

Historical Perception of Visual Art Forms in Anlo Traditional Marriage Rites in Ghana

Godwin Gbadagba¹, Agbeyewornu Kofi Kemevor² (PhD), Prosper Kwaku Asiedu³

Abstract

In this study, an attempt was made to evaluate the symbolic relevance of visual art forms in Anlo traditional marriage rites in Ghana. The study population consisted of Custodians: Chiefs, Elders and married couples in Anloga and Keta. Through a non-probability sampling technique, precisely purposive technique, a sample size of twenty (20) respondents were chosen; thus, a chief, three elders and sixteen married couples. A multi approach data collection technique was employed which included observation, interview and focus group discussion for data collection. The study showed that marriage is a very important rite among the Anlo people, and every stage of the marriage process has visual effects which are symbolic. The philosophies and concepts behind these visual art forms become the norms and ethics which bind the society. Similarly, the society is taught to make art forms not just for their aesthetics but also as a way of preserving the culture of the people. The study recommended that inhabitants of Anlo should be educated on the importance of these artifacts. Besides, the preservation of cultural heritage should be the responsibility of every member of the society.

Introduction

Throughout history, people have used art, especially visual art forms in various stages of life. These art forms and various forms of bodily adornment are expressed in the forms of signs, symbols and iconography which served as nonverbal but visual forms of expressing their habits, thought, and conditions that characterized society as a whole (Dzramedo, 2009). These visual art forms and their uses are ways of bringing into physical form, the values and historical perception of a given society. Tijana, Tomaž and Čuden (2014) suggested that, communication through these art forms are treated as a basic carrying concept and may imply an aspect of the nonverbal interaction and exchange of information in the society. For instance, various Ghanaian cultural artifacts are now being given more attention due to loss of indigenous prestige and uniqueness. Visual art forms have so many aspects, take so many directions and serve so many purposes in every culture. It is therefore plausible for one to say that they are the highest creation of any culture; as such, they make history a living reality. There is evidence that the artistic expressions of Ghanaian visual arts are interwoven. This can be seen in the way they live or survive physically, emotionally and psychologically as records of thoughts, aspirations, and needs.

Attempts have been made to boost certain cultural practices in order to ensure their unique features that are worth preserving for generations unborn. It is also culture that decides what, when and how to wear certain clothes and guides its members to interpret the messages communicated through them (Larsson, 2014). Initiatives such as wearing Ghanaian-made prints and other accessories on important occasions to promote and enhance the production and sustainability of our local production firms in Ghana have been given more advocacies. These visual art forms are tied to the shared behavior of the individual people; that is, the sum total of the ways in which they organize their societies as well as make a living.

According to Dzramedo (2009), adornment has been seen as a cherished part of an individual and the society. It is one of the most personal aspects of daily life, and at the same time, it is an expression of the social activities implanted in the cultural blueprint within a particular time. In line with the above, an important occasion like marriage involves simultaneous display of many visual art forms, musical supplements and movements in dance and poetic language among other art forms.

¹Department of Vocational Education, Dambai College of Education, Dambai, Ghana. Correspondence: godwingbadagba@yahoo.com

² Department of Graphic Design, University of Education-Winneba, Winneba, Ghana

³ Department of Vocational - Technical, Akatsi College of Education, Akatsi, Ghana

Individuals' pursuit in societies for a cultural identity is not just to demonstrate to the world that they are the most important but rather to have reached a stage of development that would make them fit for the dynamism of the ever growing world. In a world of increasing cultural integration, there can be the phasing out of an entire culture. Okere (1996) opines that:

...the African today is a living confluence of cultural rivers, the major rivers being, on one hand, the traditional culture with its tributaries of religion, social structure, language, values and world view, and, on the other hand, the Christian -Western culture (and other alien cultures including Islam) with its own tributaries (p.10).

It is clear from the above argument that Ghanaians protect the culture of the various societies by transmitting them onto subsequent generations since there are adequate indications to show that the present and the future live in the past. The best way to harness the present and the future is to revisit the past. Danielsson (1980) added his view for an orderly cultural transition with the view that:

Culture... is never a set of fixed and uniform behaviour, and any attempt on a large scale to turn back the clock is bound to end in dismal failure. The eternal question that the (*African*) will have to face also in the future therefore, is what to retain of the traditional culture and what to adopt in the form of new ideas and things(p.16).

