

# The Changing Audience of the Oral Performance in Africa: The Ghanaian Experience

**Manieson, A. A.**

*Department of English, Central University College, Accra, Ghana*

**Email:** agyeiwaadenkyi@yahoo.co.uk

**Mireku-Gyimah, P. B.**

*Centre for Communication and Entrepreneurship Skills (CENCES)*

*University of Mines and Technology, Tarkwa, Ghana.*

**Email:** pbmgyimah@umat.edu.gh

## ABSTRACT

*Oral performance, as generally known, is dependent on the performer and audience. The audience, until recently, played an active role in traditional oral performances in Africa. This was at a time when the oral performer and the audience held the same belief and cultural system. In whichever way the oral performance manifested itself - in dirges, festivals, naming ceremonies, poetry recitals, or folktales - the performer and the audience mostly merged as one and saw the performance as a communal activity and, therefore, did all there was to ensure its success. The advent of the foreigners who introduced beliefs and cultural systems new to the African has served to disrupt the oral performance which had always been the main form of entertainment, education and moral edification for the Africans. As a result, oral performance in its original rendition has now metamorphosed into hip-hop, rap, and hip-life music. This paper examines those beliefs and cultural systems which have shattered the very foundations of African oral performance. Most importantly, the paper focuses on selected oral performances in Ghana, how their audiences have changed and the reasons for these changes. It concludes that despite the changing nature of the audiences, oral performances are still alive, so the paper ends with suggestions for the way forward to arrest the situation and restore the cultural heritage. It is recommended that African-centred courses be taught throughout the educational levels in such a way as to refute the thinking that only the uncivilized person participates in the oral performances of Africa.*

**Keywords:** *Oral performance, audience, culture, performer*

## INTRODUCTION

Oral performances and tradition form important parts of literature in Africa. In fact, even in this 21st century, characterised by audio and digital recording, the bulk of African literature is still unrecorded. This is literature passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation. It consists of songs, poems, drama, proverbs, riddles, stories, etc., and it is the richest and oldest heritage. The importance of oral tradition is that, through its agency, African languages in their most aesthetic forms have been kept alive (Ngugi, 2003). The life and reality of oral performance is dependent on the performer and the audience. In other words, the existence of oral literature is dependent on performance and audience (Finnegan, 1970). The oral performer employs many resources to enhance and enliven the

performance. These include language itself; then the dramatic elements such as body language - gestures, facial expressions and mimicry to convey messages which, if in print, could hardly convey the same impact. The atmosphere of the performance, whether formal or informal, is further enhanced by the dress, accoutrement or visual bearings of the performer (Finnegan, 1970). Oral performance is a two-way affair. It takes the performer and the audience to make it complete. At times, depending on the occasion, the roles of the two become intertwined, merging as one. This is so because in the African setting, both parties, that is, performer and audience, clearly understand and accept their involvements. There are, however, times when the roles of the performer and that of the audience are clearly defined. In either case, all actively participate in the performance. Even when this does not happen, the oral performer can directly manipulate the audience's sensibility by using different types of dramatization to enhance his or her performance. This, of course, depends to a large extent on the atmosphere or occasion of performance.

The audience in some cases is deeply involved and augments the performance by joining the singing or dancing of the performer. This keeps the performance very lively and interesting indeed. During story telling moments by the fireside, the audience is involved when, for instance, the narrator raises a song, and the audience joins in the singing. This is also observable during the opening call to which the audience must respond to indicate readiness. At other times, as the narration continues, the audience intermittently interjects, to correct, supplement or simply add flavour to the story or events being narrated. It is needless to emphasise that the audience invariably determines the quality of the oral performance. Depending on the audience, the performer's choices in terms of words and body language vary. Besides the foregoing, audience participation in the performance insinuates itself through questions, exclamations, laughter and comments from the audience (Finnegan, 1970; Okpewho, 1992).

