

Communication Media as a Tool for Promoting Cultural Heritage of the Asante People of Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore the rich and diverse cultural practices and traditions of the Asante People of Ghana with a view to discovering the inestimable roles played by Communication Media in transmitting these cultural ideas and practices from one generation to another. In doing this, primacy will be given to some cultural and traditional practices, such as the famous Adowa traditional dance, music, Naming Systems and Identity and their underlying media significance in promoting cultural Heritage among the Asante People. This paper also argues that culture, as the custodian of the peoples' history, is an important tool of national planning and development through which the government could tap on in its development drive according to the cultural and traditional peculiarity of the people. Information, they say, is power. This underscores the place of the Communication Media in bringing the culture of the Asante people of Ghana to global view and, by extension, boost the peoples' tourism potential, create employment, reduce social vices, educate and entertain the people. The paper concludes by recommending wider media information and coverage of the Asante cultural practices and festivals with a view to making them a preferred tourist destination. The writer calls on all stake-holders in the culture and tourism industry to exploit the potentials the Asante culture offers to promote the "African" in us. More cultural awakening and media attention to Asante's beautiful cultural diversity must be championed.

Keywords:

INTRODUCTION

People without a past are a people lost. The history of a people therefore represents the peoples' sojourn on earth - where they are coming from and where they are going. According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2010), culture is defined as the customs and beliefs, art, ways of life and social organisation of a particular country or group. It refers to the total of the inherited ideas, beliefs, values, and knowledge, which constitute the shared bases of social action. It also includes the total range of activities and ideas of a group of people with shared traditions, which are transmitted and reinforced by members of the group. The artistic and social pursuits, expression, and tastes valued by a society or class, as in the arts, manners, dress, and the like, or the attitudes, feelings, values, and behaviour that characterize and inform society as a whole or social group with it, all constitute

the culture of a people. History has it that the Asante kingdom was founded by the great King Osei Tutu in the eighteenth century. His fetish priest was Okomfo Anokye, who unified the Asante states through allegiance to the Golden Stool, which miraculously descended from heaven. Okomfo Anokye planted two trees in the forest and predicted that one tree would live and become the capital of Ashanti. Hence, the name Kumasi (the tree lived); the place in which the other tree was planted became Kumawu (the tree died) (African Eldorado – Ghana from Gold Coast to Independence 1994 – 2011). The paper gives an overview of Communication Media bringing out its role in transmitting culture and traditions from one generation to the other. The traditional communication symbols and signs embedded in the many attires, music, dance, arts and crafts and festivals of the Asante people are revealed. The Communication Media, this paper establishes, is not only a vehicle for cultural transmission but also, a dependable tool of educational, social and economic growth vis-a-vis cultural and traditional underpinnings that go with full exploration of the cultural and tourism potentials of African cultures, the Asantes' inclusive.

This paper also examines culture and its perspectives with special focus on the cultural practices of the Asante People. Their music, dance, costumes, arts and crafts, naming system/identity and puberty rite/marriage ceremonies are given due discussion and analysis to bring out the rich cultural heritage embedded in them. The *adowa* dance, *ahenema* footwear, the *kente* traditional attire, the *adinkra* outfit, and the like all bring to bear the rich cultures of the Asantes.

Right from the time of creation and existence of man on earth, it has been settled by scientists and scholars alike that 'Man is a gregarious animal and much more so in his mind than in his body. He may like to go alone for a walk, but he hates to stand alone in his opinions.' - George Santayana (World Quotes 2012). What this means is that it is in man's nature to live in a community and in communion with others. These social and communal attributes of man inevitably engender corporation, collaboration and social engineering for growth and development as well as transmission of cultural values from one generation to another. If he must enjoy life, man must improve his environment by making it habitable through the sharing of beliefs, norms, language and the like. However, for these to be achieved, it is imperative that there exists socio-cultural interaction through communication in the human relation. Information, they say, is power. The man without information is deprived of knowledge and by extension lacks the needed information for transmission, transformation and for development. How will the information concerning Arts and Craft get to the younger generation? How will they know about their beliefs, dance, marriage, music, burial ceremonies, and festivals? It is for these challenges and importantly, the improvement in the quality of life, that the role of the communication media in promoting cultural heritage cannot be underestimated.

