

Project Report

Shapes of the Ancestors: Bodies, Animals, Art, and Ghanaian Fantasy Coffins*

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Abstract: This project report describes the research and presentation of Shapes of the Ancestors: Bodies, Animals, Art and Ghanaian Fantasy Coffins, an exhibition focusing on the workshop of Ghanaian fantasy coffin maker Paa Joe. The exhibition was on display at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures in Bloomington, Indiana from August 14 through December 16, 2018.

[Keywords: coffin making; curation; material culture; museum exhibitions; workshops. Keywords are derived from the American Folklore Society Ethnographic Thesaurus, a standard nomenclature for the ethnographic disciplines.]

Introduction

Located in Pobimam on the outskirts of Ghana's Greater Accra Region, Paa Joe Coffin Works is the nucleus of activity for legendary figurative coffin maker Paa Joe, his son Jacob Tetteh-Ashong, and their associates. It is a place where the sound of sawing wood and hammering nails mixes with the ever-present background radio, and a layer of sawdust coats every surface. For two weeks during August 2017, I made regular trips out to this workshop to research the objects popularly known as fantasy coffins. Amidst the flurry of activity happening at the workshop during those two weeks, I had the pleasure of learning from the artists on staff about the processes of making figurative coffins, their use in Ga funerals, and the increasing market for Western collection and exhibition.

During the year following my return from Ghana, I worked with the Mathers Museum of World Cultures at Indiana University to curate the exhibition *Shapes of the Ancestors: Bodies, Animals, Art, and Ghanaian Fantasy Coffins*, which opened in Fall 2018. Over this year I learned a great deal about the coffins from a university museum-oriented perspective, including the logistical practicalities of transporting them for exhibition loans, how to effectively display large objects, and the challenge of interpreting such dynamic objects for wide audiences.

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Figure 1. Airplane-shaped coffin, Mathers Museum of World Cultures, 2017-07-0001. Photograph by Matthew Sieber.

This project began with a donation of an airplane-shaped coffin (Figure 1) from Robert and Alice Schloss of Indianapolis, Indiana to the Mathers Museum collection. Their interest in, and enthusiasm for, the practice also generously led to their funding of my research trip to Accra and the exhibition. The Schloss' relationship with Paa Joe, whose workshop had made the airplane coffin they donated, also helped to facilitate the connections necessary to begin research. As a PhD student in the Department of Anthropology at Indiana University and a research associate with the Mathers Museum of World Cultures, I had already been conducting research with African objects in museums and West Africa, with an interest in methods of interpretation and exhibition. After my return from Ghana, the curation and implementation of the exhibition was supported by various Mathers Museum staff, as well as partially funded by the 'Themester' initiative at Indiana University.¹

The processes of ethnographic research in locations like Paa Joe Coffin Works and curation in museums like the Mathers Museum of World Cultures are important aspects of contemporary practice for ethnographic museums today. In documenting the process of researching and curating in this project report, I hope to provide an outline of the logistics, decision-making, and planning processes of the project for those interested. I also aim to illustrate the ways in which first-hand collections research can inform exhibition curation and design. I will begin by providing a brief background of Ghanaian figurative coffins and their collection/exhibition in Western Museums. I will then focus on the periods of research and curation in turn at Paa Joe Coffin Works and the Mathers Museum of World Cultures. Finally, I conclude with notes on the advantages and challenges of such university museum-based projects.

Collecting and Exhibiting Fantasy Coffins

Prior to beginning research, I was already aware of Ghanaian figurative coffins as a phenomenon in Western museums and collections. For anyone who has seen one in person, their impressive size, color, and diverse range of forms make them hard to forget. The figurative coffins—popularly known as fantasy coffins for their connection to personal identity—have been regularly made and used by the Ga people of Ghana since the 1950s. The practice arose out of the changing colonial and postcolonial dynamics surrounding death, leadership, land ownership, and community relationships in Ghana, spurred by the already established practice of carrying political leaders in figurative palanquins. The shapes of the coffins symbolically communicate important information about the deceased's occupation, familial identity, and social position at public, community-based funerals. More fully describing the cultural roles and the use of these coffins among the Ga historically and contemporarily is outside the scope of this paper, which will largely report on the museum project itself. However, key anthropologists and art historians have researched the subject in depth, and for this background I refer readers to the work of Roberta Bonetti (2009, 2010, 2012), Regula Tschumi (2008, 2014), and the earlier work of Thierry Secretan (1995).

