

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Talking Headdress: *Tekua*, the Proverbial Language among the Fante of Elmina, Ghana

Wendy Aku Sika Mamiya¹ & Daniel Kofi Brako^{2*}

¹Department of Music and Dance, University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast
akusikawendy@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0057-0439>

²Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast
dbrako@ucc.edu.gh, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0057-0439>

*Corresponding author: dbrako@ucc.edu.gh

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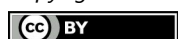
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Abstract

Silent yet loud, headdresses make explicit statements about a person or a particular culture. In many cultures, specific headdresses explicate cultural nuances such as proverbial sayings. One of such headdresses is the *tekua* of the Fante, Elmina. The avenues for showcasing these headdresses are during special occasions such as festivals and marriage ceremonies and thus serve as a medium for communication. With a theoretical anchorage in the concept of Stuart Hall's cultural representation to advance discussions on weaving proverbs in the *tekua*, this exploration interrogates the integration of proverbs in making *tekua* at Elmina. Through the lenses of a qualitative research approach, this study adopts an ethnographic design and the instruments for collecting data include participant observations and semi-structured interviews. The results show that *tekua* is a proverbial language which is dotted with symbols to communicate as espoused in Hall's cultural representation theory. Also, through this artforms, proverbs are given form thus *tekua* embodies the cultural values, norms and philosophies of the people of Elmina. In conclusion, to understand the message *tekua* carries, it requires the cultural knowledge of Fante proverbs to deconstruct the information it holds otherwise, it serves an aesthetic purpose.

Introduction

Headdresses serve as a vehicle for communication as they are immersed with symbolic codes that are treasured in a culture. Culture is the hand which guides certain communication practices as symbolic meanings are developed and authenticated by a group of people thus, become the agreed sign systems in visual communication (Kuwornu-Adjaottor et al., 2016). Visual communication relies on images as language which manifests through artistic explorations. Images as carriers of information are invested with symbols and signs to communicate. These sign systems encompass gestures, and body adornment - clothing and accessories. Cunningham and Voso Lab (1991) establish that "material objects such as clothing help to substantiate and give cultural meaning to individuals. They are the media through which cultural ideas flow" (p. 5). Cultural objects like headdresses lean on established cultural norms and practices which are rooted in socio-political developments as well as the religious and economic worldviews thus orders the paths of society (Kuwornu-Adjaottor et al., 2016; Micah et al., 2021; Wilson, 2021). In this regard, cultural products such as headdresses are not engaged in a vacuum as they are entrenched in cultural roles to accentuate the human head.

Similarly, the head occupies an important position on the body hence the use of the term 'head' in African societies connotes titles of responsibility, influence and power. In this view, the 'head' is dressed (headdresses) with caps, scarves, headgears, crowns, masks and hairstyles to affirm these positions (Arnoldi & Kreamer, 1995). These headdresses are selected based on materials to perform specific functions. Consequently, the materials for making headdresses are sourced from various items that are available in a particular cultural repertoire and geographical area. These comprises both natural and artificial materials such as barks, cotton, hides, skins and bones. Accordingly, the dependence on the environment for these supplies are based on philosophies and experiments associated with techniques of construction, painting, and embellishments relating to headdresses. (Quampah et al., 2022). Since culture is the hand which guides material choices and techniques. The uniqueness of headdresses depends on the purpose for which they are constructed.

As established above, the purpose for making headdresses depends on the cultural space and time as they are inscribed with communicative abilities. They reveal wealth of information about the wearer by suggesting social status which differentiates the ruling class from the ruled, social groups, gender, age and economic status. Aside these roles, they are also connected with religious practices, rituals, and ceremonial engagements which includes rites of passage and festivals. (Acquaah & De Graft Yankson, 2017; Arnoldi & Kreamer, 1995; Grimson, 2010; Kwakye-Opong, 2014; Quampah et al., 2022) In this regard, the next paragraphs explicate the cultural roles performed by headdresses in Ghana.