The concept of communication has been in existence right from time immemorial and as man journeys through the ages, science and technology begin to influence his means of gathering and disseminating information. From the traditional use of gongs, town criers, colours, canons and so on to the modern-day television, radio, magazines and newspaper, now include the internet. The term 'communication media' is used interchangeably with mass media in this work. What then are communication media/mass media? Wimmer and Dominick (2006) define the mass media as any form of communication that simultaneously reaches a large number of people, including, but not limited to radio, television, newspaper, magazines, the internet, billboards, films recording and books. Sharing in the above view is Baran (2009) who, while trying to describe what a mass medium is, argues that the medium is a technology that carries messages to a large number of people - as newspaper carries the printed word and radio conveys the sound of music and news - we call it a mass medium. The above definitions without doubt leave a picture in the minds of the readers that the communication media which is otherwise known as the mass media go beyond words of mouth which is considered as interpersonal or group communication. The reason is that messages across a mass medium reach a large number of people with different economic, political, social, cultural and educational background.

Whether the information is received via radio, television, newspaper or magazines, it reaches target audience far and near. Further, Hiebert (2001), while trying to explain mass media, states that basically we divide the mass media into two categories: print or newspaper, magazines and books and electronic or radio, television, sound recordings, motion pictures and the internet, these instruments must be able to carry messages quickly to audience so large that cannot be gathered together in any one place at any one time. It will not be out of place to in our effort to explain the concept mass media to state that they serve as links between media houses and the general public. Thus, Okunna (1999) describes the mass media as an intermediate transmitter of information that reaches members of the audience simultaneously. Considering the mass media as transmitter of information is supported by Berth (2007), who also sees mass media as any medium used to transmit mass communication. He goes further to say that until recent, mass media were clearly defined and comprised the eight mass media industries namely; books, newspapers, magazines, recordings, radio, movies, television and internet.

Finally Defluer and Dennis (1981) define the mass media as a device for moving messages across distance or time to accomplish mass communication. From the above views, one can conveniently state that all the present mass media are instruments/vehicles which can be employed to carry information to a large number of people with different backgrounds. In other words, for a medium to be considered 'mass', it must be capable of conveying information to audience, regardless of their location, cultural, social, political, economic and educational status.

Culture and Cultural Practices of the Asante People

Culture is the way of life of a group of people which distinguishes them from other communities. These include their greeting, dressing, language, arts, craft, festival and food among others. In general, Ghanaians emphasize communal values such as family, respect for the elderly, honouring traditional rulers, and the importance of dignity and proper social conduct. Individual conduct is seen as having impact on an entire family, social group and community; therefore, everyone is expected to be respectful, dignified and observant in public settings and in every aspect of life. Naming ceremonies, puberty initiations, marriage and death are all marked by family ceremonies, and while Ghana has the highest percentage of Christians in West Africa, belief in traditional animist religions is still common. Seasonal festivals serve to bring a whole tribe or clan together in spectacular fashion. Customs are often passed on through the extended family. These customs and traditions constitute the cherished heritage of the people passed on from generation to generation through the vehicle of communication and education. Prominent among these costumes and practices are music, greeting, government, judiciary, festivals, art and craft.

The Media as Transmitter of the Asante Cultural Values

Generally, there are various types of mass media which disseminating useful and vital information to the public to help them shape their lives in some way. The mass media, be it radio, television, newspapers, magazines or internet, perform major functions in the Asante kingdom which promote their culture in particular and well being in general of the Asantis. The Asante people have a very rich culture, and the desire of every average Asante's man is that his children and even his unborn generations are indoctrinated fully into this rich culture once they are born. They want to see their children learn and practice what their forefathers have been into. Since culture is learned, there must be an avenue through which the younger generation can get information concerning their culture. This without doubt brings us to the functions of the mass media as: (a) surveillance, (b) correlation, (c) socialization, and (d) entertainment. Studies over the years have shown that the above mentioned functions of the mass media play major role in the transmission of the Asante cultural values but there are several forms of culture practised by the Asantis. However, prominent ones like the Adowa dance, songs, Naming systems and puberty rite/marriage ceremonies and their significance shall be examined in light of the role of the mass media in ensuring adequate dissemination of information concerning these practices.

