

**NEW TRENDS IN THE AHWIAA WOOD CARVING INDUSTRY IN GHANA:  
IMPLICATIONS FOR ART EDUCATION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC GROWTH**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Asantes in Ghana are noted for their expertise in variety of specialized visual arts such as wood carving. Ahwiaa wood carving industry has developed; though production techniques have remained stereotype. Tools have greatly remained simple, materials the same, variations in form have not changed much and conventional treatment has not promoted creativity and originality, yet some new trends, new approaches are noticeable today. At present, globalization, trade, education, religion, changes in societal values and cultural practices, political and economic challenges, technology, trade (commerce), knowledge explosion have generated new approaches in the Ahwiaa wood carving industry. Besides, no organized documentation has been done on the Ahwiaa wood carving industry, so that the researchers almost always have to rely on oral tradition as a source of information from wood carvers. The researchers employed the qualitative descriptive method to carry out the study. The data were collected using interviews and observation. The researchers found out that the tools used are simple tools made by the local blacksmith which are sharpened and maintained by oiling and storing after use. The main material is wood, formerly acquired by felling special trees from the forest. Today, the log for carving is bought from Timber contractors. The carving of an item follows specific processes, according to tradition. Women were prevented from carving in the past; today women are free to carve if they so wish. The researchers recommend that School of Business, departments of Sculpture and Integrated Rural Art and Industry at KNUST should organize workshops for carvers at Ahwiaa and introduce them to modern wood carving technologies, entrepreneurial skills and business strategies to equip them to promote tourism and socio-economic development of Ghana as well as their personal development.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Wood Carving, Visual Art, Technology, Tradition, Trade, Socio-economic development.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The Asantes are noted for their expertise in a variety of specialized visual arts. These include weaving, wood carving, ceramics, and metallurgy. Of these arts, wood carving is divided into many branches, each with its own specialists. Among the major products are wooden sculptures of outstanding artistic quality and the talking-drums ("Ntumpun"). The famous wooden "stools" are symbolic and ritual objects rather than items of furniture (Adu-Agyem, 1990). "In Ashanti, a generation or so ago, every stool in use had its own special name which denoted the sex, or social status, or clan of the owner" (Rattray, 1927: p. 271). Development in wood carving gained impetus due to demands of religious beliefs. This quality gingered many carvers to become experts (Nana Frimpong Boadu, chief carver of Otumfuor, personal communication, 2012). Many of Ahwiaa wood carvers became master carvers of *Asantehene* (King of Ashanti Kingdom) who is regarded as the intermediary between the gods and the people (Edusei, 2004). The kind of carved objects produced were highly a matter of meeting royal demands of the *Asantehene*. He has been the power house and commander-in-chief whose demands propelled the growth of Ahwiaa wood carving industry.

Ahwiaa, well known for traditional wood carving centre, is a small town located on the main Kumasi-Mampong highway, about 14 kilometres north of Kumasi in the Kwabre District of Ashanti region of Ghana. It has a population of about 5000 people. The major products are mainly traditional stools, statuettes, "Akuaba" (fertility) dolls, animals and domestic products such as mortars, drums, mashing bowls, door panels, wall hangings, masks, to name a few. The main occupation is peasant farming while some of the population are wood carvers. Wood carving, according to tradition, has been the preserve of males. Women do not carve because it is considered indecent for a woman to spread her legs and place a block of wood between them for carving. This is indecent exposure. Also, women, in respect of their monthly menstrual condition, were not included in the carving trade (Nana Kwadwo Koduah, personal communication, 2012). However, modernity has changed the tradition such that women now are free to take up wood carving provided they are physically capable and are interested in the trade. In addition to this freedom, women today form an integral part of the wood carving trade. Wood carving has been the sole business of middle aged males with apprentices. The average age of a wood carver at Ahwiaa is 50 years. The oldest wood carver at the time of this research was 75 years, while the youngest was 25 years. Previously, young people served as apprentices to master carvers. But with acceleration of education in Ghana, many young persons are now in school, leaving the apprenticeship in wood carving in the hands of a few non-school goers and Junior High School graduates (field survey, 2012).

