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## Symbols, Colours, and Narratives: Basketry Ornamenting Motifs of the *Gurene* People of Ghana

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### **Abstract:**

*The Gurene people of the Upper East Region of Ghana, are reputed for producing a plethora of irresistible basketry articles, which are used locally or sold to generate income. A good number of these basketry objects are mostly ornamented with colourful motifs of different sizes, shapes, and orientations. Though a limited number of studies have been carried out on the basketry articles, the basketry motifs have not received much attention. This study therefore, investigates the repertory of basketry motifs and their symbolism in the Gurene socio-cultural system. The study, which used an ethnographic design, collected information from 85 respondents, who were sampled using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Data was collected from the informants using observations, interview guides and focus group discussions. The transcribed data were thematically analysed with the help of NVivo 9 data management and analysis programme. The study unearthed 12 variety of symbolic and representational motifs. These motifs are named after celestial bodies, animals, animal parts, farming practices, farm products, as well as natural and artificial objects. The research established that the motifs, generally, derived their meanings from Gurene oral traditions, cosmology, narratives, moral values, philosophical constructs, proverbs, and heroic achievements.*

**Keywords:** Basketry arts, Gurenebasketry motifs, basketry patterns, symbols, designs, cultural heritage

### **1. Introduction**

Symbols have been used by humans since the dawn of time. Many civilizations around the world have developed complex and intricate symbols that codify and embody their history, folkloric traditions, norms, philosophy, cosmology, aspirations, and fears. Symbols, therefore, may be loaded with rich cultural knowledge, and are visual expressions that define the lifestyles of a designated group of people.

Motifs are sub-genres of the symbol system of a given culture. Artistic motifs, largely, are unique recurring images found in a pattern of design. Motifs may be employed on various surfaces as decorative devices. Also, they can be coded to transmit unique sets of cultural information, or used as part of ritualistic practices. For example, Novellino's (2006) study in Southeast Asia shows that basketry motifs could be used ritualistically to activate spiritual entities. Young artisans were therefore well-instructed and cautioned before knowledge about the crafting of these prohibited motifs was impacted to them. Motifs in these localities, according to Novellino, largely comprised dragon and snake imageries, abstractions, rattan leaves, leeches, bamboo shoots, birds, stars and footprints.

In Africa, many basketry manufacturers are reputed for crafting distinctive cultural motifs and patterns on their basketry articles, either to enhance the aesthetic value of the articles or to convey special messages (Silva, 2011; Ward, 2008; Corey, 1995; Terry and Cunningham, 1993).

Geary (1987) writes that the basket makers of the Aghem Fugom Grass Fields of Cameroon are known for crafting intricate motifs on their basketry artefacts. Equally, Asante's (2005) study in Harare, Ethiopia, reveals the lavish use of geometric motifs on most basketry items produced in this locality. Similarly, Biro (2011) writes that geometric motifs such as; triangles, checkerboards, horizontal bands, and other assorted indigenous symbols could be found on a wide collection of Tutsi basketry products.

Zulu basketry producers are equally known for weaving varied contrasting motifs onto their basketry products, using assorted coloured grasses or leaves (Nettleton, 2010). Nettleton reports that the basketry products could be seen spotting spirals, interlocking rows of triangles, diamonds, and chevrons. The author elaborates further that aside the above-mentioned geometric motifs, Zulu basketry articles could also be seen with stylized motifs representing human figures, animal imageries (lions, insects, chameleons, horned-cattle and stylized birds), huts, boats, shields, spears, trees, flowers, and flags.

Gerdes (2007) writes that African basketry motifs and patterns may convey deep philosophical meanings or may be used purely as decorative accents to improve the aesthetic allure of the article on which it is represented. Gerdes adds that in the Congo, basketry motifs and patterns may be deliberately designed and crafted on an article to convey the complicated language of status and rights.

