

**UNMASKING THE MONSTER: USING CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE TO  
DECONSTRUCT GA CULTURAL MYTHS THAT SILENCE THE SELF.**

**A Research Report by Creative Research and Written Report**

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February 2010

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

Master of Art in Dramatic Art

## **DECLARATION**

This work to the best of my knowledge and belief has not been submitted to satisfy any requirement in any University. The research report does not contain any material previously written or published by another individual with the exception of where due reference is made within the report.

Signed: .....

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thanks be to my God for making all this possible.

To Elom my adorable wife, words can never express my sincere gratitude. You have always been and continue to be a strong pillar of love and support. To you I give all my love.

Sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Warren Nebe. Your valuable questions and guidance has added enormous depth to this research.

Thank you, Elikem for your timely intervention and your willingness to share your knowledge and experiences.

Thank you, Sara Matchett for setting the pace for the burning desire for this study.

To my fellow DFL Scholars with whom I began this journey, thank you for weaving moments of your lives into mine.

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Appendix A- CD of video clip

Appendix B- CD of Photographs.

Appendix C- Image of bad *gbeshi expelled from patient.*

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

Our worlds do not lie elsewhere, they lurk in the dark corners of our consciousness, waiting to be confronted and shared with our own people (Bharucha 1993:41).

This research study seeks to rouse frozen images, responding to the cultural myths that silence; ensuring active participation and choice. The Ga ethnic group in Ghana, a focus of this study, in their quest to ensure the transmission and reinforcement of structures of Ga cultural values, become dictatorial in the education of younger generations to preserve the existing order. A kind of dogma is set in motion that neither respects nor tolerates contrary inputs.

Society has now fairly got the better of individuality, and the danger which threatens human nature, is not the excess, but the deficiency, of personal impulses and preferences (Seidler 1994:49).

Promoting an environment conducive to full interaction and support in a family or societal setting for example, is pertinent. John Dewey perhaps realizes the power of such an undertaking when he states:

...a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes (1961).

### My Journey

I come from Ghana, West Africa, and my interest in this research is specifically in relation to the Ga ethnic group, where I find my roots. In my experience, growing up in the Ga culture, myths have played a significant role in maintaining social control and order. And while myths may not all be oppressive, I was always afraid of going against family or societal myths, rules and regulations due to the consequences of disobedience which are believed to have irreversible consequences.

The consequences of breaking a rule are traumatising and I learned what it meant to break a rule as a child. The moment a child breaks a rule, eerie images of darkness, monsters and snakes amongst others are described in a dramatic way by the elderly. These 'masters' of the night are said to come to swallow, kidnap and swim in the culprit's stomach during his or her sleep. What for me has been unforgettable was when I broke the statute of 'no whistling at night'. The vivid description of the image of an ugly monster which will scrape out my eyes from its sockets and kidnap me as the punishment for my act, resulted in my having frightening images of this monster repeatedly. A monster attack is often experienced through nightmares and in my experience, following the scary description of the consequences I was likely to face due to my whistling at night, I began to imagine images of horrid monsters, giving life to the monsters long before I shut my eyes to sleep at night. I always felt lonely and cold each night; it was as if I had been left there alone to await judgement from the monster, even though I was usually sleeping about half a hand's stretch away from my cousins. In a typical nightmare, the monsters, in most cases two or more, make physical body contact with me and toss and hurl my body between them. They then bind me and drag me away. My experiences were not just peculiar to me, but some close family relations also said they had similar nightmares. The fear alone, for instance, of losing my eyesight as a result of my disobedience produced an unconditional reverence for the Ga cultural myths. This fear of punishments ranging from the loss of eye sight to monster attacks often ensured that I conformed to the statutes of the Ga tradition. Hence I obeyed my parents as much as possible, and always ensured that I was in their 'good books'. I remember that the absence of tragic situations and the abundance of food and all we needed at home were all attributed to the blessings of the gods as a result of my obedience and that of my siblings. This educated fear taught me to be silent.

This silence of the self is imposed by the custodians of the Ga culture in an attempt to ensure a local social order. For example, my family makes use of cultural myths to instil discipline, maintain order and teach its members sacred myths which are orally passed on from one generation to the next. In most cases these cultural myths are instilled in times of misbehaviour and serve as a means of correction or punishment. However, in the bid to strictly enforce its application and adherence, a deliberate sense of fear accompanies the myths. This fear further



serves as a warning of the supposed threats of modernity through education, urbanization, and industrialization (which I hope to elaborate on in the body of this essay). Modernity is said to have caused individuals of the Ga community to inevitably detach themselves from their traditional ways of life and embrace the western culture and its ways. This is seen as the cause of several problems in the society. This fear accompanying cultural myths had a negative impact on me making me grow up carrying in my mind frightening images, which often keep me silent about the things that I would otherwise have been outspoken about. I tend to be more reserved and keep mute when subjects on traditional norms, practices or cultural myths are raised, especially around my ethnic group. Television programmes like *The National Geographic* series on life in the wild for example, make me uneasy as the sight of wild animals conjure up images of the 'monster' and the likes. Recently, in the Special Studies course at the Wits School of Arts, Professor C. Odhiambo delved into the topic "Culture". I realized I hesitated to either pass comments or ask questions. I came to the conclusion that this was to prevent any digging into the past that may perhaps result in awakening my 'monster' images. Perhaps Hermann Hesse's revelation in *A Child's Heart* captures my experience in a nut-shell. He reveals that:

If I were to reduce all my feelings and their painful conflicts to a single name, I can think of no other word but: dread, dread and uncertainty, that I felt in all those hours of shattered childhood felicity: dread of punishment, dread of my own conscience, dread of stirrings in my soul which I considered forbidden and criminal (Miller 1987:122).

In my opinion the underlying principle behind the stamp on or the approval of silence among the people of the Ga society, can be regarded as genuine and well-meaning: a means of societal-preservation. However, it has given birth to the scary images in my mind through dreams and visions, which became an impediment in my growth and progress. I would argue that this is as a result of the fact that the custodians of the Ga society mainly focus on the implementation of statutes in maintaining an existing order which is often at the expense of individual adherents whose preferences or opinions are not considered. Joseph Campbell hits the mark when he says:

We are taught to respond to certain signals positively, to others negatively or with fear; and most of these signals taught are not of the natural, but of some local social order. They are socially specific (1972:213).

## **Methodology**

This research has a creative phase. It is practice led research which is a paradigm of a qualitative research. The purpose of employing a qualitative research approach is because in my opinion, and in the context of this research, it has an advantage over other methodological approaches. It is descriptive, has the ability to offer better understanding and explain human perceptions, behaviour, actions, attitudes and values amongst others, and these serve as the right ingredients not only for unmasking, but perhaps terminating the 'monster' as is unravelled in my creative process. Denzin and Lincoln define qualitative research as:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self.....qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (2005:3).

Due to personal details and the sharing of experiences between my co-researcher and myself during the process, the above design has been very effective.

## **Contemporary Performance**

Morgan Von Prelle Pecelli defines Contemporary performance as a:

...hybrid work that integrates text, dance, objects, music, costume, lighting, image, sound, sets and vocal expressions into complex interactive systems (<http://www.lostnotebook.org/about.html>).

Perhaps Smith's (2009) assertion of contemporary (dance) performance best suits the physical theatre nature of the practical component of this study. He notes:

In contemporary dance, people attempt to explore the natural energy and emotions of their bodies to produce dances which are often very personal... (website: <http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-contemporary-dance.htm>).

This statement suggests the exploration of movements, gestures, spontaneous or select dialogue and sounds from different languages in the creative process.

The traditional linear mode of communicating messages to their targets within the Ghanaian context still remains the same. It therefore becomes challenging to effectively communicate intended goals especially when it is against interests embodied within -with respect to this study- current cultural codes. By exploring strong images, gestures and movements within the process, I hope that these images will leave indelible prints on the minds of Ga custodians and its adherents. Weiss and Bucuvalas perhaps assure me of such a potential when they note that:

Research that challenges accepted ideas,...institutions...can enlighten [decision-makers]. They do not necessarily apply it *in the short term*, but it affects the way they think about issues and gradually it can affect what they do (1980:98).

## **RESEARCH AIM**

There is limited writing or evidence on Ga mythology. This area is therefore fairly new and as such giving my experience as a Ga, I find it further encouraging to investigate the question for this study.

This study seeks to awaken frozen images, responding to the Ga cultural myths that silence, ensuring active participation and choice. This is being examined through the lens of contemporary performance.

I am also attempting to evaluate the potential of contemporary performance through a creative process in deciding on what its complete domain is for the future. This is in respect to how this approach can effectively disrupt this entrenched base of cultural myths that I speak of.

While the scope of this study is to make personal discoveries within the process, it is also my quest that through the process, I will stimulate a mutual interrogation with the present age, to review, seek and revise aspects of cultural myths that silence the self.

Given that not all myths are oppressive or have negative repercussions on adherents, I am paying particular attention to my experience with Ga cultural myths that silence the self. My experience growing up in the Ga tradition has inspired me to draw attention to the cracks in the Ga cultural system. By unmasking the 'monster', I hope to illuminate the dangers of the silencing of the self, of which I am a victim. While exploring the creative performance as a medium to eradicate the silencing of the self, and incorporating the culture of my co-participant within the process, I also hope to acknowledge and appreciate the foundations of the Ga traditional system or custom.

