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**Research Article**

## *The Socio-Cultural Significance of Selected Indigenous Visual Artefacts in the Lambussie Traditional Area, Ghana*

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### ABSTRACT

The indigenous arts and the Ghanaian culture are extremely interwoven, inseparable and culture-specific. The study investigated the Socio-cultural significance of selected indigenous visual artefacts of Lambussie Traditional Area with specific focus on woodcarving, blacksmithing, and pottery. The exploratory research method under the qualitative research approach was employed by the researchers. Data were gathered from November, 2021 to May, 2022 from 57 participants consisting of 18 craft professionals and 39 non-professionals. Purposive and Snowball sampling techniques were used and Data collection instruments adapted were interviews, focus group sessions and observation. Findings revealed that the indigenous artefacts are an integral part of the people's lives, used in ways unique to them. The study further revealed that there is a gradual extinction of some of the artefacts due to western education, religion, and technology which is in turn a major setback to the cultural perpetuation of the people.

### KEYWORDS

Indigenous visual arts, Lambussie Blacksmithing, Woodcarving, Pottery, Socio-Cultural significance of art

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## INTRODUCTION

Culture is often described as the totality of a people's way of life that marks them out distinctively from other human societies in the family of humanity (Idang, 2018, p. 97). Art which has been established as the backbone of every culture (Gyau & Obiri-Yeboah, 2011), forms an integral part of the traditional African societies (Cowhey, 1996). The continent of Africa is dazzling with an array of countless indigenous artistic creations that help to give expression to the religious beliefs, customs and daily life events of the people (Woodward, 2000). The artefacts communicate vital and important aspects of the cultures within which they were created (Clarke, 2006). This evident in the celebration events such as birth, puberty, marriage, death, fecundity, spiritual protection, social and political systems.

Indigenous African arts mostly described by art historians and anthropologists as traditional African arts or tradition-based arts, are the arts that are inherent or native to a particular group of people or ethnic society in Africa. The works are believed to have originated from the forebears or ancestors of that ethnic society (Adom, 2014). They are described as arts made to respond to the older patterns of life and function in traditional African religions, and traditional governance systems, or used as protective or divinatory tools (Curnow 2021, p. 15). The indigenous African artefacts could aptly be described as the visual narratives or vocabulary (Ross 2004) of the various cultures of Africa. As opined by Essel and Acquah (2016), these arts serve as the windows onto the cultural life of the societies that produced them and provide a better understanding of the artistic ideas, expressions, and philosophical concerns of those societies. Examples of these arts can be found in ethnic groups such as the Bambara, Senufo, Dogon, Dan, Asante, Ewe, Benin, Ife, Mende, Yoruba, Nok, Luba, Baga and many others spread across the sub-Saharan Africa (Asihene, 2004).

These arts are of diverse cultural and geographical origins across sub-Saharan Africa. Different phenomena account for creation of these arts among the various cultures. The Bamana of Mali are of the belief that a primordial being – the antelope, taught their ancestors how to till the land. This resulted in the creation of the Chi-wara mask which is usually worn by male and female masqueraders during a ceremony that precedes every farming season. The customary use of figuratively carved wooden pot-lids among the Bawoyo people of lower Congo emanated from the search for means of communicating feelings disagreements particularly between husbands and wives (Willett, 1993). These wooden pot-lids are carved to convey different proverbial meanings about the relationships between husbands and wives. The desire to commemorate the major social, political and religious events of the Benin kingdom had been the basis for the numerous traditional arts of Benin (Ebeige, 2012; Osagie, 2015). Among the Asante, the King is seen as the custodian of all Asante properties and this worldview is typified in the royal pot (kuduo) which forms an important part of the royal regalia (Arthur et al. 2015). The appearance of this pot at ceremonies signals the King's presence.

Though the uses of these indigenous arts may appear similar across cultures, their creation and usage vary from one culture to another. The Lambussie traditional area has the Sissala ethnicity as the indigenes of the land and sixteen other ethnic groups including; Dagarti/Lobi, Wala, Mossi, Wangara, Fulani etc. (paramount chief, personal conversation, 20th January, 2022). Similar to other ethnic groups in Ghana, these ethnic groups in the traditional area equally use native arts to give meaning to the ideas and thoughts of the people (Fosu, 1993) in all facets of their lives. As the role of these native arts appears highly indispensable and have contributed to the unique and long survival of the various cultures in the traditional area, it is worth answering the research question; How are the artefacts of the selected indigenous visual artforms in the Lambussie traditional area socio-culturally significant? The objective of this paper therefore

is to identify and fully discuss the socio-cultural significance of selected indigenous visual artefacts in the Lambussie traditional area of Ghana focusing on woodcarving, blacksmithing and pottery making.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study is premised on the Cultural relativism and Aesthetic Contextualism theories. These theories were applied to explain how the selected indigenous visual arts serve the socio-cultural worldview of the Sissala people investigated. Franz Boas used the term "cultural relativism" in 1887 to express the idea that a person's ideas and actions should be understood in light of their own culture (Trygstad, 1989). The proponents of this theory claim that one culture's values and norms should not be compared to another culture's values and norms. By this theory, the beliefs and practices of the people influence the specific socio-cultural use of the artefacts investigated. This theory aided the researchers to discover that despite the commonality in indigenous African arts, they exist uniquely in the use among the Sissala ethnic group understudied.

Aesthetic Contextualism is the thesis that a work of art is a specific type of artifact, an object or structure created by humans at a certain time and place, by a specific individual or individuals, and this fact has ramifications for how one experiences, understands and evaluates works of art. Artworks, according to contextualism, are fundamentally historically embedded things that lack art status, distinct identity, unambiguous aesthetic characteristics, and certain aesthetic meanings outside or apart from the generating settings in which they emerge and are supplied (Levinson, 2007). The artefacts investigated in the traditional area are found to be consequential to the thought, intentions, circumstances and feeling of the people.

## **Literature Review**

The cultural and geographical diversity of indigenous African arts makes it difficult for a succinctly chronicled history. Amenuke, et al. (1991) asserted the indigenous arts in Africa have a long and complex past dating back to prehistory. They further indicated that in oral history or tradition, myths explain their origins. For example, one of the myths says that God taught a woman pottery and men how to carve and the practice has since then been passed on from generation to generation.

