

GHANAIAN CANOE DECORATIONS¹

Jojada Verrips

University of Amsterdam, Department of Sociology and Anthropology

ABSTRACT This essay deals with the pictograms, written texts, and paintings as they occur on the canoes in the Ga speaking area in Ghana. It is argued that they are very succinct, symbolic expressions of a wide range of relations, identifications and sympathies of their owners/users with things, fellow human beings and ideas. The decorations are chosen from a big reservoir of possibilities and carefully composed into what one could call a distinctive, decorative Gestalt, so that each canoe gets, just like its owner/user, a recognizable identity or 'individuality' amongst other, similarly treated canoes. A beach with moored canoes can be considered as a revealing materialization of the social community of the fishermen. The canoes are their messengers and talk for them, they show the diversification of their mindscape and tell a lot about how they relate to each other and the world they live in.

At first, Kobina Ebow took them to the canoes
to see the figures carved into the sides of the canoes
along their upper sections.

They were mostly of sea creatures like crabs, starfish, squid, and other types of fish;
But there were some figures of land animals too, such as lizards, tortoises and birds,
in addition to figures of the sun, moon, and stars, the moon always in crescent shape.

The children walked alongside the canoes and it was great fun for them to
read what was written on them in English and Fante:

'Sea Never Dry', 'One Man no Chop',

'You Do Good for Your Self',

'Sika Mmpe Rough',

'Ekow Dzi Bi a Ewam so Dzi Bi', 'Yaaba nna Yaaba'

(J.O. de Graft Hanson, *The People From the Sea*, Tema, Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1988,
13/14)

INTRODUCTION

When one travels along Ghana's coastline and visits the sandy beaches of the numerous fishing villages one is very often struck by huge number of colorfully decorated dugout canoes of different sorts and sizes moored there (see photos 1 and 2). One not only wonders where the big trees grow that the giant craft of sometimes over 30 feet are made from, but also what the meaning is, if any, of the abundant decorations and mottoes painted on or carved into the sides. Most intriguing and calling to be decoded is the series of more or less abstract pictograms, which seem to occur in endless variations and which look like a rebus containing a hidden message. The form and appearance of the canoes is such that one gets the impression that they have



Photo 1. Canoes moored at Jamestown beach (Accra).

not changed much over time; that the fishermen used age old and very traditional symbols and proverbs handed to them by their forbears who got them from theirs, and theirs, and theirs. In other words there has been only continuity and no change. In this paper, I want to make clear that there are grounds to think otherwise, that as well as continuity there has been a lot of change. Apart from the kind of tree(s) the canoes are made from and the particular shape these vessels therefore could get, not only their use and function, but also and especially their outward appearance seems to have considerably changed over time and to have grown more layered and complex. In order to illustrate this I will present material I collected in the 1990s in Ga coastal communities on the beaches in and near Accra concerning the kinds of symbols, written texts, and paintings occurring on canoes, and how they were read and interpreted by fishermen. Then I will present some historical data in order to make clear that the decorative patterns of the past were different, less complex qua form and content, as well as a hypothesis concerning the origin of the written texts. First, however, I will start with some background information on the artisanal fishing sector in Ghana and a brief presentation of material concerning the manufacture of canoes and the ways in which fishermen perceive and treat their vessels.

SETTING

Ghana has a huge artisanal fishing sector compared with the modern trawlers' sector. The latter came into existence after the Second World War, when the first indigenous trawlers were built.² Their number was relatively small until the mid-1980s, but then a rapid increase took place. While in 1984 there were 44 industrial vessels, ten years

later they numbered more than 80 (see Anonymus 1996). In comparison with the number of canoes (in 1996 over 8000) operative along Ghana's coast, the number of trawlers can be considered small.³ Nevertheless, the artisanal sector is seriously threatened, by the increase of the trawlers because they fish in waters that were formerly the sole domain of the artisanal sector. This development has everything to do with dwindling fish stocks in Ghana's coastal waters. As a consequence canoe fishermen started to travel further, which has meant higher fuel costs and lower income, to adapt net sizes, which has meant catching more and more juvenile fish, and to even use illegal fishing methods, such as dynamite. Before the 1950s, the crews had to use paddles and/or sails to reach the fishing grounds. But since then more and more fishermen have bought outboard motors (of 20 or 40 Hp).⁴ Now the number of canoes without such motors, often made in Japan, is relatively small. The canoes in use for beach seining and the smaller ones usually are not motorized.⁵ But the bigger ones almost all are. The artisanal fishermen distinguish several types of canoes, using net type or fishing technique as a criterion.

The largest category of canoe in the Ghanaian artisanal fleet both in number and size is the *Ali/Poli/Watsa* type. These local names refer to the type of net operated. The *Ali* is a sardinella drift/surround net, while the *Watsa* and *Poli* are purse seines, the main difference between the two being the twine and mesh size used in their manufacture. The *Poli* has a much smaller mesh size and is used extensively for the capture of anchovy, the *Watsa* mainly being used for larger sized pelagic species. In fact it is now rare to find a pure *Poli* or *Watsa* net as fishermen are increasingly combining the different mesh sizes including even *Ali* in one net, known loosely as 'mixed' net (Sheves 1991:23, italics JV).⁶

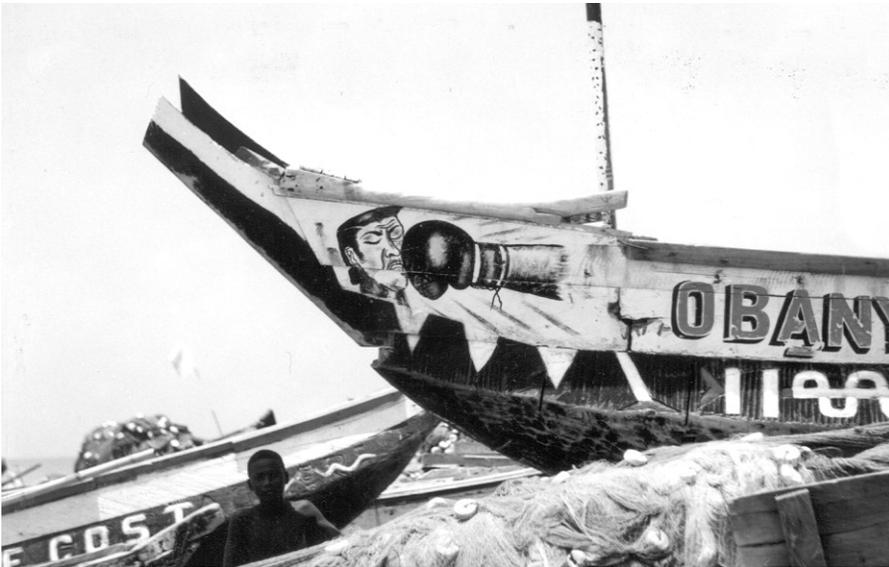


Photo 2. Canoes moored at Jamestown beach (Accra).

Next to these *ali/poli/watsa* canoes one distinguishes set net, drift gill net, and hook and line canoes.⁷ The prices of canoes, nets, and outboard motors rose enormously in the 1990s. For many artisanal fishermen it therefore became very difficult to remain independent in the business or to start a new enterprise. Most of them became or were already just crew members working with a canoe, nets and an outboard motor belonging to a non-fisherman or -woman who had accumulated some capital in another sector. Very important investors were women who earned money in the wholesale fish trade (the so-called fish-mammies) and well-educated non-fishermen, often born in a fishing village, who inherited a canoe or even canoes, who the fishermen called 'scholars'. Dependent on the type of canoe the number of crewmembers varies from 2 to 18. The Fanti have the reputation of being the best fishermen on the Ghanaian coast. According to oral tradition they were the ones who in the eighteenth century introduced fishing to the Ga in Ga Mashi (Central Accra) La (Brown 1947:23/24) and Teshie and even to the Ewe of the Volta Region.⁸ Nowadays one finds Fanti, Ga and Ewe fishermen working next to each other all along Ghana's coast and even the coasts of neighboring countries, for migration abroad is a frequently occurring phenomenon (cf. Jorion 1988; Odotei 1992). However, the rule is that the fishermen who visit or even settle on the beaches under other tribal/traditional authorities or chieftaincies, have to stick to the rules applied there. So a Fanti on a Ga beach has to obey Ga rules and regulations and *vice versa*. The whole coast of Ghana, from Keta in the East to Assini in the West, is divided into particular districts, landing beaches or fishing villages supervised by chief fishermen and their assistants, sometimes with their own associations and/or cooperative societies, all organized under a big umbrella organization called the 'Ghana National Canoe Fishermen Council' with its headquarters in Accra. It is from this organization that I got the list of the canoe owners' names and the names of their vessels for a number of landing beaches.

