



## Cahiers d'études africaines

223 | 2016  
De l'art (d'être) contemporain

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### The Media-action of *abebu adekai* (Ghana's Sculptural Coffins) in the World Market and Design

The Case of Eric Adjete Anang

*La média-action des abebu adekai (cercueils sculptés du Ghana) dans le marché global et le design*

Roberta Bonetti

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#### Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/18423>

DOI : 10.4000/etudesafriaines.18423

ISSN : 1777-5353

#### Éditeur

Éditions de l'EHESS

#### Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 3 octobre 2016

Pagination : 479-502

ISSN : 0008-0055

#### Référence électronique

Roberta Bonetti, « The Media-action of *abebu adekai* (Ghana's Sculptural Coffins) in the World Market and Design », *Cahiers d'études africaines* [En ligne], 223 | 2016, mis en ligne le 01 janvier 2016, consulté le 19 avril 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/18423> ; DOI : 10.4000/etudesafriaines.18423

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# The Media-action of *abebu adekai* (Ghana's Sculptural Coffins) in the World Market and Design

The Case of Eric Adjetej Anang\*

A Re-launch, Thanks to Wikipedia

This article describes and provides a framework for understanding some recent developments in the production and marketing of the so-called fantasy coffins; it is based on interviews with one of their major producers, and its focus is on the relationship between the producers, the new media, the market, and new techniques. I have had the opportunity to deal with other relevant aspects—social, historical, symbolic, etc.—of *abebu adekai*<sup>1</sup>

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\* I wish to thank Eric Adjetej Anang and Jean-Michel Rousset for their collaboration and their helpful comments on the content of this article. Some conclusions of this article were first presented to the “Second Annual Graduate Symposium World Art | Art World: Changing Perspectives on Modern and Contemporary Art”, held at the MoMA, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 28-29 April 2006; later, a paper was delivered at the International Conference organized by Maria Luisa Ciminelli “Indigenous Peoples and the Biennale: Coevality and Contemporary Art”, Università Ca' Foscari, Venezia, 23-24 April 2012. The article hereby published is a thoroughly modified version of the papers delivered at these Conferences. I wish to thank Prof. Ciminelli for her generous support and Silvia Forni for her helpful comments and precious suggestions on this article. Iolanda Pensa has provided substantial help and offered her invaluable expertise in retrieving statistical data from Wikipedia. Marco Maiuro has offered editorial assistance. This piece was submitted to the journal on March 2014. Since its submission, the statistical data from Wikipedia have been updated.

1. The correct form of the expression “proverbial coffins” and, more specifically, “receptacles of proverbs” was used by me in various contributions (BONETTI 2005, 2006a) first as “*abɛɓua adekai*”, then as “*abɛɓuu adekai*”, according to the suggestion of Cedi Kwei, son of Kane Kwei (*ibid.* 2006a, 2009a). Later on, I made use several times of the adjectival form “*abɛɓuu*”. I noted how the adjective “proverbial” is rendered in various forms in different areas of Accra. In fact, there is no single “correct form”. It depends on the circumstances and the relational context in which it is used and according to the organic and living dynamics of the Ga language. There were some who confirmed that “*abɛɓuu*”, or, according to what I gathered in my last field-research “*abɛɓu*”, is used in the dialogue with same-status or same-age people. The dictionary *A Grammatical*

(commonly referred to as fantasy coffins in scholarship and popular media) in other essays, and the reader is referred to them for further analysis<sup>2</sup>. Here, my goal is to explore some very recent changes that seem relevant and worth reporting.

The importance of *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989)<sup>3</sup>, along with catalogues and the then-nascent collections, to the evolving destiny of fantasy coffins does not suffice to explain their fortune, and new interest they aroused, which has been quite different from that of their alleged “inventors” (Bonetti 2005, 2006a, b, 2008b, 2010: 27). Also different has been the lot of other fortunate *Magiciens*, such as Frédéric Bruly Bouabré, who over the years has seen an incredible rise in the prices of his creations (*ibid.* 2008a, 2010: 29). If in this context the question of art and aesthetics is of crucial significance from the political standpoint (Amselle 2005: 17), one must consider a series of other elements which, intertwined in various ways, have contributed strongly to the life and transformation of these artefacts. Among these we have to consider the politics of power and prestige in the local setting (Bonetti 2005, 2006a, b, 2009a, 2012), the conditions of production and of the local and international market, the role of imagination and the media, and the world of fashion and design (*ibid.* 2005, 2006a, b, 2010: 14-33).

Over the last few years, a new stimulus for the production of *abebu adekai* for local and international markets has been provided by the strategic use of Wikipedia. As reported by Eric Adjetey Anang<sup>4</sup>, grandchild of Kane

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*Sketch of the Akra-or Ga-Language* by Rev. ZIMMERMANN (1858) gives “proverbial use” as the meaning for “*abebu*”. When I talked to the undisputed authority of Ga language, Prof. M. E. Kropp Dakubu (August 2015), I was reassured that the noun *abebu* is mainly used by the Ga and this fact is well known by those who have done field research in Ghana. The word, in fact, would find its use in informal dialogue of Ga people, whereas *abebua* would be the formal word, of akan origin, not used by Gas in their everyday language. The Dictionary by Rev. ZIMMERMANN (1858) claims that *abebua* is a word of akan origin. According to the *Ga-English Dictionary* edited by KROPP DAKUBU (1999) the word means emblematic carving and also proverb, illustration, and parable, something that might be connected with the strong presence of Christian churches and their cultural influx. The choice to translate it as proverb seems to be more appropriate, also with regard to the ethnographic research on the uses of *abebu adekai* (conversation with E. Kropp Dakubu, 2015). The word *adeka* means box, or coffin, and derives from Portuguese (from arca) (KROPP DAKUBU 1997: 145).

2. See BONETTI (2006a, b, 2008b, 2009a, b, 2010, 2012); as a consequence, the apparatus of footnotes and references to secondary bibliography is here reduced to the essential. The reader will find more thorough explanations of concepts here just hinted at, in the works cited above.
3. The collector Jean Pigozzi, who has participated with his artefacts in the most prestigious exhibitions in the world, declared that he discovered contemporary African art at *Magiciens de la Terre*. As for Magnin, he made his career as curator of Pigozzi’s works (BONETTI 2005, 2006a, b, 2008b, 2010).
4. Life, success and production of Anang seemed to me quite interesting as a case study, since Mr. Anang owes his professional and artistic repute exclusively to

Kwei and now owner and manager of the workshop inherited from his grandfather:

“Actually, the first engine to stimulate the production of the coffins was the creation of a website, with the purpose of making my workshop more visible. Jean-Michel Rousset<sup>5</sup> with a friend of his helped me create a page on Wikipedia. A short text, in French at the beginning, with pictures and links was inserted. I can say that since then it's thanks to the Wikipedia page that the majority of tourists visit my workshop. Moreover, ever since the short video *Aquarius*<sup>6</sup> was posted on Wikipedia, there has been a trickle-down effect, and several coffin-producers from Teshie have posted their videos on YouTube in order to advertise their activities” (conversation with Eric Adjety Anang and Jean-Michel Rousset, Brussels, 12 March 2012).

Since the first posting, many other links have been added and the text has been translated into other languages. The vast majority, if not the totality, of the contacts have been established *via* Wikipedia. As Anang pointed out, the YouTube phenomenon and the interest in video came at a later stage, and as a consequence of the Wikipedia page. In fact, people access the videos<sup>7</sup> primarily *via* Wikipedia, through which people can access the website and the contacts therein. Facebook, on the other hand, is more useful for keeping in touch and stimulating new projects with people he has already worked with.

