

Myths and Stories in Ghanaian Traditional Dance Performance

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Submitted: 12 January 2026 Accepted: 21 January 2026 Published: 26 January 2026

Citation: David E A Quaye. (2026). Myths and Stories in Ghanaian Traditional Dance Performance. *Glob J of Anthropol Contemp Soc*, 2(1), 01-07.

Abstract

Indigenous music and dance forms performed in Ghana are filled with narratives of traditional cultural heritage practices, myths, and historical narratives. These narratives give information about the indigenous musical and dance types performed in Ghana and Africa as a whole. Using some selected musical dance types in Ghana such as the Adowa dance from the Ashantis, Kpatsa dance from the Ga-Adamgbé, Sorkordae (Sɔkɔdæ) among the Nchumuros of the Oti Region and Agbekor (Agbekɔ) dance from the Anlo of the Volta region of Ghana. This research investigates the type of stories that are exhibited in the indigenous dances performed and the information that is projected through these music and dance forms. It also highlights the archival heritage embedded in the music and dance forms of the people who own these phenomena. Through an ethnographic qualitative study, the study is underpinned by different interpretations of the various myths that reinforce the narratives in the art form within the community as well as in the academic environment. Since the cultural indigenous heritage projects the identity of the people as well, the study will focus on the selected art forms as case studies for other similar music and dance forms. With the aid of both primary and secondary sources the study will find out whose narrative do we pay attention to or do we project through the music and dance forms. The discussion will further interrogate whose perspective are projected through the performance and how are this narrative disseminated. Every indigenous music and dance performance have more than one myth or narrative to its origin and historical antecedents. These myths, stories and narrative make the phenomenon unique in their presentation especially where these narratives also possess philosophical underpinnings with the indigenous context and performance context. Analysis of these performance practices will be done both through using song text and movement gestures. The study finally will find out whose hermeneutics should be accepted and from whose perspective. Furthermore, these stories of the indigenous music and dance practices add to the concept of family resemblance of the movements gestures that dances project through the musical performance.

Keywords: Myth, Narrative, Historical, Traditional.

Introduction

The stories we tell through the indigenous dances are from different perspectives. The question is, whose perspective do we pay attention to, or do we project as the origin of the dance or better still as authentic? Almost all the indigenous traditional dances have more than one narrative and the myths around them cannot be ignored, so the many stories. The myths and stories are sometimes derived from the etymology of the dance or the name of the dance and its origin. Sometimes the stories are from the songs texts that accompany the dance. This research is to delve into some selected Ghanaian traditional indigenous dances

from various regions in Ghana and try to understand the myths and stories surrounding these dances Adowa, Kpastsa, Sɔkɔdæ, Agbekor etc. just to mention but a few are the selected dances to be discussed in this paper as case studies, then other dances can be done later using the success stories from this research. The choice for these dances is the types that have very interesting narratives and perspective which will arouse interest in the reader to research into the other dance types. The structure and form of the dance would be discussed including their aesthetic presentation with music. These would further include the props and costumes that with the performance of dance. The songs and

the drum language would not be left out of the discussion. This study is to provide information for dance researchers and students who find difficulty in searching for literature in reference to their articles and publication.

Definitions and Literature

Myth consists of narratives that play fundamental role in society such as tales of origin, or what Baumgartner (1974) identifies as a mythos, Greek meaning word or the origin or the true state of a word hence could have different interpretation from the literal through the philosophical to the metaphorical comprehension [1]. According to Losada (2015), defines myth as oral story, symbolic, dynamic and simple situation or events composed of a series of constant cultural semantic elements [2]. With particular reference to Esi Sutherland-Addy, she explores myth from various perspectives such as negativity where the stories are untrue and of unsavory kind. Sometimes the stories are superstitious which are meant for some purpose which can be identified in most Ghanaian traditional dance forms and their song texts. Sutherland-Addy (1999) further argues that myths are seen as a particular type of story with defined features such as 'over blown aura hiding reality and seeking to entrench political, religious, and economic power, that are collected, anthologized and analyzed', (p. 15). These assertions by Sutherland-Addy confirms most of the narratives found in the Ghanaian traditional dances which have come to be the norm or better still the standard information surrounding the dances [3]. Kwesi Yankah has similar opinion as Sutherland-Addy where he observes the uncertainty quest of myth but pines that myth in Africa is derived from the very winding definition of myth, [4]. To advance his argument on myth, Yankah cites.

