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TRENDS IN POST-INDEPENDENCE ARTISTIC BLACKSMITHING IN GHANA: A CASE STUDY AT ACCRA TIMBER-MARKET

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Abstract

The research examines the development and rediscovery of artistic blacksmithing in post-independent Ghana with a focus on its decline amid modernisations. Through innovation, the study aims to preserve Ghanaian culture and promote economic sustainability by exploring how traditional practices can be adapted for modern times without compromising Ghanaian cultural identity. Using the qualitative case study design, the study focuses on the processes of artistic blacksmiths at the Accra Timber Market. The methods of data collection included in-depth interviews with master craftsmen, apprentices, and interns, first-hand observation of working processes, and photography. Purposive sampling provided expertise-oriented respondents, and thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in design, fabrication methods, finishing techniques, and material use. Findings indicate that the history of blacksmithing has gone through three post-independence stages, namely traditional, industrialisation era and digitalisation era. A combination of age-old craftsmanship and new state-of-the-art technologies adds creativity and efficiency to both tradition and innovation. The study concludes that the combination of tradition and modernity could revive Ghanaian blacksmithing, creating intergenerational continuity and internationalisation. It suggests sponsoring training by the government, partnering with designers, and promoting custom metalwork as high-end cultural products. In the context of introducing a gap in the literature, the Glossary of Artistic Design Concepts (GADC) fills the gaps by standardising design vocabulary,

inculcating traditional designs, materials and finishing of designs with contemporary designs on aesthetics and sustainability, to heritage conservation of artistic blacksmithing in Ghana.

Keywords: *Design, fabrication, finishing, industrialisation, and metalsmithing*

1. Introduction

Blacksmithing holds a pivotal role in the cultural and technological history of sub-Saharan Africa. The craft has traditionally been not only a lucrative trade in Ghana but a source of native wisdom, community identity, and aestheticism (Bern, 2018). From the blacksmithing of farming utensils and sacred items to the production of grandiose metalwork in building structures, the process of blacksmithing has been interwoven into the social and economic landscape of Ghanaian society over the centuries. However, in the decades after gaining independence in 1957, the practice has radically changed due to industrialisation, influx of imported manufactured goods, and changes in consumer tastes.

A particularly educative place to study these transformations is the Accra Timber Market, an overcrowded, informal cluster of workshops located in the centre of the capital of Ghana, as asserted by Ross and George (2000). The market has a group of artisan blacksmiths who still practice their trade despite the presence of imported machinery and modern fabrication technologies. Their workshops form a living tradition of technique and design which is inadequately captured in the scholarly literature. Though the history and ethnographic aspects of the trade have been researched in West African metalsmithing (McNaughton, 1988; Roberts and Berns, 2018), the post-independence history of the art of blacksmithing in Ghana is notably understudied, and even less so the dynamics of aesthetic innovation and cultural tradition in informal,

The paper presents an argument that blacksmithing in Ghana is not a dying art, but that it is in the creative transition stage- and that with strategic institutional support, along with the standardisation provided by the GADC, the future of this art is guaranteed both culturally and commercially. The independence of Ghana in 1957 heralded the start of a complicated era of artisanal industries. Early post-colonial governments, led by Kwame Nkrumah, both pushed to adopt aggressive policies of industrialisation that pushed out some traditional craft practices, and at the same time, promoted cultural heritage as a national identity marker (Aryeetey & Kanbur, 2017; Fosu & Aryeetey, 2008). In the case of blacksmiths, the industrialisation period of the 1970s and 1980s introduced power tools and raw materials imported, which changed the speed and the nature of the production.

In modern times, that is, between the 1990s and 2025, computerisation of fabrication processes like CNC machines and plasma cutters has further changed the workshop landscape. Nevertheless, in spite of these technological intrusions, there have continued to be highly skilled artistic blacksmiths at the Accra Timber Market, who have managed to adapt their craft by combining traditional practices with modern ones. But due to the lack of documented data and standardised design vocabulary, much of this adaptive knowledge is tacit and can be lost. The lack of a systematic way of capturing and transmitting artistic design ideas of the various generations of blacksmiths is a major threat to the survival of the art (Van Dorp et al., 2015). This lacuna is what the Glossary of Artistic Design Concepts (GADC) of the present study attempts to tackle. The research had several aims, which included recording the trends in artistic designs, fabrication and finishing methods at the Accra Timber Market in three historical periods after independence. The paper explores the design, fabrication and finishing

methods and approaches using the Aesthetic Theory (Elliott, 1966) and Theory of Functionality (Chakrabarti, 1993). The research formulates the Glossary of Artistic Design Concepts (GADC) conceptual innovation and conservation model of Ghanaian blacksmithing.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study is based on two theoretical frameworks. Aesthetic Theory by John Dewey in 1934 offers the perspective of examining the experiential and formal aspects of objects made by blacksmiths, the so-called doing (creative process) and undergoing (formal reception) aspects of aesthetic experience. The Theory of Functionality by Chakrabarti (1993) was used to analyse how design decisions can be applied in practice, in particular, the sub-dimensions of utility, efficiency, and ergonomics. Collectively, these frameworks allow a comprehensive assessment of the artistic products of blacksmithing, which respects both the cultural (as well as the instrumental) value.

