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“Echoes from the coast”: The poetics of decrepit materials

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Abstract

This study explores the intersection of African sculpture and semiotics, focusing on mask forms created from discarded wood sourced from the shores of Winneba and scavenged metals from mechanic shops and scrap depots. The study situates itself within junk art, a movement that reimagines discarded materials as vehicles for artistic and cultural expression. Employing an arts-based, studio-driven research methodology, the artist-researcher repurposes and documents a process beginning with intuitive selection of weathered wood, often from decommissioned canoes, and integration of found metal objects to create four evocative masks. The results provide the creative procedure as well as visual and symbolic analyses of the four works, namely Resurrection, Awula Bibio (Young woman), Korle-Bu and Shine-Eye, interpreting their forms, materials, and inscriptions as commentaries on life cycles, cultural identity, and resilience. The study affirms art’s profound dual role: as a vivid mirror that reflects the core values of society, and as a dynamic catalyst that ignites new transformative ways of thinking.

Keywords

Assemblage and
Construction,
Found objects,
Junk art,
Masks,
Sculpture.

1. Introduction

The interaction between found objects and artistic expression is a ubiquitous element of African life, and has long inspired artists across cultures and epochs. Akpang (2013) supports this view, noting that the transformation of found objects and waste into artworks is a dominant feature of contemporary African art, serving as a defining element of the continent’s emerging creative identity. Junk art, often regarded as a form of creative expression that challenges traditional notions of art, repurposes discarded materials or detritus into meaningful works (Agujiobi-Odoh & Onyishi, 2024; Akpang, 2013; Blier, 1998; Essel & Acquah, 2016; Donkor, Micah, & Ankrah, 2022). This artistic movement has gained

traction by critiquing contemporary society and emphasising environmental awareness (Agujiobi-Odoh & Onyishi, 2024; Katz, 2013; Meyer, 2021; Strother, 2020). In the context of contemporary sculpture, the materials employed not only serve as mediums for artistic exploration but also embody the cultural and geographical narratives from which they emerge (Aghedo & Ebodili, 2022; Essel & Acquah, 2016; Meyer, 2021), illustrating how the diversity of recycled objects and their varied applications highlight the richness of human inventiveness. This approach to art, characterised by the appropriation of waste and found objects, has proliferated across the African continent and now holds a prominent place in contemporary art practice. Evans (2010), as cited in Akpang (2013, p.41), posits that "through found object transformation, African artists have created a truly unique art form and have bequeathed a new art context to the world." So profound are its roots that some scholars contend that the incorporation of found objects into art originated in Africa (Akpang, 2013; Essel & Acquah, 2016). However, African 'junk art' remains underrepresented in global sustainability and art discourse, alongside a notable paucity of semiotic analyses linking material choice to cultural symbolism. Existing studies on Ghanaian junk art, such as Donkor, Micah and Ankrah's (2022) aesthetic analysis of Evans Kwadwo Donkor's scrap metal bull sculpture, highlight the creative transformation of discarded metals into meaningful artworks that address both environmental and cultural concerns. Donkor's work, characterised by the concept of 'metal-morphosis,' exemplifies how scrap materials can be repurposed to embody resilience (Donkor, Micah, & Ankrah, 2022, p. 36) and aesthetic value within contemporary art practice.

While the afore-discussed studies foreground the ecological and artistic significance of junk art, a gap persists in global discourse, particularly concerning in-depth semiotic analyses that explicitly connect material choices with cultural symbolism. This gap positions the current study as novel, aiming to bridge environmental sustainability with semiotic exploration to advance understanding of how materiality in Ghanaian junk art communicates complex cultural narratives beyond the aesthetic and ecological dimensions documented in prior research.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Theoretical Basis

The study was underpinned by semiotic theory. Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, offers a suitable framework for understanding how meaning is created from signs and symbols and communicated across various contexts. According to Peirce (1931-1958), a sign is something that stands for something else to someone in some capacity, making it a triadic relationship involving the sign itself, its object, and its interpretant. This foundational concept highlights that signs do not exist in isolation but function within broader systems of meaning. Ferdinand de Saussure (1916), often regarded as one of the founding figures of semiotics (or semiology, as he termed it), defined the term semiology as the study of signs within social life, focusing on the relational nature of signs, how the signifier (form) and the signified (concept) interact to produce meaning (Saussure, 1916).

Saussure's approach emphasises the structural relationships between signs within a given language or culture, underscoring that meaning arises from differences and oppositions within these systems. Building on these foundations, contemporary semioticians view signs as components of complex sign systems governed by cultural codes that shape and regulate meaning (Barthes, 1977; Eco, 1976). Barthes (1977) critically analysed how cultural myths and ideologies are embedded in everyday signs, revealing how power and social norms are reproduced through meaning-making. Eco (1976) further elaborates on semiotics by emphasising semiosis, the ongoing process of producing and interpreting signs, as inherently social and communal. However, Eco also acknowledges the role of individual interpretation, recognising that meaning is negotiated between shared cultural codes and personal experiences (Eco, 1976). This dynamic cooperation between the collective and the subjective is central to semiotic theory, illustrating that meaning is neither fixed nor purely objective. Sturrock (1986) makes a useful distinction between semantics, the study of what words mean, and semiotics, which concerns how signs convey meaning in broader communicative contexts. This distinction expands the scope of semiotics beyond language to include images, sounds, gestures, and other forms of sign, underscoring the discipline's interdisciplinary nature. Chandler (2007) further argues that semiotics reveals reality as a construct shaped by signs rather than an objective given. Through semiotic analysis, we become critically aware of how knowledge, perception, and interpretation are mediated by cultural codes and symbolic systems (Chandler, 2007). This awareness empowers us to uncover hidden assumptions and ideologies embedded in everyday communication.

