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Ghanaian Indigenous Sculpture through the Ghanaian Cultural Lens

Martin Adi-Dako¹ and Emmanuel Antwi²

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the general characteristics of sculpture produced in the traditional society by the different ethnic groups living in what is today known as Ghana. This is necessary to give an anthropological perspective in appreciation to help those foreign to the culture to appreciate and relish the works of art just the same way a Ghanaian will do. This is also necessary for sculpture particularly, because it is a major art form that influences the works of most Ghanaian artists as compared to the other art forms such as pottery, textiles or painting. A good appreciation of traditional sculpture then opens one's eyes to contemporary Ghanaian art as well. We use empirical research method to source for answers to questions usually asked by newcomers to Ghana about traditional sculpture. This knowledge or information comes by means of direct or indirect observation or experience with sculptors and users of the forms from different and diverse ethnic groupings in the culture. What is termed as 'General Characteristics' are just helpful but apt answers to real questions normally asked by foreigners seeking to make something out of their new experiences with Ghanaian traditional art. We also find that the consistent conformity of the traditional artist, does not spell a limitation in creativity, but does rather reveal the sophisticated and creative sensibilities that evolved and pervade the art of the various ethnicities. We guide an exercise to help understand a Ghanaian sculpture towards the end of this paper.

Key words: Appreciation, Characteristics, Figurine, Proportions of significance, Sculpture.

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MIR Centre for Socio-Economic Research, USA.

¹ Faculty of Cultural and African Studies (CeCAST), College of Art and Social Sciences, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana. Corresponding author's email: matinadidako@gmail.com

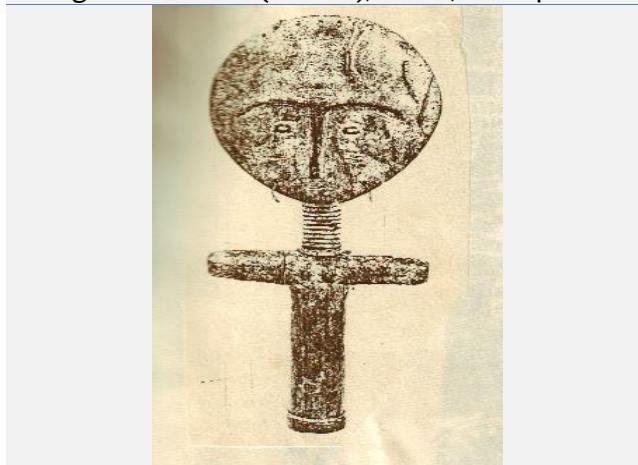
² Department of Painting and Sculpture, Faculty of Fine Art, College of Art and Social Sciences, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana, West Africa.

1.0 Introduction

History holds the fact that, Europeans out of curiosity and not necessarily for their aesthetics collected most works of African Art. They were objects of study mainly but were kept out of national museums, since the European museums typically were founded as state institutions and thus national interests shaped their collections and displays [Coombes, \(1997\)](#). The appreciation of African objects purely as fine art in Europe was largely limited to private galleries in the early twentieth century. In Paris, dealers such Paul Guillaume, Charles Ratton and Louis Carre played a role in the formation of major private collections of African art. The latter half of the twentieth century saw the opening of the first European art museums devoted to collecting and displaying African art, including the Musee Barbier-Mueller in Geneva (1977), the Musee Dapper in Paris (1986) ([Berzock et al. 2011](#)).

In writing about the art of Africa, art historians have usually highlighted wood sculpture over other forms of art. [Vansina \(1987\)](#) avers that sculpture serves as the main point of reference for traditional art in Sub-Saharan Africa, and for that matter Ghana. Obviously, this is due to the relative durability of the material. For this reason, in the midst of others, sculpture maintains a far-reaching influence among the repertoire of Ghanaian traditional arts. The design imbued in African sculpture has been phenomenal in affecting the aesthetic culture of the world. [Barnes \(1928\)](#) admits it has been responsible even for certain creative works in painting, music, sculpture and literature that have moved the whole cultured world so deeply since the 1900s. The Museum of Modern Art reported Picasso's comments regarding African art after an encounter at the Trocadero Museum thus; "...He regretted that the Western tradition lost touch with the primordial sense of image-making as a magic operation, tribal art led him back to such origins", in their 1985 publication. Picasso here hints at the core of traditional African art in its power to magically translate the level of existence through the engagement of/with higher multidimensional realities, bringing home a deeper prior responsibility to the traditional artist, to see the unexpected. Looking at these works as connoisseurs was the furthestest they could go with these work, since they lacked and until today are still curious about the Anthropological appreciation which involves the understanding of the cultural and ethnic reasons for the forms.

Figure 1: Akuaba (Asante), wood, Thompson.



A closer look at the sculptures produced in Ghana, whether in the North among the Dargati or the Moshie, or the Bono and Asante in mid-Ghana, or the Fante and Ga at the coastal belt, reveal a lot of similarities in character or appearance. These characteristics exist in such a way that the early collectors of traditional figures and figurines could not easily identify differences in style or appearance. It seemed there was little creativity in Ghanaian traditional art. For not much diversity in the classicism could be seen. The idea one gets when faced with such a situation is to conclude that; these traditional sculptures were made by one ethnic group or the artists worked, cannibalizing on already existing forms and styles. However, amidst these general characteristics we find exceptions that nullify this view and justify, even celebrate the creativity of the Ghanaian traditional artist. These exceptions themselves are true evidence that the traditional Ghanaian artist is not rigid in these rules that govern

the forms classified as general characteristics, but conforms to them as a matter of conventionality for acceptability. Where there was need to deviate for a special reason or significance, the carvers were at liberty to express their imagination and personal whims that are evident in the apparent unevenness and individual styles.