Ghanaians, living in a contemporary world, can still retain the prominent part of their indigenous culture because the nature and effects of their cultural context are omnipresent but differ depending on time, space, events and people involved (Thaman, 1999).

Marriage in Ghana is a requisite stage in life rather than an option, and remains the most important social institution. Reproduction in marriage is believed to be the most important function of the union between a man and a woman. Children are regarded as signs of status and assets to the family. They represent a successful marriage, provide valuable domestic help around the house, and can contribute to agricultural labour. Marriage between individuals from outside their kinship group is most common under customary laws. Through marriage, new social contacts are created and kinship ties are extended. Marriage serves to establish alliance between families and between communities. Before two people marry, families of both sides have to be confident of the status and character of their child's mate; especially, when it reflects on their own lineage. In the olden days, planned marriages focused more on family considerations than on personal ones. They linked two families together for political, social or economic reasons. Today, men and women are more likely to choose their own partners. However, marriage continues to revolve not only around the couple but also their respective families. In other words, marriage is still primarily a union between two families.

The three types of legal marriages in the Ghanaian society are marriage under the ordinance, customary law marriage and marriage of Mohammedan's ordinance. While marriage under the ordinance permits only the monogamous marriage, both customary law marriage and marriage of Mohammedan's ordinance allow polygyny (one man having multiple wives). Marriage under the ordinance and customary marriage exist throughout Ghana, but Islamic marriages are predominantly found in the Northern Region and among Muslim communities living in large urban centers (Falola and Salm, 2002). They further opined that consensual union may be regarded as marriage. This is a result of the changing personal and geographic relationships between men and women and between young people and their families.

Like marriage in many other ethnic societies, marriage among the people of Anlo in Ghana is an essential ceremony. The boundaries of the new African Nations are those of the old British, Belgian, French, German, and Portuguese colonies. They are essentially artificial in the sense that some of them do not correspond with any well-marked ethnic divisions (Dotse, 2011). Because of this, the Ewes have remained fragmented under three different flags, just as they were divided among the three colonial powers after the Berlin Conference of 1844 that partitioned Africa. A portion of the Ewes went to Britain, another to Germany, and a small section went to France. After World War I, the League of Nations gave the Germans-occupied areas to Britain and France as mandated territories. Those who were under the British are now Ghanaian Ewes, and those under the French are located in Togo and Benin (Dahomey).

Statement of the Problem

According to the culture of the Ewes of Ghana, marriage is one of the most important aspects of life, and it is one of the many rites observed among the people of Anlo. The use of visual art forms or artifacts is very essential in marriage rites among the people of Anlo. Unfortunately, the symbolic values and relevance of these artifacts (such as the ring, stool, beads among others as used in Anlo traditional marriage rites) are being lost because they have received minimal research attention.

The influences of modernity on art forms used in our celebrations have been embraced within the cultural and traditional setting of our systems that are mandated to hold fast these indigenous beliefs and practices (Dzramedo, Ahiabor and Gbadegbe, 2013). Hence, there is the need to research into the important roles of these artifacts and document them for posterity.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to identify selected visual art forms used in Anlo traditional marriage rites and examine their symbolic values and relevance.

Objectives

The objectives of the study were:

- ❖ To identify selected visual art forms used in Anlo traditional marriage rites in Ghana.
- ❖ To examine the relevance of these art forms to the marriage system of the people of Anlo.

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to guide the study:

- ❖ Which visual art forms are used in Anlo traditional marriage rites in Ghana?
- ❖ How relevant are these visual art forms to the marriage system of the people of Anlo?

Significance of the Study

This study is important because its findings would motivate further research in other related areas which could clearly define a Ghanaian cultural and national identity. It will also serve as a body of valuable existing information that would be accessed easily and adequately utilised as a useful resource material for teaching and learning of art education. Again, the study will contribute meaningfully to the effective teaching of aesthetics and art criticism in schools.

Methodology

Qualitative study underpinned by interpretivist philosophy was employed in this study. Weber (1949) opines that understanding of social world is deepened when an effort is made to understand it from participants' perspectives.