A few blacksmiths serve as providers of simple metal tools for carving. Other tools are purchased from shops in Kumasi. The basic tools used in Ahwiaa are chisels, knife, "adze", axe, gouges just to mention a few. The basic materials are wood, sand paper, wax, lacquer, shea butter and soot mix, wood dye, etc The logs of wood which were formally cut from the forest by the carvers are now sold to the carvers by timber contractors. The products are sold locally; tourists have also intruded the market and a few carvers are exporting their carved works to other

countries. The value of carving at Ahwiaa includes teaching morals, maintaining standards of behavior and attitudes, upholding traditions, providing functional, symbolic and purely aesthetic objects. Wood carving is a household work in the Ahwiaa village which has been passed on from generation to generation. The concept of wood carving is communal that is an artwork is owned by many. However, modernity has caused the emergence of new ways of doing things which are worth studying.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The researchers used qualitative method of research to carry out the study. Qualitative Research is a field of inquiry that crosscuts disciplines and subject matters. Ary et al (2001) focused on qualitative research as understanding social phenomena from the perspective of the human participants in the study. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) reiterated that qualitative research is typically used to answer questions about the complex nature of phenomena, often with the purpose of describing and understanding the phenomena from the participants' point of view. According to Best and Kahn (2003), qualitative research includes the following: it is descriptive; it involves field work; it is 'concerned primarily with process rather than outcomes or products'; it is inductive in that researchers build abstraction, concepts, theory and hypotheses from details; the 'researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis'; and it is primarily 'interested in meaning – how people make sense of their lives, experiences and structures of the world' (p.19). In qualitative research, data are collected in natural settings, and the researcher aims at generating a theory rather than testing theory.

Research type employed was descriptive. Sellgren (1991) and Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) defined descriptive research as factual, accurate and systematic research of a phenomenon being studied. Best and Kahn (2003) opined that descriptive research uses non quantitative methods to describe "what is". It uses systematic procedures to discover non quantifiable relationships between existing variables. Again, Best and Kahn (2003) and Sidhu (2003) described descriptive research as the following: hypothesis formulation and testing, the analysis of the relationships between non manipulated variables and the development of generalization or generalization as its goal. Also, it is to describe systematically facts and characteristics of a given population.

The researchers used interviews and observation as the basic data collection instruments. In all, 13 carvers were interviewed in the course of this research. Of these 13 respondents, 4 (30.77%) were between the ages of 25-36, 1(7.69%) was between the age group 36-45, 2(15.38%) between the ages of 46-55, 3(23.08%) between the ages of 56-65, 2 (15.38%) between the ages of 66-75 and 1(7.69%) in the age group 76 and above.

Of these 13 respondents, 4 (30.77%) trained to carve by formal apprenticeship. This means that they paid to be trained for a period of not less than three years and graduated at the end of their apprenticeship. Also, 7 (53.85%) learnt the art through family tuition. For this group of respondents, carving has been in their families for generations and so they also grew up to learn the art. For them, there is no specified period of training. You keep learning until you are

certified as having perfected the art by the master carver, usually the father or an uncle. Finally 2 (15.38%) out of the thirteen respondents learnt to carve through observation. For this group, they came to learn to carve by hanging around the carving centres and observing how things are done and after a while are allowed by the master carvers to practise while doing some small chores for them.

### **Tools, equipment and materials used for carving at Ahwiaa.**

The wood carvers still continue to make judicious use of simple tools such as the adze, axe, knives, gouges, spokeshaves and so on (Adu-Agyem, 1990, Sarpong, 1974 and Amoh, 2012). See plates 1- 9. Even though the tools are simple, the works that come out of them are intriguing and aesthetically attractive.



Plate 2 - Axe (Akuma): Is a tool with a wooden and blocking wood .