THE COMING INTO BEING OF A CANOE

The production of a huge dugout canoe has always taken a large commitment of time and labor. Good sources with regard to the production and use of canoes in the 17th century are the publications by De Marees, Dapper, Barbot and Bosman, who were regular visitors of the coastal area between Takoradi and Cape Coast, and keen observers of the life and work of its (Fanti) population.⁹ In those times the huge trees used for canoe building (the wawa trees or *Triplichiton sclerexylon*) were still growing in the forests near the coast (cf. Brown 1947:24). But soon they were not available there any longer, and one had to travel inland in order to find the trees with the right diameter (nowadays at least 165 cm). Since one had to transport the dugouts to the coast and a suitable road system did not yet exist, it goes without saying that the production sites were almost always near rivers. Whereas in the 18th century Shama at the mouth of the Prah used to be an important production center,¹⁰ in the beginning of the 19th century one had to travel six hours upstream in order to find such a place on an island in the middle of this river (cf. Marrée 1817 and Bowdich 1819). Today the main areas where the right wawa trees grow are in the center of

Ghana. 'Although found in all vegetation zones it (the wawa species – JV) is most abundant in the moist semi-deciduous north-west subtype, which occurs in the area of western Ashanti Region, southern Brong Ahafo Region and to the north of the Western Region' (Sheves 1991:3). It is there that carving teams are active now, which respectively spot, buy, fell and carve proper trees.¹¹ I will not describe here the whole technical production process in the forest, for this is done in great detail by Sheves (1991), but concentrate instead upon a few dimensions which are not dealt with by him. One of these is very poetically described as follows in the marvelous tale *The Canoe's Story* by Meshack Asare.¹²

One by one our friends left us. I knew that one day
my own turn would come. And it came.
One early morning a small gang of men came to me.
They brought with them presents of cloth, a fowl, a bottle of gin and some eggs.
They offered the gifts to me and my spirit, the spirit that
had been with me for the hundreds of years it took me to grow from
a sapling to the towering giant I had become.
They prayed that no harm should come to them
While they fell me and worked on me.
I was rather pleased about this.
With their gifts and prayers they had shown their respect for me.

Every time a team of carvers starts with a felling it has to pour a libation in order to please the tree, which is perceived as a living being having a spirit and even a particular sex. During one of my interviews with fishermen at the beach of Jamestown, Accra, one of them said the following.

Let me explain something for you. You know those who cut down the timber, those who bring down the timber in the forest, they usually perform rites before the timber falls and they knew whether the timber that falls is a male or a female. They would tell you, that timber is a male or a female. They would tell you that this timber is a man or is a woman. Therefore from there then you know what to do.¹³

This perception continues after a wawa tree is turned into a seaworthy canoe. Fishermen speak about their canoes as male and female beings that are able to talk to them about the right time and place for fishing. Brown, who made a thorough study of the fishing industry of the La community before the Second World War, wrote thus.

A good boat well treated will come to the owner when there are fish about and call him 'fi-fi-fi-fi-fi'. If he is not at home she goes to his mother's house and calls there. When she arrives at the place where the fish are she will call again. That is the place to anchor and there many fish will be caught. In the month of August 1934, one man, so called and guided, caught forty-seven tunny in one day' (1947:42).

In the 1990s Jamestown fishermen I spoke with told similar stories. According to them male canoes moved differently, were stronger and more powerful. With them

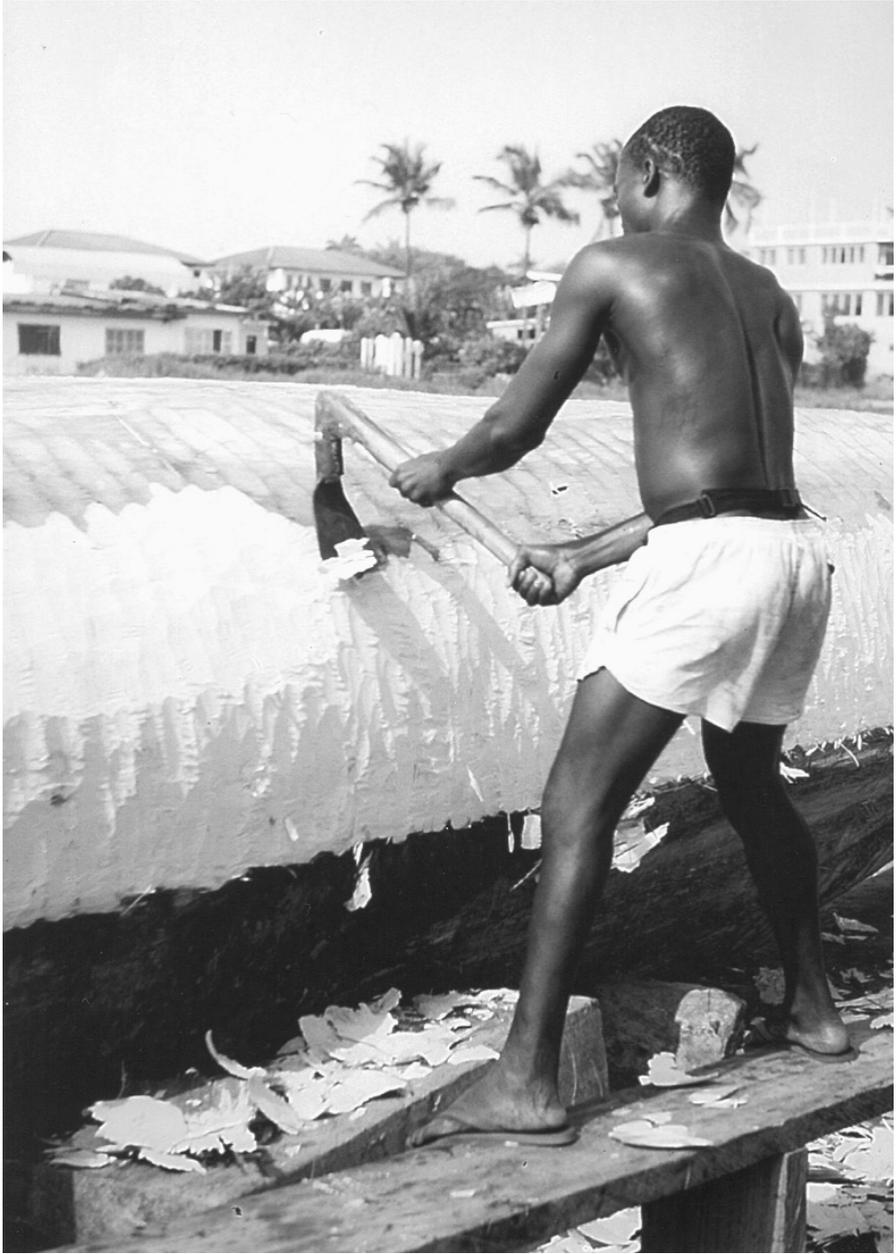


Photo 3. The chiseling of the hull.

