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EXHIBITING CULTURE, TEACHING HISTORY ACROSS TIME AND SPACE: LESSONS FOR THE PRESENT

**EXPLORING VISUAL CULTURES (EVC 2023, GHANA,
WINNEBA**

INTRODUCTION(1)

Ghana is a culturally diversified society that takes pride in showing and preserving their culture in various ways. However, how do we teach students to recognize and apply the dynamic nature of culture for life-long learning? How do we teach students to learn and appreciate these diverse rich cultures and enhance their socio-cultural identity while contemporaneously developing a critical mindset in an ever-changing society? By focusing on one such cultural practice, puberty rites for females, this presentation attempts to address some of these salient issues.

UNDERSTANDING CULTURE AS A CONCEPT

The key concepts include the complexity of culture, that culture includes capabilities and acquired habits by a human as a member of the society.

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- **IN TALKING ABOUT CULTURE WE ARE ALSO TALKING ABOUT TRADITION**

INTRODUCTION(2)

- THE CULTURAL PRACTICE OF PUBERTY RITES
- FOCUS
- **DIPO RITES AMONG THE KROBO**

NATIONAL MUSEUM VISIT (ACCRA)

This inscription at the national museum underscores the significance of the cultural practice of puberty especially for young women and the need to groom them to take on the role of “a responsible woman in the society”

Puberty Rite

Puberty rite is observed when an individual attains the age of puberty. The transition from childhood to adulthood is a major event, not only for the individual but also the society. In some societies in Ghana, the rites are performed for both boys and girls to initiate them into adulthood. Puberty rites are performed predominantly for girls, especially in Southern societies.

The main aim of the rite is to train young women on how to assume the role of a responsible woman in the society. The rites vary among ethnic groups. However, there are usually three to four elements that are similar in all the rites (1) Separation of initiates from the larger societies (2) Preparation and instruction of initiates by the elders (3) A transition phase (4) A welcoming or acceptance phase marked by celebrations. These ceremonies, marking this important stage in the life of a girl are sacred and particularly important. They come with other social and spiritual obligations and roles.

Puberty rite is known as *otufɔ* among the Gas, *bragoro* among the Asante, *dipo* among the Krobos and *tugbewɔwɔ* among the Dodome of Volta Region. In Ghana, two puberty ceremonies for girls that have withstood the test of time are *bragoro* among the Asante and *dipo* among the Krobo.

NATIONAL MUSEUM VISIT (ACCRA)

Here is a detailed account of the cultural practice as it observe in contemporary times. In the past, the duration spanned a long period of time where the young ladies were taken through the rites of preparing them as wives and mothers in the society.

Dipo

The ceremony for puberty is a rite of passage called *Dipo* among the Krobos, a tribe in the Eastern Region of Ghana. The practice is upheld strongly by the Krobos and ensured that every female in the tribe undergoes the rites. The rites are performed between April – June of every year. The rite performed allows the initiate to be recognised as a full Krobo woman. The training involves home management to motherhood to make them ideal women. There are nine areas the girls are taught: - cookery, personal hygiene, homemaking, care for members of the family, commercial activities (farming), marketing, first aid (herbal medication), poetry, singing and dancing.

The family and parents ensure that the girls who have attained the age of puberty are sent to the chief priest / priestess. The ceremony is held for a period of five – days from Friday to Tuesday. The parents are responsible for acquiring all other items needed, red cloth, white calico, wax print wrappers, items for the ritual bath and other materials.

The hair of initiates are shaved but one is allowed to keep the hair when they pay for it. Early Saturday morning the initiates go to the *Okwe* stream to have their ritual bath. The girls are forbidden to talk to anyone to and from the bath. They wash the red cloth they wore and wear another after the bath. They cover themselves with wrappers. The chief priest/priestess gives them roasted maize, groundnut, and sugarcane to eat. Chalky water and red camwood is sprinkled on their faces before they eat. Late into the night, the blood of the goat presented by the family is used to wash the feet of the initiates and libation is poured.

