

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The props propelleth the performance: Prop elements in the celebration of Edina *Bakatue* festival

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## Abstract

The Edina *Bakatue* festival is one of the traditional festivals celebrated in Ghana by the people of Elmina in the Central Region. The celebration of this festival serves as an avenue for showcasing the rich cultural heritage of the people. For this celebration, props feature prominently. Although there is a plethora of studies on festivals in Ghana, there is a dearth of research on the significance of prop elements in traditional Ghanaian festivals. Engaging a qualitative approach to research, employing the purposive sampling technique to select twelve (12) participants, and relying on multiple data collection instruments (observation, interviews, and photographs), this study sought to explore the significance of prop elements in the celebration of the Edina *Bakatue* festival. Underpinned by performance theory, the findings of the study revealed that prop elements serve as status and power for the Paramount chief, for identity and commemoration, for the spiritual protection of chiefs and other traditional rulers, and finally for the display of culture. With a wealth of scholarly findings, the study recommends that prop elements used in the celebration of the festival be preserved for future generations. Ultimately, this study contributes to scholarship on prop elements within the Ghanaian cultural space.

## Introduction

The African space is characterised by different kinds of festivals celebrated by its members, mostly to purport a reflection of happenings within their community (Bonye, 2011; Idang, 2015; Ogbenika, 2020). This is despite colonialism's influence in Sub-Saharan Africa, whose legacies have eroded or diluted some of the cultural heritage, including festivals (Adom, 2017; Dennis, 2018; Fori et al., 2021; Navei, 2023; Sibani, 2018). However, the need to unearth and showcase the utilitarian and aesthetic nuances of the African people's cultural heritage, including festivals bequeathed to them, has gained acceptance and popularity in recent times. On the heels of the foregoing, Owusu-Frempong (2005, p. 732) has noted that "African festivals are periods and events when African people come together to sing, dance, eat, and celebrate a particular event of life," of which Ghana is not an exception, where festivals are celebrated across the length and breadth of the country almost every month of the year (Agyarko, 2017; Brako, 2016; Duku, 2013; Kemevor & Duku, 2013; Kuuder, Adongo, & Abanga, 2012; Odotei, 2002). This, thus, positions Ghana as a hub for festivals.

Odotei (2002), as cited in Akyeampong and Yankholmes (2016), has noted that festivals within the Ghanaian community are classified into two categories: traditional and contemporary. The latter, on the one hand, is not identified with any traditional or ethnic group and it is put together by event organisers. Examples of contemporary festivals within the Ghanaian space include but are not limited to: Miss Ghana, Music Awards, Ghana's Most Beautiful, and many more. Traditional festivals, on the other hand, are the most common and popular among the indigenous people and are organised by the traditional authorities within a given cultural or ethnic space. Traditional festivals are normally celebrated in commemoration of historical events or as a propitiation to the gods and ancestors for various reasons, including a bountiful harvest and many more (Adom, 2017; Akintan, 2013; Kemevor & Duku, 2013; Kuuder et al. 2012; Navei, 2021; Selase & Christopher, 2013). As a result, indigenes from various communities across Ghana continue to participate in one form or another of traditional festival. It is as a result of the aforementioned that Kuuder et al. (2012, p. 105) have noted that "festivals have a lot of history behind their celebrations."

Discussing the place of traditional festivals in the Ghanaian space, Owusu-Frempong (2005, p. 732) asserts that "festivals... represent an invaluable source of knowledge about folklore, history, philosophy, aesthetics, music, dance, art, and myth, all of which form part of our collective existence." From the foregoing, a key issue arises: thus, festivals serve as a path for knowledge preservation. Among some traditional festivals celebrated in Ghana are *Aboakyire* by the people of Winneba; *Homowo* by the Gas; *Bakatue* by the people of Elmina; *Kakube* by the people of Dagara; *Paari-gbiele* by the Sisaala people of Tumu; and *Asafotufiam* by the people of Ada. The rest are: *Apoo* by the people of Tekyiman; *Bugum* by the people of Dagomba; *Oguaa Fetu*

*Afahye* by the people of Cape Coast; and many more (Adom, 2017; Kuuder et al., 2012; Navei, 2023; Odotei, 2002).