This feature of the audience actively participating in oral performance has gradually declined in recent years. Audiences of oral performances have turned from being active to passive ones. As mentioned earlier, audiences eagerly participated in oral performances because they shared the same belief, interest and cultural sensibilities with performers. Today, however, the paradigm has shifted. Now, a large portion of society which forms the audiences of oral performers does not hold on to the same beliefs as performers. The cause of this disconnection is obvious. Chinua Achebe (1958) sensitively expresses this shocking change in his *Things Fall Apart*. This work traces the life of an African community before and after the Eurochristian advent in Africa. Before the coming of the Europeans, the community held on to the same beliefs and practices. All actively participated in every activity of the community in terms of festivals, funerals, marriage ceremonies, libation prayers and others, and all those who participated or contributed to them went about their duties with a high sense of enthusiasm.

The opposite of this unity and communality is what manifests now after the European advent in Africa. With the advent of the European, disintegration, disobedience and dissolution of the extended family system are the pictures that the reader is presented with by Achebe. A fierce war is being waged on the beliefs and cultural practices of Africans.

The story is not only typical of Achebe's fictional Umuofia; it is also a template that fits and clearly describes the African encounter with Europe as attested to by the numerous novels, poems, and other works that have come out of Africa since the last quarter of the 20th Century. The result is the creation of a society that despises its own cultural practices. That high sense of belonging and enthusiasm to participate in oral literary performances is drastically diminished. Today, the African youth look down with contempt on this important remnant of African culture. They do not want to have anything to do with it because they have been taught to see it as worthless, a culture that is up to no good. In effect, they observe such performances with hardly any interest if not with disgust. They see it as a thing of old which must be performed by the old alone. When this happens, the performer is left with no choice but to play the two roles alone. Children see their parents who participate in oral performances as backward or primitive for which reason they do not want to have anything to do with such performances.

In view of the foregoing, it is pertinent to observe that those who do not participate in oral performances are viewed as the civilized, whereas those who do participate in them are considered as the uncivilized, uncouth, pagan, heathen, non-believers, lowly people, local, blind, inferior, traditional and unchristian masses, and "benighted" souls who need deliverance (Keith, 1984; Olupona, 1992; Armah, 2000). Hence, during oral performances, the younger generation becomes apathetic while the older generation looks on more frustrated, confused, and dejected. Despite all this lethal onslaught, oral performance has continued to thrive but under wavering circumstances. For instance, at the amphitheatre or drama studios, the members of the audience no longer see themselves as being a vital part of the venture. Even when they do, it is as passive observers, with no attachment whatsoever to it. This is evidenced by the fact that when a song is raised by the performer, the audience looks on unconcerned, making no attempt at joining in the performance. If a dance is done, the audience looks on without partaking in it. The artistic divorce between the performer and the audience has now made it very difficult for the audience to participate fully in performances.

In addition, the advent of technology has a rippling effect on oral performance. Oral performances have now been transformed into rap music, hip-hop music, and hip-life music, which are now totally depersonalised because they are recorded on tapes and Compact Discs (CDs). With these, the face-to-face aspect of performance is now lost. The performer alone in a lone studio produces for his audience and the audience who purchases the CDs listens to it alone without the performer. Thus, the mood, the feeling and their infections are non-existent. The close relationship between the performer and his or her audience no longer exists. Having made these preliminary observations, let us now turn to an examination of some oral literary genres (of prose, poetry and drama) among the Akan people of Ghana. This study looks at the performance of the folktale (story telling), the dirge (dirge singing) and the libation prayer (artistry of libation prayer performance) and how the audiences of such performances have changed.

Akan is an umbrella term used to refer to a large nation of people who speak one language, have one culture and traditions, and live mainly in the south comprising the

present Ashanti, Brong Ahafo, Central, Eastern and Western Regions of Ghana (Some Akans also live in the present Volta Region of Ghana and in La Côte d'Ivoire). The Akans of Ghana are made up of different groups such as the Asante, Fante, Bono, Akyem, Akuapem, Kwahu, Akwamu, Asen, Denkyira, Twifo, and Wassa (Aborampah, 1999). Their language which is also called Akan consists of mutually intelligible dialects which fall into two large groups known as Twi (made up of Akuapem Twi and Asante Twi) and Fante (or Mfantse).

## METHOD

Within the constraints of space, reference will be made to some three selected oral literary texts in discussing the changing audience of the oral performances as follows:

- (i) One Akan folktale/Story telling (Mireku-Gyimah, 2011);
- (ii) One Akan dirge/Dirge singing (Nketia, 1969 cited in Aborampah, 1999), and
- (iii) One Akan libation prayer/Artistry of libation prayer performance (Mensah, 2011).

