



Integrating Traditional Textile Metaphors With Contemporary Design Concepts

Abraham EkowAsmah

Department of Integrated Rural Art and Industry,
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST),
Kumasi-Ghana

Charles Frimpong

Department of Industrial Art.
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST),
Kumasi-Ghana

Benjamin Asinyo

Department of Industrial Art
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST),
Kumasi-Ghana

Abstract:

The study seeks to establish the fact that both the traditional designs (mostly drawn from symbols in Adinkra cloth and woven Kente) and contemporary concepts blend well aesthetically and metaphorically irrespective of the medium used in Ghanaian artistry. The study employed both the descriptive and experimental methods to produce a sample of such contemporary works to popularize this concept in the Ghanaian market. It explored the use of non-conventional materials (wood, metal oxides, and glass) integrated into a biscuit fired ware. The result of the study indicates that the new materials enhanced the texture and aesthetic qualities of the product produced but still maintained its metaphoric significance. This obviously means that other aesthetic concepts could be explored to inspire and educate producers as well as students to increase creativity. Discussions were based on theoretical, academic, religious, social, historical, cultural, philosophical and artistic contexts. The piece showed originality, contrast, harmony, multiplicity and stability, and as well captured the aesthetic energy inherent in ordinary materials. The research proved that the metaphorical significance of traditional symbols still have enormous import for contemporary concepts to improve the marketability of Ghanaian works of art.

Keywords: *pottery, integration, culture, metaphor, aesthetic symbolism, non conventional*

1.Introduction

Most Ghanaian visual art forms, designed are not only for aesthetic purposes but also carry underlying symbolisms rooted in their values and belief systems. With Ghanaian art, its function goes beyond merely aesthetic appreciation to convey a metaphorical import inherent through its symbolic usage of motifs, colours and materials. Affirmation is made by Borgatti (1983) that cloth use and cloth metaphors help to define concepts of humanity, culture, proper social relations and behaviour. So it is with any other work of art provided they explore the symbolic function of metaphor. For example, the Kente in Ghana, is more than just a cloth. It is a visual representation of the people's history, oral tradition, ethical beliefs, social values and political values. In essence, such works of art in this context is a wordless means of communication that is understood by those who use it.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to attribute a common meaning to an art form because art can be defined differently by different cultures (Omatseye, 2002). The 'symbolic' expression at the heart of artistic creativity, however, is common to all cultures. This argument, according to Leuthold (2011), stems from the 'Symbolic theories' of Ernst Cassirer, who made a case that symbolisation forms the core of all activity that is uniquely human. Cassirer (1965) also noted that art is a major aspect of this symbolic expression.

The functions of art vary, depending to a large extent on the art's socio-cultural context. Specifically, Danto (1981) explains that art functions as metaphor, eliciting the relationship between the viewer and the artist and the art piece. This function is interpreted against the background of the theory that metaphor, as a figurative form of expression, can be employed to elicit a deeper understanding of the meaning of experiences. For instance, the patterns and colours of the Ghanaian Kente cloth remind the Ghanaian of his or her ethnic values and pride as a Ghanaian and an African. In essence, art as metaphor in Ghana generates deep insights and personal understanding while it unravels untold stories and captures unspoken words.

The aforementioned further articulates the symbolic function of metaphor as a communication device in Ghanaian artistic creativity expressed through any media. Ortony (1975) indicates that this symbolic expression allows logical, emotional and experiential characteristics to be transferred from the known to the less known. This function can be observed in the use of any medium in Ghana only understood by the local people or users of the art piece. In the opinion of Beck (2005), whichever way it is used, it is understood to communicate with one's culture even in the face of modernity

and Western styles.

Importantly, such visual communication can only be deciphered and understood by the artist, who has a reciprocal relationship with the culture and not universally apparent. In other words, the ability to understand such symbolic messages comes with a certain level of competence in the culture and an awareness of it. In the Akan culture, Adinkra symbols serve as a communicative tool. The Adinkra cloth was originally more than a mourning cloth and used as an integration of elements of magic and power to repel negative energy. It is structured for safety and inscribed or marked with elaborate symbols to add protection to the wearer.

