

The Poetics *aboakyer* Festival Songs and Libation Texts: Akan Oral Art Forms

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ABSTRACT.

This paper analyses the songs and libation texts of the *Aboakyer* Festival of the Effutu in the Central Region of Ghana. It critically analyses the literary elements that provide the silver lining of the songs and libation texts and brings out their stylistic and aesthetic values. The paper analyses these selected oral pieces to bring out the devices of language embedded in them. The core proposition of this paper is that *Aboakyer* Festival songs and libation texts have their own aesthetic features and various language devices including repetition, exclamatory statements and metaphor. The paper argues that, like other traditional oral pieces, the *Aboakyer* Festival songs and libation texts constitute great oral literature which can be appreciated in much the same way as written literature.

KEYS WORDS: *Aboakyer* Festival, Oral literature, Libation Text,

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I. INTRODUCTION:

It is interesting to note that the question as to whether literary discourse exists in African oral texts has already been settled. This is because evidence put forward by a number of critics on African oral literature has so far proven that there is literary discourse in oral literature. Indeed, there is ample creativity in oral texts that warrants their being described as literary both in their content and form. Anyidoho in an article entitled *Atukwesi Okai and his Poetic Territory* observes that: "In Africa the poetic art still exists in oral form, and poetry has not yet liberated itself from the drum and dance" (Anyidoho: 1979: 47). Again, critics like Finnegan (1976), P' Bitek (1974), Kofi Awoonor (1974) and Okpewho (1992) among others have all opined that they are convinced about the poetic qualities of African songs and texts.

This study therefore does not belabour this question but rather analyses some songs and libation texts of the Effutu's *Aboakyer* Festival as her *widow's mite* and further evidence that creativity and literary language do exist in African oral tradition.

The *Aboakyer* deer hunt festival is celebrated annually on every first Saturday of May by the Effutu in the Central Region of Ghana. According to Effutu oral history, the people of Winneba (Effutu) have a migratory past. They journeyed since the 14th Century to various destinations until their final settlement at their current location, Simpa (Winneba). They have the belief that throughout their journey, they were led by their great warrior *Osim Pam* and protected by their war god *Penkye Otu*. The *Aboakyer* festival is therefore celebrated to honour and appreciate their state god, *Penkye Otu* and their ancestor *Osim Pam*. During the festival a competitive deer hunt is organized between the two *asafo* companies of Winneba; namely: *Asafo Tuafu no.1* and *Asafo Dentsifo no.2*.

The selected *Aboakyer* Festival songs are songs which in former times were sung during tribal wars. However, because there are no more of such tribal wars in recent times, such songs are sung during the festival time when the *asafo* companies go out to hunt for the deer.

These songs send deeper messages of historical, social, political, religious and economic interest to the audience. Again, they make extensive use of simple sentences, a pattern which allows messages to be more comprehensively sent.

The work has been divided into two parts. The first part categorises selected *Aboakyer* Festival songs and libation texts as panegyric poetry, religious poetry and lyrical poetry while the second part analyses the selected festival songs and libation texts to prove the point that creativity and literary language exist in African oral tradition.

1.2 ABOAKYER SONGS AS PANEGRIC SONGS OR POETRY.

Some Aboakyer Festival songs could be categorized as panegyric songs or poetry. This is a song or poem sung to praise the gods and the people who are regarded as heroes in the society. Panegyric songs or texts usually contain names of people who fought gallantly and shed their blood, especially to defend the state. Such songs are directed at chiefs, war lords and gods that led them through their wars. The language of these songs could be archaic, frightening and unpleasant. It may contain figurative expressions and historical allusions which might require interpretation before even a native audience would understand. There could be the use of powerful images of animals and natural phenomena in comparison to the great heroes or heroines in the society. The performers may use creatures (with extra ordinary powers) as symbols to depict the strength of their heroes, all in their honour. The expressions used by the performers give the heroes honour and adoration.

