

CASE STUDY

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Aesthetical tastes of academical and traditional costumes in academic processions

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Abstract

The article opens up fresh debate in aesthetical capacity of academic and Ghanaian traditional costumes in academic processions and sheds light on how the synergetic interaction of academic and traditional costumes spice up academic ceremonies in the University of Education, Winneba (UEW). Grounded in aesthetical balances, the study analyses the body of artistic ramifications in constructing academic pomposity, and signaling academic accomplishment and identities. Data gathered have been presented in simple narrative format. The researchers opted to offer visual interpretative account of the events—matriculation and congregation ceremonies, taking into account the symbolical essence and aesthetical dimensions of the academic and traditional costumes used in the ceremonies. Through participant observation and photographic evidences, the article delves into the aesthetical realms of academic costumes and its theatrical orchestrations in announcing visual identities of wearers. It posits that the construction of the visual iconographic identities through the use of both academic and traditional costuming in UEW is best understood in the Ghanaian conceptual and contextual cultural dialectic.

Keywords: Academic costume, Traditional costume, Aesthetics, Education, Procession, Dress, Cultural, Identities, Conceptual, Contextual

Introduction

The donning of academical costumes during academic ceremonies in universities and other tertiary institutions has a long history. The practice which has become the status quo was the preserve of university education until other tertiary institutions adapted it. Sharing close ties with university education, the academical costumes by its gradation, is used to indicate the social hierarchy, academic disciplines, faculty or department of wearers. To ensure strict compliance of academic costumes politics, many universities worldwide have initiated policies guiding the use of the costumes in academic ceremonies. The culture of wearing the costumes in academic functions was greatly influenced by ecclesiastical dress of the mediaeval clergy (apparel.com 2007). The adaptation of the costumes in formal school education, especially, in universities carry both denotative and connotative signification in the academic circles. It stands for the knowledge acquired and its appropriation for the society and the nation at large.

The interest of this article lies in the academic ceremonies including matriculations and congregations done by these institutions especially in the University of Education, Winneba. Matriculations are official welcoming ceremonies that seal the admission contract between matriculands and the institution whilst congregations climax formal educational journey and lead to certification of learners. Using the University of Education, Winneba (UEW) as a case study, the study attempts to investigate how the fusion of academical and Ghanaian traditional costumes illuminate these ceremonies and translate into raising the academic pride and hopes of congregants. Through observation of academic ceremonies in the aforementioned university, the researchers opted to offer visual interpretative account of the events and shed more light on its symbolical essence and aesthetical dimensions. Data gathered have been presented in simple narrative manner. In so doing, the researchers approached the study by describing the general characteristic features of Akan traditional processions on one side and academical processions on the other side. With the assumption that the former has influenced the latter, the researchers attempted to probe into the resultant of the fusion and interlaced its interpretative analysis in a narrative format.

Academic gowns usage in Ghanaian higher institutions of learning

During graduation ceremonies the academic costuming of graduands offers visual symbolic registers of their earned academic status. The academic costumes carry pride, hope and connote a lifelong intellectual flame with which to illuminate society. Ghana's first president Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah in his *African Genius* speech at the opening of the Institute of African Studies in Accra, made a metaphoric reference to academic costume. Nkrumah (1963, p. 7) says: "The time has come for the gown to come to town". By this he is referring to the knowledge acquired from the higher institutions of learning with which to fertilize the society. The best form of education is that which serves the needs and aspirations of the people. Universities and other higher institutions of learning are duty bounded to train the finest calibre of professionals in various fields of endeavour to serve the needs of the world today (Grubb 2003). Training of a more rigorous workforce, competent decision-makers and productive intellectuals who are better positioned in contributing to sustainable society is among the core mandate of higher institutions of learning (Brennan et al. 2004; Castells 2001). This mindset reinforces the semiotic power of academical costumes.

Historically, academic dress has its origins in the normal garments of eleventh and twelfth-century Europe. This period experienced the development of universities centres of higher learning around prominent cathedral and monasteries (National University of Ireland 2006). The design of the dress has evolved over time but has not affected its sartorial robe-like structure with accompanying accessories. In British West Africa, the establishment of the University College of Gold Coast (now University of Ghana) in 1948 was to develop university education in West Africa (Nkrumah 1961). Its inception saw the use of academic gowns in the University. Other universities which sprang up in other parts of the country followed suit. Established in September 1992 as a University College of Education, it was upgraded to a full-fledged university status after 12 years of its inception by the University of Education Act, Act 672. As in other universities, academic costumes have placed vital roles at its academic ceremonies. Ghanaian artistic cultural mores are injected into the academic ceremonies. It includes elements of traditional costume and procession that characterized the chieftdom.

