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Ghana Studies, Volume 25, 2022, pp. 134-143 (Article)

Published by University of Wisconsin Press



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ENJOY THE DANCE AND LOOK FOR THE FLAG MEANING [©]

Asafo Flag Dancers' Choreography of Concealing and Revealing

KWAME AMOAH LABI

ABSTRACT: The literature on Fante *asafo* art reveals that *frankaakitafo* (flag dancers) carry, dance with, and display *asafo* flags, creolized from European flags displayed on the Gold Coast (now Ghana), and now used as a traditional dance prop. This is different from how the Europeans carried them in marching and salutation.

What is missing from the scholarship is an examination of the collaborative working relations between different performers and the nature of the dance. A study of the dance reveals a phenomenon, which is similar to a spectacle and lasts only for a short transitory period. I, therefore, take into account Frances Harding's (2002) suggestion that we must identify the art and artists, the presence and role of the venue and audience in creating the conditions for a performance, and the possibility of a sacred presence. Thus, *asafo* dance performance transcends spiritual boundaries.

Not only is the dance associated with the gestures of the company's or dancers' deity and the company's self-proclaimed belief in its military supremacy, but there is also the considerable display of skill and dexterity of the dancer. This article investigates how the *frankaakitanyi* (singular) is trained and dances with

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the flag, and the collaborators involved. It also examines the content of selected flags, which are both a dance prop and a work of art.

KEYWORDS: *asafo*, Fante art, *frankaakitanyi*, *kyrema*, *asikanmafo*

This article is about how the *frankaakitafo* (flag dancers) of the Fante *asafo* in the Central Region of Ghana are trained, dance with, and explain the content of their flags. The Fante *asafo* are traditional military companies, now social and political organizations. In contrast to the flags' passive display when hung around the *asafo posuban*, the flags during these "performances" are folded, spread out, and explained by the *asikanmafo*.¹ The *asikanmafo* are gun-bearing members of the *asafo* who protect the *frankaakitafo* from *abayimona* (spells or charms) dropped by a rival to harm or disgrace the dancer during a performance.

Asafo flags have been documented since the sixteenth century by various writers recounting their origin, history, and uses, with more recent studies on the flag dancer's choreography (Cole and Ross 1977; Forni and Ross 2017; Ross 1979). The dance, according to Herbert Cole and Doran Ross (1977, 192) followed a pattern of loosely structured plays, reflecting *asafo* "gestures of leadership . . . and aggression," amid trance, as observed later. While acknowledging the pioneering works of Cole and Ross (1977), Ross (1979), and Forni and Ross (2017) that brought the *frankaakitanyi* into art historical studies, there is no analysis of choreography and the partnership between the *frankaakitafo*, *kyremafo* (drummers), *dwumtofo* (singers), *asikanmafo* and their chaperones, and the religious nature of the dance.

1. For discussions of the *posuban* see Ross 2007 and Labi 2009. This article is dedicated to the memory of the late Doran H. Ross, who I met at Legon in 1995 when he came to teach a course on exhibition during the PREMA 95 university diploma course at the University of Ghana. We became friends and remained so until his death. I am indebted to him for his kindness and support, sharing with me information that he had collected about Fante *asafo* art. Doran was well-read, very experienced in field research, and a pioneer in Ghanaian art history. He was a great source of inspiration. He was kind, pleasant, and had a good sense of humor. May his soul rest in peace.

This article, therefore, addresses the nexus between the *frankaakitanyi's* possession dance, which is similar to earlier fieldwork observations that investigated the training and performance of traditional priests and priestesses in the traditional polity of Akuapem under the influence of the deity that possessed them (Opoku 1970; Labi 1989, 127–131). The *frankaakitanyi's* dance, performed in two parts, demonstrates flag dance as structured choreographies. The content of the dance is associated with the company's belief in its military supremacy, with a considerable display of skill in the rhythm and gymnastic dexterity of the dancer. The dance recalls both tragic and victorious events, and collective memory, and may include choreography sometimes interpreted as offensive by rivals.

