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Twenty-First Century Contemporary Ceramic Art in Ghana: Emerging Visual Language and Practice

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Abstract



This article provides a discussion on Ghanaian Ceramics and how expressions have opened up in the visual art especially in the medium of ceramics to bring Ghanaian Ceramics onto the international scene. It looks at how colonialism impacted the Ghanaian Art scene and the lack of visibility due to the Western canon and privileging particular art forms, schools and exhibitions. It discusses how the Faculty of Art at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) has had significant role in building connections to the international and how the foundation for a stronger ceramics programme and practiced were developed. Through reforms and emancipatory directions from some faculty members and practitioners, contemporary Ghanaian ceramic practice is emerging on the global scene and creating connections with the global fraternity. The new

practice is becoming vital, forward looking, and imminently contemporary. The works produced currently by Ghanaian ceramic artists are strengthened by rich and diverse forms of traditional Ghanaian ceramics and Ghanaian cultural traditions broadly with less limitations to materiality and form.

Keywords: twenty-first century, contemporary ceramic art, materiality, reforms

Introduction

Ghana's art practice for a long period has not made significant voice on the international scene until a decade ago when there was a new visual language to contemporary ceramic practice in Ghana. There has been considerable disconnect between world art and ceramic art practice in Ghana for over four decades, until the turn of the century when some young artists called for reforms (Bodjawah, Nortey & Kissiedu, 2019). According to seidou (2015), the concept of Ghanaian art education in the past has been based on the relics of the 'hand and eye concept' which was introduced by the Gold Coast colonial government by the Educational code of 1887. This 'hand and eye' concept was more industrial centred rather than the development of creativity. In 1863, reforms (Auer's) were made to change the bookish-centred art education to technical and vocational ones (Owusu-Agyakwah et. al, 1994). However, seidou (2014) reiterates that, once again, it was codified in the logics of the colonial masters and epitomized in the 'hand and eye' training manual for boys and girls with emphasis on imitation of a certain kind of craft. It was a child-centred education scheme of the Pestalozzi and his follower Froebel, and their lineage of technical and vocational schemes in the British South Kensington 'manual training' system, the German *Gewerbeschule* and the Scandinavian *Slojd* system. The art of the then Gold Coast became mechanistic and remained impervious to the changing trends in Modern and Contemporary art. This inadvertently had influence on Ghanaian art practice as there was limited creativity, exploration of materials and diverse expressions.

In 1955, the National Diploma in Design (NDD) was written and introduced based on strict formats of still life, landscaping, life drawing, modelling, among others. Even after two reforms under the auspices of Professor Sir William Coldstream in 1960 and 1970, the art curriculum could not inject other forms such as Conceptual art, films, videos and Contemporary art (seid'ou et al., 2015). Most of Ghanaian early art practitioners were producing more of single narratives which were thought-provoking but did not make significant strides on the international scene. According to Oguibe (2002), the concept of art education during the colonial period were vocational and functional, and had very

complicated and sometimes antagonistic relationship with modern art. Kofi Antubam, Vincent Akwete Kofi, Oku Ampofo, Ablade Glover, Ato Delaquis, Kofi Asante, KK. Broni, Ben Offei Nyako to mention but a few were great Ghanaian artists. However, a critical look at their works reveal more of single narratives, stacked to same materials and little attention to material heteronomy and other forms of exhibiting and installations.

With this backdrop, Bodjawah et al. (2019) called for a better understanding of the colonial education, its objectives and implications, and a deeper appreciation of what Ghanaian art brought to modern and contemporary art whilst preparing for emancipated futures. The authors called for expanded field of expression in a wide range of media, formats, criticality of content and the practice of material heteronomy by using materials around us in producing works of art that society can interact with because these materials are embedded with histories and are associated with our everyday lives as Ghanaians. The need for further exploration of concepts, ideation and material developments (Nortey & Bodjawah, 2014).