Success and visibility on Wikipedia are also a consequence of Anang's amiable personality and his capacity to entertain friendly relations and expand his social network from the visits he receives at Teshie. As a matter of fact, thanks to his numerous contacts, his Wikipedia page has been translated into fourteen languages:

“I have friends from Greece, Spain, the US, India, China, Japan [...] after their visit to my workshop I emailed them the Wikipedia text and they translated it *very quickly* into their language” (conversation with Eric Adjety Anang, Brussels, 12 March 2012).

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his capacity to create a social network independent from the aid or support of art dealers or/and third parties. Other coffin makers would have been as interesting as Anang's case, but they would have required a different approach and a different set of questions.

5. Jean-Michel Rousset has extensive experience in the management of international projects. He has access to Anang's email address and uses his free time to assist him in three areas: in improving his visibility by creating and maintaining the website, Wikipedia articles, and the Facebook page; in giving him support for international projects, and finally, in communication—this last point quite vital, given the poor Internet access and facilities in Ghana. This is the way they have worked together since 2008, and they share and discuss regularly any of Anang's new proposals or ideas, using SkypeOut.
6. *Aquarius* is a mineral sports drink manufactured by the Coca-Cola Company.
7. The diffusion of videos on this topic is a recent phenomenon; when I started my research in 2001, there were almost no links to the *abebuu adekai*.

The social network of friends is an indispensable tool for the spread of information on the Internet, and at the same time the Web acts as the new online virtual catalogue, from which potential client or partners can get a sense of the new ideas and projects developed by the workshop—some sort of display, as it were, to show to visitors who request products. The Web, in fact, makes it possible to communicate effectively with images, even at a distance, and to make sure that the product requested by the customer is exactly the one he wants to purchase:

“Sometimes it’s not easy to understand what the customers really want, above all when the request is made *via* Internet. So, before the order is checked out, I say to them to go and check on the Web what they desire and send me the image of what they want me to realize. So I check the image on my phone—it’s easier to check the phone than the computer, as the Internet lines are slow—and I show it to my apprentices. I can connect my phone to the laptop, so that my apprentices can quickly see the image at higher resolution and understand clearly what the customer wants” (*ibid.*).

The social network of friends and collaborators works perfectly, even at a distance. As Anang says: “If there are urgent matters by email, there is no problem: Jean-Michel checks the email on my behalf and then calls me on Skype; or, he forwards texts to my cell-phone”:

“Sometimes I am contacted from Saudi Arabia, sometimes from India—everybody says they have gotten to know me on Wikipedia. When they come to the workshop, we usually ask them where they got the information, and they confirm that it was *via* Wikipedia, as happened recently with customers from Russia. It’s easy—customers can get on the website and from there they can reach us *via* email” (*ibid.*).

Thanks to Wikipedia, Eric Adjetey Anang has opened new pathways to international visibility and the diffusion of his creations<sup>8</sup>. Wikipedia is also likely to have had an impact on tourist itineraries in Ghana. Up until

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8. In January 2010, he took part in the photographic project *Please, do not move!* with the French photographer Guy Hersant. In December of the same year, he was invited to the third Festival mondial des arts nègres in Dakar as representative of designers from Ghana. In 2011 he was invited as resident artist by the Oregon College of Art and Craft (Portland, Oregon) and to the Gwangju Design Biennale in Korea. In the same year he was invited to the Museum of World Funerary Art (Novosibirsk) and to the Necropolis exhibition in Moscow. In 2012 Anang was invited by French artist Klaus Guingand to represent Ghana for Art Warning the World project. In 2012 and 2013 he was invited to many other exhibitions in Europe; he participated also in many documentary projects realized by various international television networks, and he was also invited to the Milan Design Week for the Afrofuture project. In 2014, beyond the participation in several international exhibits and other prestigious professional opportunities, he was also offered a two-month residency at the Centre for Art in Wood, Philadelphia, USA. This is just a selected list of the artistic experiences of Anang in the last five years. For a complete list, see <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eric\\_Adjetey\\_Anang](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eric_Adjetey_Anang)>.

FIG. 1. & 2. — ADVERTISEMENT OF THE PUBLICITY CAMPAIGN OF THE SPANISH SUBSIDIARY OF THE MULTINATIONAL COCA-COLA'S CORPORATION



Courtesy, Ana Herrero, Sra. Rushmore, Madrid.



Courtesy, Ana Herrero, Sra. Rushmore, Madrid.

FIG. 3. — SHOP-KEEPER COFFIN. PITT RIVER MUSEUM. OXFORD 2010



Courtesy Eric Adjetey Anang.

FIG. 4. — HAMMER SHAPED COFFIN.  
ERIC ADJETEY ANANG'S WORKSHOP (ACCRA, GHANA) 2009



Courtesy Eric Adjetey Anang.



FIG. 5. — FISH COFFIN.  
ERIC ADJETEY ANANG'S WORKSHOP. TESHIE (ACCRA, GHANA) 2009



FIG. 6. — FISH COFFIN. NOVOSIBIRSK (RUSSIA) 2011

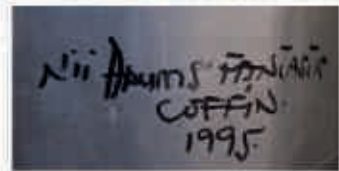


Courtesy Eric Adjetey Anang.

FIG. 6A. — FISH COFFIN. NOVOSIBIRSK (RUSSIA) 2011



FIG. 7. — eBAY. THE WORLD'S ONLINE MARKETPLACE



<<http://www.ebay.com/itm/Airstream-Trailer-Fantasy-Coffin-from-Ghana-by-Nii-Anum-Africa-Primitive-/110393350066>>.

FIG. 8. — ERIC ADJETEY ANANG'S WORKSHOP.  
ACCRA GHANA. TESHIE (ACCRA, GHANA) 2010



FIG. 9. — VODKA-BOTTLE COFFIN. NOVOSIBIRSK (RUSSIA) 2011



Courtesy Eric Adjetey Anang.

recently, it was rare to meet foreign visitors in the workshops of the coffin makers of Teshie. The most popular way of travelling in Ghana was in groups led by travel agencies. The customary itinerary started from Accra (the point of arrival and gathering for foreign tourists) with a short stay at Novotel—or any other hotel at Labadi Beach—followed by departure for other more famous tourist sites in West Africa. If one stayed in Ghana, a visit to Kumasi and the north was customary. Anang has observed that in the last five years many tourists, even young ones, increasingly planned their trips outside tourist routes, in order to visit the workshops. As a consequence, the workshops have *de facto* become a tourist attraction and tourist agencies are now modifying itineraries in order to meet the demand. The interest in the workshops has also altered the perception and the performance of the ritual, symbolic, and economic aspects of burial rites of the Ga<sup>9</sup>.

This constant flow of tourists also generates new possibilities for exchange. Anang has come to deal with a new kind of visitors/public who are used to visit museums and whose gaze and expectations have been shaped by this experience. For this reason, some of them are prepared to tip, as it were a ticket for visiting the workshop:

“It happens that people, quite often Americans, come by and leave their tip in dollars. They do not understand that I can accept money only if they buy something; they want to have a souvenir of their visit, and this can be a picture, or a video. As a token of exchange, we ask that their videos be posted, and if we like them, we insert a link to them on the Wikipedia page” (*ibid.*).