### 1.1. Problem Statement

Basketry is one of the common cultural artefacts found among the *Gurene* people of the Upper East Region of Ghana. Most of these artefacts are usually crafted with striking colourful geometric motifs. These cultural images have been admired and hailed by many basket collectors over the years. A literature survey carried out by the researchers revealed scanty materials on these decorative motifs. For example, Smith's (1978) study, which was the only published work found on the topic, alluded to only four motifs, namely; *noayemakse*, *yidoor*, *iyanaba/tana* and a zigzag motif that he did not assign a name. This revelation obviously indicates a clear gap in the subject area, which the researchers attempt to fill. This paper, therefore, aims at establishing the basketry ornamenting motifs of the *Gurene* people, as well as their cultural symbolism. It is anticipated the study would not only supplement and corroborate Smith's earlier study on the subject, but also unearth other *Gurene* basketry embellishing motifs, and underpin their cultural symbolism and relevance.

## 2. Methodology

The study was conducted using an ethnographic research design, which draws on extensive fieldwork, carried out in Bolgatanga, Bongo and Tellensi, all in the Upper East Region of Ghana. Ethnography is a social science research tool, mostly employed in studying the behaviours, beliefs and social interactions of a culturally intact group of people over an extensive period (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Reeves, Kuper and Hodges, 2008; Flick, 2002; Creswell, 1998). A researcher using an ethnographic research design, usually interacts with the actors of a cultural society in their natural setting, to detect hidden cultural patterns and meanings of the targeted group(s) (Creswell, 2012; Berry, 2011; Marvin & Johnson, 2000).

The respondents for the study were sampled using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling allows a researcher to handpick respondents into a sample, 'on the basis of their judgement of their typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sought' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; p.114). Snowball sampling, on the other hand, is normally used to recruit subjects with unique information. The strategy involves identifying informants with the needed information and extracting data from them. Thereafter, they were asked to refer the researcher to other respondents with similar knowledge, who were again interviewed (Lune & Berg, 2017). A total sample size of 85 respondents, comprising; basketry manufacturers, medicine men, household heads, basketry retailers and middlemen from the above-mentioned communities were selected for the research.

The researchers depended on interviews, observations and focus group discussions to collect the primary data. Photographs of various basketry articles with indigenous *Gurenemotifs* were also taken within the delimited study areas to support the study.

The field data was subsequently transcribed, cleaned and thematically analysed using NVivo 9 qualitative data analysis software. Thematic data analysis is a detailed systematic approach, employed by researchers to unearth hidden patterns, assumptions and meanings within a dataset (Vaismoradi et al., 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## 3. Findings and Discussions

Historical evidence on the development of the *Gurene* basketry motifs could not be concretely obtained during the study. Many of the informants interviewed indicated the motifs were in use before they were born. This makes it difficult to ascertain whether the names and interpretations given to the motifs were the original names and symbolism associated with the motifs, or they were renamed or reinterpreted over time.

The study shows that the decorative motifs are mostly crafted on guinea grass (*panicum maximum*) and vetiveria grass (*vetiveria nigritana*) woven basketry articles. Equally, a limited number of reed (*Phragmites karka*) and kenaf (*Hibiscus cannabinus L. Malvaceae*) integrated basketry objects could also be seen with some decorative motifs as well. Generally, the motifs, are crafted into the woven structures of the basketry objects. The motifs are geometric in design and are normally woven in horizontal, vertical or diagonal registers around the body of a basket, a bag or the brim of a hat. Largely, *Gurene* basketry artists consider the motifs to be the property of the entire community. the respondents averred that anyone can use or even modify the motifs without incurring any cultural verboten.

It was realized that though the basketry producers turn to combine their motifs to conform to some family traditions, many of the weavers have developed their idiosyncratic styles of integrating the motifs into their works, birthing distinct artistic signatures common to them. The colour schemes of the motifs are individually dictated by the artisans themselves.

In all, 12 assorted motifs were detected and studied during the research. The motifs may be used singly or combined with other motifs to decorate a given article. The crafting intricacies of the motifs, as explained by the respondents, were normally handed down from one generation of weavers to the other, during training. The motifs discovered during the study and their various interpretations are duly presented below.

### 3.1. Sabere

*Sabere* (see figure .1A) was translated to mean a talisman or a cowrie. Some of the informants explained that in times past, the *sabere* talisman, which was normally crafted from clay or stone, were worn by heroic women in the *Gurene*

society. The motif, they indicated, is therefore, a representation of the feminine heroic talisman, which symbolizes, fertility and motherly protection.

