

**THE CONTEXTUAL AND PERFORMANCE DIMENSIONS OF ASAFO  
MUSIC FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ANNUAL AKWAMBO FESTIVAL**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The paper presents the authors' insights into the various types of asafo music as performed by Kyirem Asafo No. 1 of Ajumako Mando. It highlights the contexts of performance of Asafo musical genre and shows the instrumental usages of the musical types including performance practice. Based on the theory of homology, the authors present a relation between musical performance and social structure that expresses musical identity of the Mando people and the Fante at large. It is noted that beside its contextual obligation of performing at the traditional Akwambɔ festival, which has been structured for seven days, the asafo group also features at funerals of men in the community as well as women who are members of the group. The paper concludes that instrumental organizations solely depend on the asafo musical type as well as the context in which it is performed, giving the Mando people a firmer sense of cultural identity.*

**KEYWORDS:** Contextual, homology, Akwambɔ festival, Instrumental Organization, Asafo, Performance

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## **INTRODUCTION**

*Asafo* is an ancient warrior organization or company that exists in all Akan ethnic groups (Turkson 1972: 1). It includes a further morphological feature, incorporating close association of certain patrilineal groups within the companies. These patrilineal groups are based either on specialization of roles in the socio-political system or on affiliation to a number of cults inherited from one's father (Ansu, 1972, p. 307). Since *Asafo* used to be a warriors' organization, its music developed in the context of war and continued to be used in other spheres of community life such as enstoolment<sup>1</sup>, social life and festivals when inter-ethnic wars were essentially no more (Acquah, 2013: 22). One of the towns of the Akan groups which has formalized *asafo* music in its annual *Akwambɔ* festival is Mando in the Ajumako District of the Central Region of Ghana. The *asafo* company is called *Kyirem Asafo* No. 1 and it performs its music in the celebration of the annual festival structured within seven days (Monday to Sunday) during the first week of August within every year. This paper highlights how the musical types of the *Asafo* are used at the various sessions of the celebration of the *Akwambɔ* festival among the Mando people.

Three models have been elaborated: *Kyirem Asafo* No. 1, its musical types and instrumental organization, the structure of the *Akwambɔ* festival as celebrated by the Mando people, then the relationship between their musical performance and social structure. The latter being the main framework of the paper.

## METHODOLOGY

In approaching this research, the authors engaged in fieldwork activity in which one of the researchers played a complete membership role as defined by Adler & Adler (1994) as a researcher who is already a member of the group under research. Similarly, reactive effects as defined by Emerson, Fretz & Shaw (1995) as the researcher's participation on how members may behave were restrained. As much as possible, role as fieldworkers had to be developed during the period immersion in the community. Data collection of information over the period of the celebration with daily attention to the models developed was done. Observation, which has been defined by Creswell (2005, p.199) as "the process of gathering first-hand information by observing people and places at the research site", occurred on a daily basis as the authors went about life as usual participating in community events and socializing with families and friends.

Interviews were used to seek out explicit information from *Asafo* members, leaders, some community members as well as observers from other places. It was important since "interviewing is one of the most common and most powerful ways we use to try to understand our fellow human beings" (Fontana and Frey 1994, p. 361). Other secondary sources were used in the process.

### **Kyirem Asafo No. 1, Musical types and Instrumental Organization.**

*Kyirem Asafo* No. 1, the traditional *asafo* group of Mando people is usually made up of adults between the ages of twenty and seventy (Acquah: 2013 *ibid*). Studies by Acquah indicated that traditionally, there are five types of *Asafo* music. These are *ɔsor*, *Famu*, *Atopre* and *ɔwambir* and *asafoesi* (Acquah 2008, p. 29). Acquah and Amuah (2014: p. 116) describe these musical types as follows:

#### ***ɔsor***

*ɔsor* in the Fante language means up, high or top. In the musical sense, words used to describe it are *hyew* (hot or fast) and *mbanyin mu* (lit., in the male way). As the name indicates, this type of music is noted for its vigour. Basically it is played at a high speed.

#### ***famu***

The *famu* type is a direct contrast of the *ɔsor* type. *Famu* means low. Other words used to describe this type are *ase* (down) and *betɛɛ* (soft or cool) as well as *mbaa mu* (lit., in a female way). It is characterized with slow in tempo and relaxed performance.

#### **□*Atopre***

*Atopre* music is performed for the dead. It is used during burial as well as when remembering departed souls. It is mostly also executed when a deceased is being conveyed to the cemetery and being put into the grave. It involves a very quick walk to the cemetery.