Anang says he is very busy. His only problem is the organization and management of his job *in loco*, for it is difficult for him to find support from his family, who strongly resist change. In many ways, it is much easier for him to find support from his international social network than from his family group:

“I get no adequate support from my family. Imagine 50, 60 people visiting your workshop—you would need help from everybody—family members, friends [...]. If I have to be absent for five minutes, there must be someone who talks and stays with tourists. The relationship with the tourists is important, not only because it generates income, but for its human component. Our visions (within our family) are different though, and the truth is that many coffin makers do this job only because they couldn't do otherwise, and not because they chose it” (*ibid.*).

The Web, Wikipedia, YouTube, Facebook, the online social network, and the international visibility of the work of social researchers (including my work) have given visibility and input to the production of these coffins. At the same time, Anang's life seems to have changed radically, and a deep rift has been created between him and his family. Moreover, a somewhat

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9. See video on <YouTube: Ghana—Kane Kwei coffins—tourists>.

new form of intergenerational competition seems to have developed in recent times among coffin makers. The youth, being acquainted with the Web, seem to be better equipped than the elderly. At the same time the increased intensity of production, as a consequence of the expansion of the international market, creates further complications. Anang admits that it is difficult to manage the new business, even from a psychological point of view. It is not always possible now to guide tourists and customers in their visits and purchases, as it was only a few years ago.

### The Aquarius Coffin

Although in the last decade sales dwindled and then dropped, sustained interest from some sectors of the art market, coupled with the phenomena of Wikipedia and YouTube, has given the coffin makers opportunities to develop new strategies for increasing their international visibility and improving their production. The most prominent example of worldwide media attention on fantasy coffins may be the advertisement for the drink Aquarius manufactured by a Spanish subsidiary of the multinational corporation Coca-Cola (Fig. 1, 2)<sup>10</sup>. This video narrates in a catchy and succinct way the story of fantasy coffins, featuring Anang and his workshop as they engage in the production of a colourful can of Aquarius.

On this occasion, Anang was able to interpret the role of someone who skilfully transforms the fantasy coffin from a burial object into an icon of hope and creativity in what has become one of the most emblematic and successful advertisement campaigns (named “Sueños”) of Coca-Cola.

Playing on the literal translation of the local terminology for fantasy coffins (*abebu adekai* means container of proverbs), the advertisement aimed to shift the focus from the ritual and burial function of these objects to their ability to contain and convey messages of hope and wisdom. The publicity campaign was filmed in Teshie. It was created by the Spanish ad company Sra. Rushmore, which commissioned to Anang the production of two coffins in the form of Aquarius cans. One coffin was used as a container to collect the dreams of consumers in Spain. For this purpose, two webcams and a printer were placed in the Teshie workshop, wired to the Aquarius “can”. Thus, everybody in the world with a computer could send their dreams to Anang by connecting to the Web and see their dreams in the form of a written obituary, printed and placed into the coffin. In June, when it was filled with dreams, a big party was held according to Ga funerary customs, and the can/coffin was carried in a procession along

10. A further example of commercial interest in the production of fantasy coffins is that showed by the company BIC, that featured the work of Eric Adjetej Anang in their annual report: see <<http://www.bicworld.com/BIC-Rapport-Annuel-2013/index.html#/49>> (accessed 6.12.2014).

the beaches of Accra. The implicit message of the ceremony/advertisement was straightforward: every consumer is reminded that their dreams can become reality, and everybody has a right to fight until their last day to see them realized. By listening to dreams, the brand Aquarius gave the message that they were really able to listen to their customers. With the slogan: "What's your dream?", everybody was reminded that they could experience, write, print, and share on Facebook a dream that would eventually become reality in Ghana. Eric, the coffin-maker, has thus become the symbol contributing to the actualization of everybody's dreams, until the last day of their life.

The idea of the "dream" was first conceived when those in charge of the ad company learned, again *via* the Internet, about the story of Kane Kwei, grandfather of Anang, who was universally acknowledged as the inventor and first producer of the fantasy coffins (Bonetti 2005, 2006, 2010: 14-29; Tschumi 2008, 2013)<sup>11</sup>. One of the most popular circulating stories about their origin narrates that Kane Kwei created a coffin in the form of an airplane for the grandmother of Anang, who all her life had dreamt of flying, without been able to accomplish it. The story seemed a perfect fit for the advertisement firm. Ana Herrero, the manager of the company said:

"We almost bumped into this story, as it was by chance that we read it on the Web; we were immediately fascinated by it. The meaning of the story goes beyond the mere fact that coffins are funerary objects. We saw in them a different way of facing life and death, as they reproduced what the person had been in life and the dreams she had had. We thought that this story was extremely optimistic and stimulating, for it perfectly mirrors the gist and spirit of the brand Aquarius" (conversation with Ana Herrero, 6 October 2009).

It is interesting to see how, while Coca-Cola uses the fantasy coffins with the aim of increasing sales, the "actor" Eric Adjete Anang benefits from Western stereotypes associated with the coffins to increase production and trade both locally and internationally.

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11. The issue of the "invention of the inventor" was first expounded in my work (BONETTI 2005, 2006a, b, 2010) where I insisted on looking at fantasy coffins in an ecological perspective, as a product of a specific historical and socio-cultural context, and not as an isolated invention of a single creator. I am happy to see that in her most recent output, TSCHUMI (2013) agreed that there is in fact no "first inventor", despite her previous claim (*ibid.* 2008: 222). Without discounting the centrality of the individual creativity, the idea that creativity is a phenomenon resulting from the interplay of social, intercultural and historical factors is widely accepted, and certainly not by anthropologists only. TSCHUMI's claim (2013: 60) that her "research shows that this assumption [that the coffins were the product of the invention of a single, autonomous artist] is false" or that (*ibid.* 2014: 6) "there existed no scholarly works or empirical studies that examined their [*i.e.* of fantasy coffins] origin, function and social context from an emic perspective" does not acknowledge my contribution and that of others to this debate, and current theory of anthropologists on this issue.



In the advertisement of 2009<sup>12</sup>, Eric says the following:

“I’d like to tell you a story which began here 50 years ago.  
 My great-grandmother had always dreamed of taking a plane trip.  
 My grandfather made her an airplane coffin.  
 In the end she flew in a coffin like this (an airplane coffin).  
 My grandfather always used to say we have to strive for our dreams.  
 Every day of our lives. Specially the last day.  
 Many people in Accra began to think the same way.  
 I remember this guy who worked very hard  
 all his life to have the feel of the wind in his face.  
 So we made him a convertible car coffin.  
 We had our local artist too.  
 A film projector coffin.  
 He dreamed, like any artist, of seeing his film released one day.  
 Today we are burying a friend’s uncle who asked for a chili.  
 But I don’t know why.  
 And I asked myself, does it make sense that a brand of soft drinks that makes you  
 feel alive  
 wants me to tell the story of my coffins? I think it makes all the sense in the world.  
 Life is wonderful and wonderful things need to be lived to the fullest.  
 Human beings are extraordinary.”

As is clear from the screenplay, the brand puts forth emphatically the idea that “human beings are unpredictable, extraordinary, marvellous”. An idea conceived because, as Ana Herrero reports, “from our market research and polls it emerged that the average consumer of Aquarius is unpredictable” (*ibid.*).

