

4-1-1996

# Traditional Mural Arts of Sirigu: Forms. Symbolism, and Processes

Christine A. Cowhey

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# **Traditional Mural Arts of Sirigu:**

**Forms, Symbolism, and Processes**

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Spring 1996

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## **ABSTRACT**

This report studies the art of mural decorating that has been passed down through many generations of women in certain villages in the Upper East Region of Ghana. It identifies the common patterns that traditionally characterize these decorations, and explores how they function as a symbolic language in the communities in which they appear.

Among the variety of surface decorations found throughout the Upper East Region, my research focuses on the traditional mural decorations of the village of Sirigu. These decorations are characterized by materials and common forms that represent objects of common use and visibility in the daily lives of the people.

The study identified two broad categories of decorations: two-dimensional patterns and raised-relief symbols. It was also observed that women who are mainly responsible for the artwork have specific reasons for choosing the patterns they use for decorations.

This report outlines how elderly women in the community teach the process of applying traditional decorations to the younger women. The study concludes that the environment and the materials it offers continue to dictate much of the art form, the technique having remained virtually unaltered for generations.

This report points out how the creation of these murals under the harsh conditions of the environment is intriguing. Mural decorations reflect the needs of the environment in two respects. First, the environmental conditions create a need for the finishing of compound surfaces and, secondly, the materials available in the surrounding environment influence the resulting design. Thus, the art forms are ultimately representations of that same environment.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to thank my parents, James and Bonnie Cowhey, who instilled in me a hunger to experience wonder and gave me the tools to satiate it. To my brother and sister, Bill and Erin, who despite the distance, have been with me every step of the way.

I want to acknowledge Susan Bowditch and Yemi Tinouye, my academic directors, for putting faith in my starry-eyed dreams.

I must thank Djaba Nyakotey, without whom I would never have made it out of Accra. I would like to acknowledge George and Juanita Lartey who have stuffed me with savory conversation and the world's tastiest home-baked breads. I will most certainly return home having "eaten well and grown fat."

I would like to express my deep appreciation to Dr. Stephen Ayidiya, who made so much of this research possible. Since Day 1, I have been unable to find the right words (in any language) to say, "Thank You." None of this would have been possible without you.

I am indebted to Isaac Nyaaba, my interpreter and friend. I will never find a "chauffeur" of the same caliber.

I wish to send warm thoughts to Aberingya Ayidiya, the extended Ayidiya family, and all the curious children of Sirigu; you have given me memories I will cherish selfishly for the rest of my life.

To Akanvole Agombire and the Tangasia Women's Society (the society that began "under the tree"), and the women of Sirigu and Kandiga whose art drew me here blindly, moved me and gave me new vision. This work is more yours than mine.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Art plays an integral role in the lives of the people in traditional African societies. In contrast to the fine line that exists between art and daily life in the Western world, art is functional in most aspects of Ghanaian culture.

Mural decorations have traditionally been one of the most visible art forms. Covering the entire surface area of the compound walls, murals are the most expansive art forms in the community and reach a large audience on a daily basis. These decorations communicate information that identifies the individuals and groups that paint them.

The first aim of my research is to identify the common motifs and interpret what they say about the people who live in the compounds that display them. The second goal of my research is to document how mural decorating developed and how it currently functions in the society.

There are many types of finishes on the surfaces of compounds throughout Sirigu. This work studies the factors that make certain compounds more likely to have traditional decorations than others. It also documents the locations within these compounds that women typically decorate, and suggests aspects of the Nankani culture which may influence these decisions.

This study identifies categories of different forms of traditional mural decorations in Sirigu. It includes descriptions of the designs and the objects they represent. It also explains the significance of these objects in the lives of the people of the community.

The study explains the process by which women create mural decorations. It documents the steps that are involved in the plastering and finishing of walls. It also explores the group dynamics of the process and identifies the roles played by specific individuals.

There is very little published research on the wall decorations in the Upper East Region of Ghana. The related literature is generally out- of -date and focuses on traditional architecture in the region. These include Susan Denyer's, *African Traditional Architecture* (Heinemann: 1978), Labelle Prussin's *Architecture in Northern Ghana* (UCal. Press: 1969), and Hannah Schreckenbach's *Construction Technology: For a Tropical Developing Country* (G.A.T.C.:1981). The other literature I found, like M. Nooter's, *Secrecy: African Art That Conceals and Reveals* (Museum for African Art: 1993) was specific to surface decoration in other African countries. Margaret Courtney- Clarke's book, *African Canvas* (Rizzoli: 1990) is the most recent and probably most acknowledged work that focuses on West African mural arts. However, it is more a photographic exploration rather than an academic or sociological study. I propose to study both the culture and the art form it creates, and draw inferences regarding the relationship between the two.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Observation is the basis of the study of art. A researcher who uses a variety of approaches will have a dynamic understanding of the art form. Non- participant observation allows the researcher to study the aesthetics of an artwork. Participant observation allows the researcher to understand the nature of the materials and their application. The two approaches together give the researcher an understanding of how the materials and process influence the art form. Follow-up interviews with the artist verify any correlations the researcher makes between the two.