Rattray (1959) indicates that a cloth with the *musuyidie* (literary meaning something to remove evil) design stamped upon it is laid beside the sleeping couch of Asantehene who places his left foot upon it every morning he wakes up from bed, and the design *Hyewonhye* (literary meaning he who would burn you, be not burned) imprinted on the king's pillow is an indication of their belief in magical powers. Indeed, Adinkra fabric, like other African artforms, represents a way of living that renders the invisible visible. The Asante use of these garments can only be understood in the context of their ideas about the mystical power for special purposes (for personal or village protection, to catch witches or to bring wealth). Surprisingly, it is not just the embellishments but also the placement of the cloths, on the body or in the environment that worked magic.

Traditionally, the use of images and motifs is crucial in the interpretation of a work of art. A study of these images and motifs provides a work of art with a deeper meaning. Such a study gives the viewer a better appreciation of the work and offers him or her the opportunity to experience the art in the context in which it was created. It is therefore not accidental that the Ghanaian philosophy of art is sated with symbols, but rather communicate the thoughts, beliefs and values of the people, thus revealing the rich Ghanaian cultural traditions.

The symbol used in this project is *Nkyimkyim* (Symbol of **Toughness, Adaptability or Versatility, and resourcefulness**) and is adapted from both the Kente and the Adinkra symbols as shown in fig 1 below. The philosophy is that the path of life is not always straight in that one should always appraise and reappraise a situation before taking the necessary initiative to avoid certain obstacles in order to preserve energy to attain maximum goals in life. In effect, it communicates with emphasis the need for critical assessment and reassessment of one's situation in life.

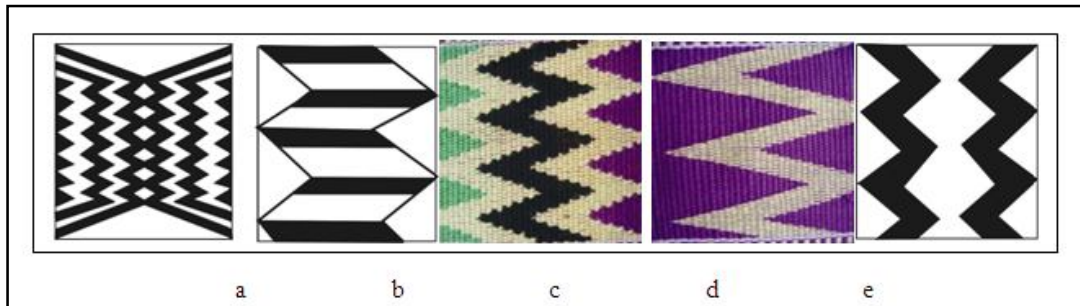


Figure 1a,b,c,d&e: Nkyimkyim motifs in black and white & Kentenkyimkyim motifs woven in colour

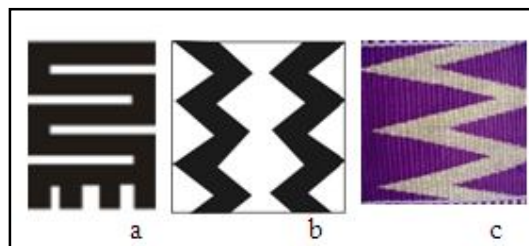


Figure 2a, b & c: Show the Adinkra symbols Nkyimkyim and the stylized Kente symbol of the same

Pure forms, motifs, images, stories and allegories are essentially manifestations of underlying philosophies. In essence, the art and the life of the people symbolically reflect each other. This conclusion further indicates that a philosophy of symbolic forms can be considered a yardstick for a philosophy of culture. There is no gainsaying that in the African philosophy of art, the motifs and designs are often mystic, and in the art's particular symbolic communicative usage, another sacred dimension is added. Today, the Adinkra symbol is still a significant symbolic force in the socio-political life of Ghanaians. This unique symbol gives it an official status in Ghanaian artistry. The status of the Adinkra makes its usage significant.

