

Conceptual Fabric-Calabash Art Installation

*on the Beauty and Struggles of African
Women*

Abigail Amoakowaa Bekoe,⁺ Ebenezer Kofi Howard,⁺⁺ Benjamin Kwablah Asinyo³
& Raphael Kanyire Seidu⁴ (Ghana)

Abstract

Women play an active role in all activities even though they continue to struggle in the society. Artworks have been produced by artists to project the struggles of women in the community. This study highlights the studio-based practice by the practicing artist or the lead author supported by the co-authors to produce conceptual artworks for art installation that carefully adopts her life experiences to depict the beauty and struggles of women in Africa. The study utilizes fabrics (both printed and dyed), nylon cords, stiff fabrics and calabash to artistically represent and express the struggles and beauty concerning the role of women in the African society. The study revealed several philosophical concepts drawn from a butterfly, chameleon, peacock and an eagle to highlight and project the image, struggles and beauty of the African woman through the artist's life experiences. Individual themes of the artworks seek to share her artistic vision, reflect and project their beauty and struggle of women in Africa. These works were created using appropriate techniques such as gluing using adhesive, hand painting and fabric dyeing to combine materials. The success of the creation process serves as guidelines to practicing artist on how to use textiles coupled with calabash to produce works with concepts from nature to project the beauty and struggles of the African woman.

Keywords: Calabash, Fabric, Beauty, Struggles, African Women, Art, Africa

⁺ Abigail Amoakowaa Bekoe, MFA Textile Design Graduate, Dept of Industrial Art, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi-Ghana, Ghana. email: abbikoe2018@gmail.com.

⁺⁺ Ebenezer Kofi Howard, Assoc. Professor, Senior Lecturer, Dept. of Industrial Art, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi-Ghana, Ghana. email: billhowardgh@yahoo.com.

³ Benjamin Kwablah Asinyo, Senior Lecturer, Dept. of Industrial Art, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi-Ghana, Ghana. email: asinyoboss@gmail.com.

⁴ Raphael Kanyire Seidu, PhD Student, Institute of Textiles and Clothing, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong. email: seiduraphael@gmail.com.

Introduction

The African woman prides herself in her beauty and the beauty of womanhood has been expressed in most sculpture and painted artworks. Such includes the Venus of Willendorf of the prehistoric era, and the Akuaba doll of the Akans of Ghana. Both have been perceived as fertility dolls although they possess other significant attributes such as beauty and hard work as seen in the physical characteristics of the objects. This belief of women being perceived as fertility dolls had made women suffer education and development thereby not been given the fairness on platforms for greater appreciation with regards to their contributions to developmental agenda of most countries, especially in Africa.

In many respects, opportunities are not given to women in Africa to take up leadership positions, contribute at traditional meetings in the community, marriage opportunities, headship of families and so on, women do not share the same space with men. In an African setting, women are limited to experience power and authority in leadership due to the cultural and historical perception of the inability of women to be leaders. A situation that makes most women uneducated, poor and deprived of inheritance in Africa. African women have always been in agriculture, trade and other economic pursuits, but the majority of them are in the informal labour force. They are guardians of their children's welfare and have an explicit responsibility to provide for their children materially. They are the household managers, providing food, nutrition, water, health, education and family planning (Harrison, 2003). These place heavy burdens on them. Despite all these, women in Africa are prominent for their hard work, fight for their freedoms and rights to clearly change the primitive mind-set of the society which makes it difficult for them to improve and grow within the community. With such challenges, women largely work harder than men approximately 16 hours a day but earn small (Harrison, 2003). Furthermore, these workloads undertaken by women contribute to them ageing prematurely.

The struggles of women most especially in Africa has remained a great concern. Sadek (2014) stated that the African woman has experienced varying wrongs (beatings and polygamy) within the society. This as opined by Sadek has influenced relevant novel writings by Ngugi Wa Thiongo whose works reflects on the experiences of African women. Aside this, renowned textile artists have used their medium to highlight the beauty and struggles of women in Africa. Valentine (2020) and Morsi (2020) cites a textile artist Billie Zangewa from South Africa whose tapestry artworks highlights and centers on the strength, family life, love, lives and experiences of women. Renowned for her two noble works *Soldier of Love* and *In My Solitude*, Zangewa produces these textile works using silk fabrics coupled with hand paintings. She carefully creates scenes that reflects her everyday life which clearly aims at empowering women. Billie Zangewa argues:

“A woman whose life is not perfect and who has her own struggles, but she is saying we can do it, we can look to the light, we can look to the positives and use those things to lift us up” (as cited in Morsi, 2020).

The calabash remains an integral item in the African society that is commonly used for serving and storing food items, and used in making musical instruments (Stephanou, 2020). It is further regarded according to Stephanou as a symbol for

womanhood which is widely used in initiation and fertility rituals for young girls as they grow into women. Rice (2017) and Stephanou (2020) revealed that the calabash is traditionally significant within the Yoruba culture and is attributed to a woman's body or vessel that conceals her gender identity. With such cultural relevance, the calabash is also used in decorating textile surface. Widely produced by the Asante of Ghana, *Adinkra* cloth is made from hand-printing *Adinkra* symbols carved on a calabash on a textile surface using paste from natural dyes (Seidu, 2019; Frimpong, Asinyo and Amankwah, 2013).

