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# Masks, Elephants, and Djembe Drums: Craft as Historical Experience in Ghana

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## **Abstract**

This article analyzes craft in a national culture and tourist art center in Ghana. Honing in on three distinct, coexisting craft worlds—a handicraft market, commercial woodcarving, and the production of djembe drums—it examines craft's mediating role between political economic regimes and generational subjectivities. I argue that craft forms, the rules that define them, and the identities they produce emerge in particular historical formations, and I explore conflicts over artistry as generational differences of experience between cohorts of Ghanaian men negotiating their place in national and global systems. In this context, I focus on the djembe drum as a contentious artifact that objectifies predicaments of Ghanaian men in the current neoliberal moment.

**Keywords:** Ghana, tourism, politics of culture, neoliberalism, tourist art, masculinity, djembe drum, wood-carving

Upon entering the Accra Arts Center, one expects to see a range of craft objects from Ghana and the West African subregion. At first glance, it is surprising to find instead young men making a single object—the djembe drum—seemingly everywhere one looks. Layers of sawdust from the intense sanding of the drum shells cover everything, the dust, like time, making the presence of djembe seem essential to the nature of the place. In fact, the drums came to the Arts Center very recently, at the turn of the millennium, where they joined—and altered the position of—several pre-existing artisanal trades. This article explores the surprising history of this craft form, contextualizing it through the histories of two pre-existing activities: woodcarving and the market trade in handicrafts. Each of these entered the Arts Center by being reframed as “national culture” at a particular historical moment, in order “to portray the [Ghanaian] cultural image to the world,” to quote a bureaucrat who worked at the Arts Center in 1965. Through this analysis, I renew an argument made by Walter Benjamin ([1936] 1968): that politico-economic regimes produce new forms of art and technology, which in turn produce historically contingent forms of subjectivity, perception, and ways of being in the world. Located at the intersection of individual experience and social formations, art—and craft—allow us to look both ways.<sup>1</sup>

The handicraft trade and commercial carving both emerged in Accra during the colonial period. They were incorporated into

the Arts Center, and transformed, under the PNDC regime (1979, 1981–2001), which positioned “culture” at the heart of the African national project, drawing inspiration from the vision of Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana’s first leader (1952–66, independence 1957). In contrast, the djembe is visible evidence of a new political regime—neoliberalism. Free market conditions enforced by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in the 1980s have led to privatization and globalization of state cultural enterprises. Although craft might seem marginal to politics, I argue that it is not. In Ghana, it has been crucial to national culture and nation-building under the British and the new independent state alike, and it remains so in the neoliberal era. The three craft forms I discuss were shaped by their own historical trajectories but coexist in the Arts Center, creating its particular “chronotope”: a disjunctive overlap of profoundly different ideologies, temporalities, and relations between labor and identity.

Further, the politics and economics that elevate distinct craft forms are at the nexus of the national and the global. Every object at the Arts Center exists in an intercultural arena, even those things which also have an indigenous market. At the Arts Center, all products are resignified in dialog with a foreign gaze. The local itself is an intercultural construct, and, although it is typically viewed as a materialization of the local, craft is in fact intercultural, shaped by colonial and postcolonial encounters. At the most basic level, foreigners want pieces of Africa, and locals design and make in response to this need. The three forms most prevalent at the Arts Center are wood elephants, “traditional” masks, and djembe drums—

none of which are regularly put to use by their producers.<sup>2</sup> All are commodities for export (either beyond national borders or into expatriate homes). In the eyes of consumers, each of these tourist craft objects stands for Ghana and/or Africa in a way that producers do not share. Yet the objects are used by their producers, in another sense: making craft is a way for Ghanaian men to attempt to solve contemporary dilemmas of personhood, specifically masculinity and citizenship. My examination of masks, elephants, and drums aims to show the shifting, historically located, and deeply intercultural shape of these dilemmas, and of craft, before and after the spread of neoliberalism to Ghana.

### The Arts Center

At first glance, the Arts Center is visually chaotic: different objects piled on top of each other, or rather, what seems to be the same object over and over. Steiner (1994), quoting Mintz (1964), describes the market at first glance as a place of visual and conceptual chaos to the outsider (cf. Kapchan 1996; Stoller 2002). But after a time spent dutifully watching, a sense of order begins to emerge. "Far from the initial feeling of disorder and chaos," writes Steiner, "the marketplace is in fact a scrupulously structured social space, in which every object has its rightful owner and in which every person has a specific status and a recognized set of social and economic roles" (1994: 18).

The Arts Center is one of ten national cultural sites that support and showcase local arts and act as tourist art markets; alongside the Kumasi Cultural Center, it is the largest, and best known (as they are in Ghana's two major cities). The Center sits

on valuable real estate in the city's oldest section, one shaped by intercultural contact since 1500.<sup>3</sup> Today, this bustling area is filled with car and pedestrian traffic, thriving street trade, government buildings, monuments, businesses, and a quartet of large markets. Inside the Center's enclosure, however, the consumerism and rush of downtown Accra is replaced by slowness, intimacy, intensity, and quiet—tourist craft is not something most Ghanaians buy.

Yet the Arts Center is also a microcosm of the city as a whole, a palimpsest. Its makeup reflects the influence of political regimes including the Ga kingdom, the European slave trade, the British Gold Coast colony, and Kwame Nkrumah's African socialist regime. Since the colonial era, the capital has been a destination for many migrants from the rural hinterlands, where small-scale farming does not earn enough to "move the family forward"—upward mobility happens only through formal education, which requires school fees, which require money. In the contact zone of the capital, craft from the regions is transformed into national culture and international tourist art. Its producers hope that this shift in status will earn enough money to prevent the next generation from turning to the same devalued forms of manual labor.

