The Heraldic Lion in Akan Art:
A Study of Motif Assimilation in Southern Ghana

DORAN H. ROSS
Associate Director and Curator of African Art, Museum of Cultural History,
University of California, Los Angeles

European influence and in particular the impact of colonialism on the imagery of West African art have long been demonstrated with indigenous representations of musket-bearing soldiers, pith-helmeted administrators, and an occasional Christian missionary. Such undisguised subjects as these—categorically referred to as “colos” in Pidgin English—are found in the arts of many peoples of sub-Saharan Africa. The Akan peoples (Asante, Fante, Akuapem, and others) of southern Ghana are particularly inclined toward such representations owing in part to their extensive exposure to Europeans since their initial contact with the Portuguese in 1471. Not all colonially inspired images, however, are as evident as those mentioned. The lion is a prime example. At first glance the superb pair of cast-gold lions in the Metropolitan Museum’s collection (Figure 1) would appear to be obvious traditional symbols of Asante royal power (their function and date are discussed in the appendix). Yet considerable evidence suggests that the lion is not an indigenous motif, or at least not an early one, in the artistic imagery of the Twi (Akan) speakers. Perhaps surprisingly, the lion is generally rare in the visual arts of sub-Saharan Africa. The principal exceptions are found among the Akan and to a lesser extent among the Fon of southern Benin (formerly Dahomey) where a lion is the primary emblem of King Glele (reigned 1858–89). For a full appreciation of its history and meaning in Akan art, the lion must be considered in relation to its zoological cousin the leopard. Akan perceptions of the two great cats reveal significant formal and symbolic differences as well as several similarities.

Both the lion and the leopard in Akan art are potent images of leadership and are particularly common in the regalia of chiefs and court functionaries, where they evoke qualities of strength, courage, wisdom, and regal beauty. Aside from these general attributes, the large majority of feline images represent very specific messages. As is typical of most Akan iconography, the meaning of a given motif is conventionally expressed in a proverb or traditional saying (epo or ebe); thus the verbal and visual arts of the Akan are very closely linked. For example, a recurrent

1. René A. Bravmann, West African Sculpture, exh. cat. (Seattle, 1970) p. 38, was the first to note the incongruity of lion representations in Akan art although he did not expand upon his observation.


aphorism associated with the leopard in royal contexts is “No one teaches the leopard’s cub how to spring” (Obi nkyere 3sebɔ ba atow), that is, the wisdom and strength of the chief are naturally passed on to his heirs. A leopard and an antelope on a Fante linguist staff—the staff of a chief’s principal counselor—at the paramountcy of Abrem represent “If the chief had been absent, many animals would have been at the funeral of the antelope” (3sebɔ wamma adowa n’ayi amma). Here the much-feared power of the chief as a warrior is extolled. A cast-gold sword ornament at the Asante paramountcy of Ejisu (similar to Figure 2) depicts the maxim “If the lion has no intention to attack, it will not show its teeth” (Gyata nya wo na ɔnkye wo a, ɔnwene ne se nkyere wo), which wisely argues for heeding the warnings of a chief. Occasionally, the Akan use the lion and the leopard as interchangeable actors in the same drama. The most common example of this shows the feline overpowering a hunter (Figure 3), associated with the saying “If you fire at a leopard (lion) and do not kill it, it would have been better not to have fired at all” (Se wo beto 3sebɔ (gyata) tuo na wanwuwo dee fanyinam). The scene demonstrates that force must be used judiciously and with precision. The above sayings and others like them exploit the predatory natures of the felines to provide metaphors for the power of the ruling elite.

One of the most frequent representations of the lion in Akan art is found on the finials of linguist staffs and depicts a small boy touching the side of a lion or holding its tail (Figure 4). It illustrates the simple ad-


2. Sword ornament, Nsuta, Asante. Gold, H. approx. 4½ in. (11.4 cm.). Nsuta, Ghana, Treasury of the Nsutahene (photo: Ross)

5. Field interview with Nana Osei Bonsu at Kumasi, Nov. 19, 1976, concerning a linguist staff he was carving for an unidentified Akan chief in the Ivory Coast.


age “The small boy does not know the lion” (*Akwasibiaa nnim gyata*). The expression emphasizes the importance of education by suggesting the consequences of ignorance. The boy’s naive behavior is a result of his youthful inexperience. An unusual, but not unique, variation of this motif forms the support of an Akan stool in the Metropolitan Museum’s collection (Figure 5). Here the product of ignorance is vividly depicted; the lion’s paw rests on its victim who is clearly


---


represented as a young child (as rare in Akan art as in African art as a whole).

