



The Tiboaar Divination Ritual as Indigenous Total Theatre: A Performative Analysis

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Abstract

Existing scholarship on African divination has focused overwhelmingly on its religious, therapeutic and social functions, leaving open the question of whether such rituals possess codified dramaturgical structure. This article addresses that gap through an ethnographic case study of the *Tiboaar* divination ritual performed by the *Bikpakpaam* (Konkomba people) of Ghana. Working from Schechner's Performance Theory and Turner's Ritual Theatre Theory, the analysis identifies six performative elements embedded in the ritual, namely theme, plot, character, dialogue, technical elements and audience, and shows that its plot follows a five-part structure moving from the arrival of the diviners through rising action, climax, falling action and an artistic denouement. Read alongside the ritual origins of Athenian and English Renaissance theatre, and against anthropological objections to analysing ritual through dramatic categories, the *Tiboaar* is best understood not as equivalent to Greek dramatic form but as evidence of a parallel and independent theatrical evolution within Konkomba funerary practice. The article concludes by considering the implications of this codification for African theatre historiography and for the documentation of indigenous performance as living cultural heritage.

Keywords: Konkomba divination ritual, total theatre, Performance Theory, Ritual Theatre Theory, African theatre historiography, indigenous performance

1. Introduction

Divination occupies a well-established place in African studies, where it has been examined chiefly as a mechanism of social control, therapeutic intervention and communication with the ancestral world. Studies of Ndembu, Dagbon, Yoruba and Sisala divinatory practice, among many others, have illuminated how communities use divination to interpret misfortune, restore order and mediate between the living and the dead. What this substantial body of work has left largely unaddressed is the question of form, namely whether these rituals are themselves organised as dramatic works possessing plot, character, dialogue and the other recognisable elements of theatrical art. This article takes up that question through a sustained analysis of the *Tiboaar* divination ritual practised by the *Bikpakpaam*, the Konkomba people of Ghana, during the *Uboa-Daal*, the divination day that concludes a final funeral rite.

Throughout this article, the terms dramatic and theatrical are used interchangeably to refer to the codified formal elements, namely plot, character, dialogue and the rest, that structure a performance event, rather than to distinguish a literary dramatic text from its staged theatrical realisation. Since the *Tiboaar* has no written text and exists only in performance, this study is concerned with theatricality in precisely this formal, structural sense.



International Journal of Arts, Culture and Creative Studies (IJACC)

Volume 1 | Issue 1 | 2026 | Article ID: 1113-0327-6511 | <https://doi.org/10.64823/ijacc.2601002>

IORO Publications · Texas, USA · www.ioro.org

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Despite extensive scholarship on African divination rituals, comparatively little attention has been paid to their dramaturgical organisation. Existing studies, reviewed in detail below, focus primarily on the religious, social and therapeutic functions of divination, leaving unanswered the question of whether these rituals possess codified theatrical structures comparable to recognised dramatic forms. This gap is compounded by a practical concern. The *Tiboaar*/divination ritual of the *Bikpakpaam* is, by the account of the diviners and family heads consulted for this study, gradually losing some of its performative detail as formal education, religious conversion and social change reshape rural Ghanaian funerary practice, with elements such as the artistic narration and certain costume conventions already in visible decline. The problem this article addresses is therefore twofold, namely the absence of a dramaturgical account of the *Tiboaar* in the scholarly literature, and the practical urgency of producing such an account while the ritual's full performative range remains observable.

1.2. Research Objectives

This study pursued the following objectives:

- I. To identify the performative elements embedded within the *Tiboaar* ritual.
- II. To analyse, using Performance Theory and Ritual Theatre Theory, how these elements function dramaturgically within the performance.
- III. To examine the implications of this codification for decolonising African theatre historiography.

1.3. Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions:

- I. What theatrical elements are present within the *Tiboaar* ritual?
- II. How do these elements function during performance?
- III. In what ways does the ritual complicate dominant narratives about the origins and geography of theatrical form?

