

Edina Bronya as a Lieux de Memoire: Developmental Inferences

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Abstract

Many works exist on festivals in Ghana. Some of the works discuss the religious relevance of festivals whereas others touch on the social and political spheres. A little reflection on the historical patterns of life vis-à-vis the coming of the Europeans reveals a change. By change, the paper refers to an adaptation of foreign approaches into majority of Ghana's festival celebrations. Moreover, one finds a shift from the indigenous approach to a foreign style. This change on one perspective has to some degree caused majority of Ghanaians to forget how their indigenous festivals provide a good basis for reconnecting the past with the present and vice versa. In this regard, this paper examines the "Edina Bronya", (Elmina New Year Festival) peculiar to the indigenous people of the Edina Traditional Area as a case study in the Central Region of Ghana. The paper uses the historical and descriptive research design coupled with the ethnographical method of active participation and an interview of an oral historian. The paper systematically aims at contributing to historical literature on Dutch-Elmina (Ghana) relations. The discussion overlaps into showcasing the Edina bronya festival as a lieux de memoire; a site for continuous reconnection with the past. The first thesis is that theories as offered by cultural memory, communicative memory and lieux de memoire offer applicable methodologies to African Traditional Religious (ATR) studies but also presents some limitations to such a perpetually oral society. The paper through analysis also posits developmental potential as presented from the celebration of the festival as a second thesis for the write up. The findings of this research is aimed at contributing to literature on the continuous social importance of festivals as an appendage of African Traditional Religion and a better comprehension of the theories of memory in its relevant applications to it.

Key Words: Edina Bronya, Cultural Memory, Communicative Memory, Lieux de Memoire, Societal Development

1. Introduction

There are many festivals in Ghana today, approximately about 70 major ones (Festivals-Cultural Calendar, Ghana Commission on Culture). Some of them are the Aboakyere, Fetu, Akwanbo, Hogbetsotso, Edina Bronya and Bakatue. These festivals are celebrated respectively by the Efutu, Cape Coast, Agona Nyakrom, Anlo and Elmina (Edina) Traditional indigenes of Ghana. In Ghana like some parts of the world, there is reason to maintain that festivals play important roles to the entire society. Some of the roles are, but not limited to the social (Bame 1991), religious (Bame 1991; Opoku 1990), aesthetic (Assimeng 1976; Asihene 1978; and Bame 1991) economic (Daily Graphic 1994) and an amalgamation of the aforementioned (Chantler 1973). Another significant role that festivals play is its ability to reconstruct and reconnect the past with the present. This paper joins in this discussion, settings out to use the Edina Bronya (Christmas New Year Festival) a ritualistic festival connecting the living to the dead ancestors, the indigenous festival of the Elmina traditional area. As will be shown in subsequent discussions, the festival has evolved only in name but not in essence following the arrival of the Dutch as colonial masters. The aim is to trace that change which spills over into the topic of memory, specifically the concepts of Cultural memory, communicative memory and lieux de memoir. The festival launches itself as a ritualistic site of memory ,an appendage of culture[cultural memory] to fill the vacuum created by lack of real environments of memory also known as milieux de memoire (Nora 1998).

With a comprehension of the festival as a site of memory, propositions will be proffered to suggest certain limitations in the applications of the concepts under memory studies; Cultural Memory, Communicative Memory and lieux de memoire to studies in African Traditional Religion. Subsequently, benefits hinging around unity, heritage and identity will be elaborated to emphasize ingredients for peace and societal development.

2. Edina Bronya; Historical metamorphosis



Figure 1. Map of Ghana showing the town of Elmina (Edina)

The natives of Elmina (please refer to location on fig. 1 above) celebrate the opportunity of two festivals in the year; The Edina Bakatue and the topic of historical interest in this section, Edina Bronya (Dadzie 2015). The period between these two festivals is approximately six months with the “Edina Bronya” celebrated the first Thursday of the year in January. The aim is to give a historical account through oral history of how the festival was celebrated by indigenes prior to the coming of the Dutch, and the influence of Dutch culture after.

The term used to denote the celebration of the festival before the coming of the Europeans was nsagu da meaning libation pouring day. It is celebrated over a period of four days, Thursday to Sunday with a dual purpose; first, to usher in the new year, transcribed as the first Thursday in the month of January of the Western calendar. Second was to thank the ancestors for blessings, protection and to ask same through prayers ritualized by libation pouring as denoted by the name of the festival.

