



# Examining the significance of visual artifacts in Anlo traditional marriage system in the Volta region of Ghana



Review article



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**Godwin Gbadagba<sup>1</sup>, Ebenezer Kwabena Acquah<sup>2</sup> & Henry Empeh-Etseh<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1,3</sup>Department of Vocational/Technical Education, Dambai College of Education, Ghana

<sup>2</sup>School of Creative Arts, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

Correspondence: [godwingbadagba@yahoo.com](mailto:godwingbadagba@yahoo.com)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6170-3066>

### Abstract

This study sought to examine the significance of visual artifacts used in Anlo traditional marriage system in the Volta Region of Ghana. Ethnographic research design embedded in the qualitative paradigm was adopted for the study. The purposive technique was used to sample ten (10) respondents; thus, a chief, an elder, and eight (8) married couples in Anyako. A multi-data collection technique comprising semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation was employed for data collection. The results identified various visual artifacts which were, the marriage stool, the marriage cloths (e.g., Achimotta, Haliwoe, Fiawoyome). Also, the study revealed that the wooden stool, "Atizikpui", is a symbol of the woman's permanency and that she has come to stay forever. The philosophies and concepts behind these visual artifacts become the norms and ethics which bind society. Similarly, the society is taught to make artifacts not just for their aesthetics but also as a way of preserving the culture of the people. The study recommended that traditional leaders must continue to use occasions like durbars, festivals, and other ceremonies to sensitize their subjects on the importance of preserving their culture. This will educate the Anlos about the significance of visual artifacts in their marriage system and also provide good sources of reference materials for the future generation to continue the legacy.

**Keywords:** *Anlo, cultures, symbolism, traditional marriage, visual artifacts*

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## Public Interest Statement

The Anlo Ewe are a sub-group of the Ewe people of approximately 6 million people, inhabiting southern Togo, Southern Benin, Southwest Nigeria, and South-eastern parts of the Volta Region of Ghana; meanwhile, a majority of Ewe are located in the entire southern half of Togo and southwest Benin. This study however, focused on the role of visual artifacts and cultural perspectives in traditional marriages of the Anlo sub-group of Ghana. This study will go a long way to add onto the existing research on African marriage contexts.

## Introduction

In many African societies, artifacts play important roles in the various rites of passage throughout the cycle of life. These rituals mark an individual's transition from one stage of life to another (Clarke, 2006). Visual artifacts are one of the ways of bringing out the philosophies and concepts of a given society into physical form, just as the Ghanaian culture is being given more concentration due to the way it loses some of its indigenous prestige and distinctiveness. In indigenous societies, artifacts were the central pole of the culture and as such any art historical survey which does not give adequate prominence to art form as an entity on its own will be a suspect of its credibility. This is because art acts as a window into human thought and emotion expressing the inner attitude of the artist (Adams, 2002). Just a cursory look at the work of art might reveal not much than an idea expressing an aesthetic appeal. Works of art should be viewed beyond this. It should actually bring out the inner paroxysmal attitude of the artists. The best way to gain absolute satisfaction in African art is by perceiving it for what it stands for. The birth of a child, a youth's coming of age, and marriage ceremonies are all events in which an individual undergoes a change of status. Art objects are therefore created and employed to assist in the rites of passage and to reinforce community values (Clarke, 2006).

Customary marriage is one of the three types of valid marriages recognised by the laws of Ghana (Adinkrah, 1980). Gyasi (2006) opines that marriage is a basic institution that legally binds a man and woman together as husband and wife. However, in traditional societies, marriage is not necessarily between the couples but between their respective families. He further argues that in the African context, emphasis is placed on maintaining lineage and building social alliance between families and groups. It also provides for companionship and psychological support in times of individual's stress and bound people together. Among the Anlo, marriage is a union between two lovers, which naturally turns to be a union between two clans; that is, a union between a man and his wife as well as a union between parents of the man and those of the woman. Marriage joins ethnic groups together when the marriage is between people of different ethnic groups. For example, if an Ewe man marries a Ga woman, the marriage binds the two ethnic groups and anything that happens in the man's ethnic group automatically affects the woman and vice versa. If the man is bereaved, his in-laws from the Ga ethnic group would be involved;

similarly, if something happens to the woman's family, members of the man's ethnic group; especially, his relatives are affected since they have to go and help the woman's ethnic group.

