

**"WORDS, MUSIC, DANCE AND PARODY IN CONFUSION:
THE PERFORMANCE OF NZEMA AVUDWENE SONGS"**

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Introduction

In an earlier article on African performance situations,¹ I drew attention to the number of such occasions in the African setting and highlighted the relationship between aesthetic considerations and creative communication in African performances. I am obliged in this paper to return to the same subject because it offers the opportunity to examine more closely the validity of the concept of performance as a complex, 'single unit' event as it applies in the African context. As I found in the previous study, there are broadly speaking, three kinds of performance situations in African society. The first, is the performance occasion which focuses attention on the individual artist who is regarded as the primary originator of the occasion. This is also the case with the narrative performer, including vocational and recreational groups of singers, musicians and dancers. These groups may perform on their own in accordance with demands for public exposure and acclaim.

On the other hand, these same groups may also be required by tradition to perform as part of stated ceremonial occasions. Since they are not regarded as the focus of attention on these occasions, their role is often restricted to providing creative support in the sense of either 'enhancing' or 'embellishing' the occasion. On the occasion of a title-taking ceremony among the Ibo, for example, groups such as praise singers, dancers and musicians may be invited, hired or compelled to perform out of loyalty to persons being so honoured. During such occasions, creative performances provide only background support, conscious of their subordinate position, hence the degree of creative assertiveness becomes comparatively marginalised. This is not the case with the third and most complex performance situation where a number of related creative performances are brought together in the same contiguous location. Each event is a focus of attention, and together, they constitute *the* performance complex.

This third performance situation is the subject of this paper. Such situations have continued to fascinate me because of their complexity. I have often been intrigued by their sources of coherence from the point of view of the audience. What, for example, are the criteria for regarding such occasions as *unit* cultural performances? Are we to accept without reservation Milton Singer's implied assertion that all performances reveal coherent experiences because they display inherent characteristics of "a definite time span, an organised program of activity, performers, audience, place and occasion?"² In other words, are such notions of performance in western culture adequate to apply to these complex African performance situations? As Beverly Stoeltje has quite rightly observed, although the 'performance-centred approach permits the recognition of common features,' one cannot deny 'the very distinctive features of each performance form and the wide cultural variation they exhibit from one place to another.'³ It is in recognition of this fact that this paper seeks to stress the relevance of the inter-cultural perspective to performance studies in the sense of drawing attention to additional considerations which would lead to a more comprehensive view of the performance concept across cultural frontiers.

This paper was first presented at a seminar in Indiana University, Bloomington under the auspices of the African Studies Program in its 1990 Performance Studies Program. The author would like to convey his gratitude to Prof. J.H. Nketia and Prof. Richard Bauman for making useful suggestions in the preparation of the paper.

Background

The *Avudwene* performance is one of the most significant highlights of the Nzema *Kundum* festival. The latter is an annual event. It takes place at the end of the rainy season and is rooted in the harvest period of August to October of every year. During this time, Ahanta-Nzema speakers along the coast of South-west Ghana, who spread from Sekondi-Takoradi to Half-Assini, set aside one week to celebrate the festival. Since the people regard the *Kundum* festival as an instrument of collective expiation, every effort is accordingly made to involve the whole community and its network of socio-political and artistic institutions. Events, ceremonies and creative performances in the festival are organised as a renewal of shared knowledge and experience (Nketia, 1990:80) and it is in this sense that the *Avudwene* performance becomes a significant segment of the festival.

In the Jomoro District of Western Nzema, this performance marks the final phase of the festival and it takes two days to accomplish.⁴ It is made up of the same events on each occasion. There are songs, dance and music and comic sketches. Although each single event has its own set of performers, audience and space allocation (often times not clearly demarcated, as we shall see), it is the central event of songs which unites or is perceived to unite the overall performance.

During the actual performance, there is a high incidence of audience mobility. Although seats are provided for traditional dignitaries, invited guests, and members of the public, participants are also very much aware of their freedom to move from one event to the other. Thus audience loyalty tends to be unstable since its retention is correspondingly dependent on the *quality* of each event. Moreover, while the song, music and dance events are pitched at given locations, and therefore are more likely to enjoy a 'stable' audience participation, the actors of comic sketches have no recognised location. They move about through the various audiences until they finally settle with the music and dance event.