The bulk of my resources came from Sirigu itself: the women who create the decorations, and the members of the community who respond to them in one-way or another. Isaac Nyaaba was my interpreter for all the interviews. Isaac is a resident of Sirigu and had previously set up repoire with most of the compounds as a respected researcher working with the Navrongo Health Research Center on Malaria. These two factors benefited my research considerably.

I began with a series of preliminary interviews in the first week. These initial visits introduced me and my research to many members of the community, exposed me to the common motifs and general use of the decorations, and helped me to distinguish the women whom the community respects as decorators with expertise. I then began establishing good relationships with these individuals by paying visits to their houses. After establishing strong relationships with one or two of these women, I returned with my pen and notebook and conducted formal interviews that I had prepared from the content of my notes.

I spent a full day as a non- participant observer at the decorating of the interior of one house owner's sleeping quarters. I documented the entire process from beginning to end, asked questions, and returned the next day to debrief. I also spent another day participating in the



plastering and decorating of an exterior in the Ayidiya family compound, where I had been staying in Sirigu. This approach complemented the Non-Participant Observation I had done previously; it helped me to understand how the materials work and how they lend themselves to specific processes.

Staying with one of the families in Sirigu was crucial to my understanding the everyday lives of the people. I also feel that the camaraderie I established with the women of the Ayidiya family gave me access to intimate information and allowed me to participate extensively in the mural decorating.

My commutes between Sirigu and Bolgatonga allowed me the opportunity to note differences that occurred among the surface finishes of compounds in surrounding villages. I visited Zaare, a nearby community, to create a more specific basis for comparison. I also visited the Catholic churches in Sirigu and Navrongo, in which local women had decorated the interiors in traditional mural relief. These visits directed me to Agombire Akanvole, the woman who was the "master decorator" of both projects. A resident of Sirigu, Akanvole became my primary informant.

In Bolgatonga, I spoke with individuals who had background knowledge of mural decorations. The formal and informal interviews I held with Mr. Francis Soyiri, co-executive of Arda Research and Development Agency, gave me insight into the more generalized questions I had about the mural arts. James Adabugah, the Director of the Center for National Culture in Bolgatonga<sup>7</sup> suggested approaches that other people who have researched related topics have taken in the past to access the type of information I was seeking.

I met with Dr. Stephen Ayidiya (my advisor and Member of Parliament representing Sirigu and two surrounding villages) periodically throughout my research period. He evaluated my research approaches and offered me background explanation for some of the questions I had about the Nankani culture.

If I could change certain aspects of my research, I would extend the length of time I had "in the field." I was only able to stay in Sirigu for two weeks and feel that I left the village with many unanswered questions and a merely superficial understanding of Nankani culture. The time constraints of my research confined me to a limited pool of informants. If I had more time, I would have cross- referenced my findings with more households and observed more decorating productions.

The other feature of my research I would change, would be my use of an interpreter. Although Isaac translated my questions accurately, I regretted not being able to hear the women's responses to their work in their own words. I also wonder whether the issue of Isaac's gender inhibited the women from disclosing certain information. I think my research would have benefited from interacting with them directly.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **SOCIAL CONTEXT OF SIRIGU, THE STUDY VILLAGE**

#### **General Background**

Sirigu is a rural village located in the Upper East Region of Ghana, West Africa. The SubSaharan climate offers two seasons: a rainy season that lasts from mid-May to mid-October, followed by a dry season that continues throughout the remaining months of the year. As an agrarian society, the people of Sirigu engage in intense agricultural practices throughout the rainy months.

The Nankani society is polygamous. The family system consists of a man, his multiple wives, and clusters of their respective children. It is a patrilineal society that gives land rights and political power to the male members. The division of labor in Nankani society is based on gender. There are many demands on the women. They work on the farms, model the pottery (for which Sirigu is renown), and go to the market to sell their goods. In addition, they raise children and carry out all domestic duties, such as fetching water, cooking, and cleaning. The wives in polygamous marriages often divide the duties among themselves or work together in a group to accomplish all they need to do.

The culture also demands a high respect for the elders in the community. Knowledge of the most efficient ways to work with the harsh climate has been passed through generations (Ayidiya, S., 29 Apr 96). It appears that the people of Sirigu value communal living as a means of meeting the basic survival needs of every member of the village. In addition, ancestral worship is prevalent in Nankani culture. People believe that the spirits of deceased family members are ever-present and accordingly pay them homage through ritual and ceremony.

The society determines a man's status by his age and wealth. As an agrarian society located in the poorest region of the country, the foremost concern of the Sirigu community is providing for the basic needs of its members. Currency plays an insignificant role in the economy of the village, and a man's wealth is measured by his ability to provide for his family. The more wives, children, and animals a man has suggested a need to provide for more, and typically raises his status.

