

The Figurative Palanquins and Coffins of the Ga of Southern Ghana

The figurative coffins made by the Ga have been acknowledged world-wide as works of art ever since they were included in the exhibition «Les magiciens de la terre», held in Paris in 1989. Kane Kwei (1925–1992), a coffin-maker from Teshie, is generally credited with their invention. The Ph.D. thesis questions widely accepted accounts of the origins and function of the coffins. It also examines for the first time in detail the little-known figurative palanquins produced by the Ga, hitherto seen as no longer extant forerunners of the coffins.

Background

The thesis is based on several years of fieldwork conducted between 2002 and 2012 in separate stages in the Greater Accra region. This research sought to shed light on the history and meaning of the coffins and palanquins by investigating the culture of the Ga people, their religion, arts, history and burial rites. The objects were thus seen in the context of the society that produces them and uses them. This interdisciplinary approach disclosed the true nature of the relationship between the coffins and palanquins, along with their real purpose.

Methodology

The approach is based on a combination of perspectives and methods from anthropology and art history such as interviews, participatory observation, interpretation of drawings and old photographs.

Results

Ga figurative coffins were not the invention of an autonomous artist. They had been used in the early twentieth century in the context of large-scale burials of initiates. Every chief sat at his initiation in a figurative palanquin that bore the shape of his family's emblem. Since the Ga view initiations and burials as complementary events, the chief was later buried in an object with the same shape. Contrary to previous assumptions, that object copied the form of the palanquin, but was not the palanquin itself, which remained with the chief's family as a closely guarded sacred object. In other words, figurative coffins did not develop out of figurative palanquins or replace them, but were copies of them. Later, in the 1960s, figurative coffins started to become widespread among Christians. Because Christians were not permitted to use coffins in the form of sacred family emblems, Kane Kwei, Ataa Oko and others began creating coffins in shapes relating to the deceased's occupation.

Keywords:

visual culture – figurative palanquins and coffins – history
– transformation – change – ethnicity – religion – spirit possession
– funerary rites

Publications (selection)

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A chief sitting in his eagle akpakai, 2010. Photo: Regula Tschumi



Eagle coffin, 2004. Photo: Regula Tschumi



The Teshie mantse Nii Ashitey Akomfra III in his eagle akpakai, 1962. Archive: Regula Tschumi