Bascom where he reiterates that myths are prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past. They are accepted on faith, they are taught to be believed, and they can be cited as authority in answer to ignorance, doubt or disbelief. Myths are the embodiment of dogma; they are usually sacred, and they are often associated with theology and ritual [5].

This assertion situates the Ghanaian traditional dances in scope of this discussion, where if not all the narratives or the historical accounts of the dances have some sort of myths around their origin and creation which have come to be accepted by the community as factual and by extension these narrative are studied and analyzed in context together with their song text and drum languages as in the case of the selected dances [6]. on the other hand, argues about myth through African philosophy, which he identifies as communications from the past, and transmitted through oral narrative affirming the statement raised by Delgado Lasade. Therefore, myth in Indigenous Africa dances and to be more specific in Ghanaian music and dance forms, are the stories or the events that happen and have been accepted as part of the stories making up of the accounts as well as the historical narratives of the dances which have been corroborated by Losada, Sutherland-Addy and Yankah. There is obviously more than at least one narrative for each indigenous Ghanaian dance practice, some of these are war, migration, drought, wealth, mystical creatures such as dwarfs, monkeys, antelopes, deer, etc. Other narratives are a combination of the narratives derived from everyday activities and the rites of passage such as birth and naming

ceremonies, funerals, puberty, marriage, relationship, farming, fishing, hunting etc.

Purpose

The significance of this study is to interrogate the various arguments in the myths, narratives, and stories we hear in the quest to understand the origin of the traditional Ghanaian dances and their performance characteristics. To unravel this mystery, the study is guided by these research questions:

1. How do these stories of traditional dances originate?
2. Do the narratives have any connection and significance to the dance?
3. How are these narratives and stories true?

Interrogating these questions would enhance understanding into what Sutherland-Addy and Yankah have identified as disbelief and unsavory in nature which makes the origin of the dance forms very hard or difficult to understand. Through the historical accounts, the study attempts to interrogate what the traditional dances communicate during performance since these performance styles are mediated through the historical narratives and the origin of the dance, the song text, the drum language, the costumes and the props that accompany these artforms.

Using semi-structured approach with the aid of an interview guide, dance practitioners in various institutions and dance companies and groups, cultural bearers from various ethnic communities were engaged in interviews and group discussions on the history and origin of traditional Ghanaian dances and their performance practices. Group research was also done by students from libraries and archival materials. Personal interviews with some drum instructors yielded very fruitful information about drum language and what they communicate and the understanding that underpins the drum text. Christopher Ametefeh, Wisdom Zigah and Emmanuel Avornyo are typical master drummers who explained in detail during an interview session that the drums communicated in Agbekor, Kpatsa, Sorkordae and Adowa and many more are verbal coded language played on the drum for dancers to decode and interpret in movement gestures. Mustapha Tetteh Addy, Paschal Younge, Kobla Ladzekpo, David Locke for example have done some work on the Agbekor dance and have also interrogated the origin of the dance. David Asun, an indigen of the Nchumuros, was my key informant on the research of Sokordae from the Oti region. He had much to share on the origin of the dance form and nature and performance style.

ADOWA

Adowa is a dance form from the Ashanti region of Ghana. It originally started as a funeral dance but has since lost that domain due to cultural dynamism and modernity. There are several accounts of the Adowa dance, and all seems to make meaning to the origin of the dance. Whose narrative do we project in teaching. As researchers, it is only fair that we project all historical accounts for students to learn. One of the popular accounts is the narration about the old queen mother of Asante who got ill, and the gods asked for an antelope (Adowa) to be brought for rituals to be done for the old queen mother. This account is one of the most popular narratives of the Adowa dance form which has become factual among members of the community. According to Younge (2011), the Adowa dance narrative emerged through the old queen mother who was sick and warriors were sent to the

forest in search of an Antelope which would be used for sacrifice in healing the queen mother [7].