According to those responsible for marketing strategies, Aquarius is a drink for which an extraordinary story should be told, rather than a conventional advertisement. Aquarius’ original character was that of a drink for sportspeople, but the directive to the firm was to broaden the consumer base and to win over “everybody who is an extraordinary person, without leaving anybody out”. Since 2004, Coca-Cola has thus made the message that human beings are unpredictable and extraordinary central to its campaign. In 2009, as already said, the campaign was rejuvenated by the “discovery” of the fantasy coffins on the Web. Anang became a new member of this “club of marvellous and extraordinary people”, one who, “helps realize dreams until the last day”<sup>13</sup>.

Although most literature on *abebu adekai* tends to present them as just direct symbols of the profession or the aspirations of the deceased, in reality, as fieldwork has revealed, motivations for their production and use appear to be much more complex and articulated. The coffin-images presented in funerary ceremonies indirectly refer back to the economic structure, the socio-political history, and the forms of material life of the Ga. These images

12. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dS-tb6AE4a4>>.

13. Conversation with Ana Herrero, 6 October 2009.

become essential strategic tools for manipulating life, its codes, and its rules. In many cases they appear to be conditioned more by a popular ideology of death through which people claim access and control to productive resources than by the “traditional” and/or Christian religious models with which they are associated (Bonetti 2006a, 2009a, b).

Popular narratives about the imaginative use of these artefacts circulating on the Web purport, produce, and spread a variety of stories. Coffin makers tap strategically into these different narrative forms to expand their visibility on the international market<sup>14</sup>. These narratives cannot be considered mere representations or pure fictions. If we consider the phenomenological aspect of storytelling as it happens for the coffins/images used in local context (*ibid.* 2005, 2006a, 2009a, b, 2012), we realize that they are all but fiction. Through the communication practises of social actors, they are able to modify reality and produce concrete effects, as far as political, social, and economic objectives are concerned.

Over the course of the year 2009 the Aquarius ad was broadcast on TV<sup>15</sup> and in cinemas. It was hailed as a great success by the public, and it showed up on the front page of several Spanish national newspapers and magazines. Anang was invited to Spain and interviewed by the Spanish national TV channel. The advertisement agency, Sra. Rushmore, was awarded *El Gran Premio de Televisión y Cine* thanks to the project *Aquarius*, the reward for advertisement creativity over the course of the 24<sup>e</sup> Festival Iberoamericano de la *Comunicación Publicitaria El Sol* at San Sebastian. The jury showed appreciation for its “energy, and its audacity” in allowing the consumer to interact in the advertisement of the drink. Aquarius’ ad included a slogan that suited an isotonic drink, which inspires energy, but it was also appealing to those people that the ad company dubbed “the every-day heroes of our times, who strive for a dream, until the last day”<sup>16</sup>.

The award referred to the work carried out by Coca-Cola and its agency Sra. Rushmore, and to their capacity to broaden their market share by reaching a broader consumer market. In fact, with the new campaign the firm succeeded in breaking with the stereotyped image of a drink for sportspeople, expanding its catchment area by 70%, well beyond the original consumer target group. Instead of an appeal to sportspeople, as in the past, the appeal was based on the “incitement to dream great dreams, and on creativity”. The ad campaign was able to create an interactive event whereby the coffin was used as a can/container, so that Spanish consumers were reminded not

14. As much as the coffin makers appropriated the language of the advertisement campaigns, so they have done with the product of field-research. See for example their use of the word *abebuu adeka*, a vernacular term since long time out of use and replaced by “fantasy coffins”, a word borrowed from the Western world. *Abebuu adeka* has been reinstated thanks to the spread of the products of field-research (BONETTI 2010: 22).

15. It was launched on Spanish TV on 27 April 2009.

16. <[http://elpais.com/diario/2009/05/31/radiotv/1243720801\\_850215.html](http://elpais.com/diario/2009/05/31/radiotv/1243720801_850215.html)>.

to give up dreaming. And the story happens in Africa—according to the codified stereotype of the “Third World”—where people, despite being poor, happily celebrate a funerary rite on the beach of Accra and do not give up their dreams even on their death bed.

The fame of Anang grew as a consequence, both in Spain and in Ghana. In Spain he became so famous that two Spanish tourists at the Casablanca airport stopped him, asking “aren’t you the Aquarius one”? According to him, the effects of his first incursion into the world of advertisements have had a noteworthy impact on the increase of his sales at a local and international level<sup>17</sup>. A few months after the launch of the ad, he was contacted by other companies from Spain, the Netherlands, and Belgium. Fifteen large coffins and fifty small ones were commissioned by a Museum in Brussels. In 2010, Pitt River museum in England commissioned a shop-keeper coffin for the exhibition *Made for Trade* (Fig. 3).

His fame increased in Accra as well, where many people now call him “Aquarius”. In Ghana, the video was viewed mostly on YouTube where it was posted soon after its commercial release.

Anang’s web popularity captured the interest of major international newspapers. Shortly after his commercial appearance, articles and reportages on him and his workshop started to appear in prestigious magazines and international TV channels, such as CNN World<sup>18</sup>, the BBC, *The New York Times*<sup>19</sup>, *Le Monde diplomatique*, *El País*, Al Jazeera, and France 24 Television, just to name a few. *Le Monde diplomatique*’s article revived, as a good example for the young, the message of the everyday hero already used by Coca-Cola’s ad, and specifies:

“Reste encore à trouver le Ghanéen, ‘héros de la rue’ incarnant le mieux cet optimisme propre à un continent qui répète ‘qu’il n’y a pas de problèmes, seulement des solutions’. [...] Eric a 24 ans. Il vit à Teshie, un village côtier des faubourgs d’Accra. Comme feu son grand-père Kane Kwei, qui aurait lancé la mode des cercueils personnalisés parmi les pêcheurs de l’ethnie Ga, Eric conçoit des ‘*design coffins*’, dont la forme évoque le métier ou la passion des défunts. En somme, Eric fait le bonheur de ses concitoyens jusque dans l’au-delà. Une histoire qui n’a pas échappé aux publicitaires espagnols chargés de vendre la boisson gazeuse Aquarius, propriété du groupe Coca-Cola, aux consommateurs ghanéens. Utilisé comme héros de la campagne télévisée menée au printemps dernier par Aquarius, Eric est aujourd’hui un modèle pour la jeunesse urbaine du pays” (vendredi 30 octobre 2009, Jean-Christophe Servant)<sup>20</sup>.

17. The case of Aquarius can be regarded as an example of the musealization of the *abebuu adekai* within the world of advertisement. There is clearly a major problem here about copyright and matters of intellectual property. This is a fundamental topic not dealt with in this paper.

18. <[http://articles.cnn.com/2010-11-11/world/ghana.coffins\\_1\\_coffins-cocoa-podpiano-teacher?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2010-11-11/world/ghana.coffins_1_coffins-cocoa-podpiano-teacher?_s=PM:WORLD)>.

19. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/29/arts/design/design-events-for-fall-2011-in-europe-and-asia.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/29/arts/design/design-events-for-fall-2011-in-europe-and-asia.html?_r=2)>.

20. <<http://blog.mondediplo.net/2009-10-30-Cette-annee-la-bonne-gouvernance-n-a-pas-de-prix#Fiers-d-etre-ghaneeens>>.

