CONFRONTING IMAGES IN MOTION
ABƐBUU ADEKAI AND FUNERARY PRACTICES AMONG THE GA OF GHANA

Roberta Bonetti

Abstract

This paper stems from my research on *abɛbuu adekai*, literally, "receptacles of proverbs," and better known internationally as *fantasy coffins*. These artifacts constitute a widespread leifmotif within contemporary African art but have yet to be examined from an ethnographical perspective. Such coffin-sarcophagi were first built and employed in Accra in the 1960s, following Ghana's independence. Their origin is usually attributed to a carpenter named Kane Kwei (1924-1992). The themes chosen for the coffins' shape – cocoa seeds, Mercedes Benz, onions, boats, and many others — represent aspects of everyday life that relate to notions of prestige and well-being. The coffins are brightly colored, varnished, and topped with sumptuous structures. The variety of motifs has steadily increased, and craftsmen are constantly devising new images.

My presentation aimed at highlighting certain processes of *mise en image* or *mise en figuration*[1] among the Ga of Ghana, focusing particularly on the funerary object-image – the coffin. Rather than dwelling on the question of whether these products can be classified as art, my research stresses inventiveness within the community in order to understand how *adekai* function in the local context, the ideas embedded in them, and how they communicate to a local audience[2].

[1] P. DESCOLA, «Une anthropologie de la figuration», *artpress*, juillet-août, Paris 2007, p. 56.

[2] I discuss about the use of the image of the coffin as well as the deceased as a powerful instrument of 'marketing' in the local context. I also highlighted the performance and the 'cinematographic vision' of the *abɛbuu adeka* in order to fix in the social memory the map of the relations of the deceased.

I speak of an "object-image" because it is through its materiality and appearance that the object is "celui qui fait image"[3]. If, as Georges Didi-Huberman states, there cannot be an image without imagination, this implies a process of coalescence among the terms in the field[4]. For Didi-Huberman, visual representation has an "underside" in which seemingly intelligible forms lose their clarity and defy rational understanding[5]. He thus suggests that we should begin to think of representation as a mobile process that often involves substitution and contradiction. Hans Belting, on the other hand, associates image, medium, and body on the basis of the close interaction between mental and physical images[6]. To consider such artifacts as object-images means making sure not to see the wooden sculpture and its image as two analytically different features.

Abɛbuu in the Ga language means "proverbial expression" and at the same time "illustration." Illustration is a form of communication that can occur without the aid of images, words, or even objects. *Amaga* or "image" in Ga is a visual expression that is more closely related to the material sphere. It is no coincidence that *amaga* also means "sculpture." Furthermore, "illustrating" and "illustration" refer to the act of visual narration more than to the finished product, and thus emphasize the inseparability of the maker, the representation/depiction, and that which is represented/depicted. The 'work',

---

[3] A. BENSA et J.C. SCHMITT, *La permanence des images et les changements de temporalité*, Colloque international Histoire de l'Art et Anthropologie, Paris, Inha, Musée du quai Branly, 21,22,23/06/2007.
[4] G. DIDI-HUBERMAN, *Imaginer, disloquer, reconstruire*, Colloque international Histoire de l'Art et Anthropologie, Paris, Inha, Musée du quai Branly, 21,22,23/06/2007.

[5] For Didi-Huberman, 2005, Confronting Images *Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art,* Penn State University Press.

[6] In his article Hans Belting underlines as some old cultures entertained the practice of *consecrating* their cult images before taking them up in ritual use. At the time, consecration was needed to turn objects into images. Without such a consecration ritual, images were merely objects and were thus regarded as inanimate without the possibility to exert power. H. BELTING, «Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology», *Critical Inquiry*, Chicago, 31, 2 (2005), p. 308.

therefore, presents itself as the result of a contiguous, supported, joint interaction between the *adeka* and its audience (Baxandall: 1972).

The coffin-images present in the funerary ceremonies indirectly refer to the economic structure, the socio-political history, and the forms of material life of the Ga. These images become strategic tools essential to manipulating life, its codes, and rules. They appear to be conditioned more by a popular ideology of death as a means of access to productive resources than by a "traditional" and/or Christian religious model with which they are associated[7].

[7] The distinction between a Christian funeral and traditional funeral is a simplification that in reality does not correspond to the complexity of the various religions forms present in Ghana. Rather, the use of the terms refers to the local way of defining funerary practices even though it is the terminology used and produced by external observers during the colonial period and by local churches. *Faa-fo* – "across the river" – is however, a pivotal point in the funerary ritual of the Ga. It represents the passage of the defunct from the world of the living to the world of the *gbohiiajen* and its reunion with its ancestors. For some it is Yordon *faa-fo*, which means crossing the River Jordan, a variation that is most widespread among Christians.