THE WAY IT LOOKS: CONTEXTUALIZING EARLY PAINTINGS IN TRADITIONAL ART OF PREGOLD COAST ERA

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INTRODUCTION

ABSTRACT

Documentation of paintings in the history of African art in regions south of the Sahara is rare. It is rather common reading of wood sculpture and other three dimensional works as the mainstay of African art. However, art in West Africa is rife with paint. This paper studies six forms of paintings found within pre Gold Coast traditional art by ethnographic, historical and descriptive research. These are mural, body, fabric, hearth & bed, stool and sculpture painting. Observing through the philosophical lens of Contextualism, the authors recognise it as the most appropriate way of looking at this traditional art, since its attributes seem to facilitate the best means of experiencing understanding and evaluating this art as against other philosophical proffers.

Indexing terms/Keywords

Paint; Traditional; African art; sociocultural; contextualism; history.

Academic Discipline And Sub-Disciplines

African Art & Culture; Philosophy; History.

SUBJECT CLASSIFICATION

Art History

TYPE (METHOD/APPROACH)

Ethnographic, Historical and Descriptive & Direct participant Observation.

Background

Since prehistory, Palaeolithic men all over the continents of the world have proven themselves prolific painters, applying pigment to virtually everything within their living environment. They painted their bodies, cave walls and domestic utility items. The same practice occurred on the continent of Africa, Persisting through the ancient and medieval era. During the time of the Green Sahara between 8000 and 6000 BCE (Fosu, 1993), the entire region was well populated until the desertification gradually set in, prompting the migration of people.

These migrants from the Sahara regions to settle in the Upper and Lower Guinea area did not abandon the practice of their art, rather, they became established part of their tradition and culture as settlements conditions improved with time. From the Coastal areas to the uppermost regions of present day Ghana, one would observe different forms of art by the people attesting to the ubiquitous nature of paint as an artistic media.

The structure of this work is in four parts; we follow the statement of the problem with the traditional period, continue with the methodology, then comes the main discussion on the various mode of paintings. We then dilate on contextualism and its relevance to traditional Ghanaian art, and finally draw a conclusion.

Statement of the Problem

Painting in Africa, especially south the Sahara is usually forgotten by African Art historians in their documentation and presentation of the history of African art. Focus usually rests on wood sculpture as the major form of African art. This work is therefore undertaken to correct the anomaly by examining some forms of painting that were practiced during the pre-Gold Coast era of Ghana as well as use the philosophical approach of contextualism in experiencing, understanding and evaluating these works.

Traditional Period
Archaeologically, knowledge of agriculture and pottery is set about 2000-1500 B.C. (Cole and Ross, 1977). Maté (1966) avers that the movement of the ancestors to this country started about the middle of the thirteenth century and continued up to the early part of the sixteenth century at the latest. He details that the people who came in were the Akan, Moshii-Dagomba, Ga-Adangbe and Ewe. The Akans arrived in order of the Guan, Fante and Twi people respectively. The Fantes entered the country from Techiman, near the source of the Tano River, where they had made their home to occupy the coastal stretch of land from Cape Three Points to Cape coast in about A.D. 1400. It is believed that the Twi-speaking people were the last Akan section to enter the country in about A.D.1550. The earliest groups among these people to form themselves into states were the Adansi, Akwamu and Denkyira. Later, the Asante set up a state which became the most powerful kingdom in the country and remained so until 1901 when they were vanquished by the British (Boahen, 2003).

Anquandah (1982) affirms that the period A.D. 1000 to A.D. 1400 witnessed the emergence of the earliest towns and principalities with centralised political authority and social institutions in the Akan areas of Asebu, Ahanta, Fetu, Elmina, Abrem, Kommenda, Adanse, Twifo, Bono Manso and Begho. Typical Akan regalia associated with statehood such as the wooden stools, drums, ivory trumpets and military array were on display when Diego d’Azambuja – the Portuguese captain who built the Elmina castle arrived. It is evident, therefore, that the Edina monarchy and policy associated with the stool were first established prior to the European advent. At Bono Manso, periods of town development have been distinguished. The first period, spanning the thirteenth century and the second period spanning the fifteenth century. The foregoing offer some leading to the collection of autochthonous art forms within the Ghanaian culture (Asihene, 1978).

