The Heritage of Ghanaian Traditional Furniture Culture

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 09 November 2021

Received in revised form 08

December 2021

Accepted 16 December 2021

Keywords:

Traditional Ghanaian

Furniture Designs

Contemporary Furniture

Akan Traditional Elements

Abstract

Traditional Ghanaian furniture designs are known as an exhibition of the splendor and elegance of decorative objects or decorative ornaments that carry profound philosophical and sacred meanings. The features found in Ghana's traditional Ghanaian design can be considered as objects for international players, with their own identity and not found elsewhere. This paper therefore seeks to identify and illuminate some of these Akan cultural objects in Ghana by referring to the Ashanti region. This paper also shows with examples how these design elements can be developed and maintained by integrating them into modern furniture and interior designs or as a straightforward or adaptive design.

Introduction

Culture in general, no matter how old or advanced, depends on its survival and self-knowledge (Clyde et al, 1945). Man's early records include material designed to satisfy his many needs to extend his physical and mental power over nature and the other person, to please his will, to establish his form, and to form symbols of meaning. If the basic miracle of man is his ability to create culture, then indeed the miracle that follows his amazing ability to do things as part of his culture. Art objects made and used by people are not the only basic expressions of those people; according to tradition itself, are a necessary means of self-fulfillment.

Studying the culture of traditional Ghanaian furniture is therefore the first lesson for people. In line with the study of the human constitution, his ideas, and institutions, the physical condition in which he lives, and the records of his actions over time, there is a clear, natural, and universal interest in human activity. Kenneth Clark made Ruskin's dictum: "The great nations write their history in three manuscripts, the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their art. None of these books can be understood unless we read the other two, but only the last of the three is the most reliable ones" (Clark, 1969). However, man-made exploration can be one of our most progressive studies of humanity. Using Leslie A. White's three main categories of culture-material, social, and mental-it, it can be said that material culture (Leslie, 1969) has received little systematic attention than the other two. Some fields of study need to be sure, focusing on their artifacts. First of all, the history of furniture, by its research into those masterpieces of architecture, paintings, sculpture, graphics, and decorative art. Second, perhaps, the science of archeology, previous history and history, through its exploration and analysis of all the vast amounts of artifacts found in the world.

A recently organized campaign in the history of technology, with a special focus on artefacts made to do the work. Slightly more organized than the three approaches to artifacts is cultural history, in which in many cases has been successfully used both practical and artistic objects, but not yet, developed both models for analyzing and interpreting this type of main source material.

History of the Ghanaian Traditional Furniture (Akan Stool)

According to Cole & Fraser (2004), the word stool has two-fold meanings. It signifies the actual shape of the stool (the seat) and the office of the chief. Stools in general are wooden seats that have been used since ancient times. They are actually one of the most ubiquitous types of woodcarving in Ghana. According to Ross (2002) and Arthur (1998), stools are monoxylous in form or carved from a single piece of wood. Arthur (op cit) and Rattray (1927) assert the stool represents the seat of the owner's soul. They affirm that when the stool is not being used by its owner it is turned on its side or leaned against a wall especially at night time in order to avoid other souls (persons or spirits) passing by having access to it.

Stools have multiple forms, functions, and meanings (Cole & Ross, 1977). They range in significance from everyday domestic furniture to the spiritual essence of its owner or user.

According to Sarpong (1971), in Ashanti and other Akan societies, the stool is considered synonymous with its owner, as an extraordinary intimacy is believed to exist between a person and his or her stool. He contends that the stool follows a person from birth to death, while ritually punctuating major segments of his or her life.

Nature of Ghanaian Traditional Furniture (Akan Stool)

Considered concretely, the Asante stool is nothing but a wooden seat of artistic design for practical use (Sarpong, 2007). They comprised a crescent top, a middle portion, and a rectangular base (Cole & Ross, 1977; Arthur, 1998). According to Sarpong (2007), rectangular Asante's stools are synonymous with female principles and notes that the crescent top is popularly known as (baatan awaamu) meaning the warm embrace of a mother. The crescent shape of the stool facilitates comfortable sitting and easy carrying on the back of the neck (in the case of stools used by chiefs) during ceremonial processions. Conversely, stools of queen mothers (ahemaa) are carried on the head (Ross, 2002).