It is significant, however, that the Akan say the child does not know the lion, because the Twi-speakers as a people generally do not know the lion. The Western world's "king of beasts," principally a grassland predator, was rare in the heavily forested ecosystem of most Akan states. Indeed, Ivor Wilks noted that the principal Twi word for "lion," gyata, is a loan word from the Mande, a large series of language-related ethnic groups living in the savanna regions northwest of the Akan, an area generally well suited for lions. On the other hand, the leopard thrives in the forest environment of the Akan, where its inclination to sleep and eat in trees has been widely documented by zoologists. Accordingly, the most common Twi word for "leopard," osebo, is apparently specific to the Akan.

Environmental and linguistic data make it understand why the leopard plays a much more prominent role than the lion in Akan oral literature. Although Wilks noted that the lion was a praise name among the Mande and suggested that gyata was first borrowed by the Akan in this usage, the lion is rare among Akan praise names. Akan chiefs are more frequently celebrated with leopard, elephant, and porcupine metaphors. For example, Robert S. Rattray, the leading scholar of Asante culture, recorded the following drum language praising a chief at a Brong festival in Ejura:

The hero holds a gun and a sword to fight.
Make yourself to arise.
The leopard is in the thicket.
The thicket shakes like anything.
Leopard, walk softly, softly.
O King, walk softly, softly.

The leopard is seen as the "king of the forest" by the Akan. The preamble to a traditional Asante prayer addresses the powers of the world and includes the phrase "Leopard that possesses the forest." In questions of land tenure a common saying is "The leopard [i.e., the chief] owns the land." The lion is rare in such contexts. Similarly, in a compendium of 3,600 proverbs published by Johann Christaller in 1879, leopard maxims outnumber those about lions by four to one. Finally, of the seventy-five folktales recorded by Rattray, the leopard is a major character in at least twelve and the lion in none. Evidence from oral literature reflects pre-twentieth-century Akan perceptions and consistently indicates the leopard as of traditionally greater importance to the Akan than the lion.

A similar situation occurs in the use of actual parts of the two felines. Their skins, teeth, and claws are not generally important—as they are in some areas of Africa—in the personal adornment of Akan chiefs with the exception of select royal crowns. On the other hand, the skins of the felines are found on other regalia of chiefs and court officials. As one might imagine, the greater prevalence of the leopard in the forest is reflected in the widespread use of its skin as a surface covering on regalia. The author's study of

11. Ivor Wilks, "The Mande Loan Element in Twi," Ghana Notes and Queries, no. 4 (1962) pp. 26–28. For cognates of gyata among surrounding ethnic groups, see G.S. Cansdale, A List of Scientific and Vernacular Names of the Fauna of Ghana (Accra, 1970) pp. 11–14. While gyata is universally understood as "lion" by the Akan, there are several other vernacular names in use, the most important of which is the Fante word awunadze.
13. Cansdale, Vernacular Names, pp. 26–28. Significantly, there are far more synonyms in Twi for "leopard" than for "lion"; see Johann G. Christaller, Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi (Twi) (1881; Basel, 1933) p. 435.
14. Wilks, "Mande Loan," p. 28. The lion as a Mande praise name in the western Sudan dates back at least to the founding king of the empire of Mali who was called Sun Dyata (Sunjata, Sundiata), "the lord lion," and reigned for an undetermined number of years after A.D. 1234: J. Spencer Trimingham, A History of Islam in West Africa (London, 1970) p. 64.
15. Ivor Wilks, personal communication, Mar. 13, 1979; McCall, "Prevalence of Lions," p. 135, notes the principal exception to this in the use of Osai or "lion" as a royal appellation for the Asantehene. An important Asante synonym for gyata is saremu see. Wilks, in the above communication, wrote, "This word has complicated nuances. It denotes the lion because the lion is the 'Osei (Osee)' of the grasslands (saremu), that is, the name of the Asantehenes of the house of Osie Tutu. But see also has the sense of 'destroyer,' so the lion is the 'destroying one of the grasslands.' Wilks related the use of saremu see as a royal name to the Asante conquest of some of the non-Akan savanna states. J. H. K. Nketia, personal communication, May 31, 1980, confirms this.
17. Ibid., p. 165.
thirteen of the fourteen Asante paramount chiefs’ treasuries revealed a uniformly greater use of leopard skin over that of other animals, with the exception of various species of antelope which form the staple leather of Akan royalty. These data are difficult to quantify, however, because leopard skins are obviously much easier to identify (especially in photographs) than more visually innocuous lion skins. Still, where the latter seem to be scarce, the former are frequently found on such diverse objects as drums, sword sheaths and hilts, haversacks, treasury bags, hats of sword bearers and executioners, and warshirt amulets. Cloth patterned as leopard skin is also used in many of the same contexts; this would not be effective with simulated lion skin.

