Seeing The Sacred: Myth, Materiality, And Narratives Of Indigenous Asante Shrine Murals

Mantey Jectey-Nyarko[1] (https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7675-9275)
Kwame Opoku-Bonsu[2] (https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1929-3360)
Benjamin Quarshie[3] (https://orcid.org/0000- 0002-5277-9496)
Felix Annor Anim[4] (https://orchid.org/0009-0007-9307-7558)

Department of Painting and Sculpture, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, +233, Ghana[1,2,4]
Department of Creative Arts Education, Mampong Technical College of Education Asante Mampong, +233, Ghana[3]

Contact: +233 24 436 7298, Email: ymjectey-nyarko.cass@knust.edu.gh[1]
Contact: +233 24 436 7298, Email: kopoku-bonsu.art@knust.edu.gh[2]
Contact: +233276886384, Email: bquarshie@mtce.edu.gh[3]
Contact: +233 24 462 7168, Email: faanim.art@knust.edu.gh[4]

Abstract

Asante culture, shrine houses historically incorporated abstract and stylised depictions of animals, plants, and symbolic motifs that communicated moral and social values. However, with the redesign of Kumasi into a British colonial "Garden City" and the advent of modern architecture, many of these traditions have faded, losing both visibility and cultural essence. Surviving shrine murals remain under-documented and are increasingly threatened by socio-religious change. This study addresses this gap by examining murals from five shrine houses in and around Kumasi. Guided by phenomenology and narratology, data was sourced through observation, photography, and interviews with twenty-eight custodians, elders, and youth under strict ethical protocols. Manual contextual content analysis through a visual analytic lens, supported by inductive thematic analysis, revealed recurring symbols, proverbial expressions, and spiritual motifs that reflect Asante philosophies and identity. Findings confirm that shrine murals serve as visual archives of collective memory, spirituality, and continuity. The study concludes that these indigenous graphical systems function as non-verbal texts requiring urgent preservation and recommends integrating endangered symbols into contemporary design, alongside digital archiving, community education, and policy frameworks to safeguard this cultural heritage.

Keywords: Graphical Designs, Indigenous Asante Architecture, Murals Symbolism, Myth, Shrine House

1. Introduction

Archaeological, anthropological, and art historical narratives affirm that image- making on walls is an ancient cultural practice dating back to the Upper Paleolithic period, approximately 40,000 to 52,000 BP (Chauvet et al., 1996; Mohén, 2002). Prehistoric murals have been discovered globally in caves such as Lubang Jeriji Saléh in Borneo, Sulawesi, Indonesia; Chauvet, Niaux, and Lascaux in France (Figure 1); and notably Altamira in Spain (Figure 2). These early mural forms influenced classical and modern traditions, including commemorative and ritualistic paintings from Egypt, Rome, Mesopotamia, Greece, Minoan and Etruscan cultures, India, Mexico (Oxitotitlán and Juxtlahuaca), and Pompeii (Tedesco, 2000; Brittenham, 2015; López-Puértolas et al., 2023). Similar prehistoric traces exist across Southern and North Africa, Australia, Europe, the Americas, Southeast Asia, and the Orient, including China, Korea, and Japan (Mohén, 2002; Rito, 2019; Brittenham, 2015; López-Puértolas et al., 2023). In India, Ajanta cave paintings from the second century BCE to the seventh century CE reflect Buddhist themes and meditative practices. Murals also appear on ceilings and walls of temples, tombs, palaces, churches, libraries, and public spaces, serving aesthetic, recreational, documentary, and spiritual purposes (Marful et al., 2023; Yiadom et al., 2022; Walsh, 1992). These works depict cultural life, from hunting and domestic scenes to funerary rituals, employing techniques such as scratching, carving, painting, and modelling (Yiadom et al., 2022; Kordic, 2015). Often located in inaccessible caves, these murals likely had communicative or ceremonial functions tied to social and supernatural rites (Morley, 2009). Common subjects include large wild animals bison, horses, aurochs, deer, mammoths and human traces such as hand stencils and finger flutings (Morley,2009; Tedesco, 2000). Figures 1 and 2 illustrate examples of these prehistoric murals.

Figure 1: Lascaux painting (Source: https://courses.lumenlearning.com/)

Figure 2: Altamira Bison (Source: https://courses.lumenlearning.com/)

Human representations in cave paintings were rare and usually schematic as opposed to detailed and naturalistic images of animals. Naturalistic human imagery principally appeared as hand stencils on walls through pigment blowing on a handheld to the wall as seen in Figure 3 (Pike et al, 2012).

Figure 3: Prehistoric cave paintings, Perito Morento, Argentina, (Source: https://www.reddit.com/r /)

Red and yellow ochre, a natural earth pigment containing hydrated iron oxide, ranging from yellow to deep orange or brown, charcoal, carbon, manganese oxide or China clay were the pigments used in cave paintings. Black and ochre were mainly used to outline animal figures engraved and sometimes painted directly onto the cave wall or rock. The paintings were depicted abstractly mostly by using the human finger, chewed sticks or fur for brushes with various textures from the cave surfaces and signs and symbols (Mohén, 2002).

