

# ***Christian Art and African Modernity***

**Editors, Nicholas J. Bridger & John Picton**

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# *Divinely- Inspired Akan State Chairs*

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Steps Divine Furniture Carvings is the invention of Tema businessman Osabarima Appiah Danso II, subchief of Akyem Takyiman in the Eastern Region of Ghana (Fig. 1). When Danso suffered a debilitating stroke in early 2011, he believed that God was bringing a big change to his life in order to use him for Divine purpose. Danso, now partially paralyzed, works with artist Wilson Kweku Oware to create high back, upholstered armchairs that are elaborately carved and covered with gold foil (Fig. 2).

Contemporary monumental chairs in Ghana are based on Akan chiefs' Chairs of State, originally inspired by highly-carved European governors' chairs used in the coastal merchant forts. This leadership art form was easily understood by a culture that recognized chief's stools as seats of spiritual and ruling power. The elaborate style of the governors' chairs stimulated the creation of Akan *asipem*, *hwedom* and *akonkromfi* chairs. Akan Chairs of State are created by several carving workshops for locals and foreigners, yet few are as elaborate as those made by the Steps Divine workshop. This essay will examine the workshop's production of chairs within the context of contemporary Akan leadership chairs and offer insight into the meaning of forms and motifs borrowed from outside cultures and Christianity to elaborate upon local stool traditions.

## **Seats of Spiritual Power**

Stools are one of the most important forms of regalia a chief owns among the Akan, Ewe and Ga peoples of southern Ghana. While anyone may own a stool, a chief's stool is significant for it is from this seat where the chief performs her or his religious, administrative, judicial and military duties. The stool is also believed to be the symbol and resting place of the chief's soul.<sup>1</sup> Chief's stools were documented in use as early as the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, and the locally-produced chair has been in existence since at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> Although stools are believed to house a bit of the owner's spirit, chairs typically do not have spiritual significance. A stool may be handed down from chief to chief, representing the state and not just one chief's reign. In other cases, a stool is commissioned when a new chief takes office. Art historians Herbert M. Cole and Doran H. Ross note that these symbols of high office are more elaborate than those owned by commoners; the stools, or *adamu dwa*, are usually adorned with gold or silver strips, bells and amulets that add

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<sup>1</sup>One of the best resources on Akan stools is by Peter Sarpong 1971, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan*, Accra and Tema, Ghana: Ghana Publishing Corporation, pp 26-27.

<sup>2</sup>João de Barros wrote about noblemen using a 'round wooden stool' in 1482. G.R. Crone 1937, *The Voyages of Cadomosto*, London, 1937, p 117; and Herbert M. Cole and Doran H. Ross 1977, *The Arts of Ghana*, Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, UCLA, pp 134, 140.





1.

Osabarima Appiah Danso II, subchief of Akyem Takyiman, Eastern Region, Ghana, *Photo: Courtesy of Osabarima Appiah Danso II*

2.

Chair for Osagyefuo Amoatia Ofori Panin II, Okyenhene of Akyem Abuakwa, Divine Steps Furniture Carvings, Tema, Ghana, *Photo: author, 2012*

to the spiritual power of the stool. For example, the metal strips are ornamented with embossed symbols, including a rosette that serves as an amulet of protection and are often attached to the center of the seat. The rosette motif may have been borrowed from Muslim amulets or Akan *akrafokonmu*, soul washer's badges worn by members of a chief's court as protective devices. The bells may summon the spirits of departed chiefs in addition to announcing the arrival of a chief.<sup>3</sup> I argue that while leadership chairs do not generally invoke similar spiritual connections, those produced in the Steps Divine workshop do so in terms of protection with their Christian motifs and inscriptions.

Catholic bishop of Kumasi, Rt. Rev. Peter Kwasi Sarpong has compared the veneration of ancestors via *adamu dwa* to the Christian worship of saints to arrive at findings that accept these local practices. 'I am of the opinion that a Catholic can licitly become a chief and allow himself to be enstooled on the most important of his predecessor's stool, in the stool-room. He must, however, make it clear to his people that his intention is not to perform a religious act, but to honour and venerate

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. pp 134-137,140.





3.

Detail of back, Chair for Osagyefuo Amoatia Ofori Panin II, Okyenhene of Akyem Abuakwa, Divine Steps Furniture Carvings, Tema, Ghana, *Photo: author, 2012*

the ancestors... because of the naturally good exemplary lives they led.<sup>4</sup> This understanding allows local chiefs to merge their Christian beliefs with cultural practices once misunderstood by the church. Steps Divine combines 21<sup>st</sup>-century beliefs of Christianity with long-held Akan practices of rulership.

### Seats of Ruling Power

Chairs of State, including Presidential Chairs, produced by Steps Divine also evoke ideas of ruling power long-exhibited in *adamu dwa*. For instance, three leopards adorn the chair for Osagyefuo Amoatia Ofori Panin II, the Okyenhene of Akyem Abuakwa since 1999 (see Fig. 2). An Okyenhene is the specific title for the chief who rules this state, an ancient Akan kingdom. Leopards are symbols of power, whether they represent the power of a chief or a rival. *Adamu dwa* are frequently displayed on leopard or elephant skins, equating a chief's power with the power of these animals and also their power to have these wild animals killed.

Leopards appear on numerous Akan art forms including

<sup>4</sup>Peter K. Sarpong 1990, *The Ancestral Stool Veneration in Asante: A Catholic Assessment*, Takoradi, Ghana: St. Francis Press, p 91.





gold weights and Fante *asafo* flags.<sup>5</sup> Leopards and lions frequently appear on flags as symbols representing the *asafo* military company, chief, town or kingdom. According to Ross, evidence points to the leopard reigning supreme over the animal kingdom prior to the rise in popularity of the lion in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Several flags depict this transfer of power. It is possible that the lion, a symbol from British, Dutch and Danish heraldry, represented the British hegemony which overtook southern Ghana's Akan kingdoms, symbolized by the leopard, in the same period.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the representation of the leopard signifies a glorification of not only past kingdoms, but also the independence from the British on March 6, 1957. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, local artists were adopting either feline to denote power. Flags, depicting a company's prowess over another, were now depicting either the lion or leopard to symbolize either party. According to Danso, 'One of our ancient kings was able to strangle and kill a leopard, and his name was Kyeretwie Boakye Danquah.'<sup>7</sup> Joseph Kwame

4.