Research Design

This research focused much on visual art forms as used in the Anlo traditional marriage system. This could not have been achieved without an ethnographic inquiry into a cultural background of the Anlo ethnic group. Ethnographic literally means to write about a group of people. Ethnographic research involves a researcher's involvement within a study community, proximity to the field site and the ability to coordinate data collected in an integrated and inductive manner; in this case, research can be more fluid (Agar, 1996). Ethnography is a branch of anthropology which looks into and provides a scientific and detailed description of ethnic groups or the culture of a particular society. These descriptions are usually based on the researcher's observation and participation in the life of the society (www.sas.upenn.edu/Anthro). Through this, the researcher is able to gain an "emic" (insider) perspective or the point of view of the indigenes without imposing their own concepts. This 'emic' perspective, which may be quite different from the 'etic', (outsider's) perspective on local life, is a unique and critical part of anthropology (<http://faculty.reinhardt.edu>). The data collected, usually the basis for interpretation of objects or practices, provides an explanation for the cultural activities of the people.

According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2003), the emphasis in ethnographic research is on documenting the everyday practices of individuals by observing and interviewing them. They further opined that the key tools in ethnographic studies are in-depth interviewing and continual ongoing participant observation of a situation. They further argued that ethnographic research also has a particular strength that makes it especially appealing because it reveals nuance and subtleties that other methodologies miss.

Population of the Study

In this study, Anlo traditional area which comprises Keta and parts of Ketu Municipals were taken to be the target population. However, the research concentrated on the Keta Municipal which contains two constituencies (Anlo and Keta) since the area was inhabited mainly by the people of Anlo. The accessible populations for the study are the custodians of the tradition and married couples of Anloga and Keta.

Kaiser (1997) affirmed that, the way people create and interpret the meaning of clothing and other tangible objects can vary from culture to culture, and the material objects that substantiate cultural categories and intangible values are linked to the cultural belief system. Based on the above, the custodians (chiefs, queen mothers, elders) know the customs and traditions of the Anlo traditional area and specify visual art forms to be presented and used in the ceremony. Married couples who have undergone the customary marriage rites have the requisite knowledge in the traditional marriage of the Anlo people. Anloga is the traditional home of all the Anlo clans; hence, the seat of the paramount chief and Keta being the Municipal capital are some reasons for choosing them for the study.

Sample Size and Sampling Procedure

In selecting the respondents, purposive sampling was used to select twenty (20) informants. Purposive sampling may involve studying some limited group of the entire population (Schutt, 2009). Rubin and Rubin (1995) cited in Schutt (2009) suggested three guidelines for selecting informants when designing any purposive sampling strategy. Informant should be: “knowledgeable about the cultural arena or situation or experience being studied”, “willing to talk”, and “represent [active of] the range of point of view” (p.173).Based on their argument, the study employed custodians who are knowledgeable and have a range of views in sharing the necessary information needed for the study.

Qualitative approach involves learning about the opinions of individuals; evaluating process overtime and finding detailed information about a few people or research site (Amedahe, 2003). According to Kumeckpor (2002), in purposive sampling, the units of the sample are selected not by a random procedure, but they are intentionally picked for the study because of their characteristics or because they satisfy certain qualities which are not randomly distributed in the universe, but they are typical or exhibit most of the characteristics of interest to the study. This sample would be able to satisfy the researcher by providing information relevant to the topic under study.

Data Collection Instruments

In terms of the research approach, the study employed semi-structured interview, Observation and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) to compile data for the study. These formed the primary data source for the study. The interview enabled the researcher to access vital information from four (4) custodians: three (3) queen- mothers and a chief of the community. Eight (8) married couples who married within five years and eight (8) married couples who married over twenty years were also interviewed. The interviews for the custodians (a chief and elders) and married couples elicited information about the various visual art forms used in Anlo traditional marriage system and the significance of these visual art forms.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was adopted because the semi-structured interview, focus group discussion and the observation tools used in the data collection produced largely qualitative data which needed to be analysed thematically. The analysis and presentation of the data started with the transcription of the audio-tape recordings. For the transcription, the researchers repeatedly listened to the tape to familiarize themselves with the recorded interviews and identified themes based on the research questions. After the themes, respondents were coded to ensure that responses were attached to the various codes as shown in the table below:

Table 1.1 Coding of Respondents (Custodians)

Respondent	Code
Chief	Ch
First Elder	EL-1
Second Elder	EL-2
Third Elder	EL-3

Source:Field Photo by Author

Presentation, Analysis and Results

In response to the research questions, all major findings of the study have been presented and analysed.

RQ 1: Which visual art forms are used in Anlo traditional marriage rites in Ghana?**Table 1.2:**

N/S Category	Item
Jewelry	Ring (finger), necklace, earring, bracelet, bangles
Beads	Sui, Glotsi, Dzinyagba, Akorso

Source: *Field Photo by Author*

RQ 2: How relevant are these visual art forms to the marriage system of the people of Anlo?