Plate 3 – Knives (sekenmoa) – used to for clearing Pare, cut and smoothen wood.



Plate 1 – Adze (soso): used for carving handle and heavy metal used for chopping wood.



Plate 4 – flat Gouges (bomye) – used flat surfaces.



Plate 5 – ‘V’ Gouge: Is a ‘V’ shaped cutting cutting deep and edge used for parting, outlining or emphasizing round curves and for boring holes, lines and decorative cuts.



Plate 6 - ‘U’ Gouge: used for cutting deep and edge used for parting, outlining or emphasizing round curves and for boring holes, lines and decorative cuts.



Plate 7 - Spoke shave: Is used to shape and smooth convex and concave wooden surfaces



Plate 8 – Brushes: for applying polish to carvings



Plate 9 – Hand Drill: for drilling holes in the carvings

### Equipment used for processing the carvings

In the past, simple equipment such as the brick wood oven was used to dry the finished items before they were sold. Today a little more sophisticated equipment such as solar dryer, gas kiln, hygrometer and chain saw are being used.



Plate 10 - Brick wood oven: Is a compartment the drying process before the carving are exported on time

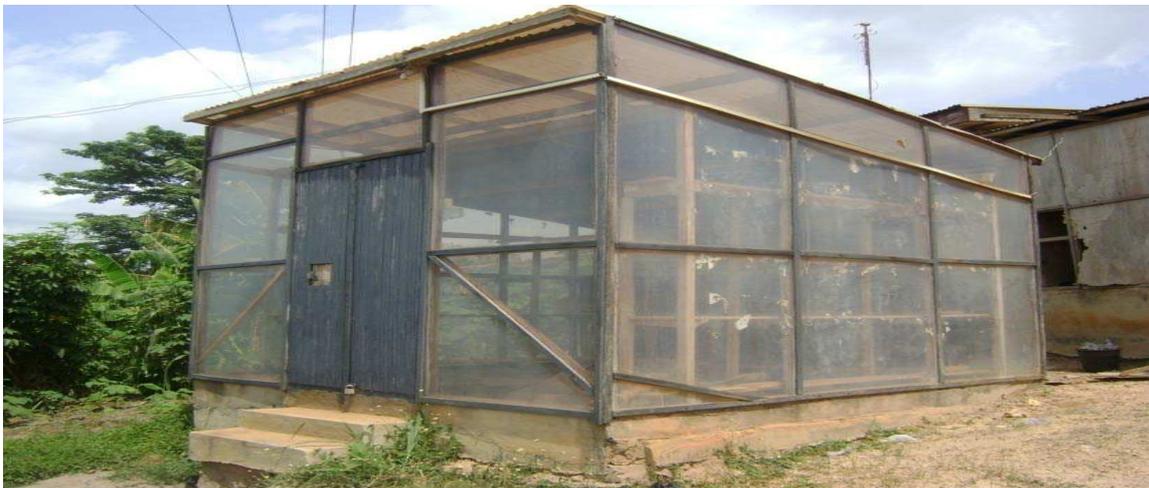


Plate 11- Solar Dryer: used to quicken warmed by heat and used for drying finished carvings



Plate 12 – Gas kiln

Gas kiln: The finished carvings are stacked in a special drying kiln where the temperature, humidity and air circulation are controlled manually from outside the kiln. This equipment quickens the drying process but sometimes makes the drying too rapid thus leading to the cracking of the carved items.



Plate 13 – Hydrometer:

Hygrometer is an instrument used to measure humidity or moisture content of wood. The hygrometer is used to test the dryness of the carving to make it ready for export.

### Materials used for carving

The main material used in wood carving is wood of different varieties. For example, the most commonly used wood are Osese, Gyenegyene and Nyamedua. Previously the wood carvers themselves were felling the trees for carving. Today the trees are felled by timber contractors and the logs sold to the wood carvers. Apart from the wood which forms the basic material for carving, other materials used include PVA glue, super glue, mansion paint, potash and dyes, wax polish, sand papers and machine oil. See plate 14 to 16.