Recent archaeological findings on the Inca and Maya in the Mesoamerican region on the Mexico Yucatán Peninsula have revealed cave chambers with several murals and ritual artefacts considered sacred and depict the polytheistic, spiritual, and moral ideas of the people's culture. The ancient Maya for instance considers caves and cenotes as entries to the watery underworld, a life-giving water and mythic places of origin, as well as ritual theatres for petitioning fertility gods of maize and rain, ancestors and other spirits (Barnhart, 2015; Stone & Zender, 2011; Moyes, & Brady, 2005). Most of the doorways to the underworld through caves and cenotes were sculpted as mouths of monsters (Miller, 1999) as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Mayan entrance in the caves of Xcaret,Riviera (Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/virt_/3956346303/in/p hotostream/)

Most of the caves and cenotes of the Maya of Yucatán, which either housed the deities or remains of their rulers and priests had pyramid temples erected on them (Sullivan, 2020), while the late post-classic temples had Spanish churches erected on them after being subjugation by the Spanish in the 16th and 17th Century (Pugh, 2005). These temple pyramids were occasionally enlarged to reveal the detailed interior of the reclining pyramid and unique exterior covered with bright-coloured stucco of red, yellow, green, and blue when excavated. Individual shrines of Maya rulers were sometimes amalgamated into a single giant complex to leave a lasting mark of their reign (Barnhart, 2015; Stone & Zender 2011).

The temple pyramids of the Mayans have monumental stairways with exteriors revealing sacred sculpture decorations and mouldings of Maya glyphs, geometric shapes, and iconography from the serpent masks

religion. Mural themes on the temple interior depict battles, rulers, and religious scenes (Barnhart, 2015; Stone & Zender, 2011), which are deeply symbolic, reflecting their culture's spiritual and moral values. The temple pyramids usually had an array of engraved murals at the top similar to that shown in the mural at the Kalasasaya "Gate of the Sun" (Figure 5) in Bolivia, South America which is believed to have had a connection with the lunar orientation (Zou, 2023; Garcia, 2021). The monolith encompasses a central figure of a staff- carrying doorway god and other subsidiary figures. The designs underneath the central figure represent celestial cycles, (Staller & Stross, 2013). The entire monolith represents a transition from a lunar religion to a solar religion based on its positioning from the sun to the West (Quilter, 2014). Figure 6 shows iconographic details of the designs of the murals at the "Gate of the Sun".

Figure 5: **Kalasasaya Sun Gate Tiahuanaco, Bolivia**
(Source: latinamericanstudies.org, http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/sun-gate.htm)

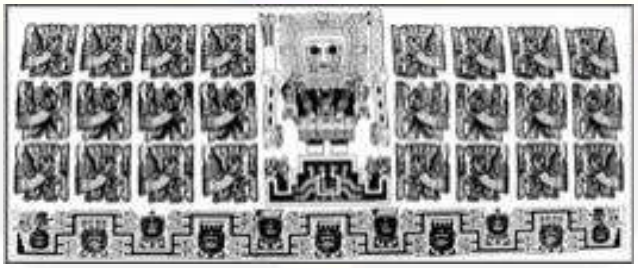

Figure 6: Details of Hieroglyphs on the top elevation of the Kalasasaya Sun Gate Tiahuanaco, Bolivia (Source: http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/sun-gate.htm)

Indigenous murals in Ghana

Murals in Indigenous societies in Ghana, either in low to medium relief or paintings on walls, are usually used for decorative purposes as well as keeping records of activities within the environment (Antwi & Adi-Darko 2014; Antubam, 1963; Asihene,1978; Anquandah, 1982; Bowdich, 1819; Courtney-Clarke, 1990; Davidson, et al 1965; Ankyiah, 2023; Mensah & Djan, 2024). In modern times, murals are usually found on large public buildings or institutions, companies and hotels. Most ethnic groups in Ghana have traditions of murals and wall paintings. Popular ones are those found in the northern part of the country, especially in the Sirigu. These paintings made on flat surfaces or moulded into relief across walls by women depict abstract geometrical and stylised animal figures (Cowhey, 1996) as seen in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Sirigu wall painting, Sirigu Ghana (Source: http://www.africavernaculararchitecture.com, Amedzofevillage.com)

Shrine murals

The Igbo of Nigeria have several of the interiors and exteriors of their indigenous architecture decorated in Uli designs. Uli designs, which are made up of strong curves, swelling and tapering lines, and delicate abstract motifs were usually painted by Igbo women on their bodies and clay walls. They were worn not only to make a vivid artistic statement but also to communicate sociocultural values and meanings (Bearden et al., 1972; Cole 1966). Figure 8 shows a Uli mural design. Cole (1966) describes how the Uli patterns, whether on the body or on clay walls, are all named, often for things of importance in the Igbo world. For instance, "head of kola" refers to the nut offered during hospitality ceremonies, "cassava leaf" and "udara seed" refer to valued foods while "the blood of a "sacrificed chicken" has obvious ritual connotations. In Cole's views, the Uli designs as a shorthand presentation of the Igbo worldview even though the patterns are applied primarily for their striking visual effect rather than to convey overt messages.

Figure 8: Uli Mural designs, Igbo land, Nigeria,West Africa

(Source: https://art635.gallery/culture/body- painting-and-the-art-of-uli)

Some of the Uli designs and images are painted on the walls of shrines in conjunction with community rituals. These are usually regarded as sacred designs (Bearden et al., 1972; Cole 1966). Notable examples include the shrine of the Eke Deity shown in Figure 9 and the entrance gate and walls of a farmer's compound at Nnewi, northern Igbo land, Nigeria in Figure 10.