Functions of Headdresses

Headdresses play significant roles in delineating the ruling class from the ruled. They are status markers which identifies chiefs, spiritual leaders and their subjects during important occasions like festivals. For instance, the *Awoamefia* wears *Batemi kuku*-made from raffia or a crown made with velvet with gold studs which visually reinforces him as the spiritual leader of *Ewes* of the *Anlo*. In the same vein, the *Awadada* the warlord of the *Anlo* also wears white fluffy hats as a symbol of authority (Kumatia, 2018). In another instance, the *Ako-tsele* made with feathers of parrots is worn by *Ga* chief priests to project his status as the mouth piece of the gods (Kwakyee-Opong, 2014). Among the *Asantes*, *Asentoa* which is made from leopard skin is worn by the body guards of the *Omanhene* during the celebrations of *Odwira* festivals (Quampah et al., 2022). Also, in the Northern part of the country, the red hat is reserved for chiefs and *Tindanas* (Acquaah & De Graft Yankson, 2017). These revelations by these scholars reinforces headdresses as symbols of authority hence imposes specific tasks and duties on the wearer.

Moreso, headdresses accomplish spiritual purposes including protecting the head from evil spirits. As Kumatia (2018) reveals "the *Awoamefia* is not expected to wear an open hat as it is considered sacred and imbued with powers which could escape if the head is exposed" (p. 53). This revelation by Kumatia explains the need to cover the head in order to preserve the wisdom and knowledge it contains from spiritual attacks otherwise, the *Awoamefia* will be rendered irrelevant. The spiritual inclinations of head dressing are observed during rites of passage such as *dipo*. During *dipo*, *Komi pee*; a woven hat made from straw is worn by *dipo* initiates as a significant part of the rite. As a requirement, the wearer is expected to be ritually clean (Adinku, 2016; Quampah et al., 2022)

Further, within the moral cycles, headdresses are worn as a measure of modesty and to show affinity. In view of this, Quampah et al. (2022) affirms that the "Men and women both wear hats, caps, and head ties as they go about their daily lives. In addition to shielding the user from the weather, they frequently fulfil the community's expectations of decorum and modesty and act as a declaration of ethnic membership in a multi-ethnic setting" (p. 40). Owing to these clarifications, what is considered appropriate style of dressing must be punctuated with a headdress thus the absence of it may be considered unsuitable and perhaps incur punishment from the appropriate quarters- ethnic groups and religious circles. Therefore, Acquaah and De Graft Yankson (2017) joins this discussion by drawing examples from the Northern part of Ghana as they reveal that "No one wears a smock without a hat, if one does, it is considered as improper dressing or the person is communicating bereavement" (p. 74). Therefore, it is mandatory that some clothing styles are complemented with headdresses hence the absence of it renders the outfit incomplete.

Correspondingly, the style of headdress holds lot of weighty messages which could show respect or disrespect to the elderly or possibly lead to the doom of the individual. For instance, in the Northern part of Ghana, when the top part of a hat points forward, it is called *Nkpei-kan or sobigarima*, which means "I have no equal around". This is considered impolite thus may call for a duel. On the other hand, when the top part of the hat points towards the back is called *N-nyanga*. This suggests forgiveness or the presence of a responsible person could avert any misfortune. Thus, this style is reserved for leaders and family elders (Acquaah & De Graft Yankson, 2017). The style of positioning a headdress is culturally informed thus, they are symbolic codes which requires cultural knowledge to decode. These cultural codes are inscribed through signs and symbols.

Conventional signs characterise the interaction process they articulate cultural beliefs, values and practices. For instance, Quampah et al. (2022), reveal that, "*Obi nka obi a, obi nka obi kye* is made of gold, leather, and green pigment. These were used to create it. It was abstractly designed to take the shape of two fishes joined together. The symbol on it talks about living peacefully with everyone in society" (p. 43). This headdress is nuanced with proverbs which is represented with symbols to reinforce the Asante value of unity and the need for peaceful coexistence with kinsmen.

Proverbs in Ghanaian art forms

Proverbs are part of the matrixes of cultural communication. As part of oral culture, proverbs are defined by their witty yet loaded wisdom. Thus, Oluyemisi (2017) defines proverbs as "short well known sentence or phrase that states a general truth about life or gives advice or caution without actually being exhaustive in its meaning" (p. 22). Proverbs are concise yet pregnant with cultural values, norms and morals which is employed to educate, advice and serves as a guide. It is for this reason that Ade and Ige (2023) expounded "Proverbs [are] simple, concrete traditional sayings that express a truth based on common sense or experiences of the people,[they] are often short generally known sentences which contain wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorisable form, handed down from one generation to the other" (p. 27). This elaboration by Ade and Ige establishes proverbs as cultural sayings therefore, understanding their meanings require some level of knowledge and experience as well as cultural competence in order to facilitate the exchange process on both sides; the communicator and the listener otherwise, its meaning will be lost. (Ade & Ige, 2023; Micah et al., 2021; Oluyemisi, 2017; Udiodem 1984) .

