

ELEMENTS OF THEATRE IN TRADITIONAL RITUALS AND CEREMONIES OF GHANA

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ABSTRACT

There have been doubts in various quarters, especially among western anthropologists as to whether drama did exist in Africa before the arrival of the Europeans as colonial masters. The emergence of this debate stems out of the variations in the definition of drama and theatre. Various scholars have tried to define theatre which mostly tilts towards the direction which suits their argument. However, others have come out with theories and facts to make assertions that Africans had and still have a form of drama. In the traditional Ghanaian society, rituals, ceremonies and festivals form an essential aspect of the daily life of its people. Marriage rites are essential rituals among the various ethnic groups in Ghana. This paper is an attempt to dramatically analyse some aspects of the Ghanaian marriage rites. A marriage rite among the Kassena-Nankana ethnic group in Paga, Northern Ghana is the basis of this paper. It has been observed that the marriage ritual has the elements of characterization, costume, make-up, enactment, props, music, dance and audience. In the final analysis, the researcher budges into the unending debate of the existence or not of drama before the advent of the colonial masters.

Keywords: drama, marriage, rituals, enactment, African theatre, marriage rites, Paga, Kassena

INTRODUCTION

From the dithyrambs of the Greeks, Abydos Plays of the Egyptians, Ludi of the Romans, Medieval and Renaissance through to contemporary times, theatre has been the heart of all rituals and other enactment of the society.

Theatre often arises in relation to religious observance. In ancient Egypt, religious rituals involved the imitation of events in god's or goddess life. Brockett (2007) opines that, by the 6th century BC, theatre had become part of a massive religious festival celebrating the god Dionysus. The Ghanaian and African by extension also have a lot of life related rituals which equally involves a lot of imitation of events and enactment which can give credence to the evolution and existence of theatre. Naming ceremonies, initiation rites, enstoolment, death rites etc are some of the life related rituals which involves a lot of enactment and imitation.

Marriage is on the life associated rituals cherished in the Ghanaian society and African at large. Just as theatre among the Greeks, marriage is revered as a sacred ritual with different levels of enactments. Marriage has become part of the daily life activities of the ordinary African. There have been several studies about marriage ceremonies and rituals in Ghana and most part of Africa. For instance, Nketia (1965) and Dzobo (1975) have both discussed the African marriages and rituals and the various processes for engaging in such rituals. They both concluded that, there are elements of theatre in African marriage ceremonies and rituals. However, not much work has been carried out to bring out the theatrical and dramatic elements of these rituals. To have a critical dramatic appraisal of these ceremonies, a marriage ritual from a typical traditional setting has been selected for analysis, the marriage ritual among the Kassena people of Paga. Paga, in Ghana is popular place due to the presence of the Crocodile pond but not much has been documented about the people's traditional lives. The people of Paga have a rich cultural life involving several rituals and ceremonies. One of such cultural activities is their marriage ceremony with it associated rituals.

This study does not only seek to appraise this ceremony as dramatic but also as a means of documenting for future studies. The methodologies employed in this study includes, *participant observation, group discussions, interviews and content analysis*.

The definitions of African theatre as given by Agovi(1991) and Banham & Plastow(1999) forms the theoretical framework of this study.

Agovi(1991) defines African theatre 'as that form of creativity in the theatre which is rooted in the composite tenor of African experience, embodying a relationship of relevance between the past and present and which in effect reflects principles of African performance aesthetics'. (p.67)

Banham &Plastow (1999) also posit that theatre embodies dance, music and it is poetry based. It serves a wide range of functions which includes teaching of social roles and behavior explaining the history of ethnic groups, social criticism, celebration and fulfillment of religious rituals.