These expressions of the ingenuity and personal whims in Ghanaian traditional sculpture if viewed through the Ghanaian's lens, brings out differences in styles and expressions that are very difficult for someone living outside the culture to appreciate and recognize, unless they are tutored or coached to see. This is the purpose of this paper: to aid in the appreciation of Ghanaian traditional sculpture by newcomers to the culture.

1.0 Methodology

2.01 Research Design

We use an empirical research method to come up with answers to questions usually asked by newcomers to Ghana about their Art, and a descriptive design to retrieve information by means of direct or indirect observation or experience with sculptors and users of the art forms from different and diverse ethnic groupings in the culture. What is termed as 'General Characteristics' are just helpful but apt answers to real questions normally asked by foreigners seeking to make something out of their new experiences with Ghanaian traditional Art.

2.02 Research Instrument

Why are most Ghanaian sculptures in miniature form? Is it because they were not able to sculpt life size forms? This is a sample question often asked by newcomers. We obtain what we called "Ghanaian cultural lens" through the administration of instruments to the creators and the users of these forms. Earlier Scholars, who had the opportunity to look into the culture for answers such as Robert Farris Thompson etcetera, had to go through similar processes to get a deeper insight into meanings of the forms they encountered. Apart from initial review and analyses of related literature, we also use direct and indirect observation and informal interviews, as we interacted with the creators and users of these forms, among the Dargati, Moshie, Bono, Ashanti, Fante and Ga people, to ensure that satisfactory answers are obtained.

2.03 Data Transcription and Analysis

We test these answers on thirty different newcomers from different countries who had the questions discussed, and the results were the same on every occasion: a smile, a nod and a relief. Of course some of these new comers initially did not voice out their concerns. We only got to know their apprehensions when we gave them the script on General Characteristics, and then their reactions betrayed and brought out their earlier difficulties and questions.

3.0 Results and Discussion

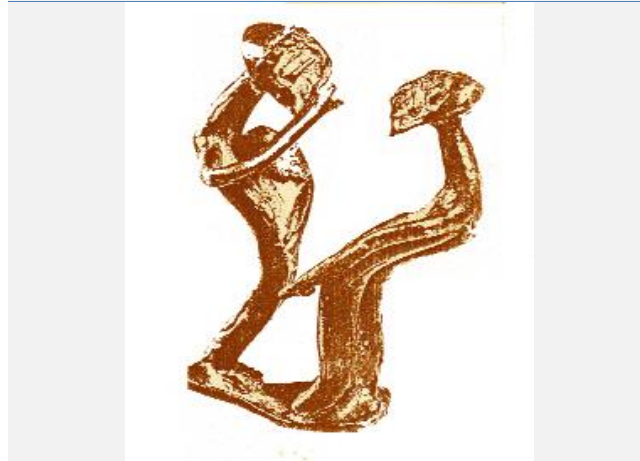
We discuss general characteristics such as size, predominance of the human figure, "proportions of significance", distortions and exaggerations, unity of contrast, internal structure, frontality, symmetry, verticality and the non-narrative character of traditional Ghanaian forms. We follow these qualities with appreciation of an Agona Asafo Funerary figure for a better grasp of these characteristics.

3.01 General Characteristics

3.1.1 Size

Generally, Ghanaian traditional sculptures take the form of miniature sculptures. This is mainly due to the use and purpose of the sculptures. Most of the sculptures produced were effigies, funerary figurines or symbols of vital spirits. Some serve, as abodes of guardian spirits, ancestral spirits, and others may be fertility figures and personal gods. In these cases, the sculpture could be carried and transported easily because of their miniature sizes. The Asante "Akuaba" sculpture in Figure 1 is a typical example. "Gold weights" produced in Ashanti (Figure 2) were used in the measuring of gold dust and nuggets on small scales, thus the need for miniature and handy forms.

Figure 2: Asante Gold weight (Adu and Amoako), metal, Thompson.



The use and purpose of the sculpture, whether tangible or intangible, dictated to the traditional sculptor the convenient sizes to make the sculptures. Although most sculptors may be good to render life-size sculptures, they had no use for them in the traditional society except in very rare cases.

3.1.2 Figure

The human figure, especially the nude figure, is predominant in Ghanaian traditional sculpture. The human form that has been given to supernatural beings is sometimes used by the traditional Ghanaian to express or symbolize the mysteries of the universe. Since the work of the traditional sculptor as a visual interpreter was to express the mysteries of life, it is not surprising that the human form assumes the central position in the sculptures produced. (Dogbe, 1977)