As expected in traditional African societies, mastery of proverbial sayings is highly celebrated. Accordingly, an individual is considered knowledgeable when he/she speaks in proverbs thus the Akan proverb "ɔba nyansa foɔ yɛ bu nu bɛ" meaning "We speak to a wise person in proverbs".

traditional African societies, to be called 'wise' is to say, one is abreast with customs and traditions of his kinsmen. This indicates the importance of proverbs in the cultural life of traditional African. (Oluyemisi, 2017; Wilson, 2021).

Accordingly, proverbs are the apparatuses for instituting decorum and modesty as they are intertwined with values, norms, practices. (Gyan et al., 2020; Micah et al., 2021, Wilson 2021) Micah et al. (2021) affirm that "Traditional proverbs have served a moral purpose, ...proverb awakens and broadens the reflection on man's world and nature to suggest matters of conversation." (Micah et al., 2021, p. 11). This cultural knowledge, embedded in proverbs awakens the consciousness and broadens the individuals mind to reflect on matters of importance. In that way, it promotes critical thinking in terms of crafting the proverb and disentangling its meaning within time and space.

However, proverbial sayings transcend the use of spoken words thus, they are socialised in artforms such as music, sculpture, textile making and dressing. (Micah et al., 2021; Oluyemisi, 2017; Opoku-Bonsu, 2017; Tetteh et al., 2022) Artists employ the use of proverbs for artistic benefits to give aesthetic colourings to art objects. This serve as a medium for documenting proverbs to safeguard them from extinction as traditional cultural decay is on the ascendancy in periods of globalisation. Therefore, artistic works of this nature serve as an extension of cultural reflections, thought systems and education, Thus, art works that are borne on proverbs serve as a memory chip in the demise of oral culture. (Micah et al., 2021; Opoku 1997). Some of these proverbs are incorporated in the weaving of kente which has its social significance. The expressive attributes embedded in kente therefore, requires its careful selection in order not to send the wrong signal. (Asamoah, 2021, Micah et al., 2021). As Asamoah, reiterates that:

Another proverbial kente name is *awerekyekyere, yefa no nipa ho*, which literally means "consolation can only be gotten from a human being." Most of these cloths with proverbial names have serious meanings so people are always careful about the kind of kente clothes they wear, especially to the palace and other customary festivities, as the name of the cloth plays an important part in the symbolic communication between the wearer and observers" (Asamoah, 2021, p. 190).

This elucidation by Asamoah establish that traditional symbols in textiles by extension other artforms like head dressing take the form of symbols to express proverbial thoughts thus selection of such items must be guided in order not to elicit negative responses.

Further, although research establishes headdresses as visual communicators, these artforms are context specific with reference to the use of proverbs as established by scholars (Ade & Ige, 2023; Micah et al., 2021; Oluyemisi, 2017; Udiodem, 1984). Therefore, the exposition of

Quampah et al., about *Asante* headdresses frames the use of proverbial symbols in headdresses within a particular setting-Asante culture hence limits its cultural connotations within a particular ethnicity. Therefore, this study aligns with context as regards traditional oral artforms to interrogate the use of proverbs in making *tekua* a traditional headdress of the people of Elmina.

The People of Elmina

The town Kwamankwakrom was founded by Kwaa Amankwa which was later known as Edina or Elmina. Located at the coastal part of Ghana, the people of Elmina belong to the Akan ethnic group, Fante, with their main economic activity as fishing. In this regard, the *Bakatue* festival is celebrated to commence the traditional fishing season. However, Elmina is also noted as the first destinations of Europeans in Sub-Saharan Africa as well as an entrepot for slaves as the castle of St. George; now known as Elmina castle supported this enterprise. In effect, these activities have birthed a cosmopolitan society under which the indigenous traditional practices of the people of Elmina thrived (Adjaye, 2018).

Hall's Theory of Cultural Representation

The theory which girdles this exploration is Hall's Cultural representation theory. This theory clarifies, communication is facilitated through cultural codes such as language. Languages are used to represent ideas, feelings as well as emotions by engaging symbols and signs. These symbols include facial expressions, gestures, clothing as well as headdress. (Hall, 2003) He explains that:

These elements- sounds, words, notes, gestures, expressions, clothes -are part of our natural and material world; but their importance for language is not what they are but what they do, their function. They construct meaning and transmit it. They signify. They don't have any clear meaning in themselves. Rather they are the vehicles or media which carry meaning because they operate as symbols. which stand for or represent (that is symbolize) the meanings we wish to communicate (pp. 4-5).