The importance of traditional festivals in the Ghanaian community cannot be overstated. This is because they serve as platforms for disseminating local communities' rich cultural heritage (Adom, 2017); for socioeconomic gains and community cohesiveness (Doe, Preko, Akroful, & Okai-Anderson, 2020); for bringing people together to celebrate a common heritage (Kuuder et al. 2012); for raising cultural awareness of local traditions (Stankova & Vassenska, 2015); for political and developmental dimensions (Kuuder et al. 2012); and many more. The celebration of traditional festivals serves as an avenue to showcase the art forms of a group of people, of which their costumes and props are key examples (Ayesu et al. 2020). As a result, traditional festivals serve as one of the means by which the use of props is pervasive. It is common, therefore, to come across the use of props in diverse forms for the celebration of traditional festivals. Without doubt, these props are also used for both theatre and film purposes. This is because theatre and film mirror the day-to-day lives of a group of people. Strawn and Schlenker (2018, p. 31) define props as:

The details fleshing out the architecture of the stage setting to define the characters in the play, set the time period, support the action needed within the structure of the play, and complete the "bridge" between the characters on stage and the reality of life object and serve as either a part of the set or a tool for the actors.

From the definition, two key issues arise. First, the use of specific props helps identify the period in which a theatrical production is situated. This is because various civilizations are characterised by specific props, and their usage in a stage performance or film helps to project the period in which the play is set. Second, the use of props also helps in actor characterisation, as actors are well situated within a specific context based on the kind of prop being used. Largely, props can be either real or improvised. Gillette (2013) asserts that stage properties can be categorised into three types: set, hand, and decorative props. Set props are larger, movable items that are not built into the set and are used by actors. Furniture, floor lamps, rugs, stoves, tree stumps, and swings are some examples of set props. Small items that actors handle or carry are referred to as "hand props". Notable examples are plates, cups, books, fans, lanterns, and many more. Decorative props, also known as set dressing, are items used to enhance the visual appeal of the setting but are not directly touched by the actors. Window curtains, pictures, doilies, table lamps, bric-a-brac, and books in a bookcase are all examples of decorative props. Beyond these categorisations, there are also costume props. By this, an item of costume that is not worn by the actor but rather held by an actor or hanged on the set is viewed as a costume prop.

A number of studies have been carried out on traditional festivals in Ghana (Agyarko, 2017; Brako, 2016; Duku, 2013; Kemevor & Duku, 2013; Navei, 2023), however, the significance of prop elements has not been explored to expand the depth and frontiers of their usage within Ghana and more especially among the people of Elmina. The current study, therefore, explores the significance of props in the Edina *Bakatue* festival of the people of Elmina in Ghana. In this article, the word propelleth is used to connote the use of an object to catalyse an action in a performance, whether on stage or screen. In the next thread of discussion, the study provides a brief history of the *Bakatue* festival to situate our discussion in context.

### **The names are symbolic: Historical trajectory of Edina, a town of many names**

Elmina, popularly referred to by its indigenes as Edina, Anomansa, or Amankwaa Kurom (Womber, 2020), is a historic town in the Central Region of Ghana. This is because it was one of the settlements that came into contact with colonialists during the colonial period in Ghana's political history. Tracing the history of the people of Elmina, Womber (2020) holds that the town was founded by three cousins: Takyi, Sama, and Kwaa Amankwaa. These were individuals who migrated from ancient Mali, settled at present-day Takyiman in the Brong Ahafo Region of Ghana, and eventually at Eguafo, a town closer to Elmina. Among these cousins, the role played by Kwaa Amankwaa, a hunter, was phenomenal for the establishment of the Elmina township. On one of his hunting expeditions, he got lost. In search of water to quench his thirst, he came across a spot of water, which he drank to his satisfaction. The more he drank, the fuller the water became. As a result, he named the area *Anomansa*, an Akan word that means "infinite water". Prior to the arrival of the colonialists, the community adopted the name Anomansa.

Later, Amankwaa discovered that the water was a lagoon. In his excitement, he shouted "Be enya", a Fanti word that means "I have got it." Consequently, the lagoon has been called Be enya since the precolonial era in Ghana. Amankwaa finally settled at Anomansa. Because Amankwaa founded the town, the town was later named after its founder, hence Amankwaa Kurom (Amankwaa's community). Amankwaa was later installed as the chief of the community, and he formed the Asafo companies, which functioned as the military unit of the community. Aggrey (1978) asserts that the term *Asafo* is derived from two words: "Sa," which stands for war, and "Fo," which stands for people. As a result, the term *Asafo* refers to combatants. Most Fante towns were defended and fought for by Asafo companies scattered throughout the various Fante communities. According to various sources (Abban & Asante, 2021; Jeffreys, 2022; Sparks, 2020), the Asafo Company collectively is thought to be a culture that was imported from European armies that were stationed in Ghana during the colonial era. All Asafo companies taking part in any type of performance during the *Bakatue* festival are designated by a flag and a key as an emblem with particular colors like yellow and white. In terms of festivals, Ashun (2017) brings to the fore that the Edina community celebrates the Edina *Bakatue*, a traditional festival

that is held on the first Tuesday of the month of July, and Edina Bronya, which is the people of Elmina's version of Christmas celebrated in January.

