

Akan Asafo Companies: Enyan Abaasa In Perspective

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Abstract: There are a lot of Asafo companies among the Akans in Ghana one of which the Enyan Abaasa Asafo Company is one. This article is in an in-depth study of history and philosophies of the Enyan Abaasa Asafo Company. This was a qualitative study that employed the descriptive and narrative designs. Observation and interviews were used to unravel the historical beliefs and philosophies of the Asafo groups. Random sampling technique was employed to sample from the population to acquire a workable sample respondents for data collection. The study was conducted in Enyan Abaasa Traditional Area. From the data, the philosophy of the Asafo Company is built on the oral tradition of the people which is transmitted from one generation to the other. It concluded that the elders never allowed the youths in any way to bring in new ideas and developments to the workings of the Asafo Company. The Asafo Company thus, gradually out living its relevance. It was therefore recommended that activities of these Asafo companies should be included in the school curriculum for easy transferability and preservation.

Keywords: Akan, Asafo, Philosophy, Symbolism, Youth.

I. INTRODUCTION

The name *Asafo* was coined out of the mobilization of the youths of the Akans who settled along the coastal belts of Ghana (Brown 2005). These groups are referred to as the Fantes amongst Akans. They formed this traditional militant organization called 'Asafo'. The name *Asafo* is made up of two distinct words, 'Sa' which means war or path and 'Fo' which means people so *Asafo* literary means 'people who go to war or clear paths' (Aggrey 1978). Aggrey further explained that in the olden days, the Asafo Company performed the functions of protecting and guiding towns and villages against attacks from enemies and wild animals as well as clearing of paths. Besides clearing of paths, it was their responsibility to defend or attack any opposing groups. Likewise, they also went to the forest to search for wild animals terrorising the towns and villages and killed it, or searched for missing people.

Edusie (1981) added that they also assisted in conveying of corpses to their grave yards, carrying sick persons and pregnant women to the nearest fetish priests or priestesses for medical attention. The duties of Asafo companies were many. In recent times, however, the Asafo companies perform social

and cultural functions during festivals, durbar of chiefs, state functions, and funerals and so on. Almost every Fante town or village has Asafo Company. Like any other organisation, the Asafo Company constituted varied personalities charged with different responsibilities (Edusie 1981).

There is the 'Asafo' chief called *Supi*. The *Supi* is supported by the sub-chiefs called 'Asafohemfo'. As a symbol of authority, the 'Supi' carries a sword in his hand and the sub-chiefs hold a special set of flexible rods or whip. These are prepared from the leather of a horse. The Asafohemfo also carry whisks, 'Bodua', a fluffy hairy tail obtained from the horse. The 'Bodua' is used to perform spiritual functions.

The 'Frankaanyi' or the flag bearer is one of the most significant and important personalities in the Asafo Company (Eghan 1994). He carries the Asafo flags and leads the Asafo Company in all its adventures. There is the 'Okyerema' who is the leading sacred drum beater. He plays the leading drum to encourage, motivate, and push the members forward during manoeuvres. The presence of the 'Okyerema' contributes significantly towards the success or failure of any adventure embarked upon by the Asafo Company. Under the 'Okyerema' are players of the other Asafo drums, musical

instruments and singers. Normally, the drum players numbered from five to eight, but the singers who also constitute the military force are as many as those willing to join (Aggrey 1978). Behind all these people are the omnipotent God, gods and the ancestors of the community who provide spiritual protection, unity, and strength to ensure the success of any task embarked upon by the Asafo Company (Brown 2005). These roles are manifested in the Asafo priests and priestesses.

Arhin, (1966), stated that the Asafo companies on the coast might have had their origin in the armed retailers who gathered around certain merchants for protection and security in the uncertain period of the slave trade. Again, the Asafo companies adopted other European military practices, including the firing of musketry, the numbering and naming of companies, and the use of distinctive flags, many of the older ones which bear the British Union Jack. Supporting the opinion that Asafo existed before the Europeans, Arhin explained that his grandfather, E.J.P. Brown, was a former magistrate of Cape Coast and Asafo scholar.

