

The Ga People and Homowo Festival

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The Origin of the Ga People

The Ga people belong to the Ga-Dagbe group of Kwa people who inhabit the Greater Accra region of present day Ghana. The Kwa people of Africa include the Ga-Dagbe, Ewe, Akwapim, Fanti, Kwahu, and Akim and Ashanti. According to some legends Ga people migrated from Nigeria, others that they were part of Israel that migrated southward through present day Uganda, then along the Congo River, westward through Cameroons, Nigeria, Benin, Togo and finally to Greater Accra.

Given that Africans have roamed the continent for thousands of years and that such migrations might have been northward, southward, eastward or westward, the origin of any group of people in Africa may be very uncertain. Any African might have relatively originated from anywhere in Africa. The cited origin might as well be what could be remembered about the recent past and not the ultimate origin. For example, the Wolof name for a king is Fari which is very similar to the word Faro of ancient Egypt and may point to the Egyptian heritage of the Wolof in West Africa. The Egyptian word for the highest god and righteous father was Ra and the Setwana word for father is also Ra. It is therefore not surprising that among the Ga people, those at Teshi claim to have migrated from a town called Boma on the shores of the Congo River, those at Labadi from Boney Island off the coast of Nigeria and those from Gamashi from Benin City in Eastern Nigeria.

While these legends from remembered history cannot be proved, they cannot be

denied as well. There are several names in Uganda among the Acholi which are very similar to Ga names and there is supposed to be a language in the Cameroons called Ge which is similar to the Ga language. Moreover, the pronunciation of the word Ga is more similar to the word Ghana than the word Akan from which Dr. J. B Danquah created his myth linking the Akan to the ancient Ghana empire. To complicate matters, the ancient unleavened bread of the Ga people called *akpiti*¹ is much the same as the unleavened bread of the Jews. What can be said with certainty is that the Ga people were not static, but dynamic and engaged in the very common phenomenon of migration in Africa and that the *Homowo* festival had its origin in such migration. Before delving into the origin and meaning of *Homowo*, it is expedient to provide a brief account of the political structure of the Ga people, and some brief account of their culture. Because very few people including Rev. Carl Christian Reindorf (1834-1917), A. B. Quartey-Papafio², and Rev. Peter Addo³ have taken the trouble to write about the Ga people, much will be derived from the rich remembered history handed down from generation to generation. Quartey-Papafio's account of Homowo applies to Gamashi only while that of Rev. Peter Addo is very brief.

While remembered history cannot be full proof, written history cannot be also full proof. Elements of truth can be garnered from each of them through critical and comparative analysis of facts collected from various sources. Much of the work of Carl Christian Reindorf followed this approach when he compared and analyzed remembered history collected from various people. Normally, such remembered history is written in the minds of trusted initiates of the royal houses after the rite of *butung*⁴. As one who hails from one of the royal houses of the Ga State, I had the advantage of being educated

in the tradition of the Ga people by the grey-headed wise men and women through the practice of writing in the mind rather than on paper described below in the section on the culture of the Ga people. I consider it my responsibility to transfer some of what has been written in my mind on paper to the benefit of humankind.

The Political Structure of the Ga People

The political structure of the Ga people comprises six main independent sub-states known as the traditional areas of Gamashi, Osu, La, Teshi, Nungua and Tema. Each traditional area has several villages in the hinterland under it and the names of the traditional areas are the same as the names of the capital towns from which the names of the traditional areas derive. The *Mantsemei*⁵ or Kings of the capital towns are of equal status and independent. In each village or town are clans “differentiated from one another by name, by the names of the members and by their particular religious alliances and rites” (Osabu-Kle,2000,p.88). Each village has its own *Mantse* or chief who is under the *Mantse* of the traditional area who is the same as the *Mantse* of the capital town. Each clan is assigned a role to play in the life of the community. The differentiation of clans by name and membership suggests that the towns and villages were founded by previously independent groups who considered it safer and convenient to lead civilized life. The clans which represent relations of the same patrilineal or matrilineal origin are subdivided into families and the families are further divided into ‘houses’ - people of a common and nearest ancestral origin. A person may belong to two traditional areas, two clans, two families and two houses at the same time, one by virtue of his father and the other by

virtue of his mother.

Each house and each family is headed by a wise elder who is usually, but not necessarily the oldest able member. Female elders head the female members and male elders head the male members, but the male elders additionally take on the additional responsibility of heading the houses and families as a whole. When an elder is feeble by age another is appointed consensually to act as head through a practice known as *shuonotamo* (sitting on the lap of the elderly and wise).