the catches were higher.¹⁴

After the carvers have dug out a wawa, which takes a lot of time – in Asare’s story the felt tree ‘talks’ about forty days – it is put on a lorry and transported to the beach where its buyer wants to have it based. There the hull undergoes some further

chiseling (see photo 3) and is torched with flames in order to make it stronger and more weather- and waterproof. There a carpenter puts the topside planking on it, makes the thwarts and places a bracket outside the starboard side for the outboard engine (see photo 4). And finally the canoe is painted and gets its decorations and name according to the instructions of the owner. In case (s)he¹⁵ is what one calls in Ghana a 'heathen', that is, non Christian or Muslim, (s)he very often has already paid a visit to a fetish priest in order to get advice on how to treat the canoe, what kind of taboos one has to observe to let 'him/her' work in a profitable and safe way, and where which kind of fetishes to secure good catches have to be hidden. A common instruction is to regularly feed the canoe with *oto*, which is mashed yam mixed with palm oil, onions and eggs, and let it drink. In Teshie, a Ga fishing village near Accra, I more than once saw this type of reddish food put in nice little heaps on top of the topside planking near the prow of the canoe (cf. Field 1937: photo facing p. 70). Another way to feed the craft is by throwing eggs at its head.¹⁶ In this connection it is interesting that the Ga term for the stem is 'lele-na', which means 'canoe's mouth', 'canoe's entrance' and sometimes also something like 'canoe's face'. The stern is called 'lele-duna' which can be translated according to one of my informants as 'canoe's tail' or 'buttocks'. When I was faced with these translations I immediately associated canoes with fishes. Later on, in the section on the decorations I hope to make clear that this is a less unusual association than one might think. With regard to taboos I discovered that fishermen do not observe the same taboos, but that these taboos differ per fisherman or per canoe. In order to illustrate this I present here a part of a conversation as it was recorded at Jamestown beach by one of my informants, K., when I was out of Ghana.¹⁷



Photo 4. Canoe with topside planking ready for being decorated.

- K. All right are there certain things that are not done or supposed to be done during the fishing process?
- X. There are different canoes with their different rules and regulations. There are some, when they are going to sea, any one can sleep or have sex with a woman before going and nothing would happen. But there are some canoes when they are going fishing and if a member had had intercourse with a woman the previous night, then it's bad luck for all of them and they may not get anything.¹⁸
- K. But don't you have anything at all in the canoe with which you protect yourself or forbid something which should not be done during fishing?
- X. There are many who do not have any *juju* at all as they go to sea. Some may just say 'let's pray'. They may buy incense and burn it as they go. They don't have anything at all.
- Y. But sometimes some Ga (Accra) canoes do not allow *kenkey* (a particular type of food – JV) in it for fishing. Even those that do not permit *kenkey* are more than those that permit *kenkey*.

Next to observing particular taboos many non-Christian fishermen also put fetishes or *juju* in their canoes in order to catch much fish and be protected against danger and malicious people.¹⁹ A common place to hide these fetishes is in the inside of the stem under a small lead plate.²⁰ Next to these plates one sometimes finds small bottles with a yellow, white or blue liquid in it,²¹ often covered with egg and fowl's blood. Christians often paint (white) crosses at this particular spot. Another way to avoid all kinds of danger and be lucky is the use of flags with symbols derived from *The 6th and 7th Books of Moses*, a publication popular amongst fishermen.²² Canoes then are very particular objects for Ghanaian fishermen that they treat with great respect and perceive as a particular kind of animated beings, with whom one can communicate and which can be influenced not only in positive but also in negative ways.²³ They carve all kinds of symbols into their hull, and paint a name, slogans, and usually colorful images on the gunwale and topsides to let them look beautiful. The canoe in Asare's story, for instance, tells:

After that a man came to work on me. He carved some patterns into my sides. (...) Then he painted my patterns with bright colours. Finally he stood back, looked at me closely and said, 'Ka Shi Me.'²⁴ Immediately (after) the man had left, the nearest canoe spoke up, 'Hullo, you are a beauty! Look at all the patterns and colours in your sides.'

CANOE DECORATIONS IN GA COMMUNITIES

I am by no means the first who developed an interest in Ghanaian canoe decorations. At the end of the 1920s A.P. Brown made a study of the iconography as it occurred on the canoes in and around La, a Ga community. Alas, I could not trace *The Teachers' Journal* of 1931 in which his article 'The fisherman's canoe' was published.²⁵ However, I am pretty sure that the canoe designs of the thirties as they are shown in the National Museum of Ghana and as Nunoo (1974) has published them were collected by Brown. When I showed these motifs to the chief fisherman of La in 1991 he was able to tell me in most cases what they represented. Some of them are still in use. After Brown, Nunoo (ibid.) and Coronel (1979) studied the designs as they occurred on the canoes in Fanti country. Coronel's study is much better than Nunoo's, for it is much more detailed. Nunoo, as a matter of fact, did not do much fieldwork and limits himself to a very succinct illustration of the following statement that

the designs on the gunwales have taken different forms in the last fifty years or so. In the 1930s they were more stylistic, embodying several animal motifs which mostly represented Akan sayings. (...) About twenty years later, the designs became more conventionalized. These often included objects such as tools, clocks, and guns, and some were purely abstract decorative fantasies (Nunoo 1974:34).

Coronel, on the contrary, is very precise in his descriptions of the kind of decorations ([non]representational motifs, proverbs, labels and names), where on the canoe one can find them (gunwales, bow and prow), whether they are carved or painted, whether the decorations are symmetrical, a-symmetrical or a combination of both, what colors are used, whether a canoe has one, two or even three decorated bands and, last but not least, whether the source of inspiration was traditional or modern iconography (that is iconography drawn from topical, contemporary sources).²⁶ Moreover, Coronel sketches how important rivalry between fishermen (for instance, belonging to different *asafo* or military companies) is in choosing a particular type of decoration, and how '[The] mobility of Fanti fishermen accounts for an interchange of motifs between fishing communities' (Coronel 1979:59). Finally he points out that canoe decorations are poly-interpretable, for they convey all sorts of (serious and less serious) messages, for example, about the philosophy, status, and religion of its owner. However, I think that Coronel is somewhat biased with regard to the ability of the Fanti fishermen to better decorate their canoes than other fishermen, for example, the Ga. What he remarks about La near Accra illustrates this bias quite well: 'Labadi, while a major fishing community is a Ga-speaking area and lacks the Fanti traditional heritage; as one might expect, canoe decoration here is not of the quality seen on Fanti canoes' (ibid.). The canoe decorations I saw at the beach of La in 1991/92 were, at least in my view, of the same quality as the ones I observed, for instance, in Winneba. But perhaps this has to be related to the fact, evidently not known to Coronel, that it were the Fanti who introduced the Ga of La to the fisheries (cf. Brown 1947) and therefore possibly also to their decorative style. Anyway, in what follows I will deal with the decorations occurring on canoes moored in the early 1990s at the beaches of La, Osu, Jamestown, and Chokor, which are all Ga communities.

