

AESTHETICISING ABOAKYIR FESTIVAL

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ABSTRACT

Aboakyir festival is considered as one of the major festivals in Ghana, celebrated by the people of Effutus, Winneba. The festival is viewed as aesthetically driven with its stunning and superlative spectacle. Considering the several art forms used in the celebration, it can be likened to what some philosophers consider in describing the beauty of an object in the aesthetic scholarship. The study explores some aesthetic aspects of the festival through the visual and performance arts. Employing the observation method, the research gathered data through documentation and interviews. Purposive sampling technique was used in selecting interviewees to substantiate my findings. The paper discloses that Aboakyir festival has some aesthetic perceptions that are exposed through body painting, body art, costumes and performance of libation in its celebration. It infuses some form of emotions among the indigenes of Effutus, likewise the travellers or sightseers who witness the festival each year. Finally, the unique form of aesthetics enable to project our culture and heritage globally.

Key words: *Aboakyir, Festival, Aesthetics, Body Art, Body Painting, Costume, Performance of Libation, Winneba*

INTRODUCTION

Festivals are social events that occur in various societies across the world occasionally. Falassi (1987) described a festival as any occasion that occurs in human or simulated setting. They are often celebrated to educate and entertain the people of a particular community. On the other hand, some festivals are celebrated to present a feast in an honour of a deity, which symbolises an idea of belonging to a religious or social group. Nevertheless, most of these festivals expose a unique form of aesthetics in the spectacle through various forms of art. A typical example is the celebration of *Aboakyir* festival by the indigenes of Effutus, Winneba, Ghana.

According to Opaynin Bony (personal conversation, June 3, 2016), the Aboakyer festival (Deer Hunt Festival) is celebrated to feed the deity *Penin – Jan* (otherwise known as *Apa Sekum*), *Penkyi Otu* and other gods. Brown (2005), postulates that the above mentioned deities and other gods lead their ancestors through the journey from Timbuktu to their current settlement according to history. The festival transpires on every first Saturday of May each year. Therefore, Opoku (1990) confirms the celebration of festivals as recurrent occasion that happens at intervals which presents some form of satisfaction at the end by a community. *Aboakyir* festival is marked by two *asafo* (people of war or traditional military group) companies known as *Tuafo* No.1 and *Denstefo* No. 2. The two *asafo*

companies are identified by several colours; *Tuafo* no.1 are clad in blue and white, *Dentsefo* no.2 identified with red and yellow. Although the main celebration is grounded on the Saturday, several events are held from the Monday to Friday. For instance, regatta (tug of peace), exhibition of deities, performance of rituals by the two *asafo* groups and merry making occurs prior to the hunt. The *Tuafo asafo* group outdoors their deity named *Nsambon* on the Tuesday, whilst the *Dentsefo* outdoors *Basabasa*. On the Friday, other two deities such *Gye Mesi* by the *Tuafo* group and the *Dentsefo's Asikama* are also outdoored. These are carried through several routes of the town in turn to prevent any clash. At the dawn of the hunt the various *asafo* groups converge at different points to proceed on the hunt. After the departure, the King, divisional Chiefs, Priests, Priestesses and other royals are seen in their regalia colourfully dressed marching to the durbar grounds (African Memorial Episcopal Zion School Park) to wait for the catch. These royals appear in their beautiful Kente cloths, swords, rings, drums, staffs, umbrellas etc. Colours of the two *Asafo* companies forms part of the regalia. After the catch, the victorious *asafo* group move to the durbar grounds. The King perform libation and steps on the animal three times before it is sent to *Apa Sekum* shrine for sacrifice. On the Sunday, the casting of lot known as *Ebisatsir* is done, an oracle to determine what the gods have in stock for the people of Effutus the year they just entered.

