

Old wine in new bottles: changes in dirge performance among the Akpini of Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Death is a necessary end to human life! It is a painful experience for bereaved families. It causes shock, pain, destabilization, confusion and anger. It separates families from their loved ones. It sends people to the other world. Indeed, the pain of losing a loved one to death is difficult to bear. To ease this pain, dirges play a key role. The performance of dirges has been part of funeral rites in many Ghanaian societies, including the Akpini of the Volta Region. Dirges comfort bereaved families for losing their loved ones; inform the audience about the deceased's new status; and give hope that the deceased is resting in the afterlife. More importantly, dirges are a means of understanding how a people perceive life and death. This paper explores the performance of dirges among the Akpini of the Volta Region. It examines the nature and importance of dirges among the people. It particularly examines various changes that have occurred in the performance of dirges from the earliest times to the present. Certain aspects of the performance, including the performers, instrumentation and song texts have undergone transformation. The paper argues that such changes have become imminent since the Akpini people continue to interact with the outside environment, and have also been affected by such factors as colonization, Christianity and globalization. At the same time, certain aspects of the performance have resisted change. The dirge performers have been able to adapt to the changes to create a genre that differs from the original form. They believe, however, that the new genre still performs the functions of the original form. The paper concludes that while these changes will continue, some aspects of the performance will persist for a long time, if not forever.

Key Words: Akpini; change; continuity; culture; death; dirges; Kpando; lyrics; performance; poetry; religion; songs.

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INTRODUCTION

At various times, Ghanaian societies have come under diverse influences, giving rise to changes of one kind or the other. Social change is often expressed as interplay of traditional and indigenous elements on the one hand, and on the other hand, those factors of change, be it internal or external (Nukunya, 2016). Change is an indispensable aspect of culture. Sarpong (1974: vii) affirms this in the following quote:

The force of social change in Africa in general and Ghana in particular is such that no institutions or patterns of ideas can remain same for all the people in one society or for different communities of that society. For culture is dynamic, never static, and it will be a mistake to suggest or hope that there has not been any deviation from the status quo.

Shreiter (2011: 30), who admits to the flexibility of culture as a whole, writes that, one way in which culture responds to this flexibility is through hybridization. According to him, hybridity is “the cultural process of mixing what goes on with different cultures.” Shreiter (2011: 30) further notes that when “cultures come into contact, they constantly borrow and reconfigure themselves through new knowledge and practices”. With particular reference to funeral poetry, scholars such as Agawu (2016), Amu (2011), Gbolo (2010), and Akyea (1999) have pointed out various aspects of change that are emerging. This paper has identified various ways in which popular culture and cultural dynamism as a whole is played out in Akpini³ dirge performance. The first part of the paper explores the origin, history and background of the study area. The second section addresses the methodologies that underpin the research while the third section focuses on the relevant literature related to the study. The last section discusses the Akpini dirge in relation to its past, present and projects into its future.

SYNOPSIS ON THE AKPINI PEOPLE

Oral history has it that the people of Kpando migrated with the other Eve from Notsie to their current home in the second half of the seventeenth century. They arrived at their present home under the leadership of three men namely Asianu (the acknowledged leader of the union), Adedze (Asianu’s right-wing leader) and Eko (the left-wing leader). It is believed that these three were leaders of some Eve groups who became friends during their exodus from Notsie. Along the way, these leaders decided to merge their groups into one organized political union. At the inauguration of the union, the leaders put their right hands together and sanctified them with the words, akpini-akpini meaning, “never, ever shall this union

³The area is called Kpando but the people are referred to as Akpini.

break, or be dissolved”. From then on, the people became known as Akpini or Akpiniawo (Bluway, 2000).

A short song rendered among the people makes reference to the three leaders hence confirms this narration:

<i>Eyawoe kplɔ mi loo</i>	They led us
<i>Tso glime ke loo</i>	From Glime
<i>Eko, Asienu, Adedzee</i>	Eko, Asienu, Adedzee
<i>Eyawoe kplɔ mi loo</i>	They led us

There are other narratives in relation to the place name Kpando. Bluway (2000) presents one of such narratives which says that, on the arrival of the Akpini to their present home, they fought and expelled from the land its original settlers whose leader was called Kpe. In order to avoid unfriendly reactions from the other settlers in the area, the Akpini declared themselves heirs of Kpe and not illegitimate claimants. They therefore took the name Kpedomenyilawo (heirs of Kpe) which later became Kpandoawo.

