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Crossroads Of Cultures: Contemporary Painting At The College Of Art, Kumasi

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**CROSSROADS OF CULTURES: CONTEMPORARY PAINTING AT
THE COLLEGE OF ART, KUMASI**

BY MARGARET HUNT DE BONA

INDEPENDENT STUDY PROJECT

**SUPERVISED BY PROFESSOR ATO DELAQUIS, COLLEGE OF ART,
KNUST**

**SCHOOL FOR INTERNATIONAL TRAINING –
HISTORY AND CULTURE OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA
2005**

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ABSTRACT

This project is an exploration of the preferred styles and imagery of contemporary artist and students of the College of Arts at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology at Kumasi. What we call the 'Arts Word' of Ghana is continually renewed and shaped within the educational system, which produces its participants. In a way this is a study of academic Ghanaian arts word through the College of Arts and the individuals and arts work, which gives it life. The specific focus of my analysis is on the debate over the necessity of having African imagery or expressing African Identity in artists work; as well as the parts the religious themes play in contemporary work.

INTRODUCTION

More than anything, this project is personal exploration of contemporary arts in Ghana. Since I began, knowing almost nothing about the artistic works of Africans past or present, I started by researching the rich sculptural tradition of West Africa, and the demise of that tradition due to the social and political upheaval following European colonization. The research I did into this quarter was extremely helpful in helping me understand the backdrop of the present day issues surrounding artistic representation in a post colonial nation. Though my resulting research is far from complete history I have brought forward some of the major themes in separate section.

Conversation among my American program members in Ghana have constantly centred on the issue of cultural preservation of neo-colonialism and rapid economic change. The question to how to succeed economically and become a so-called 'functioning member' of the global without blindly absorbing Western media and life style is asked again and again. No matter how much positive coverage of the traditional wax-print and the batik receive, the business women in Accra will preliminary wear the Western-cut and cloth in order to be accepted into the international business community. This is not an issue related to Ghana's situation, but one which developing nations in the world must confront. The country's leaders in addition to the business community have the ability to send a very clear message to the Western way in which success looks, dresses and lives look like.

Art, viewed as a social phenomenon, is in some way a reflection of the society, which creates it, more specifically the school and socio-economic class, which creates it. In choosing to do my **ISP** on contemporary art in Ghana I was looking for specifically the stance, which the student artists and professors took to preserve culture. Entering into this project my biases leaned in two particular directions. First because I come from a culture, which does not speak so openly about their religion I taught that religious themes would play a more prominent role than they do in American contemporary art. Also since other models of cultural imperialism (like the business community) weigh heavily in the favour of Western culture, I was surprise to discover that there is an overwhelming focus on the depiction of traditional Ghanaian culture. This focus is not only expressed through imagery but also an approach to style which freely mixes devices which some labels as specifically 'African' or 'European'. While some artist preferred a more naturalistic style, using foreshortening, chiaroscuro, and deep space, others preferred a flatter style, abstraction and decorative elements. Though the first approach could be labelled as European and the second as African, through out my project, students and professors challenged the use of those labels. Their

point being that, 'No person lives in a vacuum'.¹ Additionally, supposing an artist used a European style to depict a council of chiefs, are they no longer an African artists because they didn't use an African style? An attempt to draw clear lines between Western and traditional elements is impossible and denies the complexity of the artists themselves. They live in a heterogeneous world composed of elements diverse in origin and their art reflects that diversity.

¹ Ato Delaquis. Professor of painting KNUST. Discussion with author, 12 April 2005, Kumasi. Notes in possession of author.

METHODOLOGY

The nature of the faculty at the College of Art allowed me to actually approach the question of cultural imperialism and how it is being dealt with in the art world from two different angles. By conducting interviews with students I was able to get a feel for the aesthetic preoccupation of artists who had not yet consciously chosen completely personal style and objectives, but instead reflected some of the biases and interest of their institution as well as their own interest. Additionally because of the College's excellent faculty I was able to interview some of the most well known contemporary painters in Ghana and West Africa. From these professors I gathered narratives about their own personal journeys towards their present styles; as well as, inquired about the objectives which they considered most important in training the next generation.

I realize that in choosing to only interview and study students at KNUST and their professors I excluded a great deal of Ghana's contemporary artists. Professor Atta Kwami over the past twenty years has done extensive research into the prolific sign painters of Kumasi.¹ Each of these eighty-nine workshops "is autonomous, with its master, his assistant and apprentices. Their work includes a wide range of commercial output: motor vehicle number plates and decorative paintings, shop front and signage, roadside kiosk..."² The sign painters, whose work is visible in every town and city in Ghana, are not the only makers of art exterior to the College. Art is also taught at technical schools and the Teacher Training College at Winneba. There are also numerous professional artists who produce work for sale to tourists at small kiosks near tourist sites and in art and craft markets. In choosing to focus on the College of Art I did not intend to deny any of these artists legitimacy or their place in Ghana's art world. They are makers of art just as those who are part of the academy. My focus was chosen because of limitation of time and a desire to address closely the issues related to a specific type of artist in Ghana. The College of Art as the main socializing body for academically trained artists in Ghana was the perfect place to discuss the issues, which interested me.

Originally I had thought to focus mainly upon religious imagery in contemporary art, but it quickly became obvious, through conversation with my advisor and students that it really was not a common practice. I did not want to completely abandon an examination of religious imagery, especially because of the religious nature of classical African sculpture

¹ Atta Kwami. Professor of painting KNUST. interviews by author' 14 April 2005' Kumasi' Notes in possession of author

² John Picton. "The Picasso Bar, Kumasi". From Kumasi Junction, gallery guide produced by the Oriel Mostyn Gallery.

and the Christian fervour of most Ghanaians. So I designed my questionnaire to approach the topic of religious imagery as well as the emphasis placed by professor and student upon depicting certain subject- related distinctly to Ashanti and West African culture. True to my advisor statement I encountered only a few students who painted any straightforward religious themes, but I believe that this absence says something of importance about the system of art education introduced from Europe and the international art world of today. Discussing the reason for this trend with students was rewarding and informative unto itself. I held most of my student interviews in the 3rd year painting studio, since it was open at all hours and contained a great deal of the students' current work. To begin each interview, I found it most effective to ask the student to show me what work they had in the studio, what class they did it for, and what objectives they had in mind while painting.

From questions about the works they showed me I would slide into the more formal interview. Additionally seeing some of their work before starting helped me direct my question to further explore their interest. Unfortunately, though I saw a great deal of work which students had done for their classes which clearly reflected their interest, I was only able to see a few pieces which they had done exterior to their class expectation, usually either because it was in another location and too difficult to move, or predominately because they were too busy with classes to do much exterior painting. It was extremely helpful for me to use the same interview list repeatedly. I grew familiar with the pace of the interview, and I also merely noted the number of the question I was asking next to their response thus eliminating the need to write out the question, or later confusion as to which statement corresponded to which questions.

Interview Questions for Students:

1. Name
2. Age, Year in School
3. Hometown [describe rural or urban]
4. Occupation and Education attainment of parents?
5. Did you do Fine Art in SSS?
6. Is there anyone in your family who makes art?
7. Is there any style which you prefer? Abstract or Realist?
8. Is there any subject matter which you paint often?
9. Where does the inspiration for this come from?
10. Do you use photograph that you find or take yourself to help you paint? Specific source?
11. Why is this theme/imagery important to you?

12. Is any of your work concerned with religion or spirituality? [Does it reflect a certain religious belief?]
13. What artist or artistic traditions do you admire most? Any African or Ghanaian artist?
14. Do you feel any encouragement in your classes to choose composition, which depict Ghanaian culture? To use Adinkra symbols?
15. Is your family religious? If Christian what denomination?
16. Do you attend church regularly since starting school?
17. Do you participate in any campus groups?
18. Does your faith inspire or change the way that you paint? The subjects you choose?
19. [If they don't paint religious subject] Why do you think religious subjects are not an important part of your personal work? Other people's work?

I left interviews with professors a little more unstructured since as professionals who had been working in the field for a long period of time they were quite comfortable speaking about their art and usually had a better initial sense of what I was interested in. To begin with I would ask them to describe how their work has changed in style and subject over the years and what influence necessitated that change. Asking pertinent question as the narrative unfolded I would eventually hit on almost the entire questions below at some point during the interview.

Interview questions for Professors:

1. How has your art developed and changed since your time in college?
2. Does your work have any central focus? Preferred style or subject matter?
3. Was there any point in your career where you felt moved to state your Africa-ness in your work? Or has it always been present?
4. Did you experience any pressure in school or afterwards to use any specific imagery?
5. Do you refer to the ways that African traditional sculpture deals with in your painting or sculpture?
6. Are there any artistic traditions, which inspire or influence you? Any African or Ghanaian artist?
7. Do you deal with any religious themes in your work? In the past? Now? Why the change?
8. Would you say that you encourage your students to depict Ghanaian culture in their work? If so then why?

In the process of conducting my interview I was continually reflecting on the answers my informants gave, and the work I was seeing. I tried to constantly be aware of my own biases and to reshape and understand them through assumptions I had made and information that I received. I supplemented these initial analyses with a more systematic analysis of the interview once they were completed. I found it very helpful to chart all of my informant's responses onto one single graph. Thus for example I could quickly get of idea of exactly how many people had said that they preferred to use abstraction in their personal work rather than guessing and flipping through my notes any time I needed to make a generalization about the information I had gathered from several interviews.