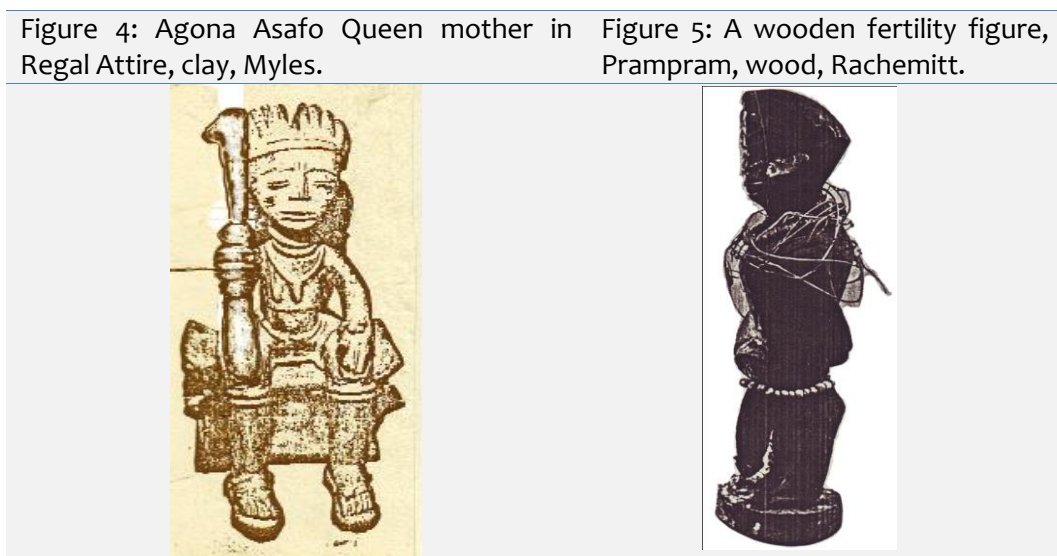
Figure 3: Fully clothed figure, Fante, clay, Myles.



Although there are clothed figures portrayed in the works of traditional artists such as depicted in Figure 3, they are mostly found in the nude form. The nudity is not intended for erotic purposes but to first, show certain componential details and secondly, to help project the parts that are of significance that may otherwise be covered. So then although some can be sexually provoking, the figures are nude mainly because of their significance in the society.

3.02 "Proportions of Significance"

Proportions of significance found in Ghanaian traditional sculpture such as is the Akuaba figure (Figure 1) is a result of a concretization and externalization of this third dimensional translation of a spiritual (fourth dimensional) concept. The artist begins his work by dividing up the block of wood into separated parts which will eventually end up to the head, the torso and the limb: the "proportions of significance". Even with these three divisions, the Ghanaian traditional artist gives much attention to the head as the most important part of the sculpture. The head is in most cases made big, and even if not so as in Figure 4, it is still considered the seat of wisdom, life and survival. The hands and the legs are mostly not portrayed and when portrayed they are less treated as compared to the treatment given to the head and the neck. The sizes of individual forms are determined by the significance attached to them. Thus, the significance of the part in relation to others is determined by their conceptual significance and not by the anatomical significance. Example, in male fertility figures such as depicted in Figure 5, the penis may have a significant proportion.



3.03 Distortions, Abstractions and Exaggeration

In Ghanaian traditional art, the forms of sculptures created were used to express values, beliefs, vision, concepts and sometimes to pass social comments. Distortions is what the Ghanaian uses to imbue his human and animal figures with the attribute that gives it life and abundant ability to speak eloquently. Although, there exist realistic sculptures such as depicted in Figure 3, in most cases the traditional Ghanaian taking a cue from living things in nature. Mostly human and animal forms, which are usually his prime source of inspiration twists and distorts some minor forms which when read in relation to other parts of the form communicates the expression envisaged. A man for example can distort his figure to demonstrate his emotional reaction to his environment. A manifestation which is usually an action that speaks such as distorting his hands, his legs, his face, his eyes, to the extent that if a photograph was taken of this man at this point he might reject it as not being a true picture of himself. He could hardly imagine his handsome self so distorted.

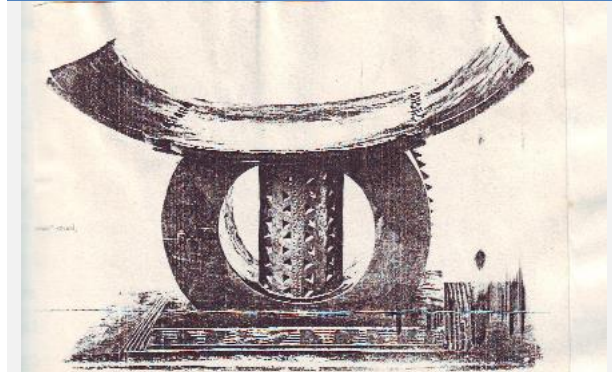
This process of distortion by re-arrangement of parts of the body which is instinctively achieved to express ourselves is what the traditional artist uses to give life to his figurative forms, a means that is seen as distortion in traditional art (Nwoko, 1977). In sculpture the production of a realistic figure sometimes weakens the form and renders it lifeless. The author in a lecture delivered at the University of Ghana explained that: "If you produce a completely neutrally placid image or picture, it will look like a death mask, a state at which the human body has ceased to live and react and therefore, has ceased to communicate. Hence if one produced a realistic copy of a human form its result would probably be

dead-like, since the work is incapable of movement in itself. Any life in any work of art, therefore, has to be predetermined and worked into the piece".

It is for this reason that the Ghanaian traditional man has assigned himself to create eloquent expressionist form in static objects such as wood by distortion, even to create life and movement in his works. This perfectly acceptable, liveliness and activity in his form has been due to his ability "to balance his forms and proportions to the extent that he makes his figurative form exude an air of confidence and therefore, establish his existence as valid" (Nwoko, 1977). In Figure 2 is an example of an Akan "Gold weight" distorted and enlivened with accurate gestural suggestions of proverbial wisdom. This ".gold weight" according to Thompson is said to represent Adu and Amoako, old friends meeting after long absence, recounting their misfortunes. These images are rendered in miniature with charming sinuously of expression far transcending normal straightforward verticality of African figural sculpture. One figure suggests the act of greeting, the other meditative reaction, hand on chin (Thompson, 1963). The distortions found in the form enliven the work, suggesting motion.

