

## A Review of Theatrical Aesthetics of Special Congregation in the University of Education, Winneba

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**Abstract:** Ceremonies are held as a commemoration for special occasions, events achievement or any celebration of a kind. Such days are normally characterized with certain routines and strict ritual observances of procedures. This is suggestive of 'purpose' for every ceremony. The sustenance or boredom remover in ceremonies is the presence of a number of artistic elements and components which interlace the somewhat methodical rite. These artistic elements or happenings may be in either performances', thus, songs, recitations, chants deliveries or artifactual, hence making reference to things made and produced by human hands such as props, paintings, or effigies. This paper attempts to use aesthetical theory to review of University of Education, Winneba special congregation on May, 2021 where two sons of the land were awarded honorary doctorate degrees

### I. Introduction

Academic ceremonies in institutions of higher learning has a long-standing history especially in universities across the globe. Hitherto, it was the sole preserve of universities until other tertiary institutions and para-academic facilities also adapted it (Essel and Kemevor, 2016). Congregation ceremonies are ritual performances held in various institutions of higher learning as an integral part of the institutions mandate to graduate students. With critical observations, congregation ceremonies can be likened to festivals. It also serves as an opportune time for all stakeholders of the institution to have a confab of a sort about management's achievements and challenges in the year under review and further presents graduands for their respective fields of study for certification.

Accordingly, academic ceremonies are of different kinds and types but one feature that is peculiar to them is that they are largely celebrated every year herein the academic year. The university as a body has three major ceremonies that is matriculation, congregation (special congregation) and investiture. It must be stated that among these ceremonies, investiture and special congregations are not yearly affair. It is done when the need arises. Considering these ceremonies carefully, they are public celebrations of all stakeholders especially, graduating students. Consequently, academic ceremonies such as congregations are joyous occasions that give opportunity to management, convocation, students and other stakeholders to express achievements and concerns that involve them.

In effect, these ceremonies with focus on the special congregation are characterized by dramatic performances that heightened and or add timbre to the whole ceremony. The interest of this study lies in the aesthetical viewpoint that is characterized by the display of dramatic and theatrical elements during the special congregation ceremony done by the University of Education, Winneba. Similarly, using the University of Education, Winneba as a case, the study seeks to examine how theatre and its performances illuminate the essence and beauty in climaxing the event.

The study adopted the qualitative paradigm with case study as its design. Through observation of academic ceremonies in the aforementioned university, the researcher selected visual interpretive account of the events and shed more light on the dramatic and theatrical elements and the significance of its aesthetical dimensions. Data collected have been presented in simple narrative form.

### II. Concept of Aesthetics

There have been a lot of scholarships on the concept of aesthetics in aesthetics and the philosophy of art. Some expositions of aesthetics that have been given by scholars such as Kant (1987) and Hegel (1975) appears to have leanings towards individual perspectives of seeing expressions artistic objects and its

receptibilities. Aesthetics is therefore a philosophical study of beauty and taste. It largely concerns itself with appreciating beauty of artistic objects that is, language, drama, performance etc. Aesthetics in other words, deals with nature and value of the arts and its responses from those natural objects that find expression in the language of the beautiful and the ugly ((Munro, 2021). Besides aesthetics seen as an individual's perspective to beauty and taste of the object does not necessarily end there. The individual viewing it has some cultural, religious and other experiences that he or she might have been exposed to which may contribute immensely in appreciating or otherwise art piece.

The various academic ceremonies organized by the University of Education, Winneba involves diverse exhibition of art forms. Music, dance and drama are worth judging and appreciating since the form part in the whole process of the ceremony. The arts appears to be central to the celebration of such ceremonies that is, congregations. It must be mentioned that these arts forms are characteristics evident among almost all the festivals celebrated in Ghana. Therefore, the university integrating aspects of what the indigenes exhibit in commemorating their special festive occasions add a further in the cup of the gown in sync with the town. Kemovor and Duku (2013) corroborate the assertion that it is the arts that is characterized in most Ghanaian festivals and ceremonies. In their view, the art is exhibited in the procession and performative rites in their celebrations. By implication, it presents a kind of orderliness, harmony and sense of beauty in both the fine art and the performing arts. Considering, the special congregation which was characterized by procession and dramatic performances of music, dance and drama cannot be left out in this discourse since it presents some aesthetical viewpoint.

