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## An Analytical Look at Bomborisi Art

JoAnnn M. Ruckman

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**An Analytical Look at Bomborisi Art**

JoAnn M. Ruckman

11 May 98

Advisor: Dr. R.T. Ackam

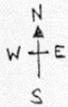
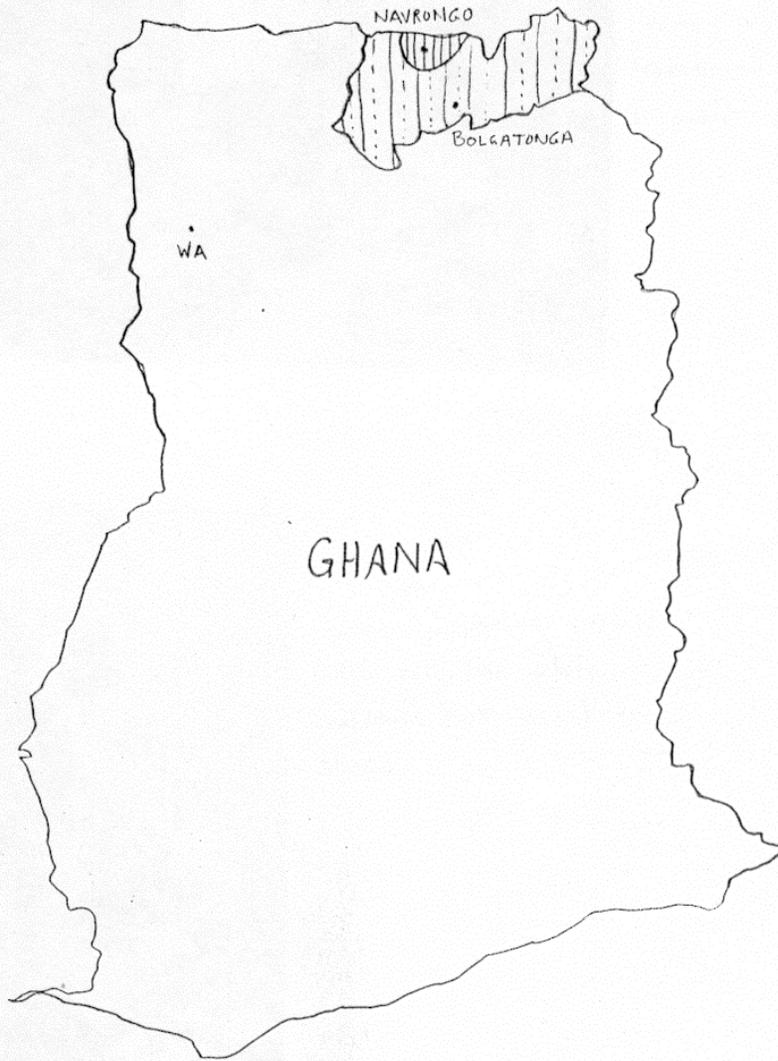
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### Abstract

This study is an analytical look at the Bomborisi paintings of the Upper East Region of Ghana in particular study villages including and particularly focused in Sirigu. This study analyzes Bomborisi in terms of an approach towards the definition of art. in relationship to the aesthetic, social, and economic context in which Bomborisi exists, as well as the dynamic qualities of this art form in the modern setting. Bomborisi, and any art form, is a reflection of the culture from which it emerges and in which it exists a traditional art form, Bomborisi reflects culture in timeless, limitless ways.

This paper is intended for an audience beyond the cultural context of Bomborisi. a Western. academic audience, in an attempt to draw something of this world into my own. Whether it leads to inspiration. awareness of other people, places, and cultures. Or perhaps something to help us to understand our own selves in our own culture, is left to the reader.

BURKINA FASSO



UPPER EAST REGION

NAVRONGO DISTRICT



Bonborisi work in Gunwoko-Sirigu at Atigitogum compound.  
Women using traditional materials to paint designs.



Women preparing surface with cold-tar plaster mixture and smoothing stones.



Mirigu Compound note crocodile



Relief work in Catholic Church, Sirigu



Works of Lazarus, Mirigu



Man applying cold-tar plaster in Sirigun

## Acknowledgments

The aspect of Ghanaian culture which has impacted my experiences during this semester most has been the overwhelmingly generosity and hospitality of so many different Ghanaian people throughout my travels. Somehow someone managed to make me feel comfortable in each place I went. I would like to thank several of these loving and wonderful people for the impact they have made on my time here.

Firstly, I thank my family in Kumasi, my parents Prince and Dora, and my sisters Afua, ~4 Precious. and Afi who never failed to help me to feel happy, free, and normal throughout my adventures. Their door was always open and they helped me to fill my belly and mind.

My first exposure to the Bomborisi paintings of the Upper East is owed to Christine Cowley and Corine Norman, two former SIT students who inspired me to follow in their footsteps and make the trek to this other world which we now share in our memories and hearts. It seems strange how well I feel I know both of them through both their papers and through the stories I heard from the friends they left behind for me in Sirigu, while I have never seen their faces or heard their voices directly. I owe so much of this experience to them.