## **RATIONALE**

Our lives, our culture are composed of many overlapping stories. We risk a critical misunderstanding when we hear or act on a single story without considering the "other" story (Adichie 2009).

The Marist Asia Centre, an organization established in over 75 countries with the aim of assisting people with education and other self-development tools, suggest that the silence of the self grows out of a hierarchically organized society where people are subjected to various levels of authority. Hierarchical societies create a sense of dependency where people are reliant on or subordinate to others who make the decisions. Those in power command obedience and respect from their subordinates and peers alike (Marche Ensemble: 2008).

Silencing of the self operates within my family setting. Youth among the Ga ethnic group can still not speak or ask about events they witness in their families, such as a serious conflict or terminal disease. Thus for example, a strange name is adopted for cancer, as the mere mention of cancer, especially by a child, further connotes bad luck to the family and will not be tolerated. At a recent poetry workshop for Drama for Life students at the Wits School of Arts, Victoria Field, a British poetry therapist noted that psychologists have attributed the increase in

youth suicide in Britain to the youth not being able to talk about their pain or problems (Wits School of Arts MADA class, March 2009). There is no doubt that like the British scenario, the silencing of the self exists - albeit in a different form - amongst Ga youth as well. It is worth noting that it is less likely that Ga youth will commit suicide out of frustration as they believe that people who commit suicide go to hell. However, there are surely unfavourable results in the lives of the people.

According to the Marist Asia Pacific Centre:

If you put a frog in a pot of cold water and then put the pot on the stove and keep heating it up gradually until it boils, the frog gets used to the gradual rise in the temperature, but by the time the water boils, the frog is dead. However if you have a pot of boiling water and then put the frog into the pot, it will immediately jump out of the pot because it knows that the water is too hot. (Marche Ensemble: 2008).

In a similar vein, the Ga community has gotten used to the consequences of their beliefs which silence the self. Strong attestations are made of the fact that “our forefathers lived by these same systems, same cultural myths and got used to the [water]”. This belief has however metamorphosed into a ‘monster’ for me and I want to react because I cannot stand the heat. You will agree therefore that the Ga who lives in a culture of silence is like the frog in the pot of cold water, which is being heated. His condition of life with regards to the consciousness of the self may be deteriorating gradually, through a social construct that deprives the self and favours a communal ideal. However because the impact on the self is a slow process, he gets used to and accepts the decline [‘in silence’]. Ultimately, by the time it becomes unbearable, he has lost all chance to react and his fate is determined.

My other reason for addressing this issue of silence, besides the frightful images encoded in my memory, is that the mode of transmission of these cultural myths results in misinterpretation of the values inherent in them. This occurs when an individual has to battle with inevitable fear after flouting a rule or norm in the society. The focus then becomes the punishment, rather than the lessons to be learnt. As a result, I would argue that the inherited mythology is garbled and its guiding values are lost or misconstrued.

Where I come from the beliefs and culture of the people, although people are exposed to other cultures from various parts of the world, are still firmly rooted in the traditions of our ancestors. For instance, I grew up knowing that I am not 'supposed' to whistle at night. I was very careful not to ever whistle at night because each time a child whistled at night it was met with stern reprimand from the older folks, threatening that a wicked monster would seize children who did not comply. Not until recently did I find out that in the days of our great grandparents, when homes were surrounded by thick forests and the presence of snakes in bedrooms was a common sight, they believed that snakes were attracted by whistling and could harm the residents of the home. What a fallacy, as we now know that snakes are deaf and cannot in fact hear whistles, no matter how loud they are. However, I grew up with this belief and the images lurked in my imagination for a very long time. I often found my dreams filled with images of snakes and monsters as if they were a part of my life. With time, as I got educated and more exposed to the realities of life, I endeavoured to break links with the strict traditional beliefs and ironically, I think this rather gave more life to those images in my mind!

Also, in my experience, heads of families ensure that health issues that are terminal are not discussed or mentioned. I have grown up knowing that the strong belief among the Ga is that ailments like cancer or HIV/Aids are evil spirits that the supreme-being unleashes on an individual or members of a family, as a form of punishment for wrong-doing. Hence it is believed that the continuous mentioning or discussion of cancer, gives life to the spirit, who grows in size, thereby spreading the cancer in the person's body. Field attests to this among the Ga when she reveals that:

An ordinary precaution which everyone takes against serious illness is never to mention its name. Many bad diseases are always spoken of by synonyms so that they may never hear their names spoken and come to the speaker (1961:120).

Keeping silent over the cancer therefore suggests to the evil spirit that its presence is not noticed nor acknowledged. The hope is that sooner or later it will leave the person's body and good health will be regained. Such beliefs that are continuously spread, I would argue, only encourage silence on crucial issues which need to be addressed. Many of my family members

therefore, are not outspoken about their ailments or about the impacts they may suffer as a result of these due to the so-called spiritual connotations. Field further narrates an experience with a Ga man during her field-work. She states that:

An old man of Labadi abruptly refused to tell me anymore of his family affairs. He said that since he last saw me he had been very sick. His gums, mouth, and lips had swollen and become very sore and painful, and all at once it came to him that his forefathers were angry with him for chattering about their affairs and had smitten his mouth in warning. He rose immediately and poured out rum and apologies and promised not to offend again. His mouth then quickly healed, leaving him convinced that any further transgression would cause his speedy death (1961:196).

Given these beliefs and practices, one can imagine what the consequences and impact of having HIV/Aids will be under the circumstances. Today the effort in combating the stigma and silence around HIV/Aids and other diseases like cancer is a challenging quest within the Ga society. Montshiwa, a Batswana Medical Scientist, notes that Ghana is ten years behind the advances in HIV/Aids stigma and adherence education found in places like Botswana and South Africa (Warren Nebe: 2010). Not only are these Ghanaian patients deprived of ARV's, but are also denied an opportunity to mentally accept their condition and receive the love and care that will assure them a decent life until they die. Such patients are isolated and prevented from speaking out about their condition and thereby encouraging young people to live more careful lives. Ga families are strict in ensuring that family names are not tainted by the known presence of an HIV/Aids-positive family member.

Today, after several years, the memory of a late friend is still too painful to bear. Oko died from HIV/Aids but his parents and relations would not have anyone talk about his death nor his life on earth. The months preceding his death were even more unbearable for me and I believe for him as well, as he was isolated from friends and extended family. We, his friends and schoolmates, were not allowed to grieve over his death. His parents would not have his name mentioned since to them such a death was a blot on the family. Today the HIV/Aids virus is manageable and the challenge is to overcome the stigma caused by silence.

A story was told to me about a newlywed woman whose husband observed with great curiosity that his wife consistently fried eggs in saucepans instead of frying pans. He broke the silence one day and asked her why she refused to use one of their frying pans for eggs as in his opinion that was more appropriate. The young wife was surprised at her husband's 'ignorance' and told him emphatically that eggs are fried in saucepans and not in frying pans. He asked where she learnt that and she said it was from her mother. They went to the wife's mother and the young husband asked the same question to which he was given the same answer with a look of surprise on the face of his mother-in-law. The young man, very sure about his convictions asked his mother-in-law where she learnt to do that and she said her mother taught her as well. Luckily, the 90-something year old grandmother was still alive and all three went to her to ask the question. The old grandmother amidst laughter said "I only used a saucepan to fry eggs because I never owned a frying pan!"

More often than not, requests from children or individuals for explanation, curiosities and questions on similar stories or myths such as the above are treated with disapproval. Such attempts are considered affronts to Ga cultural beliefs and practices. Miller notes the resultant impact on young people when she says:

In sublimating their full potential in order to fulfil the desires of their parents, they impede the creativity, vitality and integrity that is authentically their own (Miller 1987: Back cover).

Dialogue is therefore not encouraged and adherents are expected to simply observe, listen and implement. This is in stark contradiction, in my opinion, to the modern concept of free-thinking which encourages for instance, dialogue between parents and wards on the subject of sex in order to avoid any misguided curiosity that may lead to unprotected sex, which has serious consequences. Furthermore, children who fulfil the wishes of their parents are considered 'good' children but should they express wishes or opinions of their own that run contrary to that of their parents, they are labelled 'black sheep'. Eicke-Spengler confirms this custom where:

The child...was supposed to guarantee the family honour, and was loved only in proportion to the degree to which he was able to fulfil the demands of this



family ideal by *means of his special abilities, talents, his beauty, etc.* If he failed, he was punished by being cold-shouldered or thrown out of the family group and by the knowledge that he had brought great shame on his people (Miller 1987:58).

I will further argue that the advent of foreign cultures is a contributing factor to the negative impact of aspects of the Ga cultural myths. This is basically because in my opinion, Ga culture custodians feel threatened not only because they would lose their position within the group or social order but because they have the ultimate responsibility of protecting and not breaking the cycle of transferring Ga tribal norms and practices. Failure in this responsibility is believed to have dire consequences. Coupled with the advent of 'modernity', there is the strong will to ensure that myths and traditions for that matter are strictly obeyed and enforced by the said custodians.

