

Significance of the Costume Used for the Dia War Dance by the Frafra people of the Upper East Region of Ghana.

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Abstract

There are several war dances which are performed to commemorate victories achieved during wars and major fights in history. These dances mimic historical moves and gestures which were used during such trial times. During the performance of such dances, many items of clothing are worn by these war heroes or dancers which are an embodiment of knowledge and the Dia war dance of the Frafra people in the Upper East region of Ghana is no exception. However, when these dances are recorded, little or nothing is said about the costumes and their relevance to the attainment of victory in these wars and hence their inclusion in the dance. The study therefore is aimed at identifying the various roles played by these items used as clothing in the Dia war dance of the Frafra people in the Upper East Region of Ghana. Participant observation was used in this study and the main instrument adopted was the interview in arriving at the responses. Several key people were interviewed including *Tindaanas* (earth priests), retired dancers, adult and young dancers. The study saw that the clothing items used have great link with the craft and trade practices of the people. It also identified that some of the items were used to boost about ones bravery or victories over animals considered to be wild and dangerous. Also it was evident that though no formal schools are there to train people in the dance, there is the conscious effort by the people to train the young in the dance so that they can take up the mantle of leadership in the future. The study therefore recommends that the dance be celebrated at the regional level in order to raise the awareness and boost the tourism potentials of the region.

Keywords: Dia War dance, costume, culture, festival, traditional apparel, horns, smock, Frafra.

1. Introduction

Costume which is a style of dress which includes garment, accessories and hair styles with its origin in the past (Okpu, 2015) or a set of clothes appropriate for a particular occasion or season to represent a country or a time in history (Davidson, 2004; Lee, 2008) has been an essential ingredient in defining the culture and the origin of a people for centuries. Eze and Akas (2015) see costume as different from everyday clothing. They opine that “costumes are used as a form of symbolic expression of oneself as well as a communicative tool that interprets its sociological effects at any given time”. This view is shared by Vrelli-Zaxou (1994) as cited by Filippou, Ivonni and Christos (1995:23). To them, costume is a symbol which reflects the communal spirit of the society other than the personality of the wearer. Okpu (2015:21) adds that “most costumes are produced traditionally in connection with religious rituals, marriages, social groups as well as to show social status”. These presuppose that for any garment, accessory or hairstyle to be considered a traditional costume, it must first be linked to something in the history of the society wearing it. It must also be distinctive from the everyday clothes of the people.

Though costume could be easily said to beautify or adorn the wearer, its main purpose transcends what is seen visually to what is been communicated. Every costume or each part of a costume communicates a piece of information which is vital to understanding the culture of a group of people. In a study conducted by Adjei, Osei-Sarfo and Adongo (2016) on the costumes used in the Gologo festival in Tongo, it came to light that most of the items used as costumes were from the traditional trades and art practices of the people which means that although these accessories are to embellish the wearer, they are also to tell onlookers about the crafts practiced in the area. Similarly, the people of Igbibe in Delta State in Nigeria wear a skirt which is made on the raffia loom called *Ewewe*. The wearing of this skirt as a costume is to signify what was invoke when the celebration of the festival begun (Okpu, 2015).

The uses of some costumes are symbolic rather than historical. In the Ekeleke dance in Imo State, Nigeria, Akos in 2014 indicated that a dancer uses a dull coloured costume with a horse tail to indicate life's uncertainties. Also a dull socks used symbolized unseen circumstances while a small hand fan is used symbolically to blow in breeze of new hope, survival and favours (Akos, 2014:44). Eze and Akas (2015) also identified the use of some accessories for their symbolism purposes in a costume. The Kokoris from Delta State, Nigeria use broom as part of their costume to symbolise peace, value and wellbeing.

Religiously, some costumes offer spiritual protection or sanctification for the wearer. In the Holy Bible, God instructed a special costume to be made for Aaron and his sons. These costumes were to be worn anytime they go into the tent of meeting and near the altar in the Holy Place so that the costume will sanctify them before the Lord so that they will not die (Exodus 28). Similarly, priests and priestesses of deities wear costumes to fortify as well as protect themselves during some functions. Beckwith and Fisher (2002) as cited in Kwakye-

opong (2014) reveal that voodoo initiates in Togo wear talisman in their hair for protection while the Wodaabe men from Niger, wear talisman shaped in the form of a cross as protection when they leave the desert and enter any dangerous city.

The most elaborate of all costumes in Ghana is the one worn by the people of Winneba during the masquerading festival in January each year. The festival exhibits colourful costumes amidst wild dance moves geared at entertaining onlookers (Mensah, 2014, Easy track Ghana 2016). The costume used here is for embellishing the wearers and holds no religious connotations. In Ghana, several war dances are performed including the Atsiabekor performed by the Ewe speaking people of Southern Ghana, Togo and Benin, the Fontomfrom dance, performed by the Akan people at the courts of chiefs, the Kokomba's of Northern Ghana also perform the Kinatsu dance which is originally meant for hunters/warriors (Azaguno, 2016). These war dances are performed with various moves that have been used during wars and hunting. Also they are performed with elaborate costumes pregnant with values that need to be uncovered and the Dia war dance of the Frafra people in the Upper East region is no exception. This dance has been performed for centuries but knowledge of this dance is limited to oral traditions with little documentation on the relevance of the costumes used in this dance. It was therefore the aim of this study to uncover the reasons attached to the costume used in this war dance.

