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The Design Knowledge of Art Forms in Agbeliza of the Avenorpedo People

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Abstract: Festival is considered as one of the key ingredients in culture development. This means that in an effort for a community to meet its cultural growth agenda, attention should be a place of the festival activity. This study is on the design of festivals and the knowledge about artforms in Agbeliza of Avenorpedo. The main objective is the identification of artistic components and understanding the symbolisms as used in the celebration of Agbeliza. Qualitative approach was used to describe the activities of the celebration. A participant observation, interview and questionnaire techniques were used to identify the major artforms. The main artforms showcased in the celebration of the festival were visual and performing arts. The results indicated the following credibility of knowledge of the Agbeliza celebration; 70% identified various art forms but did not understand them, 11.5% identified some and gave their own meanings and, 18.5% could not identify but saw them as something needed to enhance the celebration. It was found that the lack of understanding of the visuals that enhance the celebration of Agbeliza bridges the embarrassment of their cultural heritage. It was recommended that educating citizens and Ghanaians to learn to understand and manage their cultural heritage may provide them with adequate insight to avoid escalating negative feelings. Suggested approaches like, making and using approaches with field and school experiences were the expectations of the study.

Keywords: Festival; Agbeliza; Art; Artform; Approaches.

1. Introduction

Festivals are institutionalized in Ghanaian culture. They are identified as particular institutions and are performed within the doctrines of institutions. The word festival is derived from a Latin word 'Festivus', meaning, a feast, joyous or mirthful. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (1981)*, defines festival as a day or season for rejoicing in memory of a religious event, with its own social activities, food menu or ceremonies. *Ogunba (1978)* definition gives it as an 'indigenous cultural institution, a form of art nurtured on the African soil over the centuries and which has therefore developed distinctive features and integral dynamic part of the culture of an unalienated African.'

Bame sums it all by describing African traditional festivals as seasonal propitiatory, sacrificial and laudatory ceremonies by means of which African ethnic groups acknowledge the blessings of the supreme creator, the lesser deities, and the ancestral spirits, manifested in good health, good harvest, and abundance of children (*Bame, 1991*).

Festivals are therefore, occasions for cultural spectacles, ritual observances, and social entertainment. It is clear that festival is central to the African individually and collectively. In summation, it is evident to assert that deeply embedded in the African culture ethos are religious beliefs and traditional festivals. *Smith (1991)* also shares the same ideas with the inter-related activities by viewing traditional festivals as special occasions in which a community gathers annually to remember, honour and give thanks to God, the gods and the ancestors for their help and protection; more also to exhibit its creative skills. *Cole (1975)* stresses that a festival is a relatively rare climatic event in the life of any community. It is bounded by a definite beginning and end, and is a unified occasion which is set above daily life. Every festival has a design (plan) with which it follows. It has a beginning and an end. It takes into consideration the programmes, physical settings, space, period of celebration, ban on society, rituals, durbar, arts, etc. Its structure is built up on a core or armature of ritual. Festivals can be classified into harvest festivals, commemorative festivals and festivals for the gods.

Opoku (1970) emphasizes that the dates for the observance of most festivals vary, according to the purpose for which they were instituted. The date for the celebration is fixed to suit the harvesting and marketing of their crops to enable them to be financially sound for the occasion.

1.1. Historiology and the Agbeliza of Avenorpedo

The history of Avenorpedo is never complete without the mention of Avenor and their migration from Avenor Ketukpe. The Avenor, like any other Ewe ethnic groups are believed to be the descendants of the Ewe from the walled city of Notsie in the republic of Togo in the 17th Century and finally found a settlement in their present home – Avenorpedo in the Akatsi district, Volta region of Ghana. The main sources of revenue for the chiefs and the people are farming, hunting, animal rearing, blacksmithing, goldsmithing, weaving and trading. Their main cash crop is cassava (Agbeli). That is, the ‘Agbeli’ is interspersed with corn, beans and groundnuts. To the people of Avenorpedo without ‘Agbeli’ (Cassava) people will suffer and die of hunger. Hence, cassava is the “soul of human beings”. It is an everlasting food item. ‘Agbeli’ literally means “there is life” or “life is there”. The importance of ‘Agbeli’ to the people of Avenorpedo gave birth to its celebration – ‘Agbeliza’ (Cassava celebration) during which different art forms and food items from cassava are displayed and exhibited.

