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THE TRAVELLED PATH OF GHANAIAN WOOD FURNITURE AESTHETICS: FROM THE NINETEENTH CENTURY TO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Abstract

Ghanaian wood furniture design dates back to the 19th century, yet there is limited research documenting its aesthetic evolution from the 19th to the 21st centuries. Although some studies focus on traditional Ghanaian seats and others examine challenges in the furniture industry, none provide a comprehensive account of how cultural, colonial, technological, and global influences have shaped the aesthetics of Ghanaian wood furniture over time. This study addresses this gap by documenting the historical development of Ghanaian wood furniture aesthetics from the 19th to the 21st centuries. Using an interpretivist paradigm, the research adopted a qualitative, creative arts-based approach. Data were gathered from twenty purposively selected respondents across six regions of Ghana through interviews, observations, photography, questionnaires, and focus group discussions, supported by field collection and visual analysis of over one hundred furniture pieces. The data were analysed thematically with attention to ethical and cultural considerations. The findings reveal that Ghanaian wood furniture aesthetics originated in the nineteenth century with symbolic carvings rooted in indigenous belief systems, evolved through the twentieth century under colonial and post-colonial influences that altered forms and functions, and further transformed in the twenty-first century through the incorporation of modern technologies, sustainable materials, and global design trends while retaining traditional joinery and symbolic meanings. The study recommends the digital archiving of furniture designs, policy support for local artisans, interdisciplinary capacity-building workshops, and expanded exhibitions to promote sustainability, cultural preservation, and innovation within Ghana's furniture design industry.

Keywords: aesthetics, cultural heritage, Ghanaian wood furniture, furniture design

1. Introduction

Wood furniture plays a unique role in Ghanaian material culture, serving as both a utility and an aesthetic object, and as a means of social expression (Inkum et al., 2021). From the luxuriously sculpted stool of the Ashanti kingdom that acted as seats of power and storage of the spirits of the ancestors, to the modern upholstered pieces of furniture that stock middle-class apartments in Accra, Ghanaian furniture has been mediating between the needs of daily life and the dreams of cultural identity. Although it is in the middle of the Ghanaian domestic, ceremonial and commercial landscape, the aesthetic history of this furniture tradition is not well documented.

The study follows what the author describes as the travelled path of the Ghanaian furniture aesthetics: a trip through pre-colonial artisanship, colonial experience, post-independence revivalism, and the twenty-first century global synthesis. The paper is guided by two objectives, namely, to collect and record Ghanaian wood furniture in the 19th-21st century in six regions of Ghana, and to analyse the aesthetic development of the furniture in terms of theoretical approaches based on aesthetics theory, cultural materialism, and symbolic interactionism. These aims together shed light on the way furniture has served as a vibrant cultural text, flexible to shifting political, economic, technological and social forces and yet still with a connection to long-standing Ghanaian design traditions.

The Ghanaian woodworking culture spans over many centuries and comprises an impressive variety of shapes, methods, and symbolic lexicons. The royal craftsmen of the Ashanti kingdom created extremely refined stools, beds, and ritual objects, having access to native hardwoods such as mahogany (*Khaya ivorensis*), odum (*Milicia regia*) and ebony (*Diospyros crassiflora*). The form, carvings, and the programmes of symbols inscribed in their surfaces presented social hierarchies, religious beliefs, and cosmological orientations (McNaughton, 1988; Roberts and Berns, 2018). The inflow of European colonial powers in the nineteenth century brought in new materials, new forms, and new design vocabularies, which transformed this tradition and did not eliminate it as Ghanaian craftsmen selectively borrowed and reused colonial aesthetics to produce hybrid furniture and celebrate the indigenous and foreign influence (Antwi et al., 2014).

