

***Feok* Festival Costumes: Evolution & Socio-Cultural Importance**

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Abstract

The *Feok* festival is an important festival celebrated annually by the people of Sandema and its environs, to commemorate the victory of the indigenes over slave raiders led by 'Babatu' in the 18th century, and to celebrate good harvest. The historical evolution and cultural importance of the *Feok* festival costume was studied using descriptive survey. Purposive sampling technique was used to recruit respondents for data extraction. The final sample size for the study was 70. Data was collected using questionnaires and interview guides. The final data was coded and inputted into SPSS version 16.0. The SPSS ran the analysis and the results were presented using descriptive statistics. The study found that the *Feok* costumes were originated by warriors, traditional leaders and ancestors who fought and defeated Babatu, as revealed by respondents during the study. The survey further shows that the costumes, which are now annually used in the celebration of the popular *feok* festival by the people of Sandema, were specially designed to protect the warriors from weapons of war. The research equally established some degree of economic spin-off through the sale of tourist-targeted costumes and hand woven fabrics. Some recommendations were also detailed towards the preservation and sustenance of this important cultural art form.

1. Introduction

The story of *Feok* is of great historical significance as it affects the destinies of millions of people not only in Ghana but also across the African continent and in the diaspora. *Feok* has become the most significant event in the Builsa area in recent times, giving the people a true sense of identity and solidarity. The *Feok* festival is an annual festival, which is celebrated every December in memory of the victory over slave raiders led by 'Babatu' in the 18th century, and as a thanksgiving to the gods for good harvest (National Commission on Culture, 2009). Equally, as established by Nurudeen (2003), the festival presents the opportunity for African-Americans to re-align themselves with their African routes.

By simple translation, *Feok* in the local *Buli* dialect means abundance of food. In this context, then, the festival becomes one of thanks giving by which the people of the area express thanks to God, their ancestors and spirit beings for seeing them through another year and a successful farming season. The festival commences with the pouring of libation to invoke the ancestors and deities of the land to superintend over the festival to ensure uneventful and peaceful celebration. The climax of the festival is a public gathering that brings together chiefs, war dancers, and singing groups from the villages in the Builsa area (Nurudeen, 2003).

The most conspicuous culmination of the *Feok* festival is the display of colourful costumes and war-dance performances. The basic movements of the dance serve as the main feature of the *Feok* festival that re-enacts scenes from battles. *Feok* festival has become the most significant event in the Builsa area in recent times. It is a secular occasion that presents an appropriate platform for many clans in the Builsa traditional area to congregate, clad in rich traditional costumes. Indeed, the *Feok* costume is a delight to watch.

The term "costume" simply denotes all items of apparel and body adornment such as headgears, hats, rings, earrings, handbags, belts, shoes, just to mention a few. The term also refers to clothing styles and its related accessories (Quist, 1995). The author adds that costumes are items used in covering, decorating or ornamenting the body.

Costumes are integral parts of many, and are valued as the most personal components of daily activities. Largely, costumes define the social activities within the cultural settings of a community, at a given period of time (Weber, 1990; Bernard, 2009; Rasmussen & Hammar, 2013). Bernard (2009) explains further that the costume is an inspiring source of knowledge about human life and conditions, ideas, conceptions and thoughts, customs, crafts, beliefs, values and fashion around the world. Eskridge (1998) articulates that costumes are also employed in protecting many against physical and spiritual attacks, or used as an integral part of some lavish regalia. Contributing to the evolution of costumes in Africa, Kennett (1994) opines that animal skins and bark cloths were the first materials used in African clothing. Starke *et al.*, (1990) agrees with the above assertion, adding

that the above materials were crafted into simple aprons to cover the genitals or large robes to drape around the body.

Over the years, the historical relevance of the special costumes worn by modern day traditional performers during the celebration of the annual *Feok* festival is not fully apprehended by many. Indeed, the crucial role(s) played by the various components of the *Feok* costume in winning the legendary war, which was waged against the 18th century slave raider; Babatu and his henchmen, remains a mystery to many admirers of the costume. Considering the fact that this information is largely folkloric, and remains largely the preserve of elderly people of the *Builsa* community, documenting this information would therefore be a crucial step in duly preserving this rich lore for posterity. It is equally anticipated that the research report would help educate many on the importance of the costumes, and enhance their instrumental values as objects for the promotion of cultural heritage and tourism in northern Ghana.

