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THE ARTISTIC ASPECTS OF CUSTOMARY MARRIAGE AMONG THE GBI IN THE VOLTA REGION OF GHANA

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Abstract

Like any African society, the Gbi, a sub-group of the Ewes located in the middle belt of the Volta Region of Ghana, attaches enormous socio-cultural and rich aesthetic values to the institution of marriage. As a common feature of African socio-cultural life, the Gbi seeks to maintain the cohesion of the family through marriage. In accordance with the Gbi and Ewe culture, marriage as a rite of passage is associated with some exquisite and unique transitional rites and performances. These rites and observations are not only for establishing and maintaining the family, but also for creating and sustaining the strong ties of kinship. Normally visible with marriages are libation prayers, exchange of gifts and captivating cultural performances. Though Gbi customary marriage is embedded with several art forms, the artistic relevance is normally glossed over or not taken serious note of. This might result due to the lack of appropriate orientation. This paper looks at the importance of infusion and use of art in the marriage customs of the people of Gbi in order to assert the relevance of the artistic symbolism embodied in their use. Observations made were mainly from the performances of indigenous customary marriage rites at Gbi Dzigbe and Nyigbe for close comparative analysis. Results indicated that, every artifact or symbolic representation used and ritual performed in Gbi marriage is both intended to function positively in promoting the cultural and aesthetic values of the people. The concept, form, belief of all the art forms used motivates the creation of artifacts for economic benefits and national development. It is a fact that indigenous visual art forms cannot be ignored in the day-to-day activities in the life cycle of the Gbi people, the Ewe and Africa as a whole. Indigenous art forms function in every aspect of human life that are marked in rites and observation such as conception, birth, naming, puberty, marriage, death, guidance, life enhancing support activities and remembrance.

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INTRODUCTION

The Gbi people found in two separate locations, Peki and Hohoe in the Volta Region of Ghana are a sub-group of Ewes. The location of Peki is known as Gbi Dzigbe (Gbi North) and the other at Hohoe is known as Gbi Nyigbe (Gbi South) (Agbodeka, 1997). The artistic aspects of customary marriage among the people of Gbi are diverse. This paper examines the traditional society of Gbi in relation to the importance and use of art in its customary marriage. It also identifies the various art forms and the value the Gbi people place on art in relation to its function and relevance in customary rites.

Marriage is considered a basic institution in every human society. In Africa, marriage is hardly a personal affair. It is a matter in which the lineages of the contracting parties are greatly interested (Sarpong, 1973). It is recognized as a social institution, not only for establishing and maintaining the family but also for creating and

sustaining the ties of kinship. Marriage is one of the supreme aims of life in the traditional Ewe society and as a union between man and woman to perpetuate the lineage through procreation (Dzobo, 1975). Marriage has been instituted as the acceptable and respectable mode of ensuring the continuity of the family line. Dzobo further noted that children are therefore expected to be the first fruits of marriage and as such, young men always look for young women who come from families that have a high birth rate. Marriage, consequently, has become a means whereby a man and a woman fulfill the main aim of their personal lives; i.e. to make it possible for the lineage to continue in existence (Dzobo, 1975). A person's life is not therefore considered complete if he/she remains unmarried. Aside it being a means of self-realization and fulfillment, marriage is contracted for the sake of companionship and mutual service.

In a similar view, Dzatse (1990) has noted that marriage to the people of Gbi is considered as a form of intimate personal relationship between man and woman which needs a lot of interpersonal adjustments. The Gbi people, therefore take marriage as a school of learning known as *srɔdɛdɛ* which literally means "learning marriage". To the Gbi people, indigenous marriage is a way to: procreate and provide adequate parental care for children; command respect and social standing in the Gbi community; continue with the lineage as an institution and memoriam. Through these, the children are remembered when their parents die. Therefore, marriage is ultimately a confirmation of life beyond death. All the way through marriage, it is believed that the departed are reborn not in their total being but by having some of their physical features and characteristics or personal traits in the children of the family. If no children are born, these traits and features of the departed members of the family would become extinct.

The use of art forms in Gbi customary marriage starts with pre-marital rites or puberty initiation rites. It is usually an acceptable customary activity to usher the pubertal girl into the family. In Gbi, this ceremony is known as *gbɔtowɔwɔ* which means "living outside the home". This rite is named so because when the pubescent has her first menstrual period, it is believed that she is ritually unclean and so she is not allowed to live in the family house but confined in a special hut built at the outskirts of the village for that period of menstruation. In Gbi traditional society, several art forms are also used and combined for the purpose of marriage. For example, sculpture, music, textiles, dance, body painting, clothes, ornaments among others are utilized simultaneously to enhance the beauty of the marriage ceremony.

