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**“WE CAN’T PERFORM WITHOUT SPIRITS”: INTERROGATING THE  
DISCURSIVE AGENCY OF ALCOHOL IN ADZEWA PERFORMANCE**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines how ‘spirits’, understood as both alcohol and ancestral presence, shape the musical identity, memory, and performance ethos of *Adzewa*, women’s musical tradition among the Fante people of Ghana. It investigates the performers’ assertion that “we can’t perform without spirits” to illuminate the spiritual and material dimensions of indigenous music-making. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2011 and 2022, the study argues that alcohol and ancestral presence function as active agents within *Adzewa* performance, influencing emotional depth, endurance, and creativity. Framed within Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow and Latour’s actor-network theory, the analysis conceptualises these elements as “vibrant matter” that co-produce musical experience alongside human performers. The paper further situates alcohol within its historical transformation from a local ritual offering to a colonial prestige object, showing how it mediates between the living and the dead (ancestors) while reflecting social hierarchies. Through song, libation, and possession, *Adzewa* becomes both a spiritual communion and a performance of cultural memory. The study also examines contemporary transformations as Christian values reshape traditional ritual practices, provoking debates around authenticity and modernity. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that the success of *Adzewa* transcends technical skill, encompassing a metaphysical negotiation between performers and their ancestral instructors. This paper does not seek to analyse the music and song text of *adzewa*. Instead, by foregrounding the agency of spirits, this research challenges conventional aesthetic frameworks and expands ethnomusicological understanding of how material and immaterial forces define, shape, and sustain indigenous performance traditions.

**Keywords:** Performance traditions, Spiritual agency, Gender dynamics, Musical memory, Indigenous aesthetics.

*“Can’t you see that our ancestors, the owners of the songs, have taken over the performance?”  
– Adzewa performers, (2011)*

## **Introduction**

In many African cosmologies, music and religion are deeply interconnected (Nketia, 1960). This interwoven system often involves the creation of a unified domain where the active participation of ancestral spirits and community members is essential. This is exemplified by the Akan, especially the Fante people’s belief that humans coexist closely with spirits, and, as such, no human endeavour can succeed if it is not secured in the spiritual realm (Akyeampong and Ntewusu 2014). Spirituality, therefore, influences both male and female thoughts and actions to the extent that in most Fante traditional musical practices, deified ancestors and also gods are not excluded. The centrality of spirituality in Fante societies, as expressed by the Fante themselves in the epigraph above, ensures that deities and deified ancestors<sup>1</sup> are central figures in most traditional musical practices.

Within this worldview, ancestors are understood to be spirits that have transitioned from the material world, where they existed as physical flesh, to the realm of the dead, where they exist as spirits (Chuks 2021; Nche and Michael 2024). However, though they are in the spiritual realm, they are still connected to the material world. This ongoing connection is ritually affirmed through offerings of food and drink during prayers, which serve to invoke their protection and blessings. Although they are believed to occupy space, they are invisible to the eye and inaudible to the normal ear, choosing, on opportune moments, to manifest through specific individuals. This effectively makes them “quasi-materials” and an integral part of a society (Wiredu, 2002).

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<sup>1</sup>Commenting on who an ancestor is, Chuks, (2021) insightfully indicates that not all individuals who have passed away can qualify as ancestors. To qualify for ancestorhood, a human being must have lived to a ripe old age and produced children; they must have died a good death, received honourable burial rites and lived a moral life.

Building upon this foundational interconnectedness between the human/material and spiritual/immaterial realms, the Fante people provide a compelling example with their *Adzewa* tradition. They hold their songs as their ancestors' property, since the ancestors are the original composers who bequeathed them to their descendants. This transfer carries a profound responsibility, and it is believed that failing to accurately transmit this musical heritage to the next generation is a transgression answerable in the afterlife. Field accounts discovered that *Adzewa*, a female musical tradition of the Fante people in southern Ghana, is thus sustained through this sacred intergenerational communion.

Since the ancestors are the true owners of the songs, women performers assert that each performance serves as an invocation, inviting ancestral *Adzewa* singers to join them. This spiritual collaboration ensures the preservation of the songs' authentic structure, style, and essence. To facilitate this interrelationship, performers employ libation rituals, a widespread practice within West African societies. As noted by Akyeampong (1996), libation creates a symbolic bridge to the ancestral world, invoking guidance and legitimising a performance. Ambler (2003) similarly highlights alcohol's ritual centrality in African societies, noting its role in libation ceremonies that establish communicative links between the living and the ancestral realm. Within this ritual framework, alcohol<sup>2</sup> is more than an offering because it possesses agency. It speaks through its pouring, sanctifying the ensuing music, dance, and drumming as a unified act of social and spiritual communion. Wilson (2015) and Manning (2025) also confirm that alcohol and ancestral spirits do not only accompany performances in Ghana, but instead, they actively shape its ethos, aesthetics, and social meanings.

