

# **The Atwa Kodzidan: A Unique African Storytelling Theatre Tradition and Architecture in Ghana**

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## **Abstract**

This paper investigates the Atwa Kodzidan at Ekumfi Atwa in Ghana, designed by dramatist Efua Theodora Sutherland, as an indigenous theatrical edifice apt for the preservation of oral traditions and the performing arts. The study has relied on interviews, content analysis and participant observation to discover that the Atwa Kodzidan has functioned as a model for indigenous national theatre architecture as it has also promoted and sustained the ideals of the storytelling tradition to the benefit of the people of Atwa, its surrounding communities, and around the world.

**Key Words:** Storytelling, Atwa, Kodzidan, Architecture, Community, Society.

## **Introduction**

Storytelling as an art form has existed in Ghana for an undetermined number of years. This significant art form has been with humanity for as long as our forebears decided to preserve their moral norms as well as providing the required entertainment that will relieve them of stress and boredom. Wilson (1998) relates “In many cultures there are strong traditions of storytellers who recite myths or legends from the past, or teach lessons by means of stories, to a group of listeners”. Traditionally, storytelling in Ghana exemplifies the communal ideals of the society. It is a means by which morals are taught and inculcated into the society. In the opinion of Gyekye (1996), these communal beliefs “are those values that express appreciation of the worth and importance of the community, those values that underpin and guide the type of social relations, attitudes, and behavior that ought to exist between individuals who live together in a community, sharing a social life and having a sense of common good.” When philosophically decoded, storytelling becomes norms and virtues that educate and inform society for its wellbeing and economic growth. Examples of such communal values are caring for other people, providing mutual assistance, interdependence, solidarity, reciprocal obligation, and social harmony.

Apart from these significant traditional values, storytelling performances have influenced theatre architecture. By its circular nature during performance, this form permeates even the way indigenous houses, and consequently, theatre buildings such as the arena stage are designed; with an open central area, the courtyard, enclosed by the rooms around it. Similarly, storytelling has a narrator who sits at one side of the stage while the participatory audience or chorus sit very close in front of him, and in most cases creating a somewhat circular formation.

The aim of this paper is an investigation into the import of the theatre architecture at Ekumfi Atwa, the Kodzidan, as well as the socio-cultural values in the storytelling sessions performed to enhance communal integration. Ekumfi Atwa is in the Central Region of Ghana, but it must be noted that the Central Region of Ghana is actually not in the central part of Ghana as the name implies. Just like the Eastern Region which geographically does not constitute the eastern border of Ghana, the Central Region does not occupy the central geographical position of Ghana. Central Region geographically occupies the coastal part of the country; this coastal part is rather in the southern-most sector which borders the Atlantic Ocean.

Ekumfi Atwa is about 108km west of Accra, the national capital. Ekumfi is the larger traditional area and Atwa is the community. According to Akyea (1968), “Atwia is a small village with a resident population of just over 500 people. These people are the heirs of a rich tradition of storytelling, and are splendid actors in their environment.” It is, however, noteworthy to state that the population size is no longer the 500 indicated by Akyea almost half a century ago. The population has grown tremendously and by our estimation, the town should now have a population of about 2000.

The name of the community is spelt in several ways, including Atwa, Atwaa and Atwia; but for the purpose of this study, we would use Atwa. Atwa is historically noted and revered in Ghana for the Kodzidan, a unique performance space architecture which was constructed largely through the inspiration of the renowned playwright Efua Sutherland, who was a friend to Nana Okoampah Baah IV (maiden name Adjoa Mansah Baah), the late Queen mother and at the same time chief of Atwa. Nana Okoampah Baah IV, according to the oral tradition used to narrate Ananse stories on the then only radio station in Ghana, the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC) radio station. Through her narrations, she was said to have popularized the Ananse story song “Kweku de onsurooo, Kweku de onsurooo, Kwekuee …” (Meaning, Kweku is brave). As a folk hero within the context of Ghanaian storytelling tradition, people have a lot to learn from Kweku Ananse, hence, the use of such performance art to inculcate moral ideas in the society. As a result of that, Efua Sutherland, who had keen interest in such traditional performance acts, became passionate in Ekumfi Atwa as a place with storytelling tradition. This point is buttressed by Assam (2009):

