

# Reading the intangible heritage in tangible *Akan* art

Kwame Amoah Labi

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## ABSTRACT

The intangible aspects of *Akan* art give it content that has to be 'read' in order for it to fulfil its purpose and be enjoyed. Hence there is an inextricable link between the intangible and tangible parts of an artwork, with the tangible explaining the subject matter. It is the interpretation, and the meanings given to *Akan* art that makes it function effectively as an integral part of *Akan* culture. In some situations, art functions as a form of coded language representing the *Akan* world view, values, proverbs and aesthetics, in other words, the intangible aspects of their culture. Their art is thus made up of two components, the invisible and visible parts. *Akan* artworks are not only works of aesthetic value, they provide cultural and historical evidence of the time and period in which they were made. They reveal the technology, materials, beliefs, cultural practices and the circumstances under which they were made as well as their relations with other cultures and peoples. They are a valid source of evidence for people studying the *Akan*. Their art has the status of legible documents, the tangible aspects of their intangible culture. This article seeks to establish the link between the unseen components of *Akan* art and its visible, physical components, and to show how these dual but complementary aspects can be understood and appreciated.

## Introduction

The main purpose of this article is to explain how the *Akan* translate aspects of their intangible heritage into tangible, visible art forms to communicate and to document events and ideas. This paper sets out to address the fundamental belief the *Akan* have in the unseen and to explain how this notion, and other ideas, inform the content of their art. *Akan* art contains a wide range of themes that represent complex histories, philosophies, ideas and wise sayings. Selected examples of these topics and their visual representations form the central body of this paper. I then proceed to examine the link between the invisible and intangible parts of artwork, and the works themselves. This article therefore aims to establish the relationship between the intangible aspects of *Akan* heritage that underpin selected art works, and the works themselves, in order to illustrate the concept of duality in *Akan* art.

*Akan* intangible heritage is found in, and expressed through, family genealogies, histories, traditions, customs, ethics, values, philosophies and religions. These beliefs, values, and knowledge constitute a type of heritage that is expressed through stories and narratives, told to successive generations by knowledgeable elders, family heads and holders of political and social office. Other forms of intangible heritage are drum texts that are played by drummers, songs, which are sung by musicians, and poetry recited by poets. Intangible heritage is called *abakwasem*, meaning 'important historical, ethical or cultural information'. *Abakwasem* are considered to be true accounts of incidents, values, beliefs, philosophy and practices from the past. In *Asante* courts, they tried hard to sift truth from falsehood and ensure that the information they were given was accurate. Misinformation was unacceptable, as an *Asante* proverb says, *wutwa nkotompo a, wusuro Kumasi*,

meaning, 'if you tell lies you will fear Kumasi' or 'liars fear Kumasi.'<sup>1</sup> This means it was risky to tell lies in Kumasi, the capital of the *Asante* state, in the *Asante* region of Ghana, where *Asantehene*, king of the *Asantes*, had his court. The court treated oral information as truth.

Aspects of the intangible *Akan* heritage are expressed in tangible art forms to make this intangible content visible and 'readable.' These intangible narratives accompanying artworks are considered to be an important part of the work, and are preserved as part of *Akan* history and culture, as authentic *abakwasem*. Such artworks serve to represent historical facts and general knowledge, and can be used as evidence in legal cases. This intangible heritage forms the theoretical basis of life and is the source of knowledge for engaging in all sorts of socio-economic, political and religious activities.

This paper investigates how the *Akan* have used various materials to interpret their intangible heritage in order to preserve their beliefs, memory, knowledge and information, and to communicate. How is intangible heritage fused into art and what do the final products look like? Do they provide us with any further information about artistic styles, the socio-political environment or the economy, technology and culture of the time and period in which they were made? If they do, which of these art forms can we cite as examples to illustrate this?

## ***Akan* craftsmen and women, and their ideas about shapes, colours and symbols**

The *Akan* constitute about 49.1%<sup>2</sup> of Ghana's population. They comprise several sub-groups such as the *Agona*, *Akwamu*, *Akuapem*, *Akyem*, *Asante*, *Kwahu*, *Bono* and *Fante*, all of whom speak different dialects of the same *Akan* language, which belongs to the Central *Comoé*

language group.<sup>3</sup> Each *Akan* belongs to one of the eight matrilineal clans (*abusua*) because they believe each clan to have descended from a common ancestor or ancestress and to be bound together by a common tie. Hence they consider themselves as relatives, practice clan exogamy, and therefore cannot intermarry. The clans are the *Oyoko*, *Bretuo*, *Aduana*, *Asakyiri*, *Asenee*, *Agona*, *Asona* and *Ekoona*.<sup>4</sup> Each of these clans has a common totem or symbol (an animal which played some significant role in their mythology or history) and identifies with its qualities. Inheritance to political office and land is usually by matrilineal descent. The *Akan* also believe that every person inherits a *ntoro* from his or her father which helps to account for their inherited characteristics. The *Akan* divide themselves into twelve patrilineal groups based on their *ntoro*, namely *Bosommuru*, *Bosompra*, *Bosomtwe*, *Bosom-Dwerebe*, *Bosomakom*, *Bosomafi*, *Bosomafram*, *Bosom-Konsi*, *Bosomsika*, *Bosompo*, *Bosomayesu* and *Bosomkrete*, with each one having its own special characteristics.<sup>5</sup>

These intangible attributes that every *Akan* has are what gives him or her character and personality. This helps structure the general framework that guides social and moral behaviour, relationships, legal matters, political organisation and traditional activities, and sets the parameters by which the wellbeing of the *Akan* is sustained. According to Sutherland-Addy, intangible heritage gives significance to the activities of daily life and is expressed through aesthetic and symbolic art forms through which opinions and perspectives are mediated and expressed.<sup>6</sup> These have helped the *Akan* answer certain universal questions about particular types of resources, historical situations, technology and what needs to be done to develop skills and overcome challenges.