Other respondents also explained that the motif was designed from the cowrie, which was extensively used in the past as a medium of exchange. The motif, according to this section of the respondents, symbolizes wealth and riches.

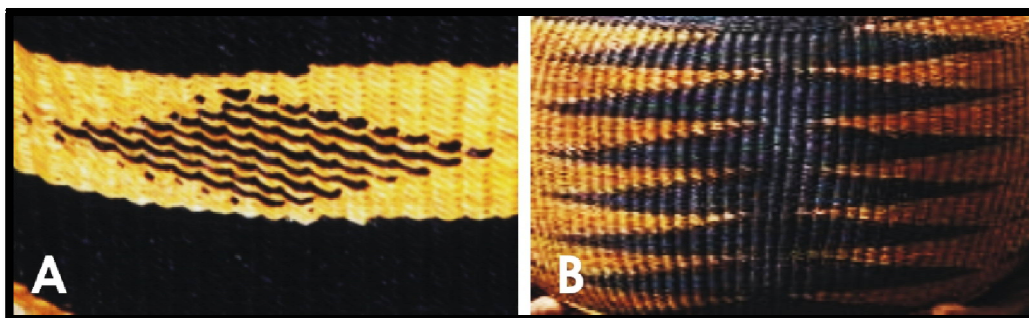


Figure 1: Sabere (A), Zuaa (B)

### 3.2. Zuaa

*Zuaa* (See figure .1B) is translated to mean the tail of a mammal. Mostly, the tails of a cow, a donkey, or a horse were affixed with leather handles and used as fly whisks in the *Gurene* society. These artefacts play very important roles in the *Gurene* culture. The tail of a horse or a donkey is a symbol of power and mostly wielded by chiefs and *Tindanaas* (land custodians) in the *Gurene* society. The symbol is said to represent prestige, power, and authority.

### 3.3. Zalenna

*Zalenna* (Figure .2A) is a woven net produced from kenaf fiber. The net is used extensively in many *Gurene* homes for storing calabashes. It is seen as one of the most cherished feminine articles visible in most indigenous *Gurene* homes. The motif is said to be designed to extol the importance of the fiber net. *Zalenna*, as indicated by the respondents, is a feminine motif that symbolizes orderliness.

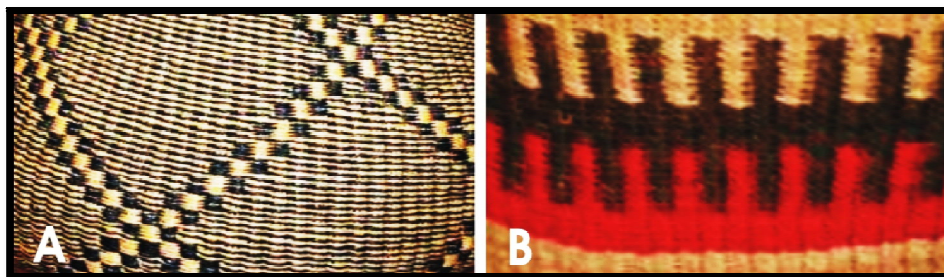


Figure 2: Zalenna (A), Gumatiataho (B)

### 3.4. Gumatiataho

*Gumatiataho* (Figure .2B) means rainbow in the *Gurene* language. The motif is normally woven in multiple colours to depict the rainbow. The motif, according to the respondents symbolizes allurements and beauty; qualities which are usually associated with the rainbow.

### 3.5. Takola

The term *takola* (See figure .3A), according to the respondents, means window in the *Gurene* language. The motif represents the squarish windows normally seen on earth-built homes common in the *Gurene* society. It is much more of a representational motif than a symbolic one.

