

Clothing and Identity: Ga Deities and Spiritual Responsibilities

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Abstract

This paper examines the components of clothing among the individual priests/priestesses of the various Ga deities. Nortey (2008) and Field (1962) have made some notable inroads in this research area, however, no/little attention has been paid to the dress code of the individual priest/priestess. Again there are no distinctions or clarification with clothes relating to the training period and ordination of these servants, as well as costumes designated for festive occasions, healing, worship/veneration of their gods and their day-to-day activities. This paper addresses these gaps through interviews and participant observation. Data were collected from people of selected Ga communities, especially Teshie, Tema and Nungua. The article argues that each Ga deity is symbolized with specific costumes and accessories and thus, requires the servant to be adorned accordingly, regardless of his/her sex. The use of specific clothing items also empowers the priest/priestess spiritually during healing. This article adds to the seemingly scanty literature on Ghanaian costume history, to improve teaching and learning and to enhance creative development among students, lecturers in the arts, ethnographers, sociologists, costumiers and stage/film/video directors. It also suggests that costume designers should check the clothing background of each deity, to avoid creating stereotyped priests/priestesses.

Keywords: costume, deity, clothing, servant, priest/priestess, Ga

1.0 Introduction

The focus of this paper is to try and investigate the dress code of priests/priestesses of some deities among the Ga traditional worship. It is supported by a hypothesis that notes that even though all Ga priests and priestesses wear different clothes relating to their various deities, they perform similar functions to safeguard the community against physical and spiritual ailment.

The Ga people are an ethnic group found in Ghana. Traditionally the Ga are mostly fisher folks, and live in towns such as Accra, Osu, La, Teshie, Nungua, and Tema. Their settlement stretches for about forty miles along the coast and shares boundaries to the east and west with Laloi Lagoon and River Densu respectively. Each Ga town is an independent political entity governed by its own constitutions. However, their political structures are virtually the same, yet they differ in details. (Manoukoure 1950) There are a lot of myths surrounding their origin, however, they are believed to have migrated to this present site around the seventeenth century or earlier. Until about the end of the 17th century, the Ga people formed groups of extended families who had a head priest as their political leader. This priest became their head of civil affairs, attached to a lineage god who represented and spiritually protected the whole town. (Field 1961) Each Ga town therefore, has numerous cults; some worshipped by all the people while others are adored by few people or individual families. From time immemorial therefore, the Ga has been conscious of his existence and has made countless efforts to stay alive. In an attempt to stay healthy, prevent sickness and untimely death, all forms of art were practiced, for which clothing has played a salient role within their traditional religion.

Undoubtedly, religion is indispensable from virtually every aspect of the life of Ga people and has a pivotal function in their socio-cultural affairs, regulating the relationship between the people and their physical as well as their spiritual environment. Consequently, priests and priestesses, representatives or servants of these gods who are empowered by their various deities to work on their behalf, use special clothes. (Quacoopome 1987) Some of these gods are Kple, Me, Otu and Tigare (Field 1961)

Every human society is known by a specific way of life that identifies it from other social groups. To anthropologists, therefore, this is our culture which encompasses all the things we know and perform. Through cultural perspectives we can simultaneously see our kinship with the rest of humanity and our uniqueness among societies. (Peters-Golden 2002) By way of our lives then we portray truths about ourselves, our thoughts, and all the symbolic signals we want to share with others. Greider (1996) reiterates this in the following:
...our cultural groups – sometimes called ethnic groups (a people who share a common and distinctive culture) – tend to have distinctive styles. We wear clothing ...that are different from those of other groups.

This paper agrees with Greider and thus attempts to examine the role of clothing among priests/priestesses of Ga deities, and my objective is to show how clothing helps delineate one deity from the other. Field (1961), Nortey

(2008) and Manoukoure (1950) all mention when and how a deity is represented by a person and establishes a unified costume used during ceremonies. This cultural misrepresentation creates gaps and raises questions such as: what clothing elements are associated with (1) the training period; (2) ordination; (3) individual deities and (4) the daily life activities of a servant? How will the sex of a deity affect the clothing and adornment of a servant?