Much may have been noted on how traditional systems or authority places a burden on the individual; I am also hoping to expand on the existing body of knowledge with this study.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Michel Foucault tells us that:

...the soldier was recognizable by his natural characteristics. Soldiers were chosen because they *already* possessed the qualities of a good and strong fighter. The modern soldier, in comparison, is a 'machine' that may be 'constructed'... The modern soldier is the result of rigorously applied training methods; of the implementation of discipline (Downing 2008:78).

With reference to the above, in Ghana, it is common to find military personnel or the police advancing in ranks by acquiring education without having any physical attributes or qualities to go into battle. The order, as Foucault suggests, has changed. In contextualizing this, I refer to the Ga, where I see the need to 'construct' the broken parts through 'applied training methods', the current nature and state of cultural myths with the sole purpose of upholding morals and instilling discipline and maintaining order. Like that of the 'modern soldier' however, this is towards exploring how the statutes can be re-designed without losing the core

benefits. Additionally, this is to meet the challenges and consequences so often ignored, which arise as a result of the unfiltered continuous applications of the sometimes distorted handed down systems.

According to Wole Soyinka, 'Africans are no less rich than the Greeks in religious myths', (Lindfors and Kothandaraman 2004:7). My aim to acknowledge and question the foundations of the traditional system with regards to myths is similar to the approach of Soyinka, when he turns to Yoruba myths, quarrying from their richness, paradigms for contemporary reality. He draws on the mythology of his people as his archetypes, which encodes the message of renewal. However, as an addendum to Soyinka's work, I am curious about the deliberate sense of silence that accompanies such myths in the bid to strictly enforce application and adherence.

C. G. Jung, states that:

All other memories of travels, people...have paled besides these interior happenings. Recollection of the outward events of my life has largely faded or disappeared. But my encounters with the "other" reality, my bouts with the unconscious, are indelibly engraved upon my memory (Jaffe 1963:18).

For me, these images and encounters serve as reminders, which keep me mute over issues that the Ga traditional system discourages and forbids its members from confronting. Jung further outlines the impact of myths, dreams and memories and how they remain with the individual into adulthood (Jaffe 1963). Additionally from Jung's position, I reflect through teenage years and beyond how these memories lingered, yet I shunned away from confronting them. For me, even though they had become a part of me, as long as we both stayed out of each other's paths, peace will prevail, at least for me.

In Roy Sieber's account on the initiation ceremonies among the Poro society of Liberia, the initiates (boys) are camped for learning. However a symbolic feature of the ceremony states that a bush monster swallows initiates and after a while vomits them out signifying a re-birth. This uncut story is what is broadcast to the un-initiated boys and to the women of the community (Lindfors and Kothandaraman 2004:6). An inevitable fear of a monster waiting to swallow him up, grips each young un-initiated boy in the community. This is no different from

the superstitions of the Ga of the existence of a monster who owns the night (as was previously indicated in the myth about a monster that torments and eventually captures anyone who whistles at night). The images this has left are strong and vivid and are re-enforced in dreams. I remember I had nightmares that were sparked off by my imagination of the images described to me when I was disobedient. The presence of the images is so real and most times I awake with a start, hoping that I do not encounter the images in my room. Sometimes, I actually smell sulphur from the monster's breathing in the pitch darkness and I experience the heat that engulfs me. This scenario quite often leaves me on the verge of choking as I gasp for air. Sometimes, the monsters get hold of me and within moments let go of me to what seems like a free fall from a very high mountain. Several of such experiences have had me somehow jump out of bed in a panicked state with a frightened scream. Despite my being afraid, I always seem to fight the expected crush to the ground from the fall. I have never had the courage to share these experiences with my older relatives since I know they will conclude that I will only experience them when I am disobedient. Perhaps I dread them gloating over my fears and thus depriving me of some sense of pride in myself. By this pride, I am content that I can outwit the monsters but only for a moment, as all too soon I dread nightfall.

Myths, in my view, are not to be explained away as inadequate science, neither should it be assumed that superstitions around the traditional man hold no water. What a people believes in cannot be undervalued. Joseph Campbell supports my sentiments and much more realizes the attempt to downplay myths when he states that, 'Mythology has been interpreted by the modern intellect as a primitive, fumbling effort to explain the world of nature' (Dundes 1984:267). Jung adds his voice when he emphasizes the power behind the spiritual beliefs of the traditional man. He maintains that:

Primitive man's belief in arbitrary power does not arise out of thin air, as was always supposed, but is grounded in experience. What we have always called his superstition is justified by the grouping of chance occurrences (1933:157).

Foucault reveals that:

...these practices are nevertheless not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed,

suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his cultural group (Downing 2008:97).

Downing expresses Foucault's concerns as a follow up when she says:

...but the way in which the individual relates to them and makes creative personal choices within their limits and strictures is what is of interest to Foucault (2008:97).

As a result, my interest like Foucault's is to outwit the 'monster', as I confront and explore my silence, within my creative piece. This study is about how silence is constructed and maintained through Ga cultural mythology. Furthermore, even though HIV/Aids afflicted persons may be abreast with their rights, they shun their rights for fear of revealing their status or from voicing their opinion on a subject that may contradict the belief systems of their society. This is in line with the belief of cancer being a god among the Ga. The enormity of this cultural response in the light of HIV/Aids today, glares us in the face as patients continually withdraw into silence. This culture has emerged in my creative practice and we continue to explore within the process firstly how the individual can as a matter of priority come to terms, consciously with his or her condition and secondly not simply accept his fate as dictated by some social order. It is about this that Foucault is concerned. Like Foucault, I challenge this custom of inaction and call for such persons to attend to those inner impulses, questions, curiosities that may seem divergent to that of the Ga institution.

I would argue that the basis of teaching, moral upbringing or enforcing discipline becomes static and immovable, since the mode of passing on systems, myths, etcetera is oral. In my opinion, there is need to re-align the foundation to meet the times, to ask questions and satisfy curiosities not for the sake of it, but in so doing widening our scope as a people in improving the quality of our customs. For example, 'what is the real underlying reason for preventing me from whistling at night which would otherwise attract such grave penalty.'

Soyinka maintains that 'For let it always be recalled that myths arise from man's attempt to externalize and communicate his inner intuitions' (1990:3). A perfect example is that the origin, transmission and execution of cultural myths within the Ga contexts can therefore be

considered elusive. The Ga custodians would obviously frown upon my suggestion that individual traits or desires could influence Ga statutes or ideals.

Unlike in the traditional Ga context, this only goes to strengthen the Ga traditional systems. This is due to the fact that the implications or impact on the individual (arising out of the oral transmission of a cultural myth) is often accompanied by a strict sense of adherence and obedience, which does not take into consideration the questions and curiosities of the individual. Bellah affirms that 'finding and expressing your unique identity is emphasized in Western societies' (Dalton, Elias & Wandersman 2001:161).

In my quest to possibly draw a charter for a dialogue between the two worlds, it is worth bringing onto the table, a similarity between the binaries that perhaps will serve as a common platform for the weaving of a relationship. The communal feature of norms, patterns and expectations of the Ga tradition, that which also denounces individualism, cannot be overemphasised.

I make mention of HIV/Aids in this study because change is necessary. This challenges me on how I can contribute through this study, to help people to be un-silenced in order to be able to deal with contemporary challenges like HIV/Aids. The belief among the Ga that information or communication around the status of an HIV/Aids stricken patient would pose a threat to the larger family setting still stands. Soyinka confirms this when he declares:

The sickness of one individual is a sign of, or may portend the sickness of, the world around him. Something has occurred to disrupt the natural rhythms and the cosmic balances of the total community (1990:51).

As mentioned earlier, this spiritual connotation that isolates and bars such a patient needs to be deconstructed. Today's contemporary space abhors and clamps down on silence especially over HIV/Aids. What this imbibes in the human race is the need for social acceptance and support for people no matter their health condition.

Soyinka asserts:

The gods are accommodating and embrace within their eternal presences manifestations which are seemingly foreign or contradictory. It is no wonder therefore that the overt optimistic of the total culture is the quality attributed to the Yoruba himself, one which has begun to affect his accommodation towards the modern world, a spiritual complacency with which he encounters threats to his human and unique validation (1990:155).

According to Soyinka, it is critical to note that like men the gods are also imperfect. As Soyinka notes, 'Like Obatala also, the gods commit their error...' (1990:159) which has also led to the forbidding of alcohol and this can be realized around the myth among the Yoruba where Obatala (moulder of men) after drinking excess wine, contaminates his craftsman's fingers. As a result a lineage of cripples, albinos, the blind and other physically challenged men were created (1990:159).

The myth of the gods from Soyinka's assertion above indicates a room for dialogue or re-connection when in Yoruba belief, 'For they were coming down, not simply to be acknowledged but to be re-united with human essence...' (1990:144). Perhaps as a follow up, on the Yoruba scenario, this further emphasizes the will to embrace and adapt to the contemporary, if need be. As Soyinka explains of the Yoruba gods:

This accommodative nature, which does not, however contradict or pollute their true essences, is what makes Sango capable of extending his territory of lightning to embrace electricity...Ogun for his part becomes not merely the god of war but the god of revolution in the most contemporary context (1990:54 footnote).