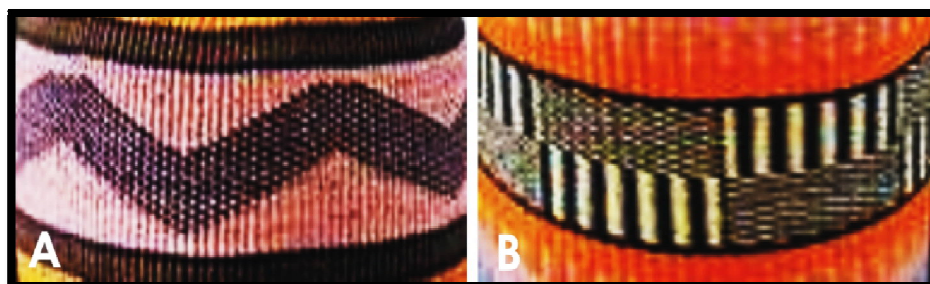


Figure 3: Takola (A), Nantandelego (B)

### 3.6. Nantandelego

*Nantandelego* (Figure .3B) means millipede in the *Gurene* language. The motif, as explained by the informants, seeks to imitate the wiggly characteristics of the millipede. The *Nantandelego* motifs are therefore woven in a zig-zag format to represent the movement of the millipede.

### 3.7. Kampenini

*Kampe nini* (See figure .4A) is translated to mean the eye of the snake. As explained by the respondents, the motif represents the pupil of a venomous snake in the *Gurene* society known as *kampia*. The informants articulated that the motif symbolizes observance and alertness, both known characteristics of the snake.

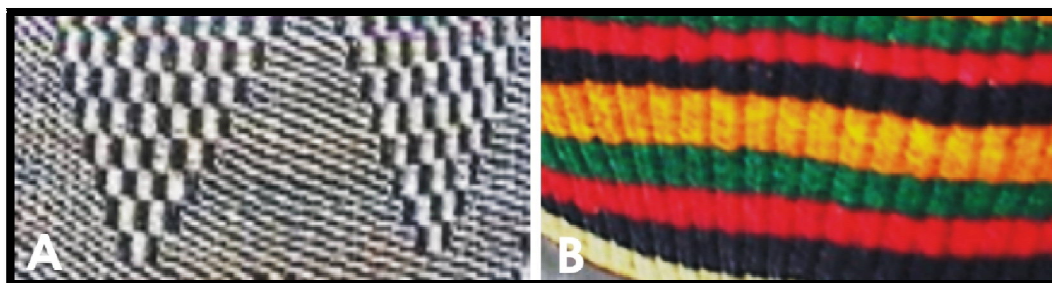


Figure 4: *Kampe Nini* (A), *Tane/ Tana/ Line-Line* (B)

### 3.8. Tane or tana/ Line-line

This motif (Figure .4B) is synonymous with the patterns seen in the narrow-woven cloths normally used in producing the popular indigenous smocks, which are common in the *Gurene* society. The motifs are mostly woven in horizontal bands in multiple colours. No clear symbolism was attached to this pattern by the informants. It is possible the motif takes its root from the textile patterns.

### 3.9. Vugudɔ/ Vugudɔro

The names associated with this motif (See figure .5A) are *vugudɔ/ vugudɔro orkayenguula/ kariyente*. The respondents asserted that the term *vugudɔ/ vugudɔro* refers to farm-plowed ridges, while *kayenguula/ kariyente* alludes to rows of corn seeds on a corn cob. Indeed, the appearance of the motif bears resemblance to both above-mentioned items. It could, therefore, be said to be a representational image.

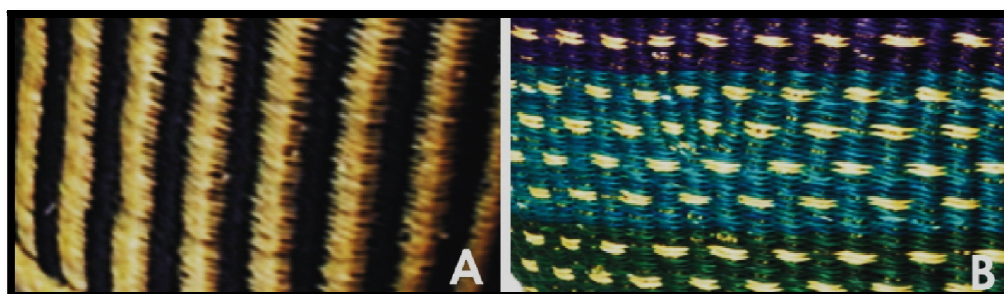


Figure 5: *Vugudɔ/ vugudɔro* (A), *Zua-A Ne Nyu/ Zu-Nyu Nini* (B)

### 3.10. Zua-a ne nyu/ zu-nyu nini

The terms *zua-a ne nyu/ zu-nyu nini* (Figure .5B) was interpreted to mean the eyes of a fly. The motif, as explained by a section of the informants, pertains to the individual lenses within the compound eyes of the house fly. They indicated that nothing escapes the eyes of a housefly. The motif, therefore, they explained, symbolizes watchfulness and observance. Another section of the informants also articulated that the motif is rather representative of the lenses of the house fly. According to this group of respondents, the motif is not symbolic but rather representative.