Figure 9: **Shrine house of the Eke deity, Uke, 1966 (Source: Cole, 1966)**

Figure 10: **Relief designs at the entrance of a farmer's compound, Nnewi northern Igbo land, Nigeria, West Africa. Photo: Edward Duckworth, 1938 (Source:http://photographs.prm.ox.ac.uk/)**

Indigenous Asante Shrines

The Asante of Ghana possesses distinctive architecture serving both spiritual and secular functions. These structures, according to Jectey-Nyarko and Amenuke (2015) and Jectey-Nyarko (2020), evoke emotional responses and foster cognitive freedom and individual agency. Their architecture is often adorned with murals that reflect the cultural identity and historical narratives of the people. Early accounts by Bowditch and missionaries like Ramseyer, document these cultural settings. Asante society is spiritually unified, guided by religious leaders who shape both social and spiritual aspirations (Manganyi & Buitendag, 2013). Reverence is accorded not only to the Asantehene but also to priests, who serve as intermediaries between the living, ancestors, and deities (Cretacci, 2003; Manganyi & Buitendag, 2013). As noted by Ross (2004), Indigenous Ghanaians integrate spiritual practices linked to shrines, deities, and ancestral veneration into daily life. The King and priests or priestesses provide spiritual and social guidance. Traditional Asante priests also perform rituals and sacrifices on behalf of the community (Asante & Mazama, 2010), and reside in shrines typically located in forested outskirts to facilitate sacred communion (Asante et al., 2017).

Shrine structures in Asante culture have evolved from simple makeshift huts into thatch-roofed mud houses adorned with symbolic motifs that embody layers of cultural meaning (Asante et al., 2015). Their murals, characterised by abstract, arabesque, and stylised depictions of animals and plants, serve not merely as decoration but as conveyors of the moral and social ethos of Asante life. Despite their significance, these artistic forms remain under-documented and at risk of erosion amidst ongoing socio- religious change. This paper therefore examines murals from selected shrine houses in and around Kumasi, analysing their iconography, stylistic features, and spiritual functions. The study aims to decode the mythic, material, and narrative dimensions of these murals in order to illuminate their symbolic systems and assess their enduring role in sustaining Asante cultural identity.

2. Method

The study employs qualitative phenomenology and narrative inquiry (Marful et al., 2023; Vagle, 2018) to explore the nature and characteristics of the shrine murals and the cultural experiences of the indigenes in connection with the murals. Indigenous knowledge was primarily sourced from the custodians of the shrines, palaces and elders within six selected indigenous communities (Braun et al., 2013). The study employed

observation, face-to-face interviews, and photographic documentation as research instruments to collect data from participants. Data collection was conducted under strict ethical protocols, aligning with established academic standards while also respecting traditional oaths that permitted access to the shrine houses and courtyards. The paper analyses first-hand data gathered from the research sites in Kumasi and sourced information on the selected murals to unearth issues consistent with the creation, usage and cultural relevance. Although the elderly were the main target for indigenous knowledge on the essence of shrine murals, a few of the youth had a fair idea of the implications for the Asante people. In all, twenty-eight (28) participants constituting 15 priests and shrine caretakers, eight elders, and five youth, selected through purposive sampling based on custodianship and traditional knowledge from the selected communities. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Sacred knowledge shared under confidentiality was anonymized. The study adhered to ethical guidelines for research on Indigenous cultural heritage. Secondary sources on related studies were sourced to supplement primary data gathered in the field. The process of analysing the information for philosophical, aesthetic and cultural essence confirms that individuals who are well advanced in age in many of the selected communities have valid and authentic information about the cultural beliefs and practices of their people (Braun et al., 2013; Aboh et al., 2019; Bonney et al., 2025). In all, five indigenous structures were selected from various places within the Asante Kingdom. Akwasi Sima Shrine at Adako Jachie, Abirem Subunu Shrine in the Kwabre District of Ashanti, Tweamoa Shrine (Kentinkrono), Yaw Tano Shrine at Ejisu Besease, and Atua-Kosua Kwame Shrine Edwinase near Ejisu.

The study adopted a manual contextual content analysis framed within a visual analytic lens, enabling close examination of both symbolic forms and their cultural contexts, as previously explored in shrine art (Quarshie, Ofori & Ameyaw,2024). Thematic analysis was subsequently employed to trace recurring symbols, narratives, and spiritual meanings, with coding conducted inductively to allow categories to emerge from the data rather than being pre-imposed. To strengthen methodological rigour and enhance the trustworthiness of interpretations, inter-coder reliability was supported through systematic peer debriefing and iterative cross-checking of coding decisions.

3. Result and Discussion

Result

Almost all the Asante shrine houses are sparsely or elaborately decorated with murals of motifs that encode the ethics of the people and carry spiritual connotations which are central to their existence. Asante et al (2015) have extensively documented the symbolism of these shrine houses. Details of the murals through findings of the study are presented pictorially and discussed in terms of their aesthetics which is philosophical and spiritual (Osei-Bonsu, 2010). Five selected shrine house murals in the Asante Kingdom are discussed below:

***Subunu* Shrine (Abirem)**

The Abirem Shrine is home to the *Abirem Subunu* deity, currently manned by a female priest. The shrine house is adorned with traditional motifs that suggest its spiritual importance to the Asante people. Figure 11 shows the exterior and courtyard of the Abirem Shrine House, while Figure 12 shows details of the courtyard of the Shrine House.

Figure 11: **Courtyard of the *Abirem Subunu* Shrine (Kwabre Asante)**
(Source: Authors Field Data, 2023)

The upper sections of the walls, beams, lintels and columns are decorated with a variety of low-relief and honeycomb designs. These include the *bese saka,* (a bunch of Kola nuts pods) symbol, the Nyansapo (wisdom knot) and the *Nsaa* (patchworks of fabric) symbols in the honeycomb representation in between the frontal columns of the wall. Other symbols used in the decoration are the *Gyawu Atiko pua* (Gyawu's occipital coiffure) and *denkyem* (the crocodile) and a combined variation of *Sankofa* and *Gye Nyame* symbols modelled boldly in bas-relief. The lower section of the wall has a spiral design rendered in red-ochre clay and polished to a dull shine.

