

Consumption of Visual Art Forms in Contemporary Ghana

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Abstract

Consumption of visual art forms in Ghana by the indigenes has been on the downbeat in recent times. This paper attempts to use preliminary qualitative and quantitative studies to make an in-depth analysis into the trend. Many factors like low income or low Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), inability to understand artistic values, lack of philosophical insight of art motifs, very low level of art appreciation coupled with the negative effects of globalization on the arts have been identified as the main contributing setbacks. The study shows that in spite of the very rich traditional and indigenous artifacts of unique philosophical values and qualities, only 36 % of Ghanaians compared to 64 % of non-Ghanaians mainly from the African Diaspora (African-Americans) and tourists from Europe and Asia patronize traditional artifacts. Recommendations have been proposed to reverse or improve the consumption rate of Ghanaian indigenous visual art forms.

Keywords: African-Americans, appreciation, artifacts, gallery, indigenes, pricing.

1. Introduction

The Republic of Ghana, a former British colony known as the *Gold Coast* until her political independence on 6th March, 1957 from British colonial rule, is located on the west coast of Africa. Ghana has very rich cultural heritage that dates as far back as *medieval Ghana* (4th to the 13th century). Ghana can boast of very rich indigenous and contemporary artifacts of exceptional intriguing philosophical values and qualities. The major areas of artistic expressions in Ghana include the visual arts, auditory arts and performance arts. The *visual arts* include symbols, paintings, sculpture, ceramics, textiles and architecture. The *auditory arts* are music, drama and spoken literature while *performance arts* which include film, dancing and theater can be either visual, auditory or a combination of visual and auditory but are performed. This study, however, is limited to the visual arts: indigenous and contemporary symbols, paintings, sculpture, ceramics and textiles.

The spectrum of these visual art manifestations is noticeable in the courtyards and offices of traditional rulers, governmental and non-governmental offices, homes of the elite and few privileged Ghanaians. Visual art forms in the country may be found at two main places. These are the Art Galleries mostly located in Accra and Kumasi and the wayside Art and Craft studios located in many towns and villages in the country. The significance of the visual arts in the cultural life of the typical Ghanaian is exceptionally high and very much admired by other nationals or cultures. The arts have consequently attracted many multinational firms, for example, in the advertising and textile industries in the country (Annku and Adu-Agyem, 2012).

Nevertheless, statistics in recent times show that the volume of consumption of these artifacts during festivals like the Pan African Festival (PANAFEST) and other expositions by African-Americans and other tourists, far outstrip that of Ghanaian indigenes. This paper attempts to make an in-depth analysis into the trend in consumption of artifacts and come out with proposals that could encourage the average Ghanaian to patronize Ghanaian artifacts. These proposals will not only help promote growth in the arts and associated industries, increase trade ties between Africans in the Diaspora and Ghana, but also generate more revenue for national development.

2. Anthropological Dimensions

Many West African colonial countries, including Ghana, belonged to a sort of sub *global village* since the 15th century. The Gold Coast was virtually a *member* of the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade which involved Europe, Africa and America. As a British colony, Ghana had to make do with a blend of two or more cultures. Ghana became anthropologically - culturally, materially and psychologically - engaged with America and Europe.

Art is intensively and extensively part of Ghanaians and therefore easy to identify a genetic link between anthropology and visual art forms consumption in Ghana. Art, essentially, is about the understanding of a particular subject(s) or culture(s) with extreme intensity. The circuits that are known to identify through the arts from Ghana directly associate with the anthropology of the region. The meaning of the arts is noted as a documentary that is a part of the past of Ghana. The indigenous art is strongly recognized by these philosophies and the traditions of the past. The exposure of the visual arts is therefore, one which is not only distinguished by the latest works and trends that are within the Ghanaian cultural milieu. More important, is the link to the social and cultural structures which many identify with when looking at different artifacts. The art work of Ghana is therefore one of the regional artifacts that continue to be exposed through indigenous and contemporary work.

In Ghana, traditional visual artifacts are broadly identical or recognizable as African productions. Examples like *Adinkra* and *Agama* symbols, brass or gold weights, *Akuaba* or fertility doll and the *Kente* cloth are often classified as African artifacts in general. Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 show: Adinkra symbol *Funtufunefu* (unity in diversity), acrylic on canvas *Brown Dolls*, Ashanti carving *Akuaba* fertility doll and a typical *Kente cloth* respectively. Visual references to the indigenous arts are a commonplace in clothing, billboards, corporate advertising, tourist items and myriad forms of popular visual culture, much of which is produced to promote consumption (Ross, 2004). The African–American identity is continuing to grow toward recognizing the beliefs and philosophies through the artwork, combined with the ideologies of meaning of culture. As the culture is emerged and recognized among African–Americans, there are other ideologies which attract individuals to the artwork. Many believe that by consuming more of the work, knowledge of the heritage and history becomes integral. As these links continue to emerge into society, a stronger sense of consumption emerges as a recognized identity from African–Americans. It is expected that the knowledge will allow the links to history to continue to build the amount of consumption by African–Americans (Rovine, 2001).