Just as in Fanti coastal communities most of the canoes in the Ga fishing communities have their decorations, slogans and names on their gunwales. Sometimes one finds them also on a second or – very rare – third band above these gunwales on the topside planking, but then they are rarely carved and mostly painted. The topside planking of the big canoes, which was increased in height during the 1980s as a consequence of the use of larger and heavier nets, is in this area almost always painted white with a blue rectangular in the middle. This particular combination of colors makes them at sea immediately recognizable as Ga canoes coming from Jamestown (Accra). With respect to the iconography one can distinguish between abstract designs, such as horizontal and vertical stripes, triangles, rectangles, circles and ovals, in short geometrical forms on the one hand, and what I would like to call pictograms on the other. These pictograms can be divided into five categories: 1) pictograms of things, such as stools, swords, hats, keys, flags, anchors, arrows, and crosses; 2) pictograms of (parts) of plants, and trees; 3) pictograms of insects,

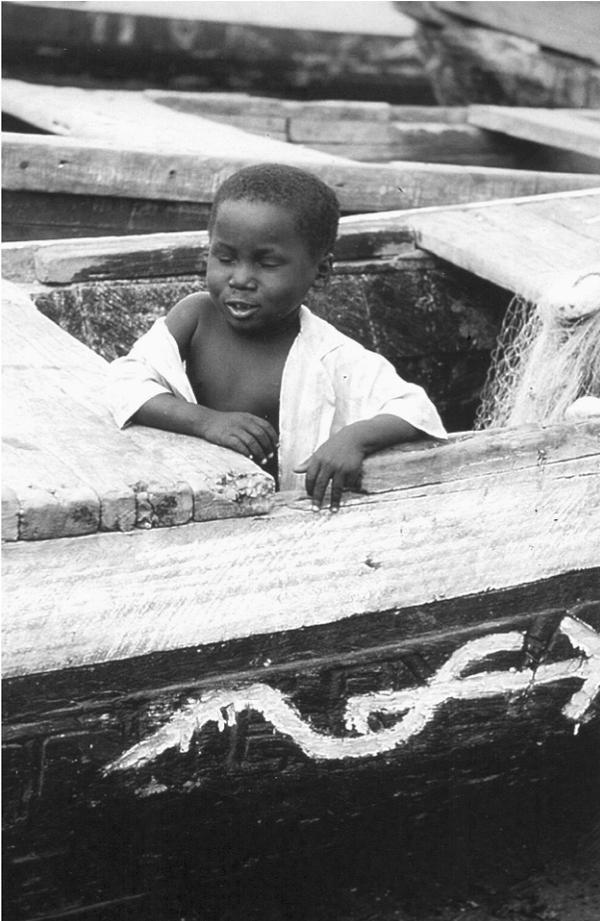


Photo 5. The chief fisherman of La, his linguist and the author.

birds, fishes and land animals; 4) pictograms of human beings or body parts such as hearts, hands, arms, penises; and 5) pictograms of celestial bodies, such as stars and the moon. The pictograms and abstract designs occur almost always in combination with written texts, such as proverbs, slogans and (biblical) names, specific abbreviations, numbers and references to passages in the Bible. Most of the gunwales contain a strip-like decoration of a very specific nature because it is a combination of images, letters and numbers, in short a peculiar text. But in case one wants to decipher, decode or 'read' this text one is immediately confronted with all kinds of serious difficulties, especially with regard to the interpretation of the pictograms. On the basis of Nunoo's piece one might get the impression that it is rather easy to understand what a single pictogram or a specific combination of pictograms stands for and that there is a broad *communis opinio* among the fishermen concerning their meaning. For Nunoo they refer to proverbs. Coronel, however, points out that it is by no means easy to trace the meaning of the motifs, for fishermen who buy second-hand, already decorated canoes often assign a new personal significance to them which might differ considerably from the original one. Moreover, he says, images become unclear through repetition. 'Many gunwale patterns pass from one generation to the next. With each repetition the motifs are a further step removed from their original meanings and become less specific and more chameleon-like in their translation' (Coronel 1979:59). Before I illustrate how much to the point this observation is, I have to mention the fact that it regularly occurs that new owners of second-hand canoes ask design makers to carve new motifs over old ones in order to really make them their own property.²⁷ What struck me when talking with the fishermen on the Ga landing beaches about the proper way to read the abstract designs and pictograms on the gunwales was how different or 'chameleon-like' their interpretations

were. To the best of my recollections nobody ever referred to particular proverbs, not even the chief fishermen of La with whom I talked a lot about the motifs (see photo 5).²⁸ Let me present a few striking examples. Take the hat motif. Some did not recognize it as a hat but took the pictogram for an image of a bell or a turtle. Others who did recognize it as a hat disagreed about whose hat it represented, of a chief or of a *wulom* (a specialist who takes care of all the rituals in a fishing community). Only some claimed that a canoe with such a symbol on it (once) belonged to this specialist or one of his relatives. The anchor/arrow motif (see photo 6), which very frequently occurs on the gunwales of canoes, is sometimes said to represent the anchors and anchor chains as they were in use on European sailing ships, in my view a rather convincing reading.²⁹ But according to an assistant of one of the chief fishermen of Jamestown this was a totally wrong interpretation.

N. During the building of Noah's Ark this was an Arabic written writing, but this our fishermen, they don't understand it. So they thought that it is something like just writing, [but] this is *bismallaharahi mahim*. This was the word which moved Noah's boat, because in those days there were no outboard motors and no paddles. So when Noah finished building the Ark [a] higher word from God was sent to him [that] was



this sign. So you will find this sign on every canoe at every landing beach. But when you ask them, they don't know. They thought it is just a sign. But it is God's words. (...) They don't know, but this is the real fact or the fact inside this drawing, concerning his drawing. (...) So this is not a drawing, but it is an Arabic writing. J. And it was for the first time on the Ark of Noah? N. Yes, on Noah's Ark. This was the highest words that move the boat.³⁰

Only once another fisherman told me the same story with regard to the anchor/arrow motif. The association with Noah's Ark came also to the fore with regard to another pictogram sometimes occurring

Photo 6. The anchor/arrow motif.



Photo 7. Pictogram of a man with an oversized penis.

on gunwales and which looks like a branch with leaves. Some fishermen claimed that it represented the leaf the dove brought back to Noah as a sign that the flood was over. Others, however, said that it was just a design liked by the owner of the canoe and had no particular meaning at all. The pictograms of human beings were also not interpreted in one sense. A specific one of a human figure with the right hand raised and the left hand pointing to an oversized buttock was said to mean: 1) somebody in danger, 2) a courageous member of the Gbese clan of Jamestown which led the Ga in a combat with the Ashanti, and 3) 'come and chop my buttocks'. When I interviewed the sub chief fisherman of Osu about a very specific pictogram in the form of an A with the lying bar slightly extended beyond the right hand slanting line, I immediately got the impression that it concerned a more abstract version of this human figure. For he said: '...and then it goes up as if it has raised the hand like this (makes an upward movement with the right hand – JV), [that is] Gbese, Jamestown. They write it in a big A letter, and after crossing the middle, then they extend the bar used in crossing the middle and then they bend it like this (the same upward movement – JV). It means: "come and chop (fork) my bottom.'" Whether my association is correct or not, the important thing is that we are confronted here with the fact that one pictogram is read in different ways and that two different ones are interpreted in the same sense, which clearly shows that there is not one way of understanding them. At least in certain cases, there are particular pictograms, such as stools, swords, crosses, specific fishes and birds, which apart or in combination, are given the same meaning by almost everybody interviewed.

Before dealing with a few of these unambiguous cases I want to say something about one pictogram occurring on canoes in the Ga area which still puzzles me very much, that is, the image of a small man with an enormous erect penis (see photo 7). When I asked fishermen about its possible meaning they did not *say* anything, but

instead started laughing sometimes accompanied by obscene bodily movements. Coronel also noticed this kind of pictogram and suggests that the erect genitalia carry an image of a very brave man with an emphasis on 'man' (1979:58). If this is correct, then one might translate this pictogram in words as follows: 'this canoe is just like its owner, a very potent man'. I will later come back to the intriguing nexus between sexuality and the fisheries, already touched upon earlier on in this paper.