Nature of Ghanaian traditional processions

It is a common knowledge that dress is a symbolic visual pointer (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992) of conceptual and contextual identities. At the southern part of Ghana, the entry of chiefs and their entourage to durbar grounds is theatrically done in courtly majestic procession in order of royalty. Usually, such processions are led by drummers, *mmensoun* (horn blowers), stool carriers and sword bearers. The constituents of the processions are determined by the type of occasion, its purpose and location. Sometimes stool carriers and sword bearers are not included in the procession. Irrespective of the occasion, sub-chiefs and linguists invariably form part of a chief's entourage. Customarily, the order of procession is done according to the traditional role of the sub-chiefs in the traditional-state. For instance the *Kyidomhen* (auxiliary sub-chief) and the *Kontihen* (guardian chief) directly follow a chief/king in any formal courtly procession.

Decorated in traditional ceremonial costumes, each participating court attendant contributes to the outward beauty of the processional pomp and pageantry. Carrying the swords in their hands in a stylistic manner, the sword bearers expose to viewers the governing power and the authoritative presence of the chiefs. Stool carriers display the stools as symbolic soul of the society representing the linkage between the traditional leadership and its people. Drummers provide meaningful drum language whilst horn blowers articulate their sonic poetic message befitting the mission of the day. Depending on the occasion, traditional dancers may precede the linguist (mace bearer). They dance to lead the procession to the durbar grounds.

Examining the format of traditional processions revealed that it portrays the hierarchy of the traditional-state security apparatus in that, the chief/king is interposed among the sub-chiefs in charge of military wing, wellbeing and protocols. This is to ensure maximum protection of the chief/king in the procession. Communicated by their costuming, the procession shows the rank of the entourage from court attendants to the chief/king. Recessions take the same order of arrangement. Both the procession and recession of a chief's entourage is a performance art. The mannerisms of the drummers, horn blowers, stool carriers, and sword bearers announce to the audience the presence and leadership of the chief/king.

Similar traditional processional format was employed in the design and execution of freestanding sculptures at the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park (Essel and Opoku-Mensah 2014). From the main entrance of the park, the procession starts with traditional instrumentalists (a drummer and *gogi* player), squatted paragon of 14 horn blowers (seven in each of the two queues) in that order before the placement of the statuesque of Nkrumah, the man at the centre of the action. Nkrumah's coming into the top hierarchy of Ghana's body politic at his time saw the keen incorporation of aspects of traditional stateliness such as donning of traditional costumes, drumming and dancing and other performing art in national functions. These statecrafts are part of the non-statutory cultural policy he put in place, some of which have been maintained till date. Fusing aspects of traditional cultural display in academic ceremonies is therefore a way of projecting Ghana's cultural heritage as against the times where her artistic culture was "studied in such a way as to reinforce the picture of African society as something grotesque, as a curious, mysterious human backwater" which in the mind of Nkrumah "helped to retard

social progress in Africa and to prolong colonial domination over its peoples” (Nkrumah 1961, p. 2).

Aesthetical values of academic processions

The University of Education, Winneba observes three main academic processions: matriculation, congregation and investiture. Each academic ceremony begins with a procession and ends with a recession. However, the discourse attaches interest to matriculation and congregation ceremonies due to the fact that the investiture procession, in terms of format, does not digress much from that of congregation except that it involves a litany of high powered delegation including the Head of State or his representative.