In addition to scholarly research, Ghanaian figurative coffins have a history of exhibition and collection in the West since the 1970s. The 1989 exhibition *Les Magiciens de la Terre* at Paris' Centre Pompidou proved to be the most sensational, catapulting the practice and the artists that make them to international fame. Since then, figurative coffins have been widely collected by both large and small museums and galleries, sometimes making their way into permanent gallery displays. Larger exhibitions specifically focused on coffins have tended to be primarily in art museums, and usually focus on the work of one artist, such as the University of Missouri-Kansas City Gallery of Art's, *A Life Well Lived: Fantasy Coffins of Kane Quaye* (1994), the more recent University of Iowa's Stanley Museum of Art, *Art & the Afterlife: Fantasy Coffins by Eric Adjetey Anang* (2017), or the exhibition of Paa Joe's slave castle coffins in *The Coffins of Paa Joe and the Pursuit of Happiness* (2017) at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City. Artists from the most well-known workshops—Paa Joe Coffin Works and Kane Kwei Coffins—have participated in several artist residencies at institutions in Europe and the US, and have been exhibited or featured in art festivals, shows, and galleries around the world. The practice of fantasy coffins was regularly picked up on and reported in popular media sources, as I found out by the frequent emails I received when I set up a Google Alert when I started research. All of this goes to show that when the Mathers Museum set out on this project, the coffins and their artists were already widely known in museum and academic circles, but until this point had been largely exhibited from the point of view of art museums and popular media.

Given the research, collecting, and exhibitions work that had come before, the objective of the Mathers project was not a full-scale ethnography of Ga life or even of Ga coffin use, but rather to research and create an exhibition based on the specific goals related to the museum's collection. First, we wanted to contextualize the airplane coffin now in our collection by documenting first-hand the place and the people from which it had originated. Second, we wanted to learn more about the cultural practices associated with the use of these

coffins from the artists who create them. Third, drawing from approaches to the anthropology of art and folklore studies so strong and Indiana University, we wanted to pay particular attention to the practices of making coffins at the workshop. These goals informed both the approach to research at Paa Joe Coffin Works in Ghana, as well as the narrative of the eventual exhibition. I was selected to make the trip to Ghana and to curate the exhibition based on my ongoing dissertation research on artistic practices in West Africa connected with museum collections and exhibitions.

Research at Paa Joe Coffin Works, Accra, Ghana

I travelled to Accra in early August 2017 as a representative of the Mathers Museum of World Cultures. The timing of my research trip happily coincided with the Arts Council of the African Studies Association (ACASA) triennial conference held at the University of Ghana at Legon. This not only meant I was able to present at the conference, but also that Paa Joe Coffin Works regularly received visiting academics and museum professionals making the trip out to see the workshop during the conference. While I did not attend the entirety of the conference due to my research at the workshop, conferring with my colleagues at the conference about the project on the days when I was able to attend gave me an idea of the excitement in the academic world surrounding an exhibition examining Ghanaian figurative coffins based on ethnographic research.

The drive to the workshop was a long one, even from my place in a conference hotel near the Legon campus, away from central Accra. The hour-plus-long drive through the streets on the outskirts of the city often gave me the opportunity to collect my thoughts and plan for the day ahead. I largely followed along with the activities of the workshop staff to get a sense of day-to-day activities, but the length of my stay necessitated some preparation to ensure I could cover a variety of topics in a relatively short period of time.

When I would arrive in the morning, the staff of Paa Joe Coffin Works usually had already begun their day. Upon pulling up to the workshop from the busy highway outside, it would not be unusual to find Paa Joe himself sitting in a chair outside the workshop in a place I would later learn is a favorite spot. Paa Joe, now seventy-one years old, no longer makes entire coffins by himself. He instead observes and guides the work of his staff, making corrections when necessary or lending a hand when needed. The heavy labor of coffin making is now largely undertaken by his son, and master coffin maker, Jacob Tetteh-Ashong, as well as former apprentices contracted for work during busy periods. In August, these included Benjamin Amartey-Mensah, Samuel Nahr, and Samuel Kudjeo, along with Jacob's nephew Justice Boakye who was on summer break from school, and Daniel Anum Jasper, an artist who comes periodically to paint the coffins.