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<sup>2</sup>Alcoholic beverages are defined as drinks containing more than 0.5% ethyl alcohol. Across Africa, patterns of alcohol consumption vary considerably between countries. These differences are influenced by factors such as ethnic diversity, religious norms, levels of economic development and industrialisation, availability of alcoholic products, societal attitudes towards drinking, and political and economic stability (WHO, 2011). Alcohol use is linked to a range of social and health-related risks. It contributes to both intentional and unintentional injuries and can cause harm not only to the drinker but also to others within the community. These risks highlight the complex role of alcohol in African societies

This study sought to understand the relationship between alcohol and ancestral presence and how they influence the musical identity, memory, and performance ethos of *Adzewa*. This is motivated by an observation that the performers often assert that ‘we can’t perform without spirits. This statement perhaps foregrounds the metaphysical dimensions of music-making and the agency of non-material forces in sustaining emotionally charged, long-duration performances. Furthermore, performers often credit the participation of their deified ancestors and alcohol as the reasons behind a good or successful performance. It is these two elements, alcohol and ancestors, that this paper conceptualises as the “spirits.” By establishing the concept of spirits, the researcher contests the perception that these tangible and quasi-tangible objects are voiceless in performance, and as such, argues that spirits have agency to shape and define a musical genre.

In this paper, I interrogate the discursive agency of alcohol in *Adzewa* performance. The *Adzewa* genre was selected because, during my field research, the Fante people consistently described it as the most expressive and dynamic of Fante women’s song traditions. Before each performance, the women would use alcohol in the form of libation to invoke their ancestors, asserting that without this ritual act, they could not perform. This indigenous practice raises critical questions: What are the discursive agencies of the spirits in their participation in *Adzewa* music-making? Why is alcohol indispensable to the performance process? And to what extent have spiritual forces shaped musical behaviours and the construction of musical identities?

To answer these questions, the paper explores the discursive agencies of spirits to provide the reader with a sense of spiritual agency and power that seems to imbue *Adzewa* performances. I further interrogate the concept of ‘we can’t perform without the spirits,’ within the context of what the Fante people describe as good *Adzewa* performance, to understand how spirits shape the performance ethos of the genre. To achieve this, I draw on Csikszentmihalyi’s

(2014) theory of flow, a psychological framework that explains the optimal state of consciousness in which individuals feel fully absorbed, focused, and involved in an activity, a state often described as ‘in the zone.’ In *Adzewa* this theory is not only useful in explaining how musical and aesthetic experience intersect but also highlights how the combined effects of spirits (ancestral and alcohol) instigate the flow state. In this flow state, which is quite different from the idea of flow in popular music studies, persons performing are fully immersed and energised by the activities of the performance, leading to some sort of loss of consciousness and distorted time perception. The paper concludes by reflecting on how material culture challenges conventional aesthetic frameworks by foregrounding non-musical factors such as ritual, alcohol and spiritual presence as key determinants of musical quality and good music in indigenous African musical cultures.

### **Methodology**

The research is grounded in extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2011 and 2022 across ten towns in the Central and Greater Accra regions of Ghana, where Fante-speaking communities are densely populated. A multi-method approach, combining purposeful sampling with immersive ethnography (Creswell, 2014), was employed to investigate the interplay of spirits and music in these communities. The ten towns include Cape Coast, Winneba, Otuam, Accra, Mankessim, Anomabu, Moree, Saltpond, Elmina, and Bodwease. These towns were chosen for their historical and contemporary significance in *Adzewa* musical practice. While some of these towns are predominantly Fante-speaking, in Accra, for example, which is predominantly Ga-speaking, I focused exclusively on the Fante Diaspora community. The selection process prioritised individuals with direct involvement in *Adzewa* performance, including female musicians, cultural custodians, elders, and members of traditional warrior institutions (Asafo) historically linked to the genre. Although

*Asafo* are presumed to be male-only groups, their relationship with *Adzewa* stems from their historical origins, where wives and daughters of these warriors constituted *Adzewa* groups.

Participants in my study were identified through community networks, local cultural associations, and a robust “snowball sampling methodology” (Hammersley, M & Atkinson, P., 2007), ensuring the inclusion of those with deep experiential knowledge and long-term engagement with *Adzewa*. Thus, deliberate focus was placed on diversity in age, experience, and roles within the performance tradition to capture a wide range of perspectives. This approach facilitated a rich understanding of how alcohol and ancestral presence are perceived and enacted within different performance contexts. The inclusion of both performers and cultural commentators ensured that the study addressed not only musical practice but also the broader socio-cultural and spiritual frameworks that inform *Adzewa* music-making. Given this paper’s emphasis on the material culture of spirits, the analysis excludes musical transcriptions and song texts, directing attention instead to the ways in which spirits shape musical behaviour and contribute to the formation of musical identities. To triangulate ethnographic findings, secondary sources, including books, monographs, academic journals, newspapers, and digital archives, were consulted to contextualise findings.

Additionally, the research draws on autoethnographic insights from my personal experiences growing up as an indigene within Fante communities, offering an essential insider perspective on the cultural and spiritual dimensions of *Adzewa*. This synthesis of empirical fieldwork, scholarly literature, and reflexive practice provides a multidimensional analytical framework. By foregrounding the discursive agency of alcohol and ancestors, this paper interrogates their role in shaping performance ethos and meaning. It contributes to broader scholarship on material culture and spiritual agency in African music-making, offering insights applicable across diverse socio-cultural contexts.