The leopard also prevails over the lion in the older plastic arts, and is very pronounced in the most diversified of all Akan forms—goldweights. These small brass castings, used as counterbalances in the weighing of gold, represent, in addition to a variety of geometric designs, virtually the whole of the Akan environment, life, and material culture with only a few significant exceptions. In a survey by the author of nearly 2,500 published representational weights, the leopard occurs forty-seven times, where the lion is found but twice. Furthermore, one of the “traditional” goldweight lions from the British Museum has been questioned by Malcolm McLeod, keeper of the Ethnographic Department (Museum of Mankind). He considers it an early tourist object or perhaps a “sample or test piece [owned by a goldsmith] to show potential customers what the finished product would look like if made into a ring.” The other lion weight (Figure 6) is unquestionably authentic and was first illustrated by Rattray in 1923 as part of the only intact Asante goldweight set ever published. This weight is important not only because of the motif’s rarity, but also because of its distinctive form. The apparent insignificance of the lion among goldweights could possibly be explained by its absence in the Akan forest; however, today lion motifs are abundant in most arts despite the animal’s near extinction in virtually all of Ghana, including the northern grasslands. Clearly, ecological rarity is not the explanation.

McLeod recently outlined his theory for motif exclusion in goldweight imagery and suggested that “nearly all those animals which are not represented as weights are those classed as fie’mmoa—house or domestic animals.” Obviously the lion is not part of this category, nor does it correspond with other exceptions McLeod analyzes. The production of goldweights for traditional use ceased with the abandonment of gold dust as a medium of exchange shortly before 1900. Considering the fact that lions are prevalent in other more recent arts, it would seem that

6. Goldweight, Bekwai (?), Asante. Brass, L. 2 ½ in. (6.3 cm.). Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Allen Alpertson (photo: Raphael X. Reichert)
art. In addition, in the three image-proverbs known to the author where the felines appear together, the lion is considered physically superior to its maculated counterpart. At the Asante paramountcy of Kokofu, one of the linguist staff finials depicts a lion drinking palm wine from a pot on a leopard’s head while an antelope observes the scene (Figure 7). The carving illustrates the adage “Only the lion drinks from the palm-wine pot of the leopard” (Osebo, oso nsa fufu a hena na obetumi ato, gyese gyata). This asserts the obvious truth that some chiefs are more powerful than others and that lesser rulers are subservient to the paramount chief. The second proverb is common on drums, appliquéd flags, and various military (asafo) arts among the Fante. It is generally represented as a solitary lion, although occasionally it appears in more complex compositions. The relevant saying is “A dead lion is greater than a living leopard” (Awinadze a a oevu ye dzen sen osebo a ose ase). In other words, the lion at its worst is still more powerful than the leopard at its best. The third image-proverb also occurs on asafo flags and generally represents a lion confronting a leopard surrounded by a variety of African animals (Figure 8). Its maxim is perhaps the most telling: “Before the lion, the leopard ruled the forest” (Ansa na awinadze beba no nna osebo na odzi hen). These three proverbs contradict the prominence of the leopard in the older arts and suggest that sometime after 1900 the lion usurped the leopard as the major feline power symbol among the Akan.

The environmental and linguistic evidence would seem to suggest that lion imagery was introduced from the savanna; however, while lions recur in the oral literature of the savanna peoples, they are infre-

7. Linguist staff finial, Kokofu, Asante. Wood, gold leaf, H. 13¾ in. (33.7 cm.). Kokofu, Ghana, Treasury of the Kokofuhen (photo: Ross)

the lion was a relatively late introduction to Akan iconography and largely a twentieth-century phenomenon. The complete absence of lions on the lids of cast-brass ritual containers called kuduo (another form whose manufacture ceased around 1900) in the midst of numerous leopards reinforces the statistics about goldweights and further argues for the lion’s late arrival. This situation is repeated in the decorative schemes of sheet-brass containers, forowa, used for the storage of a cosmetic vegetable fat. These art forms went out of local production early in the present century, and in a sample of 240 cans there is not a single identifiable lion, as against at least seventeen readily recognizable leopards.

