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Fashion on Currency: Analysis of the 1977 – 1986 Millinery Fashion in Post-independence Ghana

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Abstract: This article showed interest in millinery displayed pictorially on the currencies as well as the significance of those fashion representation in Ghana's fashion culture. The article specifically analysed the millinery fashion that featured on currency notes of 1977 and 1986 and the Yaa Asantewaa's imagery on the currency note of 1984. Three Ghanaian currencies purposively sampled for the study were the Five Cedis note issued on July 4, 1977; the Fifty Cedis note issued on 15th July 1986; and the Twenty Cedis note issued on 15th May 1984. These currency notes were released within nine years interval, that is, between 1977 and 1986. Content analysis of visual images, and social semiotics methods of visual data analysis constituted the method of analysis for the study focusing on the dominant feminine figures on the currency accessorised with millinerics. The study put forward those feminine images represented on the Five Cedis, Fifty Cedis, and Twenty Cedis currency notes issued on July 4, 1977, 15th July 1986 and 15th May 1984 respectively that displayed the repertoire of straw-woven and the Akan militaristic millinery fashion in post-independence Ghana. The millinery practices depicted on the currencies embodied historical allusions to Ghanaian women irrespective of economic background; and ingrained in the memory of the citizenry the fashioned feminine identities constructed through millinery fashion in relation to the popular culture of twentieth-century Ghana. The selected indigenous millinery-inspired visuals also celebrated female vitality and brought to the fore the visibility of women in the public sphere and represented an epitome of independent women of the twentieth century Ghana who contributed to national development. It also made a strong socio-political fashion statement about the indigenous classic millinery fashion consciousness of Ghanaians and the millinery structural design in use at the post-independence era.

Keywords: Ghanaian currency, millinery, fashion, post-independence, currency note

1. INTRODUCTION

Currencies are powerful nationalist (Smith, 1981; Gellner, 1983; Deutsch, 1966) legal tender for payment that help to construct a sense of collective memory and tradition; communicate a sense of communal and national belonging as well as contribute to notions of popular sovereignty (Helleiner, 1998; Skinner & Kubacki, 2007). They are the statutory tender for the payment of business transactions and issued on the sovereignty of a nation. Currencies of a particular nation are usually handled by millions of people daily for transaction. This suggests that people encounter and use currencies and therefore it forms an integral part of their everyday life. Section 33 of the Foreign Exchange Act, 2006 (Act 723) is instructive and contextualises the definitional perspective of the term *currency* in the Ghanaian context. It provides that currency means:

- (a) Coins, money or notes of the Republic or of another country that is designated as legal tender and that circulates as and is customarily used and accepted as a medium of exchange in the country of issue,
- (b) "travellers cheques" or other financial instruments denominated in the currency of Ghana or in foreign currency,
- (c) Any right to receive coins or notes in respect of a credit or balance with a financial institution or a non resident.

The first part (a) which gives a general definitional perspective of currency is adopted in the context of this study. Currency in this study refers to coins, money or notes of Ghana, and is 'designated as legal tender and that circulates as and is customarily used and accepted as a medium of exchange in the country of issue' (Foreign Exchange Act, 2006 (Act 723)).

Prior to independence, the West African Currency Board (WACB) issued the West

African pounds, shillings and pence that were in circulation in Ghana until July 1958 (Bank of Ghana, 2023). Ghana (then Gold Coast) signed currency notes printing contract with Messers Thomas De La Rue and Company Limited in September 1955. The signing of the contract for new currency other than the British Pounds Sterling was one of the changes and actions to signal the independence of the then new nation-state, Ghana. Underscoring the need for the introduction of the currency, K. A. Gbedemah, the then Minister of Finance, described the policy as 'one of the most important events symbolic of the emergence of the Gold Coast as an independent nation, for no nation can be regarded as fully independent which shares a common currency with its former colonial neighbours' ("Currency Contract Signed," 1955, p.20). Signing the contract, Gbedemah said with confidence, the issues of dependability and strength of the currency proposed by Nkrumah's government. He commented: 'I would like to ... repeat, with all the emphasis at my command that the Gold Coast Government is convinced that for many years to come, the interests of the Gold Coast will best be served by a close link with [the] sterling.'

Shortly after independence, the Bank of Ghana became the money issuing authority which came out with its first currency which was Ghana pounds, shillings and pence on 14th July, 1958. Both currencies issued took root from the British Pounds in terms of name and denomination. However, there was the introduction of the Cedi notes and Pesewa coins on the 19th July, 1965 to replace the Ghana pounds, shillings and pence (Bank of Ghana, 2023). The introduction of the new currency at the time in replacement of the British Sterling was to demonstrate Ghana's symbolic nationalism and true independence (Essel, 2014).