### Etymology of *Adzewa*

Two main explanations, based on field interviews, community conversations, and linguistic insight, help clarify the meaning and origins of the word *Adzewa*. The first explanation comes from extensive conversations with people in Cape Coast and the surrounding communities—youth, adults, men and women. Many explained that Fante *Adzewa* is derived from the Asante Twi word *adowa*, meaning “antelope,” suggesting a link between the Fante *Adzewa* and the Asante *adowa*. The two musical traditions may share a historical or symbolic connection rooted in the image of the antelope. Community members further described the antelope as a symbol of respect, elegance, strength, and good taste, ‘qualities widely recognised across many African cultures, including Akan-speaking regions of West Africa.’<sup>3</sup> It is also admired for its grace, agility, alertness, and beauty, traits that inform and shape the music and dance of *Adzewa* performance. These associations resonate strongly with how Fante people describe *Adzewa* songs. They are said to sound as “sweet” (*eye de*) as antelope meat—a delicacy among the Akan—and are therefore regarded as tasteful, and dignified. This idea of sweetness influences both performance and listening practices. Performers aim to produce elegant, graceful music, while audiences listen attentively for beauty, cultured in appearance, and good taste. The accompanying dance is characterised by rapid and highly coordinated movements of the legs and hands, evoking the agility and swift motions associated with the antelope, thereby reinforcing the symbolic connection between the performance and the animal it imitates.

The second explanation draws on Fante linguistic structure. In Fante, *Adzewa* is made up of the syllables *A-dze-wa*. The prefix *A*, carries no independent meaning but works with *dze* to form *Adze*, meaning “a thing.” The final syllable *wa* conveys a feminine sense. Combined, *adze-wa* translates as “a female thing,” pointing to the genre’s association with women’s

<sup>3</sup> See also, Mythology worldwide, 2024

roles, voices, or aesthetics within Fante society. Taken together, these two explanations – one symbolic and cultural, and the other linguistic show that *Adzewa* is more than a name. It reflects the Fante people’s aesthetic values, social meanings, and linguistic creativity. In essence, the term *Adzewa* captures both the beauty symbolised by the antelope and the cultural identity embedded in the Fante language, revealing a genre grounded in beauty, refinement, and feminine expression.

### ***Adzewa* as a Musical Genre**

*Adzewa* is an adult female music genre (see figure 1) that predates the 1800s, when civil wars and resistance to colonial atrocities were at their peak (Sutherland-Addy, 1998). It was originally performed by women between the ages of 40 and 90, who were predominantly fishmongers and small-scale farmers, but the youth now also perform *Adzewa*. The term *Adzewa* refers both to the genre and to the dance that accompanies it.



Figure 1: Adzewa Group in Accra (Photo by Clifford Campbell, Accra, September 2009)

Women leaders of the few existing indigenous ensembles explained that, in its early stages, membership in Adzewa groups was voluntary yet fundamentally grounded in social bonds,

such as friendship networks, longstanding community affiliations, and, most importantly, relying on kinship ties. Therefore, women from the same clan, ethnic group, and geographical location who were either wives or daughters of *Asafo* (i.e., male warriors) gathered in their family house courtyard at night when the moon shone brightly in the sky to sing and dance *Adzewa*. Gradually, the post-colonial cultural revivalist movement spearheaded by Kwame Nkrumah's government (Botwe-Asamoah, 2005) influenced and expanded the context to include performances at sacred groves, durbar grounds, educational institutions, national gatherings, and funerals. This expansion transformed *Adzewa* from a private, communal ritual into a public, symbolic representation of Fante heritage.

According to the women performers, their female ancestors possessed unrestricted access to knowledge concerning *Asafo* institutions, including their political structures, belief systems, values, and military strategies. At the same time, the *Asafo* belief system obligated all wives and daughters to worship the *Asafo* deities and gods and to participate in their cultic practices.

As women increasingly identified with their husbands' or fathers' *Asafo* cult, the relationship between *Asafo* and *Adzewa* crystallised into a clear structural–functional binary characteristic of the Fante society. This binary was not one of opposition but of interdependence, complementarity, and reciprocity, with the male *Asafo* representing overt political and military power and *Adzewa* providing the spiritual, emotional, and cultural sustenance. The elderly Fante women consequently emphasised that *Adzewa* and *Asafo* were intertwined systems within Fante society. They articulated this connection through the expression “*Asafofowutu a, na hen nso ye tu,*” meaning “we walk hand-in-hand with the warriors.” From personal experience growing up among them, this perspective positions *Adzewa* not simply as an entertainment ensemble but as a culturally embedded female institution integrated into the

community's military and civic structures, therefore distinguishing it as a unique genre within the Fante culture.

In light of the frequent use of alcohol in *Asafo* activities (Arhin, 1983), *Adzewa* practices reflected similar traits, with alcohol present in almost all rituals and events. However, this does not mean *Asafo* is defined by alcohol use. Rather, membership in the warrior institution signifies bravery, while alcohol serves as an important ritual element and a source of energy during activities. Although its reckless consumption on some occasions sparked conflicts, it was also, in most cases, indispensable for resolving those conflicts when it was served in a new cloak as *asomdwee nsa* (peace drink)(Akyeampong, 1996).<sup>4</sup> Even though alcohol is used to invoke ancestral spirits, mark transitions, and seal agreements, on the other hand, it is ritually shared to resolve disputes and restore harmony.