The year 1986 was an ‘eye-opening’ one for a lot of people in Avenorpedo due to the birth of the cassava festival - ‘Agbeliza’. It was the year people really had the chance to see and learn all about themselves, especially their culture. The avidity with which people used to celebrate the ‘Agbeliza’ is on the increase because of the joy it brings to them. An up and coming festival in Ghana like the ‘Agbeliza’ is celebrated by a section of the Ewe ethnic group in the Volta region of Ghana. It is a harvest festival type. It is celebrated with pomp and pageantry to mark the end of the long period of cassava cultivation and to thank the gods and ancestors for protection and guidance throughout the year. During the festival, arts in the form of visual and performing such as leather art, weaving, applique, calabash art, metal-smithing, textiles, pottery, body art, drama, music, the act of pouring libation (verbal art), incantations and many others are used to portray the activities of the festival. It must be pointed out that a brief insight into the origin serves as a background for viewing the functions and symbolic implications of artforms in the celebration.

1.2. Artistic components of the celebration

Art, by various definitions, is the spearhead of every cultural advancement. Kaufmann (1966) indicates that the arts are the symbolic touchstones of the values of culture. The good making of these symbolic touchstones (sounds, images, movements, tools and materials) is also referred to as art Read (1970).

It is evidently seen that the indigenes of Avenorpedo are artistically inclined. The Agbeliza contains the major elements constituting an artistic presentation of stools, state swords, drums, emblems, ewe kete, velvet crowns, chiefs’ sandals, finger rings, linguist staff and tops, amulets, bangles, jewelries as well as the flamboyant umbrellas that enhance the pomp and pageantry at the festival and, are the handiworks of the indigenous artists of Avenorpedo. These objects which play unique roles, permeate every aspect of the festival celebration. Therefore, art presents a dominating factor, since it triggers off other associated and complimenting elements.

Art has been defined as the study and creation of things in forms, texture, lines and colour which give pleasure to the mind and satisfy our sense of beauty (Egunor and Okolo, 2002). This philosophy of art seeks to answer this very interesting and complex question of the study of Agbeliza. It further considers the definitions of beauty, taste, symbolism and representation.

In many instances, the function of art is to reinforce beliefs, customs, and values within a society, often within the context of rituals. The arts also serve to create an atmosphere for the successful transmission of information, significant to culture. They offer some of the most rewarding ways of dealing with the differences and similarities inherent in the approaches and products of different cultural groups. Festivals in Ghana are a form of theatrical expressions that contain all elements of artistic productions such as visual, performing and sonic.

A study of the art forms in their cultural context offer not only a corresponding understanding of the art forms or products themselves, but also valuable insight into the way of life of the people who produced them. Festivals, such as the Avenorpedo event, are a social phenomenon, used to achieve social cohesion that results in deep sense of communion with each other. This also enables members of that community to be both observers as well as mental participants of the unfolding event.

Osborne (1970) and Cole (1975) assert that multitudes of objects, decorated people, dances, skits and sacrifices transform a once quiet space into an arena of colour, sound and motion. The festival embraces the community raising both people and place onto a plane marked by aesthetics, spiritual and social values. Cole (1975) draws attention to the artistic representation of festivals when he stressed that the totality of a festival cannot be conveyed in printed words and pictures. Cole succeeds in drawing reader’s attention to art and festival as being linked. He states that ostentatious five-crafted symbols of regal wealth and grandeur are formally positioned or ceremoniously carried by specially-appointed bearers. Umbrellas, state swords, guns, staffs, stools and jewelry display the opulence of the ethnic group, the symbols on them detail the powers and responsibilities of chieftaincy. This is a clear indication of the indispensability of art in festivals.

