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## Negotiating the Narrative Themes of Traditional Ghanaian Dance Forms within the Museum Context

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**Abstract:** As facilities for preserving tangible heritage, museums and galleries have partially opened up to the idea of merging intangible cultural heritage, such as dance, storytelling, and music, with their tangible collections. As lived heritage that serves as an emotional, spiritual and physical reflection of the people that created it, traditional dance can add to the socio-cultural understanding of tangible artefacts. This article discusses the possibilities and problems of using traditional dances from Ghana within the *nouvelle muséologie* context (de Varine-Bohan, 1976), touching on the functionality of museum spaces, ownership, and interpretability of artefacts in relationship to the embedded narratives and contextual themes of the dances. It considers the practical implications of the thematic synergy between dance and artefacts and explores the potential uses of ‘neo-traditional’ dance genres in Ghana’s museums.

**Keywords:** Ghana, dance in museums, *nouvelle muséologie*, neo-traditional dance

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# Negotiating the Narrative Themes of Traditional Ghanaian Dance Forms within the Museum Context

Eric Baffour Awuah

Museums and galleries are arguably the most significant facilities for housing tangible heritage materials and, in doing so, allowing people to make connections to the past.<sup>1</sup> Since UNESCO's adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003, museums and galleries have had to consider how they might preserve, present and interact with intangible cultural heritage.<sup>2</sup> Performances of heritage in these spaces can provide a sustainable platform for negotiating the division between tangible, material heritage and intangible heritage, such as dance, storytelling, and music.

Using traditional dance forms to interpret, represent or reinvent heritage sites and the artefacts therein can be a methodology for circumventing established notions of safeguarding heritage (Lopez y Royo, 2002). These established notions perpetuate the separation of artefacts and collections from the context of their original creation or development, which may have involved music and dance forms. A ritual mask, for example, is housed in a museum only to be looked at as an object, rather than as an important constituent of society, and so its physical, emotional, and expressive uses are unexplored. Through a re-interpretation by means of dance, audiences can better understand the object's significance and its function in a society or period of history. Dance therefore enables a more comprehensive view of the object. In addition, using dance as the thematic accompaniment to collections of artefacts is arguably important for the future development of museums as sites of heritage preservation and of dance as intangible cultural heritage.

Traditional Ghanaian dances evoke deeply nostalgic and transformative attributes of national and personal heritage. Through performance, they provide a platform for merging the past with the present. The underlying historical, mythical or folk information pertaining to the *Tampanyila*<sup>3</sup> dance, for example, may be preserved for decades, but its corresponding movements may vary to a greater or lesser degree depending on the economic, agricultural, migratory, and social situation at the time. Thus, traditional Ghanaian dances can create a dialogue between the historical and contemporary sensibilities of people and institutions, and

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through their propagation, notions of shared cultural heritage, oneness of identity, and the pluralism of cultures can be interrogated as well as perpetuated.

This article considers the feasibility of presenting the interpretive, culturally laden themes of Ghanaian traditional dance forms within museum contexts – themes such as unity, supremacy, community, migration, wars, colonialism, and traditional African religion – and proposes a rationale for Ghana’s museum and galleries as sites of heritage preservation for traditional music and dance. Drawing from my personal experience as a traditional Ghanaian dancer, I seek to illuminate the politics of negotiating cultural themes, performance spaces, and stereotypes within an abstract notion of the museum. Certain dances are used here as case studies for discussing the politics of employing and engaging with intangible heritage practices in a museum. They demonstrate that dance is an effective avenue of communication and a medium for mirroring community values and identities, since the body acts as an interpreter of socio-cultural practices. For the purpose of this article, heritage – both tangible and intangible – is considered as a dynamic lived aspect of culture and identity, subject to human use and interpretation at particular points in history.

