

Utility of Skins and Leather in Selected Chiefs' Palaces in the Ahanta Traditional Area

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Abstract

The Ghanaian chieftaincy system is embedded with rich cultural heritage that is sometimes expressed through art. Only few documentation have been focused on skin and leather related articles in chieftaincy; with notions of whether skins and leather feature in chieftaincy practices in the South of Ghana oblivious to many as these have not been voiced out. This paper presents and discusses findings with regard to the utility of skins and leather in selected chiefs' palaces in the Ahanta Traditional Area. A purposive sampling technique was used to select a sample population of 16 respondents from whom data was collected using observation and interviews as tools. Findings from the study showed that skins and leather featured prominently in chieftaincy practices in the study zone as ceremonial, body and household items; but documentation of this information was limited. It is recommended that findings from this study be placed at the library of institutions such as the Ahanta Traditional Council, Ghana Tourist Authority and Ministry of Tourism and Creative Arts as reference material for academics and students of Visual Arts, African Studies, Tourism and Arts and Culture to access.

Keywords: Skins, Leather, Ghanaian Chieftaincy, Art Forms.

1. Introduction

Documentation of traditional symbols, totems and icons among others are very important to the preservation, protection and promotion of cultural heritage of a people. It is generally argued that African works of art are functional; their meaning and uses largely documented by oral tradition and practical hand over from one generation to the other. With time, the historic, philosophical and other connotation of these artefacts are lost or distorted. This has led to so many art forms losing their meaning and utility in the socio-cultural life the people. As stated above, it was long suggested by Blocker (1988) and Ayiku (1997) that, the documentation of our

artefacts and other forms of art is important. Since then, efforts have been made by academics and even journalists to document the meanings, utilities and other functions of artefacts.

Notable among these works are Adu-Agyem (1998), Agbley (2015) and Asiedu (2011) who used documentation as a process for art education, illustrated selected Ghanaian proverbs in pictorial batik and investigated the importance of art in chieftaincy among a segment of the Akan ethnic group respectively. Many other authors have done works on art forms and oral traditions in a bid to preserving, protecting and promoting culture. Whilst these studies provide useful insights into the symbolic meaning of art forms in chieftaincy, few of these studies explored the topic of skins and leather in chieftaincy even though Chernoff and Abudulai (2016) emphasized the importance of skins in chieftaincy within the northern parts of Ghana.

A cursory look at available literature shows that works on leather and skins largely focus on tanning, artistic uses and industrial usage to mention but a few. When it comes to the uses of skins and leather in chieftaincy, focus is placed mainly on northern Ghana where skins and leather play visible meanings and important roles in the politico-cultural life of the people. But skins and leather could also play significant roles in chieftaincy systems within the southern communities in Ghana. Therefore, the question of whether skins and leather are also used among chiefs in southern Ghana remains unanswered with limited understanding of their uses and meaning, if any.

2. Review of related literature

2.1 Chieftaincy

Chieftaincy refers to the rank, dignity, office or rule of a chieftain who is “a leader of an ethnic group or clan. The concept is sometimes used interchangeably with terminologies such as kingship and chiefdom which according to Skalnik (2004, p.1) use “primitive, archaic, traditional or tribal epithets to distinguish themselves from the modern state”. Whitehead (p. 151 cited in Earle, 2011) also argues that chieftaincy is an umbrella term for “any supra-domestic political unit that defers to individual leadership”. In fact, Skalnik (2004) indicated a preference for use of the term chiefdom, which Carneiro (1981, p. 45) defines as “an autonomous political unit comprising a number of villages under the permanent control of a paramount chief”. These definitions suggest chieftaincy to be a system of governance or ruling. Pratt (2013) argues that chieftaincy in Ghana is synonymous with monarchy in other countries such as Britain, Brunei, and Swaziland. However, this varies from practices of absolute monarchy where monarchs pay no allegiance to any one in their kingdom. Rather, its activities resemble more of constitutional monarchy where the institution is subject to the authority of the modern political system and as Kuvodu (2006) explains operate on a decentralized basis. Despite this, the chieftaincy institution in Ghana when compared with countries like the United Kingdom that practice constitutional monarchy, still appears to fall short in terms of the degree of political influence. Hence Antwi-Boasiako and Okyere (2009) argue that chieftaincy in Africa differs from the concept of monarchy because its rulers wield little or no power.