Because of my project a great deal of my information gathering, included the artwork itself. While it was impossible for me to photograph some of the art work I saw at The Loom or Artist Alliance, or even a great deal of students' work hanging in the studio (since it was often the works of individuals I did not interview), I was careful to write out short descriptions of the gallery artists' specific styles and compositions so that I could refer to them later in my analysis. Mrs. Ademola of The Loom was also kind enough to provide me with several artist statements, which were extremely helpful to my project.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Explanations as to the reason why so-called primitive peoples created art, whether discussing the cave-printing at Lascaux, France or the giant sculptures of Easter Island continuously refer to the role which art played in helping explain the daunting forces of mother nature. In this way art and religion have been linked together since their birth and continually rebirth in all cultures and nations of this vastly diverse planet. Elsy Leuzinger writes in The Art of Black Africa that, Africans created the traditional art to make contact with the super natural forces; it helps them overcome dangers in the environment; it is the expression of their religion.¹ Particularly to Ghana and West Africa professors and tour guide inevitably refers to the dense forest, which used to stretch from the coast inland as a major impetus of the necessity of protective religiosity and physical manifestation of that protection in art.² Leuzinger writes of what she terms the proportion of significance, which dictates African representation of the human form, in terms of religious functions of those proportions. Depending upon their [African marks] use, they have to be as unreal weird and terrifying as possible, a non-existent being, neither man nor beast but certainly elements of both.³ The term proportion of significance is in my mind particularly appropriate because it is useful in examining all art both the so-called classic, or primitive and modern. Significance and meaning is always the aim of work but the different proportions or images through which that meaning is conveyed are unique to every artistic tradition. In explaining the significance pursued by traditional African carvers Leuzinger write 'in his view, the very closest representation of a girl would be inadequate, because it has neither life nor odour. What the African is trying to conceive is a new form, a tangible image, for the many spiritual beings, which inhabit his environment: he is trying to create something spiritual, something transcendent'.⁴ It is important to recognize that art proportion – the means through which it is measured as successful or appealing - is particular to culture. With different cultures different measurements of what is beautiful or desirable are used. European art from the time of the Greek to the renaissance of Expressionism in the early 20th century has sought to use devices like perspective and foreshortening; as well as extensive anatomical study of the human body to create art that imitates the appearance of reality. Upon seeing the art of Africa, Europeans initially, assumed that Africans did not know how to represent the world correctly. Just as

¹ Elsy Leuzinger. *The Art of Black Africa*. London: studio vista productions, 1972. p. 9.

² Ato Delaquis. Professor of painting KNUST. Discussion with author, 6 April 2005, Kumasi. Notes in possession of author.

³ Elsy Leuzinger, p. 11.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.5

they saw African society as savage, child-like, and backward so did they judge them incapable of making art a realistic manner. Early art schools sponsored by missionaries focused on teaching Africans how to see and to present the world in a distinct European style, using perspective, foreshortening and naturalistic style. In fact Africans had a specific tradition of realistic portraiture in Nigeria. The carven busts of the Ife kings are highly naturalistic and obvious depictions of individuals. They often cited to refute to the misconception of the African artist as incapable of representing objectively.⁶

Then now those who label traditional African art as primitive fail to recognize that artistic standards are culturally produced and far from universal. The European artistic tradition always traces its history to the scientific, philosophical, and artistic renaissance of the Greek civilization. However, it is important to acknowledge that the art of the Greeks was no different in its objectives than art in any other part of the ancient world.

Those statues considered to be the first example of objective realism and a scientific treatment of the human body were just as much concerned with explaining the Gods, humanity, and the forces of nature as they are product of scientific thought. In The Story of Art, a general textbook, the author writes “We must turn to old description and try to picture what it [the Parthenon’s Athena] was like: a gigantic wooden image, some thirty-six feet high as a tree, covered all over with precious materials - the armour and garments of gold, the skin of ivory”.⁷ Many Greek statues praised in the present day as exceptional realistic representation of the human body were in their original context, like the statue of Athena described above, attempt to illustrate the nature of godliness and commune with the divine, and objects of power. In labelling African art primitive and Greek art classical, European colonizers failed to recognize their mutually religious nature and purpose.

In the present time, African traditional carving and brass casting are recognized as vital and creative plastic traditional - equal to art created in Europe and elsewhere. The same sculptural pieces that were viewed as child-like or unduly bizarre actually served as inspiration for some of the greatest artistic revolution of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, the level of attention which traditional art is given is not matched in kind for the work of contemporary African.

Original art in Africa was made through the sponsorship of chieftains and kings. The monarchs of Dahomey in present-day Benin used to instruct their spies to search out exceptionally fine craftsmen and carvers when doing reconnaissance for upcoming battles. The advancing army was then instructed to capture these individuals so that they could be

⁶ Ato Delaquis, ASD lecture

⁷ E.H. Gombrich. *The Story of Art*. 14th edition. New York:Phaidon Press, 1984,p. 53

made part of the Dahomey court. In this way the monarch of the kingdom maintained workshop of skilled artists to create works for their royal court.⁸ With the conquest of Dahomey and the numerous other kingdoms and tribes of West Africa (home of “plastic art of a high standard”)⁹ by the European colonizers in the late nineteenth century these royal workshops were destroyed and dispersed along with their deposed patrons. Mission work, in addition to colonial conquest, was also largely responsible for the destruction of many highly developed sculptural traditions. Marshall Ward Mount writes in African Art: The years since 1920 “The breakdown of traditional religions has been one of the most important changes in that it has had the most devastating effect on Traditional Art”⁹. Christian mission usurped the traditional religions of Africa, often actively destroying its sacred objects in an effort to stop the worship of what they perceived as demonic idols. Mount continues, “Thus missionaries often almost completely destroyed native religious practices, thereby eliminating one of the strongest *raison d’etre* for most traditional art.”¹⁰

Congruent with the destruction of the old carving and brass casting traditions was the emergence of new types of art, usually some sort of hybrid between traditional and European styles. Ironically, those who were responsible for quelling the old artistic traditions were also in some ways responsible for the emergence of the new forms.

Mount even writes that often the commitment of independent African government to funding the art depended upon the amount of attention the colonial government had paid them. Thus both Ghana and Nigeria have stronger artistic traditions today because as independent nations they have continued the legacy of their colonial predecessors.

The art of Africa since 1900 falls into four loosely defined categories: the neo-traditional, mission art, souvenir art, and art produced by the student of workshops and colleges.

The Neo-Traditional

By 1900 the neo-traditional art of Africa had almost completely disappeared, traditional carving – like that of West Africa was most often only done to produce mediocre copies for sale to tourists and export to Europe and the U.S.¹¹ Fosu Kojo writes in 20th Century Art of Africa that “since the artists who responded to the new challenge worked outside the confines of the traditional conceptions and supervision, and produced for a European clientele which only appreciated the aesthetic appeal rather than the ethnic content of the works the artists

⁸ Tour of Dahomey Palace at Abomey, ADS Seminar. 24 March 2005, Abomey, Benin.

⁹ Elsy Leuzinger, p.6.

¹⁰ Marshall Ward Mount. *African Art: The Years Since 1920*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1973, p.4.

¹¹ Fosu Kojo. *Fosu. 20th Century Art of Africa*. Revised Edition. Accra: Artists Alliance. 1993, p.4.

resorted to spontaneous application of the classic traditional designs and patterns that did not always carry the same symbolic meanings as those of the traditional works”.¹² However, there were a few artists who learned as apprentices in the old system and produced for a small internal demand, which understood the ethnic content and purpose of their work. One such traditionally trained artist was Osei Bonsu of Ghana who was trained in Kumasi at the royal court and taught both at Achimota and Adisadel College before returning to be the official court carver for Asantehene Otumfuo Nana Sir Agyeman Prempeh II.¹³

Mission Art

Mission inspired art as Mount names it started being produced at the end of the 1400's but since that time not much was produced until it experienced a revival in at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁴ During this period there were several schools and workshops, which produced work of varying style and approach. The Cyrene Mission School of Rhodes taught its artists to paint in the European conviction of biblical representation, both in style and content, except that figures are all obviously African in appearance.¹⁵

While the Cyrene Mission focused on teaching its artists a European style of painting- other workshops run by missions employed traditional artists to produce biblical work in the local style. Fosu writes,

Although the church condemned and demeaned African cultural life and religion as primitive and pagan, its classical art as fetishist and child-like, and the symbolic images they conveyed as idolatrous, superstitious and non-scientific, it ironically relied on the creative expertise of the same African artists to promulgate its own Christian concepts in Africa.¹⁶

Such was the approach used by the Nigerian School at Oyo-Ekiti run by two Catholic priest-Fathers Carroll and O'Mahoney. Works from this school are done in a “characteristics Yoruba style of formality, deliberate disproportion, and accurate details”¹⁷ This school in particular produced one especially fine sculptor, Lamidi Fakeye, whose work became so popular that he was able to leave the mission workshop and make successful living off the commissions he received from churches and individual. The church doors, which he did for the church at Oki-Padi, still exhibit the “bulging almond shaped eyes, petal shaped nostrils and thick lips” which Fosu describes as the Yoruba style of the past 3000 years (see image,

¹² Fosu, p.4.

¹³ Mount, p.5.

¹⁵ Ibid. p.28.

¹⁶ Fosu, p.4.

Appendix 1.1).¹⁸ Though there are distinct variations as to the work produced by mission schools-they all, to some degree turned out “art in a modified African- European style”.