In other narratives, there is the account of a hunter who went for hunting expedition and came across some animals in the deep thick forest moving around one of their kind which seemed to be dead. The hunter after watching them for a while shot the animal and brought home to celebrate his game. Upon arrival he realized it was an antelope (Adowa) which is supposed to be a sacred animal for the community, hence the beginning of the movement and gestures of the Adowa music and dance. These narratives bring the myth close to the musical ensemble which uses the double-talking drum (Atumpan) made of antelope skins for both the male drum and the female drum, together with the Apetima, Petia, Dawuro and the Donno. One of the rhythmic patterns the drum plays is about the announcement of the passing of the then Asantehene Nana Agyeman Dua. The drum language instructs the members of the community of that Agyeman Odia npam literally meaning Agyeman is lying in bed which is to imply that the late chief has been laid in state, so people are to come round to mourn him. The drum language further instructs dancers to turn around though a clockwise direction known in the Akan language as Ntwaaho which is very distinct and specific.

Analysis of Adowa

As identified, the dance is a funeral dance with lots of communicative elements and gestures which symbolize the mournful nature of the person performing the dance. These communicative gestures add to the narrative and the myths of the dance. From some interviews with some performers, it is believed that when a dancer holds the stomach during performance then the dancer is trying to communicate the loss of a benefactor [8]. On the other hand, a dancer can place his or her hands on the head to demonstrate the burden or the weight the person must bear due to the death of a dear one. Likewise, the biting of the finger and snapping the fingers during the performance depicting pain and the sign of mourning. These movement gestures are communicated through semiotics, and the interpretation is understood by the cultural bearers who are akin to the tradition. Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and the ways in which meaning is conveyed [9]. Since dance is a non-verbal language, it expresses itself through signs and symbols, a language which is easily understood by all sundry, the meaning and interpretations are varied, hence the different narratives on the articulations of the movement gestures, drum language, props and costume are all considered as semiotics. The beauty and aesthetics of the Adowa dance is in the relationship between the master drummer and execution and style of the dancer. Mawere Opoku, one of the founding fathers of the Dance Studies program at the university of Ghana and the first artistic director of the Ghana Dance Ensemble is believed to have said the before the Adowa dance is performed, the master drummers would have to invite the timer (Dawuro) or the bell to begin and this is communicated through the drum language as adawura Kofi ma nhumini sue, literally meaning the person responsible for the bell pattern should start the tempo of which the rest of the ensemble would follow [10]. This narrative by Opoku has over the years been confirmed and corroborated by cultural bearers and practitioners. Furthermore, some parts of the dance performance are in strict rhythm where the dancer must respond and interpret the rhythmic patterns of

the lead drum, in this case the talking drum. Apart from this strict rhythmic pattern, the dancers have the liberty to showcase his or her style as willy nilly and communicate with both the lead master drummer and the audience.

In the Adowa dance performance, it is not only the drum language and the movement gestures that communicate to their audience but the costume too. The Kente costume is another semiotics cloth which communicates different themes and ideas to people. Sometimes, the cloth may communicate grief, pain, loss of a dear one, love etc. These themes blend with the dance performance to express particular narrative in during performances.

KPATSA

It is a Ghanaian music and dance form, from the Ga-Adangme people in the greater Accra Region. It is a dance type mostly connected with puberty rites and its rituals called 'Dipo' which according Adinku, means "cleansing, purifying, the personality in order for the person to become sensitive to Dangme moral values" [11]. The dance has since performed multiple social roles. The dance according to oral narrative is believed to be originating from the exploits of a hunter who observed the movements of some mystical creature believed to be dwarfs as identified from the literature of myth. According to oral history and narrative, Adinku, (199, pp. 2-3), affirms that there was a hunter who witnesses the movement of some mystical creatures or characters. The hunter, according to the narrative, hid himself to observe this phenomenon in the thickest part of the forest. The narration had it that, when the hunter returned from the forest, he could not speak, he had become dumb. Efforts to get him to speak proved futile, hence he had to demonstrate what he had observed during his hunting expedition. The hunter therefore articulated the gestures he had seen. Since the hunter could not really know that dwarfs are not normal beings, the movements he exhibited were not coherent for the members in the community, because his leg movements were quite funny and the people called it Kpetse or Kpatsa, in the Dangme language meaning 'uneven feet or leg' which has become the name of the dance. This historical account corroborates the arguments about myth with hunting. Mystical creatures and the belief system making the facts of the dance believable to the community. The other account of the Kpatsa dance is associated with puberty and initiation of the adolescent girl child. With this narrative the accounts are derived from the song text of the dance form. That is why one of the song texts of the dance form addresses the waywardness of the young girl, Naki leee.