Furthermore, the philosophy of Ghanaian symbols may not be fully appraised without eliciting the symbolism of its colours as its usage frequently complements one another. Colour symbolism in Ghanaian culture is best understood in the context of its usage and associations. Importantly, too, colours in Ghanaian art culture often convey particular messages. Across African cultures, black and white are generally significant colours. Black symbolises death and sadness, while white is a symbol of purity, joy, peace, holiness and cleanliness. It is thought to be the transition between mortality and immortality or the natural and the spiritual and therefore has powers of spiritual healing.

However, white is also used as a funeral cloth, especially for those who die in old age. In most cases, the deceased is wrapped in white cloth before laying in the coffin.

Red cloth, in addition to being used at funerals, is also symbolic of danger and blood and at other times of spiritual power. This colour is symbolic of the fierceness, violence, anger, fire and blood that are associated with it. The symbolism in colours is inexhaustible in Ghanaian culture. The composition of designs, motifs and colours also portrays a variety of implied concepts, ranging from a simple display of creativity and talent to religion, philosophy and expressions of family lineage.

Integrating and projecting traditional symbols and non-conventional materials in a contemporary way can be a catalyst for changing the fortunes of the Ghanaian small-scale industry. It has been observed that the long-term growth strategy of the country is predicated on the concept of modernization, repackaging, integrative approaches, restructuring and development of the indigenous sector (Adutwum, 2013). Repackaging selected indigenous artefacts with contemporary concepts will considerably add value as well as articulate the symbolic function of metaphor as a communication and promotional device appropriate to advance Ghana's interest in the world market.

Such move will play a supportive role in achieving the transformation of the indigenous art industry and orient it to a commercially attractive, viable, and dynamic sector, which is vital for national economic growth. This can be achieved without losing the essence that characterized the metaphoric objectives of products produced within the contemporary setting to complement the efforts of the indigenes.

According to Graven (1994), mixed media was advocated by the early Dadaists in one way to debunk what he calls the high art, and in another, to bring art and real life together. Mixed media offer a limitless opportunity for self-expression for the artist. Dona (1969) suggests that mixed media provide artists with amazing range of materials and ideas that can easily be expressed by any field of art from both young and older artists. Mixed media allows the artist to take a fresh look at the most ordinary item and separate them from their everyday environment and uses.

According to Lyons and Museum (2005), mixed media is gaining a new audience and that interior designers of which the researchers belong, art collectors and long-time buyers of traditional and classical art are being drawn to mixed media works for their intense use of functional metaphor and multi-dimensional materials such as paint, textiles, clay, and other found objects. The purpose of this study is to enhance contemporary design products with traditional symbols integrated with selected

traditional materials based on the Ghanaian philosophy of aesthetics for contemporary use.

2. Materials And Methods

Materials used for the project were as follows; Mfensi clay slip, wood, adhesive, tins of acrylic paint, mansion polish, PVA solution, and apotoyuaa (an indigenous ceramic soup bowl). Tools and equipment employed in the project included, utility knife, sandpaper, paper, paper template, masking tape, pencil, a pair of scissors, a tape measure and brushes.

The research process involved a review of Ghanaian metaphors related to artefacts and in mixed media integration to provide a global overview of the project as well as identify the appropriate methods to be adopted. Structured observation was used to evaluate the selected items of their colour, quality, material and shape. As described by Best (1981) this exercise provided the basis for assessing the value and result of the project. Mixed media materials were experimented on the biscuit state of the indigenous ware to ascertain their efficacy for both functional and enhancing purposes.

3. Designing

The study seeks to establish the fact that both the traditional designs (mostly drawn from symbols in Adinkra cloth and woven Kente) and the contemporary concepts blend well aesthetically and metaphorically irrespective of the medium used in Ghanaian artistry. The designing process addressed the concept of traditional symbolism and mixed media from the perspective of African aesthetics. Local materials were considered during the designing process. Sketches of the indigenous wares with its envisaged end products were made (see figures 1&2).

