

# NEW TRENDS IN ASAFO MUSIC PERFORMANCE: Modernity Contrasting Traditions

Emmanuel Obed Acquah

Abstract



This paper considers the new trends that have taken place in asafó musical performance, taking Kyirem Asafó No.1 of Ajumako Mando, Ghana, as a case study. It seeks to examine the interplay between tradition and innovation and the sociocultural impact. The study describes the retrospective aspect of asafó music performance some decades ago and goes on to bring to the fore some changes that have been brought into it to sustain and modernize it. It is seen that education and social change are powerful forces influencing most innovations of asafó music. It calls for a concerted effort of all traditional music makers to embrace the changes pertaining to asafó musical performance and use them to modernize other existing musical genres in their areas.

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## Introduction

One of the most outstanding aspects of a people's culture, which identifies them, is their music. Particularly, in a multilingual African society like Ghana, the mention of a particular musical ensemble shows the identity of the group. For instance, *adowa*, *asafó*, *adenkum*, *kete*, *bɔsɔɛ*, *sikyɪ*, *osoode* and *adzewa* are identified with the Akan while *agbadza*, *gabada* and *bɔbɔbɔ* are identified with the Ewe. *Bamaya* and *damba* are identified with Dagomba while *kpanlogo* identifies the Ga. These ensembles that are identified with the various people respond to societal change and modernization, and *Asafó* musical ensemble is no exception.

It must be stated that the symbolic role of *asafo* music performance in instilling and representing the community's social basis has not diminished. It has rather responded to the changing social basis through modification and transformation, adopting different repertoires and reflecting a modern style of imported music to make it more appealing to the younger generation. Nketia held the same opinion when he was interviewed by Trevor Wiggins (2005). He was of the view that parents know the dances of their villages but the young people know dances from all over Africa and that enables the creative ones among them to make any combination thereby yielding to the concept of integration and bringing about transformation. It is as a result of these transformed systems and concepts that *asafo* music of Mando people, a Fante community in Ghana, was explored.

## **An Overview of Asafo among the Fantes**

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According to safohen Nana Amo of Ajumako Mando, *Asafo* was formerly a warrior association that defended the town against aggression of the local enemies, incursions by her neighbours as well as the human and material resources in times of trouble or war. On instruction from the Ohen (ruler), the *supi* (the leader of the *Asafo*) alerted the members of the company to meet emergencies, such as fire fighting and chasing off marauding wild animals. Its music, which developed in the context of war traditionally continued to be used in other spheres of community life – ‘enstoolment’, social life and annual festivals – when inter-ethnic wars were virtually no more.

By its nature, traditionally, *Asafo* had been the prerogative of men because of its association with wars as it is characterized by strength and agility. To buttress this, Mato (n.d:1) asserts that “the warrior nature of *Asafo* of the Fante restrain women from taking part in their performances”.

The number of *Asafo* companies in the towns of the Fante states depends on the size of the geographical area of the township. For instance, Cape Coast, the current capital town of the Fantes, Central Region of Ghana, has seven *Asafo* companies, namely, Arshell, Siwdo, Abora, Bentsir No.1, Anafo No.2, Intsin No.3 and Nkum No.4. The traditional capital of the Fante states, Mankessim, has five companies in each of their suburbs - *ɔmam mu* (*Twafo*), *ɔbrɔm*, Anafo, Nkusukum (*ebir*) and Edwumadze (*Bɔrbɔrkumkumfi*). Simpa (Winneba) has two *Asafo* companies. They are *Tuafo 1* and *Dentsefo 2*. Indeed, apart from Ajumako town which also has two *Asafo* companies, most of the townships in Ajumako traditional area have only one *Asafo* Company. Mando, the research area, has only one company called *Kyirem Asafo No.1*.

Safohen Nana Amo disclosed that Asafo means *dɔm* (many people), or *kuw* (association) or *mboanofo* (people brought together for a particular goal). They were 'soldiers' who voluntarily came together to serve the security needs of the community. The group comprised drummers and singers who made music especially, after conquering their enemies. Their dance movements depicted military strategies used to overcome the enemies.

Likewise, Aggrey (1978) documented that, Fantes believed that one of the most important things that existed in human race is the practice of *akɔm* (currently, a musical ensemble called Priest Dance) through which misfortunes and unforeseen contingencies were foretold by the gods. It was found out that the performance of the *akɔm* was full of music and dance, so people started calling them *asawfo* (dancers). *Asawfo* gradually corrupted to become *Asafo*.