## **Physical Structure**

Round mud compounds characterize the architecture in the rural Upper East Region. The compound is a series of circular rooms organized around a central open area. The entrance to the compound consists of structures that house the animals (known as kraals) and those that contain the staple foods (known as granaries). A low wall separates this area from the central open area. Due to the warm climate, people spend little time inside rooms, and this area becomes the center of activity. This is where the family gathers; the children sleep, and the women do the cooking, pottery, and other domestic chores.

The most visible gauge of a man's wealth is the physical compound structure. Because a person must first walk through the entrance area, and step over low walls in order to reach the center of the compound, the kraals and granaries become the first symbols of a man's wealth that a visitor sees (Prussin, L., 1969). The entrance to the compound of the chief of Sirigu, for example, was considerably more expansive and had apparently more kraals and granaries than most other compounds in the village.

The physical structure of the compound also reflects the polygamous organization of the community. Each wife in a family has her own sleeping quarters. Therefore, the number of rooms in a compound is an indication of the number of wives a man has. Because the more wives a man has raises his status, a compound with many rooms is prestigious (Ayidiya, S., 14 Apr 96).

The maintenance of the compound is a further reflection on the man and his ability to provide (Ayidiya, S., 14 Apr 96). If a man has suffered a hard season, for example, he may not have the means to repair the structure of the compound, let alone provide the basic needs for his family. Decorations improve the overall appearance, and therefore enhance the image of the compound in the eyes of the community. A well-maintained and decorated compound shows that the house owner can provide for his family and attend to the needs of the house structure.

Decoration is traditionally the responsibility of the women in the compound, whereas the construction of the compound itself is the responsibility of the men. However, the overall appearance (including the decorations) of a compound is a reflection upon the male head of the family alone (Soyiri, 29 Apr 96). If a woman does the decoration, the credit goes to her husband by a process of association. In Nankani culture, a woman is a reflection upon her husband. The man receives the praise because he has a wife who can produce the object of admiration.

## **Houses With Traditional Decoration**

A number of houses in Sirigu lack any type decoration, some have limited decorations, and others are extensively decorated. The materials used in construction often influence the type of decoration on a house. Traditional decoration on compound surfaces originated as a method of protecting the walls from the elements (Soyiri, 29 Apr 96). The cow dung plaster and dowa dowa varnish used in mural decoration act as a sealant against heavy rains. The houses that exhibit decorations done with natural pigments were often those that were constructed with traditional materials. The houses with limited decorations (or none at all) were often constructed with coal tar or concrete. The addition of coal tar (a tar) into the plaster acts as a better sealant than the traditional varnish (Nyaaba, I., 28 Apr 96). Concrete houses do not need plastering, and therefore relieve women from their responsibilities in the construction process.

The modern materials are also time- and labor- efficient. The traditional plastering process takes one to two days per room, on average, and must typically be renewed every three to four years to effectively protect the walls (Atintoto, A., 20 Apr 96). The coal tar takes a half of day to apply and lasts much longer (Nyaaba, I. 20 Apr 96). A house constructed with concrete eliminates the need for plastering. It also is permanent and therefore entails either little or no maintenance. In my opinion, the availability of alternative materials into the construction process accounts for some decrease in the number of traditional decorations.

The houses that I saw with limited decorations were almost exclusively done in black. More often than not, the decorations were applied with coal tar (the coal tar has a flat luster and deeper color that quickly distinguish it from the traditional black stone). Some houses exhibit a simple border design on one or two of the rooms. These were often simplified versions of traditional motifs. The overall sloppy and simplified appearance of these designs led me to they had not been applied with the same care that attends the hand of traditional designs.

On the whole, there are not many houses in Sirigu with both extensive and well-maintained traditional decorations. There are a number of the traditional designs that are in poor condition. They are often faded and appear on houses that are in general disrepair (i.e. the walls are falling apart, roofs are breaking) These decorations have been painted over two or three years ago (Akanvole, A., 17 Apr 96) and have been neglected. Some of the possible explanations for this include the absence or lack of a woman in the house (Ayidiya, S., 13 Apr 96), or the absence of a woman who knows how to do the designs, or the man's inability to afford to the costs of redecorating.

Among the houses :I visited, most of those with extensive traditional decorations seemed to be the work of elderly women. According to A-Engbise Adumbire (24 Apr 96), it is only "the women who can no longer give birth" who "have the time" to do the traditional designs. It seems that the older women in the community are those who have both the time and the knowledge of the art to create the most elaborate decorations found in Sirigu.

The general sentiment among the younger generation of females in the village is that the art is "old- fashioned" (Ayidiya,S., 13 Apr 96). One woman in the Akanson family said she would not decorate because she needs time to do her pottery. From these responses, it is my conclusion that the recent time- efficient plastering methods have put the traditional methods out of use.