The order of the matriculation procession begins with the mace bearer, registrar, convocation (assistant lecturers, lecturers and analogous ranks), University chaplain and deans in that order. They are closely followed by principal officers (librarian and finance officer), principals of affiliated colleges, principals of UEW colleges, pro-vice-chancellor and vice-chancellor (Handbook on Academic Ceremonies 2012). There are instances where the procession is led by the registrar (Fig. 1). As observed in the traditional processions, academical processions also pay attention to hierarchical order and therefore project certain elements recurrent in the former. The donning of the academic gown for the matriculation procession is a self-referential symbolical reminder of academic responsibility and a picturesque sight to behold due to its visual semiotic power. The gown also carries similar symbolic essence when used in congregational processions though certain regalia such as the hood, mortarboard and tam are worn to intensify its aesthetic currents on the body. Matriculation processions, in general, lack flamboyant liveliness in our view in comparison to congregation. Our argument is that the academic dress plays the same function in both processions, nevertheless, the embellishment of congregational processions with traditional costuming and elements of performing art in UEW raises the ceremony to its deserving momentous aesthetic grandiosity. It may be argued that congregation ceremonies are naturally happy occasions. But the inclusion of Ghanaian traditional artistic performances enveloped in rich traditional costumes heightens the excitement of such occasions.



Fig. 1 Matriculation procession led by the registrar. 2014 Courtesy of Publication Unit, UEW

Unlike matriculation, congregational procession troop in two divisions separated by a wide gap of about 6 m. In most cases, the first division comprising of the registrar, convocation, associate professors and professors in that order move to the durbar (M. Adomina, pers. comm. February 16, 2015). Shortly the second division led by the *mmensoun* (Fig. 2), two *Adowa* dancers, mace bearer, the registrar and a host of key university leadership (the governing council including student leaders) take turn to the durbar (Fig. 3). *Mmensoun* is an Akan compound word. 'Mme' means 'horn of animal' and 'nsoun' also means 'seven'. *Mmensoun* therefore literally means 'seven horns of animals'. It is used to refer to the seven horn blowers who lead the chief's entourage to the durbar. The number '7' has a strong numerological powerful signification in Akan worldview. It represents the seven clans of the Akans and also associated with sacredness, wisdom, authority, good leadership and universality.

Till date the *mmensoun* is traditionally composed of only males. Females are customarily proscribed to be part of the *mmensoun*. In UEW, congregational processions feature a 15 member *mmensoun*, and most importantly in breaking the cultural bias of making the group a preserve for only males, females also form part (Fig. 2). This step demonstrates the University's role in the adaptation and appropriation of an indigenous culture for the benefit of the current generation. Clad in traditional costumes of



Fig. 2 The *mmensoun* leading the university council to the durbar. 2014 Courtesy of Publication Unit, UEW



Fig. 3 Two *Adowa* dancers and a mace bearer leading the University council to the durbar in a congregation procession. 2014 Courtesy of Publication Unit, UEW

brilliant contrasting harmonies of Afrocentric colour display, the barefooted males in the *mmensoun* group have their clothes wrapped around their bodies in manner that the two corners of the cloth width alternate to be securely knotted at the nape (Fig. 4). This clothing style is popularly referred to as the *kɔla* style. No specific meaning is attached to the wearing of the *kɔla* style but it is a simple royal court fashion usually for servants. Wearers of this style move with ease as the upper limbs are freed to orchestrate possible bodily movements. Grasping the horns in comfortable attachment to the lips, their clothing styles outdoor their masculine physique which in consonance with their puffed up cheeks are indication of blowing the horns (Fig. 2). *Mmensoun* performative art conveys poetic interpretations. When played in the procession of the chiefdom, it may serve as reminders of calamitous happenings that had befallen the community; the heavy leadership responsibilities (Antubam 1963); and sometimes forewarn the chiefs of an impending danger in order to tread cautiously. In this sense, it also serves as a guide against enemies and foreseeable dangers in a procession. Leading the University leadership by the *mmensoun* contextually reminds them of great leadership role, in an eulogistic tone. The female counterparts wore cover clothes that stretch from the breast regions to the knee level and glamourized with toga-like style at the upper part of the body, a dress style mimetic of Akan queen mothers' dressing. Moderately beaded, the females also wore native sandals and glittering ornamental headband.

In a saintly ordering of their footsteps in a slow march, they process to the durbar. Injecting another traditional touch to the entire procession is the two female *Adowa* dancers who usher them to the durbar grounds amidst drumming and dancing. They are dressed with cover cloths at the chests that stretch to the knees without the toga style at the upper torsi, leaving them bare-chested. The outer clothes cover their buttocks heavily padded with piles of fabrics. Rich assortment of colourful scarves hang



Fig. 4 Male counterparts in the *mmensoun* group costumed in *kɔla* style

down, circumventing their waists in a manner that adds increased curiosity to the waist regions. Engrossed in the dance with alluring smiles, both dancers wear similar stylized traditional costumes of variant colour schemes. There are sumptuous beading in the necks, wrists, knees, and ankles of the dancers. The placement of the beads at the knees and ankles carves out the calves to stand in attractive position.