As observed by Koufie (2019), the traditional god of the Benya River assured Amankwaa and his people of his protection. The god further instructed Amankwaa to build a shrine at the southern part of the lagoon, where he (Amankwaa) would have to perform rituals inside and outside the shrine in the sixth month of every year (June). However, the Edina *Bakatue* festival is held on the first Tuesday in July on an annual basis. It is in keeping with these lasting bonds that the Edina *Bakatue* festival has been sustained from the precolonial epoch to date. Ultimately, the festival is celebrated to foster unity among the people of Edina and to commemorate the discovery of the Benya Lagoon. The indigenes of the Edina community engage in fishing. Coronel (1979) brings to the fore that Fantes are regarded as having the best fishermen on the Ghanaian coast. Again, Fantes were traditionally the ones who skillfully taught other ethnic groups how to fish. Elmina is associated with a number of tourist sites. These include the Elmina castle, built by the Portuguese in 1482 and the oldest castle in Africa south of the Sahara (Owusu, 2019).

### **Edina *Bakatue* festival: The celebration as a performance**

Traditional festivals are generally celebrated among community folks and serve as an outlet to showcase the communities' rich cultural heritage, exemplified in areas such as rituals, drumming, dancing, singing, and many more (Navei, 2023). As noted by Stoeltje (1992), festivals are viewed as cultural performances that are organized occasionally within a specific time frame and are time-bound. It also serves as a way of communicating the values, principles, and worth of a community, which can either be verbal or non-verbal and are explicitly characterised by profound insights. For example, as observed by Rappaport (1992), rituals are mostly related to and appear in festivals as a form of communication that is linked to the concerns and practice of religion.

The Edina *Bakatue* festival is celebrated to pacify the Benya deity and cleanse the people of Elmina to enable them to get plentiful fishing harvests in the ensuing year. Koufie (2019) and (M.K., personal communication, August 20, 2019) have revealed that prior to the festival, a message is sent to community members a week before the ban on fishing in the Benya lagoon. Beyond this, there is a ban on all activities that are associated with extensive noise-making. These include performing funeral rites and pounding fufu, a local delicacy among the Akan. The ban on fishing and noisemaking is referred to as *woafabaka* among the Fante. The reason behind the ban is to allow the fish in the lagoon to multiply, which has the potential to result in a large catch on *Bakatue* Day. During the ban, the initial white flag on the Benya shrine is replaced with a new white flag, usually facing the eastern part of the town. This is referred to as the "recapping of the Benya shrine. Historically, it symbolises the victory of the Fantes in the War

of 1868. The replacement of the cap is done annually, and the old cap is carried to *Kunkuntar*, meaning to be swallowed by the sea. Another structure is crafted and woven, later capped on top of the shrine at midnight.

A six-week period of activity, with a distinct performance marking each week, precedes the *Bakatue* festival. The first week is marked by purification and cleansing. In order to end widowhood, known among the Akan as *kunaye*, widows are required by custom to be cleansed. In addition, the locals get ready to be purified by Nana Nyankopon (the All-Powerful God) for a prosperous fishing season. The second week is followed by a curfew in the community known as *Essarmu* through Bakaano to the Benya shrine. Two main rituals are performed: *Gyantsiatu* and *Sosogya*. *Gyantsiatu*, which translates to "bearing flaming firewood," is a Monday morning ritual. On Tuesday, young men, preferably fishermen, carry sticks stuffed with red pepper and march through the neighborhood while singing songs crafted with some of the ills in society. This is done in an effort to discourage community members from taking part in such activities. This rite is referred to as *Sosogya*.