Souvenir Art

Carvings, paintings and brass castings made purely for sale to America and European tourists are perhaps the most visible and best known type of African contemporary art today.²⁰ Mount writes “the admitted copying of traditional object is an important category of souvenir art, but a more frequently encountered ²¹ tourist art is a based on non-traditional forms”²¹ For example one of the best souvenir styles developed in east Africa after carving was introduced to the British and taken up by the Wakamba tribe when they realized the commercial benefits it production could bring.²² Depictions of exotic flora and fauna, as well as the neighbouring Masai tribesmen are especially appealing to the tourists to whom the work is intended.²³ The highly polished and elongated and reductionist Wakamba style can now be purchased all over east and west Africa - far from its birth place (Refer appendix 1.2, &1.3) Because the mass produced nature of souvenir art - wherein successful are endlessly reproduce for sale, it is not regarded by academics as ‘Art’ but simply “the repetition of empty forms of tradition without conviction or care.”²⁴

Workshop Artist

Even before the founding of university schools like the one at KNUST there were many workshop schools often run by expatriate with certain love for art. Like the mission schools the work produced was often a direct reflection of the approach by the instructions favoured by their directors. Artists were often indoctrinated... in European style and introduced to Western techniques and past styles of art,²⁵ or provided simply with materials and the inspiration of their own culture and imagination. Those who preferred it a second approach saw it as the only way to create painting which was authentically African. Pierre Lods director of Poto-Poto School in Nigeria made great effort to surround his student with as much of their own culture as possible (Refer appendix 1.4-1.7) He wrote about his objective, “The complete success of our experiment would come only when African is once again integrated in the whole art of the country - in its music, dance and acting”²⁶ Effort

¹⁸ Ibid.p.5.

²⁰ Ibid. P. 39

²¹ Ibid 45

²² Mount P. 54

²³ Ibid, P. 52

²⁴ Ulli Bier. Contemporary African Art. London: Pall Mall Press, 1986, P. 12

²⁵ Mount, P. 83

²⁶ Fosu, p. 117

made by Lods, and Pierre Romain Defossés at his school at Lambashi, Republic of Zaire, to counteract the fissure they sought to artificially bring to the traditional by surrounding their artist with native art forms and sheltering them from exposure to European artistic representation. Even over the work of these schools the argument of what is 'African' begins to take place. Defossés, because he had solely provided materials and a place to work in and not training or instruction felt that the work his artist produce is 'wholly African'²⁷ However Mount criticize Defossés' including writing, 'the production of his atelier is 'wholly African' only in the sense that it was done by an African in Africa in a style that fit condescending stereotype of what African painting should be: above all decorative, having flat forms and simple compositions'²⁸ Despite criticizing the naiveté of Defossés and Lods in thinking that the painting produce of their school was not immediately African, Mount still include some of their art work (which is dynamic and striking) while hardly showing any of the work from Fréré Marc's school (one which thought Europeans methods and history). In noting the importance of the work produced by these artist by including much more of their work in his survey, Mount has made certain judgments as to what the new style of African art is and the place which European academic training holds. Thus the author seems to side with Lods and Defossés in viewing intense academic training in Europeans convictions and damage to artists African-ness. Present day art schools are not of condescending to the intelligence of their students as this workshop approach acknowledging that African artist are not some sort of genius tabula rasa, on which pristinely African art could be inspired through careful prompting.

The time of independence brought a great deal of new experimentation and stimulus to West Africa. The philosophies of negritude and pan-Africanism pushed the independence experimentalist to look back at their continent's artistic history for inspirations in their paintings.²⁹ Out of this was born what Dr. Kwabina Bucknor of Ghana first the sculptural idiom, a style expressionistic treatment of the body, increase individual with style and experimentation with new materials and techniques.³⁰ My interviews with several artist of this era are examined further when I address the need to reclaim ones' African-ness in this report.

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Fosu, P. 11

³⁰ Ibid

MAIN REPORT - STYLE

A few generations have past since the introduction of European art of canvas painting was introduced as an academic discipline in Ghana. Painting and sculpture have been brought to KNUST since it founding in 1957 and that original faculty, actually used to be instructed by Achimota School near Accra before moving to Kumasi. Closer to the time of independence the instruction was much more focused on teaching objective realism than it is now.¹ Since that time a generation of painters who trained at the college as student has returned to teach. Their influence has been key in moving the college's focus away from the strictly old style European painting. Students now express their preference for the use of impressionism, the semi abstract and pure abstraction. Though artists of the current professors' generation often consciously express their African-ness through painting in a way which traditional sculptures portray them; the preference for abstraction and decorative elements seems to be more prevalent among the student population. The sculpture idiom is not passed on to students in their instruction.

Impressionism versus Realism

While there was much personal diversity between students, I found that most of them worked (when not using abstraction) in a style that was described as impressionistic realism. Perhaps this terminology is confusing since it is not a phrase from the canon. What I mean by impressionistic realism is that students would take a scene and include all the basic elements needed to indicate the object represented; representing the anatomy of the human body, the nature of light-and so on by using broad strokes or splashes of colour so that the image is not photographic but instead impressionistic. The style also leaves a space for personal interpretation of the subject through colour or brush stroke.

Students use this style predominately when completing class assignments. One class in particular, Thematic Figure Composition III, taught by Professor Atta Kwami, produced many works in this style. Student who preferred abstraction or semi-abstraction in their own personal work would use this style for their class assignments; leading to believe that it appeals to them, as well as the student body in general because of its close relationship to the semi abstract.

¹ Benjamin Ofei-Nyako [BON]. Professor of painting KNUST interviewed by author, 8 April 2005, Kumasi. Notes in possession of author

Rexford Okyireh's painting *Boys Fighting*² (appendix 2.1), done for Thematic Figure Composition, is further abstracted than some by the artist's use of a palette knife to apply the paint.³ The wrestling figures are still recognizable and separated from each other (the elements of realism) but the scene's emotion and movements all come from impressionistic use of colour. By choosing this style of painting the student has taken a common theme and giving it freshness and immediacy, which must have been much harder to accomplish using straight-forward objective realism.

Colour as Movements

Foli Kwei used a more angular style than his class-mate did in two of his paintings for the same composition course. However, both *Musicians* and *Hair-braiding* (appendix 2.2&2.3) use line and colour to convey movements in the same way which Okyireh did with his vigorous use of the palette knife. In *Musicians*, sweeping bands of colour in the background and across the players' clothing makes it possible for the viewer to feel the inevitable movements of their bodies' to the beat of the music. Even in *Hair-braiding* where both of the figures are absorbed in their stationary task, the juxtaposition of colours in the bands across the body makes their cloth appear to shift and slide in human restlessness. Francis Ademola, creator of *The Loom* in Accra, was also quick to note the unique use of colour by particular Ghanaian artist to lend a sense of internal movements to their work.⁴ Specifically self-taught artist, Samuel Agbenyegah (Samkobee) uses a lively semi-abstracted style, which is similar to the impasto, which Okyireh prefers. Though this work doesn't look like it is done with brush or knife and the style is even more fluid than *Boys fighting*, it lends itself well to the churning ocean and textured style of Samkobee's work available at *The Loom*.

Abstraction

As is apparent from akua'ba figures of the Asante Region and the geometric wall calendars of the Northern Region of Ghana-complex styles of abstraction geometric or organic are not lacking in the art of West Africa. Professor Ato Delaquis in his lecture "Ghanaian contemporary art" stated that abstraction has never been difficult for Africans. It was the objective realism of Europe which struck them as a particularly unnatural form of

² Most students prefer to their pieces descriptively instead of giving them specific titles. I have used my own descriptive title for the purpose of this product.

³ Rexford Okyireh. 3rd year painting student at KNUST. Interviewed by author, 6 April 2005, Kumasi

⁴ Francis Ademola. Creator of *The Loom*. Interviewed by author, 19 April 2005, Accra. Notes in possession of author.

expression.⁵ This historical preference for abstraction is clearly manifesting itself in the work of KNUST painting students today despite the differences in present day medium and culture. Several of the students I interviewed preferred abstraction to any other style in their work, and not necessarily because it was easier. Experimental Painting is Rita Bewong's favourite class this semester because she finds working without brush which is challenging and exciting. She also stated when asked who her favourite artists were, that she could not specifically name any, but that, as she preferred to work in abstract, she also really likes abstract work because they make you think. Take figure painting for example, it is so literal, but abstract work is so selective.⁶ Foli Kwei the author of Musicians and Hair braiding says that he enjoys abstraction more because there are so many challenges to overcome while executing the painting. When beginning an abstract piece he doesn't even choose any guiding themes and he likes that freedom of working with the unexpected. He says that a theme may emerge during the process of painting, but he likes beginning without objective in mind.⁷

Kwei and Bewong were different from most of my student interviewees in that they explicitly stated that, they preferred pure abstraction. Most other students preferred realism, impressionism or semi-abstract and said that they used different styles for different projects. Reflecting on my own participation in U.S art classes, I noticed that, students at the college are much more comfortable with abstraction and use it more frequently than their American contemporaries. I believe that this is because art instructions in the US are highly bent on gaining a certain level of skill at representing the world respectively using realism. The understanding being, that once you can represent the world in an illustrative decorative manner then you can experiment more effectively with abstraction and expression, whereas at the college they seem to acknowledge that abstraction itself is a learned skill and not progression from realism. Thus it is through the understanding of their culture and institution which Ghanaian art students gain a greater comfort and skill for abstraction.⁸

The semi abstract is in some way the best of both worlds - for Ghanaian artist and art students, since it allows them to represent a recognizable object or theme but elaborate upon it through distortion of objects and application of colour, yielding compositions not to the real world but with extensive interpretation from artist. This characteristic of semi abstract is what makes it so popular and useful for those painting specifically for sale. Mrs. Ademola

⁵ Ato Delaquis, Professor of painting, KNUST. ADS lecture "Ghanaian Contemporary art" 10 March 2005, Kumasi. Notes in possession of author.