2. Literature Review

2.1. African Divination Scholarship

Divination has attracted sustained anthropological attention across West Africa, though almost entirely from perspectives that bracket questions of dramatic form. In the Ghanaian context, Fortes and Goody (1987), Cardinall (1969), Nukunya (2003), Abotchie (1997) and Oppong (1973) have examined divination's role in social control, kinship and morality among Northern and Southern Ghanaian communities, while Adongo, Phillips and Binka (1998), Mendonsa (1974, 1982), Awalu (2009) and Azongo and Yidana (2015) have documented the diagnostic and therapeutic functions of divination among the Dagomba and Sisala peoples, treating the diviner primarily as a healer and diagnostician rather than as a performer. Mendonsa's (1982) account of Sisala symbol-spinning divination is unusually attentive to the diviner's use of ritual objects and vocal invocation, yet even here the analytical frame remains diagnostic rather than dramaturgical. Beyond Ghana, Clarke (1939) and Bascom's (1969) studies of Yoruba Ifa divination describe an elaborate and highly codified consultative practice, noting that interpretation varies between practitioners and that the diviner's skill lies substantially in adapting a received symbolic repertoire to the specific circumstances of the enquirer,

a description that gestures toward performative skill without naming it as such. Abukari, Issah and Adam's (2022) more recent study of divination among the Dagbamba similarly foregrounds the function of divination in managing life crises rather than its formal or aesthetic structure. Across this literature, the diviner appears consistently as a ritual specialist, healer or diagnostician, and only rarely, and then only implicitly, as a performer working within a structured dramatic form.

This pattern is not confined to Ghanaian and Yoruba material. Comparative accounts of Chinese, Rwandan, Burundian and Plains Indian divination (Hsu, 1948; Bourgeois, 1956; Lowie, 1935) share the same diagnostic emphasis, a recurrence across such disparate traditions suggesting a broader disciplinary tendency to read ritual through anthropological rather than performance-analytic categories, one that this article seeks to correct for the *Tiboaar* specifically.

2.2. *Ritual and Theatre*

A separate and substantial literature has addressed the relationship between ritual and theatre more directly, without focusing on divination as such. Soyinka (1976) argues that African drama's essential character is inseparable from its ritual origins, tracing a lineage from Yoruba cosmology and the archetypal ritual of transition through to contemporary African tragic form, and explicitly contests the notion that African societies lacked dramatic tradition prior to European contact. Drewal (1992) develops a performance-centred account of Yoruba ritual that treats participants as knowing agents who generate meaning through play, improvisation and embodied action rather than through fixed liturgical repetition, a framework that anticipates the emphasis this article places on the *Tiboaar*'s audience as an active interpretive party. Barber (2000) documents the popular Yoruba travelling theatre tradition and its debts to indigenous performance convention, while Okafor's (1998) ethnographic account of Igbo ritual, on which this study draws directly, explicitly describes Igbo funerary and divinatory performance as total theatre in which performer and audience together produce the event. More recently, Mark's (2024) study of audience participation in the Ebira Ekuechi festival and Sam Ukala's play *Iredi War*, and Wondimu and Nasir's (2023) documentation of indigenous drama elements in Gurage folk performance in Ethiopia, confirm that the codification of ritual and festival performance through recognisable dramatic categories remains an active and productive line of enquiry in African performance studies. This article extends that line of enquiry to a ritual, the Konkomba *Tiboaar*, that has not previously been analysed in these terms. This line of enquiry remains current: Odutsa (2025) has most recently argued for reading the dramatic foundations of African cultural performance directly out of age-old ritual rather than importing them from elsewhere, a position this article's codification of the *Tiboaar* substantiates with a single, densely documented case.

2.3. *African Indigenous Performance and Total Theatre*

The concept of total theatre, in which performance integrates plot, character, dialogue, music, dance and spectacle without the strict separation of these elements found in some Western dramatic traditions, has been particularly influential in scholarship on Igbo and broader West African ritual performance (Okafor, 1998). This article adopts the concept in that established sense, while extending its application to a ritual tradition, that of the *Bikpakpaam*, that has not previously been read through this lens. Taken together, the divination scholarship, the ritual-theatre literature and the total theatre concept establish both the gap this article addresses and the conceptual vocabulary needed to address it.