The semiotic interpretation of the masks in this study operates as a dynamic, triadic process involving three interrelated elements: the materials from which the masks were constructed (Object), the masks' visual features and characteristics (Sign), and the meanings they evoke—both denotative and connotative (Interpretant). Each mask's choice of materials and design was deliberate, serving not only as a physical form but also as a communicative sign that bridges personal experience with broader cultural narratives. This aligns with semiotic theory's emphasis on meaning as a product of interaction within cultural codes and individual interpretation. This framework reveals how the masks function as complex sign systems, where the assemblage of metal scraps is not random but purposefully organised to convey layered messages. Thus, the construction and visual language of the masks become a medium through which the artist negotiates identity, history, and social commentary, demonstrating the role of semiotics in unpacking the cultural significance embedded in artistic expression.

2.2 Conceptual Review

2.2.1 Assemblage and Construction in Sculpture

This study is rooted in the concept of Assemblage and Construction with found objects within sculpture, a creative approach in which artists construct three-dimensional works by collecting, combining, and manipulating a variety of pre-existing materials with distinct

textures, shapes, and meanings. Assemblage and construction center on the act of gathering discarded items and transforming them into a new, cohesive, and visually compelling artwork (Astfalck, n.d.). Each object, while gaining new aesthetic or symbolic significance as part of the whole, may still retain traces of its original identity. Assembled and constructed sculpture stands apart from traditional sculpture in several essential ways, particularly regarding materials, techniques, and conceptual frameworks.

Traditional sculpture usually involves shaping raw materials like wood, stone, or clay through carving, modelling, or casting. In contrast, assemblage is defined by the use of found, pre-existing, or everyday objects, which are assembled, joined, or glued together rather than modelled or carved from a single material (Robinson, 2023). Additionally, construction in sculpture involves a detailed understanding of the functions that each component or element plays, with the overall outcome reflecting the sculptor's level of mastery (Curtis, 2017). Unlike assemblage, which involves joining together different types of objects made from various materials, construction typically uses the same material throughout the work (Mensah, Adu-Agyem, & Osei-Barnieh, 2013). As Fichner-Rathus (1999) affirms, whether assembling or constructing a sculpture, the artist carefully selects and groups materials to create a new, cohesive form that embodies both technical skill and artistic vision. This process highlights the significance of material sensitivity, negotiation, and engagement in shaping form and exploring ideas, an integral part of the sculptor's practice (Aghedo & Ebodili, 2022).

The conceptual aspect of assemblage and construction invites viewers to reconsider the meaning and value of ordinary or discarded materials by placing them in new contexts. Through this act of recontextualization, the technique of assemblage and construction introduces layers of symbolism and often serves as both ecological and cultural commentary. The approach encourages audiences to reflect on the transformation of mundane objects into thought-provoking works of art (De Oliveira, Oxley & Petry, 2003; Kwon, 2004; Miles, 2010). Ultimately, the terms assemblage and construction often go together for sculpture works that are formed by means of synthesizing already existing forms. In construction, especially, objects can be reworked and formed, without necessarily leaving them in their found state, as pertains to the technique of assemblage. This study centers on the convergence of these techniques in the fabrication of masks using found wood and metal scraps.

2.2.1 Brief Historical Context of Assemblage and Construction in Sculpture

The term "assemblage" in its artistic sense was coined by French artist Jean Dubuffet in the early 1950s, when he created a series of collages using butterfly wings, titled "assemblage d'empreintes" (National Galleries of Scotland, 2023, paras. 3, 7). In contrast, the concept of "construction" in art became evident with sculptors like Antoine Pevsner and Naum Gabo coining the term "Constructivism" around 1920, a movement originally founded by Vladimir Tatlin and Alexander Rodchenko in 1915 (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998).

This movement emphasised the use of industrial materials and geometric abstraction, focusing on the inherent qualities of materials and their spatial presence within three-dimensional artworks. However, the modern practice of assemblage and construction, in the Western world, began earlier, in the early twentieth century, with artists such as Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp experimenting with found objects. Duchamp, for instance, was interested in human perception of change, distance, movement, and transition (Walker, 2021; Meyer, 2022; Pettersson, 2019). In parallel, Picasso incorporated materials like sand, sawdust, and rope into his Synthetic Cubist paintings and later created constructed relief sculptures, such as his 1914 work *Still Life*, which combined wooden elements and textiles to blur the boundaries between painting and sculpture (Cramer & Grant, 2019).