The entire Ayidiya family made this project possible from Dr. Stephen Ayidiya in Accra who gave me the go ahead, to Aberinga and family in Sirigu who helped to give me a home and exposure to their everyday lives, to Philip Ayidiya who voluntarily spent so many days as my guide, driver, teacher, translator, and friend throughout my research. I wish I could have found the words to say how this family has impacted my life and my perspective beyond this project.

It was my advisor Dr. R.T. Ackam who helped me to keep my feet on the ground and put the overwhelming things I came to encounter into perspective. He always seemed to know how to guide me in the right direction and even came to Sirigu for two days to see the place for himself: which is by no means a small ordeal. He has also helped to inspire and expand my ideas as a fellow artist.

I want to thank my academic directors Yemi Tinouye and Ann Pobi for keeping all of us healthy, happy, and learning more than we ever imagined in these four months, and for their role as teachers and friends.

Finally I would like to thank God or the gods or whatever enabled me to survive this experience. One thing I learned from living in this environment was that one can not stay in a place which is so hard without believing in something.

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## Introduction

As a student of anthropology, one becomes highly sensitized to the importance of perspectives. With a careful examination of the history of social theory, whether in the field of art history, anthropology, or any other field it becomes clear that throughout history, when one attempts to explain something about another culture or peoples, one often portrays just as much about their own cultural or social perspective. whether intentionally or not. The human mind is a complicated filter existing within a specific time in history and place on the earth. I do not wish to fall into the limiting perspective of environmental determinism but any student of anthropology must come to see that studying through some idealistic claim to the possibility of empirical observation or an unbiased perspective denies one's own culture and the reality of the human mind as the basis of all theories.

With this in mind I ask that the reader of this paper fully considers that my personal conceptions and definitions of art? derived from my culture and experiences have determined the nature of recording the works of the artists in this study. I have found that it is somehow easier to make observations of a foreign culture because through distance it is easier to turn life into data. Yet somehow one can never truly understand another peoples world through their own perspective. In the spirit of the Post-modernist movement in academic perspectives, this paper attempts to communicate my observations and conclusions as a product of my own personal experience, and furthermore as a holistic approach which is true to the complexity of my experiences in the field for the first time.

The aims of this study are both personal and academic. Across time, the production of art as well as ideas of art in the academic world have been dynamic, changing and reflecting the people of any given time as a culmination of history plus something which is new about the present generation of

individuals. Many have attempted to define art for a particular culture, society, or period. Others have tried to define art in terms of some overarching metaphysical truth about aesthetics and human nature. Still others have searched to define this thing called "art" for themselves through practice and experience. I fall into all of these groupings as a student of art and culture and as one of those lucky individuals who was born with an incessant urge to produce art.

R.G. Collingwood, in his 336 page attempt to define art, *The Principles of Art*, states that the artist can be seen as a spokesperson for his or her community at a given time, revealing something of his or her own heart, of a particular perspective, and the group consciousness which has influenced the manifestations of the works which the artist produces (Collingwood, 336). So it has been through the paintings of individuals in the Kassena-Nankanse peoples of the Navrongo District of the Upper-East Region of Ghana which I come to understand something of the larger cultures of Sirigu and the other focus villages. It is not my intention to simplify the complexities of these people into some general portrait of their life or their art works? but rather to explain as clearly as possible the ways in which I observed the contemporary Bomborisi paintings here as reflections of specific aspects of this cultural environment. Perhaps through this work I can grow as an artist and help contribute to the search for a definition of art.

I realize that my presence in this area, even for such a short time, has some impact on the very thing I came to study, and this became more apparent with the reactions I encountered in my research in relationship to the previous researchers and tourists in the area. I hope that future researchers keep these influences in mind and try to examine these influences carefully. During my stay I was torn over imagining a future where perhaps this art could become subject to tourism. It would bring some economic income to people who have minimal opportunity to make money, yet perhaps at the sacrifice of an art form which has come from a distinct culture and has continued solely for the enjoyment of the people of that culture.

This brings up the issue of calling this art form traditional . It is impossible to say that this culture is untouched or that there is something called traditional culture which exists within a bubble, never influenced by anything outside. One look at the religious affiliations of these people, the clothing, and the products in the market place remove all ideas about cultural "purity" and yet we see that there is something which is distinct about the people of this area which has come from a history or tradition. So for the purposes of this study and this report, I will define the term traditional as meaning that when we judge this art form and its cultural context, we have to see that there are origins beyond the scope of the observable presence and possessing something beyond the scope of Western academics. and rooted in a very different history.

As I dove into this study I was able to set out with a relative degree of freedom by the framework provided by my preceding colleagues Christine Cowley and Corine Norman, who in 1996 and 1997 respectively, traveled to many of the same regions of the Navrongo District through the SIT program in search of these paintings. These women's papers provided me with a good deal of background knowledge of Bomborisi materials, motifs, production processes, and some specific trends in the social context of the village of Sirigu (where all three of us resided during our research projects) and certain neighboring villages.

