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The Influence of Western Culture on Traditional Art Forms and Cultural Practices: 'Akuaba' Doll Among Akan Women in Africa

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Abstract

In Africa as in many ethnic societies of the world, the value and significance of artistic and cultural practices are largely based on philosophical foundations. However, the infiltration of western culture into the African social order has influenced many artistic and cultural practices. These influences have tremendously affected the very philosophical foundations upon which these cultural practices had been established. Based on these suppositions, there is a danger of indigenous cultural extinction if conscious efforts are not made to preserve these indigenous art forms and cultural practices in the future. As custodians of these valuable cultures, it is the responsibility of Africans to work towards preserving and promoting this distinctive culture. Therefore the purpose of this article is to explore the influences of 'Akuaba' doll on infertility of women among the people of Ghana. The study employed ethnographic research methodology to symbolize the mediating functions of the 'Akuaba' dolls in Ghana. It is recommended that contemporary artists, researchers must explore new concepts that contribute towards the dialogue of Ghanaian artistic and cultural practices.

Keywords: Culture, 'Akuaba' Doll, Infertility, Art, Traditions.

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INTRODUCTION

Africa is endowed with very rich traditional art forms and cultural practices. The creation of these art forms in the African traditional societies, including present Ghana, are inspired by ideas and thoughts, which are common to societal life (Fosu, 2004). One of such art forms is the ancient artifacts known as the 'Akuaba' dolls that served art and religious functions among the Akan women of Ghana. These artistic and cultural expressions form the basis of cultural knowledge that must be protected and preserved. However, the traditional Ghanaian arts and cultural practices are stuck in between the need to embrace and promote the country's unique artistic tradition and the adoption of western contemporary life styles and practices

The traditional art forms of Africa are prominent and very much noticeable as the visual vocabularies of African cultural expressions. These artistic and cultural practices have come to be frameworks of the customary visual languages that serve to identify Africa in general and Ghana in particular (Ross, 2004; Wolff, 2004) Demonstrations and exhibitions of Ghana's indigenous arts are seen and exhibited in lavish performances of cultural pageantry carry out occasionally to mark special events and to display Ghana's rich traditional art and cultural practices.

However, the penetration of western culture into the Ghanaian society has influenced many artistic and cultural practices. These western influences have one way or the other affected the very philosophical foundations upon which these cultural practices had been established. Based on these suppositions, there is a danger of indigenous cultural extinction if conscious efforts are not made to preserve these indigenous art forms and cultural practices in the future. As protectors of these treasured cultures, it is the responsibility of Africans for that matter Ghanaians to not turn away from their

valuable artistic expressions but rather work towards preserving and promoting this distinctive and unique culture.

Therefore the purpose of this article is to explore the influences of 'Akuaba' doll on infertility of women among the people of Ghana. The objectives of this study are; to explore the value and significance of 'Akuaba' doll as an art form and its cultural influence on infertility of women in the Ghanaian society. The second objective is to assess the influence of western culture and its effect on indigenous traditional art forms and cultural practices. The research questions are: How can the value and significance of 'Akuaba doll' as an art form and its cultural influence on infertility of women be explored? The second question is: How can the influence of western culture and its effect on indigenous art forms and cultural practices be assessed? The multiple perspectives and conflicting attitudes discovered in this study contribute to dithering western influences and practices which are re-positioning 'Akuaba' doll as an art form from the dominion of traditional cultural practice to the purview of contemporary art practices (Ross, 2004)

'Akuaba' Doll as an Art Form

Dolls are generally considered as play objects for young girls to play with. However when the doll concept is considered over in the context of African culture, they are typically not children's playthings, but rather artifacts that are encumbered with ritual and religious practices within the community. They are supernatural intermediaries and they are manipulated for ritual purposes. Among the Akan community in Ghana, 'Akuaba' is a special doll typically used by the Akans for fertility functions. This 'Akuaba' is far more powerful than so named a doll carried at the back and cared for like a real child, done in an attempt to invoke the fertility gods for a child. Giving birth to a child is singular rite of passage for a Ghanaian Akan woman (Odwirafo, 2015)

The exploration of the 'Akuaba' doll as indigenous art forms and its cultural practices are always associated with the Akan women of Ghana. 'Akuaba' doll as an indigenous art form is believed to have an influence on infertility of women to give birth to a child. The 'Akuaba' doll, an Asante concept of beauty, is a special artifact typically used by the Akan for fertility functions in Ghana. The non-ability to conceive is the cause for one

suspected to be of poor health, even witchcraft; the only believed solution for bareness is the Akuaba doll. The Akuaba dolls are also believed to be abodes for benevolent spirits therefore they are kept and maintained, knowing that they can promote female fertility (Odwirafo, 2015; Nyarko, Y. 2015).