The Myth and Analysis of the Stories in Kpatsa

The significance of this study is to interrogate the various arguments in the myths, narratives, and stories we hear in the quest to understand not just the origin of the traditional dance but also the performative aspect of the artform. These narratives in one way or the other help to navigate the comprehension of the performance styles. In some cases of dances the song texts that accompany the dances also help in the narration of the stories the dances seem to communicate, and it is not necessary about the origin or the history of the dance. One such song is the famous Kpatsa song is Ma bo tako ma tele. Below is a discussion of the two songs of Kpatsa, the first is that of Naki leee and the second, Ma bo tako ma tele

Dangme language

Naki lee,2x
ibi Naki lee dze dzor,
bani oba whorsi,

English

Naki (calling the name Naki)
My daughter Naki,
Come and sleep

The song text above literally provides some advice to young girl called Naki not to go out in the night but rather come home and sleep since it is late. This song text in one way or the other that adds to the story of the dance form, where the metaphorical meaning of the song is to advise the young girl to stay home and help with household chores and not go out to have fun with friends. The dance music and dance also teach the young girl how to be industrious and not to waste but rather prepare for the future. The philosophical impulse of the song is to learn to save for a rainy day. In the Ghanaian belief system, most ethnic communities attach training of the girl child during the teenage years. It is so because through puberty young girls learn the trade of womanhood, homecare, home management and how to plan for family is a very important aspect of the community which is highly celebrated. Since it is the teenage girl who will soon become an adult to be married and the woman will now be beginning to care for the home. time for t This narrative of the song has no connection with the movement's gestures in the dance and also with the narration of the hunter and the dwarfs. It rather has a connection to puberty hence the advice as a social commentary to young girls to try and live upright lives. It also helps young girls to prevent social vices such as peer pressure and being promiscuous, especially in their teenage years. This second song ma bor tako ma tele has a close underpinning with the Naki lee song text in the Ga language, which literally means "I will carry my own cross". The supposed proverbial young girl in the song announces to the world that she is going to carry her own cross and burden or bear her own consequences hence no one should advise her or better still discuss her issues since she is of age now. Even though many people associate the song with the Kpatsa dance, there are other people who also think otherwise that the song is not really meant for Kpatsa but the context of the song applies to the broader meaning of the waywardness of the girl child, hence its relationship with the Kpatsa dance. This gives the dance form a typical example of a music and dance type that has many narratives that do not connect to the origin of the dance but have facts that apply to the meaning and understanding of the dance.

Ga language

Ma bɔ tako ma tele eeee I will tie a rag and carry
Ni ma tele.2x carry on my head
Eeee eeeee ni ma tele carry on my head
Mi dienkye dzaju ni ma tele my own load, I will carry
Moko aka waie nsane doon. Nobody should talk about my issues and problems.

Given the literal translation of the song in English, the song text form me serves as a sequel to the Naki lee song or better still

an answer to the first song. The impulse and the metaphorical meaning of the song is that of one crying out for independence to be allowed to govern or rule himself or herself. The dance form helps us to decolonize our minds and stand up for your own individual rights and responsibilities. Coming of age does not guarantee you being under parents' protection and therefore they cannot comment on your behaviour whether good or bad. Reflecting on Ghana and by extension many African countries who are supposed to be independent and yet still rely on foreign aid from colonial authorities, the question is how independent Ghana is and by far the other African countries.