An example of a panegyric song among the Effutu is titled *OhenTakyiMbow* (Congratulations warriorTakyi). It is one of the songs the *AsafoDentsifo* singing in appreciation of one of their greatest war lords ever. In this song, *OhenTakyi's* name is mentioned for his bravery and dedication to humankind, particularly, to his *asafo* company, *AsafoDentsifo*. The good deeds this man did in the past for his society may not be categorically mentioned or itemized in the song but are clearly implied:

Akan English

ohen Takyimbo Warrior Takyi, congratulations!
Ei! mboeimbo, ohen Takyimbo Congratulations, warrior Takyi
Woma no mboei We congratulate you
Eimbo, eimbo asafohen Congratulations the head of the *Asafo*
ohen Yaw eieiei Congratulations Yaw the Warrior
okatakya, okitambetsir oma no mbo The Mighty Warrior with strong shoulders
we congratulate you.

ohen Yaw Takyina ne mbanyimbanyembanyinreba,
hommmayemmahonmbo, hommmayemmahonmboara
nawoyembanyinmba, akofedziakoaraator. Hommmahonmbo.
Mbanyinedzinkonyim, hommmahonmbo naye.

Asafo papa naworesenoo

Asafo Okotoono wo hen?

(The warrior Yaw Takyi and his warriors are approaching
Let us congratulate them, let us congratulate them because
They are brave when most warriors have fallen. Congratulate them
The brave has won, congratulate them
The great *Asafo* company is passing by
Where are the cowards?)

The performers use words that depict the strength of their hero. *Okatakya* and *Okitambetsir* (Mighty warrior with strong shoulders). These words suggest that Warrior Takyi, like several other heroes, is a fearless warrior who does not fight only to run away; but rather, until the enemy is vanquished. Again, the word *Mbow* is repeated several times. Clearly the poetic technique seems to dwell in multiple repetition for emphasis and to reiterate the congratulatory message.

1.3 ABOAKYER SONGS AS RELIGIOUS POETRY.

Again, the selected texts, particularly the libation texts, could be categorized as religious poetry. In her book, *Oral Literature in Africa*, Ruth Finnegan illustrates three main principles that may be present before a particular piece of poetry can be regarded as religious poetry. According to her:

Firstly, the content may be religious as inverse about mythical actions of gods or direct religious instruction or invocation.

Secondly the poetry may be recited by those who are regarded as religious specialists. Thirdly, it may be performed on occasions which are generally agreed to be religious ones (Finnegan; 1976: 168).

Finnegan thus gives the parameters by which a piece of poetry could be categorized as religious. From her words above, religious poetry should be performed by religious people, at a period that is generally regarded as religious and finally should have a religious content. The work would at this stage analyse an *Effutu* libation text as a religious poem. The text to be considered is a libation prayer which is offered to the gods and ancestors in the morning of the festival day before the hunt takes place.

Akan English

Agoo! Agoo! Agoo! Agoo! Agoo! Agoo!

TwerammpɔnNyankopɔn. The Most Dependable God.

*AsaseYaansa! AsaseYaa!*I offer you drink!

*Bosompo Kofi Bosompo Kofi memawonsa!*I offer you drink.

AbosomAkese; Mbonyi, The strong and mighty gods, *Mbonyi, Kaiko, Ayensu, Kaiko, Ayensu, Kaiko, Ayensu, Kaiko, Ayensu, Kakamoah, Akrama ɔboadze, Kakamoah, Akrama the creator, Okyerempɔn, ObosommaOponkoba, Okyerempɔn, ObosommaOponkoba Akebi, Badu Okaraka, Adoko, Adoko Badu Okaraka, Akebi, Adoko, nsa!* I offer you drink.

*Onyinsɛnfo a wɔbɔnoakokran, ɔbaatan*The pregnant one who you carry aback. *osanka, bentua no rukum, puwupuwere,* Mother *Osaka,* the syringe is killing me. *bɔmrosirebomebira, Bɔmrosire, bomebira, kakaadoa.nsa o! kakaadoa,*I offer you drink.

*Tuafonsamfo*The departed souls of *Tuafɔ,* *nsa!* I offer you drink.

*Dentsifonsamanfo*The departed souls of *Dentsifo nsa!* I offer you drink.