Despite the above the Ga people are adamant in considering any influences from the 'new age,' since the view on such an opportunity is to hasten a contamination of cultural myths or culture for that matter, which has stood the test of time.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We do not just risk repeating history if we sweep it under the carpet, we also risk being myopic about our present (Adichie 2003).

This chapter will explore the communal stance and expectations of the Ga people as against the individual and the self and the resultant conflicts that can arise. It will also reveal what will be considered an attack on Ga masculinity given what has emerged within my creative process while using a cast of African men, for that matter a Ga man exhibiting his weaknesses and fears. This will then lead to my proposal of making links between mythology and theatre since it is through a contemporary theatre performance that I hope to exonerate the self who is often denied his choices and impulses.

In my experience, the impact of traditional systems, for that matter, cultural myths has not only been felt in the social and physical realm of the Ga tradition but also in the spiritual. Since these forms are held as sacred, they are followed to the letter and carefully transferred from generation to generation. My experience has been that upholding the responsibility in itself is believed to foster blessings from the gods and ancestors that spill over to generations unborn. Jung emphasizes this when he shares the idea that ‘...the society that cherishes and keeps its myths alive will be nourished from the soundest, richest strata of the human spirit’ (Campbell 1972:15). However, I would argue, that there is a knot that needs to be untied; a cultural binding that gives birth to the ‘monster’; a ‘monster’ that distorts the application of Ga cultural myths and traditional systems; a ‘masked monster’ that becomes the core of human existence - trumpeting silence.

### Cultural Performance Theory

Principally I am locating my research within the framework of cultural performance theory.

Victor Turner explains cultural performance theory as:

Cultural performances may...themselves be... representing...the eye by which culture sees itself and the drawing board on which creative actors sketch out what they believe to be more apt or interesting “designs for living”(1988:24).

My creative research, through contemporary performance offers the platform where I am exploring my impulses, opinions and curiosities located in Ga cultural myths that have been ‘put on ice’ due to the silence the Ga system imposes.

Okagbue adds his voice when he states the following:

Cultures, according to Victor Turner, are most fully expressed and made conscious of themselves through rituals and theatrical performances. Performances, he adds, declare our shared humanity, yet each suggests the uniqueness of the culture from which it originates (2007:3).

In my pursuit to ‘unmask the monster’ in the context of cultural myths, inspired by my experience of the Ga tradition, I believe the framework of cultural performance theory best carves the routes needed to arm myself for a more informed insight of cultural myths as a whole. From Turner’s opinion, there is a shared humanity and perhaps a sense of belongingness through rituals and theatrical performances. One of such is what is referred to as “*Kpojiemo*” (which literally means the ‘outdoor’ of a new child), within the tribe. Such occasions demand the presence and participation of the entire household, ‘...sick or lame’, as one aunt put it. Full participation in ceremonies of this nature is not only intended to unite the people (especially after prolonged internal squabbles), but also to remind us that as a family or community we function as one body and it is in that communal spirit that blessings are received from the gods. Consequently, this also serves as a fitting welcome for the new born into the midst of a united family which will have a positive bearing on the child’s future. This also serves as a ‘drawing board’ and a mirror, as Turner suggests, that affords an opportunity for the family to view its shortcomings and alter them for the life ahead. This, however, is just a part of the sense I derive from Turner’s cultural performance theory.

Given this communal spirit, a stamp on cultural practices or customs leaves no room for any converse sentiments from any individual. Perhaps it is against the backbone captured in the



words of Hobhouse, a British Sociologist that explains the Ga system as unrelenting. Hobhouse declares:

What is handed on is not merely a set of ideas, but the whole social environment; not merely certain ways of thinking or of acting, but the conditions which prescribe to individuals the necessity for thinking or acting in certain specific ways if they are to achieve their own desires (Martin & Martin 1985:1).

Despite the above and given my experience, the communal spirit and priority should not be at the expense of the individual. The failure to acknowledge this (as in my scenario), poses a danger, which Silberschmidt concurs with and is captured in her words:

Stereotypes are dangerous: they are static, they do not allow for change, and they hide the fact that there are cultural variations. Stereotypes may even help to “naturalize” inferiority and may end up being internalized by the subordinates themselves (2005:200).

‘Creative actors’ as Turner articulates, in my opinion, can be represented by the custodians in the context of the Ga tradition but also be represented by individuals. I represent the individuals as far as the scope of this study entails and emphasizes. Incorporating Foucault’s ‘challenge on entrenched institutionalized models of theoretical rationality and practical normalcy’ (Hoy 1986), I am propelled in being ‘creative’, to a space where the hold of cultural myths does not immobilize me. It is with such a demand that I will perhaps briefly unpack the ‘self’ in the Ga context given the impact and challenges the traditional system produces. Since to manifest the ability ‘to creatively sketch as an actor’, beyond the Ga context, there would be the need to detach the ‘self’ from this communal fold.

Contemporary performance emphasizes the link between mind and body. It also fosters the exploration of personal emotions through movements. By employing contemporary performance therefore it is with the hope that personal impulses and choices would manifest during the process.

### **The Self**

The immensity of this subject (the self) is beyond the range of this study however to be brief, the ‘self’ that I speak of in the Ga milieu, is that which borders on what Mead (1934) and James

(1890) attest to as being comprised of ‘...the “me” a subjective, more specific set of behaviours determined largely by social circumstances’ (Landy 1993). This speaks directly to the demand of an obedient self in relationship with the Ga community or family. Landy deduces and affirms therefore, ‘Thus self becomes a social construct, and human beings build their identities on the basis of the ways they are seen by others’ (1993). ‘Obedience is better than sacrifice’ (International Bible Society, 1984), is a Biblical quote which is borrowed and is often on the lips of adults in my family. The demands of obedience on the ‘self’ as an individual in the Ga family setting places the self in a cubicle which is to provide a source of nutrition for growth irrespective of ‘...the “I” an objective, generalized set of permanent attributes...’ (Landy 1993:20). In other words, beyond the social constructs, beyond genetic influences, that which the ‘self’ or rather the ‘*kla*’ in Ga language, (meaning the soul), brings to life should be silenced. The demand of an obedient self therefore is at the expense of those personal desires, yearnings, impulses and choices. In any case Martin and Martin cite Hobhouse’s definition of tradition as:

...the link between past and future; it is that in which the effects of the past are consolidated and on the basis of which subsequent modifications are built (1985:1).

Silence in the contemporary world is an attribute that I dare to argue, cannot achieve positive results in an individual’s sphere of life. Foucault perhaps anticipates my reaction when he says:

...a system in which an externally imposed series of moral rules governs the individual’s conduct through that individual’s fear of retribution...will only result in...renunciation, rather than cultivation, of the self... (Downing 2008:101).

I have been raised to disregard what I feel as an individual and to regard my upbringing or training to have greater value; the Ga regard this training as paramount. This in my opinion is inert. In the context of this it is my hope that my opinion of the self is acknowledged and considered. This is summarily captured in Locke’s words:

The self is that conscious thinking thing – which is sensible or conscious of pleasure and pain, capable of happiness or misery, and so is concerned for itself... (Locke 2005:29).

The Ashanti tradition of Ghana, like the Ga, stubbornly endeavours to stay unique, which in a sense is commendable. In my opinion, they pretend to take no notice of the impact of the modern environment. In my experience as it is even now, I spend more hours in the 'world' than at home. I am therefore not within the reach of family traditions and perhaps in the Ga context, not 'safe'. In my opinion, I am exposed to modernity's idea of individualism in many respects which perhaps may be 'threatening' my foundation in Ga mythologies. The contradictions - where I begin to regard the silencing of the self as a burden - if not negotiated, may as a matter of time, result in my disregarding the values of Ga cultural myths. There is enough evidence when Okagbue states that: 'The indigenous forms are constantly reviewing and revising themselves in response to their ever-changing historical and cultural contexts' (2007:10).

Likewise, a new generation taking up the responsibility of ensuring that the values and foundations of cultural myths are maintained and passed on - in my opinion - will depend largely on how the Ga interacts and negotiates its approaches given the dynamism of the current world. In other words, like HIV/Aids, it's the same script but a different page. Mbiti affirms this reality:

The man of Africa must get up and dance, for better or for worse, on the arena of world drama. His image of himself and the universe is disrupted and must make room for the changing 'universal' and not simply 'tribal' man (1989:211-212).

On the strength of this, I would argue that in unmasking the 'monster', the foundation of cultural myths need pruning in a way that it's well-meaning intentions can still ensure adherence from the community without giving the 'monster' the duty of upholding the law. Fostering healthy sustainable links requires a bridge that dialogues cordially with alacrity and clarity, thereby breaking the unwillingness of authority from expressing issues in some detail with its subordinates. In this way, aligning the base of the structures thus begins to take shape and can become a reality. The converse of this while engaging with Campbell's idea of living by myths is what he fore-warns when he remarks:

However, there is a danger... of being drawn by one's dreams and inherited myths away from the world of modern consciousness...and thought

inappropriate to contemporary life. What is required... is a dialogue, not a fixture at either pole (1972:15).