Since time immemorial, indigenous African arts by their nature are generally immensely interwoven with every facet of the socio-cultural life of traditional African societies. They arts relate to the everyday life of the people – they are religious, commemorative, educative, define social classes and heal (Amenuke et al., 1991; Fosu, 1993; Willett, 1993). The indigenous arts of Africa, are largely functional in the traditional African culture (Omatseye and Emeriewen, 2010). Though the creation of these arts might be the prerogative of specific individuals or clan, the arts belong to every member of the society (Curnow, 2021) and relate to everyday life of the people. Woodward (2000), opined that African art might be characterized as “living art.” Gyekye (1996) described the African art as “art for life’s sake.” According to Willette (1993:164), “Art for art’s sake” – an artwork is valued for itself is the ideology of the Western society not in Africa. Irabor (2019), concurred when he said creating an artwork for its beauty’s sake rather than its utilitarian purpose, does not exist in Africa. Though there are purely aesthetic aspects of indigenous African arts (Gyekye, 1996) the main motive for the existence of every indigenous or art of Africa is its functionality.

In traditional African religions, the indigenous African artistic expression appears inseparable. Njoku and Okafor (2019) noted that art is inextricably linked to religion as it is considered the vehicle through which faith is expressed and embodies the religion's core. objects of art ranging from paintings, textiles to figures and pots serve as abodes for spirits and means of evoking powers that are central to human life (Hackett 2016). Irabor (2019) remarked that sculptures of bronze, silver and ivory are a significant aspect of the rituals and ceremonies of the Benin people. Similar in function to the cast brass-heads of the Obas of ancient Benin kingdom, the black stool of the Akan of Ghana serves as the abode for the spirits of their ancestors (Opuni-Frimpong, 2021).

In social or political class spheres, Clarke (2006), described African art objects as symbols that legitimize political authority as these objects form the basis for the distinction between the kings or chiefs and their subordinates. Special objects such as flywhisks, staffs, stools, pipes and cloths are used in royal activities as symbols that legitimizes political authority (ibid). Among the Asante of Ghana, the office of the king's spokesman (Okyeame) is validated by the staff he holds during court sittings of the king (Arthur et al. 2015). In the culture of the Luba people of DR Congo, the ranks and titles of leaders are indicated by the progressively patterned seating nature of the leaders. A leader begins by sitting a woven mat, then to animal skin, followed by sitting on clay thrones and finally to sculpted wooden thrones (Metmuseum.org). Njoku and Okafor (2019), averred that among the indigenous Yoruba of Nigeria, wooden posts and doors were used to decorate the homes of the powerful and wealthy people and to determine an individual's wealth and social prominence.

Several of the indigenous art objects were/are created to commemorate personalities or events. According to Olaleye-Oruene (2002), twins in the Yoruba culture are never said to have died, but to have travelled abroad or "gone to the market". In his words, saying this could help the living twin avoid distress and as such, when a twin passes on to the after world (dies), a surrogate doll or statuette is carved to commemorate the lost twin. This doll which provides company to the living twin and also serves as a playing object, is treated equally as the living twin by the mother. Images of powerful ruler of the Benin kingdom and scenes of war expeditions were cast in brass to serve as visual references of these personalities and events (Ebeige, 2012; Osagie 2015; Irabor, 2019).

According to Pyne, Osei and Adu-Agyem (2013), the Asante traditional therapists of Ghana before and even after the arrival of orthodox medicine, use several indigenous arts to deal with the phenomenon of unwellness according to African traditional beliefs or cultural practices. The 'Akuaba' dolls are used to heal infertility among the Akan women of Ghana (Kushiator, Rahman & Ofori, 2020). Asante, Adjei and Opoku-Asare (2013), noted that the residents of Kpando in the Volta region of Ghana, use the Amatsidaze (medicinal pot) for boiling herbs for traditional healing and also serve other ritual purposes at the shrine.

These arts also serve as a critical component of the indigenous knowledge transmission system. Ebeigbe (2015), described the Benin arts as narrative arts which served as visual documentations of the most important aspects of their cultural origin and for the preservation of their cultural heritage. Adinku (2016) remarked that during the Dipo puberty rites among the Krobos of Ghana where teenage women are taught the ideals of womanhood, several artforms including pottery wares are used. Among the Mende or Sherbro people of Sierra Leone, senior members of the Sande secret society of women usually wear the Bundu mask during initiation performances as they assume the responsibility of educating and superintending over the moral development of young girls (Clarke, 2006). Asante (2009), opined that the creation and usage of pottery among women in Ghana teaches them to be patient and tolerant.

While literature on these native arts abound in almost all agrarian societies in sub-Saharan Africa and for that matter Ghana, not much exist for the indigenous arts of the Sissala people in the Lambussie

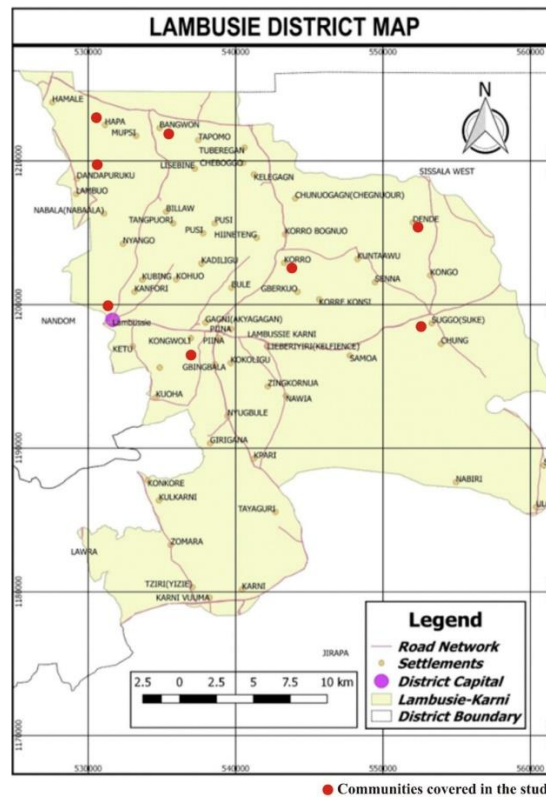
traditional area in Ghana. As people who share similar worldview on the phenomena of life other ethnic groups in Ghana and across Africa, these indigenous arts form an integral part of their daily live. This study therefore explored the socio-cultural significance of selected indigenous visual artefacts of the Sissala people of the Lambussie traditional area.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **1.1 Study Area**