The foundation which their work provided has been essential to my own work and I think it is important for a reader of this world; to study these papers as a preface to my own in order to insure a more complete understanding. Finding myself in a context which was so radically different from anything my senses, both physical and cultural, had ever encountered it soon proved essential to have some background ideas so that I could overcome the culture shock; with enough time to focus on my intentions of a deeper understanding. I have chosen not to review the information in these other works for lack of space, and because I feel that these women have done well with the details of their foci but I will reference those ideas within their works which I have expanded upon.

Language has been invented for the purpose of expressing our own experiences, and when we use our language to describe someone else's

experience other worlds come to seem more like our own (Collingwood, 37). But in the same way, the realization that definitions of certain terms have to be expanded or twisted around to fit an understanding of another application within a foreign culture helps us to understand our own culture in a new light. Also, my understanding of the many different peoples of Ghana has been impacted greatly by observing how differently people of another culture can use my language and by learning some parts of other languages and the implications of the differences reveal. Furthermore, the realization that I can learn other languages but never fully adopt the concepts of another linguistic culture as I do my own mother tongue, became lucid in my field experience where the answers which filtered back through my translator never fully satisfied the initial questions. It is a fundamental question of anthropological work as to why we study other cultures when we can never truly understand any perspective but our own.

One theory derived from the many ideas of Leonardo da Vinci stated that painting was the highest form of art and the most fully evolved. With this theory it was possible to place societies into a hierarchy of evolutionary development where societies with art forms primarily in the plastic realm were somehow less sophisticated or culturally advanced than Western societies which had evolved to painting or glyptic art forms. The discovery of Old Stone Age paintings in the late 19th Century destroyed this theory, but the idea of primitive art or that art forms like cultures, can be placed into a pattern of evolution continued (Willett, 27-8). The term "primitive art" has undergone an evolution in definition, ranging from simply, meaning primary in time, meaning undeveloped, crude, unsophisticated, or representing a disregard for naturalistic proportions or a naivety of vision. Despite many variations in defining the nature of the evolution of art forms, a common distinction has been made between representational and symbolic or geometrical art (Willett, 33).

Leo Frobenius was the first anthropologist to make Africa his special field of study and he developed a theory in 1896 about the impulse to copy natural forms and how these resulting copies convey ideas and meanings. In this way, content gives significance to form and so faithful copying from nature becomes

less necessary as the forms themselves begin to evoke sufficient associations to convey meaning. Of course the implications are that reactions are culturally determined and forms have their intended meaning only within a particular society (Willett? 35). This idea broke the evolutionist hold on defining art hierarchically because in this perspective, judging the formal qualities of works must be culturally relative.

With the turn of the century came the revolution in the Western art world which was triggered largely, by the introduction of "primitive" art forms to several key artists including Gauguin, Picasso, and Matisse, who were deeply inspired and influenced by works from Tahiti and Africa. As the abstract art movement took hold of the Western art world, conceptions of art would be forever changed. The idea of a hierarchical evolution of artistic achievement was turned on its head as the masters were looking to the "primitives" for direction and inspiration.

In my study of paintings in Sirigu and several neighboring villages, these themes became significant to my understanding of art in a non-western society in relation to the history of ideas about primitive art. I came to see how forms can take on meanings within a particular society, and I expanded my own notions as an artist of abstract painting.

## Chapter I: Methodology

In a retrospective look at the process and methodology I used in this month of independent study, I can see clearly that despite having all intentions of a systematic approach to organizing my time, in reality I had very little control over the day to day factors which lead to my final course of study. As a student of other people and other people's lives I was completely dependent upon the schedules and priorities of others, and found that I learned a good deal about many things beyond the scope of my intended agenda, including patience and flexibility.

It seemed at first that I would easily come to do the project I intended because I was following a well worn trail of the two previous SIT students in Sirigu. Yet somehow I came to find that this trail had some unexpected obstacles and that it was poorly marked. I began with an extremely difficult and time consuming search for Stephen Ayidiya who has come to be somewhat of a gatekeeper to students entering into this area. Dr. Ayidiya is a member of Parliament in Accra, serving as a representative of the area, and has a good deal of influence in Sirigu specifically. He is a link between two worlds and working through him was essential to my search. I finally contacted him and received the go-ahead much later than my intended schedule.

My first trip north to Bolgatonga served as a sort of reconnaissance mission during which I surveyed the area, established accommodations at the .Ayidiya house in Sirigu, acquired accessible transportation by repairing a motorbike, and organized a connection with Philip Ayidiya who agreed to serve as my guide, translator, and driver. During these preparations, I was simultaneously reading all of the background information I could get my hands on, including a careful examination of the aforementioned previous SIT ISP works. I was looking for specific areas of interest and how to expand upon the

works of two women who had requested follow up on certain unanswered questions. I found that achieving a certain level of preparation was key to my program because my aim to expand upon the previous works demanded proper planning.