Methodology
We adopt qualitative research design employing ethnographic, historical and descriptive research methods in this study. Our target populations are the Upper East, Ashanti, Eastern and Volta regions of Ghana. Specifically accessing 25 respondents from Sirigu, Ahwiaa, Ntonso, Asokwa, Ayigya, Somanya and Tetekope. We select these communities based upon their historical and often current connection with traditional paint usage. We adopt two main sampling methods; purposive, and snowball. We also use direct participant observation, personal observation, informal interviews and focus group discussions. We subject data to qualitative analysis which is dialectical (Jorgensen, 1989) by transcribing and coding data under thematic categories. We analyse broader and local evolutionary trends, examine supports and tools, and determine application significance among ethnicities as we reasonably follow it by Geertz (1973) foundational thick description, to facilitate interpretation. We also couple constant comparison method and content analysis. Thus all three stages stressed by Patton (1987), in data analysis are explored; data organization, data reduction through summarization and categorization and finally, the identification and linking of patterns that arise in data.

Mural Painting
Courtney-Clarke in her brilliant work gives some sources of the paint, prepared and used across Africa in wall paintings. She recounts that, “yellow chalk-like pigment is a primary colour in wall painting and is found near water throughout West Africa (Clarke, 1990: 102).” She continues; “Red, black and ochre soils, abundant throughout Africa are ground into a fine powder and then mixed with water to form a paste” (P. 149). Though her work was done in the twentieth century, it reveals a continuation of the customs and art from traditional societies.

Mural paintings dates back to ancient times and could be found on the walls of prehistoric caves, especially those in the Lascaux caves in southern France, Spain, and Altamira. In the 20th century, the Cubist and Fauvists of Paris, the Mexican Revolutionary painters such as Diego Rivera, Jose Clement Orozco and David Alfaro, together with the depression era artists of the United States were some of the prominent muralists of the century (Britannica Concise Encyclopaedia, 2012). The Hausa of northern Nigeria decorate the exterior walls of their houses with murals around the late 19th century. The painted and low relief murals comprised clocks, and bicycles. They also made use of “china plates and brightly coloured enamel bowls,” (Willet, 1994). Willet further sites mural works found among the Dogons and the people of Benin. His studies show that the houses and granaries of the Dogons were decorated with rectangular relief works, similar to the marks found on the faces of their masks. The Author explains that the palace of the King of Benin was decorated with horizontally positioned flutings on both the interior and exterior walls. In Zimbabwe and Namibia, the San people paint murals in caves. Societies such as the Soninke of Mali, the Bushongo of Congo, the Iboos of Eastern Nigeria and some traditional communities of Mauritania paint and utilize murals artistically (Anaba, 1995). In Northern Ghana, Anaba explains that the development of Christianity boosted the development of the mural art, since traditional mural Artists were commissioned by the church to decorate chapels built in the region. He averred that the first church built in the northern sector, which was located in...
Navrongo, in the Kassena Nankana District, was copiously decorated with murals executed by indigenous mural artists in 1960. Anaba explains further that in the southern part of Ghana, mural works were basically used to beautify palaces, shrines and the headquarters of Asafo companies in the Central Region. It is important to note that dry media such as charcoal, dry cassava, stone or dry clay was freely used by the traditional artists. Mural painting thus flourished during the pre-Gold Coast era in both the North and Southern part of Ghana (Plates 1 & 2).

**Plate 1: The Researcher with Mme Asaase in her home.**

**Plate 2: A relief painting at Ejisu Shrine - Kumasi**

### Body Painting

Body painting is a form of body art that is integral to most cultures. Generally people engage in body paintings for adornments, rituals, entertainment, and identification. The human body is probably the oldest painting support beside cave walls. It is difficult to find one culture today whose people did not practice this form of art in one way or the other. Among some ethnicities in Africa, body painting is combined with scarification and cicatrices and other body markings. An example is of Bena women in Nigeria (Aronson, 1991). Body painting is practiced among several other cultures across Africa. Ndebele body painting is done in South Africa. Henna dye is also much used among North African women (Kreamer, 2010), and in other countries in Africa. Ulili body painting is practiced among Nigerian Igbo women, using *edo*, a yellow chalk-like pigment usually found by water bodies. “Krobo and Ga women in Ghana use vegetable sources of paint during the celebration of certain cultural rites” (Antubam, 1963:76).