## **Rooms With Traditional Decoration**

Among the traditionally decorated compounds, only certain rooms have decorations. These rooms are typically rooms of importance (Ayidiya, S., 13 Apr 96). For example, the most commonly decorated rooms in Sirigu are the deyanga. These rooms are believed to house the spirits of the ancestors from that specific compound (ibid.). The deyanga is most often the largest room, and sits at the "nucleus" of the compound with all other rooms organized around it (Courtney- Clarke, 1990). These rooms contain stacked calabashes which hold foodstuffs such as millet, sorghum, and okra. Families keep these stacks filled to feed the ancestral spirits when they visit the compound (Ayidiya, S., 13 Apr 96). Dried meat often hangs outside the deyanga, just above the doorway, for the same purpose. The room is only used for special occasions (ibid.). For example, when a man leaves the house permanently, he leaves through the deyanga.

Also, if a member of the family is sick, he or she is brought there to be healed by ancestral spirits. The fact that the deyanga is often the first, the only, or the most elaborately decorated room in the compound shows the significance of ancestral worship in the lives of the people.

The rooms designated as the "sleeping rooms" are the other most commonly decorated rooms. The senior wife's room is decorated before the rooms of the second or third wives' rooms, with the children's sleeping quarters being the least likely to have decorations (Ayidiya, S., 12 Apr 96). I found more interiors of senior wives' sleeping quarters decorated than any other room in the compound. In my opinion the attention given to the decoration of the room of the senior wife correlates with the amount of respect she receives within the family. The rooms which are decorated, and the elaborateness of those decorations, reflects the specific family's values.

## CHAPTER 3

### TYPES OF DECORATIONS

#### **Two-Dimensional Motifs**

The predominant traditional decorations in Sirigu fit into two categories. The first category is characterized by two-dimensional patterns which cover the whole surface area of the wall. The designs consist primarily of chevrons (V- or inverted V- shaped cells) and other geometric shapes. The decorator typically organizes the cells in an alternately negative and positive pattern, according to color (light and dark) or thickness (raised and incised).

Many of the two-dimensional motifs are abstractions of objects from the domestic realm. The most popular motif I saw in the compounds that I visited was the "wanzagsi,"<sup>1</sup> a series of alternating negative and positive triangles which represent pieces of a broken calabash (Akanvole, 26 Apr 96). During my stay in Sirigu, the calabash appeared to be one of the most functional objects in daily life. We used halved calabashes to fetch water and grains from storage containers. Women use smaller, rounded pieces of calabash to model pots. Two other motifs I saw in many of the compounds represent these specific uses of the calabash, "wanne" (the halved calabash) and "yagimbasa wanzagsi" (the pieces used for modeling).

I could readily see how the designs visually correlate with the objects they represent. For example, the lines within the triangles of the "wanne" motif represent the lines that naturally appear on the insides of calabashes. The rounded edges of the calabash pieces used for modelling clearly influence the curved outline of the triangles that represent the "yagimbasa wanzagsi." The

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix B for an illustration of this and subsequently cited motifs

utility of the calabash correlates with the extensive use of the calabash motif and the range of its variations in mural decoration symbolizes the important role it plays in the lives of the people.

The net is another object that I saw commonly represented in the traditional motifs. Both the calabash net (called "zaalinga," in Nankam) and the fish net ("yoka") varieties appear in almost every house I visited that uses traditional decorations. There are two variations of the "yoka" motif- male and female (Akanson, B., 24 Apr 96). The pattern is a series of criss- crosses divided into triangular cells that represent the links in the fish net. The "female" variation is double -stranded like the double- stranded ropes of the fish net. According to Akanvole, the prevalence of this design is due to its significance as "providing the little meat this region has to offer to the family." Both nets represent objects associated with providing food for the family, and their prevalence as common motifs reveals the importance that the society places on food provisions.

The other common motifs in Sirigu tend to represent things that are visible in the landscape. A series of semi- circles represents the rounded huts which have been (until the recent introduction of rectilinear buildings) the prominent form in architecture in the Upper East Region (Prussin, L., 1969). The "akumyana nii dolebure" motif represents parent cows and their calves walking along a road (Akanvole,A., 26 Apr 96). The "school koma nyogi-nuusi" is a motif derived from the sight of school children holding hands as seen from a distance (Akanore, A., 17 Apr 96). A series of three parallel lines is said to represent the "tilled fields"(Akaaba, 18 Apr 96) that characterize the landscape surrounding Sirigu. In my opinion these common motifs are a result of generations of "artists'" interpretations of their immediate surroundings.

## **Designs in Relief**

Reliefs comprise the second of the two primary categories of decorations found on the walls of houses in this region. They are the raised designs that have been created by adding plaster to the wall. These are often figurative symbols that represent animals. They are typically rounded forms which contrast with the rigid geometric shapes of the motifs. The curvilinear quality of the forms may be a result of the material and its application to the wall. The plaster is mud-based and functions like a clay, and the women apply it as if they were sculpting it to the wall. The women add water to the plaster in order to keep it malleable (Akanvole, A., 24 Apr 96), and they continuously smooth both the surface area and the edges of the shape so the final product is a rounded form.

