

# Analysis of the art forms used as costume in the Gologo festival of the people of Tongo in the Upper East region of Ghana.

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## Abstract

The Talensi people of Tenzug in the Upper east region celebrates on of the rarest festivals in the country of Ghana. It is probably the only festival where participants observe a strict compliance to the wearing of certain kind of costume. Due to the nature of this custom, the researchers sort to find out the art form which make up the costume and their religious or functional significance. The study used participant observation and interviews to document the festivities before, during and after the festival. The prominent features of the costume includes towels of different sizes and colours, knives of different sizes and the wearing of triangularly shaped aprons. The study concludes that there is the need to advertise the festival in the entire country of Ghana as well as abroad in order to open up the Tenzug area to more tourists and investors.

**Keywords:** Tindaana, Gologo, Tongo Hills, Golib, Tenzug.

## 1. Background

Tong Hills or *Tenzug* (meaning head of the land) is the hilly portions of Tongo in the Upper East region of Ghana. It is located at southeast of the Tongo district and in 2007 had a population of 2351 of which 1080 were males (Anon, 2007 as cited in Insoll, MacLean & Kankpeyen, 2013). The place is inhabited by the Talensi people. Nsoll, et al (2013) avers that there is no pre-colonial written records of the people either indigenous or external and “the first documented contact with the Talensi was by George Ekem Ferguson, a Fanti from the Gold Coast Colony in 1894, and his role was to negotiate trading” (Gabrilopoulos et al. 2002 as cited in Nsoll et al 2013). During the colonial era, the British government attempted to rid the place of ritual activities. Also there were slave traders who invaded the Talensi territory in the eighteenth century (Allman and Parker, 2005). Nsoll et al (2013) also report that there were several tribal wars which led to the Talensis migrating to their present location on top of the hills.

Festivals, as put forward by Gbadegbe and Mensah (2013) “is the manifestation of the practices and beliefs of a people”. To them, festivals help promote the culture of a people outside the society. But within the society, festivals serve as a means of remembering important incidents in history as well as unite them in expressing their sureness in their leaders. Festivals all over the world since ancient times have been celebrated for one reason or the other. According to Yeoman, et al (2014), these reasons include “celebrating special dates or passing of time, for social benefits, for entertainment and escapism, for religious reasons, for showcasing of cultural traditions; acting as a focus for business; reflecting special interests; or sometimes simply to make profit”. Food security is an integral part of every society’s concern. Due to this, a lot of the festivals celebrated in Ghana hinges on appealing to the gods and ancestors for good rains for growing crops or thanking them for a good harvest. The Gologo festival is one of such festivals. It is celebrated to ensure “success in all food getting enterprises, security from danger, disease and death” (Insoll, et al, 2013). In the celebration prayers are said to the Golib god led by the Nnoo shrine. According to Joffroy (2005), the festival is to reinforce the belief of the people of the community in the shrine.

The Gologo festival which is also known as the Golib festival is celebrated in the month of March at the end of the dry season before the sewing of the early millet (Ansah, 1997; Allman & Parker, 2005). Tenzug, Santeng, Wakii, Gbeogo, Yinduri/Zandoya, Shia, Gorogo and Spart are the communities which celebrate the festival. The festival is one of the well-known and well-patronised festivals in the region and one of the few which lay strict emphasis on the kind of costume which must be adorned on the day of dancing and merry making. Costume is an important aspect of every festival in Ghana. As opined by Eze and Akas (2015), costumes send information to others about the character of the performers. It is difficult to understand why strict emphasis is laid on costume during this festival unless one is probably from the community even though some of the articles for the costume are very common in every society. The study therefore seeks to identify the nature of the art forms used as

costumes for the Gologo /Golib festival and appreciate the role(s) they play in the festival.

## 2. Methodology

This ethnographic study was conducted at Tongo Hills (Tengzug) in the Upper East region of Ghana. The researchers adopted a multi-approach data collection technique and this was due to make up for the shortcomings of each technique. Interviews and participant observation were used.

### 2.1 Interviews

Interviews were conducted with one (1) Tindaana, two (2) tourist guides, 10 elders who were above 60 years and 10 younger inhabitants of the town who were purposively sampled for the study. The interviews were centred on the costumes used for the festival and the cultural and/or spiritual significance. The interviews were conducted in three stages: one month before the celebration; during the celebration; and after the celebrations. This arrangement was to enable the researchers have a full picture of the festival celebration and to enable them understand the customs that were practiced before, during and after the festivities. The interviews held before the celebrations were to understand how the days of the celebrations are chosen, the dress code of indigenes before the celebrations and the kind of preparations which are made in terms of costumes. Field notebook was used to take down notes while audio recorders were also at hand to record the interviews.

### 2.2 Participant Observation

The researchers took part in the festival celebrations. Since one needs to be properly dressed before taking part in the festival celebrations, it was incumbent on the researchers to remove their shirts leaving only shorts in order that they might not violate the customs of the people. This techniques enabled them gather information at first hand from the field. A video camera as well as a field notebook were used to record the occurrences.