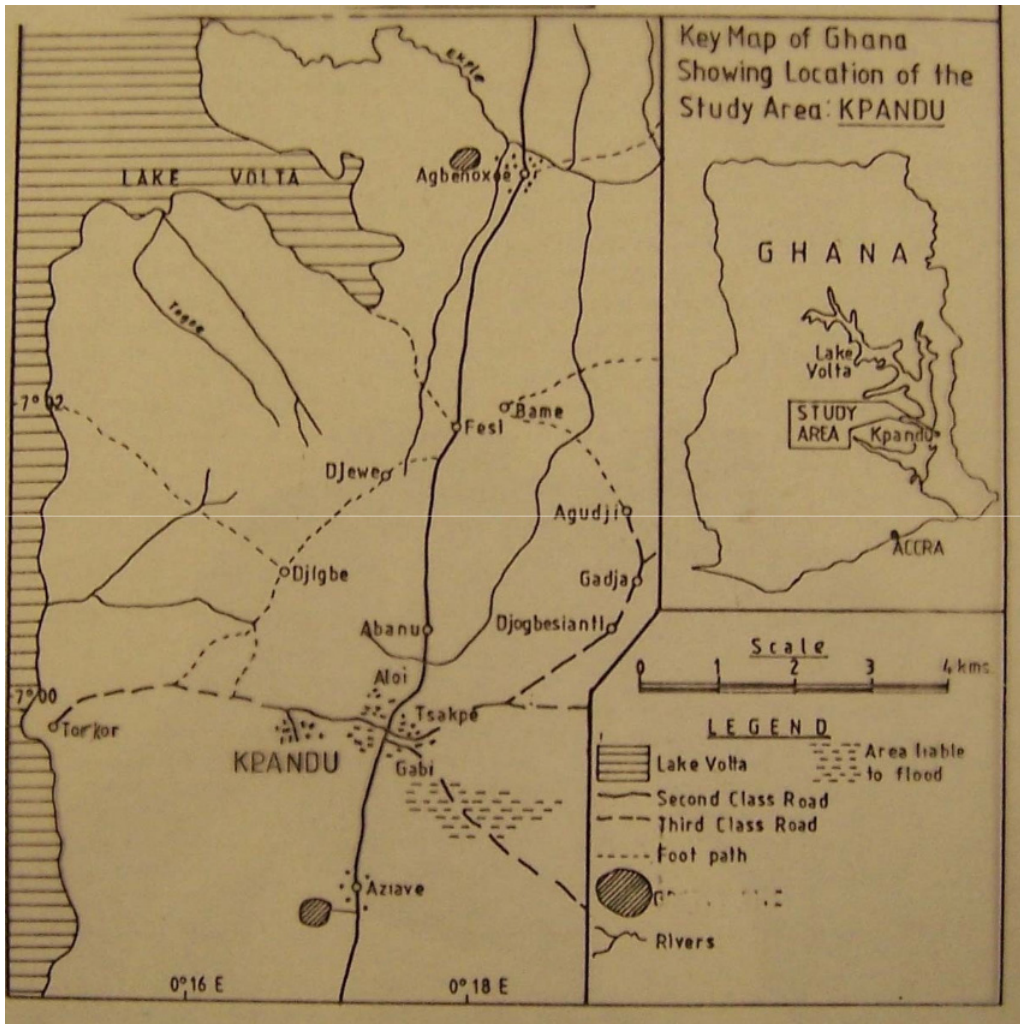
Apoh (2008), who conducted an extensive work on the archaeological investigation of Kpando, presents other intriguing narratives of the Akpini people. These narratives presented by the Akpini traditional elders bear resemblance to the one provided by Bluway (2000). To them, the name Kpando was derived from the Akpini encounters at old Aziave⁴. They recounted that after the Akpini people migrated westwards, from the River Dayi towards the Volta (called Amu in Ewe), they reached the site of Atongbomey⁵ and Old-Aziave. Here they encountered the encampment of a man named Kperi and his clan: “a Brong group called Kpaviwo, meaning Kpa and his subjects”. The Akpini people claimed that Kperi was hostile to them and drove him and his clan away from this place. The place was then named “Kperife do” meaning “the empty place of Kperi.” The name Kpando was then derived from this phrase.

The third version of the origin of the name Kpando is given by the elders of Abanu⁶. The Abanu version narrated by the elders of Abanu revealed that the leader of the early Abanu settlers was called Kwan and his settlement was called Kwankro (an Akan term meaning Kwan’s settlement which translates as ‘Kwandu’ in Ewe). They believe that the name Kpando is a corrupted version of the Kwandu. The documented histories of Kpando and the Akpini narrative are silent on this version (Apoh, 2008).

⁴ A suburb of Kpando.

⁵ Another suburb of Kpando.

⁶ A current suburb of Kpando where the people claim they were the earliest community founded on “Kpando soil” (Apoh, 2008: 33).

Figure 1: A map of Kpando Traditional Area. Source Amevor (1993:3)

Dickson and Benneh (1970) write that Kpando towns and surroundings are situated on the southern Voltaian plateau which is a horizontal layer of sandstone that rises above the Volta Lake. This hilly terrain may have attracted the early inhabitants as well as the later colonial officials to set up residences. The general elevation of the land ranges from 153m to about 305m above sea level. This area is made up of parts of the outer edge of the Akwapim-Togo Ranges and the Voltaian Sandstone formation.

The Population and Housing Census report (2021) provides information on various aspects of the physical features of Kpando. The report notes that Kpando

municipality lies within Latitudes 6° 20' N and 7° 05' N, and Longitude 0° 17' E. It shares boundaries with Biakoye District to the North, Afadzato South District to the East and North Dayi District to the South, while the Volta Lake marks the Western boundary. The Municipality covers a total land area of approximately 314.1 square kilometers which represents 1.5 percent of the total land area of the Volta Region. Almost 12% of the land is submerged by the Volta Lake. Kpando, the municipal capital, is about 70km from Ho, the regional capital.