Campbell, further states the task ahead in what perhaps will align the status quo,

We have, consequently the comparatively complex problem in educating our young of training them not simply to assume uncritically the patterns of the past, but to recognize and cultivate their own creative possibilities; not to remain on some proven level of earlier biology and sociology, but to represent a movement of the species forward (1972:48).

### **Masculinity**

Masculinity can simply be said to be a societal conviction of how a man should and should not behave. In relation to my creative research my idea of male characters parading to exhibit through ritual and drama their qualms, reservations and curiosities, within the current Ga traditional dispensation is not to be viewed as a weakness and a slight on the image of the Ga but seen as an attempt to dialogue, reveal and call for a shift in consciousness or pruning of a stance threatened by globalization. To unpack this further, many Ga's would view my engagement through this creative project as publicly exhibiting male weakness by sharing my experience which entails fear, uncertainty and opposition motivated from the nature of Ga cultural myths. To the Ga traditional person or custodian therefore this undertaking will be summarized as tainting the image of the Ga man and bringing his image into disrepute. In other words, my creative project would be an unacceptable endeavour, since the issue of Ga masculinity is a rather sensitive one and does not open up any room for negotiations. Shefer and Ratele note:

Two key elements of the dominant mode of masculinity are heterosexuality and fearlessness or risk-taking: to wit, a real male is not a sissy... a man is afraid of nothing (2007:3).

In the context of my creative research I hope to endorse what Ampofo and Boateng assert:

When men are led to intimate perspectives on men, often through the eyes of other men, [as this creative piece seeks to do] they are better equipped to recognize so-called hegemonic masculinities and their deleterious effects, not only on women, but also on children and on other men (2007:51).

For me male roles and identities have always seemed 'natural'. For as long as I remember, the birth of a son is always welcomed with great joy and is regarded as a greater achievement than a birth of a daughter. Elders always looked forward to sons as the torch-bearers of the family name, a responsibility that was to prevent the family name or lineage from extinction since most women get married and drop the family name. Perhaps Silberschmidt acknowledges my experience when she confirms:

...first, being a man is natural, healthy, and innate; second, a man must stay masculine; he should never let his masculinity falter (2005:197).

There is no doubt that male identities are shaped by cultural forces. As Ouzgane and Morrell point out:

...a combination of a colonial past, patriarchal cultural structures and a variety of religious and knowledge systems creates masculine identities and sexualities (2005: back cover).

Given that the field of Masculinity has been expanded where there is for example, '...the shift from the concept of masculinity to the concept of masculinities' there is the need to consider the question, 'What influence does context have on interpretation?' (Ouzgane & Morrell 2005:4). The constructions of masculinity in geographical terms can either have adverse or desirable effects when it comes to health for example. The HIV/Aids pandemic has had a smaller impact on the Northern Islamic countries of Africa for example, as compared to West Africa; home to the Ga tribe. One of the reasons for this as Ouzgane & Morrell state:

...is that there is little contact among unmarried young people, which in turn makes a statement about constructions of masculinity in these areas (2005:14).

Within the Ga tribe for example, inheritance is paternal while amongst the Ashanti it is maternal, which already offers some distinctions which should have a bearing on the cultural nature of masculinity within both tribes. Despite these differences, the underlining fact is that masculinity is still regarded as a natural powerhouse that supersedes any gender argument. Furthermore, like the Ga, among the Chiawa of Zambia, Paul Dover reveals:

...boys are encouraged to be tough and self-reliant for their future roles as head of a household. Women are taught to be humble, shy and to respect men. These

at least are the ideals of upbringing and how a proper woman and a proper man should behave in public. Making a man out of a boy is described as a longer and more difficult process than achieving womanhood (2005:175).

The dwindling access to adequate income coupled with the upsurge of poverty has created a keenly competitive world where resources are limited only to a privileged few. New societal orientations present a threat not only to the traditional and dominant masculine identities among the Ga but a challenge to traditional norms and regulations for all groups. Frustration sets in, based on some of the challenges listed above and the desire to seek comfort and escape leads many men outside their marital homes into the arms of casual partners. Frustrations of this nature are also part of my desire to share, question, reveal and explore my experience through my creative research. It is common among Ga men who are threatened as family heads, due to the shirking of their responsibilities, to re-assert their 'traditional masculinity' through domestic violence. In her study among the people of Dar es Salaam, Margrethe Silberschmidt confirms this augmentation when she indicates:

Possessing no means to change their economic status, many men seem to be responding by developing macho attitudes and resorting to physical violence against women (2005:196).

The similarities between Ga cultural myths and the subject of masculinity in the context of the need for Ga traditions or culture to shift its consciousness can be seen in the reprisals of young Ga men who are slowly detaching themselves from the traditional hold. Traditional marriages are threatened for example in urban settings and beyond.

'As a result... weakening lineage ties in urban centers and of population movements that separate more and more individuals from kinsmen...'  
([http://www.mongaby.com/reference/country\\_studies/ghana/SOCIETY.html](http://www.mongaby.com/reference/country_studies/ghana/SOCIETY.html)).

The lack of job earning opportunities challenges the Ga man to migrate to neighbouring countries and in most cases re-settle to seek other opportunities. In that scenario, traditional marriage commitments are sacrificed, where dowries to the families of their wives, are either underpaid or totally not met. This inability to meet traditional expectations undermines the Ga man's social and economic supremacy; a threat to the Ga epitome, expectation and ideal of

masculinity, especially when such a man is ridiculed by his partner or others during a domestic quarrel when for instance he cannot afford her bridal price.

It is quite obvious that a new orientation especially for new generations needs to be encouraged. This would not only lift a psychological burden of failure to meet a traditional masculine expectation off a growing young man, but further provide an opportunity to negotiate and embrace globalization's approach of mutually shared responsibility in the home. Where respect from a woman to a man and vice versa is not sacrificed, but viewed as a necessity for mutual survival in the face of current global economic and social challenges. Ga cultural myths in addition should not just acknowledge these trends and operate in isolation but take full advantage of making the first move where their true foundations remain intact. To re-echo Warren Nebe's statement in the 2009 African Research Conference held at the University of the Witwatersrand, which is in line with the goals of my creative research:

It is about changing the continent's consciousness...seeking to inspire communication through personal and interpersonal learning through the arts in Africa and introducing contemporary processes while paying respect to the rich indigenous knowledge that belongs to Africa (Africa Research Conference in Applied Drama and Theatre, November 2009).

To come out therefore in the open not only to share my experience but to confront it, is to be seen as not only challenging the system but is also likely to raise eyebrows about the strength of my masculinity.

The challenge for me in that respect is what my creative project is exploring within the PAR process through contemporary performance, where I am hoping to create a space for dialogue between the Ga traditional system and the individuality of its adherents.

I advocate for a masculinity that is still bold but one that is not afraid in making errors. Importantly there should be the space to express or confess a weakness or fear that which could hamper the individual's growth and still keep the Ga masculinity ideal intact.

### **Mythology and Theatre**

In incorporating ritual theatre, I echo Soyinka's statement:

Ritual theatre, viewed from the spatial perspective, aims to reflect through physical and symbolic means the archetypal struggle of the mortal being against exterior forces (1990:43).

The relationship between mythology and theatre cannot be ignored. The daily rituals man is accustomed to, have direct and indirect connotations with the spiritual. Thus the rites and ceremonies that the Ga perform, which are theatrical, as Soyinka confirms, poses a daily struggle for the Ga man to appease or to produce a character worth rewarding by the gods. This relationship is evident in Thompson's words, 'Poetry and dancing, which grew out of the mimetic rite, are speech and gesture raised to a magical level of intensity' (Soyinka 1990:33).

It is common to have members of the community taking up 'roles' that represent elements of nature as a means to communicate with their god for an intervention or request. As Landy suggests, '...long before the formal experiments with scripted texts, theatre existed as an expression of the human spirit' (1993:15). Among the Ga, fast unpredictable movements with leaps into the air and smiting down on the earth, within a ritual performance can represent lightning. These rituals, around myths which are dramatic, as suggested in my performance, are to call upon a god and in this case the god of lightning, to strike an enemy. This performance is filled with tensions, climax and suspense since until the strike; the symbol of the enemy is not yet revealed. Taking up roles of such representations enables an individual to transcend from the reality into the spiritual realm and back.

It is worth mentioning that in performing mythology based rituals, a difference with theatre is the fact that the performances are not necessarily based on aesthetics, or the admiration for the beauty of performance. What is significant in my opinion is that the motivation for the ritual performance produces communication and achieves a subsequent goal for the purpose.

Richard Schechner affirms this in his observation:

A celebration at Kurumugl [in Eastern New Guinea], privileges performance over script, drama and theatre. No one cares much about the quality of the theatrical presentation (1988:87).

To expatiate on this further, Schechner, in my opinion, makes a significant point when he proceeds:



..."aesthetics" is not the monopoly of humans; and theories about aesthetics that talk about art as a "luxury", or a function of "leisure" are wrong. Instead one ought to seek the *survival value* of performance; [in its strict sense] (1988:94).