The next step was to travel back to Kumasi to meet with my advisor who had been out of town during my reconnaissance, and discuss specifics about my goals and intentions with a more informed? prepared idea of what exactly I would be encountering in the field. Dr. Ackam surprised me by deciding to travel north with me to see Sirigu for himself after having advised three students in their research works about the mural arts of the Upper East. So I headed to the field feeling fully prepared. I entered Sirigu for the second time in the peak of heat on a market day. I was wholly unprepared for this or the days to follow.

I soon discovered that it is not a simple matter of organizing a project and sticking to that plan which leads to successful field research. Rather it is the ability to constantly adapt plans and adopt new ideas which are available when intentions are not met. I found myself wholly subject to the context I was trying to examine. And it seems that I was as much a subject of the people around me as I was an observer. It was not anyone's priority to give me the information I was seeking, whether because they had no experience with the concept of research, no stake in my goals, or because they have certain preconceptions of foreigners and white people. I was constantly berated with begging and I found that despite Philip's attempt to explain my intentions as a student, many believed that I was coming to take advantage of them somehow and that I would take whatever I found-there back to my place and make money despite their poverty. In addition I was surprised by the impact of previous researchers and tourists on the attitudes of people towards me.

So my research was often hindered by rejection. On several occasions I found a compound, painting, or artist that I wanted to study deeply and I was denied access for any number of reasons. I was also often stalled by certain social institutions which I felt it necessary to respect. The areas which I visited are extremely remote and a visitor from so far is no minor ordeal. I was

introduced to so many local leaders and shook more hands in one day than I could count in my entire life in America. The image in my mind before I entered the field of traveling and snapping photographs, interviewing artists and locals, and moving freely and quickly to cover a wide variety of paintings turned out to be very different from the reality I encountered. We traveled to the five areas of Sirigu: Gunwoko, Basengo, Tangolingo, Busongo, and Wugingo, as well as Mirigu, Navrongo, Kolugu. and areas in between.

My choice to live in the village of Sirigu and to experience the lifestyle and context of these works firsthand proved to add endlessly to my understanding of the culture. This place was so different from anything I have ever experienced that it was entirely necessary to live there full time in order to absorb as much as possible. The time spent beyond research. Although it seems that every moment I spent there contributed to my study, helped me to develop some idea of the aesthetic qualities of the surroundings and to have a sense of the atmosphere. It was also important to making connections and learning about sites and painting activity.

In discussion of my specific data gathering techniques, I found that participant observation was my first choice in studying women who were working on live works. Yet I was only given an opportunity to participate on one occasion. Non-participant observation became my primary means of investigation, accompanied by informal interviewing. I chose not to use my tape recorder on any occasion because of the sense of fear that I felt from so many individuals when I was using my camera. It seems that so many people were cautious or suspicious about recording because they did not really understand what it would be used for. I had hoped to have far more photographs than I was allowed to collect. because the visual impact and aesthetics of these works are impossible to describe in words.

I analyzed data in relation to the foundation from Norman and Cowhey and my other resources, and I discussed my findings and conceptions with Dr. .Ackam throughout the month. In the end I would say that the biggest limitations to my study were from the language barrier as I was unable to properly

communicate my mission, time constraints due to the distances I traveled, and my difficulties contacting essential people. I have come to learn a good deal more about the nature of fieldwork than I ever imagined.

## Chapter II: Bomborisi as "Art"

If one decides, as I have, to call the Bomborisi paintings "art", then it becomes important to analyze the difference between this art and the art of my own Western perspective. The idea of art is in itself a construct which embodies certain human needs for beauty, representation, creation, and a visual language. The fundamental difference between the art work of the bomborisi painting, and art of my own cultural concepts, is the difference of the academic analysis which comes behind a work of art which is produced in the Western world. Simply having a concept of this group of objects and images which have become a separate entity which we call "art" makes an important distinction from the role which art plays in the lives of these people.

The intentions underlying the Bomborisi art are more complex and multi-natured when compared to art works of the Western world. Because of the functionality that many African arts enjoy, theorists have frequently tried to separate them into a category of craft. Keeping in mind the types of ideas which have come into play in the contemporary art scene in modern art theory, specifically in America, we see that even the most harsh critics have somehow loosened their ideas of what can be called art to a degree where something like Bomborisi can be viewed with the same legitimacy as a gallery painting in the sense that both are somehow related in their fundamental importance as artistic expressions. So the question becomes how can we categorize or evaluate this art which is so different.

First we look at the intentions of the artist or the motivation for its conception. In their analyses, Cowhey and Norman defined the works to have functions including that images in a given painting could identify a specific painter or reflect something of the person who inhabits the given dwelling. Other ideas

were that the images found in paintings were interpretations of the everyday surroundings, status symbols for the house owner, a reflection of community values, or an attempt to pay homage to ancestral spirits. Yet underlying all of these ideas of the intentions of the specific images is the functional motivation of the protective nature of the plastering and painting process.

