

Recent Discoveries in the Aboakyer Festival of the Effutus-Ghana

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Abstract

The Effutus hold in high esteem their festival; the Aboakyer festival also known as the deer hunt festival. It is a festival celebrated annually by the Asafo Companies to pacify their war god Apa Sekum. The Aboakyer festival has gone through several phases since the inception of the celebration. There has been an introduction of deities for the youth of both the Tuafu No. 1 Asafo company and Dentsefo No. 2 Asafo company during the celebration. This has gone unnoticed by writers although it plays a significant role in the celebration of the festival.

Data gathered for the study was made possible by employing the qualitative research methodology and the instruments used were interview and participant observation.

Purposive sampling method was adopted to select the respondents for the study due to the nature of the study. This paper argues out that although the festival has gone through several phases right from its beginning till date, the introduction of the youth deities have not been tackled by writers. The study therefore aims at describing the Aboakyer festival, the origin and composition of the deities with regards to the role they play in the celebration.

Keywords: Aboakyer, Festivals in Ghana, Effutus, Culture, Deities, Winneba

Introduction

Festivals are rituals which recur at regular intervals, and which have as their purpose, the expression of beliefs held by a particular community. There is also the conscious expectation that certain very specific ends will come about as a result of the performance of the festivals and the performance is motivated by the desire to gain some form of satisfaction and is expected to be effected. Festivals take place at special times set aside by a community in order to commemorate some events of historical, cultural or religious significance and by the performance of certain rituals; such events are re-enacted, giving both individuals and the communities a sense for meaning and cohesiveness. (Akintan, 2013).

Winneba is a town and the capital of Effutu Municipal District in the Central Region of Southern Ghana. Winneba has a population of 60,331. Winneba, traditionally known as *Simpa*, is an historic fishing port in Southern Ghana, lying on the South Coast, 90 miles (140 km) East of Cape Coast. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winneba>).

Effutu Municipal area is one of the 170 districts in Ghana and one of the 17 districts in the Central Region. It was extracted from the then Awutu – Effutu – Senya – District Assembly in 2007 by L 11860 and it covers a total area of about 64 square kilometers.

The people of Winneba were part of the large family of Guan speaking people who migrated out of Timbuktu, proudly referred to as Tumutu by the natives, between 1100 – 1200. Some of the tribes among this group were the Gonja, Kyerepon, Larteh, Nkonya, Krakyi and the Awutus. Those who eventually settled at Winneba belonged to the latter group or family; generally referred to as Awutu abe (Awutu fo in Akan) and they speak a distinct version of Awutu called Effutu. Many choose to call them ‘*Effutufo*’ (Effutu people) after this dialect. Fishing is the major occupation of the indigenes and few enter into farming and animal husbandry. (Brown, 2005).

The Effutus have three major festivals thus colourful *Masquerading festival*, supported by brass band music and held on January 1 each year at Advance Park(formerly known as Humphrey’s park) near the South Campus of the University of Education, Winneba; *Aboakyer festival* held during the first week of May coupled with a lot of activities.

The third festival is the *Akomase*, a ritual festival celebrated in August that involves sacrificing domestic animals to the lesser gods of Winneba. All of these festivals are dominated by music and art forms close to the heart of the Effutufo. (Brown, 2005).

There are other festivals of the Effutus which are not as popular as the ones mentioned above. These are Tuafu fida (Twins Yam Feasting), Dentsefo memenda, Fantse Fantse Firing of Musketry (Petu), Eyipey Otu Yam Feasting and Ash Wednesday/festival of the gourd.

Awolalu and Dopamu, (2005, p.153) state categorically that:

Most festivals are associated with specific divinities, spirits or ancestors and they are, therefore, religious in outlook. Among the Yoruba, for example, each divinity has an annual festival associated with him or her and this

is called Odún (festival). Odún also means year and when used in relation to festival it means an “annual festival”. This means that major festivals among the Yoruba come up every season or year.

The Aboakyer festival is celebrated with the deities outdoored through selected route in the town on selected days assigned to the Asafo groups. The various gods are fed respectively but the deer is fed to Apa Sekum the war god of the Asafo companies. The ancestors are also invited to feast with the people during the occasion.

The two Asafo companies started the festival with two deities thus “Gyemisi” of Tuafo No. 1 and “Asikama” of Dentsefo No. 2 Asafo company till the recent introduction of the youth deities of both Asafo companies. They play a significant role in the celebration in recent times which has not been tackled by writers or researchers.