It appears some of these reforms have started yielding results putting Ghana's contemporary artists on the global art scene. The few reforms in the art curricula, the embracement of diverse materials found immediately in the environment such as scraps, the freedom of expression and choice of media and creation of experimental project spaces such as BlaxTarline in Kumasi, Ghana has equipped artists to respond significantly to global trends of art practice and exhibition. Nagy and Jordan (2018) reported that there is a cutting edge of Contemporary art movement in Ghana spearheaded by the Faculty of Art, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana. The writers noted that the art world beyond the country's borders has become increasingly aware of Ghana's exhibitions, site-specific installations and interventions, accessible programming which have roots from KNUST.

Ceramics, one of the earliest and traditional practice in Ghana have not made a significant impact on the global scene. Ceramic practice in Ghana has been limited to the production of earthenware cups and bowls which are lowly demanded. The practice has been traditionally practiced with monotonous wares and stagnant design revisions. However, through reforms and emancipatory directions from some faculty members and practitioners, contemporary Ghanaian ceramic is emerging on the global scene and have started creating connections with the global fraternity. The practice and thinking orientation of contemporary Ghanaian ceramic art is becoming vital, forward looking, and imminently contemporary. Ghanaian Ceramic art now is strengthened by rich and diverse forms of traditional Ghanaian ceramics and Ghanaian cultural traditions broadly. Although the early Ghanaian artists such as K. K. Broni, Daniel Cobbinah, Kofi Asante,

and J. K. Amoah had a unique practice, the current artists are developing and affirming shift in concepts, subject matter, style and an emerging visual language. They question the status quo with their installations, experiments and interrogate the minds of viewers. They do not limit themselves to what they only see but are creating new vistas that society can engage with. This is creating an urgent need to dissect this new artistic language and forms in contemporary Ghanaian ceramic art as well as understand its attendant challenges.

This article discusses and explores ways that Ghanaian ceramic artists are charting new pathways from the complex traditions of producing works. The article looks at how the foundation for a stronger ceramics programme was developed including the critical interventions to these new shifts, concepts, subject matter and style expounded by twenty-first century artists of contemporary Ghanaian ceramic art.

Theoretical Framework, Study's Position and Methods

This article is based on substantive qualitative fieldwork gathered over a decade coupled with extensive literature review covering historical information about Ghanaian art. The need to understand historical perspectives of Ghanaian art especially ceramics provided an important discussion on Ghanaian ceramics and how the expressions and colonialism impacted the Ghanaian art scene. Data sources included audio-visual materials, interviews with Ghanaian artists who were practicing during colonial times, observations at studios and exhibitions centres, documents and evaluation reports. In this study, it was understood that to examine the past ceramic art practice and the emerging new visual language, the study was informed of Campana's (2011) proposal to ask questions and construct a framework that explores how concepts of art have led to new vistas in art practices. Documents on Achimota art school were studied including how the artists were trained, audio visuals of artists were studied including past educational documents. Historical analysis conducted (Bodjawah, Nortey & Kissiedu, 2019; Nortey & Bodjawah, 2018) indicates colonialism impacted the Ghanaian art scene and the lack of visibility due to the Western canon and privileging of particular art forms, schools, and exhibitions.

Ghanaian Ceramic art training, practice and challenges

In Ghana, clay abounds in almost every region in larger quantities and traditionally women were required to learn the art of producing pots to serve utilitarian purposes in the homes. This practice of making pots and earthenware bowls were traditionally reserved for women as Harrods (1989) quotes Cox as explaining to Cardew that pottery was a village-based industry. In this regard, most were informally trained and even those

who had formal education in schools already had the skills learnt from their mothers and grandmothers. Within the formal educational training, the Achimota College in 1920 was set up as a formal art school by the British to formally train artists. Even at the Achimota school, according to Svašek (1997), the image that the colonial teachers had of their students' culture limited the artistic freedom of the students at Achimota College. According to Svašek (1997), the students were more or less forced to create art in the style of their ancestors. The Ghanaian students of the art department at Achimota College were more often interested in making models of aeroplanes just as their British colleagues and therefore had challenges understanding why they should only produce images related to their cultural past. Stevens (1930) reiterated that the 'British, paradoxically, attempted on the one hand to 'civilize the primitives' by introducing them to a British type of school system and converting them to Christianity, while, on the other hand, they intended to save primitive culture by forcing them to produce primitive art' (p.137).