According to Agbosu (1988), the use of various artifacts symbols and features during the celebration of traditional marriages in Ghana has various meanings which may also vary from one ethnic group to the other. Various communities have their unique ways of celebrating their traditional marriage rites. It is however worth noting that in spite of the fact that the celebration of each traditional marriage rite may be distinctive to a particular ethnic group or traditional area, the apparent use and display of visual artifacts has been observed to be a common feature in these celebrations, irrespective of the traditional area where the marriage is celebrated. Marriage among the people of Anlo in Ghana is an essential ceremony. The boundaries of the new African Nations are those of the old British, Belgian, French, German, and Portuguese colonies. They are essentially artificial in the sense that some of them do not correspond with any well-marked ethnic divisions (Dotse, 2011). Because of this, the Ewes have remained fragmented under three different flags, just as they were divided among the three colonial powers after the Berlin Conference of 1844 that partitioned Africa. A portion of the Ewes went to Britain, another to Germany, and a small section went to France. After World War I, the League of Nations gave the Germans-occupied areas to Britain and France as mandated territories. Those who were under the British are now Ghanaian Ewes, and those under the French are located in Togo and Benin (Dahomey).

### Research Questions

In order to achieve the above objectives, the research work sought to address the following questions: Which stages do prospective couples go through to complete their traditional marriage rites in Anlo State? What roles do visual artifacts play at each stage of Anlo traditional marriage ceremony?

### Research Design and Methodology

The study adapted ethnographic design embedded in qualitative paradigm to investigate the significance of visual artifacts used in the traditional marriage system of the Anlo people in the Volta Region of Ghana. Ethnographic studies are described by Creswell (2013) as qualitative procedures employed to describe, analyse and interpret a culture characteristic. Semi structured interviews and Observations were used to gather information that addresses the research questions. The sampling frame for the study included traditional elders and married couples at Anyako; thus, a chief, an elder as well as couples who got married through customary ceremonies. The purposive sampling technique was used to select respondents for the research: two (2) custodians (an elder and a chief of the community), four (4) married couples who married within five years and four (4) married couples who married over twenty years were also interviewed. The interviews for the custodians (a chief and a queen mother) and married couples elicited

information about the various visual artifacts used in Anlo traditional marriage system, how the people of Anlo conduct their traditional marriage rites in the past and the roles of these visual artifacts. The data gathered were subsequently analyzed using the thematic analysis plan. During the process, transcripts were read several times and later were examined to identify and categorize themes and key issues that emerged (Reeves, Kuper, & Hodges, 2008) so as to get a vivid description. All the themes identified were collected separately and compared in order to establish similarities and differences in artifacts and the stages involved in conducting the marriage rites. The observations made through note taking were merged with the analysis of the transcribed interviews corresponding to each respondent.

### **Results/Analysis/Discussion**

#### **RQ 1: Which stages do prospective couples go through to complete their traditional marriage rites in Anlo State?**

During the interviews with some custodians of Anlo culture (a Chief and elders), it was revealed that culturally, potential couples go through the following important interrelated stages to complete their customary marriage rites: knocking, engagement, payment of bride wealth, and consummation. According to these custodians of Anlo culture, various art forms are used in every stage, which informed the researcher to examine the stages from an artistic perspective. But for the purpose of this research, visual art forms or artifacts used in the traditional marriage rites of Anlo State were considered. Besides, the stages were broadly categorised into pre-marriage, marriage and post-marriage ceremonies for the sake of analysis.