Plate 14 – Gyenegyene (wood for carving)



Plate 15 – Nyamedua (wood for carving)



Plate 16 – Osese (wood for carving)

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The following results were from observations and interviews of the wood carvers.

### **The carving process**

The wood carver begins a new carving by selecting a chunk of wood with the approximate size and shape of the figure he wishes to carve and allows it for three to seven days seasoning. The seasoning is moderate because he wants to carve in mostly the green state for easier carving. The carving process includes blocking, designing, detailing and finishing processes which include smoothening the carvings with a knife, sanding and polishing the works with dyes or wax polish where appropriate.

### **Blocking**

Blocking is the shaping of a log to bring out the form. The Adze is used to demarcate the various parts and straighten the faces of the billets to make them roughly parallel. The carver swings the Adze with a sharp, chopping movement and holds the log with one hand. In this way the amount of wood removed at each blow can be controlled almost exactly. Single block carving is a subtractive process.



Plate 17 – a carver blocking a piece of wood

### **Designing**

No preliminary designs are done on the wood before the forms are cut out. The Adze is still used to remove various portions of the wood to bring out the form.



Plate 18 – designing

### **Detailing**

Chisels and gouges are used to bring out the intricate details of a work and also to remove the unwanted areas to show the actual design. Here the carver utilizes great imagination, experience and dexterity to carve abstract, symmetrical and symbolic features.



Plate 19 – detailing

### **The finishing processes**

Finishing includes smoothening (fefa), sanding and polishing with dye and wax polish. The smoothening knife is used in the process to remove small pieces of wood evenly and quickly (plate 20). The knife comes in different sizes depending on the size of the work being made. The work is then sanded to give it a smooth surface (plate 21) and then polished by applying dye to the work before using the wax polish (plate 22).