Methodology

The study concentrated on the recent discoveries in the Aboakyer festival of the Effutus –Ghana thus the introduction of the youth deities, the composition and their role in the celebration. The qualitative study was conducted and the various sections of the festival was observed by the researcher. It happened in a natural setting; the fishing beach where the regatta took place and the canoe race, through the principal street where the deities were outdoored, procession of chiefs, queen mothers, traditional priests and priestesses to the durbar grounds, and the casting of lots. Observations were made as the Asafo companies outdoored their deities through the selected routes in the town. The observation was necessary because it served as a reality check to the data gathered during the interview.

The researcher interviewed respondents and the data was recorded with a smart phone and note pad. This is so because there was the need for the researcher to meet face-to-face with the respondents to make the interview a flexible channel of gathering data. The observations and interviews served as a primary data and the information from journals, articles, books and unpublished thesis served as a secondary data for the study.

Results and Discussion

The Origin of the Aboakyer Festival

The natives of Simpa (Effutus) love deeply and cherish their deity, Penkye Otu, their war god Apa Sekum and other deities, for leading their ancestors through the arduous journey from Timbuktu to their present settlement. Oral records indicate that all along this route, the leaders of this migrating group conciliated the deity for all forms of protection against the numerous challenges that confronted them including diseases and feeding. At their present location, the annual rites were performed by the elders of the Otvano Royal House who established Simpa (Winneba). Penkye Otu and its sons (lesser gods) did enjoy human sacrifices in the beginning but this had to be changed with the dawning of civilization and human right laws. Slaves were kept for this purpose but the gruesomeness of the process because of increasing intimacy between slaves and masters and the dawning of civilization created a social concern that led to consultations with the deity for a more suitable alternative. The alternative, a leopard, was found to be more difficult to obtain as the capture of a single animal resulted in the loss of many more lives than the sacrifice of a single slave. It was also noted that by then, the able men and fearless among the leadership of the Gyarteh family were gone. Eventually the “Wansan” (the deer) became a practicable and most acceptable substitute probably before or during the reign of King Bondze Enyinam.

A school of thought says the Aboakyer festival is the major festival of all the citizenry of the Effutus and relates the celebration to the occasion to feeding the deity Penkye Otu. To them

the capture of a live “Wansan”, like the leopard, required many more hands than the members of the royal family could find. The additional hands required were solicited from the local militia as a service to the stool. It was this change in form; the involvement of the local militia, that the annual consecration and appeasement of the deity became a public affair. This gave birth to the “Aboakyer” festival initially named the Deer Hunt Festival by the early European writers who witnessed it. Indeed, observing the hunt for the first time on Mount Mungo, de Marees (1620) cited in Ephirim-Donkor (2009) wrote;

“four miles below lies the high mount Mungo, on which the blacks sacrificed to the Devil. The design of the Effutu State emblem tells this story; the black stool at Otvano on which the King is installed sits on the wansan. This festival is an important ceremony for the stool, its occupant and the royal stool house family. It is a religious duty and an obligation for the general citizenry to ensure its celebration annually to ensure a prosperous life for all”.

Another school of thought also says that the Aboakyer festival is a festival for the Asafo Company thus the Dentsefo and Tuafo and the live deer is given to their war god Apa Sekum. From the early days, there was only Asafo Company thus the Dentsefo. The Tuafo was born from the Dentsefo. First borns of the Dentsefo were sent to the scout to be trained as the junior militia. During the early day celebrations, the Tuafo take the lead to the hunting grounds before the seniors will follow thus the Dentsefo. Because of this arrangement, the early writers

wrote about the festival and brought about the No.1 and No.2. They saw the Tuafo leave first to the hunting grounds and called them No.1 followed by the Dentsefo and called them No.2.

Recent Discoveries in the Aboakyer festival

The ever popular Aboakyer festival (deer hunt festival) begins with several activities before the catch on Saturday. Active preparation towards the festival starts soon after the Easter holidays. Long before then the youth begin to learn asafo songs from their elders. They assemble on canoes along the fish landing beaches and at times open parks to learn the art of performing asafo songs. This is done in secret for the other group not to see or hear what they are doing or the songs to be sang during the festival. Around the same time preparations towards the festival also start at the Otuno house with rituals aimed at eventual consecration of the deity. However, two weeks to the due date, a special offering of a ram is performed that signifies the opening of the doors of the deity for the festival; this door remains open until a week after the festival.