The second research question sought to investigate the values and relevance of artifacts used in marriage rites among the people of Anlo. This research question was addressed by obtaining information from custodians and married couples. The researchers also observed some marriage ceremonies in the community and took pictures of the artifacts used.

Jewelry

The jewellery used for marriage among the Anlo consists of engagement rings, ear rings, bangles, necklace and bracelets. These visual artifacts are made of gold, silver, diamond, ivory, clay, glass and other vital materials. The main item among these is the ring which is considered as a symbol of love. According to the Anlo customary marriage, only the bride is given a ring and this ring is made by the local blacksmith. These rings are more sophisticated and look fashionable. The use of rings in Anlo marriage rite has symbolic relevance. Symbolically, a ring is an unbroken circle, which is representative of the eternal bond between the couple. Thus, the ring is used to symbolize that marriage is something that is never-ending. This meaning is carried over into the exchange of rings in a marriage, the continuation of the couple's love and union. The ring also is a reminder and an outward symbol to others that an eternal agreement has been entered into by the couple. There are two main kinds of rings associated with marriage rites among the people of Anlo. One custodian (E1-3) explained that:

There are two major kinds of rings and each has its symbolic meaning. These are 'Tormekpe' literally meaning (a stone in water) and 'Ametorhafia' literally meaning (three sisters). Tormekpe ring is round with a nod at the top, this ring when used during the marriage ceremony conveys a message to the public; thus, the woman has come to stay and would go nowhere. The ring is to inform the woman that in the midst of difficulties and joy she is obliged as the wife of the husband and a seal to their marriage and the two are now one.

The respondent (E1-3) further stated that symbolically, although not recommended, the man can go after other women as concubines, but once the woman has the ring, she is partly the rightful owner of the house and controls the affairs as the wife of the husband. She is also entitled to the man's property as long as they live.

The second kind of ring is called "Ametorhafi". This ring has three nods at the top. The three nods connote the notion that involving a third party in the marriage would lead to its collapse. The woman is therefore advised to refrain from sharing her marital issues with fellow women but settle every dispute with the husband. Another respondent also confirmed that the three nods imply the husband, the wife and the Supreme Being. And every issue in their marriage should be referred to the Supreme Being to address rather than consulting or seeking the assistance of man in settling issues in the marriage.

It was also explained during the focus group discussion that:

The three nods on the ring symbolize the body, soul and spirit; the basic composition of every human being. This symbolizes totality of the marriage as being a bond in the body, soul and spirit. Also, these rings are worn on the fourth finger because it is believed that a vein ran directly from the fourth finger on the left hand to the heart. Thus, the ring finger is connected to the heart and symbolically declares their eternal love for each other (Verbatim comment of respondents at FGD 1).

The response presented above shows that rings are very symbolic in the performance of Anlo marriage rites. However, it was also realised that the rings used have also undergone some changes over time. In the past, the rings used were locally made by blacksmiths in the community. Even though these rings were of quality, they were not very well polished because of the crude tools used by the local blacksmiths. In recent times, the rings are more polished and look nicer because of technological advancement. Nevertheless, the symbolism of the rings and the finger on which they are worn have remained the same.

Further, the main custodian (Ch) also indicated in an interview that a ring is a sign that the couple belong to each other. He explained that married women must be identified in society and hence, the wearing of ring is a symbol that the woman bearing the ring belongs to somebody else or is taken. He explained that:

Everywhere a married woman goes, she has the symbol of the husband. You can forget everything, but you cannot forget the ring because it is always on your finger. You may forget some things that your spouse tells you, but you cannot forget your ring because it is a symbol of love and his presence (Verbatim response of Ch).

The response above is a reiteration of the symbolic significance of the marriage ring in Anlo marriage rites. These findings in this section confirm the assertion of Kemevor (2004) that symbolism of artifact has qualities that are capable of evoking desired states of mind concerning feelings, ideas and ideals, to the psychological ramifications of which we are thereby led to respond intuitively without being fully able to identify or define them. This shows that the symbolic relevance of the artifacts used in Anlo marriage rites helps the society in maintaining the dignity of the marriage system. It also helps the couple involved to appreciate their union at a deeper level. This is because the use of symbols represents ideas or beliefs.