Marijke (2005: 261) explains that a mixture of *boa*, some leaves and white clay are mashed together and sprinkled unto *dipo* girls for decoration. *Dipo* girls with sprinkled mixture of *boa* leave and white clay. Jefferson (1993:120), in offering an anthropological perspective to the practice stated that: “Painting and staining the body may have resulted from the simple impulse to beautify, though in some cases decoration has a ritualistic or supernatural purpose. In many tribes the body is oiled and covered with colour for ceremonial dances while some groups, the Hottentots for instance, practice body paintings to keep off insects, without any evident reason to decorate”. In addition body painting may be employed to terrify the enemy or to serve in a charm-like capacity to ward off evil or danger.

The Igbo of south western Nigeria, as mentioned earlier practice a form of body painting known as *ulili*. Different plant species that provide coloured liquid from their seed are used to make *ulili* designs. Women would use a sliver of wood or the tip of a knife to apply the paint, which stains the skin. It is said that the artist's desire is to create harmony, clarity, and precise marks that were compatible with the body, all of which remarked on a woman's morality and beauty… It must be noted here that although the “*ulili*” designs are temporal, the stains left on the skin last for about eight days before it fades away.

The Surma are noted to be most adept at body painting. They see their skin as the canvas of a painter, a medium to express themselves in paint. The patterns vary from warrior figures to frighten their enemies, to decorations to seduce the other sex. Men are seen as the better artists. Adult men paint their entire bodies with white clay. In general, Surma men go naked with their decorated bodies (Beckwith & Fisher, 2012).

Osei (2002) mentions that when Asantes lose very close relatives, the deceased is smeared with red clay on the foreheads which is smeared to reach the shoulders. Body Painting among the Krobo rite of passage are marked by initiation or separation rites which inducts an individual into his or her new status Huber (1993; 136). He further states that “there is a special feature deeply rooted in Krobo ritual which in some way reveals the idea of initiation...” In all the ceremonies that mark the transition from one stage to the other “mime” is used for body painting. *Nguo* is also used in some cases but mostly by traditional leaders and during some rites that mark the *Dipo* custom.
Body painting is an integral part of the ritual culture of the Krobos as most ritual ceremonies are accompanied with body paintings. These ceremonies range from fertility rites and naming ceremonies to initiation rites and ‘fetish’ rites among others.

In the performance of a conception and pregnancy ritual, white clay is used at the final stage: Huber (1993:140), “to complete the ceremony, the woman was ritually washed and marked with dots of white clay”; “when a girl menstruates during dipo, it is seen as a blessing and she is smeared with white clay Marijke (2005: 251).

Teyegaga, (1985: 39), reaffirms that the forehead, temples, breast, shoulders, arms and legs of initiates are decorated with dots of white clay before the sacred stone ceremony prior to a pregnancy test. Reddish clay locally known as boa, blood from animal sacrifice, red cam wood, special dyes called boa, soot from smoke, charcoal, talcum powder are used. Millet which is a traditional meal of the Krobo people is also used as a body painting medium on some occasions. During the celebrations of the ngmaYemi (millet eating) festival millet paste is applied on the traditional priest. “... after some have been offered to the deity and with the rest besmearing their foreheads, koniadzuemiehi (that their minds be sober) their breast... koneatswi mi edzo (that their hearts be gentle) and the sides of their body konianahewamisaminya (that they become strong and healthy), “...another assistant thereupon marks each candidate’s forehead, temples, breast, shoulders, arms and legs with boa powder of a reddish sandstone and in some places also with millet-flour, (Huber, 1993: 175) as seen in plates 3 & 4. No sane or civilized person goes out in the raw; everyone grooms, dresses, or adorns some part of their body to present to the world Schildkrout (2006).

Plate 3: Krobo girls going through initiation. Plate 4: Body Painting on right arm

Hearth and Bed Painting

Schneider (1999) alludes to the word (hearth) in reference to the nature and elements of Palaeolithic home setting. MacMorrighan (n.d) tells of Ayaba, the hearth-goddess of the Fon tribe of Benin, West Africa. The author explains that it was wood culled on behalf of her brother Loko—the spirit of trees—that allowed for fires to be kindled within the home and food to be cooked. Jordan (2004) adds that it is also conceivable that Ayaba may have been invoked, along with her brother (Loko), when medicines were prepared over her sacred flame for consumption.