A week before the festival, the asafo companies consult their shrines for clearance, protection and early catch. Tuafo invoke the gods *Ekú* and *Katawer* on Wednesday and Thursday respectively. According to history, *Ekú sebo* was brought in by the Akomfor while *Katawer* was brought in by Kyeremfo. Dentsefo invoke *Sakagya*, *Efirim* (meaning to be released, or to free one's self) and *Kofi* during the week. These gods are invoked indoors between noon and sunset.

(Personal conversation with Neenyi Ghartey VII, April 29, 2014)

The monday before the hunt is set aside for a football gala between the youth of the town at the Adansi Park close to the old post office. Prize package and awards are allocated for the winners of the competition through sponsorship from individuals and cooperate bodies. The gala is full of excitement, music and noise from the soccer fans.

On the tuesday preceding the hunt, there is a regatta (tag of peace) between the two asafo companies thus the Dentsefo No. 2 and Tuafo No. 1 between 1:00pm to 3:00pm. This happens between the male group and the female group in the form of a competition thereby sending a signal for a peaceful celebration. The activity takes place at the fishing beach near the Winneba prisons yard. The Dentsefo No. 2 group put on a red and yellow t – shirts, shorts or trousers and “Nsise” beads as a form of identification. The Tuafo No. 1 group also put on blue or white t – shirts, shorts and the “Ehuma” beads as a form of identification and differentiation from the other party.



Fig. 1 The Dentsefo No. 2 in their Red t – shirt during the regatta



Fig. 2 The Tuafo No. 1 in their Blue t – shirt during the regatta

On that same day, immediately after the regatta, there is a canoe race between the two groups. The umpires or referees take the lead with a canoe on the sea. They locate a spot where the two groups respectively will go and

turn around the spot and the group that will be able to turn and get back to the shore first are the winners of the race. There is also a prize package for the participating members and the eventual winners. All these activity goes on as a warm up to the major event on the Saturday. Immediately after the regatta and the canoe race, the Asafo No. 1 youth outdoor their deity “Nsambon” through selected routes in the town. This is seen in Fig. 4 as the deity is outdoored.



Fig. 3 Canoe Race between the Dentsefo youth and Tuafo youth

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Nsambon” (Deity of Tuafo No. 1 Youth)

“Nsambon” is a deity of the Tuafo No. 1 youth. The spirit invoked in the deity brought about the name “Nsambon”. It is made up of six flowers, powder and traditional drink covered with calico. A mirror is pasted on the front and back of the deity. It is believed that the mirror enables them to see spiritual things or serves as a link between the natural world and spiritual world (metaphysics) thus beyond physical. Certain observations and rituals are made before outdooring the Nsambon deity on the Tuesday afternoon immediately after the tag of peace (regatta) and the canoe race.

(Nana Kwansah Panyin PRO of Winneba Youth Association, personal communication 14th June, 2014)



Fig. 4 “Nsambon” deity of the Tuafo No. 1 Youth

Wednesday is set aside for observations, rituals and the consultation of the deities by both of the Asafo groups (Dentsefo and Tuafo) and this is done indoors because wednesday is a day for no noise making in the town (a ban is placed on noise making). It is believed that Wednesday is the day the Effutus arrived in their present location (Winneba) and came across the Monyi lagoon so they hold this day very sacred. They met Monyi lagoon on wednesday, the Ayensu on Friday and settled at Penkye on a saturday.

On the Thursday preceding the hunt, the Dentsefo No. 2 youth makes certain rituals and observations to their deity “Basabasa” and outdoor the deity in the afternoon through the selected routes of the town.

“Basabasa” (Deity of Dentsefo No. 2 Youth)

“Basabasa” is a deity of the Dentsefo No. 2 Asafo youth. The ontology behind was that the youth of the time outdoored certain things during the festival for fun. This continued annually till a day the bearer became possessed after passing through mfantse mfantse where the major shrine is. They got terrified and contacted the traditional priest for certain rituals and observations to be made before the possessed youth was freed. There were consultations with the gods and they were taught the actual procedures to follow.