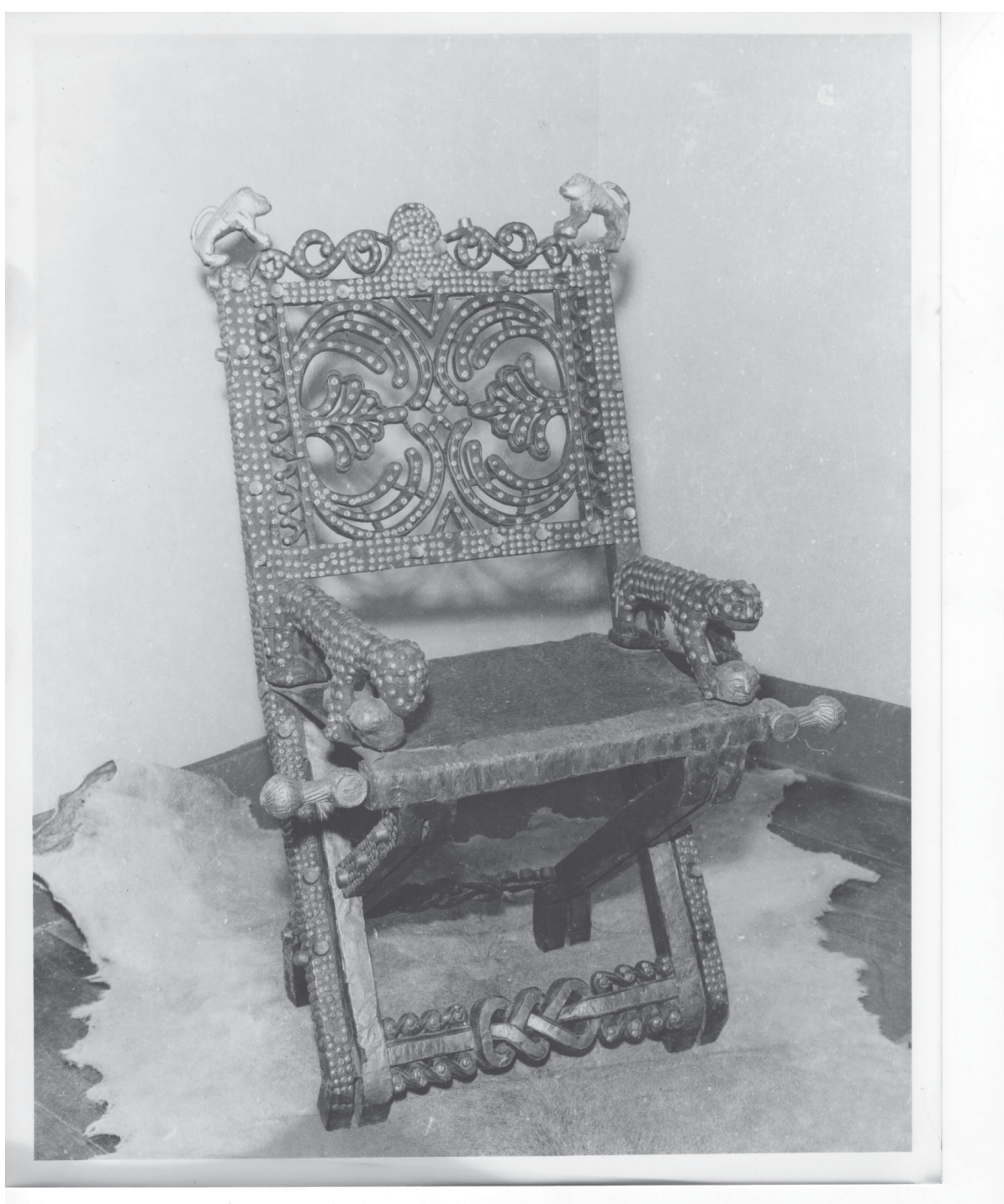
Detail of front skirt, Chair for Osagyefuo Amoatia Ofori Panin II, Okyenhenene of Akyem Abuakwa, Divine Steps Furniture Carvings, Tema, Ghana, *Photo: author, 2012*

<sup>5</sup>The Fante are located in the Central Region along the coast while Akyem Abuakwa is north of the Asante. While these groups do not live in close proximity, they share certain Akan traits.

<sup>6</sup>Silvia Forni and Doran H. Ross 2017, *Art, Honor and Ridicule: Fante Asafo Flags from Southern Ghana*, Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, pp 107-108.

<sup>7</sup>Osabarima Appiah Danso II, interview by author, 14 April 2012.





5.

Hwedom Chair, Tuafohen Nana Obuesiwua VII, a.k.a. J. Ebow Quashie, Anomabo, Ghana, *Photo: author, 2008*

6.

Chair for the Governor of the Gold Coast (backing and seat removed for conservation), Dutch, prior to 1867, *Photo: author, 2012*

7.

Akonkromfi for Oda Chief, *Photo: Bob Okanta, Ghana Ministry of Information R:8569:14, provided by Doran H. Ross*

8.

Chair for Ejisu Chief, *Photo: Boateng, Ghana Ministry of Information R:8549:69, provided by Doran H. Ross*



## STEPS DIVINE FURNITURE CARVINGS



A short process of how the work is done: we sketch on paper and we pick it piece, draw on the wood and carve. after carving we sand paper and a carpenter join all the pieces to form what we want with a high quality glue. after the carpentry work we apply a high quality sanding sealer to fill all the holes on the work and we sandpaper again with smooth sandpaper. then we coat the whole wood work with bronze rich gold, mixed with a high quality lacquer before we do the painting if any. after the painting we apply a special high quality gold paper and its vanish to give the carat level we want to the piece. after that we apply a special high quality lacquer called lacquer plus used to spray cars then we take it to the oven for baking. so everything on the piece is fixed for good hence making it withstand any weather condition. u can apply any cleaning material on it and nothing will happen.

**NAME OF THE MANAGER:**  
OSABARIMA APPIAH DANSO II



**CHIEF OF AKYEM TAKYIMAN**  
**PROPRIETOR OF STEPS CHEMICALS (IMPORTERS OF CHEMICALS)**

**MANUFACTURES OF HAND CARVED FURNITURE AND ANTIQUES.**

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Phone number: 0244373766

Location: tema community 12, 2<sup>nd</sup> vehoc estate junction. Manufactures of hand carved furniture, and antiques.

Kyeretwie Boakye Danquah (1895-1965), was one of Ghana's "Big Six" founders during independence; more commonly known as J.B. Danquah, he was a prominent politician, author and lawyer. If one interprets Danso's sentence as a metaphor, it may be understood that Danquah helped to kill a leopard, or the British colonial hegemony which was in power prior to independence.

Danso further stated that the leopard is the symbol of the Akyem Abuakwa state, and this kingdom is as strong as the leopard.<sup>8</sup> In addition to serving as armrests on the chair, a leopard is featured in relief on the chair's back and repeated in a smaller version on the front apron. In fact, an ensemble of images is depicted on the chair back and repeated in a smaller version on the apron; these represent the state of Akyem Abuakwa (Fig. 3). A state sword rests against the leopard's hind quarters. A stool with a pot of gold rests on the leopard's back, for gold brings wealth to the chief and state. The official state emblem was recorded by historian D. A. Sutherland in 1954: 'The Block depicts the "King of Dense Forest" (*Kwae Biriremuhe*). The Leopard or Tiger, the King of the animals of the Forest, lies watching and guarding the Stool – Paramount Stool of the State. On the Leopard is the Great Ofori Panin Golden Stool with the Gold Crown over it to represent that the dynasty of

9.