Asafo companies are differentiated by the colours of their headdress, hairstyles, drums, horns and other musical instruments, designation, and emblems. Automatically, one becomes a member based on the patrilineal system (Arhin 1966).

On the contrary, Brown (2005) argued, there are conflicting statements about the origin of Asafo; one faction claims that the European presence in Gold Coast influenced the formation of the Asafo groups and others claim that it existed before as a result of inter-tribal fighting among Akan groups, especially between the Asantis and Fantes. This assertion was buttressed by Cole and Rose (1977), who stated that the origin of Asafo is not remembered or documented, but various companies believe that the flag was an original element of their paraphernalia.

The Smithsonian Institute (1992) confirms this view by stating that the origin of Asafo is open to speculations and that traditions existed long amongst African peoples before European contact.

Datta and Porter (1971) stated that Asafo companies are identified by the colours of their uniforms and flags, and their emblems, either embroidered on flags or used separately, as well as by a special appellation which is drummed as a form of greetings'. Most important of all are the *frankaa* (flags), which are normally associated with the social activities of a company. During festivals, funerals, and an enstoolment of a chief, these flags are displayed along the streets, to the chief's palace and even to the town shrines to portray their loyalty. Further, during festivals and state holidays, Asafo companies of the coastal towns demonstrate with colourful designed flags and proverbs to incite other companies. Such activities often lead to violence. Some of the images and the writings shown in the flag portray conflicts between rival companies. Asafo company activities are highly militant; members are predominantly young men, but the elderly also have their roles they play within their various companies. Formally, among the Akans, elders who could not take part in fighting were often given the title *Egyanom* (fathers); their duties were to give strategic advice in times of war. That title and the honorifics associated with it remain in use today, although there is no

war. Female members (*adzewa*) were also assigned to special duties within the companies: they cooked for the men and took care of the wounded. They also provided music with calabashes to entertain the men after combat.

If the Asafo 'Supis' and chiefs lead the group to various wars and conquer or bring some towns or villages to their knees, it boosts the Asafo group to become brutally strong, brave and fearless. Every chief or 'Supi' who does not involve himself with the activities of the Asafo is not classified as a chief but rather coward and a woman, and not worth dying for. The aim of this research is to unveil some of the history, philosophy and practises of Asafo for future reference.

II. METHODOLOGY

The epistemological paradigm of this study adopted the descriptive and narrative design under qualitative research. This research was based on inductive interviews to solicit responses from the sampled population coupled with personal observations and still life images from the respondents. These methods helped the researcher to gain more oral information about the indigenous histories of Asafo, what it entails, and how they perceive it in their various groups. The sampled respondents for this study comprised Asafo Supis, Asafohemfo's, flag bearers and committed members, likewise elders of the Asafo Company of Enyan Abaasa traditional area. Random sampling technique was used to sample from the population of which data was collected.

Semi-structured interviews and participant observation methods were used, and with the aid of an audio recorder and a camera to collect all information in order not to miss any information out from the Supis, Asafohemfo's, and staunch members of the Asafo Company. Again, data collected were coded into themes to achieve the set objective. The researcher noticed that the methods employed above was appropriate since most of the interviewees were either illiterate or semi-literates.

Information collected through semi-structured interviews and observation were edited, transcribed from the local dialect (Fante) into the English language in descriptive and narrative forms. Likewise, photographs of some sacred musical instruments such as drums were taken when they were performing the rituals because they believe those drums serve as abodes for their gods to reside in temporarily when the drummers invoke the spirits through the playing of those instruments. Again for ethical reasons, the consent of the sampled respondents were solicited before photographs were taken and they were assured of the confidentiality of all data collected. All these were achieved in reaching a fair goal on some of the historical secrets and situations on the ground concerning the histories and philosophies of the Akan Asafo.

Category of Respondents	Number Selected
Asafo Supi	2
Asafohemfo	4
Asafo Flag Bearer	2
Staunch Members of Asafo Company	10
Total	28

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents

III. DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

Asafo and its related philosophies revealed in the findings are discussed below such as; the origin of Asafo, the emergence of *kyiremfo* group and Asafo emblems.