The *Korbabutu* ritual, which involves turning the wooden platter on its side, is what distinguishes the third week. It is performed by the *Asafo* Number One (1) Company, which bears a key as its emblem. In the process, a white sheep is carried and slaughtered in front of the Benya Shrine, and a sacrifice is performed to the gods. On the midnight of the same Monday, four of the thirteen straw-hat bearers who are state courtiers (*Birifikyewfo*) canoe to *Anwewdo*, the source of the river, where they invoke the spirit of the god Benya to guide and guard the Elmina community as they prepare to enter a new year. The beating of the royal state drum (*Aketsewta*) is to warn people to take cover and give way to the Benya deity. The drumming also plays a very important role in the invocation ceremony.

During the first *Dombo* (a gathering of priests and priestesses and community folks to perform rituals to forgive each other), a ritual dance performance takes place in the fourth week at midnight on the fourth Monday. Four of the thirteen state courtiers (*Birifikyewfo*), who wear straw hats, canoe to *Anwewdo*, the lagoon's source, where they invoke the spirit of the god Benya and bring it to the shrine to protect and guide the Elmina community as they get ready to ring in the new year. The second *Dombo* is held on the fifth week. A routine of traditional dance and drumming is performed. The *Omanhene* (Paramount chief), chiefs, stool-holders, and *supifo* (the *Asafo* leaders) also take part in the second *Dombo*. Priests and priestesses, *Amanfo* (state courtiers), herbalists, and spectators assemble and dance until the wee hours of the morning.

The sixth week is characterised by the *Kowbartae* ritual of the number two (2) *Asafo* company. There is a third *Dombo* in the evening, which marks the eve of *Bakatue* on Tuesday. Undoubtedly, several properties (props) play a vital role in the celebration of *Bakatue*. On *Bakatue* day, women



dress in rich Kente fabric and ride in canoes on the lagoon. The people of Elmina meet along the bank of the lagoon to witness this beautiful spectacle. A regatta is organised on the lagoon to display brute strength combined with dexterity in paddling cannon. At 12:00 noon, there is a procession of traditional priests and priestesses, *Supis* (supreme commanders of all the Asafo companies), herbalists, *Asafohenfo* (heads of the Asafo companies), and concerned citizens through the principal streets of Elmina to the shrine and banks of the lagoon. Usually, the Paramount Chief is the last person who follows the procession while clad in white cloth with *Nyanya* leaves (*Momodica Foetida*) around his neck. He also wears a straw hat called *Birifikyew* and holds his sceptre to symbolically establish his status in society. There is a brief stop at the sacred shrine to allow for purification rituals to be observed. There is a resumption of the solemn procession, with one of the courtiers carrying a wooden tray with leaves and eggs, with the *Nyanya* leaves being the most dominant leaves. The contents of the tray simulate the ills and curses of Elmina township. On the banks of the river, a sacred food in the form of cooked and mashed yam mixed with oil is offered, and the ills and curses are buried in the river. A fishing net is cast three times in the lagoon with the hope of catching fish. The fish are removed from the net, placed in a basket, and displayed to the entire gathering. The traditional ruler fires muskets in the air three times, announcing the lifting of the ban on fishing. At this time, there is also an exchange of yam and fish between Eguafu and Elmina, respectively, to represent the unity of the two traditional areas. On Saturday, there is a grand durbar and a gathering at Elmina Castle during the day. The evening is marked by merrymaking, which is patronised and enjoyed by both the young and the old. The people of Elmina are noted for fishing; therefore, the festival is also celebrated to invoke fertility, worthy children, good health, and an abundance of food and fish. Further, it also promotes peace and harmony in the traditional area. In the next segment, we discuss prop elements used in the celebration of traditional festivals.

### **Props associated with traditional festivals**

Generally, props play major roles in performances. Consequently, props used in traditional festivals in an African setting cannot be exempted as they enhance the meaning, aesthetics, and message of the performances (Amali, 2022). A study by Ahmadu (2018) is worth engaging with due to the plethora of findings it brings to the fore. Employing a qualitative approach to research, Ahmadu (2018) explored theatrical elements in the *Nakenyare* festival of the Chamba Leko people of Adamawa State, Nigeria. Findings of the study revealed that prop elements featured prominently in the festival. These were *La'ama*, made of cast metal with the hand made out of a boaboa tree branch, and is used by the *Su'u* priest during the *Nakenyare* festival. It is worn around the priest's neck as a sign of self-worth and pride, as well as for spiritual protection. *Vommaga'a* was another prop used for the celebration of the festival. Made from the horn of an adult female buffalo, it is buried on the bank of a river for at least a week or two. It is later picked, cleaned inside, and holes made at the edge of the horn for blowing purposes. As a key