## 3. Discussions

### 3.1 The festival preparations

In the month of February which precedes the festival celebration, new songs are learnt by the communities for the celebration also new costumes and accessories are procured or prepared. The date for the celebration depends on the appearance of the third moon in each year. And this could appear in March or early April. In 2016, the new moon surfaced on 9th March (Time and date, 2016). On the first day when the moon appears, the Chief and the *Tindaana's* remove their clothes (especially shirts and trousers, and put on traditional regalia meant for the celebration). The people in the community also remove theirs a day after the chief and the Tindaana have done so. For community members, the removal involves all clothing covering the upper part of the body, removing all trousers and wearing only boxer shorts, pants or shorts which have no pockets on them, or wearing *kpalang* or *kpalang peto*. This removal is for a period of one month. During this period, no noise is to be made in the community. As such crying for the dead, roofing of houses, loud music playing among other activities are prohibited during this period. The communities then begin series of mini festival rites in the towns that surround the Tongo Hills which include dancing and merry making. On the 16<sup>th</sup> day after the removal of dresses (in 2016, the day was on 24<sup>th</sup> March), all the communities will congregate at Tengzug for the final festival celebrations.

### 3.2 The Festival costume

Costume is a vital aspect of the Gologo festival both for partakers and spectators. Many are the articles that are put on by celebrants during the festival dance. Some of which are functional while others are symbolic. The first that captures the sight of first time participants are the different shapes, colours and sizes of towels that either hang around the necks of men or are tied around the bodies of women covering the breasts down to the knee area. Participants of the dance and elders in the town make reference to the weather as the main reason for the towel. The festival is celebrated at a time of the year when the sun is hottest. Temperatures could reach 45°C and since the dancers are most likely to sweat than not, the towels are in place to clean the sweat. However, according to Goldan Hanson, (personal communication, 10<sup>th</sup> March 2016), this practice of dancing without

clothes was to help select partners for marriage in the olden days. The towel as an accessory is not only worn by performers at the festival but onlookers and children alike. In the olden days, the women were using light weight silky materials as wrappers for their bodies but due to the slippery nature of those materials, they now changed to using the towel. It is a tradition that people around the festive area should not put on clothes to cover the upper part of their bodies so the women resort to using the bigger towels which can be wrapped around their bodies.



**Figure 1:** Female spectator with two male performers at the festival



**Figure 2a & b:** Male performers at the dance

Though this is a functional accessory, it has grown to nearly become synonymous to the festival celebration. The heat also give rise to men wearing apron called *kpalang*. It is a triangular shaped apron tied around the waist. It is usually worn by the elders of the community during festival while the youth will pass the long tapered end between their thighs and fasten it at the back side, making it look like a pair of shorts called *kpalang peto*. The elders wear it to cover the frontal part of their body and use the *gbeong to* cover the back side. The *gbeong* is made from animal hide such as goat or sheep (figure 7) and is sometimes decorated with leather and cowries. The hide is designed in a similar fashion as an apron with one strap that allows the wearer to easily put it over one shoulder. *Gbeong* is worn by the *tindaana* who is the custodian of the land and the elders in the community.



**Figure 3:** A female performer



**Figure 4:** *Gbeong* is made from animal skin

Aside the main dress articles are other accessories. First of which is the holding of the *zorl* (figure 5). It is made from hairs from a horse either white or black. *Zorl* is used for war dance and also to signify the strength and willingness to face challenges. It is used by the chief in the district; he holds it during occasions and other traditional celebrations to signify his authority and stature. The *zorl* is also used by fetish priest as a symbol of his powers. During the festival, performers use these as part of the dress accessories without necessarily showing their authority or rank within the community.



**Figure 5:** *Zorl* (hair from horse tail)



**Figure 6:** *Nansa* made to entertain



**Figure 7:** The Festival Costume



**Figure 8:** *Kpalang peto* worn by the youth



**Figure 9:** *Gbared* (leather waist belt)



**Figure 10:** *Golob sul*

The *Nansa* (figure 6) is a metallic dangle worn around the ankle; it is used in the dance as a musical instrument. As the performers stamp their feet rhythmically on the ground during the dance, this *nansa* create beautiful sounds because of the metal rings. It is these sounds that the performers dance to amid singing.

This is a leather belt worn by the war dancers in the festival, it is also used for decoration as part of the dressing. It is also used to beat the people who do not follow tradition and culture but are on the festival grounds to show disrespect.

Knives and other items which could be used for fighting are also visible during the dance. The most prominent of these is the *golob sul* which is a long knife (figure 10) wielded by dancers. Others also have several smaller knife in leather sheath tied to leather pelts worn around the waist as shown in figure 2.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The festival which is celebrated by the people of the Tongo Hills and its surrounding communities affords the indigenes the sense of belongingness and hence promote peaceful co-existence. It brings home all travelled and distant members of the community to partake in the rites. This annual home coming cements the bond between the members who reside in the community and those who have travelled for one reason or the other.

The ceremonial wears and accessories give opportunities for artists such as leather crafters, blacksmiths and fashion designers as well as merchandisers to sell their crafts.

There were no souvenirs on the festival and no sales outlets were seen in the town

#### **5. Recommendation**

Efforts should be made by the chief and the people of the Tongo Hills to market the festival in the country and beyond to attract more tourists into the area.

Artists in the region need to have sales outlets in the community to offer visitors souvenirs throughout the year in order to help project the festival beyond the Upper East region of Ghana.

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