The overarching objectives of this study were to:

- i. Establish the reasons for inventing the *Feok* costume;
- ii. Identify the originator(s) of the costume;
- iii. Establish the role(s) of the various components of the costume; and
- iv. Underpin the socio-economic importance associated with the *Feok* costume.

2. Background (Study Area)

The study was carried out in the *Builsa* district of the Upper East region of Ghana. The district is situated between longitudes 1° 05' and 1° 35' West and latitudes 10° 20' and 10° 50' North. The area occupies about 2000 sq Km, and the people speak *Buli*, a Gur language of the Oti-Volta sub-grouping. *Builsa* comprised a large indigenous population who engage in farming activities; mostly cultivating millet, beans, groundnut and rice. They also rear animals such as cattle, sheep, goat, guinea fowls and chicken. They harvest shea-nut and *dawadawa*, which they process into shea-butter and *dawadawa* food spices for sale or local consumption. Traditional authority is enthroned in the Sandema-Naab and his divisional and sub-divisional chiefs. The artistic preoccupations of the *Builsa* people are textile weaving, pottery making, blacksmithing and the processing of jute/sisal ropes.

3. Methodology

The study made use of a descriptive research design. As explained by Key (1997), this design is usually utilized to “obtain information concerning the current status of the phenomena; to describe “what exists” with respect to variables or conditions in a situation”. The population was mainly educated and non-educated indigenes of Sandema. These largely comprised traditional rulers, royals, scholars, producers of *feok* costumes, as well as *feok* festival warriors and dancers as shown in Table: 1 below. These people were sampled because they have varied experiences and knowledge in cultural issues of the *Builsa*, particularly the *feok* festival. The purposive sampling technique was used to sample 70 respondents from the above group of people for the study. The purposive method was used because it provides the opportunity to select knowledgeable respondents as quickly as possible; this technique was also employed because the sample being investigated is quite small and proportionality was not the main concern of the study (Crossman, 2016).

Table 1: Study Sample

Categories of responders	Frequency	%
Traditional rulers	20	28.57
Royals	10	14.29
Scholars	5	7.14
Producers of Feok costumes	15	21.43
Warriors	15	21.43
Dancers	5	7.14
Total	70	100

The researchers used questionnaires, interviews and observations to accumulate the data. The interview guide consisted of both closed and open-ended questions following a procedure outlined in Alhassan (2006). The open-ended questions were designed to enable respondents to freely express themselves and to provide in-depth information of the phenomenon under investigation. Aside the questionnaires and interviews, on-the-spot

observation techniques were also used to obtain primary information on the festival. The data was analysed using SPSS software, version 16.0. The results were presented using descriptive statistics.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

Historical Evolution and Reason(s) for Inventing the *Feok* Costumes

The results of the study relating to the historical development of the feok costume are presented in Table 2. Out of 70 respondents, 67 of them, representing 95.7% reported that the costume was invented by the forefathers of the *Builsa* people several years ago. 35 respondents representing 50% however affirmed that the costume was designed and produced by the warriors who fought and defeated Babatu and his *Zabarima* slave traders around the 1880s. Also, 61 (87.1%) believed the costume was invented by traditional leaders in the early years of *Builsa*.

Table 2: The History of the *Feok* Costume

Item	Responses	Frequency	%
Invention of feok festival costume	1. Forefathers/ancestors	67.0	95.7
	2. warriors who fought Babatu	35.0	50.0
	3. Traditional leaders	61.0	87.1
Reasons for invention	1. War and festivals	55.0	78.6
	2. Remembrance of ancestors	62.0	88.6
	3. Celebrate harvest of new crops	68.0	97.0
Other historical reasons	1. Source of emancipation	68.0	97.0
	2. Cultural preservation	56.0	80.0

Source: field survey, 2014

According to 55 respondents (78.6%), the reason(s) for the invention of the *feok* costume, was to enable the warriors fight Babatu and his slave raiders. Again, 68 of the interviewees (97.0%) stated that the costumes were meant to commemorate the harvest of new crops. Finally, on the issue of emancipation and cultural preservation, 68(97.0%) of the respondents stated that the costumes constitute a symbol of emancipation from slavery, while 56 (80.0%) of them reported that the costume epitomizes cultural preservation.