Each particular work varies in relation to numerous variables. Unlike a painting on a canvas or on paper, these works relate directly to the spaces in which they exist. Whether Bomborisi is found on the interior walls of a bedroom, decorating the kitchen area of a particular compound, or on the exterior of a certain room so that it is in plain view of any passerby, determines the choice of motif and the way in which that motif is executed.

The materials which are used, whether traditional and indigenous materials of cowdung plaster, redstone gare, blackstone kugsabile, and whitestone kugpele, a cold-tar plaster mixture with straight cold-tar painting, or some mixed combination, reflects the economic capabilities of the sponsor of the work. The choice of materials also reflects the importance the executors of the work and the sponsor place on the aesthetics and values placed on the traditional materials or the choice to use the more expensive cold-tar material because of its property of increased durability. Similarly, the choice of area which receives coverage can not be viewed in terms of aesthetic intentions alone. Often the materials are limited or economic constraints leave the decoration up to a smaller group of women because the sponsor can not afford to provide the necessary food and drinks to bring a large group of women to participate in the painting. Sometimes the women of a particular compound chose to create the work themselves without aid from the community.

So what aspects of this painting can we weed out as "art"? I can not simplify or categorize the intentions of people in another mind set completely which I have stepped into for a moment to view the manifestations from my own perspective. I also can not separate the desire to represent from the desire to beautify or from images which are intended to be lucid, intelligible, abstract' symbolic, direct, or indirect representations. I found that the best way to evaluate

these works is to take several case studies and analyze each based on key factors which contributed to their realization. But first one must analyze the aesthetic context and concepts of beauty in which these works exist.

### Chanter III: The Importance of the Aesthetic Context

The aesthetic experience of artistic activity is an experience of expressing one's emotions and that which expresses them is both language and art (Collingwood 275). The eyes which the Bomborisi mural works were created for see a very different beauty than the definition of beauty in my own eyes. For example many people of the Upper Eastern Region have a tradition of facial scarification. Many people in the area have a variety of different linear scars on their faces, usually on the cheeks, which signify their clan affiliation and/or are considered a mark of beauty. In my cultural context many people will pay thousands of dollars to have scars, especially facial scars reduced or removed because a mark on one's face is seen as an imperfection.

Beauty is an intangible quality which is not inherent or possessed by any object. It is the subjective aesthetic experience in regards to certain objects which establishes what Collingwood calls the "aesthetic perspective?"(Collingwood, 39-41). Everything about the way a person filters the endless sensory input which bombards the mind at any given time has been adapted to fit their specific needs in relation to their environment, including their cultural environment. For instance it is necessary for people living in this sub-Saharan climate to have an increased sensitivity to the properties of water. One is constantly in need of water and fetching it requires energy and energy requires food and food is limited. So they learn to bathe with small scoops from their hands. to wash dishes with minimal water, and to do chores in a particular order so that water can be recycled for several functions.

But somehow, in an environment which demands people to maximize intake and minimize energy output, the Bomborisi painting practice seems to go against these strategies in favor of the aesthetic pleasure which they bring to a

Very, empty and monotone landscape. The eye enjoys the contrast of the bright, geometric paintings against the vast savanna grasslands which in April, the end of the hot, dry season is little more to the eye than a brown expanse speckled with scarce trees, wandering animals and scattered mud dwellings.

Another important aspect of the aesthetic environment is the pallet which one encounters in this landscape. Especially during this dry season, one rarely sets eyes on any colors beyond the ranges of green, brown? and the blue of the sky. Earthy colors are also reflected in the Bomborisi? not necessarily as a reflection of the visual palette of their context but more likely as a result of the limited resources available in the environment for painting materials.

Looking at the contrast between the painting's found decorating internal spaces such as bedroom walls, versus external walls of a given dwelling, it is clear that the context change has no direct determination of the design choice but that internal art consistently uses traditional materials for their superior aesthetic qualities with the white and red and rich texture which cold-tar lacks as a paint. In internal worlds. the function of protection from the elements is less of an issue and so materials can be selected based upon beauty.

Consideration of the arts of cultures such as this which are relatively isolated from mass cultures of the Western world and are deeply rooted in unique and environmentally relative traditions, proves that somehow cultures come to a universal sense of art or beauty which is reflected in arts and craftworks. These types of aesthetic niches are more obvious in societies where people have relatively minimal constant material items in their lives, and when those items are made by hand and often by the owner. For instance in any given compound area there are very few objects besides the dwelling itself. One usually finds tools for cooking or farming, foodstuffs, clothing, sleeping mats and maybe a bicycle. Most of the tools and household materials are made locally or by the residents themselves so that the aesthetic qualities directly reflect the individual and their culture.

