

The Socio-religious Significance of Songs Performed during *Apo* Festival at Bono Takyiman, Ghana

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Abstract

The identity of any ethnic group is portrayed through cultural practices and traditions. The Bono of Takyiman in Ghana celebrate their annual *Apo* festival in April. The week-long festival celebration reaches its climax on the 8th day, which is a Friday. The festival was constituted by King Amoyaw Akumfi I, one of the founders of the Bono State around the 15th century AD. The king's advisors revealed to him a planned revolt against the monarchy because of his authoritarian rule. To satisfy his subjects, he set a day aside annually for the people to voice out their grievances. *Apo* comes from the Akan word *po* (meaning "to reject"). *Apo* is the time the people of Takyiman are permitted to reject (*po*) bad governance, corruption, abuse and unacceptable behaviour of the king, chiefs and people in high places. During the festival, people masquerade, wear funny hats, headgear and cultural outfits to hide their identity as they parade through the main streets singing songs, some of which rebuke the king and his chiefs. The songs performed during the festival hold leaders accountable for their misdeeds. The leaders are subject to ridicule by the exposure of their corruption, misuse of state resources, immoral behaviour and abuse through folksongs. The opportunity for the Bono to expose bad governance peacefully is worthy of emulation by other ethnic groups. Participant observation was used to investigate the socio-religious importance of *Apo* songs in assisting community members to amend their ways for the achievement of social cohesion.

Keywords: social; religious; accountability; exposure; folksongs; governance; improvement

Introduction

The two concepts—tradition and culture—form the basis of identity of any group of people. Culture is what defines people, and the identity of any group of people is best portrayed through cultural practices (Quan-Baffour 2008). In describing the term culture, Popenoe, Boulton, and Cunningham (1998) affirm that it is the shared products



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of a human group or society, which include values, language, material objects, dress, food, family and knowledge. It is the semiotic system in which symbols function to communicate meaning from one mind to another. Thus, religious practices, artefacts, festivals and traditions of people fall under culture. The people of Bono Takyiman, Ghana, have a unique culture. The celebration of the annual *Apo* festival in April is one way of renewing and projecting their culture, identity and values as one people. Nkonko (1999, 27) affirms that traditional African values foster a communalistic worldview towards life. The *Apo* festival is a week-long communal celebration which focuses on African values of servant leadership. The festival reaches its climax on the 8th day, which is always arranged to be on a Friday. Oral tradition has it that the *Apo* festival was constituted by King Nana Amoyaw Akumfi I, one of the founders of the Bono kingdom. Buah (1998, 9) affirms that the Bono was a great, rich and famous kingdom that came into existence between the 13th and 14th centuries AD with its capital at Bono Manso. The Bono kingdom was the centre of Akan civilization (Buah 1998). In fact, the Bono ethnic group was the first of the 11 Akan-speaking groups to emerge in modern-day Ghana (Adu-Boahen 1975). The Bono is a very conservative group of people who have conserved their culture and traditional practices since time immemorial.

In the early days of the kingdom, some of the kings were ruthless, which made the Bono dissatisfied with the monarchy. Oral tradition has it that some sections of the community planned to revolt against the tyranny of the monarchy. The king learnt from his advisors that some of his subjects were about to revolt against him because they did not like some of his authoritarian laws. To save his kingship and satisfy the subjects, the king set a day aside every year for the people to masquerade, compose and sing songs amidst drumming and dancing to voice their grievances.

The name *Apo* comes from the Akan word *po* (literally meaning to reject). As the name of the festival indicates, it is the day the people of Takyiman state are granted permission to reject (*po*) bad governance, corruption, and all unacceptable behaviours of fellow citizens including the king, chiefs and all people in positions of authority. The festival has both religious and social significance. The Akan (the largest single ethnic group in Ghana), of which Bono is a subset, believe that chieftaincy is ordained and supported by the gods and the ancestors. The position of the king or the chief is linked to the spiritual world of the ancestors, *Nananom*, who have gone to the underworld. The king or the chief is regarded as the living representative of the ancestors. As the link between the living and the dead, the king pours libation and prays on behalf of his subjects to ward off any calamity that might happen to the state and its people.