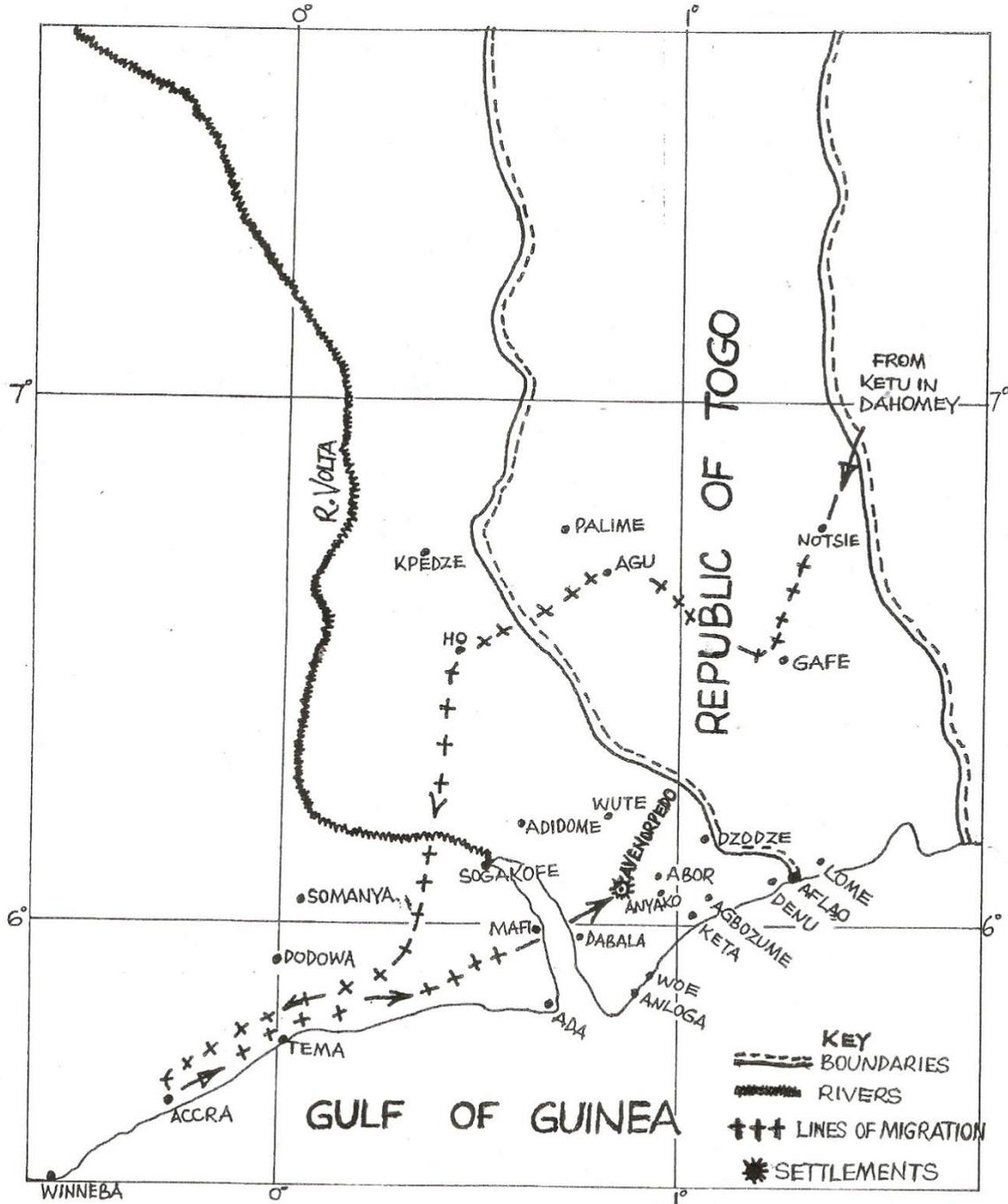
Opoku (1970) also confirms that, the paramount chief and the principal chiefs are borne in palanquins, flanked on either sides by large gold-plated swords and muskets. He points out further those multi-coloured state umbrellas are made to flutter rhythmically to the beats of accompanying drums. This is a very good explanation of the indispensable role of art as witnessed in ‘Agbeliza’ which seems to portray a more unique description of art.

It is therefore appropriate that a study about the Agbeliza be carried out to inform the general public about the important role of art in the festival and make bare its socio-economic significance to the development of Ghana.

2. Methodology

The study was conducted at Avenorpedo in the Akatsi District located in the southern part of the Volta Region in Ghana. Figure 1 shows the location of Avenorpedo on the Ghana map.

Fig-1. Location of Avenorpedo in Ghana



SOURCE: P. WIEGRABE: EWEGBALEXEXLE AKPA ENELIA P.12

2.1. Research Design

The study approach which was qualitative made use of field interview and observation as the sources of data collection.

2.2. Population and Sampling Method

The total population of the contacted citizens in Avenorpedo was 168, out of which convenience sampling method was used to get 135 respondents for giving a response rate of approximately 80.4%. This sample method was used because the researcher and the target population are from Avenorpedo and took part in the same festival.