This brief article is concerned with the training and protection of the *frankaakitafo* and explores their choreography and the flags' symbolism from contemporary examples. I approach this work as a multidisciplinary investigation into art history and religion to discuss the re-enactment of possession of the *frankaakitanyi* by *asafo* deities and ancestral spirits manifesting themselves during the dance. This observation is based on fieldwork from 1999 to 2018 documenting *asafo* flags, *frankaakitafo*, and their performances. The fieldwork for this article took place between 2014 and 2018. From August to November of each year, when the Fante *asafo* communities celebrate their annual festivals, I spent several weeks observing and interviewing over twenty flag dancers and drummers from Anomabo, Apam, Cape Coast, and Dago in the Central Region of Ghana.

The *Frankaakitanyi's* Training in Contemporary Times

The *asafo* flag is a revered mobile shrine. Therefore, the user is trained in how to respond to the spirits when invoked to inhabit the flag when being used as a dance prop. Consequently, the *frankaakitafo* are perceived as having supernatural powers and are protected by *asikanmafo*. I was informed that a novice might begin his apprenticeship by spending some years understudying a priest or master dancer as a fee-paying trainee, with the cost borne by the sponsoring *asafo*. Broadly, the *frankaakitanyi's* training involves imitation of dance moves of the trainer and receiving spiritual instruction. The training starts with listening to the different *asafokyen* (*asafo* drums) tunes and rhythms associated with the dance, and then perfecting the relationship and dance movements with the *kyrema* (drummer). The trainee practices acrobatic movements to make him agile enough to perform a range of body movements.

A significant aspect of the training is spiritual instruction. Forni and Ross (2017, 234) suggest that, although flag dancing is taught and learned

through training at various places, most of the leading flag dancers see their role as a response to a divine calling. They point out that all leading flag dancers emphasize the supernatural and spiritual nature of their art. Hence, the dancers serve as a bridge between the spiritual messaging of the drums and the sacred materiality of the flag. The *frankaakitanyi* acts like a ritual specialist or a priest, expressing through movement and choreography the strength and power of the *asafo* company. This spiritual connection derives from their ancestors who used the flags in wars and may have died in battle as warriors, having had the assistance of *abosom* (supernatural entities). To properly honor the *asafo* ancestors and the *abosom* associated with such flags or replicas, they need to be propitiated. Each *abosom* that the trainee consults, according to Opoku (1978, 4, 9), derives its powers from *Onyame*. Training includes spiritual protection; for instance, the trainer may give the trainee *asuman* or *nsebe* (man-made religious objects or talismans) as charms for his protection during his career as a *frankaakitanyi*. Thus, *frankaakitafɔ* adornment can enhance spiritual protection against *abayimona*, as they may wear these amulets or talismans in a headband or underneath their cotton or raffia skirt.

The *Frankaakitanyi's* Dance Partnership

The *frankaakitanyi* usually performs with his flag in front of the *posuban*. As noted, with appropriate rituals, the flag is transformed into a sacred abode for the spirit beings. While dancing with the flag, the *frankaakitanyi* is transfigured and the performance becomes a spectacle similar to the Yoruba *gelede* performances that Margaret Drewal and Henry Drewal (1990, 2) describe as a fleeting transitory phenomenon. The spiritual aspects of the *frankaakitanyi's* training and the *abosom* he consults become an important resource here, after having learned in training how to respond to the spirit beings during a dance. As Kobina Abakah, *frankaakitanyi* of Otuam Dentsefo, explained, “*Frankaa asa no eyɛ akɔm*,” (flag dancing is possession) and is therefore transitory in nature (Abakah 2014). The *frankaakitanyi* is temporarily transformed by the spirit that influences him, an encounter that determines aspects of the performance. For example, during a performance in 2014, I observed a complete behavior change in the *frankaakitanyi* Abakah who danced for Dago Dentsefo; he appeared stronger than normal and only responded to certain *asafo* leaders while they poured libation. At Apam, a few moments before the climax of Samuel Ofori's dance in 2014, he assumed an aggressive appearance. While he crawled slowly on his belly, the drumming, chorus, and cheers from the crowd intensified. He wriggled, looked at an egg placed on the ground and, in a dramatic move, swallowed it. Thus, this enactment

is related to the earlier reference to the *frankaakitanyi*'s relationship with the supernatural.