As an associate research fellow of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, and was to undertake fieldwork into innovative ways of formulating an authentic African theatre, Efua Sutherland met and immediately became acquainted with Nana Adjoa Mansa’s talent as a towering traditionalist and adept performer – cum – orator, on the premises of the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation in Accra where the latter had been regularly engaged in a highly entertaining evening storytelling programme on radio, popularly known by its signature tune: “Kweku de onnsuro …” to wit, “Kweku {Ananse} says he isn’t afraid …”

Another account also indicates that the two met at the Calvary Methodist Church in Accra and struck an acquaintance. Information gathered at the Atwa community indicated that the song *Kweku de onsurooo* was a composition by Nana Okoampah Baah IV. According to some distinguished Ghanaian musicologists, the song is considered as folklore and would therefore be difficult to link its composition to an individual. In that case, it would be safe indicating that the song was popularized by Nana Okoampah Baah IV when she used to host the storytelling session on Radio Ghana. In the opinion of Arkhurst (2007) Kodzidan, *The Legacy of Efua Sutherland* ‘The Ekumfi Atwia House of Stories, popularly known as Kodzidan, was built to provide the right model for a national indigenous theatre.’

According to oral tradition, the Kodzidan attracts a substantial number of visitors annually including Professor Esi Sutherland-Addy, a lecturer at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon, and a daughter of Efua Sutherland.

## Theatre Architecture and Performances

Theatre architecture is always influenced by the type of performances and the targeted audience. The latter; however, takes prominence. Each performance thrives when the performance space is adequately workable and hence does not pose much challenge. A clear reference is the Classical Greek Theatre structure where the front row, close to the orchestra was reserved for the priests and high political officials, emphasizing the design suitability at the time. Wilson and Goldfarb (2000) indicated that: “Some historians believe that a specific seating plan was followed in the Greek theatron; they suggest that the various Greek tribes were segregated and that men and women (if women were present) sat separately. Front-row seats, known as the proedria, were reserved for political and religious dignitaries”.

The Classical Roman theatres were also of religious significance; however, the entertainment component was also highly appreciated. In a sense, they had to construct performance stages to suit the type of performance presentation. Therefore, until Pompey constructed a permanent theatre, they mostly relied on temporary performance venues suitable to their performances. This point is held by Brockett and Hildy (2014) who espouse that, “... since many types of entertainment were given and a new temporary structure was supposedly erected for each festival, considerable experimentation would have been possible”.

Prior to the period when performances were done outside the churches, Medieval Europe also used the church premises for their theatre presentations because they saw that the church environment suited their kind of liturgical drama presentations. Here again, we rely on Brockett and Hildy’s (2014) view that:

A number of staging conventions used in the church would remain standard throughout the Middle ages. The playing area had two basic components: small scenic structures (variously called mansions, *sedes*, *loci*, or *domi*) and a generalized acting area (the *platea*, playne or place). The mansions served to locate the scene and housed any properties required.

Evidently, in almost all historical periods, performance spaces were constructed to conform to their type of theatre presentations, hence the Ekumfi Atwa Kodzidan cannot be an exception from theatre considerations that have transpired over the ages.

Some writers have gone ahead of us in investigating the Atwa Kodzidan. Among such people are Arkhurst, Phillips, who have all lent their voices in *The Legacy of Efua Sutherland* (2007) which sought to reveal the works of Sutherland. While some gave a general background of the structure, others were emphatic of its architectural designs. For instance, Arkhurst (2007) gives a description of the features of the Kodzidan as follows:

Careful planning and thought had gone into making the Kodzidan flexible and suited to the needs of a modern village theatre and more especially to the needs of a developing theatre. The perimeter walls serve to contain the audience and keep away goats and sheep. They also restrict the size of the audience. The backstage room with two doors provides a backstage where actors can prepare themselves for performance. The doors are used as entrances and exits and on occasions serve as inner rooms. The dressing room also serves as office and storage for properties and items of costume.

Although Arkhurst provides some specific relevant information, some minute details seem to be unnoticed, and such minute details are what this paper seeks to explore among others.