CONCEPTS OF AESTHETICS

In line with aesthetic scholarship, a lot of expositions have been given by several philosophical academics such as Burke (1756), Kant (1987), Hegel (1975) and Schopenhauer (1967). However, all their submissions relate to the expression of the definition of the beauty of an object from an individual's perspective. In my opinion, the term aesthetics simply refer to the beauty of art. According to the *Collins English Dictionary*, the term aesthetics can be defined as anything that relates to "beauty rather than to other considerations" ("aesthetics" n.d.). Similarly, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines aesthetics as "the philosophical study of beauty and taste. It is related to the philosophy of art, which is concerned with the nature of art, and the concepts in terms of which individual works of art are interpreted or evaluated" (2016). Therefore, apart from the beauty of any art form, there is always an interpretation whether positive or negative situated to it. In agreement to the latter definition, Atalay (2007) opined that the judgment of any work of art according to Kant's theory is relative and universally accepted. Kant believes that such judgements are solely based on the human senses which is available in every individual. On other hand, Goldman (2001) mentioned the renowned philosopher, Alexander Baumgarten, who adopted the term and transformed it into the satisfaction of our senses in relation to objects. Our senses such as the brain, eye, nose and mouth ignites such judgements simultaneously. Stimulatingly, such senses are available in all human beings. Also, an individual's taste of beauty related to an object can be viewed as sublime or ridiculous. Kant (1987), expressed that in an individual's interpretation of how they view the world, there must be a kind of 'aesthetic pleasure' which must be accepted by others. The emotional feelings which is related to subjectivity must be authenticated by the world. In support of Kant's theory, Graham (2005) presented a notion about the description of the colour of an object in relation

to aesthetic ideology. He believed that an individual can relate to the colour of an object, without attaching any emotions to it. However, when the same colour is described as beautiful or ugly, then there seems to be some form of appraisal or criticism.

It is revealed that the celebration of festivals involve diverse cultural activities. Therefore, the activities such as incantations, adoration of deities, music and dance are seen as art forms, which is worth judging and appreciating. Likewise, Kemevor and Duku (2013) highlighted that art is the basis of most Ghanaian festivals. For instance, they mention the art of procession in some Ghanaian festivals which presents a form of orderliness and harmony in design. The procession in Aboakyir festival cannot be eliminated in such discussions since it also presents some aesthetic art forms. Lauer and Pentak (2008) gave an illuminating explanation behind every art work produced. According to them, all art works consist of a content and form. The content describes the message the artist want to communicate and the form explains how the message is communicated. Occasionally, the aim of an art work is produced for mainly aesthetic purposes and at other times seen beyond visual fulfillment. As a result, aesthetics play a major role in the appreciation of the various art forms presented in the celebration of *Aboakyir* festival. The study explores some aspects of the celebration of *Aboakyir* festival and its form of aesthetics through the arts. It also examines the concepts of aesthetics and the role it plays in *Aboakyir* festival.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed the qualitative approach using an observation method. Observations were made and aspects of the festivals were documented through still photographs by the researcher. It occurred in a natural setting as the procession unfolded through some principal streets of the town to the durbar grounds, at the Zion Park, Winneba. However, observations were made at the durbar grounds whilst the catch was presented by the victorious *asafo* group for the necessary rites. The study used purposive sampling and the population consisted of twenty (20) respondents. Ten (10) of the respondents consisted of the indigenes of Effutu and the other Ten (10) were visitors. The sampling technique used were mainly interviews and documentation. It allowed respondents to give their views on the ideology of the festival from an aesthetic perspective. The interviews alongside the documentation process served as data gathering tools and a primary data to substantiate my findings. The articles, journals, books and unpublished thesis served as secondary data.

RESULTS

Body Painting

Many African societies use body painting as a form of decoration and communication during festivals. In figure 1, are some members of dentsefo Asafo group painting their bodies with yellow pigments in preparation for the hunt. In figure 2, is a native of Effutu's body painted with red sand bearing an *Akoban* (horn) during Aboakyri festival. In this situation, the earth is used as the medium of painting and body as a canvas in expression. Although, it serves as a link with spirits, deities or

ancestors, it gives the human being an extraordinary look which is beautiful in spectacle. Also, it forms an identity of the particular *asafo* group they belongs to.



Fig. 1: Members of Dentsefo Asafo group painting their bodies early morning prior to the hunt. Photograph taken by researcher



Fig. 2: Horn blower's body painted and decorated with red sand. Photograph taken by researcher.

Body Art

The beautiful royal member bearing a sword as seen in figure 3, has peculiar marks decorated on her chest and arms as a form of body art. It consists of oval shapes and vertical lines in repetition. It gives some form of rhythm and harmony in design. Over here, the use of white sand as body marks blend against the bright colours in the cloth. Also, it forms a contrast against her dark complexion.



Fig. 3: A royal sword bearer decorated with body marks during Aboakyri festival. Photograph by researcher.