The "Adowa" Traditional Dance: The surveillance function of the mass media is known for its effectiveness in information gathering and transmission. Defining what surveillance is, Moemeka (1991) sees it as the provision of constant stream of information about events in society and about the society itself; the mass media inform the public about local, state, national and international news, among the

guidance it gives to the individual in his/her daily life. The Adowa dance of the Asantis has been a part of the people right from the creation of Asanti kingdom and for its perpetuity, there must be a means through which generations unborn get to know and learn the Adowa dance. This is where a Nigerian television programme, *Goge Africa*, readily comes to mind. From Kenya to Uganda, Congo Democratic Republic to Ghana, this programme travels the length and breadth of Africa exhibiting her rich cultural heritage.

According to Moss (1998), *Adowa*, a music and dance form of the Asante people of Ghana which is customarily performed at funerals, not only serves as an example of an integrated, “total art” complex, but it also proves representatives of traditional African dance. Through its immutable link to social context, emphasis on communal needs and collective participation, and function in imparting essential cultural values and beliefs, the institution and performance of *Adowa* serves as a vehicle to express ethnic identity. As pointed out by Nketia (1998), numerous suggestions have been offered as to the necessary attributes of traditional African dance, ranging from the ability to alternate between straight and bent postures, to the use of the entire body rather than isolated areas in responding to music, to the creative variation of movements during a dance performance. While appealing drum rhythms will almost evoke some kinds of physical movement – clapping the hands, stamping the feet, jerking the head and shoulders - in *Adowa*, a few basic guidelines must be considered. For example, the *Adowa* dancer almost always begins and ends his/her movement with the right foot. Moreover, each step must correspond to the rhythm pattern of the *dawuro* (*gong*).

Another dance entails the importance of facial expression in *Adowa* in order to create the appropriate atmosphere for a funeral occasion. Bediako (1998) states thus: “Your facial expression, your forehead frowns, the look in your eye ...as if you are almost crying. You look so sad and morose”. It is believed that, *Adowa* is a graceful dance that must be accompanied by appropriate intricate and elegant gesture. In terms of the appropriate costume for dancing *Adowa*, women traditionally adorn themselves in two different cloths: three yards wrapped around the lower torso and tied with a knot, and four yards cloaked over the upper torso and left to hand (as does the traditional male cloth worn on everyday occasion). While dancing in bare feet is customarily a sign of respect (and facilitates easy movement and stylistic footwork), native sandals called *kyow* may however be worn in *Adowa* dance.

In addition, beaded bracelets, necklaces and ankles are worn for decoration rather than noise-making purposes, and handkerchiefs are often employed as props in dancing. Costume and adornments are typically red and black, in accord with the significance of these colours as reserved for mourning in Asante’s culture. Female *Adowa* dancers should not wear Western jewellery or apply make-up, and they must pull their hair away from their face, often done with a hair net, cloth hair wraps

or other accessories are not admissible. In fact, originally in Asante's society, women dancing *Adowa* would cut their hair extremely short and paint a black strip all the way around the hair line, as it is traditionally regarded as both beautiful and a sign of respect. Male *Adowa* dancers do not wear special hairstyle nor do they adorn themselves with jewellery or other regalia.

Instead, they simply clad themselves in eight to ten yards of cloth which is wrapped around the body and, rather than being left to drape (as is the style worn for daily use), the cloth is dropped around the waist and then tied in place. This enables the dancer greater flexibility in movement. The actual dance that is performed in *Adowa*, through its relationship to its social function and context as a funeral dance, emphasis on the collection participation, and expression of defining cultural values and beliefs, determine *Adowa*'s place as an ethnic signifier of the Asante people. The meaningful content of *Adowa* dance movements both supports and enriches its social role as a funeral dance.