#### **Stage One – Pre-Marriage Ceremony**

The first 'formal' stage of marriage among the Anlo is knocking (locally known as 'ɔfofo'); that is, the process of formally seeking the hand of a woman in marriage from her family. This stage is however preceded by the partner selection which is a more discreet exercise. There are different ways of choosing a marriage partner among the Anlo. Categorically, the partner selection is either arraigned by families or is left to the couple involved. One elder (El, 2015) indicated that:

In some communities, parents choose partners for their children. When a father feels that his son is ready for marriage, he finds a suitable wife for him. Also, in the past, most parents betrothed their daughters before they were old enough to marry. Nowadays, parents who choose partners for their children seek the children's consent first. In some cases too, the young people make their own choice and inform their parents (Verbatim comment of El).

It is the customary practice for a man to seek the hands of a woman in marriage. At the knocking stage, a bottle of "akpeteshie" (a local gin) is sent to the father of the girl (would-be-bride). This is done by the paternal aunts of the man (would-be-groom) to inform the girl's parents of their intentions. On arrival at the girl's house, her parents enquire the reason for the visit and after hearing it, send them away for some time while they (the girl's parents) consider the matter. According to El (2015), the male's family is sent away after they have delivered the bottle of local gin because it is believed that marriage is an important decision that cannot be made in a rush. El (2015) explained further:

Before the marriage, most families try to investigate each other's family background. They do this to find out if there is anything that will prevent a successful marriage. They investigate to find out answers to questions such as; are there any communicable or hereditary diseases like tuberculosis (T.B.), leprosy, insanity, or epilepsy in the family? Had there been any criminal record, e.g., murder or stealing? Is the family quarrelsome? Is the woman lazy? Can the man look after a wife? (Verbatim response of El).

It is only after both families are satisfied with their investigations that the marriage can be allowed, provide the girl also agrees to the proposal. The groom's deputation is informed on their second call that their request has been considered and accepted. For this information, two bottles of imported or locally brewed gin are offered by the deputation in appreciation. This payment is known as 'uolenu' or knocking fee. It was realised by the researcher that the items associated with the first stage of marriage rites among the Anlo are alcoholic beverages. As soon as the groom's relatives learn of the acceptance of their request, preparations start for raising the marriage payments 'Srɔnu' or 'tabianu' (bride price). The next activity in the performance of Anlo marriage rites is quite brief and unceremonious. This is called engagement. Engagement also takes place before the actual marriage ceremony; it immediately precedes the actual marriage ceremony. At this stage, a date for the marriage rite is communicated to the family of the bride and this is accompanied by drinks that would be used for the marriage ceremony because the ceremony usually takes place at the bride's family house. Engagement sets the pace for the performance of other marriage rites which are more showy and colourful.

### **Stage Two – Marriage Ceremony**

The marriage ceremony is associated with many characteristic activities, among which is the payment of bride wealth locally called 'Srɔnu'. This is done in a more elaborate ceremony which is witnessed by the family and friends of the bride and groom. Bride wealth among the Anlo includes

several local and assorted items which all have their cultural values. Commenting on the items contained in the bride wealth during the focus group discussion, one respondent had this to say:

In the olden days, list of bride price for the marriage rites are not given by the bride's parents but they ask the groom's family to bring anything they wish would befit the marriage ceremony with the sense that the groom's family has an elder who knows the items that would befit a marriage ceremony. The items would be rejected if found to be incomplete. (Verbatim comments of respondent in FG1, 2015)

The items that make up the bride price and other items used at this stage of the marriage rites are as follows:

1. Cloths (avɔ) — these are cloths of different colours and designs. Some popular cloths used in this stage are 'Achimota', 'Haliwoe' and 'Fiawoyome'.
2. Beads — this includes beads worn around the neck, waist, wrist and ankle. Some of the popular beads used are 'Sui', 'Glotsi', 'Dzinyagba' and 'Akorso'.
3. Other items used are trinkets, jewelry (rings), scarf, pillow, stool and ladies' footwear (black and white).