The beauty of the African woman is seen not only in their outward appearance but inner self or good character. Their beauty is much seen in the daily struggles and ordeals they go through to sustain their families. In recent times, it is observed that most renowned artists are using textiles to add voice to issues that confront society. Such paradigm media to artistic expression on issues of corruption, illegal mining and environmental protection, etc., artists have been instrumental in the crusades to address societal problems. Drawing from the work philosophy of Billie Zangewa who produces work from her life experiences to reflect on the happenings of women within the community, this study carefully adopts the life experiences of the lead author supported by the co-authors to produce conceptual fabric-calabash artworks for art installation that depicts the beauty and struggles of women in Africa.

African Idealism and Philosophy of Beauty

The concept of beauty in Africa is unique. African conceptualization of beauty is commonly pivoted around womanhood or feminism. Supporting this, Haselmann (2014) stated that some men in Senegal associate beauty with women in the community. Matiza (2013) however stated that beauty in African contexts draws on the person's or objects internal qualities. Subsequently, aside from such internal qualities, beauty carry certain relevant moral intonations in African contexts. For example, the language of Shona in Zimbabwe; the word "Kunaka" (beauty) denotes well-groomed character and physical attractiveness. From the Annang people of Nigeria, the word "ntuen-akpo" is used metaphorically to refer to a woman who is physically attractive but lacks good manners. Contrary to this, women with good manners and characters but lacks the physical looks are commonly not desired by men in some societies in Africa. That is the reason why a woman who is considered to have an inner beauty, but lacks external beauty would pad up her body with accessories and oils to appear to have a complete beauty. Such an act is described as a beauty enhancement.

Matiza (2013) believes that there is a concurrency in the definition of beauty in Africa. The harmony of physical attractiveness and good conduct and the perception of beauty among Africans is both internal; external deeds are appreciated by sight. A person's beauty can, therefore, be questionable if it lacks key values of beauty of womanhood. Functionality is regarded as a vital value that characterized beauty in Africa. Matiza (2013) argues that being beautiful alone does not clearly constitute beauty but rather having a social character and purpose that propagates

essential values, morals and norms to other members in the society especially the young ones. In a study amongst Sudanese, beauty is generally linked to physical appearance coupled with good skills, behavior and knowledge that is useful for the study.

Supporting this, Matiza (2013) observed that a person's beauty is deemed irrelevant or not African when it fails to consider the sensitiveness of others in the society. Additionally, the beauty must reflect the values and norms embedded in the African society. The beauty of an individual should relate and connect with the acceptable norms, values and standards that clearly reflect the reality in the community. Furthermore, beauty is communicative, and conceptually, it can be described as both objective and subjective. Objectively, it involves communicating the standards of the community, to a different standard that varies from community to community which is subjective. This is an elaboration of the common adage that "beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder." Thus, what is considered beautiful is meaningful only to the people within a specific scope.

African Concept of Womanhood

In various traditional African society, the African woman possesses the power that binds society together. The survival of the family and the future of marriages depended a great deal on the African woman. The effective role of women in the African family setting to transferring the cultural norms, values, music, language and dance of the tradition to the younger ones or children. They are described as the teachers of the home in the community to instill values into the children. Women carried appropriate responsibility and were vital to the community due to their intense knowledge of the environment and natural habitat. This made them widely dependable by the community to ensure their survival and good health due to their rich knowledge (as healers) on the healing strength of natural herbs. This clearly outlined the central importance of women with traditional communities in Africa which is "sine qua non" to improve the society. Their influence to the societal life in the community was largely felt. Additionally, they (women) contributed to improving teaching and learning of moral, social and ethical values to their children. This practice played a role to the standard of cultural values when examining behaviors in the society. Women were treated with unparalleled respect because they were seen to be closer to the creator than men ever had the potential of being. This is because women themselves could create because they were able to give birth. As the creation of life, they were charged with the sacred responsibility of caring for the needs of the next generation. Because of this, they can be regarded as the origination of the idea that is now known as sustainable development.

It is an incontrovertible fact that societal sustainable development depends essentially on a solid family structure. In every society, the most important aspect of life and survival was the family. Even though women are described as strong and the family's backbone, they are left out in decision making and hold smaller positions within the African family setting. The Urhobo people of Nigeria, regardless

of the family origin of the individual, whether nuclear or extended, single parenting or co-parenting, the female influence on the moral character of the traditional society was very enduring. The reason for this is women's traditional caregiving roles, which put them in a unique and strategic position not only to produce and sustain life but also to help instill socio-religious values and morals in the family is paramount. These teaching activities were geared towards maintaining the life of the family and controlling sexuality. Such activities points to the immerse contribution of women to the traditional society in Africa. With such vital responsibilities, positions and role held by women in Africa, they play supporting roles to the men, and the roles of women were complementary to men.