Figure. 1 Traditional Ghanaian furniture (Akan Stool)

The middle portions of rectangular Asante's stools are considered the most important part as they carry distinctive motifs and designs from which the names of stools are derived. The motifs and designs are mostly obtained from various geometric and abstract designs, animal and human motifs. They embody many proverbial or symbolic messages, and suggest or reinforce the status, authority, and beliefs of the owner or user, the worth of the stool, and the kind of stool it is. Some of the stool names serve to evoke, record, and communicate some aspects of Ashanti beliefs, history, social values, and cultural norms (Rattray, 1923; Sarpong,

2007). Stools with symbols and geometric designs in the middle are designed to achieve a horizontal or symmetrical balance when halved. A few however with animal motifs may have asymmetrical balance (Edusei, 2003).

Ceremonial Seats (Stools)

Ceremonial stools (Adamu dwa) function in the Asante political system as symbols of authority and legitimacy. These stools are usually handed over from one ruler to another and others may be commissioned when a new chief assumes office. Ceremonial stools are crucial political objects that feature when new chiefs are being enstooled by being placed three consecutive times on the stool as a sign of their enstoolment. Chiefs also use them when they sit in state or are performing rites connected with ancestral cult (Kyerematen, 1964).

A closer look at the State Chair reveals that its base is being modelled after the stool of the Asante chief. Such stools are considered the essence of power that connect the king to the ancestral world and to the power of his predecessors. They often represent proverbs that speak of the relationship between wealth, wisdom, and power, as well as other aspects of royal authority. The exact stool 'quoted' in Antubam's state seat is the kotoko dwa, a seat representing one of the most important symbols of the Asante tribe, is the porcupine (kotoko) (Ayensu & Darkwa, 2006). The Asante people, according to a popular proverb, work like the porcupine quills: when one falls, hundred more will come to the aid. It is therefore a symbol of solidarity and war, and as the military power of the Asante tribe was transferred to Asantehene power, the use of kotoko dwa was and it still continue to be a royal privilege and prerogative (Basedau et al, 2007).

Chair of the Presidency, the seat where the president sits at key moments in the parliament, is the seat of the top branch of the Ghanaian government in one of the oldest trading forts on the Accra coast. The seat has a variety of artistic styles and 'respects national standards' (Hess 2001).

Figure. 2 [a] Porcupine Stool (kotoko dwa), [b] Golden Stool Throne, and [c] Presidential Chair, which mark as Ceremonial Seats.

Material used for making Ghanaian Traditional Furniture (Akan Stools)

There are traditional choices for wood carvings; and only a few trees are considered appropriate. However, it can also be said that wood selection is done for practical reasons, because anything carved is expected to last a long time, and it should be light enough to be carried. However, the most important factor in choosing is religion. Wood is preferred because of the supernatural nature it is believed to have. "The main types of wood used by Asante wood carvings are Osese (*Funtumia* sp.) and "Nyame dua" (*Alstonia gongensis*), from one or more of the chairs made" (Rattray's 1959, p. 271).

Types of Ghanaian Traditional Furniture (Akan Stools)

Considering the materials used for stools, we can divide them thus; (1) The ordinary white stools, that is, those stools carved from the wood mentioned above and left intact without anything being done to them besides the normal periodic washing and white-washing, which Ashanti decency and self-respect demand; (2) The silver stools, white stools that have been entirely plated with silver. These are very few indeed; (3) Still fewer are the golden stools. As far as Rattray's (1959) knowledge and information go, there is only one genuine golden stool. Rattray (1959) gave a more elaborate account of this stool later on, because of the prime importance attached to it by every Ashanti. It is believed to be all gold, but prefer to see it as a wooden stool covered entirely with pure gold leaf. Other stools are also called golden stools because they are made on the model of this famous one, even though no gold is put on them.