Akuaba, being far more powerful than a mere doll, serves as a substitute child, covered in fabric, carried at the back and cared for like a real child, done in an attempt to invoke the fertility gods for a child (Odwirafo, 2015; Nyarko, 2015). The inability to conceive is cause for suspicion of poor health, even witchcraft – the only believed solution for bareness is the Akuaba doll. It is believed that when a woman who is barren is prepared by priestesses with herbal medicines, the priest (Ross 2004) normally gives the woman a carved figure of a beautiful baby to be carried on her back. The barren woman believes in her mind, that she would have a child by letting her mind be on the fact that she is going to have a child (Ross 2004). Many women, most often, are thus helped to have a child.

Therefore, if she is prayed for within the tenets of indigenous religious doctrines and she gets a baby by being asked to carry the Akua'ba doll, on her back and eventually gets a baby, then her faith can be directed towards the traditional cultural practices as being significant and efficacious. The concept or philosophy behind the Akuaba dolls is very significant (Robertson, 2004; Labi, 2009). According to (Odwirafo, 2015; Nyarko, 2015) Akuaba dolls became so prevalent that even pregnant women took to carrying them to ensure a healthy child and retain fecundity. The concept or philosophy behind the Akuaba dolls is very significant indeed.

In essence Akuaba dolls are sculptural fertility dolls which functioned as an artifact to 'charge' barren women with fecundity powers. The Asante, like other African traditions hold strong supernatural beliefs – there is the belief that there is a direct link between a being and its image (Odwirafo, 2015; Nyarko, 2015). Therefore, they believed these dolls as carved in the likeness of the perceived being, will respond to an invocation. For example, if a barren woman prefers a woman, man or even twins with particular characteristics, then she would request the sculptor who had been divinely called for such a vocation to carve the replica of such a personality.

As part of their rich history and culture, the Asantes are a major tribe in the Akan ethnic group in Ghana with very rich history and culture (Arhin, 1967; Claridge, 1915; Lentz & Nugent, 2000), the Asantes own a form of art or sculpture popularly known as the 'Akuaba' in their local dialect which literally means Akua's child. This doll is characterized mainly by their meaning of beauty. Meanwhile, it is sometimes used for medicinal purposes. Also some use these dolls in their own ways other than its intended purpose. Apart from the Asantes, there are also two other tribes also from the same Akan group that patronizes the piece. Those are the Bono and the Fante. The dolls of these other two tribes are mostly similar and different from that of the Asantes. In inference, the Asantes, the Bono and the Fante people are the only tribes in the Akan ethnic group that employ the 'Akuaba' doll (Kugbonu, et al 2020). The types are differentiated based on the style of the heads (Segy, 1963; Wolff, 2004).

The symbolism of the strongly exaggerated and emphasized parts of these dolls is specific regardless of their differences. In the case of the Asantes, as shown in Figure 1, the flat, disk-like head satisfies the concept of the Akan notion of beauty. Also, the standard ringed neck stands for conventional rolls of fat, representing beauty and prosperity. They come approximately between 20cm and 40cm in height. Figure 2 depicts the Fante Akuaba featuring distinctive facial elements and a flat, rectilinear head, which epitomizes beauty.



Figure 1 Asante Akuaba doll
Source: Fieldwork



Figure 2 Fante Akuaba doll
Source: Fieldwork



Figure 3 Bono Akuaba doll
Source: Fieldwork

Western Culture and Traditional Practices

In Africa as in many societies of the world, religion plays a very important role in the life of the people. In most African cultures, religion and artistic expressions are intertwined and therefore not separable. Therefore these artifacts have become parts of the accepted spiritual objects that serve to express the cultural art practices among the people of Ghana. These cultural expressions typically serve to represent communal beliefs that are deeply rooted in social, historical, philosophical, and religious values. Therefore, religious values are not taken for granted in the African society. Idiong (2015) asserts that religious values in African societies seem to be the pivot around which every bustle revolves. Within the African traditional religion for that matter Ghana, there is a belief in a supreme God but the world is considered to be populated with a complex array of lesser spirits. These religious values according to Ayiku (1998), form the basis of cultural knowledge that resulted in indigenous Ghanaian art forms and cultural practices.

It has been observed that not much has been done in terms of reclaiming, preserving and developing the Ghanaian indigenous art forms and cultural practices. Most modern-day Africans find it thought-provoking to adjust between their ostensibly modern-day modes of accepted behavior and primeval beliefs in certain aspects of their culture. With the support of the converts, Christian churches have one way or the other rejected many indigenous Ghanaian, beliefs, customs, and values. Thus, in the midst of the repudiation of some of the indigenous cultural heritage ideals, adherence to the beliefs and practices of the 'Akuaba' doll suffers general acceptance as it pertained in times gone by. Hardly does one observe, nowadays, the carrying of the 'Akuaba' doll by Akan women seeking the fruit of the womb.