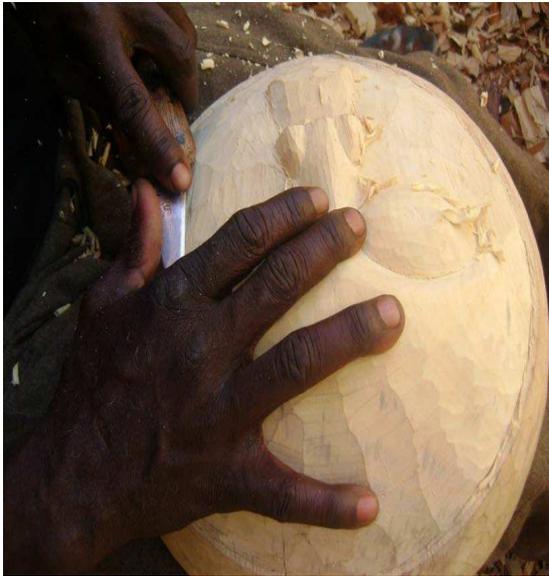


Plate 20 – smoothing with a knife paper

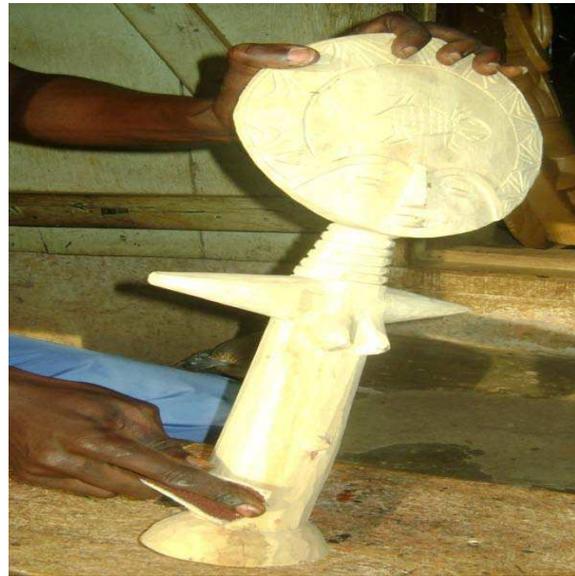


Plate 21 – sanding with sand



Plate 22 – applying dye to a work

## TYPES OF WORKS PRODUCED BY WOOD CARVERS AT AHWIAA

### The traditional ones

The traditional carvings of Ahwiaa include stools (plates 23a-c), Ancestral masks (plates 24a-c) and fertility “*Akuaba*” dolls (plates 25a-c). Others are wooden combs (plates 26a-c) used to express beauty, love and fertility. A man may carve and give a wooden comb to a woman to express his love for her and “oware” board (plate 27) is a game played by two people. Walking sticks (plates 28 a and b) used by men and carved to incorporate several expressive symbols to communicate one's status and beliefs. Linguist staff completes the examples of traditional carvings. The linguist staff (plate 29) are used for political and judicial purposes. In the king's court, for example, the linguist will carry the staff to express profound messages relating to

justice, peace, conflict resolution, and arbitration. The linguist will also carry a staff on diplomatic missions for the chief and also it promotes group identity and cohesion, national integration, and to express legitimacy of authority.



Plate 23 (a)



Plate 23 (b)



Plate 23 (c)

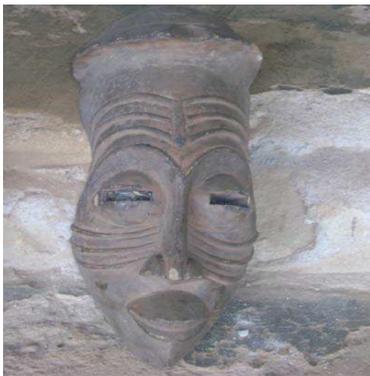


Plate 24 (a)



Plate 24 (b)



Plate 24 (c)

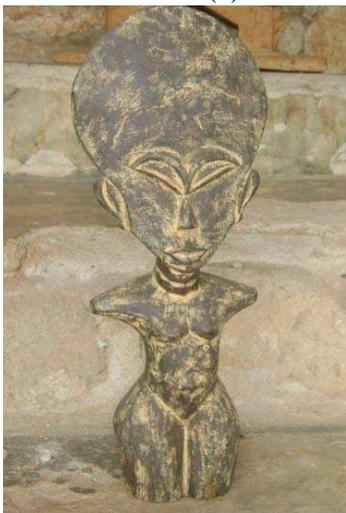


Plate 25 (a)



Plate 25 (b)



Plate 25 (c)



Plate 26 (a)



Plate 26 (b)



Plate 26 (c)



Plate 27 – “Oware” board



Plate 28(a)



Plate 28 (b)



Plate 29

## NEW TRENDS

New carvings at Ahwiaa includes a chair (plate 30) which serve as a decorative piece , abstract figures locally called shadows as shown in (plates 31 a and b), Animal figures have also assumed some prominence. The figure of the elephant and the lion in various postures are popular as depicted in (plates 32 a and b). There have also been new masks introduced which are different from the ancestral masks of old. Plates 33 (a – c) shows examples of the new types of masks in vogue. The carvings of profiles (plates 34 a – c) and figurines have also become popular (plates 35 a - c). Miniature stools probably meant for decorative purposes have become new additions to the traditional stools carved in Ahwiaa as shown in plates 36 (a – c). There are also the new intriguing sets of abstract human figures carved from one wooden block. They are interlocked and could be opened out and closed up. These are known as Unity as shown in plates 37 (a – c). Footwear lasts as depicted in plate 38 have become the latest addition to new products carved by Ahwiaa carvers.