### **Issues in the performance of heritage**

Richard Kurin, Director of the Center for Folklore and Cultural Heritage at the Smithsonian Institution (U.S.A.), acknowledges that

Museums are adept at dealing with objects. Objects are accessioned, numbered, measured, catalogued ... The primary difference in dealing with intangible cultural heritage is that the “thing” or “object” is the social practice or tradition.... In museums, objects become part of collections and reside under the roof and the authority of the museum. With intangible cultural heritage, the traditions exist outside ... in the community. They reside under the authority of the people who practise them.... All museums are constrained by the fact that they can only represent larger wholes by smaller, abstracted pieces or parts ... an aesthetic movement by a painting, a cultural group by a costume and some pottery, a historical event with a sword or crown.

(2004:7–8)

Combining the historical collections of a museum with intangible heritage, such as dance, can be problematic. Contention may arise with regards to the process of clearing the exhibition halls to make room for a performance or to working with the exhibits.<sup>4</sup> The safety of the artefacts, the availability and adaptability of the space, the distance between the performers and the collections, and the relationship between performers and audience<sup>5</sup> are among the issues that curators must grapple with before a dance or music installation can be conceptualised or approved (Laurence, 2007).

In addition, the social impact of installations can produce questions and discussions about the fixity or ownership of the artefacts, in addition to how they

are affected through dialogue with music and dance. Will they remain mutually exclusive or will they overlap to create a new identity not observed before this particular performance of heritage? Installations can intensify discord around authorship and authority for the people with jurisdiction and how they perceive their dances, as well as gaining or granting access to the artefacts themselves.

In Europe, dance within museum and gallery spaces has been relatively well received, and institutional and public skepticism has begun to dispel. I am interested to consider how traditional dances of African countries such as Ghana can survive in these settings and gain the same acceptance that European contemporary dance has. It can be argued that the practice has yet to flourish in most African countries for two main reasons. First, people still cling to the conventional ideologies of what a museum ought to be as a public space and as an institutional building housing historical collections with supporting information. Second, dance serves a different role in each of its various contexts. According to former artistic director of the Ghana Dance Ensemble, Ampofo Duodo, before colonisation, traditional music and dance were grouped into categories, such as social, ritual, and court or palace music and dance (Duodo, cited in Cudjoe, 2015). These contexts contain or produce narratives that drive each type of performance in a particular manner. The narratives mandate the ethics of the performance, the arrangement of performers, the conduct of the audience, and the placement of musicians, among other considerations. These circumstances and narrative themes provide interesting discussion in relation to the performance of heritage in museums and galleries.

### **Dance and *nouvelle muséologie***

Traditional dance is an integral aspect of heritage to Ghanaian people. It can be found in all facets of life, and it serves several important roles in society with regards to politics, diplomacy, and socialisation (Fabian, 1996). For Ghanaians, dance is a fundamental part of cultural and religious systems through rituals. For many traditional African religions, symbolic bodily movements are important as communicative tools, and each activity is made salient by the involvement of dancing (Malone, 1996). It is therefore possible to suggest that dance is vital to Ghanaians as a prominent tool for expressing cultural identities; its prominence brought about through its continual promotion within cultural interactions and demonstrations (Fabian, 1996).

Its performance in a museum can provide insights into and challenges to assessing this dynamic artistic form's efficacy in aiding understanding of heritage artefacts. As such, the 'concern becomes to look at the [traditional dance piece] ... in terms of specificity, dynamism, form, content ... to draw out the complex set of interrelationships at work in it, which combined together help create the aesthetic effect and give rise to the ... integrated whole' (Jordan & Thomas, 1998:244). Within the ideology of merging tangible collections with intangible artistic forms, dance stands out as lived heritage that serves as an emotional, spiritual and physical reflection of the people that created it (Lopez y Royo, 2002), and as such, it can add to the socio-cultural understanding of tangible artefacts.