Unlike the heads of houses and families which are age related, the selection of the clan head is based upon merit. When there is need for a clan head, the heads of the various houses and families of that clan meet to prepare a list of eligible candidates selected by merit according to how they have been observed from childhood. The list is presented to an electoral college comprising the heads of the various clans, the heads of professional groups notably the head of farming, *Okwaafoiatse*, and the head of fishing, *Woleiatse*, the *Wulomo* or chief priest and clan captains, *asafoiatsemei*⁶ and *asafoianyemei*. It is this same electoral college or council who assist the *Manche* in ruling the town or village. The electoral college selects the clan head by consensus from the list in secrecy to avoid competition and petty jealousies. At a predetermined date the selected clan head is presented ceremonially to the people of the town or village where he swears oath of allegiance to the ruling college and to the *Mantse*. The selected candidate is obligated to take office since refusal is considered a taboo and a disgrace punishable with banishment from the village or town.

The selection of a *Mantse* is very similar to the selection of the clan head. Several

houses, normally three to four, constitute the royal clan. The houses of the royal clan provide *Mantsemei* by rotation. When the mantle of succession falls upon a particular royal house, it is the responsibility of that house to provide a list of candidates selected by merit to the clan head who, in turn, forwards the list of names to the electoral college. The electoral college selects the *Mantse* from the list by consensus and appoints a date for ceremonial presentation of the *Mantse* to the people of the town or village where he swears an oath of allegiance to the electoral college and the electoral college, in turn, swears an oath of allegiance one by one to him.

Just as clans came together to constitute towns, villages and traditional areas to enable them lead a more secure civilized life, the independent traditional areas also came together to constitute the Ga State as a whole. At some point in time, the Gamashi *Mantse* was selected to be the first among equals to preside over the meetings of the Ga State Council. The members of the Ga State Council are the *Mantsemei* of the capital towns of the traditional areas. The speaker of the Ga State Council is the *Nai wulomo*.

The Culture of the Ga People

Culture comprises the knowledge base, beliefs, values, and attitudes and orientations of people towards social objects. Through a process of cultural education from childhood culture contributes to define people and to make people think and behave in the manner they do. The Ga people did not develop the technique of writing on paper to store knowledge. Instead they developed a technique for writing in the wax of the mind called *yitsontao*⁷. The technique involved repetitive imparting of knowledge followed by testing

at each repetition to ensure that the knowledge is eventually inscribed permanently in the *yitsontao*. Symbols in the form of images and if necessary punishments are sometimes used to aid the process.

The Ga people believe in the existence of spirits some of which may be good and others bad. They believe in the existence of a supreme spirit that created the world, but this supreme being has both masculine and feminine properties. Accordingly, the name of this supreme being is *Ataa-Naa Nyonmo* (God who is both He, *Ataa* and She, *Naa*) who is also referred to as *Ofe* - the one above all - or *Maawu*. While *nyonmo* means god, *Ataa-Naa Nyonmo*, *Ofe*, and *Maawu* are used exclusively only for the creator and sustainer of the world - the Most High God. *Maawu* has an adversary or enemy called *abomsam* who is the head of the evil spirits. Because *Maawu* is far away, he works through a system of intermediary *nyonmoi* arranged in a hierarchical order or levels. The first level and closest to *Maawu* are *DzemaWodzi* (singular *Dzemawong*) and the second level are *Wodzi*.

DzemaWodzi and *Wodzi* are assigned various names. Included among the names of *DzemaWodzi* are *Osabu* (the sky god), *Gbobu*, *Odame*, *Dantu*, *La-Kpa*, and the lagoon gods of *Sakumo*, *Korle*, *Osu-Klotey*, *Kpeeshi* (the war god of the Ga people), and *Sango*. While individuals may own and worship their own *Wodzi*, *DzemaWodzi* can only be owned and worshiped by groups or societies. *DzemaWodzi* and *Wodzi* may possess individuals turning them into mediums or *Wulomoi* (priests) and *Woyei* (priestesses) through whom they communicate with humans. While *DzemaWodzi* and *Wodzi* can be appeased with the blood of cattle, sheep, goats or fowls, *Maawu* can be appeased with only praises and libation. Because murder is a taboo, it is a taboo to offer human sacrifice

or blood to the *DzemaWodzi* and *Wodzi* of the Ga people. For the same reason, the Ga people do not have any institution of *brafo*, the organization of executioners.