All these factors create the impression of a highly volatile performance situation in which a sense of a "coherent performance" is difficult to locate. But this is precisely what the performance is expected to impart to its participants. In a sense, this is inevitable because performers, actors and audiences are bound to derive a sense of *meaning* from such disparate performances. It is their privilege to realise their idea of the performance situation as a homogeneous experience and following from this, define their relationship to it in terms of relevance. Consequently, a central thrust of this paper is to analyse the different ways in which such processes are achieved or realised in the performance situation of the Nzema *Avudwene* song texts. And, in order to do so effectively, I propose now to look closely at the nature of the various events which make up the total performance.

"EKO" or Comic Sketches

This is the visual representation of social types, institutions and professions. The mode of depiction is through the exaggeration of human features, costume and props. Among the Nzema, this event is known as *Eko*, an old Nzema word which means "satire" or "the ridiculous", hence the familiar expression associated with this event is "*be le pe Eko*" - "they are satirising."

Eko is undertaken by individuals or teams of individuals on their own initiative. Such individuals obviously possess dramatic talent and a strong sense of the ridiculous. Nketia has identified their acts as "wandering acts" in Ghanaian traditions of performance,⁵ particularly those associated with festivals such as the *Kundum*. In the performance under discussion, the actors of the *Eko* tend to use dance as the immediate tool to enliven, animate and act out their

chosen roles and intentions. Through the dance and music, the *skoa* performers literally take advantage to 'bring to life' what they want to say or convey to the audience. In other words, they use movement and gesture to highlight their visual representations. Their dance movements are purposely exaggerated, as these are employed when appropriate to the enactment of their acts. Although all such stylised representations are intended to create laughter, hence the emphasis on distortions in bearing, costume, make-up and props, each *skoa* act also harbours serious intentions of historical reflection and contemplation.

Historical themes of the *skoa* tend to emphasise origins of families. This is particularly true of alien populations, especially those of suspected slave ancestry from the Sahel Region of West Africa, who still experience problems of full integration into Nzema society. Such sketches have the effect of compelling reflection on what seems to be an historical 'albatross' on the conscience of Nzema society. In the same way, traditional political figures, teachers, women, itinerant fortune-tellers and traders are popular subjects of these satirical sketches. These people and their representative institutions are criticised or ridiculed on the basis of a strong awareness of social change. Strange ideas, practices and changes that are initiated by or attributed to these agencies become the focus of intense satirical sketches in the *skoa*. In all these depictions, one can perceive clearly a groping towards a sense of the grotesque in spectacle. This is used as a means of 'unveiling' sensitive social and historical issues in the society. While this sense of the grotesque may evoke gales of laughter, to the extent that spectators so regaled may spontaneously give out monetary rewards as tokens of appreciation, it also at the same time reformulates reality in a way that quietly disturbs, arousing the spectators' consciousness to an awareness that is often repressed. The ability of any *skoa* sketch to evoke such consciousness through laughter is a mark of its effectiveness and success with the audience. Interestingly, this sense of the grotesque is even more readily apparent in the verbal satire that characterises the *Avudwene* songs.

Avudwene Performance

I have already written extensively about the significance of the *Avudwene* songs in other contexts.⁶ There is no doubt that on the occasion that the *Avudwene* is performed in relation to the *skoa* and Kundum music and dance, the audience consider the *Avudwene* as the central event. For it enjoys the largest seated audience. All important institutions in the society, including representatives of the traditional state, are obliged by tradition to be seated and be attentive to the songs. There is also a strong contingent of owners of tape recorders who literally besiege or invade the arena to record the texts. While this is a new feature of the occasion, it certainly goes to emphasise the paramount significance of the *Avudwene* in relation to the other events. As a word-centred event, it carries a certain moral power and energy often associated with verbal performances in Africa. Patrick R. McNaughton (1988:7) has observed that songs of Mande bards are more than inspirational. "They are instrumental. The power in them can inhabit an audience and literally drive it to all manner of acts." Although Nzema participants may not be driven to 'all manner of acts' by the words of the *Avudwene*, they nevertheless revere the performance for its power of sarcasm and the potential for stinging social commentary. Through the satirical power of the word, the world view, ideas and convictions of Nzema participants are, for the duration of the performance, verbally distorted and reconstituted simultaneously. The design of 'distortion' and 'reconstitution' of reality becomes a powerful means of driving the consciousness of participants to new levels of moral awareness.

