



## **Amulets, A Cultural Presumption In Ghana**

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***Abstract:***

*This piece of writing is on amulets, as the cultural conjecture in Ghana. In discussing the paper, some attempts have been made to study the nature and dynamics of amulets as well as the appreciation of amulets as a human accomplishment. There is also an all-purpose impression on amulets in Ghana, outlining in particular where they are found, and the varieties that exist. The authors argue that leather amulets making is a dynamic and adoptable process which has a social heritage constituent as well as a devout dimension. Some of the conclusions drawn are that amulet making is a component of our integrated systems and tradition, but has undergone noteworthy changes over the past several decades.*

***Keywords:*** Culture, Amulets, Belief, Religion and Tradition.

## **1.Introduction**

The span of the nature and purpose of amulets is very wide and its components are numerous, wide-ranging and multifaceted. For this reason, no all-inclusive and persuasive explanation of amulets has ever been highly developed, although many definitions have been presented in attempts to give an idea about the nature and functions of amulets. The complex nature and function of amulets although, many people look at amulets as just an artifact and define it from its artistic standpoint, others define it in terms of cultural fashion and others creed. According to WordNet (2012), amulet is a thin flat strip of flexible material that is worn around the body or one of the limbs (especially to decorate the body) Webster Dictionary (2012) also explains Amulet as an ornament gem or scroll or a package containing a relic etc worn as a charm or preservative against evils or mischief such as diseases and witchcraft and generally inscribed with mystic forms or characters. in the African context amulet is considered as A trinket or piece of jewellery usually hung about the neck and other parts of the body particularly around the joints, such as the ankle, wrist and the waist, it is thought to be a magical protection against evil or disease. According to Andrasnim (2012) Ancient in their existence and crossing over cultures and continents amulets are to ward off unwanted spirit entities or demons. Leanan (2009), has indicated that amulets come in all shapes and sizes.

Amulets making has been a highly appreciated skill throughout the world from earliest times. In some cultures like the Romans and the Egyptians, techniques and skills are shrouded in secrecy and death penalty was incurred for revealing trade secrets in renaissance Venice. An amulet, from Latin amuletum; earliest extant use in Naturalis Historia, meaning "an object that protects a person from trouble", a close cousin of the talisman, from Arabic talisman, consists of any object intended to bring good luck or protection to its owner. Potential amulets include: gems, especially engraved gems, statues, coins, drawings, pendants, rings, plants, like the Loral tree, and animals, like lions, leopards, elephants, The objective of this piece of writing is to outline the nature, and function of amulets in complementing Ghanaian cultures.

In antiquity and the Middle Ages, most Jews, Christians and Muslims in the Orient believed in the protective and healing power of amulets or blessed objects. Amulets used by these peoples can be broken down into three main categories. The first are the types carried or worn on the body. The second version of a amulets is one which is hung upon or above the bed of an infirm person. The last classification of amulets is one with

medicinal qualities. This latter category of item can be further divided into external and internal. In the former, one could, for example, place an amulet in a bath. The power of the amulet would be understood to be transmitted to the water, and thus to the bather. In the latter, inscriptions would be written or inscribed onto food, which was then boiled. The resulting broth, when consumed, was assumed to transfer the healing qualities engraved on the food into the consumer.



*Figure 1: Amulet This was made from leather and seed*



*Figure 2: This was made from leather and stone*

## **2.Amulet**

The fascinating story of amulets like beads (see fig 1 and 2) spans the globe, present in all cultures and at all times all the way through history. Coles and Budwig. (1990) said that these have been made on all continents over 32,000 years ago. People in different parts of the globe used materials available to them, and developed different designs and

approaches to the craft in accordance with the belief, need and purpose. Because of travels and migrations the precise foundation of amulets is complex to trace. In Africa, Coles and Budwig (1990) explained with uncertainty that glass beads developed by the Egyptians are believed to have been brought to Africa from India 200BC by Arab traders. This is an assumption that Cole and Budwig made concerning beads and amulets and further explained that the growth of these can be traced from four perspectives. In line with these one can say amulets making is an art of the mind with close associations to the inspiration of human perfection, for intellectual and moral growth, as a body art and as a way of life, moral, intellectual and spiritual, of a self-motivated group of people.