The people who possess the unusual skills and abilities needed to translate unseen things and ideas into visual forms are highly respected. These people are called *dwumfour* (craftsman or woman). He or she firstly translates an idea, belief, or something that cannot be seen into a visual form. Secondly, he or she creates that form – sometimes an article for use, sometimes an artwork – out of raw materials, intending it to be understood, and to give pleasure, to the user or viewer.

The *dwumfour* needs a wide range of knowledge and skill. They need to know how to choose raw materials for their durability and characteristics. They are expected to be familiar with different types of tools, manufacturing

and creative techniques and processes and finishing materials and the effects they each produce. In addition, the *dwumfour* must know how to appease the gods and deities who are believed to inhabit these important raw materials in order to make the work successful and harmless to the user. The *dwumfour* are therefore at the heart of the process of translating and linking together the invisible, abstract, intangible ideas and verbal texts into art to establish a composite whole. As part of their training, they acquire a deep knowledge of the community's beliefs and heritage, taste and aesthetics in order to create appropriate art or craftworks that can be understood and appreciated by members of the community.

Craft has been described by Feagin and Maynard as works whose aim is to arouse emotion, while art is work which expresses emotion. *Akan* art fits into both categories as it both expresses, and arouses, emotion.<sup>7</sup> The terms 'artwork' and 'craftwork' are therefore used interchangeably in this paper.

Among the *adwumfour* (plural) who work to fuse *Akan* intangible heritage and art together are the *adinkra* and *kente* cloth makers who produce a variety of abstract *edwene* (designs) with names. The *dade dwumfour*, the metal casters, create a variety of figurines, flora and fauna, an assortment of jewellery and ceremonial and ritual swords. Another group of artists are the *dua dwumfour*, the wood carvers, whose array of umbrella tops, finials for the staffs spokespersons carry, stools and shrine figures – either painted or covered in gold leaf – depict *Akan* culture in its artistic form. The tailors who make the *asafo* flags and the builders who construct houses and shrines are all critical thinkers with the skills required to produce accurate representations of the intangible.

The works the *dwumfour* produces are symbolic statements of attributes based on beliefs, theories and values, which both the artist and public appreciate. For example, an idealised human figure is expressed by certain distinctive symbols, which Antubam has discussed extensively. The shape of the female body, including the thighs, must be oval with well-rounded protruding buttocks, which are seen as a symbol of feminine beauty. The neck must also have rings.<sup>8</sup> Special efforts are made to groom young girls to achieve this ideal, curvaceous shape by putting beads on their waists, knees, ankles, calves, elbows and wrists. This is the *Akan* idea of beauty and their concept of the ideal human figure.

In addition to curves, geometric shapes and colours are used, and to the *Akan* they all have distinct meanings. For example, the *Akan* consider the circle as a motif that symbolises the presence and power of God, and the male aspect of society.<sup>9</sup> It appears in the circular plan of some shrines and the chief's sword bearer wears a gold disc as a symbol of the power and sanctity of his office.

Similarly, the square or rectangle stands for the sanctity of the male aspect of God and man. It also symbolises territorial power and the dominance of the male ruler. The large triangular locket on a chain, called an *ɛdawobo* (literally meaning 'it is on your chest') is considered to be a female symbol and is often made or plated in gold and worn by *Akan* chiefs. It is also found adorning chiefs' headgear, elbow bands, sandals and stools, establishing the relationship between male and female, and the beauty which comes from combining them.

The crescent moon symbolises the female aspect of society and its influence over life as a whole. Its meanings include beauty, female tenderness and gracefulness.<sup>10</sup> It is also seen in appliqué cloths and on the upper part of stools as a symbol of maternal protection and feminine charm. When combined with a star, the crescent represents female faithfulness in love.

Colours also have meanings which are based on deep, abstract, spiritual values and beliefs. Gold, a scarce, precious metal, stands for the test of time, and represents warmth, royalty, immortality and influence on society. All shades of gold are used to symbolise prosperity, royalty, glory and maturity. White comes from ivory, eggshells and *hyirew*, white clay. It symbolises purity, virtue, virginity, joy, victory and all the virtuous, spiritual qualities of God and the deified ancestral spirits. Green depicts newness, fertility, vitality and new growth. Black is related to soot and charcoal, and thought of in terms of vice, deep feelings of melancholy, death, tragedy, misfortune and such vicious spiritual entities as the devil.<sup>11</sup> Red represents melancholy and misfortune and is used to symbolise the death of a close relative, an act of war, anger, danger, seriousness or calamity.

*Akan* culture and history, until the first decades of the fifteenth century or probably later, had no written form, but the people had their own means of recording and documenting important events and ideas in intangible ways and tangible symbolic art forms. As a result, *Akan* artworks are not just tangible and visual, but are also important works inseparably bound together by

intangible information about their culture, which, upon investigation, reveal the history, social, religious and political life and experiences of the *Akan*. Therefore these works essentially consist of dual parts which add together to make a single intangible and tangible thing put together as a piece of art. These works are important because they are in continuous use in private and public ceremonies and activities. Because they are constantly being used, they continue to acquire more intangible qualities over time. A considerable number of *Akan* artworks therefore have historic, proverbial or symbolic meanings acquired because they reflect the occasions on which they have been used, or the activities for which they have been employed. They are intended to be preserved so that they can continue to communicate these ideas and accounts in ways that cannot be disputed.