Apart from human and animal forms, certain utilitarian objects such as the Asante stool depicted in Figure 6 are abstracted. They are abstracted with symbols that are transformations of verbal and conceptual images - proverbs, wise-sayings, religious beliefs, concept of beauty and ugliness, propriety and prestige - into plastic art media. The symbolic representation of the stool in Figure 6 for example in -the shape of a rainbow, symbolizes the universal nature of death, for the same way the rainbow "encircles the necks of all, death is the lot of every human being (Sarpong, 1974).

Figure 6: Kontonkroni Stool, wood, Thompson.



Abstraction is also seen in works produced for spiritual bodes - effigies and shrine figures. These sculptures take conceptual forms that are abstractions from natural beings. Abstract art properly defined is drawn from nature, an abstract of nature, and though it is, so to speak at a distance from nature, it always implies it and has reference to it (Fagg & Plass, 1964). The African pragmatically represents these spiritual forms in highly abstracted forms, for his belief is that the super natural bodies are different from natural bodies. This makes most African sculptures figurative sculptures, representing something that exists in the spiritual realm. An example of this kind of sculpture, is the "Dua nnipa" figure portrayed in Figure 7.

Figure 7: *Dua Nnipa*, wood, Dako.

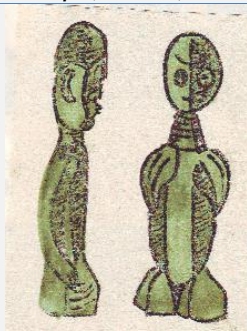


Figure 8: "Sculptured Pot", clay, Hagan.



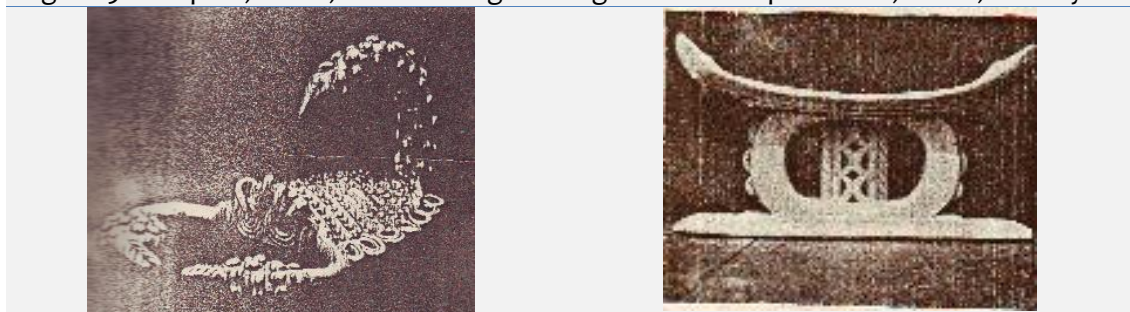
Also in Figure 8 is a "sculptured pot" in the round, abstracted and exaggerated with distorted forms. The traditional artist in his work as a visual interpreter of the spiritual beliefs carries in his work definite messages for the beholder in the society. On this ritual pot are abstracted and distorted forms of animals such as snakes and other fearful things designed purposely to create fear and awe in the beholder. They are made with the object of "harnessing spiritual powers for the assistance of living members of the society" (Trowell, 1970). These forms are abstracted, distorted, anti-exaggerated and may sometimes be ugly and may be looked upon with apathy by members of the society but with respect.

Aside these spiritual forms, depending, on the ethnic group, distortions and exaggerations of certain parts of the human figure were dictated to the artist. So then, forms such as the "Akuaba" figure is exaggerated to conform to the Akan concept of beauty - flat, large and oval head; long and serrated neck; and ideal oval-shaped minor forms (Figure 1).

3.04 Form

In one way most Ghanaian traditional sculptures are treated with simple regular volumes or forms, in the form of spheres, cones and cylinders; we may even perceive the head of an "Akuaba" (Figure 1) for example, as a discus; neck as a cylinder, torso as a barrel and the upper arms also as cylinders. These minor forms are joined together simply to create the total form required without much detail except a few ethnic group details such as scarification. This is not because the traditional artist could not produce realistic works. There were realistic works produced especially in clay and metal, as depicted in, but then these forms were made according to the conventions of the society, and major deviations were not allowed except minor individual flairs which could not be controlled.

Figure 9: Scorpion, metal, Clement-Hagan. Figure 10: Porcupine Stool, wood, Rattery.



There is also this fact that they take these shapes they have, partly because of the limitations they encounter in the use of the cylinder of wood. If an artist wants to retain the unity of a slender unbroken line in his sculpture, working from a simple cylinder without the addition of any other Piece, he will not be able to portray any detail exceeding the limits of the original cylinder (Adam, 1949). This may be partly the reason why some traditional forms have neither hands nor feet and are rendered partly void of details.

In another way, it will also not be very right to consider all traditional works as simple and unsophisticated. For if one considers the treatment given to the Asante stools for example (Figure 10), the successful correlation of curves, planes, cubes of depressions and elevations, as a matter of skill, giving the stool a monumental effect; they can be described as complex, sophisticated and ornate.