The apotoyuaa, is a circular shape; a representation of the aesthetic and sociol-cultural significance of motherhood (receptacle of benevolence). It was integrated and embellished with a non-conventional material. The ritual relevance of apotoyuaa, is strongly connected to their function as cooking containers and to their ability to contain and transform physical and spiritual substances indispensable in individual and community life. They preserve and administer the "vital substances" which ensure the continuation and prosperity of a family or a community (Warnier, 2007). Below are the sketches made prior to the commencement of the project.

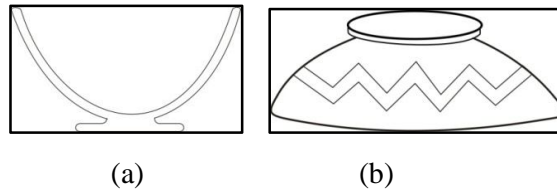


Figure 3 a & b: Sketches of the various media used- by the authors

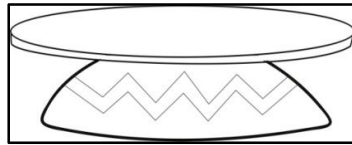


Figure 3: Sketch of mixed media work- by the author

4. Material Preparation And Forming

The project was to produce a centre table out of an indigenous water basin. The picture below shows the original appearance of the indigenous water basin normally used in the villages for bathing babies.

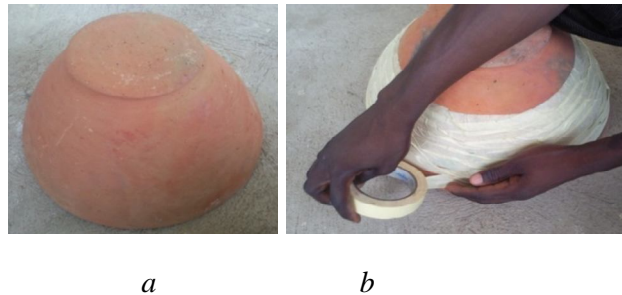


Figure 4a & b: The original appearance of the indigenous water basin and the wrapped water base

The first step was to carefully measure the length of the pot surface in order to wrap the masking tape on the design area allotted at the mid part of the basin to resist later applications of chemical and clay slip solution on the bisque surface.

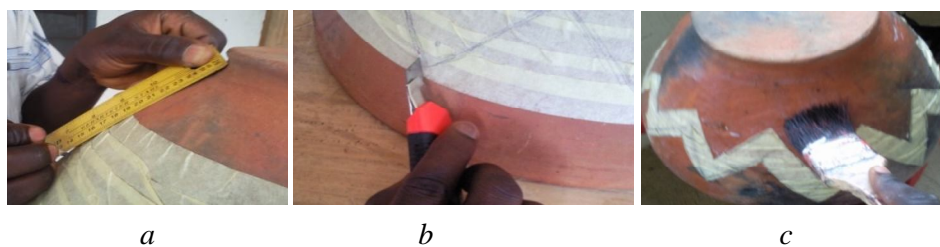


Figure 5 a, b & c: Demonstrate the measuring, the cutting of the wrapped masking tape and the coating of the pot with PVA solution

With the aid of a rule, pencil and utility knife two perpendicular zigzag line designs were drawn and cut through to create the design shown in Fig.4band4c. After cutting and peeling off the masking tape from the negative areas, the high viscosity white glue was applied onto the exposed surface of the pot and immediately followed with an amalgam (that is a mixture of clay slip and white glue). With the help of a brush the amalgam was splattered onto the whole surface to give a texture and to serve as a first coat.