In terms of climate, the Municipality falls within the tropical zone and is generally influenced by the South West Monsoon winds from the South Atlantic Ocean and the dry Harmattan winds from the Sahara. The Municipality has two rainy seasons: the major one occurring from mid-April to early July and the minor one from September to November. Annual rainfall ranges from an average of 900mm to 1,300mm. The mean annual temperature is about 27° Celsius, as the mean daily temperature ranges from 22° to 33° Celsius. The months of February and March are generally the hottest while July and August are relatively cooler. The average relative humidity is 80 percent.

The vegetation of Kpando is described as a mixture of guinea savannah woodland and semi-deciduous forest. The savannah woodlands consist of grass with scattered trees like acacia, bamboo and baobabs located along the River Dayi basin. The semi-deciduous forests are found on the slopes of the Akuapem-Togo-Attakora ranges with many tree species such as, Odum and Oil palm (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014).

The Akpini religious worldview is a component of that of the Ewe (Ewe) in general, hence, this portion does not specifically apply to only Kpando people but the Ewe as a whole. Gavua (2000) affirms that although minor variations exist in the practice of religion, which is often attributed to differences in historical contexts, most elements of religion are common to all the Northern Ewe.

Just as the case with other indigenous religions, the Ewe indigenous religion has no official name. It is a product of the forebears of the people that tries to explain and give meaning to the existence of human beings (Dzobo, 1998, cited in Gavua, 2000). Ewe cosmology suggests the people's belief in and reliance on a powerful Creator-Deity, and this is expressed in Ewe names such as Mawuli (God exists), Mawuenyegã (God is the greatest), Mawunyo (God is good), Mawutɔ (God's own) and Mawuse (God has heard).

Contrary to the assumption mostly held by Christians that the traditional believers only believe in "lesser gods" which inhabit things such as mountains, rivers, streams and other inanimate things, the latter recognize the existence of the Supreme Being. Sandra Greene, one of the scholars of Ewe religion, inaccurately stated that, until their contact with the European missionaries, the Ewes neither had the concept of, nor believed in Mawu as the Almighty and as such did not recognize or give Him the ultimate status (Greene, 2002). Greene's conclusion is

out of place owing to the fact that the Ewe name for the Almighty, Mawu (one who supersedes), already connotes the supremacy of the Supreme Being. Apart from that Mawu is also referred to as Mawugã (The greatest God). The supremacy of Mawu among the Ewes can also be gleaned from the fact that Mawu is the first to be mentioned in the libation (tsifodi) prayer.

Another aspect of the etymology of Mawu indicates that the term means “one who does not kill”. This suggests that Mawu, the source of all that exists, is believed to be one who will not destroy his own creation. Mawu is usually associated with the sky and hence referred to as Mawu dzifoto (‘the great God of the sky’) (Ganusah, 2008). Mawu is so great and powerful that He cannot be approached directly. Thus, the Ewe relate more with other spirits believed to be closer to humans, and which play intermediary roles between the people and Mawu. As discussed below, some of these spirits can even be manipulated by humans to pursue personal interests. However, Mawu is too great to be manipulated by humans.

Apart from the Supreme Being, followers of the indigenous religion also acknowledge the existence and influence of other spirits which control humans and nature. Gavua (2000) categorizes these spirits into two broad groups: *Anyigbadzinuwo* (spirits of the Earth) and *Togbuiwo* (spirits of the ancestors).

Another category of spirits which occupies a central place in the African religious belief system in general and that of the Ewes in particular is the ancestral spirits. Belief in such spirits stems from the fact that death is not the end of life and that there is another life after death. The ancestors are believed to return to the earth by being reborn, (reincarnation), a belief central in Ewes worldview. Prayers and sacrifices are made to these spiritual beings who are believed to influence the life of the living positively or negatively. In some life-threatening situations, people call on the name of their ancestors who they believe have the power to rescue them.

Apart from those earlier mentioned, there are other spiritual forces such as *dzo* (magical power), *adze* (witchcraft), spirit of animals, herbs and spirits of twins. According to Anyidoho (1983:97), “most of these forces are not conceived of by the Ewes as intrinsically evil. Rather, they are mostly neutral powers that human beings will put to good or evil use according to their individual bent of mind and their controlling passions or preoccupation”.

A glimpse into the Ewe religious worldview suggests that atheism is alien to the Ewe belief system, for the people believe in the existence of God and accord supremacy to God although they recognize the role of other deities and spiritual forces that can impact human life and the functioning of the world. These beliefs have shaped in part dirges and dirge performance among the Akpini and the worldview that is reflected in the art form observable in that context.

FUNERAL POETRY (DIRGES)

The dirge which is a poetic form, is said to be one of the most widespread forms of oral literature (Chadwick 1939 as cited in Nketia, 1995:4). This section situates funeral poetry in the broader field of oral literature. It also discusses other terms used for this type of poetry and why “funeral poetry” and “dirge” have been agreed upon as the most appropriate terms for this practice. The section further discusses scholarly works on funeral poetry in order to be abreast with the current trends and the literature in the field. This section also presents the performance conventions of Akpini funeral poetry.

Funeral poetry or dirges are sometimes referred to as laments or elegies. Gbolo’s (2010) study of the funeral poetry of the Sisaala of Ghana gave various examples to make the point that the elegy as used in Western literature cannot be used interchangeably with the dirge in Africa. *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1975) also adds that, “in classical literature an elegy was simply any poem written in the elegiac metre (alternating lines of dactylic hexameter and pentameter) and was not restricted as to subject” (Cited in Gbolo, 2010:28).