Apart from *DzemaWodzi* and *Wodzi*, there are also spirits called *Bofoi* who may be messengers of *Maawu* or *Abomsam*- the enemy (Satan) of *Maawu*. The messengers of *Maawu* are called *Nyonmo-Bofoi* and the messengers of *Abomsam* are called *mumoi fodzi* - evil spirits.

All natural bodies and living things such as the sky, stars, planets, moons, sea, rivers, lakes, lagoons, trees, forests, bushes, plants, animals, fishes, birds, insects and humans have spiritual components. In particular, the spirits of the sky, stars, moons, sea, rivers, lakes, lagoons and forests are *DzemaWodzi* (Field, 1961, pp.4-6). Death does not destroy the spirits of living things which are always in communication with the bodies they leave behind. The human body is believed to comprise three entities, the *Gbomotso* (body), *Susuma* (the spirit of man associated with dreams), and *Kla* (the sustainer of life). All people born on the same day have the same *Kla* and the same *Kla* name or day name⁸.

When the *Susuma* wanders about in dreams, the *Kla* stays behind to maintain life (ibid, p.93). If both the *Kla* and the *Susuma* leave the body together, the death occurs. If either the *Kla* or the *Susuma* leave the body permanently, the person dies. When humans die, their *Susumai* (plural of *Susuma*) live on to become ancestral spirits always willing to help their descendants while the *Kla* may enter into reincarnation (ibid, p.94). The spirits of animals and plants can be tapped and used to create *Wodzi* or for healing purposes. The various stools of *Mantsemei* are also *DzemaWodzi*. Humans can communicate with spirits through the pouring of libation. Moreover, the *DzemaWodzi* and *Wodzi* of the various traditional areas are not the same although some may bear the same name and

function. Typically, the shrines or places of worship are not the same even if the names of *DzemaWodzi* and *Wodzi* coincide.

There is also a conception of trinity which is quite different from the Christian conception of trinity. The sky, *Nwei*, is considered a male and the earth, *Shikpong* is considered female. The marriage between *Nwei* and *Shikpong* resulted in the birth of the sea, *Nsho*. This trinity of *Nwei*, *Shikpong*, and *Nsho* sustain life, *Wala*. The sacred day of *Shikpong* is Thursday on which farming is prohibited. The sacred day of the *Nsho* is Tuesday on which fishing is prohibited. Thus, the Ga people have two Sabbath days in a week.

The Ga people also have a value system of taboos that guide their behaviour. Thus, all acts of incest, homosexuality, rape, murder, disrespect for the elderly and other immoral acts are considered punishable taboos - by death (in the case of murder), by banishment from society, or by heavy fines.

The brief account of the Ga political system and culture lays the background for understanding the *Homowo* festival of the Ga people to which we now turn.

The Practice, Meaning and Significance of Homowo

Homowo derives from two Ga words *homo* meaning hunger and *wo* meaning to hoot at. *Homowo* therefore means hooting at hunger. According to legend, during the process of migration, the Ga nation experienced famine and severe hunger. However, they mustered up courage to till the land, planted corn and called upon *Ataa-Naa Nyonmo*, the *DzemaWodzi*, *Wodzi*, and *Sisadzi*, the ancestral spirits through libation to bless the farms

to yield in abundance. In response to their prayers deluge of rains, followed, the crops grew and yielded in abundance. Being experts in fishing they also caught fish in abundance which included giant red snappers called *tsile* and giant tunas called *odaa*.

Their sheep and goats also multiplied as they fed on abundance of green pasture. They celebrated this abundance of food and victory over hunger with a specially prepared diet from unfermented corn powder called *kpokpoe* which has now been corrupted to *kpekple*, and palm nut soup of fish. They hooted at and ridiculed hunger as they ate the *kpokpoe* with the palm nut soup prepared from fish only (notably *tsile* and *odaa*), poured libation and offered some of the diet symbolically to the *DzemaWodzi* and ancestral spirits, *Sisadzi*. *Homowo* which is celebrated annually between August and September is to commemorate that day when hunger was defeated, hooted at, and ridiculed. Given the political structure of the Ga people, it is to be expected that this hooting at and ridiculing of hunger might take different forms.