The study was conducted in eight local communities, namely Lambussie, Gbingbaala, Koro, Dindee, Suke, Bangwon, Happaah and Dahille, all in the Lambussie traditional area of the Lambussie District (Map. 1) located in the north western corner of the Upper West Region of Ghana. It lies approximately between Latitudes 10.250 and 11.000 North and Longitudes 20.250 and 20.400 West and covers a total land area of 1,356.6 km<sup>2</sup> (GhanaDistricts.ocm). The traditional area shares boundaries to the north with Burkina Faso, to the south with Jirapa Municipal Assembly, to the east with Sissala West District and to the west with the Nandom District (ghanadistricts.com). The population of the district according to 2021 population and housing census stands at 51,118. The traditional area is predominantly occupied by the Sissala people and has one paramountcy under the stool name Lambussie Kuoro with 14 divisional and 8 sub-divisional chiefs.

The traditional area has the Sissala ethnicity as the indigenes of the land and sixteen other ethnic groups including; Dagarti/Lobi, Wala, Mossi, Wangara, Grusi, Fulani etc. (paramount chief, personal conversation, 20th January, 2022). The people are predominantly subsistence farmers who engage in crop production and livestock rearing. Some crops cultivated include; maize, millet, guinea corn, rice, beans, groundnuts, soyabeans, Bambara beans etc. Animals reared include, cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, and fowls. The women aside farming, also engage in shea butter production and petty trading. Just as most indigenous Ghanaian societies, the Sissala people of the Lambussie traditional area, also make use of a number of traditional arts to give meaning or expression to their social, religious and cultural lives. Most of the artworks are done during the dry season normally between November and May when their farming activities are over.



Map 1. Diagram of the District Map

Source: Adopted from the Lambussie District Assembly’s 2022 – 2025 DMTDP, Planning Unit

## 1.2 Methods

The study uses an exploratory research design and adopts qualitative techniques to collect data for a greater understanding of the socio-cultural use of these artefacts. The use of this research design proved most appropriate because, deducing from [Hunter, McCallum and Howes \(2019\)](#), it allowed the researchers to have a deeper comprehension of the phenomena among people and to uncover the nature of the hitherto little-understood phenomenon. This is also plausible as it allowed for the extensive exploration on the topic as a result of its paucity in the literature. The qualitative approach also allowed for the detailed narratives of the participants’ perceptions and experiences on the selected indigenous visual artefacts in the Lambussie Traditional Area and their socio-cultural.

## 1.3 Population for the Study

The general population for the study consisted of all people of the Sissala cultural background in the Lambussie Traditional Area who make or use artefacts of wood carving, blacksmithing and pottery in their socio-cultural and economic lives. In spite of the dialectic variations among the Sissala speaking people across four districts; Wa East, Lambussie, Sisaala West and East Districts in the Upper West region ([Abdulai et al, 2019](#)), the population understudied is a homogenous one. The accessible population were fifty-seven (57) who were categorized into two. The first category (18) consists of artists or craft professionals in blacksmithing (4), wood carving (9) and pottery (5). The second category (39) includes non-professionals comprising members from other guilds such as the praise singers, soothsayers, xylophone players, undertakers, apprentices of the various art forms, chiefs, elders, and ordinary folks of society. These

people are considered as the primary consumers of the artforms. A very stringent criterion was put in place by the researchers for participation in the study in order not to compromise the quality of data collected. To be selected as a participant (artist) in any of the visual artforms under the study, one would have been an accomplished artist or craftsman, known by many in the vicinity where s/he lived with at least a known artefact in the vicinity to his/her credit. For selection into the second category, the participant must be seen to have incredible knowledge of the phenomenal use of the selected artefacts under investigation and this trait is believed to reside with the chiefs, elders and members of the various guilds.

**Table 1. Demographic data of participants**

Demographic Variables	Frequency	Demographic Variables	Frequency
Sex		Age range	
Male	49	30-39	3
Female	8	40-49	11
		50-59	5
Education		60-69	17
Tertiary	7	70-79	12
Secondary	1	80-89	5
Basic	14	90-99	4
Illiterates	35		
Religion		Occupation	
Islam	8	Retired	5
Christianity	4	Teacher	1
TAR	45	Driver	1
		Trader	8
Artform		Farmer	42
Woodcarving	9		
Blacksmithing	4	Community	
Pottery	5	Lambussie	10
Apprentices	2	Gbingbaala	6
Non-Artists		Suke	9
Chiefs	3	Dindee	6
Elders	5	Koro	10
Praise-singers	3	Bangwon	2
Soothsayers/Diviners	3	Happaah	7
Xylophone Players	3	Dahille	7
Undertakers	1		
Ordinary Folks	19		
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>57</b>

Purposive sampling, also called intentional sampling technique (Terrell, 2016) was used by the researchers to directly reach out to those believed have the requisite information. Data were collected from the artisans, chiefs, elders, praise singers, soothsayers, xylophone players, undertakers, apprentices and

ordinary folks. The snowball technique was also used to reach out to other participants with the requisite information. Snowball was also used in sourcing relevant data where necessary. In snowball sampling, the researcher identifies a small number of individuals who have the characteristics in which he is interested and these individuals are then used as informants to put the researcher in touch with, others who qualify for inclusion (Subbey, 2017). Where additional information was sought on a subject, referrals were accepted by the researchers. At the Lambussie community, the researchers were referred to the blacksmiths at the Gbingbaala community. However, the blacksmithing processes at Gbingbaala did not include the lost-wax casting method. The researchers were therefore further to the Happaah community where the complete data was obtained.