2.1 Blacksmithing as Cultural and Artistic Process

One of the most ancient metallurgical arts in human history, iron-working traditions in sub-Saharan Africa can be traced over two millennia (Sherby and Wadsworth, 2001). Traditionally, in West Africa, blacksmiths have been in a unique social status, both feared because of the power to manipulate fire and iron and respected because of the ability to turn raw material into objects of use and beauty (McNaughton, 1988; Poggo, 2006). The tradition in Ghana includes powerful aesthetic aspects: the integration of Adinkra signs, zoomorphic shapes, and geometric patterning into metalwork represents a cosmological worldview as manifested in material culture (Roberts and Berns, 2018; Bezuhla and Honcharenko, 2022).

Modern research has focused on the strains on the traditional blacksmithing industries in Africa. Emeriewen (2015) reported the substitution of hand-forging by machine processes in Benin City, Nigeria, and Ningi et al. (2014) noted the economic opportunities of blacksmithing in terms of rural industrialisation in Bauchi State. Specifically, Fening, Agyei, and Adala (2022) discovered that in Ghana, blacksmiths in Kumasi were threatened by the low-cost imported goods, but were resilient based on technological adaptations. MacGaffey (2009) also observed the space and time dynamics which influenced the blacksmithing industry in Tamale. Collectively, this body of literature attests to the fact that the craft is not dead but, on the brink, and that the adaptable tactics of practitioners should be better understood through the prism of academic interest.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Method

The research design was qualitative with the case study methodology taken as the main research design (Yin, 2012; Flyvbjerg, 2011). The case study method was chosen due to its appropriateness in the study of complex phenomena in their natural environment- a benefit especially in research where the research site is as ethnographically enriched as the Accra Timber Market. The philosophical paradigm of interpretivism was used to support the inquiry, making the researcher an active participant in constructing knowledge with participants of the study (Pham, 2018; Packard, 2017).

3.2 Study Site and Population

Accra Timber Market covers the Accra Metropolitan District of the Greater Accra Region in Ghana. It serves as one of the largest informal industrial areas of the country, with timber processing workshops, metal-working workshops, and related industries. The blacksmithing sector of the market can be described as a blend of types of workshops, from one-artisan forges

to bigger workshops with multiple apprentices and interns. The target population was the master blacksmiths, apprentices, and student interns who are actively involved in blacksmithing activities at the market. Overall, 40 participants were involved in these three categories.

3.3 Data Collection and Sampling Technique

The purposive sampling technique was used to sample clients with pertinent knowledge, experience or direct experience in artistic blacksmithing in the market (Delice, 2010). This made data collection focused on individuals in the best positions to shed light on the research questions in the study. Three main data collection tools were used: unstructured interviews with master blacksmiths, apprentices and student interns; systematic observation of working processes with the help of the structured observation checklist; and photography of the products, tools, equipment and working conditions. The interview guide entailed such topics as design philosophy, historical development of techniques, choice of material, quality evaluation, and market dynamics.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed before data collection and gave their consent. Where requested, anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed; some of the participants opted to be named. The dual role of the researcher as both academic researcher and practising metalsmith meant that the researcher could easily establish rapport with the participants and at the same time, focus on positionality as a reflexive concern during the research

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse data according to the method outlined by Terry et al. (2017). The interview transcripts and field notes of the observation were coded to find out patterns that were common within the areas of design, methods of fabrication, methods of finishing, and use of materials. Photography was not only used as a data collection instrument, but also as a visual corroboration tool to emergent themes. The analysis was performed in iterative mode with the first codes developed in the course of the further rounds of review and member-checking to increase credibility and dependability (Bush, 2012).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Three Eras of Post-Independence Artistic Blacksmithing

The research found three different periods of time that can be used to define the evolution of artistic blacksmithing at the Accra Timber Market since the independence of Ghana in 1957.

Traditional Years (1957–1970)

During the early post-independence era, blacksmiths in the Timber Market were mainly involved in making functional farming tools and household items, hoes, machetes, cooking utensils, and structural ironwork to construct buildings. Although the utility was the main concern of production, the craftsmen of the time started to integrate traditional cultural symbols into their metalwork, the most prominent being the traditional patterns (akuaba doll and sankofa) and animistic figures based on the Ghanaian and wider West African arts repertoire (Figures 1 and 2). These pioneering experiments in aesthetic embellishment are the ground layer of artistic smithing practice at the market. The members of this generation focused on the fact that design choices were oriented to a large extent by client commission and community aesthetic conventions, and exposure to formal design education was minimal.