prop element, it is used to signal the presence of the *voma* cult during the *Nakenyare* performance. The next prop is the *gasa*, a special horn made only to be blown on special occasions and moments like the *Nakenyare* performance. It is also used to convey a message to the community from *Su"u*, the supreme deity. *Ya Belbelwa* was yet another prop element. This is a special bell only worn by children who have just been circumcised before the *Nakenyare* performance and are yet to heal. Anyone seen with *belbelwa* means that the person has just been circumcised, and extra care is expected by anyone walking close to them. The final prop element was the *dunlera* or *peela* obtained from a young buffalo's horn. It is used to signal the presence of Ganwari or Gara (the king) during the *Nakenyare* performance when the king is coming to watch the *Nakenyare* performance with his family and numerous numbers of his wives.

In the Ghanaian traditional setting, palanquins and umbrellas are important props that symbolise the status of chiefs at social events, including but not limited to festivals (Marfo, 2015). Specifically, Tschumi (2013) identified the palanquin as the main prop element among the Gas in Ghana in the celebration of their *Homowo* festival. By doing so, the palanquin is revered as a sign of identity, and the shape and design of the palanquin are used to differentiate among the various clans of the Gas. A palanquin used by a chief ultimately communicates nonverbally to spectators. This is because, as Teileman and Uitermark (2019) observed, chiefs are the local gatekeepers of every traditional area. As part of their responsibilities, chiefs combine their influence to solve governmental and nongovernmental issues in their community. In *Nembe* Kingdom, located along the coastal line of Nigeria, Angba *et al.* (2018) aver that canoes are important prop essentials used in the celebration of their festival, where community members engage in paddling canoes for competition purposes. This was so because the main occupation of the people was fishing, and for that reason, it was necessary to feature such an important element of their fishing activities in the celebration of their festival. On the part of Okpadah (2018), one predominant object at most festivals in West Africa is the plant leaf. Ramachandra (2010) has noted that the use of sacred plant and leaves at festivals is very dear and relevant to the people of West Africa.

### **Theoretical underpinning of the study**

For a study on the significance of prop elements in the Edina *Bakatue* festival, performance theory is deemed suitable. According to Schechner's (1977) performance theory, the performer carries a different identity that is unique and enhances the quality of a performance. It is noted that this kind of performance has nothing to do with acting skills but is a showcase of the actual self and mannerisms. In this context, there is a separation between the actual self of the performer and the role they play in any space, whether stage or screen. Therefore, every performance demands several elements, especially props, to achieve the totality of a space



(Gillette, 2013). These prop elements enable the performance of an actor to portray a unique identity (Schechner, 2000). On the basis of performance theory, we argue that the prop elements used in *Bakatue* add to its significance and exquisiteness as a spectacle. Therefore, performance theory emphasises that most performances in traditional African festivals, especially *Bakatue*, employ prop elements in their relevant forms as they showcase deeper meanings.

## Research Methods

The current study was anchored on the interpretivist philosophical stance. Our selection of this philosophical view was made because proponents of this philosophy argue that individuals who have lived experiences or serve as institutional memory are those who bring their wealth of knowledge together to craft the narrative of a phenomenon. This means that reality is socially constructed (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Chowdhury, 2014). Since the qualitative approach aligns with the interpretivist point of view (Ryan, 2018), we settled on the qualitative approach. Our reasons are twofold: first, the roots of qualitative research lie in understanding the culture of a group of people (Mohajan, 2018), in which the use of props also thrives. Second, qualitative researchers seek to collect data in the natural setting in which the phenomenon occurs (Creswell, 2014). The 2019 *Bakatue* festival of the people of Elmina was chosen for study. This was because after the celebration of the 2019 *Bakatue* festival, there has been a ban on people gathering in large numbers for events, including festivals, following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019. The population for the study consisted of individuals who served as institutional memory of the Elmina tradition and understood the ways in which props operated within the cultural space of the people. We employed the purposive sampling technique to identify participants for the current study. This was because the purposive sampling technique is used when a researcher deliberately chooses an informant due to the qualities the informant possesses in relation to the phenomenon being explored (Omona, 2013; Tongco, 2007). Within this context, since we were exploring the significance of props in the Edina *Bakatue* festival, it was prudent to engage people who had in-depth knowledge on the subject matter. Subsequently, twelve (12) participants who were all indigenes of Elmina formed the sample for the current study. They comprised five (5) community members, made up of three (3) males and two (2) females; two (2) male traditional rulers; and one (1) male *Supi*. The rest were one (1) traditional priest, one (1) traditional priestess, and two (2) male sub-chiefs. The qualitative data saturation technique was used as a criterion to determine the sample size and when data collection should be stopped. By using this technique, additional information given by other participants had no major impact on the already collected data.