On Sunday, a leader for the *Dipo – yi* is out-doored all dressed in her beads and cloth before she performs the *Klama* dance. This is done amidst singing and the pouring of libation by the priest to invoke the blessings of the gods on her. She leads the procession with the others to the 'old lady' where they are marked with dots of clay on their body. In the afternoon, the relatives and the community gather amidst singing and dancing. The girls are dressed in lots of beads and white cloth for the visit to the sacred stone which is the ritual's climax. The initiates line up with leaves pressed on their lips and walk to the shrine holding a stick. They are made to sit on the stone three times. It is believed that any girl who is not a virgin, pregnant or has aborted will be stuck on the stone.

On the grand out-dooring day, the young women dress in wax prints and beautiful beads around their necks, hands, waist, and legs with scarves over their heads and go round the neighbourhood performing the *Klama* dance thanking friends and relatives for their help.

A durbar is held on the last day with the women dressed in beads and *kente* to dance *Klama*. They mostly dance in pairs. Suitors on this day can express and make a choice of a wife.

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HISTORICAL ART WORK OF PUBERTY RITES

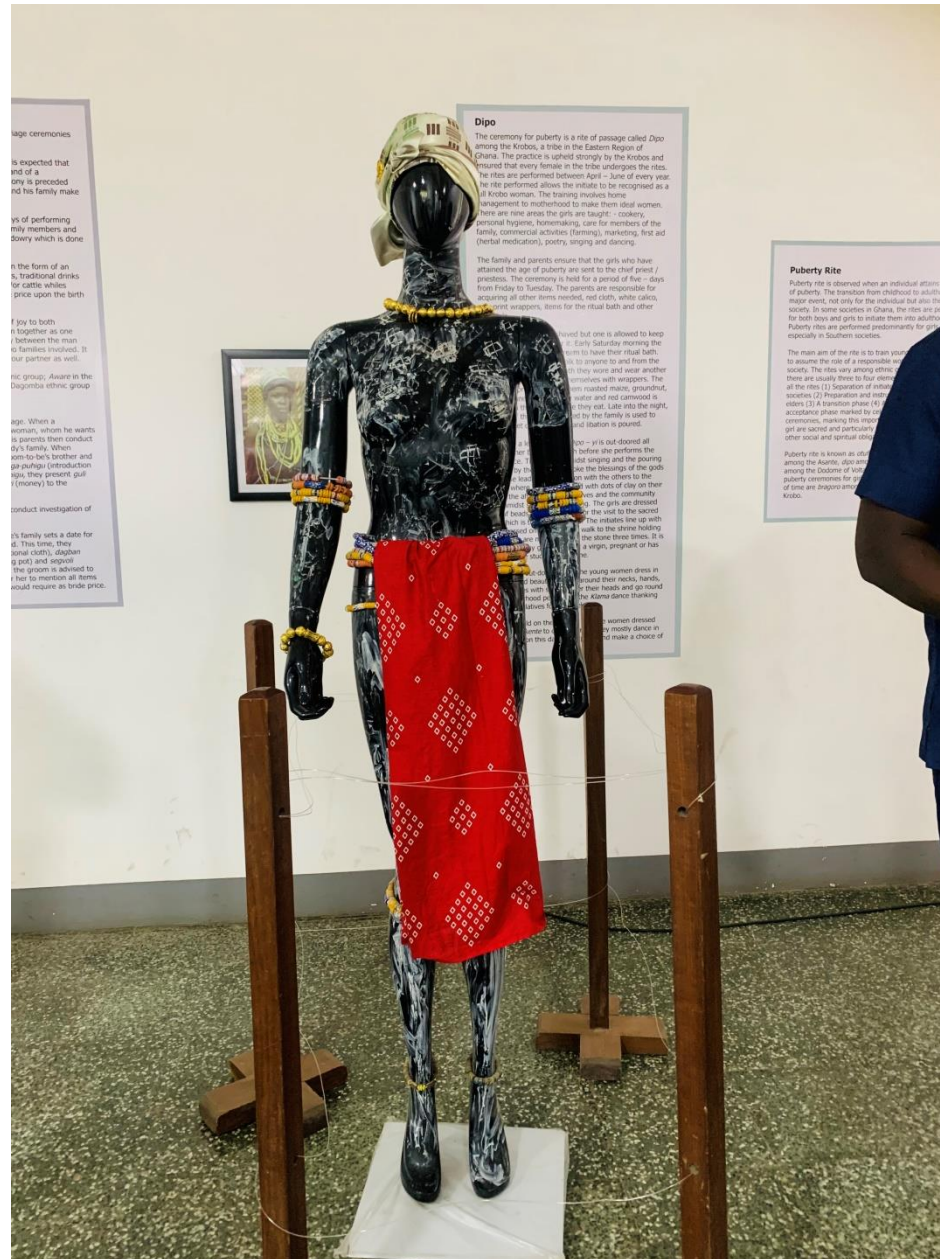
ARTIST : A. M. OPOKU
circa 1956

A depiction of young ladies being 'out-doored' and celebrated after having successfully been initiated into adulthood and groomed to take on their assigned social roles and responsibilities. The ladies, adorned in ornamental beads dance in ecstasy as the queen-mother looks on with approval. The semi-nude display of the young ladies, also an indication that they are ready to take on their next role- as wives and mothers in the society.



NATIONAL MUSEUM VISIT (ACCRA)

A MANNEQUIN DISPLAY OF AN INITIATE OF THE PUBERTY RITES EXHIBIT AT THE GHANA NATIONAL MUSEUM IN ACCRA



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Dipo

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The family and parents ensure that the girls who have attained the age of puberty are sent to the chief priest / priestess. The ceremony is held for a period of five - days from Friday to Tuesday. The parents are responsible for acquiring all other items needed, red cloth, white calico, and other items for the ritual bath and other