Dietler's (2019) anthropological framework helps explain this paradoxical dynamic of alcohol better. He argues that alcohol should be understood as a form of embodied material culture, a substance that mediates identity, power, and ritual performance, and ,therefore, it plays a critical role in shaping social relations, reinforcing hierarchies, and enabling participants to access and enact spiritual or communal agency. Dietler's formulation of alcohol as embodied material culture provides a productive analytical lens for understanding

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<sup>4</sup> For example, historical accounts, such as the 1905 conflict between the *Anaafo* and *NtsinAsafo* companies in Cape Coast, Ghana, show how alcohol could fuel political rivalries and escalate disputes, especially when consumed recklessly in competitive or militarised settings. Again, Nigeria's South-South region, (Izu & de Villiers, A. 2023) reveals that alcohol abuse during festivals and rituals has also been linked to family breakdowns, tribal conflicts, and economic setbacks. Ironically, the same substance that contributes to conflict is often central to its resolution. The ritual sharing of drinks, especially in the form of *asomdweensa*, marks the end of hostilities and the beginning of restored relationships. This dual role suggests the transformative power of ritual context, where meaning shifts depending on how and why alcohol is used. The substance itself is neutral; its social and spiritual power is dictated entirely by the intentionality and structure of its use.

the centrality of alcohol in Fante *Adzewa* performance practice. Dietler argues that alcohol is not simply a psychoactive substance but a culturally elaborated material object whose ingestion mediates identity, power, ritual action, and social relations. It functions as a symbolic and social tool with “almost unlimited possibilities for cultural variation,” deeply implicated in political, ritual, and communal processes (ibid).

This understanding resonates strongly with *Adzewa*, where performers consistently describe alcohol as essential to producing what they themselves call a good performance. In this context, alcohol becomes more than an accompaniment to music-making: it is a culturally embedded material resource that enables performers to access the affective, spiritual, and communal dimensions of *Adzewa* practice. By attending to alcohol as material culture in Dietler’s sense—an object that shapes social experience through its embodied incorporation—this paper highlights how alcohol supports and actively co-constitutes *Adzewa*’s aesthetic standards, ritual efficacy, and the broader moral and civic identities embedded in Fante performance culture. The argument presented here, therefore, is that it is precisely this culturally recognised centrality of alcohol in *Adzewa* performance that reveals the genre’s deep entanglement with Fante material, ritual, and social worlds.

The songs were performed in a typical Akan *mmoguo* style of call and response, and they were usually accompanied by *asɔ ano* (hoe blade bell), *mfɔba* (gourds rattles), and *ampae* (drum) (see Figures 2, 3, 4, respectively). They also incorporate *nsembɔ* (handclapping), and in some instances, the performers substitute gourd rattles with plain gourds, as illustrated in Figures 1 and 5.



Figure 2: *Asɔ ano*, a hoe blade bell, held in position by a player (Photo by author, Cape Coast in May 2016)



Figure 3: *Mfɔba*, gourd rattles (Photo by author, Cape Coast in May 2016)



Figure 4: *Ampae*, the only drum in the ensemble (Photo by author, Cape Coast in May 2016)

As previously noted, in addition to these musical resources, there were also non-musical elements that played essential roles in *Adzewa* performances. The two key elements were the use of the spirits – alcohol and the involvement of ancestral spirits, which need to be unpacked to help readers understand how tangible items support musical expression (see subsequent paragraphs).

Performers understand that *Adzewa* performance follows a ritualised and inherited structure that has been maintained over generations. This established sequence typically includes a libation prayer, a welcome song, a thematic medley of songs selected in relation to the specific performance context, and a concluding farewell song. This performance format is consistently observed among all indigenous *Adzewa* groups in the Fante area of the Central

Region.<sup>5</sup> Variations occur only within the medley section, where the choice of songs depends on the occasion being marked and the aesthetic preferences or stylistic approaches of the cantor. Usually, there are two or more cantors in a performance. Such patterned, yet improvisatory choices made by cantors reveal the internal mechanics of the performance and the cultural logics through which musical actors negotiate meaning and social memory. These dynamics gesture toward broader questions of musical culture, explored further in the next section.



Figure 5: Women performing with gourds at Winneba, July 21 2019.

### Understanding Musical Culture and Agency

This section situates spirits within the broader material culture Discourse. The term material culture refers to the tangible material objects that societies produce and utilise in the course of daily life (Grassby, 2005). The study of these material objects is well-established in disciplines that examine identity creation and the construction of meanings. Since the anthropologist Alan Merriam's foundational work in 1964, material culture has evolved into a dynamic field.

<sup>5</sup> Ampene Kwasi (2005) also mentions a similar performance structure in *nnwonkoro*, a female musical tradition among the Ashanti people.

Central to this evolution is the recognition that human agency is relational, formed through interactions with the material world (Bennett, 2010). In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett argues that matter is not inert but possesses vitality and agency (ibid). She introduces the concept of thing-power, suggesting that nonhuman entities can influence human behaviour and social arrangements. In this framework, the alcohol and ancestral spirits central to *Adzewa* are not passive props but vibrant matter. They are active participants who shape memory, transmission, and the performance itself.