In fact, the *Adowa* dancer changes in dance movement, depending on the nature of the social event. Accordingly, because *Adowa* is a funeral dance, it is comprised of symbolic gestures, facial expressions, body movements and general communications of the body and face that will tell the audience or mourners that this is a sorrowful dance. For example, a central *Adowa* movement is the placement of the hands on top of the head to signify the behaviour of crying, as if the dancer is saying, "I'm in trouble. I'm in crisis." In addition, clasping the hands behind the back also expresses loneliness: "I am now so lonely. I have lost a loved one", – maybe a mother or a father, husband or wife. Clenching the fists over the stomach with the arms crossed indicates "Now when I am hungry, who is going to give me food to eat? I am now an orphan. Nobody is grief going to care for me. I don't have anybody to turn to," and tapping or swinging the hands signifies pain - you are hurt. Just as dance can convey the situation or circumstance of its performance, so too can it express community membership. Dancing at funeral does not necessarily express only sorrow or grief; it may also indicate group solidarity. In fact, just as Asante's funerals do not exclusively involve an expression of sadness, there exist various *Adowa* movements to express joy, love, peace, and so on.

The movement to express joy entails throwing up the arms and clasping the hands in jubilation. Love and peace is expressed by crossing both the hands and fingers in a clasped position. Moreover, communication and interaction are stressed not only between the *Adowa* drummer and dancer, but among the drummers, dancers, vocalists, and audience alike. In other words, while the relationship between the drummer and the dancer are indispensable in an *Adowa* performance, the dancer must remain cautious not to concentrate on the master drummer alone; the communication should be between the master drummer, the dancer, and the audience all together. In addition to the axial importance of respect in Asante's society as expressed through *Adowa*, the value of a united, collective identity is also crucial in

the dance movements of this musical form. For example, at the height of a dance, if the Asante dancer suddenly falls with his/her back into the arms or lap of another community member, particularly a prominent state official, he/she wishes to convey that with you behind me, I cannot fall. Moreover, as one Asante dancer notes, the theme of unity is always present in *Adowa* dance and is conveyed by crossing the arms and hands with palms opened, or by placing the two palms against one another vertically, as if the dancer has his/her hands clasped in prayer.

On the whole, *Adowa* movements, replete with signification, assert critical values and beliefs of the Asante community. In this way, with each consecutive performance, the role of the *Adowa* as a vehicle for expressing Asante's ethnic identity is not only ensured, but also enlivened with both individual spirit and the collective dynamism of the Asante people. For example, the earlier mentioned Nigerian Television programme, *goge Africa*, occasionally brings to people outside Ghana the beauty, significance and the interpretation of the *adowa* dance thereby educating as well as entertaining Ghanaians and non-Ghanaians living in other parts of Africa. This gives people visiting the Asante kingdom for the first time an opportunity to have an idea of this special and meaningful dance called *adowa*.

Music: Music in the social lives is meant to entertain as well as educate us on certain issues or occurrences in our immediate and outside environment. Here, the entertainment function of the mass media once again comes into play. Through the radio and television, music/song which reflects the way of life of the Asante people is highly displayed in order to create awareness to the younger generation and even generation unborn about the kind of music that exists in their traditional environment. Thus, the communication media through televised and recorded programmes act as a reservoir of cultural heritage from generation to generation. For example the current singers of *Bosue, adowa music and dirge* got the ideas and inspiration through the help of the mass media. According to Ampene (2005), Music is an integral part of the life of the Asante. Songs are used to express love, hatred and sorrow in terms of occurrence of death in the community. Songs are powerful link to the worldview of the Asantes and are highly customised for specific occasions and contexts; for example, songs depicting joy and happiness at celebrations cannot be sung at funerals when people are mourning and vice versa (Arts Council of Ghana, 2000; Kamba, 2000).

Furthermore, Quan-Baffour (2008) has elaborately discussed the transformation and acculturation in Ghanaian songs. His contention is that Ghanaians, (Asante being the largest cultural group) cherish, love, practise and preserve their culture and tradition through songs, names and manner of dress despite their exposure to western culture. Also, through songs Asante musicians can sing to praise, abuse, complain, thank, speak in parables, ask for favour from God or people, rejoice and express satisfaction or disappointment in life as a whole (Quan-

Baffour, 2008). Men and women have their own kind of songs for various occasions.

