



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

Ghanaian Artists' Response to Preserving Ghanaian Cultural Values: Ablade Glover and El Anatsui in Perspective

Dr. Ebenezer Kwabena Acquah

Graphic Designer, Department of Graphic Design, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

Abstract:

This paper presents a narrative inquiry on how two contemporary Ghanaian artists, Ablade Glover and El Anatsui are responding to Ghana's cultural policy of preserving cultural values. It was observed that most of the works of the artists eloquently capture and describe, in vibrant colour and form, not only the daily lives of modest people in the countryside, but also their festivities and ceremonies. Others reveal tumultuous seascapes laden with abstract tongues that tap deep into unimaginable depths and reaching to the subconscious of the observer. Ghanaian contemporary artists have gained more freedom to experiment, and to surprise themselves and even market their products as they cling on to personal ideas and philosophies. It is recommended that the creative works should provide valuable links between the quest for creativity and preservation of cultural values.

Keywords: Contemporary art, globalization, multicultural, policy, traditional

1. Introduction

Over the years, many countries in Africa contend with the legacy of colonial education: its educational policies and practices that impact economic development (Mafeje, 1996; Mbembe, 2001). Some of these policies¹ were considered as alien and Eurocentric and do not meet the needs and aspirations of the people. In Ghana for instance, European model of formal education was adopted when the Portuguese arrived at the Gold Coast, now called Ghana. The Portuguese, who were the first Europeans to arrive at the Gold Coast in 1471, established schools known as castle schools that focused on reading, writing, and learning via Christian missionaries in 1482. Prior to the arrival of the western Europeans, the system of traditional education through apprenticeship training was practiced to equip the learner with employable skills and transition into adulthood (McWilliam and Kwamena-Poh, 1975; Mapadimeng, 2009). The institution of traditional education began to wane with the introduction of the western European formal education. Though there is no evidence of their success, it is known that Dutch, Danish, and British merchants also set up schools in the Gold Coast mainly attended by children of wealthy African merchants and prominent local chiefs, and mulatto² children of the European castle staff and African women (Graham, 1971; Net Industries, 2012). Their prime purpose was to prepare the students for employment in the European commercial enterprises on the coast. Western efforts to provide formal education were complemented by the Christian missionaries who started arriving at the Gold Coast in the 18th century (McWilliam & Kwamena-Poh, 1975) and by traditional education³ characterized by apprenticeship training. Some form of discipline-based artistic practice was also introduced into the formal education system in 1909 with a focus on practical skills in art and craft such as carpentry, blacksmithing, needlework and sewing (Edusei, 2004).

2. An Overview of Ghana's Cultural Values

Ghana has rich traditional cultures and cultural values that span across diverse ethnic groups. These cultural values are handed down from generation to generation and include but not limited to a) respect for authority, b) communality and sharing, c) self-reliance, and d) projection of traditional symbols and images (Essel & Acquah, 2016; Isiguzo, 2011; Hagan, 2007; Amenuke, 1995). The country also values the need for innovative practices. Among these values, there are elements of ambivalence: between communality and self-reliance; between the projection and preservation of culture and a quest for innovation. For instance, the value of self-reliance concerns ability to take initiative and also be independent of what one does

¹ Policy connotes an idea or value that is upheld in practice.

² Mulatto refers to children of European men and African women in the Gold Coast.

³ Traditional education is used here to refer to the process of transmitting cultural values before and during colonial period. It was designed as moral, progressive, and practically oriented.

as opposed to working in communality. For now, the communal spirit imbued in the people of Ghana (regardless of their particular ethnic affiliation) revolve around a chief, and this was observed significantly during the pre-colonial and colonial era where the chief is regarded as a symbol of authority and revered. In a report by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) in 2007, "chiefs often operate as custodians of customary law and communal assets, especially land. They dispense justice, resolve conflicts and enforce contracts. They also serve as guardians and symbols of cultural values and practices" (ECA, 2007, p. 8).