Furthermore, one of the key informants, Nana Okwan, revealed that formerly, acquisition of land was mainly through wars. Ability to capture land was by means of struggle. In view of this, communities deliberately formed resistance groups to fight against competitors in order to protect what they have and acquire new ones also in the process. These people consequently came to be known as fighters (*Asafo* or *akofo*). Infact, Opanyin Ogomon, one of the retired *Asafo* members of Kyirem *Asafo* No. 1, affirmed this by tracing *Asafo* from the word *sa* (war) and *fo* (group of people) and concluding that *Asafo* means a group of people who fight (warriors). While certain group of people sees it to have developed from wars, there are others who are of the view that it developed from the *akɔm* dance according to oral tradition.

Based on the research conducted, it could be deduced that *asafo* developed from *akɔm* because the *asafo* music makers are usually led by *akɔmfo* (priests) during important ceremonies such as annual festivals and 'enstoolment' of new chiefs. It can also be stated that few people cannot form *Asafo* and that is why people describe it as *kuw* (association), *dɔm* (many people) or *mboanofo* (group of people). Also the style of dance that accompanies *asafo* music is generally warlike in nature. *Asafo* could therefore be described as a group of dancers (musicians) who perform like fighters or warriors.

## **Tradition Versus Modernity**

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### *Emergence of new Asafo in Ajumako Mando*

Traditional *asafo* group, usually made up of adults who are between the ages of 20 and 70 has not been as vibrant as it used to be. How to modernize the old traditional *asafo*

(Kyirem Asafo Company No. 1) and make it more attractive had always been a subject of discussion. The community had thought of putting young people together to form a new asafo group of musical performers in the community. A lot of efforts were then made to give birth to a new asafo group comprising young people between the ages of eight and fifteen. The formation of this new Asafo group met with resistance. The cultural legitimacy and conventions were challenged.

The advocacy for the formation of the new Asafo group by the elders of the community is in line with the statement that “contemporary African thought is dominated by the idea of progress and development, for we are anxious to realize our potential as we build a modern Africa that is truly independent” Nketia (1976, p.2). The complementarity and interdependent role of the new asafo was to revitalize the performance of the old asafo. It was also to make it more meaningful to the youth and give them a new identity.

The upsurge of Christianity in Mando has created the notion that Asafo is associated with abosom (gods), due to this parents did not want their wards to engage in what they consider fetish. Having convinced the parents, the elders organized the youth to avail themselves for the birth of the new Asafo group, a pragmatic decision to enhance music making in the community. This confirms what Netti (1964, p.232) has stated that “musical change is usually brought about by decisions made by individuals about music-making and music on the basis of their experiences of music and attitudes to it in different social contexts.”

The second factor responsible for the formation of the young Asafo group was through educational institutions. Promotion of cultural festivals in schools, indigenous Ghanaian dances such as asafo, adowa agbadza, and ɔɔɔɔɔɔ. for the purpose of broadening the provenance of the school children in terms of the national heritage, has already inculcated into the young ones some interest in traditional culture. The exposure to this variety was found to have broken down the perception of abosomdze (for the gods) and all other barriers which were initially present.

In the contemporary context, however, the school has come to take the place of this informal type of education. The educational curriculum then prepares the students by allowing for a wide spectrum of achievement as regards ear training, singing ability, rhythm and musical creativity (Ampomah, 2003). Nketia (1999, p.3) also has the same opinion that “children provided with systematic learning experiences in traditional music will be able to put this knowledge to creative use. They will be able to make their own unique contributions in their mature years to the musical cultures of their societies”.



*Mando Young asafo members at a pre-arranged performance.*

Flolu and Amuah (2003, p.87) emphasize this and state that “the kind of music learning in contemporary education has a dual role of making children develop interest in folk music and also helping them to develop positive and responsive attitudes in music and the arts of all kinds when they practice them”. Therefore, children, having acquired those skills, would develop as well as promote the cultural heritage of their locality.

As a result of seeing the need to pass on the Mando musical culture to the younger generation, and recognizing young people’s enthusiasm, due to their formal educational background for learning the asafo music, the elders worked relentlessly to establish Asafo group for the youth and gradually involved the youth in asafo musical performances.