The *Avudwene* is performed as a collective creative endeavour. The *Esowenle* (or poet) first originates the texts and crafts them into a synthesis of language and thought; his verbal creation

is subsequently taken over by the *Kodokuma*, a team of poet-cantors, who sit in front of the singers to direct and control the verbal performance. In these days, these poet-cantors record the poet's words in a *written* form, in a notebook that is used to remind and prod the memory of the cantors.⁷ The poet-cantors (who may be four or five in number) recreate the *Ezomenle's* texts in speech rhythms intended to parallel song rhythms. The poet-cantors take turns to recite the texts in a speech form to the *Awuakama* singers, who then project the composed texts in a variety of tonal forms which may incorporate elements of song, recital, chant and speech.

Where the singers fail to grasp the words clearly, it is their privilege to ask for a repetition. In some instances, lack of clarity on the part of a poet-cantor may result in a great deal of frustration. In much the same way, members of the audience may also be frustrated when they do not hear the words properly, and may therefore intervene to offer advice on the quality of voice projection. The same audience may be moved to shout words of encouragement and congratulations to the performers if they are pleased or satisfied with clarity of expression and audibility, including especially, the depth of language use and imagery. Through these "interventions", the performance is shaped and directed. The performers themselves as well as members of the audience are free to contribute to this process of creatively 'shaping' the performance; and although such interventions may be frequent and some of them unpleasant, revealing levels of anger and frustration, they nevertheless serve to strengthen the integrity of the performance driving it to new levels of energy, credibility and vitality.

As already indicated, a dominating presence in this event is the sense of unremitting satire that pervades the entire performance. Although there are various dimensions to the song performance with regard to theme, complexity of thought and language structures, most of the audience eagerly look forward to the satirical depictions. When the texts begin to address these aspects, one notices visible signs of renewed interest, anticipation and keen involvement on the part of the audience. This is evidently the case because laughter and applause abound. Women are satirised; individuals are ridiculed; institutions are brought to public shame for their shortcomings, and in all these pre-occupations, a sense of social criticism emerges as a result of unacceptable changes and departures from the normal values and expectations of the community. This feature is known as *Nzadwene* - satirical songs - which is done in a language that is comparatively simpler and easier to understand.

As the singers perform, they are not unmindful of their links with the music and dance that is pitched just behind them. They become conscious of the thundering rhythms of the *Edomgbole* master drum. The *Edomgbole* master drum is the 'lead cantor' of the ensemble of instrumentalists who provide the musical framework for the dance movements. The rhythms of the master drum dictate the flow of dance movements and prescribe the appropriate moods which should accompany the movements. But equally important, the *Edomgbole* master drum also provides the basic beat for the songs. The group of singers - the *Awuakama* - normally consist of about ten to twelve performers. Each of them holds on to a long vertical pole with his left hand, leaving the right hand free to dramatise and interpret the texts through appropriate gestures. In between the rendition of the texts, however, these singers listen carefully to the prevailing rhythm of the master drum in order to measure the rate and pace of their intended utterance; the rhythm also provides a psychological link between them and the dance and music event.

Kundum Music and Dance

The *Edomgbole* master drum is also central to the dance movements. Its distinct language consists of 'directives' as to what dancers should do in the dance arena. In other words, the master drum continually "talks" to the dancers, compelling them to move, restraining, controlling and

liberating them all at the same time. Since the rest of the instruments are mainly bells, whistles, dry seeds, bamboo planks, rattles and small drums, it is the big *Edomgbole* master drum alone that is the sole medium for creative dialogue with the dancers. It is this drum whose strokes radiate vitality and energy enabling participants to dramatise a range of complex emotions.

