



## ABELE INDIGENOUS MUSICAL GENRE IN THE CONTEXT OF YEJI KAJOJI FESTIVAL

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**ABSTRACT:** *The role of indigenous musical performances in traditional festivals has been very significant in the lives of Africans. In Ghana, some of such festivals are pivoted on particular distinctive natures of the indigenous music. One of such musical genres is the Abele music performed by the people of Yeji in the Bono-East region of Ghana. This music is formalized in the context of the Kajoji festival celebrated annually by the community. Through ethnographic research design, the study documents the role of Abele music in the context of the Yeji Kajoji annual festival. The reason is to add to the literature of traditional music scholarship in Ghana while the source materials from the music can be used in the music classroom for music learning. In dealing with the study, participant's observation and interview were used to collect the needed data. Participants for the study included some purposely selected members of the Abele musical ensemble as well as the paramount chief of the area. It was found out that the Kajoji festival is a very vital mainspring of the traditional education and the remit of the people's culture while the Abele music serves as the side attraction of this festival.*

**KEYWORDS:** Abele, Yeji, Kajoji, Bono-East, Traditional Festival



## INTRODUCTION

It is generally known in many parts of the world, and particularly African communities, that music is a social activity. It is a communal event and a system of communication that is well understood by the community that owns the music. With this in view, specific musical types are usually assigned to specific occasions in order to align to the context of that occasion. An understanding of music involves discovering meaning in that which is heard, made possible by considering its role in the life of the people who use it. As a human activity, music making involves members of the society in various circumstances and roles. The involvement of the people in music making is very distinctive to Africans. Like Chernoff (1979) indicated, "African music is a cultural activity which reveals a group of people organizing and involving themselves with their own communal relationships" (p. 36). The community members are induced with multiple responses: physiological, movement, mood, emotional, cognitive and behavioural. The value of indigenous music to Africans received a comment from Adounum (1980):

*In Africa, music is life; that is, it permeates all daily activities. Music in Africa is the soul which is ultimately concerned with various customs and religious practices. The African is born, named, initiated, fortified, fed, nurtured and buried with music. In Africa, music heals the sick, music directs and guides the blind, it comforts the widows, and it stops tribal warfare. Music accompanies every single daily activity. It is long known in our culture that drumming and traditional songs are intended to bring healing. They allow clients to feel a sense of belonging and/or identity. The songs are often ways to shift energy, to wrap clients in culture, to allow them to cry sometimes and to bring joy to others (Survey record 71 [BC]).*

Thus, the people of *Yeji* in the Bono-East region of Ghana celebrate their annual harvest festival known as *Kajoji*, which is formalized with the *Abele* music to give it a distinctive feature. *Abele* musical genre involves dancing, drumming and singing in the organization of the festival that centres on feasting. Unfortunately, the distinctive nature of this music in the context of a festival that is paramount to a traditional community has not received scholarly attention. It is an undeniable fact that education, performance, transmission, dissemination and historical references in the indigenous African musical arts environment have been orally transacted (Mawere, 2014). Attempts at documenting historical records therefore will largely be reconstructive, relying on extant practices and materials, the memories of exponents of styles, and the accumulative collective memory of the owners of the practices in the community. It is a truism that most ceremonies of the African society therefore go hand in hand with musical performance because Africans see music as valuable as life, as the life cycle of Africa is full of traces of music and musical performances which are very significant and functional in social life. It is against this background that the people of *Yeji* never celebrate the *Kajoji* festival without the performance of *Abele* music of their own tradition.

Festivals of all kinds all over the world offer possibilities for human interactions which we do not find in daily life. It is quite evident that festivals and festive practices provide an indication of vital pulse in every society. Among the people of Africa, festivals are held in high esteem. Some of them are Kalabari of Nigeria chanting praise songs in memoirs of their superior mythical beings: *Oru*, *Owu* and *Duen*. The Effutu of Ghana perform music during the *Aboakyer* (deer hunting) festival while the Yoruba people of Nigeria also celebrate *Egungun* festival characterized by numerous masquerades, each with its drummers and dancers, to



mention a few of them. Agordoh (2000) also further commented on the significance of festivals:

*Festivals are important occasions as they are periods during which members of an African society publicly re-enact their beliefs and values on which the solidarity of the state depends. Most of these festivals are characterized by musical art performances which originally adhere to the tradition of the society (p. 50).*