In line with Bennett's stance, Bruno Latour (2011) also challenges the idea that only humans have agency. In his Actor-Network Theory (ANT), actors can be human or nonhuman, and agency emerges from relations within a network. Applying this to *Adzewa* reveals a dynamic network where performers, alcohol, ancestral spirits, audiences, and instruments are all actants. The performance is therefore the result of human and nonhuman interactions. As a result, the performers' claim that "we can't perform without the spirits" exemplifies this networked agency.

Though the material turn has yielded significant insights into the role of musical instruments and technologies (Bennet and Rogers, 2016; Bates, 2012), the metaphysical dimensions of music, particularly the role of alcohol and ancestral spirits, remain underexplored. While scholars such as Emielu and Takyi-Donkor (2019) have examined alcohol in relation to popular genres, its agency in traditional performances is understudied. This gap is puzzling, given that traditional music and dance are highly visible expressions of Ghanaian culture; it is here that the conceptual shift away from seeing objects as voiceless artefacts becomes most critical. Objects, materials, and bodies actively shape musical experience beyond language (Frantz, 1998; Goehr, 2011; Born, 2011). This paper extends the discourse by interrogating spirit bodies as agents, arguing that *Adzewa* performance is a collaborative event involving human and nonhuman participants, with each playing a vital role in its success. To advance

this discussion, the next section unpacks the concept of spirits as it circulates in *Adzewa* practice, tracing how performers understand, interpret, and interact with these invisible presences during performances.

### **Unpacking and Interrogating the Concept of Spirits in *Adzewa***

This section explores the two types of spirits—alcohol and ancestors—in *Adzewa* music-making, examining their roles to understand how they intersect to influence a performance. Based on extensive research in Fante communities, I noticed that every indigenous *Adzewa* performance begins with a libation prayer to invoke the ancestral spirits, who are believed to own the songs. This ritual is typically performed by an experienced elderly woman in the ensemble, or occasionally by a male elder from the associate *Asafo* group. Earlier on, we mentioned that *Adzewa* has an interdependent relationship with the *Asafo* group. It is not out of place, therefore, to find a man pouring libation or playing drum ( see figure 6) in an all-women *Adzewa* group performance. The key requirement is that the individual must belong to the same clan as the women performing the ritual, ensuring that the act is authenticated through direct lineage and that the libation remains a legitimate spiritual and communal practice.



Figure 6: Male drummer in an *Adzewa* ensemble ready to perform at the warrior chief's palace in Cape Coast (Photo by Eric Otchere, April 15, 2016)

Like many indigenous cultures, performers use either imported spirits such as gin, whisky, vodka, among others, or locally brewed spirits like *akpeteshie* for libation (Hamas, 2012), as shown on the table in Figure 7. According to the Fante elders, the selection carries symbolic weight. Foreign brands signify prestige and reverence, while local brews represent accessibility. This duality reflects a cultural logic where libation is simultaneously a spiritual offering and a performance of social values, and the choice of drink becomes a subtle expression of status, identity, and ancestral connection among the Fante.



Figure 7: Gin on the table in preparation to pour libation before performance

To develop this argument further, the Fante people were among the first to encounter European colonists and were introduced to European liquors, particularly gin, rum, and schnapps, along the coast of Ghana (Akyeampong and Obeng, 2005). These extensively traded alcoholic drinks quickly assumed profound symbolic and ritual significance. They were perceived not as mere beverages but as markers of prestige, wealth, and authority within indigenous social hierarchies. Chiefs and elites displayed imported European liquor as a sign of status, and its incorporation into rituals reinforced colonial power (Dumett 1974).

This colonial commodification of alcohol significantly influenced Fante cultural practices, including *Adzewa*. Before the colonial influences, libation and ritual offerings using local beverages such as *akpeteshi* to invoke ancestral spirits. However, imported spirits, compared to local brews such as *akpeteshi*, were considered superior and were thus offered to ancestors as a gesture of reverence and honour (Adu-Gyamfi, Donkoh, and Gyamfuah, 2017). The belief was that, if ancestors are revered and powerful spiritual beings, they deserve the finest and most prestigious offerings, hence the imported liquor (Akyeampong, 1996). As a result, European alcohol became a spiritual currency, mediating relationships between the living and

the dead while simultaneously signalling social status in the material world. Because the Fante were the first to be in contact with Europeans in Ghana, they have kept up with some of these Western tastes and preferences to date. However, in some rural communities, the local gin may still be preferred or used in conjunction with imported spirits, particularly considering the high cost of imported gin in Ghana today.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, because imported liquor also carries memories of colonial encounter (Nti, 1998), its use in *Adzewa* reveals how indigenous ritual systems absorbed and transformed foreign commodities. Thus, alcohol's material and symbolic roles demonstrate how colonial histories and spiritual beliefs intersect within *Adzewa* practice.

These layered meanings surrounding alcohol create the broader cultural terrain within which *Adzewa* performances take shape. It is within this same culturally charged landscape that the Oguaa Fetu Afahye festival's *Adzewa* performance event unfolds, offering a vivid example of how these dynamics manifest in a public ritual context.