The decorations which can be found on some of these items like the designs on baskets mats, and pots have some common elements. So does this

mean, that this culture has its own art language which has developed and grown within the history of this culture? Perhaps it means that the environment and the materials it provides place certain limitations on the possibilities of decoration when producing the items necessary- for life. C)r maybe there is something inherent to the human mind and how it processes a certain visual world which has established the aesthetic preferences of this culture, which in turn lead to the culture's own style of artistic manifestation. It is most likely that all of these are factors in the commonality of designs, including certain colors geometric patterns and animal depiction's, which are found embodied in everything from the murals to body scarring to household pots.

#### Chanter IV: Bomborisi in a Social and Economic Context

A common generalization about the nature of art in Africa as a whole is that African art is an integral part of life. Art forms often have functions beyond serving as a strictly aesthetic object. Whether social, religious, or as an adaptation necessary to promote survival, these art forms cannot be separated from other aspects of life. So when looking at these specific works, we discover more than just art or aesthetics but the relationship of material culture to the social context.

In the same way that the constraints of meeting certain needs within a given environment has been shown to effect the aesthetic perspective of a culture group, these factors also influence the social and economic institutions of a society. For instance. life in Sirigu and neighboring areas has very definite separation of male and female roles and the lifestyle necessitates community dependency and cooperation.

These people practice a polygamous lifestyle where a man can usually have as many wives as he can afford to support. As women's roles often include many chores in the home like cooking, tending to the house. and washing clothes, it becomes necessary for women to cooperate and work together in close quarters. The women in this society have many responsibilities to keep life

in order. I saw that it is the women who are doing most of the buying and selling in the market. It is usually women who bring water. keep clothes clean, prepare and cook food, and furthermore bring beauty to the home with the Bomborisi paintings. I can not attempt to decipher any overarching truth about the nature of all men and women, but somehow it is logical that it is the women who are motivated to create these beautiful paintings, in addition to the hairstyles, body-beads, and sewing which decorate their lives and bring beauty to the surroundings.

In such a harsh and demanding environment, it seems that the women provide the simple and essential daily details which sustain life and make things a bit more pleasurable. The women in a given compound or area can be seen networking together to accomplish their daily activities. As I was staying in the Ayidiya household, which presently included two of three wives and six girls, I observed so many instances of cooperation to complete tedious chores.

The women know that no one person alone could fetch a barrel of water by themselves, wash an entire household's clothing, or paint a Bomborisi work alone. Not only does networking and cooperation allow for tedious tasks to be completed quickly, but the social atmosphere of a cooperative effort makes work more enjoyable. At the water pump, each takes a turn at the lever until their arm falls tired and there is another waiting to take over. Women like to sing and tease each other and turn certain tasks into games or dances. In a sense, the adaptation of women in this area working together is both a necessity and one more way women creatively turn necessities into pleasure.

Despite the obvious domination of women over the domestic realm, I found that when I visited any compound in hopes of studying the Bomborisi works, that with rare exception, it was consistently the male head of the household or landlord from whom I was required to seek permission to observe the works, despite the fact that they were executed by the women. Men also have roles to play in the culture, and men also demonstrated a heavy dependency upon networking and cooperation, but towards different types of goals.

Beyond the aspects of beautification and cooperation which Bomborisi reflects one can also see the social institutions of this culture which relate to age in the production process of a Bomborisi work. In both men and women, networks are organized by age and maturity . Duties and responsibilities are relative to one's position ranging from a small boy or girl who is subject to the demands of elders, to an old person who is respected and has high authority. One moves through the ages and stages of maturity by learning from those who have more experience within your network. Just as different aged women carry out different types of tasks in the domestic setting, in observing the execution of Bomborisi painting, I saw that the primary painters are the eldest women. Of those elders, one was usually the most highly regarded because she had demonstrated a high level of skill and artistic ability. I learned that these women are usually post-menopause. Besides the fact that post-menopausal women are usually old, it is also important to view this factor as a reflection of the traditional cultural belief that women who are menstruating are restricted from certain activities or places. So women who are beyond the age of being limited by this taboo have traditionally been granted certain freedoms, and these roles have extended into the present societal roles.

The middle-aged women or less skilled women participate in the smoothing of the painting and color in the designated spaces within the black lines the elders have placed. The younger women and girls rarely touch the paintings at all but stand by to observe and keep watch over the preparation of materials. This type of age-ordered social structure constructs a culture where traditions can be systematically sustained; passed down through generations and respected. Through the process of time, certain elements tend to remain the same and others change over time and generations.

The last socio-economic element of this life which relates to the Bomborisi works is the tendency to reuse and repair materials because of the relative poverty of the area. Any non-native material is scarce because money is also scarce. so many objects are recycled through several lives before discarded as waste. Old newspapers become packaging for bean cakes. Ripped tires become

sandals and slingshots. I was surprised by so many inventions of little means. This relates to the Bomborisi paintings as an extension of the mind set that a material has endless functions. Bomborisi has been applied to so many places to provide protection and the aspect of the work which demands relatively frequent repair (usually every three years) seems fitting.