Studies by Asamoah (2012), the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, (2013) and Stoeltjie (2003) show that the Ghanaian chieftaincy set-up comprises a chief, queen mother, family head, linguist, king makers and elders. These stakeholders are referred collectively to as traditional leaders by Ray *et al.* (2005) who work hand in hand with government through the ministry of chieftaincy and traditional affairs. The 2008 Chieftaincy Act 795 of Ghana as cited by Akatey (2014) defines a chief as “a person who hailing from appropriate family and lineage, has been validly nominated, elected or selected and enstooled, enskinned or installed as a chief or queen mother in accordance with the relevant customary law and usage”. This definition suggests that for every stool there is a need to have not only a chief, but also a queen mother who are of royal lineage. While the position of a chief is normally occupied by a man, that for a queen mother is taken by a woman. The authority of both leaders are vested in symbolic art forms such as wooden stools and swords for southern ethnic groups and animal skins and fly whisks for northern and upper regions of Ghana (Ghananation.com, 2009).

2.2 Skins and leather

Asubonteng (2010) asserts that the leatherwork industry in Ghana is more than a century old. Nevertheless documentation on the topic is limited. Its roots can be traced to indigenous Gonja and Dagomba settlers in Salaga and Yendi respectively. However, Asubonteng (2010) reports that the industry only gained prominence among Hausa peasant farmers and nomad settlers from northern Nigeria in Ghana. A review of the literature suggests a difference in what skins mean generally and what they mean when used in the leatherwork context. According to Asubonteng (2010, p. 30), skins can generally be defined as the “external covering of a body of vertebrate that mediates between the outer and internal environment. In the leather industry, skins are used to refer only to the outer covering of small animals such as the sheep. For outer coverings of larger animals like the

cow, Gbolagunte, Hambolu & Akpavie (2001) propose use of the term hide while Osman (2012) suggests the word kip as appropriate terminology for the outer coverings of much smaller animals like the lizard. All three are broadly classified under the heading of pelt. For the purpose of this study, the general definition of skin is adopted and the term skin is used to refer to the outer covering of all animal types. This is to ensure easy understanding of the concept among research respondents who are perceived by the researcher to have lay knowledge on the topic.

2.3 *Uses of skins and leather in chieftaincy*

The literature on the uses of skins and leather in chieftaincy is very sparse. Nevertheless, Andersen and Bochicchio (2012) argue that animal skins, blood and body have featured greatly in artwork related to myths and rituals. Therefore, it can be argued that there is a place for the use of skins and leather in chieftaincy as a study by Maxanga (2009) suggests that rituals abound in the chieftaincy institution. Chernoff (2000), reports that chiefs in northern Ghana sit on animal skins instead of stools. According to another study by Chernoff and Abdulai (2016), skins and leather are also used as part of the funeral rituals for Muslim chiefs among the Dagaaba people. Qaurcoo (1966) presents data which imply that the uses of skins and leather in chieftaincy transcends practices in the north. He argues that skins and leather in pre-colonial and colonial times were used for girdles, haversacks and bandoliers, belts, knife sheaths, chairs and armchairs among chiefs in the south of Ghana. He explained that the girdle normally made of leopard skin referred to as the “asentoa” in Twi language was used by the subjects of the Twafohene. These were the body-guards of the Omanhene of Akwamu who wore the girdle on every Odwira festival. According to Quarcoo (1966) both chairs were made of buffalo skin. While the Asipim chair served as an ordinary chair in the palace or a seat at ceremonial functions, the Asipim armchair was made by Nana Kofi Abankwa I of Obomeng, Kwaku for use at funerals and festivals. These descriptions suggest skins and leather in chieftaincy to be used mainly by the chief and those in his military organization.

Asiedu (2011) makes reference to the Batakari also referred to as smock as another item of chieftaincy regalia made with leather. He explains that although this is of Muslim origin, it has been imported from the north of Ghana into chieftaincy practices in southern communities. These are normally associated with war embedded with leather pieces. This use of leather is similar to that proposed by Muller (2010). However, she described her leather talismans, referred to as the “sebe”, not as pieces of leather embedded in clothing but rather as a piece of jewellery usually worn around the neck by religious priests, priestesses, chiefs and queen mothers. Nkansah (2008) in a study on queen mother’s regalia in the Kwawu traditional area also associated the use of skins and leather with initiation. She showed that during the initiation rites of a Kwawu queen mother, the sheep’s skin is used as the first seat on which she must sit. In other cases, she explains that the stool of the queen mother is placed on sheep’s skin prior to her seating.