Steps Divine Furniture Carvings  
flyer, Photo: author, 2012

<sup>8</sup>It is also the symbol of the Akyem Kotoko state. Doran H. Ross, interview by author, 12 January 2018.





10.

Living Room, Osabarima  
Appiah Danso II, subchief  
of Akyem Takyiman, Tema,  
Ghana, Photo: author, Photo:  
author, 2012

the State was achieved with the aid of the Sword.’<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the leopards serve a similar protective function as the rosettes on *adamu dwa*. These amulets also have guards - the teeth-baring lions whose head and forelegs form the chair’s front legs and an intimidating red and black kingsnake, a symbol of the Asona clan, appearing in the ensemble of images on the chair back and front apron, and on both of the back support rails. On the chair back only, the Okyenhene’s motto ‘Susubiribi’ in capital letters hovers over the group of images. While this literally translates as ‘to measure something,’ it means to strive for the best every day. Underneath the images is the text in capital letters ‘Okyeman,’ the name of the area in the Eastern Region, of which Akyem Abuakwa is a part.

Further Akan symbols related to leadership adorn the chair. The *fihankra*, the *adinkra* symbol of security, is carved in relief and highlighted in red on the front rail below the armrests and on the back wings.<sup>10</sup> *Adinkra* symbols derive from motifs on dye-stamped cloth known as *adinkra*, originally made for the

<sup>9</sup>D.A. Sutherland, 1954, *State Emblems of the Gold Coast*, Accra, Ghana: Government Printing Department, pp 12-13.

<sup>10</sup>*Fihankra* has been recorded as the *adinkra* symbol of safety, security, solidarity and brotherhood, reflecting the Akan concept of family. The symbol itself mimics the shape of a courtyard house with adjoining rooms around a central open courtyard. G. F. Kojo Arthur 2001, *Cloth as Metaphor: (Re)-reading the Adinkra Cloth Symbols of the Akan of Ghana*, Legon, Ghana: Centre for Indigenous Knowledge Systems, p 164.





11.

Chair for Osabarima Appiah Danso II, subchief of Akyem Takyiman, Divine Steps Furniture Carvings, Tema, Ghana, *Photo: author, 2012*

Asante king, or *asantehene*. Historian A. A. Y. Kyerematen has also suggested that *adinkra* motifs may have originated from the Gyaman stool, the seat of power for the ancient Gyaman state.<sup>11</sup>

Crossed state swords, or *akofena*, the symbol of authority, comprise the area below the armrests (Fig. 4). The crossed swords create a shape reminiscent of the crossed legs found on *akonkromfi*. The crossed swords connect to the stretcher with six relief images below: the four painted red are *adinkra* symbols - *gye Nyame*, or God is supreme; *ohene tuo*, the king's gun; *akofena*; and *sankofa*, to learn from the past. These are flanked by a pair of black and white crows, another symbol of the Asona clan, the largest of Akan clans, and of whom the Okyenhene is the head.

The front apron also exhibits the symbols of an eagle, palm tree, a man carrying human legs, and crossed rifles; all of these Danso described as 'bodyguards of the stool.'<sup>12</sup> Thus, the motifs

<sup>11</sup>A.A.Y. Kyerematen 1964, *Panoply of Ghana*, London and New York: Praeger, p 71; and Cole and Ross, p 45 (see footnote 2).

<sup>12</sup>Osabarima Appiah Danso II, interview by author, 14 April 2012.





12.

Detail of back, Chair for Osabarima Appiah Danso II, subchief of Akyem Takyiman, Divine Steps Furniture Carvings, Tema, Ghana, *Photo: author, 2012*

on these chairs relate back to leadership and the hierarchy of power. The inclusion of similar symbols in relief or in-the-round are commonly depicted on *adamu dwa*. One example is the stool with a support in the form of a leopard in the Paul and Ruth Tishman Collection.<sup>13</sup>

All of the arm chairs Steps Divine produced for the Okyenhenes' paramountcy include a simple foot stool and a matching *okyeme poma*, or linguist staff, replete with symbols related to those depicted on the respective chair. The fabric for the upholstery is specially selected by Danso. He chose circles for the Okyenhenes' chair for its reference to stability. 'That means the kingdom is stable, and people just weave around it.'<sup>14</sup>

### Appropriation of Outside Power Symbols

The form and two motifs found on the Okyenhenes' chair and others made by the Steps Divine workshop were appropriated from artwork made by outside cultures. Borrowing from other cultures is nothing new, but it is fascinating to map the development of their appropriation and how they mix with

<sup>13</sup>See Cole and Ross, Fig. 295, p 139 (see footnote 2).

<sup>14</sup>Osabarima Appiah Danso II, interview by author, 14 April 2012.





local preferences. In this case, the form of the Steps Divine chairs continue a long history of the appropriated European chair. Chairs imported and used on the coast by the European governors at the merchant company forts impressed local leaders as seats of power, or thrones. From these seats, which were highly visible to local chiefs, the governors made crucial judgments on a variety of criminal, military and economic issues, sometimes with life or death consequences.<sup>15</sup> For centuries chairs were given as gifts – from the Europeans to local leaders and also, at least in one case, a local imitation of a European-style chair was given to a European governor.<sup>16</sup>

Three types are created and used as prestige chairs by Akan leaders today – the *asipem*, *hwedom* and *akonkromfi*. All three chairs are based on mid-17<sup>th</sup> century European farthingale or upholsterers' chairs. The *asipem* has a low seat, no arms and an inclined back. They are decorated with imported brass upholstery tacks, strips of repousse metal and tall finials. The *hwedom* chair is larger with an upright back and spiral stretchers, legs and uprights. Brass and silver tacks and bosses are used to attach the leather seat and back. This form was originally used in times of war and other solemn occasions (Fig. 5). The chair is notable for its spiral stretchers that Ross

13.

Detail of front skirt, Chair for Osabarima Appiah Danso II, subchief of Akyem Takyiman, Divine Steps Furniture Carvings, Tema, Ghana, Photo: author, 2014

<sup>15</sup>Doran H. Ross 1981, The Heraldic Lion in Akan Art: A Study of Motif Assimilation in Southern Ghana, *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 16: p 173.

<sup>16</sup>Cole and Ross, p 142 (see footnote 2).



14.