### Chapter V: Bomborisi as an Adaptive Dynamic Art Form

It has been called evolution from a linear perspective, or simpler history, but there is no doubt that art forms change with culture and that culture is inherently dynamic. Something must encourage change and the pool of potential catalysts which influence the nature of the present culture are many. Whether we look to internal dynamics, external influences, environmental conditions, etc., tracing the course and causes of culture change is extremely complex. None the less, one can see obvious changes in the Nankani culture which are of a modern nature. Examples abound, including houses with zinc roofing, imported clothing from Western nations, cars, songs on the radio, and the use of English language. None of these cultural elements have come from the traditions of the area, yet the nature of their appropriation into the modern culture in the villages reflects long standing cultural traditions.

In my study, I found that Bomborisi is as dynamic as this culture and that many works include appropriated images, materials, a melding of traditional culture and the present state of life, and clearly reflect the modern Nankani artists' perspectives.

Bomborisi is easily a dynamic art form because of the impermanent nature of the works. Someone must keep this art form alive by adding new layers to the decaying record of past artists. The paints fade and wear away, while the plaster crumbles, and new generations make sure that this cultural record is renewed year after year.

Even though this art form has seemingly limited variables in materials and motifs as compared to the freedom painters in the modern art scene encounter, I

have found strikingly original works. This supports the idea that "every genuine expression is an original one" (Collingwood, 275).

The most obvious and widespread trend of change is the change from traditional materials. Newer rooms are often built with imported materials as opposed to indigenous ones and the choice is usually a matter of whether the house owner can afford to buy foreign materials. These materials include cement, which is frequently mixed together with sand to make bricks or blocks. The structures which result are often rectangular, in striking opposition to the traditional round rooms. Some square buildings are roofed with zinc sheets as opposed to thatch layers. The other prominent change is the introduction of cold-tar, a thick black liquid substance which can be used in several ways. Cold-tar can be mixed with sand and water to make the plaster layer which coats walls as a protection. It has also been used straight as a paint to give the maximum protection to plastered walls. In this use the cold-tar is either combined with the traditional painting materials to create designs, used alone in designing, or used to cover an entire area in black.

Another aspect of change in the contemporary Bomborisi was brought up in Cowley's paper. She said that in the past, Bomborisi was reserved for internal wall spaces of rooms and sleeping areas. Today most of the newer Bomborisi works are found on external wall spaces. Perhaps this change has to do with an increased interest in the paintings which people coming from outside the area have expressed. I came to know that recently several people, including the students from SIT, have been coming to the area in the interest of observing or studying the works, some as students and others as tourists. Perhaps also, an increase in the awareness or priority of the paintings' protective qualities have influenced the movement to external spaces which are more subject to nature's forces of decomposition. Or maybe this change reflects a movement in social values. The aspect of Bomborisi as a manifestation or display of wealth of the men and artistic skill of the women is more clearly a display or statement when found in a space which is viewed by the community rather than internal spaces which are only for the eyes of those inside.

Several sites proved to be most telling about the nature of modern day cultural changes on the Bomborisi works, including the Catholic Church in Sirigu, a male muralist in Mirigu, and some scattered examples of non-traditional motifs.

The Martyrs of Uganda Catholic Mission, the Catholic church organization located in an isolated area of Sirigu has recently been decorated with local-material Bomborisi works in several locations. Within the chapel, paintings circle the room along the lower six feet of the walls. The motif choice is highly traditional and the motifs are used in a straight forward decoration. By this I mean that ~'akunyana-nii dolebure" or cows and calves walking on the road, "zaalinga" or calabash net, and "yoka" or fishnet designs have been used along with some relief work of crocodiles, bush animals, and snakes. In the rear center wall between the two entrance ways, stands a relief depiction of a preacher holding a bishop's staff with a cross encircled in the handle. This is a variation of the traditional motif of the staff or walking stick which represent the landlord or head of the household.

This art form within the context of the church chapel reflects the full adoption of non-traditional, Christian religion into the village culture. I saw the same designs on a shrine in Bugsongo-Sirigu which is meant to represent a ancestral spirit. These are two highly contrastual places of worship with the very same decoration. From several sources I came to understand that the Catholics in Sirigu as a whole believe that a fear in one God is the best way of keeping good community values because the gods which are involved in juju do not always lead to good relations between members of the community. One bigger God makes the people equal under Him and trusting of His motives whereas the other spirits can have variable motivations and can wish to cause harm.

So idol worship, and religious affiliation with earthly or ancestral spirits. is viewed negatively by the Christian community. Still it has obviously not been erased from the culture. and I saw that on many occasions the two religious practices were existing side by side in the same families or even in the same individuals. The roots of traditional religion are planted too deeply to be erased, even by a fear in God.

Certain motifs, especially the animal representations, have origins which relate to some traditional beliefs as well. For instance, some clans especially in northern areas of the Navrongo District believe that the spirits of the dead go into crocodiles and into the water so these believers refrain from killing crocodiles or eating their meat. So the implications of finding the crocodile motif on the wall of the Catholic church shows the nature of visual language to be dynamic and furthermore that the Bomborisi vocabulary can change in connotations as the culture moves over time.