On a systematic account of the celebration of the festival, two days before celebrations, which is Tuesday, a warrior group or Asafo company called “Alata Manfo”(corrupted from Banfo) also known as number 6 parade the streets of the town bearing flags captured from defeated Fante states, specifically Anomabo(Dadzie 2015). This procession is their own way of broadcasting the closeness of the new year in the absence of any form of calendar and modern communication tool. Natives in turn were supposed to disseminate this information to all members of individual households far and wide. There is also procession with the victory flags accompanied by songs of ridicule to taunt defeated states and dare to come for the flags.

A day after, another Asafo company called Eyampafo, number 7 display the victory war flags captured on the sea shore. The belief is that the flags bear the spirit and strength of the specific warrior group. Indeed, the flag-bearer is accompanied by two armed men. Following the display of flags on the seashore, one of the flag-bearers protected by spiritual concoctions is shot at to demonstrate prowess. The warrior groups then row across the sea to where the chiefs and elders sit in state to wish them a happy new year. The chiefs in turn respond with warm wishes for the new year and offer token of gifts .This action signifies the end of the year.

On Thursday , which is the actual libation pouring day or Nsagu da, as early as 4:00 pm, there is wailing by elderly women in each family household(reference is made to family as a holistic term for extended family).This is to symbolically remember all those who have died. This continues for about an hour and half. Subsequently,

the actual libation pouring rite begins at 8 or 8:30 pm. The meeting of individual households for this purpose is referred to as *ekor ye do* or *akor do* meaning oneness or unity. At this point, mention need to be made on the native rendition of who an ancestor is.

In line with scholarly literature as posited by such as Olupona (1960) and King (1986), a dead member who dies through natural means is given prominence and libation rites are performed either on Thursdays and Saturdays. On the other hand, those who died through unnatural means, known as *atofo ewu fo* such as mishaps either on land or sea are remembered on Fridays and Sundays per the discretion of family groups. Later distinctions will be explicated in subsequent discussions.

In the elaborate libation ritual, those who died natural deaths are therefore not honored along with those who did through unnatural means. At 8: 00am on either the first Thursday to Sunday of the year, the names of each dead family member is called through libation to come and eat and drink with the living. This is spearheaded by the head of the family or *abusuapanyin* who pours the drink on the ground, stating appreciation for all protection and favors given throughout the previous year and to ask for more in the coming year. In the same vein, after the general ritual is conducted, individual family members also present drinks along with special requests such as those looking for children, cure from specific ailments and liberation from financial difficulties.

The gathering of family members far and near serves as an opportunity to solve family disputes and conflicts. In addition, potential spouses are identified by elders of the family and marriage rites initiated upon further investigations of the family to which the identified woman belongs. Further, those desiring by belief to bequeath emulative character traits of ancestors consult with the family head for selection of names from the registry of dead members to be used in outdoorings new members of the family. Furthermore, the libation pouring days are used for selection and installation of family elders and linguists, queen mothers and also chiefs. Final to this, gifts such as food items were exchanged within and outside families.

A general *durbar* is held on Saturday by the chief and elders of the town to discuss development projects for the traditional area. The occasion is then climaxed by merrymaking to usher in the new year. This sums up the account of the festival, specifically called *nsagu da* prior to the coming of the Dutch.

Enter the Dutch in 1637(Dadzie 2015). A defeat of the Portuguese over a period of 72 hours according to oral literature led to their displacement from the land. Upon observing and learning a bit of the local culture, they noticed that celebrations specific to the *nsagu da* ritual bore semblance to a new year festival in their country; the Dutch Christmas. During these celebrations, parcels were exchanged specifically on Boxing Day which fell on the 26th of December, just as token of gifts were exchanged between the Chiefs and war groups and also intra and inter families.

The celebration of the Dutch Christmas runs analogous with literature describing the genesis of exchange of gifts on Boxing day; *id est* the placing of boxes on merchant ships for deposition of all manner of gifts to be shared among the poor(Dadzie 2015) and the first week-day after Christmas-day, observed as a holiday on which post-men, errand-boys, and servants of various kinds expect to receive a Christmas-box (Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. “Boxing-Day”, <http://www.oed.com/view/th/class/224126>[accessed May 18,2015]).

Identifying a similar cultural trait therefore, the Dutch in seeking to identify with the local people attempted a process of enculturation; during the period of the *Nsagu* festival; they will hung parcels at reasonable distances on boats at sea and ask anyone who could swim to reach the boat and claim ownership of the gifts. Apparently this was not a dangerous endeavor at that time since the main livelihood was fishing and anyone, not fishermen alone could partake in this exciting process.