A. ORIGIN OF ENYAN ABAASA ASAFO COMPANY

The origin of Asafo among the Akans in general is based on oral history. The story was told that one day a hunter in the Brong Ahafo region went into the forest for game hunting at midnight. While in the forest, the hunter came across a group of dwarfs 'mboatsia' engaged in fetish drumming, dancing and incantations 'Akom'. The hunter peeped and watched the dwarfs engaged in the drumming and dancing activities. While watching, he saw that some of the dwarfs were very sick. He also saw that the chief dwarf went and collected different types of herbs and used them to treat the sick ones. He went back home to inform his son about what he had witnessed in the forest. The hunter went back to the forest together with his son the following night to watch the dwarfs and study their healing activities which they later replicated in their community as a money making venture. One day the dwarfs noticed the hunter and his son and captured them. The dwarfs had sympathy on them and decided to train them in spiritual drumming, dancing and herbal treatment. The dwarfs also gave them power for invoking gods and forecasting events that might happen to the community or individuals in future concerning wars, diseases or bad omen. The hunter and the child returned home to practise the training they had received from the dwarfs. The hunter became the chief fetish priest and the child became his assistant. Quite a lot of people went to them for consultation, treatment and protection. They became so popular that other people had an interest in their activities and decided to understudy them. Similar groups emerged from the different towns and villages. Because of the drumming and dancing 'Asa' that characterised the activities of the groups they were called 'Asafo'. 'Asa' means dance and the people who dance are known as 'Asafo'. Sooner than later, Asafo groups were formed in towns and villages to engage in the activities of the chief fetish priest and his son.

Oral narratives from interviewee's suggest that Asafo is not just drumming and dancing but also have a spiritual connotation. Not everything that transpires within the group is known to the public. Also, most spiritual activities are done deep in the night by only the chiefs, priest and a few elders of the company. This stays with them till they die. One will only know if he or she is initiated into that secret Caucus. Nonetheless, Asafo strategies and activities vary from various towns and villages due to their mode of operations during wars and other social activities.

According to Brown (2005), oral tradition told by his late grandfather who was then a chief has it that before the white men came to the coast, the Akans had Asafo and still have and will continue to have it till the end of days. Asafo migrated from fetishism, incantations and involving various spirits, gods and dead ancestors amidst drumming and dancing (Aggrey 1978). From the interview data, visitors and passers-byes who did not understand what they were doing called them 'Asawfo' meaning 'dancers,' and their activities as Asafo

became so scary that whatever the chief priest said, the people obeyed. These have continued from then till now that is why when you go to the various towns and villages along the coast, they have their chief priests and gods which protect, guard and guide them in their life's activities.

It was these activities that the people of Enyan Abaasa considering their location also adopted and has become a major aspect of their communal life. These fetish activities became so immense that they even slaughtered humans for sacrifices to cast away spells. This and other activities made Asafo become so fearful that anytime the name is mentioned people got scared, bitter and frightened (Aggrey, 1978). One of the respondent claim that the Asafo groups together with their chiefs, *supi*'s, priests and elders protected themselves with various super natural powers and sacrifices. According to Datta and Potter (1971) when there is communal labour or any humanitarian activities, they were able know those who attended and those who did not. Likewise those who died during inter-tribal wars or conflicts. Findings from data also revealed that later on when the town expanded and became overpopulated, the Asafo elders divided the town into two; the youths and the elders. They named the youthful Asafo group 'Etsiwafo' and the elders called themselves the 'Adontsenfo' or 'Dentsifo' which was under the care of the Dentsifo Asafo Company. Both groups became so strong and powerful that they lived like gods in the various communities, these people gave birth to so many children and they all joined the groups (Edusei 1981). When these groups became many, they came into a consensus that they divide themselves into groups in their various areas and each group was headed by a leader.