Currently, Ghana is caught in a social pyramid characterized by a two-tier authority structure – rule by chiefs and by a political administrative president. The country also experiences a two-tier family system (nuclear and extended family systems) and communal support system (upholding collaborative values in life). Since the last five decades in Ghana, the extended family system and work schedules of parents have brought about significant changes in the communal spirit of the people (Hughes, 2011). People, for instance, rather attend to their personal chores than undertaking a communal project even if there is a call from a chief within a community who is presumed to hold a symbol of authority. Current global adverse economic conditions have made the people to give priority to personal issues as against societal demands (Isiguzo, 2011). In spite of the waning communal spirit among the people, the value placed on graphic cultural symbols in Ghana is also immense. Most of these symbols such as the adinkra symbols have proverbial meanings and found on architectural structures, fabrics, and other visual cultural products.

The 2004 Cultural Policy of Ghana (National Commission on Culture, 2011; National Commission on Culture, 2004) has three main objectives. First, this policy seeks to document and promote Ghana's traditional ethnic values that include maintaining human dignity, unity and peace, self-reliance and dignity of labour, law and order, honesty, communality and national solidarity. Its second main objective is to ensure the advancement of cultural institutions, democratic governance and national integration. Third, it seeks to enhance cultural programmes that "contribute to the nation's human development and material progress through heritage preservation, conservation, promotion and the use of traditional and modern arts and crafts to create wealth and alleviate poverty" (National Commission on Culture, 2011, p. 2).

The cultural policy of Ghana, among other things, also stipulates the need to preserve traditional values and practices while at the same time advocates for innovation in the arts (National Commission on Culture, 2004). This bipolar⁴ expectation, to some extent, may create an ambiguity in value choices and implementation. It is the question of preservation of cultural values that this paper explores.

3. Exploring Contemporary Art in Ghana

From a general perspective, one may be tempted to categorize Ghanaian contemporary visual artists into groups based on an era they belong to, or the stylistic similarities and differences, within their work. However, this article explores the Ghanaian art scene from a viewpoint of two contemporary artists and how their works relate to the traditional and the contemporary.

Significantly, Ghanaian art and artistic expression has evolved through a dynamic exchange between internal artistic vision and the external demand from changing times and public tastes, clearly an issue of push and pull factors. For instance, one of the forces that drive people away from producing traditional oriented art in Ghana is superstitious beliefs that surround traditional art while commercialization, satisfaction of the tourist market, and the quest to develop one's style through creativity constitute the pull factors.

The livelihoods of some Ghanaian artists have always depended on the patronage of local or foreign art lovers and collectors (Nauman, 2010). This relates to a study in Surinam by Herman Jiesamfoek. In Jiesamfoek's study on the effects of globalization on Bush Negro life in Surinam reveals that, as a result of the promotion of tourism, the people have changed their artistic designs on objects to satisfy tourists to reflect ordinary perceived exoticism without symbolic meanings that were traditionally designed on their object (Jiesamfoek, 2009).

The next two sections of this article look at the works of two Ghanaian artists, Ablade Glover and El Anatsui, a painter and a sculptor respectively.

4. Ablade Glover

Ablade Glover's artistry is colour, applied with coordination, juxtaposed, and from which emerges the images he creates. He focuses on market scenes, townscapes, country-side, and his embracing paintings are found in public and private collections worldwide (Glover, 2009; Amenuke et al., 1993). These subject matters provide an indication of Glover's quest and interest in the projection of material culture of Ghana. Furthermore, some authors have observed connections between Glover's work and the repeated designs in primary colours commonly found in many Ghanaian textiles (Hughes, 2011; Delaquis, 1976). His paintings are shaped by brightly coloured oil paints which gives them a rich texture yet with dynamic qualities (The October Gallery, 2011). Ghanaian art historians and educators such as Asihene, Amenuke, Dogbe and Nyarko assert that Glover's paint is applied boldly as a thick impasto with the palette knife, accumulates weight as it builds in repeated planes into a thick carpet of glowing lights and shade and almost every single painting reveals a double aspect, being at once an abstract layering of color and a detailed rendition of a reality closely observed (Asihene, 2004; Amenuke et al., 1993). Glover however argues that the interpretation of abstraction depends on the viewer's precise distance at a particular moment

⁴ Bipolar refers to two extreme forces of advocacy.