Distinct trade histories link the various Arts Center craft worlds to ethnic and religious networks, craft traditions, and kin groups throughout West Africa. They include Hausa and other Muslim "stranger" groups of handicraft traders, Asante textile traders, Frafra basket makers, Ewe carvers, Francophone merchant-producers, and most recently, a Rasta youth culture that produces djembe drums.<sup>4</sup> Visually, this means that the

Center is full of cloth, musical instruments, paintings, posters, carved wood, and brass, leather, and silver objects of an immense diversity. The shops fall into three basic organizational structures: the Handicraft Market, the Textile Market, and Carvers' Lane. These areas spread out over a large, sandy site enclosed by a concrete wall on three sides and the ocean on the fourth.

The Handicraft Market is located by making a straight shot deep into the plot from the main gate. Arranged like a typical *suk*, it is a sprawl of over 130 metal-roofed, open-faced shops that face onto narrow lanes shaded by trees (Figure 1). Several

Muslim groups, known collectively as Hausa by outsiders, sell handicrafts from throughout West Africa, some of which are produced within the Center but most of which come from outside.<sup>5</sup> Older men and their young male assistants sell highly polished wooden carvings (including statuettes, animal sets, bookends, and napkin holders), old and new masks and stools, baskets, leather goods (including bags, hats, rugs, and bolsters), jewelry (made of metal, beads, or bone), and other items. The one good that is noticeably absent is cloth. This is because there is a separate Textile Market, which sits to the left of the Handicraft Market. It too is divided



**Fig 1** The Handicraft Market, selling a variety of craft from the West African region. Here, masks, beads, calabash work, and Akan brasswork is seen. Photograph: Ruti Talmor.

into stalls facing out onto narrow lanes, is predominantly male, and is run according to a hierarchical system of older masters and younger assistants. A strict rule prohibits the two markets from encroaching upon one another. As in the Handicraft Market, it is hard to see the actual structures, for every available surface from floor to ceiling is covered with cloth, mainly the bright colors and geometric patterns of *Asante kente*.<sup>6</sup> Children's clothes, men's shirts, baseball hats, and wallets with kente patterns share space with heavily embroidered women's dresses and headdresses made of bright batik.<sup>7</sup>

To the left of the Textile Market is a boundary, which divides this part of the

Center from a large, sun-baked, sandy lot with a football field in its center and the sea at its back. Facing this field, some distance away from all the action near the Main Gate, is Carvers' Lane, which despite its name is comprised of several trades (it is formally designated the Producer Section). Like the rest of the Center, its workforce is almost entirely male. Ewe carvings are the oldest craft production in the Center and give the Lane its name (Figure 2). The most common products are elephants of mahogany and rosewood, ranging in height from 1 to 30 inches. Other objects include relief tablets, linguist staffs, figurines, and Afrocentric household items such as napkin holders



**Fig 2** Carvers' Lane. Doors to the workshops can be seen on the right-hand side of the picture, boys making djembe under the trees on the left. Photograph: Ruti Talmor.

in the shape of stools, and bookends with adinkra symbols.<sup>8</sup> Through a similar kin/village network, Frafra people weave “Bolga” baskets made of brightly dyed grass straw (named after their regional capital, Bolgatanga).<sup>9</sup> Two other networks exist in Carvers’ Lane. In several shops dispersed throughout the Lane, Francophone economic migrants and political refugees have introduced new forms of craft from their countries, including mudcloth, small percussive instruments, and calabash work. Their shops are pan-national, with Malians, Togolese, Ivoirians, and Burkinabes united by a regional Francophone identity working separately but sharing space and contracts. A similar mixed group has been built up by youth around the production and performance (and sometimes the sale and export) of djembe, the Center’s hottest commodity.

### **Elephants: Ewe Carving in Accra and the Making of an Intercultural Craft**

“You know, this place used to be called Polo Grounds,” an old man told me one day as he looked out upon the sand from one of the shops in Carvers’ Lane. He had come looking for a cane, and had stopped at one of the drum shops, too tired to go on. One of the shop boys had gone to the market to fetch him some canes to look at, and while he waited he spoke. “It was only white people here, and if a black boy came, he would be sent away.”

Colonial Accra was an informally segregated city, and the land on which the Arts Center sits was the British Officers Club, a space of white leisure and entertainment. And on the High Street, just outside the gate to the club, on the main

thoroughfare of British Accra, Hausa dealers were selling “craft”—masks and other carved wooden objects—to their foreign consumer base. These carvings came from two sources: long-distance Hausa trade routes and a local commercial carving industry by Ewe people who had migrated to the coastal cities.

When Ghana became independent in 1957, Kwame Nkrumah took over the Officers Club, converting it into an Arts Center with a gallery and a theater at its core. The Center, in this nascent stage, was organized around forms of high art, which merged Afro- and Eurocentric themes, genres, and media according to the dictates of Nkrumah’s vision of a new, modern pan-African culture (a project shared by other newly independent governments on the continent). The craftsmen who define the Arts Center today arrived in the early 1980s under J.J. Rawlings’s PNDC regime, which drew inspiration from Nkrumah, again supporting culture as part of a larger centralizing national project. Marxist playwright and scholar Mohammed Ben Abdallah was placed in charge of the cultural activities of the Center, and transformed it by bringing in both the producers and dealers of traditional craft.<sup>10</sup>

From its beginning, commercial carving was an intercultural art aimed at a foreign audience. In the Northern Volta Region, rich in precious hardwoods, a rich carving tradition developed.<sup>11</sup> Men supplemented farming and fishing with woodcarving, producing functional objects such as stools, spoons, drums, and toys alongside sacred objects. As European and American tourism followed the historic path of the European trade in gold and slaves to Ghana’s coast, carvers moved to coastal cities to “chase”

the business. By the 1950s, a community of migrants from the region was carving in Accra. Arriving with his brother in the 1970s, master carver Godwin Ametewe found a network of Ewe workshops interlinked by cross-apprenticeships dispersed through the center of town, a Ewe map of Accra.

