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Meaning of artefacts in Asogli Traditional Area: Views from residents

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Abstract



The creation and production of meaningful artefacts for trade and tourism is one way by which accelerated industrialisation could be achieved in Africa. This could first be realised through knowledge acquisition and skills development. The research sought to gather information about what residents in Asogli Traditional Area in the Volta Region of Ghana know about their own artefacts, and to identify interpretation challenges regarding them. The knowledge acquired from the results will guide artists and other creators of works of art and enable them to produce highly impressive pieces of artefacts that offer better understanding for the target audience. Questionnaire as a tool was employed for data gathering while the purposive sampling

technique was adopted in the study. The research revealed that only 19.2% of residents understand the meaning of artefacts in Asogli because of lack of supporting literature and other forms of publicity. Most artefacts are practically seen as objects of decoration. It was, therefore, recommended that for the residents and the outside world to acquire knowledge on the artefacts, art and culture symposia should be organised frequently by the local authorities, and brochures or magazines showing pictures of the artefacts and their meanings should be published occasionally and distributed among residents, hotels and libraries for proper education, to generate the expected excitement among all.

Keywords: Asogli traditional area, artefacts, symbolism, residents, sculpture

Introduction

The Asogli Traditional Area encompasses several towns and villages in the Ho Municipality of the Volta Region of Ghana. However, the main Asogli state is made up of four traditional setups namely Ho, Akoefe, Kpenoe and Takla (Asogli Yam Festival Brochure, 2015). These four traditional setups were founded by the direct descendants of a celebrated personality, Togbe Takla, who led the crusade leading to the escape of the Asogli people and other Ewe ethnic groups from the cruel rule of the king of Notsie, Togbe Agorkorli of present-day Togo (Spieth, 2011). Ziavi and Klefe which are sister towns were also included in the study. Ho is the political capital of the Asogli people. Figure 1 shows the map of Volta Region of Ghana and the Ho Municipality, the area of study.

Asihene (2004) notes that, kings, chiefs and heads of the indigenous societies have always been patrons of the arts and have supported and protected the status and welfare of artisans. The Asogli Traditional Area is endowed with varied forms of artefacts most of which could be traced to the traditional authorities who are the custodians of the people and the land. For the purpose of this study, artefacts are simply objects of art or works of art. These works of art which are both in real and abstract forms include stools, umbrella tops, linguist staff tops (finials), state swords, jewellerys, walking sticks and other decorative art pieces locally known as *dzangbe*. These are often symbolically depicted to define the emotions, expectations and aspirations of the people. In other words, the artefacts of the Asogli people have valuable meanings. This is in accordance

with the assertion made by Gyekye (2003), who states that “in general, every artistic product must have meaningful qualities appropriate to the purpose for which it was created” (p.127). The rich proverbial undertones and symbolic attachments are intended to teach vital lessons in life. The challenge, however, is the difficulty the people face in understanding the meaning of these artefacts. Otherwise stated, very little is known about the meaning and value of the Asogli artefacts among the residents, citizens and the outside world.

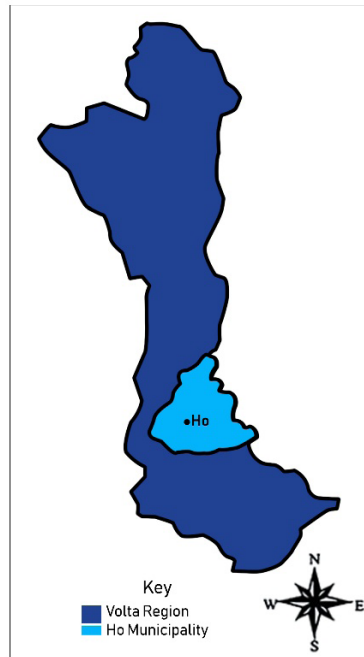


Figure 1.1. Map of the Volta Region of Ghana, including Ho Municipality.

Source: Computer generated (2015).