(Glover, 2011). The paintings are explosive constellations of seemingly random shapes confined within the frame, probably, an abstract ecstasy of colour. Thus, one may view a crowd, a flock of birds, a market scene or townscape captured under particular conditions of light and weather.

Sometimes regarded as the father of Ghanaian contemporary art, Ablade Glover's heavy oils are worked only with a palette knife resulting in an impressionistic effect of impasto (contemporaryafricanart.com, 2011).



*Figure 1: Red Market II, 2003, Oil on Canvas, 102 X 152cm
Source: October Gallery (2011)*

There is another debate on whether Red Market was made based on application of a design principle that focuses on illusion of depth or just a random display of colour. Glover's Accra Floods is portrayed in jostling geometric and organic shapes, enlarged near the bottom of the canvas, gradually shrink in size towards a virtual horizon beyond the frame's top edge (Glover, 2011). This traditional system of representation shows distance determining size, and it differs from indigenous African concepts, where size is a function of significance. For instance, the head in most African sculptural figures is made big as compared with the rest of the body. It is considered as the seat of wisdom and knowledge and as such must be given prominence (Amenuke, 1995). Accra Floods could also be viewed within the construct of planar space, depicting aerial perspective that stretches away into the middle distance. Therefore, other contending issues in these works are the representation of images based of functional demands versus aesthetic appeal.

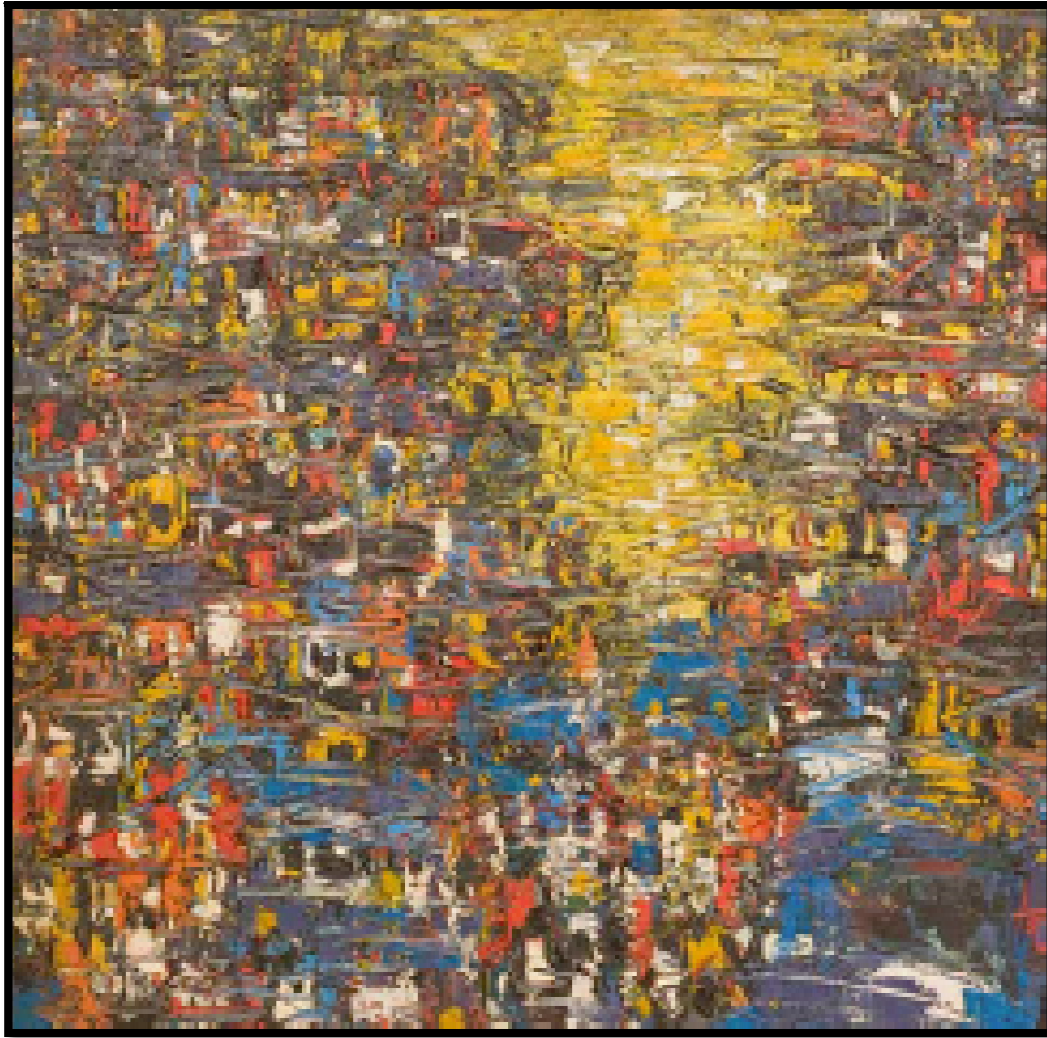
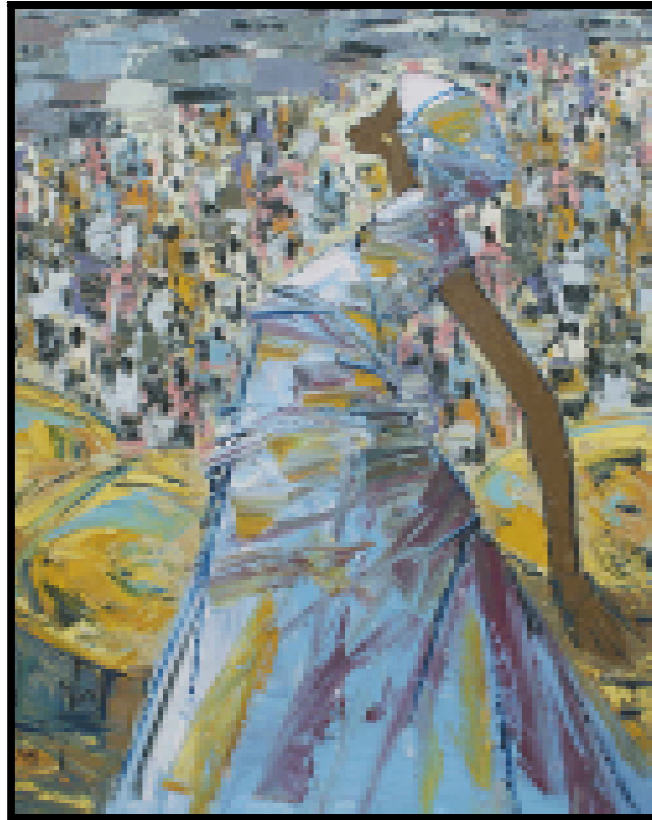