2.2 Tools, Equipment and Techniques used for Assemblage and Construction in Sculpture

Assemblage and construction sculpture constitutes a dynamic field within contemporary art, distinguished by the synthesis of diverse materials and multifaceted techniques to create complex three-dimensional forms (Addo & Wemegah, 2021; Aghedo & Ebodili, 2022). Artists employ an extensive range of tools, from manual instruments like wire cutters, pliers, hammers, and jeweler's saws to power equipment such as drills and welding apparatus (Addo & Wemegah, 2021). The selection of tools aligns closely with the properties of materials, metal, wood, plastic, fabric, and the joining methods utilised. Mechanical fasteners, including rivets, nails, bolts, and screws, are frequently applied alongside adhesive compounds like epoxy and silicone-based adhesives to secure assemblies, enhance structural integrity, and accommodate diverse material combinations (Mburu et al., 2014).

Metal-joining techniques such as welding, brazing, and soldering are practiced to form durable, permanent unions, particularly in sculptures assembled from scrap or industrial materials. Material-specific adjustments, such as choice of filler or flux, optimise the bond (Addo & Wemegah, 2021). Mechanical fastening methods allow modular construction, thus facilitating assembly, reconfiguration, or disassembly (Mburu et al., 2014). Precision cutting and shaping tools, such as metal shears, jeweler's saws, are used to prepare components for seamless integration and cohesion (Addo & Wemegah, 2021). Beyond technical processes, assemblage sculpture involves an iterative and experimental creative methodology starting from conceptual sketches that guide material choice and fabrication strategies tailored to both the physical properties and aesthetic goals of the work (Aghedo & Ebodili, 2022).

Material semiotics plays a vital role in assemblage, wherein materials act as carriers of cultural, social, and symbolic meaning beyond their physical form. Found objects, ranging from domestic refuse to industrial remnants, invoke critical narratives of consumption, obsolescence, and transformation (Keane, 2003). The juxtaposition of organic and inorganic elements provokes dialogues around nature versus industry, durability versus decay, enriching interpretive layers (Barad, 2003; Bennett, 2010). The tactile and visual qualities of materials, rusted metal, worn wood, or synthetic surfaces, evoke sensory associations that significantly influence viewer perception (Keane, 2003). From a semiotic perspective,

assemblage challenges traditional artistic norms by emphasising the socio-cultural inscriptions embedded in everyday materials, fostering critical reflection on materiality itself (Aghedo & Ebodili, 2022).

2.2.2 Key Western Sculptors Involved in Assemblage and Construction

Duchamp's iconic ready-mades, such as *Fountain* (1917), involved selecting ordinary objects and presenting them as art. The idea was to question the notion of art and accepted canon, as well as the adoration of art, which Duchamp found "unnecessary". With his "ready-mades" (Figure 1), Duchamp clearly showed the world that the context of any message is important. In a lecture in 1964, he explained the term "ready-mades" as follows: "I coined that word for ready-made objects which I designed as works of art by simply signing them" (Henderson, 1998, as cited in Pettersson, 2019). Sometimes, Duchamp also modified his objects. This way (Pettersson, 2019, p. 7), "an ordinary object became art".



Figure 1: Marcel Duchamp. (1951). *Bicycle Wheel* [Found bicycle wheel mounted on a wooden stool]. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA, United States.

Louise Nevelson was another pioneering assemblage artist who, beginning in the late 1930s, created large, wall-like reliefs from found wooden objects. Her immersive sculptures, which she described as "environments," featured multiple compartments filled with abstract shapes and found fragments, ranging from chair legs to balusters (Figure 2). In 1957, she began using shadow boxes, or crates, as a means to showcase the assemblages she made from found objects in wood. The fact that the material was discarded was part of the transformed content of the work. She not only gave the refuse new life, she gave it new meaning in these rigorously formal structures. The idea of "shadow boxes" came out of her interest in a broad range of sources, from prehistoric art to Pre-Columbian, African, and Egyptian art to store windows (Swartz, 2020).



Figure 2: Louise Nevelson (1958). *Sky Cathedral* [Painted wood assemblage]
(Courtesy: Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, United States).

Robert Rauschenberg expanded the possibilities of assemblage in the 1950s and 1960s with his "Combines," works that integrated trash and found objects into hybrid pieces (Figure 3) that dissolved the boundaries between painting, sculpture, and everyday life (Widoff, 2018). John Chamberlain is also known within the space of assemblage and construction for his monumental sculptures made from crushed automobile parts. Beyond metal, Chamberlain worked with materials such as urethane foam, galvanised steel, mineral-coated Plexiglass, aluminum foil, and even paper bags, often shifting his material focus depending on where he lived and what was available to him. Throughout his career, Chamberlain's work was marked by a dynamic reciprocity of colour, texture, and form, whether working with industrial detritus or unconventional materials. These aspects of his practice reveal that his influence and innovation reached well beyond his iconic crushed car sculptures, embracing a diverse and experimental body of work that helped redefine contemporary sculpture and assemblage, and construction (Kennedy, 2011).



Figure 3: Robert Rauschenberg. (1962-1965). *Oracle* [Five-Part Found-Metal Assemblage with concealed AM radios]. Courtesy, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

Fundamentally, this provides an essential contextual framework by demonstrating how Western artists, as examined in existing scholarship, transformed found objects into artistic expressions, thereby paralleling the methodologies explored in the current study.