Figure 12: Details of Reliefs, Courtyard of the *Abirem Subunu* Shrine (Kwabre Asante)
(Photo: Authors, 2023)

***Akwasi Sima* Shrine (Adako Jachie)**

Adako Jachie houses the *Akwasi Sima* deity. Like other Asante shrine houses, it has some relief works decorating the walls. Figure 13 shows the exterior and entrance of the shrine house. Details of the symbols on the frontage of the walls are revealed in Figure 14. The upper sections of the walls, beams, columns and lintels have intricate and interlacing geometrical designs depicting kola nut (*bese saka*) leaves. There is also the image of a pair of *Sankofa* birds, an Adinkra symbol with one's head facing forward and the other backwards, symbolising a popular proverb "Birds of the same feather flock together". On the main walls of the courtyard are stylised forms of the *dwanninmmen* (ram's horn) symbols at the base of the columns shown in Figure 14. There are similarly continuous bands of triangular and crescent- shaped patterns on the

façade of the building (Figure 14) serving as an additional decoration to the façade. Generally, the combined designs on the walls remind the people of their spiritual backing through the deity. It also reminds them that to be fully protected spiritually, one has to be very humble in the sight of God and the elders.

Figure 13: Courtyard of ***Akwesi Sima*** Shrine (Adako Jachie)
(Photograph by Studio Group, 2024)

Figure 14: Details of ***Akwesi Sima*** Shrine (Adako Jachie)
(Photograph by Studio Group, 2024)

Atua-Kosua Kwame **Shrine (Edwinase)**

This shrine houses one of the powerful deities in Asante called the *Atua-Kosua Kwame* deity. This shrine is known to have protected (Caretaker of the Shrine, private conversation 2019). Tuesday is a sacred day and a taboo day to visit the shrine. The reasons for enforcing this particular taboo at the Edwinase shrine remain sacred and coded. Figures 15 and 16 show the exterior and main entrance of the Shrine. The House consists of four rectangular buildings with decorative reliefs enclosing a courtyard and external walls. The visual elements in the relief are a unique ornamentation of arabesque-like motifs as screen walls, a variety of curvilinear and floral patterns decorate and visual symbolic representations of traditional proverbs and sayings adorn the high plinths. These include cowries (*Nserewa*) and stylised forms of the *dwanninmmen* (ram's horn) symbo

Figure 15: Details of Courtyard of ***Atua-Kosua Kwame*** Shrine (Edwinase)
(Photograph by Hanna and Kwarayire, 2024)

Figure 16: Courtyard of ***Atua-Kosua Kwame*** Shrine (Edwinase)

(Photograph by Hanna and Kwarayire, 2024)

The walls of the outer walls of the shrine are also elaborate but have more figurative elements in the reliefs. These include a crocodile, a man holding a sword and a gun, and a woman holding a rattle (See Figure 17). There is also a stylised form of *Gyawu Atikɔ pua* (Gyawu's occipital coiffure) and the *Ɔdɔ Nnyera Fie Kwan* (Love does not lose its way home). There is also an extended hand holding a machete and a sickle at the left and right hand respectively flanking a crescent moon. This symbol of the crescent moon is a graphical depiction of the popular Akan saying *ɔsrane nfitti prɛko ntware,* meaning it takes time for the full moon to rise. This symbol represents patience (Nana Kantanka, private conversation 2019). It is a common phenomenon that the moon first emerges in a crescent and gradually becomes a full moon. The symbols are painted in earthen red. Generally, the philosophy espoused by the symbols reveals how the deity uses combat and humility to protect the people of Edwinase.

Coupled with the *dwanninmmen*, the design symbolises that "whoever is humble and patient receives the guidance and protection of the deities. The sickle and the cutlass, according to the caretaker of the shrine, connotes the fighting spirit of the deity in its quest to protect the people of Edwinase. On the right side of the wall, is another relief symbol depicting an inverted *dwanninmmen* extending to form two hands holding a stick on the left and a "gong gong" on the right. Socio-culturally, the pictogram embodies how the priest, humbly consults the deity's guidance and protection for the welfare of the people and reveals his thoughts to the entire society (Caretaker of the shrine. Private conversation 2023).

Figure 17: **Exterior and details of *Atua-Kosua Kwame* Shrine (Edwinase)**
(Photograph by Studio Group, 2024)

***Tweamoa* Shrine**

Tweamoa shrine**,** located in Kentinkrono near Kumasi is one of the *Tano* shrines used to protect Asante warriors. The *Tano* deity is known to be the most powerful war deity in the ancient Asante kingdom. In a private conversation with Nana Kantanka, in 2020, he recounted how the *Tweamoa* deity has the enviable duty of protecting and guiding the Asantehene and his warriors in war. The outer walls of the Shrine House (Figure 18) show a remarkable sculpted image of a crocodile holding a mudfish with its snout. This symbolises dependability and protection. The crocodile with mudfish symbol, which is common in most Asante Shrine houses, generally symbolises how the *Tweamoa* deity must guide and protect every Asante citizen, especially by fortifying the warriors of Asantethe Asantehene from internal and external aggression.