Figure 2: *Accra Floods*, 1992. Oil on Canvas, 102 X 102cm
Source: October Gallery (2011)

On the commercialization of art, Glover emphasizes the arts as a store of wealth could serve as an avenue of investment in Ghana when its potential is harnessed (Ghana News Agency, 2010). Glover also critiqued the current situation when he asserts that drumming, dancing and dressing receive much attention in the country than fine art. One important issue arising out of this is that Glover's notion on the commercialization of art contrasts with the policy of early traditional art practice in Ghana where art was essentially made for chiefs and used as gifts for esteemed visitors to the chief's palaces (Hughes, 2011; Hagan, 2007).

In spite of the criticism and debate of the contemporary style of art, Glover is reputed for presenting high-quality art. He owns the Artist Alliance Gallery in Accra, Ghana, a gallery that supports artists in developing their professional careers (October Gallery, 2011; de-Graft Aikins, 2008; Glover, 2011). Not only is he the founder of the Artists Alliance Gallery, but Glover is also a distinguished alumnus of the American African Institute in New York and a member of the Royal Society of Arts in London (October Gallery, 2011).

Glover's inspiring urban landscapes attract viewers and invite people to step in and become part of the scenery. He also paints women, beaming with self-confidence, elegance and power, with a subtle touch of humor (October Gallery, 2011). However, one critique of Glover's images of Ghanaian females is that of not projecting traditionally and idealized shape of a Ghanaian woman who should have a guitar-shaped body, predominantly revealing the curvature of the upper and lower torso with ringed neck (Amenuke et al., 1993). A closer look of the female images in Glover's *Market Queen* and *Market Blues* clearly depict slim-shaped bodies, perhaps reflecting more recent and not traditional Ghanaian ideals of female beauty.