Ewe carvings changed in function once contextualized in an intercultural city. They became mementos, tourist art, souvenirs for European visitors, pidgin objects representing African life, to be carried home. According to master carver Godwin Ametewe,

When the Europeans came in, they developed an interest in our culture, our music, our dance, our everything. The way we eat. The way we sleep. The way we put up our buildings. The way we wear our clothes. So we took advantage of that; we put our art in those types of objects so that when they buy it they will keep on remembering what we were doing. So that's how commercial carving per se started.

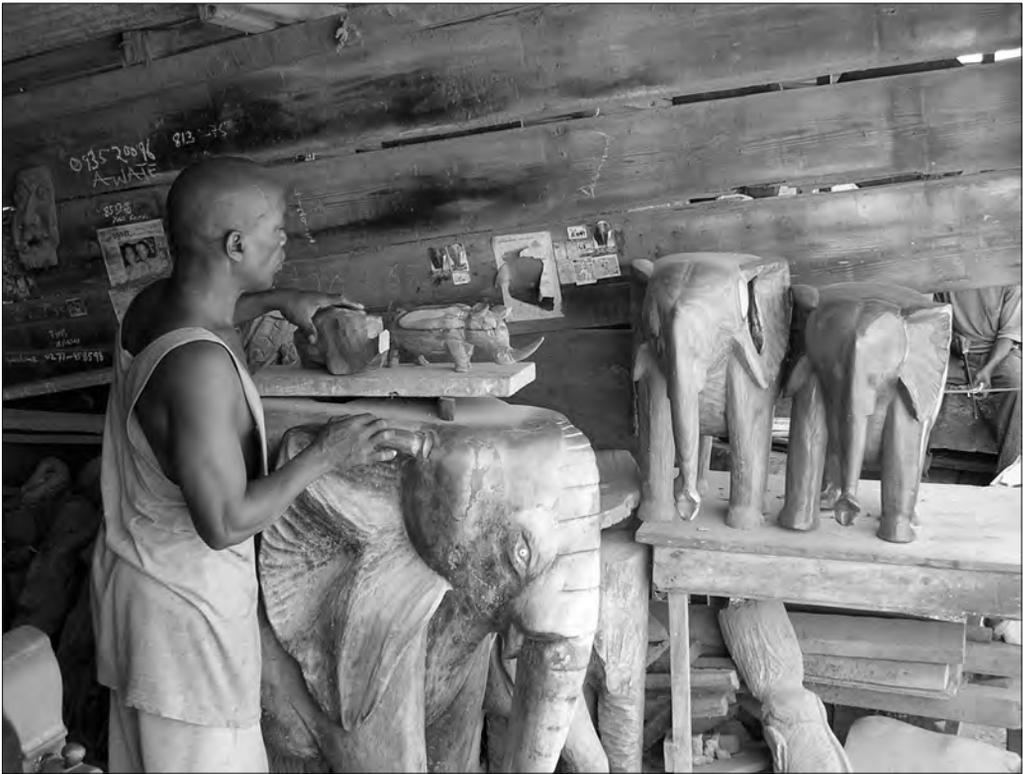
But the intercultural nature of the trade goes further. According to Ametewe's elder informants, an African-American traveling trader mediated between the worlds of Ewe village carving and international curios. He taught the carvers to craft the elephants, unity tables, and other tourist art objects they continue to make today. This man had learned carving in neighboring Ivory Coast. In Accra, Ametewe explains, he taught the carvers not only how to make objects for the tourist gaze, but also "how to look for customers, how to spend your money, how to invest your money. So this work is not learned from the Volta region. It started

from Accra: through United States, through Cote d'Ivoire, to Accra. That was before independence" (Figures 3 and 4).

Nonetheless, like all places of learning, the workshops were sites of social reproduction, profoundly shaped by pre-existing Ewe social relations. Here, elders shaped youth into men, through the transmission of broader cultural knowledge. Carving therefore created an identity that transcended labor. Through a strict six-year apprenticeship system, the workshops became a means for Ewe morality and ethics to be passed on and for elder Ewe men to continue to shape and control the products of youth's labor and energy.

When Minister Ben Abdallah called for craftsmen to come to the Arts Center, the first to arrive were master carver C.K. Awoonor and his brother, who later left to become a pastor. They became a point of contact for many other carvers, who left their workshops and joined them in a common shed under the large mahogany tree near the Main Gate. Working together at long tables in the open air, with boys running around doing errands, the carvers and their work were the first visible representation of the Center a visitor encountered.<sup>12</sup> In the early 1980s, due to overcrowding "under the tree," they (and other craft producers who had joined them) were relocated to present-day Carvers' Lane.