#### **1.4 Data Collection Instrument and Data Analysis**

Interviews, focus group discussion sessions and observation were the main instruments used to collect primary data supported with tools such as note pads and pens, cameras, audio recording devices, laptops etc. this study was conducted from November, 2021 to May, 2022. The interviews were conducted in the Sissala dialect without any difficult because one of the researchers hails from the traditional area been investigated. The semi-structured interview technique was adopted for all interviews. Despite the pre-prepared list of questions, participants were allowed to offer additional answers relevant to the study. The Participant observer stance was adopted by the researchers to observe activities at the workshops, cultural events such as funerals, coronations and the general daily life events of the people understudied. Secondary data was sourced from libraries, textbooks, journal articles, unpublished thesis, e-books, CDs and other online educational resources. The Data gathered from the field interviews, observations and all secondary sources were organized using the Descriptive method and analyzed manually by the themes of the research objective and question of the study. The themes determined the data collected and this ensured the validity of the data collected. This manually thematic analysis also ensured the consistency and accuracy of the data about the various components of the research objective and question. Collation, evaluation and interpretation of the data were made easier based on the themes.

#### **1.5 Data Collection procedures**

First and foremost, the researchers notified the paramount chief of the traditional area – *Kuoro* Issaka Kazie Zenge Tenjie II through an introductory letter from the university. By this, permission was duly sought to carry out the research in the traditional area. Having permission duly sought, the researchers moved according to the schedules with a pre-prepared interview guide. The medium of expression was the native language (Sissala). A Series of observations were also made where necessary at the various workshops of the artists. Alongside the field notes, both the interview and observation sessions were recorded and transcribed into textual information for analysis.

#### **1.6 Ethical considerations**

Ethics in research is what guides the quality of behavior of academic researchers (Hasan et al, 2021) This research was approved by the Department of Educational Innovations in Science and Technology Ethics Committee of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in April, 2021. This study took cognizance of every moral and legal bit of the research process. This allowed for the rights of both the researcher and the participants to be protected throughout the research process as well as protect the image of the institution (KNUST). By this, certain ethnical rules were established to guide the research. Introductory letters were obtained by the researcher from the department and delivered to the paramount



chief of the Lambussie traditional area and the District Chief Executive respectively before the commencement of the study. The researcher sought the consent of participants before interview sessions. The purpose of the study was explained before each interview or observation session. The interview guide was first explained to participants before the start of the interview process due to the high illiteracy rate of among participants (Table 1). Participants were not oblivious of the use of a tape recorder, camera and the taking of field notes during the sessions. Participants were also assured of their safety, the right and freedom to part-take in the study or withdraw as and when they wish. Due consent of participants was sought to use their names and pictures where necessary and all other information treated with confidentiality in order to protect the integrity of the participants. All this was done to reaffirm participants' voluntariness to participate and offer of quality data.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **2.1 Socio-Cultural Significance of Woodcarving Artefacts**

#### **The Diviners' Walking Stick (*vuuka denguko*)**

The Diviners' walking stick is a figurative walking stick which is about 36 inches tall and comes in three separate sections – a handle atop a male figure (middle) and a female figure at the bottom. A small globular piece of wood separates the two figures. The semi-abstract figures on the walking stick are symmetrical and frontal basically composed of simple lines and shapes without details -a true definition of traditional African wood carvings. Both figures have elongated torsos, arms detached from the bodies but with clamped hands attached to the tummies. Whiles the male figure is portrayed to wear a short with open legs, the female figure is portrayed to wear a mini-skirt with the legs merged into a stroke of wood. The merging of the legs of the female figure is possibly the sculptor's concept of how the African woman should be conscious in opening her legs in public.

The illustration of both sex on the walking stick by the sculptor implies that divination could be done by both sex and the services of diviners or soothsayers are available to both men and women in the society. The placement of the male figure atop the female simply emphasizes the patriarchal nature of African societies where the male dominates over the female in almost every sphere of life. The unfinished nature of the walking stick could be attributed to the not-so flourishing carving activities in the traditional area unlike carvings in the southern part of Ghana coupled with the over concentration of the sculptor on the functional purpose of the artefact.



**Plate 1. Diviners' Walking Stick**  
Unknown Artist, 2000-2010, Wood, H.36in., Koro community  
Source: Photograph by Researcher

### Socio-Cultural Significance

According to the diviners, the primary purpose of the figurative walking stick is to define their status as diviners anywhere they may appear with it. It could also be used anywhere for divination purposes in the absence of the diviners' wand.

### The log (*dol-lo*)

This log is about 12 inches in thickness and about 275.6 inches long. It has no decorative patterns on it and also appears unfinished - probably very intentional by the carver(s) because focus was largely placed on its function than anything else. The log has however acquired its surface smoothness through its handling and reuse. The size and the circumstances under which it is used presupposes that it possibly was not carved by one person.



**Plate 2. Look-alike of The Log of Justice (*dol-lo*)**  
Unknown Artist, 19th - 20th century., Wood, H.275.6in x W.12in, Lambussie community  
Source: Photograph by Researcher

### Socio-Cultural Significance

Before the arrival of colonial rule, communities in L.T.A like most indigenous African societies were mainly under the rulership of *totinas* (land custodians). The establishment of chieftaincy institutions is a later day phenomenon. These indigenous societies in L.T.A had their own value systems of ensuring law and order and the overall peace and well-being of the communities. A deviation from the norms was punishable. One of such punitive measure practiced in L.T.A in the past, was death by logging. Once a person was convicted of a crime such as murder, he/she was tied to the log and raised by well-able men and pushed to the ground repeatedly until the victim dies. This practice according to one of the elders in the Lambussie community, only existed in the precolonial era. In his own words, “*I think the oldest person in the whole traditional area today would not have been born long before colonization caught up with us and hardly will you find someone today whose was a witness to the very last act of this practice.*”

### The *totina*'s (land custodian) stool

The figurative stool whose form and structure can be likened to a wild crocodile, measures averagely 24inches long and 18inches high with a gently-upward curved back rest and forms a significant part of the *totinas* (land custodians) in the traditional area. Similar in structure to that of the indigenous African men stool in the traditional area but smaller in size. Though the stool is composed basically of slabs of wood, it is monoxyl, that is, made from a single block of wood, rather than joined by glue, pegs, or nails, another key feature of traditional African carvings (Curnow 2021). The effect of weather on the stool is made visible by the surface cracks and dents which also connotes the longevity of it. Without any noticeable detailed finishing, it could be said that the sculptor's focus was largely on its intended purpose and therefore ignoring its physical aesthetic appeals.