For traditional Ghanaian dances to be successfully performed in the country's museums, I believe the theoretical concept and critical lens of *nouvelle muséologie*, as proposed by Hugues de Varine-Bohan (1996),<sup>6</sup> must first be consulted and adapted to test its usefulness in the Ghanaian context. According to cultural policy scholar Patrick Boylan, proponents of the *nouvelle muséologie*

argue that the narrow physical and, perhaps even more important, psychological limits of the museum's building or boundary fence should be replaced by a commitment to serve a defined territory, that the physical collections within a museum should be seen as just a small part of the total human and natural ecology and heritage, fixed, mobile and intangible of the 'new' museum's agreed territory, while the museum must seek to serve not just its actual visitors, but the total resident and visitor population of the territory.

(2006:57)

*Nouvelle muséologie* opposes the disassociation of intangible cultural knowledge from the tangible artefacts. I too would argue that it is imperative for museums to recognise that intangible knowledge is equally as important as the tangible artefacts they house. Exhibiting a people's traditional, ceremonial or military dress, or weaponry through still photographs without demonstrating how these items were used through the dance provides a one-dimensional view of the people who produced them. Displaying still photographs of an Akan *Kete* dancer in motion with a description of the gesture in question serves little purpose beyond aesthetics.<sup>7</sup> This is because gestures in that dance follow particular philosophical and socio-political rules. Ampofo Duodu states that 'philosophical utterances and ideas which are difficult to express or risky to proclaim verbally are embodied in symbolic dance movement' (Duodu, cited in Cudjoe, 2015). Thus, use of the dance form in a museum can aid understanding of a photograph in an exhibition. Putting this into practice is, in essence, to serve a defined territory through accurate cultural representation.

Through the inclusive dialogue between the tangible and the intangible in a quest to preserve and maintain heritage, the past can be merged with present social conditions, which have been created by descendants of the same ancestors. This is feasible in the Ghanaian context because traditional dances are considered to be 'timeless'. Oh! Nii Sowah, a senior lecturer of dance at the University of Ghana, has aptly stated, 'When we dance, we connect with our ancestors and affirm our kinship ties with them; when we dance, we propagate their legacies and identities through our bodies and our performance' (Oh! Nii Sowah in conversation with the author, 2013). This pervasive cultural perspective must be kept in mind when discussing the feasibility of performing Ghanaian traditional dance in museums.

One of Ghana's museums, the Museum of the Nzema Culture and History, housed in Fort Apollonia, was founded in 2010 as a result of a development project supporting community-based management of the Nzema natural and cultural heritage (Cristofano, 2011). It is an ecomuseum, that is, a community venture focused on the identity of a territory or place through which local people

manage, preserve, and interpret their heritage for sustainable development. In line with the *nouvelle muséologie* concept, one aim of this ecomuseum is to be

a cultural, historical and symbolic reference for the identity of the local population and the preservation of its culture and language, in order to provide to future generations the means for empowerment of their culture.... The Fort intends not only to display heritage, but also to serve as a conservation education centre for educational activities, arts and crafts production, temporary exhibitions, art performances etc.

(Ghana Museums & Monuments Board, 2016)

Typically, curating traditional dance installations in a 'traditional' museum setting poses challenges to do with conservation and access to artefacts. From a conservation viewpoint, performing a traditional dance as an interactive educative supplement to the tangible collections is not the problem in Fort Apollonia, but the re-contextualisation of the dance(s) is, because of the change of performance venue, context, and audience. Re-contextualisation is discussed further in the next section.

### **Dance case studies and the politics of curation**

Traditional Ghanaian dance forms such as *Fontomfrom* and *Atsiabegbe*<sup>8</sup> are based on social narratives derived from historical, religious, and political or cultural aspects of a people's development over time. Such narratives include perceived spiritual, emotional, and physical encounters or dialogues with the spirit world and the living world. Ghanaian ethnomusicologist Modesto Amegago postulates that

African aesthetics is shaped by the interwoven biological/physical, social, economic, political, religious and ethical values. In general, the Africans are born within certain environments. They interact with environmental features and creatures by using their senses of feeling, seeing, smelling, hearing, touching and tasting. They also think about the origin of the cosmos and formulate concepts and ideas to communicate among themselves and with their source.