### THE FOLKTALE (STORY TELLING)

The folktale is an age-old aspect of Akan culture. Story telling is a favourite oral literary form among the Akans. In the past, it was usually told around the fire in the evenings on moonlit nights. As has been discussed earlier, it was a normal practice for the audience to actively participate in storytelling through various means. The participation of the audience can be observed during storytelling, but mainly among the rural folk, as captured by Mireku-Gyimah (2011) during a fieldwork she carried out in some three Akan Asante towns. Storytelling may start, be interspersed with, and or end with a musical interlude (called *Mmoguo* in Twi and *Mboguo* in Fante) such as the popular one, which has been literally translated as follows:

**Narrator:** *Ripe like a pineapple, Royalist*

**Audience:** *Ripe like a pineapple*

**Narrator:** *Royalist*

**Audience:** *Ripe like a pine-ap-ple*

*(sung 3 to 5x amidst handclapping and dancing)*

The following example illustrates active and voluntary audience participation in a storytelling performance:

**Narrator:** Doesn't the Ananse tale say ...

**Audience:** We ask you to tell what it says to us (We load it on your head).

**Narrator:** The Ananse story goes like this:

Once upon a time, didn't there live together a set of twin brothers and their younger brother, Tawia. Then one day, as they were still together, the twins decided to go somewhere and felt that Tawia was too young, so they would not allow him to come along. While they were walking and talking about him and trying to decide on what to do to outwit Tawia so that he would not join them, a man appeared on the scene who had overheard them saying they would not allow Tawia to follow them. The man asked, "Why do you say you won't move together with your brother?" They gave all the reasons. Then the man said to them, "Do you say he is a bad boy? If only you knew what was in store for you!"

**A Participant:** Is that so?

**Narrator:** So they invited their brother, finally, and they all left. They roamed and roamed and roamed and now it was nightfall. It was left with how they would manage to get back home.

**Another Participant:** A serious matter!

**Narrator:** Now it was so very late in the night but, as they continued to think about the problem, they found themselves in a house, which belonged to an old woman. They entered and told her about their predicament. The old woman offered to give them a place to sleep so that they could depart the following day. However, while they were sleeping, the old woman's eyes turned fiery; they did not know that she was a witch. And she was ready to devour them. Then the youngest one noticed that and alerted them that the woman was about to chew them, so they should run away.

**Some Participants:** You see? That's Tawia.

**Narrator:** They did so and climbed a very tall tree. While they were on top of the tree, the woman brought her talking drum under the tree. On seeing them on top of the tree she played it and it sounded like "Nyankankotrokanpe".

**Some Participants:** Really?

**Narrator:** Then Panyin was thrown down from the tree by the drum's mysterious power so that the ground made the sound "puu".

**All Participants:** "Puu". (They laugh so uncontrollably that they hold their nearly bursting sides). The woman hit the drum again: "Nyankankotrokanpe," then, as if by magic, Kakra also followed down: "puu". So it was left with Tawia on the tree.

**A Participant:** Then?

**Narrator:** Then she played again: "Nyankankotrokanpe," then Tawia also replied saying, "You too kampe". He didn't fall; in fact, Tawia was not moved at all. She did it again: "Nyankankotrokanpe," then he also said in reply, "You too kampe". Then the woman became furious. She said to Tawia, "What do you think you are doing? You are arrogant. I will play for the last time. If you give any reply, I will climb up there and beat you up".

**Audience:** Really?

**Narrator:** Then she went ahead and played the drum again: "Nyankankotrokanpe," then he also said in reply, "You too kampe".

**Audience:** Is that so?

**Narrator:** That is so. So the angry old woman started to climb the tree; she kept

climbing, climbing and climbing the tree to catch Tawia.

*A Participant:* Oh!

*Narrator:* ... When the woman had climbed and almost touched Tawia, he outsmarted her and quickly jumped down and then played the drum: "Nyankankotrokanpe"! The powerful force of the drum then hurled down the old woman herself from the tree and she died.

*Audience Participants:* (variously) Good show from Tawia. It serves her right.