The descriptive documentation of the Abele musical genre in the context of the Kajoji festival is significant to add up to the already existing documentation of Ghanaian indigenous musical types, which have received scholarly attention. The paper unearths some traditional music idioms in Abele which can be a supplement to resource materials for teaching music and which also make available some compositional materials for art music compositions in Ghana.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Festivals are special occasions when people celebrate something such as religious events (Melton, 2011). Ghana is a land with heterogeneous ethnic groups with different traditional history, culture, customs and festivals. Salm and Falola (2002) for instance, identified that in Ghana, traditional festivals are celebrated periodically or annually in many ethnic states but some vary from their traditional rites and cultural practices. With these, music serves as a traditional rite and a central point of each festival celebrated throughout Ghanaian culture.

According to Lewis (1997), festivals can be explained as occasional religious or a kind of religious ceremonies marked by specific rituals or activities like pouring of libation or slaughtering of animals for sacrifice to the gods of a given traditional area. There is often drumming, singing and dancing, mourning of the dead or merry-making depending on the circumstance surrounding a particular celebration. In Ghana, festivals are our cultural heritage (Lentz, 2001); by this we mean the sum total of the materials and intellectual environment whereby people satisfy their biological and social needs, and adapt them to their environment. Examining the definitions, it is worth stating that festivals are major socio-cultural activities observed by the citizens, and sometimes involving foreigners, renewing their love, cohesion and intimacy. This buttresses what Wiles (2011) indicated, that festivals are periods or occasions where citizens renew their love, solidarity and togetherness.

Indeed, Ghanaian festivals have received scholarly research—*Fetu festival* (Agyei-Mensah, 2006) as celebrated by the Oguaa traditional area, the *Bakatue* festival (Odotei, 2002) by the Elmina people, *Aboakyer* (Acquah et al., 2020) by the *Efutu* traditional area, the *Hogbetsotso* festival of the Anlo, *Damba* festival of the *Dagomba*, *Gonja* and *Mamprusi* (Acquah & Boahen, 2017) in the Northern region of Ghana and many more. The Kajoji festival of the Yeji people has not received attention although it is one of the most popular festivals in the Bono-East region in Ghana as a result of the distinctiveness of the Abele musical performance in it. Most of these festivals are associated with agriculture or harvest as well as the ancestors of the communities. Agricultural or harvest festivals are usually celebrated as thanksgiving to the gods and ancestors for ensuring good harvest, and to ask for their blessings for the coming crop season. The Kajoji festival is also a harvest festival to thank the gods but it is uniquely celebrated with the Abele music and feasting, which is distinct from most of the festivals celebrated in Ghana, and this paper fills that gap. The festivals are collective rituals. They serve



as a vehicle for communicating or offering social values and for strengthening the bonds that bind the people. Almost every festival in Ghana has a history behind it that could be traced to some past events, circumstances or occurrences; hence the need to commemorate it. The origin of Yeji Kajoji festival will be significant to narrate the episodes from the history and traditions of the people of Yeji.

The significance of festivals has been addressed in most of the research on festivals. In contemporary Ghana, festivals are used to raise funds to support the construction of development projects such as school blocks, purchase computers and build hospitals, among others. This is possible because during these periods, sons and daughters who are staying in and outside the area come together to celebrate the festival; it is therefore possible to appeal for funds. Festivals are periods when family members establish reunion with their relations. It is a time when children who are born outside their hometown are brought back home to see and experience the nature and celebration of the festival.

Çelik and Çetinkaya (2013) categorically indicated that festivals make people know more about their history. For instance, the *Nyidwoo* festival of the people of *Esumengya* makes the people, and for that matter the Ashanti, to know more about how they came out of hunger by settling in their present day area. Socially they were of the view that it serves as reunion of family members, relatives and loved ones. At that time, quarrels and misunderstandings are settled. It also provides a forum where marriages among people within a particular geographical area can be transacted. The youths at this stage get the chance to take marriages to court. In another development, Yakubu (2020) also added his views to the significance of *Apoɔ* festival that, kings and paramount chiefs sit in state and receive homage/tributes from their subordinates and people. During the festival, sub-chiefs as well as local chiefs and other people from far and near pay special homage to their paramount chief. He continues that rituals are performed during festivals to solicit good health, prosperity and peace for all during the coming year. It also renews the spiritual bound between the ancestors and the living. It is an occasion when the ancestors and gods are propitiated to pacify for crime committed against them. Libation is poured to the ancestors for blessing and abundant harvest.

