

# Communal Coherence, Spirituality and Clothing Symbolism of the Chief Priest in the Ga Traditional Governance

Communal  
Coherence and  
Clothing of the  
Ga *Wolomo*

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**Abstract** Investigations on the symbolic role, spiritual health benefits and efficacy of the clothing items of the Ga *wolomo* (chief priest) have received little attention. Highlighting the relevance of these clothes, this paper focuses on the chief priest's dress code for his appointment, confinement, ordination, ceremonial and daily life activities. Data were collected through content analysis, participant observation and interviews with people from selected Ga communities, such as La, Teshie and Ga Mashie. The findings revealed that the selection of the chief priest is confirmed with a special clothing item. His traditional clothes and adornment also have meanings, importance and symbolic interpretations; explained in their uses, colour and style. As the spiritual head, the role of the chief priest's costume is very distinguished and symbolic in executing his duties; protecting, strengthening faith, confidence and assurance during spiritual healing, and when solving pertinent problems in the community. The paper concludes by recommending further research and documentation on other aspects of the Ga clothing culture, such as hand items and hair styles from the pre-colonial period to the present.

**Key words** chief priest, *wolomo*, costume, clothing items, deity, dress code, god

## Introduction

The traditional institution of the Ga is headed by a chief priest known as the *wolomo*. The *wolomo* has a dual responsibility, manifested in his role as the traditional political leader, and also as the one responsible for the spiritual welfare of the Ga. His authority as a representative of a deity charged with sustaining peace, prosperity and the good health of the community, which has received little scholarly attention, is interrogated in this study through special ritual clothing and adornment used on various occasions.

Ga people are found in Accra, the capital of Ghana, and its surrounding towns and suburbs. The site is: "bounded on the south by the Atlantic Ocean, on the west by the River Densu, on the north by the Akuapem foothills along the Dodowa-Ayikuma-agomeda axis, and on the east by a hypothetical non-south line running from Osudoku". (Anquanda, 2006, p.1) They are one of about the seventy-five ethnic groups in Ghana, living in towns such as Osu, La, Teshie, Nungua, Tema and Ga Mashie.

Various scholars like Alhassan (2006) and Anquanda (1982) have argued about the origin of the Accra people from different premises. The first argument which is mainly based on oral tradition posits that the Ga and Dangme people migrated to Accra through Nigeria, Benin, Togo and so on. According to Alhassan (2006, p.22) "it is said that Gas originally migrated from ancient Israel, through Egypt, down to present day Nigeria, from where they came by land and sea" to settle in their present homes in Ghana around the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The third view, based on both linguistic and archaeological arguments suggests that pre-historic ancestry of the Ga people is traced to the Accra plains itself, and that people had always moved between the plains of Accra and the surrounding easting areas in historical times.

The indigenous towns of Accra include Ga Mashie, Gbese Kinka and Sempe in Accra Central, as well as other Ga speakers who according to oral sources came to settle in Accra from Fanteland, Akuapem, Akwamu, Osudoku, Laduku, Aneho in Togo, and Lagos in Nigeria. (Anquanda, 1982) The latter immigrants are presently located in Osu, La, Teshie, Nungua, Korle Gonno, Mamprobi and so on. Each of these towns and their suburbs has a form of traditional governance, and according to Labi (2006, p.123) "the *Ga* [have been] under a theocratic governance with its head being the *wolomo*".

Traditional authority permeates all ethnic groups in Africa, including the Ga people of Ghana. Usually a chief is selected according to the traditions of a people. He becomes both the religious leader, and a community head deemed to have skills and knowledge for development, and endowed with divine powers to protect the people. In spite of this authority he is bounded by rules and regulations, including taboos he must observe. Consequently, the Ga system of traditional governance is channelled through appointed heads of specific family lineage. This institution was originally held primarily by the chief priest (*wolomo*) who doubled as a spiritual head (Kwakye-Opong, 2011). However, the necessary trade links between the Ga people and European merchants who travelled to the coast between 1600 and 1700 made it mandatory for the Ga to get intermediaries to facilitate trade transactions. Hence chiefs and military groups were appointed in that regard. The military groups served as support and protection for the chiefs in their business transactions. According to Quacopome (2006) this chieftaincy rule and its regalia were adopted from the Akans who later came to settle with the Ga.

The position of a *wolomo* is basically held by men; nonetheless, queen mothers and *afieye* (wife of the chief priest) rule alongside the chiefs and chief priests of the various towns, and act as advisory bodies as well as leaders of the women in the society (Busia, 1968). Significantly, however, unlike the other Ghanaian ethnic groups, such as the Akans, where the chief is head of affairs, the Ga chief rules under a chief priest. As a result among the Ga traditional governance the chief priest holds the ultimate position, and his relevant position was and is still revealed through all the regalia he uses, including costume (Parker, 2000; Nortey, 2008). Chief priests in the various communities and towns are ordained by deities as their mouth pieces, and they serve as both the head and spiritual pillar of the people. Appointment of a chief priest is done by these deities through Ga spiritual or family heads.