In 1951, the Art College was moved to Kumasi which is now the Faculty of Art at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. In order to satisfy the art component as well as the technological inclination of the university as well as the industry, a ceramic curriculum was drawn to contain both art and science aspects of ceramics practice. The main science courses are Vitreous State, Chemistry, Colloid Chemistry, Kiln Design and Construction, Bodies Composition, Phase Equilibria, Raw materials and processing. The art components were Wheel and Hand Forming Techniques, Traditional Pottery, Classical and Oriental History and Casting.

Whilst some faculty members wanted the programme to gear towards science or split into science of ceramics or BFA ceramic art, others wanted the conglomeration of the two which makes the KNUST Ceramics programme a unique one. Although, the content made students very versatile in both ceramic science and art, it did not offer the full exploration of the students' ability such as grasping the subtle details of concepts and idea developments based on philosophies. Nortey and Bodjawah (2014) revealed that although factors such as too many assignments at a time, access to studio, waiting to use equipment and availability of space were found to be issues delaying assignment submissions, students' inability to conceptualize, ideate and gather materials appear to be challenges confronting them. seid'ou (2006, p. 295) identifies this type of teaching and training as 'hidden curriculum assumption' that prioritizes commercial marketability and producing works only to sell. This is perhaps, an influence from the intellectual legacy of the 'hand and eye' where emphasis was placed on producing exact and vocational training.

Another challenge of the ceramics practice which hindered development of ceramic artists is the issue of exhibition versus publication. In most of the academic world, the most highly-rated research practice in visual arts is exhibiting one's work. While academic artists do publish, the production and exhibition of personal visual work is the primary expectation for successful academic standing and advancement of artist in other universities. In Ghanaian academic institutions, emphasis is placed on peer reviewed publications in notable journals and this is something that hindered the promotion of many older faculties who were artists. This made many artists reversed to writing rather than doing studio work and exhibition. The reason being that the university is a science and technology based and follows strict procedural formats of publications and promotion for the sciences and technology. And even in the event where the opportunity was given for the inclusion of exhibition as part of the promotion criteria, the faculty could not make the best opportunity out of it. In this vein, exhibition was not seen as research but only as practice. Over the years, though artists embraced the act of writing and publications, a significant number also pushed for the acceptance of exhibition especially reviewed/curated exhibitions. Currently, reviewed/curated exhibitions are being accepted depending on how the artist packages the document. If the emphasis is misdirected towards publications, it deprives the arts community of dedicated producers as well as robs students of the opportunity to observe the work, making art very theoretical and unrealized. Artists should be required to exhibit and all faculty promotions should be based on their exhibition record and as well as their research publications, otherwise we fail to be artists and art educators.

Nortey (2017) noted that the challenges of studying art in Ghana for now and the decade ahead of us are in the areas of inadequate funding, infrastructure, digital media technology infrastructure and the relevance of policy and content in the international community. In the area of studio work and practice, there is increase in student numbers in institutions offering art. In a typical ceramics class, there are over 40 students. The same space, equipment and materials that were used by 6-10 students in a class is being used by over 40 students. This indeed poses a challenge to art work and practice. It affects effective installations of works and exhibitions. Ghana as a nation does not have museums and spaces specially built for contemporary art installations and exhibitions. In an effort to develop contemporary art, Ibrahim Mahama has commissioned the Savannah Centre for Contemporary Art (SCCA), located in Tamale, Ghana. The space which is owned by the contemporary artist Ibrahim Mahama is an artist run project space, exhibition and research hub, cultural repository and artist's residency. There is also the Museum of Science and Technology in Accra, and Jamestown Café in Accra which the KNUST faculty uses as an exhibition space.

Another key challenge was the acceptance of contemporary art practice. The older faculty were still at ease with formats and the status quo of producing art. Nortey et al. (2018b) confirmed that the contemporary art practice by the youth in Ghana have come under intense scrutiny from older artists and non-artists who consider the use of certain materials as impure and therefore should not be used for art making. The authors recommended a sober reflection on the pre-colonial artistic practices in Ghana where cross genre in nature are connected to the life in the communities and related them to art making. There must be self-denial, associated dismissive tendencies and abhorrence for contemporary art to a more receptive one.