Yakubu (2020), again said that, during the festivals, the chiefs and fetish priests perform some rituals and pour libation as a means of praying for good health, peace and prosperity for the whole traditional area. They also ask their gods and ancestors for the year's farming season, so as to receive abundant harvest, and also for forgiveness for the crimes and sins committed against them. to Yakubu, festivals bring both the royals and the commoners together at least once in a year. This creates an atmosphere of unity and solidarity. Members in the community see themselves as one people sharing a common heritage. Unlike the Kajoji festival, chiefs, royals, community members and foreigners come together to sing, dance and participate in the festival without blemish, seeing themselves as one people with one destiny. The secret of binding is the use of the Abele music which is formalized in every aspect of the celebration.

## METHODOLOGY

The design for the study was ethnographic. Ethnographic designs look at people in their cultural setting, with the goal of producing a narrative account of that particular culture, against a theoretical backdrop (Hammersley, 2007). In ethnography, it involves “the understanding of



music making as a creative process which should integrate the biopsychology of the creator, cultural values and aspects of the social and natural environment of the maker” (Merriam & Merriam, 1964; Blacking & Nettle, 1995). This research focuses on culture and suggests that more comprehensive understanding of a particular music depends on the knowledge of the people, why, how and when the music is created and performed. This implies that one needs to be acquainted with how the music is composed, performed, interpreted and accepted by the indigenes in the context of their culture. In this case, one of the researchers is a citizen of Yeji who was an insider of the musical tradition of the Yeji people. In this regard, much of the work was done through oral interviews, live performances, recording music and note taking. As Dresner and Stone (2008) stated, “There is the need to employ close and sustained interaction and often come face-to-face with the people whose music is the focus of study” (p. 5). This implies that there was the need for fieldwork. As Titon (1996) postulated, fieldwork implies immersion into the everyday life musical performances; thus, a fieldworker produces written accounts field notes of the experience, which then serve as data for later analysis.

The Kajoji festival is a festival celebrated only by the people of *Yeji*; therefore, the population used for this study was based on the people of the *Pru* District, with the sampling population being elders of the *Abele* group, youth leaders, the women’s wing, song leaders, drummers, divisional chiefs, opinion leaders, the *Ebusuapanyin* and the spokesperson of the *Omanhene* of the *Yeji* traditional area. The general population used for this study was the inhabitants of *Yeji* who celebrate the Kajoji festival and who are predominantly farmers and fishermen. The chief informant was *Nana Osiahene*, who is the custodian of the *Omanhene*’s palace and the chief in charge of the *Abele* dance ensemble, called *Agoro hene* (ensemble chief). *Agoro hene*, singers, drummers and dancers were all participants of the study. Apart from the chief informant, the participants included the paramount chief of *Yeji*, two traditional elderly men, the master drummer of *Abele* musical ensemble, two singers of *Abele* songs and one elderly woman who had been involved in the rituals of the Kajojo festival. In sampling the participants for the study, a purposive sampling technique was used. In purposive sampling, the researcher relies on his or her own judgment when choosing members of the population to participate in the study (Sharma, 2017). This sampling technique was very effective because all the participants selected were direct access who fit the expected profile.

The people sampled were those who could give the needed data about the *Abele* music and the Kajoji festival. Like Blacking and Nettle (1995) indicated, it is important to work with someone who has a detailed cultural knowledge of the area in order to obtain accurate data. This paved the way to make judgments about the typicality of the *Abele* songs and how they are used in the Kajoji festival. As already stated, unstructured interviews were used to get information from the respondents while observation was also used to determine the performance behaviours in the context of the festival. The interviews were also conducted in groups to gather information on the origin of the Kajoji festival, the meaning of Kajoji, the *Abele* music performed during the festival, the functions of the music and the songs used in the musical ensemble, in order to ensure a reliable database for the study. In addition, audio and video recordings were done during the festival. Some selected recorded songs were transcribed and analysed. Participant observation was also key during the festival. According to Becker et al. (2002), participant observation allows researchers to enter the world of the target participants without a framework or guide for observation. The tools used in the data collection process included notebook, pen, a multi-purpose mobile phone, as well as video and audio recorders for the collection of raw data. Data collected were cross-checked coded and analysed.



## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### *Yeji Kajoji Festival*

It was revealed in the interview that the people of Yeji finally settled at the Southern section of the river Volta and started to farm alongside fishing. One informant for instance said:

*Our major foodstuff was Kuju (yam) and since the land was very fertile, our forefathers continued to grow and harvest yam. Therefore, yam became our major staple food on the land. The yams are harvested yearly and before any of them could eat or use the harvested yam for anything, their ancestors and gods will have to eat first before any one of them could even taste the new yam. (Nana Gyasehene)*

In similar situation, Nana Asafoakye also explained:

*So on every last Friday of the eleventh month (November), all the people would assemble at the chief's palace, led by the elders, to the shrine called Kurumbuse for the chief priest, who is the intermediate between the people and the gods, to perform rituals. (Nana Asafoakye)*

It was revealed that some of the new yams would be boiled and the boiled yam would be divided into two, one would be used to prepare *ɛto* (mashed yam) and the other *fufu* (pounded yam). After feeding the gods with the prepared food, everybody at the shrine would eat from the leftover and from there, the chief priest would pray and ask the ancestors to drive away all evil spirits. Driving of evil spirits was to help them cultivate more yams in the subsequent years.

*After the rituals, amidst Abele music, everyone would return home, carrying their chief in a palanquin back to town and from then, everybody is allowed to eat the new yam. This brought about the festival called Kajoji meaning “the ancestors are eating yam.” (Respondent)*

It was a taboo for any citizen to eat yam when the gods of the land had not eaten some. This tradition has been protected over the years and is still celebrated. After the rituals, it turns into merrymaking and a feast festival.

### *Abele Musical Genre*

The heart of the Yeji Kajoji festival is the performance of the *Abele music*. According to one respondent, the *Abele music* is the genre for the youths of *Yeji*. The *Abele* genre—like other musical types such as *adowa* of the Akan, *Kpalongo* and *Gome* of the Ga, *Abgadza* and *Bɔbɔɔbɔ* of the Ewe, and *Bawa* of the *Dagomba*—is a unisex dance. The respondent explained further that:

*Even though the dance is for the youths, few elderly men and women who feel they are strong enough can join. The dance movement is vigorous in nature and the up and down movements required during the performance of the Abele dance need strong people to take part. The youths perform the dance to the admiration of the elders of the town.*



*They are supposed to watch and feast. The festival is more like a music festival because Abele music is the trick.*

### ***Song Text of Abele Music***

In the study of the cultural history of a given civilization, the description of that culture at any given point in time is very paramount. In considering music as a tool for communication and culture preservation, their choice of words in the composition of their songs speaks a lot about how far they have come as a people (Sparling, 2003). As such, it is of great essence to consider not only the sound aspect of it, but also the textual as well as instrumental aspect too. Waterman and Bascom (1984) as cited in Ghunney (2015) consider song texts as a very useful tool for reconstructing cultural history. According to them, the topical songs have been known to persist for generations when they commemorate some historic events or when they are treated with some incidents of some lasting interest. Thus, “songs referring to battles of the 18<sup>th</sup> century are still current in Nigeria, much as calypso was composed in Trinidad deriding certain slave overseers” (p. 54).

As Agawu (1995) also put it, “if verbal meaning is determined by the succession of speech tones, then it would stand to reason that the same succession of speech tones, should be preserved in melodic contour in order for sung words to retain their meaning” (p. 46). As found in many traditional songs with reference to the lyrics, the cantors play a vital role. The cantors act as keepers of the songs and are thus the prime carriers of history among the literate folks. As such, even though the *Abele* music is for the youths, the cantor is taken through some training and certain rituals to be able to sing some of the songs believed to be associated with their customs that are used during the festival. Many of the song texts make reference to particular incidents in the history of the people of Yeji. Some refer to abuse of power and civil disorders while others refer to incidents such as brave deeds of some chiefs and individuals who worked hard for Yeji, even though some song texts labeled as ‘derogatory’ tell of certain factual stories of the misdeeds of individuals in the society. Abele song texts are done or composed in line with a malfeasance in the community, bravery, praise or for societal enjoyment.