Ga traditional politics sees to the ruling of each town. As recorded by Quacopome (2006) this structure is predominantly motivated by the Akan system of state formation, including all forms of

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regalia. However, the position of the chief priest stands distinct, because comparatively his traditional clothes have not been influenced by that of the Akan.

A chief priest is trained on how to govern his subjects, know the importance and consequences of his position as a traditional head and above all, his obligation to enforce laws, as well as observe the dos and don'ts of the land. In discharging his duties, his traditional clothes and accessories have roles that help enhance as well as bring the prestigious position of the institutions into the spotlight. The meanings, importance, and symbolic interpretations of these clothing items are best explained in their uses, colours, the way the clothes are worn as well as taboos concerning their misuse.

This article is intended to highlight the role of clothing and adornment of the Ga chief priest in discharging his duties as a representative of a deity whose aim is to spiritually guard each community. It has its basis on the hypothesis that the clothing of the chief priest has virtues and philosophies that physically, psychologically and spiritually safeguard the people. This submission is supported by Nortey who has noted that "the numerous clothing and adornments of the [Ga] chief priest build "confidence, faith and assurance which psychologically aid the people during the treatment of sicknesses and during the solution of their peculiar problems" (Nortey, 2008, p.140). The paper additionally investigates the role and symbolic import of clothing and adornment of the candidate-elect, from the period of his appointment, confinement, ordination, through to clothes worn on ordinary days.

Through observations and interviews with people from some Ga towns such as La, Teshie, and Ga Mashie, the paper submits that the initial call of a person by a deity is signified with the komi fibre which is worn as necklace (Kwakyee-Opong, 2011). The candidate is confined for about six weeks to learn the rules of the position and at this point he uses very scanty clothes like a white loin cloth. However, his ordination may be characterised with very rich cloths such as velvet or kente, in addition to beads and accessories. His beads and headdress have identities that project his position as the one in charge of the spiritual security of the community.

### ***Traditional Governance and Clothing Symbolisms: A Brief Literature Review***

Instituting governance is a human concern throughout the world. Hence continents, countries, societies and institutions practice various forms of governance meant to stabilize, protect as well guide the people. From time immemorial, man has adopted ways and means of making sure, norms and virtues, which are pivots of development, are promoted through some leaders. Hence in most African countries, chiefs are identified with this honourable role. This position is, however, ethnic based and gives the chief the power to govern the people on the basis of specific rules and regulations that pertain to the society.

Investigating this prestigious culture in *Chieftaincy in Ghana* (2006) various authors such as Frempong, Kreamer, Attobra and Labi have established among others, issues such as the judicial role of the chief in Democratic Governance; Perceptions on chieftaincy; Chieftaincy and Traditional Taboos;

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Chiefs and socio-political change in the Gold Coast, and Cross-Cultural Appropriation of Regalia and Royal Art.

Commenting on 'Chieftaincy, Democracy and Human Rights in Pre-Colonial Africa; The case of Akan system in Ghana', Frempong began by advocating that the early Western anthropologist wanted Africans to accept that before the advent of Colonialism Africans did not have their own means of governance. He therefore nullifies these assumptions by indicating that:

[b]ut such an argument denies the fact that every society has its own unique set of economic, political and social problem and creates institutions capable of solving those problems. To a large extent, the British Parliament, for example, performed functions similar with his council of elders who sat under a tree and talked to agreement. (Frempong, 2006, p.379)

The above assumption according to Ayittey (2002) is just a failure to make a fundamental distinction between the existence of an institution and different forms of the same institutions. This statement is an undeniable fact because this paper discusses the exemplified authority that the costume of the Ga chief priest carries in his discharge of his duties and how the society benefits, spiritually, physically and psychologically.

Quarcoopome (2006) also comments on the "Decline of the Traditional Authority: The case of the Ga Mashie State of Accra"; that the Ga traditional society, was headed by the *wolomei* (plural) who wielded both secular and religious powers. However, between 1677 and 1681 there was a new revolution that changed this traditional system of governance. If the Ga people had to benefit from the European trading system led by the Portuguese around the 15<sup>th</sup> century then, the needed adjustment to appoint a chief as an intermediary was compelling. This change was largely influenced by the Akan system of state formation, and the power states that the Ga people later conquered, which gave them control over the European trade, and thus became powerful. However, in 1681, the Akwamu people defeated the Gas and this consequently affected the influence and authority of the chief. Nonetheless the Ga people fought and gained their independence; therefore Ga states presently have a new structure of traditional governance established within towns or Akutso. Abola, Aser, Gbese and Otublohum are now autonomous clans with their own chiefs. Despite this historic achievement in the Ga chieftaincy tradition, the *wolomo* is the head of every community or family, and thus presides over the chief. (Quarcoopome, 2006)

