

**PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE TRADITIONAL MUSIC SCENE:  
PERSPECTIVES FROM AVATIME TOTOEME MUSICAL PERFORMANCE IN  
GHANA.**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The article provides an empirical example and a study rooted in the concept of cultural construction of feminism in relation to traditional music making of Avatime people of Ghana. Data was collected through participant observation of Totoeme. The author addresses the participation of women in traditional music performance and its associated rituals based on gender asymmetric assumptions. It also highlights removal of certain barriers among women in totoeme musical performance as pertains to installation of a new queen mother. The paper concludes that women can be credited for sustaining most African dances including totoeme in this contemporary world. It is therefore important that they are supported possibly by traditional authorities in this regard to ensure cultural preservation.*

**KEYWORDS:** Totoeme, Women, Avatime, Libation, Installation, Cultural Preservation

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## INTRODUCTION

Avatime towns of Volta Region of Ghana have a stock of royal musical types containing ever glittering features that are good characteristics of African or Ghanaian musical forms. Some of these dances are *afeti*, *govu* and *totoeme* which are performed on special occasions in the Ewe communities. The *totoeme* musical genre is usually performed by females in Avatime in the Volta Region of Ghana and it is contextually bound musical type associated with political activities such as durbar of chiefs, funeral and enstoolment<sup>1</sup> of queen mothers. It is appropriate to unearth what the Avatime women sing about and their involvement in the performance of *totoeme* music. In effect, it highlights what accounts for the zeal with which the Avatime women hold on to this aspect of their cultural heritage called *totoeme* in spite of the challenges of modernity and Christianity.

Although the impact of traditional music on the culture of Ghana has been widely documented, it is difficult to imagine the role of women in traditional musical practice beyond singing and dancing. Some scholars have documented contributions of females to the sustenance of traditional music. Acheampong (1996, p.35) highlights the monopoly of women in performing music during *bragoro*<sup>2</sup>. He reports that “there were no men. Women played the *dondo*, only women drummed, sang and danced.” This was a report of an event that occurred in the 1910s. Ampene (2005) has also devoted several pages to the role of women in the perpetuation of *nnwomkorɔ*<sup>3</sup> in Ashanti and Brong Ahafo regions of Ghana, giving credence to prominent personalities who deserve publicity. *Totoeme* is a women

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<sup>1</sup> A term used to refer to installation of a chief or a queen in the southern part of Ghana

<sup>2</sup> Female initiation rite of the Akan people of Ghana.

<sup>3</sup> A type of female musical genre among the Akan people of Ghana.

musical type which is deeply rooted in the social lives of the Avatime, Ewe<sup>4</sup> communities in Ghana. It is important that women's participation in such a genre is brought to light based on gender asymmetry and the concept of cultural constructions. The paper unfolds as follows: The concept of cultural construction and the gender based asymmetry in music, methodology and process, results, discussion and conclusions.

### **Concept of Cultural Construction and Gender Asymmetry in music**

With regards to feminine constructions, Peoples and Bailey (2006) hold the view that human beings think and act within the framework of a cultural system that affects worldviews and social behaviour among others. This concept is seen in the construction of feminine among the Avatime because feminine is culturally defined. Avatime perspective about gender is based on how males and females perceive and define themselves and each other. The Avatime hold a notion about what it means to be a woman, what roles are seen as appropriate for women. "These dimensions of femaleness are learned during socialization rather than fixed at birth" (Peoples and Bailey, 2006, p.213). In the light of this, cultural conceptions of femininity and masculinity matter to the Avatime. Hence, their social behaviour is affected by the norms, categories, worldviews, symbols and other ideas and beliefs that influence their conception about femininity.

Avatime people define and make use of feminine differences in a multitude of ways. These ideas are related to the concepts derived from Amoaku (1975, pp.37-8) which state that traditional music is symbolically definable from within the Ewe worldview. Several scholars (Anku, 2009; Ampene, 2005; Charry, 2000; Burns, 2009) also substantiate such cultural constructions about gender roles. Avatime worldview in terms of cultural constructs is demonstrated in several ways. In such a context the ability to understand culture becomes a vital component of competent and active citizenship. Smith & Riley's (2009) view about culture as an autonomous force steering society is manifest in the differential roles and limitations found in the performance of *totoeme*.