It is for this exposition that *tekua* by the people of Elmina can be classified as a talking head. A metaphor which suggests the symbolic use of the headdress to communicate. These layers of meaning are enshrined in cultural codes to express the thoughts, and emotions of the wearer to his/her audience. However, this theory limits the knowledge enshrined in this cultural product to people who possess the cultural competence to understand the message incorporated into the *tekua* hairstyle.

Methods

This study employed an ethnographic design under qualitative research approach. The purposive sampling strategy was adopted to select participants and sites for the study (Cresswell, 2014; Otchere, 2013). The purposive sampling technique, also called judgment sampling enables the selection of participants who have in-depth knowledge, experience and expertise about the object of interest in this case *tekua* (Otchere, 2013). Hence, *tekua* makers fall within this vivid description to give accounts of how proverbs are engaged in making the headdress. To gain access to the participants, snowballing was employed because the craft of making *tekua* is reserved for specific families and since the researcher is not an indigene, the chain referral approach was employed (Naderifar, Goli & Ghaljaie, 2017). Although this approach led us to two families at Elmina, we observed that those who own the cultural knowledge about the *tekua* were dead but one family confirmed the use of proverbs in *tekua* with pictures as evidence. Although her knowledge is limited on the history of the *tekua* as she indicated it was a craft she inherited from her mother. She explained some cultural nuances which characterized the use of *tekua*. Thus, her selection for this study. The semi-structured interview as well as participant observation were the instruments for data collection. Picture analysis as well as thematic analysis was central to the study. To protect anonymity of the participant, the pseudonym (Ekuwa) was employed.

Reflexivity and Trustworthiness

The authors maintained a reflexive attitude throughout the interview and reflected on how our positionality as researchers not hailing from Elmina could affect the tribal dynamics and possibly erect obstacles that might affect the collection of quality data. This reflexive process allowed the authors to make appropriate changes based on the unique situations and dynamics encountered during the interview. For instance, we adjusted our tones and conducted the interview in a Fante dialect when interviewing the participant since she had a less formal education to ensure that she would not feel frightened by an assertive tone (Holliday, 2016). In addition, data gathered were sent back to the participant for accuracy check after transcription, coding and analysis to ensure credibility of findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Results and Discussion

Tekua as a proverbial communication

Tekua is crafted with proverbs to communicate among the people of Elmina. Aside the aesthetic considerations of *tekua*. This headdress informs; caste insinuations and educate. In this regard, Ekua reveals

"They like the tekua with the names because, they use it to send message if someone offends them."

This clarification seeks to reinforce the assertions by Acquah & De Graft Yankson, 2017; Arnoldi & Kreamer, 1995; Grimson, 2010; Kwakye-Opong, 2014; Quampah et al., 2022 with regard the use of headdress to communicate. Thus, the head bears this brunt of discussions as it becomes the sight of exchanges during occasions such as weddings and festivals. She further explains that:

"They use tekua which has styles for happy occasions like weddings but they don't use styles for funerals because it is a sorrowful moment. However, if someone decides to wear styles to funerals, it is because of an intention".

In this view, one must be abreast with the cultural codes embedded in the *tekua* in order not to send mixed signals to onlookers as she indicated, *tekua* for funerals are less ornate and simple in styles as compared to those worn on other occasions.

Also, the symbolic code inscribed in the *tekua* reveals the cultural values of the people of Elmina as established by Micah et al. (2021) "Traditional proverbs have served a moral purpose, ...Proverb awakens and broadens the reflection on man's world and nature to suggest matters of conversation" (p. 11). Therefore, proverbial *tekua* presents onlookers with thought provoking messages which calls for reflection. Thus, the preceding photographs indicates *tekua* and their associated proverbs.



Figure 1: "*Tsir Kor mmpam*" literarily means Two heads are better than one (Source: Fieldwork, 2023).

The value of communal living is highlighted through this *tekua* to suggest the importance of collective decision making on matters of great concern as it is believed that, different perspectives yield fruitful results.



Figure 2: "*Obi tse yie*" literally means some are fortunate (Source: Fieldwork, 2023).



Figure 3: "*Dua kor gye ehum a obu*" literally means when one tree stands against the storm, it breaks (Source: Fieldwork, 2023).