### **3. Amulets In Ghana**

The most common amulets found in Ghana in almost all the cultures are the, brass, clay, bones, ivory, leather, shells and seeds. It is particularly common in almost all the regions in Ghana.

In the past, amulets produced in Ghana were made from materials that were locally available in the locality, Bone, ivory and Leather beads were produced in Northern Ghana, Gold and brass in Ashanti, clay in the Volta Region and ivory in the Western region.

Amulets in Ghana can be grouped in to three. These are proteins, vegetables and minerals. Proteins are those made from parts of animals, like the bones, the skin, the teeth, the horn, the tusk and any part of animals that can be processed and fabricated into an amulet. Animals used for this craft or vocation include sheep, goats, leopards, lions, elephants, chameleon, cows, fish, marine creatures birds and reptiles. Vegetable amulets are from plant products like seeds and pods of plants, like the mysterious “odee” tree, (Loral tree, seeds of milk bush, marble from the marble pod tree and bamboo just to mention a few. Minerals used in amulets production include, clay, stones, shell and corals, ferrous and non ferrous metals.

Amulets of Northern Ghana are the three principal types, vegetable, mineral and the protein type with the protein type forming the greater percentage of the three. The people of Northern Ghana are influenced by the things around them especially the animals they keep, like the cow, the sheep, the goats, dogs and other non domestic animals like snakes, chameleon, crocodile and some selected birds like the guinea fowl.

Amulets making in Northern Ghana can be said to be a learned, trend and this is an indispensable attribute of the sum total of achievement of the people of the Northern part

of Ghana, and can be described as an accomplishment of a people. Several kinds of amulets are made with the parts of animals and birds. The skins of the four legged animals are used to make what can be identified as leather beads, talismans or amulets. The choice of leather is dependent on the function of the amulets to be produced. Skins of very strong animals like leopard are used for amulets for chiefs, heads of clans and heads of royal families' .and people of high ethical standing in society.

The protein amulets of the north are of different kinds and perform different functions. Where the main material is leather, the amulets produced are for protection, identification, and also for medicinal purposes. In their production, certain preparations are made by the priest at the shrine and these are encased in the leather to create amulets for vanishing, for fighting, warding off evil spirits, where the leather or skin is from an animal with a big soul, it is believed to give strength and protection. The bones tusk, horns, teeth of animals like lions, elephants are mostly used and are carved emblematically. The vegetable beads are mostly seeds of particular plants identified to have strong links with ancestry and carvings from plants with special spiritual qualities. Mineral beads are made of metals, stones and clay. Every material chosen for amulets production is for a purpose. In most of the amulet producing areas where metals are used iron is the main raw material and it is mostly for decoration and identification; clays are used for religious and medicinal purposes. Vegetable are also for identification, medicinal, religious, protection and record keeping.

The dominating amulets in Ashanti are the metals and protein types while the vegetable are however used for very special purposes; hence their production is limited to specialized people or a particular clan or family. The metals used for used in Ashanti include gold, silver, brass, and copper. Like any other culture, certain designs are reserved for the royals and for that reason are made in gold while others are in silver, brass etc.

Metal amulets are widely produced in Ashanti and they are of varied designs derived from proverbs and wise sayings. Protein amulets are normally made by specialized people from a particular clan, family or royal line and this is so because the art is shrouded in mystery and secrecy especially when dealing with symbolic designs. In the production of war smocks like the 'battakari kesse', a famous war smock of the Ashantis, a combination of protein and vegetable and in some cases minerals are composed for special purposes and used for decorating the smock (Batakari). The compositions which are normally made by priests and so called witches or sorcerers are in many cases to

render the user invisible in case of trouble or to deflect bullets when shot at during war, to purify water or drink in cases of poisoning. The variety of metals used in amulets making contributes to the class dissimilarity in the society and also for the identification of people of distinction in the society to be revered and respected.