2.2.3 African Perspective on Assemblage and Construction in Sculpture

The African perspective on construction and assemblage closely aligns with conceptual and junk art, prioritising ideas over material form while embracing found and discarded objects central to junk art, by such means imbuing them with new social meanings. Although conceptual art is often viewed as exclusively Western, scholarly literature demonstrates that African art has embraced conceptual principles for a long time. Essel and Acquah (2016) argue that precolonial African art focused on ideas rather than realistic representation or material beauty, utilising abstraction, symbolic motifs, and unconventional materials arranged in assemblages with socio-political, spiritual, and cultural significance. For instance, shrine art and palace altars often feature deliberately arranged objects, bones, metal, fabrics, and animal parts that convey complex ritualistic and ideological messages (Essel & Acquah, 2016). This approach treats materials as subordinate to the ideas they express, with intentional combinations serving to communicate culturally specific, layered meanings. According to Essel and Acquah (2016), the deliberate choice and arrangement of materials reflect indigenous philosophies about life, death, and community. This synthesis challenges Western aesthetic norms and reveals sophisticated constructions of meaning through material and spatial relationships in African art. In the context of junk art, African artists repurpose materials such as metal scraps, plastics, wood, and other waste into sculptures and installations that address diverse contemporary themes (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Gonçalo Mabunda. (2011). *Untitled* (Mask)
[Wood and metal] (Source: Jack Bell Gallery).

Such practice is both ecological and symbolic, as the materials carry histories of use, abandonment, and cultural significance (Blier, 1998). The Ghanaian-Nigerian sculptor, El Anatsui, exemplifies this by assembling thousands of repurposed bottle caps and metal fragments into large, tapestry-like works (Figure 5) that comment on liberation from colonial deprivations, globalization, waste, African history, politics, and the social transformation of Africa (Agujiobi-Odoh & Onyishi, 2024).



Figure 5: El Anatsui. (2022). *Obscured Narrative* [Aluminium and copper wire].
(Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery).

Similarly, Nigerian artist Dilomprizulike uses scrap metal and industrial waste to create sculptures that explore urban life and social issues, transforming waste into narratives of resilience. Beninese artist, Romuald Hazoumè also creates works from discarded plastic petrol cans (Figure 6), which serve as powerful symbols of African geography, history, and identity. His contemporary reinterpretations of the traditional masking technique convey messages about cultural imperialism, dark markets, and mortality. This showcases African artists as active conceptual thinkers who engage critically with contemporary issues, sustainability, and their cultural heritage.



Figure 6: Romuald Hazoumè (2013). *Bodjou-Bodjou* [Plastic petrol can, Copper wire and Synthetic hair] (Source; October Gallery, London).

The juxtaposition of African and Western junk artists enriches the recognition of the unique narratives embedded in African "junk art" and underscores the relevance of this study within the broader context of this artistic practice.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Approach

The study employed an arts-based research approach, using studio design within a qualitative research paradigm to create masks. Leavy (2018) describes the arts-based research as a transdisciplinary process of knowledge building that combines the tenets of the creative arts in research contexts. Relatedly, Candy and Edmonds (2018, p.63) describe studio-based research as "a form of practice-based research in which the practitioner-researcher uses his/her creative practice to generate insights and new knowledge". This study further adopted an interpretive analytical tool to examine the symbolic, cultural, and

experiential dimensions of the masks, moving beyond a mere description of their physical characteristics. The researcher's conceptual framework incorporates experiential knowledge, existing theory and research, and 'thought experiments' through pilot and exploratory studies. As such, the researcher was the principal instrument for the research.

3.2 Materials and Making

3.2.1. Selection of Wood

Wood forms (Figures 7 & 8) that evoke inspiration, focusing on natural uniqueness and have potential for transformation, were identified by the researcher-artist. Preference was given to ones that had been naturally transformed by forces such as termite activity, fire damage, or water erosion, while still retaining identifiable grain patterns. Additionally, consideration was given to wood featuring pre-existing markings, as these unique characteristics contribute significantly to the artwork's overall character and aesthetic appeal. Above all, the wood must be strong enough to support embedded metal elements without structural failure.



Figure 7: Broken Canoe at the Winneba Beach



Figure 8: Paint Remnant on Naturally Textured Wood

(Source: Photograph by author, 2021)

3.2.2. Initial Physical and Conceptual Engagement

The artist transported selected woods (Figure 9) to the studio and allowed them to sit in a dry, shaded, and well-ventilated environment, from weeks to months, to a season. This seasoning period enhanced durability and reduced internal moisture. Again, during this time, There was an intermittent reviewing and reflection of the wood to explore possible

creative directions, allowing initial imaginative concepts to evolve or be replaced upon deeper contemplation.



Figure 9: Wood cleaned and ready for sculpting
(Source: Photograph by author, 2021).

3.2.3. Gathering and Curating Metal Components

Discarded metal objects, gathered from local mechanic workshops, including bolts, nuts, and various metal scraps with distinctive shapes and craftsmanship (Figures 10 & 11), were identified and gathered by the artist. This was meticulously done with intent and precision to avoid unnecessary storage of rubble. When necessary, the acquisition of other metals is expanded to sourcing from scavenger depots for variety. The artist was of the view that

metal components should be aesthetically compelling, significant, and varied in form to complement the wood sculpture.



Figure 10: Scrap metal parts
(Source: Photograph by author, 2021).



