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Re-Examining the Akan Gold Weight and its Possible Reuse

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Abstract- Generally, Gold weights(called mrammou in the Akan language) are weights made of brass and used as a measuring system by the people of Akan in West Africa. This was used for weighing gold dust which was the currency until that was replaced by paper money and coins. These gold weights look like miniature models of everyday objects. In the Akan society, gold weights have played a significant part so far as the tradition and culture and the economy are concerned. The gold weights have several cultural and symbolic undertones that require a study and an understanding by modern society. Hence the study was conducted to revealed philosophical, cultural, and an outstanding value attached to the gold weights. This was attained by using qualitative research design and research instruments such as purposive and convenience sampling techniques. Interview and observation were the two main data collection tools used. However, the long hours of inquiry with key respondents in the naturalistic fieldwork which was peculiar of phenomenological study such as this aided the researcher in gaining in-depth information and understanding of what gold weights represent and its significance in the tradition and customs of the people of Akan.

Keywords: *gold weight, akan.*

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I. Introduction

Gold weights have for centuries been used by the peoples of West Africa, Sudan, and even beyond the Sahara Desert. They created objects from gold mined and controlled by the Akan of present-day Ghana. To better control and regulate the trade in gold, Akan merchants and rulers of the time developed brass weights called mrammuo which was used as the set standard units of measurements. The earliest weights were in geometric forms that reflected the gold trade's friendly links to North African Islamic symbols. Figurative imageries were later developed with inspiration by the great philosophies of Akan proverbs. The Akan society has from the time of old communicated accepted realities and practical guidance through symbols and proverbs which have been inspired and in cooperated into gold weights till today.

a) *The Akan*

Akan in contemporary Ghana is the largest ethnic group occupying five of the ten regions of Ghana; namely, Central Region, Western Region, Eastern Region, Ashanti Region and the Brong-Ahafo Region respectively (Sangaparee, 2013). Before independence, they were the people of Akyem, Akwapim, Asante, Bono, Fante, Kwahu, Sefwi and Wassa groups which virtually spoke identical tonal languages (the Akan language group) and were closely related, sharing many elements of culture and a single-origin- the Akan traces its ancestral route from a lineage. Asantes, for instance, is believed to have come from a hole and migrated to their current settling location led by Nana Dwaben Serwaa (Brobbey, 2016). Perhaps, some Asantes upon migrating settled at places like the Bono, Fante, Akwapim, etc. before getting to the then Asante land. The Akans are also believed to have migrated to their current location from the Sahara Desert and Sahel region of West Africa into the forest region around the eleventh century. The Akans kept expanding their territories through wars where small independent ethnic states in 1901 surrendered to Asantes which with time got to be influenced with their culture and traditions thereby making them practically Akans. Clans; *"ntɔn"* or *"ntorɔ"* of the Akan from time immemorial to today are similar as people from a clan were not accepted to marry because it was believed Akans were one regardless of their different location or a slight difference in their cultures (Brobbey, 2016).

From the ninth to the nineteenth century, farming, gold mining and trading were the dominating livelihoods of the Akans. The trade-in gold increased during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The Akans through the Trans-Saharan gold trade used gold, *"sika kɔkɔɔ"* to purchase slaves from further up north (located between the Senegal and Niger rivers) and Mali (located around the lower part of the Niger River). The abundance of gold in especially the Asante land for private and commercial purposes made the name Gold Coast by the Europeans before independence in 1957. The Portuguese, the Dutch, the British and other imperial powers in their quest for Akan gold traded with Akans- the Akan states waged wars on neighbouring states in their geographic areas to capture people and sell them as slaves to the Europeans (Portuguese) who subsequently sold the enslaved people along with guns to Akan states in exchange for Akan gold.

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b) Gold-Weight

Akan gold-weights were not only related to ethnicity but also, trade relations and court proceedings. There are available records of a vibrant market at an ancient site called 'Bergo' in the present-day Brong-Ahafo area. This market attracted merchants from all over the world especially from Mende, Julla as well as from parts of Northern Africa. Although it will be guessed that perhaps there were no gold-weights around 1100 AD, there was evidence of casting at a place called the '*dwomfo* quarters'; a casting village like the present-day wood village at Sokoban in Kumasi (Owusu, 2016). It must be then recalled that as early as 1400 BC, records prove that Mansa Musa travelled to Mecca with much gold, which also attracted attention to West Africa. With the presence of all these merchants there arose the need to breed a way as to how much of gold needed to exchange for a particular item brought by these merchants like cloths, beads and brass basin. Hence the needs for a benchmark- this situation facilitated the use of a type of seed then the introduction of a stone disc from Mali and Timbuktu (Owusu, 2016). Akan gold-weights locally known as *"mrammuo"* are three-dimensional miniature models executed in copper, silver, brass or any choice of an alloy of an Akan goldsmith. They were measuring tools used in determining the value of gold dust, "*sika futuro"* from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century in daily activities from markets to royal treasuries, and the payment of state taxes and tolls (Lucina, 2011). Gold weight motifs as illustrations to proverbs and sayings also become the emblems of tradition and social values.