Data collected through interviews and observations at some annual festivals, the *Homowo* (Hooting at hunger) and *yeleyele* (Yam Festival celebrated to revere a deity) buttress the argument that, Ga deities have traditional clothes with specific patterns and accessories of identity that are uniquely their own. There is also special clothing and grooming worn by their servants that are aligned with occasions such as ordination and worship or veneration of their gods. The paper significantly and interestingly notes that a servant is expected to dress according to the dress code of the deity, regardless of his/her sex. (Kwakyee-Opong 2011) There are distinct and symbolic hair styles of the individual deities, such as the gele and akukuli which have important ritual concepts that portray power and status of the servant in the community. Moreover, there is a perceived potency of some of these traditional clothes and the body designs of these servants in the discharge of their duties and during spiritual healing. Finally the paper concludes that despite the fact that all Ga deities perform the same functions (to protect the community spiritually, and also preserve their culture), there is a clear distinction in the clothing and adornment used by servants of each deity. Stage/video/film directors, fashion and costume designers are therefore encouraged to factor this in their search for the appropriate clothes for a priest/priestess in their productions.

2.0 Costumes and Worship

The use of clothes and accessories as identification has originated with creation itself. Through the Bible and the Quran, there are instances where it is believed, God used signs as representation and authority as well as a mark of doom. Or according to the New World Translation of the Holy Bible “as unusual display that has significance as an indicator of something else, present or future”. Consequently when banishing Cain for killing his brother Abel, the Bible mentions in Genesis chapter 4 verse 15 that God gave a “sign [make-up] “ for Cain in order that no one finding him would strike him”. Other biblical account also describes in detail the garment of Israel’s High Priest. For the purposes of beautification and symbolizing the glory of God, skillful men filled with the spirit of wisdom were requested to design Aaron’s garments for his sanctification, so that his sons will serve as priests: “you are to weave the checkered robe of fine linen make a turban of fine, and make a woven sash. You will also make robes sashes and headgear for Aaron’s sons for glory and beauty.” (Exodus 28)

To gain God’s approval and have good standing with Him in order to effectively intercede for the Israelites, the priest needed to wear a shining plate of pure gold with holiness belongs to God embossed on it. The gold plate was to be fastened to the turban with a blue chord placed in front of the turban. It was supposed to be on Aaron’s forehead so that he will take responsibility when a person commits an error against the holy things which the Israelites sanctify when offering holy gifts. It must always be on the forehead of Aaron so that they may gain God’s approval. (Genesis 28) In symbol of his mandate to judge the people, the breast plate of the high priest was made like the ephod with gold, blue thread, purple wool, scarlet material and fine twisted linen. Four rows of stones were to be fixed in it; (1) ruby, topaz and emerald, (2) turquoise, sapphire and jasper (3) leshiem stone, agate and amethyst ;(4) chrysolite, onyx and jade. These stone corresponded with the names of the 12 sons of Israel, and each one should be engraved like a seal; with each name representing one of the 12 tribes. (Exodus 28)

Similarly, The Holy Qur’ân 33 requires their women to “cast their outer garments over their persons (when out of doors): that is most convenient.” This dressing is a symbol of protection for them so that they will “not be molested”. Again the women are admonished to hide their beauty and not display a lot of ornaments, and also draw their veils over their bosoms. Their beauty is meant to be revealed to only their husbands, fathers, sons, brothers, or their brother’s sons. They should not draw attention to their hidden ornaments “... that ye may be successful”. (Qur’ân 24)

In most African countries, a select group of men and women serve their communities by dedicating themselves to a particular deity and becoming a priest or priestess of the god. These people worship specific deities and act as mediators between the deity and the community. Various writers have reported on the culture of these servants including clothing and adornment. (Beckwith & Fisher 2002, Blackmun et al 2001; Fagg 1990; Field 1960) These representatives need guidance and protection in spiritual matters, and therefore use all forms of clothing items to fortify them. For instance talisman is worn for various reasons such as ensuring protection and good fortune. As a result voodoo initiates in Togo, wear talisman woven into their hair. To increase their virility and make their words so powerful that no woman can turn them down, the *Wodaabe* men wear leather pouches

which contain special barks, seeds and roots. Moreover talisman in the shape of a cross, representing the crossroads of life, is worn to protect them when they leave the desert and enter the dangerous city environment. They also apply powder of pulverised chameleon on their faces, “which transforms them into paragons of beauty”. (Beckwith& Fisher 2002)