The *frankaakitanyi* performs in collaboration with *akyremafo*. The *kyrema*'s rhythms and drum texts guide the *frankaakitanyi* in dance. I questioned flag dancer Kwamina Santil, "Can you not simply display the flag without a *kyrema* or a dance?" He responded, "It's not me oh! It's the *kyrema*. He puts pressure on me to dance (Santil 2014)." The *frankaakitanyi* and *kyrema* interact with each other during a performance, a phenomenon that is similar to other performances in which the drummer (or drum ensemble) communicates with the dancer, especially in contexts involving spirit possession.

The *asafo* dance is gendered. Forni and Ross (2017, 250–267) devote an entire chapter in their book to the portrayal of women, commenting on the roles they play in war, in the community, religious rites, performance, and other contexts. Other gendered aspects of the *asafo* are seen during the performance of the *frankaakitanyi* involving the representation of both women and men. It begins with a "female dance" called *ase* (down) comprised of slow, graceful hand and foot movements associated with the graceful walking and movement of women; it relates to general female attributes, including calmness. *Ase* was originally performed after war when the *asafo* were returning home. *Ase* usually starts in a preparatory position with the flag folded around the flagpole in the *frankaakitanyi*'s hand. He begins with a slow warm-up dance movement, including short jumps and leaps, holding the folded flag down with both hands. He continues with gentle body movements from one place to the other, responding to the tempo of the music. In a slow, gentle manner, with his body bent down, he moves his arms and legs sideways, occasionally raises his torso, bends backwards, and turns his body around (Figure 1).

The dance tempo quickens and the *frankaakitanyi*, using his limbs and body, dances with more energy, sometimes appearing aggressive—making movements associated with men. This second style is called *sour* (up), previously a war dance referencing battle scenes and now commemorating the deeds and militancy of particular *asafo* ancestors. It is a "male dance" that complements *ase*. *Sour* dance styles involve forward and backward movements, hops and stomping of feet, quick footwork, and jumping. There may be several quick clockwise and anti-clockwise turns while twirling the flag or swinging it around the head, pivoting on one or both legs, lying down, squatting, or kneeling (Figure 2). Sometimes, the *frankaakitanyi* makes spectacular leaps and twirls the flag above his head with his torso facing up. *Sour* dance moves depict the strength that was required from the *asafo* during war and other activities.

These dance performances may include choreography and flag content sometimes perceived as offensive by rivals, hence the title of Doran



Figure 1. Nana Baah, Anomabo Kyirem No. 6 Asafo Company *frankaakitanyi* in an *ase* dance style. This is the beginning of the choreography with both hands holding the flag and knees bent in a second *demi plié* position. To the right is an *asikanma* protecting him. Anomabo. Photo by Selina Okle, 2014.



Figure 2. Nana Baah, Anomabo Kyirem No. 6 Asafo Company *frankaakitanyi* in a *sour* dance style twirling his flag in front of the elders. To the left is an *asikanma* shouting “*oni oooo wonhwe*” (Here it is, look!). Anomabo. Photo by Selina Okle, 2014.

Ross’s 1979 publication *Fighting with Art: Applied Flags of the Fante Asafo*. Although the *frankaakitanyi* in some segments of the dance is in a trance, dancing with the flag communicates the company’s presence and history and entertains the assembled crowd. When asked if a *frankaakitanyi*’s dance could be used to communicate, the *frankaakitanyi* of Anomabo Kyirem No. 6 *asafo*, Nana Baah, said, “Yes, I can dance to provoke a rival or to establish a cordial relationship with another *frankaakitanyi* (Baah 2014).” Baah further noted that some dances can also be insulting and bring about a fight. In these dances, the *frankaakitafo* can use their legs, hands, and head to communicate or sometimes insult a rival (Tenkorang 2014). Nana Tenkorang further stated that the *frankaakitanyi* may challenge rivals who are attending the performance to do the same.