From another angle, Brown (2005) emphasizes the use of skins in festival as he explored the Aboakyer festival among the people of Winneba. In this context, he explains that the deer skin is used to cover the god Penkye-Otu as part of rituals associated with the festival. It can be inferred from the above examples that skins and leather can be used in at least two different ways within the chieftaincy systems; first as regalia to be used by the chief, queen mother, heirs to the throne, priests, priestesses and members of the military organization of the palace and second as artefacts used symbolically to represent things or used as household items

3. **Methodology**

The research used a qualitative research design. According to Malins & Gray (1995), the use of this design for the study is appropriate because it enabled the researchers to engage in a detailed, critical debate on the research topic; something that is relatively weak in craft practice. This was carried out using the case study approach which Yin (2009) suggests is appropriate for the type of research questions investigated in this work. The study was modelled in line with the single case study with embedded units design approach proposed by Baxter and Jack (2008). As a case study, the research was conducted over a period of twelve months between September 2015 and August 2016. The subject matter were skins and leather objects used within chiefs’ palaces and decision making processes regarding why identified objects and specific skins and leather types are used.

Purposive sampling technique was used. This sampling technique was used because it allowed the researchers to rely on expert advice as well as his prior personal knowledge in the study area and from reviewed literature to select appropriate palaces and respondents that could provide reliable information for the study. A total of 16 individuals were sampled from the accessible population.

The researchers used a combination of observation and interviews as instruments. Observation was the first tool used and this was targeted primarily at addressing research question one that is to identify and systematically describe skin and leather artefacts in the social setting chosen for study. An interview guide was

used to probe deeper into findings from observation and gather detailed information from respondents. Responses from interviews and notes from observations were generally analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) systematic process of reduction, data display and conclusion drawing.

4. Results

4.1 Uses of skins and leather

An examination of Table 1 reveals that skin and leather articles used in selected chiefs' palaces in the Ahanta Traditional area include the following: Stool top ('nhoma'), Floor mat ('nhoma'), 'Asipim' chair, Footrest, Drums ('twene'), Flywhisk ('bodua'), Leather whisk ('praye), Sandal ('ahenema'), Head band ('abotire'), Headgear ('krobonkyer'), Armlet ('kontuah'), Cross belt ('nbiemu'), Necklace, Smock ('batakari kese') and Staff ('poma').

Table 1. Findings on skins and leather articles used in selected chiefs' palaces in the Ahanta traditional area

| ITEMS | RESPONDENTS | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------|---------------|---|--------|---|-------|---|---------------|---|----------|----|--------|----|--------|----|------------|----|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 |
| Stool top | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ |
| Floor mat | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ |
| Asipim Chair | √ | √ | X | X | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ |
| Footrest | √ | √ | X | X | √ | √ | X | X | X | X | X | X | √ | √ | √ | √ |
| Drum | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ |
| Flywhisk | √ | √ | X | X | X | X | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ |
| Leather whisk | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | √ | √ | X | X |
| Sandal | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ |
| Head band | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ |
| Head gear | √ | √ | X | X | √ | √ | X | X | √ | √ | X | X | √ | √ | X | X |
| Armlet | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ |
| Cross belt | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ |
| Necklace | √ | √ | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Smock | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | X | X | √ | √ | X | X | √ | √ | X | X |
| Staff | √ | √ | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | √ | √ | X | X |
| | Agona Nkwanta | | Awrozo | | Adwoa | | Princess Town | | Egyambra | | Sankor | | Ahanta | | Aketenchie | |

KEY

√ - Used X – Not used

All 16 respondents, as shown in table 1, said they used stool top and the floor mat in the eight palaces. According to all the respondents, the stool top is usually placed on the seat of the chief or queen mother before they sit while the floor mat is placed on the floor for chiefs to rest their feet on while sitting. Respondent 1 (chief of Agona Nkwanta), further remarked that at durbars, "only the mightiest chief was allowed to use the floor mat". The photographs in Figures 1 and 2 are evidence of the use of the stool top and floor mat at the palace of Agona Nkwanta and by the paramount chief of the Ahanta kingdom at a durbar ground respectively. In addition to the use of the floor mat as a foot rest, 2 out of 16 respondents suggested a slightly different use for the floor mat. Respondent 11 explained that when a new queen mother is chosen after the death of an old one, she must not sit in a palanquin. So during the funeral of the previous queen mother, instead of sitting in a palanquin, she walks on skins. Lots of pieces are arranged on the floor by an attendant for her to walk on throughout the town. Similarly, respondent one asserted again that, the practice of walking on skins was not only for funerals and commented that such a practice "could actually be carried out on any occasion where the chief or queen mother chose to walk instead of using a palanquin". Nevertheless, he was of the opinion that such

practices could sometimes be unrealistic in modern times considering the amount of work involved and the distance to be covered.