The second leg of the review which concentrates on clothing identities, asserts that clothes used over the world help to designate age, culture, religion, group affiliation/fraternity, occupation and status, of a society. Kwakye-Opong (2001); Labi (2006); Kyerematen (1964); Atobrah (1976) and Nortey (2008) provide some important clues to the cultural and symbolic import of a chief's regalia. Forms of regalia, including clothing items used by chiefs are mostly collected from historically and culturally relevant royal works of art used in adornment, installation or governance, which fall within societal traditions of artistic production and critique. (Labi, 2006)

To Kyerematen (1964) a chief's clothing is not only used for aesthetic expressions; they are also

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symbolic connotations of the beginning of history, trade, religion, belief, social and political organization. Consequently, they reveal the achievements, skills and values of a people, and according to Labi (2006:276) “various forms of traditional crafts such as woven works, embroidery, carving, pottery, works in leather and metal will form significant roles in [the chief’s costume] history.”

Most regalia are inherited and thus embody rules and regulations stipulated to govern a people; hence a chief does not rule in his own jurisdiction, rather the use of these items demand that he governs according to the legislations that aims at fostering unity among the people. As further reported by Labi:

Some regalia are inherited from early chiefs and leaders. In Asante the Golden Stool and several items used by Okomfo Anokye, the priest chief, who conjured the Golden Stool from the sky and those used by Osei Tutu, the founding father of Asante, have been preserved to represent these ancestors and the unity of Asante nation. (Labi, 2006, p.276)

Some regalia are gotten from the natural environment and used to project the prowess and bravery of a chief. To Kreamer (1995, p.113) “the use of such materials is borne out of the relationship between the people and particular kinds of animals, trees and objects believed to possess virtues such as strength, intelligence, speed, invincibility and ferocity, which they may want the chief to be associated with”. As a result, items such as skin or hair of an elephant, a lion or that of a leopard are worn or attached to the regalia of a chief to make powerful visual impressions that help to establish confidence in him. It is appropriate to deduce that “the regalia which surround chieftaincy [or traditional governance] therefore reinforce cultural symbolic associations with past users or strong virtues imported from nature”. (Labi, 2006, p.277)

Similarly, Attobra (1976) noted that between 1560 and 1580, Agyekum Adu Oware, chief of Akyem, used several symbols of gold valuing about a thousand ounces as part of his military skills, some of which are presently found on state umbrellas and swords. Myths and legends of clothing elements therefore ‘help create and sustain the authority and power of chieftaincy among the Akan in general.

The use of specific clothing elements as well as colour has been synonymous with spiritual healing. Among Ghanaians including the Ga, white denotes purity, virginity, victory and holiness. Consequently to signify purity, the Ga priests and priestesses use white clothing items. (Kwakye-Opong, 2014) They also decorate their hair with beads, talisman and cowries imbued with special powers which protect the wearer from malevolent spirits as well as evil eyes. Commenting on the priestess of Akonnedi shrine at Lateh, Ghana, Beckwith & Fisher (2002) noted that “when Nana, the late head priestess was possessed by this god, she was able to heal paralysis and deliver babies from barren women”. Moreover:

The alter of a priest displays many deities including Mame Wata, the goddess of water who traces her origins and European-style hair, to a late nineteen-century circus performer from Germany who advertised herself as an Indian snake charmer. Draped in cowrie shells and holding a serpent, Mame Wata summons health, prosperity and fertility... The sumanbrafo

priest of the Ashanti also wears a leather talisman across his back and chest and carries two fly whisks, which is used to discharge his powers once he is possessed by his deity. (Beckwith & Fisher, 2002, pp. 305-312)

In *The Homowo Festival in Accra-Its Artistic and other Cultural Aspects*, Nortey (2008) has also noted the religious position of a Ga chief priest. His discussion covers some aspects of the costume used by the chief priest, indicating the symbolic role costume plays with regard healing. He describes some of the clothing items such as the numerous beads worn; their significance and efficacy. Nortey sums up indicating that the costumes of the Ga chief priest help to build the people's confidence, and thus, promote and sustain their faith and assurance during spiritual healing.

Kwakye-Opong (2011) has also reported on the socio-cultural trend and relevance of Ga costume. An aspect of her thesis centres the dress code and its spiritual disposition of Ga religious leaders such as the *wolomo*. There are, however, some identifiable gaps, including specifics on the role of costume during spiritual healing; a means of safeguarding the health of the Ga, for their growth and prosperity.