In the actual drama of the dance, participants both male and female, are made to distinguish between two broad movement rhythms, the *fast* and *slow*. These are not mutually exclusive. The slow rhythm gives rise to a fixed dance form in which emphasis is placed on stylised walking movements. Its slow pace permits dancers to relax and to relate to each other as they dramatise "team dance." In this setting, there is no room for deviation. All the dancers move in one direction, anti-clockwise, in a clear attempt to express their collective sense of social cohesion. There is also no hurry as the slow rhythm imposes a sense of majesty in which each dancer is obliged to relate to the other "decently". This is instantly disrupted when the fast rhythm is introduced. All the dancers are swept into seeming disarray, the pattern of movement flow is disrupted and the emphasis is shifted on individual action and improvisation. The individual's movements and actions at this point become unique to him alone, completely distinguished from what others may do. He is allowed the freedom to exhibit lewd-like and uninhibited movements to generate laughter, for the enactment of laughter becomes the central preoccupation of all the individual dancers. Imaginary dance motifs are introduced. Exaggerated scenes and episodes suggesting unabashed sexual intent in courtship and romance are depicted. Aggression, jealousy and social mannerisms are enacted. Regardless of the content of the dance movements, all the dancers aim at creating and evoking laughter. In effect, the fast rhythm distorts normal dance movements, permitting individual dancers to *descend* into a momentary world of creating laughter where values of decency, self-control and social relatedness are suspended. Thus the transition from slow to fast rhythm finds a dramatic parallel in the attempt to distort and recreate reality in the dance arena. It is in this situation that *ekoa* actors also take the advantage to reveal their close affinity with the dance and music performances. Indeed *ekoa* actors highlight the comic nature of the occasion when they use such rhythms to reveal their true intentions through parody and exaggerated movements. Thus a significant characteristic of the fast rhythm is its specific emphasis on obscenity and licentiousness which is intended to generate laughter.

Linkages in the Performance

It may be postulated that the three events which make up the overall performance reveal one dominating conceptual idea. This is the drive towards comic laughter through verbal satire, visual parody and obscene movement patterns. The concept of laughter, as a dominating ideal in the overall performance, is a serious one. Bakhtin (1981:23) captures the seriousness of laughter in art in the following words:

...Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it. Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically. As it draws an object to itself and makes it familiar, laughter delivers the object into the fearless hands of investigative experiment - both scientific and artistic - and into the hands of free experimental fantasy...⁸

Such a concept of laughter is significant in African creative performances because it is fundamental to our notion of the grotesque and exaggeration in creativity and art. Very often, African creativity employs the grotesque or exaggeration as a means of celebrating temporal

reversal or turmoil of human life, in which, as we have tried to show in our analysis of the *Avudwene* performance, cherished values, ideals and facets of human experience are distorted and reconstituted as a form of renewal of human experience, and as a critical means of underlining meaning and relevance. Sound spectacle, movement spectacle, and visual spectacle, as elements in the *Avudwene* performance, clearly emphasise laughter as a common framework for perceiving such situations as a unified experience.

The idea of a unified, coherent experience is further stressed by the underlining aesthetic of the performance. This may be identified as the principle of creative *fusion* or the use of different media of expression in support of a centrally-organised and overriding idea.⁹ In the events analysed, we realise that visual, verbal and kinetic modes of perception are brought together and made to relate to each other through a process of fusion in which one creative medium or structure supports the other in an interlocking chain of reinforcement. The audience is basically aware that each event is essentially concerned with dramatising the same theme through a different creative route. They are not confused or misled by the multiplicity of simultaneous events. As they move from one event to the other, they become aware of the fact that sound, movement, words and visual parody reinforce each other in one grand metaphor of 'chaos' and 'order' that is part of their lives. Hence, the high incidence of audience mobility during the performance is the result of a desire to "take in" aspects of the same experience.