During the *Apo* festival, the people masquerade, wear funny hats, headgear and cultural outfits to hide their faces or identity as they parade through the main streets singing songs, some of which rebuke even the king and the chiefs. The songs performed during the festival hold leaders accountable for their deeds. The leaders are subjected to ridicule by exposing corruption, misuse of state resources, immoral behaviours and

abuses, through folksongs. The opportunity for the Bono Takyiman people to expose bad governance by airing their grievances through peaceful folk musical performance is worthy of emulation by other ethnic groups and communities.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this study was to investigate the socio-religious significance of the songs performed during the annual *Apo* festival and how the songs hold the local community leaders accountable for their behaviour as a strategy to ensure social cohesion.

Theoretical Framework

This paper focuses on the tradition and cultural performance of the Bono ethnic group within the greater Takyiman Municipal area in Ghana. As a paper that discusses an aspect of culture of a group of people, it is grounded in Castro-Gomez's (2000) traditional theory of culture. Culture in a very simple term can be described as the way of life of a group of people. It is the expression and meaning a group of people give to them identify and define themselves as people: that is, who they are, what they are, and what they believe in. Schuster and Copeland (2008) affirm that culture is a total way of life held in common way by a group of people. Learned similarities in speech, language, behaviours, ideology, religion, livelihood, technology, value system and society bind people together in a culture. Saleebey (1994) aptly points out that human beings build themselves into the world by creating meaning, and culture gives meaning to action by situating underlying states in an interpretive system. Brunner (1990) intimates that we get our raw material for our meanings from culture. It is through practice, performance or action that a group of people express their beliefs and identity through stories, narratives, myths, rituals, dance and songs.

Castro-Gomez (2000) posits that the radical separation between subject and object of knowledge converts theory into a pure activity of thought and the theorist into a disinterested spectator who is limited to describing the world as it is. Since the laws of social life have a cosmological foundation, independent of human will, the wisdom of the good ruler consists precisely in recognising this foundation and ensuring that the laws of the *polis* are organised around man's "cultural disposition" (Castro-Gomez 2000).

The traditional theory of culture is the "natural facticity," i.e. the type of culture that is rooted in "human nature." The theory hinges on three important characteristic elements which are: national spirit; national identity; and identity between people, nation and culture. The traditional theory of culture emphasises the fact that culture is a practice, belief, way of life, and therefore a social construction. Thus, the stories that people tell and the constructions they devise about their lives identify them as a unique group from

others. The modern idea of “man” is understood as a being that produces himself in history and creates cultural values. Culture constitutes the sphere of moral, religious, political, philosophical and technological values that permit man to “humanize himself” (Castro-Gomez 2000). When man is perceived to be the sole architect of his own destiny, then it could be said that humanity lies in the capacity to humanise; i.e. man’s ability to constitute himself in time through the creation of his own world–culture (Castro-Gomez 2000).

In fact, the true study of any group of people is through their culture because it is culture that portrays life, beliefs, traditions and values of people. It is through cultural practices that individuals are reconciled with ethical substance of the collective. As individuals within a particular ethnic group subordinate or surrender themselves to the beliefs, values, traditions and laws of their group and the community mediates between its members, people learn to be conscious of who they are, what their aspirations and beliefs are and what their destiny is as members of the particular ethnic group or tribe.

Among the Bono, culture occupies the pinnacle of the entire gamut of indigenous social practices such as the *rites de passage*, birth, marriage, divorce, enstooling and destooling of a chief, naming ceremonies, death, and farming (sowing and harvesting). To the Bono culture is not only an identity as a group of people, but also their pride; hence any attempt to undermine their culture could be fiercely resisted. All over the globe, people have done whatever it takes to protect, defend and project their culture (language, beliefs, values, songs, dance, religion etc.) because that is their identity. Without culture, there is no identity, and any ethnic group without identity literally fails to exist.

Research Methodology

The study was qualitative research, which took the form of ethnographic investigation. The primary task of ethnographic research is to uncover and explicate the ways in which a group of people in particular settings come to understand, account for, take action and manage their situations, problems and difficulties they encounter (Welman, Kruger, and Mitchell 2006, 193). Ethnographic study allows the researcher to observe a particular situation or practice; hence, this researcher adopted an unstructured participant observation in the investigation into the Apo festival. Brink, van der Walt, and van Rensburg (2012) attest that observation is a technique for collecting descriptive data on behaviour, events and situations. It allows the researcher to observe behaviour as it occurs. The social setting of this study embraced watching and listening to the performances of groups of people drumming, singing and dancing to Apo songs on the streets of the major town, Takyiman. Participant observation as a data collection tool provided the researcher with the opportunity to participate in the cultural festival and utilise informal conversation to solicit information from the participants without

making them suspicious of the investigator. Brink, van der Walt, and van Rensburg (2012) affirm that in an unstructured observation, the researcher attempts to describe events or behaviours as they occur, with no preconceived ideas of what is seen.