2.4. *Theoretical Framework*

The analysis is guided by two complementary theories. Performance Theory, developed principally by Richard Schechner (1988), examines the relationship between theatrical performance and everyday social and ritual

activity, treating performance as a dynamic interaction between performers and audiences shaped by cultural, social and historical context. Schechner's account was itself shaped by Turner's work on ritual performance, and it foregrounds the idea of restored or twice-behaved behaviour, meaning actions that are repeated, rehearsed or drawn from previously existing behaviours rather than performed for the first time. Bauman (1986) extends this by describing performance as a distinctive mode of communication in which the performer assumes responsibility for demonstrating communicative competence before an audience that, in turn, claims the right to observe and evaluate what is offered.

Ritual Theatre Theory, associated with Victor Turner (1988), supplies the second lens. Turner used ritual as an analytical frame for reading cultural patterns, arguing that ritual temporarily frees participants from the rigid structures of everyday life and creates what he termed an anti-structure, a space in which transformation and communal bonding occur through performance.

The two theories are combined here rather than applied singly because they answer different questions that a codification of the *Tiboaar* requires. Performance Theory is oriented toward the identification and functional description of discrete theatrical elements within an event, and it is this orientation that makes it suited to the first analytical task of this article, namely establishing that theme, plot, character, dialogue, technical elements and audience are each identifiable within the ritual. Ritual Theatre Theory, by contrast, is oriented toward explaining why a performance recurs in a given cultural form and what social work its repetition accomplishes, which is the second task this article undertakes, namely explaining why the *Tiboaar*'s theatrical elements take the specific form they do and how that form sustains the ritual's continuity within Konkomba funerary practice. Neither theory alone would be adequate for both tasks. Performance Theory's attention to discrete elements risks treating the ritual as a static inventory of dramatic parts, while Ritual Theatre Theory's attention to social function risks bypassing the specific formal features, such as the five-part plot structure identified below, that make the *Tiboaar* recognisable as a codified performance rather than simply as a socially significant event.

Both theories also carry limitations relevant to this study. Schechner's framework was developed largely from Euro-American and South Asian performance traditions, and its categories, while genuinely illuminating here, are not native to Konkomba conceptual vocabulary, a point taken up further in the discussion below. Turner's concept of anti-structure has itself been criticised, notably by Bell (1992), for imposing a functionalist logic onto ritual, in which the analyst presumes in advance that ritual must resolve or comment upon social tension and then reads the ritual as confirming that presumption. This study mitigates that risk by grounding its claims about the *Tiboaar*'s theatrical elements in direct ethnographic description of the performance rather than in a prior theoretical claim about what the ritual must be doing socially, and by treating the theories as an interpretive lens applied to independently described data rather than as the source of the data itself.

Operationally, Performance Theory guided the identification of the six performative elements discussed in the Findings section below, with each element defined according to the theory's own account of dramatic structure, character function, and audience role, and Ritual Theatre Theory guided the interpretation, in the Discussion section, of why these elements are organised as they are and what their persistence accomplishes for the *Bikpakpaam*.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative ethnographic case study design. Ethnography was selected because it allows the researcher to study cultural phenomena in their natural context and to interpret meaning through detailed, descriptive accounts, an approach well suited to a ritual that exists only in live, unscripted performance and cannot be adequately understood through documentary sources alone. The case study element was adopted because the objective was an in-depth, non-interventionist account of a single, bounded performance event rather than a comparison across cases, following Yin's (2018) observation that case study design is appropriate when a researcher seeks a rich, contextualised account of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life setting.

3.2. Study Site

Data were gathered at a *Tiboaar* performance held at Adjaradjah Beposo, a suburb of Prang in the Bono Region of Ghana. This site was not selected for any feature distinguishing it from other Konkomba communities, but through the practical logistics of gatekeeper access, since the researchers were able to secure the consent of a family head and diviner conducting a divination ritual at this location within the study period. The *Bikpakpaam* themselves regard the ritual's core performative elements as consistent across communities, a claim this study is not in a position to verify comparatively but reports as the community's own understanding of the ritual's uniformity.