The statistical analysis of Web traffic indicates that, from its creation in April 2010 until March 2012, the Wikipedia English page of Eric Adjetey Anang was consulted/visited/browsed 10.854 times (until December 2014, 26.845 times). The French one has a lower score, with 4.740 visits (until December 2014, 10.900); the Spanish one counts 1911 visits (until December 2014, 4.721), the German 1748 (until December 2014, 4.062), and the Dutch 1.261 (until December 2014, 3.199). Moreover, the visits to the Wikipedia page of his workshop—Kane Kwei Carpentry Workshop—in the same period of time were 15.228 for the English page (until December 2014, 33.774) and 4.770 for the French one (until December 2014, 10.377). That means that he is searched on the web as a public character, as much as a craftsman. And we should also remark that the battle for visibility is fought on the Web in an increasingly international setting. The ranking of visits shows, with regard to the months October-December 14, Eric's workshop (dubbed on the web "Kane Kwei's workshop") as the most visited of the Ghanaian coffin workshop sites (1.649 times for the English page, and 395 times for the French one), followed by Ataa Oko Addo, deceased on December 2012 (319 visits in French and 738 in English) and finally Kudjoe Affutu (267 visits in French and 585 in English) and Paa Joe (138 visits in French and 532 in English).

It is important to notice that in 2012 when I first presented the data from Wikipedia at the International Conference in Venice, they were substantially different from those of December 2014. The most striking difference is the leap in visibility and numbers of visits of Ataa Oko Addo's page, ranked third in January-March 2012, whereas its numbers are now much higher, even after his death, thanks to the fact that Oko's drawings entered the exclusive club or *art brut*. This confirms what I wrote (Bonetti 2010: 14-17) with reference to the debate Njami/Martin (whether or not Kane Kwei's coffins are works of art and whether Kane Kwei was its "inventor"). What really matters is the artistic biography of the object and its makers, that is, an examination of the network within which object and maker are embedded.

The growth of visibility of Ataa Oko, due to the websites of his promoters, the exhibitions and catalogues of collections of works attributed to him, has radically changed his fortune, making him more similar to another *Magicien*, such as Frédéric Bruly Bouabré, who over the years has seen an incredible rise in the price of his creations (*ibid.* 2008a)<sup>21</sup>.

Popular narratives about the imaginative use of these artefacts circulating on the Web purport, produce, and spread a variety stories. Coffin makers tap strategically into these different narrative forms to expand their

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21. It is in fact not by chance that Ataa Oko Addo and Frédéric Bruly Bouabré feature together in the documentary film directed by P. LESPINASSE, R. TSCHUMI and A. ALVAREZ (2010).

visibility on the international market<sup>22</sup>. Other coffin makers, such as Paa Joe who until the early 2000s was clearly favoured by the high-end art market have not been taken into consideration here since their data are not comparable to those of other artists<sup>23</sup>. Every case must be analysed on its own merits, as the biography and social networks that sustain each one of the makers are crucial factors in determining their success and visibility. This is especially true with regard to the relationship to art dealers and website managers, these last ones hidden by nicknames and therefore kept secret and anonymous by Wikipedia's policy on authorship.

### New Digital Catalogues and Production Techniques

The Web functions as a "coding scheme", that is, an artefact designed and produced to favour a certain type of gaze and not another (Goodwin 1994)<sup>24</sup>. These artefacts (the showcases, catalogues, classification criteria, and experts), as mediators, aim at disseminating and implementing specific criteria for action, embedding precise cognitive tasks in an operational and social matrix (for example, establishing whether the object is ancient, "authentic", and valuable enough to be displayed in an exhibition or placed on the market for possible buyers). Coffin makers have their artefacts that function as coding schemes. The presence of Anang's works on Web pages and in various catalogues of international exhibitions reinforces—to the eyes of international clients, critics and scholars—the proof of his products' authenticity and value.

The Web with its digital catalogue has become the prevailing tool for creating and selling the *abebu adekai* in Anang's workshop. Digital images have almost completely replaced the photographic albums and printed catalogues that were shown to clients visiting the workshops up until five years ago. Anang stores digital images of his creations on the Web, as well as other digital images chosen by international customers who purchase his

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22. As much as the coffin makers appropriated the language of the advertisement campaigns, so they have done with the product of field-research. See for example their use of the word *abebuu adeka*, a vernacular term since long time out of use and replaced by "fantasy coffins", a word borrowed from the Western world. *Abebuu adeka* has been reinstated thanks to the spread of the products of field-research (BONETTI 2010: 22).
  23. At any rate, it is important to report that the number of visits to Paa Joe's Wikipedia page have dramatically risen since October 2013, due to the overall raise in popularity of coffin makers, but also his more proactive visibility on the Web due, among other things, also to the increased involvement of his son Jacob in the shaping of his on-line persona (I wish to thank Silvia Forni for this information).
  24. C. GOODWIN (1994) reflects on vision as a discursive practice, historically structured, organized in a relational, interactive manner, and mediated by various artefacts. Vision plays a fundamental role in the construction of events and in the attribution of meaning to the social world we live in.

products *via* email. Some of the digital images of the recent works accessible *via* Web, are printed, to be collected and gathered in a demonstrative catalogue of the “production house”. They are images collected by Eric as sources of inspirations for his clients who commission the coffins. In the last few years, I have witnessed a rapid change in production techniques (Bonetti 2006a: 13-47). Although such observation warrants further analysis in order to understand how free access to digital images might have effected such a transformation, it is nevertheless apparent how strongly interconnected the access of digital images is with the new funerary production.

In the digital world there are no “continuous systems”: the numerical point can be measured, and it is the unit of measurement that coincides with the pixel on the screen. The digital image is therefore by definition discrete, that is non-continuous, broken down, as programmers and developers all over the world have been working on reducing the effect of a broken image, to obtain a more fluid and continuous image. The introduction of digital “lighter” elements—numerical codes have no weight—brings about the perceptual illusion of a lightening of the matter. The question I am here trying to answer, albeit in some cursory manner, is how coffin sculptors deal with and experience digital images, and how they, as a consequence, have transformed their production practices<sup>25</sup>. The creation of a coffin entails a complex interplay between digital image and physical final product. Its photographic model is transferred on an analogic medium—on a physical, material surface, made of wood—at the same time that it’s realized from the juxtaposition of measurable fragments/pixels, since the method of realization of the coffins resembles, to a certain extent, a mosaic of pixels (wooden strips assembled to form a fluid image). This makes me think of the familiarity and continuity between the analogic production of the Ga, and the digital experience (Fig. 4).

The digital image is characterized by a morphologic fluidity without precedents. It can be embodied, according to scope and function, in a set of pixels on a slick cover of a magazine as much as on a sculpture<sup>26</sup>. If one observes closely the evolution of the sculptural practice of Anang, one

25. The term “image” can be used generically as “vision” or “transmission of images” or as an hendiadys of “physical support” and “image”. See BONETTI (2012: 275-276), on the concept of vision among the Ga.

26. This alternative testifies to the preoccupied sensation of non-authenticity that, since its first application, has accompanied the digital image. Digital technique transforms the image into an entity that can be embodied an infinite number of times, so that there is no possibility to distinguish between the original and a copy. Even without referring to the multiple possibilities of voluntary manipulation, the simple “appearance” of an image on the screen is already a reinterpretation of it, as it has been manipulated even by means of simple technical changes (resolution, colour, operative system, speed of connection, etc.) that modify and condition the fruition of the image. Not by chance, whoever works in the field of digital graphic design, knows that the same image will hardly appear in the same way to different viewers (regardless if on screen or paper).

cannot fail to notice the pressing and growing need to lighten both the objects under construction and their forms, which look more and more dynamic. Time constraints too have contributed to determine such a transformation. This change is apparent also from the comparison between previous typologies of coffins and those recent ones that reproduce the same objects. The trend is toward lightening the object to make it appear more realistic. We ought to consider that now the reference to “reality” is acquired through the experience mutated from the virtual image; this fact requires an ongoing consultation between master and apprentices, in the search for new creative solutions. At the same time the forms of the coffins have become more dynamic and fluid.