Despite Schechner's conviction above however, I would argue, that the incorporation of theatrical elements has so far aided in aspects of my creative piece. For example employing appropriate lighting helps create an environment in the creative space that relates to the past that '... [is] indelibly engraved upon my memory' (Jaffe 1963:18). Given that my experience evolved from a mythological background I believe that aesthetics in this context would assist in constructing moments, physical and mental settings, not only to re-live an experience but to confront those silent patches as I manoeuvre my way to the present and seek the future within the process.

This chapter has shown how communal unity is strengthened through rituals and ceremonies but it also alerts the reader of the dire ramifications that befall the individual. It also suggests that the creative research needs to attempt a call for creative possibilities from the self that should not be frustrated, discouraged or sacrificed at the expense of a communal social order.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

In periods when fields are without secure foundations, practice becomes the engine of innovation (Marcus and Fischer 1986:166).

The creative research project which includes a co-researcher, Alfred Kunutsor, is a creative dramatic piece, employing physical theatre in the context of a contemporary performance. The project is titled “Unmasking the Monster”. This chapter will reveal the structure of the creative research and elements employed to achieve the goals for this study. It will also consider details of my qualitative research where listening, watching, writing, interpreting, acknowledging my own subjective voice will be explored.

Silence can be peaceful. Silence they say is golden. In silence I can reflect. However I liken my experience of silence, with respect to Ga cultural myths, to being thrown into a dark dungeon for many years where my eyes have gotten used to the darkness. However, I am unable to escape when the door is left open, for fear of the sudden impact of daylight. Given my background of the role of cultural myths and my fear of a monster who owns the night, what has been unbearable has been my inability to express my horror and grief of HIV/Aids buried in my silence. I feel trapped, like a container being filled every now and then but with nothing to offer in return. It is frustrating when traditional dictates and restrictions prevent me from asking questions, from opposing an idea or system and being hindered from taking personal initiatives. Today, I would argue that our world cannot afford the consequences of silence. With regards to HIV/Aids for example, as a result of stigmatization and discrimination, infected persons withdraw and keep silent over their condition, their fears and their stories. They are prevented from sharing their experiences and from finding the hope to continue to enjoy life despite the fatality of the disease. My mission has been to discover how as an artist I can deconstruct Ga myths to help others find their voices in the face of illness, as a way of helping people re-define relationships, manage illness and allowing HIV people to live positively with

dignity and full access to all human rights. Breaking the silence for me will allow me to make art that gives dignity to the grief but also the possibility of life even in the face of HIV.

Bharucha states:

The responsibility of any [researcher], then, is first to learn what the ritual means within its own culture, and then to reflect on what it could mean in his own. Merely 'doing' a ritual from another culture [or from one's own culture] without knowing or caring about what it means risks a simplification and distortion of its contents (1993:34).

Silence related to cultural myths is not only a feature among the Ga. Interestingly among the Changana ethnic group in the Gaza province up north of Maputo of Mozambique, whistling is prohibited at night since it is believed to attract snakes, specifically the Mamba snake, which comes to harm the whistler. Likewise among the AmaNdebele ethnic group of Zimbabwe, people are wary not to whistle at night because of monsters of the night who look fearful and ugly and tower above houses. Even though the AmaNdebele's are trained to whistle in a skilful way - as this is a communicative tool in rearing cattle - this whistling is prohibited at night. My co-researcher attests to the fear of going against these myths on silence where consequences are sometimes manifested physically. Discovering swellings on parts of the body in the morning for example is attributed to cane lashes from the monsters as punishment. In some instances, going to bed and rising in the morning feeling rather sick is also attributed to a monster casting a sickness-spell on the culprit.

Some rituals are sometimes performed to prevent the culprit from contaminating any family member. My co-researcher relates to my interest in myths and the fear of monsters and ogres. We both have a desire to rid the silence that myths cultivate over the self. My colleague - though he acknowledges the above - may not have the same desire to provoke the resultant silence. My colleague has noted so far that within the process such an attempt should be done cautiously since it may imply throwing a challenge to the monsters or powers that be and this can prove harmful as these are 'real and spiritual' (co-researcher: Feb 2010).

Coming from the same country but from different ethnic groups, there are similarities that I share with my co-researcher. For example among the Ewe group of my co-researcher, movements or dances that depict emotions and physical presence result from historical events. Thus the 'Agbeko' dance for instance emanates from a war experience. Dance or movements therefore relay meanings which communicate messages from either a personal perspective or from that of a community. My co-researcher therefore draws from this background to engage within the scope of this study.

### **Structure of the Creative Research**

To enhance and deepen the scope of this study, there were factors that we considered and subjects that we incorporated.

There was the need to willingly reveal and share our beliefs during the rehearsal process in the quest to learn and unlearn new opportunities that arose. The structure of the creative research consisted of incorporating a safe rehearsal space to investigate the total experience of this process in an environment that was not of our origin in order to prepare me for future spaces and audiences of the Ga people and others. Working as an ensemble was to explore amongst other things, dialoguing and negotiating our differences during the process. This I hoped would set the tone for my anticipation and hope for a similar experience between the Ga traditional community and their adherents. We argued that the creative research needed to employ still images to assess its impact and ability to communicate sensitive messages that within the Ga context are rarely verbalized. We explored childhood games, stories and dances that are deeply embedded in Ga cultural mythology. The structure also consisted of employing physical theatre as a medium of exploring the content. We further considered the 'black box' as a metaphor for the body. This we hoped would permit our bodies to express beyond any restrictions, to move on impulse and respond truthfully to inscriptions that they may have acquired.

## **The Qualitative Approach**

As a reminder of the strength of Qualitative Research, as I noted earlier in the first chapter, in terms of measuring the process, I was able to collect data through informal conversations, by interviewing, keeping a journal throughout the process and also closely observing developments. Darlington and Scott agree:

Observation enables us to see events and interactions as they unfold, not filtered through someone else's perception of what is happening (2002:91).

Periodically, my co-researcher took his turn to observe and document the process. This I hoped would provide me with insight into a self-reflexive point of view from my colleague, which I hoped to bring to bear on the totality of the process. Photographs of the development process were explored. Visual recordings of the process were however avoided. This was to prevent any temptation to construct or polish the artistic work in process.

## **Practice as Research (PAR)**

Practice as Research as a paradigm, in academia, is an emerging methodology. It is about research embedded in practice. Warren Nebe notes:

This evaluation is NOT about a finished product but rather about the clarity of the research intention demonstrated through praxis (Nebe 2009:3).

I concur with the sense that theory should dialogue with practice and vice versa as together, they serve as a more effective medium of communicating intended goals.

Dwight Conquergood talks about embracing written scholarship and creative work, papers and performances, which is a strength of the Practice as Research paradigm. The potency of this paradigm is exemplified by Conquergood:

The creative works are developed for multiple professional reasons: they deepen experiential and participatory engagement with materials for both the researcher and her audience; ... they offer a more accessible and engaging format for sharing research and reaching communities outside academia; they are a strategy for staging interventions (2004:318).

The nature of the PAR paradigm is one that focuses primarily on the process and one can only anticipate but may never know the outcome of this process – even if it ends in a creative product.

The process offered me the opportunity to observe my experiences that emanated as well as that which I experienced when I observed the process through an external lens. This sense emerged in the practice where it was my hope that my personal experiences with Ga cultural myths will place me in a position to gain more insight and offer informed choices for individuals who share similar experiences.

My creative research practically intended to reveal my experience with cultural myths and the strong impact it has had in shaping my growth into adulthood. I was also eager to make discoveries that may reveal more about how my present self responds or dialogues with my experience between the past and the present. In so doing, the study has explored how the consciousness of cultural myths can be probed, to prevent the silence I speak of. The Ga culture and its attempt to propagate silence seems like an adverse response to a global revolution; a global revolution that encourages self-independence as against a tradition that clings to communal spirit.

My desire for this study was also the hope that the creative research piece will serve as a medium to purge this silencing of self and yet also enable me to still live with cultural myths without despising them. My choice for PAR as a research tool therefore was the hope for it to aid in confronting a culture that was embedded not only in my psyche but in my body as well. By the nature of PAR, which permits time and allows for growth within the process, I hoped to achieve my objective of exploring how contemporary performance can help deconstruct Ga cultural myths.

### **Rehearsal: Beliefs and Approaches**

George Bernard Shaw said:

People are always blaming their circumstances for what they are. I don't believe in circumstances. The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and if they can't find them, they make them (quoted in Dyer 1995:32).

Given my experience and journey to date, my creative phase does not in any way seek to blame anyone for my circumstances or make up; I seek rather to create my own through theatre.

Seale, Gobo, Gubrium and Silverman note that:

[We] become human beings and must disclose ourselves, learning about ourselves as we try to learn about the other (2004:19).

I posit that contemporary theatre offers a way in which Ga cultural mythology can be interrogated and re-defined. It is the means through which I hope that I can change circumstances.