*Figure 3: Market Queen 2, Oil, 28'x45'
The Hour Glass Gallery (2017)*



*Figure 4: Market Blues, Oil
Source: October Gallery (2011)*

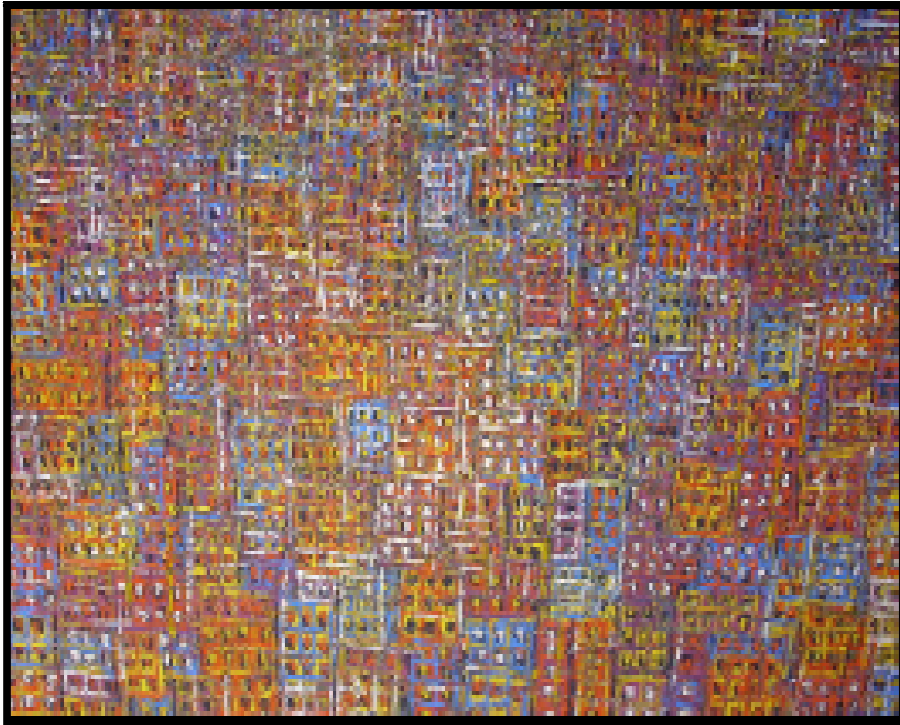


Figure 5: Ethnic Tapestry, Oil, 2007, 40'x60'
Source: October Gallery (2011)

Glover's formal education in textiles probably influenced him in the choice of technique and titles for some of his works such as *Ethnic Tapestry*. He also conducted a study on traditional adinkra symbols of Ashanti in Ghana and documented them as significant educational material (Glover, 2011). These symbols seem to be recognized as national symbols that are inscribed, embossed or printed on a host of objects. There is no doubt that at least some of his works reflect Glover's Western influence⁵. For instance, the *Blooming Reds and Yellow Forest* resonates an autumn flora in some Western countries. This is because these species of trees are virtually non-existent in Ghana but can be found in several Western countries.



Figure 6: Bloom Reds, 2007. Oil on Canvas, 102 X 102cm
Source: October Gallery (2011)

⁵ Ablade Glover attended Central School of Art and Design and the University of Newcastle-Upon-Tyre in the U.K.; and later Kent State and Ohio State Universities in Ohio, U.S.A where he completed did doctorate in 1974.