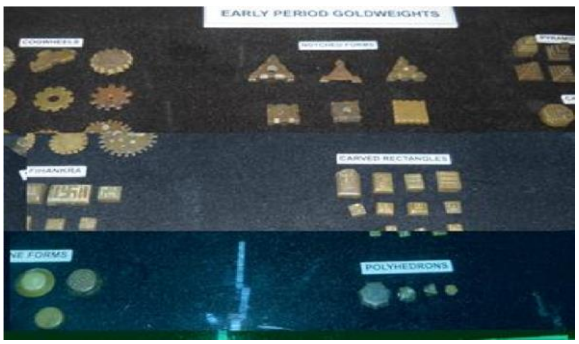

Figure 1: A sample image of Akan Gold - weights, "Mmramuo", 2016. Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon. Image by the researcher



Figure 2: A sample of Akan Gold-weights, *"Mmramuo"*, 1954. Image size: 2048 × 1477. Baltimore Museum of Art

Gold dust was then the currency used by the Akans until it was replaced with cowries, "*sedeɜ"* and later money in paper and coins in the nineteenth century. All weights can be divided into two broad categories which are: natural and not cast in metal like seeds, stones, bones which were used early on and those produced using the lost wax method whereby the molten metal poured into a mould created using a wax model is heated to melt the wax and the product (metal gold-weight) is retrieved. The seeds represented the smallest units of Akan gold-weights and measures which included "*powa"* and "*kokwa"* among others (Payne, 2015). A tiny, hard, red and black spotted seed, locally called "*damma"* of Abrus *precatorius*, a tree commonly found in the tropics were used long before the gold weights were cast in metal.



Figure 3: Abrus *precatorius* seeds, *"Damma"*

The cast gold-weights' existence prompted goldsmiths to produce other equipment that was used in helping to weigh the gold-dust, such as the cast brass containers used for storing gold dust, "*adaka and kuduo"*, shallow brass scoops used to remove impurities, "*famfa"* and highly decorative brass spoons, "*nsawa"* for putting the dust onto scales, "*nsania"*. Casters were also made in two different sizes of brass balance scales, the larger, "*akontuma"* were used to weigh big amounts and the smaller, lighter and delicate scales, "*mframa nsenia"*, literally wind scales. The forms of the gold-weights were generally geometric and figurative- the geometric styled weights provided an identifiably consistent weight system suitable for

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commerce and are believed to predate the figurative form. The figurative forms of the Akan gold-weights emerged in 1800 with the establishment of the Asante kingdom in 1750 AD when the Asante's used artisans from Denkyira to do the casting. These artisans in doing their work created works that depicted their stories and their past (Owusu, 2016) and also their moral values; hence the synonym "Proverb Weights" (Payne, 2015). Gold-weights were status symbols often gifted to men of office, such as priests, soldiers and diplomats, as well as to newly married men. A wealthy man may have owned a collection of more than a hundred weights- the number of weights owned by an Akan determined how worthy and respected the person was as that determined how much purchases and commerce a person could be of. The Paramount Chief, "*Asantehene*" and other chiefs had weights cast in gold, while the Queen Mother, "*Ohemaa*" occasionally had sets made of silver (Payne, 2015). According to Fiona Sheales, Bowdich claimed although gold weights were mainly cast in brass, Asantehene Osei Bonsu's scales, blow pans, boxes and weights were made of the purest gold.



Figure 4: A scale, *"Nsania"*, a decorative brass spoon, *"famfa"* and other Akan Gold-weights. Image size: 544 × 613



Figure 5: A cast brass container use for storing gold-dust, *"kuduo"*

II. Methodology

The qualitative research design has been used for the entire research in gathering data and analysis. This method was realized to be appropriate for the study due to its probing nature and the ability to systematically describe phenomena (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Looking for an in-depth description of the cultural and social significance of gold weights would require looking for views from the very people who produce and keep and use them. This can best be carried out using the qualitative approach and not in a statistical form as in quantitative research.

The researcher intentionally focused data collection by using instruments such as observations and semi-structured interviews using prepared interview guides on respondents. The gathered data were analysed qualitatively.