Reliefs occur in interiors most commonly, or in corridors where overhead structures shelter them from repeated rain and sun. The reliefs I saw were always located within the middle third section of a wall (just below eye-level), or flanking doorways, both of which are highly visible locations. The places within the compounds where they are most often located imply that they are regarded with more respect. The reliefs are more difficult to create than the two-dimensional designs (Akanson, I., 18 Apr 96) and fewer women know how to execute them (Atintono, A., 20 Apr 96). This may be the reason they occur less frequently throughout the village.

The most common designs I saw in Sirigu represent the cow (called "nwafo," in Nankam), the lizard ("banga"), the crocodile ("egba"), the snake ("busela"), the python ("wafo"), and the walking stick ("doore"). Each of these symbols has a specific significance that is sometimes universal throughout the whole community and other times varies from house to house. The walking stick appeared to symbolize "authority" in every house that had one, and was typically used to represent the man who lived there. The women who used cows in their decorations invariably used it as a symbol of reverence (Atuufo, 20 Apr 96). They explained that the cow is a significant symbol in Nankani culture because it is a sign of wealth (according to Nyaaba, a father must give the man who marries his daughter a number of cows as a form of dowry).

There are groups of houses in Sirigu that attach the same significance to certain symbols. For example, members of one ethnic group in Sirigu believe that their ancestors are reincarnated in the form of crocodiles and revere the reptile. However, those in another group do not attach significance to the crocodile and, in contrast, fear it (Ayidiya, J. 22 Apr 96). A symbol which a number of houses uses to express the same message may indicate houses within the same ethnic group.

Groupings of relief symbols "tell stories," according to Akanvole. The stories are a result of the combination of the symbols the decorator chooses and the relationships she depicts between them. The significance that women attach to these groupings tend to indicate personal rather than ethnic beliefs (more commonly associated with isolated symbols). I observed that the nature of the relationships between the symbols are determined by the placement, such as head-to-head, or head -to-tail. In the examples I saw, symbols which face one another were interacting. These interactions tend to be either peaceful or aggressive, depending on the particular symbols the decorators use. For example, on the interior wall of a sleeping room in the Akobialire House, two cow symbols face one another. The artist says that the scene depicts a "forest cow" and a "house cow" who lower their noses to the ground to "check the scent" of one another. The artist described the interaction as "peaceful." Atuufo described the two crocodiles that face one another on one wall in his house to be fighting. Placed next to a "peaceful" scene, the decorator intended the animals to show that "everything in water, everything under the sun, fights sometimes. " The combination and placement of relief symbols in relation to one another and the decisions that dictate these choices, often reveal the values of that individual household.

Differences among the location of symbols within individual compounds may distinguish the family of one ethnic group from another. I found that the significance of a certain symbol in one compound may be completely different from the significance of its use in another compound. In my interviews, answers to questions regarding the location of the symbol within the compound often revealed the significance of that symbol in the family.

## Colors

The traditional designs are confined to three colors- black, red and white. In my opinion, this owes to a limited availability of materials in the area. Color symbolism varies from region to region, and compound to compound (Courtney- Clarke, 1990). Among the houses I interviewed, black was typically associated with evil. Among the Kusasi peoples, black represents "the dark days of suffering when food is scarce"(ibid.). For Akanvle, black represents "the threatening Z power of black magic. " Red typically symbolizes danger or death (ibid). Akanvle colored the heads of the snakes above the doorway to the deyanga red to warn visitors that it is taboo to enter the sacred room. White, in general, is a symbol of purity or holiness (ibid.). The artist does not always choose a color because of its associations (Akanson, I., 18 Apr 96). It may be that the colors simply answer to a compositional scheme or other aesthetic need.

## **Conformity in Design**

I found very little free-hand illustration among the traditionally decorated compounds, and when it was found, it was often located on a small and discrete portion of the wall. The designs I came upon of this style were all done by children or men. These decorations are typically two dimensional and monotone (primarily black on white). The artists exercise a broad range of individuality in their depictions of people, animals, and modern inventions such as bicycles, cars, and radios. For these reasons, these decorations cannot, in my opinion, be categorized with the traditional decorations done primarily by the older women in the community.

Isaac Nyaaba told me that a section of abstract lines painted on a column of his porch was unpopular because "people don't know what it is." In my opinion, recognizable motifs and reliefs appear to be those the community regards with respect. According to Kofi, "the Ghanaian artist, as a distinct member of his society, always wishes to create something that is recognizable in his symbolism... and he is disinclined to exceed the semi- abstract in order to express it." The general conformity of design in the traditional decorations in Sirigu may demonstrate the culture's preference for recognizability in art forms.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **HIERARCHY OF DECORATIONS**

I discovered a universally recognized hierarchy that exists among the common motifs based. This hierarchy appears to be based on complexity of design. Among the various decorations in the community, there are some designs which the women regard as more difficult to execute than others. According to many of the women I spoke with, the designs must be learned, and some women are unable to execute certain designs (Abilla, D., 20 Apr 96).