The above references suggest that the description of a work as elegy is not based on the theme and the occasion that necessitate its performance, but on the metre, and so far as that metre is used in any poem, the poem automatically qualifies as an elegy. For instance, in Rilke (1975), *Duino Elegies* are not laments; but rather concerns the author’s quest for spiritual values in an alien universe. It can also be observed that unlike elegies, dirges are mostly short and repetitive, sometimes as short as two lines. An example is the song, *Gatsi medo vlom o. Ne woawum nawum kaba njuto*. Which means, ‘Death, don’t make me useless. If you will kill me then do it speedily’. Apart from elegy, funeral poetry is also referred to as lament. This term also needs questioning because just like elegies, laments are not always necessitated by death unlike dirges which are always performed on occasions of death.

Nketia (1955:127) makes a distinction between a dirge and lament: “The lament...has a wider application: in theory, one could lament almost anything, although the subject of death appears to be the most common theme of laments. The dirge is ceremonial. The lament is not similarly circumscribed.” The difference between lament and dirge is made even clearer due to the fact that there are laments performed at joyful occasions such as weddings. Dwyer (2008) affirms that in the Turkic world, bridal laments were performed on occasions when women who married men outside of their villages were leaving their kin to join their husbands’ families. Lament is different from dirge performance because among most Ewe communities it is even a taboo to perform dirge outside the occasion of death. It is said that any one performing dirge outside the occurrence of death, is inviting death into the family or society. Such a person is said to be ‘calling death’ (*Ele ku yo*) hence, such an action is seriously frowned upon. It can be said that

a dirge is part of lament but not all laments are dirges. Among the Ewes, there is a separate name for lament, *fluxleha* and another for dirge, *aviha*. The same difference exists in the oral literature of the Iggede, Nigeria where “a distinction between a dirge (*Idah ny’ Ogwuh*) or funeral essay and a ‘lament’ (*eru*) or personal elegy is significant since people regard it as taboo to compose a dirge in any other context except where a death has occurred” (Ogede, 1995:81).

Of all the terms used to describe these artistic funeral performances, the dirge is the most commonly used. Cuddon (1998:227) gives the origin of dirge as follows:

A song of lament, usually of a lyrical mood. The name derives from the beginning of the antiphon of the Office of the Dead: Dirige, Domine....Direct, O Lord.... As a literary genre it comes from the Greek epicedium, which was a mourning song sung over the dead and athrenody sung in memory of the dead. In Roman funeral processions the *nenia*, a song of praise for the departed, was chanted.

Cuddon’s comment emphasizes the point that, from the very onset, the performance of the dirge was occasioned by death. Scholars such as Agawu (1988), Okpewho, (1992), Nketia (1955); and Akiraga and Odaga (1982) have all defined dirges as funeral songs or chants.

Concerning the origin of dirge performance, the study respondents seem not to have any conclusive narration. The popular response to the origin of dirge is that it is a performance rendered to mourn the dead and to console the bereaved. A few others indicated that the performance of the dirge was passed down from the older to the younger generation. Amu (2011) who researched into the female musical bands of the Ho-Asogli traditional area presents a myth which explains the origin of the dirge. According to this myth, a woman who lost her son, soliloquized through songs cursing death and singing praises of her son while weeping. With time, people mimicked her performance and this became part of the musical tradition of the people.

Among the Kpando people as with other Ewe speaking people, the dirge is referred to as *aviha*: *avi* (tears) *ha* (song). *Aviha* could thus be explained as, ‘songs of tears’. As Nketia (1974) notes, in African societies, the occasion on which a musical genre is usually performed or the activity, custom, rite, or festival with which it is associated may be used for the music. Consequently, among the Akan of West Africa, the songs of puberty rite (*bragoro*) are called *bradwom* (puberty rite songs), while among the Nzema of Ghana, the music of *kundum* festival is also called *kundum*. *Aviha* also takes its characterization from the tears and mourning associated with funerals and the loss of a loved one. Indeed the Ewe language is replete with musical genres that derive their names from the activities of the

music performance. A few examples include: *dowohawo* (work songs), *agblehawo* (farming songs), *tofodehawo* (fishing songs), *viblehawo* (lullaby), and *gbelehawo*⁷ (puberty rite songs).

Apart from *aviha*, the Ewe dirge is also referred to as *akaye*, the same as the name for a rattle, the main musical instrument used in the performance of the dirge. This possibility of the main instrument giving its name to a music genre resonates with Nketia (1974) who affirms that, among the Akans, the principal instrument used in a particular musical type can serve as the name given to the music. It is along this line that the music of a trumpet is given the same name as trumpet, *ntahera*. Also, music in which the gourd stamping tube, *adenkum* is the principal instrument, is also known as *adenkum*; and among the Ewe, music in which a box, *adaka*, is used as a substitute for a master drum is also known as, *adakam*. As may be the case for most African societies, the performers of *aviha* are only women. Nketia (2005) for instance has made this observation after studying dirge performance in several Ghanaian societies. From his studies it is understood that, among the Akan, Dagomba, and Ewe singing of dirges is the preserve of women.