The rejections of the cultural value and practices have one way or the other affected the social life of contemporary Ghanaian Christians. The influences of Christianity on the social life of the modern-day Ghanaian Christian have been perceived to be tremendous. As a result of these, the Euro-Christian missionaries labeled African art with derogative, undesirably loathing descriptions such as primitive, pagan, fetishistic, superstitious and unscientific (Clemens, 2015). This situation has put the protection, preservation and advancement of the indigenous cultural heritage at risk (Ayiku 1998).

In support of this statement, Ayiku (1998) pointed out that these missionaries have regarded the cultural life of the people of Ghana as idolatrous, primitive and childish. As such, they have described the whole cultural system as "fetishistic," implying it is superstitious, unreal and abhorrent.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed ethnographic research methodology. Semi-structured interviews were adapted as a means of gathering data for this research. The study adapted face to face interactions with some practitioners, resource personnel at the Centres for National Culture, and some elderly people at the targeted rural villages. These participants were well-informed about the knowledge and development of indigenous arts and cultural practices. The researchers observed the working process of producing the 'Akuaba' doll at the cultural centres. The sample consisted of producers, patrons and traditionalists; practicing artists and native sculptors; Questions posed to them were organized and structured to access their knowledge, beliefs and opinions regarding the influence of foreign culture on Ghanaian indigenous culture, and how these have affected the customs and traditions of the people (Ross, 2004).

The demography consists of 14 participants; 4 producers, 4 traditionalist and 6 users and all were considered as consumers of 'akuaba' doll. For data sites and collection, interviews and observations were conducted in six rural villages and cultural centres where indigenous 'akuaba' dolls were produced and consumed. The researchers employed a participant-observer approach. The researchers also attended many public and private events of cultural pageantry that throw more light unto the customs and philosophy of the people of Ghana. Such occasions according to Ross (2004), offered rich material on visual demonstrations of traditional culture blended with political magniloquence. Data for the research were collected by means of audio, video and photographic documentation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Infertility and Cultural Practices

In Africa, children are considered as the fabric of the society and therefore the urge to reproduce is essential. Therefore, the indigenous African women would just continue

bearing children until perhaps nature interrupted to halt pregnancies that would lead to procreation of further children. Children are very important because they help continue or sustain the family lineage. A cultural institution that has a strong family emphasis can be alienating to couples who do not or cannot have children. The reasons for the high and persistent fertility are cultural; the perceptions, belief systems and traditions.

Traditional art and religious practices in African societies seem to be the fulcrum around which every activity revolves. Hence traditional art and religious values are not toyed with. For instance, many religious foundations and beliefs place a strong emphasis on childbearing (Dyer 2007). A cultural artifact such as the 'Akuaba' fertility doll cannot effectively function in the life of a barren woman without the involvement of traditional religious practices. It is believed that the main reason for marriage has to do with procreation of children. In the Asante culture, the attainment of puberty introduces the individual into the adult living world and sets him up for an independent household. Today puberty rites among the Asantes are seldom observed. The Christian 'Confirmation' has gradually assumed the place of puberty rites.

A corollary by Dyer (2007) asserts that for many, motherhood is the only way women get to enhance their status in the community. Due to this, childlessness is associated with social stigma which might be detrimental to a woman's position within the family and the community and this has made social status closely tied to childbearing. Women are one of nurturers and bearers of children (Sonko 1994). In many areas within Africa, childlessness is a socially acceptable basis for divorce by the husband (Yeboah et al 1992). Ademola (1982) also asserted that women who are childless are ostracized.

Among the Ewe and the Ashanti of Ghana, a man or woman who has no child is not considered a full adult and after death, he will not be buried with the full adult funeral rituals reserved for only adults. Besides this, it gives the couple psychological distress which is, in turn, related to other important predictors of well-being, such as marital eminence and social network (Owusu-Agyeman 2013). As a consequence, the infertile person in most communities is stigmatized and treated with contempt. As a result, people would want to have children at all cost, and so they go to great extent to fulfill that wish (Laryea 2011).

It is a very important issue which most of the time seems to be ignored but comes with a lot of ramifications some of which are informed by the religion of the people concerned and others by the cultural context in which it occurs. In the African cultural context, and for that matter the Ghanaian cultural context, infertility or childlessness becomes a very serious issue. This is because of the way the African views and values children. In some instances, it is believed that ancestors are reincarnated in the children that are brought forth. Children also help their parents economically, in the olden days, on the farm and in recent times in their businesses.