The third and final leg, the socio-political importance of body adornment, establishes that as an element of dress and grooming, body marks and body designs are used for social, political and religious purposes, playing pivotal and symbolic roles in recognizing systems and meanings of specific cultures. (Wilson, 2003; Ross, 2002; Opoku, 1978; Field, 1961) One commendable investigation on bead making in Ghana by Wilson for instance reports on types of beads and their cultural importance. She noted the ritual significance of beads and explained for instance that among the Manya Krobo's of Ghana, a queen mother is selected by means of a string of *koli* beads placed on the head of the candidate. (Wilson, 2003)

Similarly writers like Opoku (1978), Rattary (1959) and Field (1961) have indicated that chiefs, priests, priestesses, initiates and mourners wear beads to portray their status, a transitional stage in life or to show grief. Reporting on the social status or rank of traditional leaders like chiefs, Field (1961) asserts that Ga priests/priestesses wear a string of round black beads mixed with white flat beads as their priestly insignia. In the same vein Opoku (1978) has mentioned that among the people of Aburi officiating priests at their Yam festival wear a string of three precious beads tied below their knees to register their position.

It is clearly evident that we cannot depend on all these sources alone. Though some of them circles specific ethnic groups, others are general and thus lack focus. However, the accounts of Kwakye-Opong (2011), Nortey (2008) and Feild (1961), on the Ga chief priest though valuable, has some limitations which this article tries to investigate.

### ***Data Collection Approach and Analysis***

In addition to these written sources, the paper uses observations, and interviews as approaches to buttress

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the data, and also try to keep it as authentic as possible. People from three Ga communities La, Teshie, and Tema were purposively sampled. This approach suggests that sampling should involve people who are knowledgeable in the problem under investigation, and thus can give valuable contribution. The population should represent the portion of the universe accessible to the investigator, and covers the total set of individuals, objects or experiences with familiar characteristics (Kumekpor, 2002). To that end the interview considered a population of about forty people made up of three categories or strata, including; (a) chief priests, (b) priest/priestess and (c) elders.

The people in each group were: category A-19, category B-12, category C 9; a conclusive ratio based on their comparative knowledge in the Ga clothing culture. The people in category A outnumbered the other groups because they (the chief priests) own most of the clothes, and have also been tutored on the names and symbolisms of all the clothing elements before they were ordained. The priests/priestesses also work directly with the chief priests; hence, they are very familiar with their costumes. Ga elders are custodians of the Ga tradition; as such they are fully versed in all aspects of Ga art and culture, including costume.

Ten out of the nine-teen chief priest were randomly interviewed during their annual ceremonies, while the rest were done with an interview guide in their various houses/shrines. Despite the fact that they were from different towns, they provided similar information on the clothes and accessories used for the various occasions of their rule. I found it more appropriate to use the data collected from NuumoYemotey V1, a former chief priest of La, because he willingly provided me with all the pictorial records to back his report. He also consented to the use of the pictures and appreciated the effort put in the work because, similar interrogations had happened before but “he is yet to see the outcome”.

All the interviews were conducted in the Ga dialect, tape recorded and translated to English language. This means of communication was applied because the indigenes speak Ga and thus, found it easy and more convenient to express their thoughts. The translations were later confirmed with a Ga lecturer at the University of Education, Winneba.

Attendance at some ordinations and annual festivals of priests and priestess at Teshie and La, gave the study a wider scope to the interview guide, and brought to bear some salient points which otherwise might not have been considered. These participatory observations helped to confirm the uses and roles of the various clothing items, noted by the respondents.

With the permission of all concerned (chiefs and the chief priests), pictures were taken, while others were collected from individuals. It is worthy to note that photographs taken and the videos recorded were all done after the intended purpose of the research was made clear, for the necessary rituals to be performed on behalf of the researcher.

Content analysis was also employed based on documented works by Kwakye-Opong (2011) and Nortey (2008). This approach was used as a pivot to identify some missing accounts on the topic. It is worthy to note that after some seminar presentations at both local and international levels on this topic, a lot of pertinent questions were raised and this took me back to the research sites to address those concerns.

Data from the interview were analysed, and juxtaposing that with some secondary information on

Ga traditional institutions, conclusions were drawn. An aspect of the interview guide sought to know the people's view relating costume and the responsibility of the chief priest. To this 38 (95%) of the respondents indicated that the clothes of the chief priest help in curing most of their diseases, as well as providing spiritual security. 36, representing 90% of the interviewees asserted that the clothes of the chief priest worn on ceremonial occasions differ from those worn on ordinary days. However, the *afili* and the *shishe* beads worn together with the casual clothes, still give the chief priest some spiritual protection. Additionally the various clothing items such as the numerous symbolic beads, hand items and body designs promote their confidence in the chief priest and the deity. Interestingly, all 40(100%) of them affirmed that the chief priests are the representatives of their gods. They also have a similar dress code through which power is gotten to enable them work together to bring coherence, peace and spiritual protection to the community.