It should be noted that in the case of the Akpini people, *akaye* performance is not only limited to the occasion of death. One of the respondents affirmed that formerly, *akaye* was performed during joyous occasions such as *vihehedego* ('outdooing a baby'), *Dzigbenkekezãduqu* ('birthday celebrations') and *amededeledome* ('graduation from apprenticeship'). Music plays a very central role in these celebrations as it entertains the participants. Apart from the entertaining role of the music, the song texts also present admonition, encouragement, caution and other needed pieces of information. The respondent explained that with time, the churches have taken over these activities so that the *akaye* performance now seems to be limited to funerals. She added that although *akaye* is performed at both joyous and mournful occasions, the lyrics of the songs differ depending on the occasion at hand. Thus, the theme of death is not in the lyrics of *akaye* performance rendered on joyous occasions⁸. This observation also applies to other musical types such as *bobcobo*, *akpese* and *agbadza* which can be performed at both funerals and happy occasions but the lyrics of the songs depend on the type of occasion. Having explored the background and literature on the subject, the paper proceeds to explore change and continuity in the performance of Akpini dirges.

⁷ In the Ewe language, *gbelele* is the euphemism for menstruation.

⁸ A one-on-one interview with Mama Atawakumah also known as Akayemama (grandmother of *akaye*), the lead singer of the Kpando-Bame dirge performing group.

FORCES OF CHANGE

URBANIZATION

One of the significant forces causing change in Akpini dirge performance is urbanization. Urbanization and social change remain the core of Nukunya's work. Nukunya points out that the growth of towns has brought with it many alterations in social life and some attendant problems, not so associated with rural life and traditional social organization (Nukunya, 2016:167). Indeed, this assertion has a bearing on traditional funeral performances. An observation about Akpini funerals performed in Accra shows that the *akaye* group scarcely performs during funerals organized in the city. Some of the elderly members of the *akaye* group explained that formerly, even if the funerals were organized in the city, the *akaye* group would go there to perform, but this practice is no longer common. Some of the members admitted that they sometimes long to go and perform at such funerals in the city but are not able to do so because they cannot afford the cost of transportation. Interactions with some Akpini citizens affirm that in some cases, the bereaved family's desire to bring an *akaye* group to perform at funerals in the city is hindered by the cost involved. It was realized that apart from transportation cost, the bereaved family would also bear other responsibilities such as accommodation and food for the performers. These factors are gradually discouraging this practice. This suggests that the *akaye* performance is gradually being left out of the Akpini funerals that are held particularly in the urban cities. This trend is therefore limiting the context of *akaye* performance. For instance, in contemporary times, funerals are conducted at the premises of the deceased person. Besides, some Akpini-Ewes have settled in the urban areas, which hinders the performance of *akaye*.

It is important to indicate, however, that even though the *akaye* group from Kpando may not be present to perform in the cities, traditional communities may organize *akaye* performance in the cities. For instance, in Ho, there is the Avenor *Kinka* and *Nobody* which are social organizations interested in the welfare of their members and also engage in traditional musical performances. As part of the activities of these groups, there is the performance of *agbadza* during the death of a member or a relative of a member. The performing groups also take responsibility for conveying the corpse of a member who died in the city to his/her hometown and for performing *agbadza* as part of the funeral activities held in the hometown. Avorgbedor (1998) mentions *Dunekpoe* and *Lorloronyo* as examples of such groups by Anlo Ewe in Accra. According to him, the performances in the urban areas are influenced by industrial time, space, population dynamics and socialization, among others.

One of the practices which encouraged the transfer and performance of the Akpini dirge was the practice where children and family members of a

deceased person performed dirges during the funeral of their relatives. As a result of this practice, people learnt the performance of the dirge and some developed interest in the performance and become members of the group. During the funerals attended, it was observed that this practice is no more effective, as described by some of the elders, although there were instances where family members engaged in some oral performances and there was intense mourning before the final closure of the casket. The decline was attributed to factors such as modernity, education and religion. It was explained that some people regard the dirge performance as a “heathen” practice and thus do not allow their children to take part in it. Also, the belief in the concept of witchcraft and other malevolent spirits seems to have taken a toll on the performance of *akaye*. Among the Akpini, old women are often thought to practice witchcraft and this debars other women from learning from or enrolling into the group.

RECIPROCITY

Comments from community members during funerals drew attention to the fact that, although participation in funerals is a communal activity, it is also based on reciprocity. As far back as 1969, Levi Strauss argued that reciprocity is an integral part of the social structure of African societies. The practice of reciprocity at Kpando funerals highlights the mutual responsibility society members have towards each other. This can be an example of the generalized form of reciprocity whereby the return of a service or gift is not determined by time or quantity but the recipient of a gift is indirectly under some obligation to offer assistance whether in cash or kind to the one who offers him or her a gift. Based on this societal understanding, some people tend to participate in some funerals more than others, based on earlier services or relationship between the deceased's family and other community members. As mentioned earlier, Akpini funerals are mostly mass funerals. During a visit to a funeral performance, there were comments about a particular bereaved family who did not involve themselves so much in community activities such as funerals, festivals and other social gatherings. One of the women added that: *edzo ɔe eyawo tse dzi nowɔe mikpo. Etsɔ woasrɔ nu tso eme be 'ba-na-me wobaana'*⁹ ('It (death) has befallen them too, let's watch how they will go about it; next time, they will learn that if you attend to someone's need you will also receive assistance when you are in need'). This practice of reciprocity in Akpini society, affects the number of people who attend a particular funeral, the assistance in the preparation of food for the funeral and the performance of the dirge during the funeral. In terms of the dirge performance

⁹ This is an Ewe proverb which explains the practice of reciprocity.

in particular, people refuse to perform for families who do not participate in community activities.