The process of modernization has been more evolutionary in influencing cultural change. I believe in order to fully nurture the creative ability of the children as they reach adult status and to be able to participate in the dance performances of the community, they were encouraged to voluntarily avail themselves for the birth of a new Asafo solely for asafo music making in the community .

## *Costume*

Traditionally, the costume for asafo music performance is designed red and black contrasts. Even though these outfits are still used, in recent times, colourful tee-shirts and uniforms are equally used during musical performances. The groups have introduced costumes with images of political figures printed on them which are routinely worn to meet political celebrities irrespective of their political affiliations who visit the community to solicit developmental assistance. During the 2008 elections, it was not uncommon to see the asafo group costumed in tee-shirts that celebrate local parliamentarians. This political twist is reflected in their costume designs .

## *Women in Asafo Music Performance*

According to Safohen Nana Amo, the chief informant, the Fante tradition frowns on the handling and playing of asafo drums by women because it is not only a male ensemble but also associated with wars. One of the reasons for prohibiting women from playing the asafo drums was that the materials for constructing the drums go through some kind of purification process which does not allow women, especially, those in their "menses" to touch them. It was believed that the sacredness of the drums may be spilled if a woman in her menstrual period touched the asafo drum. It was therefore not surprising, according to tradition, to restrict women from it since it was extremely difficult to determine whether or not a woman was in her menstrual period.

Nzewi (cf 2003, p.27) makes reference to the same cultural experience that "in the maiden's musical group of women in Africa, men play drums for them. The reason is that cultural associations regard the drum membrane as a female sex symbol whereas the striking object and the action involved for playing the drums are considered as male sexual behaviour and both give 'birth' to musical sound". Other scholars such as Nketia (1963, 1968, 1989), Maulsby (1990) and Gourlay (1982) have given the same exposure to African musical instruments, stressing the roles of men and women in the sociocultural context of the Akan and some other parts of Africa.

Women who were aficionados of the musical performances and who willingly became members of the asafo groups were made to fan asafohemfo (Asafo chiefs) and to sing appellations to them during outdoor ceremonies.

In recent years, the role of women in the performance of Asafo ensemble has changed drastically. Today, not only do women dance, clap and sing but also play selected asafo supporting drums. Eyebrows were raised by a lot of people when a woman was seen playing asafo drums during the annual Akwambɔ Festival of Ajumako Mando people

in August 2007. It will be seen how radically this innovation contrasts the tradition. It shows how women could break certain cultural norms in this contemporary society .

### *Reasons for Participation of Women in Asafo Music*

According to the research conducted, the main duty of Asafo today is to provide music at festivals. Traditionally, it was considered a taboo in the community for women to go to wars. In the modern society, the absence of wars has paved the way for more musical performances among the groups. For that reason, it has brought about recruitment of women into the asafo musical performance.

Also, occupational mobility of men into the urban areas has made them leave little or no time for serious participation in the music. Undoubtedly, there is frequently little or no monetary compensation for musical performances so most of them treat it as a hobby. Women, on the other hand are naturally domestic, especially, at the village and therefore they are more stable in the house than the men who move from one place to another in search of daily bread. Women are therefore always available for rehearsals.

Furthermore, modern Ghanaian women are being encouraged to rub shoulders with their male counterparts at work and home . Women are now vying for ministerial positions, parliamentary seats and education directorships. Gender awareness has increased the will power of women to compete with men in all human endeavours.

Again, these days, asafo drums are purchased from the market rather than commissioned thereby challenging the traditional belief that drums are possessed by vital forces. The Ghanaian female's psyche is now free from any inhibiting spirit invocation that prevents her from handling or playing drums. This is an innovative turn which is a motivation that empowers women to actively participate in drumming in cultural activities in the Ghanaian traditional society.

### *Instrumentation*

The Asafo Companies use five or six musical instruments depending on the area. According to my research, the Asafo companies in Mando and the surrounding communities use six musical instruments. These are dawur (bell), anserwa (small-sized drum), konkon (larger than the anserwa), Opentsen or ampa (middle-sized drum), epusuw (larger than those mentioned) and the asafokyen (master drum).