3.3. Participants and Sampling

The accessible population for this study comprised one diviner, his deputy, one family head and the members of one bereaved family and community gathered for a single *Tiboaar* performance, summarised in Table 1. The diviner and the divination ritual itself were purposively sampled, on the grounds that purposive sampling is appropriate when a researcher selects a case for its specific relevance to the phenomenon under study rather than for statistical representativeness. The family head was identified through snowball sampling, beginning with the immediate bereaved family and extending, on their referral, to the senior family head with authority over the funeral rite.

Table 1. Participants in the Study

Participant	Number	Role
Diviner (Uboa)	1	Lead performer / narrator of the dead
Deputy diviner (Uboachuur)	1	Narrator / continuity performer
Family head (Uninkple)	1	Ritual custodian and convenor
Community members and elders	Not individually enumerated	Gathering / validating audience

Individual demographic detail, including the diviner's age and years of practice, was not systematically recorded during data collection and cannot be reported here; this is noted as a limitation rather than presented as complete. This is also a single-site, single-event case study, and the article makes no claim that its findings have been verified across multiple performances or communities. Both limitations are addressed directly in the concluding section, which calls for comparative replication.

3.4. *Data Collection*

Four data collection instruments were used. Oral interviews, both unstructured and semi-structured, were conducted with the diviner, the family head and other community members with direct knowledge of the ritual, following a loose protocol of broad opening prompts, namely what the ritual entails, why it is performed, when it occurs and how it is conducted, each followed by probing follow-up questions tailored to the participant's response, for example asking a participant who mentioned the artistic narration to describe, in his own words, what made a particular narration "good" or convincing, rather than working from a fixed interview schedule. With participants' consent, interviews were recorded in field notebooks and by audio recording, transcribed, and shared with participants for accuracy checking. Observation combined participant and non-participant modes across two phases, the first during the divination performance itself and the second in the period immediately following it, and was documented through field notes recording setting, participants, verbal content, tone and nonverbal cues. Videography and photography of the performance provided an audio-visual record that served as the primary evidentiary basis for identifying the ritual's performative elements, since the recorded footage allowed repeated review that a single live observation could not. Archival review of the secondary literature on divination performance, discussed above, supplemented and contextualised the primary data.

3.5. *Data Analysis*

Data were analysed using content analysis of the video and photographic record, following a hybrid coding process that combined inductive and deductive stages. In the first, inductive stage, the observational, interview and audio-visual data were organised, summarised, and reviewed for recurring actions and roles without reference to any prior dramatic vocabulary. In the second, deductive stage, these inductively identified patterns were then organised against the six-element vocabulary of theme, plot, character, dialogue, technical elements and audience drawn from dramatic theory, coded manually rather than through software-assisted coding. In the third stage, these coded elements were linked back to the interview and observational data to generate the interpretive account presented in the Findings and Discussion sections below. Presenting the six elements in that order in the Findings section reflects the vocabulary used to organise the write-up and should not be read as evidence that the categories were assumed prior to fieldwork. This process followed Merriam's (1998) account of data immersion and treated the analysis, following Knoblauch and Tuma (2019), as fundamentally a hermeneutic activity in which the analyst's own cultural competence is a necessary interpretive resource rather than a source of bias to be eliminated.

3.6. *Trustworthiness*

Credibility was supported through triangulation across three categories of data sources, namely the diviner, the family head and other community members with firsthand knowledge of the ritual, together with the photographic and videographic record used to confirm or disconfirm claims made in the interview. Peer debriefing was conducted at each stage of the study, from the literature review through to data analysis and interpretation, with trusted colleagues reviewing the developing account for internal consistency and interpretive plausibility. Member checking was limited to the transcript-accuracy verification described above under data collection, and did not extend to the interpretive claims made in this article, which are the authors' own; this is noted as a limitation rather than presented as fully resolved.