Figure 18: Crocodile with Mudfish in its mouth at *Tweamoa* Shrine, Kentinkrono

(Source: Authors Field Data)

The walls of the main courtyard of the shrine are beautifully decorated with geometric symbols which encode the philosophy of the people. It has an elaborate spiral and other geometric designs as seen in Figure 19. Among the designs include an abstracted *Sankofa* motif at the base of the wall, signifying the ever vigilance of the deity, cross symbols with spirals or crescents representing the half-moon which symbolizes faithfulness and dependency, other spirals and the *bese saka* symbol from the beam area to where the base of the wall starts. The meanings of the *Sankofa, bese saka* and *crescent-moon* symbols are akin to those of the Abirem Shrine (Kwabre), *Akwasi Sima* Shrine (Adako Jachie) and *Tano* Banie Shrine (Asawase) with similar symbols discussed in this paper. The base of the wall which houses the abstracted *Sankofa* symbol is painted in dull earthen red and the beam area to the base of the wall starts is painted white. The relevance of the colours is similar to that discussed in the Abirem Shrine (Kwabre) and all the other Asante shrines from the study gathered data. Generally, the symbols on the wall connote the vigilance and dependency the citizens have on the deity to protect them in times of need.

Figure 19: **Relief designs on walls of the main courtyard of the *Tweamoa* Shrine, Kentinkrono**
(Source: Authors Field Data)

***Yaw Tano* Shrine**

Komfo Yaw Awua built the *Yaw Tano* shrine at Ejisu Besease near Kumasi around in the 19th century (ca.1850), although the deity itself is said to have existed long before the building. *Yaw Tano* shrine is a subsidiary of the *Tano* deity and was usually consulted before any major war. According to Yaw Badu Sampene, curator of the Yaa Asantewaa Museum at Ejisu before the Yaa Asantewaa War in 1900, which is seen as the final Anglo- Asante war between the Asante and the British, Nana Yaa Asantewaa, the Queen of Ejisu, consulted the *Yaw Tano* deity. The shrine, one of the few surviving examples of a significant indigenous architectural style showcasing the opulence of the Asante kingdom has been listed as a World Heritage Site (http://www.ghanamuseums.org/asante). Figure 20 shows the details of the interior walls of the *Yaw Tano* shrine at Ejisu Besease.

Figure 20: Details of design in the Courtyard of Yaw Tano shrine house at Ejisu Besease

(Source: http://www.ghanamuseums.org/asante- tradional-buildings/ http://ejisubesease.org/galleries/yaw-tano-shrine/)

A striking design on the façade of the Shrine house depicts two bird symbols (*nnomaa mmienu*) on the upper section of the wall. The symbol is also moulded on the base of the wall of the shrine courtyard. This motif

represents the idea of peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding within the people in the community. Although the *Yaw Tano* deity is seen as a war deity, the steward of the shrine retreated that it sees war as a last resort in resolving a conflict. According to him, the deity would rather prefer all citizens to live in peace and harmony

The craftsmanship of the *Yaw Tano* shrine mural is remarkably unique. The walls, beams and columns are decorated with designs in low reliefs of intricate interlacing geometrical designs at the lower sections of the walls, the designs rendered in red clay and polished to a dull shine are in sharp contrast to that of the upper walls. There are spiral and arabesque designs. Other symbols on the walls in the courtyard include a band of *Sankofa* symbols in abstract forms on the beam, *bese saka*, stool and crescent moon (*osrani*) symbols on the walls of the shrine and *dwanninemen* (horn of the ram) at its base. The meanings of the symbols which encode the philosophies of the people and the red and white colours are similar to the others on the earlier Asante shrines discussed. It is interesting to note that as a war deity, almost every design on its wall talks about peace and unity. For example, aside from the assurance of a perpetual faithfulness to the people, the crescent moon also connotes how being faithful to each other can avert war. The horn of the ram also talks about how to be humble despite all the power and might one possess. According to Nana Kantanka, Asante by nature are peace-loving people but when attacked or provoked, can be fierce. The designs on the walls of the shrine imply that there is always the need for people to live in peace and harmony and to show mutual respect to all manner of people. War can be avoided if the people of Asante and beyond observe the karmic law of doing unto others what you want them to do to you.

Discussion

The numerous shrine houses seen in the Asante kingdom, are evident of the spiritual nature of the indigenous Asante people. As has been discussed earlier, most of the themes in the motifs used for the reliefs and murals have deep spiritual connotations that point to the spiritual essence embodied by the shrines. The symbolisms are presented in human and animal forms, plants, graphical representations of popular sayings, and the use of colour to narrate the spiritual essence of the shrines to the recipient communities. In most Indigenous rituals across West Africa, Kola nuts are extensively used. The leaves and fruits are used to consult the ancestors for direction and protection (caretaker of Shrine, January 2020). Asante et al (2015) assert that usually, four pieces of kola nuts are used to represent the four cardinal points (east, west, north, and south) of the universe during divination to invoke the deities of the land to reveal hidden secrets from all four directions of the universe.

Another significant animal symbol depicted in almost all the shrines is the *denkyem* (crocodile) among the Akan symbolises adaptability and cleverness (https://www.adinkrasymbols.org/). The symbol of the crocodile is usually presented together with the mudfish. This representation of the symbolism of dependability and protection reflects the protection that the shrines and the deities are believed to give to the people in the community. The portion of the wall with the "*bese saka"*, "*denkyem"* and "*nyansapo*" symbols is painted white, a colour which symbolises spirituality, purity and ancestral presence to invoke blessings on the land and its people (Osei-Bonsu 2010), while the *nyansapo* is a Moslem-influenced motif symbolising the wisdom knot (Osei-Bonsu, 2010; Silversman, 1985).