RELIGIOUS INFLUENCE

Another significant force influencing dirge performance among the Akpini is the Christian religion. Agawu's research on the funeral traditions of the Akpafu people of the Volta Region of Ghana, makes this point forcefully thus: "Of profound significance is the influence of the Christian church, the single most potent institution for eroding, diluting, and symbolically destroying many traditional African practices" (Agawu, 2016). Many of the things related to Christianity, including its faith and practices, have been embraced not only by Christians, but the public at large (Nukunya, 2016).

Aside all the stages of the funeral, one significant area or context in which the performance of the dirge is being completely replaced is during the wake-keeping. Members of *akaye* groups used to perform *akaye* during wake-keepings. The current trend is that some of the funerals completely leave out the wake keeping from the activities of the funerals. Some of the community members explained that even the wake-keepings the researchers attended were not what they would describe as 'traditional Kpando wake-keeping' and that it was the 'church people doing their own things'.

An important feature of a Christian funeral wake-keepings service is the singing of hymns and other choral renditions. There is also the use of drum sets, brass bands and various electrical instruments to perform varieties of music. During some of the wake-keepings ceremonies, film shows¹⁰, mostly organized by the church, took a greater part of the event.

As mentioned earlier, since most of the funerals are organized by the church, dirge performance is normally not part of the burial ceremony but rather the performance of hymns and other choral renditions. This suggests that the context of *akaye* performance is influenced by religion (Christianity). It has been realized that religion is also gradually influencing the discourse in relation to *akaye* performance. When the *akaye* members were asked about the time for the commencement of the Sunday afternoon post burial dirge performance, they gave the time as, *Míadze uua fofo ne mído le solime* ('We will start the performance after church').

During a visit to some of the churches in Kpando, it was observed that some of the *akaye* members were part of the Church. Some of the men who play the instruments during the *akaye-gabaqa* performance were also instrumentalists in

¹⁰ These films are about the rapture and the need for everyone to repent of their sins and be ready for Christ's coming. Since the funeral is a sober moment of mourning, these messages really make meaning to the audience. This is because as part of the discussions after the movie, the audience is often told that they can also die at any time, hence the need to prepare for the rapture and life after death.

their Churches. This is why some of the Church lyrics were part of the repertoire of *akaye* performance. Examples of such songs are: *Yee Dada Mariya va kplɔm ne madzo* ('Mother Mary, come and take me away') and *Xɔla mele fi o. Xɔla le dzifo ke ɔaa* ('The saviour is not here. The saviour is in heaven').

Apart from the context and time of performance, participation in *akaye* is also influenced by religion. This is because most people continue to lose interest in the participation when they get involved in church activities. A comment from one of the *akaye* band members affirms this: *Menye miawoe be yewozu solimetɔwo ta miagafo akaye oa?. Mise be wogbo gbe le fe ya miva do ɔe fi* ('Are you not those who claim you are now Christians and no longer perform *akaye*? Now that you heard our voices will be recorded you have come').

This comment was confirmed as subsequent visits to the field saw a dwindled number as compared to the first visit. One of the women, who was a member of the researcher's host family during the research, mentioned that her family has a strong dirge performing record but she could not take part because her husband was a pastor. This woman has a good memory of the lyrics of the dirge and could offer a meaningful explanation of the meaning of these dirges.

Some of the teachings of Christianity seem to oppose some traditional practices in relation to death, and one of these practices is the performance of funeral dirges. Some of the messages preached during the funerals advice the bereaved to see the death of their loved one as a call by the creator to rest, for which reason the death should be seen as a fulfilment of the Supreme Being's will. For instance, in Thessalonians 3:13 of the Bible, it is written that, "Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope."

Others were also advised not to cry or wail but to remain strong in order to put the devil to shame since some of the deaths are attributed to the work of evil spirits. Ailli Nenola in his research observes that Protestantism in particular has been less tolerant to laments. J.W. Murman, a 19th Century Lutheran minister for instance described laments as "pagan" songs and devoted his 36-page booklet to showing where the old custom came from and how unsuitable they are for Christians to follow (Nenola, 1982).

Wilce's (2009) research on laments among the Bangladeshi reveals that some of these teachings which discourage aspects of traditional mourning are also evident in the Islamic religion. Wilce noted cases where "modernist Islamic visions have decreased tolerance for women raising their voices to sing grievances or lament (*Bilap*), and urban Bangladeshis are said to weep silently" (Wilce, 2009). El-Cheikh (2003) added some of the reasons why dirge performance is opposed by the Islamic faith. First, it entails women raising their voices enough to be heard by non-kin, which reformist Islam frowns on. Then, mourning the death of a Muslim, insults God, who has willed that death. Finally, loud wailing inhibits the

soul's departure to the next world (Cited in Wilce, 2009).