Revealing the Meaning of Flag Imagery

The *frankaakitafo* performances are not choreographed to explain the flag’s content; instead, the *asafo* elders (including the *supi* [head of an *asafo* company], *safohinfo* [leaders of smaller units within the *asafo*], and the *frankaakitafo*) select a flag(s) from their collection to use for an occasion. The event informs the choice of flag, as well as what they wish to communicate



Figure 3. Nana Baah, Anomabo Kyirem No. 6 Asafo Company *frankaakitanyi* and his *asikanma* explaining the content of the stretched flag to the *asafo* elders. Photo by Selina Okle, 2014.

to their rivals or the townsfolk, which could be peaceful or provocative. For example, the reason for the flag selection made by Anomabo Kyirem for a 2014 performance was to communicate their strength to rivals in the town. Because of the provocative and religious content of some flags, the *asikanma* always surround the *frankaakitanyi* to protect the flag from capture by a rival. The outdoorings of a new *asafohin* often involves the commissioning of a flag with a theme of his choice to commemorate the occasion. Other reasons for the selection of specific flags are to spite a rival, such as the one used by Cape Coast Bentsir during the 2014 Afahye festival. While the symbols may be concealed when a flag is wrapped around the pole to which it is attached, or twirled quickly during parts of the *sour* segment, there is always a moment at which it is stretched out and its content revealed.

Cole and Ross (1977, 9) were the first to note “the verbal-visual nexus” in Akan art, of which the Fante are a part. This dynamic mode of communication puts oral texts encapsulated in proverbs in dialogue with visual imagery. The symbols in *asafo* flags are often associated with a wise saying, proverb, historical account, something detestable to a rival, unauthorized use of a rival’s symbol, or a reference to a captured item. For example, the symbol in one of the Dago Dentsefo flags used in 2014 is an *oware* game board, with a single person at one end of the flag. This was explained to me

to be associated with the proverb “*Baakofo ntow oware*” (one person does not play a game of *oware*). In the context of this flag, the proverb may be interpreted as an invitation to play a game, compete, or fight.

In some aspects of the *sour* dance, the flag is wrapped around the flagpole, with the content hidden from public view. The *frankaakitanyi* may pause periodically to unfurl the flag and spread it out briefly so that the *asikanma* might explain its meaning. Whenever the flag is spread out, the *asikanma* shout out to the public to draw their attention to the content saying, “*Oni oooo, wonhwe!*” (Here it is, look!) This was the dance strategy at the performance of Nana Baah in 2014, where he periodically opened the Kyirem *asafo* flag to the assembled leaders. (Figure 3). This specific flag depicts the Ghana national flag, three women marching while carrying guns, and a man behind them with his hands on his mouth. The *asikanma* cite a proverb, “*Se hen mbaa mpo na woko ko yi aa, nna yen mbarima*” (If our women can go to war and fight, then what will our men do). The imagery insinuates that if Kyirem women can bear arms then the Kyirem men, by comparison, are very strong and able to undertake risky war maneuvers, handle weapons with greater firepower, and perform far more dangerous tasks than their rivals.

Some flag designs follow an old colonial period tradition of including a written statement. One way of categorizing *asafo* flags is by grouping them by period—based on the inclusion, in the upper corner, of the national flag of the European nation with whom they were aligned or with whom they traded, or which was then the ruling colonial government. Thus, *asafo* flags typically have in a corner either the Danish flag, symbolizing their relationship with the Danes, or the British Union Jack, marking the colonial period, while post-independence examples use the Ghana national flag.

Some contemporary flags deviate from this practice with no national flag insert. An example is a flag belonging to Dago Dentsefo with the inscription *Kyedε Nyame* (*Except God*), meaning no other *asafo* can defeat Kyirem. This was used by one of the *frankaakitafo* during the 2014 Akwambo festival. In another contemporary example, a flag belonging to Cape Coast Bentsir *asafo* depicts a padlock with two keys on its side with the inscription “*oman saafii*” (state keys). A man stands on the left holding a whip and pointing to the keys. This means Bentsir *asafo* has in its possession the keys of the state and thus can lock, unlock, stop, or permit any activity. One of the flags belonging to Cape Coast Akrampa shows a goat and a lion facing each other with a sword between them. This is an image of confrontation, a strong *asafo* company challenging a weaker one; the sword is a symbol of aggression that here serves as an invitation to a fight.

Conclusion

This article has drawn attention to the importance of the *frankaakitanyi*'s training, learning of drum texts, collaboration with the ancestral spirits and deities whose influence he comes under, and a harmonious working relationship between four groups of people—*kyremafo*, *dwumtofo*, *frankaakitanyfo* and *asikanmafo*—for a successful performance that honors these spirit beings and the *asafo*. The choreography is a multidimensional combination of possession dance, communication with the drummers, and graceful feminine and energetic masculine movements. Through the dance, the spirits of the ancestors and deities come alive, and the flag is honored.

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