Kweku Wilson Oware, Tema,  
Ghana, *Photo: author, 2012*



associated with the zigzag pattern used in *kente* cloth and as an *adinkra* motif. This pattern refers to a person's ability to adapt and change according to the circumstances.<sup>17</sup> It is perhaps a suitable design for both leadership during battle and the artistic appropriation of the form. The legs of the *akonkromfi* chair do not fold, but they are based on folding chairs popular in 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe. The openwork back with carved imagery across the top and on the arms reflects a European Baroque style.<sup>18</sup> Though once used for festive occasions, I have not seen one used in contemporary times. However, Ross states that the *akonkromfi* is the more influential, for its Baroque style and addition of figurative sculpture was the first to be borrowed for state chairs.<sup>19</sup> Steps Divine borrows the basic form of the *hwedom*, eliminating the spiral stretchers, and elaborates upon the baroque figurative style of the *akonkromfi* and European governors' chairs (Fig. 6).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Doran H. Ross 2009, *Royal Arts of the Akan: West African Gold in Museum Liaunig*, Neuhaus, Austria: Museum Liaunig, pp 144.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid. pp 140-142.

<sup>19</sup>Doran H. Ross, interview by author, 12 January 2018.

<sup>20</sup>W. Brandford Griffith 1905, Native Stools on the Gold Coast, *Journal of the Royal African Society* 4, no. 15: p 294.





15.

Shepherd Muku, Tema, Ghana,  
*Photo: author, 2014*

The influence of the *akonkromfi* upon these elaborate chairs is evidenced in two photographs for A. A. Y. Kyerematen's *Panoply of Ghana* in c. 1959.<sup>21</sup> An *akonkromfi* belonging to a chief of Oda was carved with leopards as armrests and lions atop the stiles (Fig. 7). One leopard holds a creature, perhaps a porcupine, in its mouth, while the other guards a human head between its forelegs. The curvilinear vegetal pattern on the back of the seat has been translated into the state chairs' use of adinkra symbols with their curvilinear forms or patterned upholstery. A state chair belonging to a chief of Ejisu bears an upholstery back with a busy floral design (Fig. 8). Carved vegetal designs cover the upper portion of the back and much of the entire wooden surface. An eagle surmounts the back. Its outstretched wings however resemble the American, rather than the Ghanaian, coat of arms. This chair, created prior to independence, may reflect the popularity of American culture and ideals of democracy at the time.

Two symbols on the Okyenhene's chair, a British crown and the Sacred Heart of Jesus, evince appropriations of power symbols brought to the area by the British administration and Christian missionaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see Fig. 3). During the period of colonialism (roughly 1874-1957), locals used the motifs of British power to communicate either their allegiance with or resistance to the British. Over time these symbols have become part of the Ghanaian vernacular or corpus of images

<sup>21</sup>I have viewed the photograph archive of state regalia at the Ministry of Information in Accra, Ghana. Doran H. Ross duplicated this archive with their permission and generously shared his images with me. See Figures 7 and 8.



16.

Kingsley Kyei, Tema, Ghana,  
*Photo: author, 2012*



to express local ruling power.<sup>22</sup> On the chair, three British-style crowns appear, topping the chair back and two supporting stiles. These British crowns continue the history of using an outsider's power symbol to refer to a local leader's ruling power.

The Sacred Heart of Jesus was carved in multiple reliefs, six on each wing of the chair. The Sacred Heart of Jesus is a widely-practiced Roman Catholic devotion that utilizes his physical heart as the representation of his divine love for humanity.<sup>23</sup> Artistically altered, the motif has a cross inside a small heart with flames on either side. This image is located

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<sup>22</sup>See Courtney Micots 2017, A Palace to Rival British Rule: The Amonoo Residence in Ghana, *Critical Interventions* 11, no. 2: pp 132-154; 2015, Age of Elegance: An Italianate *Sobrado* on the Gold Coast, *African Studies Quarterly* 16, no. 1: pp 39-71; 2015, Status and Mimicry: African Colonial Period Architecture in Coastal Ghana, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 74, no. 1: pp 42-63; 2014, Carnival in Ghana: Fancy Dress Street Parades and Competition, *African Arts* 47, no. 1: pp 30-41; 2012, Performing Ferocity: Fancy Dress, *Asafo* and Red Indians in Ghana, *African Arts* 45, no. 2: pp 24-35; and 2011, Griffins, Crocodiles and the British Ensign: Kweku Kakanu's *Asafo* Flags and Followers, in *Africa Interweave*, ed. Susan Cooksey, pp 142-145, Gainesville: Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art.

<sup>23</sup>Kevin Knight, Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07163a.htm> (accessed 19 December 2017).





within a larger heart with flames. Clearly, the motif is one of protection, but this time it serves as an amulet that connects the work to Christian spirituality.

Sarpong notes the similarity between the local veneration of ancestors to Christian veneration of saints. Both were once human and are now spirits. Both receive the prayers of the living and assist them. These spiritual beings are able to assist because of the good lives they led on earth.<sup>24</sup> Jesus, like ancestors and saints, is believed to hear prayers and assist the living. Thus, the motifs in this chair successfully merge ideas of honoring ancestors and Jesus, spiritual beings aiding the chief seated on the chair.

17.

Peter Clever Edzesi, Tema, Ghana, *Photo: author, 2012*

### Steps Divine Furniture Carvings & Prosperity Faith

In March of 2012, I attended a trade fair in Labadi, a local suburb of Accra. I was surprised to find a 10x20-foot space occupied by a carving workshop amongst the displays of pure spring water, mattresses, herbal and beauty products, and other typical trade show wares inside one of the two large buildings. Outside were stalls dedicated to the sale of tourist art, namely masks, small figures, beads, batik and jewelry.

<sup>24</sup>Sarpong, *The Ancestral Stool Veneration*, p 30.(see footnote 4).





18.

Healing Garden Angels, Apam,  
Ghana, *Photo: author, 2008*

Yet, in this double-sized booth I was pleasantly confronted by well-carved, elaborate chairs covered in vivid upholstery and gold-covered motifs. Running the booth was William Danso, who first informed me of his father's workshop.<sup>25</sup>

William gave me a 5.5x8-inch one-sided color flyer to address my questions (Fig. 9). The flyer included several photographs of the chairs on exhibition, contact information, an official portrait of his father Osabarima Appiah Danso II seated in state, and a paragraph explaining the creation process. It states:

A short process of how the work is done: we sketch on paper and we pick it piece, draw on the wood and carve. after carving we sand paper and a carpenter joins all the pieces to form what we want with a high quality glue. after the carpentry work we apply a high quality sanding sealer to fill all the holes on the work and we sandpaper again with smooth sandpaper, then we coat the whole wood work with bronze rich gold, mixed with a high quality lacquer before we do the painting if any. after the painting we apply a special high quality gold paper and its varnish to give the carat level we want to the piece. after that we apply a special high quality lacquer called lacquer plus used to spray cars then we take it to the oven for baking. so everything on the piece is fixed for good hence making it withstand any weather condition. u can apply any cleaning material on it and nothing will happen.<sup>26</sup>

I called Danso and scheduled an interview with him in Tema. When I arrived at the local trotro station, Danso himself picked

<sup>25</sup>William Danso, interview by author, 4 March 2012.

<sup>26</sup>Steps Divine Furniture Carvings, 2012, flyer.