From the interview data (2016) as years went by, the population of Asafo overgrew so much that the elders needed to plan something again so what they did was that they gave amnesty to other villages to start their own under their supervision. More so, since Asafo is a human institution, there were various riots, misunderstanding and internal conflicts amongst themselves. Members who did not understood their leaders and elders left the groups and even the town to settle somewhere and started their own lives. That is why when you go to some villages around Enyan Abaasa traditional area, some settlements have only one Asafo company this was because of what was stated above. Mostly, it is the youthful group 'Etsiwafo' that are expelled by the strong group into exile, and when they go, they also divide into two and create elders and youth.

B. THE EMERGENCE OF OTHER ASAFO GROUPS

Data revealed that another group was created from the existing ones and christened '*kyiremfo*' literary meaning 'an explainer'. Since the Dentsifo Asafo group became overpopulated with younger youths and they also became interested and wanted to know the secrets and the sacrifices that their leaders and elders were doing which was hidden to the youths. According of one of the interviewee's this '*kyiremfo*' group made so much noise in the ears of their leaders and elders asking them to explain their secret activities to them since they were the upcoming ones who would succeed them and they were seeing the light and the deeds of Asafo.

When you look at the various groups in Asafo Company, the group that does not conform to the norms and values of Asafo is the 'kyiremfo' group, because their activities are exposed to the public, unlike the 'Etsiwafo' and 'Dentsifo' group. If the Asafo group is clearing paths to the various villages or towns or travelling, it is the youths that take the lead before the elders follow, they clear the paths first and the elders will follow to make sure that the work is well done or put final touches to the paths. This made the 'kyiremfo' group acquired another name called 'Tuafo' meaning the first people to clear a virgin forest.

As time went by, other names also emerged such as 'Nsamfo,' 'Akrampafo,' 'Apagyafu,' etc. These appellation of names remained sealed and unique to a particular group forever. For instance 'Asonko' group means unique and different. 'Annkobe' means they do not leave their kings or chiefs and go elsewhere; they are always with the royals protecting them. 'Brofomba' means wards or children of the whites. E.g. is the Ogua/ Cape Coast Asafo number (5) company (Eghan, 1994). It mostly shows the migration of the groups. Other people who left their various towns and villages to settle with the Cape Coast members also had a group called 'Amemforfo' which literally means people who came to join us that is the Asafo number six of Cape Coast (Eghan, 1994). These Asafo groups had unique weapons and style of fighting that the rest did not have so collectively, they called themselves 'Akyemfo' (Edusie, 1981).

The Asafo elders said that in the olden days, it was only the Amemforfo' group who settled at the shores of Cape Coast first before the influx of the white men and they could understand them more in terms of their language, and the white men brought different people from the diaspora as slaves and workmen. They also captured and bought most of the able-bodied men in the various towns to build their royal forts and armouries along the central coastal belts.

Oral interview from elders and staunch Asafo members said that with the Asafo, if you look at it from the war perspective or clearing of paths to various towns and villages, the leading group is the 'Dentsifo' but when you consider the origin of Asafo, the leader is the 'Akomfodze' Asafo group.

C. ASAFO ENSEMBLES

Asafo has unique instruments used in drumming and dancing such as 'Dawur' 'Anserwa,' 'Ngyegyey ho,' 'Opentsen,' 'Epusuw,' and 'Asafo kye'. According to the interviewee's Asafo songs are in call and respond forms. The leader first raises the song and sings it before he calls in the rest to respond. When the rest respond, the first instrument that is played is the Dawur, The player listens to the rhythm of the song before he starts playing.

The second one that follows is the 'Anserwa' or 'konkon' comes in as a form of garnishing to the smaller instrument. 'Okyerema' the player of the sacred drum, listens to the voice and the roles of the various instruments and see if they blend harmoniously if not he will cut the whole ensemble and let them start all over again. The youths are allowed to dance first before the chiefs and elders steps in with their gracious leaps and jumps in dancing to grace the occasion. If the 'Okyerema' does not come in the drum ensemble, it can

never be classified as Asafo, it is only when the 'Okyerema' comes in that the beauty of the songs and the drum ensemble comes out. It is likened to a soup without salt. The Asafo can be played for a long period of time and when they are about to stop, it is only the 'Okyerema' that stops the whole ensemble.

