

Historical and Sociocultural Relevance of Royal 'Ahenema' Sandals in Asante Culture

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Abstract:

The study traces the historical origin of *ahenema* and investigates its socio-cultural relevance in Asante chieftaincy cultural milieu. The study found *ahenema* as a culturally essential fashion object, whose origin dates back to the eighteenth century, during the reign of the fourth Asante king, Otumfuo Osei Kwadwo Okoawia who ruled from 1764 to 1777; and the queenship of Nana Konadu Yiadom I (whose tenure began in 1768 – 1809). As an essential cultural footwear accessory with densely-layered symbolisms, *ahenema* became regalia for the chieftaincy, a tradition which has remained unchanged; and spread to be multicultural and multinational. *Ahenema*, has unwavering socio-cultural power in the (un)making of kings/chiefs in Akan culture in the realms of enstoolment and destoolment rituals of Asante chiefs as well as other Akan chiefs as a whole. They are ascribed symbolic, philosophical, and proverbial names which are cultural codes and language that need to be decoded.

Keywords: Socio-cultural; Royal; Ahenema; Asante culture; Fashion object; Regalia

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I. INTRODUCTION

Fashion accessories help in decorating the human body and act as an essential influencer of accessories production and commodification. By decorating the human bodies, fashion accessories heighten the aesthetic aura around its wearers based on the precepts of the standard of beauty held by the society that created such objects. The production and commodification of fashion accessories are universal to different cultures across the globe. It happens in different parts of the world, including Africa. On the continent of Africa, different societies have demonstrated their creative prowess in fashioning accessories for the decoration of human bodies. For example, the Asantes of Ghana are known for their decorative gold weights, pendants, and other jewellery products that served as regalia (Rattary, 1927; Busia, 1951; McLord, 1981; Ross, 1982, Antubam, 1963; Kyeremanten, 1965; Fosu, 1994) for utilitarian and communicative purposes.

The use of artistic fashion accessories such as dresses, fabrics, footwear, headwear, brooches, earrings, belts, bangles, anklets, amongst others, have always had a strong political, social and cultural role in safeguarding the histories, values, and identities of different cultures. It implies that these fashion objects give hints that help to unravel particular histories surrounding their origin, material, tools, semiotics, and creators in society. Of the accessories that served as regalia, one of the commonest, yet essential and inevitable fashion objects for Asante kings/chiefs, and by extension Akan and even non-Akan chiefdoms is *ahenema* (native sandals). The usage of *ahenema* goes beyond Ghana. Some kings/chiefs in neighbouring countries such as Togo and Cote D'ivoire also use it as essential regalia for traditional functions.

There have been instances where *ahenema* has seemingly been used as panoplied regalia and an authoritative object of the power of a king/chief. Ghanaweb (2007, August 18) reports of the Asantehene, Otumfuo Osei Tutu II's destoolment of the Asomfohene, Nana Osei Kwabena, for flouting the chieftaincy orders of the Asante Kingdom. The destoolment process included the removal of his *ahenema* sandals to signify that the said chief has been destooled under Asante chieftaincy tradition. There were also reports that the Asantehene, Otumfuo Osei Tutu II, in December 2010 destooled the Queen of Atwima, Obaapanin Asamoah Duah II, and two sub-chiefs for taking a bribe (VibeGhana.com, 2010). As part of the destoolment rituals, the *ahenema* sandals of all the three culprits, which symbolised their office as traditional rulers, were removed from their feet. These instances of destoolment with the *ahenema* seemingly playing a symbolic role need further investigation. This is because the instances raise questions of the sociocultural relevance of *ahenema* regalia in Asante chieftaincy culture. Besides, the historical twist to the origin of this fashion object and regalia needs academic attention. This study, therefore, traces the historical origin of *ahenema*, and investigates its sociocultural relevance in Asante chieftaincy cultural milieu.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical perspectives that support this study is the object-based theory propounded by Lou Taylor. The study is situated in the object-based theory propounded by Lou Taylor (2002) and Riello's (2011) methodological model of *material culture of fashion*. The object-based theory is concerned with materiality which has to do with description and documentation to bring out and classify garments or objects for historical purposes. It also focuses on the contextual attributes of the exhibits, oral history, company history, and design philosophy of fashion production (Taylor, 2002; Skou & Melchior, 2008). Riello's (2011) methodological model of *material culture of fashion* which he borrowed from art history, anthropology, and archeology also makes fashion art objects central to historical studies and narratives be it socio-cultural, economic, and other practices of a particular period (Essel, 2017). Informed by object-based theory and material culture of fashion, the study considered the contextual attributes of *ahenema*, its oral history, design philosophy, description and documentation to bring out its history and sociocultural relevance amongst the Asantes and by extension, the Akan chieftaincy. This theoretical stance took *ahenema* fashion art object as central to historical studies and narratives in a sociocultural context.