The spirit invoked in the deity brought about the name “Basabasa”. It is made up of the “nkanto” tree, cola, six flowers, blood from a dog and covered with calico. The colour turns brownish black due to ageing and also the blood been poured on it during rituals and observations. The nkanto is a tree in the forest and is cut or fell without breathing. It is believed the tree speaks and possesses certain spirit. The spirit can possess or take dominion over the person when talking and cutting at the same time.

The bearer of the Basabasa deity hang a “bodua”(tail of a horse or donkey) with mirror on their arm as they parade through the selected route in the town during the festival. This serves as a third eye which enables them communicate with the spirit world and also see what the opposing group is planning against them. Basabasa is outdoored on the thursday before the catch. Time is allocated for the outdooring of the various deities of the Asafo companies to avoid rivalry and conflicts. The Basabasa deity is shown in Fig. 5 on the next page.

(Nana Kwansah Panyin, PRO of Winneba Youth Association, personal communication 14th June, 2014)



Fig. 5 “Basabasa” deity of the Dentsefo No.2 youth outdoored through selected routes

The Friday preceding the hunt is spectacular for Aboakyer; Tuafo invoke and outdoor *Gye mesi* (meaning restore, protect), while Dentsefo come out with Asikama. These are paraded along selected routes in town and in turn so as to prevent a clash or conflict. Tuafo are supposed to come out between noon and three in the afternoon and

then Dentsefo follow. These outdoor performances by the asafo are really exciting as their respective head priests carry their idols in a trance amidst shouts and chanting of asafo war songs and led by one person playing a pair of special oval shaped handmade bells - *nkojow*. The asafo members disperse at the end of the day to prepare for the actual hunt the following day. There is no asafo drumming during this parading of gods.



Fig. 6 Tuafo No. 1 Asafo Company outdoor their deity “*Gyemisi*” on a wooden board



Fig. 7 Dentsefo No. 2 Asafo Company outdoor their deity “*Asikama*”

Scouts are sent to respective hunting grounds to observe the movements of animals and thereby secure the best hunting site. They are followed by an advance party at dawn and the main body at day break.

By 4.00 am on the hunting day, Saturday, Asafo members are awakened by the sounding of drums, bugle, rattles and bells to start trooping to their respective meeting places. Supis, Asafohenfo and Kobae are escorted from their homes to their respective Asafo bases. While this goes on, Asafo youth groups parade the streets in readiness for a final departure command. The singing and playing of Asafo musical instruments awaken everyone to come to the road sides as they begin moving out of town to the hunting grounds. This movement is gradual until at the appointed time, 5.30 am for Tuafo and 6.00am for Dentsefo, (because of the distant location of the former’s hunting grounds) the head Supi of each asafo gives the command for the groups to move out. The Asafo depart in groups according to age and all pass in front of the Kings palace where the King and his elders and state linguist are assembled to offer them a final blessing. Just after *Abosomba*, the priestesses of Otuano, Dawur prama and others sprinkle water from a herbal mixture on them also to offer another level of protection for a safe and successful hunt.



Fig. 8 Dentsefo no. 2 group on their way to the hunting grounds



Fig. 9 Tuafo no. 1 group on their way to the hunting grounds

Soon after their departure, the King and his Divisional Chiefs leave the palace in a long procession to the durbar grounds to wait for the arrival of the first catch. This procession is done with all available royal drumming:

fontomfrom or bombae, mpintsin, mmensuon and aprede.



Fig. 10 Procession of chiefs, traditional priests and priestess to the durbar grounds

When a catch is made, message gets to the people in town within minutes and this turns the people into jubilation. The people then troop to the durbar grounds for a glimpse of the frenzied catch. The jubilant asafo men now carry the animal shoulder high, present it to the King who then performs the acceptance rites. The process involves an offer of libation and then an impression with the right bare foot on the animal thrice.