#### ***ɔwambir***

This is performed during the normal procession of the *Asafo* in the streets of the town. The songs are mostly of the marching type. It is slower than *atopre* □

#### ***Asafoesi***

*Asafo-Esi* is performed to invoke the spirits of the gods, especially, when performing rituals at the shrine. The texts used are about wars and praise of the gods and the ancestors. It is also performed to provoke enemies. In that context, the texts of the songs used are usually full of provocation, casting of insinuation, insults and filthy words.

### Instrumentation

The instruments used by *Kyirem Asafo* No. 1 are six. These are *dawur* (bell), *anserwa* (little-sized drum), *konkon* (larger than the *anserwa* □ □ □ *ɔpentsen* or *ampaa* (middle-sized drum), *epusuw* (larger than those mentioned) and the *asafokyen* (master drum).

### Instruments of Asafo ensemble



From the left: *dawur*, *anserwa*, *konkon*, *ɔpentsen* (*ampaa*), *epusuw* and *asafokyen*

### Descriptions

The *dawur* (bell), which is metallic, controls the tempo and regulates the rhythmic cycles of the *Asafo* ensemble. It is the lead instrument in the ensemble because of its role in starting a piece or cueing other instruments. It is played with a straight stick.

The other five instruments are drums with their body made of hollow wood and at one end a calf-skin or stretched membrane to cover the surface and tightened with heavy threads. The surface where the skin covers is larger than the base thereby determining the density of the drums.

The smallest of the five instruments is the *anserwa* (high pitch). It has the highest pitch. That is the instrument heard after the *dawur* in the performance. It is played with two small straight sticks. The next one is the *Konkon* (background drum) also called *ngyegyeho*. It is larger, denser and shorter than the *anserwa*. It is played with the hand and stick. *ɔpentsen* or *ampaa* (middle pitched drum) is the fourth instrument heard in the *Asafo* ensemble. It is a medium sized drum with a heavier and denser pitch than the two drums mentioned earlier and it is played with the two hands.

The fifth instrument is the *epusuw* (action drum). As the name indicates, it creates a lot of tension in the performance through its counter rhythmic manifestations. It is the heaviest among the three instruments mentioned. It adds sonority to the ensemble with its heavy voice and it is also played with both hands. The master drum is *asafokyen*. Traditionally, it is also called *onyin* (male). It is about the same size and height as the *ɔpentsen* but the skin covering it is heavier. Like the salt in soup, without it, the ensemble is not complete. Some call it *ɔdabɔkyen*, *kyenboa* or *anobɔakyen*. The alternative names show the leading role of the drum. It is played with two hooked sticks. Sometimes, the hand and stick technique is used.

Apart from these instruments, many other supplementary instruments such as *Dawurnta* (double bell), *adawurasa* (triple bell), *adɔmba* (bell), *awosowa* (shakers), *pataku* (a type of horn), among others are used during *asafo* musical performance. The instruments of the *asafo* have been metaphorically designed to exhibit the prowess, unity and wisdom of the *Asafo* group in all their engagements. It must be noted that the kind of musical type determines which of the main instruments or supplementary ones are used.

The *Asafo* company has a central shrine known as *pusuban* which serves as a store room for regalia, musical instruments and focus for sacrifices. It is brightly decorated yearly before the celebration of the annual *Akwambɔ* festival.

### *Posuban (the central shrine) of Ajumako Mando*



### **The structure of Mando *Akwambɔ* Festival and the role of *asafo* music**

In Africa, traditional festivals are held for many purposes. Some are held to celebrate bumper harvest or agricultural boom. Examples of such festivals have been stated by Agordoh (2004, p. 37) as the *Argungun* (fishing) of the people of Sokoto state of Nigeria, Yam festivals of Ghana and Nigeria, Cassava festival of the Urhobos of Nigeria and the people of *Avenofedo* of

Volta Region of Ghana. Others are *Pafu* (Rice festival) of the people of Volta region and *Ɔmɔwɔ* related to farming and fishing of the Ga of Ghana.

In Ghana, colourful traditional festivals are held yearly in all parts of the country revealing some common features and beliefs of our society amidst merry making. The significance is in two folds; first, to preserve the cultural heritage of the people and second, to bring all citizens around the world together, to assist in the developmental projects of the community. Some other festivals are *Dzawuwu* (celebrated by the Agave people of Dabala in the Volta region to thank their gods), *Ngmayem* (traditional harvest and thanksgiving festival of the Krobo people), *Kalibi* allows for ethnic purification from evil deeds and wrong doings in the society, celebrated by Sankana people of the Upper West region *Aboakyer* (a hunting expedition by two asafɔ companies to catch live antelopes in a nearby game reserve.), and, *Akwambɔ*, Etymologically, *Akwambɔ* is from two words; *akwan* (path) and *bɔ* (clear), which has corrupted to be *Akwam-bɔ*. It is therefore basically a path-clearing celebration though the origin is associated with the death of a legend. The festival as celebrated by the Mando people annually which is usually structured and spread for seven days with the music predominantly provided by the *Asafɔ* throughout the period of the celebration. The context within which the *asafɔ* music performs is dependent on what goes on within the festival.