Early homes in Ghana had hearths in either enclosed or open kitchens with its structure transforming from simple stones to more permanent clay-moulded props, a clear indication of change from a previously nomadic life to a more sedentary one. Appearing in the traditional Ghanaian kitchen, it changed further, making it more useful and lasting. To prevent the clay from cracking, as result from the heat it was painted daily with red ochre paint. Whether in an open or enclosed kitchen, traditional Akan women delighted themselves in the early morning painting of their hearths before setting fire to cook. Faber (1938) reports that "on ceremonious occasions the hearth was draped in red and the Vestal Virgins, the priestesses of the Roman deity of the hearth, wore a head-dress of red woollen threads in the form of a diadem", explaining that red was believed to protect them from evil forces. Probably the Akans covered their hearths (Plate 5) in red paint for similar reasons. Among the people of Asante the building of the hearth is a feminine role, and so is the painting of it. In the morning, the woman of the house clears the hearth of all ashes, charred coal and any pieces of wood. She then proceeds to paint – kwa using the plantain rag lying wet in the paint and start rubbing it all over the hearth. The rag is dipped again into the paint when it feels dryer in her hand and brought back rubbing over
the hearth. The hearth may be constructed in several different designs. There are those designed on little platforms in the corner of the kitchen floor. Others are designed to have a kind of shelf at the back. Sometimes this projection may rise to about half the interior wall height. During painting, platforms, back-shelves and wall projections are all painted. When the surface is dried, the varnish prepared from the left over fufu is mashed and applied – kuta as varnish using a fresh plantain fibre rag, resulting in a shiny patina on the surface.

Unlike hearths, the construction of the bed is a masculine role (Plate 6). Deemed as heavy duty assignment, the role could parallel the construction of the house itself which is the lot for men. Painting the bed is approached the same way as that of hearths, which is also feminine role. The only difference is that after painting the bed, which may be located in one corner of the room, one goes ahead to paint the whole floor also. Beds are not varnished, and painting does not have to be done daily but weekly. Painting of hearths and beds in traditional homes are done primarily for maintenance. It is reasonable that hearths that are daily exposed to fire are painted daily and beds are painted weekly because the surfaces of beds go through a different form of stress; weight in this case, other than the heat for the hearth.

Traditional Ghanaian core values upheld the woman as an effective wife, mother and home manager. In order to honourably deploy these characteristics, the woman of the house creatively seeks out and initiates skilful actions that will make her the delight of her husband, the joy of her children and the happiness of the wider extended family and strangers. By engaging in such initiatives including these paintings, she distinguishes herself as a valuable and resourceful woman of worth. E\_nye \_sb\_aa \_b\_ia\_a \_ne\_ b\_aa, which literally means “Not every woman is a real woman” (Antwi, 2015).

Fabric Painting/Printing

Adu-Akawboa (1994) and Anquandah (2006) affirm that before the introduction of weaving in Ghana, many employed the bark of trees for clothing. The commonest of them being the k\_yer\_ny\_ken tree (Antiaris Africana). The process involved the beating of the bark with clubs or sticks to loosen their fibres, after which it is washed, dried and beaten again to soften it before finally being used. And that the indigenous textile industry has been carried out by the Asantes, Ewes, and the people of the Northern part of Ghana. Asantes produce the popular Kente, and the Ewes, the Ewe Kete, woven especially among the Anlos of the Keta lagoon area, as well as those in Kpetoe and Kpando. The Northerners on the other hand produced the Fugu cloth. The Kente and Fuguweru both woven fabrics. The Asante’s however produced other fabrics like the dark brown Kuntunkuni, the brick-red Kobene and the black Bris\_i which are dyed fabrics, the Nti\_amu\_u or Adinkra which is hand stamped with Adinkra designs and the N\_w\_om\_u\_u which is made up of large strips of cotton cloth hand-sewn together with coloured yarns. Other kinds of Adinkra cloths exist which are not suggestive of funerary cloths on the bases of their colours which is characterized by light or bright backgrounds and they are Kw\_asi\_adia\_d\_Adinkra or Sunday Adinkra and means fanciful wear that are suitable for festive occasions or even daily wear Adu-Akawboa (1994).