Rehearsals were skeletal. In other words we overcame the temptation to familiarize ourselves with the content and procedures of the process in a linear context. Having known my co-participant for several months and having attended workshops within the academic year together, we easily connected without any tensions. Knowing each other's temperaments guided our relationship, reactions and responses unconsciously, throughout the process which bordered on sensitive personal issues. This however sometimes had its disadvantages, when we easily made fun of almost everything and this sometimes slowed our pace and compromised the day's progress. Given that I was determined not to allow anything to go by unnoticed; it is interesting to reflect on moments within the process where we digressed. One such instance was when my co-participant questioned amidst laughter, what would happen if our fears or what we dread, come alive within the process. I noted that I would take that risk and face it. He however said he would take to his heels and leave me in the space with my research. With this at the back of my mind, I concluded that my co-participant would rather let sleeping dogs lie. He believed that at best, laid down traditions with spiritual implications should be left alone. Even though we disagreed on the subject, he concurred that where it becomes an impediment to the progress or self-aspirations of the individual, this process would perhaps be ideal. What was worth noting for me from this encounter, was the fact that unconsciously the process, after creating that relaxed atmosphere, had led us to a confrontational point. By this, we were soon to meet head-on with our traditional orientations, given our inner drives and choices and also having embraced new cultures. This confrontational point for me was not destructive but

offered an interesting insight during the creative process. For instance I noted that despite our traditional upbringing, we both had Western cultural influences. Within this context we had the option of either ignoring the traditional with its impediments or finding a blend and living alongside both cultures and we agreed to pursue the latter for the concerns of this study.

Despite our fluid rapport, when it was time for serious work, this same familiarity generated so much intensity from us, thus allowing true and genuine feedback. There were days when we just had workshop sessions. This aided in digging up material from our personal experiences while finding instinctive ways of expressing them through action, movement or interaction. These workshop sessions entailed going back to our individual pasts and bringing up playful moments and other experiences that we still cherish to this day. Likewise we reflected on those moments that we do not want to remember. These reflections made us open up to each other as we considered how those experiences had influenced our make-ups and what we wanted to do, or rather not do, or change about our personal lives.

### **Choice of Space**

The choice of space came up when considering aspects of this creative research. Preferably this creative process may at best take place within the environment or space of the Ga ethnic group given the aims of this study. However I made a conscious choice of completing the creative research here in South Africa.

Putting this creative piece on show in the Ga environment would likely escalate tempers and condemnation since I would not only be seen as challenging the Ga status quo, but exposing a weakness in the Ga man's masculine image. There was therefore the need to assess and consider all possible responses and reactions in a neutral space which would also help shape and guide the content of the phase without compromising the PAR paradigm for this creative component.

We maintained within the process, praise rituals to pay our respect and homage to the beliefs and practices of our culture since we are still products of those traditions.



Our everyday activity of the process within our choice of space (the Nunnery) revealed for me how a particular space can be transformed to suit a certain context. Beyond the Nunnery having a theatrical feature, the consistency in the importation of sound from my childhood, colour, and its compactness made me relive and recreate moments in my past within the space.

### **An Ensemble Approach**

There was the possibility of either of us commanding our own elucidations and suppositions when as part of the creative process we took turns as participants and as observers. As this emerged in the process - in order to avoid the temptation - we allowed for each to share his experience in a particular frame within the process as the same activity for each of us did not always mean the same thing. In order to avoid a potential of dominance by either of us- given our similarly proud traditional backgrounds- there was the need to maintain a sense of impartiality as a team. Barba notes that 'The way to escape from error and pain is to eliminate the self' (1999:49). Trusting each other within the space was essential. Engaging in trust games for instance made us responsible towards each other which enhanced our working as a team.

### **Focus**

Making fun of our childhood experiences within the process through laughter may have contributed to a relaxed space while allowing for a healthy preparation for confronting that which keeps us silent. This however sometimes compromised the needed focus for the day. On such days I observed that it affected how deeply we searched ourselves to bring out our true responses to bear on the process. The uniqueness and rigour of this kind of theatre-making from performance is the need to focus on the self rather than a prescribed character.

Grotowski perhaps stresses the importance of this focus when he states:

The actor's performance become a vehicle for self-study and self-exploration, a field for work on one's self and individual transcendence (Slowiak and Cuesta 2007:21).

We therefore attached some reverence to the process. As a result we were willing to engage both spiritually and emotionally, staying true to where our minds wandered and how that was

expressed through our bodies. We focused on our sensitive experiences, the reasons for our fears, by playing back those moments through our senses in the space. This was a conscious self-exploration which allowed us to visit the root causes, where our fears, grievances etcetera all begun. This process therefore offers the opportunity for individual transcendence. It took us to those moments we are reluctant to re-visit. The impact of the process afforded me a chance to re-confront, re-write those childhood inscriptions. This had an immediate impact on my inner drive to pierce through the silence, rousing my frozen images to give them a voice through the creative performance.

### **The Vulnerable Performer**

A relaxed body posture, a relaxed mind and a safe environment within the creative process was crucial in encouraging us to be responsive and receptive to new sounds and thoughts that were related to our experiences. This made us sincere with each other and ourselves. Our target was to attain what Grotowski refers to as the 'Holy Actor' where an actor's body becomes transparent. He states:

Sacrifice occurs when the actor reveals something precious and personal as a gift to the audience through detailed work on structure and the self (Slowiak and Cuesta 2007:21).

This process seemed rather difficult as I realized that I built a natural resistance to protect what I was holding on to from my history; mentally, emotionally and spiritually. We were however able to embody those personal details through our body movements and in the stillness. This for example gave birth to the frozen images at the beginning of the creative research, where our vulnerability was channelled through these images to the observer. These frozen images therefore for me, did not just represent moments of my personal experiences by way of embodiment but served as a convergence of impulse and action; that which I believe will aid the self in transcending its limitations.

Silence in my opinion does not only imply a shutting out, but the resultant anger, bitterness, fear and the inability to express one's preferences, etc. that an individual fails to express or release, remains trapped in the body. This consequently influences and shapes that individual's

development and growth. Though the process began with no dialogue, words and sounds from our bodies were explored. My belief was that sometimes sounds formed even if not understood can be impactful. This opened up an opportunity where we expressed ourselves in our respective dialects which came naturally to us. Our natural responses and reactions through dialogue or sound were assessed, especially in an environment where we considered our process as safe from the restrictions and threats from our respective traditional settings. The implication of a performance that seeks to deconstruct Ga myths is that it provides a safe medium which offers liberty for choice and individual participation rather than a lingering silence. Likewise the choice to remain silent or not (through this medium) becomes a personal decision. For the performer therefore, making that preference from a personal impulse or desire is what is crucial rather than which choice was made.

### **Body as Archive**

The body is not simply a house for the mind, rather it is through our lived experience of our bodies that we perceive of, are informed by and interact with the world (Thomas 2003:29).

It is believed that the human body stores a person's history. Athena Fatseas notes that '...the body serves as an archive that records our memories...' (Fatseas:2009:3). Similarly, I consider the body as the 'black box' of the individual. The sudden death of an individual, especially one that is devoid of an accident or ailment, limits the options as to what caused the death. However, with the act of post mortem on the 'black box', answers are revealed for the cause of death. The scars, experiences and history are stored in the mind and on the body. In reference to this, even though I am reluctant to speak about some of my experiences it is significant to note that during my creative process, some of these experiences came alive the moment I began to re-live or attempted to reverse those encounters. The reliance on the body therefore with respect to the concerns of this study, cannot be underestimated. This is implied in Steinman's words, '...each body speaks its own native language, given to us at conception...' (Steinman: 1986:14). I therefore sustained the exploration of my body's history through

movements within the creative space. In this instance, my co-researchers expertise in physical theatre and traditional Ghanaian dance played an important role.

My impetus was not to be confined to movements related to our history of silence, but for our bodies to manifest new movements, to travel new experiences as a result of personal impulses and choices. Pina Bausch notes that for her, a dancer's experience is the critical component which the dancer expresses in bodily terms, creating a new type of body language. She does not consider her dances as choreographies, rather one method she engages with, is the fusion of personal accounts of her dancers' stories, images and gestures in her productions. Her practice is not dance in the conventional sense but focuses on the expression of feelings, by whatever means will best convey them (Bausch P. Biography:2005). Perhaps what she is well known for is her statement '[I'm] not interested in how people move, but what moves them' (Tashiro: 1999). For Bausch, each dancer's body tells its own story based on what it has experienced.

Movements in the creative process were therefore motivated as a result of our personal experiences and history. Where there were similarities or differences we fused the movements accordingly. In inculcating this approach therefore, expressions of our past experiences in relation to cultural myths were explored within the process. We have so far experienced this approach within the process where our movements and gestures in expression have been motivated by our sometimes distinct past experiences.

### **Still Images**

Perhaps my goal in drawing on the power of images is summed up in Boal's words, 'The creation of images of the world as we want it to be is the best way to penetrate the future' (Boal 2006:46). In reference to this we incorporated images within the process not only to create a world of our past and the present, but to help carve our desired future. My belief was that as we continued to explore the images, our natural impulses and desires would be best revealed by our bodies through the images. Our body which served as a container and all that was trapped within was challenged to break loose and express that which had been suppressed. So for example, these still images which were experienced in the silence at the

opening section of the creative process consistently brought to mind and body the loneliness, isolation and painful memories of a Ga family member afflicted by a terminal disease.