It's a Horse

It is a dance type that finds its origin from other parts of Ghana including the Oti Region due to the creation of the new regions. The dance is among the Nchumuru of the Kracchie people who have settled in Dambai, the capital of the Oti region. The dance is believed to have originated from the imitation of the peacock bird due to its characteristics of the way the bird behaves and how it spreads its tail and the beauty that comes with it [12]. When one observes the movement and gestures of the dance there is no movement that has a connection with the bird but rather interviewing members of the community who perform the dance indicates that the dance showcases parenthood. This is also demonstrated in how the performance is structured. Men performing the dance must use a full piece cloth tied around their waist and move according to the rhythm with their supposed children holding the edges of the cloth to dance. Likewise, a woman performing the dance must use a two-piece cloth to dance as shown in the pictures below. On the other hand, how the name came about is also another myth since the name has nothing to do with the peacock. It is also not too clear how the name of the dance originated but very obvious that the name is derived from the language. The drum ensemble and the rhythmic patterns have much to discuss, since the rhythm of the drums also serve as communication for the people in the community. The sound of drums serves as the main source of official communication from the chief's palace. Anytime the chief wants to address the members of the community, communication is done through the drums. Again, when there is going to be a performance of the dance it is also done through the drum language. It is language that differentiates the activity that is to be done at the chief's court. For the dance form according to the community members when they hear certain phrases from the drum, it requires them to stop whatever they are engaged in, go home and pick up cloths either two-piece cloth or six-piece to the durbar grounds ready to dance with them. The use of the costume symbolizes the nature of the peacock and how it behaves through movement. According to the people, when dancing with the cloth the must be others, supposedly your children to hold the ends of the cloth and dance around with them showing off with dancing skills. It is the belief of and pride of parenthood when you have your children holding the cloth as one dance.



Figure 1: Pictures of sôkôdae Dancers Demonstrating the use of Costume, Credit by David Quaye

Agbekor

This is a dance form originating among the Anlos of the south-eastern part of the Volta region of Ghana. It is a war dance which is believed to have originated from the great oath of the warriors (Atamga). It is a dance form that exhibits movement gestures of war, military and warrior-like characteristics who are prepared to sacrifice their lives for their people [13]. It is also believed that the inspiration of the dance originated by Ewe hunters' stories they told of monkeys in the forest changing into human form to dance and play drums. In an interview with Wisdom Zigah, a native of Afidenyigba in the Volta region and a master drummer of the Agbekor dance believes the movements in the dance is as a result of the gunshots heard on the battlefield and these gunshots are the some of the rhythmic patterns played on the drum. The songs and chants sung also give historical antecedents of events that account for the narrative of the dance. During this dance, these songs and chants depict characteristics of readiness to fight and display exploits of battle. The costume and make-up of the dance is an identity marker for battle ready. Fierce facial expressions and finally the way and usage of the sword or the flywhisk (horsetail) as their prop. The dance is an account of the warriors or the people who survived the war, Agbe-kor, it also reflects the life of Anlo people through the many battles they had to fight on their journey [14].

Analysis of the Narratives and Accounts of Agbekor

The movements gestures are narratives of the survivors of the war who returned to tell their stories as to how they fought during the war. So, the articulations of movements in the dance form account for the myths and the stories the dance possess. These gestures on the other hand are narrated through the rhythmic patterns of the language the drum speaks, in reference to Locke, he argues out how some of these myths and stories have been documented [15]. This surrogate language the drums speaks are the activities or the exploits of war that were undertaken by the warriors, the brave men and the hunters. Another addition to the narrative and the myths are the song texts of the Agbekor dance forms. Most of the songs are about survival, war chants and sacrificing and exhibiting military dexterity. This notwithstanding the song texts in the dance also depicts some of these accounts such as in the example of a chant below.