The independence of the traditional areas and the possibility of an individual belonging to more than one traditional demands that the celebrations be organized in succession such to enable interested parties to attend any of them. The dates for the celebrations in the traditional areas are decided upon by consensus a council of *Wulomei* representing the various traditional areas. The first to begin is Nungua because the Nungua people are supposed to be the first of the Ga people to arrive in Ghana followed by the people of Gamashi. Teshi is the last to celebrate being the youngest of the Ga towns which broke away from La and was established in 1710.

The preparation for the festival begins with the planting of crops before the rainy season that begins in May. In June, a ritual called *gbemlilaa* (locking the way) bans

drumming and music to enable people attend to crops with seriousness. This is followed by *nshobulemo* or ritual to calm the sea. Another ritual called *okomfemaa* bans fishing in the lagoons until the *Homowo* festival is over. The *Homowo* is preceded by yam festivals in the villages of the hinterland. This is the village version of celebrating victory over hunger, but falls short of hooting and ridiculing hunger which is reserved for the capital towns. When the date for the *Homowo* festival of a traditional area is near, the people of that traditional in the villages are expected to return to their homes in the respective capital towns. The villagers begin to arrive a week before the celebration beginning on Thursday, the sacred day of the earth when farm going is prohibited. The first arrivals on Thursday are called *Soobii* (Thursday people).

The villagers arrive with pomp and jubilating songs bringing their harvested crops especially maize and palm nuts along. They arrivals parade the streets all day and retire only during the night. Friday of the arrival week is dedicated to remembrance of those who died during the year. In the early morning hours of Tuesday, the sacred day of the sea when sea going is prohibited, *kpokpoe* and palm nut soup are prepared for the feasting. The *Mantse* of the traditional area, clan heads, family heads and head of families pour libation to *Maawu*, *Sisadzi*, *DzemaWodzi*, and *Wodzi* and sprinkle white *kpokpoe* mixed with palm soup to the *DzemaWodzi*, *Wodzi* and *Sisadzi* to thank them invite their blessings, and to signify the beginning of the feast. The next day, Wednesday, is the day of *ngoowala* when young visit the elderly to wish them long life and the elderly, in turn, shower the young with gifts of all sorts including money.

There are some variations in the celebrations in the capital towns after the *kpokpoe* feast. At Teshi, Tema and Labadi, for example, the feast is followed by the

Kpashimo dance and parade. At Nungua, it is followed by *Obene* dance during the night and *Kpele* dance during the day. The most popular celebration after the *kpokpoe* feast is the *Kpashimo* of Teshi which attracts foreigners. It begins on Sunday after the feast and ends on the next week Saturday with *Sesebumo*⁹. Most people from the traditional areas of the Ga State, foreigners, and other Ghanaians domiciled in the Ga State converge at Teshi to watch the last celebration of the Homowo season, *Sesebumo*.

The *Kpashimo* of Teshi begins on Sunday with *sesefaa* (the carrying of a wooden dish containing water and sacred leaves) and ends on Saturday with *Sesebumo* (the overturning of the wooden dish and its contents) to cleanse the people, make their wishes come true, and bless them. During *sesefaa*, the *kpa* groups from the seven quarters of Teshi are led first to the palace of the *Mantse*. The *Mantse* pours libation and provides some amount of money as a customary gift of appreciation. The *kpa* groups proceed to the palaces of the divisional chiefs, heads of clans, heads of families, *asafoiatsemei*, *asafoianyemei* and *Wulomei* of the town by turn who also pour libation and provide gifts of appreciation. This opens the way for *kpashimo*.

Kpashimo is of two types. The more gentle type is in the form of traditional songs and dancing and it is called *Amlakui-Akpa* meaning the *Kpa* dance of the nobility. The *sese* carrying group engages always in this type. The other type is very democratic and aims at exposing the wrongs committed by the nobility and commoners alike during the past year with the view of making them change their behaviour for the better. The *kpa* groups from the seven quarters of the town engage in this type. After *sesefaa*, the *kpa* groups break into their separate groups and begin to expose the wrongdoings of the nobility beginning with those of the *Mantse*. The wrongdoings of the head of State of

Ghana and his Ministers may also be exposed. They then proceed to expose the wrongdoings of individuals. Any person whose wrongdoings are exposed is expected by tradition to provide some gift usually money to express his or her appreciation. This goes on from Sunday to Friday while the *sese* carrying group continues to engage in *Amlakui-Akpa* and people desiring special blessing shower the *sese* with gifts of money. Paper notes are handed over to the *sese* group leader while coins are put into the *sese*. The *sese* group parades through the principal streets of the town once a day.