Proverbs and wise sayings are part of the *Akan* language and are therefore intangible, but they are expressed in some specific artworks because they simplify abstract ideas into clear, visible, tangible, symbolic forms thereby making them 'readable.' Many *Akans* use proverbs in various situations to warn, advise, admonish, praise or rebuke, and political leaders often order regalia which has proverbial or symbolic parts thus making them important visual forms of communication in governance. Today, *Akan* art embodies a lot of proverbs in the form of symbols which stand for something other than what is immediately visible. In fact, symbols are a way of representing ideas through objects whose meanings are commonly understood and accepted. Attempting to give meaning to things found in the environment, through the study of their characteristics and behaviour, has led to the selection and use of common symbols to communicate certain ideas. Each one of these natural items has a set of ideas, values and attributes associated with it. For example, the lion is known for its strength, the elephant for its size, the antelope for its intelligence, the crocodile for its versatility, the palm tree for its multiple uses, the cock for its pride and its role in announcing daybreak - and so on.

One method of interpreting symbols, according to Saphir's analysis,<sup>12</sup> is to consider them as being a sort of condensed language which he defines as a 'highly saturated' form of expression. Thus symbols, according to him, have polarised meanings, with the possibility of each one having many interpretations.<sup>13</sup> To understand symbols one needs to go to a range of sources - specialists and laymen, people from the communities

that created them, documented sources and information about the contexts in which they were made.<sup>14</sup>

This is elaborated by Sylvan who describes this as 'iconology', the study of the symbolic meaning of objects in an artwork, and of how they are related to the political, religious, philosophical and social periods in which that work was created, and to the tendencies of the person who made it or the time and place under investigation.<sup>15</sup> *Akan* artworks bear the hallmarks of their historical and cultural milieu and reflect the social and political conditions of the time when they were produced, but they also always have an underlying intangible aspect that the viewer is expected to understand.

### **The *Akan* view of the world, intangible culture and its manifestations in art**

In this section, I discuss briefly some essential aspects of *Akan* intangible heritage, especially their belief system, its importance and how it surfaces in art. I argue that belief, though not tangible or scientifically proven, can still be overwhelming in its effect. Centuries of *Akan* belief and practice cannot be dismissed; for them, belief in the intangible is just as real as belief in the visible. Hence, belief is an essential aspect of their life and is expressed in art and other forms in everyday life. The *Akan* believe there is a supernatural force behind nature whose power needs to be solicited, thus they have evolved a system of religious practices which mean that craftspeople have to ask the gods' permission before using natural resources. This places religion at the core of traditional *Akan* art and makes it the basis for moral guidance, health, government, philosophy, agriculture, rites of passage, adornment and aesthetic values. It involves having a strong belief in the reality of the intangible component of all visible things, including human beings. Opoku, sums this up as ... *the unseen is as much a part of the reality as that which is seen*. He sees this as being related to Achebe's notion of duality. In other words, there is a complementary relationship between the tangible and the intangible, with the spiritual being more powerful than the material.<sup>16</sup>

At the core of *Akan* belief is the 'Supreme Being' called *Onyame*, God, who is placed outside the pantheon and is eternal. He is creator of the universe and is given attributes such as the 'Giver of Life'. He is also seen as the 'Grand Ancestor', 'Giver of Sun or Light', 'Rain' and the 'Sustainer of all things'. *Onyame* is the great deity

who is self-begotten, infinite and self-born and at the same time both male and female. His unique position in *Akan* philosophy is evident by the names attributed to Him, which are not shared by any other divinity.<sup>17</sup>

It is generally believed that *Onyame* delegates some of His powers to lesser spirit beings who are actively involved in the daily activities of this world. *Abosom*, as they are called, are graded into different categories in a descending scale from *omanbosom* (state god), those owned by *boron* (districts), to others venerated by lineages and individuals in their own homes, sometimes known as 'private' gods. *Abosom* are usually envisaged as personified spirits or as taking on other forms, such as animals endowed with spiritual powers to bless or kill. It is the artists' responsibility to translate these beliefs into concrete artworks or into an abode to house the deity. The artist may see a form through a spiritual encounter and translate it into an exact shape of its attributes. Some sculptures of deities - or their representations - are based on descriptions narrated to the artist by an adherent or priest. The type of locus representing the deity may be a building, a mound, a figure, a pot of water or anything else the priest or the artist may decide upon.

Some *Akan* sculptures are associated with religion. This genre includes those which adorn shrines, ancestral and charm figures, stools used in initiation rites, abodes for spirits and a variety of ritual paraphernalia. Some of these artworks are believed to possess the spiritual essence necessary to sustain life or support a particular activity. They are 'fed' and venerated during life's daily activities, through rites and rituals, so that through sculptures the *Akan* have access to spirit beings and the powers whose assistance they seek.

The *Akan* belief system means they make efforts to live in harmony with their environment, and as a community they establish and maintain very good, close links with the intangible aspects of the world in which they live. Therefore, when there are changes in the climate, or the season produces plenty of rain, a bountiful harvest or a good catch, or when someone is able to move successfully from one stage in life to the next, it is marked with a celebration which involves the community, the gods, deities and the ancestors. Central to all these activities are rites, rituals, and ceremonies which are themselves artworks of a sort, all acting as mediums through which contact with the spirit beings can be established and maintained. Artworks become physical embodiments of *Akan* beliefs as well as visual

expressions of their aesthetic tastes and preferences.