Puberty Rite/Marriage Ceremonies: Puberty rite/marriage ceremonies are important aspect of Asante culture. At a certain age of female child, say between the ages of 15 and 18, she is expected to be getting ready for marriage and before such marriage takes place, puberty rite should be performed on the *awruaba* (*girl*). The puberty rite involves the coming together of the celebrant's age group to prepare her for the rituals ushering her into adulthood which will in turn prepare her for marriage. During this celebration, the celebrant is ushered to the stream by her age mates and given a bath. Thereafter, she is adorned in beautiful traditional attire usually provided by her father as his gift to her. From the stream, they proceed to the father's compound singing melodious songs about the celebrant's graduation into adulthood. At the father's compound, there is usually plenty of food and drinks to be enjoyed by all guests. This practice is similar to the circumcision ceremony practised among the Urhobo people of Delta State of Nigeria.

Now, once a girl gets to this stage, it is assumed that she is ripe for marriage and so can be approached by any man. Marriage among the Asante people takes place between a man and a woman within the same community or different communities. When a man sees a woman he is interested in, he makes advances at her, and once her consent is gotten, he informs his family members who pay a visit to the woman's family some gift items to make their son's intentions known to them. Once both families agree, a date is fixed for the marriage. On the day of the marriage, it is expected that the groom's family will come with the brides price which usually involves the dowry and other items like the *Kente* cloth, *Adinkra* attire, *Ahenema* foot ware, beads, powder, cream, comb and other items needed by a woman. A time comes during the ceremony when the groom's family presents all that they have come to marry the woman with. On acceptance by the bride's family, she is presented to her husband and in-laws, and at this point merriment follows. In performing its function in this wise, the mass media through its socialization function bring to young and unborn generations existing marriage practices in their locality. Moemeka (1991) in shedding light on socialization as a function of the mass media, states thus: 'The mass media help unify society and increase social cohesion by upholding by upholding and teaching a broad base of common social norms, values and collective experiences ...the mass media help transmit culture and social norms from generation to generation... Education comprises intellectual development, acquisition of skills and capabilities and formation of character'. Through radio and television drama series stories that depict the Asante marriage practices are brought to the people who ordinarily would not have had this knowledge. The movie industry today is also doing a great job in this regard as it allows such cultural practices to be recorded played for future generations.

Names and Identity: The name given to a child is believed to have a strong effect, whether positive or negative, on him/her. People again believe that personal names

support human interaction as a vehicle for communication. They are intrinsically communicative, and thus, contrary to any belief that there is nothing in a name. Personal names play a role in social interaction, at the root of which is communication. Theoretically, communication tends to be explained through many models which posit a basic assumption of “transmission” of messages from sender to receiver. However, messages deriving from personal names may not necessarily incorporate the element of intention. Much of the communication attributable to names could be unintentionally stimulated. The Asante people have a pattern of naming a child after the day he/she was born. As a result, a child can be named after any of the days in the week as long as that child was born on that day. Examples below show the naming pattern of the Asantes according to days of birth:

DAY	MALE	FEMALE
<i>Sunday</i>	<i>Kwasi</i>	<i>Akosua</i>
<i>Monday</i>	<i>Kwadwo</i>	<i>Adwua</i>
<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>Kwabena</i>	<i>Abena</i>
<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>Kwaku</i>	<i>Akua</i>
<i>Thursday</i>	<i>Yaw</i>	<i>Yaa</i>
<i>Friday</i>	<i>Kofi</i>	<i>Afua</i>
<i>Saturday</i>	<i>Kwame</i>	<i>Ama</i>

Another important aspect of naming among the Asante people is the *eba din to* system of naming which involves naming a child after a personality who the child’s parents hold in high esteem as a result of the person’s contribution to their immediate family or to humanity as a whole. In this case, the day the child is born serves as a prefix to the name of the person the child has been named after. For example, if a parent has named his child after a woman known as *Nimo*, and the female child was born on a Sunday (*Akosua*), the name of the child automatically becomes *Akosua Nimo*.

CONCLUSION

The Asante cultural heritage had become the toast tourist and lovers of African brotherliness and hospitality. Historians, artisans, traditional musicians as well as the growing generations have learnt a great deal, their cultural practices with many becoming renowned scholars in the several areas of culture. This paper calls on all stake-holders in the culture and tourism industry to take advantage of the unique opportunities of the Asante cultural practices in their quest for the promotion of African love and heritage.

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