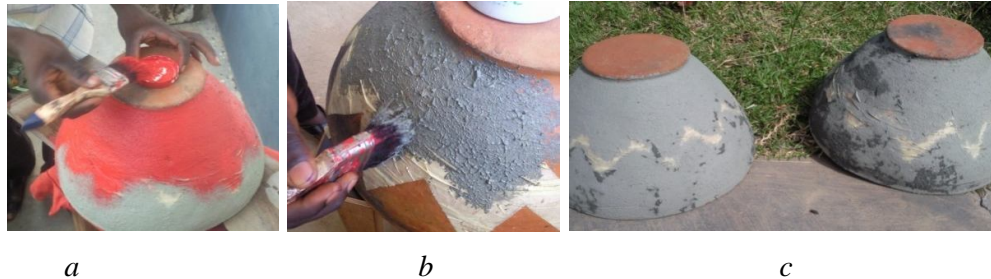


Figure 6a, b & c: Show the red acrylic paint, and the amalgam priming and its drying stage

After drying, the whole surface was painted with red acrylic paint and allowed to dry under sunlight (this was to serve as a second coat). The last coating of black acrylic paint was applied to the dried red coating and this was kept under shade for twenty four hours (Fig. 5).

The surface was sanded to expose the three coated layers and the masking tape removed to reveal the actual colour of the pot and also, to give it an aesthetic finish. A hand drill machine was used to create six holes at the base of the pot. A mansion polish was applied and a sponge brushed over the surface of the pot to achieve a glossy finish. Suction cups were then inserted into the drilled holes with the help of an adhesive to hold the glass in position as seen in Fig.6c.

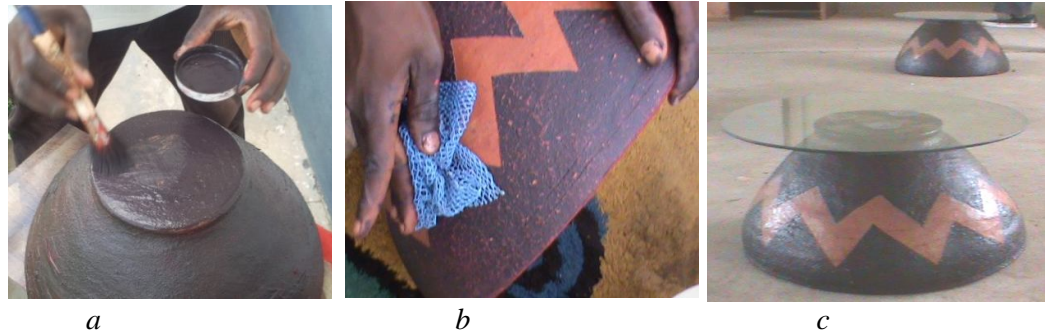


Figure 7a, b & c: The application of the black acrylic paint, the sponge brushing and the completed work mansion polished with the top fixed glass respectively.

5.Results and Discussion

'Two worlds' have the basic form of a handmade pottery table. The natural awareness of the role handmade pottery has been made in the modern world and the forms appropriated by the environment of contemporary design suggest an alliance between art and life that creates a new artistic form and opens numerous philosophical readings for those so inclined.

Inspired by traditional Ghanaian craftsmanship, indigenous natural materials, and personal philosophy of maintaining a harmonious balance between ethnic grace and cosmopolitan elegance and simplicity, the product is exclusively produced to fit an interior design concept. The need to promote the vast and diverse traditional metaphor and to provide sustainable employment, has necessitated the need to incorporate traditional metaphor with indigenous craft techniques in a contemporary designfashionedto bring aesthetic and philosophical products to today's consumers. It is also to embrace a philosophy of individuality: that is, no two items will ever be the same or every item produced is unique in itself.

The centre table pottery piece was created from an indigenous bowl most people see as mundane and inconsequential yet has turned out to be a functional and a fascinating sculpture home decor. The natural body curves and design shape compliment and contrast the free flowing transparent glass that lies on top of the pot. The piece is designed to accentuate the traditional stature and purpose symbolizing the importance of peaceful co-existence between the traditional, contemporary and the complexity of its artistry. An important property of the piece is its extremely good dimensional stability. It is strong, of medium weight, and of average hardness. The motif is very abstract, and is

designed to challenge the viewer to new interpretations while giving the designer's imagination free reign.