The value and potency of an amulet is dependent on how the society rates it. Some are so highly rate that it can be used to purchase the life of a man to be killed during production of the amulet and in times when absolute power is required. Others are although not of any economic value, yet it is so important to the people. An example is the head of a chameleon which is believed to ward off evil forces introducing sickness like asram (a disease that causes convulsion.). Most royal beads and amulets used in public are made of one of the following metals, Gold, silver, or brass and designs made are symbolic and derived from the totems (kra bua) of the society.

In the Volta, Greater Accra and Central regions of Ghana, amulets made from marine shells are very common in their productions in addition to the clay and marine stones. Due to the encounter with foreigners who traded in ivory with the south, the trend in the south was influenced. It is however believed that the Western Region was influenced by large stocks of supply from La Cote d'Voir (Ivory Coast).

#### **4.The Nature And Dynamics Of Amulets**

Amulets are the result of the response and the creative reaction of a people to nature. This is the outcome of man's encounter with nature to create a meaningful way of life for onward development. It forms a minute yet vital part of the culture of a people. Effa-Ababio (2005) said culture is the human achievement in nature and it involves the whole of life. It is within the frame work of culture that amulets evolved. Amulets were made and used in most cultures for communication, ie storing information and passing on information on ideas, beliefs, traditions, trade and commerce, moral values and standing, identification, titles, religion, medicine and science. All these Effa-Ababio (2005) said are constituents parts of culture and are the products of the achievements in nature.

#### **5.Amulets Making, A Human Achievement**

The creative potentials of man were first experienced in the time of Adam and his wife Eve. The eyes of Adam and Eve were opened when they ate of the tree of which God commanded them not to eat, they saw they were naked and made aprons out of fig leaves for their covering.(Genesis 3.v7). The need for covering was as a result of their ability to

perceive with a new understanding of their environment. Their source of material was nature and the motivation factor was need. Amulets making is not by accident but by design because it evolved out of a need, a desire to achieve. It is an activity that was discovered and has the ability to be bequeathed to latter generations for advancement, thus becoming an achievement or part of the sum total of achievements of a people. Effa-Ababio (2005) said culture is evolved and conserved for posterity. He explained that the Almighty God created the world and created man and placed at his disposal the world of nature, his environment and gave him the power and ability to utilize nature to facilitate and enhance his life and what he achieves from his encounter with nature becomes his culture and amulets making is not an exemption. Arnorld (1993) said that culture is the love of perfection. He further explained that culture is everything. If culture is everything then amulets making is not an exception. Effa-Ababio (2005) said that man's purposiveness and endeavors in his encounter with nature distinguish culture from nature.

Traditionally, amulets making has been in practice among people of all nations from time immemorial and in Ghana the culture of using traditional amulets and beads represented the main way of adornment, for religious functions, identification, spiritual protection, healing and for beautification. Amulets are believed to have started from the time of the last ice age 32000 years ago during the period of Paleolithic Art just around the time bead making started. It comprises portable pieces, such as figures or decorated objects carved in bone, antler, stone or crudely modeled clay. These works were in North Africa, Iberia , Western, Central and Eastern Europe.

Portable art comprises a wide variety of forms and materials. The simplest are modified natural objects like teeth of animals, shells, or bones that were incised and perforated to form beads or pendants. The vast majority of the Paleolithic art are made of ivory or soft stone, bones skins and hides. Ivory was also used to make beads bracelet, and armllet.

Amenuke (1995) observed that during the time of Paleolithic art sympathetic magic was practiced. The theory of this special magic states that animals have an unseen link with their images that allows one to model or draw the animal to be hunted and wounded through the image to make the hunt successful. Amenuke et al (1991), These images, they further explained are not only drawn in the caves but carved or modeled and hanged around the neck or waist in a form of an amulets or bead. These authors further commented that it was the belief of the time, that the bone of a bigger animal used as pendant, protected the individual from that animal, and even in the event of an attack the

presence of the bone made one stronger than the attacking animal, such a belief was based on the understanding that bone is the abode of the soul of the dead animal. Bigger animals, he said have very big souls, hence the use of the bones of strong animals like lions, leopards, tigers teeth, bones and tusk of elephants and other huge animals to increase the size of the soul of the individual and to make him strong Amenuke et al (1991),. These practices and beliefs have existed for several generations and cultural practices in Ghana same as we suspect some other African countries.