At a deeper level, however, one can also consider the fact that each of these media of expression in the performance is concretely associated with an important faculty of man - his ear, feeling and sight - faculties which co-exist in man and help to realise the totality of his being.¹⁰ Underlining the principle of creative fusion, as isolated in the events of the *Avudwene* performance, therefore, may be discerned an assumption, an aesthetic assumption, that man integrates and imposes order on his sensory perceptions. And it is this ability to impose order on his random perceptions that is dramatised in the outer arena of the *Avudwene* performance.

Conclusion

By emphasising the thematic factor in this complex performance situation, I have tried to suggest that participants use such occasions to re-state their real life concerns. Their perception of meaning and relevance, as conceived in creative performances, has to do with issues that vitally concern human life. It is as if each performance has to *advance* life in the qualitative sense.

Yet, at the same time, the relationship between art and life is not communicated as a mere functional enterprise. It has to do also with an aesthetic principle whose focus is man. This arises from the principal consideration that the manner of communicating felt life must be based on what man continually does in relation to his senses and in relation to the perception of reality in his environment. The requirement of continually imposing order through his senses seems to parallel man's ingenuity in using his 'creativity' to 'communicate' what is eternally significant, meaningful and relevant to him. The concept of performance in the African context therefore recognises the significance of man's perceptions as a unifying factor in his attempt to express reality as a renewal of shared knowledge and experience in his relationship to others.

References

1. See K.E. Agovi, (1988) "The Aesthetics of Creative Communication in African Performance Situations" in *Research Review NS* Volume 4, No.1, Legon: Institute of African Studies, p.3.
2. This quotation is taken from Beverly Stoeltje and Richard Bauman's article (1988) on "The Semiotics of Folkloric Performance" in *The Semiotic Web 1987* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter) p. 589. They attribute it to Milton Singer (1972), *When a Great Tradition Modernizes* (New York: Praeger).
3. Beverly Stoeltje and Richard Bauman (1988), "The Semiotics of Folklore Performance" in *The Semiotic Web 1987*. In this same article, they also include cultural performances which "differ around the world" (p. 595).
4. The two days of the same performance is based on a long standing tradition. During this phase of the *Kundum* in the Jomoro District, the town of Bonyere take their song-texts, dancers and comic sketches to the town of Ezinlibo on Thursday of the *Kundum* week. The following day, that is on Friday of the *Kundum* week, the town of Ezinlibo also 'reciprocate' the gesture by taking their version of the same events to Bonyere. According to this tradition, the two towns are supposed to ridicule and satirise each other, but in effect, their activities are also expected to cover historical events, problems and issues of the whole Jomoro District.
5. J.H. Nketia (1965) *Ghana - Music, Dance and Drama: A review of the Performing Arts of Ghana* (Accra: Ministry of Information) p.31.
6. See Kofi Agovi (1979) "Kundum: Festival Drama among the Ahanta-Nzema of South West Ghana." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon, pp. 230-277. See also Kofi Agovi (1980) 'Of Actors, Performers and Audience in Traditional African Drama' in *Presence Africaine* No. 116, pp. 141-158, and Kofi Agovi (1989) "Oral Tradition and Social Change in Contemporary Africa" in *The Ancestor's Beads: Crosscurrent*, Volume 2, Nos. 3 - 4 (Hamilton Outrigger Publishers) p. 45-46.
7. This feature reminds of the literary situation Ruth Finnegan (1982) extensively describes in her article, "Oral Literature and Writing in the South Pacific" in *Oral and Traditional Literatures: Pacific Quarterly Moana* Volume 7, No.2 (Hamilton, New Zealand: Outrigger Publishers) pp. 22-23.
8. M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981) p. 23.
9. This is extensively discussed in Kofi E. Agovi (1988) "The Aesthetics of Creative Communication in African Performance Situations" in *Research Review NS* Volume 4, No.1.
10. This is the subject matter of an article on "The Philosophy of Communication in Traditional Ghanaian Society: The Literary and Dramatic Evidence" in *Research Review* Volume 5, No.2, 1989.

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- Holquist, Michael (ed.) 1981: *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* by M.M. Bakhtin. Austin: University of Texas Press.