*Narrator:* That is why it is said that wherever you go learn to go with your brother, for you do not know what could happen on the way and what help he could offer. And now, this story that I have narrated to you, whether it is sweet or not sweet, take some away and let some stay. I call upon so and so or whoever is ready to narrate the next story.

The various audience participation forms as recorded by Mireku-Gyimah (2011) were natural ones as they flowed spontaneously from the audience in the course of the performance of the tale entitled "Unity is Strength" (see Tale 6 English Version). However, this natural practice of the audience participants to voluntarily and actively participate in storytelling still remains only among a few rural folks. Today, audience participation in storytelling sessions is normally done by those Okpewho (1992) calls "professional performers". For example, at a book festival organised by the Ghana Association of Writers (GAW) on 21st September 2011 at the Aviation Social Centre, storytelling was included in the line-up of events. The guest performers narrated the stories in turns. When one of them began a narration, the rest of them served or functioned as the audience, and they beautifully interjected, exclaimed, objected, sang and danced. But what happened to the rest of us gathered? We looked on aloof, unconcerned and withdrawn.

Observing the scene, two kinds of audiences were identified: those who had rehearsed their roles over time and, therefore, played them off-hand and those who cared less about whatever went on around them. The former audience is the "professional performers", and it would be agreed that this type of audience is no audience since it is only a segment of the group of performers who, all together, must play their roles well enough to evoke the participation and active involvement of the real audience which has now become almost extinct.

### **THE DIRGE (DIRGE SINGING)**

The dirge, a song for the dead, is very important among the Akans of Ghana. Nketia (1955) explains this attachment to the dead to be the Akan belief in the after-life. The dirge is sung during the time the dead is laid in state and during funerals (Finnegan 1979). In the performance of the Akan dirge, the singer (wailer) laments the loss of the deceased, recounting his or her great deeds, rich ancestry and the vacuum created by his/her death. The grief and emotion of the wailer affect the members of the audience, enjoining them to spontaneously participate in the wailing. The following example is a dirge, and it is expected to invite spontaneous audience participation:

*There is no branch above which I could grasp  
 I am in flooded waters. Who will rescue me?  
 When father meets me, he will hardly recognize me.  
 For he will meet me carrying all I have; a torn sleeping  
 mat and a horde of flies.  
 Your children and I will feed on the spider;  
 The mouse is too big a game  
 Your children and I (what will become of us!)  
 I am done for  
 I am destitute  
 Your children are looking for you  
 The night is fast approaching, where the orphan is dying  
 To see its mother (Nketia 1969: 47-48 as cited in Aborampah 1999: 264-265)*

The mourners so affected by the words in this emotional "song" from a woman wailing as in this dirge, necessarily participate by joining in the singing, or, at least, by being moved to shedding tears. This singer wins in emotional appeal as she pours her heart out to express her utter despair, great grief and deep sense of loss by the demise of her beloved. In fact, in this dirge, the singer does not merely lament her loss but also extols the character of the deceased even as her tears fall. Apart from the words, various body language and facial expressions such as pacing up and down the funeral grounds in short steps, moving the head "this way and that way", groaning, shaking the body gently, throwing the arms in the air or clasping the fingers together and placing them on the head as she wails, all depict the sorry state she finds herself in, and all these in turn tend to touch the audience who then must respond by sharing in the sorrow in one way or the other, as expected. Audience participation would necessarily be in the form of sympathy: supportive comments expressing deepest condolences would normally be heard from among the crowd of mourners who constitute the audience. Some of these comments which may be made amidst shedding of tears are:

*Due o, due!, Eno kose!, Abaayaa due!/Abaayaa kose! A!, O!, Yee!, Hyε den!, Awerεhosem!, Owuo tirimuoden!, and, say, Owuo begya hwan ni? (literally meaning Condolences!, condolences!; Beloved Lady, condolences to you; Our sympathies go out to you!; Ah!; Oh!; Sorry indeed!; Take heart!; Death is really wicked!; and Surely, who shall be spared by Death! respectively).*

It must be noted, however, that the audience participation does not follow any fixed order and would not involve everyone present at the funeral grounds. To illustrate the point, we would include audience participation in our example of dirge above. This dirge, taken from Nketia (1969) and cited by Aborampah (1999), is an "Expression on the Extent of Loss" and would require appropriate responses such as those we have inserted in the original text, which, taken together, the result of the performance of our example dirge should become like the following:

**Singer:** There is no branch above which I could grasp. I am in flooded waters.  
 Who will rescue me?

- Audience:** Due o, due! (Condolences! condolences!)
- Singer:** When father meets me, he will hardly recognize me.
- Audience:** O! A! Awerehosẽm (Oh! Ah! How sad!)
- Singer:** For he will meet me carrying all I have; a torn sleeping mat and a horde of flies.
- Audience:** Eno kosẽ! (Beloved Lady, condolences to you)
- Singer:** Your children and I will feed on the spider; The mouse is too big a game  
Your children and I (what will become of us!)
- Audience:** Abaayaa due!/Abaayaa kosẽ! Yee! (Beloved Lady, Sorry! our sympathies go out to you!)
- Singer:** I am done for  
I am destitute
- Audience:** Hyẽ den! (Take heart!)
- Singer:** Your children are looking for you. The night is fast approaching, where the orphan is dying to see its mother
- Audience:** Owuo tirimuoden! (Death is really wicked!)

Today, however, the audience rarely participates in the performance of a dirge. The singer's (wailer's) grief and emotion may appeal to the audience but the audience does not participate either because the audience does not know how to participate (since one needs to learn certain key words, phrases and fixed expressions to be resourceful in performing the dirge), or they just find the singing of the dirge to be obsolete and primitive. Today, the audience prefers gospel or some kind of hip-life music and would not mind interrupting the singing of a dirge with spontaneous singing of a more popular gospel music.

For example, at a wake held at Kwahu-Tafo (in the Eastern Region of Ghana) in honour of a deceased kind, old man who had sponsored the education of a number of orphans, while the widow sang a very emotional dirge, weeping and inviting the audience with her gestures to join her, the audience burst into a typical Presbyterian song entitled "ɔlɔho ne manfani na meɛ wɔ fam ha" (literally meaning) "I am only a stranger and a sojourner on this earth". The old woman was completely ignored, her dirge suppressed to inaudible level by the sound of an accordion that soon augmented the Presbyterian song. On another occasion, at the funeral of a very kind and prominent woman in Tarkwa (in the Western Region of Ghana), the wailing of a singer who was sorrowfully recounting the kindness of a deceased woman was soon to be swallowed by the popular tunes of a mighty Police band which attracted the very current Azonto dance. In both instances, we observe two things: first, the unwillingness of the audience to listen to the dirge; and, second, the devastating effect of Western culture on Akan oral literature such as the singing of dirges.

### **THE LIBATION (LIBATION PRAYER PERFORMANCE)**

Like the tale and the dirge, libation prayers are also a common aspect of Akan culture. Libation is a traditional prayer (Finnegan, 1970) and is performed by the priest or priestess and the audience. On the content of traditional prayers, Mensah (2011) writes that it is determined by the occasion and purpose of its performance. She observes that the traditional prayer is a religious poem which may be pure invocation and that the purpose of such a poem is to invite divinities, ancestors and ministering spirits into the

midst of human beings (p. 36). In performing the libation prayer, the audience is expected to observe and actively participate in it. The following is an example of a libation prayer showing audience participation:

*Priestess:* Asaase Yaa, provider of good harvest, have your drink

*Audience:* Yes, yes

*Priestess:* You who protect us, we give you drink

*Audience:* Yes, yes

*Priestess:* Nyankopɔn, have your drink

*Audience:* Yes, yes

*Priestess:* Multitude of gods, come for your drink

*Audience:* Yes, yes

*Priestess:* Ancestors, have your drink

*Audience:* Yes, yes

*Priestess:* We summon you in peace

*Audience:* Yes, yes

*Priestess:* We wish you happy yuletide

And many happy returns

We summon you in order to testify to the blessings you have granted us

*Audience:* Yes, yes

*Priestess:* We thank you for doing away with all kinds of mishap in our way

*Audience:* Yes, yes

*Priestess:* We celebrate this festival in remembrance of Agya Ahor, who offered himself as a sacrifice for us