3.7. *Ethical Considerations*

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and consent forms were signed by the diviner and his deputy specifically authorising photography and videography for academic purposes. An introductory letter

from the researcher's institution was presented to the family in advance of data collection, and customary courtesies, including the presentation of cola nuts, fowls and drinks to the family head and diviners, were observed before data gathering began, in recognition of the ritual's sacred status within the community. No participant is identified by name in this article or in the underlying study, and sensitive or confidential ritual knowledge is presented only with the permission of the cultural custodians concerned.

3.8. Researcher Reflexivity

This study was conducted within the interpretivist and constructivist paradigm described above, which combines an emic engagement with the ritual's meaning as the Birkpakpaam themselves understand it with an etic, analytic distance that allows the researcher to organise that meaning against a dramatic vocabulary the community does not itself use. Maintaining that combination in practice required deliberate reflexive checks rather than a single declared standpoint. The lead researcher's relationship to the community was mediated throughout by gatekeeper introduction and customary courtesy rather than pre-existing kinship or residence, a position that afforded the etic distance the paradigm calls for while depending on the family head and diviner's willingness to explain emic meaning that would not otherwise have been available to an outside observer. This positioning was treated as a resource to be made explicit rather than a bias to be eliminated: the peer debriefing described above under Trustworthiness served in part to surface moments where the researcher's own disciplinary training in dramatic theory risked reading structure into the ritual faster than the observational record supported, and the coding process described under Data Analysis was deliberately sequenced, inductive description first, dramatic categorisation second, to slow that tendency down.

4. Findings

Findings are reported using *Likpakpaaln* terms, such as *Uboa*, *Uninkple* and *Eibua Monn*, as the primary vocabulary, with English dramatic categories used to organise rather than to replace them; this choice follows the *Birkpakpaam*'s own naming of the ritual's parts and is intended to keep the indigenous terminology, rather than its English gloss, as the analytical anchor throughout.

The *Tiboaar*/divination ritual unfolds across a full production cycle rather than as an isolated act. The pre-production stage occurs when family members gather at the head of the family's house to set a date and select a diviner. The production stage takes place on *Uboa-Daal*, the divination day itself, when the ritual is performed live before the family and community. The post-production stage follows as the family responds to whatever further ritual action the diviner has prescribed to allow the spirit of the dead to rest. The ritual is not rehearsed, its characters are not cast or auditioned, and its dialogue is not scripted in advance. The findings below present the six performative elements identified in the data, namely theme, plot, character, dialogue, technical elements and audience, largely as they were observed and reported; interpretation of their broader significance is reserved for the Discussion section that follows.

4.1. Theme

The *Tiboaar* carries two interlocking themes recorded consistently across observation and interview data. The first is to give the deceased a befitting funeral and a final farewell. The second is the expectation that the gathered family and community will receive a message from the dead and their ancestors, disclosing the circumstances of the deceased's demise. Audience members reported, in post-performance discussion, that they frequently left the divination ground with a changed attitude toward the deceased and with lessons applicable to their own future conduct.

4.2. Plot

Observation and videographic review identified a five-part plot structure. The first part is the arrival of the diviners and elders on the divination ground, in which the diviner is paid in cowries and fowls, and the name of the deceased is announced. The second part sees the diviner seek permission from elders, youth and mothers to proceed, withdraw briefly to consult the dead, and mark the entrance to the family head's house with a ritual sign before announcing the arrival of the deceased's spirit at the divination ground. The third part is the performance of the divination proper, in which the diviner narrates the circumstances of the deceased's demise, sometimes plainly and sometimes in veiled language, depending on the sensitivity of what is disclosed. Where the diviner has spoken in veiled terms, a fourth part follows, in which the elders consult in secrecy using three divination sticks known as *Eibua Monn*, striking the stick that represents the answer they judge correct. The fifth part is an artistic narration, in which the deputy diviner recounts everything the main diviner has said from beginning to end, marking the formal close of the ritual.