2. Methodology

The data collection method used for the study was the participant observation approach of qualitative research. According to Twumasi (2005) it is crucial for the scientists to know their field prior to conducting a study. He also advice that good rapport with the population is essential in ensuring that accurate information is received from the respondents. To do these the researchers had to stay with the people, interact with them and participate in their funeral celebrations which often saw the performance of the war dances in the 2015 and 2016 dancing seasons in order to gain some understanding into the matrix of their traditional practices. The passive participant-observer approach was adopted in order not to interfere with the activities of the dancing groups (Blaxter, Hughes, & Tight, 2011; Kumekpor, 2002). Notes were taken while the performances were going on and relevant questions were asked after the dances were over.

The data gathering instrument used was interview. An interview guide was prepared and used to conduct series of interviews with varied respondents as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Interview respondents

	Category of Persons	Quantity
1	Tindaana (Earth priests)	4
2	Community elders/ retired performers	11
3	Adult dancers	23
4	Dancers under 18 years	6
	Total	44

Two non-probability sampling techniques were used: purposive and snowballing. In random sampling, the units are intentionally picked for the study due to the sort of qualities inherent in them (Kumekpor, 2002; Twumasi, 2005). Wolfer (2007) adds that this style of sampling is only appropriate when:

- a. researchers are looking at a unique case
- b. a researcher wants to make an in-depth study of a case and
- c. members of a population are hard to reach

These reasons offered were in line with the characteristics of the population. The dance is uniquely performed by few suburbs around the Bolgatanga Municipality and not many people have in-depth knowledge on the history and the practices that led to the development of the dance, hence the chosen sampling techniques. The purposive sampling was used to select the communities for the study and also used to select retired dances, lead dancers and some *Tindaanas* who had relevant knowledge about the origin and practices of the dance. The selected communities are Sumbrungu, Yikene, Zuarungu and Zaare. Since the researchers were not indigenes of the communities visited, the snowballing was adopted to locate some other elders and performers who help in organising the dances. All the respondents were males.

3. Findings

3.1 Background of the dance

The war dance is a special dance which is seldom performed. In the days of old, this dance was performed during funeral rites of a clan head, a chief or a *tindaana* (earth priest). These people are very significant for the survival of the society. They lead the people in performing sacrifices, they are the keepers of the customs of the society as well as lead them in times of wars and strive (Adjei, Osei-Sarfo, & Adongo, 2016) and as such the dance is performed as part of the rites that are performed to usher them into the ancestral world. In modern times, the dance is performed during festivals and even a worthy person can contract dance groups to perform during

the funeral celebration of a loved one. The dance is not taught in any formal institution in the community; however, young men observe old men and siblings during the performance and learn. For this reason, all men in a clan are expected to know how to dance. When the need arises for the dance to be performed, the people in the affected clan (in case of a funeral) and those related to them through marriage organise to perform the dance and the most senior of the performers lead the dance.

There is a seeming resemblance between a hunting act and the war dance. The dance mimics the moves used during a hunting expedition. The weapons used are the same as those used for hunting and the costume is predominantly made from items gotten from a hunt. It is believed that during the olden days when women go to farm and meet a wild and fearful animal, the women will begin to sing and the animal then will start to dance and go away. It is the dance of the animal which is learnt and performed as a war dance.

3.2 Who is qualified to dance

The traditional war dance performance, like any other important cultural activity has norms which set it apart for certain kind of people to partake while others observe. To qualify to wear the costume and be part of the dancing troupe means that one would have satisfied certain pertinent conditions. The first of these is that the partaker must have been born by parents who are indigenes of the community. This gives a person the first right to be initiated to be able to take part in any serious performance. The second is that the person must have gone through the initiation rites which include eating of some traditional preparations and the bathing of some herbs which fortifies oneself against charms, poisons and some spirits.

During the day of the dance, others who might have not gone through the rites and visitor are free to observe and even dance to the tune of the drums been played without harm but are not allowed to be fully dressed in the costume of the performers and joining the dancing troupe. Other categories of people who are treated differently are children from families performing the dance. These children who must learn the dancing steps in order to take the mantle of leadership in the future are allowed to put on some of the regalia and perform at the fringes of the troupe. This informal dance training is aimed at preparing these children for the future.

3.3 The costume

Costume is at the core of the dance. It differentiates one clan from the other as well as indicates the attributes of the wearer. It decorates the ceremony with colour and flare. Several articles add up to make up a suitable costume for the dance. At a glance, one cannot miss the array of weapons held by these performers.