Plate 30



Plate 31 (a)



Plate 31 (b)



Plate 32 (a)



Plate 32 (b)



Plate 33 (a)



Plate 33 (b)



Plate 33 (c)



Plate 34 (a)



Plate 34 (b)



Plate 34 (c)



Plate 35 (a)



Plate 35 (b)



Plate 35 (c)



Plate 36 (a)



Plate 36 (b)



Plate 36 (c)



Plate 37 (a)



Plate 37 (b)



Plate 37 (c)



Plate 38 (Photographed by Adu-Agyem and Amoh)

### **Factors Which Have Prompted New Trends in the Carving Industry at Ahwiaa In Kumasi, Ghana.**

The indigenous carving industry at Ahwiaa, a suburb of Kumasi has resisted change for several decades due to strong traditions. Modernity and fast social change have however not left indigenous traditions intact. Somehow, certain factors in modern life have impacted positively or negatively on wood carving at Ahwiaa. These include trade (local and international), exchange of goods and services, export and imports, tourism, education, etc. have exposed Ahwiaa tradition to the outside world, so that carvers could adapt to new ideas and ways of thinking. Various religions other than traditional African religion have also placed the wood carver in contact with ideas other than they have known.

Education has diverted attention from carving to the classroom so that young people prefer to go to school rather than remain at home to carve. The youth who continue their education beyond Basic Education Level, sometimes end up in sculpture where wood carving is done, and therefore, could pass on new ideas to their parents. Besides, carvers come into contact with persons knowledgeable about wood carving, and through interaction and exchange of ideas become exposed to new ways of doing things in wood carving.

Tourists have thronged Ahwiaa for years. They bring new ideas to Ahwiaa from their various cultures. Through comparisons and discussions, Ahwiaa carvers become aware of new ideas and alternative ways of carving. Tourists place orders for particular carvings with specific themes, so that themes and shapes may differ. Modern Technology has brought ideas about designing and making things. Buckley and Cosson (1985), cited Schumpeter (1934 and 1939), Lamberton and Minor-Evans (2002), Certo (2006), Kotler and Keller (2006), believe that invention represents a change in state of arts, innovation occurs only when resources are diverted to exploit the new state of the arts and a new, improved or cheaper product is produced. As a consequence of successful innovation, markets for substitute products contract and resources specialized in their production become obsolete; Though carvers would not normally design their work on paper or elsewhere before they carve, criticisms about shapes, forms and meaning of their carvings have resulted in certain types of works produced. Technology should now open the way for new ways of doing things. For example, at Ahwiaa, carvers have began to measure certain works because they should know how many works will fit into containers for export. Carvers now use the hygrometer to check the moisture content after slow regulated drying before export. Presently, in Ghana there is so much information about ICT meant to quicken the way or procedure for doing things. The question now is “are the carvers prepared to adapt their work to technological ways of going about the carving business”?

Sawmills now fell the trees for timber, using sophisticated machines where wood carvers buy logs for their carvings. This is the time carvers at Ahwiaa would adapt more sophisticated gadgets to quicken the pace of carving. This will increase production levels and quality of carvings. These possibilities are now ripe at the door steps of the carvers. It is not clear whether they are prepared to adjust to new suggestions and recoil from their traditional ways of doing things into alternative approaches to carving. Eventually, new ways, new ideas or new trends

will tend to improve the carving industry at Ahwiaa, and place the works in a global picture. There is so much knowledge today around the world. The world has become a global village such that it is so fast to source, retrieve and compile information using electronic media to acquire knowledge, just about anything, including wood carving. The picture of globalization is such that it is possible today to stay at Ahwiaa in Kumasi and be placed in touch with wood carving information from other cultures around the world. This would enrich various aspects of the wood carving industry at Ahwiaa.

### **What are the new trends of Ahwiaa wood carving and their implications for Art Education and Socio-Economic Development?**

The wood carving industry at Ahwiaa provides a consistent history of development of wood carving. The history is enhanced by factors which promoted and continue to promote the growth of the industry. Such factors are many, among them, royal demands from the Otumfuo *Asantehene's* palace for wood carvings, effects of trade and tourism, religion, cultural practices, demand from domestic needs, tourism, global economy and technological challenges do promote development of new trends in tools, materials, processes and other related practices. These factors and their effects are ripe grounds for Art Education and socio-economic development.

