



# **Gender Stereotype in Musical Performances among the Alavanyo People in Ghana**

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## **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Study aims at exploring the traditional musical types that are performed among the people of Alavanyo in the Volta Region of Ghana and classify the musical types according to gender orientations; and also to investigate the reasons why women in the area are not supposed to participate in some traditional musical ensembles in the area. The study being qualitative type adopted descriptive and case study approaches to present the study. The population consisted of Historians, Chiefs, Women in traditional musical performance as well as Men who are into traditional music performance. Interview and Observations were some of the instruments used for data collection. It was revealed that, Musical genres such as Akpi, Adevu, Vuga, Borborbor and Egbanegba are found among the people in the study area. The study made it clear that, due to superstitions, Taboos and Religious affiliations, women are forbid from taking part in some of the musical types in the area. The study recommended that, music should be taken serious in the school curriculum; traditional rites must be performed to pave way for women who want to take active part in all the traditional musical types in the area.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

People of Alavanyo in Ghana are culturally and musically inclined. They are however mindful of the gender roles in the performance of the musical types. Beliefs about gender affect behavior in variety of social settings and contexts such as the home, school, church, work place, political arenas and society at large. The role of gender in human relationships among the people of Alavanyo traditional area forms the basis of all group activities with specific roles to individuals, the use of symbols such as dress, behavior, speech styles, sex preferences, practices and values. This society is patriarchal in nature where men hold more power and therefore dominant over women. It is in this direction that James & Garrick [1] assert that “*cultural conception of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ matter just as much in same-sex as in opposite-sex interaction*”. P. 213

The people of Alavanyo traditional area define and use gender differences in diverse ways and many scholars such as Burns, [2] elaborate on cultural constructions about gender roles. There are several musical types in Alavanyo traditional area with different worthy features of Ghanaian musical forms. For instance, Akpi, Avadogboto, Adevu, Wuga and Bobobor, Akayevu, Egbanegba, Asiwa, are but a few to mention. Women participation in these various musical types is categorized into activities that are strictly sacred and invocative, and recreational. Participation in Akpi and Avadogboto are sacred and invocative. Women are denied participation in these musical performances because these musical types are considered warrior dances which are vigorously performed, and certain rituals are attached to their performances. Women are not even supposed to touch certain drums because they are considered unholy due to their monthly menstrual experiences. Warfare is a prerogative of men in Alavanyo traditional area. It is for this reason that women are denied participation in the performances of Akpi and Avadogboto musical genres. It is a belief in this community that men go to war with some form of spiritual and physical strength which women do not have. In course of performance of these musical types, the men invoke their spirits and showcase their powers through vigorous dance movements showing various skills at battlefield. It is culturally unacceptable for women to partake

in such vigorous musical performances involving such rituals.

Women are also denied participation in Adevu musical performance because it is strictly performed by male adult hunters. In this dance, male adults who are not hunters are also denied participation in Adevu musical performances. During performance, dancers showcase their various skills during hunting.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Alavanyo community is well endowed in terms of traditional musical assets. They are as well careful about gender in relation to the performance of the musical types. But much study and documentations have not been done to showcase these assets. The study therefore seeks to explore those musical assets in relation to their gender orientations and showcase them for posterity.

### 1.2 Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the Traditional Musical ensembles among the people of Alavanyo focusing on those that are women oriented and those that are men oriented.
2. To examine the reasons why women are not permitted to partake in some traditional musical ensembles in Alavanyo

### 1.3 Research Questions

1. How are musical types classified according to gender among people of Alavanyo in Ghana?
2. Why are women restricted to performance of only certain musical types among the people of Alavanyo in Ghana?

## 2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### 2.1 Traditional Music in Ghanaian Context

Traditional Music has links with culture, traditions and philosophies of society. According to Agordoh [3] traditional musical is the type that is free from any form of Western acculturation. He concludes that, traditional music is the type that is associated with the indigenous people, and has remained so even in the midst of influence from other Western musical types.