RELATED LITERATURE

THEATRE IN AFRICA-THE DEBATE

The contemporary African society is characterized by a high level of scientific and technological culture which has plunged the indigenous theatre associated with the African into virtual extinction. Theatre in Africa is one known for the flamboyant display of cultural aesthetics in music, poetry, dance, storytelling, rituals, drama among others geared towards audience participation at an outdoor setting where no fees are charged. The type of theatre currently showcased in Africa is thought to have been infiltrated with European theatrical conventions and elements. This situation has ignited heated debates among scholars both Western and African to

ascertain the realities behind the existence of an indigenous theatrical culture in Africa. According to Kerr (1995), this debate has come as results of trying to distinguish African rituals from what is described as drama or theatre in modern days. The existence and supposed nature of drama, mimetic dances, or masquerades in Africa have been taken as evidence of the existence of drama by the relativists however the evolutionists do not agree to this assertion. The evolutionists' school of thoughts postulates that there is nothing in traditional African society to be called drama. (Menegbe, 2011). Finnegan (1970) who seem to have agreed to the relativist view only ended up describing Africans performances as quasi-dramatics. She however accepted that these performances are enacted in oral traditions such as storytelling, dance and mime, rituals, festivals among others. This led Agovi (1991) to argue that if the Greeks are known to have invented theatre through their ritual performances in the classical era in honour of their gods, then the truth that Africa did not have theatrical performances prior to her contact with Europe is far-fetched.

African drama is known to be an embodiment of rituals, music, dance, mime, puppetry, poetry, recitals that are enacted during their festivals, rituals, rites of passage, enstoolment or enskinment of a traditional leader, and among many of other such ceremonies. There is also a storytelling tradition performed by a narrator or storyteller at moonlit night. (Rattray, 1927). In some African communities, this tradition is compulsory for all and sundry to attend since the gathering does not only entertain but makes it possible to imbibe moral values and beliefs into the younger generation and reinforce the importance of these customs in the lives of the elderly ones whose lives are rather contradictory to the acceptable norms of the African. Sackey (1991) asserts to this when he says it was a period seen as people meeting and sharing experiences in their community. In other communities where one's presence is not compulsory, one tends to lose the pleasure derived from the entertainment which relieves the tension from the day's activities and rejuvenates the individual for the following day. This leaves the African to seldom "salivate" or crave for such moonlit nights.

Africa houses over eighty distinct ethnic groups. Each of these ethnicities is known by distinctive rituals and festivals that are pregnant with beautiful and creative display of dramatic performances. The Igbo people in Nigeria have their performances peculiar to their tradition, likewise the Zulus of South Africa, Ewes of Ghana among others. During these dramatic occasions, the aesthetics in costume, pattern of dance, rhythm of music and venue triggers the query of whether the performances have been documented for the emerging generation to easily emulate without losing the accompanying purpose, beauty, beliefs and values.

THEATRE IN TRADITIONAL GHANAIAAN SOCIETY

It is only right to state that the same fate which befell African theatre as far as its identity and existence are concerned also affected the Ghanaian traditional theatre/drama. Like the larger

African setting, Ghanaian theatre is associated with the daily life activities and rituals of the people. Bame (1991) in his *Profiles in African Traditional Popular Culture: Consensus And Conflict: Dance, Drama, Festivals, And Funerals* attempts at showing the various forms of traditional activities that have led to the development of what we now describe as a typical Ghanaian theatre. He mentioned rituals, festivals, marriage ceremonies, traditional dance and music as some of the source of Ghanaian theatre. The Ghanaian theatre is one which is participatory and communal in nature. Yirenyki & Amponsah (2014) explains Ghanaian theatre as a contemporary performance of drama, documenting ritual practices, storytelling, public performance which is aimed creating a coherent and significant sense of community life.

TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE IN GHANAIAI CONTEXT

In Ghana, marriage is basically contracted between a man and woman with mutual understanding with the backing and support of both families. It is a ritual that seeks to bring a man and a woman into a perpetual union. Even though Ghana boasts of over hundred ethnic groupings there are semblances in their marriage rites. Marriage is the beginning and continuing of family cycle in most communities. According to Osei (2002), this union is mostly initiated by the man in the Ghanaian society. Marriage is seen as a means of bring families together and to continue the process of procreation and enlarging one's ethnic group. Mbiti (1991) writes that, marriage is a communal responsibility and he who does not support the marriage of proposed couples brings curses to himself. It is the duty of the whole community in the marriage process. Marriage in the Ghanaian society is to bring people together, to increase them, to multiply them and keep them alive.