It is evident that there has been currency change in Ghana in the post-independence and pre-republican status attainment era. From 1965, there had been the prevalence of images of Ghanaian personalities, occupations, places and artistic works of national significance featured on the currencies. This article showed interest in fashion art displayed pictorially on the currencies as well as the significance of those fashion representation in Ghana's fashion culture. The article specifically analysed the millinery fashion that featured on currency notes of 1977 and 1986 and the Yaa Asantewaa's imagery on the currency note of 1984 to establish their historical, socio-political and fashion sense.

2. PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is based on the Akan concept of the past, embodied in the proverb, '*Tsetse wo bi ka, tsetse wo be kyere* which translates as 'The past has something tell and teach.' This Akan philosophical proverb puts premium on digging deep into the past to bring out useful lessons to inform the present and the future. This philosophical framework is the backbone of research studies that concerns historical enquiry. Specifically, the socio-political situations in Ghana at the time the feminine figures rocked in their millinery fashion featured on the currency notes is of great importance in understanding what informed such a populist decision. İnaç and Ünal's (2013) argued that national identity can be built in different socio-political circumstances, and that identity construction occurs in accordance with the exigencies of the existing conjuncture. This implies that the exigencies of the time imparted on the nationalistic identity formation. Getting an inkling of the political situation in the country at the time, that is, 1977, 1984 and 1986 was key in understanding the conceptual focus of the feminine pictorial representation in millinery fashion which constituted political

identity formation mechanism and nation building strategy.

3. METHODOLOGY

Three Ghanaian currencies were purposively sampled for the study. They were the Five Cedis note issued in July 4, 1977; Fifty Cedis note issued on 15th July 1986; and Twenty Cedis note issued on 15th May 1984. These currency notes were released within nine years interval, that is, between 1977 and 1986. The currency notes were sampled because they depicted some indigenous millinery fashion of Ghana at the time. They were subjected to visual analysis to reveal their historical, educational and artistic relevance in the teaching and learning of millinery fashion of Ghana. Content analysis of visual images, and social semiotics methods of visual data analysis that deal with iconic signs—still or moving pictures, drawings, paintings, material culture, landscape, and the human body and its adornments, among others constituted the methods of analysis for the study (Vanini, 2008). The analysis focused on the dominant feminine figures on the currency accessorised with millinerics. Due to the nature of the study that make the images prime subjects of fashion art-historical and aesthetic analysis, the results and discussion section was put together.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three Ghanaian currencies namely the Five Cedis, Fifty Cedis and Twenty Cedis notes issued in July 4, 1977, 15th July 1986; and 15th May 1984 respectively revealed interesting insights. A smiley-faced woman in sleeveless blouse and skin-tight headscarf partially covered by an overarching broad brim straw-woven millinery (Figure 1) occupies almost one-third of a surface area of a Five Cedis (5) currency note which was in circulation in 1977. The rounded facial fleshiness, the bulging roundels at the chest regions, the fleshy upper limbs and the entire physique heightens the femininity of the human figure. Both the blouse and the headscarf

costuming are patterned in full drop motif arrangement. Solidity of forms is achieved using highlight and middle tones in the chest, left limb and the face of the figure. The figure received more elaboration at the facial regions in an artistic style that put the temple, forehead, cheeks, chin and mouth into prominence. Through this treatment, the artist succeeded in drawing attention to the smiley face and mood

of the figure. The colour tonality of the figure in grey and darker shades of brown put the straw-woven hat into high contrast. To offer viewers a full three-quarter view of the facial gaze of the feminine figure in her blouse and headscarf fashion, the artist positioned the hat in the manner that does not obscure the full facial gaze. This treatment put the composition into bi-focal attention – the woman and the hat.



Figure. 1. Woman with large hat. Source: <https://www.bog.gov.gh/bank-notes-coins/bank-notes-of-ghana/>



Figure. 2. A figure in straw-woven millinery. 1986. Source: <https://www.bog.gov.gh/bank-notes-coins/bank-notes-of-ghana/>



Figure 3. Queen Yaa Asantewaa. 1984. Source: <https://www.bog.gov.gh/bank-notes-coins/bank-notes-of-ghana/>

The hat represented is usually worn during performance of an outdoor activities in sunny weather conditions in Ghana. For example, when one is selling outdoor or in an open space, s/he wears that to keep shade and avoid the scorching sun. Usually, market women who sell in outdoor spaces wear this hat. Using that image on the Five Cedis currency note seemingly addressed multifaceted issues of feminism, women empowerment, social recognition and inclusion. It was a profound political statement on Ghanaian women's contribution to the economic development of the country in visual format. Market women, in the Ghanaian elitist perception, belong to the middle and or low class, perhaps, because many of them have not had so-called formal school education as compared to their male counterpart.

The year 1977 was within General Kutu Acheampong military regime that trumpeted the *operation feed yourself* policy. It was a popular policy that targeted drastic reduction in importation of goods and services including food items into the country. It tuned the sensibilities and energies of the nation to grow what they eat, and eat what they grow. The

policy sought the involvement of people of all economic backgrounds.