### ***Instruments and their patterns in Abele Ensemble***

The musical instruments that are used in the Abele ensemble are both idiophones and membranophones. The idiophones are *Firikiyiwa* (castanet), *Trowa* (rattles-maracas) and *Dawuro* (Bell). The membranophones on the other hand are *Conga* (medium size), *Bingos* (small size congas), 1 and 2 Prenene, *Conga and Bass* (Tamalin).



**Figure 1: Dawuro**



**Figure 2: Trowa**



**Figure 2' Bingos**



**Figure 6 :Prenene 2**



**Figure 3: Medium size Conga**





**Figure 5: Prenene 1**



**Figure 7: Tamalin (Bass)**



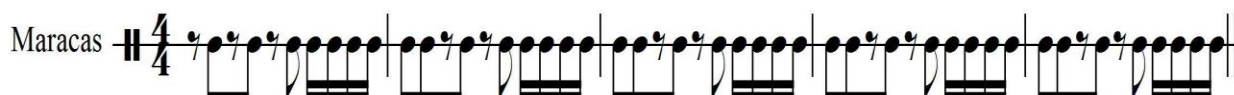
**Figure 8: Tom  
(big conga - Master drums)**

*Dawuro* (bell) and *Firikiyiwa* (castanet) are used to play the timeline of the Abele dance. One dancer plays the *Firikiyiwa* in the course of performance. The *Dawuro* is also played to give a backing to the *Firikiyiwa*. The basic timeline is in simple quadruple time.



### Example: 1 Abele timeline

**Trowa** [rattles]: This is of the primary type commonly called maracas or *akasaye*. It is made of small gourds with stretched necks, filled with pebbles. It is played with the palms but usually hung on the neck of the player for stability. It is also shaken several times as an improvising rhythmic instrument.



### Example: 2: Trowa rhythmic pattern

**Conga**: It is the first drum in the *Abele* ensemble. It is played with two sticks (stick technique). The rhythm played is as follows:



### Example: 3: Conga rhythmic pattern

**Bingos**: This is the first supporting drum used in the performance of the *Abele* ensemble. The rhythmic pattern is as follows:



### Example 4: Bingo rhythmic patterns

**Prenene 1 & 2**: These are the supporting drums in the performance of the *Abele* ensembles.



### Example 5: Prenene 1 rhythmic pattern



### Example 6: Prenene 2 rhythmic pattern



The study revealed some pertinent social aspects of the festival. Respondents made it clear that the beauty of the musical performance amidst the spectacular dance movements among the youths in the festival has branded the entire events, thereby attracting all surrounding communities as well as people elsewhere who have witnessed the occasion before. The music attracts people to meet old friends and educate the young ones who are growing. Festivals usually go with traditional rituals passed down from past generations to the present (Connor, 1987). They are characterized by a corporate worship of the ancestral spirits who are believed to abide in the ancestral stools. The music provides avenues for tourism for many people, thereby generating developmental project possibilities for the community. Members of the community see themselves as one people sharing a common goal/heritage. The *Kajoji* festival brings chiefs, royals, community members and foreigners together to sing, dance and participate without blemish, seeing themselves as one people with a common destiny.

## CONCLUSION

The paper confirms that the Abele musical genre is the heart of the Yeji Kajoji festival. The genre contains unique rhythms and fine melodies that are very attractive to many people. The involvement of the youths as well as the distinctive dance movements that accompany the singing and drumming during the festival cannot be overemphasized. The Abele music provides the basis for the understanding and appreciation of the *Nchumburu* musical culture in general, and gives the community a unique identity that projects its ideals and aesthetic achievements. The rhythmic vocal music constructed in short melodic patterns—and which is characterized by repetitive texts and by their rich instrumental accompaniment—has demonstrated a higher degree of adaptability to current compositions. Thus, the melo-rhythmic as well as the percussive rhythmic patterns identified with the genre are a rich source of corpus for art music compositions. The musical materials as well as the entire festival celebration are very important and could be used to supplement the existing music resource materials, for teaching the music aspect of the Creative Arts in the current educational reform. It is possible since practical experience involved in it could be a right music source for classroom use.

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