Gender based asymmetry in music is also manifest in the work of Sakata (1987, p.88) quoted in Sarkissian (1992, p.343) who notes that "in Afghanistan musical instruments are generally played by men". The issue of gender differences in musical roles as they operate in indigenous music operates in classical as well as popular music spheres (Sarkissian, 1992). These constructions are linked to hegemonic processes of gender type of cultural reproduction and resistance. In the face of such cultural typecasts females in contemporary times have proven beyond every doubt that they are capable of performing some roles traditionally reserved for men. This is evident in academic institutions where males and females are required to undertake the same task in drumming for assessment. Hence, this standpoint must inspire music practitioners to break away from the classification of music and differential roles based on the premise of seemingly natural biological differences.

In many African music cultures scholars such as Johnson (1987), Ampene (2005), Anku (2009) and Burns (2009) have noted that musical roles are often gendered as male and female and they carry asymmetrical levels of local recognition. Indigenous musical traditions have been extensively studied throughout the history of ethnomusicology but a few have addressed female musicians and their musical arts in Ghana and Africa. In one of the studies,

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<sup>4</sup> An ethnic group located in the Volta Region. Also means the language spoken

Burns (2009) redresses the deficiency through a detailed ethnography of a group of female musicians from Dzodze in the Volta region of Ghana. The purpose for the study was to bridge the gap created by scholars who have abstracted and fetishized Ewe rhythm without addressing other aspects of music behavior. Consequently, Burns (2009) gives credence to female musicians who have been ignored throughout West Africa. He outlines the cultural context of female musicians in Eweland. He observes that the role of women as sustainers and nurturers of Ewe culture has not accorded them a corresponding degree of social prestige. Duràn (1995) adds her voice to the discussion and notes that the gendered separation of musical roles by the *jeliw* (griots) among the Mande group of Mali, Guinea and Gambia have dominated the local music scene for hundreds of years. Charry (2000) also reports that the music of Mande *jeli* consists of three distinct dimensions of artistry: instrument playing, song and speech. The male musician is said to specialize in instrument playing and speech while the female musician specializes in song. Song, from the perspective of Charry (2000) is considered feminine because of its power to stir emotion.

Participation of women in drumming is generally prohibited in both Akan and Ewe societies (Anku, 2009). Meanwhile, women constitute the core of the chorus and dance in several ensembles for mixed groups while men lend a supporting hand as drummers in female ensembles. Ampene (2005) also highlights a similar cultural experience among male instrumentalists and female singers and dancers in *nwonkorɔ* ensemble. This phenomenon is prevalent among many African cultures. Most African musical cultures including the *Kpelle* and *Vai* of Liberia; and the Akan and Ewe of Ghana assign chorus singing to be a feminine activity, and instrument playing to be a male activity. Such inspiration explains the rationale for bringing in men to play instruments while women take charge of singing and dancing.

In terms of new compositions for traditional songs Burns (2009) argues that perceived associations of men with creativity and women with reproduction (both biological and artistic) have worked to deny female artists equal opportunities for creative development. Although Ewe women may not have an environment that favors them to have leisure time to pursue creative aspirations, I perceive the source of this limitation to be lack of motivation. Many women in rural communities are noted to control economic capital (Acheampong, 1996). It can be argued that the financial outcome generated from their trading activities serves as the motivation to pursue and sustain their businesses. Evidence of motivation to create music can be found in the accounts of Burns (2009) which states that *jeli* (female musicians) among the Mande and the female *nwonkorɔ* singers among the Akans receive financial incentives, and this fuels their interest to compose new songs. These arguments may be put up for the female musician engaged in regular performances on commercial basis. Nonetheless, members of ensembles which feature occasionally like *totoeme* which happens once or twice a year may not find it necessary to compose new songs since they do not have the forum to challenge their creative skills. Moreover, cultural taboos restrict women from supplanting sustenance activities with music. Thus, “the contributions of Ewe female musicians to society are termed to be ‘simply’ reproductive” (Burns, 2009, p.59). It is perceived that female input to music does not entail significant development or make use of the creative faculties.