The consequences of this phenomenon are grave because it has the tendency of causing even fewer people to understand the meaning of artefacts. It could also result in imminent apathy toward these essential artefacts and a likely discontinuity of the production of new ones. The research therefore, sought to gather information about what residents in Asogli Traditional Area know about their own artefacts, and to identify interpretation challenges regarding them.

Spieth (2011) notes that historical accounts point to one thing that the Asogli, who are part of the Ewe people have migrated over a long time from the northeast, specifically the Niger bend as their common homeland. Other reports agree with Spieth and further pointed out that they migrated westwards, halting in different places including Oyo in Nigeria, Ketu in Benin and Notsie in Togo (Agbodeka, 1997; Buah,1998). Oral history, however, traces their origin first in Abyssinia in present-day Ethiopia before their existence in other territories (Hogbedetor, *Eweawo-Mina Miakp4 Megbe* Cassette, 2001).

Symbolism is a major style in Ghanaian visual arts in particular (Quacoo, 1972) and the art in Asogli is no exception to this symbolic identity. In an introduction to his book, Agbo (2006) explains that “symbolism is the representation of ideas by the use of signs, literary and artistic invention to express ideas, emotions and abstractions in place of realism”. The Adinkra symbols and Ashanti wood carvings and stools symbols are typical examples. These symbolic stools which were interpreted are said to serve as dwelling places for the various spirits (Rattray 1954. p 269). Appiah (1979) emphasises that the use of symbolism is common in African art and the Akan society of Ghana in particular. She emphatically states that “even the crudest artifact could have profound meaning” (p.64). The Asogli artefacts equally have deep symbolic meanings including the choice of traditional dresses for the chief (Kukah, 1977). Ross (1981) also observes that in most Akan iconography, the meaning of the artefact or motif is often expressed in a proverb or traditional saying. In the same vein, the researchers discovered that artefacts from Asogli Traditional Area also share similar attributes.

From the above discussions, it is quite clear that symbolism as an important ingredient in Ghanaian artefacts comes in two folds; first by the use of symbols and second, through expressive traditional sayings such as proverbs. This summary perhaps explains the obscurity that surrounds the meaning of some Asogli artefacts and Ewe symbols in general. Gavua (2000) observes the interpretation challenges of some artefacts and laments that, “the meanings assigned to traditional symbols are becoming blurred. Most of the symbols are therefore only interpreted and explained by only a few knowledgeable persons, including the followers of the indigenous religion who are the main custodians of the traditional values of the people” (p.112). In this direction, the demystification of the works of art in Asogli is necessary for their intended purpose of creation, to yield the maximum results and further attract the attention of lovers of artefacts outside the Asogli territory.

Methodology

The study employed questionnaire as a tool for data gathering. The respondents included secondary and tertiary students, ordinary adult residents and indigenes. It was assumed that elders and members of the royal families knew the meaning of the artefacts and for that reason were not involved in the survey. Out the 450 respondents that constituted the accessible population, 135 were selected to form the sample of which the same number of the questionnaires were administered. One hundred and twenty-five (125) respondents, representing approximately 93% of the sample population actually responded to the questionnaire for the data collection. The purposive sampling technique was adopted. This is because it provides opportunity for the researcher to choose samples that can be presumed to represent the population of a study. Also, it offers fair representation on diverse perspectives on issues.

Copies of the questionnaires were administered during the period of the annual yam festival where most the artefacts were displayed and were fresh in the minds of the residents. Questions that would only have direct bearing on the topic were asked in the questionnaire. Examples include “Do you understand the meaning of artefacts you see in Asogli Traditional Area?”, “If yes, how did you get to know of the meaning(s)?”, “Which category of people do you think understand the meaning of artefacts in Asogli?”, and “What roles or functions do you think artefacts play in society?”. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 17 was used for the analysis. It was analysed through descriptive statistics. It is worth-noting that all the respondents freely provided responses to the questionnaire.