Analysis of Data

As a member of the broader Akan linguistic community, the researcher did not find it difficult to accumulate data for analysis. He was able to provide a complete description of everything he saw and heard without the use of an interpreter. Throughout the investigation, the researcher kept a journal of what he observed, and this assisted him to select five Apo songs and arrange them under specific themes before analysing them. The songs, which were investigated through participant observation, related to the theme of the cultural festival—*rejection of bad behaviours of Bono leaders*. The five selected Apo songs are thematically analysed in the ensuing paragraphs.

Apo Folksong that Rebukes and Corrects Leaders

The Bono chiefs are regarded as the living representatives of the ancestors, and, as such, they are supposed to provide good leadership and seek the welfare and spiritual protection of their people. They need to listen to the problems and concerns of their subjects but there are some of the chiefs or community leaders who do not listen to the advice given to them by the council of elders (made up of representatives of the community). Hence, the disgruntled subjects sing the song “*Ye tu wo fo a wo nnte?*” (Do you not hear advice?). This folklore song is composed by the local people spontaneously to reveal or expose some scandal in the Bono communities and to draw the king and his chiefs’ attention to how the people feel about it.

A few lines of the song, which include rebukes to the chiefs and other community leaders, are reproduced below.

*Nana wo ti kotoo ye tu wo fo wonnte?
Nana w'aso kakraa yetu wo fo a wonnte?
Nana w'ani potwee yetu wo fo a wonnte?*

[Chief with a big head, do you not hear advice?
Chief with large ears, do you not listen to advice?
Chief with too big eyes, do you not hear advice?]

The above song indicates the frustrations of the people who think the king could have heeded their advice to avoid something which has gone wrong in the community. As the king, who represents the Bono on spiritual, community and national issues, anything that goes wrong may be blamed on him. For example, where allegations of bribery or fraud among community leaders who demarcate land for building of houses surface, the

people expect the king to take drastic measures against the people involved, in order to restore faith in his leadership. When nothing is done about the corrupt practices, the people become angry and announce their grievances through *Apo* songs that ridicule, rebuke and insult the monarch and his sub-chiefs. The grievances stated in the song are meant to assist the king in taking the necessary steps to solve a particular social problem in the community.

Apo Folksong that Condemns and Rejects Laziness, Pretence and Opportunism

Another *Apo* folksong sung by community members to expose and rebuke opportunists is *Mmere yi adane* (Times have changed). There are many sycophants, opportunists, misers, parasites, fraudsters and scrooges who take advantage of the kind, rich, poor and vulnerable people in the society. Using the first names of some of the “crooks,” the people sing to chastise them to make others aware that times have changed, and they should change their behaviour to suit the time. A few lines of the song are reproduced here below:

Mmere yi adane Kwadwo eeh!
Kwadwo Fodwo eeh mmere yi adane
Mento ma woni na menyaa ka a wo asere me?

[Times have changed, Kwadwo—name of a male born on Monday
 Kwadwo Fodwo, times have changed,
 Should I continue to buy or farm for you to enjoy so that
 you mock me when I am indebted?]

The *Apo* folksong above exposes and denounces laziness, and the parasites, misers, opportunists, penny-pinchers, scrooges, skin-flints, niggards, and hoarders in the society. The song points out that it is time such people realise that their hypocrisy is known, and no one will be fooled by them any longer. Times have changed, and they must change with the times. They must transform their behaviour by taking advice from good people in their communities. Although the song mentions *Kwadwo Fodwo* (an anonymous person), it is an indictment on all parasites, crooks, misers, sycophants and the lazy people in the Bono communities, be they male or female.

The song also expresses the frustrations of farmers in the rural communities who feel abused, fooled and undermined by people who benefit from them. Some of the singers explained to the researcher that, as rural peasant farmers, they do not get financial support from the government or loans from the banks. They depend on their own physical efforts or loans from “loan sharks,” who often double the interest. The success of farming in rural Ghana depends on good rainfall but because of changes in climate, sometimes the rain does not come at the time farmers need it. The absence of sufficient

rain leads to poor yields and indebtedness of farmers who take loans to expand their farms. In cases where farmers are unable to pay their debts, they lose their properties and not only become poorer, but also become a laughing stock in their communities. The song therefore indicates the change in attitude of the rural farmers because they may no longer do business as usual. As some of the participants revealed to the researcher, most farmers used to give free food to their neighbours, and now that farming has become a risky business and more expensive, they cannot continue to provide free food to crooks and parasites who would mock them when they become indebted, hence the refrain;

Me nko do ma wo nni na se me nya ka a w'asere me?