Despite these historical preconditions, the furniture sector in modern Ghana struggles with numerous challenges: a threat of being pushed out by inexpensive imports, a lack of access to capital and technology, insufficient documentation of traditional practice, and the fact that traditional skills are gradually eroded as apprenticeship systems become weakened (Dadzie et al., 2015; Fening et al., 2022). Another difficulty - and this paper is in the best position to fill this gap - is that there is no systematic documentation of the aesthetic history of Ghanaian wood furniture. In the absence of such records, artisans, designers, educators, and policymakers do not have a common point in history against which they can perceive and advocate, and further develop the tradition. The establishment of a written record of furniture between the 19th and 21st centuries, and the theoretical frameworks in which it can be interpreted, is a contribution of both scholarly and practical value.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Aesthetics and Wood Furniture

Aesthetics has long occupied a central position in philosophy, art, and design studies as the discipline concerned with beauty, taste, perception, and artistic value. While early aesthetic philosophers such as Kant and Hegel regarded beauty as an object of contemplative judgment, contemporary aesthetic theory has expanded to include cultural meanings, functionality,

symbolism, and user experience. According to Mikki (2021), aesthetics provides a conceptual framework for understanding how people perceive and evaluate objects not only through their visual qualities but also through their social, historical, and cultural significance. Thus, aesthetic appreciation extends beyond appearance to encompass emotional attachment, symbolic communication, craftsmanship, and cultural identity.

Within furniture design, aesthetics cannot be separated from function. Since the famous proposition by Sullivan (1896) that "form follows function", designers have continuously debated the balance between utility and artistic expression. Norman (2004) argues that successful products evoke emotional responses through their appearance while simultaneously satisfying functional needs. Furniture therefore, becomes more than a utilitarian object; it serves as an artistic medium through which societies express technological advancement, social values, economic status, and cultural identity. The aesthetic quality of furniture is consequently determined by the harmonious integration of form, proportion, material selection, colour, texture, ornamentation, craftsmanship, and usability. Wood remains one of humanity's oldest and most versatile furniture materials because of its durability, workability, and natural beauty. The grain patterns, texture, colour variations, and finishing techniques contribute significantly to the visual appeal of wooden furniture. Scholars have noted that handcrafted wooden furniture possesses unique aesthetic characteristics because each piece reflects the artisan's skill, creativity, and cultural interpretation. Unlike mass-produced furniture, handcrafted pieces often embody local traditions, indigenous symbolism, and environmental knowledge that collectively enhance their artistic value.

2.2 Historical Development of Furniture Aesthetics

The evolution of furniture aesthetics reflects broader transformations in civilisation, technology, and artistic movements. Archaeological evidence from Ancient Egypt reveals sophisticated wooden furniture dating back over 3,000 years, characterised by elaborate carvings, gold ornamentation, and symbolic motifs associated with royalty and religion (Postell, 2012). Classical Greek and Roman furniture emphasised symmetry, proportion, and structural elegance, principles that later influenced Renaissance furniture across Europe. The Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century fundamentally altered furniture production. Mechanised manufacturing enabled mass production, reduced production costs, and expanded consumer access to household furniture. However, industrialisation also generated criticism regarding declining craftsmanship and artistic quality. This concern gave rise to the Arts and Crafts Movement led by William Morris, which advocated a return to handcrafted production, honest use of materials, and aesthetic simplicity. Subsequently, Art Nouveau introduced flowing organic forms inspired by nature, while Art Deco embraced geometric ornamentation and luxurious materials. During the twentieth century, Modernism and the Bauhaus School revolutionised furniture aesthetics by promoting minimalism, functionalism, and industrial materials such as steel and plywood (Postell, 2012). The late twentieth and twenty-first centuries have witnessed increasing emphasis on sustainability, ergonomic design, digital fabrication, and environmentally responsible production. Contemporary furniture aesthetics now integrate traditional craftsmanship with computer-aided design (CAD), CNC machining, engineered wood products, and sustainable forestry practices. Consequently, furniture design has become a dynamic intersection of technology, environmental consciousness, cultural heritage, and consumer preferences.