Observations made during dirge performances revealed that some of the performers resort to various means to strengthen and keep themselves active during the performance of the dirge. For instance, a common accompaniment to the performance is the drinking of alcohol and the sniffing of tobacco (*atama dodo*). Though some of the members complain about the excessive use of alcohol during the performance, it may not be easily done away with. It would not be surprising if some of the Christians decide to withdraw from it because of the use of alcohol during such performances.

The role of the dirge performance as a medium to announce death is also becoming less important as mobile phones and the internet now offer faster options to announce death. In some cases, by the time the family members of the deceased confirm the news, it is already being discussed on social media platforms, and on radio and television stations.

Furthermore, the practice whereby the dirge was performed to console the bereaved family after the news of death has been confirmed is also being threatened by the performance of songs by church members.

CHANGE IN DRESSING

Another area of influence is in relation to the dressing of both dirge performers and the audience or bereaved family. Red, black or dark colours¹¹ are the traditional colours used for funerals, but it has been observed that not everyone strictly adheres to this code as people were seen wearing bright and multi-colored dresses. Apart from the most elderly man of the group, who, in most cases, was dressed in the prescribed attire, most of the men wore a pair of trousers and shirts that were not indigenous to the people.

¹¹ In most cases the age of the deceased dictates the color for mourning. Thus, white cloths are worn during the funerals of those beyond eighty years while dark colors were used for those younger than eighty.

Figure 1.2: A picture of a woman in a yellow lacoste instead of the prescribed attire of dark cloth



It has also been observed that some of the female participants do not cover their heads with scarves. This trend is mostly found among the audience who join in the performance and not the performers. It is actually rare to see a female member of the *akayɛ* group without a scarf. Most of the women who do not wear scarves are young ones. Upon further observation, it has also been gathered that most of the women without scarves are those who travelled in from the urban areas.

Figure 1.3: A picture of a man performing *akaye* in suit.



Figure 1.4: Shows a picture of women dancing to the *akaye*-gabada without a scarf



INNOVATION IN THE USE OF INSTRUMENTS

One other observation that was further made during the *akaye* performances was innovation in terms of the instruments used during the performance. Apart from the gourd rattle which is used in the *akaye* performance, some of the women now use a plastic material created in the form of a rattle.

Figure 1.5: Shows a woman holding a plastic rattle.



Interactions with some of the performers concerning the use of the improvised rattle revealed that it is more durable and easier to play. The idea of its durability and it being easier to play was rejected by others, especially the elderly women in the group. According to the older generation, those who use this instrument do so for aesthetic reasons. They added that the gourd is a durable material and is used for making serving bowls and pans.

Some of the younger women confirmed their preference for the improvised rattle on the basis that it is considered to be beautiful and presentable. This affirms that, apart from the functional or musical qualities expected of instruments, their aesthetic or physical qualities are also important for some of the users and other members of the society at large. Explaining this point, Nketia (1990) states that, instruments are not only presented in situ in performance arenas but also at parades and processions that take place on special occasions for instance, during festivals and ceremonies or periods where performing groups display themselves

and their instruments to the community before settling down to perform. Among the Asante and other Akan speaking people of Ghana, musical instruments form part of the traditional art exhibition which occurs on ceremonial occasions when all state regalia valued as objects of aesthetic interest, are displayed (Nketia, 1990).

Nevertheless, the gourd is still the more preferable instrument as compared to the improvised rattle because the latter does not produce the exact sound expected from a rattle. This highlights the point that, one of the important determinants of the aesthetic value of a musical instrument is its appropriateness of sound and not necessarily its physical features. This goes to confirm the point made by Nketia (1990:24) that, “A musical instrument’s value is determined by the attributes of its sound, as the Akan put it, its inside or inherent property...”

THE ROLE OF FORMAL EDUCATION

Nukunya (2016) asseverates that formal education, apart from causing people to migrate, also coerces people to take to European lifestyles. Among these lifestyles are: food-habits, dressing modes, music, dance, entertainment and many aspects of social life, which then become the fashion for school-leavers to follow. In a similar vein, apart from the creativity in terms of the use of instruments, formal education is likewise bringing some dimensions to Akpini dirge performance. Following government’s introduction of adult education, some of the women in the *akaye* groups have started attending school and have learnt how to read and write. As a result, some of the performers have decided to write the *akaye* songs and bring them to the performance, so that they can easily recollect them during the performance. An example is the lead performer shown in the picture below. She is the lead soloist of her dirge performing group. As a result of her long stay in the group, and her effort in maintaining the *akaye* performance in the area, she earned the title, *Akaye Mama* (‘Grandmother of *akaye*’). In her hands are an exercise book, a pen, a mobile phone and a napkin. According to her, apart from the fact that writing the songs helps her for easy recollection, it is also a way of revising the reading and writing lessons she is given in her adult education class. She added that since she is the class prefect, writing *akaye* songs and reading the Ewe bible are some of the means she has adopted to excel in her class. Indeed, many members of *akaye* groups are literate, so they are able to write down their songs and group norms to avoid being forgotten.

Figure 1.5: A picture of a woman holding an exercise book containing written *akaye* lyrics



Although formal education has been blamed as one of the factors causing a loss of interest in traditional oral and musical traditions, it has been observed that formal education has a positive side too. It has created room for the study, research and transfer of these traditional performances for a wider audience. Community members attest to the fact that a number of researchers come to them for enquiries on oral performances such as dirges, folktales, proverbs and other cultural practices.