"Carving takes time," Awoonor once told me. He stood at his corner of the high table he shared with the two other carvers in his shop, his perfectly calculated blows drawing an elephant shape out of a hunk of mahogany fastened in his clamp. In one hand he held the fist-shaped mallet he had carved



**Fig 3** Elephants and hippos, two of the most popular carving subjects, neither of which exists in the Volta region from where the carvers hail. Photograph: Ruti Talmor.

out of ebony, in the other, his chisel point made and followed a path through the wood. Long shards of wood, thick and solid at one end and curling thin at the other, gathered at his feet (Figure 5).

Awoonor was referring both to the time it takes to learn the trade and to carve an object (up to a week from start to finish). Time is a measure of value: it measures dedication, morality, artistry, and discipline. But it is also a measure of what has been lost.<sup>13</sup> In recent years, carvers cannot make a living at the Arts Center. Their turnaround is too slow. A French Canadian dealer I

interviewed in Awoonor's shop told me that in recent years the whole market has shifted to Asia, where the elephants and other "African" objects Ewe carvers make can be purchased for a much cheaper price from Thais. No carver ever mentioned the Asian market to me. When Awoonor and Ametewe discussed how the market had fallen, they spoke of competition in more local terms. They described the government's failure to support craftspeople, and the poor in general. They talked about the tensions between carvers and dealers of carved artifacts, both of whom were trying



**Fig 4** A tool set. Carvers have explained that German missionaries to the Volta introduced currently used tool sets. Photograph: Ruti Talmor.

to sell the same thing to a limited client base. And they talked about how djembe had taken over the Arts Center and how its young producers had driven away the clientele.

### **Masks: Hausa Finishers**

It is Ramadan, and several traders from the Hausa Market have joined Al Hajji in the rest that attends the fast. Wearing long robes, they lounge on the woven mats that cover the sandy ground inside the Muslim prayer area in front of his shop in Carvers' Lane. This is a dealer's shop, and it bears

the distinctive objects and arrangements of Hausa Market aesthetics. Instead of the raw materials that one would see in a producer's shop, Al Hajji's is filled with finished objects which in their diversity create a miniature museum of West African tourist art: polished Ewe carvings stand next to Asante brass figurines; elongated, brightly painted "colo" statuettes and distressed stools of various "tribal" types are propped against chipped Hair Salon signs (Figure 6). But production is taking place outside, on the benches under the tree, where four of Al Hajji's boys are applying beads and cowry shells to large,



**Fig 5** Awoonor works on a teak female figurine, using a hand-carved ebony mallet. People regularly ask if they can buy the mallet. Photograph: Ruti Talmor.

round tables. This is unusual, in that finishing is not usually seen in the Market. It typically takes place in workshops in Zongo Lane, the Muslim quarter not far from the Arts Center:

Al Hajji himself, a respected member of the Accra Central Hausa Community and respected elder of both the Lane and Market communities, sits cross-legged inside the prayer area. He alternates between Hausa and pidgin as we speak, and is assisted in translation by one of his boys. He recounts the history of how the Hausas brought the handicraft trade: “You see this kind of mask.

My master, one of our fathers, created this mask, and then I learned how to do it. Then I teach more than 200 boys. Then it came here [to the Arts Center].”

Al Hajji knows I am doing an apprenticeship with the Ewe carvers. He also knows that I am interested in history. It is important to him that I recognize Hausa authorship, too. Al Hajji instructs boys to bring him masks from different corners of the shop. For each, he names the type of wood and the type of sandpaper that was used, explains how the paint is mixed, the materials by which a piece is distressed. He



**Fig 6** Al Hajji's shop, with its marketlike array of craft items. In the background is a container waiting to be filled and shipped abroad. Photograph: Ruti Talmor.

explains beadwork, staining, metalwork. He tells me the Hausa names for everything, and listens as I repeat them back to him.

Although he is talking to me, the traders and the boys working under the tree all listen attentively. The boys are too young to have witnessed this history, but it is a point of contention for all Hausa craftspeople, particularly salient now because, in recent years, the trade has been taken over by educated Ghanaians who formerly belittled it but now have discovered “the gold mine in it” and control its export. Ametewe corroborates Al Hajji's account:

Then, it is *only* Hausa people. Hausa people. And a few of the North. Formerly when you are doing this work they say it's one of Luciferian work, they call it *abonsan* work—evil work. Because they associate carving to idols and evil spirits. Those people that call themselves educated ones, they do not even want to see what is called carving.

The handicraft trade developed on the High Street, the heart of British life but also a colonial contact zone where itinerant merchants sold goods to the English.



**Fig 7** In a Hausa workshop in Zongo Lane, a boy “finishes” a mask with patterned, cut aluminum. Photograph: Ruti Talmor.

Positioned within Ghana as landless strangers, Hausa migrants settled in *zongos*, “stranger quarters” allocated to them by the British. Accra’s largest and oldest *zongo* was just off the High Street. Here, Hausa people created the city’s handicraft trade. These men were not carvers themselves, but they obtained carvings abroad or from local workshops dispersed throughout the city.

Hausa dealers would buy carvings from Ewe carvers in an unfinished state. “Finishing”—the process by which a raw carving or mask is stained, polished, colored,

aged, beaded, or sheathed in tooled metal foil—developed as a separate art, practiced by a completely different group. Most of this work was (and continues to be) done in workshops in the various Hausa neighborhoods of Accra (Figure 7). The traders would then “go to bungalow,” bringing objects to white homes for sale.

Master Mustapha Mohammed, today recognized as one of the great Hausa designers, recalls his time as a boy in Zongo Lane. At the time, an intense level of polish was popular. Receiving unsanded

carvings from the older men, the boys would sand and polish objects to a high gloss before delivering the goods to the High Street, where these would be sold to Europeans.