Nipping the Challenges and Way Forward

In order to understand the emerging practice, it is imperative to look at the foundations of the ceramic practice in Ghana, be it traditional or formal from an educational unit. seidou (2006) critiqued the theoretical foundations of the KNUST Painting Programme and inquired of the philosophical and contextual relevance in Ghanaian culture and revealed that the programme did not offer much exposure to students to respond to global and contemporary art practice, theory and criticism. In similar vein, Nortey, Okai and Bodjawah (2013a) also examined why the practice of ceramics have been limited largely to the making of pottery and also monotonous designs and forms. The authors critiqued the status quo and through workshops, art talks and experimental projects worked to break through student conservatism and spurred innovations in forms. Nortey et al (2013a) argued for a more assertive intervention by artists but of a very generative kind, a push not towards a specific aesthetics or approach, but a push towards in-depth exploration, analysis, spontaneous play and association, design development, and revision". Nortey et al. (2014) in a bid to expanding the frontiers of pottery production worked with indigenous and youth potters in the Nanumba South District of Ghana. This expansion was necessary simply because the indigenous potters were stacked to format and this was inadvertently affecting patronage and demand.

Nortey, Opoku-Amankwah and Bodjawah (2013b) again studied the undergraduate ceramic programme and revealed that the programme which was placed under the Department of Industrial Art was ossified and based on the colonial intellectual legacy of industrial activities and obviously do not offer too much on global contemporary art practice, aesthetics and criticism. Nortey et al (2013b) observed that there has been limited interest to study ceramics at the tertiary level due to low background motivation for senior high school students to opt for the programme and practice. The course content of the diagnostic year at the university was too much of producing what one sees, more of single narratives and teaching of pot making in monotonous forms. The content, even up to the third year of the ceramic programme were ossified

in producing under strict format and measurement such as producing a pot using coils, slabs or throwing with the sophomore and third years dealing with mural and miniature fountains. The practice was largely vocational and industrially inclined. Even with the objective of training to provide manpower and requisite skills for the industry, the industry has been very low in functioning. What was missing in practice was students' inability to create, explore other materials and develop criticality of content and thinking by interrogating existing models and pushing forward their thoughts in works that the society can interact and engage in.

Interestingly, these missing links and a complete disconnect from the global contemporary art practice was not only to the students but also Ghanaian ceramic artists. For over two decades there has not been any exhibition or art talk of ceramics or contemporary ceramic art in Ghana until recently when the contemporary practice started emerging. It must be noted that Kingsley Kofi Broni, Kofi Asante and James Kwame Amoah who were internationally recognised as ceramic artist had worked as artist in residence in USA, Netherlands and Germany and featured in many local and international exhibitions and were exhibiting periodically. Based on the recommendations from Nortey et al. (2013), there was the need to look at the criticality of course content, material heteronomy, philosophies and practice.

Critical Interventions and the Emerging Ceramic Contemporary Practice

With the interest to critically intervene ceramic practice in Ghana, Nortey et al (2013) revealed that there is the need to do criticality of content and background motivation. In addition to the findings, the strengthening of art history, research and technical writing and critique were recommended. This means students will be required to go through critique of their works at end of their projects. These created the platforms for the student artists to openly talk about their works and also learn about the works of others. One major critical intervention was the holistic look at the teaching and the practice of ceramics in Ghana and overall assessment of the opportunity it offers for full exploration of creativity, materiality, forms and practice. After critical discussions with practitioners, industry players, curriculum experts, art educationists and artists, it was accepted that although the conglomeration of the science and art components provide good opportunities, it limits the full exploration of skills and practice. Currently, the programme has been separated with a stronger BFA Ceramics and also BSc Ceramics Technology. However, the first year serves as a foundation course and then students may branch to ceramics technology or ceramic art in the second year. The separation between the science and the art has created more rooms for experiments and practice. Contemporary ceramic art in Ghana has for a long time being on the low side even in its much acclaimed traditional practice. In 2006, young ceramic artists were brought on

board to understudy the older ceramic artists who were exiting the faculty. Though they did not embrace contemporary practice to the fullest, they provided the little networks, connections and shared their experiences with the younger artists.