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The main aim of the rite is to train young women to assume the role of a responsible member of the community. The rite varies among ethnic groups and there are usually three to four elements involved in the rite: (1) Separation of the initiate from the family (2) Preparation and initiation (3) Initiation (4) A transition phase (5) A post-rite phase marked by the initiate's return to the community, wearing this respect. The girls are sacred and particularly important to the community and spiritual well-being.

Puberty rite is known as *Asare* among the Asomans, *Dipo* among the Kroobos, and *Adom* among the Dagombas. Puberty ceremonies for girls of some are *Asare* and *Krobo*.



A Dipo Yi

www.GaADangme.edu



MODERN DAY DISPLAY OF YOUNG WOMEN

Kpa Womi (Tying Of String)

AN INITIATE PARTICIPATING IN THE CEREMONY

A Dipo yi wearing a special string, with one reddish bead around the neck and waist. She is expected to stand or step on sacred antelope skin as a way of inspecting and proving her chastity. This is usually done by an older woman. It is believed that something bad happen to a girl if she fails this stage of the rite.



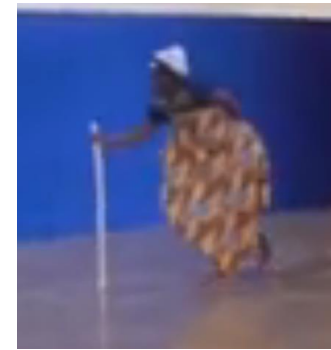
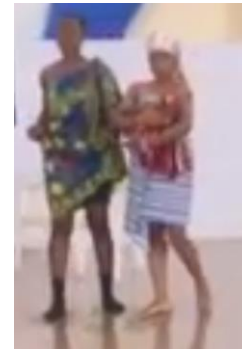
INITIATES IN PROCESSION



SHORT VIDEO OF STUDENTS PERFORMING THE PUBERTY RITES (GNHD CELEBRATION 2023)

**A RE-ENACTMENT OF FEMALE PUBERTY RITES BY
HISTORY STUDENTS FROM
ZION GIRLS SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL, WINNEBA.**

SHORT VIDEO OF STUDENTS PERFORMING THE PUBERTY RITES (GNHD CELEBRATION 2023)



SITUATING AND RECONCILING HISTORY, CULTURE WITHIN CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

Scholars have critiqued traditions as mere inventions created to suit the period within which these traditions emerged that “traditions which appear to be old are often quite recent in it origin and *sometimes invented*” HOBBSAWN

- “Invented tradition...mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seem to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with a suitable historical past.”