The groom's paternal aunts carry the items to the bride's parent's home either in a large trunk or wooden box, or in a large pan called 'fovi'. On arrival at the bride's house, these items are inspected and accepted but if found to be insufficient, the whole load may be carried back. During the focus group discussion, a respondent explained that:

Mostly, it is a young girl from the groom's family that carries the items to the bride's family house. The purpose of this is to encourage the young girl and others around to wait patiently for the same to be done to them as an honour for their womanhood (Verbatim comment of a respondent in FG-2, 2015).

The above comment implies that the performance of marriage rites among the Anlo is embedded with symbolic meanings. Generally, the artifacts associated with marriage rites among the Anlo as identified in this study can be categorised as Jewelry, Clothing, and Stool (sculpture). Other important items used are drinks (alcoholic and non-alcoholic) and cash. These items are in various specifications and are all significant in their own rights. The main custodian (chief) indicated in the interview that all these items are very important to the marriage process and cannot be omitted.



### Third Stage — Post-Marriage Ceremony

The final stage of the marriage process is consummation. This is after the merry making and after all the gifts and bride wealth have been presented and accepted. This is after the formal handing over of the bride, which takes place in her father's house. The consummation is usually a short ceremony where both parents give pieces of advice to the couple, followed by the declaration by both of their willingness to marry. The responsibilities of each to the other are then meticulously enumerated and concluded by a short prayer to the ancestors. The importance of this is to transfer sexual rights to the groom after powdering.

During the focus group discussion, a respondent said in the olden days a day is then fixed for the traditional wedding which must be a good day ('asinyuigbe') and the ceremony takes place in the evening when the moons are dark. On the appointed day, the bride is sent for and brought to the groom's father's house which by tradition is the venue of the ceremony. Upon her release, she is accompanied to the groom's place by her own mother's sister and father's sister as well as others. A young girl follows them with a bundle of linen or marriage cloths. In the bedroom, the 'srɔdeba' is laid and covered with a white bed sheet. For the purposes of the ceremony, the groom buys two yards of imported cloth, a yard of silk head kerchief, 'seda-taku' and a stool 'atizikpui'. At the house, the spokesperson who is the bride's father's sister hands the bride over to the grooms father with these words:

The parents of the bride have given her to us to bring to you in response to your request. From now on responsibility for her maintenance lies with you. She must be well fed. You must take good care of her when she is sick. We do not quarrel in our house and we do not want her to quarrel in your house.

The groom's father receives the bride and offers his thanks to all the messengers. After this, those present; notably, the groom's mother's brother give some admonitory speeches about the basic necessities of happy married life such as patience, tolerance and understanding of each other's point of view; above all, hard work and co-operation in economic and household activities. The groom's lineage head then pours libation to address the ancestors. The marriage is concluded by the giving of marriage payment and a series of elaborate ceremonies, each of which is considered necessary for the establishment of a legal union: handing over of the bride to the groom's parents or 'dedeasi', the powdering of the bride or 'togbagba'; the consummation, or 'dɔdɔabadzi' and the seclusion 'dedexɔ' are most important.

The consummation is also a ceremony on its own which is performed by the Mistress of Ceremonies (MC) who is usually the groom's father's sister (paternal aunty) and known to have experienced a successful marriage and been lush or productive, since it is believed that the bride will follow in her footsteps. The MC holds 'ɲugbetɔ' (bride) by the hand and leads her to the door

of the bedroom of the groom. On opening the door, she makes the *ɲugbetɔ* look into the room three times, then cross the doorstep to and fro six times. The seventh time, she is taken inside and it is believed that if *ɲugbetɔ*'s feet touch the doorstep, she will not be a good wife. There, her cloths are replaced by the two-yard cloth bought by the groom.