When I asked for the name of the simplest design, the women invariably responded the "wanzagsi" (the broken calabash). There was some discrepancy as to what the most difficult design is, but the most popular response was the female "zaalinga" (the calabash net). There was more discrepancy as to the progression toward more difficult designs and as to what defines "difficult" in the women's terms. It appears to me that the more "difficult" designs are those that consist of more lines and require the artist to adhere to predetermined relationships to the other lines and detailed color schemes.

The more visually complex designs I saw often had more sophisticated significance. For example, Agombire Akanvole says the "cows and calves walking along a road" is the most complicated design to execute. She also says that the sight of cows and calves outside a man's home indicates wealth "because a rich man owns many cows," and admits that she used the motif in highly visible locations as a status symbol. In contrast, the "wanzagsi," which appeared as a monotone design in every instance I saw it, had no discernible supplementary significance associate with it other than its representation of a broken calabash.



## CHAPTER 5

### PROCESS

#### General Trends

Mural decoration typically occurs at the end of the dry season (during the months between February and May). This is the most "leisurely" time of the year (when people are waiting for the rains to come) which, according to Prussin, allows families the time they need to construct, plaster, and decorate their houses. Another obvious reason women decorate at this time of year is to avoid the rain.

The decorations applied with traditional materials and techniques must be renewed every two to three years (Akanore, A., 17 Apr 96). The process of plastering and applying decorations to the wall takes approximately one to two days. The women start "with the sun" (Akanvole, 24 April 96) and finish just before dark, typically taking three breaks which total approximately one hour. The women also work in shifts that allow them each to rest in intervals. These shifts, I imagine, make it possible for the women to make it through the duration of the day.

## Materials

The materials used in the plastering and decorating processes are all natural, meaning that none have been manufactured and occur in their natural form in the surrounding environment. This does not imply that all the materials are literally taken from the compound's immediate surroundings (although many are), some of the materials are available in the market.

The plaster, called "bole" in Nankam, consists of loam soil, fine sand, and cow dung. The women prepare it by adding water to a pile in which the three ingredients are combined. The women mix the plaster by stomping in it barefoot until it reaches an even consistency.

The pigments used in traditional decorations all come from ground stones. The primer, called "zigmorligo," comes from a red stone called "gare." A black rock called "kugsabile" (available in the market) makes the black paint. A larger red rock than the "gare," called "kugimole" creates the red paint. The women pound all three types of stone to create the pigments and add water just before applied to the wall, as the paint seems to dry quickly. The women apply the final pigment, the white, in solid form, with a rock called "kugpele." The primer is applied with straw hand- held brooms, and the paints use feathers of various birds.

The final stages of the decorating process require very few materials. The women smooth the painted surfaces with smoothing stones called "saska," which they collect from nearby rivers and streams. The final protecting varnish comes from an extract of the dowa dowa plant. The women remove the fruit of the plant and boil the covering in water, and use the resin to coat the walls.

## Documentation of the Process

The house owner must buy the stones used to make the pigments in the market the day before the plastering takes place. The women in the house must prepare all the materials. They also must prepare food and the local drink, "pito," for all the women who decorate. When Aberingya Ayidiya's wives prepared for the decorating that was done at their house, it took them four days to prepare the "pito" and the bulk of one day preparing the "zoom" (a water- grain mixture) and the T.Z. (a millet-based food product which is very similar to fufuo).

The first step is the application of plaster to the exposed wall which the men have typically constructed the previous day. The sand they use for the plaster is finer than the sand use din the bricks and mortar in order to facilitate a smoother surface (Ayamdoo, A., 24 Apr 96). Typically, two to three other women will transfer the plaster to large basins or will shape it into soccer ball sized balls and transport it to the three women who will apply it with their hands to the wall. These women divide the wall into thirds and work horizontally, top to bottom. The two or three women continue to transport the plaster until this phase of the process is completed.

In both the demonstration I observed and the one in which I participated, the women incorporated reliefs in their designs. The reliefs require a damp surface, and may explain why the women began working on one wall rather than plaster all four walls simultaneously, as that would appear to be more time efficient.

When the initial layering of plaster is complete, the "master decorator" outlines the symbols she has chosen to use in the central (horizontal) third of the wall. After she completes the outline, she begins adding plaster to one of the symbols<sup>2</sup> while two other women add plaster to the other symbols. One or two other women are responsible for sprinkling water in the area the three

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix B, Photograph 1.

women are making the relief designs. Other women stand on planks supported by tanks and smooth the plaster above the designs with the flattened palms of their hands.

While the women are doing this, another woman prepares the "zigmorligo" (the crushed red stone which acts as a primer when added to water). She mixes the zigmorligo with her hands in a large hallowed calabash and hands it to the women who sprinkle it on the wall with straw brooms (again, left to right, progressively downward). A group of seven other women begin plastering the wall to the left, and will follow the procedure described here on each wall of the room. After the first layer of zigmorligo, the women apply a second layer with one bare hand while simultaneously smoothing with a stone<sup>3</sup> they hold in their other hand. From experience, I found the application of zigmorligo to keep the plaster malleable and conducive to smoothing. If it dries, the stones dislodge chunks of the plaster off the wall.