⁶ Rita Bewong, 3rd year painting students, KNUST. Interviewed by author, 12 April, 2005, Kumasi. Notes in possession of author.

⁷ Foli Kwei, 3rd year student, KNUST, interviewed by author, 11 April, 2005, Kumasi. Notes in possession of author.

⁸ Francis Ademola, interviewed by author

stated that buyers' taste has been rapidly moving in the direction of semi abstraction in the past five years.

Colour and the use of decorative elements

African painting is often negatively stereotyped as being solely decorative and colourful-naïve and fresh, without the sophisticated use of depth and foreshortening which used to be so admired in the Western world of art. Part of rejecting the stereotype has been acknowledging that African painters are quite capable of using the tricks of illusion in creating perspective on canvas, but the other more important aspect is that their use of colour and ability to respect the two dimensional nature of the canvas is a complex art to itself. Having said that, I obviously do not mean pejoratively when I say that the great deal of the work of work I saw at the Loom, College and at the Art Alliance utilized a great deal of decorative elements, in addition to be very colourful. In fact from my observation I will say that, over all, Ghanaian art students have a much more subtle and complex use of bright colours (and colour in general) than most American students. After fishing interviews students would ask me often about the difference between student's art in Ghana and in U.S., and the unique use of colour was one of the main differences I noted. In our following speculations as to the reason of this difference I was always drawn to the memory of winter in the U.S. and how it changes colour and light for about five month of the year to a darker and greyer spectrum.⁹ The decorative or abstract paintings of Africans are often described as flat or lacking depth. What this description fails to recognize is that canvas is indeed a three-dimensional surface possessing no depth of it own. Pablo Picasso when he started experimenting with cubism recognized that most paintings were an attempt to represent the three-dimensional world on a two dimension plane. His painting revealed their 3-D subject by presenting every plane parallel to the surface of the canvas. Similar to Picasso's cubism the flat nature of some paintings recognizes that the canvas is in 2-D and seeks to expand and innovate within the parameter, instead artificially introducing a 3rd dimension.

Several celebrated African artists of the last century are known for their complex decorative styles. Papa Ibra Taal of Senegal is known for his commitment to African heritage in both subject and style. While his works portray the legends and people of Senegal, his style reflect both an obsession with native embroidery patterns and the sculptural idiom.¹⁰ As is apparent from The Stride of the Champion and Peace will Come the decorative nature

⁹ Rexford Okyireh, interviewed by author.

¹⁰ Kojo Fosu, P. 132.

of the surface does not eliminate an element depth and spiritual relationship (Refer appendix 1.8 &, 1.9). Bruce Onobrakpeya's Painting three spirits is another example of work which refers to both decorative and sculptural tradition (Refer appendix 1.1). The three figures of the piece has the same tall narrow shape of much traditional sculpture (caused by the vertical nature of the wood used for carving) and an expressive disregard for anthropomorphism. Their surfaces remind me of topographical maps, with regards to how they portray depth and altitude, but only to those practiced and reading them.

Several of the students I spoke with did work which included or were wholly composed of intricate natural or geometric decoration. Frank Addai, a third year painting student, does a great deal of independent work in pen and ink. I was fortunate enough to see a great deal of this work and was amazed to see the range of completely different styles which he was capable of using. Addai uses a realistic style for his class compositions, favouring the use of broad areas of varying hues of colour to indicate the play of light across figures and surfaces.¹¹

In his independent work Addai uses pen and ink in two different styles a realistic one such as in Crying woman and Child and a highly abstracted and geometric one as in The Musician and Abstract Woman and Baby (Refer appendix 2.6, 2.5 & 2.4). Addai has made about twenty drawings in the second style of depicting single or group figure dancing or making music. I especially like the one in Abstract Woman and Baby in which he used small and large geometric shapes to describe an essentially curved form, and the tightly packed surface and long contours gave the figure internal movement. Kate Baidoe, whose work is on display at the Art Alliance, has a very similar style. Like many of Addai's drawings she uses similar geometric forms in both the fore and back ground so that they blend together and are sometimes indistinguishable.

Addai and Baidoe have used decorative elements in black and white as Kwei does in his painting. Look again Hair-Braiding (Refer appendix 2.3) and note the swirls, scallops, dots and long linear wedges, which segment and texture the figures. All these artists have used geometric shapes and linear elements (in addition to colour) to give the two-dimensional surface of the canvas a sense of movement.

¹¹ Frank Addai 3rd year painting student, KNUST. Interviewed by author, 7 April, 2005, Kumasi. Notes in possession of author.

CHOICES OF SUBJECT MATTER

The Most Common Themes

Surprisingly students and professionals (at least those with work displayed at the two galleries in Accra) made very similar choices as to the subject matter of their paintings. This surprised me because I had expected students to be choosing rather basic themes to fulfil their assignments while believing that as artists develop as professionals they will choose to pursue more complex or obscure themes. What I had not anticipated was that not only the art works displayed in Accra influenced by interesting buyers, but the subject of student's art was also more greatly determined by assignments and their professors' preference as it is in U.S.

Most of the student's art and professional art I saw fell into basic subject categories these are: markets scenes, traditional musicians, coastal scenes with fishing boat, northern villages and women carrying head loads. Of course there were exceptions, a few artists at the Art Alliance had work that did not fall into these categories; Professor Ablade Glover's abstract works depicting urban scenes using small repeated units of colour is quite unique. But most of it which did not fit this specific division can be labelled as scenes depicting traditional culture. Granted the scope of artists with whose work I saw was limited, but I think that, nevertheless, this narrow window of subject matter says very distinct things about the venues in which the pieces were shown. Since African professionals are not very active art patrons, much of the demand for work from Ghana is tourists, private groups in the US or in Europe, and the galleries and shows of an international nature.¹ In particular the Loom and Art Alliance are mostly frequented by tourists and the types of art which are displayed there reflect that clientele.² This, however, does not explain why students were so focused on depicting the same cultural themes, or the over all obsession with painting African women.

Encouraging the Depiction of Culture

I asked both students and professors whether they felt that depicting Ghanaian culture is encouraged in the college, and the overwhelming response I received was 'yes, definitely'. When asked to specify in what ways they would encourage students, they either expressed that the assignment they received directed them to do so, or that it was not explicitly stated

² Francis Ademola creator of the loom. Interviewed by author, 19th April, 2005, Accra. Notes in possession of author

but that, a professor's preference were understood, for example through their praise.³ Professor Ackam for example took his fourth year painting class to a special event at the Asantehene's palace after they had spent a great deal of their semester doing large scale portraits of traditional rulers.⁴ Frank Addai when I asked him about culture told me that during one of his first year classes they did a lot of compositions using geometric shapes.⁵ While not oriented towards culture in a subject matter a study of composition through abstract geometric arrangement is itself a way of calling students to be aware of their cultures artistic history. Adwoa Adomako, when asked about the use of culture in her composition, told me that the encouragement came during her second year she was given assignment to paint something about rites of passage.⁶

There was one class particular i.e. Thematic figure composition, in which I saw lots of student's work which was invariably about culture or in some way about social commentary. Rexford Okyireh's work for that class include Boys fighting as well as a painting of three seated children titled Hunger, and finally a Xylophone player, that he said was inspired by a photograph from a magazine.⁷ Frank Addai's painting for the same class included one of children in special traditional dress doing a ritual dance (done for an assignment broadly asking them to portray 'rites')⁸ Hair-Braiding, and Musicians by Foli Kwei (Refer appendix 2.2 & 2.3) and Early rites and Unity by Emmanuel Riverson (Refer appendix 2.7 & 2.8) were also done for Thematic figure composition. When I asked whether students had received a specific assignment directing them to portray culture they said no, but it was understood that it was the preferred subject matter (except the assignment on rites). That this one class produced three compositions of musicians (as well as assorted dancers), solely from the work of the three students I interviewed seems significant.

A few of the students responded to this question saying that they were actually more interested in painting, what they saw around them and that their classes were also weighted in that direction, in addition, to emphasizing culture and that and that they did not feel limited by either of those things⁹ Often when I discussed this focus on culture with professors they would point out many of those paintings which supposedly refer to as traditional culture and

³ Rexford Okyireh, third year students KNUST. Interviewed by author, 6 April, 2005, Kumasi. Notes in possession of author

⁴ Emmanuel Brew Riverson, 3rd year painting student, KNUST. Interviewed by author, 13th April, 2005. Kumasi. Notes in possession of author.

⁵ Frank Addai, 3rd year students, KNUST. Interviewed by author, 7th April, 2005. Kumasi

⁶ Adwoa Adomako, 3rd year student, KNUST. Interviewed by author, 12 April, 2005. Kumasi. Notes in possession of author.

⁷ Rexford Okyireh, interviewed by author

⁸ Frank Addai, interview.

⁹ Rita Bewong, 3rd year student, KNUST. Interviewed by author, 12 April 2005, Kumasi. Notes in possession of author.

were just scenes that student saw as part of their every day lives.¹⁰ I do acknowledge that it makes plenty of sense for college students living in Kumasi to paint market scenes, head-porters, hunger and poverty that affect their urban neighbours. However those students dress in the latest Western fashions, watch shows from the U.S. and Europe, listen to music from diverse origins, read magazines like Glamour, and are generally from privileged families. My question being if student are painting their surrounding how is it that part of their everyday culture doesn't seem to make it to their canvas.