Findings

A total of 33 categories of subject areas were collated when respondents were asked to indicate some of the subject areas of artifacts they knew of. Sculpture, jewellery, textile, and beads making were frequently reported as majority of the subject categories stated by the respondents. That is, sculpture, jewellery, textile, and beads making overlapped most of the categories of subject areas of artefacts the respondents said they knew of. However, for easy presentation of the data, detailed information from the survey was summarised into the bar graph shown in Figure 2. As a result, only six (6) categories were shown in the bar graph. The most outstanding category appears to be the bar with the label “Other”. However, it must be noted that this label is made up of 28 subject areas whose individual inclusion in the bar graph will make the graph clumsy. The details are reported in *Appendix A*. So then, from the explanation provided, the “sculpture,

beads making and jewellery” category was the most reported subject area the study participants had knowledge of (25 individuals). This was followed by the “sculpture and beads making” category (16 individuals), “sculpture and textile” group (13 individuals) in decreasing importance respectively.

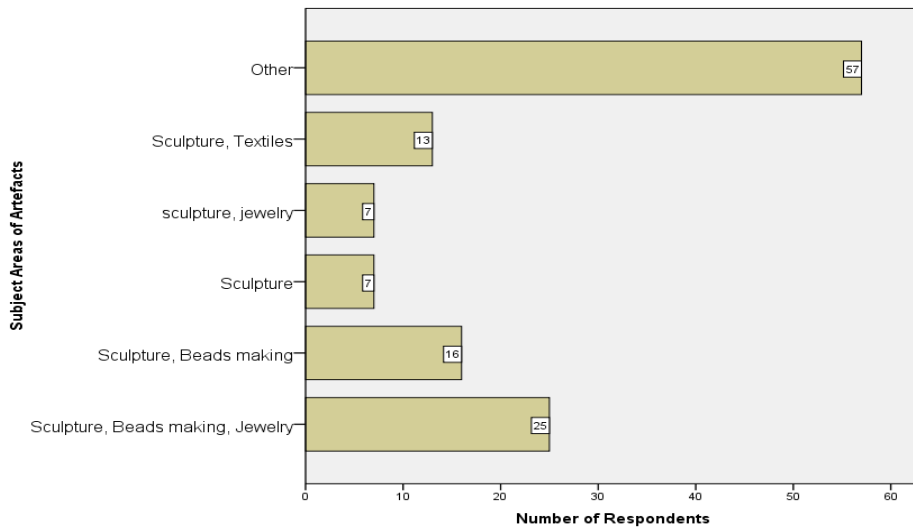


Figure 2: Respondent knowledge of subject areas of artifacts

Source: Field work data (2012).

The “sculpture” and “sculpture jewellery” categories recorded the same level of importance (7 individuals). From this presentation, of the six (6) categories, sculpture was the single most common or frequently mentioned art-form respondents indicated they had knowledge of.

Table 1

Respondents' understanding of the meaning of artefacts in Asogli Traditional Area.

	Number of Respondents	Percent (%)
Yes	24	19.2
No	101	80.8
Total	125	100.0

Source: Field work data (2012).

Approximately 81 % respondents surveyed did not understand the meaning of artifacts they have seen and known in Asogli Traditional Area. Only 24 respondents (representing approximately 19%) were reported to understand the meaning of the artifacts they have come across in Asogli as indicated in Table 1. Of these 24 respondents, 37.5 % acquired their understanding through explanations provided by artists, 29.2% through friends or other onlookers and 25.0% simply by guessing. Those who got it through earlier research (4.2%) and information leaflets (4.2%) barely served as a source for explaining the meaning of these various artefacts existing in Asogli.

Notwithstanding the low level of understanding the meaning of the artifacts, a significant majority of the respondents indicated they thought the chiefs and royal families understood the meanings of the artefacts found in the Asogli. Approximately 97% of the respondents held this view point. Others also believed that ordinary citizens (2.5%) and students/youth (0.8%) could be a source for explaining the meanings of artifacts in the study area. The study also explored the awareness level of respondents with respect to personalities involved in the making of artifacts. The results showed that 96.0% of individuals surveyed were unaware of the personalities involved in the making of the artifacts. The results reported in Figure 3 show that artifacts play multiple roles in the Asogli Traditional area. A total of 26 roles were reported by individuals who participated in the study.