Data were collected using an interview guide, an observation guide, and photographs. With regard to the interview guide, the semi-structured approach was preferred over others. This is because the semi-structured interview guide allows the interviewer to further probe the

interviewee's ideas in order to better understand issues that have been shared by participants or to clarify beliefs and feelings about a phenomenon (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Flynn & McDermott, 2016; Wishkoski, 2020). The interview sessions were conducted by the researchers, and with the permission of the participants, they were recorded using a recording device. Interview sessions lasted between twenty (20) and thirty (30) minutes. The interview recordings were later transcribed manually, coded, and themes generated. In terms of observation, we observed the 2019 *Bakatue* festival on a non-participant basis and also took pictures, both in motion and still, of the various props used for the celebration. The photographs were sorted and used to further explain the various props. The data were analysed using qualitative descriptive analysis. This is because qualitative descriptive analysis concentrates on a phenomenon, comprehends its traits, and honors the contributions and accounts of participants.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were taken into consideration throughout the research process. Pseudonyms, rather than the participants' real names, were used to represent excerpts of information provided by participants. Again, the consent of participants was also sought. By doing so, participants agreed to verbal consent and were free to quit the research process at any time they felt the need to do so. We also sought their permission before taking photographs of them and assured them that the photographs were only meant for academic purposes.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Props associated with the Edina *Bakatue* festival**

#### *Traditional Two-Tiered Umbrella and Palanquin*

The data analysed revealed that a traditional two-tier umbrella and palanquin are among the prop elements used for the celebration of the Edina *Bakatue* festival. According to some participants, the difference in the design of the Paramount chief's umbrella is that it is two-tiered as compared to that of sub-chiefs, which is characterised by a single layer. The two-tiered umbrella used by the Paramount chief represents his superiority and status in society. Beyond the two-tiered umbrella is the use of the palanquin, which is used to carry the Paramount chief during the procession through the grand durbar of the festival. Figure 1a illustrates the two main prop elements: a two-tiered umbrella and a palanquin. From the figure, the umbrella canopy fabric is white, and the Paramount chief is also clad in white cloth with leaves arranged on the head and neck. As indicated by sub-chief participant one, "the leaves are for spiritual protection. This is because the position of the Paramount chief is perceived as superior, hence it must be

protected spiritually". This is further highlighted by Teileman and Uitermark (2019), who present chiefs as the local gatekeepers of every traditional area. As part of their responsibilities, chiefs combine their influence to solve governmental and non-governmental issues in their community. In that manner, they play multitasking roles in their own traditional areas. This core duty indicates the level of power a chief has in controlling the affairs of various communities in a Ghanaian setting. As indicated by community male participant one, "for the *Bakatue* festival, the Paramount chief's palanquin is covered with white cloth to connote the symbol of power and purity". Inference from this submission is that the symbolic meanings of colours within the Ghanaian space are employed to convey a nonverbal message to spectators about the Paramount chief. The use of umbrellas and palanquins by chiefs is affirmed by literature by Marfo (2015), who asserts that umbrellas and palanquins play a major role in Ghanaian traditional settings to depict the status of chiefs during social functions, including but not limited to festivals. Specifically, the use of palanquins is affirmed by literature by Tschumi (2013), who argued that among the Gas, the palanquin is revered as a sign of identity, where the shape and design are used to differentiate between the various clans.



**Fig. 1a:** Paramount chief of Elmina, Nana Kodwo Kondua VI, covered by a two-tier traditional umbrella while he sits in his palanquin covered with white fabric on procession to the festival durbar grounds (**Source:** Fieldwork, 2019).



**Fig. 1b:** Paramount chief of Elmina, Nana Kodwo Kondua VI, carried in his palanquin on procession to the festival durbar grounds (**Source:** Fieldwork, 2019).