19.

Drawing of Holy Grace Church Chair, Kweku Wilson Oware, Tema, Ghana, Photo: author, 2012

me up in his black Hummer with gold painted trim. I hopped into the vehicle, made my greetings, and we were off to his home/workshop. Along the way we enjoyed a lively conversation. We entered the property through a pair of large hand-wrought black iron gates with gold detailing. Danso guided me into his large living room for the interview (Fig. 10). Needless to say, my senses were on overload. Here were all the chairs from the Labadi trade fair plus their accompanying footstools and staffs. Additionally present was Danso's own furniture, gold-painted chairs and a sofa covered with faux animal print upholstery. The cacophony of colors, prints, motifs and rich gold was impressive, seemed inherently Ghanaian, and somehow appeared overall reminiscent of James Hampton's *Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly*.<sup>27</sup>

Danso told me he suffered a debilitating stroke on January

<sup>27</sup>Hampton (d. 1964) was an African-American artist who was inspired by religious visions to create an installation over the last 14 years of his life that was comprised of found objects and recyclable materials he then covered in metallic foils and other papers. Smithsonian Institution, *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly*, <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/throne-third-heaven-nations-millennium-general-assembly-9897> (accessed 25 January 2018).



20.

Chair of State, team of artists,  
1960, National Museum, Accra,  
Ghana, *Photo: author, 2012*



3, 2011. All of his ‘nerves went down for 3 minutes.’ In order to distract himself from the pain, he started thinking about how to set up a carving business. This idea sprang from a directive given to him shortly before by his “king,” the Okyenhene.<sup>28</sup> After Danso had successfully had an older state chair for the Okyenhene restored, he asked Danso to commission chairs for himself and all his subchiefs, including Danso. Danso is not a carver, nor does he consider himself an artist. Rather, he defines himself as a ‘businessman.’ He built his business empire on the importation of textile dyes for the major local manufacturers, including ATL (Akosombo Textiles Limited) and GTP (Ghana Textile Prints). Today, he owns several businesses. Therefore, he considers the production of the chairs as a business solution for his leader and patron.

Steps Divine also demonstrates Danso’s spiritual beliefs. He belongs to the Bethel Methodist Church, established in 1973, and located in Community 8, Tema.

The main idea behind Steps is that any journey of a thousand miles begins with a step. The Steps Divine, you

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<sup>28</sup>Osabarima Appiah Danso II, interview by author, 14 April 2012.





21.

Presidential Chair for Ghana,  
Divine Steps Furniture  
Carvings, Tema, Ghana, *Photo:*  
*author, 2012*

see, whenever something bad happens to us we think negatively about whatever happens to us, but immediately I started this carving work. I saw it was a big change God was going to use me for. And I saw that day after day the things I was creating was changing from good to better. Then I got to know it was Divine – it was inside the work I was doing.<sup>29</sup>

The mix of business prosperity, good health and religious faith are curiously intertwined in Ghanaian Christian prosperity faith. According to religion scholar Paul Gifford:

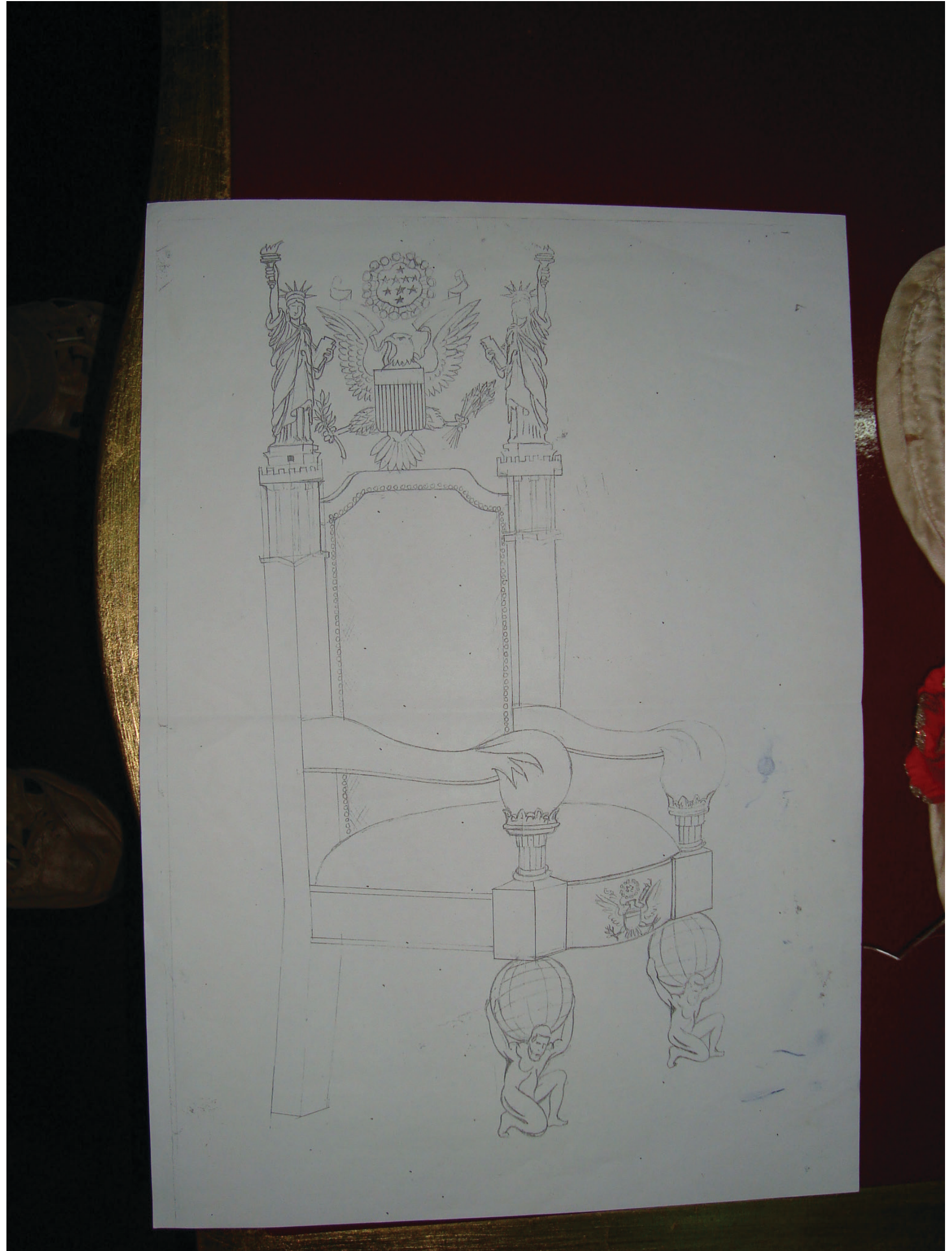
The church's theology is the faith gospel of success, health and wealth.... [Arch-bishop] Duncan Williams [writes] From Gen. 1, 29-30 we 'find out that God never planned for (us) or any of mankind to have sickness, fear, inferiority, defeat or failure' (p. 102). In this way he interprets the whole Bible: 'The Word of God is a tree of life that will produce riches, honour, promotion and joy' (p. 58)... Williams understands that being created in the image of God (Gen 1,26) refers to success.... His understanding is that prosperity inevitably

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.