As stated earlier, the actual celebration begins from the first Monday of August through to the following Sunday, and most of the activities mandate *asafɔ* music to feature prominently from the beginning to the end. The activities for the various days are summarized as follow:

### **Beginning of the Festival**

A day before the commencement of the festival, the group performs *dawur* (bell) ensemble through the principal streets of the community reminding the town folks of the impending festival. This annunciation performance is done by about four *dawur* players and normally ends at the *Pusuban* (central shrine).

### **Tuesday**

On the first day of the festival, a path-clearing exercise is organized in the early hours of the day which is led by the *Asafɔ* group. The exercise demands all and sundry – men and women, the young and the old - to help clear all the paths linking the surrounding villages. These paths are cleared in turns. Having cleared the paths, the *Asafɔ* then leads the entire town in music and dance to the centre of the town. Groups of conformity made up of females only, males only, mixed, young and the old come together to create their own spontaneous music while following the *Asafɔ* group.



***Four dawur players leading the town folks to the various paths linking the town to begin the celebration of***

From the centre of the town, the *Asafo* group led by the *frankaatunyi* ( the flag bearer) and the *ɔkɔmfo* (*the fetish preist*) enters the shrine amidst drumming and dancing. At the shrine, *Asafo-Esi* is performed. The performers become high in spirit coupled with frightening faces and seriousness to show that they are with the gods. This is done to invoke the spirit of the gods to tell the people what would happen during the year ahead of them. The only instrument used in the performance of the *Asafo-esi* is *awosowa* (shakers). The music sang involves a lot of declamations while the shakers are shaken to quaver with emotion throughout the performance.



*A fetish priest dancing at the festival*

At the shrine, the full *Asafo* ensemble is represented. Special prayers are offered for the dead and the ancestors. *Atopre* music is performed at the shrine. It is at this time that all the departed souls who lived exemplary lives within the year are remembered. The only instrument used in the *atopre* music for the dead is the master drum, *asafokyen*, beaten in a form of recitals with the hand and a stick technique.

This is followed by display of musical prowess of the *Asafo* at the centre of the town. During this time, both *ɔsor* and *famu* musical types are performed. The *ɔsor* musical type is performed first. All the instruments of the ensemble are used for the performance. Only men are authorized to dance the *ɔsor* musical type because of the strong energy involved. Iddrisu (2011, p.103) opines that some African dance styles require high energy and athleticism to execute. We agree with him since *Asafo* music is characterized with vigour and agility.

During this time, *Asafo* groups within the neighborhood are invited by *Kyirem Asafo* No. 1 to perform independently and complementarily with them. Infact, There is usually a challenge of musical performances among the groups portraying their identities and their strengths confirming what Ansu (1972, p. 312) stated that “in the Fante political system, competitive

segmentation has traditionally been a built-in structural feature. Fanteland is characterized by a multiplicity of traditional states (*aman*) which have always been in a state of opposition, latent or manifest". Averill analyses Haitian music by adopting a homological approach (1994, p. 178) as he sees music as a site for a contest over cultural identity by different groups. He set different groups of people, with their associated homologous musical styles, in opposition to each other. The various performances therefore portray different energies involved that characterize the historic strengths of the companies as warriors.

Apart from the challenge thrown to themselves, Anderson (1983, p.40) and Gellner (1994) emphasize the importance of homogeneity and state that it is a way of exhibiting citizenry identification with other unknown compatriots in a common allegiance to the region locality they belong, thereby giving them some kind of nationalistic feeling. Like Blacking (1967, 1995) contends, "each social group has its associated style of music, its audible badge of identity", indicating that social units, have music they perform which they call their own. The texts involving this type of music are mostly war related, portraying their success in wars and acknowledging their remarkable efforts after wars.

After the performance of the *osor* music, *Famu* musical type is also performed. The texts are also about wars, morality, identity of the *Asafo* group and continuity. The words (diction) in this type of music are slowly articulated coupled with quietness, meekness, feebleness and dynamism. This type of music allows chiefs and women to dance, however, men who cannot dance the *osor* type also take advantage to participate in the dance. All the instruments of the *Asafo* company are used in this type of music

### **Wednesday**

A grand durbar with a state dance is held on the Wednesday. During the durbar, the main types of music performed by the *Asafo* group are *osor* (high) and *famu* (low). The durbar is held to give expression to the people's lively moments. Chiefs and women normally dance the *famu* type whereas men dance the *osor* type as described above. The durbar is held to purify the entire community in order that people will enter the New Year with hopes and confidence.