Fig. 11 The Dentsefo No. 2 with a catch at the durbar grounds

The victorious side then picks it up from the feet of the King and parades with it to *Abosomba*. At this strategic position, visitors who could not go to the durbar grounds also troop to catch a glimpse of the catch. After a while, the priest and some elders of the god *Akyeampong* (messenger god) all clad in white calico along the waist come with twigs, they spread them out to form a mat, lay the animal on them, and with the stem of a creeping plant as twin, the twigs (“mpar”) and animal together are bound firm to enable it to be carried away. On their way, the senior member of the prama (*Akyeampong ano*) plays the gong requesting all to clear from their path. With a head pad as support, the catch is carried to the ceremonial *Apa Sekum* shrine at the ancestral market for the next day’s sacrifice. On their way back to the shrine, the person who led them in now wields an ancient cutlass in a

fashion that is reminiscent of one clearing a bush path as if the animal is being brought from the bush to the shrine. An additional catch by any of the asafo companies is not material to the festival but only adds to the fun fare. In such situations all animals are carried by the people of Akyeampong *ano* (*ano* when used this way refers to the prama) to the ancestral market but the one for the sacrifice is marked for easy identification.



Fig. 12 the animal been laid on a mat made of twigs and tied with twines (mpar) on their way to the shrine

Soon after noon it is time to take the king back home; to the Palace. This is the time for the afternoon procession. By 1.30 pm the Asafo now in full regalia; very colourfully decorated, start the procession from the outskirts of town. There is Asafo singing, drumming and dancing to *Akosuadontoba* and *Owombir*; a free for all dance time. The King rides in palanquin along the procession led by his chiefs in rich regalia. The victorious Asafo company, i.e., the one that brought the first catch for that year leads in the procession followed by the King and his entourage, and at the rear of the procession is the Asafo company that returned last from the hunt. This procession ends at the King's palace where libation is poured in prayer and a ram is slaughtered to thank all and sundry including the souls of the departed and the deity and then the asafo is dismissed pending the King's appreciation drinks; the *ayekoo nsa* which the King pays to the Asafo for honouring their vow to present to him with a live deer for the propitiation of the deity, Apa Sekum annually.



Fig. 13 Apa Sekum shrine where the deer is fed to the deity

The final stage of the festival is on the Sunday after the catch. This is called the “Ebisatsir” (casting of lot). This time is meant for inquisition from the oracle what the gods have in store for the new year they just entered. The chief priestess draws four parallel lines on the floor. One in white, another in red clay, the third charcoal and the final one is in salt. She places a pot upside down at the end of the lines. The fabric covering the deity Penkye Otu is then taken off and rolled into a carrying pad which the priestess places at the bottom of the pot. She picks up the little round stone that lies before the fetish, puts it upon the pad and invokes the spirits of the 77 gods of the Effutu state to descend. She invokes Penkye Otu. The moment the priestess stops speaking, the stone rolls and rests upon one of the four lines drawn on the floor. She places the stone on the pad and leaves it to roll again. This is repeated a third time. She then announces the result to the people. If the stone falls upon the white clay, it signifies great drought during the year. On the other hand, if it rest upon the charcoal line, it implies heavy rains. If the stone stops on the salt, it indicates plenty of fish and food for all and if it settles upon the red line, it signifies war and strife. (Ackom, 2005)

Today, the festival is celebrated with other additional events that is meant to entertain the tourists and other guests. The festival has been programmed to last a week long. The key entertaining events are:

- Open Marathon competition organized to help the youth unearth their sporting talents
- Regatta and Tug-of-war this event is meant to engage the fishermen who constitute the Asafo to have their day.
- Race on the sea between the two groups as a form of competition
- Football matches this engages the youth of the community to have fun
- Aboakyer tennis open (tennis tournament for the youth)
- Mini trade fair to support entrepreneurs in the area to showcase their products. This lasts the length of the festivities
- The crowning of Miss Aboakyer after the Saturday procession of Asafo and chiefs is to have further fun fare in a musical night programme with beauty pageants.

Conclusion

The celebration of the Aboakyer festival has been one of the notable carnivals in the country which bring people from all walks of life to Winneba. It is such a colourful celebration which exhibit the rich culture of the Effutus and also affects the social, religious and economic lives of the people. The study has shown that there has been a tremendous change in the celebration due to the introduction of certain elements. The aggressive nature of the youth during the outdoor of their deities have added some flavour to the festival and has attracted a lot of visitors to the place.

The Aboakyer festival in the past saw only two deities outdoor through the town by the Asafo companies. The

introduction of the youth deities have made it four; this has added additional strength to the celebration thereby transforming a quiet and serene atmosphere into a vibrant, colourful, noisy and lively place to be.

This paper is very important to researchers, students, lecturers, and archeologist who will embark on any form of research about the Effutus. It will serve as a documentation of recent happenings and additions in the celebration of Aboakyer festival by the Effutus.

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