22.

Drawing of Presidential Chair  
for the United States, Kweku  
Wilson Oware, Tema, Ghana,  
*Photo: author, 2012*



accrues from the inexorable application of spiritual laws...  
He simply created His spiritual laws and freely gave them to  
everyone. Every person then has a choice – to implement  
the laws of poverty, or to implement God's laws of prosperity.  
(p. 139)<sup>30</sup>

Gifford also discusses the philosophy of another popular religious leader in Ghana, Mensa Otabil. According to Otabil, 'Every problem is temporary, every problem can be solved... God did not create you with failure in mind, but with success.'<sup>31</sup> Therefore, Danso made a choice to combine his desires for good health and prosperity with his religious zeal to create Steps Divine. He also was starting another business when I first met him – a printing shop to create posters, banners and large billboard displays for the upcoming Ghanaian elections in December 2012. His signage for the new shop; along with his house, gates and car; are all trimmed with gold paint. Gold, a symbol of wealth and prosperity in Ghana and more especially

<sup>30</sup>Paul Gifford 1994, Ghana's Charismatic Churches, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 23, no. 3: pp 243-244, from Nicholas Duncan-Williams 1990, *You are Destined to Succeed!* Accra, Ghana: Action Faith.

<sup>31</sup>Gifford, pp 246.





Akan peoples, is Danso's personal trademark.

The chair made for Danso demonstrates his religious beliefs further (Fig. 11). Like all the chairs made for the subchiefs, his chair is slightly smaller in stature than the one for the Okyenhene. Six angels grace Danso's chair. A painted relief scene on the chair back consists of two angels who carry a British-style crown while floating in the sky with a bright orange sun (Fig. 12). According to Danso, 'The two angels bring the crown from heaven. That means my kingdom is not from this earth; it's from heaven.' Danso also pointed out that his crown was different from the Okyenhene's crown because it emanates from his town of Akyem Takyiman, where the kingdom or state of Akyem Abuakwa started. The setting sun indicates that the 'crown came in the evening when everything was getting calm.'<sup>32</sup>

The crown on Danso's chair can be compared with those on the Okyenhene's chair. Danso's crown is more detailed with what appears to be a central Greek cross and several heart-shaped motifs along the bottom edge of the crown. While these can be read as mimicking the British royal crown, they may also be interpreted as Akan *adinkra* symbols. The shape resembling a Greek cross is more likely either the *fihankra* or *kerapa* symbol. While the *fihankra* relates to security and solidarity, the *kerapa* (also *mmusuyideɛ*) refers to good fortune

23.

Subchief's Chairs behind Chairs from Lebanon, Divine Steps Furniture Carvings, Tema, Ghana, Photo: author, 2012

<sup>32</sup>Osabarima Appiah Danso II, interview by author, 14 April 2012.



24.

Subchief's Chair, Divine Steps  
Furniture Carvings, Tema,  
Ghana, *Photo: author, 2012*



and spiritual strength. This symbol, prominent on Danso's crown, is important for its link to prosperity and the spirit. According to G. F. Kojo Arthur, the Akan believe humans are born sacred and come to know evil through socialization and enculturation, unlike Christians who believe in original sin. The *kerapa* symbol would have been woven into a bedside mat on which the chief would step three times for good luck prior to lying down to sleep. During the annual ritual of *Mmusuyideɛ*, all the streets of town would be swept in the morning and evening to symbolically remove danger and prevent disease or death from entering the community.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the *kerapa* symbol is significant for its protective spiritual power and ability to bring good fortune to the chief and his people. The heart may be read several ways. It may be seen as a decorative version of *sankofa* or *akoma*. While *sankofa* is a cautionary symbol reminding one to learn from one's past mistakes, *akoma* comes from the saying *Ɔdo firi akoma mu, nyɛ tirim*, or 'Love is from the heart, not the head.'<sup>34</sup> The heart is repeated on the chair back, framing the sheep's skin-covered

<sup>33</sup>Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor*, p 132 (see footnote 10).

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 160.





cushion. Two kneeling and praying angels are placed under the armrests, and a kneeling and praying angel surmounts each of the stiles. The kneeling angels on the stiles are ‘guarding the other angels.’<sup>35</sup> The kneeling angels carved on the front of the arms are praying for Danso.

Dual meanings also appear on the skirt that is painted with a background simulating *kente* cloth, the popular hand-woven strip cloth of Asante and other Akan chiefs (Fig. 13). In relief are two crows flanking a Bible and cross. The crows refer to Danso’s Asona clan and appear again on the armrests. The Christian cross lies on top of the *Gye Nyame* symbol, thus combining two symbols of God – one Akan and one Christian. The Bible is open to the painted verse ‘We are Sons and Daughters of Love. Let Love Lead.’<sup>36</sup> This Christian saying repeats the idea of love that the symbol *akoma* references, linking Christian and Akan ideas.

Danso’s chair is covered with other relief *adinkra* symbols. Danso selected several of his favorite ones for the chair. ‘When

25.

Anthony Kakra and Isaac Kesse  
Aidoo in front of their shop,  
Antique Woodworks, Nungua,  
Ghana, *Photo: author, 2012*

<sup>35</sup>Osabarima Appiah Danso II, interview by author, 14 April 2012.

<sup>36</sup>Although Danso told me the line was from Corinthians in the Christian Bible, it actually comes from T.B. Joshua Ministries, a ministry in Lagos, Nigeria, which is televised in Nigeria and Ghana. Joshua, a televangelist, uses this line to introduce 1 Corinthians 13 in his sermon, also popularized on his ministry’s Twitter and Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/tbjministries/photos/a.105659106221541.7350.103470916440360/539773006143480> (accessed 29 January 2018).



26.

Chief's Chair, Antique  
Woodworks, Nungua, Ghana,  
*Photo: author, 2012*



people come to me with their problems, I have to use one of these, a proverb, to solve that problem.’<sup>37</sup> *Adinkra* symbols and their meanings are often linked to proverbs and evince the verbal-visual nexus in Akan arts as noted by Cole and Ross.<sup>38</sup> The *akoma* symbol is repeated on the crown, back cushion, and under the arms. Danso’s chair is the only one that uses sheep’s skin for the upholstery. He told me, ‘When I use it, it means I’m very humble. That is why mine is exceptional.’<sup>39</sup> Sarpong notes several dissimilarities between Asante ancestral veneration and Christianity, such as: ‘The essence of the goodness of the Saint is humility, that of the goodness of the ancestor can be more or less compared to magnanimity.’<sup>40</sup> While these differences exist, it is the similarities between the religions Danso seemed most keen to illuminate.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Cole and Ross, p 9 (see footnote 2).