2.3. Instrument for the Study

A semi-structured interview guide was used to gather information for the study. This instrument according to Wragg (2002), allows the interviewer to ask initial questions followed by probes meant to seek clarification of issues raised. Semi-structured interview schedules, conversation and observation were employed in the collection of the data for this study. The researcher participated in every activity of the festival on three different occasions (individual ritualistic activities in various house, ritualistic aspect with the elders in the shrines and dressed in regalia to the durbar ground) to solicit for more information regarding the festival. This participant observation approach enabled the researcher to appreciate, perceive and observe key features and elements about the festival. Among the observation were the art forms on display, the appearance and understanding and, benefits of the celebration. In all, 135 questionnaires were administered to respondents from the community who participated in the festival. They included the chiefs, queen mothers, opinion leaders, clan heads, traditional custodians, students, etc. The questionnaire had both closed and open ended questions, with questions focusing on the art forms, festival knowledge level, importance and challenges.

Transcripts were generated from the semi-structured interviews, conversations and the observation. They were coded, edited and entered into SPSS for analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

Art forms can be explained as decorations that are characterized by materials that represent objects of common use and visibility in the daily lives of the people (Emeka, 1985). They are close to everyday life-styles because they are within every person’s reach. They are a necessity, an integral force and a part of living.

Table-1. The use of art forms in the celebration of Agbeliza.

		No. of Respondents	Percent
Are artforms used in Agbeliza Celebration?	Yes	110	81.5
	No	25	18.5

Table 1 shows an overwhelming majority of the respondents (110) 81.5% who affirmed that artforms are being exhibited in the celebration of Agbeliza. However, some respondents (25) comprising 18.5% indicated that art forms do not exist in the celebration.

3.1. General Knowledge of the Artforms in the Festival

Generally, Art has many aspects, takes so many directions and serves so many purposes in such a variety of ways. It is imperative to state that artforms have a clear nature of depiction, which has no special importance within the philosophy of art for a pictorial representation is just a frequent outside as an art.

The real clarity about the ways in which the elements of the Agbeliza can acquire value as an art must be founded on sophisticated understanding of what an element is and the psychological resources needed to grasp what it depicts in its performance.

Table-2. Respondents identification of art forms during celebration

	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Textiles	20	14.8
Graphic Design	1	0.7
Sculpture - Carving	56	41.8
Leatherwork	3	2.2
Music/Dance	2	1.4
Beadwork	29	21.5
Painting – body art	2	1.4
Jewelry	15	11.1
Metal work	1	0.7
Basketry	4	3.0
Pottery	2	1.4

Table 2 summarizes the descriptive statistics of responses provided by the study participants with respect to their knowledge regarding the identification of art forms during Agbeliza celebration. The key findings showed that 41.8% of the respondents (56) had identified sculpture carvings as the majority, while 21.5% (29) to Bead work, 14.8% (20) to Textiles, 11.1% (15) to Jewelry. The least identified art form is metal work (1) being 0.7%. But irrespective of the variation in the identification of the various art forms in the celebration of Agbeliza, 81.5% of the respondents agreed that art forms enhance the celebration.

Further revelation was that respondents identified artifacts such as cowrie shells, 'Atibla' dress, chiefs' dresses, chiefs' necklaces with locket, velvet crowns, kete cloths, chiefs' sandals, linguist staff, staff tops, hairdo, colourful umbrellas, umbrella emblems, amulets, umbrella tops, bangles, finger rings, drums, ceremonial horns, beads, 'kevi'(woven container), state swords, guns, body designs, stools etc. These artifacts play various roles in the celebration of the festival. Artforms possess certain intrinsic artistic qualities which characterize all good works of art. Such artistic qualities are visual. This is to high light the fact that it takes viewers with high artistic sensibilities to discern such artistic impressions. In this sense the imagery are not chosen for their own sake but are functional.

Music found in the celebration of Agbeliza is by far the oldest and most widespread folk or traditional music with its associated dances where they are appropriate. Music is, of course, a cultural expression and every culture decides for itself what is music or not (Blacking, 1976). It was also observed that, one social characteristics of folk music is that it is functional integral with life and the rhythms of life. Considering the functions of music in festivals, Nketia (1974) stated that festivals provide opportunities for sharing creative experiences. In creative fields such as art, design, music and performance, the relationship between creative production and academic research has in particular how such a relationship can contribute and develop knowledge.

Various performances are displayed especially during the drumming and dancing of the different cultural troupes that are invited. The youth are mostly engaged in various activities of the festival. They are made to perform dances such as atibla dance, kinka dance, atsiagbekor dance, thereby dramatizing and displaying skills of various movements in the act. They are also dressed in the traditional attire, acting as youthful chiefs, reciting poems, blowing horns, drumming and playing the drum language.