The story behind the production of this cloth by Asantestraditionally run that, the king of Gyaman named Adinkra, annoyed the Asante Hene by making a replica of the sacred stool of Ashanti, and for that reason war was declared on him. He was captured wearing the Adinkra cloth. The Ashanti’s later forced the war prisoners of the Gyamans to teach them the technique of making this fascinating cloth. Another version states, after conquering Kofi Adinkra, the Gyaman Hene the designs were found on his stool after bringing it to Kumasi. The Asante’s are currently the sole producers of the Adinkra prints. The Adinkra cloth was originally a woven cotton fabric dyed with Kuntunkuni a local dye processed from the bark of the Badie tree and stamped with a variety of Adinkra designs.

Traditionally, the cloth was used exclusively by royalty and spiritual leaders for very important sacred ceremonies and rituals. The printing process entails stamping one symbol at a time onto large sheets of cotton cloth. The stamps are cut from pieces of calabash and the dye, Adinkraaduro, is prepared by boiling the bark of Badie together with iron slag.
Originally the Adinkra cloth was printed on the ground, however today raised platforms with sack coverings act as the printing table. In addition to its traditional sacred usage, Adinkra cloth process (Plate 7) today, is also used to make clothing for such special occasions as festivals, church-attendance, weddings, naming ceremonies and initiation rites.

The indigo plant is a widespread plant introduced from Sierra Leone to Cameroon and even Equatorial Guinea. It is reported by Schumach&Thonn (1860), to have been particularly cultivated in Sierra Leone, and Ghana. The Baule of central Cote d’Ivoire heavily used it in dyeing cloths. The South Western Nigerians refer to the indigo plant as ‘elu' using it in a kind of batik technique dyeing. In Sierra Leone the ‘Gara cloth’ result from dyeing a locally woven cotton cloth called “country cloth” that had a wide local use and export base. It was an art, taught Temme women in Kabala-the Northern Province of Sierra Leone by Madinka traders who knew about it through their commerce with the people of Guinea.

Clarke reports that, Mali women painted the “mud cloth” using a dark liquid obtained from boiling the bark of the walo tree and leaves of the n’golama tree. A strongly toned chequered cloth results after a series of painting layers upon layers, interspersed with washing and white gluing whatsoever. They are classified into two main categories; state stools and domestic stools.

Sarpong (1971) avers that before the introduction of chairs by Europeans, every Akan had many of these seats for use in his house. The introduction of chairs has not put an end to the importance of stools. For even now by far the greatest majority of the houses have more stools than chairs, the author continued to expound that it would not be easy to find a house without a stool. This was true in 1971 when it was stated, however today other forms of furniture have usurped the place of stools in most Akan homes, until the carving centre located at the Ahwiaa village where stools are usually produced, currently faces a threat of extinction for want of sustained labour. Usage of the stool is not limited to the palace alone, but to the entire household of the Akan traditional society. The stool has been the seat for all household chores and the seat for the reception of guests as well. There are several kinds of stools: Firstly the ordinary white stools carved from the Sess and Nyamedua wood which are both white wood. Besides the periodic washing and white-washing, which the Akan decency and self-respect demand, nothing much is done to these stools. Then the silver stools; these are stools which have been entirely plated with silver. Very few indeed. In the third group, there is a single known stool that falls under the name the Golden stool.

Stools are also classified according to the sex of the user. There are men’s stools and women stools (generally presented by a bride-groom to his bride) and stools used by both men and women. The social status of the persons who use stools for official purposes, affords still a third division of stools. We have the Ahennwa (chief’s stool) the Ahemmadaa (queen’s stool) and the Adammadaa (literally the two-penny stool i.e. the poor man’s stool) Priests have their special stools with single centre supports, and so have certain attendants at the chief’s house, e.g. the Padlock stool is used by the chief’s spokesman.

A further division of the stool is provided by the names given to them. There are special types of stools which more or less serve as the patterns for the carvers. Five of these stool-models are: The porcupine stool upon which sits the members of the chief’s council; the moon stool, used by ordinary people of either sex; the Draught board stool, the Amulet stool and the Leopard stool (Sarpong, 1971).
Blackening of Stools