Within the last five years, contemporary ceramic art in Ghana is emerging with the occurrence of major shifts in philosophies and artistic productions. This has been necessitated by firstly and largely by works of some young artists such as Ibrahim Mahama whose works are being showcased globally and in 2019 was selected to be part of the Ghanaian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Ibrahim Mahama in his early works used jute bags which Ghana used to export our cocoa to tell a story that binds us as a nation Mahama's exploration of new media and subjects that circumscribe new artistic genres has been part of reforms suggested by seid'ou (2006). Since 2015, there has been yearly exhibitions such as the Gown must go to town (2015) which showcased works from students, faculty and alumni, Cornfields in Accra (2016), Orderly Disorderly (2017) was organized and in all these media heteronomy emerged as wider range of materials such as empty cans, snail shells, discarded materials and the likes. The world has started following works from Ghana and KNUST in particular with young artists doing residencies in London, Tel Aviv, Berlin, Amsterdam, Kassel for Documenta and the prestigious Venice Biennale. Our ceramic art practice was still producing traditional pots and earthenware bowls and still stacked to the status quo of procedures with a disconnection to global practice.

Another breaking grounds was the strengthening of reading culture on artists, their philosophies, story books and documents that border on creativity, innovations and stronger foundations in art history. This encouraged most students to follow global contemporary exhibitions and become connected to the happenings in the art world. Both students and faculty were encouraged to join other critique sessions at the blaxTarlines, an art incubator and experimental project space for contemporary art. These were all part of the breaking grounds to ceramic students to break monotony in forms, spur innovations in form and go beyond single narratives whilst embracing thought-provoking.

Whilst reading culture was encouraged, the art of writing and critiquing was also looked at. The art of writing about one's work or colleagues work was key and for one to effectively do this requires extensive reading and knowledge about art. The tour of visiting art sites in Ghana was also organized to afford students to be conversant and abreast with what other artists are doing in Ghana. Students and faculty had the opportunity to meet women potters in Afari, Vume, Kpando, Accra, and Winneba centres practising and producing earthenware bowls. In all, the works were largely pots and

single narratives. Interestingly, currently, men are also involved in these activities who largely use mechanized wheels to produce their pots. In May 2015, the Ceramics Section at KNUST organised a conference under the theme 'Developing the ceramics towards nation benefit' and an exhibition under the theme 'From earth to the market'. At the exhibitions, though the works were of industrial and traditional pieces, the intersection between the early mode of the practice based on culture and the environment, and new ideas and media, cross fertilisations and imaginations, new media, and local and global opportunities, as well as the search for and debate about new stylistic forms, and the role of the artists in the society was actively seen. Discussions led to exploring of materials around our immediate environment and questioning the status quo that materials should not limit practice.

Whilst these critical interventions were ongoing, the ceramics section got connected to global practice in contemporary ceramics signing a memorandum with the School of Art in the J. William Fulbright Building of the University of Arkansas. In June 2018, a ceramic student visited the School of Art, University of Arkansas during the summer break. Her shared experiences from the six weeks' intellectual exchange and internship in the US was very beneficial as she began to understand different perspectives to art making and the exploration of materials and space. The memorandum was more deepened and within two years, four of our ceramic artists have been awarded full scholarship to do their MFA Ceramics at the University of Arkansas, University of Delaware, Illinois State University and University of Florida. This collaboration was deepened with a visiting US Fulbright Scholar to KNUST to assist in teaching and research in ceramic art. Professor Hulen came with the husband Adam Posnak who was also a studio ceramic instructor at the School of Art, University of Arkansas. The two had already been on two short visits to KNUST where they familiarised themselves with Ghanaian ceramic art practice and materials. Jeannie and Adam emphasized on empowerment and the need for our voices to be heard on the global practice taking into respect the works and skills of the students. The two working together with the faculty and students explored materials, forms and techniques of production. Jeannie strengthened the making of multiple moulds and cast and the students were able to produce 32 piece mould cast pieces within the academic year whilst Adam looked at improving portfolio and making works produced become accessible to the global world. Following art talks and critique sessions, our students and faculty practice became familiarize with the happenings within the twenty-first contemporary art practice. In this regard, materials heteronomy, critique, critical thinking and developing portfolio became topics during seminar and critique sessions. These became stepping stones to more exploration and the students embraced it with reading more about various artist especially influential artists that have been documented in Venice Biennale, Documenta, NCECA, among others.