Artforms contain valuable educative messages. The term education itself is often erroneously used in a sense quite narrow as to refer to formal instruction. This is a restricted use of the term and shows much parochialism. Broadly speaking, education entails the preparation of the youth to be useful citizens. This brings into the lime light the fact that wherever the youth exist, education takes place and its rationale is to transmit knowledge, values, wisdom, beliefs and customs of societies from one generation to another. In effect there is moral, political, social, cultural, aesthetic and every conceivable type of indigenous education. It is against this backdrop that some of these types of educational values reflect in artforms.

3.2. Socio-economic Values of Festivals

According to Getz (2000), the majority of event stakeholders still select economic performance as the leading indicator of event success. Festivals and events have main economic functions such as attracting investment, seeking employment, and improving standard of living.

Celebration of Agbeliza is significantly associated with great community achievements in which the members get together to thank God and celebrate good yields or harvest. Vordoagu (1994), Boamah (1972) and Ayisi (1970) have all stressed on the economic importance of festivals that

citizen initiative development projects contribute financially towards different projects. The Agbeliza celebrations are seasons of gainful economic activities for local craftsman and food sellers. During the celebration, people prepare assorted food items (gari, cassava biscuits, starch biscuits, yakayake, tapioca, cassava dough, akple/banku, agbelikaklo, garif4tor,eba, gari cheese, cassava cake, beads etc) from 'Agbeli' and are displayed and sold to the general public. These preparation skills are to educate and enlighten their audience especially the youth so as to create a climate for meaningful economic impact. The festival promotes tourism as people come to catch glimpse of the artistic development and the rich culture of the Avenor society.

4. Conclusion

The thrust of this paper has been the examination of Agbeliza of Avenorpedo people of Akatsi District, in the Volta Region, Ghana. In the course of this investigation the origination of the people and their festival were surveyed. It was however observed that although there is copious use of visual and performing arts in the festival, the context of their performances are highly regulated by the people. This is one of the factors which enhance the therapeutic power of the visual and performing arts in the celebration.

A festival is a friendly event that presents a variety of performances and exhibitions at different venues or at one venue, but at different times. Festivals are important cultural activities in Ghana and they are very significant and indigenous to the very people who celebrate them.

Real life experience and art for contemporary festivals become pillars while the events are organized to create a significant connected pattern to give education to the public (on history, culture, economy, politics, health, knowledge, fashion, music and technology); to develop audience awareness and, to provide an avenue for artists to interact and exchange knowledge.

The experiences and art derived from art and culture presented as performance become aesthetically configured as heightened modes of communication showcased for an audience other than the traditional owners of the arts and culture. The activities of these items contain rich artistic elements of poetry, prose, excellent music and lively drama which have not been raised far above their traditional level. Festivals are lavish, with organized displays: dances, costumes, music, drama and poetry.

The forms of art are deliberately or consciously created to invoke differences in emotional responses. The distinctive nature and value of a particular artistic genre, the response it encourages from us, and the insight into human life it displays and imparts are some important characteristics of the aesthetic nature of art exhibited in the Agbeliza celebration.

The functional roles of art in Agbeliza suggest that art that preserves and transmits the beliefs and traditions of our communities during festivals must be well studied and documented for posterity. Traditional African arts especially in Agbeliza depicts the Avenor achievements in technology, communication, artistic production, and aesthetic consciousness.

If our goal is to achieve a fuller knowledge and appreciation of art, we should avoid utilizing only one theory and excluding much of what might be relevant to a work of art. We have already seen that art has a variety of purpose and aspects. To understand art, our primary question should be, "why does it look this way?" The viewer begins with the object itself. The main function of any work of art is to provoke aesthetic interest. But art should be intelligible to the viewer. Integral to its success are formal concerns: its design and composition.

Suggestions

Since art has many roles that can be of benefit to individuals and society, education would also help in preserving the intrinsic values of artistic expression in the process of presenting it in a new context so that its artistic merits are highlighted and not submerged or debased. The primary modes of artistic participation in the traditional arts are the dramatic process of making artifact, and its uses in everyday life. The making and uses of art have been identified with every indigenous artifact used in the celebration of festivals.

Education on the artforms can occur in a) Art making and b) Using art approaches to the study of art. These approaches can be implemented in two kinds of experiences (Field and School experiences). The youth or students will learn about the oral history of the art. The craftsman will show the learner how to use tools and media to make artifacts. Having mastered a few basic techniques and skills, the youth will be able to make artifacts. The artifacts can be made in schools or in the craftsman's workshop. This could serve as a new period of self-discovery and cultural awakening. Our children, our nation, and our future will be the beneficiaries.

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