In terms of cultural relevance of *Feok* costumes, the responses are shown in Table 3. In general terms, 63 (90.0%) of the respondents opined that, the *feok* costume instils bravery and unites the people. In terms of relevance of the costumes, 67 (95.7%) of the respondents asserted that the talisman-studded smocks provide spiritual protection against bullets and arrows; this affirms similar findings by Akapata (2009). Beside the above, 56 (80%) of the respondents added that the pantaloons protect the lower parts of the body, when fighting battles. In relation to the hat, 58 (82.9%) of the interviewees revealed that the hat was specially designed to protect the head against bullets from guns during combat. The horns are also of significant relevance. Warriors wearing the horn-studded hat possess in them some form of courage as it encourages them to fight on or to frighten the enemy as reported by 65 (92.9%) of the respondents. With regards to the waist belt, 67 (95.7%) of the interviewees pointed out that this accessory usually holds the cloths, bullets, arrows and water firmly in place.

Table 3: Relevance of the *Feok* Festival Costume

Questionnaire item	Responses	Frequency	%
What importance do the costumes add to the Builsa tradition?	Bravery, unity	63	90.0
Relevance of the talisman-studded smocks	Spiritual protection against bullets and arrows during war	67	95.7
pantaloons	Protection of the lower parts of the body	56	80.0
The hat	Protects the head spiritually against arrows and guns	58	82.9
Waist belt	Hold the cloths, the arrows and bullet pouches and water firmly in place.	67	95.7
The horns on the hat	To fight on, and frighten the enemy	65	92.9

Source: field survey, 2014

In finding out the socio-economic gains associated with the *feok* costume as captured in Table: 4, 51 of the respondents (72.9%) reported that the costume attracts tourists to the event due to its uniqueness in the Upper East Region. However, 19 of the respondents (27.1) disagreed with the above assertion.

In relation to the costume's uniqueness in the Upper East Region, 56 (80.0 %) of the respondents opined that the costume is the only dress code that was developed out of war, while 14 (20.0) of the respondents disagreed. According to 51 (72.9%) of the respondents, the festival provide income to costumiers and retailers through sale of costumes; 19 (27.1%) of the interviewees however disagreed with the above assertion.

Table 4: Social and Economic Impact of the *Feok* Costume

Question	Yes		Reason for Yes	No	
	Yes	%		No	%
Do the costumes attract tourist?	51	72.9	uniqueness of the costume in the Upper East Region	19	27.1
Is the costume unique in Upper East Region?	56	80.0	designed out of war	14	20.0
Do the costumes generate income to the designers?	51	72.9	sales of fabric and the costumes	19	27.1

Source: field survey, 2014

4.2 Discussions

The study clearly underpins the fact that *feok* festival costumes were designed and crafted by the forebears of the *Builsa*, largely not only as special armour, but also as a symbol of courage. After employing the costume successfully to defeat Babatu and his confederates, it appears the costume has since been used largely in harvest festivals as well as celebrations of emancipation and memoriam. Indeed, the *feok* costume could now be seen as an icon of freedom, unity and remembrance.

The fact that the costumes are still being actively employed by the *Builsa* people in varied cultural activities could be attributed to the high regard the society has for these costumes, and the roles they played in the past in emancipating their forebears from slavery. It is crucial to add that the annual *feok* festival and any other related celebration in which the costumes are employed, could be seen as special cultural tools which have aided in the preservation of the old costumes, and accordingly perpetuated the production and use of new costumes.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

Historically, the invention of the *feok* festival costume could be traced back to the collective efforts of the forebears of the *Builsa* people and the warriors who defeated Babatu. The reasons for the invention as revealed in the study were for war, celebration of festivals and ancestral remembrance. Other reasons are emancipation from slavery and cultural preservation. The costume is now seen as a symbol of unity, identity, courage and traditional pride. It portrays itself as one of the unique historical evolutionary feature that is matchless in the upper east of Ghana. It can therefore be concluded that the *feok* festival costume has great historical, cultural and socio-economic importance for the people of the *Builsa* traditional area. The need for its development and sustenance can therefore not be denigrated.

5.2 Recommendation

The Ghana Tourist Board should consider establishing a museum in the Sandema traditional area where historic *feok* regalia could be kept for posterity, tourists' view and research.

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