Figure 2. Paa Joe Coffin Works Workshop. August 2017, Pobiman, Greater Accra Region, Ghana. Photograph by author.



Figure 3. Paa Joe (right) and Samuel Nahr (left) work on framing a boat-shaped coffin. August 2017, Pobiman, Greater Accra Region, Ghana. Photograph by author.

Paa Joe (whose birth name is Joseph Ashong) and his associates were working on a large number of projects when I was there in August. One was a coffin shaped like an ear of corn for a farmer's burial. Others were a group of sea-themed coffins for an exhibition in Accra that would celebrate Paa Joe's fortieth anniversary of coffin making, including coffins in the shapes of a boat, conch shell, fish, canoe, and clam. Finally, the staff was also working on updating a pair of lion palanquins for local chiefs. Elaborate projects such as these could take up to a month to complete, so I was unable to observe the creation of one specific coffin from start to finish. However, I was able to observe each at various stages in the process; from framing to construction, shaping, and painting. In combining these observations with interviews with staff, I was able to experience the complete process of making figurative coffins.

The workshop itself was split into several sections, including the area in the front where painting and preparation for shipping would take place. The rectangular concrete structure of the workshop was largely taken up with a showroom, where stock examples of their work could be shown to tourists and those interested in commissioning coffins. It also included a small office where Jacob conducted the day-to-day business of the workshop, as well as storage areas for tools. Much of the actual work of coffin-making took place in the back, concentrated in the areas of shade offered by the surrounding buildings and trees. Consequently, this was where I spent the large majority of my time at the workshop.



Figure 5. Paa Joe (right) and his son Jacob Tetteh-Ashong (left) at work in the shade behind the workshop. August 2017, Pobiman, Greater Accra Region, Ghana. Photograph by author.

My methodology for the research involved balancing periods of observation—documented through note-taking, photography, video, and audio recording—with discussions and formal interviews with the staff. From this some of the challenges inherent in a short-term collections-research project undertaken by a single researcher are apparent. Projects like these need to maximize the effectiveness of time in the field. However, the natural ebb and flow of work at Paa Joe Coffin Works meant there were periods when a flurry of activity was taking place with each staff member working on various different projects. At other times, everyone was in a holding pattern while waiting for tools to be fixed, awaiting the arrival of appropriate materials, or away from the workshop on business. These breaks in activity gave me the opportunity to talk more freely with staff away from the often loud sounds of physical labor and the concentration necessary for coffin making. When everyone started working again, however, it meant that I often felt the need to be in multiple places at once. Given the limitations of time and resources with the project, as well as its goals associated with an exhibition and collections research rather than a long-term ethnography, I focused on distributing the resources I had available in a time-efficient manner. For example, I would leave my audio recorder running with Samuel K., who was sawing sections of wood for a clam coffin, while simultaneously setting up to video record Jacob sanding the fish coffin and keeping an eye on Ben, who was nearby puttying the boat coffin, rotating after short intervals.

While the breaks did prove useful for talking with staff and catching up on notes, they were not always sufficient for the more in-depth discussions that I hoped to have during interviews. I interviewed Paa Joe and Jacob in-depth, as they spoke the most English of the staff (Jacob is entirely fluent). I split up their interviews into sections according to topics—processes of making coffins, personal backgrounds and training, cultural practices of coffin use in Ghana, and current workshop activities—and distributed these interviews among the days I was at the workshop. Still, I was very conscious that audio and video recording interviews necessitated the relative stoppage of some work, not only by the person being interviewed, but also by others who (very kindly) stopped some of the louder tasks, such as hammering nail heads, near the interview site so that we would be able to hear each other. The interviews took place both in the showroom and in the back of the workshop, and all but the initial interview on the processes of making coffins were video recorded. Often, after the interview finished Jacob or Paa Joe would then leave immediately to whatever task awaited them. At one point while interviewing Jacob, Paa Joe walked past and said something to Jacob in Ga. When I asked what he had said, Jacob laughed and said, “He said, so you aren’t working today?” Although mostly a joke, balancing my own interest and the staff’s desire to help me with the project with the deadlines of the workshop proved to be a careful arrangement.

I conducted shorter informal interviews with the rest of staff when they had time available. These short interviews were necessary not only because of the higher demand on their time, but also because some of them spoke very little English, and I spoke even less Ga, revealing another limitation of such short-term collections research projects. With such a short time, I was unable to learn any significant amount of Ga in order to better communicate with staff, although I was often assisted by the staff members who spoke more English.