Similar image, in what appears to be straw-woven millinery, is captured on 1986 Ghanaian Fifty (50) currency note. It depicts a feminine figure in a pensive gaze (Figure 2). The rounded facials and vertically draped piece of fabric on the shoulder at the right reveals the feminine characteristics of the figure. The draped piece of fabric at the shoulder gives hint of *Kaba* fashion, a Ghanaian classic. *Kaba* ensemble encompasses a three-piece outfit – a blouse, slit and a cover cloth. The cover cloth may be used as a waist cover or draped on the shoulders depending on the stylistic taste of the wearer. Small portions of the blouse show at the left side of the figure.

A famous heroine named Nana Yaa Asantewa was represented in an Akan militaristic millinery fashion on the Twenty Cedis (20) currency note issued in 1984 (Figure 3). Bejeweled in the neck with three variations of jewelries, the figure looks refreshing and gentle. It is graced with Afrocentric feminine beauty ideals – elongated neck, rounded facial details and soft bodily appearance. The use of highlights on the eyebrows, cheeks, nose, mouth

and chin intensifies the young characteristics of the face. Using militaristic fashion in representing, King Yaa Asantewa (Y. Sakyi-Baidoo, personal comm., November 10, 2019) was to reminisce her legendary leadership in rallying a male military wing in battling with the then British colonialist and their allies on the coast to prevent the British from capturing the golden stool that unified the then Asante nation state (Fuller, 2014). This military dress is called *Batakarikese* (literary called 'big smock'). Heralding the *Batakarikese* is a millinery rendered in green colour scheme, drawing more attention to the face. Fashioned in the manner of the *Batakarikese*, the millinery is composed of talismanic assortment of fabrics and sacred objects believed to possess spiritual powers for protection for the wearer. In Akan cosmic worldview, strong sense of spirituality cuddles positive energy helpful in surmounting both physical and spiritual battles. On one hand, it was an overt display of women representation, power and agency to signal the national interest of issues relating to women in the society; and announces the importance of 'women' in national development.

The use of the straw-woven millinery (in the case of Figure 1 and 2) makes a strong fashion statement about the indigenous millinery fashion of Ghana at the time. In other words, it gives hint of the prevalent classic millinery design produced in Ghana at the time. Culturally, women may cover their hairs as a signal of courtesy depending on the social functions they may attend. Apart from keeping shade, it is a way of accessorizing the body for purely aesthetic pursuit. The distinctive treatment of the millinery reveals (Figure 3) the artist intention of popularizing this Ghanaian millinery fashion.

The images (Figures 1, 2 and 3) also address issues of women representation across time and

space in Ghanaian indigenous culture. In a typical Ghanaian society, the men are the figure head but often take instructions and seek wise counsel from women whether in chieftaincy, communal, extended or nuclear families. Writers or observers who have little or no contextual understanding of the Ghanaian sociopolitical and cultural life often position women as docile with no say in both nuclear families and communal affairs. In fact, women rule Ghanaian societies through men in the cultural sense. The currencies (Figures 2 and 3) were issued in the regime of President Jerry John Rawlings who trumpeted the message of *power to the people*. He willed to improve the precarious economic conditions of the people and promised to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor, a promise that did not materialized. The used of the feminine images were political rhetoric bringing hope and prosperity to the ordinary and poor people during his regime.

5. CONCLUSION

The feminine images represented on the Five Cedis, Fifty Cedis, and Twenty Cedis currency notes issued in July 4, 1977, 15th July 1986 and 15th May 1984 respectively displayed the repertoire of straw-woven hats and the Akan militaristic millinery fashion in post-independence Ghana. It expressed a visual memory about the millinery fashion culture of the people of Ghana. The visual representations of straw-woven millinery in graphical format on both Five Cedis and Fifty Cedis currency notes made a strong socio-political fashion statement about the indigenous classic millinery fashion consciousness of Ghanaians and the millinery structural design in use at the post-independence era. The images construct feminine sartorial appearances and progressive indigenous identity. The millinery practices embodied historical allusions to Ghanaian women irrespective of economic background;

and ingrained in the memory of the citizenry the fashioned feminine identities constructed through millinery fashion in relation to popular culture of the twentieth century Ghana.

The selected indigenous millinery-inspired visuals also celebrated female vitality and brought to the fore the visibility of women in the public sphere and represented an epitome of independent women of the twentieth century Ghana who contributed to national development. The representation of the historic heroine, King Yaa Asantewaa, in her indigenous militaristic fashion signaled the nation's expectation of commendable nationalistic contributions of women to for national good.

The historical, socio-cultural and fashion-inclined memories engineered by the images featured on the post-independence Ghanaian currency notes are relevant in the teaching and learning of millinery fashion of Ghana. Using these images as source of reference to inspire historical and socio-cultural narratives of Ghanaian millinery fashion; and millinery design and type in the post-independence era is strongly recommended.

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