In contrast to the clear numerical dominance of the leopard in the three older metalwork traditions, it is the lion that dominates in twentieth-century Akan

27. In the author’s photographic archive of 253 kuduo, leopards are found on the lids of 19 examples.
29. This is especially true of chiefs’ regalia where lions are a common motif on rings, sword ornaments, and sword bearers’ skull caps. In a dramatically different genre, of the 61 Fante military shrines studied by the author, the lion is represented in cement sculptures on 31 shrines and the leopard on only 16.
30. Field interview with Nana Osei Assibey III and his elders at Kokofu, Aug. 29, 1976. This is also a common motif on Fante asafo flags.
32. Field interview with elders of Egya No. 1 Asafo Company and Kobina Badowa, Sept. 25, 1981.
8. Warrior’s flag, Egya No. 1, Fante, sewn by Agya Acheampong, ca. 1945. Cotton and rayon trade cloth, L. 67 in. (170.1 cm.) Los Angeles, UCLA Museum of Cultural History, promised gift of Beth and Richard Rogers, LX81-417 (photo: Antonia Graeber)

quently found in their visual arts. Perhaps the best-known exception, and also the closest to the Akan, is the Kore society “lion” mask of the Bamana.33 Yet the Bamana live in southern Mali several hundred miles from the Akan, and their lion masks are highly abstract, possessing none of the naturalism of the full-bodied Akan representations. Furthermore, since masks are generally alien to Akan society, the Bamana tradition is an unlikely prototype. In addition, since the proliferation of lion imagery is largely a late nineteenth- and twentieth-century happening, the northwest is an even less likely source of influence because Akan commercial and cultural contacts during this period were focused on the coast-dwelling Europeans rather than the Mande and other northern groups.

Some of the most compelling evidence for the origin of the lion in Akan art is in the form of the feline itself. While the position of the body with all four feet on the ground is typical of Akan animal representations, other details of posture are unique. The lion is most frequently posed in a highly conventionalized fashion with the head turned to the side, the tail curving over the back in a horizontal S-shape, and occasionally with the tongue protruding from the mouth. All three traits are found on the pair of lions in the Metropolitan Museum’s collection (Figure 1), as well as on the sword ornament from Nsuta (Figure 2) and the rare goldweight (Figure 6). The recurved tail and especially the side-facing head on the lion recur in Akan art regardless of object type or medium. All three of these traits are nearly nonexistent in Akan representations of other animals.

The side-facing head is the most diagnostic of the three traits. Aside from the lion, only the sankofa bird has its head consistently facing in a direction other than straight forward. It faces to the back in a position related to the motif’s message which is usually translated as “Go back and fetch it,” or “Pick it up if it falls behind you” (Eto woakyi a fa). The image deals with learning from experience; if a mistake is made (if something is left behind or forgotten), it can be corrected (retrieved). It could be argued that the side-facing head of the lion has an analogous morphological explanation. According to Rattray, “Lions, leopards, and other members of the cat tribe are all supposed . . . to be left handed, that is to say, they spring to the left on seizing their prey.” In this connection he cites the proverb “If a leopard could spring upon its prey to the right hand, then no animal would be left alive in the bush” (Aboa kurotwiamansa huno ato njia, ankrana aboa bi nni wiram). Of course, “lion” can be substituted for “leopard” here. This Akan perception of the great cats, however, does not indicate why the lion is generally depicted with its head turned to the side while the leopard faces forward. In addition, the lion’s head is as often turned to its right in Akan art as it is to its left.

An alternative explanation of the side-facing posture was presented by Leo Frobenius in his discussion of a hypothesized “lion cult” patronized by West African hunters. Although none of his evidence came from the Akan, he considered the pose an attribute of a deity and reasoned that the full-face stare was a manifestation of the deity’s power over its surroundings in something akin to the “evil eye.” Daniel McCall, however, responding to Frobenius’s study, demonstrated that in sub-Saharan Africa the lion is almost always a symbol of kingship and he could find no evidence relating the image to deities.

The S-curved tail is nearly as telling as the pose of the head. Most animal tails in Akan art hang directly down from the back or trail straight behind the body. Aside from the lion, the principal exceptions to this are the crocodile, whose tail curves to the side (occasionally into a spiral), and the leopard, whose tail comes up over its back in a single curve but is very seldom recurved like that of the lion.

The exclusive juxtaposition of the side-facing head, S-curved tail, and protruding tongue on the lion, in view of the static posture shared by almost all other animals in Akan art, suggests that the lion pose is alien to Akan traditions. These features are typical of many European heraldic lions; the posture is identified as statant guardant, and the position of the tail and the protruding tongue are considered normal for lions. The arbitrary nature of these traits makes it unlikely that they were invented independently by the Akan, on the other hand, certainly had ample opportunity to observe European armorial compositions.