Materials and Methods

The studio-based research design is adopted using the Double helix of Praxis-Exegesis (Figure 1) Model by Marshall (2010). The model allows to toggle between creative processes both in theory (exegesis) and practice (praxis). Conceptual Development is both theoretical and practical. After gathering data by observation, there is the need for reflection, analysis, description to make sense out of what has been gathered and further creation or development of concepts. The concept will then be translated practically into an art piece through a similar process of observation, reflection, creation and analysis. The response of the viewer towards the work will affect the description both in theory and practice. In short, the processes of development both in theory and practice for this research are co-related and for that matter, the double helix of praxis-exegesis model presents a suitable approach with additional advantage of making changes at any stage in the design process.

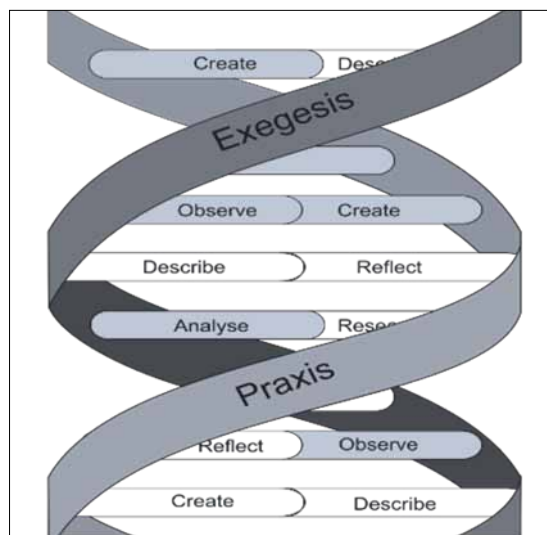


Figure 1. Double Helix Praxis-Exegesis Model (Marshall, 2010).

Observation

The lead author supported by the co-authors adopts her life experiences to produce conceptual fabric-calabash artworks for art installation that depicts the

beauty and struggles of women in Africa. She carefully situates and embodies herself within the artworks to highlight and give significance to the ideas and concepts. With such self-reflexivity, the position of the lead author as an insider aids to share experiences that are similar with African women within the community, a situation which is considered important (Teh and Lek, 2018). For the creative process, four animals (butterfly, chameleon, peacock, eagle) were selected to provide artistic and philosophical underpinnings to the artworks. The butterfly naturally has four development stages to ultimately grow into a beautiful animal. Drawing from these stages, the artist reflects and relates her life experiences after having gone through various struggles and challenges but finally overcoming and achieving success at the end. With the adaptive nature of a chameleon to different changes in the environment, it was selected to reflect the various unfavorable circumstances and changes the artist has to go through to adjust herself to different changes in the environment. The peacock is characterized by its beautiful appearance but inherent in it are strength, firmness and love. The artist reflects on these features where she has inherent strength and love to discharge her duties at work for socio-economic development. With the seven character traits of an eagle (vision, courage, tenacious, high flyers, never eat dead meat, vitality and nurture their younger ones) as stated by Hetri (2020), the artist can relate more with these traits in the care and upbringing of her children. In the community, the woman is responsible for taking care of the children, nurturing them, ensuring they are protected and eat well for healthy development.

Reflection

The basis of concepts in art is to summarize and most often talk about issues in the simplest of forms; pictures, whether abstractive or realistic. This study adapts Ikuenobe (2016) theory of beauty which conceptually describes beauty as both objective and subjective. Objectively, it communicates a communal standard, but it is also subjective in that the standard of beauty is different from community to community. This is an elaboration of the common adage that "beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder." The African society hails inner beauty especially of women because of its high regards for morality, character and nature. The African woman is an institution in the development of the African society because of these virtues. Evidentially, the family is the backbone of the society and the African woman is the backbone of the family, hence the foundation on which the society is developed. With the laying of these facts, conceptualizing them in art forms, adding extra meaning and appreciation to the facts and arguments seeks to exonerate the African woman's beauty through her struggles to cater for herself, family and the community that she lives in.

Creation

The creative process employed fabric dyeing, hand painting and gluing as major techniques to arrange the relevant elements or materials (printed and dyed fabrics, and calabash) on a canvas to produce the 3D fabric-calabash artworks for art installation. Other materials used are adhesives (top bond white glue and super glue), cords, mercerized cotton, acrylic paints.

Artwork One: The Butterfly

At the studio, the structure of the butterfly was drawn carefully on the canvas. This gave a clear outline of the butterfly of which pieces of African prints, nylon cords and calabash was arranged and glued on the canvas to build the artwork (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Creation Process of the butterfly art work on a canvas, Studio Practice, 2020, Photo credit: Authors.

Artwork Two: The Chameleon

The outline of the chameleon was drawn on a paper after which it was transferred unto the canvas followed by an arrangement of the calabashes in various sizes and shapes to conform to the shape drawn on the canvas (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Mounting of materials on the canvas, Studio Practice, 2020, Photo credit: Authors.