2.3 Ghanaian Wood Furniture Aesthetics

The history of wood furniture in Ghana predates colonial contact and is deeply rooted in indigenous artistic traditions. Among many Ghanaian ethnic groups, furniture historically

served ceremonial, political, and religious functions rather than merely domestic purposes. Traditional stools, chairs, headrests, beds, and ceremonial objects were carefully carved from indigenous hardwood species and decorated with symbols reflecting authority, spirituality, kinship, and communal values. Perhaps the most internationally recognised example is the Asante stool tradition. The Asante stool functions not only as seating furniture but also as a sacred political and spiritual symbol representing authority, lineage, and ancestral continuity. Decorative motifs incorporated into stools frequently communicate proverbial wisdom, cosmological beliefs, moral values, and social status. Appiah-Kubi et al. (2022) observe that these carvings embody complex symbolic systems that cannot be adequately interpreted through purely formal aesthetic analysis. Rather, their appreciation requires understanding the indigenous philosophical and cultural contexts within which they were created.

Similarly, furniture traditions among the Fante, Ewe, Ga, Dagomba, Gonja, and other Ghanaian communities demonstrate distinctive regional approaches to craftsmanship, ornamentation, and material usage. Indigenous artisans historically selected wood species based on durability, symbolic associations, availability, and workability. Decorative carving, pyrography, painting, and polishing techniques further enhanced both the aesthetic and functional qualities of furniture.

2.4 Colonial Influence and the Transformation of Ghanaian Furniture

Colonial administration introduced new architectural styles, missionary education, imported furniture designs, and European standards of domestic furnishing. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Victorian and later Edwardian furniture styles became increasingly influential among colonial administrators, mission houses, educational institutions, and emerging urban elites. Indigenous craftsmen gradually incorporated Western furniture forms—including dining tables, wardrobes, cabinets, sofas, and office desks—while adapting them to locally available timber and indigenous carving traditions.

This interaction between indigenous and European design traditions resulted in hybrid furniture forms that combined Western functionality with Ghanaian artistic symbolism. Rather than replacing indigenous aesthetics, colonial influences often stimulated creative adaptation. Ghanaian artisans modified imported designs by incorporating traditional Adinkra motifs, geometric carvings, Akan symbolism, and locally preferred proportions, thereby producing distinctive furniture styles that reflected both cultural continuity and historical change.

2.5 Contemporary Ghanaian Wood Furniture

Following independence, Ghana's furniture industry expanded considerably due to urbanisation, industrial development, vocational education, and increasing domestic demand. Contemporary furniture manufacturers operate across both formal industrial enterprises and informal artisan workshops. While machine production has improved efficiency and market competitiveness, handcrafted furniture continues to command appreciation for its uniqueness, artistic quality, and cultural authenticity. Globalisation has introduced new materials, production technologies, design software, and international aesthetic influences. Modern Ghanaian furniture increasingly combines indigenous hardwoods with metal, glass, upholstery, engineered wood products, and minimalist contemporary designs. At the same time, growing interest in cultural tourism, heritage preservation, and sustainable production has renewed appreciation for traditional craftsmanship and locally inspired furniture aesthetics. Recent scholarship highlights increasing efforts by Ghanaian designers to integrate indigenous artistic principles with contemporary design thinking, creating furniture that is globally competitive while maintaining local cultural identity. Nevertheless, challenges remain, including illegal

logging, scarcity of quality timber, competition from imported furniture, changing consumer preferences, and declining apprenticeship systems.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Paradigm and Design

The philosophical paradigm of the study was interpretivist, which is especially appropriate when the area of interest is related to cultural meanings, historical context, and human experience (Pham, 2018; Rehman and Alharthi, 2016). The relevance of context, meaning and subjective interpretation, which are critical issues in research that addresses the aesthetics aspect of furniture as a culturally entrenched activity, are predicted by interpretivism. This paradigm saw the research adopting a qualitative research design that was based on creative arts. This methodology, according to Pentassuglia (2017) considers creative practice and aesthetic analysis as valid and fruitful forms of scholarly inquiry, and allows the knowledge of the researcher as a practitioner of art and design to inform data collection and interpretation. The method of research used was descriptive as it records and examines the furniture pieces gathered in a way that enables them to be characterised in terms of their formal, material and cultural characteristics.