34. This is perhaps the single most common motif in all of Akan art and has been published numerous times. See, for example, Brigitte Menzel, Goldgewichte aus Ghana, exh. cat. (Berlin, 1968) p. 195, fig. 737.
36. Ibid.
37. Frobenius, Kulturgeschichte Afrikas, pp. 72–74.
These crests. Castles emblazoned Dutch, heraldry European the found two. The is more political, the judgments of white and most of the lions of British (Figures 9, 10). From these seats two lions support the shield of the Dutch arms. These heraldic images were readily identifiable symbols of white authority in southern Ghana and were found on numerous politically potent objects. One of the more influential displays of royal arms was that emblazoned on the backs of the Dutch and English governors' chairs, formerly at Elmina and Cape Coast Castles respectively (Figures 9, 10). From these seats crucial judgments were made on an array of criminal, political, military, and economic issues, with occasional life or death consequences. Although the governors' chairs represent only two distinctive and elaborate examples, they were nevertheless highly visible to chiefs and court officials brought before the Europeans. The Akan copied their own three major chair types from the structures of European examples typical to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, some of which undoubtedly featured lions in various heraldic poses on finials, armrests, or stretchers. A royal chair still in the treasury of the Asantehene has an openwork back clearly derived from European principles of heraldic composition although it is not a direct copy of any particular arms.

Aside from chairs, armorial devices also adorned the European forts lining the coast, and a heraldic lion can still be seen over the principal entryway to Elmina Castle. Heraldic lions were carried to the interior of Ghana as finials on flagstaffs and on messenger canes used to identify official representatives of the governors on diplomatic missions. Both items were common gifts to chiefs who acknowledged the authority of the British and/or Dutch.

Sailing ships supporting the gold and slave trade during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries made a dramatic impression on the Akan as evidenced by their depiction in goldweights, often complete with rigging, flags, and cannons. During those two centuries the single most popular ship's figurehead was the lion, and stern ornamentation usually included royal arms, which again meant lions. In addition, lion faces capped the ends of catheads, projecting


42. Cole and Ross, *Arts of Ghana*, fig. 301. This chair features eagle motifs and may have been influenced by a late 17th-century Iberian chair that was taken from Kumasi in 1896. See Malcolm D. McLeod, "A Note on an Asante Royal Chair of Iberian Origin," *Akan-Asante Studies*, British Museum Occasional Paper no. 3 (London, 1979) pp. 21–22. The eagle in Akan art also seems to have been heavily influenced by European prototypes.
46. L. G. Carr Laughton, *Old Ship Figure-Heads and Sterns* (London, 1925) pp. 69–79 and 95.
47. Ibid., pp. 11 and 131.
timbers which secured the anchor near the bow. However, the European tradition of elaborate ship decoration reached its peak during the mid-1600s and was generally unimpressive after about 1800. The proliferation of lions in Akan art did not begin until the nineteenth century. Thus, naval imagery is unlikely to have been a direct source, but coupled with the profusion of lions in other European media was probably a contributing factor in establishing the early Akan conception of the lion, at least in the coastal regions.

Undoubtedly even more influential was the program of images associated with the various commercial interests operating on the coast. The lion in different heraldic postures was a corporate emblem of many West African trading companies and especially of nineteenth-century British firms. In nonliterate cultures like the Akan, heraldic crests and trademarks played an intensified role in establishing corporate identities. Company symbols adorned trading premises, identified cargo ships, and marked items, such as cloth, sold by the company. Businesses were generally known by their symbols and were identified as “house of the lion” or “house of the unicorn,” rather than by their more unmanageable (for the African) European names. Trade goods marked with company emblems were effective vehicles for transmitting European imagery to the interior of Ghana.

Printed advertisements, announcements, and other illustrated publications, often put out by the trading companies, were also influential throughout most of the nineteenth century, and of course later. Brodie Cruickshank, who spent more than eighteen years on the Gold Coast beginning in 1834, provided the following rich account of local interior decoration:

In other parts of the house we find, suspended from, or nailed to the walls, a variety of portraits and prints, chiefly French, and vile daubs. Africans are exceedingly fond of pictures in their rooms, and to gratify this taste press anything into their service that comes readiest to hand. Napoleon in his cocked hat, in gaudy colours or simple

48. Ibid., p. 57. In a public lecture that influenced the research in the present paper, Bill Holm convincingly argued that one type of Kwakiutl Nulmal mask from British Columbia was based on lion figureheads and catheads of sailing ships that frequented the northwest coast of America, “Some More Conundrums in Northwest Coast Art: A Kwakiutl Mask, Northern Carved Bowls, and More on the Copper,” paper presented at the symposium Traditions and New Perspectives of Northwest Coast Art, University of California, Los Angeles, Feb. 22, 1975.
49. Laughton, Old Ship Figure-Heads, pp. 18 and 23.
woodcut, on foot and on horseback, and George IV in his coronation robes, may be seen disputing for space with Punch and his dog Toby, as they appear in the frontispiece of his publication, with the urns, tea and coffee-pots of Cox, Savory, and Company, as seen in their advertisements, or with the royal arms of England flaring in all the glory of an announcement of one of her Majesty's tradesmen.52

Clearly a variety of images was readily available even in the first half of the nineteenth century.