There is an illuminating thoughts and explorations behind every art form be it the visual or the performing arts. Therefore, every art work has some specific traits that make it stand out. Such traits are the content and the form (Brako, 2016; Lauer and Pentak, 2008). The content of any artwork seeks to describe the inherent message the creator want to communicate and the form on the other hand explains the process by which the message is or can be communicated. In effect, the artist creates his or her work with the aim of invoking or provoking it audience to appreciate it aesthetically. Aesthetics consequently, appears to play an important role in the appreciation of the performing arts in the celebration of the special congregation in the University of Education, Winneba.

The study then seeks to explore the dramatic and theatrical aesthetics that illuminated and climaxed the special congregation on May, 2021 where two sons of the land were awarded honorary doctorate degrees.

### III. Aesthetical Values of Theatrical Performance

The University of Education, Winneba observes three main academic ceremonies notably; matriculation, congregation and investiture. With the exception of matriculation, congregation and investiture ceremonies are climaxed with dramatic enactments. Therefore, it was not out of place to have a dramatic performance in the special congregation. As observed in the traditional setting of Ghana, there is always an opportunity for dancers to exhibit a kind of dance performances specific and related to the occasion. In effect, the special congregation saw a spectacular choreographed creative dance in sync with the cultural backgrounds of the celebrants. The following elements were evident in the performance. They are performers(characters), costume, props, music and spectacle. This performance is symbolic as it tells the purpose of the ceremony. The purpose of the creative dance is explicitly indicative from the title *Abasobode3* (Honouring). The title sets the tone for the purpose of the event that these two sons of the land are going to be honoured.

With a critical observation of the dramatic performance comes with its aesthetical stance. The performance is a fusion of varied dances from the Akan and Dangbe tribes in the southern of Ghana. The dances are *Adowa*, *Kpatsa* and an enactment of *Dipo*. These dances are specific to the ethnic groups of the celebrants. For instance, Dr. Matthew OpokuPrempeh a former minister of Education hails from the Ashanti region where *adowa* happens to be one the well performed dances in that part of the country. Likewise, *Kpatsa* and *Dipo* are also associated with the Dangbes and the ManyaKrobos from the eastern region of Ghana where Professor Mike Aaron Ocquaye also comes from. He was the former Speaker of Parliament.

The dance opens with three priests costumed in white apparels embellished with *nyanya* (a green leaves) wrapped around their necks and holding swords and staff signifying their authority and position in the community. Their entry aesthetically, interprets as the spiritual heads responsible for the cleansing of the land from any curse or misfortune.



Figure 1 Priests in their costumes leading the entrance. 2021. courtesy Sampana

By implication society upholds and respect them for their counsel and direction. They ensure that the spiritual health of the society and its people are in consonance with the deities and if there are spells or charms to impede progress and development they have the power to undo or reverse such spells for the sanity of the society. Thus, the entry is a signification of such traditional practices in the society enacted to usher the emissaries with the parcel of gift to the celebrants.

Immediately after their entry comes the *adowa* and *kpatsa* dancers. They are colourfully costumed to exhibit the richness of their tribes. With the adornment of the female *adowa* dancers from the Akan tribe are clad in traditional costumes of brilliant contrasting harmonies of colours. Their costumes are worn in a manner that allows them to freely move gracefully in their gestures. They wore clothes that stretch or extend from the breast area to the knee level and embellished with toga-like style at the upper part of the body. Interestingly, this dress style is an imitation of the dressing of typical Akan queen mothers. Again, they are moderately beaded as an accessory to enhance their character. Native sandals and glittering ornamental headbands were worn to pamper their feet and glamourized their heads respectively (Essel and Kemeavour, 2016). With elaborate make-up they gracefully move with gestures with its connotative meanings and message to audience and especially a prominent personality at the event.



Figure 2 Female Adowa dancers leading the entry of the emissaries unto the auditorium. 2021. Courtesy Sampana



Figure 3 Male Adowa dancer following with his gestures in a graceful manner. 2021.  
Courtesy Sampana

Accordingly, the male counterpart is adorned with full piece of cloth which is wrapped or folded to the loins forming a puff with parts flowing freely showing the chest bare. These performers exhibit the court dance of the Akans specifically from the Ashanti region of Ghana. They exhibit alluring smiles with corresponding hand gestures by inviting, praising and adoring prominent individuals at the ceremony and even the audience. In showering of praise, they normally showcase the strength, power, authority and wealth of the personality involved. For instance, in the case of the special congregation, the celebrants were exalted gesturing how humble, noble, hardworking and responsible they are in the discharge of their duties.