4.3. Characters

The *Tiboaar* is populated by a defined set of characters occupying recognisable functions. The *Uboa*, or main diviner, and the *Uboachuur*, the deputy diviner, lead the ritual alongside *Uninkple*, the family head, his fellow elders, and an invisible character, *Utikpiir*, the ghost or spirit of the dead, summoned to the divination ground in the spiritual realm. The diviner functions as director, actor and continuity artist, directing the unfolding action according to what he receives from the spirit world while performing the role of that spirit himself, switching between the voice of the diviner and the voice of the dead for the duration of the ritual. The deputy diviner functions as narrator, reprising rather than generating the ritual's content. *Uninkple*, as the acknowledged representative of the ancestors and the family's chief priest, anchors the ritual's judicial and administrative dimension. *Utikpiir*, the invisible spirit of the dead, occupies the position of protagonist or antagonist depending on the moral character of the deceased's life, a status that is itself an outcome of the diviner's narration rather than a fixed attribute given in advance. Supporting roles include the woman who pours powder on the diviner as a sign of belief, those who make financial offerings, and the women who ululate in the diviner's support from behind the performance space. The diviner's own role is described in terms consistent with this study's observation: he "knows, hears, speaks to the deity and sees beyond the physical world" (Njoku, 1994, p. 28), a description that captures the same dual capacity, as both narrator and impersonated spirit, identified in the character analysis above.

4.4. Dialogue

Dialogue in the *Tiboaar* takes the form of verbal exchange between the diviner, the gathered family and the spiritual world, sometimes narrowing to monologue when the main diviner alone addresses the gathering. The content of the dialogue is understood by the *Bikpakpaam* to originate with the dead and the ancestors and to be transmitted through the diviner under their direction, producing communication across several distinct channels within a single performance, between the invisible spirit and the diviner, between the diviner and the family head, between the diviner and the gathered audience, and between the diviner and the women who ululate or offer praise from the margins of the performance space. The diviner draws on repetition, personification, proverbial language, symbolism, rhetorical questioning and figurative speech to deliver the message, and modulates tone between the tragic, the comic and the tragic-comic according to the moral weight of what is disclosed. The following exchange, recorded during the performance, illustrates the deputy's interpretive rather than purely reproductive role: the diviner instructed, "*Tell my elders to distance themselves and speak a certain language there for Uninkple Lanlir,*" and the deputy relayed this to the gathering as, "*My elders, distance yourselves. Let custom and tradition speak for Uninkple Lanlir, and then*

revert.” The deputy does not repeat the diviner's words verbatim but recasts them in the register of custom and tradition, confirming his function as narrator rather than mere echo.

4.5. Technical Elements

The *Tiboaar* is structured by a recognisable set of technical elements, comprising setting, costume, properties, sound and light. The setting is the *Linakochabal*, the forecourt of the family head's house, functioning as a fixed performance space bound to the family's cultural and spiritual authority. Audience seating takes the form of an arena or theatre-in-the-round arrangement, with elders positioned nearest the performance space and younger community members further back. Costume distinguishes the diviner and his deputy from the gathered mourners, while the audience and sympathisers wear black and red to signal grief. Properties include the diviner's staff, seat, bell, cowries and *dawadawa* leaves. Sound is supplied by chant, ululation and song, recorded during observation in the women's ululation, “Kuu Linn, linn, linn, linnn,” directed at the diviner as an evidentiary endorsement of his disclosure rather than a generic expression of celebration. Light is simply the sun, situating the *Tiboaar* within the tradition of open-air, communal African performance.

4.6. Audience

The audience of the *Tiboaar*, referred to within the community as the gathering, was observed to be an active party whose participation authenticates the ritual rather than a passive witness. Ululation, financial offering and the divination-within-divination performed by the elders using the *Eibua Monn* sticks together validate and lend credibility to what the diviner discloses, and the diviner in turn calls upon the gathering for confirmation before proceeding. This authorisation follows a fixed verbal pattern recorded during observation: the diviner asks, “Bi Ninkpiib foo gne ti maa?” (elders, kindly do it for me), and the elders respond, “Li gneee! Li gneee!” (carry on, carry on), an exchange repeated in turn for the youth and the mothers present before the diviner may proceed.