The Illustration of Proverbs

Two students in particular who I interviewed express great enthusiasm about painting Ghanaian culture and more specifically Akan proverbs. Rita Bewong, when asked what her favourite subject matter was replied that she always want to paint something related to Ghanaian culture and that over the summer she hopes to start working on abstract depiction of traditional proverbs.¹¹ She said that this subject was important to her because a visiting lecturer in Legon inspired her to help maintain her culture through her art. Emmanuel Brew Riverson when asked why he liked to illustrate culture and proverbs said "It's important because I'm an African and want to portray my culture and let the world know that it is important to me and I can't be any one else."¹² Two of Riverson's pieces simultaneously are illustrations of Akan proverbs and social commentaries. Early Rise¹³ (Refer appendix 2.7) refers to a proverb, which translated into English means "if a game is to be enjoyed then it has to start early." Riverson's, like many compositions I encountered takes its central theme from the life of an African woman, how her work begins early and through out the day. His other proverb painting Unity (appendix 2.8) refers to the Adinkra symbol and proverb, 'Two crocodiles with one stomach' a sign of interdependence and co-operation. The painting shows three musicians, 2 playing northern style drum and the other playing Asante horn. Riverson says that he is reminding people that the north and south of Ghana are interdependence and must work together to reach their common goals.¹⁴

An ever greater number of people I interviewed said that they painted women and it was by far their favourite subject matter. When questioned further answers usually either cited the aesthetic beauty of African women, or their social positions or hardship that they continually bear. Frank Addai, whose many ink drawing depict women dancing or carrying head loads (Refer appendix 2.4) said that he draws inspiration from watching women "how

¹⁰ Ato Delaquis, professor of painting, KNUST. Interviewed by author, 12 April, 2005. Kumasi. Notes in possession of author.

¹¹ Rita Bewong. Interviewed.

¹² Emmanuel Riverson, interview.

¹³ both titles Early Rise and Unity were supplied by Emmanuel Riverson.

¹⁴ Emmanuel Riverson, Interview

they move, how they stand, their actions”¹⁵ His many dancing women seem to speak primarily to the physical contours of their subject, but Crying Woman and Child, which is one of his few non abstract works seem to focus on the much anger or sadness that the pair are experiencing (Refer appendix 2.6) Nella Kumafo and Tetty Arko Andrews, the Master of Fine Art (MFA) students I interviewed, both expressed enthusiasm in the most proportion of the female body. Andrews’ MFA project is about nudity and thus he has done several much painting of the female nudes. He is specifically interested in calling out people’s hypocrisy about nudity, since he says that people enjoy looking at nude paintings, but are afraid to admit to that pleasure.¹⁶ Kumafo, who is just completing her MFA in sculpture expressed so much enthusiasm for the beauty of African women and showed me several of her cast plastic works of full-figured women.¹⁷ These artists concentrate their work about women solely around the beauty of her physical appearance.

On the other hand, Professor Ben Ofei-Nyako, known simply as BON, has been painting portraits of women for many years now. He says his women always have sombre, serious expressions, and are almost never joyful, because he is mainly focused on telling the viewer about his subject’ difficult life. He says “women bear the brunt of everything here” and I want to remind people of that burden.¹⁸ Linda Ama Agyeiwaa, a 3rd year painting student, says that she paint about the struggles of African women. She says, “ We are not recognized, men are the boss and we don’t have a say-but African women do everything. I want to show people her importance...and remind men to appreciate us”.¹⁹ I wasn’t quite sure what to make of this predominate focus on women since it didn’t simply fall into the category of voyeurism or feminism, and often those who painted women voiced simultaneously an appreciation for their beauty and her strength in performing so much labour And no matter how much a person seemed to focus on the hardness of the work, which African women must bear, it never seemed to be an option to make a painting that ridiculed men for being lazy by comparison. It is my personal opinion that even when women paint other women as a sort of feminist statement they often use all the same convention of viewing her beauty in a moment of toil which would be expected of male painter. There were

¹⁵ Frank Addai interview

¹⁶ Tetty Arko Andrews. MFA Painting student KNUST. Interview by author, 11 April 2005, Kumasi. Notes in possession of author.

¹⁷ Nella Kumafo, Interviews.

¹⁸ Ben Ofei-Nyako [BON]. Professor of painting KNUST. Interview by author, 8 April 2005, Kumasi. Notes in possession of author.

¹⁹ Agyeiwaa, Linda Ama. 3rd year Painting student KNUST. Interviews by author, 14 April 2005, Kumasi Notes in possession of author.

a few pieces I saw in which the women, represented, seemed to strongly reject the gaze of the viewer, to assert themselves within the frame, like in Addai's Crying Women and Child and several of BON's pieces. I do not mean to say that these painting are not feminist painting, or that they do not send clear messages about the social position of African women, but that this objective is often accomplished within the convection of seeing women as beautiful object even in their moment of sadness and hardship. Perhaps this is why I like Addai's piece so much because both mother and child have rejected their own beauty, they exist purely in their emotions and not as an aesthetic pleasure.

Emphasis on a Group Message

Returning to the question of why students choose to represent such uniform subjects. Yes, definitely in part because of encouragement from their professors; however, I believe that beyond simple prompting through assignment there is a different understanding of the individual within the college than at art school in the U.S. Many of the convection which emphasize the individual – such as critiquing, where one person puts their work up before the class to defend and receive criticism are the same; but the emphasis on conceptual content is lacking. Kirsten Young an American art student taking classes at the college this semester when asked about the differences in how art was taught at her school in Santa Cruz said that in the U.S. the concept behind a piece often mattered more than the skill with which it was executed.²⁰ From my own experience participating in critiques at home I agree with Young, in that students are asked to explain the conceptual reasoning behind their aesthetic choices and that their ability to visually link a unique concept and execution determined how well the work was received by both student and professors, whereas at the college they focus on skill, leaving personalized concept either secondary, or absent all together.²¹ When conceptualization is present it is usually safely within the bounds of exploring Ghanaian culture, Akan proverbs (such as Riverson's work, which was actually highly developed conceptually), or African women. What matters most at the college is the individual delivery of these subjects rather than a unique topic unto itself, which is not to say that student art work in the U.S. does not fall into a few categories. It often does. I can remember many final projects wherein, inevitably several people (women usually) did large nude portraits of either themselves or their friends, it was a very popular and tried composition. However, despite choosing similar topics they would always strive to include exterior object, unusual facial expression, or unique poses to fulfil the requirement for conceptual uniqueness.

²¹ Kirsten Young, interview.

In one of my first conversations with Professor Ato Delaquis about the transition from the traditional production of art in royal workshop to the present, he discussed in length the introduction of individuality to a society, which had previously focused solely on group achievement.²² Despite having taken up a Western style education system which focuses on individual achievement I still believe that as a culture Ghanaians are more group oriented than perhaps American culture, which is reflected in the college in their lack of emphasis on concept, individual experimentation, and exploration in different subject matter.²³ Instead the focus is directed towards an almost group celebration of Ghanaian culture and African femininity.

Religious Imagery

In the month before I began this research I attempted to organize the little I knew about contemporary Ghanaian art and decide on what specific focus I would choose to guide my research process. As someone coming from a place where Christianity and religion in general is less prevalent or visible I thought that perhaps it would play a more prominent role in the imagery of contemporary African artists and student. I quickly realized that this assumption could be comparable to someone from Ghana visiting an art school in the U.S. and expecting student to routinely paint about the non-religious nature of their lives. Just as my non-religiosity was something I didn't feel the need to paint about, so too were religious themes unimportant to most Ghanaian student I interviewed. Still I included question about religious imagery in my interviews since I was interested to see whether anyone was pursuing it and what exactly they were communicating.

Rita Bewong, Tettey Arko Andrews, Professor Delaquis, and BON said that they had done religious painting in the past, but only on the occasion that they received commission to do so. There were two students who told me that they did paint religious themes because of their interest. Almost all of the people that I interviewed answered with a flat 'No' to my question-sometimes adding, "I never considered it." When asked as to the reason why student never painted religious themes most responded that religious expression was really something exterior to the things they wanted to express artistically. Rita Bewong said, "Christianity governs my daily life-how I live. I don't feel it is necessary to paint about it, for me it's a different realm which speaks about different things."²⁴

²³ Kirsten Young, interview

²⁴ Rita Bewong, interview.

In addition to Bewong's understanding of this separation, I also believe that the art school does not consciously encourage the painting of religious themes because it is fashioned after a Western model. While Europeans and African artists of the past have been extensively trained in the creation of religious objects, the relationship between churches and artistic patronage has long been dissolved in Europe and now in Africa thanks to colonization and mission activity. Which is why it is not surprising that most students at the college are not interested in painting biblical themes.²⁵

Of the individuals who I spoke with about the biblical painting they had completed in the past all expressed a common objectives. They all stated that one of their goals in making the works was to paint Christ as a Black African.²⁶ Lydianne Antwi who for her senior project did five biblical scenes said that she had no other conceptual message to communicate in her work other than painting Christ (and all the other figures present) as Black.²⁷ That she wanted them to be completely within the usual convection of biblical painting, to show that Christ's blackness did not change the message or content of the scenes.²⁸ Professor Ofei-Nyako (BON) participated in a competition between Ghanaian and Italian artists to design a triptych mural for the newly built Catholic, Christ the King church at Takoradi. The resulting mural design is a seamless integration of symbols from Christian and Ghanaian tradition with the central Madonna and Child (as well as Eve, Adam, Joseph, and Jesus featured as Africans) seated upon a traditional female stool and surrounded by the symbols of Fante and Ashanti culture (Appendix 1. 16).²⁹ When I asked BON about this triptych he told me that he never painted religious themes, but he was glad to participate in the competition because he had always wanted to paint Christ as a black man, to assert that he at least was not a blond Caucasian.³⁰ I was particularly struck by this painting because in some ways it goes beyond the usual Christian practice of integrating local symbols and places the local geometric style, symbols, and people as more prominent features than the biblical frame.