## **Data Collection Approach**

The study adopted a non- probability method, targeting the purposive sampling technique. This was relevant because the research required the use of people who have relevant and reliable information and are willing to provide them for the study. Kumekpor (2002) reveals that purposive sampling should involve choosing people who are knowledgeable about the problem under investigation. In view of this sampling approach, data was collected through interviews and participant observation in Atwa, (where the tradition is performed) and three surrounding villages; Ekumfi Eysisam, Ekumfi Narkwa and Ekumfi Dunkwa. We passively participated in the storytelling performance. This approach created a good relationship between us and the people, and thus assisted us to unearth very relevant information on the art in respect to its aesthetics, historical background, philosophies, audience participation, and reception. In all, thirty (30) people were purposively sampled for interrogation. Eight (8) of the interviewees who were custodians with distinct indigenous knowledge in the storytelling tradition were older men in their late seventies (70's). Four (4) people were also interrogated because of their various roles as narrators in over thirty storytelling sessions. We interacted with four (4) elderly men believed to be in their eighties (80's) and were retired cultural organizers. Although these men have not been part of telling the stories, they kept faith with the art, and have followed the tradition with keen interest. The rest of the interviewees, fourteen (14), who were mostly youths in their twenty's (20's) represented the audiences who provided us with their views on the stage performances and how they have gained knowledge under the tutelage of the elders to sustain and preserve the arts for future generation.

Data from these categorized groups were analysed in order to deduce relevant and reliable information of the performances. By means of content analysis of the stories, emerging themes from the various interviews were expounded to draw conclusions on the Atwa storytelling tradition with particular emphasis on the Kodzidan; its origin, architectural structure and performances.

## **The Values and Philosophical Import of the Storytelling Performance**

Storytelling as a tradition at Atwa has been maintained up to date. Some of the original storytellers *have been invited to dine with the ancestors*, while the original performers in the Kodzidan who are living are too advanced in age to be engaged in the art. The research revealed that, young ones have been trained to keep the tradition going, though their performances of late have not been as regular and popular as it used to be. These young ones constitute the special group for storytelling presently and their resolve to uphold the storytelling tradition of the community falls in line with the vision of the National Theatre Movement. This point is affirmed by Agovi (1990) who states that:

..., the National Theatre Movement, started in 1956, became a national cultural policy document to develop theatre in Ghana. Its aim was “to bring into existence a theatre that will derive its vitality and authenticity from roots firmly planted in the true traditions of the people”. It had the mandate to refashion indigenous Ghanaian traditions to suit our modern theatre through creative experimentation.

The inherent values and philosophies in the stories performed includes remaining chaste until marriage. While others also touch on the menace of drug abuse, prostitution, peer pressure, teenage pregnancy that could expose one to deadly diseases such as HIV/AIDS and other incurable diseases. The performances also help train the people in the traditions of the land and prepares them to take up the mantle of leadership in the future. In this way, the culture of the people is preserved. Themes from some of the stories that bother on communal integration, success in life through hard work, help mold the individuals to become prosperous, patriotic and exemplary citizens. Ultimately these ideals culminate into a developed community.

## **Kodzidan: The Model for Ghanaian Theatre Architecture**

Kodzidan is the brain child of Efua Sutherland. The structure was built to provide the right model for a traditional indigenous theatre. Arkhurst (2007) aptly refers to the Kodzidan as “the Ekumfi Atwia house of stories.” This special edifice was believed to have been constructed in 1966, and according to sources, it annually attracts visitors from within Ghana and beyond. Akyea (1968) asserts:

The Kodzidan (the local name for the theatre) is an eleven-sided structure built with low surrounding walls. It has two gates to it. In the centre is a stepped-down area which is flanked by a higher-level stage. Behind the top stage is what may be called a dressing room. The back wall of the stage arcs gracefully and there is a door to the dressing room at each end of the arc.

Our investigation on the short wall seems to differ from Akyea's assertion. Based on our own observation and interviews, the short wall was a later addition which was constructed by the citizens and not part of the original design by Sutherland. Those of us who pay attention to minute details may be tempted to believe in Akyea's assertion owing to the fact that the extension from the short wall regarding the floor texture appears slightly different from the materials used for other parts of the floor. Logically, however, Akyea's presentation sounds more authentic than the information gathered at Atwa owing to the time difference between when Akyea wrote and the period the structure was believed to have been completed. According to oral traditions, the short wall was believed to have been constructed in 1966, while Akyea's publication was in 1968, two years after the structure was said to have been completed. Given that it took Akyea a year between the research and publication, it implies that by 1967, the short wall might have been constructed. How early could the citizens have constructed the short wall after the main structure was constructed, bearing in mind the fact that the structure must be used for some period before its shortfalls can be noticed and attended to? The short wall has, however, been confirmed to sit some audience both on occasions when the venue is full and occasionally when not full.