One of the important duties of a priest/priestess is to provide healing for people from severe physical illness to emotional, psychological and spiritual disorders. Their position as intermediaries between the deities and the community help people to sustain their religious and cultural inheritance. Among the Ga, priests and priestesses use white clothes and adorn their bodies with chalk and white kaolin to signify purity, as they discharge their duties. They adorn their hair with talismans and wear beads imbued with special powers: certain strands cure headaches or skin troubles; while others protect the wearer from malevolent spirits. The state of possession entered into by the priests or priestesses requires special clothes. The Atanofo priest, for instance covers himself with white myrrh, considered to be the food for the priest, to elicit power from the deity. The *Sumanbrafo* priest of Ashanti also covers himself with red clay and black charcoal to signify the fierce nature of his deity, whilst the priest of Flimani of Benin, when possessed wears a tree-fibre skin and smears his body with a medicinal paste. (Beckwith& Fisher 2002)

In a Bondo ceremony of the Temne people, *nowo* is a significant masquerade. Every aspect of the masquerade is connected with the character of her spirit, as well as the roles and values of the *Bondo* association. A white scarf is tied to the central projection at the top of the helmet-like head of the *nowo*, which represents her solidarity with the initiates, who wear white powder during their initiation, a symbol of their detachment from the sins of life. Officials of the association use a small scalped version of the *Bono* or *Sande* masquerade on their staffs that remind the community of the spiritual source of the power of the women. (Blackmun et al 2001)

Writing on “Vodun identity and Typologie”, Blier (1990) reported that *Vodun* are said to take a range of identities, comprising “all the manifestations of power that cannot define any monstrosity or phenomena which surpasses one’s imagination or intelligence,... all things that god reclaims in the form of cult”. She draws a distinction between Vodun of the city gods and that of the family religious powers, however all of them associated with trees, mountains, stones and rivers. A voodoo is attached with a sense of directing the future of the society and this is seen through their signs *weke* found in clothes, drums, umbrellas etc. “*Weke* is said to denote the cardinal directions (with the zenith sun in the middle), and to reveal the mysteries and order of the universe and its sponsoring vodun”.

Clothing symbolism in masks and masquerades among Nigerians is quite a masterpiece, and unique tradition. Among the Igbo, masking has become more progressive in recent times, where some “ masks radiate an aura of power even today, and many still have locally effective regulatory roles”. Masks to them, are spirits. Almost all the masquerades are masculine; however, they are used to idealize women promoting their beauty, patience and care, to contrast with the masculine aggression, power and autocracy. The larger dark mask manifests female spirits, and symbolizes purity, safety and clarity, while the male represents chaos, obscurity, mystery, danger and conflict. The Oweri people among the Igbo, have a masking tradition, *mgbedike*, (time of the brave) which has bold, exaggerated features, including open, snuggle-toothed mouths and fantastic horns. All the group members are also identified with polychrome applique cloth “body suits” whose patterning loosely recalls monochromatic designs painted on youthful females in the area. The use of the horns and snuggle-teeth as well as the wild hairstyle represents power and bravery. (Blackmun 2001)

Reporting on the role of Ga priests and priestesses, a renowned anthropologist, Margaret Field, who has extensively and remarkably written about this ethnic group reports that these servants “are the mouth-piece of their deities, great and small. In the jargon of western spiritualists they are mediums, in that of western physicians they have hysterical fits”. She also mentions that every deity has besides its officiating priest at least one priest or priestess through whom the gods communicate, either to the chief priest or the people. She further mentions four (4) gods; Kple, Me, Otu, and Akon and identifies them with specific dances. However, with regards their clothing the writer makes a general statement; presumably identifying even male and female with one code of dressing. She indicates:

They are naked except for a short dress or calico skirt, sundry necklaces, and anklets of beads and cowries, their hair is unbound and stands out in a high bush, their faces and bodies are often painted with white clay streaked with runnels of sweat, they usually brandish a brush or a cow tail...