II. METHODOLOGY

Historical case studies constituted the research designs for the study. The historical case study helps in analyzing cases from the distant past to the present, using eclectic data sources, in generating both idiographic and nomothetic knowledge (Widdersheim, 2018). The use of the historical case study was informed by the fact that although case studies and histories can overlap, the case study's unique strength lies in its ability to deal with a variety of evidence including documents, artifacts, interviews, and direct observations, as well as participant-observation beyond what might be available in a conventional historical study (Yin, 2018). A total of nine (9) respondents were purposively sampled for the study. They consisted of four (4) *ahenema* designers and producers with active experience ranging from 20 to 35 years on the job, two (2) chiefs and three (3) elders from chief palaces in Asanteland. Unstructured interview and focus group discussion constituted the method of data collection. Permission was sought from the respondents for face-to-face interview with the agreement to audio-tape for transcription purposes. Historical and narrative analysis tools were the data analysis tools used. With the historical research tool, the study used the heuristic of considering the source and the context of the data and corroborate it to ensure the trustworthiness and authenticity of the data gathered. Historical research concerns itself with identification, analysis, and interpretation of old texts (Špiláčková, 2012), eyewitness accounts, and other oral history and interviews. Using the narrative structure, data analysis was done to accentuate consistency, suppress contradiction, and produce rationally sound interpretation (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000) without truncating the content of the told stories about the lived experiences of the respondents. The historical narration was supported with photographs of *ahenema* taken with the permission of the creators. The transcribed and analysed data was shared with the respondents for verification purposes. The respondents also provided some pictures and permitted the researcher to use them for academic purposes. To ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents, pseudonyms were used in place of the original names.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Akan word *ahenema* literally means 'children of kings/chiefs.' Legend has it that, when it was developed, only kings/chiefs and their families could wear it to show their status as royals. Later, it became permissible for the subjects and all to use. The king/chief belonged to the high class of society because they were the leaders of their flourishing kingdoms and ethnic states respectively. They had creative artists in their courts who produced functional and decorative artworks and fashion accessories used as body adornments. Per the high status of kings/chiefs in the society, the trickle-down theory, where new fashion art usage begins with the top echelon of society and gradually gets to the masses, exemplifies the spread and use of *ahenema* in Ghanaian society. *Ahenema* is also called *Kyawkyaw*. The word *Kyawkyaw* was derived from the sounds it makes when worn for the usual characteristic majestic walk. Respondent Opanin Kwame explained that:

Ahenema used to be worn by only the chiefs/kings and their families. If you are not a chief ... you are not permitted to wear it. When the one who is not a chief is sighted wearing some at a durbar, the elders sent people to remove it from the person's feet.

Legend has it that, the first *ahenema* was fashioned out of wood which served as the *sole* (called *asee*) while the *top* (referred to as *nsiso* or *ahenemapɔnkɔ*) was made of leather. It developed to a stage where the flat wooden soul was replaced with layers of animal skins, cut out to form the shape of the sandals. The animal skins (for example, *okohoma*) used as the *sole* produced the *kyawkyaw* sound when in use. The sound became the name of the sandals.

Respondent Opanin Antwi and Opanin Kwaku have been in the business of *Ahenema* production for more than thirty-five years. They make a living from the job, and have trained more than ten 10 and 16

apprentices respectively, some of which have set up their production shops. In a focus group discussion, they revealed that:

There are two basic *soles* (*asee*) of *ahenema*, namely *Asansantoo* and *Atenee* (Figure 1). Beyond these, producers create new ones which are sometimes suggested by clients. It could be in the shape of animals like crocodiles, lizards, tortoises (Figure 1c) or fish. The *soles* have symbolic meanings that are usually associated with the animal or objects which influenced its creation. However, it is the top (*nsiso*) that determines the name of the *ahenema*.