My intention was also to transport my audience into the world of the 'monster' to possibly give them a feel of what keeps the characters silent. This was intended to encourage the audience to consider their own silence. I am of the opinion that like the cast, some audience members may have their own 'monsters' within themselves which they endeavour not to confront. The hush and unwavering gaze between me and my audience offered a mutual connection by the close of the performance. I believe however that to speak more fully to my investigation, a fuller participatory experience between audience and researcher(s) would reveal more.

I acknowledge that Ga culture is embedded deeply in me, given my experience, but also acknowledge embracing other cultures and the need to dialogue. This is what both Campbell and Jung agree on, when Jung notes, 'what is required...is a dialogue, not a fixture at either pole...' (Campbell: 1972:15).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### REFLECTIONS ON PROCESS ORIENTED PERFORMANCE

The three distinct frozen/fluid images, of the two characters, that open the creative research demonstrate a childhood lingering silence on a health crisis and on personal choices and impulses. These images include an unhealthy contracted and contorted image that yearns to be seen but is quickly swallowed into pitch darkness. Also, an image that is bubbling with so much personal information and desires to be heard, soon coils into the dark as an oppressive eye watches for any errors or slips. The unpredictable rhythm of whispers, breath and movements in the dark suggests a lingering fear that the two characters dread ever so much. The creative research leads us to the communal ideal and expectation through ritual performance with dance and songs which is soon contrasted by the individual's choice and impulse through childhood games. These games express the innocence of children at play amidst laughter and fun and their desire to improvise and be creative through their play. A cultural myth is however activated in the process as the children innocently break a Ga cultural norm by whistling at night. Ga custodians soon stamp their authority ensuring an oppressive silence and fear. Soon the consequence of breaking the traditional norm brings the child in direct contact with a monster in an ensuing battle. The masked monster torments and pounces on the child, while the child coils and contracts. The child encounters an angry monster which is determined to arrest the culprit who has not conformed to Ga statutes. The child finds his voice in the midst of fear by screaming, which pierces through the silence. The child wills to be liberated when caught in the world of the traditional communal ideal and in the space of individuality.

The first two nights' presentation of the creative process felt rushed. This was after my co-researcher and I had reflected on both presentations. It felt as if we were under observation to complete the process under record time. This obviously affected our response to the space, to lights, which was a key element in the process, and exposed some inconsistencies in our relationship. Our subsequent rehearsal meeting however as we prepared for a third showing enabled us to refresh our minds and bodies on the whole process and the intentions of this

study. The key for us was to allow for the further exploration of the moments within the process even during the presentation.

For me, at the end of the third night, we discovered the journey and I truly felt relieved. We had both allowed ourselves to be more relaxed. I had been patient with the moments and travelled the journey, transforming it into moments in my past. Even more significant for me was that by the end of the presentation, I did not feel that 'eye of caution' looking on and ever present in my Grandfather's home as we played in the compound at night. As I quietly took that bold step forward at the end of the presentation, I felt I was in a safe space without the burden of having any authority who would soon judge where I had faltered during my playtime. 'Why couldn't our games or fun times as children, end like this without having our sleep being threatened as a result of a cultural code we innocently flouted?' I asked myself. If only we had the courage to play under the moonlight so freely, perhaps there would have been brighter memories of childhood.

My co-researcher further indicated that his experience through the process confirms for him the similarities we share as individuals and as a people and the only distinctive feature which separates us into Ga and Ewe ethnic groups, is language (co-researcher: 2010). Hence his being able to perceive himself as part of my journey given our similar history and upbringing on silence and fear within the Ghanaian context.

### **Concluding Thoughts that Emerge from PAR**

Perhaps my quest for a dialogue and negotiation, which I deem necessary between a contemporary orientation and the Ga tradition, was provoked when it appeared by the end of the presentation that the individual or the self had managed to outwit the monster. Given this new found space, which for me is symbolic of piercing through the silence, I no longer felt that weight of scrutiny from a 'monster' in the context of Ga cultural myths. There was and still is the impetus to clarify that this act did not denote the severance of my ties from the Ga tradition. I am implying what is captured in Mbembe's words:

...it is not true, as either starting point or conclusion, that Africa is an incomparable monster, a silent shadow and mute place of darkness, amounting to no more than a lacuna (2001:9).

African modernity may be complex, as Mbembe affirms, ‘...all human societies participate in a *complex order...*’ (2001:8) but through the PAR process, it is not enough for me to appreciate the genuine will of the Ga people to preserve what they believe in and perhaps that which makes them unique. At the end of the creative process, the distance between the self (me) and the receding Ga culture, re-affirmed the need for dialogue and reconstruction where possible.

### **Connotations for Contemporary Performance**

Significantly, I have been able to use myself as a means to explore how contemporary performance processes can help deconstruct myths. This is in the quest of overcoming fear and hence silence and is also a way of finding voice and expression amidst health crises.

### **Fear**

Like fear, movements or gestures in contemporary performance are unpredictable. In effect fear might remain a part of us, however as this creative process has shown, fear need not be an overpowering feature but a choice of the individual to allow the expression of its power while finding a space for relief. This should therefore not be viewed as a weakness in Ga masculinity but as a strength to confront that which exists with human experiences. Like HIV/Aids, the contemporary performer should acknowledge the overwhelming power of fear and enjoy the option of not succumbing to it. The contemporary performer must be willing to make personal choices and be prepared and responsible for the resultant consequences. A performer requires the freedom from fear to engage with, and to express the complexity of Ga life.

### **The Traditional Linear**

We explored the power of the non-linear and the process revealed to me how this medium can deconstruct the traditional linear mode of communicating sensitive and necessary subjects like the pursuit of this study. Rather than engaging in the traditional linear mode and verbalizing the contents of this creative performance, contemporary performance proved certain abilities. The



process therefore hopes to maintain image-oriented non literal theatre for its Ga audience. Employing still or fluid images would easily grasp and hold the attention of its target. This would prevent any premature condemnation which characterizes the traditional linear mode.

### **The Technical Process**

The application of lights through this medium did not simply make us visible as we journeyed through the process but lighting served as an instrumental actor who effectively complimented our actions within the process. Thus for example the quality and feel of light added to the moment, when I experienced playing in the compound under the moonlight in my family house moments before I whistled that night. It was as if I could inhale and exhale the moonlight in its beauty as its rays lit and watched us play in the compound. Technology therefore compliments contemporary performance as shown in this process. Beyond the individual researcher and what he/she brings to the space, technology creates the environment that embodies the experience of the researcher thereby enhancing the potential for discovery.

### **Limitations**

Costuming was also an area that needed thinking through but given the lack of time I ignored the use of costume which also prevented any rushed decisions for costuming that might not have a direct bearing or meaning on the creative process.

Costume and design are important because contemporary performance is about understanding how meaning is made through gesture, symbol etcetera. Among the Ga it is common for a medicine-man to expel *gbeshi* (bad omen) from a patient. This is symbolically tied in the form of cloth strands to a post or tree outside the town. One of such areas we could have explored is the wrapping of white cloth around our bodies (which signifies a spiritual authority in the Ga context), and binding the clothed body with the cloth strands, creating an image of an individual who is bound by the *gbeshi*, that which should be expelled (find image attached to appendix).

Contemporary performance therefore allows working beyond the culturally literal and permits the use of symbolism, imagery and objects. This allows the breaking of strangleholds of cultural symbols.

### **Prospects**

I envisage a number of prospects for this creative piece. I find its current growth sitting between the potential for a full theatre product and a full ritual based creative project. As a full theatre product I could have explored by an expansion of the creative research, the life journey of an individual who struggles with fear and silence and how that individual triumphs over them. As a ritual based project, I could also have explored a purging experience for the self and for the audience, where both audience and the self would embark on a ritual journey before, during and after the journey.

The encounter with the monster perhaps may have seemingly suggested the self as being able to have only shrugged off the monster. Conceivably it would be interesting to explore the self facing the monster and plausibly being able to outwit fear by the end of the process.

The prospect of presenting this piece among the Ga community, taking into consideration the above possibilities and others to deepen its experience, suggests the hope for a much deeper impact with respect to the concerns of this study. I would explore the implication of a public theatre performance or ritual performance in Ghana carefully, ensuring safety, containment and integrity.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The process of experiencing, watching, writing, listening and learning through this practice presentation has further opened avenues for further study and improvement. It is my intention that ultimately, the custodians of our respective traditions and systems will not view this as a plot to usurp their authority, but realize the need for collaboration with their members and adherents for a common goal in unmasking the 'monster' and in shifting consciousness. This would provide a united front in combating the silence around the HIV/Aids epidemic, a major

problem confronting Ghana today. This would help teach others like me and provide insights and options for personal discoveries and choices.

This study has neither solved all concerns raised nor dealt with them. It however seems adequate for me to instigate or extend the discussion beyond the context into a larger space. This would allow for the further exploration of the power of process in contemporary performance as a means of change and self-development.

It is my ultimate hope that this study will further extend its potential by providing another research project that could involve working with Ga youth in Ghana as a means to address HIV/Aids.

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