### ***Clothing Symbolisms of the Ga Chief Priest; Appointment, Seclusion and Ordination***

As the spiritual head of a community, the dress code of the Ga chief priest does not only silently communicate to the people, but has the ability to protect both the priest and the people against all forms of spiritual attack. In this vein all his clothing elements: hair styles/headdress, cloths, beads, body markings, body designs and hand items spiritually fortify him for that obligation. These clothing elements are characterised by specific occasions such as his selection by a deity; seclusion to learn the rudiments of the position; ordination as a chief priest; annual ceremonies as well as when providing spiritual healing.

### ***Clothing Items Associated with Appointment as a Chief Priest***



**Figure 1.**  
*Komi* necklace worn to signify the candidature of Nuumo Yemotey VI

As stated earlier in this paper, among the Ga the *wolomo* acts as the mouth piece of a deity. The position is ultimately identified with natural phenomenon such as the sea and lagoons. *Nai wolomo* for instance represents the sea deity and wields power within his jurisdiction or community, whilst the deities of the Korle and the Sakumo lagoons have their respective chief priests. However, there are family deities represented by *wolomei* (plural) and one example is the *Ayiku wolomo*, who is the chief priest of the *Ayiku* family in Teshie. Nonetheless family *wolomei* are subjected to that of the community. (Akropong, 2006) As noted already, the candidate selected for this prestigious position, is the exclusive right of the god. According to Nuumo Yemotey VI, to show the god's approval and confirm his selection of the candidate to the community, the deity appoints a ritual specialist who



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accomplishes this by throwing the komi fibre around the neck of the candidate (See figure 6). According to Ga oral tradition, the necklace also affirms the deity's connection with the candidate, and the power bestowed on him. This plant fibre has the power to 'arrest' a person from refusing the position, since most people would want to run away from such an obligation; due to their diverse religious background and beliefs. A Christian for instance will not want to be associated with such practice, and might want to avoid it by running away to a distant land.

### ***Clothing and the Role of Families during Seclusion of the Candidate***

The candidate selected as the chief priest is secluded for some days in order to learn the rules, regulations and the taboos of the position. This is done under the tutelage of older Ga women who are equipped with Ga art and culture. Apart from this, it is also customarily expedient that the candidate is 'hidden' from the site of the people so that he can be presented as a 'new bride' in all the glamour of clothing and adornment on the day he is ordained. Nuumo Yemotey VI further asserts that as soon as he was selected he was kept in a special room reserved for that purpose. He continues:

for about three weeks I was kept in this room where I learnt all the traditions and customs associated with the position. This included learning about related clothes, and their taboos. Clothes associated with the seclusion were a white jumper and *adasaa*. [A big long togas] I did not wear jewellery, beads or body designs, and all my hair including pubic hair was clean shaved.

This ritual shave is intended to cleanse the candidate of all 'contaminations' and to present him pure and without blemish before the deity. All the required clothing items in fulfilment of this ritual are provided by both the paternal and maternal families. The paternal family presents a white jumper and *adasaa*, while his mother's people provide myrrh, powder and pomade. The use of white among the Ga people symbolizes peace, victory, joy and so on. Appropriately therefore his paternal family expresses the joy and honour accorded them by the deity for selecting a member of the family to that position. To the maternal family, his security is paramount; hence the use of myrrh which is believed to have strong spiritual powers to ward off evil eyes and evil spirits.

The chief priest does not wear body marks of any sort. The fact that his appointment is not done by human beings but through the deity, it is obvious the deity will fortify him. Again, from the day the candidate is selected until his death he is forbidden to use footwear. This custom signifies the candidates reverence to the deity, and also helps him gain direct spiritual powers from the ground. Even though this tradition might seem risky, because a person might get hurt walking barefoot, it is very commendable because it is believed to have some health benefits, such as working on the nerves of the individual and thereby facilitating the blood cycle. Hence, it is highly recommended for all manner of people. (Kwakye-Opong, 2011)

The third day of his confinement is very significant, as he is honoured with the symbol of his rank, the *afili*; off-white string of beads worn as bracelet on the right hand. This priestly insignia is worn by the chief priest throughout his entire life, and as long as he remains in that position.

### ***Ordination and Related Costume***

Having gone through the seclusion period the candidate is ordained as a chief priest. His dress code on this occasion includes; a white jumper, white *adasaa*, a multi-coloured kente cloth, the *afili* and bundles of *adiagba* beads. Other symbolic beads include *tonyoro*, *ade*, *fufua*, *bihii ale-nii* and *dade kulo*. These beads come in different colours, and they are believed to protect the chief priest and the community spiritually, as well as elevate his position and role. For example he expresses his dominant position by wearing the *afili* on both the left and right wrists. An alternating red and black stringed bead is also worn as an anklet, and its import according to Ga oral tradition is to protect the chief priest against any evil means of attack from the ground. Other accessories used for the ordination and also during festive occasions include five beads worn as wristlet and two others as anklets.