As part of the field experience, I was co-opted as a non-active and temporary member of the ensemble during the 2021 Oguaa Fetu Afahye festival in Cape Coast. During the durbar on the festival's final Saturday, *Adzewa* groups, *Asafo* companies, and community members processed through Cape Coast, preceded by an elderly woman pouring libation with schnapps, drinking some, and passing it on for other members to do the same before the procession began. This ritual served multiple purposes: affirming collaboration with the

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<sup>6</sup> Akyeampong and Nteuwusu (2014) claims that even from the 1600s, which is long before the 1800s, the rise of warfare and state formation—driven by the Atlantic slave trade—deepened the ritual importance of imported liquors, as European spirits like rum became linked with war deities and blood sacrifice. This reflects how socio-political change reshaped the spiritual sphere. In contemporary *Adzewa*, alcohol continues to function both as a sacred medium and a colonial prestige object; performers emphasise that ancestral presence, invoked through libation, is essential to successful performance (interview with performers, June 2021).

ancestors, demonstrating trust, and ritually binding the spiritual and physical realms. Throughout the performance, all performers sipped the alcohol intermittently, reinforcing the spirits' ongoing presence. When I asked the lead singer why the alcohol, she explained, “The more you drink, the better you perform... If you want to perform like us, drink! Drink alcohol!”

This statement crystallises a ritual theory of performance (Schechner, 2020), and a postcolonial practice of re-signification, which is an act of cultural agency (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1993). In *Adzewa*, alcohol is not a neutral prop but a “sacred technology” (Schechner, 2020) that mediates ancestors, bonds performers, and materialises musical agency. Its imported, colonial provenance intensifies—rather than cancels—its ritual value by making it a thick sign of hybridity, memory, and gendered authority. In this light, the exhortation to drink is less about intoxication than about joining a sacramental circuit, inhabiting a historically layered object, and performing a lineage in which sound, spirit, and material culture co-produce efficacy. This reading respects cultural logic while acknowledging health and ethical complexities—inviting a nuanced understanding of how Fante *Adzewa* performance reworks colonial histories into living ritual economies. While this worldview reveals the deep entanglement between material culture, spirituality, and artistic expression, it also raises important questions about the boundaries between ritual necessity and social expectation, offering valuable insight into how performers conceptualise the embodied and symbolic forces that shape successful musical performance.

The performance began gently but intensified dramatically as all the lead singers joined in, each contributing songs in their unique style. The performers' dynamic responses, enhanced by rattle shakers, rhythmic drumming, handclaps, and bell patterns, culminated in a vibrant, interactive, and collective sonic explosion. Although the ensemble consisted of only fifteen members (the number varies from ensemble to ensemble), the collective power and resonance

of their voices under the shed at the durbar ground created the impression of an ensemble at least twice that size. The vocal intensity and layered harmonies produced a sonic experience that felt as though forty people were singing. While the dancers acquired some kind of energy, the drummer's strokes were also very loud. The entire atmosphere was electrifying, and the cantor led them to sing about thirty songs successively and logically without any written guide or breaks, but followed the typical *Adzewa* structure discussed earlier in this paper. Such an immersive performance reveals the deep connection between musical expression, ritual energy, and communal presence. Audience members rose to their feet, dancing and clapping. For many, the music was engaging, but for cultural insiders, the intense atmosphere signalled the presence of ancestral spirits. This duality reveals *Adzewa* as both an entertainment and a sacred communion, where cultural knowledge dictates interpretation. It also confirmed the notion that ancestors help them recall songs.

While the performance peaked at the durbar in Cape Coast (see Figure 8), the Master of Ceremonies attempted to pause the performance for announcements, but the performers could not stop. In my role as a researcher and co-opted member, I tried to draw their attention to the instruction from the Master of the Ceremony, but the leader exclaimed, "Can't you see that the owners of the songs have taken over?... we have no control." This moment exemplified a heightened form of spiritual embodiment in which performers became the medium through which ancestral presence was articulated. Individual autonomy diminished as ritual authority was perceived to originate from beyond the human performer, positioning the body as a conduit for ancestral influence rather than as the primary source of agency. The Akan proverb *Nananom nsamanfo ye abɔde a wɔwɔ tumi* (The ancestors are spirits with power) was vividly affirmed.



Figure 8: *Adzewa* Performance at the Cape Coast Durbar in 2021

The performance continued despite the master of ceremonies instructing the ensemble to pause for announcements. When it became apparent that the drummer had entered a state of spirit possession, believed to be prompted by an ancestral presence, one of the ensemble members discreetly stepped aside, picked up a small stone, and placed it secretly into the drummer's mouth. This simple ritual was done to bring the drummer back to consciousness. Eventually, the performance stopped. This experience challenges conventional notions of artistic control and promotes the importance of cultural knowledge in interpreting such events (Sinclair, 2019).