Figure 1 : Akuaba concept blacksmith product



Figure 1 : Sankofa design blacksmith product

4.2 Industrialisation Era (1971–1990)

The era of industrialisation introduced dramatic transformations in the organisation of workshops, the use of tools and design repertoire. The mechanical shear was introduced, along with welding equipment and power grinding tools, which increased the variety of shapes that blacksmiths could easily make. Vocabulary The vocabulary of this era was enhanced with the use of twist designs, tight and loose, and geometric patterning based on a synthesis of Western artistic influences as well as indigenous Ghanaian influences. The spiral (open and closed), coil, and geometrical shapes (circles and polygons) started to be used in architectural metal work like gates, burglar-proof grilles, and balustrades. Historians of this generation gave accounts of the period as an age of creative confidence, where new tools provided the means to what they termed more ambitious design ambitions, without complete rejection of hand-forging methods. What was produced was a hybrid form of practice that a combination of the tactile precision of traditional smithing with the speed efficiencies of industrial tooling.

4.3 Digitalisation Era (1991–2025)

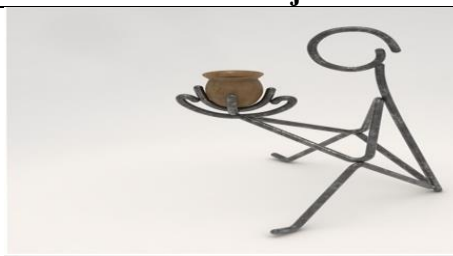
The modern era is marked by the introduction of digital and computational technologies into the practice of the workshop. The more capitalised workshops will now have access to CNC machinery, plasma cutters, bending machines, and drilling equipment in the market. Bio-mimicry has become a design trend, and blacksmiths have been integrating plant, animal and natural process forms into their products, a move that reflects the interest in biomimetic design around the globe, and taps into Ghana's rich botanical and zoological past. Modern blacksmiths operate in a tricky design language, combining Adinkra symbolism and Art Nouveau organic structures, the geometric simplicity of Bauhaus, and bio-mimetic images of the local environment. What has emerged is a Ghanaian aesthetic that is both Ghanaian and globally intelligible - a creative hybrid that some of the participants call their competitive edge in a world that is becoming more globalised.

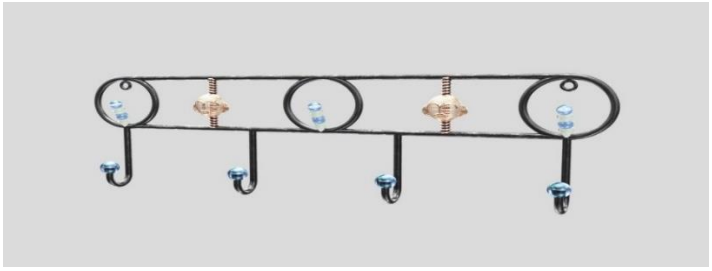
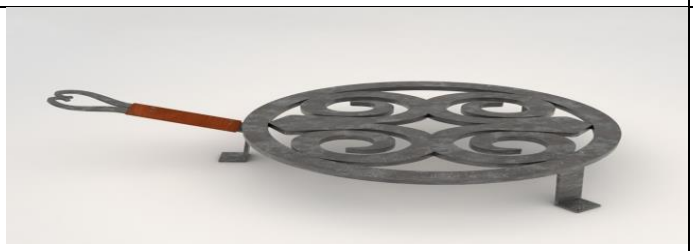
4.4 Purpose and Conceptual Underpinning of the GADC

The greatest theoretical and practical impact of the study is the creation of the Glossary of Artistic Design Concepts (GADC). The GADC is a catalogue of design terms designed using both traditional Ghanaian blacksmithing tradition and contemporary design theory, and includes terms like fabrication, finishing, material usage, and aesthetic decision-making. The GADC addresses a gap that has long existed in the literature: the lack of standardised design vocabulary has traditionally not only hindered the formal transmission of craft knowledge between the generations of Ghanaian blacksmiths but has also been a barrier to the inclusion

of traditional Ghanaian blacksmithing practice in modern design education and professional discourse. The conceptualisation of design based on local linguistic materials such as the Ewe, Twi and Ga languages, and the adoption of international technical metalsmithing language, the GADC creates a model of bilingual and biculturalism illustrated in Table 1.0.