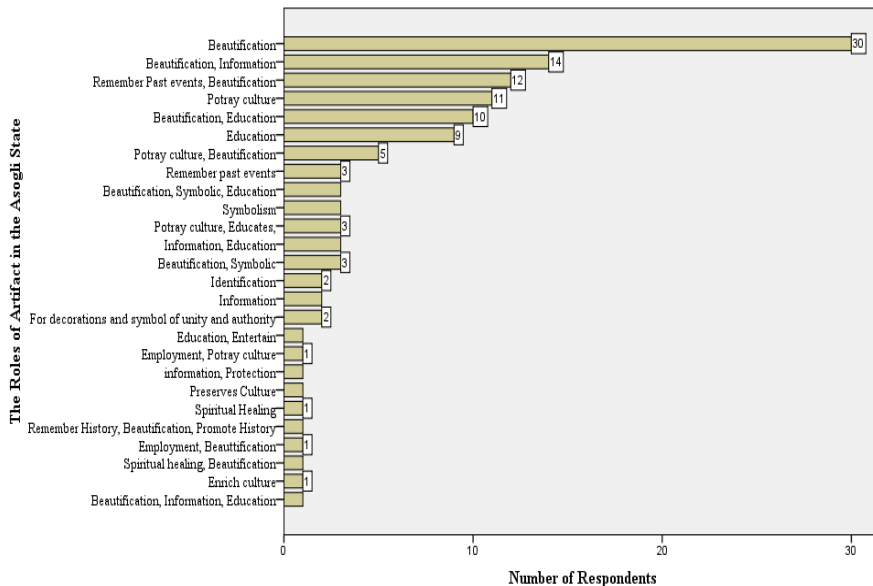


Figure 3. The role of artefacts in the Asogli Traditional Area.

Source: Field work data (2012).

The top six roles found by this study, in descending order of importance, are “beautification”, “beautification and information”, “remember past events and beautification”, “portray culture”, “beautification and Education” and “education” respectively. The use of artifacts for beautification straddles most of the categories of roles captured in the data. In other words, beautification appears to be the main purpose served by artifacts in the Asogli Traditional Area. “Education” and “portrayal of culture” were the other prominent roles reported by the respondents. Furthermore, 96% of the respondents (120 individuals) had no knowledge of any documentation about artefacts and how they are interpreted in Asogli. But irrespective of the low knowledge and understanding of the meanings of artefacts, the respondents unanimously agreed it was very necessary for the artefacts found in the Asogli Traditional Area to be interpreted in order to educate future generation and promote the culture and heritage of the people.

Discussion and conclusion

Even though artefacts form part of Asogli culture, citizens and other residents do not understand their meaning. Only 19.2% of those surveyed could interpret and make meaning out of art works in Asogli. This scenario might be occurring as a result of lack of publicity for these artefacts in magazines, books and journal for the consumption of the citizens. The failure of the elders of the traditional authorities to educate citizens appropriately on their culture could be another reason for this trend. Since less than 20% of respondents could understand the meaning of Asogli artefacts, it gives reason to believe that those who could not understand might only be looking at these artefacts as mere decorative or beautification items. This deduction was given some credence, when further results show that beautification emerged as the leading answer for the role or functions artefacts play in our society. In other words, some people think artifacts are made for beautification purposes only. The unanimous agreement by respondents that interpretation of artefacts in Asogli Traditional Area was very necessary probably might have come as a result of the challenges people go through in understanding artefacts, including the lack of provision for access to meaning.

Notwithstanding the low level of understanding the meaning of artefacts, a significant majority of the respondents (96.7%) thought that the chiefs and royal families understood artifacts more than any other group of people. This assertion could result from the fact that the chiefs and royal families are the conventional custodians of custom and tradition from where most of these artefacts come from. They are therefore expected to know a lot more and share with citizens. The revelation that most of the personalities involved in making the artefacts are not known (96%) is counter progressive for the creative art industry because they could provide a reliable source of meaning to the artefacts. The producers of these artefacts might have passed away long ago and not remembered again. In addition, as most artefacts of old have no signatures of their producers on them, the artists could not be identified and acknowledged. Despite the fact that there are many varied forms of art found in Asogli, Sculpture (modeling and carving) emerged as the most common subject area (72%) of traditional artworks found in Asogli. The result might be due to the fact that sculpture (especially wood carvings) had for long been one of the oldest forms of art since earliest times (Basaani, 2005).