A cotton fabric was dyed with vat dyes using a marbling technique. The dyeing process utilized yellow, violet, green and orange colors in a random pattern on the piece of cotton fabric. After oxidation, the dyed fabric was cut into pieces and arranged at the background of the canvas (Figure 4). The next step involved making a loop which served as a branch for the chameleon to stand on. Furthermore, the calabash (body of the chameleon) was painted to depict its adaptability to its environment which is the background.

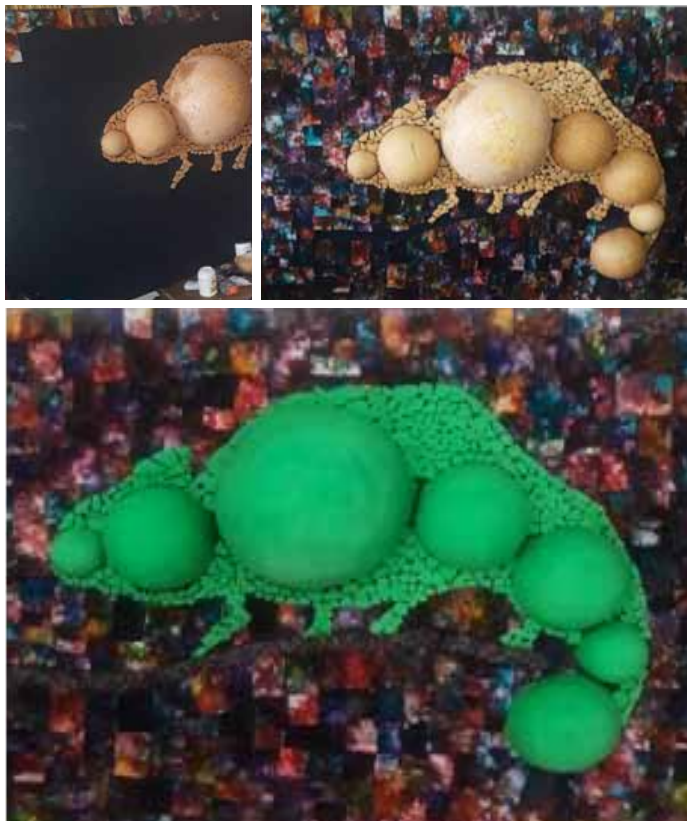


Figure 4. Arranging the pieces of dyed fabric on the canvas, Studio Practice, 2020, Photo credit: Authors.

Artwork Three & Four - The Peacock and the Eagle

As part of every design and production process, this work started with the idea development. That is, the outline of the peacock was drawn on paper and transferred onto the canvas stretched on a wooden frame. The calabashes were arranged on the canvas in various shapes and sizes, to conform to the outline of the peacock and eagle. Fabric pieces were cut into and arranged on the canvas to depict the structure of the peacock and eagle. Subsequently, the fabric was painted to give the peacock an actual feather effect (Figure 5), and clouds with emerging sun on the canvas of the eagle artwork (Figure 6).



Figure 5. Transferring the design onto the surface, Studio Practice, 2020, Photo credit: Authors.



Figure 6. Arranging calabashes and fabric on the canvas, Studio Practice, 2020, Photo credit: Authors.

Analysis

The section presents and discusses the philosophical underpinnings for the four-project works made and reveals its relation to the beauty and struggles of the African women. This is drawn from the informed life experiences of the practicing artist and carefully share her artistic works.

Artwork One- Afafranto Fefeefe Beautiful Butterfly

The beauty concept of the African woman is represented in the various stages of the development of the butterfly. To this effect, these various stages of the development of the butterfly from the artistic concept and philosophical underpinnings, is to project the beauty and struggles of the African woman (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Art Work Afafranto Fefeefe (Beautiful Butterfly), calabash, African prints, nylon cords, fabric pieces, fabric paint, 55× 69 inches. Photo credit: Authors.

Just as the butterfly is observed to typically have four stages of development before becoming the beautifully grown, butterfly is admired by many; so, does the African woman passes through various stages of struggles in her quest to survive,

make ends meet and provide a better life for her children and family. Hence, the philosophy that 'there is beauty in ugliness.' The various stages of struggles that the African woman goes through make her beautiful at the end of the day when she has achieved success regardless of the numerous obstacles and challenges, she had to overcome. Again, as observed by Ebila (2015) that proper woman in the African tradition has always been imagined as an icon for family making and this constitutes part of the stages she has to go through in her struggles and development. The butterfly goes through four main stages of development, namely; the Egg, Larva (Caterpillar), Pupa (Chrysalis) and Adult Butterfly

The egg stage: At the egg stage of the butterfly, it mostly lasts 3-7 days depending on the species. This is the most significant aspect that directly transfers to the struggles of the African woman. The diapause stage refers to a period of postponed development in the butterfly development and this is likely to happen during bad environmental conditions. The growth and development of the African woman may be characterized by hostile or unfavorable conditions which may be conditioned at home while growing up or certain ideologies surrounding the female gender.