Several religious rites and social celebrations use art to mark these occasions. To ensure a successful occasion or season, adequate preparations must be made for the celebration. Some of the rites for these physical, social and seasonal changes are performed at the birth of a child, as children are seen as important members of the family. On the eighth day after birth, the child is brought out into the open for a naming ceremony that takes place very early in the morning. The *Akan* believe that after eight days it will be clear whether or not the child will survive. It also allows time for the child to settle into his or her new environment and get acclimatised. The child is given a name, usually by the father, while an adult family member explains to the new-born the virtues and morals associated with the name they have been given and gives them advice about the importance of truth and honesty. In order to represent what childbirth means, the clothes, beads and other jewellery are all white, the colour that symbolises happiness and success in childbirth. A combination of white and other colours may also be worn but they must all symbolise a happy occasion.

The transition from childhood to adolescence is not considered a physiological phenomenon alone; it is characterised by puberty rites, performed only for girls. It involves a religious and cultural ceremony known as *bragro*. In this ceremony, a deity will be consulted to ascertain the appropriateness of the rites to be undertaken. In brief, the ceremony involves an early morning cold bath and a jubilant response with songs from family members and well-wishers after the bath. The initiate lowers her bottom three times to touch a white stool which rests on a mat, her helpers dress her from head to knee leaving only her face uncovered and a brass bowl is placed nearby in which to collect gifts of money. There is also a dance performance and other activities for the initiates either individually or collectively. Several forms of both tangible and intangible heritage are expressed here with artworks acting as a link between the two as well as helping to focus attention on the essence of the celebration.<sup>18</sup> It is through these works, which become vehicles for the visual expression of *Akan* beliefs and values, and which brings joy and significance, that the ceremony becomes effective and complete. These ceremonies are not valid if there are no tangible materials to demonstrate the importance of the occasion. The crowning moment of these rites comes with the use

of clothes and jewellery to depict the new status of the initiate.

The next important stage in life that is celebrated after *bragro* is marriage. This is a social arrangement between a man and a woman with the consent, and in the presence, of both families, thus creating an alliance between the two families. *Akan* marriage is a union that places a set of rights, responsibilities and obligations on both the man and the woman. Marriage ceremonies are regulated by custom mainly in the form of payments or exchange of valuables as a means of sealing the relationship and establishing a 'legal marriage.' The most important of these exchanges is the presentation of gifts, bride-wealth, by the man and his kin to the woman's family. This places an obligation on both the donors and the recipients and their families to ensure the success of the marriage. Bride-wealth takes the form of money, drinks, clothing, cooking utensils, beads, jewellery, items of value and souvenirs, or anything else that may be determined by the woman's family. These articles of value, largely of an artistic nature, are permanent reminders of the event and therefore move from being marriage gifts and works of art to becoming documents and evidence of the event and of the ceremony at which they were presented. They become the tangible evidence that the ceremony took place. In the event of a divorce it is these items that are returned to annul the marriage.

Death is the final rite of passage. It is considered to be transient, the dead continue to be members of their families and their relationship with the living remains unbroken. This means the living have an obligation to venerate their ancestors from time to time, especially during festivals, and the ancestors have the reciprocal responsibility of protecting their families and overseeing their conduct. Ancestors are believed to play an important role in *Akan* life and a number of deeds are attributed to them. In order to merit recognition of ancestorship, a person must have upheld the social ethics and values, and should have fulfilled the expectations of his society during his or her lifetime. As a result of these achievements in life, his relationship with the living continues and is maintained by the chief who derives his authority from the ancestors.

As explained earlier, the traditional colour for funerals is black for the ordinary mourners, but close relatives may wear *koben*, bright red, and distant relatives may clothe themselves in *kuntunkunu*, which is umber. Families may choose to commemorate the death of an

aged member by wearing white or a combination of black and white to celebrate the long successful life of the deceased. *Nyanya* leaves made into wreaths and hung around the mourners' necks show the political status of the dead person, and his or her relationship to the wearers and therefore how deeply they will be grieving. Wearing the right colour to show how close you were to the deceased, and how deeply you are mourning, is also very important. The colour of clothes and all the articles used for the burial and funeral ceremonies are dictated by traditional codes. They are important in identifying the different groups of mourners, their roles and the customs to be performed. Colours therefore speak at funerals.

The cornerstone of *Akan* polity is the relationship between the dead and the living, established and maintained through stools. Because the owner used it frequently, a stool is believed to be close to the user, and therefore will provide a good channel to reach the spirit of a dead person. A typical stool is carved in three parts, namely the base, middle and the crescent shaped seat. The middle part often contains a proverb or saying. A 'blackened stool' is created through a ritual of pouring a libation on to the last stool on which a chief sat before dying, and then smearing it with blood, fat, alcohol, salt and soot. As this is being done, prayers are offered and the spirits – including that of the deceased – are invoked so the stool can be inhabited by the spirits of the ancestors when their presence is sought. This gives the stool a dual, practical and spiritual, purpose. Therefore, black stools are venerated as sacred objects and 'fed'. The blackened stools are auspicious and are dedicated to

the spirits of the dead and are purposely treated to appear black. The black colour for these stools also creates a reverential atmosphere in the stool rooms. There are other stools, which represent past chiefs like the one shown in Figure 1. This artwork in the form of a stool represents the spirit of the dead and is a physical reminder of the past chief and of his deeds, and is venerated at festivals and other appointed times.

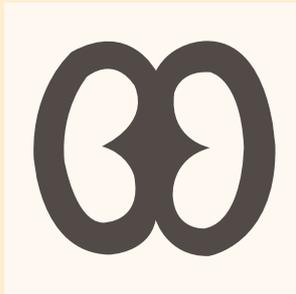
Festivals establish and renew relations between the living and the 'living dead' – ancestors, gods and deities – through various spiritual and physical activities and objects. Typically, all these activities have dual aspects, the seen and the unseen. *Akan* festivals are complex celebrations in which the ancestors and gods are invited, 'fed' and venerated. Other celebrations include the planting of new food crops, the beginning of the new fishing or farming season, the chief accounting for the year's stewardship, family reunions and the mourning of those who have died during the year. An important feature of all these ceremonies is how they culminate in the display of several artworks, many of which represent past users and are therefore reminders of them. These artworks are also the channel for propitiations and requests to the ancestors and the gods. Art stands at the centre, negotiating between the spirit beings and humankind.

