The Poetics of 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 Efutu 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 Texts

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. Anyidaho in an article entitled "AtukwesiOkai 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" (Anyidaho: 1979: 47). Again, critics like Finnegans (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 Efutu’s Aboakyer Festival as her widow’s mite and further evidence that creativity and literary language do exist in African oral tradition.

The Aboakyer festival deer hunt festival is celebrated annually on every first Saturday of May by the Efutu in the Central Region of Ghana. According to Effutural history, the people of Winneba (Efutu) 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 PenkyeOtu. The Aboakyer festival is therefore celebrated to honour and appreciate their state god, PenkyeOtu and their ancestor Osim Pam. During the festival a competitive deer hunt is organized between the two asafo companies of Winneba; namely: AsafoTuafo no.1 and AsafoDentsifo 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.
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 warrior Takyi). It is one of the songs the AsafoDenistsifo sing 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 asafocompany, *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 Takymbo*Warrior Takyi, congratulations!  
*Ei! mboeimbo, ohen Takymbo*Congratulations, warrior Takyi  
*Woma no mboei*We congratulate you  
*Eimbo, eimbo oşafohen*Congratulations the head of the Asafo  
*Ohen Yaw eieiei*Congratulations Yaw the Warrior  
*ɔkatakyi, okitambɛntsir wma no mbo*The Mighty Warrior with strong shoulders  
*we congratulate you.*

*Ohen Yaw Takinya ne mbanyimbanyakimnireba, hommmayɛmɛmam:ɛmbo, hommmayɛmɛmam:ɛnmbɔara*  
*nawɔyembanyinmba, akofoedziakoarattɔ. Hommmayɛmmbɔ.*  
*Mbanyinɛdɛziŋkɔnyɛm, hommmayɛmmbɔnɔnayɛ.*  
*Asafo papa nawɛresenoo*  
*AsafoOkotono 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 Asafocompany is passing by*  
*Where are the cowards?)*

The performers use words that depict the strength of their hero. *ɔkatakyi*and *Okitambɛntsir*(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


AsaseYaa! I offer you drink!

Abosombo Kof Kof Abosombo Kofi memawonsa! I offer you drink.

AbosomAkεse; Mbonyi, The strong and mighty gods, Mbonyi,
Kaiko, Ayensu, Kaiko, Ayensu, Kaiko, Ayensu, Kaiko, Ayensu,
Kakamoah, Akrama aboadze, Kakamoah, Akrama the creator,
Okyerempɔn, ObosommaOponkɔba, Okyerempɔn, ObosommaOponkɔba
Akebi, Badu Okaraka, Adoko, Adoko Badu Okaraka, Akebi,
Adoko, nsa! I offer you drink.

Onyinsεnfo a wɔbnoakokran, ɔbaatan The pregnant one who you carry aback.

bɛntua no rukum, puwupuwere, Mother Osaka, the syringe is killing me.
bɛmbiri, bɛmbiri,
kakaadoa, nsa o! kakaadoa, I offer you drink.

Tuafonso The departed souls of Tuafo,
nsa! I offer you drink.

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

Me frεmondaduee a nnyε bɔn bi, I invoke you today
nsanamedzi ma mo. To offer you drink.

Ndεyεdapcnkεse ma Today is a great day because
hεnosandε yεafahyε it is the festival day.
da. Effutumanakanhɔn da mu, aftiako The year has gone round to meet
aporowababio. Me frεhom EffutuState alive
a, mɛfremo wɔ asomdwee mu namsre We call upon you this day and we
dehomaraondzikananna mobo yɛnhɔask you to guard and protect us from
ban sfremusanyeASSan mu, wo afeyi mu misfortune through the year.
Ye ma monsa. Dzi bɛmbifo We offer you drink. Lead the
ayimkankɔ hunters to the hunting
ahayjnasyiwɔnɔmbragrounds and bring them back
fie asomdwe mu, home safely.