Concerning their training she mentions the ordeal they go through: “strict chastity, frugal fare, a hard floor to step upon, insufficient covering during chilly nights”. (Field 1961) The “insufficient covering” mentioned by the writer on this occasion leaves a lot of questions to be answered; (1) what is this covering? (2) What is its purpose? (3). Undoubtedly, Field has tried to project the relevant position of these religious bodies, backing them

up with some clothing and adornment. Nonetheless, some significant dimensions, for example, the relevant and pivotal role of costume in the discharge of their duties are relegated to the background; a need this paper tries to accomplish.

3.0 Approach to the Study

The study relied on participant observation and interviews conducted to collect data from location sites such as Teshie, Tema and Nungua in Accra. Critical observations were made during the Ga annual festival, *Homowo*, which was celebrated in September 2008 at Teshie and Nungua. Further observations took place at the annual yam festivals of some priests/priestesses at Teshie, Tema, Teshie and Nungua, between October and November, 2009. This festival, *Yeleyele* is celebrated by priests/priestesses every year to revere and venerate their deities for the care and protection given to them and the whole community.

Interviews were purposively conducted with priests, priestess, chief priests and some elders of the communities. This group was sampled and used because of their knowledge in the Ga culture, and also because of their closeness to the clothing items used by the deities. The interviews (with 35 people) were primarily done, one-on-one, but in few cases some were conducted via telephone, when I needed more clarifications on some of the observations. Since most of the indigenes of the research location speak Ga, The recorded interview was later translated into the English language, in consultation with Nii Boi Mensah, a Ga native who teaches Ga at the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana.

Photographs were collected from some of the priests and priestesses (especially Nuumo Ahungua, who additionally helped me with the required rites before accessing each ceremony) while others were taken during some annual festivals at Teshie and Tema. It is worth noting here that permission was sought from the people, and the purpose of the research made known to the priests/priestesses for the necessary rituals to be performed before I could take the pictures and the video coverage.

All the data collected were finally analysed and interpreted in line with the objectives and the hypothesis of this paper.

4.0 Clothing and Adornment associated with rituals for Ga Deities: Appointment, Training and Ordination

Each Ga family (*we*) is spiritually 'married' to a particular Ga deity. These gods are usually worshipped by the particular family through a priest or priestess who becomes "the servant of the deity and ministers in temples and shrines" (Quacoopome 1987). Currently, however, almost all the shrines visited at the research sites were and still are in the homes of the servants, and not situated on the outskirts of the town, as in the past. A priest/priestess can be chosen by the god regardless of his/her age, profession or religious background. According to oral tradition, people who resist the offer of the god will fall sick, may go mad or become restless until he/she complies with the request. A person can be appointed right from her mother's womb, at birth; when the child is born or at a very old age- there is actually no age limit for a deity to appoint a person as a priest or priestess. When a person accepts the call he/she has to undergo training by the particular god who has appointed him/her, and that person is assigned a trainer under whose tutelage the position of becoming a priest/priestess is learnt. The teacher becomes his/her spiritual wife/ husband, and the priest/priestess in training is taken to the shrine of the particular deity to be trained. "The official priest/priestess training consists chiefly of a week's solitary confinement, ceremonial cleansing, head shaving, a simple investiture, and initiation into simple duties" - Field 1961. However, according to Nuumo Blefo, a priestess in Teshie, today the training period may take three to six weeks, depending on the attitude of a person. To her "some people learn fast and thus, take about four weeks to learn the art. Other lazy ones use over six months to finish the training".

4.1.1 Clothes associated with the Training and Ordination of Priestesses: Cloth, Body markings, Body designs, Hand items, Hairstyles

There is a specified code of dressing for trainee priestesses, sometimes referred to as acolytes. Each of them is identified and known by the different types of clothing and adornment associated with the deities. To undergo training at the shrine, the trainee is given her first accessory prescribed by the deity, and worn to spiritually fortify her during the training period. According to Nuumo Ahungua, a priestess and a native of Teshie, a type of strung beads, known as *banka*, is worn as a wristlet on the right wrist and only used during the training period. Each person is identified by the *banka* of her deity, and she is not allowed to wear additional accessories or dresses of her choice. They walk barefoot. As mentioned already, some of the Ga deities include *kple*, *otu*, *akon aben* and *tigare*.