Me fremondaduee a ɔnnyɛbɔn bi, I invoke you today *nsanamedzi ma mo.* To offer you drink.

Ndeyɛdapcnkese ma Today is a great day because *henosande ɔyɛafahyeit* is the festival day.

da. Effutumanakanhɔn da mu, afiiakɔ The year has gone round to meet *aporowababio. Me fremhom*EffutuState alive

*a, mefremhom wɔ asomdwee mu namesɛ*We call upon you this day and we *dehomarmondzikanna mobɔ yɛnho*ask you to guard and protect us from *ban nfremusunyeassan mu, wɔ afeyi mu* misfortune through the year.

*Ye ma monsa. Dzi ɔbɔmbofo*We offer you drink. Lead the *anyimkannkɔ* hunters to the hunting *ahayjnaɛnyiwɔnmbra*grounds and bring them back *fie asomdwe mu.* home safely.

Yebisanhyira ma Ghana We ask for blessing for the head *ɔman panyinnaa*of the state of the *apamanfo. Yebisanhyira*Republic of Ghana. We ask *nnaasomdwe ma* for peace for all the people *obibiara a ɔkahɛn wo* who have joined us in celebrating *wɔ afahyenyi mu.* the festival today.

Ye ma monsa! We offer you drink.

*Yebisaasomdwe, nkwana*We pray for peace and *apcmudzen ma Effutumannyinaraa.* good health for all people of Effutu.

Yebisaasasee (AsaseYaa) nsa mu nhyira, We ask for the blessing of the land.

Yebisanhyirafirabosom a wɔwɔ po mu We ask for the blessing of the sea.

Yebisanhyira ma edwumayjfonyinara. We ask for blessings for all workers.

*Eyina me serɛmo*This is what I ask of you

Nsa, nsa, nsa! We offer you drink.

ɔnye hɔ. So be it.

It is important to note that this text satisfies the criteria for religious poetry prescribed by Finnegan. According to the *Effutu* tradition, libation is a preserve of the priests (*Osow*) who are obviously a team of religious specialists. The libation is offered during the *Aboakyer* festival, in the morning of the festival day before the two *asafɔ* companies embark on the hunt.

Libation or *mpayis* the act of offering a drink to a god or ancestor. It can also be explained as a means through which man establishes communion or communication with his god or ancestor. This premise undoubtedly is a religious occasion. Also, since it is a prayer by the priest to the gods, it could be considered as a purely religious performance with its religious content. The libation text thus meets Finnegan's three main requirements for religious poetry. The opening line of the text shows the respect and honour which the *Effutu* community has for their gods and ancestors.

Agoo! Agoo! Agoo!

Agoo! Agoo! Agoo!

Agoo! is a powerful prelude that resounds far and wide thus capturing everyone's attention. The repetition here shows that the priest (*osow*) would not want to budge into the privacy of the gods and ancestors in the spirit world. Hence, he calls them or "knocks on their door" three times.

The priest goes ahead to mention the names of the Almighty God first; the African traditional religion refers to Him as the Supreme Being. Due to His supremacy, He has to be mentioned first before other deities or lesser gods are called upon. The mentioning of the individual names of the deities after *nyankopon* has been mentioned is indicative of this hierarchy:

Akan English

Twerammpɔn Nyankopɔn. Dependable God.

Asase Yaansa! Asase Yaa, I offer you drink!

Bosomfo Kofi, Bosompo Kofi,

memawonsa! I offer you drink.

Abosom Akese; Mbonyi, The strong and mighty gods, *Mbonyi*,

Kaiko, Ayensu, Kaiko Kaiko, Ayensu, Kaiko

This is also an indication of the allegiance of the priest and the entire *Effutu* community to the gods and ancestors.