The creation of artefacts in Asogli Traditional Area is often triggered by proverbs and historical events. Some artefacts are also made of symbols making their understanding quite difficult. There is therefore the need for the traditional authorities to provide access to meaning of the artefacts through effective publicity. Since most of the works are found and used by the chieftaincy institution, the Asogli State Council should

organise occasional public educational programmes such as seminars and symposia, where teachings and explanations on these educative artefacts would be done. Through these teachings, the reasons behind the creation of these artefacts and the expected transformation they were intended to cause among citizens especially would gradually be realised. Also, brochures and magazines showing pictures of artefacts and their meanings should be published occasionally and shared among citizens, tourists, libraries and hotels for knowledge to be acquired on the artefacts. By this way, the present and future generations would better see the relevance of art to society.

In conclusion, when knowledge is acquired through the meaning of the artefacts, it could cause makers of the artefacts to be creative and produce highly impressive pieces of artefacts that would better serve the interest of owners and buyers. The knowledge acquired could also boost interest leading to trade and tourism for socio-economic development.

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APPENDIX A

Knowledge on subject areas of artifacts

	<i>Number of Respondents</i>	<i>Percent</i>
_____ Sculpture, Painting	3	2.4
_____ Sculpture, Painting, Beads making, Basketry	3	2.4
_____ Sculpture, Beads making, Jewellery	25	20.0
_____ Sculpture, Beads making	16	12.8
_____ Sculpture, Basketry	2	1.6
_____ Sculpture	7	5.6
_____ Sculpture, Jewellery, Textile	3	2.4
_____ sculpture, jewellery	7	5.6
_____ Painting, Metal works	1	.8
_____ Beads making, Textiles	5	4.0
_____ Sculpture, Textiles	13	10.4
_____ Sculpture, Jewellery, Painting	2	1.6
_____ Painting, Textiles, Jewellery	1	.8
_____ Sculpture, Textiles, Beads making	6	4.8
_____ Sculpture, Textiles, Beads making, Jewellery	2	1.6
_____ Sculpture, Painting, Textiles	4	3.2
_____ Jewellery, beads making	2	1.6
_____ Sculpture, Painting, Beads making, Jewellery, Basketry	1	.8
_____ Painting, Beads making, Textiles, Sculpture, Jewellery	1	.8
_____ Metal works, Textiles, Painting	1	.8
_____ Sculpture, Beads making, Metal works, Jewellery, Textiles,	1	.8
_____ Painting		
_____ Metal works, Textiles, Basketry, Sculpture, Painting	1	.8
_____ Sculpture, Painting, Metal works, Basketry	1	.8
_____ Textiles, Sculpture, Jewellery Painting	1	.8
_____ Painting, Textiles	3	2.4
_____ Beads, Jewellery, Textiles	3	2.4
_____ Bead making, Basketry	1	.8
_____ Sculpture, Painting, Beads making, Metal works, Jewellery,	1	.8
_____ Textiles, Basketry		
_____ Sculpture, Painting, Bead making	2	1.6
_____ Textiles	2	1.6
_____ Textiles, Jewellery	2	1.6
_____ Metal work, Sculpture	1	.8
_____ Sculpture, Painting, Bead making, Jewellery	1	.8
_____ Total	125	100.0

About the authors

Dickson Tsey is a Senior Lecturer at Takoradi Technical University, where he has been lecturing since 2007. He was a former Dean of Students' Affairs and local Polytechnic Teachers Association of Ghana (POTAG) Secretary. His PhD is in Arts and Culture from the University of Education, Winneba (UEW). Dickson has several research publications and had participated in several local art exhibitions.

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