Every society according to (Laryea (2011) has culturally approved resolutions to infertility involving, either together or alone, amendments of social relationships, therapeutic interventions and spiritual engagement. Due to the magnitude of the stigma and prevalent of childlessness in the African society, the childless woman goes all out to find solution to the childlessness. As a result the childless woman first of all seeks for medical interventions either through orthodox medicine or herbal medicine. Seeking orthodox medicine for the first instances is very important to the modern African woman. These are as a result of the faith they have in orthodox medical practices as compared to cultural interventions. Some socio-cultural activities that are part of Ghana's traditional visual culture are believed to be in disagreement with the dogma of Christian doctrine because some people deem it inappropriate for contemporary life styles in the African society.

Western Culture and African Cultural Practices

The unrestrained increase in disappearance of the practice of using the 'Akuaba' doll as a conduit for fertility among the Ashanti leaves so much to be desired. The 'Akuaba', like many other Ghanaian cultural artifacts that were entirely traditional with their religion and beliefs has been undervalued. The causes of the change in function and values of the 'Akuaba' doll and its practices are due to Western culture, colonization, Christianity, and communication technologies among others. Colonizers in the Gold Coast (Ghana) simply viewed 'Akuaba' doll as art. However, these artifacts transcend religious, fertility, and social contexts intrinsic of the Akan.

These were misunderstood and underappreciated, thus, colonizers and Christian missionaries interpreted them as fetish, primitive and tribal (Clemens, 2015). This phenomenon has affected many Ghanaian's attitude towards traditional sculpture as they are seen as objects of fetish worship. African sculpture such as the 'Akuaba' doll are mass produced and sold without appreciation for their historical and sacred symbolism. In such circumstances, the rich African values and philosophy has been tainted, in the sense that most cultural practices and belief systems have been replaced by Western conventions.

Even though western culture had brought some goodies into the African society, the missionaries, for that matter Christians, have cleverly strategized and introduced education interlaced with their religion. As a result of such machinations, western education and Christian doctrines are inseparable. As part of their diabolical schemes, the missionaries have devised ways to pressurize and force Christianity down the throat of innocent irresistible Africans. One of such indoctrinations apart from the performance of Christian doctrinal ceremonies during morning assemblies in schools is the study of the Bible. This to some extent became compulsory as can be found exclusively in Christian schools and colleges.

These things happen to such an extent that if a pupil/student fails to attend church service on Sundays, that student is mercilessly caned to drive the hell out of him to such an extent that he/she has no other choice but to compulsorily accept the Christian doctrine and deny the traditional art and cultural practices. Therefore accepting the Christian faith had become the legal document and customary visa for acquiring western education and thereby rejecting traditional art and cultural practices. This phenomenon according to the custodians of the traditional and cultural faith is seen as unfortunate. Despite the traditional authorities trying everything humanly possible to educate and promote the significance of traditional art and cultural practices, the younger generation is gradually drifting away to contemporary life styles at the same time shunning and ostracizing their unique culture.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The recognition and appreciation of Ghanaian traditional art forms and cultural practices continue to grow with the values and philosophies imbibed in them. The philosophies imbibed in the Ghanaian art forms and cultural practices are one of the main attributes that are recognized among the individuals within the society as artifacts. However, most people are being influenced by their Christian doctrine to such an extent that there are no good things that come out of the traditional cultural practices. Therefore, certain attitudes, practices, and habits have changed, creating the tension between the traditionalists and agents of change. Agents of change such as spread of Christianity and contemporary live styles have led to changes in traditional structure, and old beliefs are being suppressed by new legal institutions.

Though the cultural practice of carrying 'Akuaba' at the backs of women to conceive is not as widespread as it was in the past, the practice is still carried out in some rural parts of Ghana today. In contributing to the increasing body of literature on the social, historical cultural and religious conditions in Africa, there is the need for scholars to research into visual culture affecting the continent. To really understand the influence of foreign culture on the traditions of Africa, there is the need to understand the importance of context in cultural traditions, as well as the need to look more closely at the socio-cultural conditions, including the clash of religious doctrines, impacting Africans everywhere (Ross 2004).

Most Ghanaian women have forsaken the cultural practices of using the 'Akuaba' doll as an object of fecundity for having children. These artifacts have become parts of the accepted spiritual objects that serve to express cultural values and art practices among the people of Ghana (Ross, 2004; Wolff, 2004). The cultural values and significance of 'Akuaba' fertility doll in the Ghanaian society cannot be overstated. Therefore, it is recommended that researchers, artists and anthropologists learn to understand and manage the factors responsible for the dynamism of the Ghanaian culture.

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