Costume

A study describing costume (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992) observed it as a terminology related to body adornments used in playing a social role or activity. However, the term can be likened in the discourses of dress used during a theatre performance, festivals, rituals and other related ceremonies. Such costumes enable to identify people of certain ethnic groups or cultures. Aboakyri festival showcases several traditional costumes in the celebration.



Fig. 4: Queen mother dressed in her traditional cloth during Aboakyir festival. Photograph taken by researcher.

The way the cloth is draped on her body emits some wavy lines and eccentric folds. The gold colour of the cloth blends with the vibrantly coloured beads worn around her neck. Similarly, below in figure 5, is a Chief clad in traditional cloth. The beautifully created squares repeated and placed by each other on the cloth follows a particular rhythm. The squares appear in earth colours such as brown and ochre positioned on a white background with several dots. The design inculcates some the elements and principles of design in harmony. Notwithstanding the stylistically draping of the cloth resting on the left arm. The motifs and patterns in this cloth are sometimes inspired by the weaver's dreams.



Fig. 5: Chief dressed in his traditional Kente cloth in a procession to the durbar grounds. Photograph taken by researcher.

Verbal Art

The performance of libation has been a common practice to the people of Ghana from the pre-colonial days till date. Making of libations consist of a verbal or non-verbal performance. In Ghana, the performance of libation is followed by pouring water, wine or alcohol on the ground alongside invocations and appellations in a prayerful manner. The act is mostly performed in a form of showing respect and according exaltations to the deities or spirits. This is identified by Ladzagla (1980), as cited in Kemevor and Duku (2013), that whenever libation is performed, our deities, spirits and descendants are exalted. The image below depicts a similar act by a royal member leading the procession to the durbar grounds during *Aboakyir*.



Fig. 6: Royal member leading the procession to the durbar grounds performing libation. Photograph taken by researcher.

THE ROLE OF AESTHETICS IN ABOAKYIR FESTIVAL

Aboakyir evokes many feelings among the indigenes of Effutus. All the artistic elements has some unique form of aesthetics attached to them. The celebration reminds the people of the past whenever a catch made. The victorious group in their beautiful *asafo* colours jubilate relentlessly. The actual catch is seen as a magnificent experience when the animal is carried around an *asafo* group member's neck and carried through the principal streets of the town. Below is a scenario of the catch as seen in figure 4, by *Dentsefo asafo* group members in the recent *Aboakyir* festival.



Fig. 4: Victorious *Dentsefo asafo* members displaying the catch. Courtesy of Frederick Boakye

On the other hand, It also brings some form of nostalgia in reminiscence of the past and the achievements of their fore fathers. Also, people from all walks of life gain a new experience, especially the first time observers who are witnessing the festival celebration.

DISCUSSIONS OF RESULTS

It is noted that all *asafo* companies are identified with certain colours which is also inculcated in the body art and painting. Although the philosophy behind the choice of colours are not explained, it can be related to the use of colours as spiritual and expressive connotation among the Akans as described by Antubam (1963). According to some oral sources, the white colour of *Tuafo* represents the “men” and purity, whilst the red colour of the *Dentsefo* represents the “women” in society. On the hand, the warm colours adapted by the *Dentsefo* no. 2 may play a role in their aggressive nature and also influence a catch during the festival. The *Tuafo*'s cool blue and neutral white colours also characterises their calm nature. The repetition of circular body marks created with white sand on the body of the royal sword bearers represents purity and sacredness.

Although, the horn blower's body painting may look scary, he also plays a role in paving the way spiritually for the royals to tread peacefully to the durbar grounds. However, the royal costumes against the gold accessories, such as gold rings, beads and necklaces represent the rich culture of the Effutus.

Also, the performance of libation is considered as one of the old practices in the Ghanaian culture. In the same vein, the people of Effutus also holds the act in high esteem. Therefore, the royal leading the procession, performing the libation and reciting words, invites the deities to join and protect the occasion spiritually.

CONCLUSION

Aboakyir festival is carried through all forms of arts such as the visual, performance and verbal art. Its colourful event promotes a lot of tourist attraction, therefore the stakeholders responsible in the organization should consider diverse ways in which the festival can be promoted globally. This will promote our culture and earn the country a lot of foreign exchange. The art forms in *Aboakyir* enable to preserve our heritage and culture aesthetically.

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