“At the beginning of the week we began work on a hammer coffin that needed to get done quickly. It was ordered by a family, apparently for an elder who just died who was a carpenter. This provided new opportunities for me to learn some very different things. The first was construction of a new form. And by new form, I mean it was new to the crew as well. They have an old hammer coffin in the display area that is about 25 years old, which puts it in (grandfather) Kane Kwei’s era. The problem with this older form as seen by Eric and his father, Cedi, is that it is too heavy and bulky in form. It is heavy for the coffin bearers to carry and too heavy in shape. They wanted to lighten up the form and make the proportions more true to a real hammer. Another problem that has to be considered is that you have to also place a body within it once it is fabricated. So, they brought out a brand new 16 oz. claw hammer and placed it on a bench and gathered everyone, including me, around it and asked for suggestions as to how to proceed. A lot of conversation was carried on without my knowing what was being said. But pretty soon someone got out a piece of wood and began ripping 5 inch wide, 6 ½’ long boards. Still not understanding what the process was [...]. The next thing he did started to make sense to me. [...] By relief-cutting the back of the plywood board every so often it allowed the board to be bent to a tighter curve. What was happening with this piece of wood for the hammer was that cutting each segment, anywhere from 10’’ to 18’’ apart, either on the front or the back, allowed the board to be bent in a zigzag sort of form resembling the ins and outs of the hammer handle edge as it ran up from the bottom to where the hammer head would be connected. Once four of them were made, each section was bent in its appropriate direction and nailed across the bend to hold its shape. Then again a big group discussion happened, and by group I mean the masters—Eric and Cedi—and all the apprentices from senior to the last [...]. Now, I was expected to contribute not only competently, but with speed as well [...]” (Michael de Forest, 31 July 2009)<sup>27</sup>.

In the example cited above, although de Forest speaks of a coffin created not from the image of a hammer, but from an “actual hammer”, the reference

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27. <<http://michaeldeforeststudio.blogspot.it/>>. I have here pasted the pictorial descriptive technique of de Forest, as it is useful to the discourse I am carrying out. It is important to note, however, that his text is finalized to a much deeper analysis about the sense and relational aspects of his work: “Art is the centre of an experiential school”, says de Forest. “No art can happen without doing. And no doing can be done without practical knowledge of the world and in collaboration with the people around you. Art allows us to take risks, to use our ideas to create, and to succeed and fail [...]”

to “actuality” is here made through the experience they mutated from the virtual image. The “actual hammer”, in fact, is, as Eric and his father, Cedi say, “too heavy and bulky in form”. Its form is reshaped in order to appear more fluid and lighter. The colours of the coffin look now brighter, and have a pictorial rendering that is closer to the experience of the virtual light. If we look at the fish coffin built a few years ago (Fig. 5) and compare it to its more recent replica (Fig. 6), we will note that the latter’s colours are brighter and more glaring, like the ones we see on a laptop. The brightness of acrylic colours (easily available on the local market), and the new techniques of colouring, permit total correction flexibility and get closer to rendering the final product in the brightness and sharpness of colours visible on the Web. Digital technology marks the trespass from pigments, as selectors of colours—light, to the colours of light. Through the digital experience of colour and the capacity to articulate it, one gets a chromatic spectrum much wider than with traditional pigments. In brief, colour treated digitally widens the palette of the artist/designer.

The dualisms of colour, artificial/natural and virtual/real, are resolved in the synthesis of a form of production of natural colour produced by an artificial means. If in previous times the model of reference for realizing a coffin might have been “nature” and advertisement billboards across Accra, now trickery and technology infuse for the artist a colour that is dynamic and fluid. Today, and even more so in the future, 3D laser scanning machines and systems exist for rendering tri-dimensional “immaterial” objects from numerical models. The challenge of “immaterial” robotic engineering is not limited to the recreation of 3D objects—it seeks to add functions to these objects, by rendering “intelligent” the space itself where the object is placed, or the very shape of this space, introducing relationships between areas of this space and utilizers in it, present or remote. *Abebu adekai*’s use in funeral ceremonies (from their production to their use in the local context) refers indisputably to the robotic realizations, though where the ritual takes place, the *adeka* is to be considered not so much an inanimate object, but a subject that is really alive and moving. During Funerary ceremonies, I often noticed that excitement would mount as the coffin was about to enter the room of the deceased, reaching its peak when the body was finally placed into it. From this moment on, and for all present, the *adeka* would no longer be a piece of carved wood, but the body of the deceased, guiding the living to the burial place. The coffin became an animated body; it had the power of sight and the ability to move, and feelings and emotions were attributed to it. Through movement—an action of its own form—the *adeka* became an instrument or tool, an extension of the deceased’s body, that spoke through gesture within the space of those alive. In this moment, the idea of the coffin as an expression of the social body emerges with great clarity (Bonetti 2009a, b, 2012)<sup>28</sup>.

28. In order to explain the social action performed by the coffin, I ought to resort to a vocabulary usually referring to human beings. The *abebu adeka* is an



### Afterlife Design and Its Imagery<sup>29</sup>

Coffins have been commodities available on the international market for several decades. Many workshops have dealt with customers from South Africa, United States, Europe, Canada, Australia, Japan, Russia, India, Cambodia, Saudi Arabia, China, Korea, and beyond. Moreover, the purpose for which these coffins are purchased has diversified: they are not merely regarded as collectables, but also as burial items, design objects, and furnishings. Innumerable Internet sites are now dedicated to them (Fig. 7). It is possible to find authentic Ga coffins as dining room cupboards, tables, beds, etc. It is clear, then, that these funeral artefacts cannot be considered as something outside the market of fashion, design, decor, and mass media. In the various phases of their movement, the objects are embedded in a commercial Web that maintains and produces new relations, a process that in turn affects in substantive ways the continuity of the production and use of *abebu adekai* within the local context. Market value fuels and expands local demand. For international consumers, the knowledge that these objects are commonly used among the Ga is a guarantee of “authenticity”, even when they are made in other countries, or when they have nothing to do with traditional use, as is the case with table-coffins, bed-coffins, or closet-coffins. Finally, it is important to remark that both sides, the international market as well as African consumers, make a profit from their reciprocal representations. Many shops that sell coffin related objects claim that their own artisans have just completed their apprenticeship at the traditional coffin shop in Teshie, and that they are currently making Ferrari or Subaru coffins, dinosaur coffins, and “the most original” objects<sup>30</sup>.

This rapidly expanding market can be explained also by the fact that all those who participate in this art trade make a living by satisfying the appetites of other cultures. Whether the authenticity claimed is real or fabricated, it does not affect its significance and relevance in this specific commercial arena. Authenticity is not so much determined by the origins of the object, but by our innermost drives. More than a real place, Africa represents an imaginary realm that the Global North needs in order to regenerate itself, feel alive, and defend itself from the cold, aseptic industrialization of its environment. Significantly, the largest demand by foreign

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activator of memories. The coffin creates a screenplay, it produces a “cinematographic vision” of photograms in a sequence in which the spectator does not stay still and passive (as before a screen) but partakes of its movement.