Larva (Caterpillar) stage: It is for a fact that a very minute caterpillar hatches from the egg and is intended to be an 'eating-machine' to increase its body mass thousands of times before it begins to pupate. This is significant in the struggles and beauty of the African woman. They go through a lot of struggles, hard work and doing all manner of trades and work just to ensure that there is food on the table for her children and family. The African society finds many women engaging in petty trades just to fend for themselves, their children most especially and their family. The African market is full of women engaged in all sorts of trades to ensure that by evening, they would have earned something to cater for the welfare of their children.

Pupa stage: When the caterpillar is full-grown and stops eating, it becomes a pupa. At this stage, special cells that were present in the larva are now growing rapidly. They will become the legs, wings, eyes and other parts of the adult butterfly. Similarly, the African woman gets to a stage where she would have to marry and get pregnant. At pregnancy, the woman is shelved from following her dreams and would have to stay back. Even though she might be staying back, there is another life developing in her womb. Hence, bringing another life into the world. The pregnancy stage may be characterized by lots of challenges and complications which the woman has to deal with. Regardless, it is a crucial stage for the African woman and it forms part of the developmental stages of the African woman. Women are seen as fertility icons and as such, it is prerequisite for the African woman to marry and give birth regardless of the numerous complications associated with pregnancy.

Adult butterfly stage: Interestingly, this is what most people see and might be oblivious to the previous stages and hardships the butterfly had gone through before arriving at this stage. Similarly, the African woman passes through a series of

stages in her development as part of her struggles and quest to making a living for herself, children and family. This is the stage where regardless of all the struggles they woman went through, still stands tall above the challenges and succeeds in life. This is the stage where beauty is seen. This is the stage where the African woman's struggles pay off. This is the stage where she succeeds in making ends meet, caters for her children, puts food on the table and keeps her marriage and family together. Indeed, there is beauty in ugliness (struggles). These roles the African woman play make her beautiful and not necessarily her outward appearance. This is why Matiza (2013) argues that in Africa, "beauty is not for the sake of being beautiful but rather having a social character adding that the concept of beauty must have a purpose which it fulfils. As opposed to the Western concept of beauty which is rooted in aesthetics as observed by Startwell (2012), the various struggles of the African woman in comparative to the development of the butterfly makes her beautiful and stand tall.

Artwork Two - Chameleon Woman-The Adaptable Beauty

The beauty concept of the African womanhood is represented in the ability of the chameleon to adapt to different environmental changes. Similarly, the African woman can adapt to various changes she might find herself in be it, marriage, childbirth, unfavorable relationships etc. This artwork (Figure 8), therefore, seeks to project the ability of the African woman to still adjust to unfavorable circumstances and come out strong. This makes her beautiful regardless the struggles she goes through.



Figure 8. Chameleon woman - The Adaptable Beauty, calabash, dyed fabric pieces, fabric paint, 36x58 inches. Photo credit: Authors.

The African society and context regarding gender balance tend to discriminate against women as observed by Ebila (2015). The proper woman in the African tradition has always been imagined as an icon for family making. She is expected to accept marriage and have children because marriage is assumed to be the end goal for most African women. The life of the African woman is characterized by various degrees of changes that might be unfavorable for her but is left with no choice than to adapt to the changes and live with it. That is an epitome of inner strength and inner beauty refers to a person with a pure soul, full of kindness

and love for everyone. Someone genuinely concerned about feelings and respect, and at the same time give a helping hand to the ones in need in whichever way possible. This forms a core beauty concept for the African woman because she is compelled to put her dreams and aspirations aside for the sake of her love, kindness and concerns for her children.

The African woman while growing up had so many aspirations and goals to fulfil but because of gender discrimination in Africa, she may be forced to accept marriage at an age when she might not be ready. This becomes a new phase of life which she had not psyched and prepared her mind for it. It becomes a different environment for her which she has to adapt to it. This presupposes that her dreams and aspirations would have to be put aside or in some cases truncated to focus and adapt to her new marriage responsibilities. The traditional division of labour in Senegal saw Senegalese women as responsible for household tasks such as cooking, cleaning and, childcare. These very household tasks become a core of the daily duties of the African woman once she accepts marriage. Along the line, the African woman may get pregnant and pregnancy and childbirth present a new environment to her which she must be able to adapt to it. The rudiments of childbirth and childcare at this stage becomes her focus which means she has to forego her plans and adapt to her new environment. This philosophical underpinning is what the Chameleon project is rooted in. It thus goes to reiterate that the beauty of African womanhood cannot be established without a discussion about her ability to adapt many unfavorable circumstances life and society may throw at her. Yet, she can overcome due to her inner strength and beauty. This peculiar characteristic of the African woman reveals her inner beauty to the outer world.

Artwork Three - Peacock Woman-Masculinity in Femininity

The peacock was selected as the third beauty concept for the artwork (Figure 9). This beauty concept of the African womanhood is represented in the colorful nature and overall beauty of the peacock.



Figure 9. Peacock Woman-Masculinity in Femininity, calabash, African fabric pieces, fabric paint, 51 × 58 inches. Photo credit: Authors.