The literal translation of swim-to-get is *bor* meaning to swim and *nya* meaning get or to get. By this, a combination of the two words came to be known as *Bronya*. This word came to replace the name *nsagu da* which had been the name of the festival long before the coming of the Dutch. The festival since then has come to be known as such, with no alterations to its essence and line of activities except a metamorphosis of its name from *Nsagu da* to *Edina Bronya*, the modern traditional festival of the ancestors of long ago, for which authentic applications of cultural memory is alluded to in subsequent discussions

3. The Concepts of Cultural Memory and Lieux de Memoire

The concept of memory has been a topic of interest across cultures for ages. It was also a major preoccupation among critical thinkers in Greece, evidenced by the method of loci also called the memory of place. This uses the power of the ocular and objects to organize real information. These were popularized by scholars like Yates (1996).

The term Collective memory was firstly explicitly used by Hugo von Hofmannsthal who defined it as “the dammed up force of our mysterious ancestors within us” and “piled up layers of accumulated collected memory” (Schieder 1978:2).

Contemporary usages are traced to Maurice Halbwachs, sociologist and student of Emile Durkheim who advanced a socially conditioned form of memory. He claimed that individual private memory is understood only through a group context; these groups may include families, organizations, and nation-states (Halbwachs 1992). Aby Warburg (Gombrich 1970) also used the term to analyze artworks as repositories of history.

Building on the theory of the socially conditioned nature of memory, two other proponents, Jan Assman and Pierre Nora proposed Cultural memory as a way of solving certain exigencies presented by the theory of Collective Memory. Pierre Nora proposed what is known as lieux de memoire as an outgrowth of cultural memory in the field of Historiography – The writing of history; written history (Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. “historiography”, <http://www.oed.com/view/th/class/232319>[accessed May 19, 2015])

Jan Assman dwelt on the idea of a specific character that a person derives from belonging to a distinct society as a result of socialization of customs (Assman& Czaplicka 1995: 125), and the need to maintain human nature across generations (Assman& Czaplicka, 1995:126). By way of definition, Assman proffers that Cultural Memory is a:

“Collective Memory for all knowledge that directs human behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generation in repeated social practice and initiation” (Assman&Czaplicka 1995:126).

Inferring from the definition, the idea of prescription of moral tenets to guide human behavior sets in suggesting religion and ethics. Cultural memory therefore behoves such profound importance for societies which refer to the scope of religion in averring identity and heritage. As Assman puts it, with cultural memory, “the depths of time open up” (Assman 2006: 24), enabling an ability for societies without writing, to transmit religious information across ages albeit in addition to media forms such as stones and tablets.

Together with wife Aleida Assman, they also propounded the theory of communicative memory as a delimitation and better mode of comprehending and applying Cultural Memory. Communicative Memory in opposition to Cultural Memory includes all forms of everyday social and expressive modes of giving and exchange of information. This includes dialogue, gesture, habit and the like (Snyder 2009:127). This is also specific to certain groups such as neighborhoods, families and professional groups. These constitute the domains of oral history which again is time bound and does not extend more than three or four generations into the past at the most eighty to hundred years (Assman 1995:127). With Communicative memory therefore, the depths of time close up, far less in comparison to Cultural Memory.

Cultural memory also includes the displacement (forgetting), adoption (re-invention) and reinstatement of new cultural (religious) forms to enable help preserve identity. Cultural Memory therefore accounts for a society’s ability to reproduce its way of life diachronically over many generations and its ability to forget and rediscover cultural forms (Snyder 2009:128).

Also important for subsequent discussions is the Assman’s theory of a shift from ritual forms of remembering, also using media forms such as stones and tablets to preserve a continuum in religious tradition. In connection to this, he invents a seven-stepped process from ritual modes of remembering to texts which he calls canonization. (Assman 2006). He ascribed this process for what he calls cultic religions.

Cultural Memory has a lot of characteristics through which it functions (Assman&Czaplicka 1995:130-132). The first is the concretion of identity. A group derives through the structure of knowledge provided by Cultural Memory a sense of unity.

Next is its reconstruction capacity. Cultural memory enables versatility and adaptation in society. A priori knowledge applied to the status quo hic et nunc is potentially displaced and reinvented to ensure uniformity. There is uniformity and concreteness in rituals before writing (Canonization). Meanings as transmitted by Cultural memory is not pluriform in nature but objective.

There exists an organizational structure directing a formalization of roles and specifics of ceremony. The forebears of Cultural Memory such as the elders of a traditional religious society perform specialized duties.

The fifth characteristic has to do with the constant reference to values as a way of keeping with the essence of the group. Inability to keep in tune with these yardsticks implies anomalous behavior inharmonious to the identity of the group.