Figure 11: Selected scrap metal parts for sculpture
(Source: Photograph by author, 2021)

3.2.4. Integration Considerations for Wood and Metal, and Carving Techniques

The selection of wood forms (Figures 12 & 13) with sufficient density and toughness to securely hold metal parts without cracking or deformation under stress was of prime importance to the artist. Visual exploration was conducted by delineating design elements directly onto the wood with chalk. Added to that, placement of metal onto wood was meticulously planned to highlight intriguing areas of the wood or to enhance the overall artistic vision (Figures 12 & 13), particularly in sculptures such as masks. With an angle grinder equipped with a cutting disc for precise definition of sections to be removed, the carving process continues, occasionally employing an adze or appropriate carving tools to remove large wood sections according to design outlines and evolving mental images. There was a recognition that the actual carving process is adaptive, shaped by the physical properties of the wood and available tools, which many a time, prompted alterations to original concepts.



Figure 12: Use of Traditional Gouges
to Create Desired Depth



Figure 13: Metal fixed in wood

(Source: Photograph by author, 2021).

3.2.5. Iterative Reflection and Adaptation

Regularly, the artist reevaluated the emerging sculpture during the carving phase, allowing for modifications in concept based on the wood's response and the integration of metal components. It was also considered and accepted that some preliminary ideas remained unexecuted due to practical constraints or new creative insights arising during the hands-on work.

3.3 Ethical Consideration

Abandoned canoes are commonly left exposed along the Winneba beach, with some parts occasionally collected by local fishmongers for firewood. Although these canoes appear deserted, whenever the artist attempted to take them, individuals would come forward to assert ownership and request compensation. As a result, the artist made it a priority to first obtain permission from the rightful owners before collecting the abandoned canoes, and in some cases, provided financial compensation to ensure proper consent was given. This same approach was applied to the collection of metal scraps for the study; the materials were either gifted to the artist with the consent of the scrap collectors or purchased from them.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents a discursive analysis of the sculpture works produced through assemblage and construction from found materials at Winneba. Specifically, it discusses four

works themed *Resurrection*, *Awula Bibio*, *Korle-Bu*, and *Shine-Eye*, shedding light on their philosophical and cultural symbolism. The creation process was shaped not only by the constraints and possibilities inherent in the found wood and discarded metal scraps but also by the deliberate and reflective creative decisions made by the researcher-artist regarding the conceptualisation and realisation of the works. Consequently, the results, presented under the subheading, *description*, arose from the dynamic interplay between the material affordances and the deliberate artistic agency exercised during the studio practice. Accordingly, the discussions are articulated as *associative Interpretations*, which explore the denotative and connotative exposition of both the individual components and the holistic form of the masks produced. Concerning the interpretation of the masks, three tools seemed particularly relevant: presuppositions, conventions, and contexts (Griswold, Mangione & McDonnell, 2013).

4.1: *Resurrection*



Figure 14: *Resurrection*, 2014.

Wood and metal with dimensions: 3.8m x 64cm x 20cm (Source: Studio data, 2014).

4.1.1. Description

Figure (14) is phallic in structure, measuring 3.8m by 64cm by 20cm. It is symmetrically divided by a dark area to the right and a light area to the left. The right side has an

inscription carved amidst rows of serrated horizontal lines. This incised inscription has a spattering of light and faded blue colour within, in contrast with the black within which it is submerged. In terms of colour, the left side is predominantly light brown, embodying three prominent high relief forms. From the top end, a curvilinear form descends from the edge, arching around a circular form, and descends downwards whilst flaring back towards the edge. This form abruptly ends a little below the midpoint of the sculpture. The circular form is very close to the edge and perforated with a hole, thus creating a circular space that complements a bigger and incomplete semi-circular one below. A constellation of bolts and nuts populate this circular form, giving it a textured effect and a darker brown colour. Some of these bolts and nuts can also be found precisely at the side of the first form descending from above. The second space is within a triangular-looking form that sits at the bottom end of the Figure. However, the top region of this triangular form is uncharacteristically rounded. A vertical row of sequentially arranged lines made up of iron rods descends from the bottom line of the pseudo-triangular form to the base of the figure. Blotches of variously shaped holes and fleeting lines are evident all over the Figure.

4.1.2 Associative Interpretations

The choice of wood, from a discarded canoe, as the main material for the mask titled *Resurrection* is symbolic. It reflects the African religious concept of resurrection, which is conceived in ideas of reincarnation and apparition. Unlike the Christian notion of bodily resurrection, African beliefs often center on the spirit of the deceased transitioning to the realm of the ancestors, where they can continue to interact with the living (Mbiti, 1969). This interaction is seen as a continuation of life, albeit in a different form, as noted by Mbiti (1969), who emphasises that African conceptions of life and death are cyclical and relational rather than linear.

Dugout canoes are traditionally carved from hardwood trees found in the forests north of the coast of Winneba. Rituals are usually performed before these trees are felled, and the carving is often done in situ before the canoe is transported to the coast for finishing. The felled tree, presumed dead, is given new life as a canoe, serving fishermen and transporting fish across many seas and shores (Sangban, Asenso, & Yormesor, 2023). After years of service, the canoe may become “useless” due to wear, tear, or accidents. It is then retired, left to rot on the beach, or used for firewood, completing its natural life cycle. This lifecycle of the canoe and the ritual practices surrounding its making and use align with ethnographic accounts of West African boat craftsmanship, where spiritual and material continuity is emphasised (Connell, 2001; Sackeyfio, 2011). Reincarnation, as a philosophical concept, has developed from the cyclical rhythms that traditional Africans observe in the events of life (Tempels, 1969). By salvaging these discarded woods and transforming them into art, they are brought back to life once more, this time with the potential to endure for generations, as sculptures often outlive their creators, echoing Clarke and Arkenberg (2006) and Fontanille’s (2012) analysis of material reuse as symbolic rebirth in African art.