According to an urban legend popular with people at the Arts Center, another intercultural moment created the local handicraft market. In 1957, British monarch Queen Elizabeth II came to pay her respects to the new independent state, admired the itinerant Hausa merchants who sold masks in British Accra, and suggested that they settle on the High Street. According to Ametewe, the place came to be known as Hausa Market; the dealers "mounted small kiosks along the roadside [and] that place became a marketplace . . . So any time an expatriate needs something, they come to them. So, that is the place where the *real* business start from—High Street."

In about 1980, the dealers were asked to come to the Center; both to clear the road and to form part of the PNDC's centralized national culture project. Eventually, as their number grew, they were allocated the space in the back, where the Market now stands. One to six men may be present in each shop at any time, not including customers. Typically, young assistants, or "boys," will open, set up, dismantle, and close the shops and take care of most affairs while elder owners, or "masters," will stop by for several hours a day. It is hard to see the actual architecture of the shops: all available surfaces—walls, floor, doorframes, tables, and ceilings—are covered with objects for display.

### **Djembe: Youth Takeover<sup>14</sup>**

By 2001, expatriate Accra had shifted northeast of the High Street. The bulk of

customers were now separated from the Arts Center by several miles of traffic and often opted to buy in shops that opened in the new neighborhoods. Business at the Center went downhill and carvers were forced to split their shops, take in tenant carvers, or, at worst, rent or sell their shops and go back to the village, which they originally left in search of money and better opportunities for their children. In the first years of the new millennium, the newcomers who replaced the carvers were almost always djembe producers.

Though local drum sets are produced and sold at the Arts Center, the djembe originally hails from Guinea and Mali.<sup>15</sup> How did this foreign drum come to be the most popular item at a national arts center? How did it come to "stand" for the touristic experience of Ghana, the "proof of having been there" (Fabian 1990)? The drum had to travel to the West in order to attain its current status as a quintessential African commodity. Following one of the various global flows of black culture, it was popularized in the 1980s and 1990s, first by the creation of Francophone African national ballets and then by the rise of world music, notably the drumming and teaching of Guinean master drummers.<sup>16</sup> By the time it "returned" to Africa, the djembe was an intercultural object, its meaning transformed by its performance for foreigners. From being an artifact attached to particular locales and groups, it became an icon of Africa as a homogenous whole. So popular is the drum today that it is the source of its own touristscape, with people traveling to Ghana explicitly to attend drumming programs but also to take part in the broader interculture that has developed around these. Similar

youth cultures can be found throughout the tourist zones of Africa and the Caribbean. At the Arts Center, youth make traditional instruments, perform traditional dances, and represent themselves as the guardians of tradition who salvage its lessons and live accordingly.

Yet this tradition does not belong to any particular ethnic group. Arriving in the city, previous generations of youth seeking to become men had also drawn upon “African” culture in this way. In the historical ebb and flow of intercultural craft genres, the djembe was the newest objectification of a foreign, imagined Africa, thus challenging notions of authenticity. Were imitations of foreign tribal objects made by devout Hausa Muslims for British expatriates authentic? Was the technique of carving an elephant, taught by an African-American traveler to a Ewe carver who had never seen an elephant, authentic? Now, the new generation was doing the same—turning to a tourist craft born of current global flows to fulfill local needs and desires. Neoliberal removal of state funds had forced many craftsmen out of the Arts Center, carving out a place for djembe as objectifications of privatized entrepreneurship (cf. Shipley 2009).

From the beginning, djembe at the Arts Center were made for export. Elsewhere, the drum is played by master drummers and made by master drum makers as part of ongoing indigenous traditions. According to most reports, the drum arrived at the Arts Center as elephant carvings had done, brought in 1998 by Ajete, a traveling craft trader who had learned of the drum’s enormous popularity with tourists in Ghana’s neighboring country, Ivory Coast. Returning to Ghana, he set up a shop in the back of

the Arts Center and began making drums. A boy whose mother had a well-known food stall in the Arts Center began to hang around the trader, learned from him, and then began to teach his friends. By 1999, there was a critical mass of these boys at the Center—boys of the underclass, whose families could not put them through school; boys looking for a way through “the system” without formal education.

In contrast with the age-hierarchized apprenticeship system that traditionally shapes craft knowledge transmission (as seen in Ewe carving and the Hausa market), youth at the Arts Center learned drum making from other youth. Jeremiah, one of the first to learn, explains:

At that time, there was no international drum like djembe at Arts Center. They only had kpanlogo and the other sets of instruments from Ghana. [In 1997], djembe was introduced as the best instrument in Ghana, so we all tried to go through that. Because djembe was selling well—all the people coming from all over the world; they all want djembe. It was going through Europe, the USA, Asia, in different parts of the world, you know. Ghana is very small and our instrument—kpanlogo—can’t go far. But this djembe came from all over Africa, so we tried to learn the djembe too.

The boys who became drum makers at the Arts Center were the children of men like the carvers and dealers who struggled in craft so as to put their children through school, only their fathers were unable or unwilling to financially support their children. In fact, when youth explained their turn to djembe, they presented the decision as a

direct response to this lack of support by the men in their lives.

“Big men—what do they want you to do?” John asked me rhetorically one day, after yet another conflict had erupted between youth and adult members of Carvers’ Lane. John came to Accra from the north, leaving school and hustling at the Arts Center to put his younger siblings, especially his sister, through school.