### The meanings of *adinkra* symbols

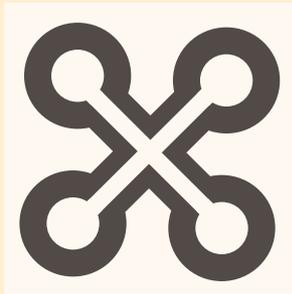
In the next few paragraphs, I shall explore the way this duality of spiritual and material, tangible and intangible, unseen and seen is depicted in abstract *adinkra* symbols,



**Figure 1**  
*Akuapem Omanhene Stool representing past Okuapehenfo, Akropong, 2001*



**Figure 2**  
An *adinkra* symbol saying *Nyame, biribi wo suru na ma me nsanka*, meaning, "God, there is something in heaven, let me receive it."



**Figure 3**  
An *adinkra* symbol saying *Onyame nwu na me awu*, meaning, "God does not die therefore I shall not die."



**Figure 4**  
*Mate masie*, signifying wisdom, knowledge and prudence.



**Figure 5**  
*Dwennimmen*. This is a symbol of humility and strength, wisdom and learning.

to balance a work as well as validating it within the community. The *Akan* believe all things come from *Onyame* and they expect to receive things from Him. They say *Nyame, biribi wo suru na ma me nsa nka*, meaning, 'God, there is something in heaven, let me receive it.' This proverb is not only a verbal expression based on a belief, but has also been transformed into a tangible art work (see Figure 2) as one of the several *adinkra* symbols.

*Adinkra* symbols come in a variety of geometric designs which represent various proverbs. The original designs were etched or carved out from fragments of calabash into various forms<sup>19</sup> using three piece of sticks stuck into the calabash with the edges tied together at the end. This is held and dipped into black dye derived from the *badie* tree.<sup>20</sup> The bark of this tree is cut up and boiled in a pot with several lumps of slag (*etia*). This dark liquid is called *adinkra duru* (*adinkra* medicine). *Adinkra* designs again touch upon a wide range of religious and moral themes as well as proverbs, and are made as geometric, stylised representations of inanimate and animate objects, abstract symbols of proverbs and actual representational designs such as the heart, all of which have interesting meanings.<sup>21</sup>

God is linked to the sky and is believed to manifest Himself in various ways expressed in proverbs such as *Asaase trew na Onyame ne payin*, meaning, 'the earth is wide but *Onyame* is foremost.' The *Akan* experience and belief in God is expressed in other concrete, tangible forms. A tree (*Alstonia boonei*) is known as *Nyame dua*, 'God's tree', and is seen as a symbol of man's dependence on Him, and is used extensively in carving.

The eternity of God and the spirit of humankind is embodied in the *Akan* maxim *Onyame nwu na mawu*, meaning, 'God does not die, therefore I shall also not die.' The visual link between this expression and art is shown in the *adinkra* symbol in Figure 3. There are several other examples of the way in which the intangible permeates and addresses almost every type of issue and theme. In Figure 4, the design is *matemasie*, a symbol signifying wisdom, knowledge and prudence. The design of *dwennimmen*, the ram's horn (Figure 5) means humility, strength, wisdom and learning as being the essential qualities needed to excel in any endeavour. These designs are stamped on plain cotton fabrics called *adinkra* cloth, and are used for a variety of social functions including naming ceremonies and funerals.

It is generally accepted among the *Akan* that death is an inevitable part of human existence and this idea has its *adinkra* symbol - *obi nforo owu antwere nsan*, meaning, 'a person does not climb the ladder of death and return' Death is unavoidable in life and this symbol of a ladder reminds all humankind of the fact of death, and consequently of the need to live an upright life. The *Akan* believe that death does not end life because a person's soul does not die, but passes on from this world to that of the ancestors. Because this symbol is so often used, worn and seen, it reminds observers of the reality of death.

These *adinkra* designs have gained nationwide acknowledgement because of their symbolic nature. In this instance, the verbal and non-verbal, visible and invisible merge into a single symbol often used in

Ghanaian life. Hence, many have become national symbols and are used on academic and religious gowns and cassocks, in architecture and in interior decoration, in churches, as emblems and logos of both private and state organisations, as jewellery designs, in modern printed fabrics, and, until recently, on the old national currency notes (the *cedi*).

## Reading the intangible in *Akan* art

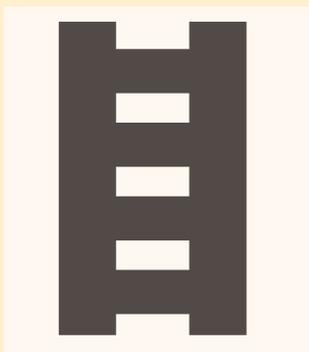
Thus far, I have attempted to give the context of the *Akan* world view and to show how the intangible aspects of their culture have been transformed into works of art. My intention now is to interpret a number of *Akan* artworks to illustrate my contention that almost every *Akan* work has two aspects - the physical work and a deeper meaning that has to be understood or explained. For example, in architecture there is the building itself and then the cultural factors that determine how different parts of the building are used. How different spaces are used is culturally very important, and any change is usually significant. *Akan* buildings are square or rectangular, and they either stand alone or are grouped round a courtyard. The courtyards in the middle of domestic units are used for various household activities. Domestic dwellings and palaces vary greatly with social, political, cultural differences in the way they are built. Different households have different sorts of buildings, for example, a farming family will have barns for the storage of agricultural produce; houses for people who have political positions will have a *dampan*, or open sitting space, where guests can be received and cases discussed. Sometimes a section of the residential unit

will be reserved for the planting of spices and medicinal plants for household use. A study of the design of *Akan* architecture shows the link between practical needs and the relationship to intangible cultural values.