1. Methods

The qualitative method involving descriptive, recording, analysis and interpretation of conditions was used. It helped to discover the importance or interest in the artistic aspect of customary marriage rites of the people of Gbi. Document or content analysis serves a useful purpose in yielding information that is helpful in evaluating or explaining historical, social and educational practices.

The accessible population was the Gbi of Hohoe and Peki. The study covered a sample size of 220 community/opinion leaders in four categories: traditional rulers - (chiefs and queen mothers; traditional priests and priestesses); literate Gbi citizens; and married initiates/married couples. Each of the categories differs in one way or the other. For instance, the elders, chiefs and queen mothers are the custodians of the culture and traditions of the people. Only traditional rulers have the authority to effect changes in the performance of Gbi customary marriage rites. The priests and priestesses, who constitute a separate set of opinion leaders, are directly in charge of the performance of the Gbi customary marriage rites. They inspect and accept the dowry for the bride on behalf of their family. The simple random sampling method was used in order to obtain a manageable segment of the population. This technique was employed because it consists of a simple and systematic procedure. It also has a high probability of being representative of the total population. It again ensures that each subject has an equal chance of selection.

The instruments used for data collection were questionnaire, interview and observation. Two separate questionnaires were designed for men and women. The questionnaire sought to solicit respondents' knowledge, views, comments and suggestions about the place of art in indigenous marriage customs of Gbi. Formal interviews were conducted at palaces, homes of elders, queen mothers and opinion leaders. An audio tape recorder was used to record the voices of respondents. No interpreter was involved because the lead researcher is a native of Gbi who could speak the Ewe language fluently. The study observed four marriage rites and certain pertinent questions were asked and discussed with respondents where necessary.

2. Results and Discussion

2.1 The Marriage Process

Anyone in Gbi traditional area who wants to contract customary marriage has to go through a number of processes. This discourse discusses eight systematic stages.

Uɔfofo (knocking) - The first stage of the marriage arrangement is done only on *Asigbe* (market day), when everybody is at home. It serves as an official notification of interest of a man in a woman. The bride's parents to be usually accept the knocking drink but symbolically remark: *ahafo de tsime* which literally means "the drink has poured into water". The implication here is that they have accepted to drink the intimation palm-wine but it is not a confirmation to give their daughter's hand in marriage.

Akpedada (thanksgiving drink) - This is the stage of acknowledgement from the groom's parents to be that they are happy and their proposal has been accepted. On an agreeable day, they present two big pots of palm-wine and two crates of soft drinks to the bride's family to be to thank them for accepting to give their daughter's hand in marriage. The marriage contract is partially fulfilled and by custom the woman's parents cannot give their daughter to another man without breaking the contract. The groom to be can now visit his prospective in-laws home, usually in the evening to fraternize with them.

Sagbledede (Service to in-laws) - This process of customizing the marriage gives the man the chance to show his prospective in-laws how hardworking and helpful he may be. If he is a salary earner, he gives out gifts in the form of commodities but if a farmer, he occasionally presents firewood and foodstuffs to his in-laws. During the farming season, he would arrange with his friends to clear the land, sow and harvest cassava, yam or maize into barns for his in-laws.

Gbɔmekplɔga - A hundred thousand old Ghana Cedis (¢100,000.00) is collected from the groom as the brideswealth. It is assumed that when the married woman is no longer living in the community the money paid would cater for her communal duty.

Srɔhakpakpa or *Dehoho na srɔdeɖe* (Tapping the marriage palm wine) - This is a traditional art activity by which the uncles of the groom to be tap palm-wine purposely for the other members of the bride to be extended family (see Figure 1).

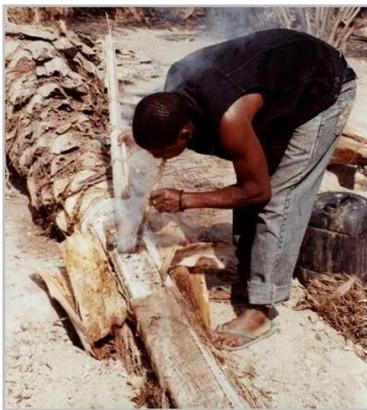


Figure 1: *Srɔhakpakpa*



Figure 2: *Zenua Drinking Palm Wine During Saha*

Tɔviseseha - Two kegs of palm-wine known as *kakraha* (saying good-bye) is mainly for the bride's clan. This is the day *tɔvi* (spiritual father) who will represent the groom's father and will lead him to the bride's family anytime he needs to present anything to them or perform any rite will be appointed for the groom's family.