(Bogya, 2014). The marriage as a ritual is a means of connecting with the dead, this Mbiti (1991) affirms by saying that through marriage the dead can be reincarnated through birth.

THE STUDY AREA-PAGA

Paga is a relatively small community in the Upper East region of Ghana with a population of about 11, 000. The community boasts of rich historical background; believed to have been founded by Naveh a wandering hunter in 1400. It has recently been named as the capital of the West Kasena Nankana District which was created by the Ghana government not long ago. The indigenes of Paga are called *Kassena* with *kassem* as their local language. They are mainly peasant farmers who are into crop and animal productions. The farmers rear farm animals like cattle, guinea fowls, goats and sheep. Some of the food crops cultivated in the area are millet sorghum, maize, ground nut and yam.

Some of the famous landmarks in the community are the Slave Camp in Kajelo where slaves were kept during the era of slave trade. There are also some marble stones believed to have served as musical instruments for the slaves. The chief's palace is also a remarkable landmark

not because of its size but the historical significance. The most celebrated landmark is the famous Sacred Crocodile Pond which attracts people far and near to the Paga community. The crocodiles in this pond are human-friendly. It is said to be one of the few places in the world where one can sit on crocodiles, touch them and take pictures without any bit of fear. It is further believed that crocodiles in the pond are indeed the souls and spirits of departed generations of Paga people and so are not to be harmed. The *Kassena* are seen as traditionalist who still hold on to the historical and cultural values.

MARRIAGE RITE AMONG THE KASSENA OF PAGA

The marriage ritual among the *Kassena* people of Paga is divided into about four main stages with each having players who perform the various activities and rituals in each stage.

A lady who attains the marriageable stage is referred to as *Katogo* in the *Kassim* language literally means “ready to get married” after marriage she is referred to as *Katoro* meaning ‘engaged’. The bachelor who is about getting married is also referred to as *Nenan* meaning ‘a gentle man’.

When a *Nenan* is interested in a *Katogo* and wants to marry her, he first of all send’s guinea fowls, cola nuts, tobacco, *pito* (local drink) and salt to her family to show his intensions. This then gives the lady’s family the opportunity to investigate into the man’s family to see if there any abnormalities such as issues of madness, chronic disease, theft, murder etc.

When they are satisfied with their findings, the lady is then consulted to find out if she really wants to marry the man. When the lady approves, the man continues to present guinea fowls to the potential wife’s family until the family says it is enough. When it is clear that the lady’s family has agreed, she is then invited by an elderly person in the man’s family. When the lady goes to the man’s family she is **abducted** and not allowed to go home that night. In the evening, the elderly woman in the house will perform “*woli*” thus announces to the whole community that the man is about getting married. The place for this announcement is special place on the roofs of the man’s father’s house. This announcement is made so that if there are other women this same man has promised to marry, they will come out and say it so that the current arrangement can be cancelled.

The next day the man’s family sends a guinea fowl to the lady’s house to inform them that their daughter is not missing but with them. The lady’s family begs them to return their daughter. She is not taken back until after a number of days (**at least four days**). When she is finally sent back to her parent’s home, she is asked by her father if she likes where she had been for the past four days and how well she had been treated. If she answers in the affirmative, her family prepares her formally with the required items to conclude the marriage rite. Items sent includes but not

limited to *calabash, broom, dawadawa, guinea fowls*. The lady together with the items is sent back to the man's house.

After a couple of days, the lady's brothers go to the man's house demanding their sister from the man. They always insist their sister goes back with them; this is where the man tries to appease them by killing *a dog or goat* to prepare food for them as a compensation for taking their sister. After this gesture, the man donates either cattle or sheep according to his strength to the lady's family. It is after this donation that the marriage is considered fully done.

Each stage of the marriage rite is accompanied with music and dance. For instance, when the lady is being sent finally to her husband in view's house, she is accompanied by all her friends who carry her items and parade through the entire community amidst music and pageantry. The women perform the *goon* dance while they accompany their friend to her husband's home.