With her duty done, the MC closes the door and returns to join those waiting next door. Custom demands that '*ɲugbetɔ*' should play hard to stay inside for several minutes although they both know it is only a formality before they get busy. After a long time, the MC knocks on the door and the groom opens the bedroom door and allows the MC to examine the white bed sheet. If it is bloodstained, there is jubilation. The girl is led away to the bathroom where she is washed in hot water by the MC who is also the paternal aunty of the groom. The original idea behind the consummation is the public declaration of '*ɲugbetɔ*'s virginity; for this reason, the groom must make an additional payment if she is a virgin. Establishment of virginity is a matter of great pride for both the bride and her parents in addition to establishing her unblemished reputation; it entitles her to the use of '*blitsikpi*' (golden bangles/bracelets). Her parents also rejoice because her virginity shows they have performed their parental duties and in addition, her mother receives several gifts for a good work done.

It would be realised from the forgoing that every stage of the marriage rite is associated with its own artifacts which have symbolic interpretation. Right from the knocking stage, the marriage rites are performed with artifacts and most of these have interesting visual artistic values. The artifacts associated with the performance of marriage rites among the Anlo are cloths, scarf, jewelry, beads, sculptured stool, pan, pillow and mat, footwear, ladies bag. Other important items are cash and drinks. The artifacts identified were found to be very important to the people; so, the people are attached to these artifacts.

## **RQ 2: What roles do visual artifacts play at each stage of Anlo traditional marriage ceremony?**

### **CLOTHS**

Cloths play vital roles in the celebration of marriage rites among the people of Anlo. Pieces of cloth may either be sewn into dresses of different styles or wrapped around the body beautifully for special occasions. There are different kinds of cloths for different occasions. There are cloths for celebration, mourning the dead and cloths that symbolize fertility among others. During the performance of marriage rites, six pieces of cloth of different kinds are presented to the bride. The custodians explained during the interviews that the pieces of cloth are given to the woman for dressing while in the husband's house. One custodian (El, 2015) remarked that:

The woman's beauty is the pride of her husband so it is assumed that the man always wants the woman to dress beautifully for him. The different kinds of cloth are given



to the woman to be used on different occasions. Each piece of cloth is accompanied with a matching scarf, footwear and accessories.

The statement above shows that the pieces of cloth are accompanied by other different artifacts mainly for the purpose of beautification. Some popular cloths and scarf used for marriage ceremony are displayed in Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2.



*Figure 1.1: Pieces of cloth (Source: field photo by Author, 2015)*

Figure 1.1 shows different pieces of cloth kept in a silver pan. These pieces of cloth are among the recommended cloths presented to the bride. It is important that the cloths come in different colours and designs so that the woman would find an ideal one for every occasion. One respondent explained this during the focus group discussion that:

A woman does not wear one piece of cloth so the man must buy several yards of the same cloth and many pieces of different cloth for her. This is because it is assumed that whilst she wraps the cloth, if her first piece of cloth slips or falls down her body will be exposed. So the man must buy several pieces of cloth for her so that she can use more than one piece every time (Verbatim comment of respondent at FG 2, 2015).

This explanation also shows that the presentation of six pieces of cloth captures the importance of cloth in the marriage life of a woman. The different pieces of cloth and their quality is a sign that the groom can provide for the bride. These notwithstanding, there should always be a white cloth which is a symbol of joy. The above discoveries confirm what Kemevor (2004) opines that symbolism of visual art forms has qualities that are capable of evoking desired states of mind concerning feelings, ideas and ideals, to the psychological ramifications of which we are thereby led to respond intuitively without being fully able to identify or define them. This implies that

significantly, the art forms used in Anlo marriage rites help the society in maintaining the dignity of the marriage system. They also help the couple involved to appreciate their union at a philosophical level. This is because the use of symbols represents ideas or beliefs. The white cloth is known as 'Fiawomodzi'. A picture of an example of white cloth used in Anlo marriage is presented in Figure 1.2.