According to Ndah [4] traditional music has a link with the traditional or indigenous establishments of the Ghanaian society such as chieftaincy, festivals, funerals and other social events. He explains in addition that, these traditional events when being observed are bound to see traditional music accompanying them. He cites an example for chieftaincy, where revered traditional leaders are exalted or dignified with certain musical ensembles such as Kete ensemble being used to dignify Asantehene as well as Akpi or Adevu musical type for the exaltation of chiefs in the Volta Region.

Ebeli [5] as well states that, traditional music is the type that serves as a conduit through which the sentiments and emotions of a society is expressed. She admits that, in performance of traditional music, Ghanaian behavior, culture and aspirations are clearly seen.

It could therefore be concluded from the authorities above that, traditional music is performed based on the culture and philosophy of the people.

## **2.2 Women and Traditional Musical Performance**

Music could serve as a career for both sexes in Ghana. Interestingly. Societal restrictions in certain areas in Ghana limit women in terms of certain musical types that could be performed.

According to Ndah et al [6], among the people of Logba in the Volta Region of Ghana, women are socially not permitted to partake in traditional musical types such as Akpi and Adevu which are regarded as court musical types reserved for warriors, Chiefs and Hunters.

Ebeli [7] equally opines that, there is social stratification of traditional musical performance in Ghana. She explains that, among the people of Avatime in Ghana. Totoeme musical type is solely performed by women.

It could therefore be deduced that, as part of the performance practice in traditional musical performance, there are some types that associate with men and some that equally associate with women.

## **2.3 Role of Traditional Music in Ghana**

Music making has become part and parcel of Ghanaian society. And for that matter plays various roles among the people.

According to Okyere- Twum et al [8], traditional music helps in observing some of the life cycle events such as Birth, naming, marriage and funeral celebrations. They argue that, it is hardly impossible to observe such events without music making.

Ampomah [9] equally shares that music specifically traditional types are part of funeral celebrations among the Asante people. He opines that, in Asante culture, when one dies, there should be observation of funeral for the deceased else he or she would not be accepted in the spiritual world. He collaborates that, dirge and other rites that accompany such rites are all rendered in music and dance.

According to Brewu (2009), Traditional music is so vital in Ghanaian societies. He shares that, among the people of Patakro in Ashanti Region of Ghana, traditional musical type helps in showcasing the cultural heritage of the people. Furthermore, he opines that, the musical types help in worship among the people.

One could therefore conclude that, traditional musical type serves as a medium through which societal norms and philosophies are display.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Research Designs**

The research design adopted for this study is qualitative. Qualitative research involves collecting, analyzing and interpreting data by observing what people do or say. It also refers to the meanings, concepts and state of being [10]. The researchers combined different techniques to achieve the goals in the study. One of such techniques was descriptive technique. This is because the researchers sought to describe the various traditional musical ensembles in the area and their gender stratification.

The survey approach was equally helpful to the researchers as it helped to put the Target population into clusters and easily got them to solicit information from them.

Observation technique was as well employed to watch demonstration of how traditional musical types are performed in the area based on gender.

### **3.2 Accessible Population**

Two historians (2), Two (2) Chiefs, Six (6) women who are traditional music performers and

Ten (10) men who are Traditional music performers.

These categories were sampled using purposive and convenience sampling methods. These methods were used because the variables in the study directed the researchers to those respondents they thought could provide accurate information to help in the study. Convenience technique was used to solicit information from the chiefs. Because of the position of chiefs in society and in the study area, the researchers did not want it to be as though they were mounting pressure on the chiefs for information. So they were accorded that respect to invite the researchers at their own convenience time so the information could be given out.

Interview and observation were the research instruments adopted in gathering data in the study. Interview guide was used to direct the line of discussions during the interview.

Data was analyzed using **Thematic Content Analysis approach** and conclusions drawn appropriately.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The interaction during the interview is seen below:

On the historian category, they admitted that, they have been in the study area long before the researchers were born and for that matter, have seen rites and conventions that go with the performance of traditional music in the area.