Figure 1. Use of stool top and floor mat at the palace of Nana Eziaku IV of Agona Nkwanta.



Figure 2. The floor mat used by the paramount chief of the Ahanta traditional area.

With regard to the ‘Asipim’ chair, Table 1 shows that, 14 out of 16 respondents acknowledged its use in their palaces. One of the chiefs however admitted that he did not use the ‘Asipim’ chair in his palace because he did not feel it was necessary. The other chief did not assign any reason to why he does not use it in his palace. Further, an assessment of Table 1 shows that 8 out of 16 respondents acknowledged the use of foot rest in their palaces. One of the respondents however said he did not have the foot rest because its use was not part of the Ahanta chieftaincy tradition. Table 1 also indicates that all the 16 respondents confirmed the use of drums in the eight palaces studied. Respondents 1, 7, 9 and 11 mentioned that their palaces used the Asafo, Abisakene, Kundum and Bomba drums specifically; and figure 3 shows the bomba drum being used at recent Kundum festival in the traditional area.



Figure 3. The Bomba drum being used at Kundum festival in the Ahanta traditional area.

It can also be seen from Table 1 that 12 out of 16 respondents who answered the question reported the use of fly whisk in their palaces. According to 4 of the respondents (chiefs and kingmakers from the palaces that did not have the fly whisk), this was because the odikro was not allowed by custom to use the artefacts as he participated in dispute resolution activities only at the court of his divisional chief and not on his own; hence did not need such artefacts as they were normally used for summoning people to court. Similarly, Table 1 also reveals that only 2 out of the 16 respondents stated the use of the leather whisk in their palaces. These were the chief and kingmaker from the palace of the paramount chief. The limited use of leather whisk in the study palaces indicates that this item is not common in the traditional area. As shown in Table 1, all 16 respondents mentioned that the sandal was used in their palaces and it was worn by the chiefs especially during occasions. Additionally, a review of table 1 also indicates that all the 16 respondents confirmed the use of the head band in their palaces and eight out of sixteen respondents reported in Table 1 that the head gear was used in their palaces. According respondent 1, chief of Agona Nkwanta, the head gear is used occasionally because its design is sophisticated. Figure 4 below shows how the head gear was used by the chief of Agona Nkwanta at a funeral.



Figure 4. A black leather head gear used by Nana Eziaku IV of Agona Nkwanta at a funeral.

An examination of Table 1 also shows that all the 16 respondents confirmed the use of armlet in the 8 palaces studied. Furthermore, all the respondents explained that this was normally used only by the chief as part of his dressing for ceremonial events. Further, interview responses from all the respondents as shown in Table 1 indicates that the cross belt was used only by chiefs in all 8 palaces studied. Although it was not part of the items on the observation checklist, Table 1 shows that 2 out of 16 respondents made reference to the necklace as a

leather artefact used within his palace. This indicates that leather necklaces are not common among the chiefs in the traditional area. Table 1 also revealed that 10 out of 16 respondents indicated the use of smock in their palaces; and figure 5 shows its use by the chief of Agona Nkwanta. However, the other 6 chiefs acknowledged their knowledge of it but do not use it. Although it was not part of the items on the observation checklist, a review of Table 1 shows that 4 out of the 16 respondents made reference to the staff as a leather artefact used within their palaces. Again, this indicates that use of the staff is not common among the chiefs in the traditional area.



Figure 5. A smock used by Nana Eziaku IV of Agona Nkwanta (in the middle)

5. Discussion

An analysis of the raw data presented under uses of skins and leather in selected chiefs' palaces revealed that the uses of skins and leather can be categorized under three main headings – ceremonial, body and household items - which were normally procured through a supply chain comprising manufacturers based in Kumasi through retailers within the study zone who supplied what was needed to the various palaces; or directly from the general market by representatives of the chief and queen mother as and when needed. Ceremonial items referred to artefacts that were used in rituals and religious ceremonies within the chieftaincy system such as the stool top, floor mat, 'Asipim' chair, fly and leather whisks, staff and the drum; most of which were made with skin rather than leather. The 'Asipim' chair is considered a ceremonial object due to the symbolism associated with the skin used to make it. Similarly, the drum is classified as a ceremonial object because it serves not only the purpose of making music for celebrations such as festivals, but also as a means through which stakeholders in the chieftaincy system communicate with each other, smaller gods and their ancestors.