Nɔha (mother's drink) comprises one full keg of palm-wine, two bottles gin and half piece of wax print. In drinking *nɔha*, the family wishes their daughter and her husband good luck. The half piece of cloth in the brideswealth is an acknowledgement to the bride's mother for bringing up a good wife.

Saha (thanksgiving day) the ceremony that climaxes the marriage involves everybody in the village. Usually, this day is fixed on *agblemigbe* (a non-farming day) which is Thursday. The marriage is formally consummated by an act known as *sahanogbe* or *nɔgbɔnutata* "the art of adorning the wife by the groom's family". On this occasion, the fiancé equips his fiancée with all the remaining items demanded by the bride's family. The items include two crates of soft drinks or more, two bottles of foreign Schnapps or more, two bottles of *akpeteshie* (local gin) or more, *nugbedosige* (engagement gold ring), three or six half pieces of wax prints and three big pots of palm-wine. The palm wine is shared among family members as indicated in Figure 2.

2.2 Importance of Art in Gbi Traditional Marriage

Every artifact used or rite performed is believed to promote symbolic and aesthetic values of Gbi traditional marriage. At marriage, the gift symbolically replaces the bride's presence, reminding her family and clan that though she has left, she is not dead. In the same vein, the marriage rite is an assurance that she is not stolen but going away under mutual agreement between the two families. In reality, the gift legalizes her value and the marriage contract. After the marriage rites the bride is dressed and adorned in a very attractive mood (Figure 3) believed in Gbi that young men who may not have the intention of marrying may suddenly change their mind to properly engage women they might have taken notice of earlier on. *Bɔtresasa na srɔnyɔnu* "the use of local cotton thread and a single bead" as in Figure 4 is one of the art forms during *saha*. It is used to heartily accept and welcome the bride into the groom's family.



Figure 3: Adorned Couples Seated



Figure 4: *Bɔtresasa Na Srɔnyɔnu* at *Saha*

Social relationships are conveyed to the people in Gbi when artifacts are used in marriage ceremonies, e.g. the stool (see Figure 5) that is presented as one of the requirements for the bride, has links with the ancestors and encourages effective social relationship in the society. It also expresses essential provisions of life e.g. the warmth or hospitality of the married woman.

Culturally, the arts relate to everyday life in Gbi customary marriage. They are so integrated with life that the absence of singing, drumming, dancing during the performance of any marriage rites in Gbi would make it meaningless and boring. In Gbi marriage customs, the art objects such as *drums*, *akaye* - a type of appellation are used to enhance the aesthetic value of the customary gathering during marriage (Figure 6). These arts continue to secure the spiritual, physical and economic welfare of the community.



Plate 5: The Stool



Plate 6: Playing *Akaye* by Women

To the Gbi, the arts reflect their struggles and aspirations especially, the economic, religious and philosophical underpinnings of their lives. To that extent, they use oral art forms such as proverbs, riddles and

parables especially during *tsitutu* (invoking ancestral spirits) to serve as records of memorable events and also communicate and reflect upon the impact of history on the people.

Tsitutu a dramatic verbal art form of the Gbi (Figure 7) is an act of invoking the spirit of the ancestors through libation prayers of the clan to shower their blessings on the new couples and to thank the Almighty God for their protection and guidance. The various priests, chiefs and family heads present at the function also shower their blessings on the new couple. Palm-wine is served and everybody who took part in the drinking of the wine was considered a fighter to protect the marriage from breaking apart.

Among the Gbi, the arts express the culture of the people in that when young people attend such ceremony they are introduced to marriage activities through the arts. The passage from childhood to adolescence through adulthood is marked by initiations, rites, and ceremonies where the arts are exhibited. Mama Akpanya, queen mother of Akpanyavi clan noted that apart from marriage serving as entertainment, *ye* (white clay) also serves as medicinal purpose physically and spiritually to expel evil spirits and bad omen whenever a married woman paints her body before appearing in public during *nɔgbɔnutata* rite.

