

# Narratives of the artistry in the house of Chief Golobdan of Tongo: An Afrocentric aesthetics research

Original Research Article

## ABSTRACT

This article critically examines through a purposive qualitative case study the philosophical and conceptually coded symbolism within the indigenous artistry housed in the residence of Golobdan, the chief of Tongo in Ghana's Upper East region. The primary objective is to establish a meaningful correlation between these traditional art forms and contemporary artistic practices. Such scholarly analysis will turn to project the aesthetic underpinnings of the shrine arts within the daily routines of the family of the chief beyond religious relics. Findings of the study reveal that these installations, functioning as personal deities, emanate a profound sense of awe, manifesting expressions of power and authority in absentia upon initial observation. These works serve diverse purposes, acting as conduits for protection and fostering connections between the realms of the living and the spiritual. Employing a contextual content analysis through a visual analytic lens grounded in Afrocentric aesthetic theories, the results demonstrate that these artistic creations possess robust visual and conceptual characteristics, making them suitable candidates for placement within the global contemporary art sphere. The intricate concepts and philosophical foundations embedded in both the architectural designs and installations generate compelling visual statements. This visual eloquence stems from the daily dialogues enacted between the chief, as a mortal being, and his dynamic interactions establishing connections with the spiritual realm. In alignment with previous scholarly perspectives, the paper contend that contemporary conceptual art is not a nascent trend in Africa but rather an ingrained practice seamlessly woven into the spiritual fabric of daily life and cultural traditions. We assert the imperative need for African art scholars to amplify scholarly discourse on the ontological underpinnings of these cultural practices and associated artistry. This advocacy is crucial for bridging the existing education gap in African art history and aesthetics, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of the rich artistic heritage embedded in indigenous practices.

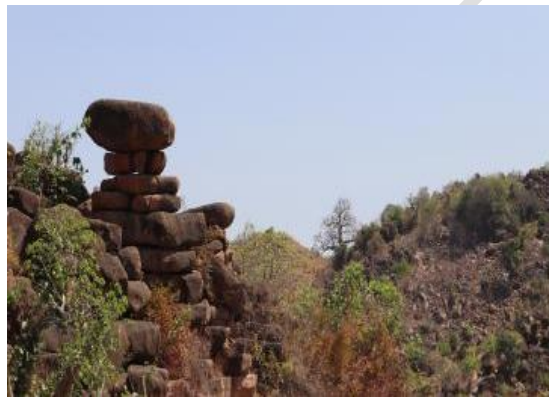
*Keywords: Afrocentric aesthetics, Artistry, Conceptual, African shrine art, Ghana, Tourism,*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tongo, situated in the Upper East Region of Ghana, serves as the capital of the Talensi-Nabdam District and is located approximately 16.4 km away from Bolgatanga (refer to Figure 1). Noteworthy among its distinctive features are its captivating terrain and natural artistic configuration of rocks that warmly greet visitors and tourists (see Figure 2). The geographical makeup of Tongo presents an ideal setting for tourism and hiking enthusiasts. Crowned above the mountainous chain of rocky hills is the renowned Tengzug Shrine, known for its historical significance and ancestral connections [1]. Functioning both as a spiritual sanctuary and a source of prosperity, this shrine attracts individuals from diverse backgrounds who seek its protection and blessings. Visitors from various parts of the world journey to the shrine, drawn by a multitude of reasons, to seek counsel from the deity.



**Figure 1.** Location of Tongo in Upper East Region on Ghana Map.  
(Source: wikipedia.com)



**Figure 2.** Dramatic artistic naturally composed rocks that welcomes visitors into Tongo. (Source: Fieldwork, 2020)

Beyond the renowned Tengzug Shrine, the Tongo community offers additional captivating landscapes—a harmonious fusion of natural beauty and **organised** artistry intricately interwoven with the daily lives of the local populace. From our perspective, the everyday practices of the community members transcend mere routines; they constitute artistic expressions reflective of the people's beliefs, philosophies, and cultural practices. This sentiment aligns with the conventional characterization of African arts as "functional" rather than pursued solely for "art's sake." Daily artistic performances, such as libation ceremonies, incantations, rhythmic group activities in farmlands, coordinated fishing net maneuvers at the coasts, and the transmission of information through drum language, represent common forms of artistic expression across various ethnic cultures in Ghana. These performances often incorporate elements like installations, assemblages, body markings, paintings, and unconventional costumes—constituting integral components of contemporary arts.