What are the potency and/or significance of the beads? As shown in figures 1, 2, 5, 7&8, the first wristlet; the *afili*, identifies the *wolomo* as the chief priest of the traditional area or family. Next in line is the *fufua* which is in blue and ash colour and believed to have the power of protecting him. The third, *tɔnyɔrɔ* also in red colour is for instant self defence against malevolent spirits. The fourth and fifth, *ade* and *bihii ale nii*, identified with a combination of yellow and green, as well as light green re-



**Figure 2.**  
Nuumo Yemotey VI (right) wearing the 'corn row' hairstyle holding the *mmleti* used to clear the way for the *Homowo* festival.



**Figure 3.**  
Nuumo Yemotey VI wearing a white jumper, togas and a loin cloth and the *akotsele*.



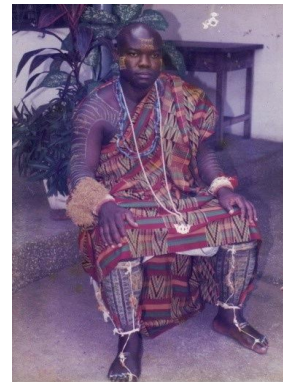
**Figure 4.**  
Nuumo Yemotey VI holding the ceremonial cudgel: *gbulo* (front right)



**Figure 5.**  
Nuumo Yemotey VI with body markings holding performing rituals during the *Homowo* festival.



**Figure 6.**  
Nuumo Yemotey VI sprinkling kpokpoi during the *Homowo* festival.



**Figure 7.**  
Nuumo Yemotey VI wearing kente cloth, body designs and the *afili, tonyoro, ade, fufua, bihii ale-nii and dadekulo* beads during his ordination. Nuumo Yemotey VI wearing kente cloth, body designs and the *afili, tonyoro, ade, fufua, bihii ale-nii and dadekulo* beads during his ordination.

spectively, are for 'magico religious purposes'. Other beads with similar characteristics include the Dade kulo and nakutsonii which are worn on the upper arms and on the upper part of the ankle respectively. (Kwakyee-Opong, 2011)

Even though these beads and their symbolic connotations are almost similar to that of the priest and priestess, there are some differences. For instance, among the bracelet worn by the Nai *wolomo*, is the *banka*, which is distinct from that of the priests because it has additional three precious stones which are symbolic. These stones come in blue, yellow and red colours, representing, the sea; wealth accrued from the earth and heaven respectively. Consequently it shows the status of the Nai *wolomo* as the representative of the sea deity, and elevates him as the intermediary between the community and God (Nortey, 2008) As shown in figure 4, the chief priest also wears specific beads, *shishe*, on his left ankle and a spiritually fortified string is tied around the knee, which is connected further to his toes. This connection of the string to the toe symbolises his allegiance to the deity, and his commitment to the spiritual welfare of the people. Again his hair is clean shaved; however, a small portion of hair is left at the back to signify him as the prime custodian of the rules and regulations of the land.

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*Clothes Associated with Annual Ceremonies: Hair Styles/Headdress, Facial Hair, Style of Dress, Body Designs, and Hand Utens*

The dress code of the chief priest during ceremonial occasions differs from the ordination, and comprises hair styles, style of dress, body design and hand items. To the Ga, plaiting and braiding of hair as well as wearing headgear are synonymous with the grooming of women. Nonetheless, during ceremonial occasions the Ga chief priest is demanded by custom to wear any of these clothing items because he is believed and seen as the mother of the community, therefore using all forms of coiffure is a physical and symbolic means to project 'her' parenting role. It further assists 'her' to prove 'her' tender affection, and also constantly remind the community of 'her' care and unflinching support.

There are thus several symbolic headdresses as well as hair styles, most of which are inherited from past chief priests. Some of these coiffures include braiding/plaiting, the Ako-tsele (Parrot feathers) and the kotofai as shown in figure 3, left. The Ako-tsele is a type of cap decorated with the feathers of a parrot. (See figure 2) The use of the feathers as an embellishment projects the chief priest as the spokesperson and direct representative of the deity in that, the parrot is a bird known for its skills and natural tendency in echoing people. As a result the use of the feathers helps the Ga to be convinced that the *wolomo* is a true reflection or direct representative of the deity in power and might. Consequently whatever he says and does, as well as requires of the people is the exact message from the deity. The third, kotofai, is a type of cap made with white material and sewn like layers of feathers. This symbolic hat shown in figure 3 (left) is cut into three hundred and sixty-five edges, with each representing each day in the calendar year; which is meant to intercede for the Ga. The edges are cut into seven layers, with each overlapping the other, and represent the seven waves of the sea (Nortey 2008). There are also other caps generally referred to as *amane*, (tradition) which are made of leather and worn for spiritual protection. (See figures 5&8) To authenticate and also symbolise their assumed Israel origin, a white rectangular piece of cloth can also be used and worn as a turban. (Figure 3, third from left)

White materials such as calico, velvet, satin and lace are sewn in styles like a jumper and togas; a big cloth and jumper or a big cloth worn over a jumper and togas, as shown in figures 1,2&3.