With regard to unambiguous pictograms such as stools nobody seemed to doubt their meaning; they indicate that a canoe belongs to a chief or a member of a chief's family. The pictograms often flanking a stool at both sides represent for the fishermen the chiefly swords (see photo 8). The flags refer to the clans making up the community.³¹ Also with regard to the frequently occurring combination of a snake-like creature and a leg-less bird both with their head bent backwards everybody came up with the same interpretation, at least in the first instance. These pictograms represented for everybody I talked to, *onufu* and *sankofa*, respectively a particular kind of 'sea snake' and a specific bird. The bird is able to look forwards and...backwards, so that it can spot the danger, which is haunting it in the form of this 'sea snake'.³² Though there is great agreement in this respect, if one probes further all sorts of nuances in interpretation crop up, which I cannot deal with here. To conclude this section on pictograms I want to say, that they form a collection of motifs of mixed Fanti and Ga origin, which do not have a single meaning shared by all the fishermen. On the contrary, they are read in many different ways, which are not always consonant with the owner's intentions. If an owner chooses specific pictograms in order to express particular 'messages', that does not mean that they will be understood in the way he intended, whereas whole stories might be read in pictograms chosen by an owner because he just fancied them. Sense seems to be in the eye of the beholder. I think this an important observation, for anthropologists



Photo 8. Canoe decorated with a stool and two swords

sometimes still tend to be after the discovery of 'the' meaning of symbols in particular communities or societies. Such a meaning often does not exist, as Cohen (1985) has convincingly shown, which does not mean that the sheer sharing of symbols is without significance. On the contrary, this sharing of symbols without sharing of meanings is what is so significant in the construction of a sense of belonging to a community, in this case a community of fishermen. But let me now concentrate for a moment on the written texts on canoes.

In the late 1980s the Ghana National Canoe Fishermen Council collected information on the artisanal fleet in use along Ghana's coast. The chief fishermen were asked to precisely register the kind of canoes (*ali, poli, watsa*, hook and line, etc.) were in use on the landing beaches they supervised, their owners, and the 'names' (sometimes called 'marks') of the canoes. The following is mainly based on the lists they submitted.³³ What immediately strikes when one sees these overviews is the fact that the category 'names' is rather broad, for it includes, for instance, next to real names (of persons, places, companies, clubs, organizations, and things) also numbers, abbreviations and slogans, mottos or parts of proverbs. However, the latter type of 'names' is clearly the dominant one. Before dealing with these telling 'marks', I first will say something about the other ones. Though one might expect a frequent use of the names of men and women on the basis of the fact that canoes are said to be male or female, this happened not to be the case. I only came across a few cases in which a canoe was named after a specific person. So there is a striking difference here with, for instance, Dutch bargemen who express the perception of their barge as a human being, more particular as a female one, in giving it the name of a woman. Right now I cannot think of a proper explanation for this remarkable contrast. More popular is the use of the names of countries (such as *Japan, Israel, Holland, Angola, U.S.A.*) and cities (such as *Lagos, Free Town, London*), probably the places where the money to buy the canoe was earned. One also finds every now and then the names of towns in Ghana (*Tafo, Takoradi, and Kidua* [= Koforidua]), and specific parts of Accra (*Mataheko, Jamestown, Korlebu*) on canoes. Sometimes canoes bear the names of popular restaurants or drinking spots in Accra, such as *Wato* or *Next Stop*. More often, however, one comes across names of particular stores, firms and companies, such as *Glamour, Kingsway, Texaco, Trade Fair, Commercial Bank, United Trading Company (U.T.C.), Tema Textile [Limited] (T.T.[L.])* and *Ghana Airways*, all expressing a certain connection of the owner of a canoe with these institutions. Owners sometimes express their love of football by naming their canoe after a particular club (such as *Oly[mpics], City Boys, Stand Fast, Phobia, Kotoko* and even *Man[chester]-U[nited]*) or a popular player (*Polo*). Remarkable are the names referring to cars (such as *Ambulance, Station Wagon, Volvo* and *Tata* [a bus made in India]). To this category also belongs the rather cryptic name *Go-In-Side*, a term once in use for a police car. Numbers are also popular as names among owners, especially in Teshie, an important landing beach near Accra with almost 300 registered canoes, where I came across a lot of numbers sometimes in combination with a single letter, for instance, *T 99*. In this connection it is important to realize that the registration of a canoe under such a 'name' or even another one does not mean that it lacks further inscriptions or texts. Numbers, however, are evidently more in use to make clear that an owner possesses more than one canoe or possessed other canoes with the same

name.³⁴ A particular category is formed by abbreviations. Some refer to companies (such as *U.T.C.*, *P.Z.*, and *T.T.*), some to political parties (for instance, *C[onvention] P[eople's] P[arty]*, founded by Kwame Nkrumah), others to particular phrases, expressions, slogans or proverbs. Interesting examples of the latter type are *K.Y.L.* which stands for 'Kill Your Light' and refers to the time the government proclaimed to be thrifty with electricity and *S.M.O.G.*, 'Save Me O God'. Of the same type as *C.C.P.* and *K.Y.L.* are non-abbreviated ones with an outspoken political connotation. *Curfew* is an example, for it refers to the period (for the last time in the early 1980s) in which people were not allowed to be in the streets after a certain hour in the evening, and *Yellow Corn* is another. Francis Agyei, who translated most of the 'names' for me, said about this name: 'It alludes to 1975/1976 when famine forced the Supreme Military Council of Ghana to import yellow corn meant for poultry for consumption by human beings'.³⁵ Names like *S.M.O.G.* bring me to the main category of names, that is, expressions of a religious nature on the one hand and specific phrases and proverbs containing a particular wisdom or moral view with regard to life and humans on the other. The languages used in the Eastern parts of Ghana are predominantly Ga and English. Only in a few cases Twi and Hausa occur. Canoe owners rather frequently give their canoes names revealing their religious affiliation. Especially, Christians like to use names like *Daanyɔmɔsi* (Give thanks to God), *Nyamekye* (God's gift), *Nyonɔmɔ Dromɔ* (By God's grace), *Jesus Saves*, *God Bless*, *God First*, *Wonderful God*, *God's Power*, *Be True To God*, *Psalm 23* (or: 27, 46, and 91), *Christ Is The Answer*, *God Never Sleep*, *God Is King* (or simply biblical [geographical] names as *Canaan*, *Neneve* [Nineveh], *Noa[h]*, *Ebenezer*, *Sampson* and *Jesus*). Only in a few cases one comes across an Islamic name, such as *Akwei Allah*, *Alhaji* and *El Shadai*, no wonder if one realizes that Ghana, at least in the South, is predominantly Christian. However, since the majority of the artisanal fishermen (both owners and non-owners) are neither Christian nor Moslem, but worship local (sea) Gods it is not surprising that religious names occur less than the other type in the category I am dealing with here, that is, the often strongly morally colored ones. Examples of this type are: *Yaa Ye Okomo* (Go and mind your own business), *Foo Ohe* (Turn yourself around), *Soro Nipa* (Fear human beings), *Pipe Naa* (Abundance is not gotten), *Kaatahe* (Do not touch it), *Okwe Onye* (Watch your mother [instead of me]), *Tsui* (Patience), *Naa Dani* (See before you talk), *Adzo* (Let sleeping dogs lie), and *Wiase Yeden* (Twi, The world is a difficult place to live in). Popular English ones are: *Sea Never Dry*, *Wait and See*, *Had I Known*, *Travel & See*, and *Cry Your Cry*. Every now and then rather obscene names are given to canoes, such as *Osootsoo* 'My clitoris', *Bie Ashweo Ye* 'This is the place where copulation takes place'/'This is where play/sexual love is made', and *Wase Yede* 'Your bottom/vagina is sweet'. *Dodo* also falls in this category, for it here concerns a polished way of referring to the vagina, *toto* in Ga.³⁶ I once saw *Tso ooo yoo naa* 'Fill a woman' together with the pictogram, already mentioned, of a man with an enormous erect penis on a canoe in Jamestown. Each time I asked fishermen what this peculiar combination meant they started laughing, moved with their bodies as if they were making love to someone, but did not explain it in words. It seems to me that these names and their bodily movements to 'explain' them are less an expression of the 'roughness and vulgarity' of the artisanal fishermen, as some intellectuals claimed, and more of the way they perceive their canoes, just like women, as indispensable means of re-production. Though the

temptation is great to elaborate on this, I will not give in to it. Instead I will present here a part of the conversation on 'names' recorded by my informant K. (see note 8). It shows in a nutshell how fishermen can talk about them and their possible background.