Mostly, the peacock may be associated with masculinity since it is viewed as a male bird. However, though the discussion herein to the topic relates to the image of femininity, thus, the beauty and struggles of womanhood from an African perspective, the researcher selected the peacock as a beauty concept on the premises that there is masculinity in femininity coupled with the fact that women are associated with beauty and color. The ideology of the researcher is that the African woman loves colors, beautiful things and exhibits masculine traits with strength and boldness in discharging of her duties. African women have shown leadership and played vital roles in so called masculine positions for economic development in society. This confirms Afisi (2010) submission that women have continually fought for their right to work in different sectors within the economy. This has relatively made it difficult for contemporary African women to combine household chores as wives and compete with their men counterparts for promotions and positions for the upkeep of the home. They have also laboured in fishing, herding, farming, and commence like cloth making, pottery, and craftwork, alongside men.

Despite these roles, it is assumed that the beauty and aesthetic arrangement and tidiness of the home are dependent on the African woman. For this reason, one may blame the untidiness and dirty surrounding of a home on the woman. Once a woman marries, the onus lies on her to ensure that her home is kept clean at all times, of which the African women are responsible for household tasks not limited to cleaning and childcare. Further to that, the selection of colorful and beautiful clothes for children is mostly dependent on the woman. The woman is responsible for going to the market or shops to purchase beautiful clothing and decorative artefacts for the house. At this stage, her sense of aesthetics, beauty and her love for colors becomes very imperative here as it influences her choices.

Because the peacock is linked to beauty and many colors, the philosophical reasoning adapted here to the beauty of a woman, is in her ability to ensure high sense of judgments and hard work in executing her marital and professional duties to bring out the totality of the beauty of her family which may be seen in her children's looks, the cleanliness of her home as well as the looks of her husband. In African perception, marriage is of key concern to the woman and this is why the totality of the beauty of her family which may be seen in her children's looks, the cleanliness of her home as well as the looks of her husband rests on the shoulders of the woman. An African woman has to go through all the hassle and tussle to ensure her marriage works and her duties are performed to perfection. This goes to buttress the findings of Ebila (2015) that the proper woman in the African tradition has always been imagined as an icon for family making.

As observed by Cook (2018), peacocks possess long tail feathers, which fold open into an elaborate fan. The researcher draws an analogy herein that, the African woman goes through a series of struggles to protect her children and her family. Hence, the long tail features which fold open into an elaborate fan, according to the ideology of the researcher in the context of the study, represents protection. An African woman would always want to go the extra mile to protect her chil-

dren's education and upkeep. The woman in a typical African setting could be seen at plying several trades to earn a living to support the education of her children. This is most evident in the case of single mothers where they have to struggle day in and day out to put food on the table and further sustain the education of their children. For this reason, the peacock project emphasizes such protective nature of the African woman in the course of which, brings to bear the many possible struggles she may have to go through in her quest to ensure her children receive the best of everything in her small way. The same situation can be said for the 21st century African career woman who always works day and night to also ensure her children and family are happy and satisfied as declared by Ebila (2015) that, the African woman is seen as an icon for family making.

Artwork Four - The Eagle in African Woman

The beauty concept of the African womanhood is represented in the seven-character traits of the eagle in the artwork (Figure 10). According to Hentri (2020), the eagle's seven-character traits are discussed below to the philosophical concepts behind the Eagle project; vision, courage, tenacious, high flyers, never eat dead meat, vitality and nurture their younger ones.



Figure 10. The Eagle in African Woman, calabash, African fabric pieces, fabric paint, stiff fabric, 56 × 81 inches. Photo credit: Authors.

Vision: A critical observation of an eagle sitting high above a tree or a stiff mountain reveals the attentive nature of the bird. Thus, the eagle's body rests still and with the head tilting from side to side in the quest to critically observe its surroundings. In the course of the eagle flying, its eyes still appear keen in the look-out for its prey. Hence, eagles are noted to possess high vision in that, their eyes are purposely created for long-distance focus and clarity. Hentri (2020) establish that eagles can spot another eagle which may be soaring from 50 miles away. The African woman is perceived to be a visionary character coupled with the ability to see ahead into the future and also foresee the dangers ahead with regards to

decisions her children may want to take. The African woman or mother for that matter sees the dangers ahead and become protective of her children and family. As an icon for family making as established by Ebila (2015), a sustainable family is dependent on the ability to foresee risks or dangers ahead and put measures in place to avert or escape them. The African woman is responsible for keeping her home with particular reference to house chores and childcare; the success of her home and children partly depends on her. In the smaller context of a mother-children relationship, the mother could be seen as the leader directing her follower (children) to a successful destination. As such, a leader with a good vision is much preferred here. Africans value internal beauty more than external beauty whereby the internal beauty connotes love, care, compassion, respect, wisdom, faithfulness and truthfulness. It is the love and care of the African mother that drives her to have that high vision to foresee danger ahead and become highly protective of her children and family. Thus, just as the eagle can sight its prey many miles away, the African woman is also able to foresee dangers of life which may be ahead of her children and family and take the necessary steps to protect them. Hence, as part of the character traits of the eagle, the project on the Eagle seeks to project how women have the vision and high sight to spot dangers ahead and become protective of their children and family. This makes the African woman beautiful.