### Asafo Company Flag

The Asafo flag used by the Asafo companies is another key prop element identified with the celebration of the *Bakatue* festival. Historically, Asafo companies are typically combative groups that play major roles in traditional Fante societies situated along the coastal areas. Each Asafo company in every Fante community has unique numbers, such as "number one" (1) or "number two" (2). They are involved in activities such as marching in procession, holding special company flags, using musketry salutes, and constructing shrines that have architectural features like European forts. It is believed that Asafo Company, as a group, has a culture borrowed from European armies that were present in Ghana in the colonial days (Abban & Asante, 2021; Jeffreys, 2022; Sparks, 2020). In the *Bakatue* festival, Asafo companies participating in any form of performance are identified by an emblem with specific colours. In Figure 2, the Ankobea Asafo company's emblem- flag is characterised by a yellow pattern in the form of a key affixed to a white fabric used during the ritual to initiate the ban on fishing and other recreational activities in Elmina. A synthesis of the data revealed that the key pattern in the flag symbolises the closure of all fishing and other related activities associated with the Benya lagoon. This, therefore, communicates, in non-verbal terms, the ban on fishing to community folks.



**Figure 2:** Ankobea Asafo Company flag held by a flag bearer  
(Source: Fieldwork Data, 2019).

Although various Asafo companies were supposed to be present during the procession to initiate the ban on fishing, during the 2019 *Bakatue* festival only one group was represented. A participant informed:

Really... I am surprised at seeing just one Asafo company show up with her flag during this year's ban on fishing for the *Bakatue* festival. I am aware that there are about seven Asafo companies with different flags in Elmina. Well... this might be the result of a major decision taken by the Paramount chief and his traditional leaders (Male participant one)

The thoughts and ideas of another participant were that "most males who belong to the various Asafo companies are inactive and do not participate in some of these activities. On the other hand, when old men who belong to some Asafo companies die, there are no replacements". This serves as an avenue to deplete the existing membership of the various Asafo companies in Elmina. The existence of Asafo companies within the Fante communities in the Central Region of Ghana is affirmed by Aggrey (1978) that the Asafo companies were the military groups that fought to protect the various communities from attacks. However, literature seems to be silent on the Asafo flag.



## Traditional sceptre

According to some participants, it is believed that the traditional sceptre shown in Figure 3 is among the key props used in the celebration of the Edina *Bakatue*. After data synthesis, it was discovered that the sceptre was used as a weapon by traditional warriors to fight their enemies during wartime. During *Bakatue* festival day, a traditional priest drapes white cloth around his waist, wears a straw hat and stirs the lagoon for minutes using the sceptre. He later moves out and paddles with the sceptre to imitate the act of fishermen riding a canoe boat, thereby symbolising the lifting of the ban on fishing. However, it is noted that literature seems to be silent on the use of a sceptre in the Elmina traditional setting.



**Figure 3:** Traditional priest using his club to stirring the lagoon back and forth to simulate paddling of a canoe (**Source:** Fieldwork data, 2019)

## Leaves and Wooden Bowl (*kroba*)

From the data, some participants indicated that during the Edina *Bakatue* festival, leaves play a major role in the performance of rites. Dominated among these leaves was *Nyanya*, (*Momodica-Foetida*) a creeping plant as seen in Figure 4a. In the Ghanaian traditional setting, varied plant species are believed to have some spiritual or medicinal value apart from producing food crops for human consumption (Solberg, Asase, Akwetey & Jager, 2015; Tabi, Powell & Hodnicki, 2006). As indicated by community male participant one “*Nyanya* is often worn around the neck and sometimes used to adorn straw hats worn by traditional priests and priestesses, sub-chiefs, and the Paramount chief. Beyond these, the *Nyanya* leaves are sometimes soaked in water and used for bathing to ward off evil spirits”. From the submission, it can be deduced that the main role of the *Nyanya* leaves is for protection against evil spirits that may harm the wearer in any given



space. The use of leaves in the celebration of the Edina *Bakatue* festival is confirmed with literature by Okpadah (2018) who asserts that plant leaves are predominant elements used in festivals in West Africa. Again, the use of the *Nyenya* plant for spiritual protection for the Paramount chief is also in consonance with literature by Ahmadu (2018) where the *Su"u* priest of the Chamba Leko people of Adamawa State, Nigeria wears *La'ama*, around his neck for spiritual protection. On *Bakatue* day, different species of leaves from plants are arranged artistically in a wooden bowl (*kroba*), and on top of these leaves are eggs. The entire content and the bowl are buried in the Benya Lagoon to pacify the gods. After this ritual, the Paramount chief, sub-chiefs, traditional priests, and priestesses also throw the leaves used to deck their bodies into the river. A participant noted:

*...so the leaves you saw have been buried in the lagoon and are believed to cleanse us of our evil deeds. Also, during this ritual, the indigenes and onlookers must exercise a period of silence since the ritual process invites a lot of spirits, who avail themselves to witness the entire process. Therefore, all human movements are halted to ensure a successful ritual (Supi participant one).*

From the exposition, a key issue arises: the main essence of this ritual is to cleanse the sins of community members and ask for forgiveness. This is aimed at carrying all grudges among the indigenous people into the lagoon. It is a major rite performed before the actual ban on fishing is lifted. From the foregoing significance of the use of *Nyenya* leaves, practitioners in the theatre and film fraternity may borrow this concept in their performances to affirm such cultural importance on stage and screen.