The mode of dressing for the kple servant throughout the training period consists of two loin cloths. It can either be two multi-coloured cloths of the same print or in different colours or designs as shown in figure 2.

A person serving the otu god uses two pieces of plain white cloths during the training period. But in addition to the banka, a servant of the otu or akon deity wears on her left arm: three rings on the last two fingers and the thumb. The servant of the tigare deity uses two plain white loin cloths, and in addition to the banka, she wears an iron band around her bicep. (See figure 2)

The aben deity is also identified with a red cloth, worn as two loin cloths. The material can also be sewn into a gathered skirt, but the breasts are exposed as shown in figure 1.3. A plain white cloth worn over any other printed cloth, associate acolytes of the *gele* god. All the clothes for all the deities are worn with no age limit.



Figure 1: Two tigare trainees in their costumes



Figure 2: Some kple acolytes wearing their training clothes.



Figure 3: An aben trainee in red skirt.

During the training period the trainee does not wear underpants, and in place of beads, she wears a white string tied around her waist with a piece of white or red cloth worn between her thighs to cover her female genitals. Madam Teiko of La, noted that this form of dressing (which has metamorphosed into the 'G-String' pants presently in vogue) is prescribed by their deities because "these spiritual wives and husbands should be sexually ready for their 'spouses' by wearing such clothes".

Every trainee is supposed to wear her prescribed clothes on every occasion; whether she is going to town to shop, at home, or when she sleeps. The same clothes are also used during ceremonial occasions such as the *yeleyele* of another priest/priestess. (See figure 16).

Each deity has special body marks that should be worn, and these consist of one or two straight lines which are normally made on the forehead, chest, arms, biceps ankle and at the nape. For instance the Otu, Akon, Me and Mla priestess wear four rows of cicatrize at her back. (Fig.4). There are additional six, four, six and three others, marked on the chest, shoulders, waist and the back of the leg respectively. These marks are similarly worn by the tigare priestess but in place of those made on the shoulders, she wears two lines that intercepts. The kple priestess, however, does not have any identifying mark.

When the training period is over, the medium brings the priestess and leaves her at the outskirts of the town. Nuumo Ahungua indicated that "I learnt I was brought home after the training period wearing only the *nyanyara* leaf (*momordica charantia*) designed to cover my breast and genitals" In my attempt to get a copy of the picture for documentation the priestess vehemently protested and cautioned me to stop. According to her the photographer who took that picture died immediately after, and "I don't want my god to kill you".



Fig: 4 The four rows of cicatrization worn at the back of a priestess.

4.1.2 Costume Elements in connection with Ordination: The role of Beads, Hair style, Body designs and Hand items.

Having successfully completed and satisfied all the customary requirements, the trainee is initiated. It is worth noting that at this point all the clothes, including the beads, and accessories used by the various deities are the same. The only difference is the hair styles which are maintained and worn as a mark of identity of each deity. All the servants thus, wear a plain white cloth and white powder, which according to the Ga colour concept, represents victory, purity or success. (Figure 7) After the initiation ritual is performed, the servant is adorned with all kinds of clothing items believed to spiritually help her in discharging her duties as a representative of the deity. Some of these elements are beads of deferent colours as well as hand items. As a new bride, the priestess is first adorned with the *shishe*, an alternating red and black strung bead, worn as an anklet on the left leg to protect her against any evil medicine (*juju*) planted in the ground to harm her. (See figure10) There are other beads of different colours worn in five bundles on the wrist, and believed to have the power to protect the priestess spiritually. What is the power and/or significance of these string of beads?

The first bead, the *afeli*, identifies her as the priestess of the traditional area, and the elevated position she holds in that society. The second in line is the *fufua* which is in blue and ash colour, and believed to have the power to protect the priestess against evil eyes as well as other spirits that might want to challenge her. The third bead is the *ƆƆƆƆ*, which is red coloured, and used for instant self-defence against evil spirits. The fourth and fifth, *aɔ* and *bihii ale nii*, are strung with a combination of yellow and green, as well as light green beads respectively. Both of them join forces for 'magico religious purposes'. Other beads worn for the same purpose include *dade kulo* which is worn on the upper arms and the *nakutsonii* (worn on the upper part of the ankle) shown in figure 8.