Fig. 1 *Funtufunefu* Symbol of Unity in Diversity

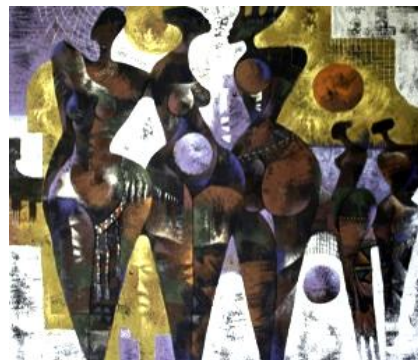


Fig. 2 *Brown Dolls* by Wiz Kudowor



Fig. 3 Akuaba Fertility Doll



Fig. 4 Typical Ghanaian Kente Cloth

The growing consumption is not only identified with more knowledge about the heritage and traditions that African–Americans claim as their own. There is also an attribute to the religious beliefs that many of African–American origin are moving back to. An example of this is the fertility dolls that are a part of the Ghanaian market. The dolls are known to bring good luck for fertility and relationships and are combined with the indigenous traditions and carvings to prepare for the correct symbolism. Many African–Americans that are moving back to their roots are looking at the consumption of materials such as these, specifically to go back to the traditions and beliefs that identify their roots. It is noted that the export of artifacts to the US from Ghana are consistent with the traditional beliefs that the indigenous hold. The concept is one which is now being developed as a part of the ethnic arts market, specifically because of the large demand that has been developed (Wolff, 2004).

The ethnic art market is not only growing because of the beliefs and values with African–Americans, there are also ideologies which are emerging in terms of identity and style which many in other regions relate to. The indigenous style of artwork is now linking to movements and social structures on a global level, specifically with those who want to combine the artistic works with contemporary and modern looks. This further expands interest in Ghanaian artifacts into wider artistic discourse.

3. Visual Arts Consumption

The basis of consumption of visual art forms that is associated with the culture of Ghana is one which is continuing to grow with the values and philosophies imbibed in them. The aesthetics of indigenous visual art forms exude powerful cultural values and historical experiences that are displayed to mark special festivals, durbars, rites of passage as well as honouring visitors. The National Commission on Culture (NCC) was established in 2004 to preserve and promote cultural activities in the country. NCC has accordingly enhanced relations among internal organizations and institutions like the Houses of Chiefs, Ministries of Education, Tourism, Foreign Affairs, indigenous and contemporary art producers *et cetera*. The NCC has also been working assiduously beyond the borders of Ghana in concert with external cultural institutions through the African Union, ECOWAS, the Diaspora, the Commonwealth, the United Nations and independent cultural organizations through cultural workshops, conferences, exhibitions, festivals and exchange programmes (Anon, 2004). These efforts have contributed immensely to the conservation and growth of Ghana's tangible and intangible heritage through research and documentation, exhibitions, museums and galleries.

From the standpoint of the high exposure and unique cultural significance of the nation's visual arts heritage, one would naturally expect at least one or two classic visual art forms in every home, office, school, church or mosque. Unfortunately, this logic is not the case. Studies done on a cross section of galleries in the country (from January, 2009 to February, 2012) show that consumption of visual art forms by African-Americans and other tourists are much higher than that of indigenous Ghanaians (Table 1). The gallery has been identified and used for the study because it is the most potential outlet for the cream of these visual art forms.

Table 1 Percentage of Visual Art Forms Consumption in top Ten Art Galleries in Ghana

| Gallery | African-Americans and Other Tourists | Ghanaians |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------|
| Artists Alliance Gallery | 70 | 30 |
| The Loom African Art Gallery | 65 | 35 |
| Art Without Borders Gallery | 70 | 30 |
| Amandzi Art Gallery | 60 | 40 |
| Adinkra Art Gallery | 50 | 50 |
| Creative Arts Ventures | 70 | 30 |
| Maric Artefacts Ventures | 75 | 25 |
| Kofi Agorsor | 50 | 50 |
| Berj Art Gallery | 70 | 30 |
| Herschel Gallery | 60 | 40 |
| Mean | 64 % | 36 % |

4. Analysis

The consumption is not only based on the anthropological links to social and cultural identity. The philosophies imbibed in the arts of Ghana are one of the main attributes that are recognized among individuals within the society. The art form of culture that is associated with this attracts African-Americans who recognize the philosophies and functions that are a part of the cultural ideologies. The consumption then becomes linked to a variety of dimensions, including the philosophical, traditional, cultural, social and religious belief systems that are a part of the heritage and roots of all Africans. It is noted that the continuous growth of consumption of art from Ghana is attributed to the link to the heritage of the people (Andrews, 2003). Many other factors like inability to understand artistic values, lack of philosophical insight of art motifs, very low level of art appreciation, poverty, coupled with the *negative* effects of globalization on the arts have also been identified as challenges to the average Ghanaian.