K. I was told formerly names or words were not written on canoes, but now they are done with the designs. Why? X. Some write words which they just fancy. But others are sometimes spiteful and write words to tell somebody something or to shame somebody, because of some quarrel between them. Y. Yes, maybe that the canoe owner had a quarrel with somebody. So he writes what he feels on the canoe. Z. But there is something else too. I have seen this canoe *Cold Store*. When it was bought it had no name, but every time when it went out, it 'killed' a lot of fish. So they decided to name the canoe *Cold Store*, because in a proper cold store there is always fish in.

Let me conclude this section with a few general observations concerning the written texts on canoes. The first remarkable thing is the fact that the slogans carved into or painted on the dugouts are treated as 'names'. This is a direct consequence of the organization and bureaucratization of the artisanal sector. Initially the texts were not meant to be used for administrative purposes, but only to express particular identifications, relations or sympathies with clubs, companies, parties, persons, places, religions and worldviews. And this is what they still do in spite of the fact that they nowadays also function as registered names. The texts are messages and statements, though sometimes cryptic ones, which are used to characterize and distinguish, to



Photo 9. Canoe at Teshie beach looking like a shark



Photo 10. A canoe with the painting of hand holding a shovel with a lot of fish.

tease and challenge, to criticize and joke, to invoke and ward off. Together with the other decorations they turn the canoe – this crucial means of production on which the existence and lives of the fishermen and their families depend – into a ‘speaking’ object, an entity with a ‘voice’, a ‘messenger’, or a vehicle of meaning with a particular identity. Against the background of the belief that canoes are dug out of living trees with their own sex and spirit one could even maintain that this use of texts to let canoes ‘speak’ and be more than just objects is just obvious. Anyway, the variety of texts carved into or painted on canoes can, at least in my view, in one way or another be related with this belief and/or the tendency to treat important means of production as something more than just that.

Let me now turn to a kind of decoration I have not touched upon so far. At the landing beach of Jamestown (Accra) I saw several canoes that had next to a series of pictograms and written text(s) also paintings on their prow. They were usually painted just above a particular type of carving, that is, of three teeth like designs followed by a ‘fishtail’, which is never lacking on canoes in the Ga area, though its meaning was not easy to trace. Some fishermen said that it was just a design to make canoes look nicer, but others told me that it were ‘signs to make the boat swift like a fish’. Since I once saw a canoe in Teshie near Accra with just a big eye painted above this carving and immediately thought of the craft as a huge and dangerous fish, more in particular a shark (see photo 9), I am inclined to favor the latter interpretation.³⁷ The paintings just like the slogans are very diverse. Next to the big eye I saw, for example, paintings of a face severely hit by a hand in a huge boxing glove (see photo 1) of a hand holding a shovel with a lot of fish (see photo 10), of birds, of a harpooned whale, of somebody listening to a huge radio, of a hunter shooting birds in a tree,³⁸ of an ejaculating superman (see photo 7), of a beach seine with a big catch, and of an angel praying in front of a candle. These pictures can be compared with the ‘names’, for they express a similar range of things and let the canoe ‘speak’ (to both humans and god[s]) in a related way.³⁹ In a sense they can be seen as a variation on a theme, this time using realistic images instead of texts and pictograms. Since Colonel mentioned that he only saw two prow decorations along Ghana’s coast in the

1970s (see note 27) one cannot but conclude that we are dealing here with a rather recent development concerning canoe decoration. And this raises the question about what can be said about the decorations in historical perspective. When did which kind of 'designs' appear and is it possible to say something about their origins? In the following paragraph I will briefly deal with these issues.

CANOE DECORATIONS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the few rather recent articles dealing with canoe decorations one does not find much with regard to these decorations in the past, let alone their development over time.⁴⁰ This is not surprising. Though canoes have been described by all kinds of visitors of the Gold Coast in the past, their reports, at least the ones I have seen, hardly contain data on their decorations. However, in a publication of 1748 which contains a compilation of earlier travel reports on the Gold Coast one can read this: 'La grossièreté des Nègres n'empêche pas qu'ils ne recherchent l'ornement dans leurs Canots. Ils ont l'art de les peindre en dedans & en dehors' (*Histoire Générale des Voyages*, etc. 1748:218). So it seems that the practice to beautify canoes is an age-old custom. In order to find out what kind of designs were used in the past I have carefully studied the illustrations (engravings as well as photographs) in books published before the twentieth century looking for decorated canoes, but to no avail. Though some of these illustrations clearly show the continuity of the form of the dugouts over time, they 'tell' nothing about their decoration. However, on a few photographs, probably taken in the beginning of the twentieth century, decorated canoes can be seen. Balmer, who worked in Ghana between 1907 and 1911, published one photo in a book (1926: facing p. 64). It shows canoes on the beach of Elmina (in the Fanti area) that almost all wear the 'fishtail-teeth' motif on the bow. And *A Short Manual of the Gold Coast* by Rattray (1924) contains a picture of canoes on the beach of Osu near castle Christiansborg, nowadays the landing place of almost 70 hook-and-line canoes. This picture is very interesting, for it not only shows canoes with the same motif, but also one canoe with a written text! With a little bit of effort one can decipher *Abdeeshien* on its gunwale.⁴¹

On the basis of these sources I dare say that the use of pictograms in combination with slogans at least goes back to the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴² For the twenties and thirties I have found a handful of pictures of more or less richly decorated canoes moored at different landing beaches along Ghana's coast. Since they are also taken at the same place as the picture in Rattray's publication, I only want to mention the photographs in Redmayne (1938:74) and *The Golden Shore Magazine of the Diocese of Accra* (1939, VIII, 5: facing p. 460). Especially the former is interesting, for on it one sees a canoe with a design in combination with a written text of a type which still occurs, that is, *We Are Looking Unto God. U[nited] A[frica] C[ompany]*). But this is not all. In the caption Redmayne writes: 'Note the mottoes on the surf-boats...' Though the canoes on the picture might have been in use as 'surf-boats', they do not differ much from the big dugouts of the fishermen. It is possible that Redmayne mistook them for 'surf-boats'. However, if he is right, then this could be relevant for tracing the origin of the written texts on the canoes of the

fishermen. The 'surf-boats' as they were introduced by the British in the second half of the nineteenth century, were of a particular type and might have had numbers and/or texts ('names') on their bows and/or gunwales.⁴³ Alas, the picture of 'surf-boats' on the beach at Cape Coast in Macdonald (1898: facing p. 185) is too vague to be revealing. With regard to this, further research could be relevant. But next to the British 'surf boats' the freighters which anchored in the absence of proper ports far before the heavy surf – reason why other crafts were absolutely necessary to bring their cargo ashore –,⁴⁴ may have been a source of inspiration for putting particular symbols and texts on canoes. The occurrence of the abbreviation 's.s.' ('steam ship') on one of the canoes lying next to the *We Are Looking Unto God* on the picture in Redmayne's book seems to support this hypothesis. In the 1990s owners still called their canoes 's.s.' so-and-so.