When the 'Okyerema' becomes possessed while drumming and does not want to stop the ensemble, they use another sacred drum to communicate to the ensemble to stop playing. From the interview data, there is no specific time or periods for the learning of the Asafo and how its instruments are played. What happens is that when an elder, chief or an Asafo member dies, they play the Asafo the whole day and that is the period one can use to learn either the songs or how its instruments are played. But during festivals, grand durbars, or the arrival of other Asafo groups from elsewhere, it is only the master players who are allowed to play because there wouldn't be any room for mistakes.

The data revealed that the mode of playing Asafo are in five categories; 'Osor' 'Famu' 'Owambir' 'Asafo-Esi' and 'Atoperε'. 'Osor' meaning up showed that the songs and the drums, are played in high pitch. 'Famu' which meaning slow, showed that the songs and drums and songs were played in a solemn manner. 'Atoperε' meaning instrumentals, with this, only one or two selected drums are played continuously without songs. This happens when the Asafo members are sending a corpse to the graveyard. With this form of Asafo, no songs are added, its only Asafo instruments that are played. 'Owambir' meaning unknown. When this kind of Asafo is played, it means that the Asafo members are threading on a path to somewhere or to a nearby village. The songs and drums played correspond to the pace they walk.

An interviewee said the difference between the 'Owambir' and the 'Atoperε' is that the 'Atoperε' is faster than the 'Owambir' and with the 'Owambir' there is no 'Dawur' instrument added. The last one of them is the 'Asafo-Esi,' this happens when the Asafo groups have gathered at one place with the entire Asafo ensemble. This is the period where war songs are sung amongst the Asafo companies.

Asafo instruments are part of their regalia and they cannot do without in terms of any activities they embark on. Examples of some of the instruments they use are as follows

D. 'DAWUR'

This is a musical instrument made out of metal plates shaped in a conical form. It is usually played with a stick or a piece of metal rod. Before Asafo instruments are played, it is the 'Dawur' starts first. Just as we have the various modes of playing such as high life, cools, war songs etc. it is this 'Dawur' which determines the pace of the rhythm or the type of song to be played.



Figure 1; 'Dawur' Gong-gong being played (Source; Fieldwork 2016)

a. ANSERWA

Anserwa is the smallest drum amongst the ensemble. It is mostly carved out from a branch of a log. It uses two tinny chopsticks like in playing it. Anserwa in the drum ensemble is like a lead treble singer. It follows immediately after the Dawur.



Figure 2: 'Anserwa' drum being played (Source; Fieldwork 2016)

b. NGYE GYE HO

This drum is similar to that of the 'Anserwa' but a little bit bigger than the 'Anserwa'. It is usually played with one stick. It plays the role of an alto in the drum ensemble, the first drum shown below in the picture.



Figure 3: Ngye gye ho drum being played (Source; Fieldwork 2016)

c. OPENTSEN/AMPAA

This drum is normally played with the hands only. The players used mostly the fingers and the wrist in playing this type of drum. It is the third drum to be played. It normally plays the role of Tenor as shown in the middle of the picture below.



Figure 4: Opentsen/Ampaa being played (Source; Fieldwork 2016)

d. EPUSUW

This drum similar to that of the Opentsen, it is also played by the use of the hands, Epusuw is slightly bigger than that of the Opentsen, and plays the role of Bass in the drum ensemble. The first drum shown in the picture below



Figure 5: Epusuw being played (Source; Fieldwork 2016)

Most of the drums are carved from the 'Odum' tree. The elders and members of the Asafo groups believe that there are gods and other spirits which resides in these kinds of trees and before such trees are chopped down, they have to pour libation and other sacrifices to pacify the gods to accept that the trees could be used for such purposes before they cut it down.

The carver also needs to pour libation before he uses his tools to carve out the drums. When these drums are done, and ready to be handed over to the Asafo group that requested,

they also pour libations slaughter animals and pour their bloods on these drums and perform some rituals on them calling the gods and ancestral spirits to come and dwell in them so that whatever the drums will be used for will be successful before they add to their regalia and materials for their activities. An example is shown below where the drums are pacified.



Figure 6: (Asafo drum been pacified with schnapps and animal blood.