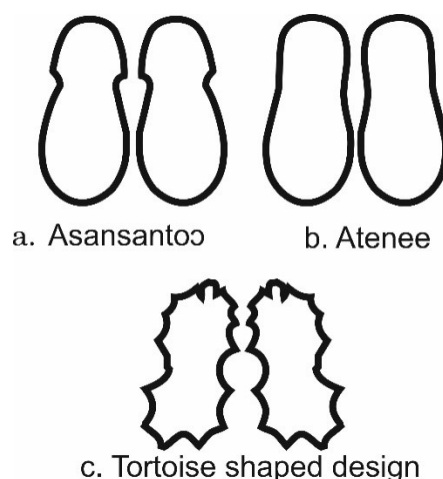


Figure 1. Showing some of *sole* pattern designs of *ahenema*.

There are different schools of thought on the etymology of *ahenema* footwear. One legend account traces it to the reign of the fourth Asante king, Otumfuo Osei Kwadwo Okoawia who ruled from 1764 to 1777 ('A Guide to Manhyia Palace Museum', 2003). This account posits that Asantehema (Queen mothers) had specially made sandals, for they do not walk barefooted in the courtyard of the palace. One of the Asantehema once got injured in the foot while walking without sandals. The wound, according to legend, took long to heal and became a great oath of the Asantehema. Since this account is believed to have occurred during the reign of Otumfuo Osei Kwadwo Okoawia, then, the fourth Asantehema, Nana Konadu Yiadom I (whose tenure began in 1768 – 1809), was the possible beneficiary of the earliest *ahenema* footwear.

Bodwich's (1818) narrative accounts of the culture of the Asante people offer some hints on the history of the *ahenema* footwear. In his description of the regalia of the kings, he pointed out that (p.35) 'their sandals were of green, red, and delicate white leather ...' In thick description of what the king wore Bodwich said, their royal sandals 'of a soft white leather, were embossed across the instep band with small gold and silver cases of sappies' (p.38). Gold pendants and designs of varied symbolism that show the power and wealth of the Asante kings were used to embellish their unique *ahenema* footwears. Vansina (1982, p.222) offered hints of the period of production and usage of some *ahenema*. She revealed some of the artefacts including sandals and cast of gold rings had production dates estimated in the range of 1700 to 1900. This confirms the eighteenth century as a possible period *ahenema* sandals production in Ghana began.

Categories of Ahenema

There are categories of *ahenema* (Figure 2). The categories of *ahenema* are traditionally informed by the kind of occasion and the purpose for which they are made. There are those used for funerals, durbars and festive occasions (festivals and other merrymaking events), especially, in the customs and traditions of chieftaincy institutions. The red, black and brown coloured ones are usually used for funerals to depict bereavement, sadness and death. In the Akan notion of colours, red, black and brown are associated with decay, death, bereavement and pain (Antubam, 1963; Amenuke et al., 1991), hence, its association with funerals. Those meant for durbar (*adwabɔ*) are the gold stud sandals (*Sika mpaboa*), silver and related colours. One of the Akan chiefs commented that:

To complement the wearing of toga style by the chieftom, they desired to develop footwear to match with it. As a result, they developed *ahenema* for different occasions. They created *ahenema* for funerals and durbars. But there are some people who are unaware of the types and, therefore, use them anyhow. This suggests that there are categories of *ahenema* worn for different occasions but certain factors have caused its improper usage in the traditional cultural milieu. These factors include ignorance of the colour symbolisms as well as the meanings ascribed to the entire design. In one breadth, the users who default the conventional usage in terms of colour schemes and meaning may be doing so for purely aesthetic reasons rather than meaning associated with them.

Amongst the Akans (which form over 70% of Ghana's population), *ahenema* is the traditionally sanctioned footwear accessory suitable for traditional gatherings or occasions. Wearing the toga fashion (usually 6- 12 yards of fabric gracefully wrapped on the body) without *ahenema* is culturally inappropriate in the traditional chieftaincy milieu. Likewise, it is traditionally unethical and unacceptable in Asante customs and traditions for kings or chiefs to wear the toga fashion classic without wearing befitting *ahenema*. Even for those who are not part of the chieftaincy, wearing *ahenema* that is unsuitable for a particular durbar, funeral and other traditional events of the chieftaincy are likely to invite troubles for themselves.