5. Art Appreciation

The ultimate objective of any art work is to communicate the philosophy behind it to others. And for effective communication, it is imperative to offer our whole being to the visual art object under consideration. The visual art forms help us understand culture better and also guide us to create the means for improving the quality of our lives. However, the exigencies of life; and struggling to make ends meet in a third world country like Ghana, make it difficult for the average Ghanaian to stand and stare as it were. Many respondents hardly see any other attribute beyond the external aesthetics of visual art forms. The historical or cultural context of the visual art form, the *school* it belongs to, analysis of the subject or technique of the work, allegory (the intellectual concept used by the artist to explain a point or the story line) and symbolism are not explored to appreciate the work. Beauty and the retail price are what matter to the Ghanaian indigene clientele.

6. Pricing of Classic Visual Art Forms

The pricing of artifacts depends on a number of factors that have little to do with the fundamental laws of supply and demand as in normal business transactions. Very often many artists and galleries have large supply of artifacts and little or no demand because of the high retail price. Visual art forms in some of the top ten galleries range from US\$ 50 to US\$ 14 000 and more. At least four reasons could be assigned to the pricing of a 72''x 72'' acrylic work on canvas for US\$ 14 000. The first reason or price determinant is the status of the artist – that is where he or she stands in art production, the extent of *authority* and *power* he or she exudes coupled with the creativity that emanates from the art work. The second is the aesthetics, philosophical content, medium, materials used and finishing. The third may simply be emotions. Artists sometimes price with their emotions, overpricing at times in order to impress potential consumers. The fourth is the status and geographical position of the gallery or retail outlet. These determinants have, to a large extent, made the pricing of visual art forms *irrational* in the sight of many indigenes of Ghana as far as the purchasing power of the clientele is concerned. The low purchasing power of the Ghanaian could also be explained by the state or strength of her economy.

The 2010 World Bank estimate of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) per capita of the United States of America (African-Americans) stood at US\$ 47.184, for the European Union at US\$ 31.676 and Ghana was US\$ 1.625 respectively (Anon, 2010). The inequality from Ghana's standpoint explains the inability of those below the middle income level to patronize classic visual art forms, especially from the galleries.

7. *Negative Impact of Globalization*

Globalization emerged in the 1990's as a result of unprecedented advances in communication, transportation and information technologies. Trade and technological revolutions have come to transform not only the Ghanaian milieu but the very mindsets of its people in the consumption of the visual arts. The youth of today are gradually adapting to Western culture and identity (Annku and Adu-Agyem, 2012). Free trade, unprecedented technological revolution in the 21st century and the information superhighway of the open world economy have made it easy for powerful economies like China to deride visual art forms from Ghana. The importation of posters, furniture, building materials and other artifacts (that even include catapults and bamboo toothpick) from China is worrying. Cutting-edge large format printing machines are capable of reproducing classic portraits and landscape paintings. Thousands of Ghanaians consume Chinese landscape paintings from the open market for as low as US\$ 20 per piece in lieu of a typical Ghanaian market scene in the 20th century in acrylic on canvas priced at US\$ 3 000 or more in the art galleries.

8. *Expectations*

In the face of these downbeats, there is still hope for the growth of the Ghanaian visual art forms market. As far as the African-Americans and other tourists are concerned, the export of the visual art forms from Ghana to the US and Europe is now being recognized as a way of developing the region. African-Americans relate to the traditions and roots of the Ghanaian culture. These are the main types of artistic endeavors that are being sent to other regions of the world and which have consequently established the growing consumption. The exploration and success of this is based on the creation of African art that has direct link to the roots of African-Americans. In other words, African-American link to Ghana is directly associated with the perception of art that is a part of the heritage of those in the United States (Stoller, 2003).

Closing up the consumption percentages will involve the re-orientation of the mindset of the Ghanaian milieu through cultural education to increase awareness. The onus of this lies on the NCC, essentially, by collaborating with visual art form producers, communities, other cultural advocates and art institutions to engage in dialogue with all Ghanaians to disseminate information and promote understanding of the country's heritage, cultural practices and values. This will stimulate general public interest, conservation, development and consumption. It is hoped, that these, plus gains from the country's newly discovered oil fields, will also create substantial improvement in the PPP per capita of the average Ghanaian and ultimately enhance the consumption of visual art forms.

9. *Conclusion*

The study explored the visual art forms in contemporary Ghana and discovered a number of factors that affect the overall appreciation and consumption by Ghanaians. Consumption by the African-Americans and tourists from other nations has revealed that the African-Americans appreciate and value functional and non-functional Ghanaian visual art forms much more because of their anthropological affiliation which is largely underpinned by better PPP per capita. Ghanaian visual art forms, like many other classical art works the world over, stimulate different parts of our brains to make us experience a kind of internal bliss or enchantment, laugh or incite us to riot, with a whole gamut of emotions in between. The potential for these products to reach the ethnic market is one which is continuing to grow and expand. The market is one which is being noted from African-Americans who are continuing to demand the artworks of Ghana. The artwork that is available is defined specifically by the identity that holds the roots of those from Africa. This expands into philosophies, beliefs, values, culture and identity that many African-Americans are now looking toward. The potential with the indigenous artwork is one which is beginning to expand into the exporting alternatives available. These will contribute immensely to the development of Ghana.

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