### 3.11. Nwaribibsi

*Nwaribibsi* (Figure .6A) in the *Gurene* language means stars. The motif is reminiscent of the multitudes of stars normally visible in the sky at night. The motif as explicated by the respondents is both representative and symbolic. They explained that the motif does not only represent stars in the night sky but also symbolizes brilliance, mystery, and awe.

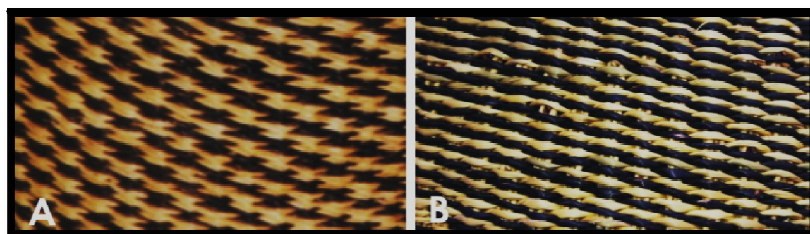


Figure 6: Nwaribibsi (A), Nuayeman Kohise (B)

### 3.12. Noayemakose

*Noayemakose* (Figure .6B) when translated in *Gurene*, means fowl feathers. This is another representative basketry motif. The motif, as indicated by the respondents was inspired by the plumage of the guinea fowl, which is an important bird in the *Gurene* society. These birds are used extensively in marriage and funeral rites in the *Gurene* society.



Figure 7: Nantandelego (vertically oriented) (A), Nantandelego (Diagonally Oriented) and Sabere (at the upper part of the basket) (B)

The informants explained that over the years, some of the original motifs were moderately modified or oriented in various creative ways by some individual artisans to generate new variations of the archetypes. The *sabere* motif appears to be the most played-around motif. Some of the remodified versions of the *sabere* motifs could be seen in figures 8 and 9(B) below. Other altered versions of *nantandelego*, *takɔla*, and *vugudɔɔ/vugudɔro* (*kayenguula/kariyente*) motifs are also shown below in figures 9(A), 10 (A), and 10 (B) respectively.



Figure 8: Sabere Variants

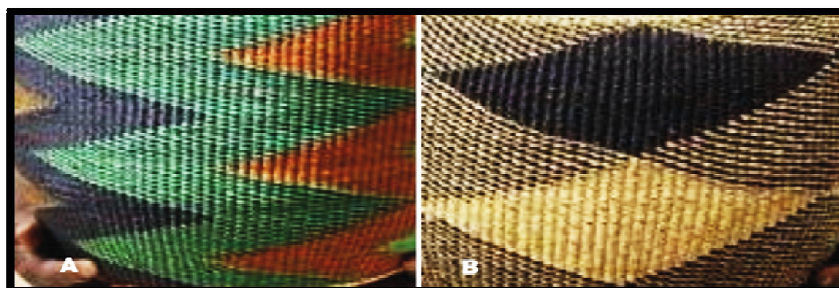


Figure 9: Nantandelego Variant (A), sabere variant (B)

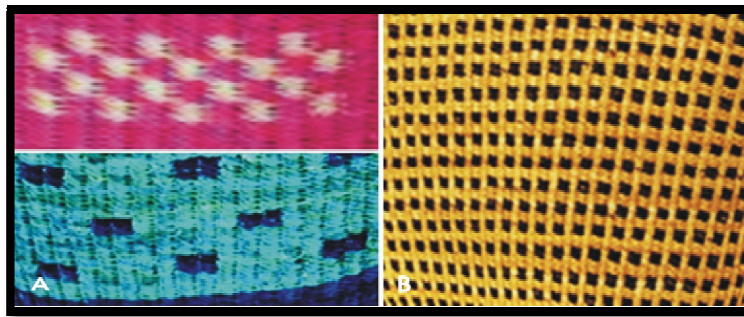


Figure 10: *Takola* variants (A), *Vugudɔɔ/vugudɔro* (*kayenguula/kariyente*) variants (B)