Figure 1. Circular Model of Meaning-Making and Community Transformation in the Tiboaar Divination

5. Discussion

The findings reported above show that the *Tiboaar* is codified with theme, plot, character, dialogue, technical elements and audience in ways that are structurally comparable to the categories that dramatic theory, from Aristotle onward, has used to describe theatrical form. This section considers what that finding means, situates it against the existing literature reviewed above, and addresses a significant objection to the analytical approach taken here.

5.1. Confirming and Extending Prior Scholarship

The identification of a codified character system, with the diviner occupying a dynamic, round role comparable to a protagonist-narrator and the deputy diviner occupying a flat, narratorial role, extends Okafor's (1998) account of Igbo ritual as total theatre to a Konkomba context in which it has not previously been documented. It also lends specific empirical support to Drewal's (1992) more general claim that Yoruba ritual participants are knowing agents who generate meaning through improvisation, since the *Tiboaar* diviner's capacity to clothe sensitive disclosures in veiled language, and the elders' capacity to test those disclosures through divination-within-divination, both depend on exactly this kind of agentive, improvisatory skill rather than on the mechanical repetition of a fixed liturgical script. At the same time, the five-part plot structure identified here, moving from exposition through rising action, climax, falling action and denouement, is a more specific and more fully sequenced dramatic structure than the divination literature reviewed above has previously attributed to any West African divinatory ritual, and represents this study's principal extension of that literature. This matters because it shifts the analytical question from whether African ritual contains dramatic elements in some general sense, a point the ritual-theatre literature has established for other traditions, to how precisely those elements are sequenced and by whom they are authorised, a level of structural specificity that changes what counts as evidence in debates over indigenous dramatic form.

5.2. Engaging the Anthropological Objection

A significant strand of ritual studies scholarship would resist the reading offered here. Bell (1992) argues that performance-theoretic approaches to ritual are prone to a circularity in which the analyst presumes a dramatic or social structure in advance and then reports the ritual as confirming that presumed structure, treating ritual as a vehicle for dramatising conceptual categories that the analyst, rather than the community, has supplied. A discipline-specific version of the same objection comes from African theatre scholarship itself: Echeruo (1973) argued that Igbo ritual's dramatic potential is real but limited by its liturgical, sacred form, and that ritual would need to be secularised and built around individuated characters before it could properly be called drama. Applied to this study, the objection would run as follows, namely that describing the *Tiboaar* in terms of theme, plot and character imposes an Aristotelian vocabulary that is foreign to Konkomba understanding and risks distorting the ritual to fit a template it was never designed to match.

This objection carries genuine force and is not fully answerable within the scope of a single case study. Two considerations nonetheless justify the approach taken here. First, the six-element vocabulary was not imposed prior to fieldwork as a hypothesis to be confirmed, but was applied afterward to organise features of the performance, the five-part sequence of events, the diviner's dual role as narrator and impersonated spirit, the audience's validating interventions, that were independently observable and reported by the *Bikpakpaam* themselves as distinct components of the ritual's structure, even though the community does not use Aristotelian terminology to name them. Second, and more importantly, the purpose of the codification offered here is emphatically not to establish that the *Tiboaar* is theatre in the Western sense, or

theatre by virtue of resembling the Athenian stage, but to demonstrate that dramatic organisation of this general kind is not the exclusive property of any single cultural tradition. Bell's objection is best read as a caution against over-claiming equivalence rather than as a reason to abandon comparative analysis altogether, and the following section takes that caution explicitly on board.