<sup>39</sup>Osabarima Appiah Danso II, interview by author, 26 May 2012.

<sup>40</sup>Sarpong, *The Ancestral Stool Veneration*, p 31 (see footnote 4).





## The Workshop and Oware

After recovering from his first stroke in 2011, Danso hired designer and artist Oware (b. 26 September 1955) with whom he has worked with on a part-time basis for about 30 years designing banners, book covers, calendars and billboards for one of Danso's other printing businesses (Fig. 14). Ideas for the chairs come to Danso in his dreams. Danso tells Oware his ideas, and Oware draws the design, adding his own interpretations and motifs. Danso also hired two carvers, Shepherd Muku and Kingsley Kyei, a carpenter Paul Aduful, and a sander Peter Clever Edzesi (Figs. 15-17). Sometimes other carvers, such as Tommy from the Volta Region, will join these men. Thus, a team of skilled artisans works together to create a product inspired by Danso and visualized by Oware.

Oware trained at the Ghanatta College of Art in Accra and earned his art diploma in 1975. In addition to working on the side for Danso, Oware is a partner in the advertising company Update Media, formed in 2000, which does branding for Nextel Communications. Oware works from Danso's converted garage and in 2012, was not being paid. According to Oware, 'I don't think of getting paid. We are starting something.' Like Danso, Oware is a Christian inspired by God. 'God uses us all the time. We feel it.'<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup>Kweku Wilson Oware, interview by author, 14 April 2012.

27.

Chiefs' Chairs, Antique Woodworks, Nungua, Ghana, Photo: author, 2012





28.

Pastors' Chairs, Antique  
Woodworks, Nungua, Ghana,  
*Photo: author, 2012*

Oware has a broad knowledge of imagery that inspires his work for Steps Divine. These images come from children's Bible Story books, other books, television, movies, objects in church, cement sculptures, animals from the traveling circus, and the internet. Oware borrowed the angel forms from Bible storybooks and concrete grave markers in the local cemetery. In the 1930s cement angels were created for grave markers and by the 1950s their use expanded to Twelve Apostles Church healing gardens found throughout southern Ghana and Fante *asafo* shrines, or *posuban*, in the Central Region along the coast (Fig. 18).<sup>42</sup>

The workshop also produces chairs and other carvings for churches. In a drawing for a Holy Grace Church arm chair by Oware, angel finials and a large eagle are perched on the chair back. Arms terminate in eagle heads and the front legs imitate eagle's claws (Fig. 19). According to Danso, the eagle is a divisional chief symbol for the Akyem Abuakwa state. Kneeling and praying angels surmount the stiles. Thus, even on a priest's chair for a charismatic church in Tema (outside of Abuakwa), symbols of religion and local leadership are intertwined.

<sup>42</sup>See Paul S. Breidenbach & Doran H. Ross 1978, The Holy Place: Twelve Apostles Healing Gardens, *African Arts* 11, no. 4: pp 28-35, 95.





29.

Chair for the British Governor General, English, National Museum, Accra, Ghana, *Photo: author, 2012*

Eagles and *adinkra* symbols are found on Ghana's official Chair of State, on exhibit at the National Museum in Accra (Fig. 20). This gilded wood chair was commissioned by Ghana's first president Kwame Nkrumah and designed by a team of artists.<sup>43</sup> The chair evokes the *akonkromfi* style with the upright form of the *hwedom* chair with eagles flanking a black star across the top of the high back and with a relief carved *fihankra* symbol below. The eagles flanking a black star represents a simplified coast of arms for Ghana without the shield and ribbon. The side supports of the Chair of State consist of a carved *dwennimmen adinkra* symbol, meaning humility with strength. A stool accompanies the chair. This state chair represents political power in Ghana, not only within

<sup>43</sup>Nkrumah requested three State Seats be made by a team of artists between 1959 and 1960. The result was the Seat of State, also called the Presidential Seat, the Chair of State, and the Vice-President's Chair. According to Abbey, the Chair of State was carved at the "Achimota Compound and [Kofi] Antubam contracted the leading carvers at the time to work on the traditional designs." Antubam organized the art production for the chairs and the inner chamber of the Old Parliament House, but it is not known to what extent he designed the artwork. At least four carvers/goldsmiths worked on these seats. Abbey tries to uncover the names of these artists and their level of involvement





30.

Ecclesiastical Chairs, Sample Sheet in the possession of Antique Woodworks, Photo: author, 2012

local roles, but also on a national level.

The concoction of European and African political symbols is examined further by Carola Lentz in her article examining Ghana's Seat of State. Lentz states that Antubam's choice to include an Asante symbol of leadership, the porcupine stool on the base, and the golden color were 'intended to link the Ghanaian's President's authority to pre-colonial customs of state-making and royal power.'<sup>44</sup> In the Chair of State, the team of artists utilized Asante power symbols, *adinkra* and gold leaf, to create this link. The black star on both chairs is the Lodestar of African Freedom and is depicted in Ghana's flag, coat of arms and on the Independence Arch, thus identifying with Ghana's recent independence.<sup>45</sup> These chairs would be a strong influence on Danso and Oware, though neither

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which may have included input into the design. H. Nii Abbey, 1997, *Kofi Antubam and the Myth around Ghana's Presidential Seat*, Accra, Studio Brian Communications, pp 11-15, 48-52. For more information about the artists involved and the surrounding controversy, see pp 70-95.

<sup>44</sup>Lentz was unfortunately unaware of the earlier publication by Abbey and erroneously attributes the Seat of State to Kofi Antubam alone. Sadly, this is often the case because publications written by African scholars are rarely widely-published and made available internationally. I was fortunate to have guidance from Ross. Carola Lentz 2010, Travelling Emblems of Power: The Ghanaian Seat of State, *Critical Interventions* 4, no. 2: p 51.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid. 53-54.





31.

Wedding Chair, Divine Steps  
Furniture Carvings, Tema,  
Ghana, *Photo: author, 2012*

mentioned the chairs in our discussions. The ideas however have been reinterpreted by carpentry workshops for the past 300 years for chief's state chairs, yet the designs for Nkrumah are more well-known because of their prominence. The gold leaf on the Chair of State has largely flaked away. In an effort to make the gold on their chairs more long-lasting, the Divine Steps workshop uses gold foil instead of gold leaf. Gold foil is thicker than gold leaf, which is difficult to apply, flakes and wears away more easily. The workshop then coats the desired parts of the chair with a lacquer they then bake at a local auto body shop to seal the gold and paint.