**Plate 3. A look-alike of the *totina* (land Custodian's) stool**  
Unknown Artist, 20th century., Wood, L. 24in x H. 18in. Lambussie community  
Source: Photograph by Researcher

### Socio-Cultural Significance

The stool is considered as part of the *totina*'s costumes. The *totina* does not sit on anyhow, he only sits on it during communal gatherings to adjudicate on matters brought before him and his elders or general societal issues. He is the only person qualified to sit on it and it is always kept in secrecy. Upon the death of a *totina*, the stool is carried to the household of the successor in secrecy and only brought out for the successor to sit on the day of his enskinment. The carrying and movement of the *totina* stool from the house to the public or from house to house is the sole duty of a particular clan whose members are forbidden from becoming *totinas* themselves. The stool defines leadership status of the *totina* as the custodian of the land.

It is the symbol of legitimate Authority for the office of the *totina*, the society's soul and the unity of the people similar to that of the Akan Black stool in terms of its function but not the structure (Opuni-frimpong 2021).

### **The funeral Stool (*lele dabore*)**

Carved out of a long log by unknown carver(s), the funeral stool measures about 180inches long, 18inches high and about 24inches in width. The long flat rectangular surface of the stool stands on four legs with a protrusion at one end of the surface and another protrusion under the surface. The upper protrusion presupposes that a deceased person was laid flat on the bench with the head placed on it. The fact of its longevity is manifested by the deteriorating effect on the surface which could also be ascribed to its exposure to bad weather conditions.



**Plate 4. The Funeral bench**

**Unknown Artist, 19th - 20th century., Wood, L. 180in x H. 18in x W. 24in, Lambussie community**

**Source: Photograph by Researcher**

### **Socio-Cultural Significance**

During the funeral performance, the corpse or its surrogate is usually staged at a vantage point in the village square as the centre of focus for all the funeral activities. It is usually on this bench that the corpse or its surrogate is placed. At the end of the funeral ceremony, the stool is turned on its side to mark the end of the funeral rites.

### **2.2 Blacksmithing products**

#### **Wristlet (*hormil-la – twisted metal*)**

The wristlet (*hormil-la*) is purely forged out of iron. This circular black-looking metal which is about 3.1inches in diameter and 0.2inches in thickness has a spirally etched line with an opening through which the wristlet is worn. Series of this metal are distinguished with knots that lie directly opposite the opening. The knotting is created by twisting and hammering the metal to achieve the desired folding.



Plate 5. Wristlets (*hormil-lee* – twisted metals)

Naaveh Jukpiebon, 2000 - 2010, Iron, D. 3.1inches, Gbingbaala community

Source: Photograph by Researcher

### Socio-Cultural Significance

Reincarnation is an important part of the Africans' belief system. It is a common thing for the Sissala people in the Lambussie traditional area to label babies as their late grandparents who returned to the world of the living. To them, when a new born baby is believed to have reincarnated, the baby as he or she grows may put-up strange behaviours like prolonged sickness, unusual crying, refusal to feed well among others as signals of his or her return and the need for him or her to be recognized as such. This attitude of the baby then prompts the family head to consult a diviner or soothsayer to find out whether the child is a reincarnated child. If yes, then they consult further to know which grandparent specifically. If the child is a girl, then the parents find the materials the old lady used in her first life for her craft such as potting or basketry and hands them over to the new born girl child after rituals. According to a study participant, a blacksmith in the Gbingbaala community, if the reincarnated child is a boy, the parents will do same but in addition have a blacksmith forge this wristlet (*hormil-la*) for him to wear until he is come of age and then may choose to remove it. The presence and number of knots on the ring indicate the generational status of the reincarnated child. Each knot represents a generation. If the reincarnated male child returns as his grandfather (his father's father), the wristlet is forged without a knot. If the child is believed to be to be his great grandfather, the wristlet is forged with two knots indicating that it is the grandfather two generations ago that has returned. If the knots are three, a grandfather three generations ago has returned. The four-knotted wristlet follows suit. The researcher however observed that scarcely will a child reincarnated from the third and fourth generations and hardly beyond these generations.

### The Palm-sized bell (*Tiwa bimbil-la*)

The small-sized bell (*tiwa bimbil-la*) which is about 3.1inches in length and 2inches in width is iron-forged by the blacksmith. The bell comes in two separate parts; the hand and a hallowed-body. The hallowed-body has a wide opened mouth with a dangle in it and a narrow base on which the handle is attached.



**Plate 6. The Palm-sized bells (*tiwa-bimbillee*)**  
Bamie Jimomi, 2022, Iron, L. 3.1in x W. 2in, Gbingbaala community  
Source: Photograph by Researcher

### Socio-Cultural Significance

The existence of the secret society (*tiwa*) is a common phenomenon in most Sissala communities even beyond the traditional area under the study. The secret society is believed to be the spiritual power hub of the communities where it exists. Membership to the secret society is either birth or initiation. Though its membership includes women, it is dominated by men. During the death and funeral rites of a member of the *tiwa* secret society, the public gets the opportunity to witness an intense spiritually-gymnastic performances from the members of the society. The bell plays a very significant role as each member holds and shakes his or her bell in a dance that is highly forbidden to the ordinary people. In a personal conversation, 25th May, 2022 with an informant who is a secret society member by birth, indicated that the spiritual performances they display is for two main reasons; first to celebrate and honour the deceased who was once part of them, and secondly to showcase to the world, the spiritual capacity of the entire community. In ordinary everyday life, when one sees a male child (toddler) with the bell hanged around his neck, it signifies that the child is a born or a reincarnated member of the *tiwa* secret society. The bell is also used by some diviners during their divination activities as a medium of communicating with the spirits.

### The Thunder god metal (*Nansie henna*)

In the Lambussie traditional area, the god (deity) of thunder and lightning is represented by a short wavy metal of about 8inches long forged purely from iron by the blacksmith. The rhythmic form of the metal piece can be likened to that of a snake in motion. The sense of movement created by its wavy nature imposes and redirects the focus of the viewer to follow it from the left to the right. A movement that connotes the unpredictable movement of the thunder strikes. Thus, makes the artefact an appropriate representation of the thunder god.