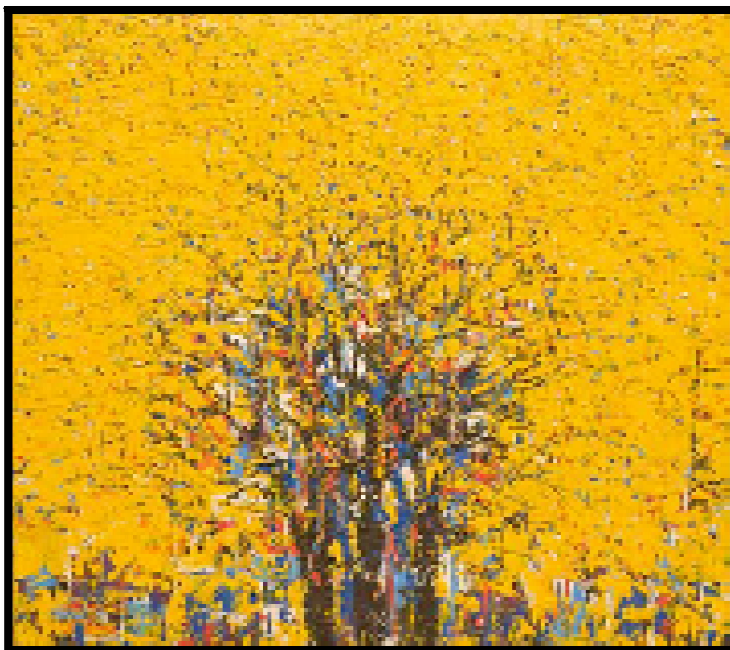


Figure 7: *Yellow Forest II*, 2008, Oil on Canvas, 102 X 102cm

Source: October Gallery (2011)

5. El Anatsui

Another contemporary Ghanaian artist of international repute is El Anatsui. His shimmering wall sculptures of interconnected metals resonate with the textile traditions of Ghana, his birth place (Worth, 2009; The World Bank Art Program, 2011). Anatsui earned his bachelor's degree from the University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana in 1968, receiving his university training under the British model, which continued in Ghana following its independence in 1957 (Gee, Binder, Ghelerter and Weible, 2011). Gee, Binder, Ghelerter and Weible also note that Anatsui studied drawing, painting, and sculpture in the Western tradition and had art history classes that did not include discussions of African art. After a short stint of lecturing in the Art Education Department Specialist Training College, Winneba, Ghana (now University of Education, Winneba), Anatsui was employed in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka in 1975 (Gee et al., 2011; Anatsui, 2011; Yale Books, 2011).



Figure 8: *God's Omnipotence*, 1974, Wood, Paint,

Lacquer, 21 ½ X 20 ½ in

Source: Googleimages.Com (2016)

Anatsui incorporated Ghanaian traditional motifs and techniques in his original works dubbing his approach Sankofa²⁴, literally translated 'go back and pick' in the Twi language (The World Bank Art Program, 2014). In *God's Omnipotence*, Anatsui used pyrography, a technique inspired by Ghana's traditional decorative burnished wooden trays. He also incorporated elements of Adinkra cloth design motif (Gee et al., 2011). In *God's Omnipotence*, Anatsui decorated this wooden tray with a central symbol *nyame ye ohene*, literally meaning "God is King," and this symbolizes the majesty and supremacy of God (Gee et al., 2011). In the context of traditional symbolic representation in his art work, in principle, I make an inference to a response to the preservation of Ghanaian cultural tenet as enshrined in the Cultural Policy of Ghana.

Throughout his career Anatsui has worked with a great variety of media, including wood, clay, glass, photography, metal and recovered materials. Anatsui's works serve as sophisticated visual metaphors of the history and present-day realities of Africa (The World Bank Art Program, 2014).



*Figure 9: Akua's Surviving Children, 1996, Wood, Metal
Installation Dimension Variable, Height of the
Tallest Individual Piece 65 in
Source: Googleimages.Com (2016)*

El Anatsui uses dual meanings with reference to a link between history and language as elements of his art practice (The World Bank Art Program, 2014). This involves using local names and historical events as basis for some of his themes. Anatsui also makes profound social commentary through his art work. An example is *Akua's Surviving Children*. This composition is made of driftwood logs that had washed ashore on a beach in Denmark, and according to Anatsui, it represents individual Africans who crossed boisterous waters (seas) during the Danish slave trade (Anatsui, 2011). In Ghana, Akan children are given a day name, which is based on the name of the day of the week a person is born. The Akan also believe ancestors give children to the living to continue their family and their society.