European buildings - forts, castles, trading posts, residences for European officials, churches, Christian institutions, houses built of stone - have all influenced *Akan* architecture. The Europeans hired and trained local artisans, introduced a money economy and enabled local merchants to become rich and this, too, has affected the way the *Akan* build, though the *Akan* architectural heritage is still evident. There has been a change from traditional mud and thatch buildings through stone and wooden ones with several storeys, to contemporary European-influenced styles.

The Fante *asafo* (a traditional military and socio-political organisation) *posuban* (military shrines) and *frankaa* (flags) present us with further evidence of the importance of intangible culture. They contain a considerable number of symbols, which have to be interpreted to be understood.<sup>22</sup> The *posuban*, an example of which is seen in Figure 7, are not merely shrines, the local and foreign symbols on them bear witness to their adherents' experiences and struggles in defence of their art and culture.

The *asafo* copied the manufacture and use of flags from the Europeans who lived on the Gold Coast. The *Fante*, in providing services for the European traders, adopted flags and used them in various ways - in war and conflicts, in formation marching and as a focus for salutation. The flags represent the values of the *asafo*, serve as a form of identity and pay tribute to previous leaders who created and used them. As a result, they act



**Figure 6**  
An Adinkra symbol saying *Obi nforo owo antwere nsan*, meaning, "no one climbs the ladder of death and returns."

**Figure 7**  
Gomoa Dago No. 2 Dentsefo Posuban.

**Figure 8**

*Osua otow ma ne nsa bo su*, meaning "the monkey jumps only as far as it can," 1999.

**Figure 9**

*Abofraba tsew muko a oka n'enyiwa*, meaning "when a child picks peppers it gets into its eyes," 1999.



as religious icons and as abodes for the ancestors when invoked and act as historical documents that contain messages to be read.

*Fante asafo* flags and *posuban* are iconographic and contain a wide range of symbols and messages. These intangible aspects provide interesting information that complements and completes the actual flags. Without a clear intangible content these flags have no meaning or value. These intangible ideas are translated into zoomorphic and anthropomorphic forms based on *Fante* culture. In creating them, *asafo* companies aptly express their thoughts through combining, mixing or contrasting symbols that are linked to *Fante* proverbs. The intangible messages and their meanings help enhance the aesthetic appreciation of *asafo* and *Akan* art in general.

The flag in Figure 8, is not just a picture of two trees with a monkey between them, its meaning is to be found in a *Fante* proverb which advises members of the community to be cautious and try to avoid trouble - *osua otow ma ne nsa bo su*, meaning, 'the monkey jumps only as far as it can' - rather like the English proverb 'look before you leap'. In pictorial form this appears as a monkey falling as it tries to jump from one tree to the other. Although monkeys can perform skilful acrobatics and manoeuvres in the trees, they have to realise that there could be dire consequences if they make a misjudgement.

Another flag with a bushy tree explains a proverb about uncertainty and hidden danger - *dua wusuu wokqase mbarimba*, meaning, 'it is only the brave who venture to go underneath a bushy tree.' In this context a bushy tree is understood to mean danger. Figure 9 shows another example of a pictorial proverb. A boy is pointing to a tree and two others are looking on. Technically, the design is balanced and framed with triangular patterns.

But more importantly, the flag expresses the importance of good behaviour and self-evaluation. The figures of the two children on the right attempting to pick peppers are meant to warn other *asafo* companies with the proverb *abofraba tsew muko a oka n'enyiwa*, meaning, 'if a child picks peppers it gets into its eyes'. The warning comes from the child on the left who is pointing to the plant. In other words, if you are a small or weak *asafo* company, you must behave as such, be like a child and avoid provoking stronger companies. A flag with a lion on it may not simply imply strength, but rather invoke another proverb - *awendade a wewu no osin osibo a nanyi kan*, meaning 'a dead lion is greater than a living leopard.' This means that a powerful *asafo* at its weakest is nevertheless stronger than a weak rival at the peak of its strength.

Another type of *Akan* artworks are *akyeampoma*, staffs which are symbols of office for the *okyeame*, or spokespersons. At all functions, a public speech is given by one of the *okyeame*, who has been appointed to speak on behalf of an elder or a chief, as seen in Figure 10. The *okyeame* is expected to embellish the chief's speech with appropriate linguistic flourishes, with *Akan* values and proverbs being cited at appropriate intervals. He also has to display the appropriate *akyeampoma*. *Akyeampoma* are made of wood, sometimes cast in gold, covered with gold leaf or painted. The finials of *akyeampoma* can take many and varied forms. The motifs or finials on the *akyeampoma* are non-verbal expressions linking verbal texts with motifs and symbols. They represent proverbs and sayings which have chains of metaphorical associations and can be applied to a range of subjects.

*Akan akyeampoma* embody information about ethical and moral values and are used as an unspoken form of communication at public gatherings and in government.