The mask features an inscription, *Obiara Bowu*, which is commonly found on canoes along the Winneba beach. Originally carved and painted by artists who specialise in canoe decoration, this phrase remains visible even after many years at sea. In the Akan language of Ghana, *Obiara Bowu* translates to “All shall die” (Akan, in this context, refers specifically to the Fante people in Winneba, the Central Region of Ghana). The reappearance of bodily marks from a deceased person on a newborn child is another basis for the African belief in reincarnation, as documented in Akan cultural studies (Obeng, 1998). Paradoxically, the sculpture is titled *Resurrection*. In this context, it defies the finality of death, symbolising rebirth or reincarnation in African religious philosophy. The rust, holes, and lines on the wood (Figure 14) speak to the rough experiences typical of a sea-going vessel. The expression characterised by one eye being completely open and the mouth slightly ajar, suggests defiance, a refusal to yield to forces that threaten man’s right to endure and thrive. This is contrasted with the inscription, set amidst a dark patch, evoking the mystery of death. Ultimately, this new identity for the wood reflects an interaction between form and subject matter, reaffirming an African philosophy of the continuity of life (Mbiti, 1969; Fontanille, 2012).

4.2: *Awula Bibio*



Figure 15a: “*Awula Bibio*” (young woman). 2021.

Wood and metal; dimensions: 1.5m x 88cm x 38cm (Source: Studio Data, 2021).



Figure 15b: Side view of “Awula Bibio” (Young woman). 2021.

Wood and metal; dimensions: 1.5m x 88cm x 38cm (Source: Studio Data, 2021).

4.2.1 Description

Figure (15a) is characteristic of a cone turned upside down with a missing upper left end. Arrays of lines going in several directions occupy the right end. A small area that is encircled by an incised line; a shiny and silvery domelike object is set atop a bigger dark coloured one. Downwards to the left, a grey coloured form of undefined shape is embedded between a dark brown patch to the left and a light brown zone to the right. This zone is relatively smooth, in contrast to the other zone. A close to circular protrusion is centered at the lower and narrow end of the form. This protrusion is semi-divided by a scalloped line, giving the impression of an arched upper form and an oval lower form. Just below the protruding area, the form tapers into a narrow section defined by a jagged edge.

4.2.2 Associative Interpretation

Awula Bibio means ‘a young woman’ in Ga, the language of the Ga people native to Accra. The term evokes the image of a once youthful and beautiful woman who has lost the essence of life prematurely. Beauty, as a concept, carries a paradox, a quiet tension between its awe-inspiring presence and the inevitable sorrow it can bring. This tension often emerges when the vicissitudes of life take their toll, especially after overindulgence in worldly pleasures. Perhaps the true essence of beauty lies not in its permanence but in its transience. The African philosophical understanding of beauty emphasises its ephemerality, highlighting that beauty is temporary and deeply connected to character, communal values, and authenticity rather than fixed physical traits (Ibanga, 2017). This holistic notion of beauty integrates both external appearance and moral character, where the latter is considered paramount because physical beauty fades with time (Ibanga, 2017; Ikuenobe,

2018). African aesthetics generally view beauty as functional and relational, serving communal harmony and ethical standards, rather than individualistic or superficial standards common in Western societies (Ibanga, 2017; Ikuenobe, 2018). This worldview stands in stark contrast to Western-influenced ideals, which frequently prioritise unchanging, surface-level features such as lighter skin.

Many young African women, influenced by Eurocentric beauty standards and internalised colourism, resort to skin bleaching in the hope of attaining beauty. This practice is often motivated by the belief that lighter skin confers higher social status, greater economic opportunities, and increased desirability (Charles, 2011). However, these motivations stem from a distorted, externally imposed definition of beauty that conflicts with indigenous African values, where beauty is understood as holistic and transient. As the enhanced beauty achieved through bleaching inevitably fades, the psychological and physical effects become clear. Prolonged bleaching can cause visible skin damage, health complications, and a loss of the natural features that once defined a woman's unique identity (Asumah et al., 2022). In the sculpture *Awula Bibio*, the iron rods emanating from the head symbolise weakened hair strands, while the dark patches on the face represent the skin damage resulting from bleaching, visually embodying the tension between imposed beauty ideals and the authentic, temporal nature of true beauty (Konadu, 2009). Thus, *Awula Bibio* critically engages with the paradox of beauty within contemporary African contexts, reminding viewers that genuine beauty is intertwined with identity, community values, and the acceptance of change and impermanence.

4.3: "Korle-Bu"



Figure 16: *Korle-Bu*, 2020.

Wood and metal; dimensions: 2m x 48cm x 30cm (Source: Studio Data, 2020).