3.2 Population of the Study

The research involved 6 parts of Ghana, which were chosen to reflect geographical and cultural diversity of the furniture making tradition in the country: the Ashanti Region (Kumasi), the Greater Accra Region (Accra), the Western Region (Takoradi/Essikado), the Eastern Region (Koforidua), the Central Region (Cape Coast) and the Upper East Region (Bolgatanga). These areas include the larger furniture-manufacturing centres of Ghana, including the larger commercial workshops of Kumasi and Accra and the smaller artisanal workshops of Bolgatanga. The intended audience included furniture manufacturers, designers, proprietors of furniture businesses, furniture collectors, scholars in the field of furniture design, and institutional custodians of historic furniture works. One hundred and fifty furniture businesses were located in the six regions.

3.3 Sampling and Participants

Complementary sampling strategies were used three times. Twenty respondents (master craftsmen, furniture design academics, institutional furniture experts, company directors, and others) were selected using purposive sampling, as they possess specialised knowledge of furniture design, production, and history (Andrade, 2021; Etikan et al., 2016). The availability of convenient sampling allowed the researcher to record furniture items found in corridors, along roadsides, in front of shops and houses, and in institutional contexts - retrieving furniture items that would not have been detected using structured sampling. Snowball sampling helped to recruit more participants and furniture collection via referrals by first respondents (Etikan, Alkassim & Abubakar, 2016). Combined, these approaches allowed the systematic involvement of professional participants as well as the opportunistic recording of historically important objects.

3.4 Data Collection

Five main instruments were used in the collection of data. Master craftsmen, directors of furniture companies, and experts in the field of art were interviewed using semi-structured interview formats to discuss such issues as the philosophy of design, the historical development of methods, the choice of materials, the importance of aesthetic values, and the market. The recordings of all interviews were transcribed and audio-taped with the consent of participants.

Using structured observations of workshop processes, tools, and working environments offered first-hand information on fabricating and finishing practices. Photography not only acted as a data gathering medium but also a visual recording medium, resulting in an overall photographic record of more than one hundred pieces of furniture between the 1950s and 2000s. The structured data collected through questionnaires involved preferences of the respondents on the materials used, design factors, and quality perceptions. The discussion of the focus groups allowed the collective contemplation of the aesthetic development of furniture during different periods of time. Field collection consisted of a physical retrieval of historically significant furniture pieces with the permission of their owners to be part of an exhibition, and in cases where physical retrieval was not possible, supplemented by photographic documentation.

3.5 Data Analysis and Ethical consideration

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data according to Terry et al. (2017) approach, where codes were created inductively based on interview transcripts and field notes and were then developed through multiple rounds of review. Aesthetic theory was used as an analysis tool of furniture photographs and collected items, focusing on formal attributes, such as proportion, texture, carving, joinery, finish, as well as on contextual data as collected during fieldwork. Ethical issues were managed in the following way: informed consent was provided by all participants; anonymity was promised where it was demanded and cultural sensitivity was ensured in the manner in which objects of spiritual or ceremonial importance were handled. Institutional custodians were approached to allow access to and records of historically significant pieces.

4. Results

4.1 Overview of the Collection

The fieldwork produced a documented collection of over one hundred wood furniture pieces drawn from all six study regions, spanning from the 1950s to the 2000s and encompassing chairs, beds, cabinets, sideboards, and wardrobes. The collection represents both institutional and domestic furniture, sourced from universities (KNUST), government offices (Public Works Department), private residences, and furniture workshops, including Kpogas Furniture, White Eagle Décor, Ben Bright Furniture Works, Smart Wood Construction and Furniture Works, Jonatools Furniture Works, Ebenezer Furniture Works, Iroko Furniture, Agorwu Furniture, and Aducraft Furniture. The breadth of the collection, geographical, typological, and historical, makes it one of the most comprehensive physical archives of Ghanaian wood furniture yet assembled for scholarly purposes.