The lion also appeared as a decorative boss or handle on widely traded brassware. At the paramountcy of Adansi Fomena, a Birmingham-produced brass pot with lion-face handles has replaced the traditional kuduo as a major ritual container.53 Before its confiscation by the British in 1896, one of the most important vessels in Asante society was the aya kese (great brass basin). This European-manufactured form, allegedly captured from the Sefwi (another Akan state), was located near the entrance to the royal mausoleum at Bantama in an area reserved for human sacrifice.54 The rim of the vessel is surmounted by four crouching lions cast in the round.

One final category of lion images assimilated into Akan culture is found in the numerous pieces of European brass used as goldweights. Called “pseudo weights” by contemporary scholars, these enormously varied “found objects” were a convenient medium for the transmission of foreign imagery. Among other things they include bits and pieces from clocks, furniture mounts, musket fittings, wall brackets and sconces, door knockers, spigots, and trivets, as well as intact snuff boxes, buttons, belt buckles, and coins.55 A common object in this array is a British-made pressed-brass lion face originally used as a button or anchor for a whistle chain on military uniforms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Figure 11). In the same illustration is a European lion statant guardant from an unidentified source also used as a goldweight by the Akan.56

This inventory of European-produced lion images, drawn from a variety of media and from different times and places, cannot be considered comprehensive, but it does demonstrate the wealth of visual models available to the Akan. The earliest documented Akan-made heraldic image is found on an Asante adinkra cloth (a textile usually used in mourning) collected before 1826 (Figure 12). In the center of the fabric is a loose interpretation of the Dutch royal arms (cf. Figure 9) with its two lion supporters and with a third lion charged on the shield. It is unclear whether the design was portrayed at the instigation of the Dutch or was an unprompted depiction by the Akan. In either case, since adinkra was traditionally made by the Asante in only a few villages north of Kumasi, over one hundred miles from the coast, the textile provides strong evidence that heraldic models were available for reproduction in the interior near the beginning of the nineteenth century.57

While the adinkra with Dutch arms is a unique early piece, British royal arms began appearing in Akan art with some regularity after most of the southern Gold Coast was officially annexed as a Crown Colony in 1902. A lion and a unicorn flanking a crown, excerpted from the British arms, is a frequent motif on the drums of traditional popular bands (Figures 13 and 14). According to elders of these drumming groups the motif demonstrated adherence to colonial regulations. Rivalries between groups and the drinking and revelry which accompanied performances led to recurring conflicts. To deal with this problem the British required permits for recreational drumming, and the heraldic arms on the drums are said to acknowledge this authority.58

In view of the political associations of royal arms and heraldic lions it is curious that the greatest number of armorial images recurs on one of the least political of all Akan arts—the wooden comb. Elaborately carved openwork combs with relief or incised

53. A related piece from the same manufacturer in the treasury of the Nsutahene is illustrated in Kyerematen, Panoply, p. 98. In the background of the same photograph is a royal stool with a heraldic lion support, repeating a motif found on a sword ornament from the same state (Figure 2).
56. Other “pseudo-weight” lions are illustrated in Menzel, Goldgewichte, fig. 1271; Bassing, “European Inspired Akan Goldweights,” p. 20 top right.
57. For further discussion of adinkra, see Cole and Ross, Arts of Ghana, pp. 44–46 and 214.
58. Ibid., p. 175, figs. 349–351. The Akan also created their own heraldic designs to identify individual local states. See D. A. Sutherland, State Emblems of the Gold Coast (Accra, 1954).

decoration are traditionally owned by women, although they are usually commissioned by a man as a gift to his girlfriend, wife, daughter, or mother. These combs are unusual in African art because they are explicit statements of affection between a man and a woman, often formally depicted in the comb's design. Although heraldic compositions are common on combs, they are rarely represented correctly or with full detail. One of the most accurate has the lion (with crown) and unicorn supporters rampant on either side of the shield which has been translated into an oval from the garter-encircled prototype (Figure 15; cf. Figure 10). The shield has been quartered, but the lion charges have been omitted, and in their place a cross dominates the field with the letters L-O-V-E, an obvious reference to the human relationship which the comb capsulizes. Beneath the shield is the scroll without motto, while above, the helm is missing but the crest (a crown) is present. In spite of the modifications, this comb is unusual in the relative complete-

ness of the heraldic composition, which nonetheless seems to have no specific message other than the lettering it frames.