It is apparent that for these artists, the act of painting religious themes is mostly one of reclaiming Christ, asserting that he is a universal figure, whose colour is translatable into the hues of this diverse planet.

²⁵ The entire student I interviewed identified themselves as Christians.

²⁸ Ibid.

AN AFRICAN IDENTITY FOR WHOM?

Nationalism and the Sculptural Idiom

In the 50's and 60's when African nations were fighting and gaining their independence from the colonial European powers art like many other cultural venues became an avenue through which the new nations reclaimed their own culture. Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, was a great leader in the Pan-Africanist movement and encouraged Ghanaian artists to create works, which positively reflected their maker's African-ness¹. The new independent governments became patrons of nationally oriented art, such as Kofi Antobam's carved doors for the Parliament House in Accra which display Adinkra symbols on their six panels (Refer appendix 1.12). Other African artists made dynamic illustrations of their peoples' traditional folklore, such as Bruce Onobrakpeya's Quarrel Between Ahwaire the Tortoise and Erhako the Dog and Maiden's Cry (Refer appendix 1.4, & 1.5). The painters of the Sculptural Idiom turned to traditional sculpture and took inspiration from the expressiveness of its human forms to create a new and starting imagery. Elongated limbs, exaggerated heads and facial features and an exhilarating raw expressiveness often characterize their work (Refer appendix 1.8, 1.9, & 1.11).²

Kojo Fosu writes of artists since the time of the Sculptural Idiom, "They are now attempting to break free from the rigidity of the traditional past and the nationalist ideology which previously restricted them."³ Fosu here points to the double-edged sword of nationalism's fervour. While it was an exhilarating time of reclaiming and celebrating a culture which had long been ignored; as well as one of new innovations inspired by traditional culture, it was also restricting in that it required artists to express solely their African-ness in order to be sponsored and supported by the new independent governments.

Despite the drive towards nationalism having faded into the background, artists since the Sculptural Idiom have still struggled to understand their own artistic relationship to the traditional culture. When I interviewed Professor Ofei-Nyako he told me about this own journey towards making art like an African. Fosu writes of his work, however, it must be noted that the success of his approach to painting has been gradual. Between 1976 and 1980, he worked strictly in the academic and representational realism... after his return from his post-graduate studies in Bulgaria, his figurative images were rendered in stylized realism.⁴

¹ Kojo Fosu. 20th Century Art of Africa. Revised Edition, Accra: Artists Alliance, 1993 p. 117

² Ibid

³ Fosu, p.167

⁴ Fosu, p. 211.

Fosu charts BON's journey towards a richer use of colour, some abstraction and a monumentality reminiscent of the Sculptural Idiom.⁵ BON himself told me that after he returned from his graduate studies people told him that he painted like a European because he favoured realism and portraiture so much.⁶ Because of this BON said that he started looking to his African-ness, experimenting with geometric figures, Adinkra symbols and elongated figures.⁷ That was some time ago and he is now continuing to evolve and move towards flatter, 2-dimensional representations using geometric and abstracted shapes.

BON said that part of the reason he painted so realistically was that, the college of art (where he earned his undergraduate degree) used to be much more based upon the British system. Now he says they work hard to diversify the education that students receive to allow them more freedom in choosing their own style.⁸ From the many varied stylistic approaches I saw being used by different classes, I would say that this goal has definitely been accomplished. Simultaneous to recognizing that their students should be versed in styles which are not solely European or African the college's faculty understands that traditional Ghanaian culture is threatened and because of this that they openly encourage their students to study and invest themselves in the artistic history of their people. This emphasis is not meant to be limiting, but a necessary reaction against Western encroachment. Students take African Art History, Contemporary African Painting, and African Diasporan Art as well as a General History of European Art, these courses bolster the emphasis which cultural themes already receive in their classes on technique and composition.⁹

If you wanted to further explain why religious themes are not expressed more frequently in a society which is known for its religiosity, then it would be of use to note that Ghana's religiosity is not threatened by cultural imperialism and thus what is in danger of being lost (traditional culture) becomes far more important to express than something which is not challenged.

The 'African Identity' as Limiting

I spoke with several professors who expressed conflicting views about the positive nature of encouraging cultural awareness in their students' artwork. While they participated actively in this culturally weighted education they also expressed anger towards those who considered it only appropriate for African artists to use distinctly African styles and

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ben Ofei-Nyarko, interview.

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subjects.¹⁰ On several occasions I was told, ‘No one ever called Picasso an African for doing his paintings – why should I be called a European if I use a different style – I’m still an African.’¹¹ Professor Ackam in particular was very adamant about it not being necessary for him to assert his African-ness in his art work. He said, ‘I’ve seen many African-Americans at Howard University go through the process of reclaiming but for me that was not necessary. I paint what is in myself – I do not see any black or white in art.’¹² Ackam asserts that there is no reason why he should limit himself to the imagery and styles associated with Africa when European and American artists are not expected to do the same. Ackam’s statements place African artists on an equal level with their international compatriots and proclaim that they are comfortable enough in their own African-ness to borrow freely from other cultures. Gebre Kristos an Ethiopian artist who was criticized for not using the imagery and style of his homeland responded with this statement.¹³ It’s really funny that some people who know nothing about the history of art attach such exaggerated importance to the art of their own country. They don’t realize how international art really is. Picasso would hardly have created his cubism had he not seen African art. Matisse was influenced by Islamic traditions. Gauguin went as far as Tahiti to find new inspiration. We create ultramodern houses in our developing countries. We build superhighways on which we drive the latest model cars from all over the world. We use all sorts of up-to-date international styles in technology, science, education, medicine and what have you. What in the world should art be any different.¹⁴

Professor Atta Kwami when asked if he ever felt the need to reclaim an African identity in his art said that he grew up steeped in his culture and never felt the need to make a conscious effort to include it in his artwork.¹⁵ In this way Kwami is like the many students who felt that religion was deeply a part of them and not something they needed to proclaim. However, Kwami is still highly invested in teaching and researching the contemporary and traditional art of Ghana and doesn’t see why this interest should be considered in any way be paradoxical to his ‘international’ style.¹⁶

In the same vein Kojo Fosu writes, the late Vincent Kofi of Ghana warned against “slavish addiction” to the past to avoid creating art which “is static, unrealistic a vacuum unrelated to the present or future.” And yet they must not and cannot forget the art heritage

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¹¹ Ibid.

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¹³ Marshall Ward Mount. *African Art: The Years Since 1920*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. 1973, p.116

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Atta Kwami, interview.

¹⁶ Ibid.

of their past. For it is the past art culture which gives them conceptual inspiration, and therefore the uniqueness of their work.¹⁷

Professor Atta Kwami, along with many other artists of the new generation are aware of their existence in a post-colonial nation, and as such encourage their students in the pursuit of national culture – but they also do not let this fact bind them, or blind them to the international nature of art today.

An 'African Identity' For Sale?

Having come to the understanding that the Ghanaian artist was not limited by the demand that she portray an 'African identity' in order to be considered legitimate I was a bit surprised to visit the galleries in Accra and discover them filled with very sophisticatedly executed, but continuously repeated picturesque scenes of Ghanaian culture: fishing boats, market scenes, traditional drummers or horn players, and shapely women carrying head loads. In my conversations with Mrs. Francis Ademola, curator of The Loom, I soon came to realize that Ghanaian artists know their audiences.¹⁸ A work appearing in Accra will be seen by a few Ghanaian professionals and great deal of tourists. Just as the Wakamba carvers of Eastern Africa knew their audience and chose exotic animals and tall Masai tribesman to represent – so too do Ghanaian artist paint with a purpose in mind. They acknowledge that the painting one does for sale at one venue is not necessarily the painting that one does for sale at another. Nor is that a strictly African dilemma – artists the world over make aesthetic choices based upon their intended audience. One of the standing inequalities which African artists face, is that often making these choices means sending ones work to be shown overseas instead of in their own country. Fosu writes, "Many artists agree that art is an international language and must be shared. But they argue, and rightly so too, that Europe has enjoyed exclusive rights to seeing African art in Europe without sharing European art in Africa. This disparity can hardly be justified."¹⁹

One of the issues that I grappled with when I saw the art work on display at The Loom was that many of the works I saw were more sophisticated versions of the student work that I saw in Kumasi. For example the pen work of Frank Addai is very similar to that of Kate Baidoe's on display at the Art Alliance. Baidoe's were of women in traditional head scarves, and Ashanti akua'ba figures and Addai's of dancing women. My thoughts being that much of the student work, which I saw, was produced because of their institutions emphasis on portraying culture, therefore was the college focused on preparing students to

¹⁷ Fosu, p.168.

¹⁸ Francis Ademola, interview.

¹⁹ Fosu, p. 167.

produce work all within the same subject matter that appealed so much to the European and American tourists who visited the Accra galleries? My own answer to that important question is 'No'. The college focuses on culture because of the treat of Western cultural imperialism, but it does not limit its students' work solely to that realm. Students also receive extensive training in abstraction, portraiture, and realism – all of which often take them from the sphere of traditional culture. Additionally the work of many professors at the college is not in anyway limited solely to repeated scenes of picturesque tourists-friendly Ghana.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

The question of who benefits from the maintenance of culture, i.e. when it is preserved only because of a paying audience, has cropped up numerous times during my short stay in Ghana. Thus it was a very positive experience for me to speak with artists who seemed not be interested in blindly repeating past forms for economic gain, but were truly interested in examining the many cross-roads between the traditional and modern. I entered this project knowing almost nothing about contemporary or traditional African art and have emerged with so much more knowledge and experience than what is just contained within this paper. And I am so privileged to have been able to learn about it here in the place where is actually happening and not in a class room halfway across the globe. But there is so much more to the art world of Ghana than the few issues I have addressed here. I was particularly interested in the sign painters who line the roads of Kumasi with their work – which is often quite humorous and satiric. It would be so exciting to conduct a project centred on their workshops.