Again, the 1966 date identified for the construction of the Kodzidan is also debatable. A number of the first batch students of the School of Performing Arts, University of Ghana, Legon, indicate that while they were students between 1963 and 1965, they used to attend performances at Atwa (the Kodzidan). This gives an indication that the structure might have existed before 1966. However, in another twist to the year of construction of the Kodzidan, Amovi (2007) writing on 'A life in brief', indicated in his presentation titled 'Chronology' which appears in *The Legacy of Efua Sutherland* (2007) pointed out the following under the year 1964: "... Efua Sutherland begins Ekumfi Atwia Experimental Community Theatre Project, conceptualizes and builds the Kodzidan, or 'story house', which becomes a second locus of theatre development in a rural community".

Amovi seems to agree with the opinion of some early students who visited Atwa in the 1960s. Nevertheless, both dates provide a platform to conclude that the structure was constructed in the mid-1960s.

The main features of the Kodzidan however are:

1. A stage which has about three V shaped floors
2. A pit in front of the stage reserved for the storyteller and performers
3. A somehow tiered level for the audience
4. A short wall which surrounds the seating area of the structure
5. Eleven-sided main structure with pillars
6. A dressing room with two doors, one at each side.
7. Two gates
8. Roofed and circular when viewed from afar

A cursory look at the structure paints a picture of it being too small for the community. One would think that it could not sit more than a hundred people. However, after watching a performance at the place as part of activities commemorating 2015 edition of the Pan African Historical Theatre Festival where the National Association of Black Story Tellers from the US performed, we had to review our opinion regarding the sitting capacity of the area. There were about 100 audience and performers and more than enough space was left to take about three times the space already occupied.

Though the size of the stage has nothing to do with the population, the stage appears too small for a serious theatre presentation. It is, however, understandable why the stage is that small. Storytelling being the main reason for the construction of the structure makes it reasonable for the stage to be small, creating space for the pit specially created to suit that purpose. The pit was constructed in front of the main stage in the form of an orchestra pit. In addition, the intimacy of storytelling tradition makes it so unique that it does not require a large performance area. In essence, the size of the Kodzidan is just very ideal for the purpose for which it was constructed. The foresight developed for its construction was simply ideal for storytelling and we are optimistic that it shall remain so for a very long time.

The space around the storytelling performance pit is raised to about two or three different levels to accommodate audiences. In our opinion, the facility could sit an audience of about 300. The community has its way of positioning people at the Kodzidan. The royals/important visitors sit to the right side close to the stage from the point of someone standing on the stage while ordinary citizens occupy the rest of the space. This arrangement; therefore, corresponds with earlier submission on the classical Greek theatre presentation, where the royals had reserved place. The Kodzidan is not a novelty, for, such arrangements have existed in the theatre and other performances and events during historical periods.

The dressing room is just one long space meant for both sexes. The research revealed that, a piece of cloth is sometimes used to demarcate this long room, serving as two changing rooms for male and female performers.

The performance areas somehow merge with the auditorium and make it unique for audience participation. The short wall, on which the year of construction was artistically and culturally embossed, was to probably prevent animals from entering the structure (Arkhurst 2007). The wall could also at the same time serve as seats for some category of audience, especially the youth, in situations where the place is full and citizens have no place to sit or place chairs. Under such conditions, they could use the short wall as seats because the wall is not too tall to prevent people from sitting on them.

One striking feature of the Kodzidan which our informant gave and for which we think needs a lot of consideration to modern architectural designers, was a particular portion of the roof. This portion was centrally positioned with different kinds of roofing sheets which appear somehow transparent from the other portions of the roof. It is presumed that the somehow transparent portion was specifically designed so that during moonlit nights, moonlight could reflect in the performance area, thereby providing a sort of lighting effect and also contributing to the aesthetics of performances. It was also revealed that in previous times, the community used to wash dust off that portion of the roof, with the intent of receiving light through the roof during moonlit nights. This aspect does not mean that the venue does not presently have electricity. It is hooked onto the national electricity grid and light provided when it is required.