*Mando asafo female ensemble. Behind them are their instructors also from Mando*



*From the left: dawur, anserwa, konkon, opentsen (ampaa), epusuw and asafokyen*

## *Performance Context*

Asafo performance is no more held to celebrate victory in wars. In Mando community, for instance, it is not only used in celebrating the annual traditional Ahorba and the Akwambɔ festivals but also during funeral rites. Formerly, asafo music was performed during the funeral rites of their members only but presently, it is used to celebrate funeral rites of males, whether young or old, Christian, Muslim and traditional religious believers. Also, it celebrates women who are members of the Asafo group.

Asafo is also performed at other social and political gatherings where prominent leaders visit the community. In particular, when chiefs, local assembly members, parliamentarians, traditional divisional chiefs and, specifically, the president of the state pay visits to the community.

## **Sociocultural Impact of the Innovation**

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The young Asafo group was constituted to perform during annual festivals but they have moved from performing at the village square onto the national stage. One of their performances was at the National Theatre. They have also been attending District and Regional fund raising programmes.

Here are two contradictory opinions about this innovation. Greater percentage of the retired Asafo complained about the women who now play asafo drums, as; “Me nana, amambra dze wɔnse no” (literally means, my grandchild, a tradition is not blemished). This indicates that some changes in asafo musical traditions are taboos that must not be permitted.

In contrast to the above opinion of the retired Asafo members, the younger generation think that “adaptability is a fundamental characteristic of music. If music is to qualify as a creative work of art, it must endure the passage of time and appeal to future generations”(Mbabi-Katana 1995, p.100). If allowing women to play drums will incorporate new spirit of enjoyment to the Asafo music performance, then it is necessary to be adopted and well embraced.

Furthermore, the innovation has resulted in a strong ethnic and cultural identity of the community. As stated by Ampene (2005, p.182), “musical groups maintain an important status in the community. Likewise, Stokes (1994, p.5) has the opinion that “music is socially meaningful not entirely but largely because it provides means by which people recognize identities and places”. The young Asafo members in the community are sometimes hired to perform in other surrounding townships. As indicated earlier

on, the complementarity and the inter-dependent role of the young Asafo group is a unique factor in giving the community a firmer sense of cultural identity, community pride and cultural continuity. As a result, currently, Asafo music performances attract more spectators and audience than ever before.

The community at large appreciates most of the changes in the asafo musical performance such as the new beautiful costumes, female and children drummers as well as the use of modern gadgets. There is general appreciation, awareness and increased understanding of this cultural innovation.

## **Implication for Practice**

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It has become increasingly clear that the new context which has been adapted for the performance of asafo music has helped to sustain the asafo music in Mando. Berlina (1978) reviewed the musical culture of the Shona people of Zimbabwe and states that the introduction of modern mechanized techniques of plowing and the proliferation of grinding mills have eliminated the kind of work that used to provide the occasion for the performance of work songs. He explained that other traditional songs have survived because the Shona people have found new contexts with which to associate them. He gave an example that former war songs are today commonly sung at boxing matches and also play an important role in African political rallies. This is an indisputable fact and that is what is also happening to Asafo musical performance of the Mando people of Ghana. It has become necessary therefore, to develop those new contexts within which Asafo musical groups can perform to rescue it from extinction.

It is envisaged that the Traditional Music Units of the Music Departments of our institutions will consider the addition of keyboards, trumpets and guitars, not only to asafo music performance but also to other traditional music genres to breed new hybrid of musical genres.

The recent changes discussed are cultural innovations that could be introduced in other existing musical genres in the Ghanaian communities and Africa as a whole. Leaders of other musical types could train new groups to ensure cultural transmission and continuity. This will promote 'we-feeling' (sense of oneness) among the youth in the area. It will foster speedy development of their abilities and aesthetic sensibilities at an early stage. The ability of the children to take part in such community musical activities as voice, instrumental music and understand their cultural practices are what formal education seeks to enhance.

## Conclusion

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Summing up this paper, the emphasis has been how modernity has led to the modification of asafo music performance of Mando people; how cultivated habits which contrast tradition have been accepted as part of the musical tradition to sustain the continuity of the asafo music performance and how traditional perceptions about the involvement of women in Asafo as drummers have empowered women in the Arts, specifically, in music making. Given these facts, attitudes of the people to these innovative ideals of the musical tradition have been positive. It is recommended that these innovative ideals are employed by music practitioners to modernize other existing musical genres.

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