In their dynamic *Adowa* dancing movements they accentuate the procession by inviting huge spectatorship. *Adowa* is a polyrhythmic hermeneutic expressive traditional dance of Akan ethnic origin characterized by intense dramatic gesticulations of the hands frequently positioned close to the thoracic region making it the centre of attraction. Occasionally, the hands are stuffed with handkerchiefs, and move in multi-directional harmonious rhythm in tune with the lower limb movements. A performer of the dance intermittently introduces a mightily animated swift turning and a gentle lowering of the upper part of the body stimulated with eye-popping jumps that adds bounteous beauty to the dance. These theatrical miming gesticulations and facial expressions worn by the performers are interwoven with conceptual and contextual messaging which is of great importance to the procession. These dramatizations are meant to welcome the gathering at the congregation ceremonies; to exalt and adore the leadership of the University, emphasizing that with the presence of God and unity among the University leadership the institution shall continue to attain greater developmental breakthroughs.

The mace bearer clothed in prestigious kente cloth in a toga-like style wears *ahenema* (native sandals) and carries in the hands the mace in a slanted position. The toga style is one of Ghana's fashionable classics worn by male adults in the society. Hardly will chiefs and their elders in southern part of Ghana appear in durbar without this classic. It is customarily, therefore, its usage in such occasions adds traditional touch to the ceremonies. Symbolizing the vice-chancellor's governing authority (Handbook on Academic Ceremonies 2012) the mace comprised of a burning flame-shaped object rooted to a totemized *matie masie* adinkra motif design implanted on a staff. It is a three-dimensional version of the central motif in the University's logo.

When leading the congregational recession, the mannerisms of the *Adowa* dancers seal the excitements by expressing profound gratitude to all who were present to grace the occasion. Recessionals change the order of the procession closely led by the mace bearer, followed by the chancellor, vice-chancellor, members on the dais and the last is convocation members (Handbook on Academic Ceremonies 2012). The entire recession is always led by the *mmensoun*. It could be observed that as compared to traditional procession and recession format, the order of the academic recessions change with the mace bearer leading, followed by the chancellor in a descending order. Besides, the globalization of academic ceremonies through the interplay of fashionable classics (queen mothers' dressing, toga and *kola* styles) and conventional academic costumes project the Ghanaian cultural values and enlivens the ceremonies. The spectators, members in the procession and the participant performers are able to connect and feel a part of the ceremonies and enjoy its aesthetical splendour.

Conclusions

The fusion of academic and Ghanaian fashionable classics in academic ceremonies in UEW has not been given attention by Ghanaian art scholars. Lots of artistic currents run through

from the beginning to the end of matriculation and congregation ceremonies yet these ceremonies have not received the due intellectual attention it deserves. It is often observed as a mere one-off annual event. One of the topical issues contributed by this article is how the use of academic and Ghanaian traditional costumes in academic processions and recessions backs the aesthetical power of the ceremonies and how this translates into raising the academic confidence and pride of wearers. It is evident from the article that elements of Ghanaian traditional procession formats appear in academic ceremonies such as matriculation and congregation. The *mmensoun*, *Adowa* dancers and the mace bearer that form part of the traditional-state processions and recessions have been adapted in academic ceremonies. They don fashionable Ghanaian classics such as queen mothers' dressing, toga and *kola* styles. These traditional cultural borrowings into academic ceremonies tell volumes of historical experiences in relation to Ghana's cultural heritage. Again, the performative aspects of these Ghanaian traditional borrowings are better communicated through their respective costuming in digesting the import of the message they carry across to the audience. Both the understanding of the performative elements and its aesthetic implications to the functions invoke in the student celebrants the spirit of academism and offer them the reasons to experience the ceremony. The blend of classics and academic costumes in UEW academic processions and recessions in constructing symbolic visual identities and academic pride is, therefore, better understood through the Ghanaian conceptual and contextual cultural dialectic. This deepens our conviction in traditional costumes as flattering aesthetic panacea in dormant academic processions.

Authors' contribution

OQE and AKK drafted the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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