

## Research through material cultures and indigenous performance

The centrality of material culture to the performance, study, understanding and aesthetic appreciation of indigenous African arts are all too obvious. Construed by social scientists as “the physical objects or “things” that belong to, represent, or were created by a group of people within a particular culture...” (Auslander 2012) material culture stands as an under-explored index in the artistic research matrix in Africa. This panel explores the nature/make and essence of material culture’s embodiedness, its close relation to the human body, and how they frame artistic performances and their contextual meanings and appropriateness. The panel’s focus is premised on the position that since not all perceptions can be expressed through music sound and language, material objects deployed in indigenous artistic contexts, ought to engage the interest of arts researchers as vital players in the meaning making matrixes of indigenous expressive arts.

### 1<sup>st</sup> Presentation *By* N. Laryea Akwetteh

**Title:** Have the flags taken off?: The Silent flag and the Sanctioned Sounds in Teshie *Homowo*

**Abstract:** This paper explores flags as vital players that impact and reflect the secular musical tradition of the annual harvest festival (*Homowo*) of the Teshie people of Accra. A flag during this indigenous festival represents a musical style, the originators of this musical style, performance occasions, and certain performance conventions. In the hands of a master flagman, the flag provokes several moods and actions during the musical performances of the festival. Based on Jane Bennett’s (2009) concept of vital players, this paper argues that though technically not a musical instrument, at least in the conventional sense, these pieces of fabric attached to poles hold the key to explaining the aesthetic conventions that underpin the secular music making context of the *Homowo* festival. The paper draws from ethnographic data gathered between 2016 to 2021, as well as my own lived experiences as an insider of the tradition.

**Keyword:** *Homowo*, flag, conductorial, *Kpashimo*, flagman.

**Bio:** N. Laryea Akwetteh is a PhD student in Ethnomusicology at the University of Toronto, Canada. He holds degrees in Music (with Theatre Arts) and African Studies from the University of Ghana, Legon. He also holds a teaching appointment at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Presentation by Adwoa Arhine

**Title: 'We can't perform without spirits': Interrogating the discursive agency of alcohol in adzewa performance.**

**Abstract:** Although it is common knowledge that most African societies have clearly defined aesthetic conventions, scholars have not explored fully the dimensions of musical and non-musical factors that people ascribe "good" music performance to, such as 'spirits. In performing *adzewa*— a female musical tradition of the Fante people of Southern Ghana— the women lay claim to a spiritual licence to negotiate the power to remember songs that would otherwise be considered impossible or difficult to recall. Referring to both alcohol and their ancestral overlords, they say "we can't perform without the 'spirits'". This paper examines how 'spirits' shape the identity and performance ethos of *adzewa* music against the performing women's claim that they can't perform without 'spirits. Drawing on a decade long research on *adzewa* musical practices, the paper argues that the success of *adzewa* performance extends beyond singing, drumming, and dancing. For, in such performances, spirits have agency to define and influence musical behaviours, norms, and identities. The paper concludes that, the success of *adzewa* performance is rooted in a metaphysical negotiation between musicians and their ancestral instructors to be able to perform a full repertoire and have the resilience to finish performances that last several hours.

**Keywords:** Music, women, spirits, performance, negotiation, agency.

**Bio:**

Adwoa Arhine (PhD) is an ethnomusicologist, a Fulbright Scholar (2014) and Senior Lecturer, Department of Music, University of Ghana, Legon. She has published on women's performance practices and African identities, music and play, and taught courses in Music of West Africa, Music and Gender Studies, and Ghanaian Traditional Folk Songs.

## 3<sup>rd</sup> Presentation by Moses Nii-Dortey

**Title: Beyond sounds and movements: Performance sights in Ghanaian ceremonials**

**Abstract:** Often, the tendency among ethnomusicologists in African music making contexts has been to emphasise the sonic component in the performance matrix mainly because of its rather obtrusive role. What seems obvious, however, is that it takes far more than the music sounds to both define music's contextual role and appropriateness in such

ceremonies. In this paper, I argue that, with regard to indigenous African ceremonials, performance sights— including musical instruments, regalia and other performance materials— play complementary roles in defining the histories of a people and their arts. The sights, additionally, define the performance essence, contextual appropriateness of the music form/genre, and, in such ceremonies, contribute to the attainment of what Diane Thram (2003) describes as therapeutic efficacy. Data for this paper are drawn from Ghanaian ceremonials, including the 2017 Asante royal funeral of the late Nana Afiya Kobi Ampem II, and the annual *kplejoo* possession drama of the Nungua people of Accra.

**Keywords:** Ceremonials, performance sights, therapeutic efficacy, music.

**Bio.**

Moses Nii-Dortey (PhD.) is an ethnomusicologist and a Snr. Fellow, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon. He was an African Presidential Fellow, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (2009), and AHP Fellow, University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, (2011-2012). Nii-Dortey has published on Ghanaian folk opera, and traditional festivals as integrated Performances.

**4<sup>th</sup> Presentation by Ọbádélé Kambon**

**Title: The Political Economy of How indigenous is the material culture of Afrikan Spiritual Systems**

Any phenomenon, tangible or intangible, can be subjected to a set of evaluative criteria and organizing principles. Among these evaluative criteria are considerations of who originates a given phenomenon and who benefits from its existence. Rituals and ceremonies considered to be traditional and/or indigenous are accompanied by a host of ritual objects— some of which play central roles and are considered indispensable in their performance. In 2021 The Supreme Court of the U.S. rejected an appeal from Johnson & Johnson seeking to undo a \$2.1 billion damages award against it over allegations that asbestos in its talcum powder products, including baby powder, caused women to develop ovarian cancer—yet this same talcum powder covers the body of those possessed with the spirit. Dutch schnapps are ubiquitously poured in libations from the palace to the shrine. Imported calico cloths, cigars, whiskey, gin, toffee, n.k. are integral parts of many shrines and the rituals that take place therein. In this paper, using participant observation, we will look at the proliferation of these non-Afrikan implements. Further, we will utilize key organizing principles to examine how indigenous or traditional many of these implements actually may or may not be as well as who benefits in which areas (economically,

politically, socially, n.k.) from the created tastes and desires which now permeate the physical and spiritual realms unchallenged and unabated.

**Keywords:** Political economy, indigenous spirituality, material culture

**Bio:**

Ɔbenfo (Professor) Ɔbádélé Kambon completed his PhD in Linguistics at the University of Ghana in 2012, winning the prestigious Vice-Chancellor's award for the Best PhD Thesis in the Humanities. He also won the 2016 Provost's Publications Award for best article in the College of Humanities. He is an Associate Professor and Head of the Language, Literature and Drama Section of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana. Ɔbenfo Kambon is currently Editor-in-Chief of the Ghana Journal of Linguistics and served as Secretary of the African Studies Association of Africa (2015-2020). He is also a special advisor to UNESCO (ICM). His research interests include Serial Verb Construction Nominalization, Historical Linguistics, Kemetology, & Afrikan=Black Liberation. His website is <https://www.obadelekambon.com>.