Just as every parent in Gbi welcomes traditional marriage for their daughters and sons, the same way chiefs and queen mothers embrace the welcoming news of their subjects to marry legally through the customary way. When marriages are to be contracted in Gbi, the chiefs and the queen mothers all attend the marriage rite. The Chief, most often allows the *ɔkyeame* or spokesman to represent him on such occasions. In the culture of Gbi, it is not proper for a chief to address his subjects directly during marriage ceremonies. In the same way, it is an act of disrespect for any person to address the chief directly. The *ɔkyeame* who is the official spokesman of the chief bears a staff as a symbol of his office. This staff has the proverbial symbol or totem of the village or clan embossed on top of it. The socio-cultural significance of this staff is that it brings the authority and spiritual presence of the chief to the marriage ceremony.

The stool on which the chief sits at the marriage ceremony is also an artifact carved and designed from wood. It embodies many strands of cultural and spiritual significance. It symbolizes the soul of the Gbi community, signifies the chief's authority and serves as a symbolic link between the people and the chief. There are two types of stools usually used at Gbi marriage ceremonies: the chief's stool and the female stool. The female stool is believed to be the first stool designed and created. The top of the stool (shaped like a crescent moon) symbolizes the loving embrace of a mother for the children among the Gbi. It also represents the warmth of the female influence in society (Amenuke et al, 1991).

Tati kple to (pestle and mortar) are artifacts made of wood used to prepare *fufu*, a popular dish among the Gbi during customary marriage celebrations, (See Figure 8). Among the Gbi, *fufu* is considered the greatest meal to welcome a visitor with and it is usually enjoyed during joyous occasions.

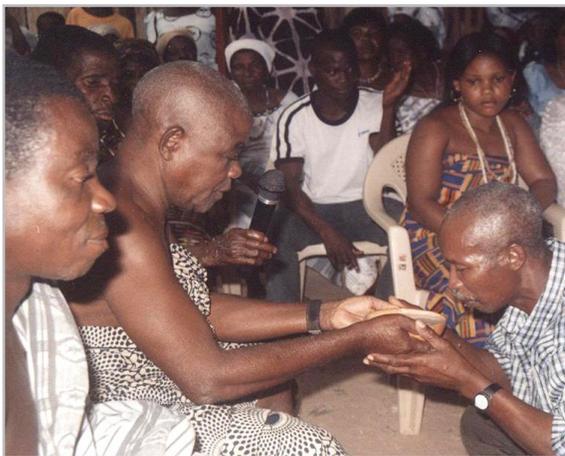


Figure 7: *Tsitutu* Ritual



Figure 8: Women Pounding *Fufu*

Davufẽ (comb) is a carved wooden comb. A decorated wooden comb is one of the Ewe delightful aesthetic expressions that receive great artistic attention among Ewes. The delicate openwork format provides the carver with a vehicle for the display of skillfulness. Traditionally among the Ewes, the carved comb is owned and used only by women.

In Gbi, combs are used as one of the important components added to bride wealth and in painting the body on festive occasions. They are also used to make beautiful designs on the human body. Body painting which is

classified as personal adornment has always played an important role in preserving the history, value and ethnic identity of Gbis. Symbolically, the comb serves as wealth for the woman at home. Some combs are shaped and carved like the *akuaba* doll of the Akans.

Another artifact used just after marriage rites in Gbi during the olden days was a type of carved wooden figure called *ametikpakpe*. It is carved from *kpomiti* commonly known in the Akan language as *sese*. It is stained with black prepared from a mixture of soot from the base of cooking pots and albumen or raw egg. Also added to the mixture is potash from burnt plantain peels, cocoa pod and rusted particles of metals. Wooden figures among the Gbi have four main purposes that are linked with customary marriage. For their socio-cultural and religious importance, they serve as fertility and beauty symbols, children's dolls and charms. All these functions are linked to successful stages of conception, full-term pregnancy and stress-free child birth. This is one of the significance of marriage among the Gbi. A childless woman may request a wooden figure which is believed to make her fertile (Cole H.M. and Doran R.H., 1977). For example, the form of fertility figure is determined by the wish of the couple. If a female is desired, the figure is carved with the characteristics of a female. On the other hand, the figure may represent a twin who is dead. It is believed that the dead twin has its spirit in the wooden figure carved to represent it, therefore whatever is done for the surviving twin is also done for the wooden figure also. This is deemed to reaffirm the continual presence of the dead twin. Wooden figure dolls are also used as charms; they are used in finding missing children from their homes. In the past, among the Gbis, it was believed that every missing child was captured by dwarfs. Therefore a figure was carved to represent the image of the missing child. This was dressed up in clothes and was placed by a tree at the edge of the nearest bush (Amenuke et al, 1991). Unsalted mashed yam, mixed with palm oil and eggs was placed by the wooden figure to attract the dwarf spirits. It was believed that as the dwarf spirits scrambled for the food, they would set the child free.