In contemporary art, the aesthetic enhancement of forms is understood within diverse aesthetic contexts, grounded in the artist's concepts or ideations [2; 3]. African arts inherently possess such qualities that position them within the realm of contemporary arts.

Some art historians and scholars have initiated scholarly discussions on African shrine arts, advocating for their appreciation as contemporary art forms or aesthetic performances [4]; [5]. Additionally, the functionality of African shrine art as indigenous knowledge, particularly in the field of medicine [6], has garnered acknowledgment from scholars. There is a pressing need to enhance academic discourse on the artistry of African shrine arts, contributing to Afrocentric aesthetics literature using Afrocentric research methods [7; 8]. In alignment with the call to elevate the appreciation and understanding of African arts, culture, and aesthetics, this article provides an aesthetic report on the interpretations of installations in Chief Golobdan's house, delving into how these forms connect with the spiritual life of his family. The focus is also on contextualizing the artistic performances and the nuanced artistic expressions emanating from the installations, moving beyond mere religious objectification.

### **2.1 Brief theoretical underpinning**

Afrocentric aesthetics theory constitutes a crucial framework in the domain of art and cultural studies, offering a nuanced perspective for scholars to scrutinize the artistic expressions inherent in African cultures [9; 10]. With its roots embedded in the cultural experiences and philosophies of the African diaspora, Afrocentric aesthetics underscores the necessity of comprehending art within its cultural milieu [9]. This theory contends that artistic expressions are intricately interwoven with the broader socio-cultural fabric, mirroring the historical, spiritual, and communal dimensions of African societies [10; 7; 8]. Scholars employing the Afrocentric aesthetic lens aim to decipher the complex interconnections between art and lived experiences, recognizing the profound impact of cultural heritage on artistic forms [9]; [7]. This theoretical framework accentuates the importance of recognizing and valuing the diverse artistic traditions of Africa, challenging Eurocentric perspectives that might overlook the nuanced meanings embedded in African art forms [10]; [8]. Afrocentric aesthetics theory significantly contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the intricate tapestry of African artistic expressions, fostering a heightened appreciation for the cultural underpinnings of these creative endeavors. In the context of this study, the Afrocentric aesthetics theory served as the anchor for examining the artistic installations at the residence of the chief of Tongo, allowing for the identification of artistic elements and a deductive juxtaposition of lived experiences within the context of daily religious routines. This approach facilitated a deeper appreciation of the forms beyond their religious connotations.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

In delving into an examination of the artistry encapsulated within the shrine arts located in Chief Golobdan's residence, the study adopted a contextual critical content analysis approach, akin to the methodology employed by [11] in their scrutiny of cruise travelers' perceptions. A deliberate and purposive selection guided the choice of specific artistic installations, subjecting them to a meticulous analysis through the lens of visual analytics, augmented by the nuanced perspectives of Afrocentric aesthetics [10; 9]. The interpretative process involved the transcription and manual analysis of interviews, coupled with a comprehensive scrutiny of photographs depicting the installations, both descriptively and thematically.

## **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The indigenous inhabitants of the Tongo community assert the sanctity of the Tengzug shrine, designating it as a sacred enclave. Entry into this revered space is a ceremonial undertaking involving backward steps and a state of undress, a privilege accorded solely to those embarking on spiritual or divine missions. Consequently, individuals lacking purposes

of spiritual fortification or seeking fortunes are explicitly prohibited from ascending the hill to access the shrine (Bawa, personal communication, January 1, 2021).