On some of the traditional musical types that are performed in the area, they stated some of them as Gbolo, Egbanega, Borborbor, Akpi and Adevu.

For those musical types that are women oriented, Gbolo and Akaye were identified. Borborbor and Asiwa were however identified as recreational musical types for both sexes.

On why women do not partake in some musical types in the area. One of the respondents in this category has this to say

*“ These musical ensembles are for the gods  
And the gods must never be defiled  
Because we don't know when a woman  
might be*

*In her menstrual cycle, it is better they are  
kept off  
the performance lest the gods get angry”*

As to whether they would wish for change of mind and allow women to freely partake in such musical types in future, they insisted that, tradition must be preserved always for posterity.

On the Chiefs category, they identified some of the musical types in the area as Akpi, Adevu and Vuga. They added Borborbor, Egbanegba, Akaye, Asiwa and Avadogboto as well as Gbolo. They mentioned Akayevu and Egbanegba as those that associate with women.

As to why women are not involved in certain musical types, the respondents explained that, some of the ensembles such as Akpi, Adevu, Avadogboto and Vuga are meant for warriors and hunters. And in the study area, women are considered fragile who are not permitted to go to war or hunting. That is why they are exempted from such performances.

They stated also that, because of the vigorous nature of the dances, it could happen that, a woman could have a miscarriage when she takes part in such musical types. So in order to safeguard them, they are exempted from such performances.

The Chiefs were ready that, they would initiate traditional rites to pave way for women to partake in such musical ensembles as and when the need arises.

For the women in traditional music category, they identified some traditional music in the area as Borborbor, Egbanegba, Akayevu, Akpi, Adevu, Avadogboto, Vuga and Asiwa.

On the musical types that associate with women only, they identified Akayevu, Egbanegba and Asiwa.

On why women are exempted from certain musical types, they said that, it is believed when they are in their menstrual cycle and take part in the ensembles, gods would be offended. One of the respondents said:

*“ I heard there are traditional rituals that are  
performed before  
Musical ensembles are played.  
And women are not permitted to be part of  
such rituals; else*

*They (women) may be married by the gods  
hence cannot give  
Birth with any mortal man "*

It also came out that, some of the dances are court ensembles that accompany Chiefs and also they are used to incite people to go to war. If a woman partakes in such musical ensembles during menstruations, it would bring bad omen for the community hence their exemptions. They however advised that, such perceptions should be changed because a woman could have talent to take up career in such musical types. Therefore, traditional leaders must lead the way for some of such beliefs to be changed to allow women who are interested to participate in such performances.

For the men in traditional music category, they admit that, musical types such as Akpi, Adevu, Vuga, Avadogboto are found in the study area. The rest are Borboborr, Egbanegba and Asiwa. They however stated that, Akayevu and Egbanegba are for women but in recent times, Egbanegba is for both sexes.

They gave some of the reasons why women are not allowed to partake in some ensembles as that:

Before performance of some of the ensembles, libation and other rituals are supposed to be

made and women are not permitted to lead such rituals. (See example on Plate 1).

Photograph: The Researchers

They opined further that, most of the dances are vigorous and seem dangerous to the health of the women. They continue that, ensemble is believed to have been possessed so if women take part or even come into contact with the drums, they may get possessed as well thereby becoming barren.

They argued that, if society wants to change such perceptions in future to allow women to take part in all musical types they would support it.

The researchers being music educators and ethnomusicologist equally observe the musical types during festivals and also during schools' cultural festivals in the area and have made appropriate judgments in regard to the topic under study. They observed that musical types such as Akpi, Adevu, Vuga and Avadogboto are found among the people of Alavanyo Traditional area. The rest are Borborbor, Egbanegba, Gbolo, Akayevu as well as Siwa. It was noticed that Adevu, Vuga and Avadogboto as well as Akpi are regarded as warrior and court genres that are performed by the Men. See the men performing Vuga in Plate 2:



**Plate 1. Libation underway for Vuga ensemble to commence**





**Plate 2. Master Drummer and his assistant performing Vuga Credit: Researchers**

However, Akayevu and Siwa are performed by only Women. As seen on Plates 3 and 4:



**Plate 3. Women performing Akayevu during durbar photograph: The researchers**



**Plate 4. Leader of Akayevu leading performance photograph: The researchers**

Borborbor, Egbanegaba and Gbolo are recreational musical types which are performed by both sexes.