Guided by genealogical history and review to the traditional practice and the general art intellectual legacy from colonial masters, the faculty prioritized the cultivation and promotion of contemporary Ghanaian ceramic art as a crucial goal to developing a new visual language and practice. A new visual language of contemporary ceramic art practice started emerging within the ceramic studio. Kofi Adjei moved from the making of earthenware pots and mixed media and was working on Ghana's cultural heritage of cocoa and how these pods speak volume of our history and significant contribution to the nation's development. In the same vein, Samuel Nortey was challenged as an Art historian to get into the pit, process clay and set up his studio to produce his first ever exhibition on the theme "The hands are not for begging". The students have become very much of going beyond just 'hand and eye' and being creative, not limited by material culture, not limited by status quo but guided by inspired philosophies and being flourishing in thinking. Jeannie Hulen and Adam Posnak became increasingly aware of the depth of talents and artistic skills of faculty and young artists and together with the decision of the faculty and students thought it expedient that the vitality of the works that are being produced by the students and the faculty deserves a wider recognition. This culminated into the exhibition '*Ahoɔden*' which is translated as power or strength. The 2020 National Council on Education for the Ceramic Art (NCECA) Conference in Richmond, Virginia under the theme Multivalent: Clay, Mindfulness and Memory will have a panel of three ceramists (Samuel Nortey, Japheth Asiedu-Kwarteng and Eric Andre) from Ghana and two from the US (Jeannie Hulen and Adam Posnak) sharing cross border experiences in studio practice and research.

A New Visual Language and Practice in '*Ahoɔden*' Exhibition

The significant artwork of KNUST Ceramics must rightfully be considered to inhabit the same social sphere and conceptual space as the widely recognized Ghanaian contemporary art practice embodied by events such as the *Chale Wote* festival and venues such as the Jamestown Café in Accra. Traditional 'craft' media must often fight for inclusion in contemporary art discourse and spaces as seen in figure 1, and Ghanaian contemporary ceramics warrants the same consideration as any other art-making method or material. *Ahoɔden* share a conviction in the present power and future strength of the artists of KNUST Ceramics, supremely worthy of attention and recognition by the contemporary art establishment both within Ghana and internationally.

The international contemporary ceramic-art dialogue is overwhelmingly dominated by voices from the U.S., Western Europe and Asia. It is an unfortunate condition of this international (but somewhat less than globally representative) community that voices from the African continent and West Africa in particular are often included only as tangential elements in contemporary ceramics curating, critical writing, or events.

Considering the overwhelming richness of the history of the clay medium in West Africa, and in Ghana specifically, as well as the meteoric rise of Ghanaian contemporary art practice broadly, the artists who were involved in *Ahoɔden* believe it is a serious shortcoming that the presence of contemporary Ghanaian ceramic art is negligible in mainstream contemporary ceramics venues such as international publications, exhibitions, conferences, residencies, whether in Ghana or abroad.



Fig. 1: *Expressionism*, (2017), clay, manganese finish, large installations by Japheth Kwarteng Asiedu.

Photo: Samuel Nortey, *Ahoɔden* Exhibition, 2019

This was a motivating factor in conceptualising and organising *Ahoɔden*. In the work 'Paradigm of Captivity' as shown in figure 2 by Vincent Frimpong and Emmanuel Asamoah, the ceramic artists interrogated why present generation is enslaved by strange and intriguing stories of captivity. This installation consists of a set of two

patterns which form a common linguistic theme. 'The clenched fist and feet: a paradigm of captivity'. With the use of multiple hand, foot and the industrial method of slip casting refers conceptually protesting and battling for freedom being deprived. The sculptured pot indicates anxiety, boredom, lack of control and personal human deficiencies which have being imprisoned.