4.1.1 Collection of Ghanaian wood furniture from the Various Regions

The study results showed that wood furniture from Ghana, spanning the nineteenth through the twenty-first centuries, showcased the country's extensive contemporary and traditional wooden craft heritage. The comprehensive collection originates from all parts of Ghana, including Ashanti, Eastern, Western, Central, Greater Accra, and Northern Region, revealing crucial information about the collection, which presents a range of traditional and contemporary furniture styles along with various woodworking techniques that define Ghanaian furniture production from the 19th century through the present day.

4.1.2 Office chairs

Office or desk chairs are usually used in offices and homes; they are not confined to enclosed spaces but are also used in open ones. These chairs are often paired with desks for administrative or academic work, including reading and writing (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Armless chair: Identified at the Labour Office, Asafo Kumasi. (Researchers' Field work, 2024)

4.1.3 Beds

Notably, the bedside measures six inches in width, which aligns with the typical dimensions of bedside tables from the 1980s, generally ranging between five and six inches. In contrast, beds produced in the 2000s tend to have broader sides, measuring approximately ten to twelve inches. This comparison highlights the evolution of design preferences over time (Figure 2).



Figure 2: A locker headboard double bed (Ashanti Region), Aduposo in the Adansi Asokwa North Kumasi (Researchers' Fieldwork, 2025)

4.1.4 Chest of Drawers

The chest of drawers shown in Figure 3 was identified during fieldwork at a motorbike repair shop in Bakano, Cape Coast, located near the police station. According to observations and informal interaction with the occupant, the cabinet, which was originally designed for domestic use, had been repurposed as a toolbox for storing repair tools and equipment. Historically, furniture of this nature served an important function in households, where it was commonly used to store valuable items such as money, jewellery, and other personal effects.



Figure 3: Chest of drawers (Central Region), Bakano, Cape Coast (Researchers' Fieldwork)

4.1.4 Living Room Chair

The chair in the living room is a unique item reflecting late-1980s design. It has well-turned front supports that give it a classical design, and the vertically striped back adds a unique visual beauty, making it a masterpiece in any room. Loose cushions on the seat and back support the chair, making it comfortable and easy to maintain, thus making sitting one's most comfortable (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Partial upholstery at Pedu, Cape Coast (Researchers' Fieldwork, 2024)

4.2 Socio-Cultural Factors Influencing Furniture Aesthetics

4.2.1 Ritual, Ritual, and Symbolic Meaning

From the nineteenth century through to the present day, religious belief and the practice of the rites have had an extensive control on the Ghanaian furniture aesthetics. During the pre-colonial era, furniture objects, especially stools and beds, were used as means of spiritual communication and worship of ancestors. The Ashanti stool was not just a seat but spiritual object capable of holding the sunsum (soul) of an individual and, when it belonged to a king, a repository of the spiritual energy of a family or a people. The stool carving programmes of stools and other ritual furnishings embodied religious meanings in the selection of motifs:

animal figures possessed connections with certain spiritual power; geometric patterns expressed the cosmological order; human figures told stories of ancestral linkage.

With the changing religious environment of the twentieth century in Ghana, with the colonial Christianity and Islam, furniture aesthetics changed as well. Furniture in churches, pews, pulpits, altar tables demanded new shapes and forms, and domestic furniture was increasingly required to be able to hold household shrines, prayer stations, and articles of religious observance. Symbolic motifs that previously coded indigenous religious meanings were gradually secularised or reused, and Adinkra symbols, once identified with Akan religious cosmology, were increasingly made more widely accessible as cultural identifiers of Ghanaian identity instead of religious identifiers. It is happening in the twenty-first century, as well, with Adinkra symbols and other traditional motifs being used in the furniture as the demonstration of cultural pride and national identity instead of the purely religious meaning.