(2011:220)

The diverse contexts in which traditional dances are performed necessitate and assign meaning to music and dance performances. For example, at a particular cultural festival, the Asante King performs *Fontomfrom* movement variations to display his authority and control over all he governs (Arhin, 1994). Here, the underlying narrative theme intersects with the context because the movements function in a communicative capacity and, as such, can either serve as surrogates for the voice or as independent communicators in their own right. This is also the case with *Kete* funeral dances, which the Asantes people from the Asante Region of South-Central Ghana perform for the deceased (Nketia, 1965). The selection and execution of particular movement gestures rely on the social status of the deceased

and of the people in attendance. If the deceased is a chief or king, the movements executed portray his kingly status, and if he is a 'commoner', other appropriate movements are exhibited (Arhin, 1994). The tone of the *Kete* dances can be positive, particularly when the deceased lived a good life according to the standards of the society. Communal movements may then change to those of gratitude towards the deceased, rather than sadness (Nketia, 1965).

In a verbal description of a *Kete* variation, researcher and *Kete* performer Emmanuel Cudjoe explained the physical iteration of a movement variation known as the *Dwannyini mienu shiaa, na yebu b33ma*, which is performed in various contexts, including funerals.

*Dwannyini* literally means an "adult Ram" (in this context with horns); *mienu* literally means the "number two"; *shiaa* literally means "to clash"; *na yebu b33ma* literally translates to, "we see the stronger man". Therefore the sentence translates into "if two adult Rams clash (with horns), we see the stronger one". Movement-wise, this is exhibited by the adjacent hitting of the two clenched arms [together]. This symbolises competitiveness or war and that in the face of confrontation, only the strong will survive.

(2015:46)

The conceptual diversity of the *Kete* dance means that it could be performed at a wedding. In this case, the kinaesthetic arrangements would be used to portray happiness, with the meaning derived in part from the musical accompaniment and in part from the song text within the social setting and appropriate customs. Furthermore, these traditional dances are adapted by each community and have varied interpretations in each. Movements pertaining to war, friendship, grief and so forth are represented by gestures or patterns that are 'readable' by the community.

When considered within the museum setting, the plurality of these dances and the societal specificity of their execution add several layers of complexity to their curatorial uses. This raises questions such as: which movements are to be selected from which social and political classes for display and why? Will the narrative of the dance remain intact when exhibited in this new setting? Can the artefacts express the fullness of the communal feelings and narratives associated with a particular group of people?

Contemporary dance choreographers, such as Boris Charmatz, Siobhan Davies, William Forsythe, and Tino Seghal, who create dances for museum and gallery installations at venues like London's Tate Modern and National Gallery have the liberty to experiment widely with diverse themes and content. In contrast, traditional dances from Ghana cannot be staged with the same freedom because they are maintained within a strict socio-political context and are closely governed by specific aesthetic markers, as determined by their formative communities. Therefore, curating traditional Ghanaian dance performances in museum settings requires genre-specific knowledge.

Bearing in mind the dance case studies presented above, I propose two scenarios for Ghanaian dance in museums, one local and one international. In