29. In the first part of this paragraph I am referring to concepts already published in R. BONETTI (2005, 2006b, 2008b, 2010: 29-31).
30. The fact that the coffins are the fruit of the labour of many carpenters who are often in competition with each other, combined with the apprentices' precarious labour conditions, the lack of formal employment contracts, and the scarce attention paid to copyright, are only some of the factors that have contributed to the local shops' loss of control over production and its takeover by the international market (BONETTI 2010: 29).

consumers is for the most “modern” and “technologic” forms of coffins: not the pirogues or the cocoa seeds (an internal production focussed on representations of local professions rather than on symbols of the modern world), but cell phones, cameras, airplanes<sup>31</sup>. These latter are symbols that are perceived as the copy of “our” world.

The demand for coffins with modern imagery increased the attraction and the success of these objects in the foreign market, thus creating a sort of paradox. It seems in fact that it is their very reference to modernity that strongly qualifies them in terms of otherness, distance, and authenticity, since the Western imagination usually associates Africa with the clichés of underdevelopment or tribalism, along with the usual images linked to these.

We have seen how coffin makers construct their own identity by appropriating global referents, and how, with this image moulded by the international market in disadvantageous terms within the hierarchy of power relations, they make virtue out of necessity.

In the last years there has been a phenomenon of convergence with the world of design that has brought about another kind of paradox. Eric Adjetej Anang was invited as a performer to the fourth Biennale of Gwangju<sup>32</sup> in 2011. On that occasion his profession was described as follows:

“Ghana coffin workshop is a combination of industrial design, painting, and live performance created within the biennale gallery by renowned coffin designer Eric Adjetej Anang. During his weeklong workshop, Anang creates an original coffin design based on Korean cultural motifs” (Park & Kim 2011: 44).

The description of Anang’s work is consistent with the programmatic guidelines of the Biennale of Gwangju, whose intention was to explore the sources and the origins of contemporary design. As an attempt to redefine the notion of design from being a separate/specialized discipline into a political/civic practice that has a direct impact in the world, the intention of the Biennale was to avoid fragmentation, classifications, and preconceived taxonomies. The aim was to create a series of settings for exhibitions which were organized according to concepts such as complexity, simultaneity, exchange, and dialogue among different thematic blocks such as architecture, landscape design, fashion, performance, and craftsmanship.

The thematic focus of the Biennale was driven by the following question: “Is design named or unnamed?” By “named design” one refers to attributes of value and to a statute of design that is not based necessarily on its utility, but on the acknowledgement of designers and the prestigious brands that represent it. “Unnamed design” is the counterpart, the opposite

31. During the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne, a series of eight carved coffins from Paa Joe’s carpentry workshop were exhibited. Among them were a cell phone, a shark, a lizard, a running shoe, and a palm nut.

32. The co-directors are Brendan McGetrick and An Xiao Mina. The co-artistic directors are Ai WeiWei and Seung, H-Sang.

of “named design”, the one that according to the curators of the Biennale looks neglected if compared to the one acknowledged by the prestigious brands (*i.e.* the “named design”) and at the same time is influenced by everyday life. “Named design” is based on individuals and groups that with a consolidated, renowned name establish their authority on the construction of objects, systems, and settings. The brands, as happens with different forms of identity, become more visible if they bear a name (Park & Kim 2011: 12-13).

In the Biennale’s project authority and the effects of names on other disciplines was at the centre of the enquiry, together with an attempt to stress the crisis of this system. Many designers are no longer content to limit their practice to a single discipline. Moreover, as it is now easier with new technologies, they are increasingly involved in alternative forms of collaboration that challenge the concept of authenticity and the uniqueness of the brand. The exhibition intended to embrace the ambiguities of contemporary culture and explore the tensions of coupling highly established name designers with young and emerging designers, while questioning the hierarchy of pre-eminence.

Whereas according to the curators design is often a tool for exclusion, in Gwangju the aim was to include, and welcome contributors from across cultures and classes, expanding the boundaries of design to include fields such as bioengineering, virtual communication, capital punishment, non-violent protest, and pre-modern technology. “Unnamed designer” challenged the myth of the designer and intended to be a stage for ideas, rather than for the authority of the brands, by presenting the millions acts of imagination that are implicated in the creativity of design. The goal was to promote a concept of design that would be able achieve what mainstream European design is no longer able to, *i.e.* to be a product accessible to everybody as it used to be in the aftermath of the industrial revolution. According to the curators, new technologies have created a digital setting whereby the concept of design can no longer be defined by a brand or exclusively anchored to a niche of specialists or specific places. “Today, anyone can design” (*ibid.*: 11-13).

Eric Adjety Anang and his funerary production was, as a consequence, categorized under the heading of “unnamed design”. Despite being a great opportunity for international visibility, this labeling was not a choice that Anang shared or embraced. As a matter of fact, Anang quite intentionally chose to continue to use his grandfather’s name Kane Kwei for the workshop that he runs, as a way to insure continued visibility of what he understands to be an internationally renowned and well established brand. For this reason, he recently painted his workshop anew with a large sign advertising the prestigious name of this grandfather (Fig. 8). However, even though Anang’s reputation has gained enormous momentum thanks to a series of exchanges among different competences and the “power of imagination”, there are at least two further aspects that could be teased out from reflecting

on the Gwangju Biennale participation. On the one hand, the insertion of funerary coffins in the “unnamed design” category reasserts, by contrast, the power of the “named design”. It is, in fact, thanks to his name recognition that Anang has gained international acclaim to the point of being invited to a Biennale like that of Gwangju. On the other hand, we have seen how much the power of imagery represents for fantasy coffin producers—not only for Anang—an act of revised re-appropriation of an element that is dear to the global market, and to the “named design”, if we think of the emblematic case of Coca-Cola—for conquering new room in the global market. From this point of view, it is important to acknowledge other forms of “named design” that shape and contribute to the creative production of Anang. These include the work of other “names” from the intellectual and creative contribution of anthropologists (including myself), the interest of industrialists, of TV networks and newspapers, and of artists, who all together, more or less consciously or willingly, end up expanding the fame of the sculptor and paving the way to new market chances for his products. Eric, not by chance, inserts all these names in the links of his webpage on Wikipedia.

Today, Eric Adjetej Anang acts as a designer and an instructor. A few examples: Michael de Forest is an international wood sculptor, a teacher at the Catlin Gabel School since 1996 and adjunct professor at the Oregon College of Art and Craft since 1993. While already an accomplished woodworker, Michael has worked for a few months as an apprentice in Anang’s workshop in 2009. As a follow-up to this experience, Anang was invited in 2011 by Michael de Forest to the Oregon College of Art and Craft in Portland, for an experience of shared practice with students in the context of a course taught by de Forest. In 2013 he was invited to the Milan Design Week where he collaborated with me in a performance/reflection on his practice. Successively, Anang has obtained a fellowship for a period of research in summer 2014, as a resident in the Center for Art in Wood in Philadelphia (PA).

Increasingly, he is also sought after as an artist. In 2011, Eric was invited to create and exhibit a few coffins at the Museum of World Funeral, at Novosibirsk, the biggest city in Siberia, and then to NECROPOLIS 2011, the XIX International Funeral Exhibition held October 25-27 in Moscow<sup>33</sup>. At Novosibirsk, invited as artist and performer, he realized in just five days a coffin in the shape of fish and another one in the shape of a bottle of Coca-Cola. The bottle of Coca-Cola was transformed into a bottle of Vodka over the course of its realization—upon the request of the curator of the Museum—as a testament to the problem of alcohol abuse, felt quite strongly in Siberia (Fig. 9). In every place—Russia, Korea, the US—Eric travels accompanied by one or more assistants who deal with the painting of the work, while other assistants are found on site.