- **AND HISTORY DEALS WITH MORE THAN JUST CONTINUITY BUT ALSO CHANGE THROUGH TIME**

- Different historical times do present different ways of doing thing, explaining and exhibiting cultural values and identity
- How do these cultural practices resonate with the present and connects with the entire history and transformation of a community?

SITUATING AND RECONCILING HISTORY, CULTURE WITHIN CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

FOR EXAMPLE BEYOND TEACHING GIRLS TO UPHOLD SOCIAL NORMS AND VALUES OF A GOOD WIFE AND MOTHER, HOW CAN THIS TRADITION TEACH YOUNG WOMEN TO ASPIRE TO ROLES AND SKILLS THAT ARE ESSENTIAL IN OUR 21ST CENTURY?

- **CULTURE/TRADITION CAN, AND SHOULD BE QUESTIONED**
- **IT CAN ALSO BE ADOPTED, ADAPTED AND NEGOTIATED TO ADDRESS PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES AND IDEALS.**
- **DYNAMIC AND COMPLEXITY OF CULTURE AND INADVERTENTLY HISTORY**
- **LESSONS**

CONCLUSION(1)

- **HISTORIANS believe that the past has something to teach especially where our cultural practices are concerned.**
- **Need to look for creative yet critical ways to use education to develop and foster sociocultural identity.** It is also crucial to teach history by especially situating this within the historical context within which it developed and try to look for different ways that the past can be reconciled with present discourse.
- So beyond aesthetics, beyond fostering and extoling our cultural identity what lessons can we learn from this and how do we make applications of the past with our contemporary perspectives?
 - Socio-cultural sustainability and education
 - Global connection

CONCLUSION(2)

- **LESSONS**

- IT IS USEFUL TO FIRST KNOW ABOUT THESE CULTURAL PRACTICES AND THEN ACT ON THIS KNOWLEDGE TO MAKE GOOD APPLICATION OF KNOWING ABOUT OUR HISTORY, CULTURE FOR LIFELONG LEARNING.
- THIS CALLS FOR THE FOSTERING OF CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS WHICH IS A KEY COMPONENT OF THE CORE COMPETENCY SKILLS THE CURRICULUM CALLS ON STUDENTS TO DEVELOP.
- TO CRITIQUE HISTORY AS REFLECTED IN OUR CULTURAL PRACTICES IS NOT NECESSARILY TO SUBJECT THEM TO BINARY CONNOTIONS OF BAD OR GOOD, AN EITHER THIS OR THAT CONCEPT BUT INSTEAD, RECOGNISING THAT ONE CAN LOOK AT THESE FROM A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL PERSPECTIVE, WE CAN HAVE GREY AREAS AND ADDRESS NUANCES AND COMPLEXITIES.

CONCLUSION(3)

- WHILE IT IS USEFUL TO APPRECIATE THE MORAL VIRTUES AND VALUE ESPOUSE BY TRADITION IT IS EQUALLY USEFUL TO CRITIQUE THE NEED FOR THIS PRACTICE TO ALSO ENCOURAGE OTHER ROLES FOR WOMEN BEYOND TRADITIONALLY ASSIGENED ROLE OF WOMEN AS WIVES AND MOTHERS.
- SKILLS SUCH AS OF LEADERSHIP, ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND OTHER NECESSARY SKILLS THAT CAN BE USEFUL FOR GIRLS AS GLOBAL CITIZENS.
- **THE BENEFIT:** Have a generation of young ones that are in tune with their culture and history and yet able to critique and negotiate their identity in an ever-changing globally inclusive society!

**Thank you all
for your time.**