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Images – Appendix 1

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- Anonymous. Roaring Lion, wood . Collection of author, #26 p. 53.
- Antubam, Kofi. Carved doors for the Assembly Hall, Wood. Parliament House, Accra Ghana, #62 p. 128
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- Okeke, C. Uche. Fabled Brute, oil on hardboard. Collection of the artist. #70 p. 139. Maiden's Cry, pen and ink. Collection of the artist. #71 p. 139.
- Ondongo. Drummers, gouache on paper. Collection of Rolf Italiaander, # 35 p. 86.
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- Tall, Papa Ibra. The Stride of the Champion, oil on masonite. Collection of the artist. #39 p. 91
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Appendix 2

- Addai, Frank. Abstract Woman and Baby. Pen and Ink, 2005. Photograph taken with permission of artist.
The Musician. Pen and Ink, 2005. Photograph taken with permission of artist.
Crying Woman and Child. Pen and Ink. Photograph taken with permission of artist.
- Kwei, Foli. Musicians. Acrylic on canvas, 2005. Photograph taken with permission of artist
Hair-braiding. Acrylic on canvas, 2005 Photograph taken with permission of artist.
- Okyireh, Rexford. Boys Fighting. Oil on canvas, 2005. Photograph taken with permission of artist.
- Riverson, Emmanuel Brew. Early to Rise. Oil on canvas, 2005. Photograph taken with permission of artist
Unity. Oil on canvas, 2005. Photograph taken with permission of artist

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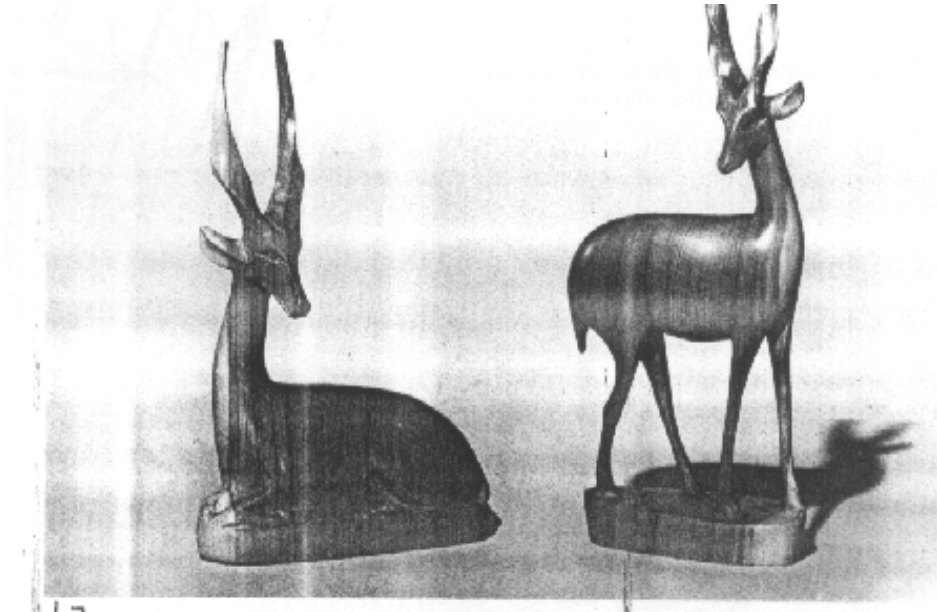
Copies of the following Artists Statement were provided to the author by Mrs. Francis Ademola. Curator of the Loom in Accra. 19 April 2005. In possession of the author and available at The Loom. Artists: Samual Agbenyegah (Samkobee), Robert Aryeetey (supplied to the Loom by Robert Aryeetey), Kofi Nduro, and Gabriel Eklou.

Appendix 1

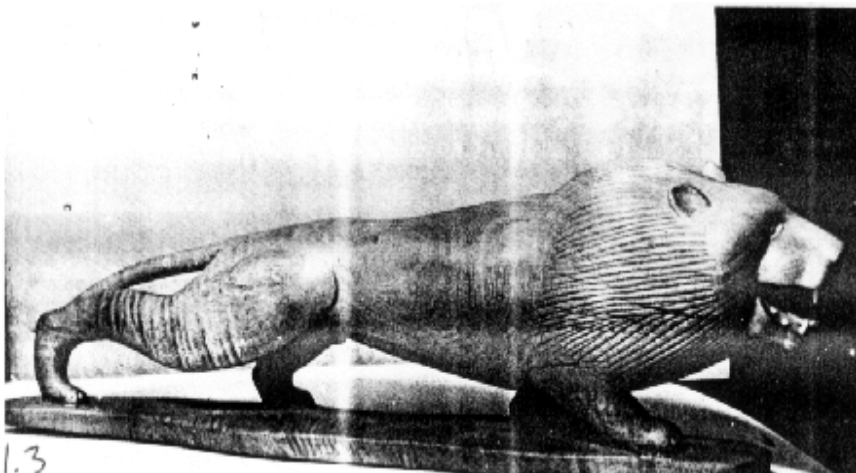
AFRICAN ART



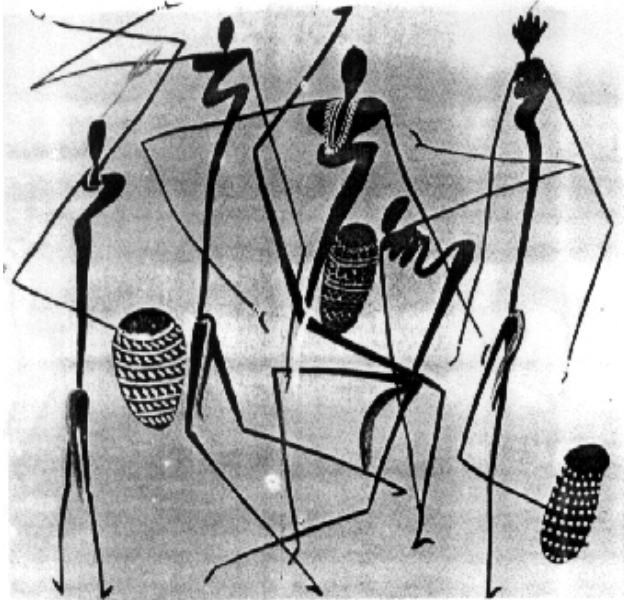
17 Lamidi Fakeye. Doors for church in Oke-Padi, Ibadan, Nigeria, wood. Single panel enlarged, Christ among the Elders.



1.2 25. Anonymous. Antelopes, wood. Collection of the author.

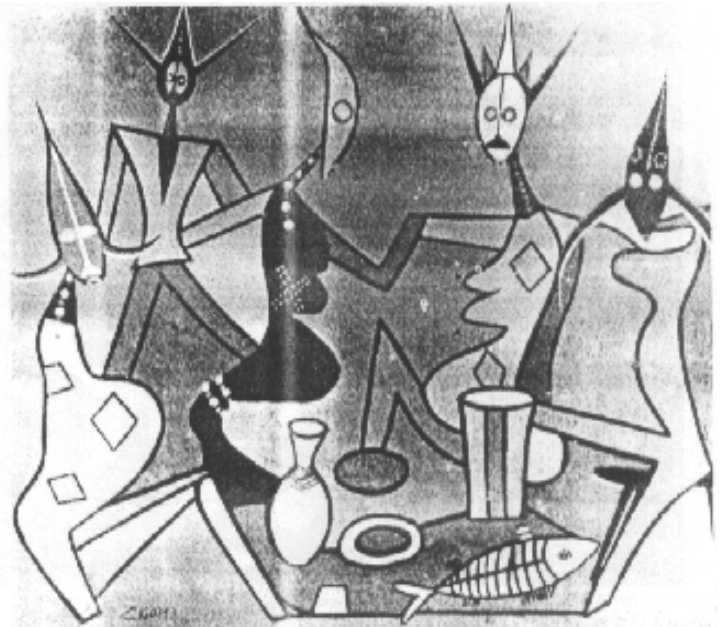


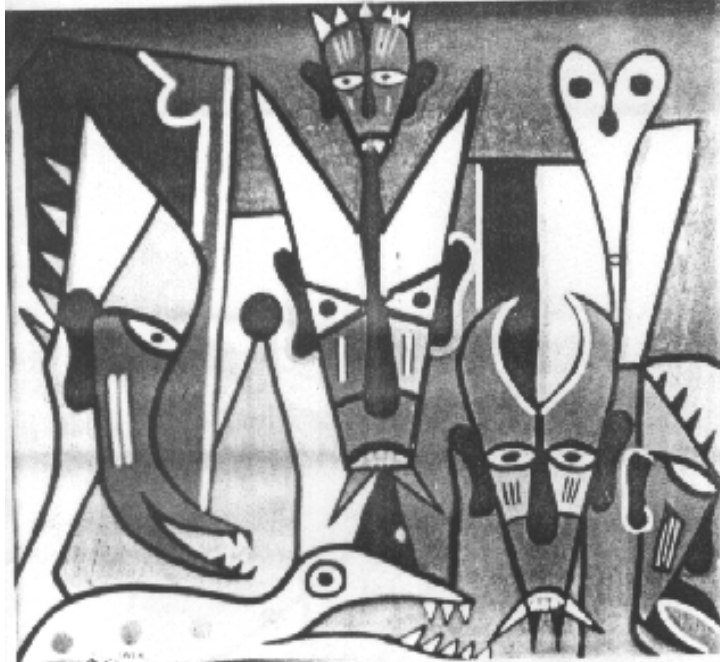
1.3 26. Anonymous Roaring Lion, wood. Collection unknown.