**Plate 7. The Thunder god metal (*Nansie henna*)**  
Naaveh Jukpiebon, 2020 - 2021, Iron, L. 8in, Gbingbaala community  
Source: Photograph by Researcher

### Socio-Cultural Significance

This metal after been fortified spiritually through sacrifices, is placed in a pot specifically known as the thunder god pot (*nansie vii-teke*), covered and placed on the roof-top of a local mud-room. It is one of the deities that ensures the physical and spiritual welfare of the people. For instance, in times of severe draught, the elders of the community could climb up to it with sacrifices in order to obtain this god’s favour for rainfalls upon their crops and animals. This deity (*nansie*) also serves as an anti-corruption tool in the cultural value system of the people that helps to put the behaviour of the people in check. In the view of the participants, it could be described as an instant god of justice in that when one steals and is cursed by the god (deity for thunder and lightning), the clouds would gather particularly during the rainy season with few showers and the thunder would strike the victim to death with stolen item(s) placed on the body of the deceased. They added that the powers of the god of thunder can however be rendered impotent in the blacksmith’s forge or foundry because it (god of thunder metal) was forged in there and therefore cannot have any power within the premises of the blacksmiths forge. The forge is therefore a place for those cursed by the god thunder to seek refuge until the curse is reversed through sacrifices.

### The Male Praise Singers’ Hoe (*gok-pitillo*)

The square-shaped black metal blade measures 6inches heigh and 4inches wide and similar to that of a stretched animal skin in form and structure. It comes with projections that can best be described as fingers. The praise singers’ hoe is usually accompanied with two or three big finger rings. Two of the finger rings are normally fixed in the left middle finger and the hoe blade is placed on the palm of the same left hand to touch the rings. Another ring is fixed in the right thumb and used to hit on the hoe blade simultaneously with the two other rings in the left middle finger amidst appellations or praises to the death or traditional rulers.



**Plate 8. The Male Praise Singers’ Hoe (*gok-pitillo*)**  
Unknown Artist, 2000 - 2010, Iron, H. 6in x W. 4in, Gbingbaala community  
Source: Photograph by Researcher

### Socio-Cultural Significance

The praise singers rhythmically perform either on their own or alongside the xylophone players primarily for mourning or dancing during funerals. They also perform during other occasions like festivals coronations and durbars. It indicates the membership status of its bearer to the praise singers’ caste.

### **The Anklets (*Nachiima*)**

The paired anklets are composed of circular iron rings of about 2.4 inches in diameter and 0.2 inches in thickness with three dangles attached to each. The black solid rings forged from iron are in a deplorable state particularly with the breaking off of a dangle on one of the rings leaving one to wonder the existence of their usefulness.



**Plate 9. The Anklet (*Nachiima*)**

**Unknown Artist, 19th – 20th Century, Iron, D. 2.4in, Dahille community**

**Source: Photograph by Researcher**

### **Socio-Cultural Significance**

These anklets or dangles are worn on the legs of toddlers or the newly walking babies and as they move around, the anklets begin to tickle, drawing the attention of the mother or nearby persons so as to monitor the baby's movement. According to the elders in Lambussie, even though it is not a taboo for female child to wear it, it is mostly worn for the male child because they are believed to be more adventurous than female child. This allows the child's movement to be monitored in order to avert any possible danger or hurt. When the child finds him or herself in the dark, the tickling of the anklets sends signal to any person approaching that a child is also approaching or wondering in darkness. These anklets or dangles are worn for the babies largely to ensure the safety of the children in the society.

### **2.3 Pottery Wares**

The generic term for pots among the Sissala people of the Lambussie traditional area is *vii* or *vii-teke* (singular) and *vii-nee* or *vii-tek-si* (plural) depending on which community you visit. As indicated earlier, different pots are made to serve a number of purposes; cultural, social, economic, utilitarian etc. The following are some commonly made pots that are used in the everyday lives of the people.

#### **Soup Pot (*pipiye*)**

The soup bowl locally known as *pipiye* or *pipisi* (singular and plural respectively) is about 3.1 inches high and 5.9 inches wide. The pot appears in a singular geometric form – half-spherically shaped or halfmoon-shaped, wide-hipped, thin-walled, has an upper wide opening as the mouth without any elaborate rim, heavy, stable and energetic in form. The nearly perfect symmetrical vessel still shows evidence particularly when closely observed from the rim and the body shape that it was hand-built probably by coiling and pulling technique. Without any visible carination line, the lower body narrows gradually downwards to form a gently curved broad base that gives it stability. The pot is a freshly modelled one,



well burnished, fired, blackened, highly polished and radiating a luminous effect at first sight, similar to the contemporary ceramic vessels of Magdalene Odundo (Berns, 2012).

Without any elaborate decorative patterns, the pot has sparsely incised sets of diagonally parallel or hatch lines found on the upper body which serve both as aesthetic elements and signature of the potter. The curvilinear body shape of the pot can be likened to that of the womb of a woman and that probably insinuates the relationship between the pot and child birth in the traditional area. The half-spherically shaped clay vessel does not only serve utilitarian but also plays several cultural purposes including its use by traditional birth attendants to collect the placenta during child delivery.



**Plate 10. Soup Pot (*pipiye*)**

**Basin Baberiyo, 2022, Clay, H. 5.9in x W. 3.1in, Koro community**

**Source: Photograph by Researcher**

**(i) Utilitarian Significance**

In the utilitarian circles, the pot is usually used in pair with another kind of pot in serving meals. The staple food for the Sissala as well as other ethnic groups in Northern Ghana is Tuo zafi (TZ – a meal prepared from maize or millet). This pot is used to serve soup and the TZ is served in another pot. The use of the pot to serve meals according to the people, is gradually faded with the arrival of the numerous plastic and metallic bowls in the markets.

