



Preserving the Golden Heritage: Understanding the Historical and Social Meanings of Asante Royal Jewellery and Regalia Adornments

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Abstract

Gold jewellery, regalia, and ornaments were traditionally reserved for special occasions, when chiefs appeared in public adorned with gold and dressed in fine silk robes. The king wore so much gold on his arms, wrists, and fingers that he had to rest his hands on the heads of small boys standing before him. These gold ornaments also symbolized rank and status within Asante society. However, many people today are unaware of the rich histories and cultural meanings behind these jewellery pieces and the royal traditions they represent. In this research, historical and descriptive qualitative research design was used to examine how the Asantes used their ornaments to adorn their royals, the cultural meanings and social definitions associated with the activities. The results showed that these ornaments are not only a symbol of wealth and power but also important displays of identity and culture. Conclusively, these traditions can be maintained by educating the Asantes, organizing cultural festivals, and by communicating with the people to uphold the cultural heritage of the Asantes. It is advisable that stakeholders such as cultural institutions and policymakers work hand in hand to develop awareness programmes and support initiatives that promote and preserve Asante's cultural practices in the coming generations.

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Introduction

The Asante Empire influenced craft production throughout the region in Ghana; they had access to gold and contact with Islamic artists and traders. The Asantes encouraged the production of gold jewellery, ornaments because they believed it had supernatural abilities or spiritual power (Richter et. al, 2011) ^[22]. They used objects made from gold to protect the power of the empire or the safe spiritual travels of the deceased (Janse, 2006) ^[11]. The Asante are not the only group that has continued to use ceremonial regalia (Kyeremateng, 1970). Tribal structures are still important in rural Ghana, with village chiefs, divisional chiefs, and a paramount chief who serves as the highest authority in a clan (Frimpong, 1996) ^[8]. Obeng (1996) ^[20] agrees that women in Asante Kingdom wore long chains of gold attached to a bodice.

Another big fashion was heavily decorated rings that had cameos, gemstones, and compasses or sundials in the bezel of the ring. Some rings had hidden compartments that may have contained a relic, perfume or even poison jewellery and was easy to sell and valuable so it was seen as a currency (Kwakye, 2012) ^[15]. As evolution caught up to the Asantes, globalisation has seen the different types of jewellery and new additions of ornaments flooding the market making the indigenes forgetting about the cultural heritage of the Asantes due to technology.

The cultural, social and symbolic meanings of gold jewellery, especially in African society and the Asante in particular, has been discussed in considerable detail in earlier literature on this subject. Historians such as Kotoku (2008) ^[12] and Koulidou and Mitchell (2021) ^[13] have reported the role of gold jewellery in Asante society as being not just ornamental but a highly effective

Symbol of power, wealth and spiritual protection. As noted in these studies, gold ornaments will be part of the royal regalia and are worn in key ceremonies to mark rank and social status.

According to the work of Kuwornu-Adjaottor *et al.* (2016)^[14], the history of gold craftsmanship among the Asante highlights that the detailed patterns and symbols frequently represent profound symbolism, proverbs, beliefs, and narratives of history. Equally, Manlow (2021)^[18] writes about the role of gold jewellery as a means of expressing identity and cultural survival particularly in the context of modernization and globalization.

There is the need for us the Asantes to protect and promote our cultural heritage by not killing the tradition for the future generations. Although a lot of festivals are celebrated and showcased to the public, there is the decline of indigenes partaking or honouring our chiefs and traditional rulers who adorn themselves with the jewellery, regalia and ornaments. This article seeks to set things right by alerting and educating the Asantes on ensuring that their rich cultural heritage is not thrown away and annihilated.

Literature Review

Theory of Cultural Preservation

The study is based on the theory of cultural preservation introduced by Dewidar (2015)^[3] who defines material artifacts as the fundamental elements that help to protect intangible heritage. Gramegna (2012)^[9] in his work describes the mechanism by which maintaining jewellery traditionally as a form of cultural heritage preservation ensures the preservation of cultural heritage on a larger scale. Asante jewellery tradition in Kumasi evidences a theoretical stance which shows how conservation of material objects safeguards actual physical objects, as well as the knowledge base entrenched in them, of the Asante culture between 1950 and 2024. The cultural preservation theory recognises physical manifestations of culture such as Asante jewellery as having rich historical as well as artistic and social significance (Dewidar 2015)^[3]. The products of human labour are the tangible artifacts of Ghanaian culture that demonstrate to us the artisanal techniques of the past, revealing artistic information and social practices. By analysing Asante jewellery materiality and design iconography in terms of theoretical concepts the research shows how the artefacts act as collective cultural depositories amongst respondents in the study.