The literary device which is used as the priest mentions the names of the deities is an example of consonance. This is illustrated by the repeated consonant "K" as in *Akese, Kuoko, Kakkamoa, Akrama, Akebi, Okarako, Adoko, Akokran, Osanka and Kakaadoa*. The priest goes ahead to tell the deities that his mission is peaceful. It is first of all, to offer them drinks:

Me fremoneduee a

ɔnnyɛbɔn bi,

nsanamedzimamo

(I invoke you today, it doesn't mean the worst has happened but to offer you drinks)

The second mission is to ask for protection for the hunters:

Dzi ɔbɔmbofoanyimkannkɔ ahaye

Na ɛnyiwɔnmbra fie asomdwe mu.

(Lead the hunters to the hunting grounds and bring them back home safely)

The prayer is also to ask for peace and blessings for the President of Ghana and for all celebrants of the festival.

Yebisanhyira ma Ghana ɔman Panyin...

Yebisanhyiranaasmondwe ma obibiara a

ɔkahenhowcafahyeyimo...

ɔnyɛ ho

(We ask for blessing for the President of Ghana...)

We ask for peace for all people who have joined us in celebrating the festival today ...

So be it!

In fact, the performance of the libation as discussed above is restricted to the priests who are the spiritual leaders and also in charge of *Penkye Otu*'s grove as well as the other deities. Indeed, this performance is sacred, it is done by religious people (priest), on a special occasion which is the *Aboakyer* Festival and the song is nothing short of a religious text. Per the tradition, libation is poured in an atmosphere of reverence and solemnity.

ABOAKYER SONGS AS LYRICAL POETRY

The *Aboakyer* songs under discussion could also be studied and analyzed as lyrical poetry in relation to the characteristic features that are generally associated with that genre. Generally, the aesthetic value of poetry refers to the aggregate of features that come into play to make the poem stand out as a literary piece. It must be noted that one of the most striking features of a work of art and by extension, poetry is its ability to give both instruction and pleasure.

The performers of the *Effutu* festival songs place equal emphasis on both instruction and pleasure. These songs, which were primarily war songs which have become festival songs are not just sung to, as it were, charge the celebrants of the festival. Their main themes and objectives go further to instil discipline and set rules for good behaviour, thus to instruct the audience and the entire *Effutu* state. Although our discussion shows that the entire emphasis of the performance of the songs is on the content or instruction, pleasure has an equally crucial place in the presentation. For instance, the rhythm of the drums, rattles of various musical instruments, tone and sweet melodies of the singers' voices, stamping of feet to rhythm, body movement, gestures, costumes

and the zeal which accompany the rendition, portray a complete frenzied atmosphere of ecstasy. Through all this, the performers and the audience in general exhibit and experience pleasure. It can consequently be stated that the Effutufestival songs conform to Pater's theory of aesthetic value of art which must have both "instruction and pleasure"

Interaction with some of the performers revealed that this merger of instruction and pleasure is not accidental because conscious efforts are made by the performers to soften the pain and the tension that might be created through the mockery used by one *asafocompany* against its rival *asafocompany*.

Lyric poems are usually brief and have a striking feature that expresses the personal feelings and thoughts of performers or the community. It follows therefore that the performers in the study area use their song performance to air their personal feelings and thoughts particularly about their rival *asafocompany*. In the song *Asemyiwcnka*(Abomination) for instance, *AsafoDentsifouse* lyrics that express their thoughts, feelings and their candid opinion about the leadership of their rival *AsafoTuafocompany*

Asemyiwonnka!, Asemyiwonnka!, Asemyiwonnka!

AsafoTuafoka aka fa ɔpeteedzehene...

Adze a wɔ reyɛ wɔ kyireooo!

(Abomination! Abomination! Abomination!

AsafoTuafohave enstooled someone who looks like a vulture

... what they have done is an abomination and is forbidden.)

Repetition of *Asemyiwonnka* holds everybody in suspense; wondering what it is that should not be said in public. There is the use of a powerful imagery (hyperbole) of a vulture for a chief. The vulture which is despised for its dirty habits contrasts with a chief whose habits are expected to be a model for society. The effect is extreme humour, since the *asafoleader* is being ridiculed.