Saturday is the day of *Sesebumo* to bring an end to *Kpashimo* and the Homowo festival as a whole where all attention is focused on the *sese* group. In the morning, the *sese* group goes to the *Mantse*, and elders as it did on Sunday to greet them. The pour libation to invoke blessings from Ataa-Naa Nyonmo (the same as *Ofe* or *Maawu*), *DzemaWodzi*, *Wodzi* and ancestral spirits. They repeatedly sing the song:

Sese yaabu dza neke afi.

Mee loo abaaye ?

Sese shall not overturn again till next year.

What fish shall we feed on?

After greeting the nobility, the *sese* group rests till the afternoon. In the afternoon, the *sese* group leads the *kpa* groups of the seven divisions of the town who are also followed by the towns people and visiting spectators through the principal streets of the town all singing “*Sese yaabu dza neke afi. Mee loo abaaye?*”. The procession ends at *Sangonaa* near the Sango lagoon. At *Sangonaa*, the song and *kpashimo* get louder, more

vigorous and intense till finally the carrier of the *sese* overturns it and its contents. This overturning of the *sese* marks the end of the Homowo of the Ga people and the lifting of the ban on drumming.

Conclusion

The Ga people of Ghana belong to the Kwa speaking people of Africa which also includes the Ewe and the Akan. Several legends give differing account of the origin of the Ga people. What can be said with certainty is that they were dynamic people who participated in the phenomenon of migration on the continent for thousands of years that make it impossible to determine with accuracy the ultimate origin. During one of such migrations, they faced some acute famine, but were courageous to plant and pour libation to Maawu, DzemaWodzi, Wodzi and ancestral spirits to bless their farms. After a deluge of rain which they considered a response to their prayers, there was an abundance of food and fish. They prepared a special type of food from unfermented corn which they ate with palm nut soup prepared with fish. They hooted and ridiculed hunger in those days. *Homowo* means hooting at and ridiculing hunger. It is an annual festival to commemorate the day the ancestors won victory over hunger, hooted at it and ridiculed it with songs and dancing.

Despite the popularity of the Homowo festival in Ghana, very few have written about it. This is partly due to the Ga tradition of writing on the wax or slate of the brain called *yitsontao* using repetition, testing, symbols and initiation. Hailing from one of the royal houses of the Ga State and a product of the *yitsontao* process of education in Ga

history, culture and traditions, I have used my unique experience to enrich what others before me have written. I have personally lived the life of Homowo for decades of my life. What I have seen, what I have experienced and what I have been educated in is what I have committed on paper so that others may read, study and enjoy.

¹ *Akpiti* is an bread of the Ga people prepared from unfermented corn flour. A variation of it is sometimes fried in balls and sold in the market, *akpiti-ni-ashi*. Another variation of akpiti is *kpokpoe* which is the food eaten during the *Homowo* festival.

² See <http://members.tripod.com/tetty/festival.htm>

³ See <http://www.addo.ws/Homowo.htm>

⁴ *Butung* is rite performed by the Ga people to train and qualify men to assume traditional office. Nobody can be a clan head, a divisional chief, or chief without going through this ritual. The candidate is confined for thirty days during which he is trained in the history, customs, administration and rites. Only those who have gone through the butung rite are qualified to enter the sacred shrines and stool rooms.

⁵ The Ga word for a King is *Mantse* and the plural form is *Mantsemei*.

⁶ In the precolonial days, the Ga army was divided into *asafoi* (singular *asafo*). *Asafoiatse* is a male captain. Its plural form is *asafoiatsemei*. *Asafoianye* is a female captain and its plural form is *asafoianyemei*.

⁷ The Ga people believed that there is a portion of the brain called *yitsontao*, a slate in the brain on which knowledge can be written and stored permanently and be retrieved when necessary.

⁸ Every Ga person has a day name which is the same for all males and females born on the same day. This is the *Kla* name. For example, the *Kla* name for all males born on Sunday is *Kwashi* and for females born on Sunday, it is *Akoshia*.

⁹ *Sese* is a large wooden dish into which water and sacred leaves are usually put. The combination of water and leaves in *sese* is believed to have cleansing and blessing power. *Sesebumo* literally means overturning of *sese* and its contents to cleanse the people, make their wishes be fulfilled, and open the gates of blessings.

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