Situated a mere 20-minute walk from the rocky hills of the Tengzug shrine is the residence of Chief Golobdan, a persona of considerable influence in Tongo. At 84 years old, the chief presides over a familial expanse comprising 24 wives, an undisclosed number of children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren (Golobdan, personal communication, January 1, 2021). The chief's expansive compound, equivalent to the size of a soccer field (refer to Figure 3), is replete with ergonomically designed artistic architectures, sculptures, and installations, discernible through astute critical observation and content analysis of their forms.

The distinctive traditional architectural compositions primarily employ mud construction, with fore-sticks serving as columns to support roofing, guided by spiritual directives from the chief's deities. These architectural designs showcase ingenious traditional artistic engineering, catering to the ergonomic needs of the community. While older structures have been reinforced with cement at the base, newly constructed ones utilize cement blocks and concrete, eschewing the use of aluminum for roofing materials. The chief asserts that the deities forbid the use of aluminum or any metal sheets for roofing due to their reflective nature, which could cause discomfort by directing light into their eyes.

Examining the aerial view of the chief's compound (see Figure 3), the flat rooftops of interconnected round buildings create an artistic representation akin to a complex irregular maze. This architectural layout symbolizes the intricate interrelatedness characterizing the social life within the chief's household. Notably, this labyrinthine structure also signifies a robust bond and protection afforded to the inhabitants, rendering intrusion difficult and reflecting the strength of the Ghanaian extended family system as one of the oldest and resilient social institutions [12]. Consequently, the chief's family enjoys a profound social cohesion and physical security, fostering a pervasive sense of safety and belonging among its members.



**Figure 3.** Partial aerial view showing the flat rooftops of the buildings Chief Golobdan's house. (Source: *Fieldwork*, 2020)

The utilitarian ingenuity of the circular buildings extends to the rooftops, which serve as impromptu sleeping mats during excessively warm seasons, providing respite when the interior temperatures become intolerable. Additionally, these rooftops double as elevated platforms for the purpose of drying grains and hay, exemplifying their multifunctional nature [13]. Constructed with meticulous engineering finesse, these traditional circular edifices are reinforced with seven robust sticks serving as foundational columns. Subsequently, smaller sticks are intricately interwoven before applying a layer of clay to fashion the top and body of the structure (refer to Figure 4).

Remarkably, these architectural marvels forgo conventional windows, opting instead for a small, circular aperture that demands a deliberate effort to access the building. Within each structure, a series of small configurations, comprising earthenware pots affixed to raised platforms adorned with furs and bloodstains, coexist with walls embellished with bones extracted from donkey jaws. These installations symbolize the presence of personal deities, providing protective guardianship for those who inhabit the rooms (see Figures 5a & 5b).



**Figure 4.** A pose inside the traditional roundhouse in Chief Golobdan's compound showing how the sticks were used as columns to support the flat roofing. (*Source: Fieldwork, 2020*).



**Figure 5a.** The entrance to one of the rooms of the traditional roundhouses in Chief Golobdan's compound (Source: *Fieldwork*, 2020)



**Figure 6a.** Personal deity of Chief Golobdan. Appears as a building but an abstract artistic figure representing the personal deity of the chief. (Source: *Fieldwork*, 2020)



**Figure 6b.** Details of installation of rope and guinea fowl feathers mixed with blood stains. (*Source: Fieldwork, 2020*)

Intriguingly, the internal dimensions of these remarkable indigenous structures average about seven feet in height and possess a four-foot radius, rendering them both spacious and conducive to unhindered standing or sleeping. Noteworthy is the application of cement to both the interior and exterior walls, as well as the floors, although historical records indicate that clay was the predominant material in the past. From a scientific standpoint, these circular dwellings exhibit structural resilience against natural forces, adeptly regulate room temperatures, and mitigate noise, thereby facilitating restful sleep—a deliberate architectural consideration implemented by our forebears [14]. Furthermore, the central courtyard within the chief's residence serves as the sanctum for Chief Golobdan's personal deity.