both, curators must continually negotiate with the choreographer or dance company concerning the theme(s) of the dance installation, the dance(s) that might be featured, and the type of space in which to create or house the work. Regardless of the chosen style of presentation, the dance forms must contain traces or remnants of the tradition they come from in order to appease and appeal to the sensibilities of both 'personal' and 'impersonal' museum audiences. As explained by Ghanaian dance scholar Ofotsu Adinku, a personal museum audience involves 'the people who know the dance that is being performed because it is part of their culture. They are the ones who will judge it most harshly if the original meaning and symbolism have not been adhered to' (Adinku, cited in Fabian, 1996:21). In contrast, members of an impersonal museum audience 'may not understand the meaning of the dance. They will be more likely to judge the dance solely on its aesthetic beauty' (Adinku, cited in Fabian, 1996:21). For a dance installation on home soil in Ghana, it is imperative to think about what sections of the form being presented can be modified to contribute to the theme of the installation, to serve the artistic and aesthetic sensibilities of the personal audience, and to encourage audiences to think about different possibilities for exploring their traditional heritage objects within unorthodox spaces. Conversely, due to the absence of local knowledge, an installation in Europe or the Americas may be able to modify to a larger extent the whole or specific sections of a featured traditional Ghanaian dance to suit the installation, without backlash from the primarily impersonal audience. Audiences will assess the efficacy of the installations based on their own cultural convictions, awareness, and knowledge, and therefore, considered choices must be made through deliberate curatorial strategies when dealing with traditional dances.

These location-based scenarios raise key issues relating to the performance space and re-contextualisation of Ghanaian dances. In both geographical locations, the dance migrates from a 'traditional' dance into a 'neo-traditional' dance by virtue of a change in performance venue and context. Welsh (2010) defines neo-traditional dances as dances created in the likeness of traditional dances but not bound to all aesthetic and cultural rules of the society. This can become an area of contention for the relevant community.

Dance installations in Ghana's museums would, however, provide a viable cultural platform for rethinking the channels for disseminating heritage. Performing traditional Ghanaian dances on the University of Ghana's proscenium and amphitheatre stages, and at various social functions such as weddings and funerals, typically serve as the methods for maintaining the dance form through neo-traditional performance. The museum can provide a new performance space. The Fort Apollonia Museum of the Nzema Culture and History demonstrates how flexible monumental heritage can be in accommodating such installations, where the museum space becomes a showcase not only for physical historical collections but also for intangible forms such as music and dance. This integration could lead to academic discourse by the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences based on dance heritage studies, which could help conceptualise uses of museums and gallery spaces as heritage sites, lessening dependence on conventional venues such as the National Theatre and rural village squares as designated performances spaces. Traditional Ghanaian dance installations in museums could also promote

or advertise the synergy between artistic forms and possibly help to elevate them to the status that Western artistic forms enjoy through multi-disciplinary dance studies.<sup>9</sup>

Dance installations have implications for the commodification of the art form and the culture by the institution, however. In this regard, Lopez y Royo singles out the use of 'illuminate' in the rhetoric of museums, noting that the British Museum, 'evocatively, undertakes to "illuminate world cultures"' (2002:3). Using artistic forms such as cultural and religious philosophies, dance, and music to provide 'illumination' in museums, galleries, and public spaces can create problems around privacy. Some museums' approaches to attracting visitors rely on advertising the 'unknown secrets' of artefacts, whilst discounting the notion that some information is esoteric and must remain as such (Lopez y Royo, 2002). Therefore, insomuch as the process of illumination may be good for documentation, it may also be the end of cultural power for some societies, through the removal of ownership, copyright and cultural privacy. As heritage and tourism researcher Susan Keitumetse suggests, 'Secrecy is one way through which power, whether economic, social or cultural is attained and retained within a community setting' (2006:169).

Certain elements of a people's heritage may be shrouded in secrecy, such as with the *Yeye* cult whose rituals and activities are mostly kept private (Arhin, 1994).<sup>10</sup> Their reverence and mysticism as a ritual sect depends on privacy, and so, for ethical reasons, esoteric information cannot be made public unless permission has been sought from and granted by cult seniors (Arhin, 1994). If a choreographer and curator were to present certain dance materials belonging to the cult in an exhibition, who then decides what can be presented and who maintains authorship and ownership of the dance form? What becomes of the secrecy that cult practitioners value so highly? Detailed parameters would need to be established in order to help make decisions about which aspects of traditional forms can be transmitted publicly through dance and which must remain private. If the performance of a traditional form is not given adequate critical attention before it serves as an installation in a museum or gallery space, it can 'potentially devalue communities' cultural capital to an extent where it destabilizes the socio-cultural foundations upon which the heritage existed before, together with the foundations upon which it depends for future existence' (Keitumetse, 2006:167). Without proper negotiations regarding acceptable content to be displayed in these spaces, there can be serious breaches of trust in relation to these intangible heritages' esoteric information such as exist in many Ghanaian cultural practices. Within opportunities for museums to display both tangible and intangible heritages, therefore, important decisions must be taken to safeguard sensitive materials of the people being represented – or 'imagined'.