### **Performance situation at the durbar**

During the durbar, everyone has the opportunity to dance but it is important to build up the intensity factor which serves as a drive, by urging members to clap vigorously to incite dancers. However, whenever the flag bearer or the fetish priest is on the floor dancing, no one is expected to dance at the grounds. It was very significant that no one danced alongside these two important personalities of the *Asafo* because they are believed to possess supernatural powers that could flaw and disgrace one in the dancing arena.

One important technique used by the master drummer during the state dance is the display of replication by a simultaneous portrayal of the dance steps of the dancer. The dance movements could be fast or slow depending on the musical type performed either *osor* or *famu*. As a result of this, anyone who wished to dance would initially alert the master drummer by courteously hinting him so that he will make him imitate his/her dancing steps. Informing the master drummer is also very important so that the dance might not be ended abruptly while still dancing. The dance is characterized by a high spirited style of expressing one's strength through the act of somersaulting and twisting of the waist. The dance also incorporates quick swinging and movement of the arms and bodies briskly in full consciousness of the lilt of the music.

During the performance, all the instrumentalists sit horizontally while the master drummer positions himself in front of the drummers (usually, the last drummer at the extreme right). The entire singers stand behind the drummers and the dancers perform in front of the drummers.

### Thursday

Fund raising is organized during the 3<sup>rd</sup> day of the festival to assist in the developmental projects of the town. Here, all the citizens at the various branches<sup>1</sup> in Ghana are represented. The *asafo* group performs the *ɔwɔmbir* music through the town and at the fund raising grounds to inform the folks to gather for the ceremony. Early hours of the day, a new *asafo*<sup>1</sup> group that has emerged in Mando are made to celebrate the festival in their own way. According to Acquah (2013, p.22), the music of the emerged *asafo* group adopt different repertoires that reflect a modern style of imported music to make it more appealing to the younger generation. Other traditional dances such as *apatampa*, *sikiyi* and *kete* ensembles are also performed to complement the efforts of the *Asafo*. The *ɔwɔmbir* music involves four *dawur* (bells) and the *asafokyen* (master drum). The *ɔwɔmbir* musical type is slower and the texts used are about identity, succession and provocation. The only instruments used in *ɔwɔmbir* are *asafokyen* (master drum) and *konkon* (2<sup>nd</sup> supporting drum).

### Friday

There is usually outdoorings<sup>1</sup> of chiefs on the Friday of the celebration. *Asafo* plays jointly with the *fɔntɔmfrɔm* group at this function. The outdoorings of the chiefs makes it compulsory for the performance both the *ɔsor* and *famu* musical types which have been described already.

### Saturday

Saturdays of the week of the *Akwambɔ* festival celebration are set aside for games. *Asafo* plays recreational musical types to entertain the people. Here, songs sung are related to morality. All the musical types are played in series but some of the texts used relate to moral issues, recreational and on mixed themes.

### Sunday

The festival is rounded off with a ceremony known as *mbaa-nkɔ-adan-mu* (lit.women should be indoors) on the last day to wind up the entire celebration. This rite is a prerogative of men. Some rites are performed by the *Asafo* group at the shrine with musical interludes to invoke the gods. This ceremony involves only experienced and matured members of the *Asafo* group. There are clandestine activities that go on at the shrine.

After the rituals at the shrine, the *Asafo* group walks through the principal streets of the town performing *ɔwɔmbir* music. In the olden days, two people would be stripped naked carrying flames of fire and processing through every corner of the community. History has it that any woman or child seen during this round off rites would be hit with the cane (staff) of the *Asafo* leaders and that could cause his/her death before the year ends. This role of the *Asafo* in the *Akwambɔ* festival was very scary and it distinguished the *Asafo* from the other musical groups such as the *fɔntɔmfrɔm*, *akɔm* and *apatampa*. Today, those who carry the fire through the town are made to put on shorts. Due to the availability of street lights, the ritual is performed from eleven in the evening through twelve o'clock mid-night. By then, most people would have slept; especially, women and children.

Songs sang during *mbaa-nkɔ-adan-mu* ceremony are warriors in nature to portray their achievements in terms of war. After going through the streets, they get to the outskirts of the town and throw the fire away to quench amidst gun shots and musical performance. Only the



*asafokyen*, the four *dawur* and hand clapping are used to accompany the music. The performance finally ends at the *pusuban*.