fig. 2.1

fig. 2.2

fig. 2.3

Figure 3. [2.1]: Ashanti Stool; [2.2]: Asika dwa kofi "Friday's Golden Stool"; [2.3]: Ahemmaa dwa Queen's Stool

fig. 2.4

fig. 2.5

fig. 2.6

Figure 4. [2.4]: Mmarima dwa "Man's Stool"; [2.5]: Mmaa dwa "Woman's Stool"; [2.6]: Osram dwa "Moon Stool"

Owners of Stools

Every one of the Asante tribe can have a seat, regardless of their gender, age, social status, economic status, and marital culture. Many parents often buy small stools for their young children. In fact, any self-respecting person has many stools in his house so that he can accommodate guests. Our aim here is to find out who can own which stools. Because not everyone can buy any stool, Rattray (p. 271) notes, "Many of the stools shown here were the 'ownership' of the Asante king, and could, for whatever reason, be sold in the open market". The unique golden stool, owned by the Asante king, he is the only one who can hold an elephant stool (esonodwa, fig 2.8) and a Leopard stool (osebodwa). As an act of respect, in the past, he received other stools and gave out as gifts to other chiefs whose services delighted him. Those who own silver stools are the queen mother of Ashanti and the paramount chief of the Mampong State The latter is the chief who takes over the traditional administration during the king's absence or illness, and presides over the national royal council. The Techiman Chief also has a silver stool, which he uses for special purposes and for a special occasion.

The Cross stool (mmaremudwa) is used only by the Ashanti king and the superior amanhene (officials or chiefs of the State), with his permission. The seat of Porcupine (kotokodwa, fig. 2.7) belongs to the king and his council. A sub chief uses mmomiwa (a stool with two side supports). The sanctuaries of the gods sit on the crocodile stool (denkysmdwa, fig. 10) during a public gathering. Priests use the sakyi-dua-korodwa (the stool with only a single central support, fig. 2.11). In addition to the women's

stool, the fair sex also use the me-fa- asa-dwa "my half is finished stool", that is, half part of my family is dead. However, like the owo-foro-adobe-dwa "Snake-climbing-the-raffia- tree seat", the stool of the Moon (osram dwa, fig. 2.6), and the "mframa-dan-dwa", meaning the house of the wind stool "can be used by both men and women. This shows that, in the past at least, the Ashanti were focused on the use of their stools. We have not been able - in fact, it is impossible - to enumerate all the possible offices and the kind of stools associated with each. With regard to silver stools, it is rumored that many chiefs have more than we have said, or are in a position to know about it, because those who do have it do their best to hide the truth for fear of being severely reprimanded for exceeding their rights. Perhaps it should also be pointed out that the firmness that the Ashanti once took as a question of who should have what stools, these days has become more lenient, especially with regard to the differences between the stools of men and women. Now no one could argue with what kind of stool he was given to sit on. We should also point out that it was the lower castes who were restricted to the right to have stools reserved or allocated to management and not vice versa. A king could obtain whatever stool his subjects were entitled to. The Ashanti king could have a stool of his choice. For this reason, it is in royal ceremonies that one meets many stools.

Symbolisms of Designs on Akan Traditional Stools

In Akan traditional life, a stool symbolizes the soul of society. The seat, which was remarked at the beginning of this article, is in the oval form of a crescent moon, symbolizes the warmth of a mother's embrace. The obi-te-bi-so- dwa "some-one-sits-upon-another stool" (fig. 3.6) is carved in such a way that one stool is standing on top of another. The symbolism is not hard to find. It means that in any society there is a hierarchical order among the citizens; and even among chiefs, priests, elders and the like, there is an order of precedence to be observed for the good running of the community.