There is no work outside. And if you have been learning in a shop for four, five years and you have a fight with the master and he kicks you out—where are you supposed to go? Things are worse now than they were before. They are not even giving jobs to the unemployed. And the market people give you so little for a drum, but sometimes you need the money so you sell for a bad price. Or somebody else will underquote you because they need the money. Here they are fighting small boys when they should be fighting with all these outside people.

Here John makes an explicit link between “big men” of all kinds—the masters in the producers’ row, the market dealers who buy drums from youth, Arts Center management, the Ghanaian government. Even though these groups’ relations are defined by conflicts and vast power inequalities, for youth they are alike. Big men do not take care of small boys as they should: in exchange for youths’ allegiance, respect, and labor; they should offer economic support and protection, a familiar patron–client relationship throughout West Africa that goes far beyond craft. In the boys’ view, big men left them to fend for themselves and then blamed them for doing so.

But when Hausa and Ewe elders, often at odds in Arts Center life, spoke about the youth there, there was no empathy in their stances; they stood united in their disapproval. This is, first, because djembe making, in their opinion, is not a “proper” artisanal trade; second, because the craft—taught by youth to youth—sidesteps the whole system of apprenticeship which gives elders power, respect, authority, and control of youth’s labor; and third, and most importantly, because djembe have ruined the business for everyone else at the Arts Center.

First is the issue of artistry. “To become a carver is no small thing,” Ametewe once said when I asked him if djembe makers were masters of their craft. In a carving context, artistry is linked to longevity, to time (dedication, discipline, the patient acquisition of skill, and hence the right to authorship). By contrast, it takes little time to learn how to make a djembe worthy of the tourist trade. Drum making is a process that is broken up into several steps, only a few of which require much skill. The most difficult aspect is carving out the shell, or frame, which must be round, smooth, uncracked, and correctly proportioned. Professional carvers in several villages outside of Accra do this, most notably in the village of Okurase. Once the shell is carved, purchased, and transported to Accra, the rest of the work is done by boys. The shell is decorated, most frequently with carved relief designs, but sometimes also with beading, paint, or metalwork (Figure 8). At several points, it needs to be sanded down. This is taxing physical work; one is paid for the effort involved, not the skill. While this work is being done, the owner of the drum (almost always distinct from the producers of



**Fig 8** Carving designs onto the djembe frames. Photograph: Ruti Talmor.

the shell) has purchased two other elements, the leather—goat or calf skin—and the metal rings.<sup>17</sup> The stiff, dried animal hide is soaked, while the rings are covered with cloth and rope is woven in between them. This is done partly off the drum and partly on it. The softened hide is wrapped around the third ring and dressed onto the drum. The two roped rings are then mounted onto the drum (Figures 9–11). “Pulling” is done

by holding the drum in place between one’s legs and weaving a stick through the ropes in order to pull the leather tight. This work too is physically taxing (Figure 12). Once it is done, the drum is placed out in the sun so that the hide will dry. It is then shaved of its hair using a standard razor blade (Figure 13).

Elders say drum making is “cheap.” The value of something, as Simmel (1978) reminds us, is determined by our difficulty



**Fig 9** Working with djembe rings. Photograph: Ruti Talmor.



**Fig 10** Working with leather. Photograph: Ruti Talmor.

in acquiring it, by the space that divides desire from attainment. To learn djembe making does not require time, effort, dues, or fees for an apprenticeship. As such, it is not worth very much. This, of course, was the appeal for boys with no money, no connections, no family support, and no money for their next meal.<sup>18</sup>

Providing his own version of a Marxist theory of labor, carver Ametewe explained,

You know, djembe work is very cheap, provided you have the capital. There are people who do the carving, there are people who do sandpapering, there are people who will put the skin on it. So, it's there that work becomes a division of labor.

Labor loses its original cause—artistry—and becomes simply a means for survival. Ametewe goes on,

Like the weaving—people take that as their profession. They do not take the work from the beginning and complete it. You do a little, you take small money. Not like carving, whereby you have to start at the beginning and do the polishing at the end. A lot of young people, they are lazy somehow; they want the easiest way to life. So they decided to jump into djembe making.

Carver Afrane Dawson, who now lives in the UK and deals primarily in export, was the first to hire many of the boys who now make djembe at the Arts Center. Younger than the other carvers, he too had been an unmoored boy who picked up traditional craft by untraditional means. This made him sympathetic to the youth roaming around the Arts Center; he took them in as “boys”—apprentices. Carving had given him

a chance, and he wanted to give that chance to them.

I would say about 60–70 percent of the boys over there were my boys. And a lot of them did not complete what they were learning. And you know, artwork, especially carving—if it is not given to you, you find it difficult to do it. That's why you see a lot [of] them now doing drums. Because it's only drums [with which] they can survive. They cannot do any other thing. And drums too—it's not—I do not call it—I in particular do not call it woodcarving. You just ship it and do a little design, just put the leather and pull, that kind of thing. So if you pick up somebody from even out of Arts Center, if you bring him there, teach him for a month, you see him doing it.

While Dawson understands the position of the youth, who do not have four to six years to learn carving, other carvers do not. Ametewe, for example, ascribes the boys' turn to djembe making as based not on need but on laziness and a lack of respect for elders.

You see, the younger generation nowadays, they do not want to live under any instruction. They want to live on their own. And djembe making is one of the cheapest things you can acquire. Within one day you can be able to master how to produce djembe. So because they do not want to stay under any instruction, under any disciplinary society, they choose the easier way around. That's why when you see them—as young as they are, they classify themselves as masters.