3.3.1 Weapons

The most visible is the bow (*tafo* in *Gurune language*) and arrows (*peema*). They are made out of the stem of the plant from the forest. In times of war, the tips of these arrows are poisoned with either plant poison or crocodile bile in order to make it deadly. Also the tips are fastened to metal heads for quick piecing. The arrows are contained in carrier (*wogane*) which is made from the skin of baby alligator or the skin of an antelope. The second of the weapons is the spear (*kane*) which is made of metal or wood with a metal head and it is decorated with colourful strands of fabric in order to make it scary. In the dance, performers act as if they are about throwing the spear. In some instances, some members of the dancing group can adorn themselves with knives similar to the ones found in the study by Adjei, Osei-Sarfo, & Adongo (2016) among the Tongo people of the same region. Others may use guns as weapons. Some of these weapons are adorned with totems and charms. During the dance it is a regular feature to find one clan trying to test the spiritual potency of the other. This can take the form of performers spiting fire, or cutting or piercing themselves with the weapons.



Figure 1: A group of dancers getting ready to perform

Figure 2: Dancers with traditional head dress, spear, bows and arrows charging into the dancing area

Figure 3: Lead dancer

3.3.2 Head dresses

There are a host of head dresses (*Zufaka*) which are used for the dance. The *gebego* is a cap which has horns mounted on it. The cup is made of calabash which is covered with fabric and decorated with cowries. Mostly the horns from wild animals are used but where it is difficult to find such horns, use is made of horns from domestic animals such as cows and rams (Figure 2). The second is the head cover which is calabash covered with animal skin, fabric and cowries. It usually has the colour red. It is also a common sight to spot some of the dancers in masks (figure 5). Other dancers make use of the traditional heads dress made from a smock material. The interviews conducted with the elders of the communities revealed that these are recent additions to the dance costume. A probable origin of these masks some say is Burkina Faso. The people of the neighbouring Burkina Faso have a lot of masks which are visible in some of their festivals such as FESTIMA (Balzani, 2016). Others believe that these masks were borrowed from the Western and Central regions of Ghana who engage in masquerade festivals mostly around late December and early January.

3.3.3 The apparel

Articles of apparel are varied and encompass both local and foreign attire. The most flamboyantly clothed among the dancers is the lead dancer. The utmost significant of all the articles for clothing is the animal skin. The type of animal skin used by a dancer goes to tell the history and abilities of the wearer. These animals usually are wild animals of which the dancer has killed in a hunt and therefore the wearing of the skin shows the hunting mastery and the spiritual endowment of the wearer. A person wearing the skin of a ferocious beast commands more respect than one who wears a skin from a domestic or less fearsome animal. The skin, though used for such functions can also be used as a ceremonial or occasional wear by priests, *tindaanas* or elders of a community as shown in figure 6. Another item of clothing which is common is the smock which is attire, produced in the three northern regions of Ghana: Northern, Upper East and Upper West regions. This perhaps indicates the origin of the dancers and how rooted they are in their culture. Attires from foreign materials include the wearing of denim and khaki as trousers. Those who do not want to wear trousers put on a triangular apron (*lebere*), the same as *kpalang* (Adjei et al., 2016). This triangular apron can also be rolled up to form some sort of shorts (figure 6). Others put on *kulani*, a trouser with very loose crotch and panel (figure 7).



Figure 4: Lead dancer in a pose with two young dancers



Figure 5: A dancer in mask

3.3.4 Footwear

Emphasis is not placed on the kind of footwear that can be worn by a performer; as such any footwear can be used for the dance. The basic idea is that it should be robust to protect the foot from getting hurt when the foot is vigorously stamped on the ground during the dance. To make the footwear comfortable enough, performers use lofty socks. The colour of the boots or the socks is of no significance in the performance.



Figure 6: Tindaana Atale in a skin and shorts made from triangular apron

3.3.5 Other accessories

Other minor accessories include the belt which is made from animal skin. It is used to embellish the costume. The wrist band is also used by performers who use the bow and arrows. This is to protect the wrist during the shooting of the arrows. The horse tail is another significant item in the dance. This is usually held by women and it is to show the hunting abilities of the troupe.

There is also a bag which is made from animal skins known as *tapɔtɔ*. This bag is hanged around the shoulder and during the era of fights/wars, this bag was used to house food items as well as other relevant items.



Figure 7: Young dancers in some costume and accessories



Figure 8a: Some observers dancing & **(b)** Drumming from a roof top

4. Conclusions

The study has identified that the various components of the costume have significant history which tells the story of the wearer or the family within which he comes from. Also the type of costume worn by an individual and his position in the troupe when they are lined up indicates the rank of the person, significant among these is the lead dancer who is the most dressed and the first in line.

Though there is no system of formally teaching the young, they are allowed to participate in the dance so they can learn through practice and take over when the old is no more. This ensures continuity and transfer of knowledge from the old and experienced to the young.

The study saw that the dancers have introduced some items which hitherto were not a part of the costume. This could be the effect of modernity on the customs of the people or the difficulty in having access to clothing items which were used in the past.

It is therefore recommended that efforts should be made at celebrating this dance at the regional level so that more people can patronise it which will boost the tourism of the region.

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