The tradition that women do not carve wood in Ghana is now obsolete. At Ahwiaa, the tradition goes on. However, today, the male carvers indicate that there is no restriction on women any more. Women can carve wood if they so wish, and if they are physically capable. These developments constitute new trends in the carving industry, and therefore provide a good ground for study in Art Education. The beauty of a carved item is not in its physical appearance and no one talks about western concepts of aesthetics in Ahwiaa carvings, though this is possible in terms of African aesthetics. According to interview with the carvers, the weavers employ formalism, emotionalism, contextualism and expressionism theories of art and aesthetics in producing their works. Beauty is in the significance of each carving. The knowledge that there is no "blanket word" that is a common word meaning or describing Ahwiaa carvings as "Art" is a source for learning. Each carving has its own name and is for a specific purpose. If there is no need for a carved object, no one will carve it. This is great knowledge to be learnt in Art Education (Adu-Agyem, 1990). Appreciation and criticism are areas in Art Education that can be derived from Ahwiaa wood carving industry. The features which constitute a good and bad carving are in the heads of the carvers and the criteria for making informed judgments about carvings are sources for research in Art Education. Art Educators should study the elements of aesthetics, appreciation and criticism of the wood carving industry at Ahwiaa and develop what could be known as "Ahwiaa Aesthetic Criteria" to enrich the content of Art Education. Procedures in the practice of wood carving, such as identification of tools and materials, the preparation of tools and materials, care and maintenance of tools and materials, storage of tools and materials could be studied by sculpture students. The indigenous and new technologies in wood carving can constitute content for study in Art Education.

One most important feature of Ahwiaa wood carving industry is apprenticeship. The formal way of training a carver is "schooling" in wood carving. This is a methodology that Art Educators could study and adapt to formal training in wood carving in educational institutions. Apprentices

practise carving first by learning how to smoothen finished carvings. This is done so that when polished, the surface of the carving will reflect light. It is believed by some writers on African Art that the shiny surface of a wood carving reflects the intelligence of the carver. This kind of information is “classified” and should be known to African carvers and students (Adu-Agyem, 1990, Thompson, 1973). Wood carvers at Ahwiaa do not design their images on paper before carving. This and the so many variations in carved objects is a sign of unparallel creativity. Carvers have been endowed with vast dimensions of creativity so that they are able to think, produce and feel the greatness of their carvings.

Moreover, Current trends have introduced competition in the wood carving industry. This means that the carvers exploit modern and innovative ways of producing their works to gain competitive advantage over rivals to meet the varied needs of customers. Business or marketing management is shifting to customized management or marketing (Kotler & Keller (2006). Businesses thrive mainly on creativity and innovation (Certo (2006). The foregoing facts together with the related issues constitute a fertile ground for Art Education, enhancing the trade in the Ahwiaa Wood Carving Industry, as well as contributing immensely in augmenting the growth in the Small and Medium Scale Enterprises, tourism, and socio-economic development of Ghana.

## CONCLUSIONS

From the study, it was clear that the carving tools used at Ahwiaa are mostly traditional with a few modern ones and it is difficult to change the traditions of the carvers. The main source of material, wood is threatened due to the government regulations against the depletion of the forest. This will be detrimental to the industry. Due to heavy customer demand of products, the wood is no longer adequately seasoned before it is carved and this affects the product. Due to traditions, no new skills are being acquired, therefore expansion of the industry is difficult. The carving industry is now a purely business affair and therefore, the industry has become more dynamic. Tourism, Exports, Customers’ satisfaction, taste and preferences also affect current trends in the industry. The youth are not much involved in the carving trade therefore the future of the wood carving industry is threatened. Both men and women are free to carve if they so wish.

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All photographs by Joe Adu-Adyem and Elizabeth Amoh.