From my time at Paa Joe Coffin Works, I gathered over six hundred images, seventy minutes of video of the processes of coffin making, interviews with all staff of varying lengths, and forty minutes of audio of various sounds around the workshop, along with my own notes. In such situations, one often looks back wistfully at “what could have been done,” and I do wish that I had been able to spend more time in Ghana in order to experience a funeral or conduct interviews with more Ga people outside the workshop about the practice of funerals with figurative coffins. As I was unable to do so in the brief time I was there, I later relied on my interviews with staff on the subject alongside the work of ethnographic researchers who had come before me.

Curating at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures

Upon my return to the United States, I started processing the data generated from the research project, and began collaborating with the museum staff in planning for the exhibit. One of my first steps was to create a guide for the images and videos that I had gathered—documenting who was in the image, what was taking place, and when it was taken for others to easy access. I also began transcribing the interviews. Working through the images, interviews, and video produced from my time in Ghana was not only necessary immediately after my return as the experience was fresh in my mind, but also because it helped to prepare for funding applications for the exhibition project. Over the course of the fall semester and early spring, I also worked with staff at the Mathers Museum to develop a proposal for Indiana University’s Themester initiative, which in the year 2018 would be themed around Animals/Humans. Since the coffins often take the form of animals in accordance with the deceased’s occupation or familial identity, as well as house the deceased’s physical body, the theme was a natural fit for the exhibition effort. The proposal was ultimately successful.

I continued reviewing research conducted by other ethnographers, art historians, and media professionals on Ga figurative coffins, which greatly assisted my understanding of funeral practices and the use of the coffins. As I did further background research and reflected on my own experience at the workshop, several key themes of interest emerged. These themes—history and development, individual identity, community practice, the influence of Western collectors, and the creative making process—would become the exhibition’s main wall text sections. However, in thinking ahead to the exhibition, I was already aware of a gap in my research in Ghana: the documentation of Ga funeral practices in which these coffins are used. Given the goals of the research and the exhibition, I wanted to be sure that visitors not only got a sense of the artistry of the practice and of their use from the accompanying text, but also by seeing images of the coffins in use. Based on my conversations with people unfamiliar with the practice about my project, I was already accustomed to the general sense of disbelief by Westerners, fueled by the familiarity with stoic Western funerals, that such objects would be used and buried in Ghanaian funerals. To address this, I licensed images for use in the exhibition from art historian and photographer Regula Tschumi, who had conducted extensive research in the area and dynamically captured the practice. Images from my own research in Ghana would inform the section I developed on the making of the coffins, focusing on Paa Joe’s workshop. I also learned a new skill—video editing—in order

to create three short looped videos that were displayed to document various activities at the workshop, drawing from the footage from my research trip.

The airplane coffin was already a part of our collection, but given the interest we had already received in the project and the results of my research in Ghana, we were keen to expand the range of objects on display. I approached surrounding museums that agreed to loan collections for the exhibition, including a pink fish coffin from the collection of the Eskenazi Museum of Art at Indiana University, as well as two coffins from the Children's Museum of Indianapolis. These loans were exciting in that they allowed us to tell more diverse stories of use and artistry with the collections on display, but they also presented challenges. One of the more curious aspects of curatorial work at small university museums is the unexpected tasks that occupy your time, including researching what size truck we would need in order to transport two coffins in the shape of a hen and a shoe from Indianapolis to Bloomington.

We also began broadening the objects in the exhibition beyond full-sized coffins. I chose to incorporate a funeral outfit from the Mathers Museum's Mary Warren collection of West African clothing to highlight the other forms of community and familial expression at Ghanaian funerals. We included two miniature coffins in the popular forms of a Coke bottle and a Star beer bottle to discuss the ways in which coffin artists have adapted the full-size form to appeal to the tourist trade. We also commissioned three miniature coffins from Paa Joe Coffin Works in the shape of a lion, eagle, and rooster in order to draw more attention to the most common animal forms and the importance of animal symbolism in Ga familial lines. During the negotiation for these miniatures, we also acquired some examples of tools from the workshop in order to show other forms of material culture associated with making and artistry.