Example: enye looo egbleooo ahoooooo'. Good or bad we shall go

This example literally means whether good or bad we believe that the Agbekor people will take care of us whether we die or not. So, for the Anlo people they that once they have taken the oath (Atamga) their survival is in the hands of the ancestors, the gods and their people, hence when if they survive or die at the battle front, they are heroes and their people will take care of them. This narrative has proved why many of the Anlo warriors are very brave and they perform the dance with such alacrity and meaning

In another account, the dance is about the various narratives shared by different people who survived their war and came back to share their stories through movement gestures which is called Atsea meaning style. It is for this reason that sometimes the dance is referred to as Atsea Agbekor. According to oral narrative the rhythmic patterns of the drum serve as communication or commands to dancers who must execute movement gestures according to what the drum language instructs. The myth is that the commander in chief is the lead drummer who provides instructions on the drum for the dancers to perform. These instructions from the drum language add up to the stories, the styles and themes in the dance. For example, the drum language instructs performers to redraw their sword or put their sword in their Sachs. The performers hold swords as a prop in their performance to demonstrate how they used this prop in their fighting. The lead or master drummer may instruct the dancers in the following rhythmic patterns which according to Quaye, are languages spoken on the drum which must be understood or decoded by the performers through articulation of movement gestures.

Ewe English

Ava wɔ ge	Let's go to war
Tododo	Attention (be ready prepared)
Ma wu torgɔ	I will strike you
Mi bla go dzi	Tighten your belt
Mikpo dzidzor	be happy/victory
Megbɛ	Back/ retreat
Metso ge/Me se ge	I will cut/kill you (drum text)
Kpodo kuio dzi	Warning/be careful
Mia yi Kalewudae	Lets go to the land of the strongmen/because of the strongmen
Aayie aayie	Okay/Yoo

These surrogate rhythmic language structures are interpreted in movement gestures also known as Atsea (styles). These ver-

balizations from the drum rhythm symbolize the act of fighting, warning, retreating, etc. which are all characteristics of the dance, and they add up to the myths and the narrative of

the dance form. The visual representation in this dance is more representative than in other dances such as the Kpatsa and the Sokodae dances.



Figure 2: This is a Demonstration of Agbekor Dance in a Class Situation where Students are Holding Sticks as a Representation of Swords to Narrate their Stories. Picture Credit by naa dei

The Agbekor drum ensemble is another semiotic element that identifies the dance once it is visible. Even though the drums can be used to play multiple Ewe dance types it mostly unique and synonymous to the Agbekor dance form. The drums also have their own unique narrative within the dance type. The tallest drum which is the lead or master drum is known as Atsimevu. This drum is believed to be the commander of the ensemble that give commands and directives to the dancers to execute. In other words, it speaks to the dancers. The next drum in line is Sogo; it is the next tallest and a little protruding cylindrical instrument. This drum can deputise when the commander is not in sight. It also responds to commands from the lead drum as a first sup-

porting instrument. The Kidi is smaller than the Sogo and serves as the supporting drum similar to the Sogo. There is also the Kuroboto which is roundish in design. It plays a particular rhythmic structure which adds to the harmony of the music within the performance. Within the drum family is the Kagan the smallest of the instrument which also has a particular rhythmic structure and compliments the bell pattern. The Gakogui is the double bell that keeps the timeline for all performers both musicians and dancers to keep in tune. It also regulates the pace of the performance. Finally, the Axatse, a gourd with beads or cowries around to provide rhythm. It also compliments the Gakogui in the same timeline but has unique sound effect.



Figure 3: The Agbekor Drum Ensemble

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to find out if the arguments and the discussions above have been addressed. The study has demonstrated that, through the analysis of movements gestures, song texts and to some extents costume and props, the narratives have proved the importance and the connections to the dance forms. Inasmuch as many of the issues have been addressed, there are still other arguments that can be interrogated further. This is because this study has limited the discussions to four selected Indigenous African dance forms in Ghana. There are many more that this study has not touched on which makes it impossible to say for sure that these would be about all the myths and narratives even in this discussion. In addition to the discussions

above, whose narrative or account do we accept as authentic or for lack of a better word the truth. Since according to the arguments raised in the literature, myths are half-truths, or believable stories that have existed over time and have become part of the narrative. Therefore, we cannot do away with these accounts since as the years go by there may be other studies that would emerge other accounts and narratives to these existing narratives in addition to more others.

This study has given the opportunity to acquire more insight into the myths and the stories embedded in the Indigenous Ghanaian dance forms. This is because since one may be relying on fact as the narrative of a particular dance but rather the dance may

possess varied historical accounts that make the appreciation of the dance more interesting and hopping to probe the more.

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