35. Ondongo. Drummers, gouache on paper.
Collection of Rolf Italiaander.

36. Zigoma. Figures, gouache on paper.
Collection of the artist.





37. Zigoma. Masks, gouache on paper.
Collection of the artist.

1.6

38. Thango, Composition, gouache on paper. Collection of Leo Alhadeff, Kinshasa, Republic of Zaire



1.7



1.8

38. Papa Ibra. Tall. *The Stride of the Champion*, oil on masonite. Collection of the artist

40. Papa Ibra. Tall. *Peace Will Come*, tapestry. Collection of La Manufacture Nationale de Tapisserie, Thies, Senegal



1.9



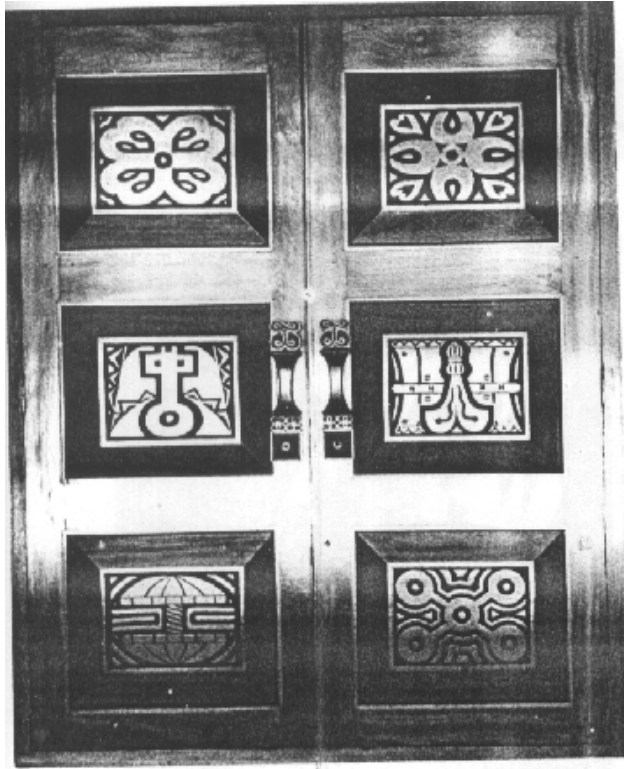
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68. Bruce, Onobrakpeya. *Quarrel between Ahwaire and the Tortoise and Erhako and Dog*, lino-cut. Collection of the artist



1.11

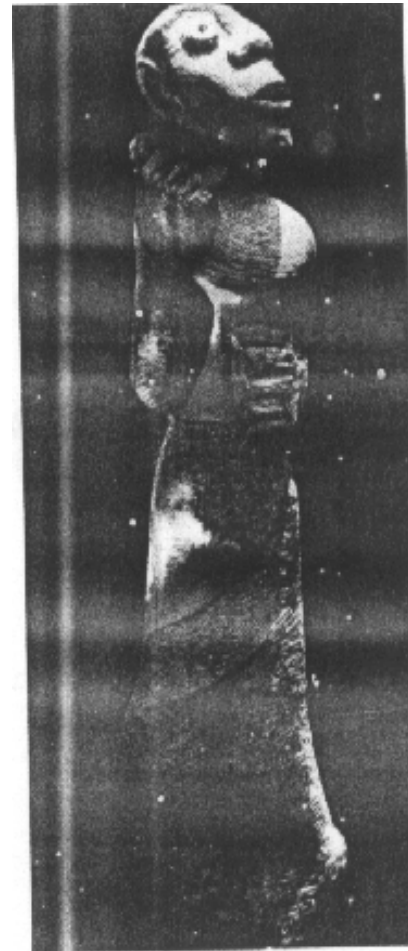
69. Bruce, Onobrakpeya *Three Spirits*, bronzed relief. Collection of the artist



1.12

62. Kofi, Antubam. Carved doors for the Assembly Hall, Wood. Parliament House, Accra Ghana

63. Vincent, Kofi. *Drummer*, wood. Collection of the artist

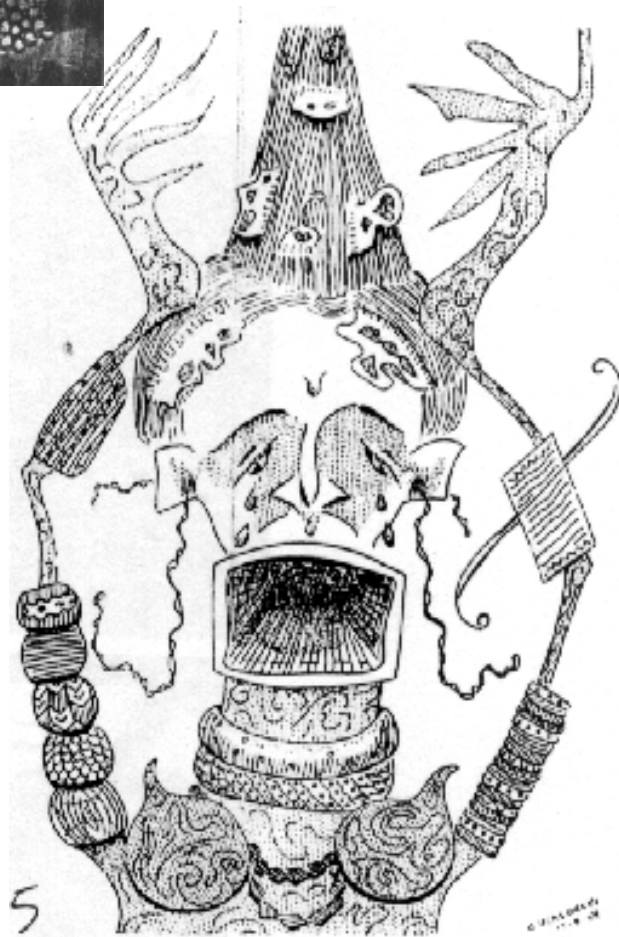


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1.14

70. C. Uche, Okeke, *Fabled Brute*, oil on hardboard. Collection of the artist



71. C. Uche, Okeke. *Maiden's Cry*, pen and ink. Collection of the artist

1.15



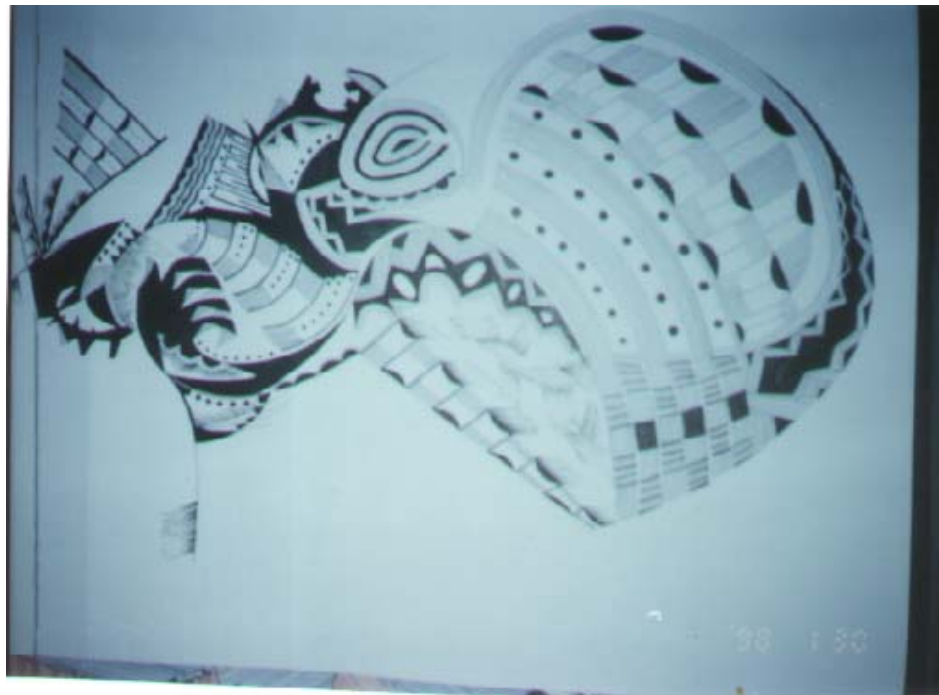
Appendix 2

- 2.1 Rexford, Okyireh. Boys Fighting. Oil on canvas, 2005. Photograph taken with permission of artist.



- 2.2 Foli, Kwei. Musicians. Acrylic on canvas, 2005. Photograph taken with permission of artist.

- 2.3 Foli, Kwei. Hair-braiding. Acrylic on canvas, 2005. Photograph taken with permission of artist.



- 2.4 Frank, Addai. Abstract Woman and Baby. Pen and Ink, 2005. Photograph taken with permission of artist.

- 2.5 Frank, Addai. The Musician. Pen and Ink, 2005. Photograph taken with permission of artist.



- 2.6 Frank, Addai. Crying Woman and Child. Pen and Ink. Photograph taken with permission of artist

- 2.7 Emmanuel, Brew Riverson. Early to Rise. Oil on canvas, 2005. Photograph taken with permission of artist



- 2.8 Emmanuel, Brew Riverson Unity. Oil on canvas, 2005. Photograph taken with permission of artist