The central part, without determining the stool name, is the substance of various motifs. In the circular rainbow stool, used only by the Asante King, is the rainbow figure (Fig. 3.3). It is the wooden construction of the famous proverb kontonkurowi, eda amansan kon mu "rainbow is on the neck of all nations." The parable tells us that it reminds the king that death is the lot of everyone, including him, who is as powerful as he is, and therefore should not be proud because of his high position on earth.

Another thinks it depicts the power, which the king has over everybody in Asante. Then there are the esono stool and the osebo stool, the middle parts of which are the figures of the elephant (see fig. 3.2), and the leopard respectively. They are the symbols of the inordinate supremacies of the Ashanti King, for the animals are considered the toughest and most frightened in Asante. The maxim says: wodi esono akyi a hasuo nka wo "when you follow the elephant you do not get wet." To follow the owner of the stool with the figure of the elephant therefore, is to be free from any unlawful provocation and aggression. The description of the Asantehene as the elephant is very succinctly put in the laudatory poetry about the chief of Kokofu, one of the greatest.

Figure 5. [3.1]: Kotoko dwa "Porcupine Stool"; [3.2]: Esono dwa "Elephant Stool"; [3.3]: Kontonkurowi dwa "Circular Rainbow Stool"

Figure 6. [3.4]: adenkysm dwa "Crocodile Stool"; [3.5]: sakyi-dua-korodwa "Stool- with-one center-support"; [3.6]: obi-te-bi-so-dwa "Someone-sits-upon-another stool"

Ghanaian Traditional Symbols / Motifs (Adinkra)

Symbols or motifs are objects, characters, or other concrete representations of ideas, concepts, or other abstractions. According to Heider (2001), a symbol or motifs are a visible form of an invisible concept. Meaning that it could be an idea or mental image of an absent reality. The symbol or motifs could be a natural object or synthetic or even an abstract form in the cosmos.

Symbols or motifs are pictorial languages of the beliefs of a society, their philosophy, culture and history. Some symbols like Adinkra, are rich in proverbial connotation and frequently imply the collective wisdom of the tribal group. They can speak knowledge, ideas, values and feelings, implying that it is a language on its own.

"Adinkra" from West Africa are fully defined set of symbols in form of pictures or images through which the West African culture of "Asante" kingdom preserved and conveyed their rich philosophies. Adinkra's symbols "are based on a variety of observations and interactions between people and objects, animal and animal scenes, the human body and its organs, and natural objects, geometric and abstract ideas" Arthur (2001).

Adinkra literally means 'goodbye' or 'farewell' are symbols believed to have originated in Gyaman, the former state of present-day Côte D'Ivoire (Agbo, 2011).

According to the Asantes of Ghana, legend Adinkra was the name of a Gyaman king (Nana Kofi Adinkra). Adinkra was defeated and captured in battle by the Asantes for copying the "Golden Stool," representing the full power and unity of the nation. He was eventually killed and his territory was attached to the king of Asante (Agbo, 2011).

Figure 7. Adinkra Symbols

Contemporary Traditional Asesedwa Upholstered Couch

Basing on the Asesedwa stool concept of greatness a unique upholstered couch was design and constructed by extruding the form, style, and structure of Akan traditional stool and Adinkra symbols. By using contemporary manufacturing technology in constructing, the various components that constituted the concept model as displayed in fig. 5

Source: Paul Inkum MPhil Thesis, KNUST 2016

Figure 8. Contemporary Traditional Asesedwa Upholstered Couch Design

Conclusion

The Ghanaian traditional design elements reflect the culture of the Ghanaian societies that can be distinguished from the design and construction of natural motifs, forms, and patterns as well as the beauty of the soul. Across cultures and time, the intrinsic value and the degree of the golden segment regulation in the design elements have demonstrated the value of its ever-present beauty. Therefore, incorporating these elements (either directly or indirectly) into modern designs is a way to strengthen national values or heritage. However, designers need to set the balance when combining these design elements to ensure that local identity is preserved and well-kept-up

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