Fig. 2: *Paradigm of captivity*, (2019), clay, large installations by Vincent Frimpong and Emmanuel Asamoah.

Photo: Samuel Nortey, *Ahooeden Exhibition*, 2019

Individuals who are confined or subordinated cannot act freely upon their desires and live their lives as they want. The cracks on the pot and around the multiples, give the notion of the struggle caused by the force exerted by the hands. The hands on the pot visually depicts liberation whereas the cracks around the hands represents aggressiveness perpetuated by individuals. Freedom, liberty and equality are as vital as breath, we are left gasping when the colours of diversity and individual liberty are drained from the world around us. The critical interventions have led to interrogating why we sometimes become afraid of intimidations, become confused regarding our purpose in life, and surrounded by people and things that undermine our confidence. The artists used the clenched fist which has proven such a powerful symbol, encapsulating connotations of resistance, solidarity, pride and militancy in one simple gesture. The desire for freedom is innate to humans and one will fight as long as one lives to restore freedom that has been denied. However, if one is in captivity and desires to free themselves, it will require a great struggle.

It is significant to note that the works included in *Ahooden*, are vital, forward looking, and imminently contemporary. It is equally important to recognize that much of the work acknowledges and is strengthened by rich and diverse forms of traditional Ghanaian ceramics and Ghanaian cultural traditions broadly. Much of the work takes the form of installation which hitherto was not so. However, the presence and weight of the utilitarian vessel is also evident and developed upon. The works for the exhibition possessed the dual ability to move boldly forward while remaining mindful of the past. The students and faculty of the ceramics section, rather than being mutually exclusive are in fact reciprocally enriching. A unifying and deliberate curatorial priority was the inclusion of work that manifests Ghanaian societal themes, whether triumphant or critical, political or personal, whether celebrating or challenging the status quo. These were achieved through constant evaluation, questioning, and critiquing the institutions of wherever one may be. Work that bravely undertakes this task, undeniably embodying and manifesting.

African, and particularly Sub-Saharan African contemporary artists and artworks are often approached by outsiders with a biased or in fact racist (whether realized or not) set of assumptions, when and if they are engaged by the contemporary U.S./European art "establishment", subjected to an antiquated anthropological-like objectification rather than being considered through the lens of contemporary critical theory. In this capacity 'tradition' may be considered a double-edged sword; while the strength of the past may be recognized, a contemporary African artist may also be borne down by the weight of history applied by an outside agent, in a manner not experienced by contemporary 'western' artists. Ghanaian ceramic art practice is becoming increasingly aware of the

complexities and potential imbalances of cross-cultural navigation.



Fig. 3: 'cocoa mmua apem', (2018), clay, manganese finish, large installations by Kofi Adjei

Photo: Samuel Nortey, *Ahozoden Exhibition*, 2019

Kofi Adjei's ceramic installation in figure 3 explores the farming heritage of Ghana as one of the leading producers of the commodity. The work reminds us of the historical facts to how the farming of cocoa has contributed immensely to development of Ghana as a cocoa producing country. It sets out to link the history of cocoa production and migration in Ghana and the sub-region. The work explores cocoa processing culture with a focus on the pod gathering settings at the farm. Cocoa is an international name and occupies the realm of currency and political commodity. Throughout Ghana's history, even pre-independence, the subject of cocoa has been a driving force for many political decisions and discourse. In figure 4, George Kumi Koranteng Danso's installations replicated swords and machetes as symbols of empowerment to the marginalized in the society. The installation was a conglomeration of slipped cast swords, machetes and photography. Danso's installation is towards gender equality and creating of a positive portrayal of gender equality and the need to re-evaluate our interaction with each other not using culture to play down on the opposite gender.