Per the categorisation of *ahenema* sandals, *sika mpaboa* (literary translated as 'golden footwear/sandals) for example, is the highest status-defining type of *ahenema* footwear amongst the chieftaincy. For the chieftaincy in the Asanteland, *sika mpaboa* (Figure 3) is a preserve of the Asante King. No other paramount chief could wear it without his approval. Based on the achievement of chiefs under the rulership of Asantehene, he may honour a chief with *sika mpaboa*. Such honours remain a great chieftaincy laurel, privilege and meritorious achievement in the Asanteland. Once a chief has bestowed this honour, it implies that that chief has the power to wear *sika mpaboa* at traditional chieftaincy functions, durbars, or occasions. The *sika mpaboa* of the Asante king remains distinctive. It may be decorative with cast-gold (Ross, 1982) symbolic animal and geometric figurines that ornament the (top) *nsisoɔ* of the sandals. Bodwich (1818, p.256) confirms this centuries-old and long-standing tradition of who has the prerogative to wear *sika mpaboa* (ahenema stud with gold or golden colours). He writes:

The caboceers of Soota [Nsuta], Marmpon [Mampong], Becqua [Bekwai], and Kokofoo [Kokofu], the four large towns built by the Ashantees at the same time with Coomassie [Kumasi], have several palatine privileges; ... These four caboceers, only, are allowed, with the King, to stud their sandals with gold.'

A chief who wears *Sika mpaboa* that is not sanctioned by the Asantehene to durbars and other traditional occasions is slapped with contempt. The act becomes contemptuous because it breaches Asante chieftaincy etiquette, customs and traditions, which is punishable. In support, one of the chiefs commented that: 'Look, I'm a chief in the Asanteland, but I do not have the right to wear *sika mpaboa*. Should I wear it, I would be cited for contempt, for it does not show respect to the Asante King.' There are ranks of chiefs. A subchief could not wear *ahenema* of a higher status and prestige such as *sika mpaboa* to a durbar of paramount chiefs. He will be cited for contempt. One elder recounts that:

We attended a durbar in the Asanteland. I wore a particular *ahenema* as part of my toga fashion. As custom demanded, I was part of the entourage that went to greet the chiefs at the durbar. While greeting, I overheard one of the subjects whispering to one of the chiefs, if I'm traditionally permitted to wear that particular *ahenema*. The chief sighed in the affirmative in response to his subject due to my status in the traditional area (N. K. Duah, personal communication, October 19, 2020).



Figure 2. *Ahenema* sandals in display. It shows about 49 pairs rendered in various design and colour schemes. From the collection of Antwi. 2020. Image Courtesy of Osuanyi Quaicoo Essel.