Figure 4: "omama ho ye ehi" literally means a public figure attracts envy (Source: Fieldwork, 2023).

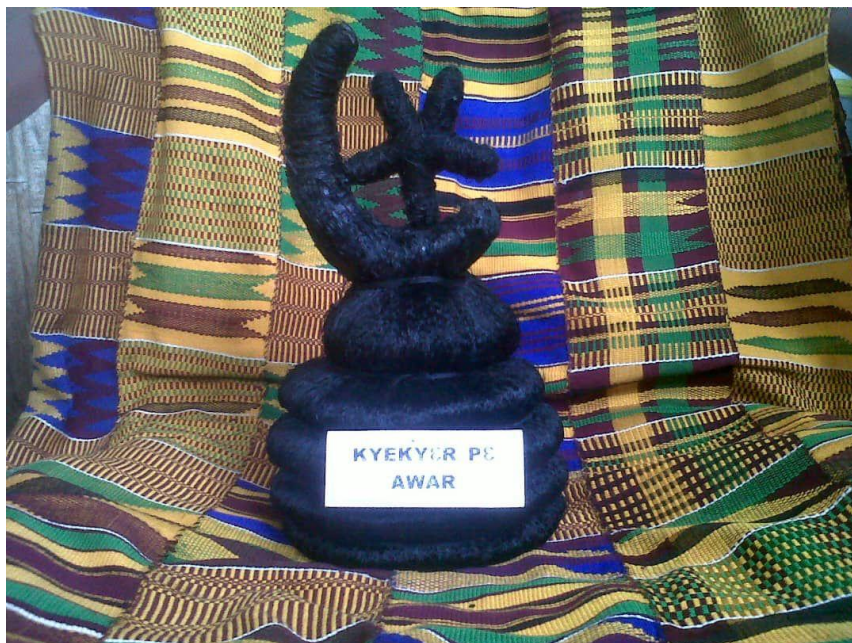


Figure 5: "kyekyer pe awar" literally means the marriage between the moon and the star (Source: Fieldwork, 2023).

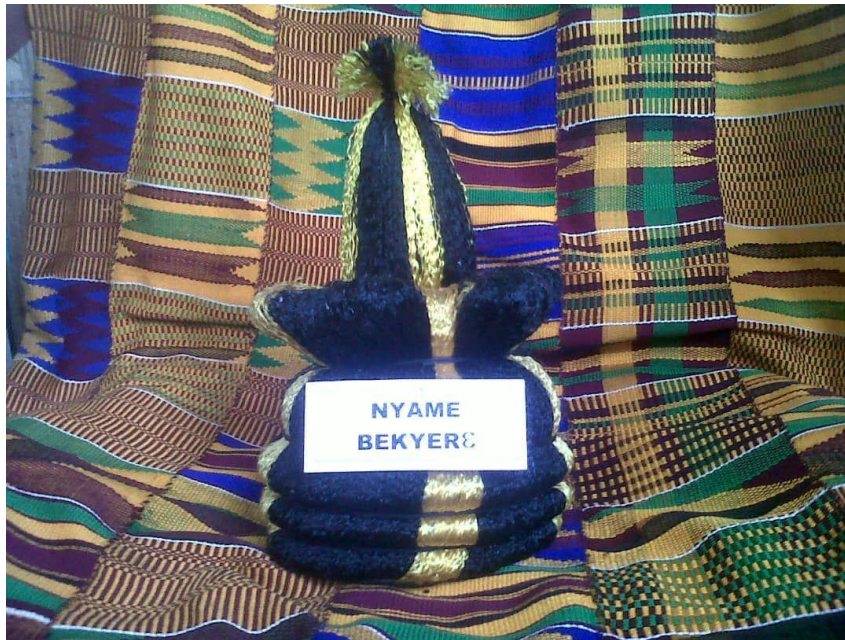


Figure 6: *Nyame bekyere* literally means "the reliance on God for his directions (Source: Fieldwork, 2023).

Tekua as Proverbial symbols

Tekua is laced with several communicative abilities through the use of symbols. This confirms Asamoah (2021) and Micah et al. (2021) revelation in previous submissions that every cultural product is enshrined with artistic use of symbols to communicate in Ghana. The use of proverbs by *tekua* makers at Elmina is not an exception. Thus, Ekuwa (a participant) reveals that:

"The proverbs are represented with symbols which are later made into the tekua. This enables easy identification."