(Source; Fieldwork 2016)

These are huge drums which normally come in pairs. They are mounted on stands or most often they stand on their own because of its weight. These drums are played with a pair of ninety degree naturally shaped sticks or sometimes one stick and a bare hand. These drums are like men of the house, they command power and authority amongst the various drum ensembles. They have varied base sounds depending on the player and how he is playing these drums. These drums are talking drums are used in communicating to everybody including chiefs, elders, Asafo groups and members of the general public during festivals and durbars and so on.

e. *ACCESSORIES OF ASAFO; EKUMA (SHORT AXE) KOTOKORABA (PAIR OF STICKS)*

When the Asafo are about to parade the principal streets or roads in the towns and villages, it is the bearer of the short axe who takes the lead first to ensure that the roads are safe and clear, he also plays the role of overseer that is, sometimes most people walk fast depending on the types of songs sang which mostly leave some people behind so he makes sure that no one is left behind.

This is where the Kotokoraba (Pair of crossed Sticks) comes in. These sticks are long ninety degrees shaped long sticks used by the Asafo members. It is usually used to bracket each other to indicate that the road is closed. This is to allow the Asafo members rest and also let the other Asafo members left behind to catch up before it is opened again for passage after the bearers after the of the axe has done its job by overseeing that everything is moving on well. The pair of sticks is also a symbol of authority that is when the two bearers of this stick bracket each other, it means no one should leave the cue or no one should cross to the front line of the

sticks. If it happens that some people disobey the rules by passing under it or jumping over, the bearers of these sticks will either raise it higher or lower, preventing you from crossing or hurting you. After that, you will be severely beaten and handed over to the elders of the Asafo Company to pay a fine or pacify the gods.

It is only the bearer of the axe who has the authority to move around in front of the crossed pair of sticks to make sure that everything is in order, after, it is only the bearer of the axe who cuts the braced sticks open for continuous passage.

As these things go on, the Asafohemfo's also makes sure that their members are ok by providing water and encouraging them to be strong in the group and so on. This also makes the members also have confidence in their Asafohemfo's that they can bravely lead them to and fro's in their manoeuvres. The Asafohemfo's cannot control the crowd alone in the lane so the pair of sticks are like a doorway which is used to close and open's the gates for passage and its only key for that process is the axe and it is the Kyiremfo group that holds the axe and the pair of sticks because they lead the multitude in the town.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We now know the multiple roles that the Asafo played then and now. From the ancient times, there were many tribal and ethnic wars so members of Asafo were so much important and carried in high esteem. Unlike today that there is no wars and civilization and technology has taken over, this study sort to document the histories and philosophies of Asafo for future reference.

Guns and Musketrys have been used in those days for wars and other ethnic conflicts are barely used now and mostly for gaming only in these days. Huge sums of monies used to buy alcoholic drinks, gun powders, domestic animals etc. for rituals and sacrifices are now used in communal labour in various towns and villages.

The most regretful aspect of it is that the elders never allowed the youths in any way to bring in new changes and developments. Things were always done in the same way from generation to generation. Nonetheless, today Asafo is still used in communal labours and also help each other in commercial farming and so on. Even though our forefathers did not use Asafo to develop their towns and villages, they used it to protect themselves. Now that we have no conflicts and feuds and are protected by the government, the police and the military, it will be a good idea to re-look into the activities of Asafo and re-shape it to improve the lives of the people of Akans from its poor state into middle-class income towns and villages.

Again, museums should be built at vantage places and all ancient Asafo regalia should be paraded for the education of the youths, tourist attractions and for foreign exchange. Further, history books of African religions and cultures should be written by us and documented since European scholars misinterpret our cultures for us. Also, most African symbols, totems, cultures proverbs etc. has been distorted by the whites since most of the information concerning our cultures are orally transmitted and not documented. Most governmental and non-governmental organization should collaborate to help

with workshops, seminar presentations and conferences to educate the youths to understand our cultures very well. Likewise, it should be incorporated into the tertiary school curriculums for studies. Finally, Asafo post-cards on their various activities should be made and sold out in both local and international markets for income and also to be known worldwide.

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