## Conclusion

The performance of heritage is practised in museums and galleries in a framework proposed by *nouvelle muséologie*, which promotes the implementation of dance curation, regardless of original contexts. This methodology of heritage propagation

and safeguarding provides opportunities for curatorial engagement with traditional Ghanaian dance forms. Conceptually and practically, this practice provides the possibility of prolonging the existence of traditional dances, whilst simultaneously and conversely exposing them to the dangers of misrepresentation, appropriation and dilution. Curatorial interpretations should go hand-in-hand with ample research and development into how certain traditional dance forms from Ghana can be used as installations in established museums and galleries and still be meaningful in the present day. In Europe and the Americas, the lure of exoticism in relation to dances from Africa can generate a rhetoric around their performance to the extent that these dances' function within a particular society is replaced by the need for entertainment. Therefore, efforts must be made to identify a neutral forum through which researchers can guide performances when curating dances in museums.

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## Notes

1. Some examples are the National Gallery and Tate Modern (United Kingdom), Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen (The Netherlands), The Civic Museum (Italy), and Le Louvre and Mac/Val Museum (France). According to the ICOM, 'A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment, for purposes of education, study and enjoyment' (International Council of Museums, 2016). In the UK, the Museums Association (2016) states that its definition of 'museum' includes 'art galleries with collections of works of art, as well as museums with historical collections of objects'. Its definition reads: 'Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society' (Museums Association, 2016).
2. According to UNESCO's 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, '“Intangible cultural heritage” means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage' (UNESCO, 2003:2).
3. *Tampanyila* is a social dance of the farming community of *Soffiasi* in the Upper West Region of Ghana. It has experienced a number of changes in the movement, although the background information remains the same. During eight years of personal research in the village, I found that costuming, for example, had undergone slight alterations, which was confirmed by my informants.
4. Claire Bishop highlighted this in relation to Tate Modern's Turbine Hall and its interactions with gallery artefacts, dance and audiences (Bishop, 2014).
5. For traditional dance performances there is a separation of performers from the audience based upon dance competence and social status (Nketia, 1965).
6. Hugues de Varine-Bohan was director of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) from 1965 to 1974. He succeeded Georges-Henri Rivière, an influential figure and ICOM director from 1945 to 1965 (Lorente, 2012).
7. *Kete* was a royal suite reserved solely for the entertainment of the king and his family but can now be seen within broader social contexts (Arhin, 1994).
8. Traditional dances performed by the Asante and Ewe people of the South East Region of Ghana, respectively.

9. Due to rural-to-urban migrations in search of employment, traditional dance performances have been on the decline in recent years. Moreover, due to its social familiarity, some people do not believe that dance merits academic status or university-level study. Most people think that dance is just for entertainment, and thus, there is a disassociation from context in dance performance in many settings (Lorente, 2012).
10. Avorgbedor explains, ‘The *Yeve* (also known as Xebieso, Hu of Tōhon᠑) is a thunder-god, a pantheon with historical relations to the Yoruba *Shango* and Dahomean *Xevioso*. The cult is one of the most “powerful” and most secretive among others that exist in Ewe-society (Anlo-Ewe especially). Formal initiation rites take place after candidates have undergone prolonged, intense and secret training and instruction in dance, music and manners of conduct and behaviour’ (1987:4).

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