This revelation supports Micah et al., 2021; Kuwornu-Adjaottor et al., 2016; Opoku 1997 elucidation with regard the use of proverbial symbols in artforms. The representation of proverbs in the *tekua* satisfies both aesthetic and communication purposes however, *tekua* serves as a safe house for storing traditional Fanti proverbs for future generations as established in the foregone discussions. Thus, the preceding paragraphs explains how Ekuwa represents proverbial symbols in *tekua*

"Tsir kor mmpam" means "two heads are better than one" (refer to fig. 1) This proverb is represented by symbolically joining three heads to show the significance of collective decision as it is assumed that different perspectives provide clearer insight to issues.

"*Obi tse yie*" literally means some are fortunate (refer to fig. 2). This proverb is represented with one big tuft of a conically shaped symbol to suggest good living. This headdress brings to light how some are born with silver spoon while others are less fortunate.

"*Dua kor gye ehum a obu*" this means when one tree stands against the storm, it breaks". (Refer to fig. 3) This proverb is represented with a big tuft sitting on a smaller base. To show that over reliance on one person may lead to stunted personal growth which could have dire consequences thus this headdress brings to bear the need to involve others to lessen these burdens. Thus, Ekuwa reveals that "*this particular headdress does not usually last like other tekua headdresses because the base weakens with time.*"

"*Ɔ mama ho yɛ ehi*" literally means a public figure attracts envy (refer to fig. 4). This proverb is represented with a crown symbol to suggest how a prominent person may appeal to some groups of people while other may scorn him.

"*Kyekyer pɛ awar*" literally means the bond between the moon and the star. This proverb is represented by joining the symbol of moon and star (refer to fig. 5). To communicate the harmony between these two entities to foster peaceful coexistence.

"*Nyame bekyere*" literally means God will show the way" (Refer to fig. 6). This is represented with an elevated section of the tekua pointing towards the heavens. To suggest the reliance on God for guidance.

Conclusion

The paper concludes that *tekua* is a proverbial language which incorporate symbols to communicate as espoused in Hall's cultural representation theory. Through this artforms, proverbs are given form thus *tekua* embodies the cultural values, norms and philosophies of the people of Elmina. Therefore, to understand the message *tekua* carries, it requires the cultural knowledge of *Fante* proverbs to deconstruct the information it holds otherwise, it serves an aesthetic purpose. We recommend that further studies be carried out on the process of making the *tekua*. However, owing to the pride of place occupied by *tekua* in Elmina with regard to occasions such as festivals and funerals, the use of *tekua* should be extended to national programmes such as the Independence Day marked each year and Pan African Festival of Arts and Culture (PANAFEST) celebration. To sustain this head dressing culture of Elmina, we suggest the organization of workshops on *tekua*'s history and cultural impact for the youth at Elmina as well as an audio-visual documentation of *tekua* making process to serve as an archival material that can be easily accessed by individuals. Above all, scholars and practitioners in performance and screen studies may use this text as a reference point when staging and telling stories that include a *tekua* headdress as part of the storyline.

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Authors' Bio notes

Wendy Aku Sika Mamiya graduated from the University of Cape Coast with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Theatre Studies and a Master of Fine Arts Degree (Theatre Arts) from the University of Ghana, Legon. Her interest in addressing environmental challenges through creative practice has advanced her preference for reusing materials in the field of costume making. This approach has inspired her explorations with found objects in making of costumes for performances including her Master of Fine Arts degree project. With years of experience as a theatre practitioner, she has worked on several costume design projects for notable institutions. She aspires to deepen her understanding of material objects, culture and sustainability and this has led her to pursue a PhD in Ethnomusicology at the SDG Graduate School, Performing Sustainability Cultures and Development in West Africa, University of Cape Coast. She is currently researching into community engagement in costume performance to promote environmental stewardship.

Daniel Kofi Brako, is a Lecturer at the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Cape Coast (UCC), Cape Coast, Ghana. He holds a Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Arts and Culture, from the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana. He also holds a Master of Fine Arts Degree in Theatre Arts (Scenic Design) from the University of Ghana, Legon and Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree in Art Direction from University of Media Arts and Communication (UniMAC), of the Institute of Film and Television (IFT), Accra, Ghana. His research interests are in the area of theatre and film set design, performance studies, scenography, digital art and design, art direction/production design, aesthetics, semiotics and film analysis.

Authorship and Level of Contribution

All authors contributed equally.

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