More typically, the arms are abbreviated, with only the lion and unicorn supporters depicted (Figure 16). In this comb again the armorial images apparently serve simply a decorative function while the principal messages are conveyed in the incised representations of antelope, elephant, tortoise, and snail along the bottom of the handle. Two separate motifs are illustrated. The antelope and elephant form one unit and illustrate the adage “Despite the size of the elephant, we give the stool [chieftaincy] to the [wise] antelope” (Eson kunteen adowa na yedze egua yi rema no).60 This extolls the supremacy of wisdom over brute strength. Juxtaposition of the tortoise and the snail in Akan art inevitably depicts the saying “If it were only for the snail and the tortoise, the gun would not fire in the forest” (Ekaa nwa ne akyekyere nko a anka otuo rento wo kwae mu da).61 These slow-moving unaggressive creatures are valued foods collected by hand rather than hunted with a musket. The message emphasizes peace since neither animal prompts the use of firearms. Wisdom and peace, of course, are traits highly valued in interpersonal relationships and are thus appropriate in a gift for a loved one.

Leonine motifs on combs occur also in less specific armorial situations (Figure 17). The two lions statant guardant flanking a heart with a cross recall at first glance the Dutch royal arms (cf. Figure 9). In fact

60. None of the combs mentioned in this paper has been documented in the field, but the meaning of the elephant/antelope motif is standardized across object types. The version cited here was recorded on a Fante linguist staff in a field interview with Nana Edu III and his elders at Enyan Maim, Aug. 27, 1975.

61. This version of the proverb was recorded on a linguist staff belonging to a Fante sub-chief in a field interview with Nana Adoku V and his elders at Mankesim, July 27, 1975.

15. Detail of comb, Akan. Wood, W. 3¾ in. (9.5 cm.). Private collection (photo: Ross)


18. Detail of comb, Akan. Wood, W. 4¾ in. (12.4 cm.). Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Daniel J. Crowley (photo: Ross)
Akan artists occasionally confuse the Christian Sacred Heart with the cross-topped arched crown borrowed from European court regalia. Yet, since the comb is dated 1973 on the reverse, it is unlikely that the design is a mutant survival of the arms of the Dutch, who abandoned the Gold Coast in 1872. Once again the lions appear to have little connection with the function of the comb or with the images of two hearts joined by a cord and two hands shaking in a greeting of friendship, motifs which convey the same meanings for the Akan as they do for the Western world.

As a final example of combs with heraldic felines (Figure 18), four great cats flank an akua'ba, an image associated with fertility and feminine beauty. Three of the felines are in statant guardian poses with the large heads of lions, but they are spotted and lack manes. Thus the distinction between lion and leopard is confused here, suggesting that the distinction, at least in this case, is not even important. Below the felines the motif of two hearts joined with a chain or cord occurs again and frames the phrase OBI DO BI, which translates as "Somebody loves somebody."

The carving of wooden combs is an ongoing Akan tradition which continues to utilize European armorial vocabularies even after the end of colonial rule with Ghanaian independence in 1957. The two-dimensional openwork structure of the combs probably encourages such compositions. The persistence of the heraldic lion in a context antithetical to themes of power and predation indicates its thorough entrenchment as a decorative device. The alien nature of the lion to the Akan is reflected in the narrow range of associated oral literature, for although the leopard appears less frequently in twentieth-century Akan arts than the lion, the leopard is still found in a greater variety of verbal and visual representations.

The lion is not the only motif from European heraldry to surface in Akan art. Such obvious subjects as the unicorn, griffin, Welsh dragon, and mermaid run throughout the military arts of the coastal Fante. These arts are among the most acculturated of all Africa, however, and are often not typical of the Akan as a whole. Still, the motifs demonstrate the far-reaching adaptability of European heraldry to an African context. Further research into the arts of the Akan and other African peoples may reveal related patterns of influence.

Finally, it would be misleading to refer to the Akan lion as solely a product of European influence. The initial Akan conception of the lion was undoubtedly transmitted orally from the savanna regions north of most Akan states where the lion was endemic, but this paper presents evidence that the lion had relatively little verbal or visual impact on Akan culture until the barrage of European-produced lion images saturated the interior of the country during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although the Akan borrowed the conventionalized posture of the feline from the Europeans, they interpreted it in a variety of traditional contexts. Perhaps the sophisticated pre-European matrix of images associated with the leopard allowed for the easy substitution of the lion and its assimilation into Akan iconography. In any case, today the lion must be seen as an indispensable and "traditional" element of Akan art.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Herbert M. Cole and Timothy F. Garrard for their well-considered comments on a previous draft of this paper. I have also benefited from discussions with Malcolm D. McLeod and Ivor Wilks concerning lion imagery in Akan verbal and visual arts. J. H. K. Nketia, former director of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, and A. K. Quarcoo greatly facilitated research on Asante regalia in Ghana, while B. A. Firempong and Yaw Boateng transcribed the taped interviews on which this essay is partly based.