One distinct feature of the clothing elements of the *wolomo* is the use of beard. The investigation revealed that every *wolomo* must wear a beard. (Figures 2, 3, 5, 7, 8) Papa Nii Myers, a king maker from Ga Mashie explained that some Ga spiritual heads such as the chief and the *wolomo* must block frontal attacks from evil spirits, consequently some of their protective powers must be enshrined in their beard.



**Figure 8.**  
Chief priests in different priestly clothes including the *kotofai* (left)

Special materials such as myrrh are used to create body designs as an allegiance to a deity. For example, green myrrh is believed by the Ga, to have a sweet medicinal scent to ward off evil spirits. As a result during ordination and on ceremonial occasions the hands and legs of the chief priest are decorated with myrrh to protect him. The designs are made in lines and shapes. The straight line symbolise the uprightness of the deity during judicial matters, while a circle for instance gives a holistic view of success as emanating from love and unity.

Some hand items have specific spiritual roles to play as accompanied accessories needed to complement the clothing and adornment of the *wolomo* in performing distinct ritual duties. Some of these items includes the ceremonial cudgel (*gbulo*) shown in figure 5, the *mmleti* and the walking stick (Figures 1& 7) which are used for spiritual cleansing. For instance the *mmleti* is used to drive evil spirit or clear the way for the beginning of a ritual event such as the annual *Homowo* festival, or for cleansing and clearing the womb of a barren woman to enable her bear children. (See Nuumo Yemotey VI in figure 1 using the *mmleti* in performing the womb cleansing ritual for a priestess)

### ***Costume and the Annual Homowo Festival***

Within every culture worldwide, costumes are worn to mark annual celebrations, transitions in life as well as in remembrance of past heroes. During such moments the clothing and adornment of the Ga *wolomo* function according to the occasion and its demands, where his outfits help to project his office and jurisdiction. Among the activities on the Ga annual calendar is the *Homowo* festival, celebrated in remembrance of their victory over hunger. The festival starts with a ban on drumming, which is charac-

terized by a ritual performance led by the chief priest. In this instance the *wolomo* plaits his hair, applies myrrh on both hands, and wears the *adiagba* beads on his neck, knees and ankle. Both wrists are decked with the *afili*, *tonyoro*, *ade*, *fufua*, *bihii ale-nii*, and *dadekulo* beads, together with the *shishe* bead worn around the knee. Additionally, he is bare chest but wears a piece of white cloth around his waist with some left to hang at the front and back. All those who help with this ritual performance dress in white to denote victory over hunger. To symbolically confirm the ban on drumming, the *wolomo* later adds the *Ako-tsele* cap to his original costume and with a hoe, he digs the ground. (Figure7)

There is a day within the festival for eating the spiritual meal, *kpokpoi*; when the *wolomo* sprinkles some of it for the gods and ancestors around the principal streets of the town. His ritual clothes on this occasion include a long jumper worn over a pair of trousers made with calico. This special jumper (Figure 9) known as *Gan*, (probably gotten by corrupting the word gown) is used for all religious ceremonies and as indicated earlier on, it supports the Ga presumed ancestry with ancient Israel, where the chief priest wore a long tunic.

### ***Spiritual Healing and Related Clothing Items***

As the 'mother' of the community, (noted on an earlier page) the *wolomo* is seen as the god of fertility, who receives spiritual powers from the deity to solve the problem of childlessness. Barren women and men with sterility problems consult the *wolomo* in that regard. If the problem is spiritual, the *wolomo* is able to cure such people by means of the *mmleti* and a preparation of the *nyanyara* leaf. When the issue arises because of health implications, then herbal treatment is given with only the *nyanyara* medicine to the patient to cure his/her ailment. This service from the *wolomo* helps to erase the shame of the affected people in the community, and also make them proud parents who will help in procreation and thus continue the family lineage. To Nuumo Yemotey VI, his clothing elements play a very significant role in psychologically healing the people. The use of the white gown; the several symbolic beads; the *mmleti* broom used to ward off evil spirit, and the *nyanyara* leaf believed to possess magical powers, all help in the physical and spiritual exercise of curing bareness, sterility, madness and other spiritual illnesses. In that vein after knowing their specific problems through consultation "I quickly change into the already mentioned clothing items and immediately they see me, I perceive some joy and conviction on their faces, that gives me hope and complete confidence in the medicine I am about to administer".