**(ii) Socio-Cultural Significance**

The soup pot is used significantly as part of the burial procedures of the dead in the traditional area. It is customary amongst the people that when a person dies, shea-butter is molten in this pot for smearing the body of the dead after bathing. At the end of the process, the pot is then broken into pieces and thrown away. In the past when child delivery was mainly the job of the Traditional Birth Attendants and even now still prevalent in some rural areas, this pot was used as custom demanded to bury the placenta of the newly born child. As part of the traditional healing process, herbs are boiled using this pot- a function similar to the medical pot of the kpando residents in the Volta region (Asante, Adjei & Opoku-Asare 2013). In traditional African religion, altars play a very a key role in ancestral veneration. Believing that these altars are the abodes of the ancestral spirits, the pots are fixed to the mud altars for serving water to the ancestors. It is a common sight to behold in the communities in the traditional area.

**Cooking Pot (*viiteke*)**

Measuring 15inches x 15inches in height and width respectively, the pot appears in three visible parts, the rim, upper body and lower body or the base. The convex-shaped rim sits directly atop the upper

body. The point of carination is exactly at the midpoint of the total body of the pot. The lower body narrows gradually downwards to form a gently curved narrow base making it unstable without support. The upper and lower upper bodies are joined together at the carination line. A closer look at the pot reveals that it is not perfectly symmetrical. Evident to this claim can be seen in the formation of the rim. This slightly asymmetric qualities on the pot indicate that the pot was entirely hand-built but not thrown and turned on a potters' wheel. The effect of proper burnishing is very well noticed on the pot despite its complete blackness acquired through low temperature firing. The absence of visibly damaged areas indicates that the pot is still in good condition and serves its purpose. Using the incision technique, the pot is decorated with repeated triangular chevrons of dots on its upper body along the carination line. These design patterns which were intended to add an aesthetic appeal to the vessel could also serve as unique signatures of the various potter per the potting tradition in the area.



Plate 11. Cooking Pot (*viiteke*)

Unknown Artist, 2010 - 2020, Clay, H. 15in x W. 15in, Lambussie community

Source: Photograph by Researcher

(i) **Utilitarian Significance**

The cooking pot comes in a variety of sizes mainly for cooking purposes.

(ii) **Socio-Cultural Significance**

This is used upon the recommendation of the herbalist for boiling herbs in the process of traditional healing. Again, during the final funeral rites of a woman, this pot is normally displayed with a local broom in it customarily to help the deceased in her supposed chores in the after world.

**Storage Pots (*kon-uo*)**

This storage pots of the Sissala people in the Lambussie traditional area come in a variety of sizes. This very pot which is perfectly spherical in shape is about 18inches high, 15inches wide and located in the Lambussie community of the traditional area. The globe-bodied pot has a relatively smaller but elaborate convex rim with the upper and lower bodies joint together at carination line. The carination line is the midpoint of the pot with a round base. The narrowed nature of the pot's rim is in tandem with its purpose - a storge pot, as it limits contamination of the pot's content. Though the pottery production technology in the traditional area has still not seen the introduction of a potter's wheel, the potter in her outmost ability has achieved an almost perfect shape, from the rim through to the bottom of the pot leaving the viewer to

wonder if was thrown and turned on a potter's wheel. An achievement which could be attributed to the choice of the modelling technique, probably molding over a convex form. A technique that is rare in the traditional area contrary to its dominance among the Bambara and Dogon potters of Mali (Mayor 2010).

The visible repair works at the base and the rim coupled with paint marks on the body of the pot indicate that the it is an old pot. This however could not hide the evidence of the proper burnishing and firing of the pot. Its original colour of reddish-brown is still most visible except areas of repairs. The luminous finish effects of the pot almost comparable to the ceramic vessels of Magdalene Odundo can still be felt on it. On the upper body of the pot are curvedly incised sets of three parallel lining closing down on the carination line to form big oval shapes around the middle belt of the pot. In all, the pot was well rendered and ideal for all of its socio-cultural functions.

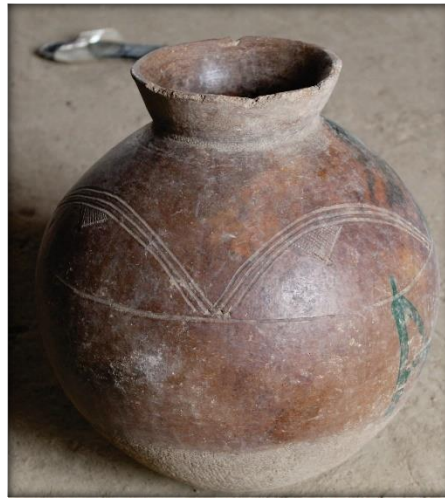


Plate 12. Storage Pot (*kon-uo*)

Unknown Artist, 2000 - 2010, Clay, H. 18in x W. 15in, Lambussie community

Source: Photograph by Researcher

(i) **Utilitarian Significance**

The bigger one, apart from carrying and storing water, is also used for storing grains and serving and selling “pito” – a local beer prepared by the people of Northern Ghana using guinea corn or millet.

(ii) **Socio-Cultural Significance**

A smaller size of it is used at the altar or by the diviner for storing water or some other valuable items used at the altar. During final funeral rites where the corpse is already buried, a mock-up corpse is usually created and a small size of this pot is used to represent the head.

**Smoking Pot (*Chul-la/chu-lee*)**

Measuring 16inches x 14inches in height and width respectively, the spherically-shaped pot has a widely opened convex rim. It is asymmetrical, non-carinated, thin-walled, a perforated body with flat base. Evidence of the use of a hand-built technique for the pot's formation is clearly visible in its morphology. The entire body of the pot also shows a properly burnished, fired and agate effects. Unlike other pottery vessels, the pot comes with no visible linear of figurative design patterns except for its uniquely perforated body. This probably suggests the placement of priority on the function of the pot by the potter rather than any aesthetic intend. The body perforations most likely created with simple but sharp pointed hand tools at the leather-hard of the pot, allow for the gradual drainage of water from the pots content or gradual

application of heat into its content which are primary purposes of the pot. The overly perforation body pot does not leave the viewer to wonder the pot's possibility of simultaneously serving practical utility and other socio-cultural purposes.



**Plate 13. Smoking Pot (*chul-la/chu-lee*)**  
Unknown Artist, 2000 - 2010, Clay, H. 16in x W. 14in, Lambussie community  
Source: Photograph by Researcher

(i) **Utilitarian Significance**

This pot is used for smoking meat and for the processing of dawadawa - a food-seasoning agent produced from the solid substrate fermentation of cotyledons of locust bean (*Parkia biglobosa*).