Cultural Memory is reflexive in nature. Adherents require only digging into their fold to identify ingredients for clarification of concepts. It uses such as established social systems and draws on common practices such as proverbs and maxims.

Pierre Nora also acts as a focal proponent of cultural memory in the methodology of history. In his classic, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire* (1989), he launches a systematic account of the inefficiency of history in giving authentic accounts on the tradition, culture, heritage and identity of a group. He finally assents to memory, what he call lieux de memoire or sites of memory as authentic forms of what were real environments of memory, millieux de memoire. Examples of lieux de memoire are monuments, festivals and anniversaries.

Nora divides memory into three periods, pre-modern, modern and post modern periods (Kansteiner 2002). The pre-modern period is characterized by natural, unself-conscious relation people and the past. There are real environments of memory, millieux de memoire which sustain traditions and rituals that provide a stable sense of being in time for members of local memory communities.

In the modern period, there was a fall from memory due to industrial and social modernization. By way of fallouts, old traditions and affiliations lost their meaning, relationship between people and their past was constructed through first order simulations of natural memory. Elites produced sites of memory in language with one referent, the nation state (Kansteiner 2002:183).

The post-modern period sets in with a collapse of the ideology and reality of the nation state in the 20th century, first order simulations are replaced by second order simulations .Memory culture has little or no relation to shared tradition, life worlds, rather than the frantic pace of media consumption itself (Kansteiner 2002: 183).

The inevitable clock of time runs concurrent with a less effective correlation between a people and their past. More so are factors such as industrialization and modernization which challenges correlation between a people and their past, and in the case of Nora's description, the French and their past signifying a passage from memory to history. This passage from memory to history is what he calls the acceleration of history.

The acceleration of history also encompasses attempts by history to prevent a total loss of the past. This Nora sees as useless if not fruitless in an attempt at salvaging the past. There is rapture in equilibrium (Nora 1989:7). There are inaccuracies in this futile attempt by history and sometimes even distortions (specific reference to the French revolution). History he reiterates, has an ambition to annihilate what in reality has taken place (Nora 1989:16). Memory in this endeavor is constantly suspicious of history.

As a remedy, Nora advances what he calls lieux de memoire under the umbrella of Cultural Memory. Lieux de memoire, sites of memory:

“...are fundamental remains, the ultimate embodiment of a memorial consciousness that has survived in a historical age that calls out because memory has abandoned it” (Nora 1989:12)

Within the enfolds of lieux de memoire, memory crystallizes and secretes itself .The sites of memory create a feeling of continuity and an embodiment of the past so that though there is consciousness of the absence of millieux de memoire (real environments of memory), there is a content of a continuum (Nora 1989:13). There are lieux de memoire, sites of memory because there are no more millieux de memoire, real environments of memory.

The concepts of cultural memory with its related concept of lieux de memoire presents a very applicable trajectory for Edina Bronya as a festival of remembrance and further insights for the application of memory studies to African Traditional Religion.

4. Deductions from literature

In exploring the Edina Bronya festival as a potential for development and application to memory, it is important to state at this point that its potential for development is self assertive .Application of theories of memory is however limited and requires further outlook.

The festival reinforces identity by making vast the depths to be explored by using memory rites of recollection in connecting adherents of ATR to the ancestors. Why is this connection to the ancestors so important? The ancestors and what can be termed cultural heroes culminate in what is a truly pragmatic religion. Jacob O. Olupona (2001:51) in an expatiation on ancestors in African cosmological stories states that:

“Ancestors are often regarded as deceased members of the lineage of the clan inhabiting the underworld, while culture heroes are mythic founders of communities and villages who go through apotheosis after their heroic sojourn on earth. They are regarded as greater in importance and authority than the ancestors, whose sphere of influence is limited to their lineage and descendants”.

Employing an envelope term of ancestors for culture heroes and ancestors, their major role in ATR is as guardians of morality. By this they have the moral responsibility to act as “guardians of the moral and social order in the world” (Olupona 2001:57). This is why the natives of Elmina who profess belief in ancestors seek to bequeath names of ancestors dead and gone with exemplary lifestyles on new entrants of the family during the festival.

Dissecting further, the ancestors act as a point of reference and reminder in leading lives on earth in reference to the supernatural. By constantly imitating their lives led and through rites of recollection and constant prayers to seek for protection and favors, the natives of Elmina are reminded of where they come from, why they are here on earth and an assurance of a good life in this life and after. This is a synopsis of the identity reconstruction function of the Edina Bronya festival as a lieux de memoire, a religious playground for interaction with the divine.