The most commonly used staff is *asempa ye tia*, meaning, 'the truth is brief' implying that there is no need for long speeches. Another example of an *akyeampoma* image is the depiction of a small boy holding the tail of a lion, *Kobia nnim gyata*, meaning, 'a boy does not know a lion'. This suggests naivety, ignorance, innocence and uninformed behaviour when in danger. Other proverbial *akyeampoma* finials are, *wonsa demu a yen ndi ngya wo*, meaning, 'if your hands are in a meal you are not left out of it,' *akokobre nim se adi akye nso otiae afi onini ano*, meaning, 'the hen knows it is dawn but waits for the cock to crow.' This one suggests orderliness and respect for leadership. *Kyeremerekuku, me be wu ma esie ewu*, is another, and can be translated as 'when *Kyeremerekuku* dies the ant hill will collapse.' *Kyeremerekuku* is the queen termite, and her death is likened to the loss of an important person.<sup>23</sup> Two antelopes standing beside each other depict the proverb *hwe me aniso ma me nti na atwe nam mieno*, meaning, 'it is for the sake of blowing foreign matter from each others eyes that antelopes walk in pairs,' which means people should care for each other. Others proverbs stress the importance of consultation such as, *ti koro nkɔ agyina*, in which two or three heads are carved or cast together, meaning, 'one person does not take a unilateral decision.' The symbols on these *akyeampoma* represent spoken *Akan* language made visible through art. Every spokesperson's *akyeampoma* carries a message. The designs and their meanings are

inseparable.

These are just a few examples of the relationship between the intangible and tangible aspects of *Akan* heritage. Their knowledge of technology and history and the environment are all combined into other art forms. Further examples of the expression of intangible culture are seen in figurines cast in brass, commonly called gold weights, but in their symbolic context they are specifically called *mrammog*, or 'proverb weights'. Cast brass figurines were made to record significant ideas and were sometimes kept along with jewellery, gold dust or nuggets. These figurines cover a wide range of themes including human figures in different postures, food crops, marine life, animals, musical instruments, military accoutrements and proverbs. When assembled chronologically - either by style or development - they represent the past, a history of art, events over time and act as a visible, tangible reminder of those things. As is typical of the *Akan*, proverbs are also used in metal artwork. In the Institute of African Studies collection of brass works, there is one depicting two mud fishes, apparently biting each others' tails thus forming a loop called *obi nka obi*, meaning 'no one bites a friend'. This is quite a common form and illustrates the importance of living in harmony (Figure 11). The *funtumirefunu denkyemmirefunu*, two crocodiles with one stomach, symbolises the division of power between various people<sup>24</sup> and is also as a symbol of unity in diversity. The



**Figure 10**  
The *Okuapehene*'s spokesperson speaking,  
Akropong Akuapem, 2001

**Figure 11**  
*Obi nka obi*, "no one bites the other" meaning, friends must live in peace, Institute of African Studies, Legon 2006.

**Figure 12**  
 Cast brass in a proverb '*funtumirefunu denkyemirefunu*' is also a symbol of unity in diversity, Institute of African Studies, Legon 2006.

**Figure 13**  
*Forowa*, brass sheet container with sankofa bird on one side and another bird on the other, Institute of African Studies, Legon 2006.



meaning given to the two crocodiles, which have the same stomach, is that they need not fight each other for food, as it will end up in the same place (Figure 12).

From these works we can learn about *Akan* values, but they also tell us about the history of importing brassware from the northern trade centres of Jenne and Timbuktu in Mali and from Europe, and about the *cire perdue*, or 'lost wax' technique used in their manufacture. The range of brass works includes *kuduo* (cast brass containers for the storage of gold, jewellery and precious items, which are also used in various rituals). These are of Islamic origin but tell us about the *Akan* ability to borrow from other cultures, innovate and make foreign forms their own. The *forowa* (containers made out of sheet brass to store body lotions such as shea butter, see Figure 13) point to the use of imported sheet metal and show how items made from it also reveal aspects of *Akan* culture. The example of an *Akan* proverb on this *forowa* shows a typical *Akan* composition of a bird with its head turned backwards, called *sankofa*, meaning, 'reaching back to ancient wisdom.' From this container we can also see the combination of geometric designs on the lid as well as on the container itself. These may show Islamic influence. These containers are a reflection of trade, Islamic religion and design, technology and *Akan* thought all linked and bound together. My informant, Agya Kweku Manu<sup>25</sup> of Kuroforo, told me of the importance of making these *forowa* and figurines. According to him, his ancestors made them in order to teach the younger generation the skill of casting

to represent ideas so that the technology, and knowledge, would not be forgotten.

Items made of clay have been found in many archaeological sites and they also provide useful information about *Akan* culture. Pottery is one of the oldest crafts as it is fairly easy to make. Pots are used for cooking, food storage, as palm wine and water containers, cooking utensils, in the transportation of liquids for trade and to store rain water or water collected from rivers which is believed to help create a home for deities. Other types of pottery are used for ceremonial and religious activities. Pots have acquired a religious significance because they are made from the earth, which the *Akan* also refer to as *Asaase Yaa*, the venerated Earth goddess. Funerary terracotta urns are used in burial ceremonies, to remember the dead and mark grave sites. Some are in the form of pots called *abusua kuruwa*, they establish a link between the earth in which the dead are buried and the material which is used to create a memorial for the departed. *Akan* funerary terracotta urns have become treasured works, which help to identify burial sites and tell us about the ceremonies that separate the dead from the living. These clearly link the tangible clay works to the concept of death, preservation of memory and even sometimes to veneration and family rituals. Their stylistic approach to the busts and the variations in which they have been made is a departure from wooden sculpture, which emphasises different parts of the body.