Furthermore, the male Adowa dancer in expressing his creative patterns on the dance intermittently changes the movement in concert with the drum patterns with fast and swift turns of gyrations which engages the audience to fasten their eyes on him. These theatrical mimes and gestures together with facial expressions by the performers are contextualized with its corresponding message to the occasion. As it has been intimated earlier, these dramatizations are largely to praise and welcome leadership and the celebrants. It can be adduced from the gestures and movement of the dancers as they seek to appreciate the efforts of the celebrants placing emphases on the Supreme God factor and the help from friends and family for the feats attained.

Besides the *adowa* dance, come the procession of the emissaries believed to have been sent by the management of the university. This procession had two beautiful maidens clad in strands of folded clothes held from the waist and embellished with contrasting harmonious colourful costumes with concentrated beads covering it. The beads further help to hold the clothes well from falling from their loins. At the torso is a white piece of cover cloth to hold the breast. They have beads around the neck. Beads are also worn at the arms that carves the arms to stand out in attractive position. Also, there are some beads worn at the wrists for further accentuations. These sumptuous beading on the performers are significantly important as it conveys a specific information about the family background, clan and wealth of the wearer as seen in the *Dipo* ceremony by the Krobos. In effect, the larger and concentrated of the neck beads signifies affluence of the wearer's family. Hence, it connotes the background of Mike Aaron Ocuaye one of the awardees who hails from the Krobos.



Figure 4 Dipo dancers gracefully adorned with beads in leading the procession into the auditorium. 2021.  
Courtesy Sampana

The climax of the creative dance performance happens to be the grand pomp and pageantry entrance with the gowns on a donkey. It was an awesome spectacle. The created donkey was realistic in the parlance of theatre. It had a rider who was costumed in *fugu* (smock) and passenger, a beautifully adorned young princess in a glittering gold-like apparel with and embellished *tekoa*. It is black with gold-like lines creatively done creating a pattern and rhythm and balance. In it are circular lines which makes an impression of the *GyeNyameadinkra* symbol. This created realistic donkey is symbolic. The donkey is believed to be a humble and dutiful animal in the Sahara and the northern part of Ghana. Therefore, it being a choice animal to carry and usher in the gowns depicts the humility, dutiful and responsible these celebrants are in the discharge of their duties in their respective areas of operations. That is, Matthew OpokuPrempeh as former minister of Education and Mike Aaron Ocuaye as former Speaker of 7<sup>th</sup> Parliament of Ghana respectively.

It is however, interesting to note that children were used to lead and sit on the donkey. The main reason has to do with the kind beauty and honesty they exude. This was to add to the aesthetics of the whole procession.



Figure 5 The donkey and the procession of the emissary .  
2021. Courtesy Sampana

Interestingly, the entrance of the donkey and presentation of the gowns received a rapturous applause from both the high table and the entire audience. A respondent after the event remarked; The performance added colour and beauty to the event. So, without it the event wouldn't have been a success. It said it all. That is, it spells out the meaning, the purpose and significance of the occasion. Another respondent added that it was nice, colourful, splendid and extraordinary. From these remarks, audience were able to relate and understand the purpose of the ceremony. It goes further to buttress the assertion that drama has the power to leave with its audience an impression that stays for longer period.

In conclusion, the entire ceremony was a unique performance which saw the climax with the theatrical display of the creative dance. The audience, convocation, management, celebrants saw a well thought through fusion of Ghanaian culture that can be seen as a connector that after all we are one people. This link makes the people feel part of the ceremony and enjoy its aesthetical splendour. Again, the performance and its aesthetical connotations to the ceremony invoke in the audience the spirit of togetherness and belongingness. This is seen with the synthesis of the dances and cultural practices in acknowledging the celebrants. The experience is refreshing. This in effect deepens the conviction that the time is appropriate to embrace one another using the aesthetics of our divergent cultural gleanings in elucidating that we are one people.

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