CONCLUSION

I hope to have made clear that there is not one way to 'read' the pictograms, written texts, and paintings as they occur on the canoes in the Ga speaking area. This is an immediate consequence of the fact that they are very succinct, symbolic expressions of a wide range of relations, identifications and sympathies of their owners with things, fellow human beings and ideas. The decorations are chosen from a big reservoir of possibilities and carefully composed into what one could call a distinctive, decorative *Gestalt*, so that each canoe gets just like its owner a recognizable identity (not to say individuality) amongst other, similarly treated canoes. A beach with moored canoes can be considered as a revealing materialization of the social community of the fishermen owning these precious means of production. The canoes are their messengers and talk for them, they show the diversification of their mindscape and tell a lot about how they relate to each other and the world they live in (or to their manscape and landscape). In this connection it is good to emphasize a distinction between insiders and outsiders. The former are familiar with the repertoires, whereas the latter are not. That the insiders are familiar with these repertoires does not mean, however, that they know all their components and that they all decode these components in the same way, for that is evidently not the case. What counts is that they all recognize these repertoires as theirs and in doing so express their belonging to the world of the Ghanaian fishery. So the decorations function on the one hand to express all kinds of differences amongst fishermen and on the other between fishermen and non-fishermen. This does not mean that the way fishermen decorate their means of production and how others such as trotto-, taxi- and lorry-drivers do are unconnected. Coronel has pointed out that '[T]here is continual competition and pressure among owners of canoes, chop-bars, and lorries to decorate with the most recent products and popular ideas' (1979:58). The totemistic principle works in ever widening circles one could say. An interesting question in this connection is where the widespread practice in Ghana to decorate crucial material objects, especially canoes and cars, with written texts has its origins. Right now I have the idea that it might be possible that this long-standing custom found its way from the beaches inland. Already a long time ago fishermen must have been

inspired not only by what Coronel calls traditional iconography ‘primarily based on Ghanaian proverbs’, but also by a much more varied number of sources. For instance, texts, names and/or numbers on both the European ships visiting Ghana’s coastal waters and the different type of craft, such as sloops and boats, in use to bring persons and goods to and from the shore. It is highly probable that the long standing and intensive contacts with Europeans and their ways to decorate ships went hand in hand with a specific appropriation or creolization (cf. Hoetink 1962:228/29) process amongst the coastal population of what was to become Ghana in the second half of the 20th century. Instead of putting names in the way we understand them on their dugouts, the fishermen and ‘surf-boat’ crews supposedly started with the writing or carving out of proverbs, formerly only represented by particular pictograms, and texts inspired by the bible. As a result the very typical combination of texts and pictograms must have come about, which later, in particular after World War II, when the use of cars for goods and persons rapidly expanded, was also applied to let these vehicles speak, this time to a much broader public. I think that it makes little sense to qualify the pictograms as ‘traditional’ and the texts as ‘modern’. This distinction can easily lead to the wrong idea that the pictograms consist of an age-old, limited, static and pure collection of Fanti or Ga designs. This is implausible, for some have totally disappeared, whereas others were borrowed and endowed with new meanings as well as newly invented. The anchor-arrow-motif might illustrate this.

Let me conclude with the observation that the Ghanaian fishermen are no exception to the ‘rule’ which says that human beings tend to treat crucial means of production not as sheer objects but instead are inclined to transform them into a specific kind of subjects, ‘companions’ or ‘collaborators’, for instance, by decorating them abundantly and giving them ‘names’ and sometimes even food.

NOTES

¹ I am grateful to Derek Johnson, Birgit Meyer, Thomas Nyaku and Kodjo Senah for their critical comments on this essay. I also like to thank Francis Agyei and Bra Kodjo who helped me with the collection of data.

² ‘The first fishing trawler to be built in the Gold Coast was named recently with considerable celebration. It has been built by a retired African barrister at a cost of £ 4000...’ (*The Crown Colonist. Review of the Colonial Empire*, October 1949 No. 215, Vol. 19).

³ See, for instance, Eyeson (n.d.) and Lawson and Kwei (1974) for the coming into existence of the non-artisanal sector and Surgy (1969) for a history of the artisanal sector.

⁴ To save fuel fishermen still use paddles and sails.

⁵ In order to keep out water these canoes often have ‘weatherboards in the bow, planks raised two or more feet...’ as Burton already observed in the 19th century (1863, Vol. 2:66)

⁶ See Gulbrandsen (1991:5, 78) for very precise descriptions of the *Poli* and *Watsa* purse seines and how they are used.

⁷ These are classifications as they occur in the Ghana Canoe Frame Surveys. The fishermen not always use these classifications, but slightly different ones. When I asked, for instance, one of the chief fishermen of Jamestown Beach, Accra, to draw sketches of the main canoe types he distinguished between *Poli/Watsa*, *Hook/Anifa* and *Ali* canoes, the former being the biggest (14 mtrs) and the latter the smallest (10 mtrs). An interesting distinction is the one between ‘go-come-canoes’, which are used for the day fishery, and ‘la-gaz-canoes’ (from the French word ‘la glace’, ice), which stay at sea for a number of days and have ice boxes aboard.

- ⁸ This seems to be exaggerated, for it is reasonable to assume that the Ga and the Ewe knew how to catch fish. Perhaps the Fanti introduced particular techniques to them.
- ⁹ See Smith (1970) for a historical sketch of the role of canoes in West Africa.
- ¹⁰ Others were Axxim, Boutri, Takoradi, Commenda and Winneba (cf. *Histoire générale des voyages* 1748).
- ¹¹ According to Sheves these teams can be classified into three categories: 'sedentary, indigenous part-time carvers and farmers; formerly migrant carvers now sedentary, part-time carvers and farmers; and highly migratory full time carvers' (1991:10/11).
- ¹² I got this story in hand writing from a housekeeper of the chalets of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon. I was unable to trace where it was published.
- ¹³ Unfortunately I did not ask on which basis the sex of a tree was determined.
- ¹⁴ The frequency and emphasis with which the different movements, strength and power of male canoes were mentioned gives me the idea that there really exists a difference in quality and characteristics between male and female wawa trees. Some fishermen talked about the big size canoes as male and the small(er) ones as female, which is a bit remarkable, for out of one tree of 1.8 m diameter and 30 m length a 15 m and a 9 m canoe can be made (see Gulbrandsen 1991:79).
- ¹⁵ One needs to realize that owners can be both men and women and that they are not always active in the fishing business themselves. Women never go out at sea but they let their craft be used by a *bosun* and his crew against a specific share of the catch.
- ¹⁶ See Brown (1947:42) for the way in which a new canoe was treated in La before WW II and Nunoo (1975:32) and Coronel (1979) for the same in the 1970s.
- ¹⁷ This informant was an unemployed man with a great network in the fisherman's world. Through him I invested a small amount of money in a particular canoe at Osu. In return for this investment I sometimes got some fish and information, for example, a tape with conversations recorded by him when I was in the Netherlands. After I came back we listened together to this tape and he explained in great detail what the conversation was all about.
- ¹⁸ The chief fisherman of La once said to me that he would never go out in a canoe after having slept with a woman, for that would bring him bad luck.
- ¹⁹ It is said that they also put fetishes in their nets. To use fetishes inside canoes is an old custom, for this is already mentioned in the 17th century (cf. *Histoire générale des voyages*, 1748).
- ²⁰ According to Coronel the fetishes consist of sacred bundles prepared by a herbalist and are hidden in holes drilled into the side of the bow (1979:54)
- ²¹ It was often said that Florida water was one of these liquids.
- ²² Copies (printed in the USA) can be bought at particular places in Jamestown, Accra, for exorbitant prices.
- ²³ The same attitude exists among Ghanaian taxi drivers towards their vehicles (cf. Verrips and Meyer 2000). However, it should be emphasized, that it thus concerns a very general way of dealing with important pieces of material culture. Dutch bargemen, for instance, perceived their craft as female beings and treated them accordingly (Verrips 1990).
- ²⁴ 'Ka Shi Me' is Ga and means 'Never Leave Me.'
- ²⁵ The same holds true for J. Francis' unpublished paper 'Construction and decoration of canoes in Ghana', written for the Winneba Training College.
- ²⁶ In fact Coronel starts with making a contrast between traditional iconography 'based on Ghanaian proverbs' and an iconography 'drawn from topical, contemporary sources', which 'seem to have *always* been present' (1979:56; italics JV). Since immediately thereafter he writes about 'modern iconography' one cannot but conclude that he meant with this type of iconography the one based on 'topical, contemporary sources'. It would have been wise, if he had expressed himself more carefully, for the combination of 'contemporary', 'always', and 'modern' is a bit confusing, to say the least.
- ²⁷ This practice shows a great family resemblance with the custom among Dutch bargemen who, after buying a second hand barge, paint a new name over an old relief name.
- ²⁸ Perhaps this remarkable fact is a consequence of my style of doing research and interviewing people. I did not work with structured interviews.
- ²⁹ Coronel, who explicitly mentions this pictogram, does not say anything about its possible origin and

for it takes a long time to die. *Sankofa* is a traditional representation of interlocutory discourse between the past and the present

³³ I am most grateful for the fact that the officials of the GNCFC, which has its main office in Accra, gave me permission to copy a lot of the lists pertaining to the (almost fifty) landing beaches in the Volta Region.