Upon initial observation, this deity presents itself as a modest round structure topped with a thatched roof (see Figure 6a). However, upon closer scrutiny from an artistic perspective, the construction unveils an abstract representation of a figure adorned with a hut-like roof, the two sticks just beneath symbolizing eyes, and two smaller conical forms resembling bent knees—a nuanced artistic manifestation. Such artistic interpretations, while diverging from the practices of certain African societies that venerate and make sacrifices to ancestors [15], align with the prevalent tradition of configuring deities and ancestors into abstract forms due to the elusive nature of their actual appearance. The deliberate arrangement of elements such as donkey bones, guinea fowl feathers, calabash, ropes, bloodstains, and sticks (depicted in Figures 6a and 6b) serves as mediums through which the chief engages in communication with the ancestors and deities. This interaction serves diverse purposes, including seeking divine protection from physical harm and invoking prosperity [15]. It is essential to underscore that, although these configurations may be appreciated from an artistic standpoint, their primary function lies not in aesthetic appeal but rather in facilitating the ceremonial practice of ancestral veneration.



**Figure 7.** Chief Golobdan in front of his personal deity and dressed in special costume made of donkey skin for sacrifice performance.  
Photographer: Bawa (Son of Chief Golobdan).  
*Image courtesy of Bawa.*

Within the realm of contemporary art, the intrinsic message encapsulated in the artistic form is rooted in conceptual frameworks, disseminated through various artistic mediums [16]. Consequently, the installations in Chief Golobdan's residence are accompanied by a ceremonial ensemble involving libations, animal sacrifices, the pouring or sprinkling of blood, along with hushed incantations and prayers, all executed with the utilization of special costumes. These ritualistic elements collectively constitute facets of both contemporary conceptual art and performance art.

Illustratively, Figure 7 captures Chief Golobdan adorned in a distinctive warlike costume crafted from donkey skin, symbolizing a performative act of sacrifice and benediction to his deity. This specific type of costume, when employed during significant occasions in traditional Ghanaian societies, metaphorically projects the social and political prowess of the individual donning it [17]. Thus, it comes as no surprise that Chief Golobdan, a political figure and self-described 'fearless warrior with many titles,' meticulously attires himself to seek favor from both his deity and ancestors (Bawa, personal communication, 2021).

Remarkably, situated behind one of the structures, in proximity to a substantial baobab tree, lies a discrete mini-cemetery where some of the ancestors, including Chief Golobdan's late father, find their eternal rest. A noteworthy observation is the meticulous construction of these tombs in near-perfect circular forms, adorned with configured installations comprising

sticks, earthenware pots, calabash, feathers, and bloodstains, collectively creating an ambiance reminiscent of a shrine (refer to Figures 8a & 8b) dedicated to the venerable practice of ancestor veneration.



**Figure 8a.** Circular tombs at the private mini-cemetery behind the house of Chief Golobdan. (Source: *Fieldwork*, 2020)



**Figure 8b.** Details of installations on the circular tombs behind the house of Chief Golobdan. (Source: *Fieldwork*, 2020).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The artistic manifestations within Chief Golobdan's residence serve as a contemporary reflection of prevailing conceptual art practices embraced by artists globally in recent times. Significantly, shrine art stands as an enduring tradition in Africa, with its continued presence in various villages, utilizing hybrid media to convey potent emotions of horror, fear, or psychological tension, placing them at the core of artistic focus [18]. The exposition within Chief Golobdan's abode vividly illustrates those contemporary conceptual arts, particularly installations and performance art, are not novel or emerging within Ghanaian traditional societies. These practices are deeply embedded in the cultural heritage of traditional African

communities. [18] aptly underscores the importance of addressing gaps in public awareness regarding this conceptual artistry through academic writings and documentation, such as the present article. Beyond the imperative of documenting the intricate traditional conceptual artistry within Chief Golobdan's residence, this article endeavors to spotlight the geographical allure of Tongo as an enticing tourist countryside. The multifaceted exploration of the region's artistic and natural richness enhances its potential as a captivating destination for cultural and artistic enthusiasts. **It is therefore imperious for the Tongo jurisdiction to be given a serious attention for tourism investments to impact the socio-economic tourism development. This will go a long way to also impact the livelihood of the location.**

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