Another equally important and symbolic accessory is a long necklace made of black and white beads that are arranged alternatively. This necklace is called *afili*, and has a pendent that is cast like an antelope's horn (Figure 9-right). According to the elders, the pendent was initially made with the actual antelope horn, to symbolize the swiftness of the servant in relation to the animal. Since this item is not accessible today, Ga people use iron to cast this two-horn antelope pendant called '*Kor*' and '*Kaanin*'. To revere a deity, the priestess walks barefoot immediately she puts on the *afili*, and it is also an offence to wear the *afili* after six o'clock in the evening. Any priest/priestess who flouts these two laws is punished by the deity. The *afili* is only worn during festive occasions and at traditional healing as well as the pacification of the gods.

Two significant hand items; the *mmlleti* (Figure10) -that resembles a broom-and the *ayetso*, believed to be a witch stick, is used by the priestess to help her exhort those arrested by a deity for being a witch, as well as those under the evil influence of witches. It is also worth noting that these accessories are associated with all the deities.

Hairstyles worn by the priestess is the choice of the respective gods. Some of these include *akon*, *pesempese*, *akukuli* and *gele*. (Figures 5&6) *Akon* and *otu* priestess for instance wear the *pesempese* hair style by cutting the hair very low and applying a mixture of the liquid of egg and the *nyanyara* leaf, resulting in a permanent twist-

like texture. In order to maintain the *pešempese* it is occasionally washed with the *nyanyara* leaf, and spiritually strengthened with a talisman.

Another fascinating hair style, *gele*, is associated with the priestesses of the *kple* gods. This hair tradition is achieved by plaiting the hair with a black thread and either hold them high (Figure 6) or leave them to fall at the back. (Figure 16, Top right) While those who wear *pešempese* use them during training and afterwards, the *gele* hair style is only worn during training, and ceremonial occasions. However, other fashionable hair styles may be used when the period is over. (See Nuumo Ahungua in figure 12 wearing treated hair).

The *akukuli* hair style is also aligned with the *kple* deity. It is a complex piece of art which is embellished with feathers. It is crafted into five tufts, with the end of each portion twisted and tucked into the base, (Figure 5) and decorated with cowries as well as the tail of parrot feathers. According to oral tradition the use of the feathers is for religious purposes such as transmitting cosmic powers in the priestess. The parrot is known to be an intelligent bird that is able to echo the speech of a person. As a result the use of its feathers to decorate the hair symbolises the ability of the priestess to reecho the speech of the god, and also manifest his/her powers. Consequently, the servant is able to provide the community, the exact spiritual support gained from the deity.



Figure 5: The *Akukuli* hair style body designs made with *krobo* (myrrh).



Figure 6: The *gele* hairstyle (back) and some

The priestess wears body designs that do not only bring out the aesthetics of her achievement, but they are done for identification and religious purposes. The designs are applied to establish her courage and virility, because not all of the people are able to complete the training. (Figure 1.9) These designs usually come in different shapes and lines such as “round and spiral lines”, “vertical and horizontal lines” respectively. The straight lines denote the uncompromising nature of the deity when dealing with judicial matters. The round ones caution the people to be circumspect of life, and show loving kindness because “if you ignore people on your way up, you will definitely meet them on your way down”. The material used for the designs is called *krobo* (myrrh). Its scent is said to help invoke the gods and further heighten the reverence and veneration that people already harbour about priests and priestesses. Nortey (2008) notes that *krobo* is also used for the purposes of affirming contacts with ancestors “during the installation or performance of ancestral rituals”. Its sweet smell is also believed to ward off evil spirits. These body designs are unanimous with all of them.

Nuumo Blefo further mentioned that, in the olden days a priest/priestess only wore a white cloth during and after the ordination. Today, however, the initiate wears the white calico for the initiation, and when the ritual is over, she changes into other expensive white cloths such as lace, *kente*, linen, satin, organza or velvet. Two to three pieces of any of these cloths are worn together, with the various symbolic beads and the body designs. The priestess then parades through the principal street of the community to reveal herself as an approved representative of her deity, who is now capable of handling the spiritual needs of the people (See figure 8).



Figure 7: Nuumo Ahungua (middle) preparing for her ordination



Figure 8: A priestess adorned in lace cloth, the afili, tonyoro, ade, fufua, bihii ale-nii and dadekulo beads.