Figure 1.1: Sample of Marriage Rings



Tormekpe: a ring with a nod at the top Ametorhafi: a ring with three nods at the top
Source: *Field Photo by Author*

The two types of rings used in Anlo traditional marriage rites displayed by one of the elders during an interview

Figure 1.2:



Source: *Field Photo by Author*

Other kinds of jewelry such as bracelet, necklace and bangles are also used in the performance of marriage rites. These items serve the functional purposes of adornment. This is because jewelry expresses more about the wearer and enhances his or her status. This practice confirms what Berry (2007) said about beauty: beauty is a multi-dimensional, subjective concept created and sometimes agreed upon by society. Most often, it is referred to as physical attractiveness. It is an idea that is embedded within different cultures and changes over time and throughout generations in order to include several different ethnic and age groups.

Beads

Every society has its unique way of adorning the body, so within one country, variations of body adornment are evident. Often, a combination of adornment is used in everyday lives of Ghanaians. Beads are small round pieces of pierced glass, special stone, wood or metal strung together to serve as adornment for the waist, neck or ankle. When the researcher tried to find out the kind of accessories used by the Anlo in their marriage, it was revealed that a common feature is wearing of beads. A variety of beads are worn around the neck and wrist.

One respondent (FGD1) stated that:

Beads of different colours are worn by the bride and the bridegroom as well as some of the family representatives present at the ceremony. Usually, the beads worn by the couple during the marriage ceremony are carefully selected to match with other ornamentals and clothes they put on. This therefore makes the ceremony colourful and attractive.

Pictures of beads used during Anlo marriage rites are presented in Figure 1.3:



Figure 1.3: Beads used in Anlo marriage rites (Sui, Glotsi, Dzinyagba, Akorso)

Source: *Field Photo by Author*

Figure 4.3 is an open display of beads which the Anlo used during their marriage ceremony. During the focus group discussion, one respondent commented that:

A newly married woman must continue to change the beads so that people around her become aware of her new state. A married couple also continues to change their beads to show their new state. The beads symbolize the new state (marriage) in which the couple has entered (Verbatim comment of respondent at FGD1).

The above response shows that beads also have a symbolic connotation which is to show the new status of the couple. This is important because marriage is considered as an important state and the beads symbolize that the couple have acquired this status in the rightful manner according to the Anlo customary practices.

It was revealed that the waist beads presented by the man to the woman have a very symbolic meaning. Waist beads are the kind of beads worn over the waist. These are different from other kinds of beads worn for the purposes of adornment. In the olden days, the waist beads served a functional purpose of holding the undergarment of the females, which was usually a piece of wrapper. (A red linen fabric which is worn on the waist to cover their private part and it served the purpose of a pant). Thus, the waist beads given to the female at the marriage ceremony would be used to tighten their undergarment, which in the olden days, was a piece of cloth used as wrapping.

In addition to the above, waist beads are also believed to enhance the shape of the woman. In the focus group discussion, one respondent explained:

The waist beads make you more beautiful from the waist. We believe that the waist beads enhance the shape of the woman's waist and her back. This makes her look more beautiful for her husband. The husband may also play with the woman's waist beads as a form of sexual arousal (Verbatim comment of respondent at FGD 2).

Waist Beads are more common with females and they are an excellent tool for women to feel more feminine and beautiful. These beautiful gemstone waist beads are handmade and customized. It would be observed that the waist beads are bundled. Thus, several strings of the waist beads can be bundled together and worn. However, ladies usually wear three strings of the same beads.

It was also found out that waist beads worn by a woman after marriage show her belongingness to a man because the beads were given by her husband. This is also because waist beads are considered private possessions of the couple which only the husband can see and touch. In the light of this, it is abominable for another man to touch the waist beads of a married woman. Any man found culpable of this act has committed adultery and would be made to compensate the husband of the woman or punished according to the custom.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study concluded that, there are various art forms associated with every stage of the performance of marriage rites among the people of Anlo and these artifacts are important elements of culture and are very valuable. It is recommended that the inhabitants of Anlo should be educated by chiefs and other opinion leaders on special occasions such as festivals on the cultural values of these visual art forms. Parents on the other hand should also educate and conscientise their children to acknowledge the significance of these art forms in the

celebration of Anlo traditional marriage rite. This will help the younger generations to appreciate the role these art forms play in their lives. Also, the study revealed that the symbolic values placed on these art forms even outweigh their functional purposes. It is therefore recommended that the preservation of cultural heritage should be the responsibility of every member of the society. For this reason the marriage processes should further be documented in audio and videos format. The audio documentation should be played on community radio stations for the entire community to listen to.

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