*Audience:* Yes, yes

*Priestess:* We beseech you

Let his death bring peace and unity as we enter the New Year

*Audience:* Yes, yes

*Priestess:* We need protection as we enter the New Year

*Audience:* Yes, yes

As shown in the above-cited libation prayer, the audience observes and actively participates in the prayers. Unfortunately, the pattern of performing the libation prayer with normal active audience participation has changed. Now, there is little or no participation from the real audience. Therefore, to maintain audience participation in the performance of libation prayers, the current practice is to elect and train some people to play the role of the audience. The above-quoted libation prayer as recorded by Mensah (2011) of the Agona tradition of Akwanbo is quite illustrative since the priestess actually performed the prayers with her "followers", who are, indeed, trained participants:

*Priestess:* Asaase Yaa, provider of good harvest, have your drink

*Followers:* Yes, yes

*Priestess:* You who protect us, we give you drink

*Followers:* Yes, yes

*Priestess:* Nyankopɔn, have your drink

*Followers:* Yes, yes  
*Priestess:* Multitude of gods, come for your drink  
*Followers:* Yes, yes  
*Priestess:* Ancestors, have your drink  
*Followers:* Yes, yes  
*Priestess:* We summon you in peace  
*Followers:* Yes, yes  
*Priestess:* We wish you happy yuletide  
 And many happy returns  
 We summon you in order to testify to the blessings you have granted us  
*Followers:* Yes, yes  
*Priestess:* We thank you for doing away with all kinds of mishap in our way  
*Followers:* Yes, yes  
*Priestess:* We celebrate this festival in remembrance of Agya Ahor, who offered  
 himself as a sacrifice for us  
*Followers:* Yes, yes  
*Priestess:* We beseech you  
 Let his death bring peace and unity as we enter the New Year  
*Followers:* Yes, yes  
*Priestess:* We need protection as we enter the New Year  
*Followers:* Yes, yes.

In a later interview with the researcher, she confirmed that, on the field, the people who participated in the traditional prayer were very few. She also observed how when the prayer was being performed, only the followers of the priestess responded to the prayers for the Akwanbo Festival even though it is a big and important festival. Asked whether without the followers of the priestess the prayer may not have been successfully done, she responded in the affirmative and added that, perhaps, that is the reason the priestess always moved with her followers. These followers, then, have become a substitute for the natural, real audience.

### CONCLUSION

We have been able to establish that the oral performance depends heavily on the active participation of its performers and the audiences. But recent developments, beginning with Eurochristian advent, have served to distraught a once active audience into a modern passive one. Sad to say, this trend cannot be reversed easily; however, it can be adapted to boost audience participation in African oral literature. The sure way to do this is to revive and teach African-centered courses geared towards debunking the idea that only the uncivilised, pagan, unchristian person actively participates in oral performances. This demands education which should start right from the crèche and at all educational levels.

### Notes

- Tawia:** That is the name given to anyone - boy or girl - born after a set of twins.
- The woman's eyes turned fiery:** The literal expression is "she lighted her eye" or "she made her eye turn into fire" ("ᏔᏔ n'ani"): This means she was a witch.
- Chew:** literal expression for "kill"; witches chew their victims. This means that they kill their victims.
- Panyin:** Elder Twin; that is the name given to the elder of twins - male or female. However the full forms are *Atta Panyin* - male- and *Ataa Panyin* - female.
- Kakra:** Younger Twin; that is the name given to the younger of twins - male or female. The fuller forms are *Atta Kakra* - male - and *Ataa Kakra* - female. *Atta Kuma* and *Atta Ketewa* are variants, *Kuma* (*Kumaa*) and *Ketewa* meaning little.
- Azonto:** the most current dance form among the youth in Ghana. It is done to the rhythm of very danceable music with short beats and consists of raising the hands, twisting the body in different styles of movement while going down, down, down and up, up, up but in no special order, and it could be a mixture of all kinds of dance.
- Asaase Yaa:** An Akan name for Mother Earth (*Asaase*) considered to be a Thursday born (*Yaa*).
- Nyankopɔn:** An Akan name for God (literally meaning the one greatest and supreme friend)
- Agya Ahor:** Name of a legendary figure (*Agya Ahor* literally meaning Father Ahor).
- Agona:** An Akan group of the Central Region of Ghana
- Akwanbo:** An important festival celebrated at the beginning of the year by the Agona people of Central Region, Ghana (*Akwanbo* - literally meaning clearing the path)

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