From the shapes, textures and decoration on the pot, to the techniques used in their creation, the influence of the natural world is evident, from the pots resembling a zebra skin design to aspects of philosophical landscape. Using only minimal decoration, the body of the bowl stained in a unique way projects a band of sharp zigzag line forms having an abrupt alternate right and left turns that reveals the light bisque ware colour. Though the design of individual elements is fairly free, the composition as a whole show marked unity and coherence revealed by the relationship between the functional blank spaces and the zigzag decorated shape.

5.1.The 'Twists And Turns' Or 'Zigzagged 'Shape Is Taken From The Proverbial Expression

ObraKwanyenkyinkyimiie; meaningthe course of life is full of twisting, ups and downs, and zigzags (Rattray, 1959).Charged with aesthetic dynamism, the symmetrical, simple, elegant shapes of the entire piece convey the energy and exhilaration of motion evident in the limpid lines and subtle implication of movement peculiar to African art designs. The anonymous, truncated shape suggests a kind of universality, immortalized by the antique reddish-brown colour discovering an extraordinary realism in abstraction. The fluid curved body and the intimate alliances forged in clay and glass make this graceful sculpture a visual celebration.

6.Conclusion

This study evaluated both the visual effect of Ghanaian art and the underlying aesthetic symbolism inherent in Ghanaian art philosophy and that the mixed media materials employed in the creation of the centre table could be used effectively to achieve high quality aesthetic contemporary products. It also ascertains that materials such as wood, glass sheet, and many other materials coupled with traditional metaphor could be a wealth of additional resources to enhance indigenous products. The visual art form created, as a metaphor, reflects all aspects of Ghanaianlife. Specifically in this case, the unique nature of the designs, motifs, colours and usage convey a metaphorthat only the owner of the art piece can untie.

Conclusively, contemporary products integrated with traditional metaphors could be an effective means to provide alternate and unlimited opportunities for artists to explore for maximum economic benefits. The outcome of this study provides hope for our traditional metaphors and the work of contemporary artists in exploring unusual materials and traditional metaphors to finish their contemporary products. The results are that, traditional metaphor can add value and improve the marketability of indigenous art forms. In this regard, enhancing contemporary works with traditional metaphor can help foster economic cohesion by linking up and supporting foreign investment inflows which will contribute to improving the production expertise of Ghanaian artefacts.

6.Reference

1. Beck, R. M. (2002). Aesthetics of communication text in textiles (Kanga) from East Coast (Swahili). *Research in African Literatures* 31 (4): 104–124.
2. Borgatti, J. (1983). *Cloth as metaphor: Nigerian textiles from the Museum of Cultural History*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
3. Danto, A. C. (1981). *The Transfiguration of the commonplace: A philosophy of Art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 189.
4. Dona, M. (1969), *Collage and Found Art*. New York: Art Horizons Inc.
5. Ernst Cassirer, (1965). *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 1: Language*. USA, Virginia: Yale University Press.
6. Graven, W. (1994), *American Art History and Culture*, New York: McGraw Hill Companies Inc.
7. Leuthold, S. M. (2011). *Cross-cultural issues in art*. London: Taylor and Francis e-Library.
8. Nevadomsky, J. and Inneh, D. E. 1983. Kingship succession rituals in Benin. *African Arts* 17 (1): 47–59.
9. Lyons, C. & Museum, P. G. J.(2005). *Antiquity and photography*. California, Los Angeles: Getty Publications
10. Omatseye, B. O. J. (2002). An Appraisal of the Aesthetic Dimension of the African Philosophy of Cloth. *KEMANUSIAAN* Vol. 19, No. 1. University of Benin Press. 59–73
11. Ortony, A. (1975). Why metaphysics are necessary and not just nice. *Educational Theory* 25 (1): 45–53.
12. Adutwum, R. O. (2013). *The Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy- GPRS II (2006 – 2009)*. Retrieved April 12, 2013, from [http://www.ndpc.gov.gh/GPRS/The%20Architects%20by%20DR%20ADUTWU M.pdf](http://www.ndpc.gov.gh/GPRS/The%20Architects%20by%20DR%20ADUTWU%20M.pdf)
13. Rattray, R. S. (1959). *Religion and Art in Ashanti*. London: Oxford University Press, p. 265