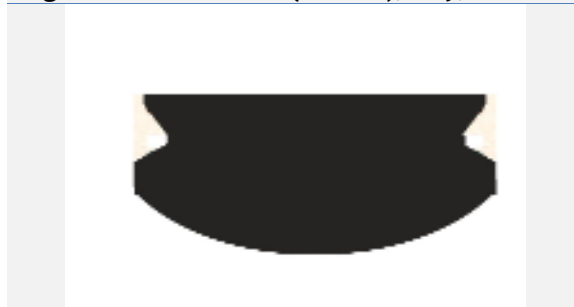
3.05 Unity of Contrast (Angularity and Rounded Forms)

The Ghanaian craftsman, by psychological impression, has the recurring of angular and rounded forms exhibited in most effective pleasing forms. This is the result of the influence of the spiritual forces on the Ghanaian society and particularly on the craftsman, and also the Ghanaian's realization of

the reality of the "unity of contrast" even in his daily life. "Angularity and roundness are the recurrent, motifs of African art" (Segy, 1958). This union of opposites: rounded and angular forms express a satisfactory pattern of plastic Language and it is sometimes that which is universally expected. The Ghanaian traditional craftsman therefore was intuitively aware of this, and consciously incorporated it into his visual forms.

To illustrate this fact further, the sharp renderings and breaks on the Asante "kwansen" pot portrayed in Figure 11 is meant to bring a pleasing balance to the almost completely round pot.

Figure 11: "Kwansen" (Asante), clay, Dako.



Also the Akan "Akuaba" (Figure 1) representing fertility, looks rounded with mainly oval shapes, but the renderings and sharp cuttings in the wood and the treatment of the short hands at right angles to the neck express a satisfaction that is only possible by the union of contrasting forms. In wood sculpture, immediately a cut is made into the log, angularity results. The tools used such as the adze and the gouges are designed to cut into a log to bring out the form. The sculptor's intuitive knowledge places him in a position to unconsciously marry angularity and roundness in his work. Kofi Antubam in his book "Ghana's Heritage of culture" (Antubam, 1963) does an exposition on round and angular forms in relation to beauty and the sexes (male and female). According to him, the human figure as the Akan understood it, was made of ovals and rounded forms. A figure void of these forms is not considered beautiful as far as the Akan are concerned.

3.06 Internal Structure

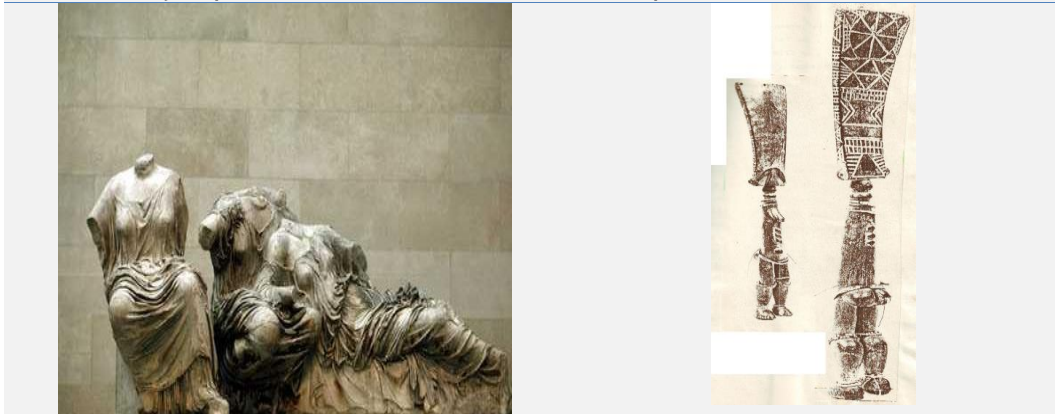
Looking at the posture of the Ghanaian traditional sculpture, one seems to be convinced of an internal structure. This seemingly internal structure is far removed from physical support or an armature that keeps a modeled sculpture in the shape. Internal structure is the support, which we perceive from the outside of the sculpture. To take the Agona Asafo funerary figure (Figure 4) for example, the changes in the surface connect through the volumes as well as round their surfaces. This suggests the operation of an internal structure or force, which is responsible for the conformation found on the surface. In this same figure, there is a feeling or a sense of tension, in spite of the relatively rounded forms and feminist feeling, in the stiff neck and head and the outstretched right arm. It is as if there are some inner structures that are holding the neck and especially the outstretched arm into position. In the case of the "Akuaba" figure, the traditional Ghanaian sculptor arrives at this feeling of internal structure through his mode of carving. 'Precision' is the key word to this approach. The wood carver has to coordinate the constant rhythmic movement of his adze or tool with the gradual rotation of wood in his other hand. Constant practice makes this approach almost instinctive to the traditional wood carver. As Segy explains:

Rhythm is elemental in all human beings whose organic functions are carved on in regular pulsations, but this is truest perhaps of the African. The sculptor brings his adze to cadences as Boaz points out, which becomes a "motor-habit". (1969)

The traditional Ghanaian deals with volume and mass to represent the human form, but in most cases they approximate to the human figure; a few are equal or rather even more powerful than the human

figure. The traditional artist is able to arrive at these qualities within the confining limits of a cylinder, with still the feeling of tension inside of the sculpture, created by the treatment given to the forms.