Body items referred to articles worn on the body to adorn stakeholders in the Ahanta chieftaincy system which included sandal, head band, head gear, armband, cross belt, necklace, smock and staff primarily made with leather rather than skin. The head band was considered different from the headgear because while the head band was worn around the forehead of the wearer, the head gear covered the entire scalp of the head of the wearer. Household items usually made with leather also comprised artefacts used generally within the palace for decorative or functional purposes. The use of household items appeared to be limited only to the footrest. Nevertheless, feedback from some respondents gave the impression that skin and leather related items in this category could actually be more depending on the taste of the chief and other stakeholders in the palace. Therefore, the limited use of household items identified in the study could be a result of the small size of some of the palaces visited which realistically did not make room for large household items such as furniture and fittings. In one of the palaces where space allowed for such things, the researcher observed a preference for fabric made sofas and armchairs rather than leather ones.

Findings from empirical work mirrored findings from literature on the use of skins and leather primarily for chieftaincy regalia. Articles such as the stool top, Asipim chair, smock, drum, footrest and other body items identified in the literature (Nkansah, 2008; Quarcoo, 1966; Asiedu, 2011; Adu-Agyem, 1998; Kyeremanteng, 1965) were observed within the study. However the leather pillow and clothing for first born son suggested by Chernoff and Abdullai (2016) to be used in chieftaincy systems in the northern part of Ghana were non-existent. Although the stool top was observed in the study, it is important to note that it was used on a daily basis rather

than on special occasions such as initiation ceremonies as reported by Nkansah (2008). Similarly, even though the smock was identified in the study, the attire was seldom used within the chieftaincy set up; thereby showing that leather, is not common material for generally making clothing in Ghana; a point emphasized by Asubonteng (2010) in the literature. While items such as girdles, haversacks, knife sheaths (Quarcoo, 1966) and coverings for gods (Brown, 2005) identified in literature were not observed in empirical work, leather articles such as the floor mat and leather whisk discovered in the study did not show up in the literature.

Findings from the study also revealed the sandal to be the only body item used by all stakeholders in the chieftaincy set up. This to some extent provides justification for why footwear is said to constitute the largest use of leather in general in the literature by O'Flaherty et al. (1956) and Sarkar (2005). Further, most of the other skin and leather articles identified in the study are used mainly by the chief and in some cases the queen mother with limited reference made to other stakeholders such as military personnel, priests and priestesses and heirs to the throne mentioned as users of skin and leather artefacts in the chieftaincy institution in the literature (Muller, 2010; Quarcoo, 1966; Chernoff and Abdullai, 2016). In addition, findings from empirical work showed use of most body items for funerals which contrasts findings from the literature on their use not only for funerals but also for functions such as festivals (Brown, 2005) and in times of war (Quarcoo, 1966).

6. Conclusions and contributions

Skin and leather articles used in selected chiefs' palaces in the Ahanta traditional area can be grouped under ceremonial, body and household items. Items comprise the following: stool top, floor mat, 'Asipim' chair, fly whisk, leather whisk, drum, footrest, sandal, head band, head gear, armband, cross belt, necklace, smock and staff. Five of these items were made with skins and the other ten made of leather. Further, skins were preferred for making ceremonial items, while body and household items were made normally with leather; and body items made with leather were usually worn for funerals. This leads to the conclusion that skin and leather articles are used prominently in selected chief's palaces within the Ahanta traditional area but documentation of this information is limited. Additionally, it can also be concluded that skins are considered more valuable than leather for religious reasons in selected chief's palaces within the Ahanta traditional area. Therefore, it is recommended that findings from this paper be placed at the libraries of institutions such as the Ahanta Traditional Council, the Western Regional House of Chiefs, the Ministry of Chieftaincy and Culture, the Ghana Tourist Authority and the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Arts as reference material for people in academia and students of Visual Arts, African Studies, Tourism and Arts and Culture, to access. Further, studied palaces should keep the production of ceremonial items in-house and avail themselves for training on how to prepare, process and preserve skins. Such knowledge sharing program can be initiated by the Ahanta Traditional Council and Western Regional House of Chiefs who engage the services of academics in leatherwork departments in polytechnics and universities.

The study was conducted in selected palaces within the Ahanta traditional area. As such the replication of this study across other chiefs' palaces in the study zone not included in the sample would be beneficial and allow for a better understanding of practices within the traditional area as a whole. Furthermore, the investigation of the same research question in chieftaincy practices within other ethnic groups in the southern and northern parts of Ghana would allow for cross comparison in order to understand the utility of skins and leather in Ghanaian chieftaincy as a whole.

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