Red and red-ochre are colours used by the Asante to represent blood, grief and seriousness of spiritual and political encounters (Osei-Bonsu, 2010). The Indigenous Asante believes that there is a tendency for an individual to fall short of their spiritual relationship with the supreme being and the various deities, (Nana Kantanka, private conversation, December 2019). According to the Caretaker of the shrine, the use of the symbols on that portion of the building is to remind the people in the community of the omnipotence and centrality of God in their daily activities. It also reminds those who are spiritually weak to reinvigorate themselves. Most of the Asante traditional buildings are painted with red ochre and white paint. According to Anquandah (2006), the white paint was usually derived from either Kaolin or mollusc shells,

According to Asante et al. (2015), white colour (*Fitaa*), which also refers to all shades of pale colours such as grey and cream connotes innocence, peace, coolness, purity, virtue, victory, virtuosity, happiness, God and other deified spirits such as the ancestors. The ochre grief, anger, heat, blood, danger and crisis. The combination of the ochre and white at the shrines symbolizes how some inevitably negative aspects of everyday activities can be mitigated by the deities through the traditional priest actions of appeasing the deities of the land during sacrifices and purifications (Caretaker of the shrine, October 2019). The *Sankofa* symbol connotes that human beings are perpetually bound to their underlying culture and traditions and no matter how far they may stray, they can still return to the traditions as guiding principles for the success of the land (Caretaker of the Shrine, October 2019)**.** Asante et al. (2015) stress the unique symbolism of the *Sankofa* as not telling the people to revisit their part but rather a symbol of the deity's prowess and capability of envisaging evil deeds from all directions and alerting the community and its people of impending calamities. The symbol connotes the strength of the deity akin to that of the ram's horn and the ram itself, which will fight fiercely against an adversary in its activities, but also submits humbly to the slaughter. Socio-culturally, the symbol connotes that even the strong have to be humble in the sight of the creator and the deities.

4. Conclusion

Religious and belief systems of cultures are usually exhibited artistically to communicate specific ideas steeped in various beliefs (Anquandah, 1982; Bowdich, 1819; Courtney-Clarke, 1990; Davidson, et al 1965;Ankyiah, 2023; Mensah & Djan, 2024). Examples are murals associated with the ancient world such as the Maya, Inca, and Asante, prehistoric art seen in most of the rock arts in Europe, Africa and Australia etc. which had religious connotations among many other connotations. However, murals in some instances were mere ornamentations. Even in such circumstances, the symbols and imagery must be deciphered for intended significance (Barnhart, 2015; Stone & Zender, 2011; Moyes, & Brady, 2005; Yiadom et al., 2022; Walsh, 1992). One remarkable essence of the Indigenous murals around the world is how they help foster an increasing sense of belonging to Indigenous culture and ancestry. They also help strengthen unique identity and attempt to preserve evolving indigenous traditions by subtly keeping records of cultural activities at different times. It is also evident that most of the embellishments on architecture are imbued with a lot of philosophical, socio- cultural and spiritual essence (Barnhart, 2015; Stone & Zender, 2011). In all these, the value of murals in any environment cannot be underestimated, even by ignorance. They similarly serve as bases upon which a people's culture, heritage and economic activities, including cultural tourism, can persist, especially in the conservation and revitalisation of rituals and storytelling (Ankyiah, 2023; Mensah & Djan, 2024).

The indigenous Asante were highly skilled in decorating their architecture be it sacred or secular. Interestingly the decorations were not simply ornamental but had symbolic meanings, meant to be read and understood (Asante, et al., 2015; 2017; Bowditch 1819;Ankyiah, 2023; Mensah & Djan, 2024). These were graphical extensions of Asante proverbial sayings that mirror the moral, social and religious values of the society, where they are known for their prevalent use as non-verbal communication, and as an integral part of the culture in which almost every activity can be expressed using symbols. The findings of this study revealed some notable indigenous Asante shrines still use ancient coded narratives, in the form of expertly crafted murals, to communicate various connotations of the shrines in the religious and social life of the Asante. This practice finds a striking parallel in northern Ghana, where research on the house of Chief Golobdan in Tongo shows how shrine-like installations function as silent but spiritually communicative artistic expressions (Quarshie, Ofori, & Ameyaw, 2024).

The study concludes that Indigenous graphical concepts and symbolic representations has over the ages doubled as a reference document and how the present and future generations can engage and incorporate them meaningfully into modern expressions, including architectural and other creative designs (Antwi & Adi-Darko 2014; Antubam, 1963; Asihene, 1978). This will help promote, sustain and transmit the cultural heritage of a people particularly the Asante and that of other ethnic groups in Ghana to succeeding generations, and to worlds outside them. The study's results also provide a platform for researchers to evaluate the significant impact of Asante murals on the socio-cultural development of their community. However,

there is concern that the influence of these murals on the spiritual life of the people might diminish as Christianity and Islam become more widespread, leading to the decline of the shrines they are associated with. It is suggested that a lot of pictorial, interactive, and written documentation be done on the shrines that have been mentioned as well as all other shrine houses in Asante and by extension the whole of Ghana. Again, just like the case of the *Yaw Tano* Shrine at Ejisu which has been declared a world heritage site, the government of Ghana and other interested bodies can adopt and renovate these shrine houses to serve as heritage sites that will preserve and transmit the spiritual and symbolic mindset of the ancestors as well how they were able to code the verbal in graphic forms to the present and subsequent generations.

As a recommendation, future research on cultural heritage and the preservation of indigenous knowledge could examine the potential of digitally archiving, community- based education, and policy frameworks as tools for safeguarding mural traditions. Beyond scholarly inquiry, practical interventions that integrate local custodians, heritage institutions, and policymakers are necessary to ensure that these indigenous visual narratives are preserved, revitalised, and transmitted to future generations.