Yeabisanyira ma Ghana We ask for blessing for the head
ɔman panyinnaa of the state
apamanfo. Yeabisanyira Republic of Ghana. We ask
maasommw de ma for peace for all the people
obiara a ɔkahen wo who have joined us in celebrating
wo yafahyenyi mu, the festival today.
Ye ma monsa! We offer you drink.

Yeabisasomdwe, nkwana We pray for peace and
apcmudzen ma Effutumanyniarias good health for all people of Effutu.
Yeabisasasere (AsaseYaa) nsa mu nhyira, We ask for the blessing of the land.
Yeabisanhyirafraborosom a wɔpo mu We ask for the blessing of the sea.
Yeabisanhyira ma edwumayʃfɔnyinara. We ask for blessings for all workers.
Eyina me seremo 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 asafocompanies embark on the hunt.

Libation or mpɔyi is 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 nyankpon has been mentioned is indicative of this hierarchy:

**Akan English**

TwerampɔnNyankɔn. Dependable God.
AsaseYaansa! AsaseYaa, I offer you drink!
Bosombo Kofi, Bosombo Kofi,
memawonsa! I offer you drink.
AbosomAkẹse; Mbonyi, The strong and mighty gods, Mbonyi,
Kaiko, Ayensu, KaikoKaiko, 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, Kakamoa, 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:

Mε frɛmondeduee a
Ngɛbɛ 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 ɛmbofoanyimakannk ahaye
Na enyiɛnmbra 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 ɛman Panyin...
Yebisanhyiraamaasmondwe ma obibiara a
skahenhowcafaheyeyimo...
ɛmɛ ḥo
(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 PenkyeOtu ’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

DOI: 10.9790/0837-2310082228 www.iosrjournals.org 25 | Page
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 Asemyiwɔnnka(Abomination) for instance, AsafoDentsifohave lyrics that express their thoughts, feelings and their candid opinion about the leadership of their rival AsafoTuafo

Asemyiwɔnnka!, Asemyiwɔnnka!, Asemyiwɔnnka!
AsafoTuafo aka fa ɔpeteedezenehene...
Adze a wɔ reye wo kiireeoo!
(Abomination! Abomination! Abomination!
AsafoTuafo have enstooled someone who looks like a vulture
... what they have done is an abomination and is forbidden.)

Repetition of Asemyiwɔnnkaholds 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 straightforward 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, AsafoDentsiforegister their disapproval and disgust at the leadership of AsafoTuafo. The new Supiis compared to opete(vulture). In the traditional setup 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 AsafoTuafoleader is a bad leader and useless at that. Their action is further described as Adze a wɔreyewosyire wo! (What they have done is an abomination and is forbidden). The expressions above are symbolic of the useless and valueless traits of the Tuafoleader. 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.

... wonhurowwɔnno!
Wɔnserwɔnkwaaw, kwaaw, kwaaw ...
(Laugh at them ha, ha, ha!
... hoot at them oooh!)

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 enyentemwɔmfankɔe
Roman father ɔregyen aboa
Wɔmma enyentemwɔmfankɔe
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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. IsidoreOkpewho 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 AsafoDentsifo in 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
Okatakyi, oketambetsirThe 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 mbowalso 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
ɔbo eh! eh! eh! ɔbo! ɔboeh! eh! eh! ɔbo!
Eh! eh! eh! ɔbo!Eh! eh! eh! ɔbo!
ɔbo to ɔman yen a gyaw ɔbo spare the native when you meet him
ɔbo to ɔman kum no!but kill the stranger
Ye nyim wo, wɔ akofodoesiwo! We know you at your shrine of warriors.

Chorus

Eh ṭbo! Eh ṭbo! Eh ṭbo! Eh ṭbo!

Tuaforeba o! Tuafosare approaching

To manyengya no spare the native when you meet him

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

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 AboakyerFestival 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 AboakyerFestival 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 AboakyerFestival 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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