



THE ROLE OF PERFORMING ARTS IN GHANAIAN SOCIETY AND ITS IMPLICATION FOR FORMAL EDUCATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract:

The Performing Arts play a pivotal role in the traditional and contemporary life of the Ghanaian. Among its numerous importance and benefits are academic development, career development, transmission and preservation of cultural values, and promotion of tourism. In spite of some knowledge that has been created about these benefits and importance, the significance of the Performing Arts in the Ghanaian society is downplayed. The aim of this paper is to re-emphasise the role as well as the benefits and importance of the Performing Arts in Ghana and its implication for formal education.

Keywords: performing arts, transmitting cultural values, preserving cultural values academic development, career development, tourist attraction

1. Introduction

The Performing Arts which is an integration of music, dance and drama (Anderson, 2007; Manford, 2007; Amuah & Adum-Attah, 2016; Nzewi, 2003; Flolu & Amuah, 2003) is believed to have been with mankind from time immemorial and “are as old as human existence” (Manford, 2007, p. 1). It forms part of both traditional and contemporary Ghanaian social events such as festival, funeral rites, marriage and naming ceremonies (Amuah & Adum-Attah, 2016). In the traditional Ghanaian context, performing one of these arts cannot be divorced from the others. For example, in performing *Adowa*, *Kpanlogo*, *Agbadza*, or *Bawa* (traditional Ghanaian music and dance types), the drumming and playing of the other supporting musical instruments, and singing which constitute the music aspect of the performance trigger bodily movements (dancing)

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which are embedded with gestures that convey specific meanings (drama). These show the integrated nature of the Performing Arts as practiced in Ghana.

Traditionally, the Performing Arts play a pivotal role in the life of the Ghanaian. It embodies the total expression of the Ghanaian culture, serving as standard that controls social life. It serves as an avenue for expression social sentiments (Amuah & Adum-Attah, 2016) and passing on “*cultural values and behavioural patterns of society*” (Boamajeh & Ohene-Okantah, 2000, p. 3). The Performing Arts promotes physical fitness, recreation, virtues and ethics, enforcements of societal mores and prescripts, and humane living (Nzewi, 2003; Manford, 2007). However, in spite of some knowledge that has been created about its importance (Dzansi, 2002; Dzansi, 2004; Flolu & Amuah 2003; Flolu, 1993), the significance of the Performing Arts in the Ghanaian society and in formal education is downplayed because “*they are found everywhere people live*” (Manford, 2007, p. 1) which makes it very easy to overlook their importance to human existence (Boamajeh & Ohene-Okantah, 2000). Quite a number of people consider it as an activity which can be learned casually in life due to the fact that traditional and some contemporary practitioners in most cases seem not to require any formal training to be able to perform. In relation to this, Nketia (1999, p. 10) stated:

“Because music is something performed or listened to in the home, the village square, at work places, the court of a chief, the night club, the cinema hall or the church or locations for ceremonial or ritual, it is easy to overlook its intellectual and artistic dimensions and view it only as an object of functional interest, something whose sole purpose is entertainment and which can therefore, be approached largely as an extracurricular activity for children who are interested.”

In view of the above described phenomenon, the aim of this paper is to re-emphasise the role of the Performing Arts, its importance and benefits in the Ghanaian society, as well as its educational implication. Among the numerous benefits and importance of the Performing Arts are academic development, career development, transmission and preservation of cultural values, and promotion of tourism.

2. Intellectual Development

Generally, Performing Arts education in the primary school helps children to understand the usage and application of music, dance and drama materials in their communities (Amuah & Adum-Attah, 2016). Nketia (1999, p. 120) stated that:

“It is evident therefore, that in addition to the artistic techniques and skills that music and dance demand, the pursuit of both tangible and intangible forms of knowledge, including symbolic and conventional forms, can contribute to the intellectual development of the child when they are systematically presented at appropriate levels as part of the learning process.”

Primary school pupils acquire knowledge of the role of the Performing Arts in their societies and how it affects their lives through observational experiences and formal studies in their environment and in school (Flolu & Amuah, 2003; Nzewi, 2003). Research has also shown that the application of the Performing Arts as a teaching tool across the school curriculum promotes learning among children. It is used to develop language acquisition and listening skills (Heyning, 2011; Watson, 2004) which are very critical in training children. Through singing, playing of musical instruments and dancing, children develop their cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains (Manford, 1996) which aid the development of their whole being. The Performing Arts enable children to develop a sense of belonging and social bonding and cohesion (Amuah & Adum-Attah, 2016; Amuah et al., 2011) which are very necessary for collaborative learning thereby creating opportunity for children to learn from each other. It supports the development of creativity, aesthetic sensitivity and self-esteem among children (Essa, 2003; Mayesky, 2002) and teaches them how to think divergently (Manford, 2007).

Manford (1996) explained that, music correlate with many subjects and therefore it is very advisable to use it as a medium to teach subjects such as mathematic, languages, social studies, physical education and science. This has the tendency of helping primary school pupils to make meaningful connections between concepts and helps to achieve understanding during teaching and learning in the classroom.