5. References

Aboh, I. K., Ndiok, A. E., & Ncama, B. (2019). Evidence of care of the Aged in Ghanaian Communities—A scoping review. *Advances in Aging Research*, *08*(03), 43–6 https://doi.org/10.4236/aar.2019.83004

Ankyiah, F. (2023). Ritual Ecology and Sirigu mural paintings: interrogating the intersection of art and culture. *Journal of Advanced Research in Social Sciences*, *6*(4),1–15. https://doi.org/10.33422/jarss.v6i4.112 1

Anquandah, J. (1982). Rediscovering Ghana's Past, Longman Group Limited Burnt Mill, Harlow, Essex U. K. P. 96.

Antubam, K. (1963). *Ghana's heritage of culture*. Koehler & Amelang. Retrieved from https://books.google.com/books/about/ Ghana_s_Heritage_of_culture.html?id =-Cu_tAEACAAJ

Antwi, E., & Adi-Darko, M. (2014). Painting: Is It Indigenous to Ghanaian Culture? *Journal of Art and Humanities, 9*(3) 44- 49. https://doi.org/10.18533/journal.v3i9.5 52

Asante, E. A., Ababio, S., & Boadu, K. B. (2017). The use of Indigenous cultural practices by the Ashantis for the conservation of forests in Ghana. *SAGE Open*, *7*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/215 8244016687611

Asante, M., K., and Mazama, A., (2010) "Encyclopedia of African Religion," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: *3*(13), https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/v ol13/iss3/20

Asihene, E. (1978). *Understanding the Traditional Art of Ghana*. Associated University Press. London.

Barnhart, E. (2015). *Maya to Aztec: Ancient Mesoamerica Revealed (Course Guidebook)*. The Great Courses. Virginia: The Teaching Company.

Bearden, R., Holty, C., & Beier, U. (1972). Contemporary Art in Africa. *Leonardo, 5*(2), 176. https://doi.org/10.2307/1572562 Bonney, E. N., Campbell, A. A., Fusheini, A., & Adesina, K. A. (2025). Cultural wealth as pedagogy: Elders' knowledge and community engagement in sustaining linguistic and cultural heritage. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 1– 21. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2025 .2502059

Braun, K. L., Browne, C. V., Ka'opua, L. S., Kim, B. J., & Mokuau, N. (2014). Research on Indigenous elders: from positivistic to decolonizing methodologies. *The Gerontologist*, *54*(1),117–126. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnt067.

Brittenham, C. L. (2015). *The Murals of Cacaxtla: The Power of Painting in Ancient Central Mexico*. University of Texas Press. https://www.ubcpress.ca/the-murals-of- cacaxtla

Chauvet, J., Deschamps, E. B., & Hillaire,
C. (1996). Dawn of art, the Chauvet Cave: the oldest known paintings in the world. *Choice Reviews Online*, *33*(10),

Cole, H., M., (1966) *Igbo Art in social context*, art & life in Africa, https://africa.uima.uiowa.edu

Jectey-Nyarko, M., & Amenuke, D. A. (2015). Interactive and perceptual engagement of reconstructed thoughts: A sustenance for our built environment. *African Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies, 8*, 56–60. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publicati on/305329771_INTERACTIVE_AND_PERCEPTUAL_ENGAGEMENT_OF_RECONSTRUCTED_THO UGHTS_A_SUSTENANCE_FOR_OUR_BUI LT_ENVIRONMENT

Jectey-Nyarko, Y. M. (2021, May). *FIHANKRA: The concept of communality and security in indigenous Asante architecture*. In *Kaira LooroArchitecture Competition: Emergency Operations Centre* (Independently published, July 7, 2020). Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publicati on/351879323_FIHANKRA_THE_CONCEPT_OF_COMMUNALITY_AND_SECURITY_IN_INDIGENOUS_ AS ANTE_ARCHITECTURE (ResearchGate

Kordic, A., (2015). *Mural-The history and the meaning* https://www.widewalls.ch/what-is-a- mural-the-history-and-meaning/López-Puértolas, C., Casanova-González, E., Mitrani, A., & Ruvalcaba-Sil, J. L. (2023). New insights on Teotihuacan color technology: a proposal of a technological style for mural painting. *Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences*,*15*(6). https://doi.org/10.1007/s12520-023- 01786-5

Manganyi, J. S., & Buitendag, J. (2013). A critical analysis on African Traditional Religion and the Trinity. *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies, 69*(1). https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v69i1.1934

Marful, A. B., Adzah, E., Nunoo, F. K., Duah, D. Y. A., & Anane-Antwi, E. (2023). Exploring street graphics: Strategies and challenges for city branding in Kumasi, Ghana. *Cogent Arts and Humanities*, *10*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.202.2206235.