Figure 12: Draped sculptures (Greek), Figure 13: Akuaba (Fante), wood, Encarta Encyclopedia, 2005. Thompson.



Draped sculptures produced in Greek art (Hellenistic period) showed very strong internal structure beneath their draperies. In Figure 12, for example, the breasts, the elbow and knees often acted as focal points for the movement of the draperies which tend to pull tight over them and radiate increases or folds away from them. The various shapes and contours of the body as well as areas where tension and stress were located were exhibited. In Ghanaian traditional wood sculpture such as depicted in Figure 13, the figures are mainly nude, for it is not uncommon to see abdomens and buttocks and even calf muscles all pervading tending to suggest growth as though something inside were pushing towards the surface. Internal structure conforms to the superficial areas to show power and vitality. If a surface of a sculpture bulges in a downward direction, all illusion of heaviness is created.

3.07 Frontality

The general posture in Ghanaian sculpture is frontal. The artist produces an image, which is a conceptual cutting down to size of the universe. As stated already, most of these figures produced served as representations of spirit beings and abodes of vital spirits. Frontality is the normal position for confrontation and for dialogue with the extra-terrestrial world that the Ghanaian traditional man endeavors to contact. This position enables the worshipper who is meditating to concentrate and to bring into sharper focus his ideas, thoughts and beliefs. Thus, the quality of frontality that dominates most Ghanaian sculptures is due to the fact that as a social etiquette, the figures are approached as human beings. They need the reverence of those who use them as though they are approaching the real spirits they harbor.

The Shrine priest speaks to most of the figures as if they are the spirits. And so this accounts in some way for this general characteristic of Ghanaian sculptures, whether they are standing or seated, they are generally frontal as illustrated in Figure 4 & 13. Exceptions to this general characteristic are mostly found in forms of animals such as depicted in Figure 9.

3.08 Verticality

Verticality expresses strength in an artistically convincing way. When one stands upright, he towers above those sitting down and his mere posture simulates dignity and power.

Most of the traditional sculptures (whether wood, metal or clay) are made in a vertical position. The artist prefers to follow the vertical medial axis. The traditional sculptor works to portray that humane effect and this he does by making most of the time a vertically standing and seated figure.

A major significance of the vertical nature of traditional sculpture may be to show vitality of life. A horizontal position, which is the opposite of verticality may show more of stagnation, sleeping or even dead poses than vertically standing, upright figures. Again the vertical nature with those well defined planes as against details adds to the scale of the work. Most Ghanaian traditional sculptures assume a large scale, even though they may take the form of miniature sculptures. This may be the successful condition of curves, planes and the vertical positions of most sculptural figures.

With the qualities mostly to portray dignity, power and stability, figures of the Ghanaian traditional sculptures assume grandeur and verticality. However, there are exceptional traces of horizontality which presupposes that the African produces a work void of verticality. The scorpion depicted in Figure 9, for example, is horizontal in nature, and because it is naturally horizontal, it cancels the feeling one gets when a human figure is seen in a horizontal position. Although this scorpion portrayed is horizontal, it portrays some amount of vitality, dignity and power, which is further enhanced by its vertically rendered tail.

3.09 Symmetry

Another dominant feature of Ghanaian traditional sculptures is the element of symmetry. There is almost always an intuitive attempt of the artist to bring a balance in the sculptures.

This symmetrical quality may have a sub-conscious appeal which may relate to the bilateral symmetry of the human figure and that of animals. That is, looking at the sculptures, the right side of it has the sameness of form, elements and proportion to that of the left as illustrated in Figure 14. When an imaginary line is drawn perpendicular through a traditional sculpture, whatever would be seen at the left in most cases would show a mirror reflection of the right side of it. This makes the figures more stable looking, balanced and expresses security and survival. Though there may be exceptional cases of asymmetry such as depicted in Figure 15, generally Ghanaian traditional sculptures are symmetrical.

Figure 14: Symmetry of traditional sculpture.

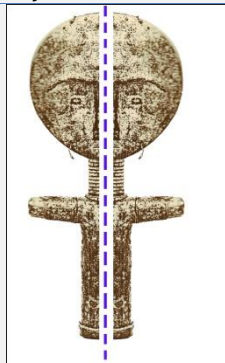
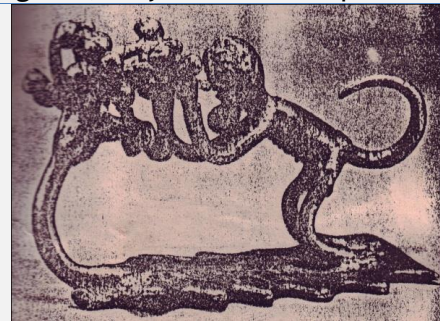


Figure 15: Asymmetrical sculpture.



3.10 Texture

Texture in Ghanaian traditional sculpture, especially in wood sculpture, is not used for its own sake. Scarifications, incisions and renderings indicating beards and hairstyles found on sculptures are not necessarily decorative but are understood by members of the society. In Figure 16, the Asante understand the treatment of the Asante bust as a hairstyle of older women in the society - a characteristic feature that distinguishes them from other women from other ethnic groups. Texture in a sculpture indicates and distinguishes one minor form from the other; it embellishes and helps to break monotony in the work by giving variety to the work.

Also in the traditional society, art forms accepted by members of the society are distinct from forms that are derived from the kind of tool used (tool form). In the case of wood sculpture, after the use of

the flat broad-edged tools some indigenous carvers intentionally leave the facets which, especially when blood and other sacrificial matters are applied, give a glitter and liveliness to the sculpture.