1.5 ASPECTS OF POETRY IN ABOAKYER FESTIVAL SONGS AND LIBATION TEXTS

In *The Poetics* (From Allan H. Girbert's *Literary Criticism from Plato to Dryden* 1982) *Literary Criticism, Plato to Dryden*, Aristotle maintain that ordinary language produces clarity. He opines that the departure from the normal method of using ordinary language could still make the diction clear even though the language may not be that common. He says:

... ordinary language will produce clarity but lengthening and contraction and alteration of words contribute in no small part to making diction clear but yet not common, for the departure from the normal method of using the ordinary language keeps the diction from appearing common, and yet the relation to the

norm secures clarity for it (Aristotle, 1982: 10).

This quote establishes that the use of ordinary language will make the diction clear, this notwithstanding, the unusual use of words and expressions will produce language that is not common and thus maintain the known qualities of the genre. The language used in the Effutu songs under discussion seems simple on the surface, thus the lyrics and their arrangements look simple and straight forward at a glance, however the literary devices including similes and metaphors used in the songs paint a vivid picture in the minds of the audience. A look again at the song *Asemyi wɔ nnka*(Abomination) shows that the performers, *AsafoDentsifore* register their disapproval and disgust at the leadership of *AsafoTuafoka*. The new *Supiis* compared to *opete*(vulture). In the traditional set up a vulture is more or less a useless bird, a bird who feeds on the refuse dump. There is thus a hint perhaps that the *AsafoTuafoka* leader is a bad leader and useless at that. Their action is further described as *Adze a wɔreyewokyire wo!* (What they have done is an abomination and is forbidden). The expressions above are symbolic of the useless and valueless traits of the *Tuafoka* leader. The contempt for this choice is so much that the next thing is for the performers to call on the community to ridicule and hoot at them.

... *wɔnhurowwɔnoo!*

Wɔnserewɔnkwa, kwa, kwa ...

(Laugh at them ha, ha, ha!

... hoot at them ooo!)

The performers in the study area carefully use lyrics which are suitable for the occasion to show their skill in and mastery of the choice and use of words. An instance could be cited with the song which was composed almost immediately by a rival *asafocompany* when it was detected that the other company had stolen a Catholic priest's (Roman father's) deer.

Wɔmma ɔnyentemwɔmfankɔɛ

Roman father ɔregyen' aboa

Wɔmma ɔnyentemwɔmfankɔɛ

Take it back as soon as possible
The Roman father wants his deer
Take it back as soon as possible

This song is a social commentary discussing an embarrassing situation on the part of an *asafocompany*. Again, it exhibits an extreme sense of humour in the suggestion that the deer which is to be presented for the chief's approval is a stolen one. There is also the use of anachronism in that a Roman Father or Christianity does not fit into the historical, the traditional and the social contexts.

One of the most significant devices that is used in the composition of the Effutu songs and libation texts is repetition. Isidore Okpewho says that:

Repetition is no doubt one of the most fundamental

characteristic features of Oral literature. It has both aesthetic and a utilitarian value: in other words, it is a device that not only gives a touch of beauty or attractiveness to a piece of oral expression (whether song or narrative or other kind of statement) but also serves certain practical purposes in the overall organisation of the oral performance. (Okpewho 1992; 71)

Nketia also states that repetition in [festival songs] are not monotonous, neither are they due to barrenness of thought:

On the contrary, they may have a musical mode of meaning or they may be a means of emphasizing points that [celebrants] might wish to make. (Nketia: 1955; 104)

Repetition is thus generally used to stress a point or emphasize an already stated idea. Areas which are often repeated are words, phrases, clauses and sounds. Such repetition puts emphasis on whatever they imply and the seriousness of the situation. The performer or singer sometimes intentionally repeats parts of the song to emphasize a point or to enable him think of introducing a new character. It also draws the audience's attention to their object of interest in the song. Repeated words, phrases or clauses allow the audience to function concurrently as chorus and participants in performing the song with the artist. Again, since the repetition of words, phrases or clauses occurs several times, it allows the members of the audience to commit the songs to memory. Again, considering the fact that most of the songs are usually put in figurative language, it is quite useful that they are repeated to facilitate an understanding of their implications. The song below reflects the kind of repetition under discussion.