Figure 9: A priestess in two loincloths (left) and three loincloths (right)



Figure 10 A priestess wearing skirt and holding the 'the witch' broom



Figure: 11 A priestess in plain white clothes, celebrating her *yeleyeli* festival.



Figure 12: An attendant removing clothes of Nuumo Ahungua when she was possessed by her god.

4.2 Clothing Symbolisms among Priests: Training, Ordination and annual Festivals

A male who is training to become a priest also goes through the same process as the priestess, and his clothes are similarly dictated by his deity. During training the *kple* priest wears *adasaa* (togas) and one multi-coloured loin cloth around his waist, while the *tigare* priest uses a plain white jumper and *adasaa* (Figures 13&14). He similarly cuts his hair low or wears the *pesempese* hair style, just like the priestess. The *aben* servant uses a red cloth worn around the waist or sewn into a jumper and togas. Using the same fabrics like that of the priestess therefore, the clothes of the priests is usually worn as a loin cloth around the waist with bare chest, or sewn into a jumper and knickers during the training period. His ordination and other functions follow the pattern of the priestess.

During his ordination, the *yeleyele* festival, and other ceremonial occasions, his style of clothing changes to: a jumper and trousers, a big loin cloth worn over a jumper, or a big cloth worn over one shoulder. Some of them wear the loin cloth over a jumper and trousers, sewn with the same cloth or material. All the rich white cloths used by the priestess also apply here. Accessories, hand items, body designs, body markings, beads and their spiritual connotations as well as their taboos (already discussed relating the priestess) are associated with the priests too.



Figure 13: Tigare priestly costumes used during the training period.



Figure 14: Costumes used by the kple priest (right) during the training period.

4.3 Annual Veneration of a Deity

Each priest/priestess holds an annual *yeleyeli* festival to thank his/her god, and accordingly people who are blessed with children by a deity through the priest/priestess bring their children for blessing. The children normally dress in white cloths, in addition, white clay is applied to their faces or their whole bodies (See figure 14, right). The priest/priestess who is celebrating the festival is dressed in a plain white cloth, and a white headgear. Her whole body is painted with white myrrh. Ornaments are not used at this stage, except one string of white beads worn to commensurate that blessed happy occasion. (Figure 11) The priest similarly wears a white loin cloth, and the white myrrh. The festival is climaxed with a dance performance, during which priests/priestesses, including those in training perform the ritual dance of the particular deity being venerated. No specific costume is required except the one expected of each priest/ priestess. Invited servants may choose to wear casual clothes.

When the priest or priestess is possessed, immediately an attendant in charge of his/her clothes removes his/her clothes and changes him/her into the dress of his/her deity. All the ornaments are also removed as shown in figure 12. The otu and akon servants for instance, change into a raffia skirt, and it is important to note that the raffia skirt (mostly worn by priests/priestesses in almost all Ghanaian stage/video/film productions) is associated with only the otu and akon deities and their servants.

The tigare servant also uses smock and whisk at this point. The explanation is that, since the tigare deity was brought to the Ga community from Northern Ghana, the smock which is associated with people from the north is used to show the real origin of the god. (Figures 15&18)

It was observed at the *yeleyeli* festivals at Tema, Abokobi and Teshie that, the person who dressed the priest/priestess was familiar with the costumes of all the deities and therefore, had in his/her possession two or more clothes. This is needed because during the dance performance a deity can 'enter' (through actions and dance movements) any priest/priestess other than his/her own servant, and costumes has to be changed accordingly. This tradition of changing clothes symbolises the presence of the deity, hence, the mandate to be acknowledged and dressed to reveal him/her.



Figure 15: A tigare priest wearing the smock and togas style



Plate 1.15 Figure 16: A kple priest in one loin cloth worn around the waist and the afili beads.

4.4 Worship and Sex Designation in Clothing

Within the Ga culture, as in most cultures around the world, distinct clothes are reserved for each sex. Female costumes most often differ from those of the male. This is not the situation in the Ga traditional religious institution. According to all the people interviewed, a male can be chosen by a female god as servants and vice versa. In such circumstance the person's clothes worn throughout the training period and during ceremonial occasions conform to the sex of the deity. Conclusively, a male who serves a female deity is made to wear female clothes. In line with this, all the prescribed accessories and body markings are rigidly adhered to; however, a male is exempted from wearing some hair styles such as the gele and akukuli.