Only systematic documentation and thorough scholarly research combined with appropriate conservation methodologies can constitute the fundamental prerequisites to effectually conduct cultural preservation as postulated by Gramegna (2012)^[9]. This theoretical model classifies our study of the Asante royal jewellery since master craftsmen still adhere to traditional technology alongside their acculturation to modernity. Cultural records of materials and techniques and symbolic designs should be coupled with academic research on historical development and cultural meanings during the preservation process. As per cultural preservation theory the research demonstrate how Asante jewellery can be used to do more than ornamentation by being active cultural objects that continue cultural traditions by adapting.

History of Ghanaian Jewellery

Fening (2021) posits on how as late as the 2000s the Asante people proudly wore gold and bronze, and beads during special events. It was instituted by the Akan migrants to Ghana in the Sahel and Sahara. One of the Akan states that was united and consolidated by Asantehene through military campaigns in the early 18th century was historic Asante, then an amalgamation of a number of Akan states. After assimilating a few other Pra Twifo states, the state grew fast, providing enough men continuously in opposition to Anlo Ewe invaders, because of peaceful scenery in Asante, who traded-in with British through specially agreed terms of peaceful restorative cession in natural state-flowing gunpowder acquisition

In Ghana Fening (2001)^[4] has stated that there has been a rich history of traditional jewellery that has been bonded with the cultural and historical importance of the country. Ghanaian jewellery is the product of local craftsmen with the influence of different ethnic groups and their own traditions on jewellery making (Kotoku 2008)^[12]. Agyei *et al.* (2024)^[1] believe that Ghana is a land of a rich and historical background of traditional jewellery. Tetteh and Agyei (2022)^[7] also affirm the view that Ghanaian jewellery is a demonstration of the art and craftsmanship of local craftsmen, who represent different ethnic groups with their different traditions.

Baah *et al.* (2024) say that one of the most recognizable Ghanaian jewellery is Asante gold jewellery. Asante region of Ghana has its own goldsmithing Asante people are famous in goldsmithing. The Asante or Asante Empire with its history of making complicated jewellery.

Factors that Influence the Characteristics of Akan Jewellery and Regalia

As far as the features of Ghanaian jewellery are concerned, there are a few factors which impact its peculiar style and design. Cultural heritage, use of indigenous materials, historical events and the impact of modern jewellery fashion are some of the key factors.

Cultural Heritage

According to Fening *et al.* (2022)^[7], in certain tribes, the girls who have reached adolescence seem to have inherited beads that they wear around the waist to protect themselves against the evil spirit. Priestesses of the related Dangbel, a subgroup of Ga-Dangbe signal their role, status and divinity with them up to an optimum number or arrows beyond which they are discarded as falling off; with tovi beads. Picture bracelets also indicate what a chief is in the tribe.

Simply put, Ghanaian jewellers produce various designs of jewellery to meet the local and international market demands. Ghanaian jewellery is the potent identity marker of the culture, linking jewellery to its origins and history. These pieces of art show off the different cultural practices of Ghana and their mastery of developing creativity (Kotoku, 2008)^[12]. The backgrounds coupled with personal stories embedded in Ghanaian jewellery are easier to understand over time.

The Use of Indigenous Materials

As Ray (2024)^[21] shows, design qualities of traditional Hawaiian jewellery are largely reliant on native materials.

The natives provide jewellery raw materials that combine both cultural heritage and natural resources in the country. According to Agyei *et al.* (2022)^[7], one of the factors which influence the nature of Ghanaian jewellery is the access to materials. According to the research conducted by Agyei *et al.* (2024)^[1], Ghana is endowed with natural resources including gold, silver, brass and other precious stones. They are frequently used to make jewellery that has a clear and genuine Ghanaian feel. The cultural meaning of some materials can be another reason why Kotoku (2008)^[12] arguably shares the opinion.

Methods

The qualitative research method was used in the research on how to promote the cultural heritage of the Asantes using their jewellery, regalia, and ornaments; to understand the cultural importance and practices connected with these adornments (Busha and Harter 1980)^[2]. This research strategy was descriptive and historical in nature and enabled a thorough investigation of Asante jewellery and regalia development, symbolism, and relevance today. The historical study allowed exploration of archival sources and past documents to trace the origins and changes of these cultural items, and a descriptive study offered a description of the ongoing practices and meanings as they were observed in the community.

Several instruments were used to achieve rich and triangulated data, which supported data collection. The elaborate designs and styles of the jewellery, regalia and ornaments were also captured visually by photography where some details could be missed in a description. Key informants

such as cultural custodians, artisans, and community elders were also interviewed to provide personal accounts, interpretations and contextual information about the role of these adornments. The use of participant observation also enabled the researcher to observe at first-hand how jewellery and regalia were used and displayed at cultural events and ceremonies and how they were used socially and to what end. All these approaches and techniques helped to understand the means of how the cultural heritage of the Asantes is reflected and how it is saved by means of their jewellery, regalia and ornaments in a holistic manner.