[Should I farm to feed you so that when I am indebted you mock me?]

The refrain, *mere yi adane* [times have changed] emphasises the risky nature of farming because of the effect of climate change, over cropping and the cost of farming. Farming land is depleted due to continuous farming on the same piece of land for many years, but farmers lack money to buy fertilizers to improve the soil. "Times have changed" could also mean that with much demand for food in the communities, farming is now a big business and can no longer feed people gratis. Farmers now want to sell their produce to defray costs and do not want to provide handouts to lazy community members.

Apo Folksong that Denounces Gossip and Rumours

There is one *Apo* folksong that condemns gossip and rumour-mongering amongst community members. The song explains why some people decide to keep vital information away from family and community members. The song gives reasons that because of possible repercussions on community members who divulge information, some people do not like to share potentially vital information with others. Instead, they choose to keep it to themselves. In a family or community, where certain people are undermined or ridiculed, they may decide to keep what they know, see, or can offer others secret to avoid humiliation or ridicule; hence the song *Ma mene masem* (I have swallowed my thoughts). The main lines are the following:

Mamene m'asem
Atamfoo afere
Se meka a na mobe te
Nsekafoo afere
Se meka a na mobe sere
Mamene m'asem

[I have swallowed my thoughts
 My enemies are ashamed
 It is only when I talk you will hear

Shame unto you rumour-mongers
 It is only when I voice it out that you will mock at me
 I have swallowed my thoughts because of your lies and exaggeration.]

There are community members who are full of gossip and rumours and exaggerate information. The introverts in such communities always think it is better for them to put such people to shame by keeping their thoughts to themselves. This folksong castigates and warns rumour-mongers and scoffers in communities. It advises people to stop gossiping because it leads to exaggeration that may have negative effects on community members. Unfounded allegations bring suspicion, mistrust, hatred and may negatively affect social cohesion, hence community members should refrain from such bad social practices.

Apo Folksong that Denounces Unfounded Allegations

There is an *Apo* song which responds to and denounces unfounded allegations on some people in the community. It is often difficult for people to get the opportunity to defend themselves or others on false allegations. They therefore use the occasion during the celebration of the *Apo* festival to sing songs to defend and reject unfounded allegations which seem to harm the image of people. For example, the song, *Nea enni me so* (Accused for what I did not do). Few of the lines are explained here.

Nea eni me so yede nam ooh!
Me huru a meka nti,
Nea eni me so yede nam ooh!

[What I never did is being circulated around
 because I am vocal what is not true is said about me.]

The song laments the ordeal of extroverts who comment on whatever goes on in their communities. The people who speak their minds can be accused falsely but may not have the opportunity to defend themselves. They wait until the time of celebration of the *Apo* festival to vent their grievance or defend themselves; hence the refrain, *Nea enni me so yede nam ooh* (What I know nothing about is being gossiped around).

Apo Folksong that Condemns Acts of Sabotage

Aboro firi fie (Sabotage comes from the family) is a song people sing to denounce sabotage and jealousy in the family and the community at large. The song denounces sabotage and wickedness and encourages family and community members to help one another to avoid egocentricity, since charity begins at home. There are rich people in some families who do not assist others, such as brilliant children to further their education, and that is sabotage to the progress of the family and community. There are

also some community leaders who sabotage the progress of their subjects; hence the refrain, "Wickedness comes from home" (*aboro fri fie*). A few lines from the song are reproduced here below:

*Ee Amokua ee
Aboro fri fie
Enfiri babiara
Aboro fri fie
Ee Amokua ee, Agyinamoa ee
Aboro fri fie
Enfiri babiara*

[*amokua* is a rodent that destroys farm produce
sabotage if from home
It is not from outside the family
amokua eeh, agyinamoa (cat) *eeh!*
sabotage if from home.]

The rodent (*amokua* and *agyinamoa*, a cat) are used here metaphorically to stand for family and community members (including traditional leaders) who physically or spiritually work against the progress of people. As the rodent, *amokua*, destroys maize and peanuts, and a cat (*agyinamoa*) catches mice in the house, so do the wicked people destroy family and community members who want to progress.