The song below is sung by the *AsafoDentsifoin* appreciation and honour of one of their greatest warriors ever.

Eh mbow, eh mbow! Congratulations! Congratulations!

OheneTakyimbow! Warrior Takyi Congratulations!

Wo ma no mbow! Congratulations!

Eh mbow! Congratulations!

Asafohene, sana no Head of the *Asafo*

Mbow! Mbow! Mbow! Congratulations! Congratulations! Congratulations!

Ohene Yaw eh! eh! eh! Warrior Yaw

*Okatakya, oketambetsir*The Mighty Warrior with strong shoulders

Wo ma no mbow! Congratulations!

The message in the song is simply to honour the Effutu war lord *OhenTakyi*. The instances of repetition are obviously to emphasize the point that *OhenTakyi* is indeed a great warrior with distinguished prowess. The repetition of *mbow* also facilitates the commitment of the song to memory by the members of the audience. Also, the use of incremental repetition in the appellations tells a story about *OhenTakyi*. It starts with a congratulatory message and goes on to tell us why the need to congratulate to Warrior Takyi. From the song, the reason for the "congratulatory" is because he is a great lord, who is very strong willed which, of course, denotes a person who is both principled and disciplined.

Repetition as a literary device is again used in the Effutu song below. As usual this is a war song for the *AsafoTuafono.1* Company. Now it is one of the songs sung during the hunt for the deer on the festival day. The *obo* mentioned in the song is one of the powerful deities of *AsafoTuafono 1* Company.

Akan English

Obow eh! eh! eh! Obow! Oboweh! eh! eh! Obow!

Eh! eh! eh! Obow! Eh! eh! eh! Obow!

Obow to manyen a gya no Obow spare the native when you meet him

Obow to nana kum no! but kill the stranger

Ye nyim wo, wɔ akomfodoesiwdo! We know you at your shrine of warriors.

Chorus

Eh ɔbo! Eh ɔbo! Eh ɔbo! Eh ɔbo!

ɔbo! ɔbo! Eh ɔbo! ɔbo! ɔbo! Eh obo!

Tuaforeba o! Tuafosare approaching

ɔbo, ɔbo, ɔbo ɔbo, ɔbo, ɔbo

to manyengya no spare the native when you meet him

ɔbo! ɔbo! ɔbo! ɔbo! ɔbo! ɔbo!

ɔbo to onanakum no but kill the stranger when you meet him

ɔboTuaforeba o! ɔbo, ɔbo! ɔbo the Tuafosare approaching

Unlike the previous song *WarriorTakyi* which sends a congratulatory message, this song is an invocation of the god *ɔbo*. The repetition of *ɔbo* is not just to call the god but to ensure that he can hear them. It is war time or hunting time and since the hunting is competitive, the god's supernatural assistance is desperately needed in order to win the contest. There is also the indication that since the god is a spirit, he will be able to differentiate a native from an enemy. The prayer goes on to request that:

Akan English

ɔbo to ɔmanyen a gya no spare the native when you meet him

ɔbo to ɔnana kum no but kill the stronger when you meet him

The obo mentioned above is specially requested to protect the members of *AsafoTuafɔ*

ɔbo! ɔbo! ɔbo! ɔbo! ɔbo! ɔbo!

Tuaforeba o! The *Tuafosare* approaching

By extension the repetition signifies a clarion call on all other deities of Effutu community to come to their aid. The exclamatory statements portray the strong feelings of the society, and the power behind the utterance depicts the community's belief, reliance and dependence on the deities.

II. CONCLUSION

At the end of the exercise of analysing the selected *Aboakyer* Festival songs and libation texts, the researcher has observed that some language devices have been used by the artists/ performers to enliven the performance and to bring it to real life experience. Again, from the analysis carried out on the poetic features of the *Aboakyer* Festival songs and libation texts, it has been proven that the creation and use of some language devices clearly accentuates the literary discussion embedded in them.

Indeed, it can be seen from the aesthetic features of the songs and libation texts in the *Aboakyer* Festival that, the same vocabulary used in appreciating or analysing poetry can be employed with equal validity to the libation texts and festival songs.

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