The focus on animals was fostered by the previously mentioned funding source for the exhibition, IU's Themester: Animal/Human. The Animal/Human theme provided a guiding point for me as I developed the exhibition narrative to be presented in the script. Since the exhibition space was relatively large in order to accommodate four full-sized coffins alongside other objects, there would have been opportunity to be more verbose in the exhibition script. However, after seeing others' reactions to the coffins I realized that the objects themselves would do much more speaking than exhibit text ever could, I chose to instead focus on certain key perspectives on the coffins. I drafted dedicated wall text sections on the historical development of the practice, aspects of Ga culture informing the symbolism and use of the coffins, the relationship between the coffins and individual identity, the process of using coffins in community-based funerals, the relationship between the coffins and Western collectors, and the making of the coffins. I worked with Sarah Hatcher (Head of Programs and Education), Matthew Sieber (Manager of Exhibitions), and Ellen Sieber (Chief Curator) in order to adjust the exhibition text for our target audience of Indiana University students and the broader Bloomington public.

Another main task that informed the arrangement of the exhibit was the design of the exhibition itself. In order to fit the sheer scale of the objects, the space was formed from what had previously been two separate exhibition spaces by removing a temporary wall. We chose to exhibit the full-size coffins in the center of the space, rather than against the wall, to ensure

that visitors would be able to walk all the way around each to get complete vantage points—no small feat given their sheer size. This decision had many impacts, including how the coffins themselves would be interpreted. As they would not be located directly near any of the significant wall text, we chose to include brief interpretation on labels displayed alongside the coffins. These labels were incorporated into the structures surrounding the coffins to discourage anyone from touching the coffins. Wanting to avoid obstructing views with stanchions, we collaborated with the exhibit preparator, Mark Price, to construct brightly colored frames to surround the coffins at floor level; creating a barrier. Price's skill was also put to work constructing a tool box display case for the tools, modeled after the tool box in the Paa Joe Coffin Works workshop. The nature of the exhibit space allowed us to clearly distinguish the section focused on the making of the coffins, including selected photographs and videos from my time in Ghana as well as the shoe coffin, by hanging a model of the Paa Joe Coffin Works sign over the entrance. The rest of the exhibit was open and free-flowing. We chose to include two main labels, as there were multiple points of entry to the space. The objects and photographs, of course, provided enough color on their own. Consequently, we limited the use of color to the barriers surrounding the coffins and the wax prints incorporated into the labels.



Figure 6. The main entrance to the finished exhibit at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures. Photograph by Matthew Sieber.

Conclusion

The exhibition opened to the public on August 14, 2018, just under a year after I had returned from Ghana. During the run of the exhibition, we organized a variety of public and targeted

programming, including a curator's talk, tours, and collaborations with university courses. The exhibit received positive responses from audiences and closed on December 16, 2018.

Projects such as this one underscore the key importance of fieldwork to inform both collections and exhibitions. The opportunity to conduct ethnographic research at Paa Joe Coffin Works, however brief, produced a wealth of data to document the objects in our collection and others. This research is now accessible to interested museums, including the American Folk Art Museum in New York City, which used it to inform their 2018-2019 exhibition of Paa Joe's work. The opportunity to observe processes of making, and learn first-hand from the people who created an object in the museum's collection, proves invaluable not only for institutional documentation, but also in creating more opportunities for visitors to personally connect with the objects on display.

Such small-scale projects are not without their challenges, however. Time in the field was limited by schedules and funding, and consequently not all aspects of the use of figurative coffins could be examined. In this we benefited, like others, from the work of scholars before us and the generosity of our research collaborators. The coffins themselves also prove logistically difficult as such large and attention-commanding objects in relatively small exhibit spaces. We were able to address this through creative display elements and the careful balance of text and images.

From the construction-filled workshop in Pobiman to the university-based exhibition space in Bloomington, the processes of curating this exhibit spanned two continents. The project was rewarding in many ways—for the ways it enriched the documentation of the museum's collections, for how we were able to collaborate with and learn from artists, for how it drew attention to both cultural practice and making, and for how it engaged diverse publics. Building from other collections-based research projects at the Mathers, *Shapes of the Ancestors* provides an example and learning experience of how research and exhibits unite in smaller, university museums.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. During fall 2018, the Themester theme was Animal/Human. These theme was a fruitful one for the exploration of the complexly human practice of sculptural coffin production, collection, and ritual use, particularly because a significant number of these works are created in animal form. For more on Themester, see <https://themester.indiana.edu/about/theme/past-themes/animal-human-2018.html>, accessed February 24, 2019.

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