4.3.1 Description

Figure (16) is conical in shape, tapering toward the top and widening at the base. However, while the line on the right side flows continuously to the bottom, the line on the top left is cut off partway down. This side's smooth flow is distorted by jagged lines at the top end with an indent at the lower end. There is a flow of sinuous incised lines with a diamond-shaped form at the centre. In contrast, the right side portrays geometrical forms and shapes. From the top left, a line tapers and sits on top of a square form that has a square as negative space going through. Underneath that, there is an incised line resembling the symbol. This is outlined by a raised form in the manner of a sickle turned upside down. This form, which appears split in two, seems held in place by four thin lines in the manner of stitching. Across this to the right is a line running from the bottom to the top half and ending just below a rectangular-shaped incision. The colour is generally of a warm brown with blotches of darker shades. This figure was carved from a discarded hull of a once-thriving canoe. It is the main frame of canoes made from whole tree trunks that were hollowed out by carving with 'adzes' (a traditional carving tool that looks like a hoe). With almost half of the face gone, a half-faced mask was carved with what was left. Thus, the square form with a square hollow represents an eye, whilst the form of a sickle turned upside down with a cavity represents part of the mouth. Iron rods simulating stitches were necessary to hold together a broken piece of the wood.

4.3.2 Associative Interpretation

Korle-Bu, meaning valley of the Korle Lagoon in the Ga language, is one of Ghana's largest and most important referral medical facilities (Ministry of Health, 2019; SYNLAB Ghana, 2023). As a Teaching Hospital, it plays a critical role in saving lives, particularly those of accident victims who might otherwise succumb to their injuries. The half-faced mask adorned with "stitches" symbolises an accident victim, representing the duality of injury and healing. This image directly reflects the hospital's mission of restoration and communal support, conceived in "Providing excellent healthcare services..." (Ministry of Health, 2025, para. 3). The mask highlights human vulnerability. It underscores the essential need for both medical intervention and community care to preserve life. At the heart of Korle-Bu Teaching Hospital is the Accident and Emergency Centre, a vital gateway for emergency admissions. Here, trauma patients with life-threatening injuries receive rapid triage, resuscitation, stabilisation, and surgical intervention, services crucial to saving lives.

Beyond the physical treatment of injuries, many African traditions understand health as a holistic balance of physical, spiritual, and social well-being (Tosam, 2021). Therefore, 'healing' is viewed as the restoration of this balance. *Korle-Bu* embodies this holistic philosophy, reflecting the African concept of *Ubuntu*, which can be summarised as *I am because we are* or *Humanity to others* (Leadership Forum Community, Inc., 2024). This philosophy emphasises interconnectedness and communal responsibility, values that are sacred in African thought. The symbolism of the *Korle-Bu* mask also serves as a poignant reminder and inspiration for sculptors and artists. It invites the creative imagination of

contemporary African artists to engage in environmental restoration efforts by repurposing found objects (*objet trouvé*) into thought-provoking artworks that reflect themes of healing, community, and resilience (Asenso, Issah & Som, 2020).

4.4: *Shine-Eye*



Figure 17: *Shine-Eye*, 2014.

Wood, metal, jute sack; dimensions: 1.07m x 87cm x 66cm. (Source: Studio Data, 2014)

4.4.1 Description

Figure (17) is an angularly shaped wooden form measuring 87cm across at the top end and 66cm at the bottom, with a height of 1m and 7cm. It has a prominent ringed projection that is clad with a strip of jute sack and embedded with a silver rim. To the extreme left end is another circular form made up of a dark coloured metal object with an inner projection pierced with eight equally spaced perforated holes surrounding a relatively bigger one. A line extends from the top right end, going over the circular projection to the right and almost abruptly turns down, separating the twin circular forms. This line leads to a pyramid-shaped depression atop a similarly shaped projection that turns sharply out of view to the left when one is facing the figure frontally. On top of this depressed pyramid form is a constellation of organised holes that run downwards and flow both ways to the left and right. The right side flow sweeps upwards to the right, almost in sync with the circular projection, and seems to empty into a dark, burnt portion at the extreme right. One cannot miss an extension of tapered wood from the lower left side of the figure.

4.4.2 Associative Interpretations

The figure is a mask designed to express the vital need for vigilance in all aspects of life. It represents a pseudo-gullible young man (a young man who appears gullible but is discerning). Its title, *Shine-Eye*, was derived from the popular aphorism “shine your eyes!” a Nigerian Pidgin English expression meaning to be watchful, vigilant, and wise (Kperogi, 2010). It is a call to be aware of one’s surroundings and the events happening around them. Often used in contexts where caution or shrewdness is needed, it can also imply being receptive and discerning, noticing things that others might miss (Naijalingo, n.d.). This representation aligns closely with African philosophical traditions that emphasise practical wisdom, often conveyed through wise sayings and oral storytelling. Wise sayings, or proverbs, serve as educational tools conveying practical, social, and ethical knowledge (Oruka, 1990; Abrahams, 1970). Such wisdom guides individuals to navigate complex social realities with discernment and care, as illustrated by the Yoruba and Nigerian storytelling traditions where masks symbolically embody multifaceted meanings, including vigilance, duality, and social awareness (Falola & Genova, 2006). The Nigerian cultural landscape values strategic awareness, often encapsulated metaphorically in masks that visually express nuanced human qualities like watchfulness with subtlety and layered meaning (Enwonwu, 1967; Okeke-Agulu, 2015).