The researchers equally observed that, women exemption from participating in certain musical type is based on Beliefs, taboos, religious orientations and perceptions from society.

**Presentation of Findings:** From the study, various musical types are found among the people of Alavanyo Traditional area. Some of these are: Akpi, Adevu, Vuga and Avadogboto. The rest are Borborbor, Akayevu Egbanegba and Asiya. Their stratification is seen on a Table 1:

From the study, women are denied participation in such vigorous musical performances (Akpi and Avadogboto) as it may result in the depression of fertility among them and its subsequent effect on the growth of population in the society. This is evident where heavy exercise reduces a woman's fertility for which modern female athletes (long distance runners) do not menstruate and ovulate monthly [1].

It also came out that, women are not supposed to go for war and since most of the musical types are warrior dances, women are not encouraged to take part in such performances.

**Table 1. Musical Type and their Gender Orientation**

<b>Musical type</b>	<b>Gender Orientation</b>
Akpi	Male
Adevu	Male
Avadogboto	Male
Borborbor	Both
Egbanegba	Both
Gbolo	Both
Asiwa	Female
Vuga	Male
Akayevu	Female

Furthermore, most of the ensembles are associated with rituals such as making of libation. And such roles are reserved for men, as a result of that women are made to stay off such performances.

Religious affiliations are other reasons why women do not partake in the performance of certain musical types in the area. It was clear that, some women believed that, the rituals that associate with some traditional musical ensembles are against their Christian beliefs hence the need to stay off. (This assertion confirms the stance of Ndah [4].

The study revealed also that, women in the study area believe once they engaged in the musical types that associate with men, they would look masculine hence defame their natural beauty. To avoid that, they exempt themselves in such performances.

Societal perception and expectation of women is another factor why women do not take part in certain musical types in the study area. Society expects women naturally to be home keepers to make sure family gets food. So for fear that, society would think they have deviated from that core mandate and engaging in musical ensembles that are associated with men in society, they prefer not take part to avoid being call names.

Superstitious beliefs that associate with the drums and the musical ensemble in general equally draw the women away from certain musical genres in the area. It is belief that the drums as well as the ensemble as a whole is possess by spirits. And such spirits are believed to be masculine in nature and could manifest in the women hence make them deviate from their feminine roles in society.

The findings of the study therefore confirm the stance of Ndah, [4], Ndah et al [6], Ebeli [5] and Burns [2].

## 5. CONCLUSION

The focus of the paper was to identify the musical types that are performed in the study area, classify them according to their gender orientations and also to explore the reasons why women are exempted from performing certain musical types in the area. Some musical genres performed by the people of Alavanyo are Akpi, Adevu, Vuga and Avadogboto. The rest are

Egbanegba, Gbolo, Borborbor, Akayevu as well as Asywa.

Women are however exempted from performing some of these ensembles due to the fact that, most of the musical types are warrior types and seen as not healthy for women to partake in. Furthermore, taboos and superstitions surrounding performance of some musical types equally make it impossible for women to take part in them. Other factors such as religious inclinations and societal expectations from women as well make women shy away from the performance of some musical type.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Traditional council in the area should initiate traditional rites to pay way for women who would want to perform such "Forbidden" musical types as a career to do so.
2. Much awareness needs to be created among the people in the area for them to be able to appreciate the traditional musical assets in the area.
3. Cultural festivals in schools should be strengthen in the area so that importance of the traditional music could be felt among the people
4. Music must be giving much attention in the school curriculum in the area so that, people in the area could see the need for musical performance by both sexes.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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