Before the performance stopped and while the ensemble's energy was intense, the male drummer's actions stood out distinctly among those of the women. His virtuosic rhythmic displays and frenzied body language, typified by rolling his head, shaking his body in a frenzy, and standing to lift and strike the drum with intensity, suggested a deep emotional connection to the music. These actions were not random. They were responses to the energy of the ensemble and the applause from the dancers and audience, which seemed to fuel his excitement, even though he was perfectly cueing the dancers. This dynamic interaction

between the drummer, dancers, singers, bells, shakers, and audience responses exemplifies the collaborative nature of *Adzewa*, where each performer contributes to a shared musical and spiritual experience. At this heightened point in the performance, audience members openly showed their positive reactions. A singer strategically interjects “*Ebee ebee!*” (It’s cooked, it’s cooked!). An audience member shouted, *agor no asɔtwan* (the performance has reached its highest intensity) signalling the song's climax, and calls to repeat sections *anchor oo, nsi do* (repeat, repeat) by some audience members heightened the excitement. The creative ability to move the audience to participate, and the skill to sustain the energy level, or what Nketia describes as the “intensity factor” of a performance (Nketia, 1988, p. 54), contribute to a good performance. Members explained that as a social event, emphasis is placed on collective involvement, and participatory human and non-human numbers. All these elements serve as a yardstick for value judgment among the Fante people. Ultimately, judgements suggest a competitive environment, driving musicians to show their prowess through spontaneous ancestral recall for support in song recall, performance style, and creativity on existing songs.

This collective, heightened immersion aligns with the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) concept of flow, which he describes as a full absorption in an activity. Turino (2000) also used this concept of flow as a “feeling of timelessness ... and of transcending one’s normal self” (p. 4). In *Adzewa*, flow is a collective experience and is believed to be mediated by ancestral spirits, enabling performers to channel past elders' voices and emotions. *Adzewa* performances are more than artistic displays—they are immersive, spiritually charged events that blend music, movement, and emotion into a unified experience. The concept, as physically observed in the drummer’s actions and the ensemble’s interactions, highlights the transformative power of traditional performance. It is through this collective immersion that

*Adzewa* affirms its role as cultural heritage and as a medium for unity and ancestral communion.

From an ethnomusicological perspective, this experience demonstrates the performative duality of *Adzewa*. It is both a musical and spiritual practice. The performers are not just artists, but they are ritual conduits, channelling ancestral voices and energies. The audience was split, with those familiar with the spiritual dimensions experiencing the performance as sacred, whereas others perceived it simply as entertainment. This experience challenges the assumption that cultural insiders automatically perceive all layers of meaning. It also draws attention to the significance of ritual literacy and the ability to interpret and respond to spiritual cues in performance contexts.

### **Spiritual Agency and Musical Control in *Adzewa* Performance**

Another striking experience of spiritual agency occurred in September 2023 during a generated performance at Saltpond, also in the central region of Ghana, where Fante-speaking people are highly populated. In front of their *posuban* (monumental shrine), ten women and a gentleman I was interacting with offered me a taste of their *Adzewa* performance. Similar to the Cape Coast groups, they began with prayer, pouring libation with *akpeteshie* (palmwine alcoholic drink) to their *Adzewa* singing ancestors, asking them to come and perform with them. Their instruments were not different from those of the Cape Coast group. The lead singer started a song, *yema mo akwaaba* (We welcome you), followed by three medley songs. As I observed this event, the women performers attempted to signal the end of a song that had been repeated for over five minutes.

The lead singer slowed her tempo and used subtle gestures to signal to the drummer that the performance was ending. After the rest of the ensemble concluded the song, the drummer intensified his playing, repeating the final phrase with increasing force. This divergence

revealed a deeper spiritual dynamic. From the Cape Coast experience, I realised the drummer had also entered a liminal state, but unlike the Cape Coast drummer, his eyes were wide and fixed. He was not following any human instructions, but he played the drum even harder than usual. The drummer had taken control of the performance and was determining the ending. Then a woman shouted, *nananom agye agor no afa, eben, eben oo* (Our ancestors have taken control of the performance, it is cooked). Such moments can be understood as a form of spiritual "authorship." Rouget (1985) explains authorship as a concept in which metaphysical agents, though unseen, are believed to possess the performers and shape the performance from within (Rouget, 1985). In *Adzewa*, I realised that spiritual authorship drives a performance to its intensity. On the other hand, it often leads to unusual repetition or extended renditions of songs, contrary to the instructions of the human performers.

The performance space, therefore, became a site of layered conflict – musical, gendered, and metaphysical. When the tension reached its peak, a singer placed an unidentified item into the drummer's mouth. From my seat, I could not see what the item was, and the group members did not want to disclose it. However, the effect was immediate, and the drummer returned to normal. The performance ended with clear relief and joy among the musicians and the few audience members, marking it a good and successful performance. Members of the ensemble that I interacted with after the performance explained that the drummer was possessed by a male ancestral spirit, an active participant who could override human decisions. The question is: why is it only the male drummer whose possession becomes so aggressive that it ultimately dominates a female performance? Given that the drummer and the female participants were unable to explain this phenomenon, necessitates further rigorous investigation.

Within the Fante culture, individuals under spiritual possession are treated with reverence. However, in this playful, unofficial setting, the women jokingly scolded the drummer for

prolonging the performance's end and tried to calm him with light punches. These events and their experiences present three significant focal areas within *Adzewa* performance. First, it emphasises the belief in spiritual agency, where ancestors are co-owners of the music. Second, it demonstrates the fluid boundaries between human and spirit, where possession can alter a performance's course. Finally, it showcases how gender dynamics are negotiated, as female performers engaged with a male spirit through a possessed male drummer. The experience illustrates how music becomes a medium for spiritual expression, in which control and surrender are constantly negotiated, showing how ritual and performance are intertwined (Schechner, 2020).