Courage: One of the character traits of an eagle is to never relent to the size and/or strength of its prey. Rather, the eagle would always fight to win its prey or regain its territory. The African woman exhibits a greater degree of courage as she is fearless and determined to protect its territory (children, husband, family, home, work). The African woman is prepared to fight to the end to ensure she gets the best in the interest of her children and family. Many times, African women go through lots of struggles, challenges, difficulties of life, stormy situations and face certain obstacles which pose as threats to the wellbeing of her, her children and family. Nonetheless, the internal beauty character traits as love, care and wisdom, equip the women to become fearless and go all out for what they love and protect it.

Because the African woman is courageous, she never gives up on her children and home. If it means, plying petty trade, she would do it to see to it that her children and family receive the best of education and other life necessities. For instance, a typical African woman is not afraid to venture into certain hard jobs that are associated with the male gender. The African woman may engage in construction work as a casual worker just to ensure her children and household have food on the table. The African woman would go the extra mile of taking many risks to protect and fend for her children. Yaa Asantewaa in Ghana played her role by influencing the Ashanti men to battle the British. She was chosen by several regional Kings to be the war leader of the Asante fighting force in which she succeeded in the end. So, it goes to emphasis the fact the African woman is fearless and would go through the mill just to fend for children and family. These struggles are what the project of the Eagle seeks to project to the world to appreciate the role women play in African society.

Tenacious: In the event of a storm and while other birds fly away with fear, the eagle, on the contrary, spreads its immense wings to soar to higher heights. The tenacity of the eagle therefore takes leverage of the same storm that lesser birds fear. It thus goes to say that the challenges in the life of an African woman are many and these are the very challenges (storms) that the African woman is expected to face in her quest to rising to higher heights in all areas of her life; be it, education, career, marriage, pregnancy, bad relationships, etc. The researcher believes that, just like an eagle, the African woman is only able to rise to higher heights by her ability to withstand the challenges of life without running away from it. Her ability to do this makes her beautiful because her struggles, in the end, pay off. More so, as an icon for family making as observed by Ebila (2015), her tenacity is a much-desired trait to ensure a sustainable family for the fact that the household tasks and childcare also rest on her shoulders. Hence, the work produced by the researcher seeks to highlight all these beauty concepts in the context of African beauty vis a vis. the beauty and struggles of the African woman.

Never Eat Dead Meat: It is also evident that the eagle never eats dead meat. Thus, the eagle does not scavenge but rather eats the meat from the prey it kills itself. Likewise, the African woman would never settle for less. She is determined and highly keen to work hard to make it in life regardless of the struggles and challenges. Similarly, the African mother would not settle for less when it comes to her children and family. The African mother would work toil and pass through many struggles just to see to it that her children receive the best of education and are well catered for. In the end, her joy is in enjoying the fruits of her labour. Thus, when her children in turn grow up to be responsible adults and take good care of her as well in her old age. This makes the African woman beautiful and her struggles ought to be appreciated and that is what the researcher seeks to achieve in this work.

Vitality: For a fact, eagles are full of life and visionary yet, they make time to reflect on their life and re-energize themselves. When eagles attain age 30, their physical body condition deteriorates at a higher rate and this poses some form of difficulty in their survival. Regardless, the eagle never gives up living. Hentri (2020) observes that it rather retreats to a mountaintop and over five months goes through a metamorphosis by knocking off its beak by banging it against a rock, plucks out its talons and then feathers. Hence, every stage produces a re-growth of the removed body parts and this allows the eagle to live for another 30 - 40 years. Similarly, there comes a time in the life of the African woman that she must look back and take stock of her life; thus, the good and the bad experiences she might have been through. This helps her to make a better-informed decision moving forward. Same way, she uses such experiences and lessons to give good advice to her children as well to ensure they also do not make the same mistakes she might have made in the past. Hence, the African mother is full of life and vitality as she uses her experiences to nurture her children. She never gives up living even when the going gets tough for her and her children as well as the family. Also, there is beauty in ugliness in that; all her ugly experiences, in the end, serves as good lessons to direct her children in a better path of life to ensure they have a successful life and this can be said to be the beauty in all her struggles. Thus, her children also have a

referential point to make a better living. This makes the African woman beautiful and thus, what the project work seeks to project to the outer world.

Nurture their younger ones: When the mother eagle notices that the time has come for it to teach the eaglets to fly, she gathers an eaglet onto her back, and spreading her wings, flies high. However, she all of a sudden swoop out from under the eaglet and allows it to fall. In the process of falling, it gradually learns what its wings are meant for until the mother catches it once again. The process is repeated and repeated until the eaglet develops the ability to fly. The African woman is responsible for nurturing and grooming her children to become useful members of the society and subsequently contribute their quota to national development. The role of the African woman in the development of children is worth appreciating and celebrating. For this reason, the project of the Eagle seeks to project that aspect of beauty in the struggles of the African woman.