### Other Contexts

Traditionally, another context of performance of the *asafo* music is during the funeral celebration of its members. Like Iddrisu (2001, p.79) stated, “funerals and wake-keepings are important because they offer opportunities for performing groups to showcase their unique musical and dance forms for very appreciative audiences”. The *Asafo* features with its music when a member is called to eternity. They go to the house from the day the death is reported to perform and share their condolences with the bereaved family until the final day when the corpse is at last buried. Mostly, the *atopre* music is performed to make the dead join the ancestors. The only instrument used in the *atopre* music is the *asafokyen* (master drum), beaten in a form of recitals with the hand and a stick technique.

It has been revealed through oral history that *asafo* music was also performed as incidental music for search parties: evacuating accident victims, putting out fires, rescuing drowned persons and searching for people who committed suicide in the bush.

Ancestors are ‘dead and gone’ people who are believed to have led a successful life and had remained patriots to community life. People who did not lead life worthy of emulation were not considered as such after death. *Asafo* members and other persons in the community who die with clean hands are accorded high reputation to be associates of the ancestors.

### Performance practice

Quality delivery of musical performances of the *Asafo* group depends on the effective supervision of the *safohen* and his assistants. They know when, what and how the performance should take place. There is usually a cantor and a chorus. The cantor draws the attention of the members by their appellation as follows:

	<b>Fante</b>	<b>English Translation</b>
The Leader:	<i>Asafo ko a, yi hɔn</i>	<i>Asafo</i> , if you fight, deliver them
Response :	<i>Yeeyi hɔn</i>	We’ve delivered them
	<i>Kyirem Asafo mfrɛ yie</i>	<i>Kyirem Asafo</i> call good to come
Response :	<i>Yie mbra</i>	Let good come
The Leader :	<i>ɔdomankoma Kyirem Mpentsin</i>	The great <i>Kyirem</i> of the gods
The Leader :	<i>ɔdomankoma bɔɔ adze Bɔrbɔr Mfantse,</i>	When God created the Fante,
	<i>wɔfrɛ hɔn den?</i>	What name was given to them?
Response :	<i>Wɔfrɛ hɔn bɔrbɔr kunkumfi</i>	They were called the great.

This will be followed by a ccapella performance in a declamatory form before the actual musical type is performed. The declamation makes use of great three warriors: *Oburmankoma*, *ɔdapagyan* and *ɔson* □□The names of the three warriors are associated with bravery, heroism, intrepidity, gallantry and great leadership as well as selflessness, justice, firmness and determination. It is told, according to history, that these people were three strong men who led the Fante people from Techiman to Mankessim. Distinctive qualities of these three people were clear to be allied with the *Asafo* group to depict their identity as being brave. *ɔson* (elephant) which is second to none in the animal kingdom shows how strong the man with this name was.

### **Musical performance and social structure**

The centrality of this discussion is within the perspective of homology, unearthing the idea of a relation between musical performance and social structure. Among the Fante people, *asafo* music and dance is a unique folk culture as compared to the other occasional musical types such as *sikiyi*, *fɔntɔmfɔm* and *adenkum* because, it is the most frequently performed, especially during their traditional *Akwambɔ* festival. The above findings show the various *asafo* music in context of the traditional festival structured within a week portraying the social identity of the Mando people and the Fante in general. Music is seen as constituting, rather than simply reflecting identity since both music and identity become more flexible and less reified (Frith, 1996 and Stokes, 1994). When, for example, drummers are able to sound clearly together, they express their sense of belonging and identification with the indigenous population. The people possess a deep understanding of their cultural and performance milieu as well as their formal, stylistic and identities.

### **CONCLUSION**

This paper has attempted to demonstrate that *asafo* music and dance, like any tradition, is not inert among the musical traditions of the Mando people. The view is that the people understand that the musical performance of the *Asafo* in context of the traditional festival enables them to visualize and dramatize cultural ideas and values that are passed on from generation to generation. The paper shows that *asafo* musical types are five and each of them is performed in a specific context of the annual festival even though there are other social activities that involve *asafo* music. It is worth stating that the role of *asafo* music in the *Akwambɔ* festival cannot be underestimated, as the festival cannot be celebrated without it. It is imperative to acknowledge the role in sustaining that cultural and indigenous customs as the music performance continues to inform the traditions of the people through the text of the songs coupled with theatrical dances.

We conclude that the heart of the *Akwambɔ* festival of the Mando people is the *asafo* music. The musical performance within the structure of the festival undoubtedly shows a connection between musical forms and social structure since it enhances the social positioning from which identity is held to arise.

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