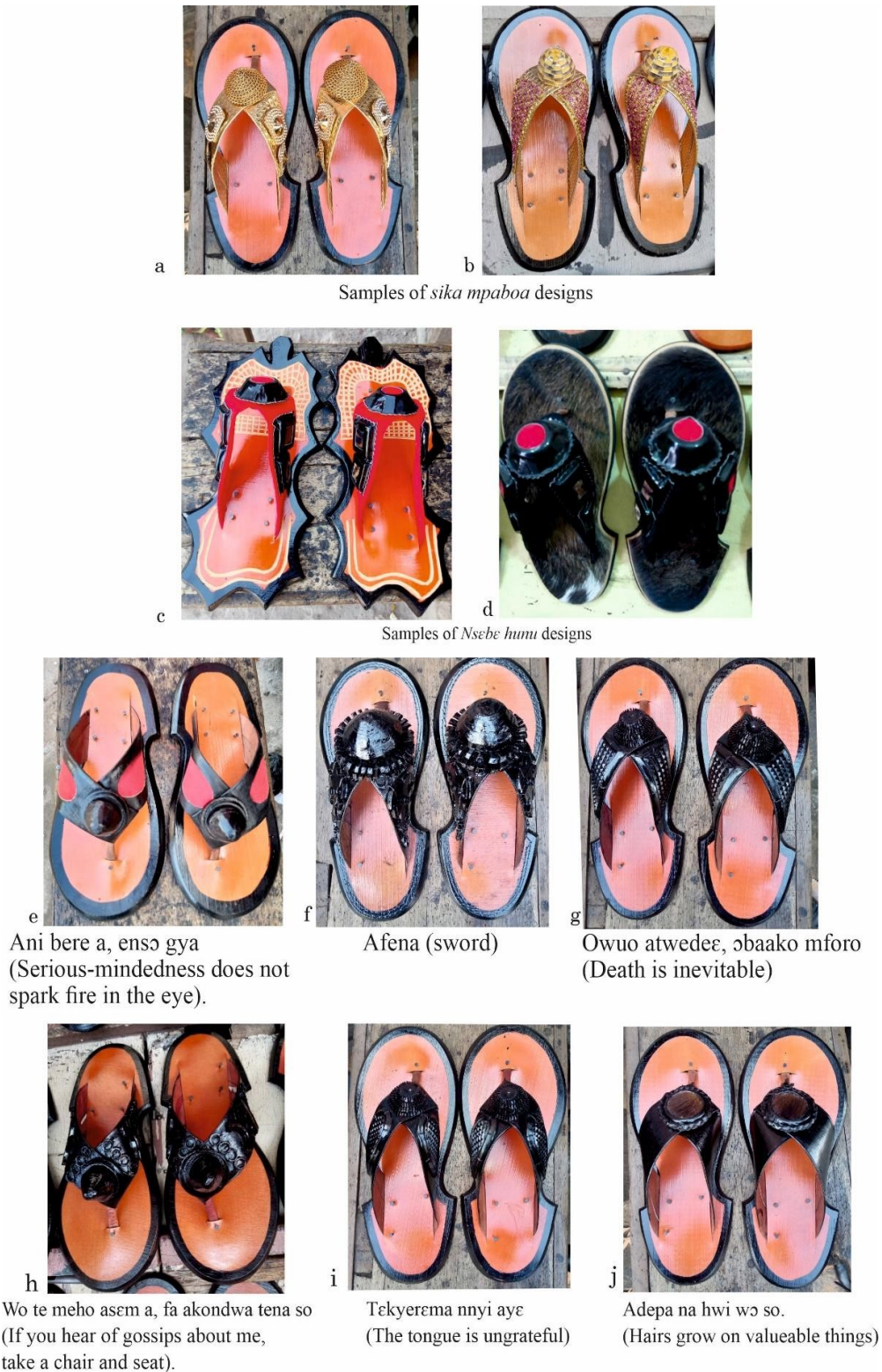


Figure 3. Some *ahenema* designs and their names. From the collection of Antwi & Tetteh, 2020. Image Courtesy of Osuanyi Quaicoo Essel.

Ahenema names and Semiotics

As in the case of wax print fabrics, *ahenema* are given unique symbolic and proverbial names. The names are usually given by the producers. In some cases, the client suggests the preferred name for the producers to fashion the sandals based on that. Respondent Opanin Kwame added that:

We came to meet some of the design names given by some of the earlier *ahenema* producers. We also create some designs and name them based on Akan symbolism associated with animals, plants, human body

parts, adinkra symbols, among others. I have personally created some designs based on periwinkles which are small marine snails. Per its tiny nature, many people usually eat it when they don't have money to buy fish or meat. People, therefore, consume it in difficult times. Based on this I used the shells of the periwinkles in my *ahenema* design and named it *Me nso meho behia da bi* which literally means 'I will be useful to people one day'.

The names given by the producers or suggested by the clients may cast insinuations, promote peace, warns against the ills of society and show one's status. Some of the names are presented in Table 1 and Figure 3 respectively. For example, *Ani bre a, ensɔ gya* design (Figure 3 e), shows red-dyed leather used as in-lay against the black colour scheme to suggest the symbolism of its name. The red parts of the design look seed-like, an abstract representation of reddening eye, which symbolically suggests seriousness. Philosophically, this treatment connotes that no matter the degree of seriousness in pursuing something, it will not cause the eyes to redden. In other words, seriousness, as an attribute does not mean one has to be boisterous or overly expressive. One could be serious and yet show a calm disposition.

In the production of *ahenema*, some producers specialise in making the *sole* (called *aseɛ*) while others specialise in making the *top* (referred to as *nsisoɔ*). Both the *sole* and the *top* have their unique names. However, when the top is fixed onto the sole, the name of the top becomes the name of the *ahenema*.

Table 1: Meaning of some *ahenema* designs

Name of the <i>ahenema</i>	Meaning
Ani bre a, ensɔ gya.	Serious-mindedness does not spark fire in the eye.
Ebididi bi ekyi.	There are classes/grades in things
Enku me fie, na enkosu me abontene.	Do not kill me home and turn to sympathize with me in public.
Da ben na me nsoroma bepue?	When will my star arise?
Abuburo nkosua, adea ebeye yie no, ennsee da.	Something that is destined to succeed will never fail.
Asaase tokru, oibara bewura mu bi.	All are susceptible to death.
Wo te meho asem a, fa akondwa tena so.	If you hear of gossips about me, take a chair and seat.
Tekyerema nnyi aye.	The tongue is ungrateful.
Nsebe hunu.	Powerless talisman
Kɔtɔ didi mee a, na eyɛaponkyereni ya.	When the crab is well fed, the frog becomes jealous.
Ebusua dɔ funu.	The extended family cares overly for the dead body.
Ebusua te see kwayiee.	A family is like a forest.
Akokɔ nae tia ba, na ennkum ba.	The legs of the hen step on its chicks, but it does not kill them.