## METHODOLOGY AND PROCESS

In dealing with women participation in a musical ensemble of Avatime people of Ghana, participant-observation was used to collect data. Being a woman, I had the chance to participate and witness some rituals connecting the performance of the *Totoeme* musical performance. This ritual ceremony was performed for a newly installed queen mother. In my white outfit, I joined the entourage of the queen mother to the river side for cleansing rituals. Although I was not permitted to witness the ritual bath due to privacy accorded the new queen mother, costuming and make-up were exposed to public view. The procession from the stream to the town provided me an opportunity to participate in the chorus that responded to the cantor's calls. It was quite a distance but the excitement that coloured the day took away any fatigue. At the community square I was privileged to sit behind the female royals, thus enabling me to have a full view of proceedings. While my participation in the acceptance dance was exciting, I did not lose sight of my role as a researcher. Rather, I was keen in observing the women's involvement in the music and did not hesitate to ask questions sporadically at the least chance. My participation in the communal dance was an inspiration to many educated women who joined the arena.

Participation in the musical activities during the *enstoolment* exposed me to the two categories of *totoeme* songs of different structures. As an insider of this tradition, my experience in playing the gourd shaker and singing to harmonize, not ignoring portions of the songs where they usually sing unison was a manifestation of recognition and acceptance from the women. I participated in the singing and sometimes became the lead singer due to my enthusiasm. The level of zeal I had after my initial participant observation in *totoeme* confirms Myers' (1992: 103) assertion that some authors begin their research with an enthusiasm for a particular instrument or a type of music and consequently becoming performers. Hood (1982) championed the approach to ethnomusicology known as "bi-musicality" in which the student learns to perform an instrument as an approach to understand the music just as learning the language to speak with the people. Hood's description of learning to play and Chernoff's (1979) description of drumming in Ghana are typical examples of my involvement in the musical performance.

## RESULTS

The performance of *totoeme* music at the installation of the new queen mother involves certain rituals which are performed by the women. This includes libation<sup>5</sup> at the beginning of the ceremony. Several observations reveal that the beginning of libation is normally marked by an invocation addressed in the following order – to the Supreme Being (Mawu in Ewe, Aya in *Siyase*), to the earth (*kesawa bidome*), to all deities inhabiting the earth and rivers (*babuwa*) and then to the ancestors (*bakatsiwa*). This is followed by the reasons for the libation, the petition or request (or supplication), a prayer for the general blessings and conclusion which may be in the form of blessing or threat to those who do not wish people well. Libation is normally performed by males at state functions, but *totoeme* creates space for the Avatime women elders to break barriers into the male dominated field. In the instance of *totoeme*, palm wine is used for libation. The performer is assisted with two other elders who interpolate the prayer by saying *wie* or *nte* (yes or truly). The pattern for pouring libation

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<sup>5</sup> A traditional prayer where drinks are offered to the gods

in Avatime follows the scheme presented in Ampene (2005) for the Akan libation song in *Nnwonkorɔ*. Whereas the women in *Nnwonkorɔ* sing their invocation, the Avatime women say their libation. The bottom line here is whether a libation is sung or said, it employs text and the import of the prayer is carried to the audience.

Female elders and queen makers as agents do not only shape roles that become models for future performances, but they shape and reinforce analogous roles in everyday life. This is particularly true in societies where trained specialists perform rituals that are intimately interwoven into the ongoing fabric of everyday life. We may assume that individuals sometimes accumulate experiences that comprise their personal corpus of models over their lifetimes. At various points they may weigh those experiences in relation to others that may turn up in subsequent libation text or ritual invocation they embark on a lifelong agenda of searching, reflexivity and interpretation.

It was revealed that every movement from one place to the other during the installation process was accompanied with *totoeme* songs. The queen mother with the *totoeme* ensemble, returned to the community square where everyone was refreshed with the traditional drink (palm wine) provided by the family of the queen mother to end the occasion. The communal drink committed all present as witnesses to the event and at the time bonding them as one. One thing observed was that women do not clap in *totoeme*, instead, they keep the pulse of the music with their *akayε* (gourd shakers). The researcher gleaning on musical traditions of the Avatime people looked at how the various aspects of musical genres performed affect social order and what it really means to the women in the communities.