### **Contemporary Changes in *Adzewa*: Spirit and Agency**

*Adzewa*, historically rooted in ritual and spiritual invocation, is undergoing significant transformations in contemporary contexts. Traditionally, alcohol functioned as a ritual conduit and colonial prestige object (Dietler, 2006), central to invoking ancestral spirits and enabling performers to achieve emotional freedom and creative flow. However, interviews with the Odorkor *Adzewa* ensemble in Accra reveal a marked shift. Most members no longer consume alcohol during performances because they identify as Christians. This change reflects broader religious influences and the negotiation between indigenous practices and modern faith systems. When I shared a video of the Odorkor ensemble with indigenous *Adzewa* women in Cape Coast, their reaction was telling. They dismissed it as “not the original *Adzewa*,” a statement that confirms scholarly observations and perceptions that contemporary performers are often regarded as “quack, suspect, inauthentic, and tainted” (Feintuch 2006, p.1; Smith, 1969, p.16). Such judgments reveal an ongoing tension between authenticity and adaptation, where spiritual agency is contested in the face of modernisation. These changes also highlight inherent dichotomies in cultural discourse: rural versus urban, tradition versus modernity, and indigenous versus popular. The absence of alcohol and ritual

libation in some ensembles suggests a pivotal shift from spiritual mediation to aesthetic performance, reducing the perceived role of ancestral spirits in shaping musical agency. Such transformation raises questions about whether spiritual possession, once central to *Adzewa*, can coexist with contemporary religious and social norms. Despite these tensions, *Adzewa* is not disappearing, but it seems to be adapting. Emielu's (2018) concept of "progressive traditionalism" provides a useful framework for understanding how indigenous music traditions sustain themselves through continuous self-renewal. In the age of cultural globalisation, ensembles incorporate new values while retaining core musical structures, ensuring relevance in changing social landscapes. This process suggests that authenticity is not static but continually negotiated, allowing *Adzewa* to remain meaningful even as its spiritual dimensions evolve.

The shift from ritual alcohol use to Christian-informed abstinence has profound implications:

1. **Spiritual Agency:** The diminishing role of libation and possession may redefine *Adzewa* from a sacred ritual to a secular cultural performance, fundamentally altering its ontological status. This does not necessarily mean that all *Adzewa* performers now abstain from alcohol due to Christian influences because ensemble members come from different religious backgrounds.
2. **Identity and Authenticity:** Communities debate what constitutes "real" *Adzewa*, revealing how authenticity is socially constructed and often rooted in a romanticised past.
3. **Cultural Sustainability:** Adaptation through progressive traditionalism ensures continuity, but it also risks eroding the very symbolic practices that once anchored communal and spiritual life.

Contemporary changes in *Adzewa*, therefore, illustrate the complex interplay between tradition, religion, and globalisation. While spiritual agency is being renegotiated, the music

persists as a dynamic cultural form, shaped by historical memory yet responsive to modern realities. These transformations challenge rigid notions of authenticity and invite a broader understanding of tradition as a living, adaptive process. Ultimately, *Adzewa's* survival depends not on preserving every ritual element but on its capacity to continually reinvent itself, balancing heritage with innovation.

### **Conclusion**

This study has explored how alcohol and ancestral presence function as active agents in shaping the musical identity, memory, and performance style of *Adzewa*, a Fante women's musical tradition in Ghana. Far from being peripheral, these elements are central to indigenous aesthetics, enabling performers to recall complex songs, sustain emotional intensity, and negotiate social norms through ritual practice. Conceptualised as spirits, alcohol operates as both a spiritual conduit and a performative enhancer, mediating ancestral agency and fostering what Csikszentmihalyi calls flow, a state of deep immersion where music transcends ordinary experience and performers become conduits for ancestral voices. The performances exemplify how music, spirit, and community converge to create a space where the past is not only remembered but actively embodied, and where the power of the ancestors continues to shape the present.

The findings challenge assumptions that associate alcohol primarily with male spaces. In *Adzewa*, alcohol creates inclusive environments that empower women and disrupt gender hierarchies, thereby asserting its discursive agency in cultural performance and challenging patriarchal norms. At the same time, contemporary shifts, notably the influence of Christianity and urban modernity, have led some ensembles to abandon alcohol, sparking debates about authenticity and spiritual legitimacy. These changes reflect broader tensions between tradition and modernity, rural and urban, and indigenous and popular forms.

Yet, as Emielu's (2018) concept of "progressive traditionalism" suggests, such adaptations do not signify cultural erosion but rather a dynamic process of renewal. *Adzewa* persists as a living tradition, constantly balancing heritage with innovation to remain relevant in global and diasporic contexts. Ultimately, understanding *Adzewa* requires seeing music not merely as sound but as a dialogic space where spirit, substance, and society converge. The statement "We can't perform without spirits" captures this reality, affirming that in African musical traditions, performance is a deeply embodied, spiritual, and communal experience that continues to evolve while retaining its cultural essence.

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