The facility is still used for storytelling but not as regular as it was in its early days of construction. Despite that the flair for storytelling still exists in the community. Other performances in the form of dances are now regularly performed at the Kodzidan. On the wall against the dressing room and to the back wall of the raised stage is a television set used for watching programmes and events that elders of the community consider are necessary for collective viewing. An example of such programmes is the FIFA World Cup or any programme of national or International concern that might not compromise the morals of citizens. We believe that the restriction on the use of the television set on regular basis was an attempt not to divert the community's special attention from the storytelling performance act. Our outmost concern about the television is how low it has been fixed owing to the security features attached to it. It is so low that it could pose a danger to performers on stage and at the same time restrict the stage size since performers would have to be very mindful of it while in performance. This television idea; however, was not part of the original arrangement of the structure. In addition, the structure is also used for community meetings.

The Kodzidan still remains a property of the Atwa community and it is the community that maintains it. Government has no hand as to its operations and maintenance. Its open nature in terms of the short wall and not the roof, coupled with the fact that it is considered a community structure, makes it imperative for no gate fees to be charged when performances take place there. The Kodzidan has been centrally positioned in the community and it is right in front of a shrine known locally as Pusuban. The Pusuban is believed to have predated the Kodzidan. Assam (2009) espouses the idea that the place that sits the Kodzidan originally was 'a popular spot in the village, where the Kodzidan (the house of storytelling) now stands was indicated as the village square where citizens often assembled under a big tree to share their rich musical heritage.'

Publicity to attract people to programmes at the Kodzidan is through a community public address system which is loud enough to reach surrounding communities. In addition to that they also use mobile phones to inform a number of friends or influential personalities like chiefs and elders of nearby communities. This idea is a move, not an improvement from the original gong-gong beating to inform community members about upcoming events at the venue.

It is a remarkable idea that the people of Atwa have maintained the storytelling tradition through the continual use of the Kodzidan as a performing area. Thus, we are of the view that culture must be held in its traditional form for preservation. In as much as we do not want to malign the issue of cultural pluralism, we cannot ignore a school of thought that the world must stick to cultures that apply to each community or society. We believe that the idea of the Kodzidan must be maintained otherwise all cultures of the world would be merged into one, and this might bring about a one long boring world culture of monotony. Our view is supported by Dukore (1974) who in citing Plato's *The Republic* holds the view that communities should refrain from taking on new identities, and tagging them as modernity, for the community stands to face dangers in the midst of these so called new cultures. It is therefore an ideal effort by the people of Atwa to maintain their cultural product, packaged in the form of storytelling for which the Kodzidan was constructed. The Atwa Kodzidan is a true reflection of the Cultural Policy of Ghana (2004) which states;

8.4.1. The National Commission on Culture shall collaborate with the District Assemblies and communities to establish community theatres to serve as venues for the promotion of the performing arts.

8.4.2 The design of theatres should be based on African indigenous architecture as well as African concepts and traditions of performance.

This provides the platform for which the ideal performing art theatre architecture should look like in Ghana. All the structures need not necessarily be the same as the Atwa Kodzidan but should reflect the theatre traditions of the country and not alien architectural designs, especially the now popular proscenium performance spaces that seems to distant performance and audience.

## Conclusion

Conclusively, classical Greek Amphitheatre was constructed to suit the religious implication of the Dionysian festival at the time; hence the orchestra which holds the altar. Classical Roman theatre structure was constructed to suit the entertainment activities of the time, and so on. We have a very strong affection for the Ekumfi Atwa Kodzidan in the sense that it typifies the appropriate architectural structure for a local storytelling tradition and these are the sort of facilities that as Ghanaians or to a large extent Africans, should adopt for the preservation of our performance act and refrain from relying heavily on European or Oriental structures which appear alien and breaks the commonality and intimacy that binds African indigenous performing arts. The people of Ekumfi Atwa see their storytelling tradition in the Kodzidan and have come to accept it as part of the traditional performance act. It will forever remind them of how their community came to be popularly known in the scheme of storytelling tradition in Ghana and Africa as a whole.

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