III. Philosophical Connotations of the Akan Gold-Weights

Akan gold-weights which take up the collective "*adinkra*" symbols in three-dimensional forms like *"owuo atwedeɜ baako nforo"*, *"nyansapɔ"* and *"gye Nyame"* basically preserved the cultures and values of the Akans by documenting past events, sending messages and symbolised proverbs. The themes and forms of the Akan gold-weights were enriched with oral Akan histories which symbolised the significant and well-known stories notably executed to be passed down to other Akan generations. Each gold-weight told a story, riddle or gave codes of conducts that helped guide the way Akans lived. "*Oware"*, a common Akan indoor brain game normally played by elders is portrayed with gold-weight as it also symbolized the Akan badge of office in chieftaincy- the stool; hence, the bottom looking like the stool. The "*oware"* as well as the one with two people playing also symbolizes an event that happened at Fehiase. Ntim Gyakari, the then chief went to Fehiase to play "*oware"* in public and disaster fell while playing the game. That is the import of the saying *"Ntim asoa ne dɔm akɔ bɔ ne man wɔ Fehiase,* meaning Ntim destroyed his township at Fehiase in English. It tells how keen we should be in our term of authority and to be much conscious of how best to preserve what we have.



Figure 6: Akan gold-weight, Two people playing "oware"

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Figure 7: Akan gold-weight, *"Oware"*

Gold-weights which bore symbols of animal motifs reflected similar connotations as leopardlike figures with serpentine bodies symbolized character as according to common Akan folklore; "the leopard never loses its spots even in the rain". Similarly, the motif of a tortoise symbolized preparedness, since it never knows when it will die, so it carries its shell along wherever it goes as an icon of coffins on its back as a reminder that irrespective of whom anyone is death is inevitable.



Figure 8: Akan gold-weight, Tortoise *"Akyekyedɜ"*. Image size: 159 × 244



Figure 9: Akan gold-weight, Tortoise *"Akyekyedɜ"*. Image size: 500 × 304



Figure 10: Akan Gold Weight depicting their daily life. Image size: 736 × 549



Figure 11: Akan Gold Weight, Traditional sandals Image size: 544 × 350

a) *Reusing the Akan gold-weights in Contemporary times*

Today's mass-production methods provide a thriving tourist market with weights as souvenirs and collectables; they lack the refinement of earlier specimens. Authentic gold-weights are now found mostly in museums and private collections (Payne, 2015). The gold-weights are also collected to tell their respective philosophical connotations assigned to their designs. As teaching aids in exhibition spaces, they are mounted in cultural-based institutions to tell the lives of the past generations of the Akans.

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Figure 12: Akan gold-weights exhibited to depict farm tools of Akans (their way of life), 2016. Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon. Image by the researcher



Figure 13: Akan gold-weights exhibited to depict the badge of office of their respective chiefs (their way of life), 2016. Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon. Image by the researcher

The aesthetic nature of the gold-weights, now perceived as art, makes people buy them from the open market as well as museums and art centres. The varied sizes now produced range from very small ones which are used as bead pendants ends for traditionally designed neck wears, key holders and hair accessories whereas the quite larger ones, at times, drowned with decorative textiles like kente fabric are used as decorative pieces both at homes and offices. The gold-weights are used as "abɔsodeɜ" of various shapes with different meanings which is worn by chiefs



Figure 14: Akan gold-weight used as a keyholder. Image by the researcher



Figure 15: Akan gold-weight used as "abɔsodeɜ" by chiefs. Image by the researcher

The gold-weights also at times portrayed the reproductive lives of the Akans. The erotic illustrations perhaps were given to newly married couples and also could be a symbolic representation of the hazards of wars and as such to prevent them as women were brutally raped by some of the soldiers. The private collection of Tribal Art Treasures consists of some of the erotic Akan gold-weights being sold online.



Figure 16: Akan erotic gold-weight for sale online. Private Collection. F.d.G in NL/Tribal Art Treasures



Figure 17: Akan erotic gold-weight for sale online. Private Collection. F.d.G in NL/Tribal Art

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IV. Conclusion

Outlining the genesis of gold-weights in general till contemporary times exposes the versatility in their respective uses. Akan gold-weights have been used not only in commerce but also for purposes of documentation, sending messages as well as proverbial representations. In no doubt are Akan gold-weights an embodiment of education when used and preserved properly.

Documentation forms of Akan culture embodied in its gold-weights are to be paid much attention to and likewise extended to the cyberspace- when the historical and philosophical underpinnings of Akan gold-weights are studied in detail and documented properly (written and virtually online either than oral sources mostly), they can safely be used as a tool for cultural education in Ghana and beyond. Art talks and related programs on Akan gold weights must be frequently organised to extend more insights of the Akan culture to researchers, tourists and the upcoming generations. Also, Akan gold-weights which serve as artefacts in cultural institutions and other exhibition spaces must be well preserved.

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