The master decorator and her subordinates (I have been told that they are "apprentices" (Akanvole, 24 Apr 96)) apply black outlines around the raised animal symbols. The women always apply the black paint first, then the red, and finally the white (ibid.). The master decorator begins to paint the background motifs, beginning directly above the reliefs and working up to the ceiling. She "maps out" which cells of the motif will be colored black by leaving a fingerprint on each cell. She allows the other women to fill these cells in. The red paint is applied in the same fashion. The women must wait for the wall to be considerably dry before they can apply the white pigment. They apply it like chalk in the form of a solid white rock.<sup>4</sup> The same caution that the women use with the smoothing rocks applies to the application of the white rock; if the surface is not firm enough, the rock will push off chunks of the cow dung plaster.

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix B, Photograph 2.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix B, Photograph 3.

Throughout the whole period that some women apply pigment to the wall, other women are continually smoothing the surface with smoothing stones. They restrict the smoothing to the black and red areas as the white pigment is too malleable and smudges under the force of the stone (Aberingya, A., 26 Apr 96). The smoothing stones give the wall a shine as well as smooth out any imperfections in the paint itself. Upon completion, the motifs cover the complete surface of the wall and expose none of the original zigmorligo primer. The master decorator returns to add the final touches on the relief designs. This includes painting detailed spots or lines, making incisions with the roots of the feathers, sticks, or sharp stones, and the addition of mosaic pieces (such as cowries shells or broken glass).

A woman removes the fruit of the dowa dowa from its shell, and boils the shell in a pot of water. Another woman, typically the master decorator or the senior wife of the house, applies the resin to the wall by spraying it with a broom. She starts systematically from the left and works to the right, retracing her steps, it seems to me, to assure that she has covered the entire surface. Generally, the women leave the first layer overnight and allow it to dry and come back in the morning to smooth again<sup>5</sup> and apply the final layer of dowa dowa varnish (Akanvole, A., 24 Apr 96).

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix B, Photograph 4.

## Respect for Expert Decorators

Mural decorating is a learned art, and the Sirigu community generally regards those who are more proficient in making the more complex designs with respect. This may be because most women understand that it requires a number of years to learn how to paint the decorations correctly (Akanson, B., 24 Apr 96). It is typically the elderly women in the community who can execute the greatest variety of designs with the highest precision (Courtney-Clarke, 1990).

The community recognizes certain women as "master decorators," and these are the women whom house owner's commission to orchestrate the decorating of a room in their compounds. I saw the respect given to the elderly women regarding mural decorating as an extension of the respect given to the aged and experienced in other aspects of Nankani culture.

A man receives praise if he has a highly esteemed woman orchestrate the decorating of his house, and this motivates him to "invest" in the decoration (Soyiri, F., 14 Apr 96). Contrary to popular thought, it "costs" a man to have women come and decorate his house (Soyiri, F., 14 Apr 96). He provides food for the women for the whole day, in addition to the local drink, "pito." Due to the "costs" attached, decorations done by esteemed "master decorators" may also heighten a man's status in the community.

According to Soyiri, competition among women is responsible for transforming mural decorations from the merely practical use it originally served into an elevated art form. Murals have a greater value if an individual who is in high demand decorates them (ibid.). Although the house owner receives the credit for an impressively decorated compound, there is a respect that exists among the women in the community as a result of the demand for decorations made by the men.

The majority of households I visited in Sirigu referred to Agombire Akanvole as the most experienced decorator in the community. Both the Catholic churches in Navrongo and Sirigu called upon her to orchestrate the extensive interior decorating projects as a result of her

recommendation by the surrounding communities (Akanlu, R, 19 Apr 96). There is universal acknowledgment of the best decorators in the community. It seems to me that this recognition on among both the female community as well as the general public motivate the women to compete within the mural arts.

## CHAPTER 6

### SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF THE DECORATION PROCESS

Throughout the decorating process, the women work in staggered shifts, and simultaneously accomplish different duties. For example, some women smooth the region of the wall above the area where other women work on the reliefs. The simultaneity of shifts appears to accommodate both the breadth of work and the numbers of people involved.

The leading woman, like Agombire Akanvole, for example, (or a number of leading women) orchestrates the whole process. They make all the compositional decisions and correct a woman's technique until it meets their satisfaction (Soyiri, F., 13 Apr 96). This is not a strictly inflexible hierarchy; it may alter depending on the context (*ibid*). For example, I noticed that the women who assumed decisive positions in one mass firing and glazing production did not play principal roles in the mural decorating, even though the same group of women were involved in both events.