The elderly men in the community too sit and have drinks where the supposed groom is introduced to the elders as a fully matured man who can now partake in the decision making of the community.

Each stage also involves different rituals, prayers and incantations by the elderly men and women in the families of both parties. In the absence of an elderly person in both families, they are allowed to move into other families and *borrow* one.

ELEMENTS OF THEATRE IN THE KASSENA MARRIAGE RITE

Theatre is an adaptation, recreation and reflection of reality on stage. It is a story enacted on stage for life audience. It is seen as putting a slice of life on stage as Banham, M. (1995) describes it. Drama deals with every day aspects of life. When men put themselves in positions that imitate that of others with the intention of enactment, the end results is what we call drama. It is the most active of all the genres of literature because of the immediate impact it has on the audience. It is used to inform, educate, entertain and in some cases to mobilize the audience for communal action. When discussing the elements which make up the best drama, we can only fall on the six basic elements of drama as given by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. In Aristotle's *Poetics* translated by Halliwell, (1987) the six elements are given as *Plot, Characters, Theme, Dialogue, Spectacle, and Music/Rhythm*. Ideas have changed slightly about the various elements as espoused by Aristotle but these elements have stood the test of time. A modern element which will be added to the already stated ones will be the element of *audience*.

THE ELEMENT OF ENACTMENT

The Kasena marriage ceremony as has been narrated above involves series of enactments. These are laid down processes which have been carried on from generation to generation. There are a

lot of imitations and situations which the various characters in the ceremony must adjust themselves to. According to Aristotle, imitation (*mimesis*) entails some copying of actions but not copying verbatim. If drama is a re-enactment of life activities to a group of people called the audience, then the Kasena marriage rite could be described as one too. A typical point of enactment in this marriage process is when the brothers of the lady go into the house of their brother-in-law demanding that their sister is allowed to go home with them. This issue is only resolved after the man has slaughtered a *dog* for them to eat.

Dialogue

The entire story is told through dialogue or what the characters say to each other, to themselves, and in some cases, directly to the audience. Dialogue in this ceremony comes under the element of enactment. During the second stage of the ceremony when the two families sit to agree on the terms of the marriage, the language used is more lofty and dramatic. Representatives of the two families act as if they are having a bargain in the market. They talk in turns with a lot of *poetic* verses. There are a lot of *repartee* and other non verbal gestures.

PLOT

Plot refers to the way events are causally and logically connected in the story line. The plot in this ceremony is that of simple plot which follows cause and effect. The classical theory of drama states that a play should have a beginning, middle and an end within the plot structure. This structure is evidently clear in the Kasena marriage rite. When the man makes his intentions known by presenting the guinea fowls, he is accepted only after the investigations into his family have been confirmed as positive. The various stages of the ceremony can be likened to a simple plot of dramatic piece. From when the man sees the lady and makes his intentions known, through to the stage the lady is finally presented to him in his house. In between the main plot there are subplots, where the lady meets with her friends and the man also meeting with the elders of the community. The event of the ceremony could be a narration of a full dramatic piece.

CHARACTERS AND CHARACTERISATION

Characters are the people (sometimes animals or ideas) portrayed by the actors in the play. It is the characters who move the action, or plot, of the play forward. People's interactions and actions are the basis of drama. This interaction moves the plot of the play. The interaction happens amongst the characters; and same is seen in the marriage ritual. There are both major and minor characters in this marriage rite. In each of the stages, there are roles played by selected figures in the community. Major characters include the groom, the bride, the elderly woman who performs the *woli*, parents of both parties and the brothers of the bride. Other characters may include the elderly men and women who perform the various rituals and incantations, friends of the bride and other family members. Actions in the marriage are representational which have

been performed over years so the people doing the performance could be described as mere actors. There is the presence of *artificiality* in the whole marriage process.

SPECTACLE

Spectacle refers to the visual elements of a play. This may comprise of sets, costume, make-up, props and other special effects which draws the audience closer to the action.