The opportunities for international experiences have become numerous over the last few years; I have cited only a few of them. His appearances

33. <<http://funeralportal.ru/exhibitions/1005/8362.html>>.

on TV shows have also become more frequent. In 2012, together with Rieko Saibara, he participated in a fictional documentary movie in Japanese titled *Let's celebrate funerals with our best smile!* (TVMAN UNION/NHK) to be broadcast in a series of documentaries called: "Force of a Journey". The main goal of this series is to show a series of experiences of artists/designers in various countries of the world, through the eyes of a reporter. NHK, the Japan Broadcasting Corporation, is the major TV channel in Japan, and it has an international reputation for its high-level documentaries<sup>34</sup>.

The "African" and "international" imagery that operates in the various examples reported in this article is a mode of encounter full of contradictions and paradoxes. These examples can be understood using the concept of "environmental bubble" developed by van Beek (Crick in van Beek 2003: 254) in a study of the meeting of mutual images in Africa, between the host culture and tourists. The environmental bubble cushions the shock of cultural encounter by constructing the other in one's own image. From the point of view of the tourist the "bubble" provides comfort and a safe distance from the reality "but the host culture also stages itself for the tourists" benefit, people showing their life as they want to portray it, and as they perceive the tourists want to see it: a local culture tailor-made for visitors' (van Beek 2003: 255). The bubble "also filters and produces information about the other party in the encounter: on what is 'interesting' and 'authentic' [...]. It provides a total and uncontested image of the other, both for the guests and for the hosts" (*ibid.*). The "bubble", beyond providing the "commodities in the desert", filters and produces images of any otherness, offered to every party involved. Such a process is not always explicit and intentional. In order to understand the meaning of the "imageries" and of the objects of everyday life, that, more or less consciously, on one side are eaten up by the international markets—the Biennale of design, the researcher, the tourist, and the local consumer—and, on the other side, are connected by the agency of the coffin maker it is essential that the viewer participates in these actions and observes how the objects are integrated and utilized in the events and everyday rituals.

In concluding, the scenario I described succinctly here highlights at least other two phenomena that are related to the imageries evoked in the previous paragraph. The first one concerns the anthropology of heritage in relation to the Museum's *mise en scène*. The multifaceted, dynamic, and multisited "nature" of *abebu adekai* demonstrates that it's impossible to understand these objects from a dichotomist perspective that posits a division between

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34. See: <[www.nhk.or.jp](http://www.nhk.or.jp)>. The South African Agency Japan and TV MAN UNION INC., regarded as the major production company of Japan, were responsible for the direction of this series of documentaries broadcast for the NHK. An interesting aspect not touched upon in this piece is about the circuits of circulation of Eric's work in the African continent.

material and immaterial culture (Bonetti 2007: 178). I also argue that labelling such works as funerary objects—as it usually happens in museums—is ultimately inadequate and reductive, as it attributes a unique, specific and precise identity to objects that in reality are quite complex in nature and function, and have been for decades. The multisited aspect of my research highlights the diachronic and synchronic complexity of *adekai* (*ibid.*: 177), the limits of a biography of things based on the Cartesian concept of linear time and the consequent tendency to regard things sequentially.

As a second point of reflection, I introduce the concept of “complicity” (Marcus 1997) as an aid to rethink fieldwork as a fluid arena shaped also by the positioning of the anthropologist-informant relationship (*ibid.*: 87). The subjects of fieldwork are more a “counterpart” than the “other”. In this way the inequality of power relations, weighted in favour of the anthropologist can no longer be presumed in the world of multisited ethnography (*ibid.*: 99-100) and we can escape the tendency to see change as a disruption of what was “there before” (*ibid.*: 98).

Eric Adjetey Anang, is my “counterpart” in many years of fieldwork. He is counterpart in discussions, in the shaping of ideas, but also in initiating collaborations, seeking for funds and opportunity of ever broadening exchanges:

“This is all very different from the way in which collaboration has been embedded, neglected, and redeemed in the traditional practice of ethnography. Collaboration instead is a key trope for condensing a whole complex of new challenges in the reinvention of anthropology’s key method” (Marcus & Pizarro 2008: 7-8).

Anthropologists continue to work intensively and locally with particular subjects but they no longer do so with the sense that the cultural object of study is fully accessible within a particular site. Also, the awareness that a site of fieldwork anywhere is integrally and intimately tied to sites of possible fieldwork elsewhere has become an essential component of contemporary anthropological methodology (Marcus 1997: 96). In any particular location where the *adekai* are situated, paradoxes and ambivalences emerge as specific responses to the functioning of non-local agencies and causes:

“The basic condition that defines the altered *mise-en-scène* for which complicity [...] is a more appropriate figure is an awareness of existential doubleness on the part of *both* anthropologist and subject; this derives from having a sense of being *here* where major transformations are under way that are tied to things happening simultaneously *elsewhere*, but not having a certainty or authoritative representation of what those connections are” (*ibid.*).

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#### ABSTRACT

*Abebu adekai*, literally "receptacles of proverbs", known worldwide as fantasy coffins, are funeral sarcophagi used primarily by the Ga people who live in Accra, south Ghana. These coffins rapidly achieved popularity abroad after they began to be presented as artwork in international exhibitions, and caught the interest of mass media. Through the case of Eric Adjetey Anang (grandson of Kane Kwei), the article examines the intersection between the actual production of the coffins and the international market of mass media, fashion, tourism, décor, and design. It also explores the way in which new media (Wikipedia first, then YouTube and Facebook) have given coffin producers a degree of visibility that has in turn prompted them to develop new and more effective working strategies. Moreover, the experience of digital images has deeply transformed the production process, from creative modelling to reproduction techniques. This recent phenomenon has led to a transformation: coffins are no



longer funerary objects, they are actually objects for design; their producers are no longer woodcutters, but artists in the widest possible sense, and, as in the case of Anang, actors, performers, and managers.

#### RÉSUMÉ

*La média-action des abebu adekai (cercueils sculptés du Ghana) dans le marché global et le design.* — *Abebu adekai*, littéralement « récipients de proverbes », connus dans le monde entier comme des cercueils fantaisie, sont des cercueils funéraires utilisés principalement par le peuple ga vivant à Accra, au sud du Ghana. Ces cercueils ont rapidement acquis une grande popularité à l'étranger après qu'ils ont commencé à être présentés comme œuvres d'art dans les expositions internationales, attirant l'intérêt des médias de masse. À travers le cas d'Eric Adjetey Anang (petit-fils de Kane Kwei), l'article examine l'intersection entre la production des cercueils et le marché international des médias de masse, la mode, le tourisme, la décoration et le *design*. Il explore également la manière dont les nouveaux médias (Wikipedia tout d'abord, puis YouTube et Facebook) ont offert aux producteurs de cercueils un degré de visibilité qui les a, à leur tour, incités à développer des nouvelles stratégies de travail plus efficaces. En outre, l'expérience d'images numériques a profondément transformé le processus de production, de la modélisation créative à des techniques de reproduction. Ce phénomène récent a conduit à une transformation : les cercueils ne sont plus des objets funéraires, ils se sont convertis en véritables objets de *design* ; leurs producteurs ne sont plus des bûcherons, mais des artistes dans le sens le plus large, et, comme dans le cas d'Anang, ce sont également des acteurs, des artistes et des gestionnaires.

Keywords/Mots-clés : Eric Adjetey Anang, African art, design, fantasy coffins, new media/*Eric Adjetey Anang, art africain, design, cercueils fantaisie, nouveaux médias.*