**Fig 11** Working with leather for djembe. Photograph: Ruti Talmor.



**Fig 12** Weaving a stick through the ropes to pull the djembe leather tight. Photograph: Ruti Talmor.



**Fig 13** Djembe and other drums awaiting shaving and shipment. Photograph: Ruti Talmor.

Ametewe signals the way djembe production subverts the apprenticeship system, which defines age relations and gives older men power. If a youth needs to learn what an elder knows, he must spend several years as a dependent, paying for his learning with labor rather than using that labor to build his own career. Djembe making, which can be learned in a day from other youth, directly challenges this system of big men and small boys. Such intergenerational relations extend far beyond the Arts Center, defining the life course of Ghanaian masculinities. As we have seen, they are crucial to why youth become djembe makers in the first place.

Thus to elders, the rise of djembe in the Center signals the destruction of a whole system of ethics, aesthetics, authority, and value. Enlarging on this point, one might say that the djembe objectify the destabilizing effects of contemporary space–time. As a globally circulating representation of Africa, it objectifies globalization, and as an alienated form of divided labor, requiring little time or talent to learn or execute, it objectifies capitalist time. Finally, as a commodity produced for a global market on privatized state terrain, it exemplifies neoliberalism. The elders of Carvers' Lane, shaped by an older system, cannot catch up. They are confronted daily with reminders

of their loss. Everywhere they look, they see drums. And they hear them, too: all over the Lane is the sound of drumming, atop the older, accustomed noises. As Dawson mused,

Arts Center is—it's changed now. At first it was like, you work, and you won't find it difficult to sell it. But as of now—the system is a little bit hard now. So everyone is looking for money, not thinking about the work that he is doing. But at first, a lot of people were thinking about the work that they were doing, you know? Now, everyone wants to make a drum and sell and make some money.

Artistry, ethics, and generational identity aside, elder men at the Arts Center denounce the djembe because its takeover of the Arts Center has been terrible for business. For some youth, of course, the new trade has been positively transformative, creating professional partnerships and personal relationships that have radically changed their life course. Others manage to get work weaving, skinning, or sandpapering drums. But there are many who don't find work. In the day-to-day scramble to survive, they often become hustlers. When tourists enter the Center, they are instantly surrounded by these youth, who have relationships with specific shops in the Handicraft Market, the Textile Market, or Carvers' Lane. If a boy succeeds, connects with a tourist, and convinces that person to go to one of his shops, he gets a “dash”—a small payment on the sale—from the shop owner. Hustling has given the Arts Center a bad reputation, so that today, many tourists buy their craft elsewhere under calmer conditions.<sup>19</sup> As Dawson explains mournfully,

the old times, when you calmly worked and perfected your craft, are gone.

## Conclusion

Perhaps surprisingly, the youth are no less ambivalent about djembe than their elders. They, too, wish for a future or imagine a past when more holistic forms of labor and personhood were possible. Certainly, for most of them, djembe production has been a step along the way rather than a lifelong identity, a way out of a system that gives them an unattainable life script. For a boy to attain the status of an adult man, he must be fiscally independent and capable of supporting dependents himself. Yet neoliberal changes of the last two decades have put new pressures on the current generation, especially those of the underclass. Part of a growing global condition, Ghanaian youth cannot attain adulthood because they cannot afford to marry, purchase a house, and support a family. This generation is trapped in the present, poised between boyhood and manhood, unable to cross over. Boys whose parents cannot afford to send them to school or job training are stuck, and the alternative, craft, no longer pays as it once did. Youth's hand-to-mouth existence demands immediate returns; boys are forced to beg for work or for help, to take whatever is necessary. They are dependent in the most extreme way. As John explained,

You know, a lot of people think those who make drums are uneducated. Some of us here, we are all educated, even though we do not have that much level of education. Because of poverty, we can't make it up and we drop out. That does not mean that we do not have brains and we can't

challenge big man's sons or big man's daughter. But that is the thing. We do not have money to continue our education. So that is why we branch to the business side. So we can live day to day. So we can survive.

For carvers and dealers, djembe is a moving sign of the collapse of a way of life, masculinity, labor, and art. For poor, urban, Ghanaian youth, the drum offers a way out of their current condition, but one fraught with ambivalence. The djembe is, then, a double objectification: both of the desire to remake the world and of the loss inherent in that remaking.