3. Career Development

A number of Ghanaians have developed careers out of positive engagements in the Performing Arts. Students who offer courses in music, dance and drama education in the various universities comes out as teachers to teach these arts in various schools across the country. Other graduates practice as sound engineers in recording studios, organists, percussionists, trumpeters and guitarists in various churches. Some of these graduates are composers and conductors who employ their knowledge and skills to form and manage choirs which perform for various religious and social functions for financial reward. Quite a number of practitioners informally trained as singers, drummers and dancers form traditional music and dance ensembles which are mostly engaged to perform during festivals, funerals, marriage and naming ceremonies, and other social events mainly to provide entertainment. Other careers that are associated with the Performing Arts are carvers of drums and manufacturers of other traditional Ghanaian musical instruments. People are trained to manufacture instruments such *donno*, *atumpan*, *sogo* and *atsimevu* (Ghanaian membranophones), *frikyiwa*, *trowa*, *gyile* and *axatse* (Ghanaian idiophones), *goge*, *seprewa* and *benta* (Ghanaian chordophones), and *wia*, *odurogya*, *atenteben* and *mmenson* (Ghanaian Aerophones) (Amuah et al., 2011). It is very significant to note that these people get income from engaging in careers associated with the Performing Arts and mostly depends on this income for their livelihood signifying the importance of the economic role of the Performing Arts in the life of some Ghanaians.

4. Transmission and Preservation of Cultural Values

Traditional Ghanaian Performing Arts are intensively embedded with lots of cultural values that control social lives. Behavioural norms which are normally dictated by the culture are intensively displayed in the practice of the Performing Arts. Nketia (1999) acknowledged the importance of providing opportunities for children to experience the music and dance of their own environment to ensure continuity of participation in social life of the communities they belong. In analysing children's repertoire from three themes: Names and Identity in the Ghanaian Context, The Love for Natural Forms: Chewing Sticks, and Cultural Significance of Food, Dzansi (2002) identified some Ghanaian indigenous cultures which were manifested in their singing games on the playground. I have learned through observational experiences that dramatic acts, movement in response to music, texts of folk stories and songs are employed to recount history, as devices for moral training and education, and as tools for controlling the social behaviour of members of societies and communities. According to Gbadegbe and Mensah (2013), drumming, songs, dancing, belief systems, norms and practices are vital components of Ghana's culture which are perpetuated and preserved through celebration of festivals. The annual inter schools cultural festivals which are organised by the Ghana Education Service serves as a miniature of these festivals purposely educate, provide experiences and to pass on the acceptable Ghanaian way of life to the younger generation. It therefore holds that positive experiences in traditional Ghanaian Performing Arts ensure the transmission and preservation of Ghanaian cultural values.

5. Promotion of Tourism

The Performing Arts features prominently in most social events such as festivals in Ghana. A very popular one is the annual *Aboakyer* (literary meaning catching of an animal) festival celebrated by the people of Winneba in the Central Region of Ghana. A significant part of this festival is the hunting and catching of a live deer in the forest. After a successful catch, the hunters bring the live animal to the festival durbar ground amidst singing, drumming, playing of other musical instruments and dancing. This colourful section attracts both domestic and foreign tourists to Winneba as participants and observers which results in increase in demand for goods and services thereby generating employment and income in the local economy. Other Ghanaian festivals in which the Performing Arts features prominently and also attracts tourists are the Yam harvest festival celebrated by the people of the Asogli traditional area in the Volta Region of Ghana to mark the end of yam cultivation period (Gbadegbe & Mensah, 2013) and the Akwasidae festival celebrated by the people of Ashanti to commemorate the attainment of statehood after defeating the people of Denkyira in the Battle of Feyiase which was fought between 1697 to 1699 (Gyamfi, n. d.). These go to affirm the contribution of the Performing Arts to the promotion of tourism in Ghana.

6. Educational Implication

As explained elsewhere in this paper, the role the Performing Arts, especially traditional Ghanaian music, dance and folklore is being downplayed. The current state of these arts in primary school education is not the best (Amuah & Adum-Attah, 2016; Adjepong, 2018). As noted by Flolu and Amuah, (2003, p. 92), “schools are artificial institutions designed by the society to explore, analyse and criticise our culture in a special way”. If we want to improve upon the standard of primary school education which has become a topical issue of late, develop sustainable careers, promote the transmission of cultural values that have the tendency of reversing the negative trend of moral behaviour of a good number of people, and promote tourism which has positive impact on our local economies, then there is the need to encourage primary school teachers to reflect on how to improve upon Performing Arts education in their classrooms. The schools should carefully reconsider the positive impact of these arts on the citizenry and on the society in general with the purpose of incorporating the subject fully in the school curriculum to provide children with adequate literacy and practical experiences. This can form a positive foundation for further studies and engagement in music, dance and drama which can lead to ensuring a sustainable fulfillment of the positive role of the Performing Arts in our societies and communities.

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