5.3. *Parallel Evolution Rather than Equivalence*

Reading the *Tiboaar* against the historical account of Athenian theatre is instructive, but the comparison must be handled with care. Worthen (2007) traces Western drama's origins to religious festivals honouring Dionysus in classical Athens, in which competitive dramatic performance formed part of a multi-day cycle of procession, sacrifice and choral contest, a structural pattern, embedding a discrete performance event within a longer sequence of preparatory and closing ritual activity, that the *Tiboaar* shares in general outline. It does not follow, however, that the *Tiboaar* and Athenian tragedy are dramaturgically equivalent, still less that one derives from or explains the other. The two traditions arose independently, in unconnected cultural and historical circumstances, and their points of resemblance are better understood as parallel evolution, the recurrence in unrelated societies of broadly similar dramatic solutions to the shared human problem of organising communal meaning-making around death and crisis, than as evidence of any deeper structural identity between them. This distinction matters because claims of direct equivalence between African ritual and Greek tragedy have historically been used, in both directions, to rank rather than to compare traditions, and the argument of this article is better served by the more modest and more defensible claim that dramatic sophistication of a broadly comparable kind emerged independently in both settings.

The gender dimension of this comparison illustrates the value of the more cautious framing. Worthen (2007) notes that Athenian tragedy and comedy excluded women from the stage entirely, a convention English Renaissance theatre later reproduced through boy actors. Women in the *Tiboaar* do not perform as diviners, but they hold defined and indispensable participatory functions, including ululation, the pouring of powder, and financial offering, placing them inside the ritual's mechanics of authentication rather than in the marginal position women occupied on the classical and Renaissance stage. Read as parallel evolution rather than equivalence, this divergence is a finding in its own right, namely that assumptions about the universality of women's theatrical exclusion do not transfer straightforwardly to the Konkomba case.

5.4. *Implications for African Theatre Historiography*

The cumulative case built across the preceding sections carries implications beyond the description of a single ritual. It supports the argument, advanced from Soyinka (1976) onward and extended more recently by Mark (2024) and Wondimu and Nasir (2023), that theatre did not arrive in Africa with colonial contact but was already present in indigenous ritual form, evolving according to its own logic rather than in imitation of or anticipation of the Athenian stage. This has practical as well as historiographical significance for at least three interlinked domains. First, African theatre history textbooks and university curricula, which still commonly open with Greek or European dramatic origins before treating African performance as a later or derivative development, could instead present the *Tiboaar* and comparable rituals as independent points of origin in their own right, altering the sequence in which students first encounter the idea of theatrical form. Second, the codification offered here provides a documentary template, namely the six-element and five-part vocabulary used throughout this article, that could inform how the *Tiboaar* and similar rituals are catalogued within national and UNESCO intangible cultural heritage frameworks, which currently have no standard means of registering dramaturgical structure as a heritage attribute distinct from a ritual's religious or social function. Third, the practical urgency noted in the Statement of the Problem above, namely the visible decline of elements such as the artistic narration, makes systematic audio-visual and textual documentation of the

Tiboaar a matter of some priority, since the codification presented in this article depends on performative detail that may not survive unrecorded into the next generation of *Bikpakpaam* funerary practice.

6. Conclusion

This article has argued that the *Tiboaar*/divination ritual of the *Bikpakpaam* is codified around the same performative elements, theme, plot, character, dialogue, technical elements and audience that structure dramatic art more generally, organised around a five-part plot structure that bears meaningful, if partial, comparison with classical dramatic form. Reading the ritual through Schechner's Performance Theory and Turner's Ritual Theatre Theory, while remaining attentive to Bell's caution against over-imposing dramatic categories on ritual, makes visible a level of dramaturgical organisation that existing scholarship on African divination has largely overlooked. The comparison with Athenian and English Renaissance theatre is best understood as evidence of parallel rather than equivalent theatrical evolution, a framing that also clarifies the distinct and non-marginal participatory role women hold within the *Tiboaar*. Because this study is based on a single performance event at a single site, its findings should be treated as a first codification rather than a generalised claim about Konkomba ritual practice as a whole. Future research should extend this codification to other Konkomba communities and to comparable divination traditions elsewhere in Ghana and West Africa, both to test the generality of the five-part plot structure identified here and to build the documentary record needed to sustain the *Tiboaar* as a living form of indigenous theatrical heritage. What matters, in the end, is not whether Africa can be shown to have possessed theatre before Europe, but that theatrical form itself has arisen independently, more than once, wherever communities have needed a structured way to stage their encounters with death, memory and the unseen.

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