## Notes

- 1 Support for the research on which this article is based was provided by the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Social Science Research Council, The Department of Anthropology at New York University, and the Center for Afro-American and African Studies at the University of Michigan. Support for the writing was provided by the Mellon Foundation. Portions of this article were presented as talks at the University of Michigan and Haverford College. My sincere thanks to Glenn Adamson and to the anonymous reviewer, whose careful reading, suggestions, and comments were extremely helpful.
- 2 I do not discuss the fourth prevalent item at the Center—cloth—because it has a very strong local value and market. However, as I discuss elsewhere, even such objects are resignified at the Arts Center.
- 3 The Center is located between two of Accra's three colonial trading forts, built by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century and subsequently occupied by the Dutch, the Swedes, the Danes, and finally the British. It was the only extant portion of Accra as late as the 1870s (Konadu-Agyemang 1998) and served as the commercial and governing center for the Ga kingdom (Hess 2000: 37). This was the "British Accra" of the High Colonial era, which contained the High Street, the old Polo Grounds, and the British Officers' Club.
- 4 The Hausa are a Sahelian people chiefly located in the West African regions of northern Nigeria and southeastern Niger, but diasporic communities exist throughout West Africa along centuries-old trade routes. Hausa is the *lingua franca* among Muslim West Africans; hence the market is called the Hausa market but in fact includes Mossi, Yoruba, and other West African Muslim groups. Frafra people live in Ghana's Upper East Region. Ewes hail from the southeast of Ghana, around Lake Volta. Ghana is surrounded by Francophone states, including Togo, Ivory Coast, and Burkina Faso. The Arts Center's youth culture includes young men from all the above communities.
- 5 Anthropologists and historians who have worked with diasporic Hausa communities in West Africa include Adamu (1978), Cohen (1969), Meillassoux (1971), Pellow (1999; 2002), Rouch (1956), and Schildkrout (1978). Hausa trade diasporas now extend as far as New York, where they have been studied by Stoller (2002). Most *zongos* include several Muslim groups, and Hausa serves as the *lingua franca*. Outsiders to the community perceive many of these people as Hausa. Thus, for instance, colonial documents regarding the ethnic makeup of the Accra Muslim community are inconclusive (Pellow 2002: 68 n.4; cf. Schildkrout 1978 for the Kumasi Zongo). Notable among these groups in Accra are Mossi people who bridge the Ghana-Burkina Faso border.
- 6 Kente is woven in long strips which are then sewn together. The strips consist of multicolored geometric designs in which gold (bright yellow) predominates. Kente is highly valued both locally and globally; it has come to stand not only for Ghana but also as a more general Afrocentric signifier. For studies, see Picton and Mack (1989) and Ross (1998). For more recent work on the role of cloth in West African societies, see Hendrickson (e.g. 1996) and Renne (1995); on the role of clothing and fashion, see Allman (2004) and Hansen (2000).

- 7 Less frequently, one can find Ewe and northern kente (with color schemes and patterns different from Asante kente); these are also highly valued locally if less well known globally. Malian and Burkinabe mudcloth and Fante Asafo flags have gained popularity recently as both tourist art and high-end collector items. Originally made by Bamana women in Mali, mudcloth—*bogolanfini*—is now a popular tourist item also produced in Burkina Faso. Designs are painted with iron-rich muds onto strips of unbleached cotton sewn together into cloth. Asafo flags—*frankaa*—are part of the Euro-inspired, locally modified ritual regalia associated with the military “companies” which developed in the various towns of Ghana’s Fante region in the eighteenth century.
- 8 For various Ghanaian groups, linguist staffs are part of chiefly regalia. The linguist—the speaker for the chief—often holds a wooden staff, its top a cast gold or bronze sculptural rendition of a proverb. Stools are another regional form of regalia. Adinkra symbols are a set of Akan glyphs representing morality proverbs. They have become national symbols and can be found on items ranging from presidential regalia to cloth and plastic chairs.
- 9 This is the only craft production at the Center made by women as well as men, but the latter are always masters of the shops.
- 10 Their arrival led to an expansion of the Center on to the farm and holy land to the east of the old club building.
- 11 A rich carving tradition thrives among Akan people throughout southern and central Ghana, and today, Hausa carving networks exist in Accra as well. Why the Arts Center is dominated by Ewe carvers is a topic for further study.
- 12 In a craft or more general work context, the term “boy” refers to a relational, structural position rather than biological age. Boys are apprentices, assistants, or helpers. They are the opposite of “masters,” the men who control the shop, its labor, and its products.
- 13 See Ferguson 1999 and Mains 2007 for parallel discussions of the ways in which recent economic developments have altered Zambians’ and Ethiopians’ senses of time.
- 14 The following analysis applies only to djembe production in a tourist art setting, not to drums made for professional musicians.
- 15 Many ethnic groups in Ghana have their own drum sets, which form part of distinct (often regional) musical traditions and differ greatly in sound and design. In southern Ghana alone, the Ewe, Asante, and Kpanlogo (Ga) sets are very well known.
- 16 See Berliner (2005), Castaldi (2006), Chernoff (1981), Flaig (2010), Polak (2005), Sunkett (1995). The djembe is a loud, versatile drum, which makes it easy to hear in solos over ensembles. It invites dramatic physical movement and can be played from a sitting position but also worn on the body, the latter essentially allowing the drummer to dance, to move close to the audience and other dancers.
- 17 The skins come from northern Ghana or Burkina Faso and are brought down to Accra by middlemen. Youth report that they originally purchased skins in Fetish Lane at Timber Market not far from the Arts Center. Today, djembe production at the Arts Center creates a high enough demand that skins are brought to the Arts Center. Rings are commissioned from two welders on Arts Center grounds, again pointing to the amount of business present on the premises.
- 18 Determining the economics of this trade is very difficult, as prices vary dramatically depending on people’s need. I was often told that people would do work, or sell drums, for much less than their market value if they badly needed the money, which was often the case. However, for a contract of 50 djembe, drum makers reported the following *approximate* costs for 2012: mounting leather and rings: 15 GHC (Ghanaian New Cedi); pulling, sanding, and designing the shell surface: 5 GHC; polishing the shell and shaving the skin: 3 GHC. Raw materials, much more expensive than labor, take up the majority of the payment, leaving little profit and

requiring more than 50 percent of the money up front. A single shell for such a contract would cost 15 GHC. Add transport, the cost of other materials, and labor; and by the time a drum is sold (approximately 50 GHC to a wholesaler; anywhere from 80 to 120 GHC to a consumer), there is little profit for the owner of the contract (1 GHC is currently worth about 56 US cents).

- 19** Djembe production is one among several practices of youth's cultural production. Elsewhere I discuss these; they are beyond the scope of this article.

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