(ii) **Socio-Cultural Significance**

The use of ritually fortified objects on people's farm produce, personally planted or acclaimed fruit trees like mangoe, shea-nut and other properties is a common practice in indigenous African societies to ward off thieves. In this regard, the Sissala people in the traditional area also believe that when a broken pieces of this pot is hanged on a fruit tree, farm produce or any other property by the owner, it scars off thieves. It is believed that when someone steals a property against which a piece of this type of pot is tied, the body and some say the internal organs of the thief will perforate just as the perforated body of this pot, thereby leading to the person's death. Socially, this pot also defines the widowhood status of the potters. According to the potters, it is only modelled by menopausal widows. It is a taboo for woman who still bears children, with the husband still alive to model the smoking pot (*chul-la*). If she does, she will become barren and also may lose the husband to either death or a misfortune.

**Ritual Pot (*vibun-na or nansievii*)**

The ritual pot which is about 16inches in height (with lid) and 12inches in width was produced in 2022 by an unknown artist (it was bought from the market) and is currently located in the Nambie's family of the Lambussie community and it is used to house the thunder god (a metal). The pot comes in two parts – a bigger pot and a smaller pot atop the bigger one. The pot is round-shaped with protuberance (knobs) in parallel linear progressions on both the lid and the pot, thick-walled and low-fired.

The pot (with lid) appears in dark, dark-brown on the body to reddish-brown of the knobs. The colour effect was achieved as a result of the low temperature firing and the type of clay. Aside its low fired effects and the knobs, the vessel does not have other decorations rendered either in incisions, painting or ornamental features that could allow it to be linked any known ethnic ceramic tradition as in the case of the Bamana pottery in Mali (Mayor, 2010). It is a freshly modelled pot and so does not show any visible defect

on it, yet to be put through the ritual process. Its form and structure can be compared to the ritual pots of the Lobi and Mossi ethnicities in Burkina Faso ([ethnorigincompany.com](http://ethnorigincompany.com)). The pot's appearance looks very informative enough for the viewer to probably guess its function. It carries with it the snare that sends shivers to the viewer at first sight – a feeling that engulfs a person when thunder lightning strikes. The power structure of the pot is therefore suggestive of the potency of the thunder god it is intended to house.



**Plate 14. Ritual Pot (*nansievii*)**  
Unknown Artist, 2022, Clay, H. 16in x W. 12in, Lambussie community  
Source: Photograph by Researcher

### Socio-Culture Significance

It is used to serve as the abode for the god of thunder and lightning represented by the wavy metal (god of thunder) as shown in **plate 7**. Upon the sight of this, every indigene acknowledges the god of thunder pot. It is usually placed on the roof-top of households that are believed to own this god.

### Decline in the Use of Selected Indigenous Visual Arts in the Traditional Area

The indigenous visual arts of the Lambussie traditional area and broadly across sub-Saharan Africa, are rapidly on the decline (Mayor, 2010; Coleman, 2016). Interacting with participants in the traditional area, the researchers noticed a dip in the practice – production and usage of the indigenous artefacts. Some notable factors for the decline were identified as follows; Western Religion and Education, modernity, importation of substitute products and general disinterest among the youth. A Participant in the Lambussie community blamed the decline in the practices largely on Western religion – Islamic and Christian. In the very words of the participant, “*when a person gets converted into another religion other than that of our fore-fathers, they do not want to be a part of all these arts and by the time such a person gives birth to his/her children, they do not know much about all these things*”.

In the opinion of another participant from the same community (Lambussie), rural-urban migration shares in the blame for the dip in the practice of these indigenous artforms. It was observed during the daily events of the people who have left their native communities for the cities in search of greener pastures and have returned, turn to lack in-depth knowledge and interest in some artforms and artefacts compared to

those who have lived all their lives in the communities. The participants were unanimous in identifying who has lived continually in the community and for that matter considered repositories of the knowledge of these indigenous arts.

According to Mr. Jimomi, a senior blacksmith in the Gbingbaala community, *“when we were children growing up, we were all always available to work with our father in the forge... but nowadays, it is difficult to find the youth to work with as apprentice because of school”*. The above assertions by the study participants are very much in tandem with Ayiku (1998) that, indigenous Ghanaian artistic expression is impacted negatively by Western religion, education, technology and rural-urban migration have on the Ghanaian creation and usage of its indigenous arts.

The participants in the Koro community blamed the dip on the importation of substitute products in the market. In her words, Madam Baberinyor, senior potter said, *“the practice is no longer as booming and lucrative as before because now there are so many cheaper plastic and metallic imported containers in the market.... also due to the fatigue in the job and the low-income levels, the youth are not interested, they deter the practice now hence the dip”*. These claims are in line with the claims made in a study conducted by [Nortey and Asiamoaso \(2019\)](#) that the 21st century has brought forth a whole new era for pottery making at the same time there is the influx of very affordable plastic plates, bowls and cups from Asian countries which makes the Ghanaian pottery no longer rewarding due to low demand and for that matter the youth are no longer interested. This phenomenon of decline is reflective in the low numbers of artists as recorded by the researchers (Table 1).

## CONCLUSION

The study has established that indigenous woodcarving, blacksmithing and pottery artefacts are an integral part of the socio-cultural life of the Sissala people of the Lambussie traditional area. The artefacts serve specific purposes such as religious, funeral, festival, authority and power, wealth, status and prestige, protection and healing, agricultural, utilitarian etc. The arts are purely functional - “art for life’s sake”. They give meaning to their daily events and constitute an important part of the people’s historical background. The artefacts serve as the pegs upon which the thought and worldview, values, norms and traditions of the people are hang and transmitted from generation to generation. To them, the aesthetic value of the artefacts used in their daily lives lies in the functional use of the artefacts. The study further revealed that despite the socio-culture significance of the understudied artforms, the practice is on the decline largely due to Western education and religious practices, modernity, rapid importation of substitute products and general disinterest among the youth. Urgent steps therefore need to be put in place to preserve this culture heritage of the people.

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The authors contributed equally to the study.

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There is no potential conflict of interest.



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