The entire Ghanaian coat of arms graces the top of the Steps Divine chair for the President of Ghana (Fig. 21). Real *kente* cloth graces the back and seat of this chair. The way the adinkra symbol forms the outline of the back cushion is reminiscent of the Vice President's Chair created for Nkrumah's commission in 1960.<sup>46</sup> Danso would like to give the Divine Steps's Presidential Chair to the Office of the President without charge. Representatives have come to consider the chair, but

<sup>46</sup>See Abbey, 54-55 (footnote 43).



as of 2014, they have not yet officially accepted it. An eagle also appears on a drawing of a chair for the American president, however it is positioned similar to the eagle found on the Great Seal of the United States (Fig. 22). Instead of angels on the stiles, a Statue of Liberty alights both. Torch flames emanate from the ends of the armrests, and the front legs are supported by the Greek figure of Atlas bearing the world of the heavens on his shoulders. In all these chairs leadership and spiritual symbols co-mingle. The religious symbols may include Christian angels, Akan *adinkra* symbols or Greek titans, but the message that leadership and spirituality are linked remains consistent.

Creative imagery abounds. The workshop built four other subchief's chairs, each represented by an image on the chair back and repeated on the front skirt – a palm nut tree, an eagle, a man carrying legs, and a cannon respectively (Fig. 23). The original purpose for a *hwedom* chair was as the 'war chair'.<sup>47</sup> According to Danso, the cannon depicted on the back and skirt of one of the subchief's chair was a motif chosen by Oware (Fig. 24). The front legs and armrests are comprised from two real double-barrel shotguns. Danso stated that 'the white man brought his canon to the bush, and the bush was stronger than the canon, referring to the eventual local defeat over the British hegemony through independence'.<sup>48</sup> In this way, the imagery on the chair exudes a similar message as the Chair of State and Seat of State.

### Comparing Contemporary Chairs

Steps Divine creates the most elaborate chairs I've seen in Ghana thus far. Danso says he was initially inspired by the animal-print chairs in his living room (see Figs. 10 and 23). These he purchased from a now-defunct store in Accra's Circle market where the Lebanese owner imported carved furniture from Lebanon. Other carpentry workshops in southern Ghana are creating elaborate chairs for locals and foreigners. Twin brothers Anthony Kakra and Isaac Kesse Aidoo are Christians who run Antique Woodworks, a furniture shop located in Nungua, a town situated on the coastal road between Labadi and Tema (Fig. 25). For 15 years these brothers have made custom chairs, beds, dining tables and other furniture items. No chairs were on display when I visited the workshop, but the brothers shared a photo album of their work.

According to Isaac, the chiefs come to the workshop and tell them how they want their chair (Fig. 26). Often the chiefs will bring pictures for the carvers to imitate. Though each is unique, they all incorporate floral and vegetal motifs, and sometimes animal and human motifs relating to their community or family symbols (Fig. 27). None of these chairs incorporated *adinkra* symbols. The level of detail, elaboration and color do not meet the quality of the Steps Divine chairs. The use of bright yellow paint also does not create the same strong visual effect that real gold communicates in terms of prosperity and power. Chairs by Antique Woodworks for pastors may include only floral designs or a cross on the chair back and actually more closely resemble governor's chairs, substituting the coat of arms for the cross (Figs. 28-29, see Fig. 6).

The amount of decoration generally depends upon what the patron can afford. Chiefs and pastors find out about Antique Woodworks by driving by the shop, which is visible from the often congested coastal highway, or by word of mouth. Unlike Steps Divine, Antique Woodworks does not exhibit at trade shows, or have a website or email. Yet, these chairs are more affordable than Steps Divine's artwork.

Isaac and Anthony showed me an example of one of the image sheets a patron brought to them (Fig. 30). This Norwegian patron commissioned a chair like the one at the upper left of Figure 30. The workshop created the chair and kept the sheet as inspiration for future patrons. These elaborate European chairs appear to be ecclesiastical seats used by high-ranking clergy of the Christian church.

<sup>47</sup>Ross, *Royal Arts of the Akan*, p 144 (see footnote 17).

<sup>48</sup>Osabarima Appiah Danso II, interview by author, 14 April 2012.



Unfortunately, the brothers could not remember the function for the Norwegian's chair. Antique Woodworks has created many chairs and other pieces of furniture for clientele outside of Ghana, including those from Norway, Germany, Denmark, Britain, the United States, Canada and Australia. Additionally, the brothers boast that a store in Norway sells their furniture. The brothers filled a shipping container and sent the goods abroad.

Steps Divine will also sell chairs to other patrons than those for the Okyenhene. However, Oware told me in 2014, that Steps Divine had only sold one. With prices ranging from \$1,800 for a Good Shepherd themed chair to \$3,000 for a wedding chair, not everyone, even a chief, can afford Danso's chairs (Fig. 31). The workshop has a website with pictures of some of his chairs, a phone number and his email address (none of which works on a regular basis). His website in 2012 stated that Steps Divine Furniture Carvings are '[experts] in master piece of hand carved furnitures for presidency, kings, queens, prince & princesses.'<sup>49</sup>

### **Divine Steps within a Ghanaian modernity**

The trajectory of the high-back arm chair in Ghana since its introduction on the coast three centuries ago is one in which the leadership symbol has become more elaborate and popular amongst local secular and religious leaders, and the occasional tourist. The Ghanaian Baroque style appears to be at its zenith in the artworks created by Steps Divine Furniture Carvings.

The form and style of the governor's chair was first appropriated by Akan chiefs who commissioned them from their personal workshops. For Nkrumah's commission, a team of artists took this appropriation further by creatively combining this European leadership form with Akan symbols of rulership, linking it with independence through new nation-state emblems. In the Chair of State, they added *adinkra* to protect and guide the leader. Most contemporary carpentry shops produce these *akonkromfi/hwedom* chairs upon occasional request from chiefs, pastors and tourists. Steps Divine is unusual as a workshop begun out of such a commission and later adding options for potential outside patronage. This business, which has not been lucrative, is supported by Danso's other pursuits.

Divine Steps chairs are unique for their ingenious combination of motifs, including leadership symbols such as leopards and canons, and religious emblems like Akan *adinkra*, Christian angels and crosses, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and even Greek Gods. The link of rulership with spiritual guidance and protection connect these chairs with Akan chief's stools. The contemporary twist borrows images from daily life, including those from the popular movement of Ghana's Christian prosperity churches. Danso, who suffered personal health issues in 2011, was inspired to link his desires for good health and prosperity with his faith to create this specialized workshop. Prosperity faith intertwines with these Akan leadership chairs through the profusion of power images.

Despite the appropriation of forms and images from outside cultures, Divine Steps chairs are the product of a 300-year-old tradition that speaks to the confident, symbolic strength of Akan seats of power. Yet this is a confidence that opens the tradition to the appropriation of forms and images with histories in other cultural worlds, including Christianity, in the development of a contemporary Akan modernity.

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<sup>49</sup>Osabarima Appiah Danso II, "Steps Divine Furniture Carvings," [www.stepshandcarvedfurniture.getafricaonline.com](http://www.stepshandcarvedfurniture.getafricaonline.com) (accessed 15 September 2012).