---

62. Another potential stimulus to the Akan conception of the feline is the assortment of lion images associated with Christian iconography. These images, however, generally lack the conventionalized heraldic pose and probably served only to reinforce lions associated with the more influential armorial situations.

Appendix

NOTES ON THE FUNCTION AND DATE OF A PAIR OF LIONS IN THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

The Metropolitan Museum’s cast-gold lions (Figure 1) have been nondescriptly identified as “royal emblems,” but the functional context of the pair has not been explored. The flat bases circled with four small holes obviously indicate that they once adorned some item of royal regalia. Unfortunately, the possibilities are numerous and the medium, scale, and multiple nature of the lions are consistent with many royal objects. Yet, in a study by the author of the treasuries of thirteen of the fourteen Asante paramount chiefs, lions were consistently represented on only five object types: linguist staffs, umbrella tops, rings, sword ornaments, and the skull caps of sword bearers. The first three of these can be quickly and confidently dismissed as potential sources because of dramatic differences in structure and medium. On the other hand, there is a striking similarity between the Metropolitan Museum’s two lions and the three Asante sword ornaments (abösodee) with lion motifs in the treasuries of Ejisu, Juaben, and Nsuta (cf. Figures 1 and 2). All five are in the statant guardant posture with horizontal S-shaped tails, and only the Ejisu ornament lacks a projecting tongue. Even the triangular cut-outs on the lion’s body are shared by all five and are typical of sword ornaments as a whole. Nevertheless, two factors preclude identification of the Museum’s lions as sword ornaments: the lions are too small (about half the height of the extant ornaments) and, more important, sword ornaments never occur in matched pairs.

The scale of the Metropolitan Museum’s lions and the fact that there are more than one of them raise the distinct possibility that they once adorned the headdresses of sword bearers. Two lion-adorned skull caps still exist at Juaben and Kokofu (Figure 19), although the lions are facing forward and are gold-leaved wood carvings rather than castings. At Juaben the hat is worn by the same individual who carries the sword with the lion abösodee. A similar situation exists at Kumawu where the regalia of the court is quite rich. Of the eight swords with cast-gold ornaments, five are paired with hats adorned with small gold castings which duplicate the motif on the sword. It is quite possible that the Metropolitan Museum’s lions served a similar function as ornaments on a skull cap that was once associated with a sword displaying


64. The systematic elimination of each of the approximately fifteen possibilities is not possible in the space of this article, but motif restrictions remove most from consideration.
65. The other two ornaments are illustrated in Ross, “Iconography,” figs. 2 and 21.
66. Several statant guardant lions adorn a sword bearer’s skull cap in the treasury of the Fante paramount chief at Cape Coast.
67. See illustrations in Ross, “Iconography,” figs. 11, 13, and 14.
a lion abosodee. The strong resemblance of the Metropolitan Museum pair to ornaments whose function is known reinforces this likelihood. Since one lion is turned to the left and its mate to the right, one can imagine them positioned symmetrically on either side of the hat.

A second, more speculative possibility exists. The Asantehene, principal chief of the Asante, has in his treasury a pair of sandals with a recumbent cast-gold lion ornamenting each (Figures 20, 21). Kumasi elders maintain that lions on sandals are the exclusive prerogative of the Asantehene and that this is the only such pair. The sandals are worn when the Asantehene is presiding over important traditional judicial proceedings which may involve one or more of the thirteen lesser Asante paramount chiefs. Elders say that the lions represent the power, strength, and wisdom of the Asantehene.68

The lion ornaments now in Kumasi postdate the exile of Asantehene Agyeman Prempeh I from 1897 to 1924 and could be as late as 1935, when his successor Prempeh II was officially installed as Asantehene and when many new items of regalia were created to celebrate the occasion. The Metropolitan Museum's lions, on the other hand, are consistent in quality and style with earlier castings. They compare favorably with many examples of goldwork in the British Museum taken from Kumasi by the British in the Asante wars of 1874 and 1900. There is no question that the New York lions are Asante—other Akan groups simply did not produce such accomplished work. If the prerogatives of the Asantehene were honored by other chiefs (unfortunately, not always the case), then we must conclude that the lions in the Metropolitan Museum came from the Kumasi treasury prior to the exile of Prempeh I, probably among the large quantity of gold objects taken out of Kumasi in 1874. The scale of the lions fits comfortably on the typically large Asante chief's sandals.

Whether the New York lions were headdress ornaments—as is the more likely—or sandal ornaments, a pre-1874 date for their manufacture seems most probable. This would place them near the beginning of the lion's assimilation and conventionalization in Asante art.

68. Field interview with Asantehene Opoku Ware II and his elders at Kumasi, Oct. 2, 1981.