Costume

According to Gillette (2000), anything worn onstage is a costume, whether it be layers of clothing or nothing at all. During the marriage rites especially the final stage, there is the use of colorful and elaborate costume by the two families and close associates. The friends of the bride most often wear the same kind of cloth (*costume*) for the occasion. The father of the bride is also presented with a special *fugu* (smock) which he wears for the ceremony. Most often the women dress so lavishly during the final stage of the marriage ceremony.

Make-up

The bride has to be different from all her friends and so there is a special make-up for her which will make her stand out from her peers. Her hands and feet are smeared with red *lele* (a local herb). Her friends who will accompany her must not have the same make-up effect as that of the bride.

Props

All the tangible items presented to the family of the bride qualify to be props in this *dramatic* piece. The guinea fowls, salt, cola nuts, calabash, fugu etc are all items which are used by the characters to move the plot of the ceremony. There are also other ceremonial objects without which the process cannot be complete. According to Tunner (2002), stage props contribute to the "mise-en-scene" (the idea that everything within a scene has a meaning). They may also allude to the narrative and give the audience greater understanding of a character or their motives. Stage props help create the alternate reality of the production and may even be used to convey meaning to the audience. Therefore the various items which make the people who have gathered under the process can also be classified as props.

STAGING

All performances cannot come on without a performance space. Most African theatrical performance are an outdoor event and requires a degree of audience participation. Mostly, the space for the performance of the final marriage rite is an open space, with a horse-shoe seating arrangement like an arena theatre. The arrangement of the community elders, the audience and the participating families is remarkable. The seating arrangement reproduces a kind of scene

where a director places his actors on a stage. The seating arrangement makes the event more dramatical. The *roof top* where the old woman stands to announce the intended union of the two families is also a stage area that needs to be noticed. On normal days, this old lady will not climb up there for any reason, but for the purpose of this performance, she goes up there to perform the needed ritual.

MUSIC/RHYTHM

Almost all ethnic groups in Africa have drum and drumming patterns peculiar to their style of dance. There are chants and processions all with musical accompaniment during the marriage ceremony. Drumming and singing is an integral part of ritual performed by the elder of the community. As part of the ceremony, the bride and her friends are required to perform a choreograph dance piece which is often termed as *the last game* as friends. It is the belief that, once she enters her husband's home her friends may not have access to her again. When the bride is finally being led to her husband's home, there is merry making with music and dance as the integral part. Some of the dances include the Lenle, nagila, navolo and goon.

AUDIENCE

Every theatrical moment needs a live and lively audience who can constructively criticize performances and generously appreciate quality work. Wilson (1994) opined which Norman (1995) agreed that the theatre is not complete without the audience. The audience is what makes the theatre experience complete. The audience in the Kasena marriage rite are the active and participatory type, the type which Stanislavsky(1963) describes as spect-actors. The rite is communal in nature which involves the direct or indirect participation of all community members. Like the theatre, the audience add colour and motivate the performers (the bride/groom) to carry on through the final stage of the play. They also serve as witnesses to the union of the two families. There are two types of audiences witnessed during the ceremony. They are the *purposive audience*, people who were invited by the families and *incidental audience*, those who were not invited but came around to partake in the ceremony.

CONCLUSION

This paper has brought to fore the various aspect of the Kasena marriage ritual in the light of theatre. All six classical elements of theatre as outlined by Aristotle in his *Poetics* have been appropriately dealt with. These elements of theatre/drama outlined in this *traditional* marriage have unearthed the ancient theatrical practices of the African. It is the hope of the researcher that, this will go a long way in adding positively to the debate about the existence or otherwise of theatre in African traditional rituals and ceremonies. The rich cultural practice of the Kassena people has been brought to the lime light which will add to its already famous feat due to the presence of the *Crocodile Pond*.

It is recommended that, Africans must appreciate their own indigenous theatrical art forms and create avenue in the current era for its performance. This, apart from the great economic benefits will also create a rich reserve for African cultural values and customs which will bring out the African identity, authenticity and ingenuity.

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