Figure 16: Asante Bust, clay, Myles.



The modern uses of the gouge to scoop out the surfaces of objects give an impression that 'the sculptures were carved and later given those textures. In others - especially in clay works today,- a sculptor may intentionally press bits of clays on the finished work to give some form of texture. This modern use of texture can enhance the work, but if done in excess tend to disguise the forms rather than describing them.

3.11 Non-narrative

Ghanaian traditional sculptures do not themselves portray much of their significance as well as their meaning in the society. At a glance, one cannot know the meaning or the purpose of the sculpture unless information is given him by someone from a culture or society in which the piece was produced. The observer is ignorant of what a sculpture is all about. This in a way explains the rejection of African sculpture as works of art by the early collectors. (Leiris & Delange, 1969)

4.0 Appreciation of an Agona-Asafo Funerary Figure

We appreciate of an *Agona-Asafo* funerary figure is an attempt to guide African Art lovers to fully understand and enjoy Ghanaian traditional art.

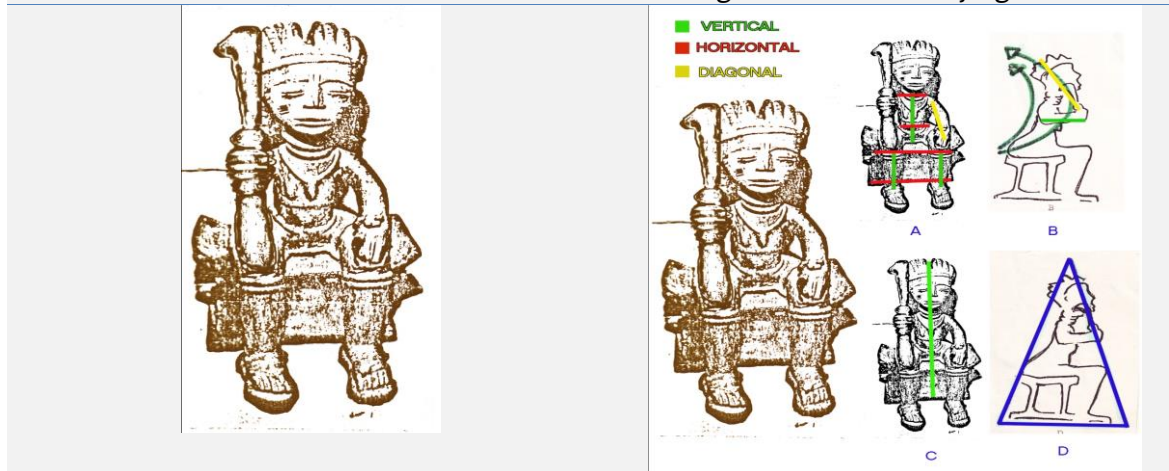
The sculpture in Figure 17 is probably one of the finest funerary figures produced by the Akan of Agona-Asafo. It offers a majestic example of sculpture produced by this small Akan tribe. Probably the figure is of a queen mother, with the height of about fifty centimeters. This figure is a clay modeling. It is a splendid figure of a seated female holding a sword of authority ("*Afena*"). The African proportion of significance as stated already, may not work properly here, but still a relatively small head carries the same spiritual significance. Compared to the body the head is proportionately normal. The morphological forms of the face, the eyes, the pouting mouth and the nose are all sculpturally well rendered. There is what seems to be a crown on her head. The oval and flat shaped face is a characteristic that seems to disseminate among Akan sculptures. The head is held in position by a long neck that is serrated, another general characteristic of Akan figures.

The middle part of the body, the torso, seems to be shoulder-less holding the long upper arms into position. There are two insignificant breasts (small and weak) and then what looks like a necklace, ending just above the abdomen. The left forearm has what looks like a bracelet on it and is placed on the left knee. The right hand, which is holding a sword, is stretched forward in an authoritative way. On both hands, there is a suggestion of fingers by incisions.

On the lower part of the body it looks like a loin cloth. The two legs are very long in relation to the whole body. The feet are big and heavy in what looks like a pair of native sandals with incisions to suggest the toes.

Figure 17: Agona Asafo funerary figure, clay, Dako

Figure 17: A, B, C and D: Structural analysis of an Agona Asafo Funerary figure.



The sculpture is vigorous and seems to be concerned with its concrete essence, making no concessions to natural human anatomy of meaningless detail. Its impression is one of solidity, stability and weight. It looks majestic; it possesses the calmness and remoteness, characteristic of an Akan queen mother with dignity.

The sculpture possesses some bigness of form, which is characteristic of any good sculpture. There is little or no details of naturalism as the total figure appear splendid. The domineering features of the face - a deep concentration, evoke the calmness of the figure. The figure is dignified, domineering but graceful.

Frontally, the outstretched arm, holding a sword, breaks the calm symmetry of the composition. However, nevertheless it does not disturb the symmetrical aspect of the figure. In Figure 4C the sculpture is divided into two halves by an imaginary line from the head through the nose-, the neck, and in-between the breasts down to the middle of the lower limb. All elements on one side apart from the two hands differently positioned are repeated on the other side.

Verticality is stressed by the whole posture in the first place: the neck, the torso, the four stands of the middle portion of the stool and even the lower part of the legs. In Figure 17A horizontal lines counter-balanced the verticality of the figure. There are horizontal lines under the chin, the lower right arm, across the waist, and the top and the base of the stool.