Installation of the Artworks

Due to covid-19, the researcher could not mount the work at its designated place (Ministry of Gender, Women and Children Protection, Kumasi). Pre-installation of the work was therefore done in the fashion studio of the Department of Industrial Art at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology for observers to appreciate the artworks (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Observers viewing the installation, Photo credit: Authors.

Conclusion

These conceptual fabric-calabash artworks for installation in this study revealed the creative use of calabash and textile fabrics. Using four animals from nature (butterfly, chameleon, peacock and eagle), their characteristic features were carefully linked to the works created based on the informed life experiences of the artist. This research sought to appreciate the role women play in the society for people to respect their contributions to the development of Africa through the artistic expression of their struggles and beauty. The hardworking attribute of African women cannot be overemphasized. African communities see women as unequal with men. In community meetings, traditional settings, marriage negotiations, rights to the positions of leadership, the headship of families and so on, women do not share the same space with men. Leadership occurs within a given indigenous configuration of power, authority and legitimacy. In leadership, women are inconsequential simply because the configuration is shaped by culture, institutions, history, goals and context, all in consonance with particular set up. Despite all these, African women are hardly known for giving up. The beauty of the African woman is seen not only in their outward appearance but significantly through their inner self or good character. Their beauty is much seen in the daily struggles and ordeals they go through to sustain their families. Individual themes of the artworks seek to share her artistic vision, reflect and project their beauty and struggle of women in Africa. These works were created using appropriate techniques such as gluing using adhesive, hand painting and fabric dyeing to combine materials. The success of the creation process serves as guidelines to other practicing artist on how to use textiles coupled with calabash to produce works with concepts from nature to project the beauty and struggles of the African woman.

References

- Afisi, O. T. "Power and Womanhood in Africa: An Introductory Evaluation." *Journal of Pan African Studies* 3 no. 6 (2010): 229-238.
- Cook, M. "Characteristics of a Peacock Bird." (2018). <https://sciencing.com/characteristics-peacock-bird-6155098.html> (accessed April 23, 2020).
- Ebila, F. "A Proper Woman in the African Tradition." Master's Thesis, School of Women and Gender Studies, Makerere University, Kampala, 2015.
- Frimpong, C., Asinyo, B.K. and Amankwah, A. "Contemporary trends in adinkra cloth production: design, printing technique, base fabric and printing paste (dye)." *International Journal of Fiber and Textile Research* 3(1), (2013): 43-48.
- Harrison, R. *Heritage: Critical Approaches*. Routledge, Abingdon and New York, 2013.
- Haselmann, A. "All Women Talk – A Study of Beauty and Female Identity in Senegalese Culture." Dakar: Wheaton College of Peace and Conflict Studies Africa. 2014.
- Hentri, I. D. "5 Positive Leadership Traits People Can Learn from Eagles." *ToughNickel-Money* (2020). <https://toughnickel.com/business/7-Leadership-Characteristics-of-An-Eagle-That-Man-Should-Learn-From> (accessed April 25, 2020).

- Ikuenobe, P. "Good and Beautiful: A Moral – Aesthetic View of Personhood in African Communal Traditions." *Essays in Philosophy* 17(1) (2016): 125 -163.
- Marshall, C. "A Research Design for Studio-Based Research in Art." *Teaching Artist Journal* 8(2) (2010): 77-87.
- Matiza, V. M. "African Social Concept of Beauty: It's Relevancy to Literary Criticism." *Asian Journal of Social Science & Humanities* 2(2), (2013): 61-70.
- Morsi, E. B. "Meet the Textile Artist Weaving the New World." (2020). www.harpersbazaar.com/uk/culture/bazaar-art/a34522880/billie-zangewa-art-interview/ (accessed May 24, 2021).
- Rice, E. C. "Re-thinking the Calabash; Yoruba Women as Containers Deconstructing Gender in Yoruba Society Using the Calabash as a Metaphor for Women as Containers of their own Gendered Identity." *Editorial Assistance*, (2017): 118-149.
- Sadek, S. "The Struggle of African Women in Selected Works by Ngugi Wa Thiongo." *European Scientific Journal* 10(5), (2014): 169-187.
- Seidu, R. K. "The Art Produced by Substitute Surfaces in Hand Block Printing." *Research Journal of Textile and Apparel* 23(2), (2019): 111-123. <https://doi.org/10.1108/RJTA-08-2018-0047>.
- Startwell, C. Beauty. *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab Philosophy Department Stanford University, 2012.
- Teh, Y. Y. and Lek, E. "Culture and Reflexivity: Systemic Journeys With a British Chinese Family." *Journal of Family Therapy* 40, (2018): 520–536. doi:10.1111/1467-6427.12205.
- Valentine, V. L. "South Africa-Based Artist Billie Zangewa is Now Represented by New York Gallery Lehmann Maupin, Her Silk 'Paintings' Center the Lives and Experiences of Women." (2020). www.culturetype.com/2020/05/07/recognition-of-south-african-based-billie-zangewa-continues-to-grow-as-lehmann-maupin-adds-textile-artist-to-its-roster/ (accessed May 24, 2021).