### **6. Amulets Making Dynamic And Adoptable Process**

In Ghana, amulets and beads have played talismatic role in cultures. As a source of fortune and fortification and to appease spirits, they bejeweled rich and poor alike in costly or cheap materials. For centuries in these great indigenous cultures, amulets like beads have been traded for priceless merchandise. In the advent of twentieth century a middle class and low class market for amulets came new material and techniques such as recycled plastics and paper, enabling more people to wear amulets and beads. This trend however rescued the downhill trend the bead industry faced. Synthetic or imitation, they described the newly introduced recycled plastic beads and, Original was the picture for mineral amulets and beads. This however exaggerated government inventiveness of organizing free training in recycled plastic casting for amulets and beads makers in Ashanti. Today in Ashanti Aboabo, about five to seven percent of the people are producers of recycled plastic casts. A new development has entered the industry with the blend of the dissimilar types creating a new awakening in the industry. This is a go-ahead trend resulting from the process of change emanating from cultural contacts which is cultural. It is so, because humans share in Nature and manipulate things in Nature to meet needs in different ways and this is Culture, it is dynamic and adaptable, the sum total of achievement of a people.

### **7. The Social Scope Of Amulet Making**

Amulets making is a social heritage which is handed from generation to generation. As a social heritage, amulets makers will not admit anything which is so private that it neither originates from nor seeks to enter this social way of doing things. One of the characteristics of such working groups practicing that which has been handed down from generations to them is that, they become increasingly organised as they advance, so they form co-operatives and advanced macro system. The need for the survival of such groups



According to Effa-Ababio (2005) necessitates the making of rules. This attitude unites amulets makers giving them an identity and a working culture. The social scope of amulets making as an art revealed that, the art of amulets making to the amulets maker is not only a vocation, but an attempt to bring into light the perfection of God in man in achieving greatness in this life. Amulets designed and fabricated for body adornment are inspired by wise sayings. This practice, it is believed reminded users of amulets of values of life and as such are kept awake to maintain high moral standards, work hard to create wealth and by exhibition influence the up and coming youth to emulate.

### **8. Religious Dimension Of Amulet Making**

Belief systems engross stories and tradition, and this is associated with amulets making. Designs are made to reveal the concepts of belief whose understanding can give people insight into how they should feel, think or behave. The making and use of amulets can influence the daily life of the people in a society and play an important role in giving meaning to people actions. Hagan(2009) said besides office holders and other prominent members of society who wear amulets to mark their statuses and ranks, certain people in the society use the amulets for identification. He further opined that because amulets are intimately involved in life crisis rituals, and especially, because we wear amulets to express our emotional states and belief, it is not surprising that in many places amulets should be counted among things endowed with spiritual force. The most prominent systems of beliefs tend to be those associated with formal religions, nevertheless any system of belief in which the interpretation of stories affect the behavior of the people can be an important component of culture of a society, and this is noticed in the making of religious amulets for use at the shrines, mosques and churches. Amulets produced for religious purposes according to the amulets maker of Ashanti are for worship, prayer, protection, healing, adorning the Priest and for the Gods and Ancestors. Materials used for each set differ from others. In other words materials from nature with very high spiritual base are used for amulets for the protection, like the seed of the Loral tree (odee), the head of a chameleon to ward off diseases, the bones of lions to give strength, clay to seek Gods favor. Nyame dua to be in the presence of God. Amulets for the Gods and ancestors are in mixed media comprising skins and hides, teeth and bones, seeds and roots, stones and marine shells and other natural materials accepted to be powerful or the abode of the soul of the dead animals.

**9. Conclusion**

The purpose of this piece of writing was to scan and make clear the natural history of amulets in Ghana. The study has suggested that amulets are one of the products of human encounter with nature. From the analysis so far, amulets or amulets making is an integrated system of belief, values and traditions. The reason for the craft is common for most cultures and forms a tie connecting people of different cultural backgrounds. It has under gone vast changes and growth through creativity and due to relocation of people during wars, commercial activities, need for repositioning and agricultural activities of the early past. In pursuit of development and advancement several innovations has evolved helping man to develop a civilization, religious conviction, and a way of existence that has it ancestry from early times.

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