These horizontal and vertical elements satisfy our universal expectations. The interplay of these lines gives a great sense of satisfaction, which may easily overshadow the sudden contrasts. There are diagonally positioned forms that go to contrast the universal expectations. The head is diagonal as well as the sword in her right hand. The left hand from the neck to the knee, where it is placed, is in a diagonal position. The diagonal positions are accentuated by the shape of a woman as shown in Figure 17A.

The figure is superbly balanced even in the profile, reminding us that asymmetrical design has a balance. Figure 17D depicts this figure as a pyramidal composition. A vertical line felt to be running from the head to the base stabilizes this pyramidal shape.

The figure has weight and the force of gravity is acting upon the figure that makes it so stable. The centre of gravity is from; the apex to the base which is firmly fixed to the ground. It induces an onlooker with a majestic attraction; it appears absolutely unmovable, but within the whole figure there is tremendous movement. In spite of the weight expressed by the figure, the lineal directional forces revealed in the profile (Figure 17B) creates a tremendous movement in the figure. These lineal directional force depicted suggests a release of the gravitational pull in the figure. Four dimensionalities or exponential curvature is so graphically expressed as in this repetition of lines in the profile view of the figure. The figure by these lines is delicately and confidently poised for "lift off". The movement of the eye from the base to the top, the unusual concave curvature (figure 17B) of the back of the figure suddenly joins the flat diagonally positioned head to create the head movement. The arched back together with the drawn sword shown in figure 17B give a movement, which suggests that, the head is about to be flung into space, into orbit.

The long serrated neck and the rings on the left forearm are rendered to represent rhythm as well as convey the nuances of the virtues imbued in an Akan queen mother seated in state. Apart from the stool, sculptural feet and "blocky" sandals, which are angular in form, there is a manifestation of rounded forms all over the figure. This is not strange because in the Akan concept of beauty, oval and rounded forms interact to express beauty and gracefulness, qualities that must not escape the queen mother. Apart from the visible language that can be formally analyzed, there are some sensuous qualities of the force that add some spiritual touch to it. There is some sensational effect one gets at a glance, an emotional effect that can only be fully felt by critically examining the figure.

With the stiffness of the neck and the head, there is a feel of eagerness; the whole comportment seems to suggest a sort of superiority, which is typical of an Akan queen mother. In spite of the relatively roundness in the form, which gives a feminist feeling, the stiff neck and head and the outstretched right arm suggest a masculine stance, combining to portray an inner tension. It is as if there are some inner structures holding the head, the neck and especially the outstretched arm into position. The verticality, symmetry and all the frontal qualities come together to make the work assume a sense of uprightness. There is also a feeling of lightness in the figure because of the rhythmic movement in the sculpture.

This queen mother 'hypnotizes' one with her downcast eyes and her deep concentration. The figure is an involved composition yet controlled with very assertive forms, elegant, yet rugged and robust. The figure is brought to life by the sparkle the rhythmic movement adds to it. It has an erect head that exhibits pride with a cool expression of common human natural characteristic. This splendid figure is a product of experienced female potters of high artistic ability. The sculpture has fourth dimensional qualities; it seems to be in the spiritual realm in her deep meditation - aloof from this world.

It is amazing when one realizes the ability of this anonymous traditional woman artist, her great sense of rhythm, her assertive, robust, yet elegant forms even compares to those of Henry Moore and Picasso of modern times with great awareness in scientific discoveries. What today many artists are trying consciously to produce, the Ghanaian traditional woman artist made them intuitively and "freely" without any struggle. It was something they could produce every day, and not with the mind of preserving. This clay modeling style of the Akan women potters is evident in almost all the works produced as funerary figures. The only possible difference, are the evident individual flairs which suggest the originality of the artists. Difference in the form can also be the result of the social status or the activity of the dead person being portrayed, which may differ in each case.

In clay work, unlike wood sculpture, where definite forms are repeatedly made due to conventions laid down by the society, there is however a flexibility of form. In Ashanti for a funerary figure made for one person can be entirely different from that made for another patron without recourse to societal norms. What however makes the works look similar springs from the pottery apprenticeship training amongst the women of the pottery producing regions as notable in Sirigu in the Upper East and Kpando in the Volta region of Ghana.

5.0 Conclusion

What we have discussed above only goes to portray what is mostly seen in Ghanaian traditional sculpture, although these works of Art are initially difficult to appreciate and understand, especially when one is foreign to the culture, it is possible to fully appreciate and enjoy them using a Ghanaian cultural lens. However, this is not to suggest that the traditional artist, because of his conventions and traditions, was dogmatic, stacked with a set of rules. There was certainly creativity and individuality in the style and forms as well as general appearance of works from different arts of the traditional ethnicities.

It must also be noted that one does not necessarily need to become African to understand African Art. The Anthropological view point is not the only recommended standpoint, but Art everywhere can be fully appreciated when one divorces herself/himself, in a sense, from what she/he is used to, and make an effort also to understand and appreciate things from the point of view of the creator living in the culture the works are formed.

Numerous foreign art lovers and scholars encountered, after a short course, to fit their 'new' Ghanaian lenses, have always given a smile to what they once scowled and frowned on. It is therefore recommended that these general characteristics be made available to tourists, art lovers, scholars and foreigners in general, to aid in their quick assimilation of the characteristics of traditional sculptures of Ghana.

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