**Figure 4a:** Traditional priest carrying leaves and eggs in a wooden bowl (*kroba*) for rituals  
(Source: Fieldwork data, 2019)



**Figure 4b:** Traditional priests carrying leaves and eggs in a wooden bowl to be buried in the lagoon as a ritual (**Source:** Fieldwork data, 2019).

## Canoe

Canoe is yet another prop element used in the celebration of the *Bakatue* festival. For some participants, canoe is an esteemed artifact of the people of Edina. This is because Elmina is known as one of the renowned fishing hubs in the country, which is accomplished by the use of canoes. As emphasised by Coronel (1979), the Fantes are noted to have the best fishermen along the Ghanaian coast. Traditionally, they were the ones who introduced fishing to other ethnic groups. On most fishing market days, you may find people speaking different dialects when trading. During Edina *Bakatue* festival, canoes are displayed on the lagoon to commemorate the occasion. Apart from showcasing their dexterity in fishing, which is a major occupation of the indigenes, there are seated in these canoes women dressed in *tekua* (traditional head gear), wearing T-shirts designed for the celebration of the festival, and wrapped in Kente cloth. These women sing and dance to traditional Fante songs in the canoe as seen in figure 5a.



**Figure 5a:** Women dressed in *tekua* headgear wearing branded white polo shirts and draped in Kente cloth (**Source:** Fieldwork data, 2019).

Another important role of the canoe is in a sporting event on the lagoon, the regatta race organised during *Bakatue* Day. Figure 5b is pictorial evidence of fishermen showing their paddling skills during the 2019 regatta race. Usually, fishermen wear T-shirts that come in colours such as yellow, blue, and black. Sometimes these T-shirts are adorned with the colours of various Asafo companies in Elmina during the regatta. The use of the canoe for regatta is acknowledged by Angba et al. (2018), who expressed that the celebration of festivals in the Nembe Kingdom, situated along the coastal line of Nigeria, has a regatta organised at the end or final day where canoes play a key role in executing the race.



**Fig. 5b:** A regatta race for expert fishermen in boat racing (**Source:** Fieldwork, 2019).

## Conclusion

The celebration of traditional festivals within the Ghanaian space is always held in high esteem due to the plethora of importance it brings to the fore, and the Edina *Bakatue* is not an exception. It is important to note that the celebration of this festival cannot take place without the use of props. Thus, props are positioned as the cornerstone in this regard, thereby playing relevant roles in the Edina *Bakatue* festival. This echoes Schechner's concept of performance theory with the use of prop elements in performance to portray that unique character identity on stage and screen. Findings of the study indicated that the design of the Paramount chief's umbrella and palanquin signify the status and power of the Paramount chief. Also, the Asafo company flag associated with a key pattern signifies identity and the placement of a ban on fishing activities in the lagoon. Beyond this, the key is used to metaphorically lock up all such activities in the lagoon. Other important prop elements used as part of rituals in celebration of the *Bakatue* festival were a sceptre, a wooden bowl, leaves, and a canoe. The sceptre is handled by a traditional priest when performing rituals in the lagoon to lift the ban on fishing. The leaves worn by chiefs, sub-chiefs, and other traditional rulers serve as spiritual protection for these categories of people. Canoes are basically used for competitions and also identify communities as fishing hubs. These findings are relevant to practitioners in the performing arts cycle, who must be in tune with various prop elements and their relevance to serve as a guiding post for their usage on stage and screen. From the above, the Edina *Bakatue* festival is worth celebrating since it serves as an avenue to preserve the rich heritage of the people of Edina. On the heels of the foregoing, the study recommends that prop elements used in the celebration of the Edina *Bakatue* festival be preserved for future generations.

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## Disclaimer Statement

This work is not part of a thesis submitted to a university for award of any degree.

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### Authorship and Level of Contribution

**Daniel Kofi Brako:** Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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