Discussion of Findings

The researcher's interaction with the participants revealed pertinent information related to the socio-religious importance of the Apo festival. The general consensus of a cross-section of the participants was that the songs sung during the festival expose and criticise both the community's and leaders' corrupt and immoral behaviours. The study revealed that the Apo songs are part of traditional music through which the local people air their grievances and show resistance to corruption and misuse of community resources by the traditional leadership. The step-by-step rhythmic body movements and gestures in response to the sound of African drum language and songs carry the message of the performers to the traditional leaders and the general audience. Through the songs, community members and leaders are rebuked, and named and shamed for their bad deeds, and this makes them to be careful in whatever they do to avoid exposure and public condemnation.

The major findings from the songs are briefly discussed below:

- There is a general resentment to corruption and misuse of community resources related to allocation of land for building houses. In some instances, a particular piece of land could be allocated by some of the chiefs to more than two community

members resulting in conflict and litigation among the citizens. Such a corrupt practice, which is deemed “sabotage,” is exposed and condemned through a song, dance and gestures that rebuke the leaders. The refrain, “Sabotage is from within the family” (*aboro firi fie*) indicates how some traditional leaders and community members could stand in the way of progress of their subjects.

- The need for traditional leaders to heed the advice of their subjects was an important finding. Some traditional leaders may be dictators and do not seek or listen to advice from their subjects. In an era of democracy and human rights, leaders are supposed to listen to their people. The lack of “listening ears” by some of the leaders is emphasised in the song, “When we advise, do you not hear us?” (*ye tu wo fo a wonte?*).
- Laziness is an abomination in society during the times of drastic changes brought by global economic downturn. Young people in the community should get into farming and work and refrain from being parasites on family and community members because times have changed (*mere yi adane*).
- Another very interesting finding is that the Apo songs have important socio-religious importance to Bono traditions. The Bono, as part of the broader Akan ethnic group in Ghana, regard their traditional leaders (i.e., kings, chiefs and queen mothers) as the living representatives of the departed leaders who are believed to be in the spiritual or underworld (*asamado*). Being the representatives of the ancestors (*nananom*), traditional leaders are the custodians of tradition, culture, religion and beliefs and are supposed to provide servant leadership and live beyond reproach. They pour libation to venerate the ancestors (*nananom*) and ask for protection, peace and prosperity for their subjects. The songs sung during the Apo festival, which expose bad deeds of the leaders, serve as a report to the ancestors of the stewardship of the current leaders. The belief is that the ancestors could punish the traditional leaders or summon them to the underworld (*asamado*) to explain their misdeeds. The fear of sanctions or punishment from the ancestors keeps traditional leaders on their toes as nobody wants to face calamities. The Apo festival therefore has a strong socio-religious impact on the behaviour of both community leaders and traditional leaders of the Bono state.

The above findings from the songs confirm the views from the literature that traditional music can be used as a language to critique unacceptable social behaviours of people in high places. The study fits into the broader perspectives of traditional music where the Bono have created cultural symbols through music and dance, and these symbols are properly utilised to castigate unscrupulous community members and leaders in a very subtle manner.

Conclusion

The article was the result of an investigation into the socio-religious significance of songs sung at the *Apo* festival among the people of Bono Takyiman in Ghana. The article has established that culture is what defines the identity of any group of people, and any ethnic group without culture does not exist. The *Apo* festival of the people of Bono Takyiman is the epitome of their culture and traditions through which they build social cohesion and hold their leaders accountable by reporting their grievances via folksongs. As a mechanism to hold people accountable through the celebration of the *Apo* festival, the bad behaviour of individual community members and people in high places in the Bono state is rejected by community members through songs and dance instead of weapons and fighting. In considering the importance of peaceful co-existence, the article concludes that in this era of African renaissance, indigenous people of Africa must use their traditions and cultural gems to promote social cohesion and to avoid corruption, strife and wars which bring nothing but untold hardships (death, destruction of communities, and nations) to innocent people of Africa.

Recommendations

- Ethnic groups in Africa should emulate the example of the Bono of Ghana and utilise their cultural traditions to foster social cohesion, peace and stability through peaceful resolution of conflicts.
- Advisors of African (traditional) leaders should have the courage to point out the dangers of dictatorship and encourage the implementation of policies that can serve the interest of their people to ensure peace and socio-economic development in their areas.
- Cultural festivals should be used as a time for traditional leaders to meet their citizens to plan and execute projects that can bring development to the local communities.

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