In contemporary society, however, many people tend to look up to figures of authority in the socio-political arena, seeking material or spiritual salvation. In doing so, they sometimes forget their capabilities and accept, without question, everything these leaders tell them. This blind faith often leads to being misled or exploited because they fail to “shine their eyes”, to remain alert and critically aware, as reiterated in the *Shine-Eye* sculpture work (Figure 17). The blind faith phenomenon contrasts with broader African traditions that encourage individuals to exercise personal agency and warn against being easily deceived or manipulated (Albert, 2021). The contrasting silver (shiny) and matt black eyes of the mask metaphorically illustrate the concept of strategic awareness, being vigilant without overtly revealing one’s insight. This subtlety is reminiscent of African storytelling traditions, where wisdom is frequently communicated through metaphor, nuance, and indirect expression (Drewal & Mason, 1998; Soyinka, 1976). Ultimately, the mask serves as a critical reminder to remain vigilant, wise, and self-aware in the face of social and political challenges, embodying a deep-rooted African philosophical ethos that cherishes practical wisdom and the cultivation of discernment as essential life skills.

4.5 Solo Exhibition: *Echoes from the Coast*

The assemblage of artworks portrayed in Figure 18 represents a significant culmination of a solo exhibition themed, *Echoes from the Coast*, marked by the exploration of subthemes related to life, restoration, and the interconnection between art and the natural environment. Against the tranquil backdrop of night, the sculptures, including *Resurrection*, *Awula Bibio*, *Korle-Bu*, and *Shine-Eye*, manifest as ethereal presences that transcend their physical form, infusing vitality into an otherwise dormant setting. Each piece, distinguished

by its distinct forms and textures, embodies the notion of transition, encompassing not only the rejuvenation of the physical landscape but also the revitalization of the human spirit. More so, the enveloping darkness of the sky, coupled with the sandy foreground, amplifies this motif, suggesting a moment of introspective reflection, wherein the absence of daylight permits a deeper engagement with the internal realm of the self.



Figure 18: Transfigures merged with the serenity of night, “Echoes from the Coast”.
(Source: Studio Data, 2022).

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study addressed the underrepresentation of African 'junk art' and the paucity of semiotic analysis linking junk artistic works to cultural symbolism, using the creative process themed as *Echoes from the Coast*. The study demonstrated, by transforming decrepit canoes and scavenged metals into evocative masks, how found objects in contemporary African sculpture serve not only as artistic innovation but also as vessels for reclaiming African narrative, memory, and identity. These works challenge conventional boundaries of art, breathing new life into discarded materials and underscoring the enduring human capacity for reinvention and meaning-making. The sculpted works, *Resurrection*, *Awula Bibio*, *Korle-Bu*, and *Shine-Eye*, each embody profound symbolic meanings that mirror cultural values and societal issues. *Resurrection* represents the African concept of reincarnation and the cyclical flow of life, showing how abandoned materials can be reborn into new forms; *Awula Bibio* (Young Woman) embodies the conflict between fleeting beauty and societal expectations, addressing the phenomena of skin bleaching and the effects of imposed beauty standards on individual identity and self-image; *Korle-Bu* conveys the dual nature of harm and healing, highlighting the role of community care and holistic

perspectives on health in African traditions; and *Shine-Eye* acts as a symbol urging vigilance and wisdom in confronting social and political challenges, emphasising the importance of personal agency and awareness in modern society. This study affirms African art's profound dual role: as a vivid mirror that reflects the core values of society, and as a dynamic catalyst that ignites transformative new ways of thinking. Also, it advances scholarship on contemporary African sculpture practice within the context of "junk art", demonstrating how the creative transformation of discarded canoes and waste metals reclaims cultural narratives, memory, and identity, thereby contesting conventional artistic boundaries. Practically, the study offers a replicable pedagogic and curatorial model regarding waste material recovery for sustainable artistic practice that has sociocultural underpinnings. This framework raises the visibility of marginalised artistic forms (such as junk art) and provides a valuable resource for future research, teaching, and community-engaged practice.

To extend these insights, future research initiatives should actively engage local communities, including fishermen, artisans, and youth, in collaborative creative processes. This participation will help safeguard traditional knowledge and instill pride in cultural heritage. Moreover, partnerships between the researcher-artist, cultural institutions, and environmental organisations are vital to promoting sustainability and responsible resource use. Public exhibitions and educational outreach by the researcher-artist can effectively demonstrate the environmental benefits of creative reuse, prioritising thorough documentation through photography, videography, and oral histories to establish archives that support future researchers, artists, and educators. Incorporating found-object sculpture into art education provides both practical and pedagogical value. It invites students to work creatively with local and sustainable materials, fostering resourcefulness and environmental consciousness. At the same time, it opens pathways to engage with cultural symbolism and social narratives inherent in everyday objects, enriching students' appreciation of art as a means of expressing identity, history, and community. Finally, presenting these works on national and international stages, such as the Chale Wote Street Art Festival and Art Basel, where the researcher-artist actively engages as both creator and interpreter, will elevate conversations around African contemporary art, materiality, and sustainability. This approach ensures that the distinctive contributions of African 'junk art' gain recognition within global dialogues on art, identity, and environmental responsibility, grounded in rigorous research and creative practice.

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