Sampling

First of all an interview was conducted with jewellers, traditional rulers and some Akan speaking individuals together with a visit to the Manhyia palace and the cultural centre. The research entailed promoting the cultural heritage of the Asantes through jewellery, ornaments and regalia telling about the importance in preserving the history of Asante kingdom, the impact of its cultural heritage to the public, Akan's and future generations to come through. Leedy and Ormond (2005)^[17] explain that, in purposive sampling, people or other units are chosen to suit the purpose of the study. Among the various sampling techniques, purposive sampling was employed in the selection of the various places and individuals. Due to the large size of places and individuals 30% was a fair representation of the sample size. Out of an accessible population size of 150 individuals and places, 50 of these places and institutions were purposely selected. The target population 150 people with a sample size of 30%.

Table 1: Population sampled

Category	Accessible Population	Sample size
Jewellers/Manhyia /Cultural Centre	30	6
Chiefs and traditional rulers	30	6
General public	90	18
Total	150	30

When carrying out this research on the promotion of cultural heritage of the Asantes using their jewellery, regalia, and ornaments, ethical considerations were observed closely during the research. All participants gave informed consent before interviews and observations, and were made aware of the purpose of the study and allowed to revoke that consent at any point without adverse effects. The identity of respondents was maintained through encryption of information and the use of pseudonyms in case of anonymity to maintain confidentiality and protect the identity of the respondents. Also, cultural sensitivity was observed, respecting the local customs, traditions, and protocols when collecting data, especially when taking photos of sacred or important objects and when attending cultural ceremonies. Another aspect that promoted trust and collaboration is that the researcher approached the leaders of the community and cultural custodians prior to any data collection activity.

To analyze the data, the researchers used thematic analysis (Nowell *et al.*, 2017)^[19] to identify, analyze and report patterns in the qualitative data that was collected through interviews, observations and photographic records. This approach entailed familiarization with the information by repeated reading and reviewing and then coding important characteristics of the jewellery and regalia in terms of cultural meanings, usages and symbolism. The codes were then

grouped into larger themes that described the culture of the Asantes as was contained through their adornments. The analysis of data and the identification of major themes (identity, status, tradition, and cultural preservation) was made possible through thematic analysis, which was rich, detailed, and nuanced. This strategy helped in ensuring that the results were based on the participants views and their cultural backgrounds, which would be useful in the promotion and maintenance of the Asante cultural heritage.

Results and Discussions

Research Process and its Preliminary Stages

After a tour at the Manhyia Palace, Cultural Centre and interviews with Traditional rulers and the general public, it was found out that, people had little information about Asante's jewellery and regalia since communication to the public are poor on their rich history and cultural heritage. There is no exhibitions, articles, journals and books and media announcement on the cultural heritage of the Asante. The people in the Asante kingdom are ignorant about their rich cultural heritage.

The research conducted at the Manhyia Palace, Cultural Centre, Traditional rulers and the general public saw many jewellery, ornaments and regalia of the Asante's exhibited. Relics at Manhyia palace were not been shown, but the tour

guides at the various premises were able to tell the rich history of these artefacts and how we can promote them. Exhibitions organised at the various premises will help promote the rich cultural heritage. Also articles, journals and media communication will help promote the cultural heritage of the Asante's.

At the visit to Manhyia palace, there were regalia and jewellery and other ornaments there which could be promoted through exhibition, online media and among others to tourists and people to come around and visit the place. These are some of the jewellery and regalia found at the Manhyia palace. We had tours with the tour guides there at their gift shops and museums and how to promote the rich

cultural heritage of the Asante's. These are some of their iconic jewellery, ornaments and regalia figures located at the various places. The National Cultural Centre is located in the Kumasi, the capital of Asante region of Ghana and is indeed one of the top-most tourist sites in the area. The Centre is considered as the show piece for Ghanaian culture. The centre displayed other replica of jewellery and ornaments adorned by royalties for the public to purchase (shown in Plate 1 and 2). (Plate 3 and 4) displays other regalia found at Manhyia gift shop Interviews were conducted with sales personnel's, artists and cultural experts around for their views on Promoting the cultural heritage of the Asantes.