*Figure 10: Lady in Frenzy, 1999. Metal, Wood, Fabric, 74 X 26 in
Collection of the Artist and October Gallery, London*

In 1999, Anatsui began to use found objects more frequently than he had in the past (October Gallery, 2011). Metal and wood, two of his predominant mediums throughout his career, are combined with fabric in *Lady in Frenzy* to create this freestanding figure (October Gallery, 2011). The abstract figure (*Lady in Frenzy*) was, probably made by Anatsui as a result of external influences from western artists such as works of Marcel Duchamp and Robert Rauschenberg, traces linked to post-modern art.

Anatsui explains that the *Peak Project* and others in the series were inspired by "huge piles of detritus from consumption," such as the mountains of milk tins and bottle tops that have been growing throughout West Africa due to limited recycling technology (Anatsui, 2011, p. 1). Though many have compared his works to West African cloth, when he found the tops, one of the artist's first thoughts was of the history of migration and consumption.



*Figure 11: Peak Project, 1999 Tin, and Copper Wire, Installation Dimensions
Variable, Each Sheet Approximately 24 X 48 in
Source: Googleimages.Com (2016)*

Anatsui merges personal, local, and global issues in his work that anchors his work as part of a twenty-first century postmodern tradition in Ghana as he presents it within various contexts. Anatsui also makes huge compositions from the tin cover and these almost resemble fabrics with drapery as he names them. Examples are *Society Women's Cloth* and *Earth cloth*. However, in Anatsui's conversation with Lisa Binder, an associate curator of Museum for African Art, New York, in 2008, it became clear to that this historical connection to a specific cloth type was secondary to the transformation of material and the significance of this change in relation to local and global political and societal conditions.

Anatsui argues that he returned to the cloth motif after many years with *Adinkra Sasa* (*Adinkra Patchwork*), with references the colour schemes and not funeral cloth per se. He also points out that one of the artists whose work influenced his early life was Vincent Akwete Kofi, a Ghanaian sculptor of the pre-colonial era who made massive ponderous wood forms (Gobel, 1970; Preece, 2009; Harper & Moyer, 2007).



Figure 12: El Anatsui. Society Women's Cloth (2004) Aluminium Bottle Tops and Copper Wire, 400cm X 500cm (157½" X 196¾") as Exhibited at "Dak'art 2006," Dakar, Senegal

Anatsui exhibits abundant textured histories and stories through his materials and processes. These may defy a single definition as the audience interacts with the works. Though the metallic media appear permanent, the installations as cloths assume new waves of life with every new space they are installed.

6. Conclusion

This article reflects on Ghana's cultural policy that presents an ambiguity of emphasis on preservation of cultural values against the development of creativity through a policy of self-reliance. This has made scholars in the country to call for the cultural policy's review. Also, in this article, two Ghanaian artists, Glover and Anatsui eloquently capture and describe, in vibrant colour and mastery of form and medium, not only the daily lives of modest people in the countryside, but also their festivities and ceremonies. Also, romantic scenes of forest routes or tumultuous seascapes are laden with nostalgia and a longing for something other than what one is used to. Some of them speak also in abstract tongues, tapping deep into unimaginable depths and reaching to the subconscious of the observer. The sculptors are also not in any way different.

The growth of tourism in the 1990s in Ghana motivated Ghanaian hotels to organize expositions, and to purchase contemporary art for interior and exterior decor. Some Ghanaian businesses started investing in contemporary art with new galleries emerging. The biggest and best-known gallery these days is the Artist Alliance, run by the renowned Ghanaian painter Ablade Glover. The various styles of the artists are no longer the expression of a group identity, but rather of personal ideas and philosophies. For instance, El Anatsui, a sculptor, focuses on issues of environmentalism and social challenges that confront Africa.

From the artistic lenses of the two artists explored in this article, it is evident that globalization in market liberalization provides the Ghanaian contemporary artists with a whole new set of themes for their work. Furthermore, urbanization enables artists to get their inspiration from diverse elements of Ghanaian society. Significantly, it appears the contemporary artists have gained more freedom to experiment, to surprise themselves and even market their products. However, the main question of how contemporary art in Ghana is responding to a policy of preserving Ghanaian cultural values is an issue that requires further studies.

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