## DISCUSSION

Though notable by interaction and observation, majority of Avatime people are Christians, the ideas about the relationship between God and lesser gods are deeply entrenched in all facets of Avatime life and are basic to their worldviews. As a result all traditional social gatherings open with a traditional prayer (pouring of libation). The Avatime firmly believe that God is involved in the affairs of this world. Starting events by acknowledging His presence and committing the queen mother into His care points to the intimate relationship the Avatime have with God. There is also the fear that ancestral spirits would descend on the living in anger for a belief that the dead can punish those who contravene traditional sanctioned mores. Consequently, all the female participants in the cleansing rituals are church going Christians. It could be construed that ancestral beliefs represent a powerful source of moral sanction for they affirm the values upon which Avatime society is based. Agawu (1995) reports of related beliefs held among the performers of *Adavatram* music. Such rituals provide insight into the relationship between the music and the people.

It is inferred from the responses of the interviewees that Avatime women have made conscious effort to champion the sustainability of *totoeme* heritage. This confirms the assertion made in Coplan (1986) that the owners and agents of mass cultural media now regard themselves as the preservers and champions of the richness and beauty of the African tribal heritage. *Totoeme* music in Avatime belongs to all Avatime women and it is incumbent on them as the custodians of the genre under the umbrella of their elders and *Awasi* to spearhead a sustainable transmission of the music. Hence the various contextual settings serve as the channel for the performance and preservative mechanism of the genre.

It is also deduced that *totoeme* music is created and developed as an entity that has to be learnt and that the makers of *totoeme* are members of Avatime society who are seen to carry their life experiences with them into *totoeme* music (Amoaku, 1975). This musical culture manifests close affinity to observations made by Nketia (2005) that since musical culture is cultivated in a particular social and physical environment, it is shaped not only by ideas generated within its own sphere, but also by the response of music makers to the wider environment or their world of reality. It is obvious in contemporary times that a musical culture may respond to technology and industry, to current political and social tendencies, to variations in social structure, to intellectual and to philosophical climate of the wider environment. *Totoeme* is perceived to respond to cultural, political and social tendencies of the people.

*Totoeme* music is exclusively a reserve for Avatime females and this is a great deal in terms of historical, social, moral, religious and political lives of the community. Thus, the dance segment brings to bear the hierarchical structure in the community and defines the status of the new queen mother. Issues of power and internalization of status quo are complex and deceptive. In Avatime cultural lore with courtly traditions, queen mothers appear to have more honour than ordinary women, but such reputation is illusory since these queen mothers still have to fulfill certain female demands – defined expectations identified with their status including normal domestic roles for Avatime women. The concept of asymmetrical power relations is particularly crucial for the examination of the practical ways in which domination is achieved. Myers (1992: 342) quoting Collier and Rosaldo (1981: 311) observes that “gender conceptions in any society are to be understood as functioning aspects of a cultural system”. As a result, the dance segment brings on board the inclusion of male participants in the performance of *totoeme*.

The fact that women seem to be blamed or condemned and left by the way side by social discourses is more disconcerting. In attempt to find a solution close to the phenomenon the Avatime traditional authorities have tried to address feminine issues, by first delving into the reasons why the problems exist. There are attitudes that have an impact on women’s self image. Tetey (2002) observes that men’s perception about the role and status of women was seen as fundamental obstacle that results in women overlooked and ignored as developers. Much as traditional authorities seek to maintain Avatime values, women and girls are encouraged to eschew ingrown attitudes that manifest as conservative mentality as accepted norms shared among them. This move has over the years resulted in breaking the barriers and limitations of traditional roles and that makes females embrace new fields both in their family lives and chosen careers.

While Avatime women are trying to blaze the trail, Gadzekpo (2001) asserts that we have paid a terrible price for what we have got in return for globalization. Nonetheless Awoyemi (2007) suggests that we must think about the consequences of the rapid globalization that has engulfed our nations. This trend of change is a national or global phenomenon, supported by the Avatime traditional authorities to ensure sustainability of their cultural values especially with regard to feminine issues. Most concerns underscore the fears that infrastructural development and rural migration to urban areas enable women to “break from traditional custom” and put the social fabric at risk.