*Akan* views on masculinity and femininity are seen in

the types of work each produces. Craftwork is gender-based with men often working on difficult materials such as wood and metal. Women usually work on the softer materials like clay, cotton and plant fibre. Women have traditionally worked with beads though today this is changing. Beads are, however, used by both sexes and worn around the neck, arm, wrist, knee, waist and ankle. Beads are used for social, medicinal, political and religious purposes. They can be used in rites of passage, they may have religious significance, they can be status symbols or enhance sexual roles. Beads are also fashion items and can be used in faith based healing rituals. Some beads are also given names such as, *ahene pa nkasa*, meaning 'good beads do not speak,' or *teteaso, abodom, bota, nwewa*, and *ahwene kokoo* (red beads). Again, beads are another art form with links to intangible heritage.

Musical instruments such as drums call the community together and are used to sound out histories, warnings and to praise chiefs and play tunes for royal, religious, secular and social dances and occasions. Drum language is non-verbal but it is understood by the *Akan*. The drum becomes the medium through which the intangible heritage of drum language is expressed and communicated. Horns also sound particular tunes as verbal messages. For example, *Okuapehene* has one which sounds *owuo yi oo, owuo*, meaning, 'this death oh death.' Its deep sound was played in the past when *Okuapehene* was about to pass a death sentence on a guilty person.<sup>26</sup> *Mamfe asese ben* sound texts include *Osafo Tenten Kantanka*, meaning, 'the great, tall warrior Kantanka.'<sup>27</sup> A horn made out of ivory and decorated with

the jaws of a human victim was associated with the ancestral deity called *Apafram* of *Breman-Asikuma*, and its sound text is *Onipa a oye mahu no. Akwasi Apafram a ote mmoawe so. Akwasi gyegye ma wo ho. Akwasi ennye wo a*, which means 'he who offended me has been seen by me, Akwasi Apafram who sits on jaws. Akwasi accept it for yourself, Akwasi it was not you,' implying that he knows who has acted as traitor.<sup>28</sup> These musical instruments, which are also artworks in their own right, are actually used to communicate non-verbally.

One of the best-known pieces of *Akan* wood sculpture is the *Akuaba* (*Akua's child*) doll. Oral tradition has it that it originated from the legend of an infertile woman called *Akua*. She is said to have consulted a priest who commissioned a small wooden doll to be carved for her as a surrogate child. She was, however, mocked by fellow villagers who referred to the doll as *Akuaba*, 'Akua's baby', but she eventually conceived and gave birth to a child. Since then, this type of doll has represented the story of *Akua's* experience of infertility and childbirth. Similar dolls have since been created and used to address infertility problems. *Akuaba* dolls are still made as talismans for the delivery of healthy children and their traditional form shows us the *Akan* concept of beauty. They are, however, also made as children's toys and for sale to tourists.

## Conclusion

*Akan* art embodies invaluable cultural, philosophical, scientific and technological information. It reflects beliefs, proverbs, histories and various intangible ideas made



**Figure 14**  
*Akuaba* (*Akua's child*) dolls originally made by a priest to cure infertility

tangible, thus establishing an indivisible link between art and the intangible. The objects seen during ceremonies, in museums and in private collections are only the superficial evidence of centuries of deep-seated knowledge and experience. Just as the *Akan* philosophy of the unseen being as real as the seen, and Achebe's view of the notion of duality, and the general principle of pairs - left and right, negative and positive - a large number of *Akan* art objects consist of two sides, the tangible and the intangible. They are complementary, as the tangible helps explain the intangible and vice versa. It is only when we understand this duality of subject matter and subject in *Akan* art that we can arrive at a full and complete understanding of it. *Akan* art is largely symbolic and contains unseen meanings that can only be read in conjunction with the physical object.

In this article, I have argued that *Akan* artworks are not mere objects, art for art's sake, but expressions of an intangible heritage which is inseparably bound to the tangible object. Artworks reinforce *Akan* religious and philosophical beliefs, making them complement one another and serve as historical documents and resource material for the study of the roles the tangible and the intangible play in *Akan* culture. To understand *Akan* art means a dual journey, first to enjoy the seen and second to interrogate the unseen to uncover its layers of meaning. These complementary roles make artworks serve as pictographs to be read, taking the viewer far beyond aesthetic values and concepts of beauty. *Akan* art represents the visible and the invisible, the tangible and the intangible, and is inextricably linked to the religious beliefs, cultural values and aesthetics that sustain the *Akan* community.

(This article was initially presented as a draft conference paper at the 2nd *Conference and General Assembly* of the International Council of African Museums (AFRICOM), 4th–7th October 2006, held in Cape Town, South Africa, in conjunction with the South African Museums Association (SAMA). The theme was *Intangible Heritage: African Museums and Living Cultures*. My paper was entitled *Making the Intangible Heritage Tangible: a discussion of art works in Ghanaian museums*. After further reading and research, I have revised the draft paper extensively and included a considerable amount of information about proverbs expressed in pictorial form that I collected from the *Fante*, *Asante* and *Akuapem* ethnic groups in Ghana.)

## Notes on *Akan* spelling and pronunciation

The letter e is written as the reverse of the number 3 and pronounced like the 'e' in 'egg'. The letter o is written as the reverse of the character 'c' and pronounced like the 'o' in 'orange'. 🇳🇮

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21. Rattray (*op cit.*) recorded about fifty-three of them in 1926.
22. Labi, K. A., 1992.
23. Kofi Antubam has illustrated symbolic objects adorning state regalia, and described their use, the proverbs they represent and the traditional significance attached to them, *op cit.* pp.165-184.
24. *ibid.* p.106.
25. Interview with Agya Kweku Manu, a sub-chief in Kuroforo, a suburb of Kumasi, conducted on Wednesday 14th February 2007, at Kuroforo, where brass casting is a major occupation; it is still the largest single place for the production of brass works in the *Ashanti* region.
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