Mensah, N. T. K., & Djan, N. I. (2024).Exploring the multifaceted narratives embedded in some murals in Accra: A Cultural Insight, Ghana. *International Journal of Innovative Research and Development*. https://doi.org/10.24940/ijird/2024/v13 /i5/may24014

Mohén, J.-P. (2002). *Prehistoric art: The mythical birth of humanity*. Paris, France: Pierre Terrail. Retrieved from National Library of Australia catalogue: https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/23 29177

Morley, I. (2009). Music and ritual: Parallels and practice, and the Upper Palaeolithic. In C. Renfrew & I. Morley (Eds.), *Becoming Human: Innovation in Prehistoric Material and Spiritual Culture* (pp. 159-175). Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from https://www.cambridge.org/gb/universitypress/subjects/archaeology/prehistory/becomi ng-human-innovation-prehistoric-material-and-spiritual-culture?format=PB&isbn=9780521734 660

Moyes, H., & Brady, J. E. (2005). *The Sweatbath in the Cave: A Modified Passage in Chechem Ha Cave, Belize*. In K. Prufer & J. E. Brady (Eds.), *Stone Houses and Earth Lords: Maya Religion in the Cave Context* (pp. 187– 212). University Press of Colorado. https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/kip_arti cles/7666

Miller, M. E. (1999). *Maya art and architecture*. Thames & Hudson. Retrieved from University of Southern Indiana Library Catalog: https://library.usi.edu/record/292855

Osei-Bonsu, M. (2010). *Stool regalia of the Dwaben state of Asante: relevance to art education*. KNUST.

Pike, A. W. G., Hoffmann, D. L., García- Diez, M., Pettitt, P. B., Alcolea, J., De Balbín, R., González-Sainz, C., De Las Heras, C., Lasheras, J. A., Montes, R., & Zilhão, J. (2012). U-Series Dating of Paleolithic art in 11 caves in Spain. *Science*, *336*(6087), 1409– 1413. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1 219957

Pugh, T. W. (2005). Caves and artificial caves in Late Postclassic Maya ceremonial groups. In K. M. Prufer & J.
E. Brady (Eds.), *Stone Houses and Earth Lords: Maya Religion in the Cave Context* (pp. 47-69). University Press of Colorado. https://doi.org/10.5876/978164642186 2-006

Quarshie, B., Ofori, W. Y., & Ameyaw, H. O. (2024). Narratives of the Artistry in the House of Chief Golobdan of Tongo: An Afrocentric Aesthetics Research. *Current Journal of Applied Science and Technology*, *43*(3), 9–18. https://doi.org/10.9734/cjast/2024/v43i 3435

Moyes, H., & Brady, J. E. (2005). *The Sweatbath in the Cave: A Modified Passage in Chechem Ha* Quilter, Jeffrey (2014). The Ancient Central Andes.*Routledge World Archaeology*. 205

Rito, T., Vieira, D., Silva, M. *et al* (2019). A dispersal of Homo sapiens from southern to eastern Africa immediately preceded the out-of-Africa migration. *Sci Rep 9*,4728. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-019- 41176-3

Ross, M. (2004). Art at the Crossroads: The Contested Position of Indigenous Arts in Ghana's Post-Colonial Education Systems. *Studiesin Art Education*, *45*(2), 117–134. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1321096

Staller, J. E., & Stross, B. (2013). *Lightning in the Andes and Mesoamerica : pre- columbian, colonial, and contemporary perspectives*. Oxford University Press. http://site.ebrary.com/id/10703950

Stone, A., & Zender, M. (2011). *Reading Maya Art: A Hieroglyphic Guide to Ancient Maya Painting and Sculpture*. https://www.amazon.com/Reading- Maya-Art-Hieroglyphic-Sculpture/dp/0500051682

Sullivan, (2020). *Sacred Cenotes: Portals to the Maya Underworld.* https://www.ancient-origins.net/ancient-places- americas/sacred-cenotes-maya-006456

Tedesco, L. A. (2000, October 1). *Lascaux (ca. 15,000 B.C.) - The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. https://www.metmuseum.org/essay s/lascaux-ca-15000-b-c Vagle, M. D. (2018). Crafting phenomenological research.In *Routledge eBooks*. https://doi.org/10.4324/978131 5173474

Walsh, K. (1992). *The Representation of the Past: Museums and heritage in the Post-Modern World*. http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA18425364 Yiadom, F. B., Ankrah, O. A., & Micah, V. K. B. (2022). Symbolic significance of concrete wall murals. *International Journal of Innovative Research and Development*. https://doi.org/10.24940/ijird/2022/v11 /i10/oct22023

Zou, Y. (2023). Pyramids, Mountains, and Sight Lines: The Diachronic Evolution of Teotihuacan's Monumental Structures. *Latin American and Latinx*

6. Biographies

MANTEY JECTEY-NYARKO

Mantey Jectey-Nyarko is currently a lecturer at the Department of Painting and Sculpture, Faculty of Art, in the College of Art and Built Environment, KNUST-Kumasi. He holds a Ph.D. in Art Education, MFA in sculpture and a BA (Hons) in Art, all from KNUST Kumasi. He is a practicing artist with an interest in studio practice, and heritage conservation. His focus is in the interpretation of indigenous Ghanaian cultural concepts into artistic forms. His research interest is in the integration of indigenous and contemporary idioms in artmaking, as a tool for preserving the Indigenous Ghanaian Cultural Heritage.

KWAME OPOKU-BONSU

Kwame Opoku-Bonsu is an artist educationist who teaches at the Department of Painting and Sculpture, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana. He holds a Master of Fine Art from KNUST with research interests in studio practice, emerging methodologies and meaning constructions in the plastic arts as cultural symbols.

BENJAMIN QUARSHIE

Benjamin Quarshie is a lecturer at Mampong Technical College of Education, Ghana and a former doctoral fellow at the University of Jyväskylä (JYU), Finland. He holds a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Art and Culture, MPhil in Art and Culture and B.Ed Art all from University of Education Winneba and a Diploma in Competency-Based Training from Akenten Appiah-Menka University of Skills Training and Entrepreneurial Development. His academic interests span the intersections of visual culture, indigenous art practices, tourism, blended learning and arts-based pedagogies in teacher education. Benjamin Quarshie's research engages with