*Figure 1.2: White cloth (Fiawomodzi) (Source: field photo by Author, 2015)*

The white cloth is used for happy events such as outdoorings of a child and other festivities. The cloth may be adorned with a scarf and its accompanying beads to match. In figure 1.2 above, some accompanying neck and wrist beads (to match the white cloth) are also displayed on the table next to the researcher. The 'Fiawomodzi' cloth may be kept by the woman for many years depending on how safe it is kept and how often it is used. This is because it is a local cloth made from quality cotton. Another kind of locally made cloth used in the Anlo marriage system is the 'Haliwoe Kete'. The 'Haliwoe Kete' has yellow stripes which match the yellow beads that can be worn with it as shown in figure 1.4 below:



*Figure 1.3: Kete (Haliwoe) and beads (Source: field photo by Author, 2015)*

The colour combination between the Haliwoe Kete and the beads in figure 1.4 above further establishes the idea that cloths and beads are always in harmony. This is for the purpose of beautification.

Besides, 'Kete' comes in different designs and colours and can be used on different occasions such as marriage ceremony, formal gathering, and for religious services among others. A respondent (EI, 2015) explained that the harmony among the items connotes unity in the marriage as the two are dressed up in the same attire with harmonious colours. African aesthetics generally have an ethical or religious basis. An art work considered "beautiful" is often also believed to be "good," in the sense that it exemplifies and upholds moral values. The fact that in many African societies, the words for beautiful and good are the same suggests a strong correspondence between these two ideas. The ability of an artifact to work effectively, whether that means connecting with the spiritual realm or imparting a lesson, to initiate, may also be a standard for determining the "beauty" of an artifact (Clarke, 2006).

### **Sculpture**

The sculpture pieces used are also very important items in the marriage rites among the people Anlo. These items are not directly presented to the bride but they are part of the ceremony. The stool ('atizikpui') is a seat for the bride. The bride sits on this stool at the ceremony after she has been adorned in the beautiful cloths and ornaments the husband has presented. Another important purpose of the stool is to inform the woman that she is to stay back home and perform her household duties. This is when she is rubbed with powder from a rare tree called 'eto', while the following proclamation is made to her:

I have rubbed you with this powder, and from today, you have become the wife of (name of groom). Henceforth, you are not to sit on any seat offered you by another man other than your own husband (Verbatim response of Ch, 2015).

With these words she is helped from the stool into the bedroom where she is joined by the groom for their first time together as husband and wife. This recitation is to announce to all gathered and the bride that she has formally been handed over to the husband and cannot entertain any other man. Also, it is believed that the powder with which she has been rubbed has some mystical powers that could harm her if she does not keep the fidelity of the marriage. Pictures of the stool are shown in Figure 1.4.



*Figure 1.4: Stool for the bride (Source: field photo by Author, 2015)*

As shown in Figure 1.4, it was observed that the stool is designed in a very simple manner and is curved at the top to make it comfortable for sitting. This is the stool used to symbolically welcome the bride to her new home and to signify that she has finally taken a seat and does not need another man's seat. The practice of making the woman seat on the stool at the groom's family house also signifies that she has been 'installed'. This is a symbol of authority in the husband's house which shows that she is not a stranger but part of the family. One respondent remarked:

The very act of carving a special stool for the woman and making her sit on it upon her arrival at the husband's house is a sign of permanency that she has come to stay forever (Verbatim response of respondent at [FG 1, 2015](#)).

Figure 1.5 below presents a picture of a bride who has been installed by the groom's auntie on the marriage stool as a sign of her permanency in the house of the groom:



*Figure 1.5: A bride installed on the stool as a sign of her permanency (Source: field picture by Author, 2015)*

It was also realised during the interviews that the stool used by the bride during a marriage ceremony has undergone some changes in its design. The stools shown in Figures 1.4 and 1.5 are stools used in more recent times. A picture of a stool used in the olden days (four decades past) is presented in Figure 1.6 below.