TECHNOLOGY

The rise of technology is also exerting influence on *akaye* performance. There are cases, where radio stations create times for traditional performances. Apart from holding traditional performances such as *aviha/akaye* in media outlets like Volta Star FM, Kekeli Radio and Touch FM in Ho, in the Volta Region of Ghana, there are other radio and television stations such as Radio Gold, Lōlōnyo FM, Radio Univers and TV Africa, which are outside the Volta Region but play recordings of these traditional performances. Another way in which these recordings are

influencing the performance of *akaye* is that, in some funerals, the live performance of *akaye* is substituted with the playing of earlier recorded versions. This is mostly the case in urban areas where live performance of *akaye* at funerals is rare. It has been observed, however, that the recorded versions do not fulfill all the needs of the live performance. For instance, the live performance brings about a gathering of people in the community who turn up to witness the event and avail themselves of opportunities to meet their friends and families. Apart from the community feelings, these recordings cannot replace the important rituals such as *asidedelevunu* ('Parting ritual') and *amedidi* ('Searching for the dead ritual') that accompany the live performance of dirges.

CHANGE IN CONTENT

The influence of popular culture on Akpini discourse is also reflected in the lyrics of the dirge. On one of the occasions during the research, before the elder of the group performed the libation for the parting ritual, he gave a brief introduction about how they got information about the sickness of the deceased until her final demise. He mentioned that the family informed them about the efforts they were making to restore the health of the deceased when she was sick by visiting hospitals such as Margaret Marquart Hospital, Kpando. As part of the libation, he called on the deceased to send them lotto numbers so that they could win the lottery to get enough funds to settle their debts and also cater for their needs. During the performance, some of the members, in order to call on the group to repeat a particular song, were heard saying, 'encore, encore, encore'. When asked about the meaning of the word and its role in the performance, the members seemed not to understand it, but some of them explained that during choir ministrations in church, music directors use the word when they want a song repeated. The word, encore, "to repeat", mostly used in popular music, has therefore been borrowed into the traditional oral performance. Interestingly, during the libation, the performers were repeating the following word, *nsānom* (a Twi phrase meaning, 'drinking, drinking, and drinking'). Although the people seemed not to clearly understand what the word means, they explained that it was a way of inviting the ancestors to accept the drink offering. The use of the Akan word, *nsānom* in Ewe ritual performance motivated the researchers to find out its origin. According to one of the respondent, the Akan word was initially used by a member of the Bame-Akaye group. It was indicated that, this member was an Akpini citizen who married an Akan man and stayed in Koforidua for a long period of time. The informant recounted that the woman was always heard saying those Twi words whenever libation was being made. With time, other members of the group learned them from her and these were handed over to new members. She added that most of the young members in the group did not know the story

behind those words but they used them.

One of the interesting discoveries of this research is the fusion of *gabada*, a purely recreational performance for the youth into the *akaye* which is performed by the elders for mourning. Amu (2011) observed a similar trend among the Asogli people where *Mide Ama* (let us be naked) (which can be categorized as adult humor or a profane performance) is infused into the *aviha* performance. One of the reasons given for this infusion is to attract the youth, most of whom consider *aviha/akaye* as too slow or too dull for them. This flexibility suggests that the society is finding ways to respond to the demands of cultural dynamism.

Apart from the inclusion of recreational performances into the *akaye*, it has been observed that the performance is not always a solely mournful and sorrowful one. For instance, among the Akpini people, although the songs performed at dawn on Saturday do not differ from those performed on Sunday, there is a form of happiness and an atmosphere of entertainment in the Sunday performance. This observation concurs with Agawu's (2016) point that,

...funerals are occasions not only for mourning but also for celebration. Even though the events are occasioned by death -a specific death- they splinter into myriad forms and resurrect a host of impulses, not all of which are a direct response to death. It is an interpretive mistake, to think of the funeral as an occasion on which sad songs are sung, on which somber and restrained behavior is enacted. There surely are moments when a solemn demeanor is required, but there are also moments of vigorous and boisterous music making.

Interactions with some participants, observations during dirge performances and personal experiences with dirges have confirmed that these performances play an important role in the community. For instance, some of the words of the dirges are comforting, and especially during moments of grief, they give the assurance of hope, thereby, offering a psychological relief to alleviate sorrow and grief. Apart from the theme of death, these performances also have other manifest roles since they present a platform where society projects its values, morals, beliefs and worldview as a whole.

CONCLUSION

This paper explored the current state of the Akpini dirge performance. It concludes that popular culture and other factors such as Christianity, urbanization and formal education are influencing various aspects of Akpini tradition and dirge performance is not left out. Hence there are identifiable changes in the context of the performance, costume, the use of instruments, and introduction of foreign lexical items among others. Although the study admits the influence of social

change, it points out that the dirge performance in Kpando is not becoming extinct, but is rather taking different forms. An instance is the merging of *gabaḡa* with *aviha/akaye*. Apart from that, the recording of dirges is making the performance more accessible and able to reach a wider audience as people listen to the performance on their mobile phones or through Compact Discs (CD), radio stations and television stations.

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