Apart from body painting, fire places are also painted by women. Floor and walls around the hearth are painted in different colours of clay e.g. grey, red, and brown. This type of painting is done in order to keep the fire side tidy and neat before cooking. Among the Gbi, general cleaning in the home is one of the most important lessons considered in the training of neophytes during puberty rites before marriage.

Since art and life are two entities that are intertwined and therefore cannot be separated among the Gbi, the use of indigenous art forms begin from the day a married woman conceives. The following artifacts are used by the woman until she is delivered of her baby. They are body markings, body painting, hair styles, clothes and sculpture figurines for fertility.

The woman's physical wellbeing is believed to depend on her spiritual state. Towards delivery, the expectant mother leaves her husband's home for her mother's, where she is given pre-natal care. There is a belief that the foetus in the womb may be "stolen" during pregnancy. This means that she may lose her child through spontaneous abortion. With this belief, her parents consult ritual experts who prescribe various protective measures to be taken. Some spiritualists of Gbi prescribe charms to be worn around the waist as a girdle or around the neck as a necklace. Others are also worn around the wrist as wristlets or bracelets or around the ankle as anklets. At times incisions are made on parts of the body with a knife or a razor blade or the tooth of a python and black powder rubbed into the cuts to protect the pregnant woman and the foetus. Such incisions are usually made around her naval and they are covered by the woman's clothes to prevent the enemy from neutralizing the potency of the charms and that of the black powder put into the incisions. Sometimes the expectant mother may be advised by a member of her family to smear white clay on her body in order to strengthen and sustain her spirit. No special cloth is prescribed but the pregnant woman is advised not to wear black cloth, as black is often associated with death and misfortune and it is believed to be capable of inviting ill-luck and evil spirits.

The risk of child bearing is seen as equal to going to war among the Gbi. In order not to attract enemies, a pregnant woman tries to adopt a low profile by refraining from the use of attractive make-ups, stylish hair and dresses that might invite the envy of people. Anything that makes her conspicuous is believed to attract an evil eye. What is noticeable about a pregnant woman in Gbi after her customary marriage rites is her deliberate use of body paintings and markings for medicinal and spiritual reasons. All the various indigenous visual art forms used above by pregnant women play the roles of adequate protection and safe delivery.

In all the customary marriage ceremonies in Gbi, white colours play a very significant role. The meanings assigned to and associated with white are not based on scientific theories but rather on philosophical, psychological and spiritual values related to life. Marriage is considered a joyous moment and victory for both families from which the couples belong. White clothes, white clay, white beads and other accessories are all used to enhance and complement the beauty and success of the marriage rites.

Prayer is said in the form of libation at various stages during the marriage rites and indigenous visual art forms are used to invoke the wisdom and authority of the ancestors. Calabashes, native palm-wine and the *okyeame*

performing the libation tell of the way of life or the way one should live in an acceptable manner according to Gbi values.

The local palm-wine is so generic to Gbi marriage and Ewes such that it is unthinkable marriage rites would be deemed complete without them. This wine is tapped from the palm tree and all the activities that go on with it are very artistic. The palm-wine tapper fells the palm tree with the mattock, uses knife to create holes in the trees to produce the sweet wine. The receptacle in which the sweet wine is collected under the fallen palm tree is a specially molded clay pot called *lubu*. Palm-wine is conveyed to the ceremony in a bigger pot called *ahaze* for all to enjoy.

3. Conclusion

In Gbi, customary marriage is among the best preserved aspect of their custom in the life cycle of the people. It has been identified that, through the payment of bride wealth, the stability of the marriage is maintained. Apart from their entertainment value, the art forms are also used to educate fertility of sexes. They are also used to teach the youth to maintain values, dignity, attitudes and the logic of truth in Gbi.

It is noted that the indigenous visual art forms cannot be ignored at all in the day to day activities in the life cycle of Gbi and its people. Every aspect of life namely, conception, birth, naming, puberty, marriage, death and funeral depend very much on the use of indigenous art forms for the reasons of protection, guidance and enhancing life support activities.

In the process of marriage in Gbi, families get the opportunity to meet while lineages are preserved, old friendships are revived and new ones made. Shortcomings are discussed and disputes are settled bringing about communal recreation.

Lineages utilize the presence of family members to choose heads to effectively lead them. Also, chiefs, traditional priests, elders get the opportunity to address their subjects and participate in collective decision making. It is a period when the various members remind themselves of belonging to one family.

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