*Figure 1.6: Earlier form of stool for the bride (Source; field picture, 2015)*

Figure 1.6 above displays some differences between the previous design of the stool and the modern designs. The most ostensible difference is the shape of the seat. Whilst the modern stool is carved into an absolutely oval shape, the old version is vaguely curved. In addition, the modern versions are polished with wood polish to preserve and make the stool look fashionable, but the old version as displayed in Figure 1.6 is not polished. From the cultural perspective of the people of Anlo, the carved stool is for the woman's use in her kitchen while preparing the meals and doing other household chores. Hence, it serves the same purpose at the kitchen in recent times. Moreover, Amenuke (1991) argues that the top of the stool being shaped like a crescent moon also symbolizes the loving embrace of a mother for her children as well as the warmth of female influence in the society. Edusei (1991) also gives an account of what another art form used in during the marriage ceremony – the hairstyle symbolizes. He explains that in most of the traditional marriages, the type of hairstyle a bride has during the ceremony enhances her beauty and prestige for the event. It is also a symbol of deep-rooted standing into her new marital home.

The trunk or head pan is used to safely carry the pieces of cloth, jewelry and other items that are given to the bride at the marriage ceremony. The trunk was used to carry the pieces of cloth, scarf and other items while the "fovi" pan is used to carry the accessories such as beads, rings and other valuables.





Figure 1.7: 'fovi' (pan) (Source: field photo by Author, 2015)

As shown in Figure 1.7, it was observed that the pan comes in different shapes and sizes. Most importantly, the pans are supposed to keep the items safe; hence, there is no fixed size or design for what an acceptable pan is. The cylindrical pan in Figure 1.7 was used in the olden days while the second pan in Figure 1.7 is the more recent designed pan. As variously indicated by previous researchers (e.g., [Lodonu, 2009](#); [Mbiti, 1990](#); [Uzoagba, 2002](#)), the various art forms have their respective significance regarding the traditions and culture of the people who depict or display such art forms.

### Conclusion and Recommendation

From the results of the research, it can be concluded that the various artifacts exhibited at the marriage ceremonies of the Anlos have contributed a lot in promoting their traditional marriages to the outside world. It is therefore recommended that traditional leaders continue to use occasions like durbars, festivals and other ceremonies to sensitize their subjects on the importance of preserving their culture. This will educate the Anlos about the significance of visual artifacts in their marriage system. It will also ensure continuity of their cultural legacy through provision of good reference materials for posterity.

### Authorship and Level of Contribution

All the contributors equally contributed to the research, writing and revision of the work.

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### Biographies

**Godwin Gbadagba** is a Tutor in the Department of Vocational/Technical Studies at Dambai College of Education, Dambai. He obtained his M. Phil in Arts and Culture from University of Education, Winneba, Ghana in 2015. He has been an art Tutor at Dambai College of Education for the past 10 years. He is also an assistant examiner in College of Education.

**Ebenezer Kwabena Acquah, PhD** is an art educator, a Fulbright scholar, and book illustrator. Currently, he is a senior lecturer at the School of Creative Arts in the University of Education, Winneba (UEW) in Ghana. He had his doctoral degree in Art Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the United States. His research interest focuses on the influence of culture on artistic practices of learners; art teachers' response to cultural policies; examining the visual representations of learners, and other related areas. He features prominently in the teaching of Art and Design at the University of Education, Winneba.

**Henry Empeh-Etseh** is a Tutor in the Department of Vocational /Technical Studies at Dambai College of Education, Dambai. He obtained his M. A. in Arts and Culture from University of Education, Winneba, Ghana in 2013. He has been an Art Teacher at Obrachire Secondary Technical School from 2006 to 2008 and now a Tutor at Dambai College of Education for the past 12 years. He is also an assistant examiner in College of Education.



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