Besides missionaries. another large and salient external influence on the traditional Navrongo culture is the introduction of Western education systems and schools. The changes that the introduction and incorporation of the English language has made to so many different cultures in Ghana along with the influences of Western style education are far reaching.

In every village I set foot in the Navrongo District, I saw some 'graffiti" type writings on buildings which expressed sentiments ranging from "Oh! How good is the Lord" in Sirigu, to "To be poor is a crime" in the market area of Gunwoko to names and dates of the house completion or owner. to my personal favorite, "theory is empty if with not notice". In some places I also saw words written in the native tongues of Frafra and related dialects but these were often jumbled or incomplete or misspelled to the point where my translator Philip could hardly decipher meanings. The written expression is largely reserved for English due to the education system's emphasis. The expressions in written language are a more clear and individual expression of people to their audience, and yet many of the local people express themselves more easily in languages which they can not write.

The education system also proved to have some influence on the artistic training of a male muralist I found in Mirigu named Isaac Agyebtoch Atowkaik Lazarus. This man had a totally unique hold on a similar function within the village as the Bomborisi artists have in other communities. Isaac has been hired by several landlords in Mirigu to paint his unique style of mural worlds on building throughout the market area of Mirigu. His motif's of cartoonish, figure-based

images range from depicting scenes from modern day life in the village to images or scenes from selected stories in books he has been able to acquire from the market. He uses the kugpele stone to sketch his drawings cold-tar to draw the linear base and then he shades in forms with his set of 54 crayons.

The scenes he has created to represent modern day life in his village include characters who are often drinking which I observed to be a huge part of life in Mirigu and most of these villages. He has one painting of a mother breast feeding her baby while her older son pushes on the breast to help. In another mural he has depicted the elderly people who have gathered at the market and are being served by a young man. Some of the figures are meant to represent actual residents. He has several representations of Jesus. In one comic scene he shows a woman who is angry at her husband for running around and drinking while she's pregnant. Other motifs are chosen passages from his story books.

The stories he has chosen show more about him as an individual than the other drawings which are more reflective of the community in which he finds himself.

Isaac's style reflects the training he received in primary, middle, and secondary school. He calls his talent a gift of God which has been stifled by his poverish context. His work is a far cry from the other Bomborisi mural works in the Navrongo area? but it seems that he has had some influence on other painters in his area. Other paintings near Mirigu show a clear deviation from traditional motifs like one house owner who covered an exterior wall with stars and flowers. Other Bomborisi works within Mirigu are strikingly more free uses of the traditional motifs, combining animals and designs boldly.

Isaac was the only male painter I found in this study, but I came across several men who were participating in the plastering process as a preparation for the paintings. Two men in Sirigu were plastering with imported tools, in contrast to the women who I always saw using only their hands to smooth and apply the plaster mixtures.

## Conclusion

In the middle of my fieldwork period, Philip and I visited a village which is about eight miles south of Navrongo which is called Kolugu. We started our day's search by locating the chief's house which was extremely large due to his 12 wives. I was surprised to realize that Bomborisi designs were no where to be found. Some wall areas were painted solid colors, mostly a red color derived from boiling a particular bark and sprinkling it on the plastered walls and some cold-tar covering external wall spaces, but no designs at all. It is even more difficult to figure out why something does not exist than why it does, but my questions lead me to the fact that there is no principle painter in Kolugu, and no one who knows how to do the designs.

Perhaps this is the first place where the tradition has been washed away by the many types of weathers of time, or maybe it never existed here at all. There is no written record, and I could not find anyone who knew of Bomborisi works existing there in the past. With the transgression of different cultures on the people of the Navrongo areas. Obvious influences have permanently altered the course of traditional culture and the way of life, but in another respect, the academic world has come to preserve something of these works in the form of written reports such as those of Norman. Cowley. and myself. Although there is no doubt that this record is just as much a reflection of my perspective as it is a representation of the people who Bomborisi art really belongs to. it is a record nonetheless. This record attempts to put the Bomborisi art, a language in itself into my language, and in doing so, most of its nature is lost. I have found that the images which we as students of Bomborisi art have tried to summarize. categorize, and evaluate have so many different meanings, just as words in the Frafra language can have many meanings, and as objects and images have infinitely more dimensions of communication than words ever could possess. I saw how an object like a cowry shell, in the past a form of currency in some areas, was used as the eyes of animals in the Sirigu church mural work with the belief that they could keep the animal from seeing evil. In another context the

shells were imbedded in a juju shrine entrance at the Adomolga compound in Bugsongo with the belief that they could keep evil spirits out of the room.

So many things can be learned about culture from objects and the visual art world of the past and present and about the past and present. Beyond the universal appreciation of beauty which spans cultures and environments, art is a language which can stand, with or without an attempt at translation.

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