³⁴ Sometimes brothers give the same name to their canoes but with consecutive numbers, for example, *Bookmen No 1, 2, 3, and 4*. But see Coronel who mentions that numbers carved on the gunwales of canoes often refer to specific *asafo* (or military) companies in a community (1979:58).

³⁵ Other interesting names with a political connotation are, for instance, *Abe* not only the word for palm nut fruit but also the emblem of a political party (the PNP of the Third Republic), and *Agee* 'alluding to the exodus of Ghanaians to Nigeria to find green pastures'.

³⁶ These are all translations of my assistant, Francis Agyei.

³⁷ In this connection the following observation by Coronel seems to be relevant: 'I found only two examples of prow decoration is coastal Ghana. The most dramatic took the form of a stylized shark head, which is thought to invest the canoe with the shark's ability to find schools of fish; the owner explained, "The shark is a strong fish which catches many fish, just as my canoe does"' (1979:58).

³⁸ I found this painting which clearly compares a fisherman with a bird hunter fascinating, because it not only points to the sometimes striking family resemblance between birds and fishes (for instance, expressed in the *onufu-sankofa* design on canoes), but also to the tree as a mediating element between the two species. If one realizes that some trees are dependent for their reproduction on the transport of their seeds by birds first and fishes later, then the use of dugouts in the fisheries suddenly gets an extra dimension at a deeper level which I can not deal with here.

³⁹ The paintings show a remarkable family resemblance with the paintings military pilots sometimes put on their aircraft. It might even be possible that the latter once functioned as a source of inspiration. Some names used for canoes, such as, *Jombo Jet*, *KLM* and *Ghana Airways*, as well as the occurrence of images of airplanes on gunwales point in the direction of at least a comparison between the two types of vehicles.

⁴⁰ This pertains at least to the pieces I read. It might be possible that, for instance, Coronel in his M.A Thesis (1975) - which I could not trace - deals with the history.

⁴¹ None of the Ghanaians I asked for a translation could tell me what this letter combination meant. One guessed that it might mean something like: 'you did not finish your studies'.

⁴² When I interviewed the assistant of the chief fisherman of Osu and his linguist in 1991 they said that one started with writing 'names' on canoes 35 years before, that is, around 1955! They apparently were not well informed, though they claimed to know the name of the fisherman with whom it all began.

⁴³ 'Since the commencement of the Ashánti disturbance ... communication with the land has been facilitated by the introduction of "surf boats", constructed for this special duty...' (Allen 1874:11)

⁴⁴ Ever since Europeans visited the Gold Coast they relied on the indigenous population living along the coast bringing goods and persons to and from the shore in their dugouts. Gradually it even became a kind of special profession to do this. See, for instance, Gordon: 'Another class of canoeemen devote themselves more or less to the transport of goods and passengers to and from vessels at anchor in the "roads"...' (1874:45).

REFERENCES

Allen, M.

1874 *The Gold Coast or A Cruise in West African Waters*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Anonymous

1996 Ghana Fisheries – What Future? *Foeline. A Magazine of the Earth Ghana* 4: 8/9.

Balmer, W.T.

[1926] *A History of the Akan Peoples of the Gold Coast*. 3d impr. London: The Atlantis Press.

Bowdich, T. Edward

[1819] *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee*. 3d Ed. Ed., with notes and Introduction by W.E.F. Ward. London.

- Brown, A.P.
 1947 The Fishing Industry of the Labadi District. In: F.R. Irvine (Ed.), *The Fish and the Fisheries of the Gold Coast*. London. Pp. 23-45.
- Burton, A.F.R.G.S.
 1863 *Wanderings in West Africa from Liverpool to Fernando Po*. Two Vols. London: Tinsley Brothers.
- Cohen, A.P.
 1985 *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. Chichester: Ellis Horwood.
- Coronel, M.A.
 1979 Fanti Canoe Decoration. *African Arts* 13(1):54-60.
- Eyeson, E.O.
 n.d. *Some Vital Information about the Fishing Industry in Ghana*. Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, Tema Press.
- Field, M.J.
 1937 *Religion and Medicine of the Gã People*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Gordon, C.A.
 1874 *Life on the Gold Coast*. London: Baillière, Tindall & Cox
- Gulbrandsen, O.
 1991 Canoes in Ghana. IDAF/WP/37. Cotonou. FAO/Danida/Norway.
- Histoire
 1784 *Histoire générale des voyages ou nouvelle collection de toutes les relations de voyages par mer et par terre, qui ont été publiées jusqu'à présent dans les différentes Langues de toutes les Nations connues, etc.* Tome cinquième. La Haye: Pierre De Hondt.
- Hoetink, H.
 1962 *De gespleten samenleving in het Caribisch gebied. Bijdrage tot de sociologie der rasrelaties in gesegmenteerde maatschappijen*. Assen: Van Gorcum & comp. N.V.
- Jorion, P.
 1988 Going Out or Staying Home: Migration Strategies among Xwla and Anlo-Ewe Fishermen. *MAST* 1(2):129-156.
- Lawson, R.M. and E.Kwei
 1974 *African Entrepreneurship and Economic Growth. A Case Study of the Fishing Industry of Ghana*. Accra: Ghana Universities Press.
- Macdonald, G.
 1898 *The Gold Coast Past and Present. A short description of the country and its people*. London: Longmans, Green and Co.
- Marrée, J.A. de
 1817 *Reizen op en Beschrijving van de Goudkust van Guinea etc.* 's-Gravenhage/Amsterdam: Gebroeders van Cleef.
- Nunoo, R.B.
 1975 Canoe Decoration in Ghana. *African Arts* 7(3):32-36.
- Odotei, I.
 1992 The Migration of Ghanaian Women in the Canoe Fishing Industry. *MAST* 5(2):88-96.
- Rattray, R.S.
 [1924] *The British Empire Exhibition April – October 1924. A Short Manual of the Gold Coast*. s.l.: n.p.

Redmayne, P.

1938 *The Gold Coast Yesterday and Today*. London: Chatto and Windus.

Sheves, G.T.

1991 The Ghanaian Dug-Out Canoe and the Canoe Carving Industry in Ghana. IDAF/WP/35. Cotonou: FAO/Danida/Norway.

Smith, R.

1970 The Canoe in West African History. *Journal of African History*, XI(4)515-533.

Surgy, A. de

1969 La pêche maritime traditionnelle à l'ancienne "Cote de Guinée." Situations et fonctionnement des unités de pêche. Documents du centre d'Études et de Recherches de Kara (Togo).

Verrips, J.

1990 On the Nomenclature of Dutch Inland River Craft. *MAST* 3(1):106-119.

Verrips, J. and B. Meyer

2001 Kwaku's Car: The Struggles and Stories of a Ghanaian Long-Distance Taxi-Driver. In: D. Miller (Ed.), *Car Cultures*. Oxford/New York: Berg. Pp. 153-185.