### ***Clothes Associated with the Daily Activities of the Chief Priest***

Clothes used by the *wolomo* on ordinary days differ from all the others already discussed. He is at liberty to use casual clothes when he is at home, when he does not have to perform any ritual assignment. Accordingly, in my first interaction with Nuumo Yemotey at his residence, he was dressed in a white Lacoste shirt, a white cap and an *adasaa* which had a white background. He was barefoot. On another visit he was met wearing a white shirt over blue-black togas. He noted that the *wolomo* can wear such

clothes provided they have a white background. Nonetheless, the mantles of authority, which are the *afili* and the *shishe* must be worn always; “even when you go to sleep in the night, because removing them means that the person has automatically disowned the position”.

The chief priest is permitted to marry and bear children. His wife by tradition also uses the same beads worn by her husband, such as the *tonyoro*, *ade*, *bihii ale-nii*, and *dade kulo*. Her clothes are basically two loin clothes; one worn over the other around the bust. Her hair style is fashioned after that of her husband’s deity. Consequently Nuumo Yemotey VI’s wife wears the *gele* hair style, which is plaited with black thread and held high on top of her head. (Figure 9)



**Figure 9.**  
The wife of Nuumo Yemotey VI wearing the *afili*, *ade*, *bihii ale* beads and the *akukuli* hair style.

### ***Conclusion***

The paper proposed at the very beginning that the Ga people of Ghana have a political organisation that is headed by the chief priest who doubles as the spiritual head. The Ga, political structure under the chief priest has roles and functions that are promoted by specific costumes. Other examples of symbolic costumes used by priests from other ethnic groups such as the Ashanti and Krobos, all from Ghana were observed to have similar functions like that of the Ga. However, a contrast was drawn between the Akan traditional governance and that of the Ga, noting that whilst the Akan rule with only chiefs the Ga has the chief priest as their political head. In general, other literary works consulted, revealed that

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priests and priestesses represent their various deities and perform ritual assignments on their behalf. They act as “mediators between the everyday world and the world of the gods, and also provide healing and guidance” for the people. The *Akonnedi* head priestess for instance was associated with curing paralysis. Tracing her origin from Germany, *Mame Wata* priestess also relates she “summons health, prosperity and fertility”. Moreover, the *sumanbrafo* priest of Ashanti Ghana wears specific clothing items that help him to discharge his powers when he is possessed.

The article further identified the dress code associated with the socio-cultural activities of the Ga Chief priest. The role of his costumes as outlined in this paper indicates the significant state of the art in establishing the appointment, installation, as well as ceremonial clothes of the chief priest, focusing also on the role of his adornments. His presence on festive days is very important because his clothing and adornments promote and sustain the confidence, faith and security of the people. The chief priest also helps the community psychologically during the treatment of sicknesses and during the solution of their peculiar problems. In this respect all the clothing elements of the chief priest are believed to safeguard him and the community against malevolent spirits. The use of white clothes by the chief priest for instance projects his purity. Wearing several types of coiffure is a physical and spiritual means to portray him as a “mother” who has tender affection for her children. The use of hand items, specific beads and special materials such as myrrh also reveal his ability to provide spiritual security for himself and the community. Specific costumes were further designed to delineate appointment, seclusion, ordination, and ceremonial occasions such as the *Homowo* festival as well as those used on daily basis. Finally, the numerous clothing items used such as the *mmlati* and the *nyanyara* leaf which are believed to have magical powers, help to physically and spiritually safeguard the people.

It is clear from the discussion that clothing has different functions. It helps to delineate rank, the geographical location of a people, as well as determine the cultural perceptions of some fraternity. It can help to physically and spiritually protect a people, and through the use of colour, it denotes the emotional stance of a person or a society. Consequently the clothing and adornment of the Ga chief shows his elevated social status that indicated prosperity and good health for the people. It is imperative that the clothing items used by the Ga chief priest indicate the relevant position of the art in the cultural dispensation of the people as well as their communal development.

Significantly, the article has built on the works of Kwakye-Opong (2011) and Nortey (2008) by improving reports on the trend, and the spiritual relevance of costumes used by the chief priest during his selection, ordination, ceremonial occasions, healing and his day-to-day activities. Again the paper adds to the minimal documentation on the history of Ga costume. It will also benefit cultural anthropologist, costumiers, ethnographers, lecturers in African art and Culture, as well as people who want to upgrade their knowledge in the Ga history. The paper finally recommends further studies to close up missing gaps in areas such as: (a) Hair styles, Headgear and Hand Items used by Ghanaians from pre-colonial period to the present.



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