On the fateful day of blackening, which is also a day of mourning, all the chiefs, sub-chiefs and elders are to be present. The stools are brought out of their abode under the supervision of the Nkonwasuafoo (Stoolbearers), the designated office in charge of royal stools, and assembled in the palace hall from that of the earliest departed ancestor to the most recent. First, libation of alcohol is offered the ancestors to praise them for their gallantry and thoughtful provision for posterity; their blessings are invoked on the day’s ceremony. This prayer is offered to the predecessors by pouring on all the stools from the eldest to the youngest. Next, eggs are broken into a calabash mixed with the spider web, soot and sheep’s blood. This mixture is applied to smear the whole surface of the stool to be blackened. Larbi (1993) indicates the inclusion of gun powder without mentioning spider’s web. After this process of smearing the mixture with the hand all over the stool, the stool becomes a sacred object, known as AkonwaTuntum (Black Stool, Plate 8). This stool, however, is a sacred religious object with taboos and prohibitions, and it is revered by the elders of the state. On posing the question whether human blood may ever be part of the mixture for blackening? The response given was that under no circumstance should that happen. However, Perbi’s (2011) comment that “Slaves did suffer a number of disabilities. The first was the possibility of being sacrificed in accordance with traditional customs and religious beliefs” suggests that, the idea of human blood in blackening of stools, especially during the traditional pre-Gold Coast era cannot be entirely ruled out.

Apart from the great need to preserve this royal and religious object by reason of its continual existence to receive offering and homage from the state, the black stool is painted this way to assume habitation of the spirit of the departed. It is imperative to indicate that the most used stool of the ancestor while living on earth is the one blackened. The items involved in the mixture; spider web, eggs, soot and gunpowder are believed to possess some preservative abilities that prevent the wood from decay. This traditional approach to conservation has been scientifically confirmed (Larbi, 1993). As a royal and religious object these stools (ancestors) are marked to occasionally receive ceremonial food and drinks during the Adae and other festivals. During such times the Nkonwasoafoo would offer mashed yam and eggs, alcohol and blood to the ancestors. Sprinkling blood and alcohol continually on a stool will eventually darken anyway. It is better therefore to blacken them than leaving them in their natural state.

Black is usually associated with night, death, loss and ancestors. Nana Frimpong explains that, since black remains the colour of mourning, it is appropriate for the living to commemorate the dead with this colour in order to reflect their state of mourning and sadness at the departure of the ancestors. He further alludes to the fear ascribed to things black, saying the living must venerate the royal ancestors with deep respect and the stools are blackened to invoke this feeling.

Plate 8: Nkonwasoani (Stool-bearer) attending to Black stools. Source: Cole and Ross 1977

Sculpture Painting

The traditional sculptor or carver did occupy a very important place regarding works contributed to the repertoire of traditional art forms. In addition to carving stools, he carved drums, deity and initiation masks, ancestral figurines, games, linguists’ staff, sword handles, handles for agricultural implements, and even domestic utensils.
Painting of sculpture was practiced by traditional Ghanaian artists using extract from the wild indigo plant that commonly grew in West Africa. Schuman & Thonn (1860), report that the gara or West Africa wild indigo plant was extensively cultivated in Sierra Leone and Ghana, and widely used in several countries in West Africa. They refer to its multiple usefulness thus; “...used to dye blue to blue-black cotton cloth, bark cloth (formerly), raffia and other vegetable fibres, leather, hair and wood carvings. Cole and Ross (1977: 108), present one of the best example of sculpture works painted with this dye in their book, entitled; “Queen Mother with Child seated in Asipim Chair” (Plate: 9).

Plate 9: Queenmother with child seated on asipim chair; possibly finished with indigo dye. Source: Cole and Ross (1977).

Contextualism

It is curious why great philosophers, including Schelling (1800) draws the conclusion that the fulcrum of philosophy rests on the philosophy of art. The assertion is buttressed by the intractable nature the definition of art has presented itself to the community of philosophers to date. Certainly, not each one of them made it a concern of pursuit, a few such as Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Hegel and Sartre did. The task hangs on and it is no gain say to surmise that it is still arduous today as it was in the beginning.

Both domains of art and philosophy are singularly and significantly products of the mind, Levinson (2007) avers, and are so deeply rooted in cultures. The testimony that these two domains exude in reflecting any particular culture is perhaps matchless to anything else in them, the author continues.