Plate 1: Jewellery displayed



Plate 2: Ornaments displayed at Cultural centre



Plate 3: Regalia found at Manhyia Gift Shop



Plate 4: Traditional ruler's regalia

The bravery and traditions of Ghanaian warriors were imprinted in pre-independence Ghana in the iconography of

warriors and weapon-themed jewellery produced by Asante jewellers. The use of warrior symbols like shields and spears

was quite common in jewellery to celebrate the prowess and courage of the Ghanaian warriors who literally fought their colonial rulers through the Akans. The symbols served to demonstrate the natural combativeness of the Ghanaian society as well as demonstrate the collective defensive functions of the society. Swords and axes became central in jewellery before independence was achieved in Ghana to demonstrate defensive ability in addition to the power to wield power. By wearing jewellery that contained symbols of weapons, royalties and leaders declared their duty to protect civilians and that they were guardians of the law in the community.

The pre-independent Ghana jewellery designs used animal motifs to represent the various attributes and faiths. The animal symbols on the traditional jewellery pieces worn in Ghana were used to represent different attributes such as power and intelligence and defense.

The Sankofa bird is perhaps the most important of all animal symbols in Ghanaian jewellery. Sankofa bird has appeared in several Ghanaian jewellery designs to serve the purpose of reminding the individual that he/she needs to research into his/her past to make plans in the present (Personal Communication at Cultural Centre, Kumasi).

The jewellery road to independence of Ghana had to look back at the past battles as well as the successes to achieve national development by looking at what the jewellery makers and consumer interaction at Asante.

The animal symbols commonly found in Ghanaian jewellery are the lion and the turtle that symbolize strength and wisdom respectively. These symbols are used in the jewellery by creating cuttle fish casts and various forms of engraving. This paper has shown that Asante jewellery comprised of the elephant due to its power and strength as a leadership and authority symbol.

The connection between the chief and traditional beliefs was also highlighted by the inclusion of animal motifs in chief palaces, decorations and royal displays. To illustrate this, the jewellery and regalia of Akyem Abuakwa, many of which were created by Asante Jewellers, bears animal symbols including the leopard, which is associated with agility and secrecy, and were commonly worn in jewellery to symbolize the skills of a chief to protect and lead the community with a quick decision (Personal Communication at Cultural Centre, Kumasi).

These motifs not only made the regalia beautiful, but were also used to strengthen the culture and spiritual beliefs attached to the rule of the Ghanaian society.

Discussion

When one thinks of the iconography of design behind Asante jewellery design, one can be interested in how it has evolved throughout the years in terms of various designs, and how the culture and tradition of art has changed these designs. To take just one example, such Asante jewellery as has had a especially rich history in a given area, such as the Asante culture, often includes highly detailed symbolism and literal references to its cultural history in its ornamentation as asserted and alongside research by Haugen (2008) and Kotoku (2021). The history of the Asante jewellery design iconography represents a blend of the traditional and modern motivation. Its design incorporates traditional symbolism (Adinkra symbols) aided by the examination of Fening (2015) ^[5] which are symbolic representation of proverbs expressing wise sayings, interpretations and guidance in day-

to-day life such as Sankofa into its forms through pieces of jewellery to reconnect wearers to its cultural lives and connections with the ancestors. The motifs today are bold in their symbolism and full of heritage; an honest expression of tradition in a constantly changing environment that encompasses modern Asante jewellery designs. Over the years since then, the art of Asante jewellery had been shaped by both ancient ways and modern sensibilities. The combination of these centuries-old highly ingrained methods with modern elements has enabled increased accuracy, individualism and creative panache in designing Asante jewellery thus expanding the possibilities of artistic liberty. On the one hand, the iconography and symbols applied to Asante jewellery design have developed as a result of trade, migration and Globalisation in accordance with the results provided by Kotoku (2008) ^[12].

Conclusion and Recommendation

The study concludes, based on interviews done with individuals in Asante Kingdom, most Asantes do not know about their rich cultural heritage as portrayed through jewellery and regalia. Historically, only gold jewellery, ornaments and regalia were used during special events, especially when the senior chiefs were out in the open wearing heavy gold decorations and deep silk robes. Such decorations are a symbol of status, power, and cultural belonging in Asante society. But the historical backgrounds and inner meanings of these cultural artifacts are not known to the average masses any more or any less today.

Thesis writing, articles and journals are other useful methods of popularising and maintaining the Asante cultural heritage through their jewellery and regalia. Also, books and displays may be used as a convenient source of education and cultural enjoyment. They include the suggestions that cultural bodies, academicians, and community chiefs should work together in producing and sharing scholarly and popular resources to demonstrate the importance of Asante jewellery and regalia. Exhibitions and cultural festivals with these artifacts will also attract the population and help them feel pride in the Asante culture. Moreover, this cultural knowledge should be incorporated in school syllabuses so that younger generations can have strong attachment to their culture. With such concerted efforts, the rich Asante cultural heritage can be maintained and enjoyed even many years later.

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