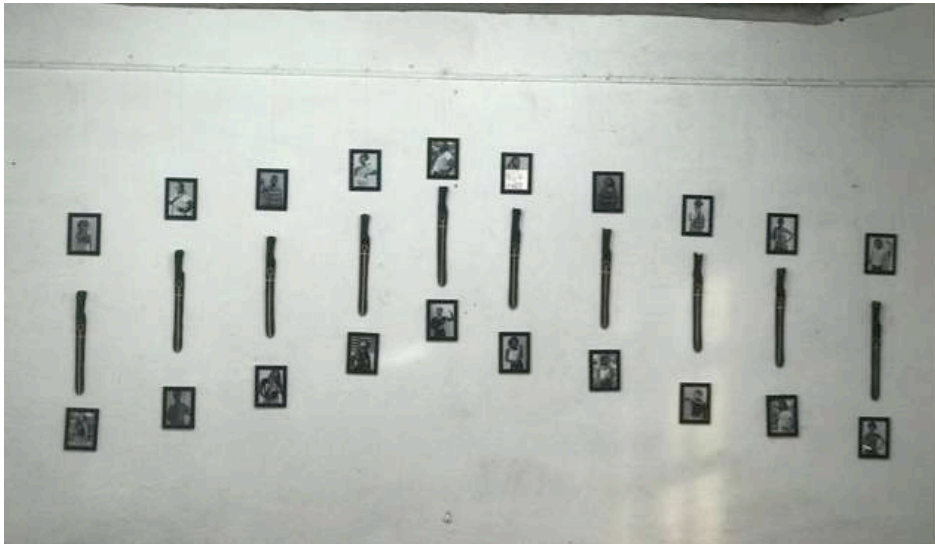


Fig.4: *Empowerment*, (2019), pencil work, installations, George Kumi Koranteng

Photo: Samuel Nortey, *Ahoɔden Exhibition*, 2019

Nortey's installation in Figure 5 questions nations or people have rich resources such as cocoa, gold, bauxite to mention but a few and yet, are very empty in hand. The installation is a follow up to Nortey's earlier work on 'The hands are not for begging' where the artist puts into contemplation the issue of developing countries possessing rich resources yet are forced to rely on external capitalist economies to utilize, process, and profit their own resources, selling them back to them in the form of finished products. Nations or individuals are endowed with rich resources and instead of working hard to develop and make gains out of these resources rather resort to going to others cup in hand. Begging have become a common spectacle on the streets and every corner in Ghana. The cowries which is representational of wealth depicts the abundant resources available.



Fig. 5: *Rich resources; (2019), empty in hand, clay, slip/manganese finish, Samuel Nortey*

Photo: *Samuel Nortey, Ahooden Exhibition, 2019*

Conclusion

Testament to the strength of contemporary Ghanaian art, and KNUST specifically within the decade, Ghana has made a profound impact on the premier world art event, the Venice Biennale. There have been multiple glowing international press reviews of the Ghanaian contributions to the event, especially significant because this is the first year Ghana has participated with a pavilion. It is not an exaggeration to state that this is the absolute highest degree of attention that visual art can receive, and Ghana is firmly in the international spotlight. Ghana is one of the five countries that are consistently being sighted and cited as the most significant showings of the 2019 Venice Biennale, and

this is primarily due to the tireless efforts and reforms from the various departments within the KNUST Faculty of Art. Contemporary ceramic art practice in Ghana is bringing international recognition to Ghanaian ceramics, both traditional and contemporary, and especially to currently-working Ghanaian ceramic artists, whether student, faculty, or professional, and whether working in a contemporary or traditional paradigms. A new visual language is being practiced now by both students and faculty and this is vividly seen in the philosophies and works of these artists. Through reforms and emancipatory directions from some faculty members and practitioners, contemporary Ghanaian ceramic practice is emerging on the global scene and creating connections with the global fraternity. The works produced currently by faculty and students are strengthened by rich and diverse forms of traditional Ghanaian ceramics and Ghanaian cultural traditions broadly with less limitations to materiality and form. Given the above, and the prolific activity of Ghanaian ceramic artists, students and alumni, both within Ghana and internationally, it is clearly a time for Ghanaian ceramic contemporary art to capitalize on the present successes and incredible future potential of visual art, to bring both acclaim to Ghana from abroad as well as to draw visitors to Ghana by way of arts-inspired tourism. The Ghanaian contemporary art community has been able to do so much with relatively little in terms of resources and funding. There is therefore considerable evidence that a modest support and investment will produce exponential results, as the Venice Biennale serves to prove.

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