The females also go through the same process and are normally seen during ceremonial occasions in a big men's cloth worn over a jumper or without it. Other clothing styles include a jumper and big togas, almost at ankle length, normally sewn with the same cloth or material. It is also worthy to emphasize that these clothes are only used during training, ceremonial occasions and the veneration of their gods. However, clothes used during other days by these servants conform to their gender specification. A clear example is seen by comparing figures 17 and 19, where we see the same person in both male and female clothes on different occasions. This male serves a female deity and thus, during 'her' *yeleyeli* festival he wears female clothes with accessories as shown in figure 17. The same person in figure 19 is wearing a jumper and shorts, at another priests' *yeleyeli* festival.



Figure 17: A priest in female clothes- two loin cloths, afili, fufua, tonyoro, ade, bihiiale-nii and dadekulo beads.



Figure 18: Tigare priestesses wearing smock and togas style made of cheddar material.



Figure 19: A priest wearing female clothes in figure 17, now in shirt and togas made of white printed fabric.

4.5 Clothing Elements and Spiritual Responsibilities

The various clothing elements used by the priest/priestess do not only help to identify his/her deity. They are also used to protect the servant and empower him/her to be able to safeguard the community against all forms of spiritual attack. The beads, witch broom and the myrrh all together help the servant to perform his/her duties in curing diseases such as fit or convulsion, bareness, sterility, paralysis and mental disorder. According to Nuumo Blefo, “during the healing process, the moment we wear the clothes together with the hand items, our eyes open and we are also elevated into the spirit realm to be able to challenge the bad spirits who are causing trouble”. When the community is plagued with a strange disease, a priest/priestess is consulted to enquire if they have probably offended the god. If the answer is in the affirmative, the servant wears the prescribed costumes before he/she can evoke the deity and perform the pacification rites on behalf of the community.

The clothing and adornment also help the people to build faith in the priest/priestess, and thus promotes or facilitates the healing process. Nuumo Blefo further confirmed that: “during consultation, immediately I change into the ritual clothes with my mmeti in hand, I see smiles beaming in the faces of my patients. This gives me hope and conviction in the efficacy of the medicine that I am yet to administer”.

4.6 Everyday Clothes of Priests and Priestesses

It is fascinating to acknowledge that the everyday costumes of a priests and priestess is completely different from those used during practice. A priest/priestess can wear any kind of dress to suit a particular occasion. This is indicated in figure 21 with Nuumo Ahungua in her sports outfit worn on the last day to climax the *Homowo* Festival at Teshie. A priestess can also wear *kaba* and slit (see figure 1.-left), shoes/slipper, braid her hair or use make-up; in fact decorate her body to commensurate any given situation. The priest may wear clothes such as a jumper and *adasaa* made with any printed cloth, as already discussed in figures 19&20.



Figure 20: Everyday costumes of a priest: shirt andogas.



Figure 21: A priestess (Nuumo Ahungua) in her sports outfit.

5.0 Conclusion

The paper has examined the religious disposition of Ga people through the clothing elements of the priests and priestesses; the role costume plays in highlighting the identities of the various deities, and more importantly sex designation in clothing. Furthermore, these clothes have proved to have distinct religious factors that identify each priest/priestess in his/her discharge as a servant of a particular god, and entrusted with the responsibility to spiritually protect the community as well as safeguard its cultural inheritance. In that regard the body makings, body designs, hand items, and beads of different kinds have proved to have magical powers that empower the priest/priestess. In this capacity he/she is able to cure all kinds of illness that may afflict the people. Ultimately, the paper has tried to reveal that every deity is associated with a code of dressing. Again we are clear that the use of the raffia skirt, to symbolize the cloth of all deities in most of our movies/video/stage performances are a misrepresentation of the reality. The study thus recommends that directors and costumiers should do a thorough research into the costume of individual deities, in order to present the appropriate character. Playwrights should also try and highlight specific deities in their plays, so that the costume designer will be able to provide the appropriate costume, and thus avoid creating stereotyped priests/priestesses.

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