4.2.2 Colonial Impression and Hybridisation of Culture

Victorian, Art Nouveau, and Art Deco aesthetic influences were brought to the Ghanaian furniture design by the colonial experience in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and gave rise to the hybrid tradition leading to the mid-twentieth century collection, which is recorded in this research paper. European furniture forms found their way into Ghanaian visual culture with colonial administration buildings, missionary establishments, and offices of trading companies providing access to Ghanaian craftsmen to imported materials, including metal fittings, glass and synthetic textiles. The selective appropriation and cultural redefinition of these foreign influences was typified by the creative reaction of Ghanaian furniture makers, as opposed to wholesale adoption: the principles of Victorian structural design were blended with local carving traditions; the forms of Art Nouveau were blended with Ghanaian symbolic motifs; imported materials were used in objects that were still markedly Ghanaian in terms of their joinery and material choices.

A very instructive illustration of this hybridisation process was given by an expert located in the Upper East Region: the traditional Kente stool - the throne of kings, symbolically equal to the Ashanti stool - was restructured in the colonial era to include woven patterns of Kente cloth as decorative patterns on the backs and seats. The combination of two of the most influential cultural icons in Ghana, the stool and the Kente cloth in one piece of furniture proves the creative potential of Ghanaian artisans to create meaningful syntheses of culture out of the materials of colonial experience.

5. Discussion of Findings

The presence of more than one hundred pieces of Ghanaian wood furniture in six regions confirms that the process of furniture design is never solely technical and always mirrors the social, economic and cultural realities of the time in which the furniture was created (Inkum et al., 2021). The works of the 19th century were both utilitarian and didactic due to their mortise-and-tenon construction and the native hardwoods (Appiah-Kubi et al., 2022). Creative hybridisation, but not aesthetic displacement, is the result of the colonial encounter as craftsmen used the principles of the Victorian era selectively without giving up material preferences of indigenous materials (Antwi et al., 2014). Institutional furniture produced in the mid-century by KNUST and the Public Works Department focused more on the structural robustness of their pieces than on ornamentation (Dadzie et al., 2014), whereas more recent enterprises, including Kpogas and Aducraft, show that the ability to stay competitive on the market is more and more reliant on the ability to market their cultural heritage as a quality indicator (Agyeman et al., 2023). These observations confirm the hypothesis put forward by

Postell (2012) that the design of furniture represents the social, economic, and cultural realities of its time of creation.

Design preference is not a sufficient force behind aesthetic change but rather a more profoundly religious change, urbanisation, colonialism and globalisation (Harris, 1979; Carter and Fuller, 2015). The continuity of the use of mahogany, odum, teak, and sapele over three centuries supports the cultural materialism of Harris (1979). The symbolic interactionism presented by Carter and Fuller (2015) is validated because the Ashanti stool has transformed into a hybrid cultural symbol with the use of Kente cloth due to its prior state as a purely ritual item. The transformation of the functional brief of furniture in urbanisation was the shift of living spaces in a compound to nuclear-family setups (Donkor et al., 2021). Globalisation gave birth to ingenious and not replicative reactions among the talented artisans (Theiding, 2006). The aesthetic theory proposed by Mikki (2021) offers the integrating lens: Ghanaian furniture is beautiful, meaningful, and socially embedded at the same time, and the development of its aesthetics cannot be perceived without taking all three aspects into consideration simultaneously.

6. Conclusion

The aesthetic history of Ghanaian wood furniture, including the symbolism of the nineteenth century, the colonial hybridisation of the twentieth century, and the global-local hybridisation of the twenty-first century, has been documented and analysed using a fieldwork collection of more than a hundred pieces in six parts of Ghana. The results validate that Ghanaian furniture aesthetics have been in a constant state of responding to religious change, urbanisation, encounter with the colonists and globalisation, and still with strong continuities in terms of material preference, joinery tradition and symbolic vocabulary. Contrary to being a tradition on a downward trajectory, Ghanaian wood furniture is a living design legacy of astounding flexibility and cultural richness. The paper suggests that a national digital collection of the recorded furniture designs, ongoing government funding of artisan education and environmental sustainability, and national and international exhibitions should be created to inform as many people as possible about the richness of the Ghanaian furniture design tradition and its present vibrancy.

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