***Ahenema* symbolisms in enstoolment and destoolment**

Ahenema is considered as irresistible chieftaincy regalia in the scheme of Akan customs and tradition. Without it, the adornment of any Akan king or chief becomes incomplete. This implies that it holds a central position in the chieftaincy diplomacy and culture. As a result of its inevitable role in that regard, it has become symbolic regalia in both enstoolment and destoolment of kings and chiefs. When a chief goes contrary to the etiquettes, rules and regulations, taboos, customs and traditions in his/her role which tantamount to destoolment, the removal of his/her *ahenema* from his/her feet is a symbolic sign of destoolment. One of the chiefs explained that:

When a chief falter, the queen mother and the council of elders that throne, removes the *ahenema* from the feet of the culprit chief to show that s/he has been destooled. The affected chief could seek redress from the paramount chief under which s/he serve.

Likewise, in the enstoolment process, wearing *ahenema* signifies his/her authority. In both the enstoolment and destoolment process, the sandals connote power, authority and might. Beyond enstoolment and destoolment, the Akan observe some etiquette in the usage of *ahenema* because of its symbolism to show respect to the elderly or powers that be. One has to negotiate a partial withdrawal of the feet from the *ahenema* as a sign of respect and demonstration of custom adherence during the greeting of the elderly or chief at durbar or public gathering.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Ahenema occupies a central place in the chieftaincy institution, customs and traditions of the chiefdom and the life of Asante people, and by extension the Akan of Ghana. It has remained essential regalia that is inseparable from the customs and traditions of the Akan. Though the regalia is associated with the Akan, it was developed by the Asante people. As a culturally essential fashion object, its historical origin and socio-cultural relevance in Asante chieftaincy cultural tradition which remains largely uncharted was the focus of this study.

By delving into oral history, supported with available historical documents, the study positioned the root of *ahenema* (also called *Kyawkyaw*) regalia designing and production as an eighteenth-century Asante phenomenon during the reign of the fourth Asante king, Otumfuo Osei Kwadwo Okoawia who ruled from 1764 to 1777; and the queenship of Nana Konadu Yiadom I. The Asantehema Nana Konadu Yiadom I, whose tenure

began in 1768 – 1809, was the beneficiary of the earliest *ahenema* regalia. Subsequently, *ahenema* became regalia for the chiefdom, a tradition which has remained unchanged; and spread to both Akan and non-Akan states and kingdoms till now. Some chiefdom in parts of Togo and Cote d'Ivoire use the regalia. From the chiefdom, the regalia did trickle-down to the masses. To be ablest with the evolving designs of *ahenema* in the twenty-first century require extensive documentation of existing ones for posterity. Also, the creators of *ahenema* designs need to be saved from the clouds of anonymity to reveal their creative contributions in fashion accessories production.

Ahenema design and production are informed by the purpose and functions (occasion) for which they are made. There are designs meant for funerals, durbars and festive occasions (festivals and other merrymaking events), by traditional authorities in the observance of the customs and traditions, while there those made for purely utilitarian and aesthetic reasons. The Akan notion of colours applies in the designs for the chiefdom. Of all the *ahenema*, *sika mpaboa* (*ahenema* stud with gold), is regarded as the most prestigious, for it is the preserve of Asantehene. A chief under his reign could be honoured with *sika mpaboa*. With *ahenema* assuming a fashion object of huge socio-political and cultural connections and signification, it would be of interest to delve into the power politics of *ahenema* and how it is used to negotiate self-actualisation among the chiefdom.

The regalia, *Ahenema*, has unwavering socio-cultural power in the (un)making of kings/chiefs in Akan culture in the realms of enstoolment and destoolment rituals of Asante chiefs as well as Akan chiefs as a whole. *Ahenema* are given unique symbolic and proverbial names by its original producers and, in some cases clients. The names have philosophical meanings that need decoding to fully understand the language of *ahenema*. In the traditional sense, failure to understand the language of *ahenema*, may land one into contempt.

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