Negating such emotional concerns, it is noted that some dying traditions such as *ablabe*<sup>6</sup> has been enacted and fused into the performance of *totoeme*. Women are seen to have a double edged clip on the female music and their puberty tradition. The ratification of the *ablabe* rites without the performance of *totoeme* would obviously keep the puberty rites behind the curtain and would go unnoticed. So, the enactment of *ablabe* integrated into the performance of *totoeme* is a re-narration of the culture guiding puberty rites in Avatime for their young females in pre-colonial times. Also, the numerical superiority enjoyed by Avatime women and their status as nurturers of *ablabe* and *totoeme* traditions favour participation on the local arena. This encourages quite a number of women and girls to participate in this musical tradition to sustain it.

The performance of *totoeme* during the Easter durbar of chiefs and during *Amuna* festival generates a discourse that guides our knowledge about Avatime people of the past and present. Hence, the study of *totoeme*, a female music of the Avatime people in the Volta Region of Ghana brings out the cultural life of the people as well. An important aspect of this type of study is to understand how the field of traditional music is closely identified with cultural life, social life and gender. It is worthy to note that *totoeme* is the only means by which women cross barriers to male dominated traditions like the performance of rituals and total autonomy and control over installation rites. *Totoeme* has generative power because it is one traditional genre that brings women together with such commitment. It is a symbol of unity as both male and female reflect the make-up of traditional judiciary.

Inferences from the study cast a spotlight on female elders, *totoeme* knowledge keepers and participants who are competent in performing the genre as living educational treasures. These individuals become storehouses that contain a functioning Avatime culture based on *totoeme* knowledge. Their experiences can be adequately conveyed and appreciated. Hence, their expertise is included in the traditional durbar of chiefs in Avatime since *totoeme* cannot be performed outside royal occasions which are not envisaged. For the Avatime people *totoeme* is another material resource contextualized and reconstructed to reinforce the image of the Avatime women congruent with rationales for their political involvement and societal significance.

## CONCLUSION

I want to emphasize that to say that femininity is culturally constructed is not the same as saying that physical differences between males and females are irrelevant. We acknowledge that biological differences between males and females are relevant for both ideas and behaviours in the perpetuation of Avatime culture. Hence, it is inferred that *totoeme* in any context is defined by the role of the Avatime woman. Otner (1974) argues that feminine boundaries articulate the most deeply entrenched forms of domination which provide basic metaphors for others, and thus constitute the most intensely 'naturalized' of all our boundary making activities. The boundaries which separate male and female and assign to each other proper social practices are as natural as the boundaries which separate one community from another. Musical practices are no exception—it is natural that men will make better drummers in *totoeme* as it is natural that women will make better dancers with graceful movements in

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<sup>6</sup>Female initiation rites among the Avatime in Ghana

*totoeme*. Musical performance is often the principal means by which appropriate gender behaviour is taught and socialized (Sugarman 1989).

The role of women as dancers and chorus singers are perceived as almost peripheral to the performance. Burns, (2009) maintains that it is due to the roles played by the women that traditional dance-drumming performances are preserved. Much as the women could be credited for the preservation of traditional performances; for improvising song and dance forms and creatively adopting lyrics of songs to contemporary social concerns, I believe that it is a collective responsibility on the men and women to sustain the performances. The role of men as instrumentalist cannot be overlooked in that without the instrumental background there will be no performance. Equally, the performance will not be complete without the chorus and dance sections. Hence, *totoeme* music provides a path for discovering the underlying assumptions and cognitive understandings of Avatime people. *Totoeme* also reflects the people's approach and attempt to integrate moral, social norms as well as feminine phenomenon within their own cultural context.

One unique aspect of the findings is that of all traditional musical genres performed by the Avatime people *totoeme* is the only musical genre that exhibits Avatime cultural heritage on a large scale. The performance of *totoeme* allows participants to exhibit aspects of Avatime courtly courtesies, traditional costume, traditional diet, social life and religious beliefs. Furthermore, it has been realised that the perpetuation of *totoeme* as a cultural art has contributed to the maintenance of a gender balance in Avatime communities. We may then say that the emancipation of the Avatime woman is closely linked to the acknowledgement of its female rulers and traditional musical arts in festivals. It must be stated that Avatime feminine cultures (*Kedeame ikɔɛ*) have increasingly been preserved by the women through the performance of *Totoeme*, making the women prestigious in the Avatime communities.

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