The network of roles, and similar hierarchies occur in other social organizations within the community. The duties that require the most skill are typically held by the most elderly of the women, while those that require the least amount of experience held by the youngest or more novice women in the group (Courtney- Clarke, 1990). Age and experience dictate which women perform specific duties (*ibid.*).

Mural decorating is an art that is passed down from generation to generation. A woman learns the technique by "apprenticing" under more experienced women (most often her mother) in multiple mural applications (Akanson, I., 18 Apr 96). Most women I spoke with estimated that it took them one to two years (dry seasons) to learn the art. I imagine it has taken the more



"advanced" artists (those who can create the widest range of designs) longer to perfect their skills.

Aside from being a bonding experience between a mother and her daughter, mural decorating acts as a social function among the women. In the two mural decorating efforts I witnessed, song, drink, and dance played an integral role. The women sang almost throughout the whole day, and interrupted their work to serenade and call forth certain members of the group to dance. The women sang the same songs during both projects I observed (Nyaaba, I., 26 Apr 96). The words of these songs stressed the value of hard work and empowered the group of women to accomplish their duties by working together (ibid.). It appeared to me that in addition to serving a practical function, the group projects are both occasions for the women to be with one another and fosters a sense of community which may ultimately affect their productivity.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

Mural decorations function as one of the various ways to protect the surface of a compound. Women have chosen to paint traditional decorations for a number of reasons. The social context has a profound influence on the art form it produces. The factors that comprise the social context of the mural decorations in Sirigu include the physical environment, the Nankani culture, and the agrarian lifestyle. Because the society greatly influences the creation of the artwork, the product becomes a tangible reflection of the society which produces them. The mural decorations, therefore, function as an interpretational art piece of the community.

As I studied the various forms of decorations that are found in Sirigu today, I saw that the traditional mural decorations comprise an art form that is dying out as quickly as they are literally fading from the surfaces of the compounds. I learned to read the current decorations as both fading records of the culture that initiated them, and as dynamic records that document the changing culture that currently creates (or neglects) them.

The traditional mural decorations continue to perform a practical function in the protection of walls, improving a house owner's status in the eyes of the community and a woman's status in the eyes of her peers, and providing an opportunity for women to gather socially. However, I am not convinced that these reasons alone inspire the mural arts. Amidst a growing number alternatives that meet these ends, the notion that some greater motivation impels women to decorate their walls becomes increasingly evident.

Although we are generations removed from the origins of this art, and I carry with me a Western tendency to romanticize, I theorize that the murals began and continue to be motivated by a basic

desire to beautify one's surroundings. It is this desire that is the fundamental basis of much of the creation of art the world over. It is what has attracted me here from a very distant land and very different culture. I believe the desire to interpret and beautify one's environment is universal. I know, at least, it has placed me on common ground.

## APPENDIX A

### ILLUSTRATIONS OF COMMON MOTIFS



“wanzagsi”: broken pieces of calabash



“Yagimbasa wanzagsi”: pieces of calabash used to  
model pots



“Wanne”: halved calabash used to hold water  
or grains



“Yoka” (male): fish net



“Yoka” (female): fish net



“Zaalinga”: calabash net



“School koma nyogi-nuusi”: school children holding  
hands



“Lungae”: traditional drums



“Akumyana nii dolebure”: cows and calves walking  
along a road

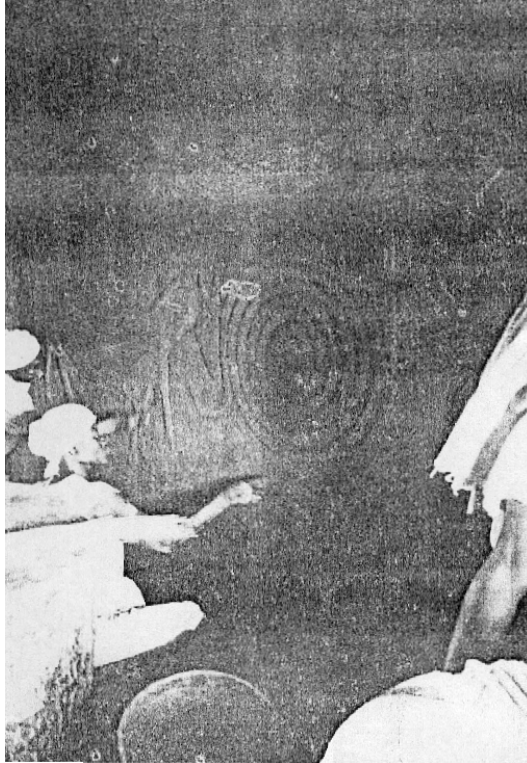


“Bonkeka zuovaka”: round huts

## APPENDIX B

### PHOTOGRAPHS DOCUMENTING THE PROCESS

- 1.) Top: Woman applying plaster relief to interior surface.
- 2.) Bottom: Woman smoothing interior surface after plastering and applying Zigmorligo.



1.) Top: Woman applying white stones to exterior surface.

2.) Bottom: Women working in shifts; the final smoothing of mural decorations.



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