As a contribution to heritage, the display of victory flags by warrior groups, that one symbolic act triggers memory channels spanning ages, rekindling a sense of pride on what the lineage has been through. This directly effects a feeling of belonging and reinforcement of tendencies to lead lives in tandem with the norms of that group.

During these rites of recollection at family homes in Elmina, paths are created for the identification of minor disputes and conflicts among family members. These are resolved with the family head as moderator. The term ekor ye do which is the name given to the gathering of households for the ritual of libation pouring, speaks volumes of the potential for social cohesion and a microcosm of avenues for development in the community.

The promotion of harmony and peace at the family level also reduces referrals of family disputes to the chief and elders for adjudication. In the same vein, disputes which go beyond the family are addressed by the chief and elders of the town. There are also calls for unity and instigation of myriad of development projects. This trend is a norm at launches of both festivals in the town as witnessed during the 15th May, 2015 launch of the annual Bakatue festival. The focus was on sanitation and its contribution to development and reiterations of a plastic making factory for the productions of jobs (Edina Traditional Council, May 15th 2015). Similar evidence from published reports on the developmental potential of the Edina Bronya festival includes:

- 1) Calls for unity and peace by the Paramount Chief of the traditional area during celebrations in January 2015. At this same occasion, an eminent philanthropist and native of the town pledged infinitely to work with the chiefs and the people to ensure development (Daily Graphic, 2014)
- 2) During the launch of the festival in October 2014, the paramount chief again reiterated calls to the government to enforce the Communal Labour Act for active involvement in clean up exercises in the community. His assertion was that there could be peace and development once the people were clean and healthy (The Chronicle, 2014).
- 3) Under the same latter publication, noteworthy causes were the request to Government for re-instigation of funds accrued from museums and monuments to support needy but brilliant students and the importance of

educating their children other than engaging them in fishing and other forms of employment (The Chronicle, 2014).

4) The festival was employed as a unifier for the various clans of Elmina after a period of absence of peace and tranquility (Daily Guide, 2013). The tool and signal for peace was noted by the paramount chief when he stated that the festival could be celebrated in grand style due to the atmosphere on peace and tranquility now present in the community.

Do current scholarly trends in the study of ATR suggest a canonization of texts as seen in Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism? This debatable issue is relevantly important in attempts at applying theories of Cultural memory, communicative memory and lieux de memoire to such as the Edina Bronya festival and without hesitation ATR. The answer is no. ATR is a religion practiced in many different shades and passed on by oral transmission. With this proposition in the background we may proceed to apply the characteristics of Cultural memory as exemplified in the concepts of Lieux de memoire and Communicative Memory.

Modes of communicative memory as seen in the possession with flags prior to the onset of celebrations was and is unique to the people of Elmina and served as an alternative to other forms such as calendars. Other gestures such as the display of victory flags on the seashore beholds meanings which are relevant even till date and survived more than the asserted 100 years in the theory of Communicative Memory by Aleida Assman.

With the celebration of Edina Bronya, the depths of time open up for the natives of Elmina open up, allowing a connection gap of years lost. Such a society without writing invokes the abilities of Cultural Memory to enable a preserve of heritage; else with a loss of sense of where they come from, there is no telling who they are and where they are going.

Digging into the folds of Communicative Memory, oral history comes into the fore under the guise of everyday religious modes of transmitting and receiving information. Some of these modes are specific to the religious sphere of the Edina Traditional Area.

The festival also epitomizes as a lieux de memoire for renewal, periodically refreshing religious history for what was in reality and has to be in vivid conception. As a site of memory, the acceleration of history garnered by value-displacing variables of modernity does not see the light of the day.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

African Traditional Religion as exemplified by the Edina Bronya celebrations thrives on memory. By the application of memory, both in the neural and social sense, tenets, doctrines and other appendages of its character are maintained, reproduced and transmitted across ages.

External factors such as assimilation with other cultures as witnessed with the Dutch culture do not, in any way corrupt the essence of rituals. It goes without saying that as an oral, non-scriptural religion, its assertions are as authentic as religions with scriptures. Continuous, scholarly interest into the place of memory especially from within will serve as a panacea for all misconceptions and incomplete comprehensions from without.

As a corollary, the contribution of proponents of Cultural Memory from without is priceless and a *conditio sine qua non* for the continuous flourishing of the religion and a stake for scholarly literature. The dearth and paucity of literature on the place of memory in African Traditional Religion is undoubtedly unsatisfactory to say the least. With the continuous, infinite contribution of the religion to unity and development, all attempts at ensuring its survival is critical. The academia needs to step in again to dispel doom by promoting further research into the roles of memory in African Traditional Religion, particularly in the modes of oral transmission.

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