#### 4. Discussions

Smith's (1978) earlier study among the *Gurene* people identified four decorative motifs and patterns used by the artisans on their baskets and hats. These comprised; checkerboard patterns (*noayemakose*), narrow horizontal bands (*yidoor*), vertical strips (*tana* or *iyababa*) and zigzag patterns. This current study can categorically corroborate the existence of the *noayemakose* and *tana* (*tane/line-line*) motifs in the design repertoire of the *Gurene* basketry producers, as discovered earlier by Smith. The 'zig-zag' motif mentioned by Smith, could probably be the *nantandelego* motif mentioned above in figures .7 (A and B) and .9 (A), which have zig-zag features. There is, however, no evidence of the *yidoor* motif which was also alluded to in the work of Smith.

The basketry motifs could be used to gauge the philosophical and cosmological thoughts of the *Gurene* people. The meanings yielded by motifs such as *nwaribibsi* (stars) and *gumatiatahɔ* (rainbow) for example, inferred a metaphysical appreciation of heavenly elements such as the stars and rainbows, and a possible picturing and mental reflections about their sources, the divine intelligence behind their creation, and the forces that nourished their existence.

The aesthetic persuasions of the *Gurene* people could also be deduced from their appreciation of the various natural and organic elements, which inspired the development of motifs such as *nuayeman kohise* (fowl feathers), *vugudɔɔ* (corn cob) and *nantandelego* (millipede). Indeed, nature's beauty and allure were clearly appreciated and channeled towards the design and development of the above motifs. These motifs were subsequently used on the bodies of some *Gurene* basketry articles, not only to enhance their attraction but to encourage dialogue and appreciation of the creative works of nature, by members of the community who understand the messages encoded in these motifs.

The names of the motifs and their interpretations, as revealed during the study, stemmed from *Gurene* oral traditions, cosmology, narratives, moral values, philosophical constructs, proverbs, and heroic achievements. The motifs were named after celestial bodies (*nwaribibsi* and *gumatiatafɔ*), animals (*nantandelego*), animal parts (*zuaa*, *kampenini*, and *zua ne hu*), farming practices (*vugudɔɔ/vugudɔro*), farm products (*kayenguula*), natural objects (*sabere*), and artificial objects (*zalenɲa*, *takola*). The interpretations given by the respondents evinced that some of the motifs are symbolic, while others are representational.

The researchers assert that through the employment of the above cultural motifs, the basketry artisans aid in the preservation, and the subsequent dissemination of *Gurene* cultural knowledge to upcoming generations.

Some of the motifs discovered mirror Nankani mural motifs, which were studied by Wemegah (2009) among the people of Sirigu. For example, the *sabere* basket motif resembles the *sabaa* and *zaalin da* mural motifs, while the *zalenɲa* basket motif looks very much like the *ligipelga* mural motif. The *nantandelego* basket motif also resembles three different mural motifs, namely; *agurinusi*, *golima*, and *taana golima /sorogolima* motifs. Sirigu people are the close neighbours of the *Gurene* people. There is, therefore, a high possibility of mutual borrowing among these two tribes. Indeed, Smith (1978) also speculates that the *yidoor* and *tana* motifs might have been borrowed from *bambolsi* mural motifs.

#### 5. Conclusions

The study evinced that the basketry motifs are cultural storehouses of the *Gurene* people. The basketry motifs contained coded information relating to the cultural thoughts, creativity, heroic achievements, cosmological leanings, and philosophical thoughts of the *Gurene* people. It is evident the motifs represent and symbolize what the *Gurene* people ponder over, holds dear, or are fascinated about. They are therefore essential in the preservation and dissemination of some indigenous knowledge systems of the people *Gurene*.

The basketry motifs discovered could be digitally developed for use in various artistic applications such as; creative painting, mural decoration, graphic design works, leather ornamentation, and textile printing. This would help in popularizing the motifs and immortalizing them.

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