Table 1.0: Glossary of Artistic Design Concepts

Object Name	Label
	**Name:** Agbormor **Description:** Stick figure flowerpot holder **Media**: Wrought iron **Dimension:** 50cm x 57cm
	**Name:** Agama **Description:** Lizard door handle **Media:** Wrought iron, brass, and glass beads **Dimension:** 20cm x 14cm
	**Name:**Ahoufe **Description:** Towel rack **Media:** Wrought iron and wood **Dimension:** 120cm x 60cm
	**Name:** Agoo **Description:** Door Knocker **Media:** Wrought iron brass and stone **Dimension:** 20cm x 10cm
	**Name:** Amakpa **Description**: Leaf basket **Media:** Wrought iron, copper **Dimension:** 20 cm x 32

 	**Name**: Emashie **Description:**Twist-forged ceiling hook **Media:** Wrought iron **Name: Awuga** **Dimension:** 14cm x 9cm **Description**: Cloth hanger **Media:** Wrought iron, copper and brass **Dimension:**54cm x 21.5cm
	**Name:** Dwennimmen **Description:** Hot pot stand **Media:** Wrought iron, wood **Dimension:** 10cm x 25cm

4.5 Design Prototypes

The GADC includes original design prototypes, created by the researcher in close collaboration with Timber Market blacksmiths, each called in native Ghanaian languages to affirm cultural ownership and linguistic continuity. They are the Ahuofe (Towel Rack), Nsa Dia, Amakpa (Basket), Dwennimmen (Hot Pot Stand), Agoo (Door Knocker), Agama (Door Handle), Agbormor (Flowerpot Holder), Emashie (hook) and Awuga (Dress hanger). The prototyping of each prototype was a strict sequential process, including conceptual ideation, hand-based construction, computer modelling, and digital rendering - it was shown with striking clarity that the old craft methods and the new digital design workflows are not mutually exclusive but instead mutually enriching.



Figure 3 : Emashie, artistic blacksmith product



Figure 4 : Agoo, artistic blacksmith product

5. Discussion

The development of artistic blacksmithing in the Accra Timber Market is a reflection of larger patterns in the world literature about craft change. It was subsequently determined by McNaughton (1988) and Roberts and Berns (2018) that the West African blacksmiths have long existed at the border of material production and cultural symbolism - a duality which was quite tangible during the Early Years period (1957-1970) as the symbolic elements of Adinkra were imprinted on functional ironwork, reflecting the Arts and Crafts Movement The congruence of hand-forging and mechanical tooling in the Industrialisation Era (1971-1990) indicates the continuation of technology among smiths in Ghana during Digitisation Era as discussed by Fening, Agyei, and Adala (2022), who argue that tacit knowledge of crafts remains despite the adoption of mechanised production. The era of biomimicry and CNC integration, the Digitalisation Era (1991-2025), aligns with the Emeriewen (2015) report of design innovation as a life raft to African blacksmithing industries. It is against this background that the GADC is a direct response to the gap that has been identified throughout the literature - lack of a standardised design vocabulary between indigenous practice and modern aesthetics - which is informed by the African material culture theory of Wynne-Jones and Fleisher (2015) and the framework of social change of Nisbet (1969) to formalise what has been intuitively practised.

This synthesising practice indicates the larger thesis put forward by Sennett (2008) that skilled making and critical thinking cannot be separated, and is consistent with the idea put forward by Manzini (2015), who suggests that design used in social innovation should be based on already existing community knowledge and practice. The prototypes, therefore, have a dual purpose: not only are they actual examples of what Ghanaian artistic blacksmithing is capable of creating once tradition and modernity are placed into creative dialogue, but they also act as pedagogical models to be followed in training programmes aimed at creating the new generation of skilled artistic blacksmiths.

6. Conclusion

This paper has explored the history of artistic blacksmithing in post-independent Ghana by a limited case study of the artists at the Accra Timber Market. The results prove that the craft has been through three developmental stages that can be observed with ease: the early functionalism production of the independence era, the hybrid hand-machine practice of the industrialisation era and the technically advanced and aesthetically complicated practice of the digitisation era, without losing its fundamental nature as a cultural expression and community knowledge.

The main contribution of the study is that it records this evolutionary process, and it proves that artistic blacksmithing at the Timber Market is not a residual practice but a dynamic and adaptive practice. The artistic fusion of the traditional Ghanaian design vocabularies and modern aesthetic influences such as Art Nouveau, Bauhaus, and biomimetic design results in a unique artistic tradition, which is culturally oriented and transnational at the same time. The Glossary of Artistic Design Concepts (GADC) is an important new theoretical and practical invention. The standardised, bilingual design vocabulary, based on indigenous knowledge and modern design theory, provided by the GADC, offers a framework for knowledge dissemination, integration with formal education, and global market positioning. The study recommends future research on innovative materials, with a focus on developing new alloys and materials that enhance performance and durability, as a significant area of interest in artistic blacksmithing. These materials can be used to create stronger and more versatile tools and artworks.

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