In proffering a philosophical aesthetics for illumination on the art form of traditional Ghanaians, an art by a particular people, at a particular time, in a particular place, aesthetic contextualism looms up, and that reasonably to our minds it seems, as against, on one hand, different sorts of formalism, structuralism, and empiricism, and on the other hand, to different sorts of relativism, nihilism, and deconstructionism. Levinson (2007) captures the definition in the most lucid form: Contextualism is the thesis that a work of art is an artefact of a particular sort, an object or structure that the product of human invention at a particular time and place, by a particular individual or individuals, and that that fact has consequences for how one properly experiences, understands, and evaluates works of art. The author clearly and reasonably establishes the appropriate need to base our approach to every art on where it is coming from. In other words the context of a work of art must inform the way it is experienced, understood and evaluated. From this perspective therefore, "artworks are essentially historically embedded objects" (Levinson, 2007), hence such works are devoid of any form of attributes other than the generative contexts in which they arise and within which they are proffered.

Looking at Traditional Ghanaian Painting with Contextualism

The foregoing reasonably situates Ghanaian traditional painting in an observable perspective of contextualism as an appropriate means of gaining insight and illumination. How does contextualism help in this regard?
Contextualism augers for effective appreciation of artworks by acknowledging a number of situationally generative factors that help us to appreciate works of art. We consider four of these points, and follow with a dilation. a) Contextualism recognizes and acknowledges the maker(s) of artwork(s) and their unique historico-cultural circumstance. b) Contextualism recognizes the intentional efforts people making contribution towards their existence. c) Contextualism considers facilities and difficulties of processing art. d) Contextualism goes beyond the causal how, to what the work communicates.

a) Contextualism recognizes and acknowledges the maker(s) of artwork(s) and their unique historico-cultural circumstance. Regarding makers of any art, contextualism sees historically situated individuals with aims and intentions, thoughts and feelings working to communicate contents or convey experiences through concrete media, and as such, antecedents, and culturally rooted significance must all be taken cognizance of.

To illustrate, the paint discussed in this work, even though originating within the borders of Gold Coast and Ghana, have specifically extracted from certain ethnicities having their own unique aims, intentions, thoughts and feelings guarding its use. In spite of the heavy proliferation of Adinkra designs emanating from Asante textiles, in global media, the contextual appreciation of its historical origin and working significance remains limited to a few people.

b) Contextualism recognizes the intentional efforts people make as contribution towards their own existence. In focusing on art contextualism involves itself in accessing the existential aspiration of people, in that, art practice reflects a culture's attitude towards life. The art of post-World War Two carried a lower existential aspiration as compared to the art of pre-war era. The despair and disillusionment conveyed in the art of the 1950s onwards becomes evident. This stance has consistently continued to dovetail into postmodern and contemporary art. In similar vein, traditional Ghanaian artists employed paint to protect, decorate and communicate, as an expression of hope and preservation of their existential aspirations.

c) Contextualism considers facilities and impediments peculiar to specific production situations. The resources available to people within a particular culture, their provenance, facilities and impediments, providence and upheavals, all these work together as generative factors to determine the outcome of cultural productions or art. The soul art of the Blus at Tetekope among the Ewes of the Volta Region will serve a good example here. The Kla is composed of a painted calabash, executed under specific ritual conditions and kept in a fisherman's net and hanged on the wall of its owner's bedroom. This sophisticated artwork of the Blus is evocative of an early philosophical survival psychological scheme of a minority clan who find themselves among a larger Ewe ethnicity.

d) Contextualism goes beyond the causal how, to what the work communicates. Limiting experience of artworks to their formal and empirical qualities only has its problems, since it risks the exclusion of vital historical and cultural currents central to the life of the people but not directly experienced. It is fascinating to appreciate the fact that in spite of the vast visual difference between Sirigü mural paintings and Asante hearth paintings, the two have strong common concepts of traditional society's desirability of the woman as adept preservers and managers of the home.

Conclusion

Paint is a ubiquitous element in most art forms, and ancient and traditional art of Ghana was no exception. As observed since Palaeolithic times, people expressed themselves through appropriate media sourced from their environment. This was the practice through the ancient Saharan culture, ancient Egyptian kingdoms, persisting through the migration of ancient kingdoms and during their resettlement in other parts of the continent including West Africa. Painting has its role among the people and their culture, specifically in traditional Ghanaian art. It is however certain that the use of paint as a universal art medium may bear degrees of semblances in its usage among various cultures however, it would take a working aesthetic philosophy such as contextualism to illuminate the arts of such "little worlds" that were overlooked during the era of "grand narratives" to borrow Lyotard’s(1984) phrase. It provides a recommendable avenue by serving an appropriate means of immersing oneself into effective appreciation of the local art of any particular people.

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