

## Nana Yaw Frimpong: A royal footprint of modern Ghanaian painting

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**Abstract:** Ghanaian modernist painting started with the establishment of Achimota school in 1927 where the artists learned to combine the traditional Ghanaian artforms with the European representation artistic techniques. Though the influences of this new movement went beyond the academically trained artists to affect the self-trained artists, very little is known about it. The main objective of this paper was to conduct a biographical study of Nana Yaw Frimpong who without any art college training, booked a notable slot for himself through his painting within the modern Ghanaian art space. An Iconographic analysis of five paintings of Nana Yaw Frimpong using Erwin Panofsky's three-step approach which include 1. the pre-iconographical description, 2. the iconographical analysis, and 3. the iconological interpretation. The selected paintings were compared to the philosophical underpinnings of the works of the earlier academically trained artists from the Achimota school. The findings revealed that the philosophy and style of Nana's paintings were the philosophical foundations of modern painting in Ghana hence, placing Nana within the Ghanaian modern painting space.

**Keywords:** Achimota School, Ghana, Modern Ghanaian painting, Traditional cultural practices

### 1. Introduction

Nana Yaw Frimpong, an important self-taught modern Ghanaian painter popularly known as Nana, has also culturally excelled - a custodian of the gods of the Otumfuo's royal palace and the chief horn blower. He was born on 13th May, 1953. Nana lives and works in Kumasi - Ghana. At the age of fifteen, he nurtured and developed his artistic prowess through pencil drawings and watercolours painting and then started full-time career painting after he graduated from form-fourth in 1971. In Nana's own words, "I started my painting in 1968, no one taught me how to paint, I learnt it under the influence of William Charles Owusu- a former lecturer cum step father, Azii Akator and Prof. Ablade Glover and I chose painting because it's my interest and also more viable to me than the other artforms. I can also carve but I chose painting".



Figure 1- Nana Yaw Frimpong, 27th July, 2021,  
Dichemso, Kumasi. photographed by the authors.

His paintings which are mostly landscapes and portraits are mainly depictions of Ghanaian traditional cultural practices. The themes of Nana's paintings include; social and domestic life, hunting activities, and initiation rites captured akin to the themes of the early modern Ghanaian painters - pageantry, folklore, social life and market activities (Labi, 2013). "I became interested in traditional Ghana culture since I was a child, not only Ghana but Africa". He has an unflinching passion for capturing traditional Ghanaian cultural practices for future generations. With brush and acrylic paint mostly on unprimed black-cloth as canvas, Nana flamboyantly renders his paintings in realistic and semi-realistic styles. Tinted reds, yellows, browns, blues, violets, and greens dominate his paintings with contrasting bright and dark hues. Some of his paintings include; The Ashanti Village, Northern Village, Tropical Hunter, *Dipo*, *koaso næbo ahen*a, Mother and Child etc. His love for preserving the Ghanaian heritage across all ethnic groups is manifested in his paintings beginning from the themes. and paste from your manuscript. Copy and paste from your manuscript. Copy and paste from your manuscript.

His paintings are patronized by both local and international art patrons. According to Nana, since the start of his career, he displayed his works in craft centres and art galleries in Accra- the capital city of Ghana, Centre for National Culture and the Manhyia palace both in Kumasi. Since the 1970s he has visited, participated and sold his works in a number of art shows across West African countries, including FESTAC 77 in Nigeria. He is currently stationed permanently and works in Dichemso a suburb of Kumasi – Ghana's second largest city. Nana who was born in the midst of the development of modern Ghanaian painting, has tremendously booked a notable slot for himself through his painting within that historical art period and its wealth noticing. It is therefore not out of place to devote such a biographic study to his honour. Without any formal College art training, he has produced and continue to produce works rooted in traditional Ghanaian culture similar to the works of some academically trained artists whose training and practice marked the turn of modern painting in Ghana. This paper explores the iconography of five (5) of Nana's paintings titled 1) **Typical Ashanti village**, 2) **Tropical Hunter**, 3) **The Northern village**, 4) **Dipo Puberty Rites** and 5) **Koaso Næbo Ahena**.

## **2. Situating Nana within the Modern Ghanaian Painting Context**

For the purpose of clarity, it is imperative to start off from the global art space. In the global art scene, modern art follows the birth of European enlightenment. The Modern Art movement describes the style and concept of art produced during the period spanning roughly from the 1860s to the 1970s (Adom, 2014). Other literature sources indicate different dates for the start of this period. Richard R. Brettell (cited in Labi, 2013) considers 1846 as a plausible date for the start of modern art, as well as 1848, 1855, and 1863. Modernism as a shift in the historical journey of the global art scene was brought about by the desire of people to break away from existing traditions or conventions in search of freedom of self-expression or experimentation. In the early decades of the twentieth century when African art (masks and sculpted figures) had great influence on legendary artists, such as Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso (Pennisi, 1912), the arts of Africa itself at the time had experienced a great deal of interplay between tradition and modernization from place to place as a result of European colonization (Smith, 2011).

In Ghana, the establishment of Achimota school in 1927 marked the origin and development of modern art. Notable amongst the pioneers were K. Antubam, A. Kotei, S. Acquaye, and Vincent Kofi (Woets, 2014). Instead of a total rejection of the traditional art practices, the Ghanaian modern saw a combination of the Ghanaian heritage and European techniques taught at the Achimota art school (Labi, 2013). The arts and crafts curriculum at Achimota School was transferred to Kumasi College (now Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology) in January 1952, along with its entire staff, to form the autonomous School of Fine Arts, which was the forerunner of the current Department of Painting and Sculpture (Woets, 2014).

The artists from Achimota school and subsequently the Kumasi College of Technology, Science and Arts, freely experimented with new ideas by combining indigenous or traditional renditions with European techniques of naturalistic representations thus, creating personal styles but remained Ghanaian in identity. This wind of change grew and blew beyond the academic walls to encompass the self-taught artists in Ghana at the time as most of them (self-taught artists) under studied the academically trained. One key feature of this new wave of painting in Ghana was figurative painting with the themes running from ceremonial, folklore, social life to market activities (Labi, 2013). This is evident in the works of some pioneers and famous modern Ghanaian painters such as Kofi Antubam, Ablade Glover, Ato Delaquis, and Ben Ofei Nyarko (Fosu, 1993). Scenes captured in their works were the daily traditional life events and colours such as reds, yellows, yellow ochres, blues, violets, browns, greens, siennas, and white were used by contrasting bright and dark colours and tints (Labi, 2013).

Nana who was born in the midst of this new art movement, certainly got influenced. Evidence to this was his own confession- “no one taught me how to paint, but then I encountered some prominent artists as I was growing up in my career as a painter. Notable among them were, Owusu William Charles a former lecturer and my step father, Azii Akator and Prof. Ablade Glover.” The artists who influenced Nana are indeed prominent modern Ghanaian artists and therefore Nana’s practice as a painter could not have been any better placed in a different art movement, rather than modern Ghanaian painting. His paintings are realistic and semi-realistic renditions of Ghanaian environmental scenes (landscapes) and cultural practices dominated by colour schemes not too different those of the modern Ghanaian painters. These qualities of Nana’s paintings were the philosophical foundations of modern painting in Ghana hence, placing Nana within the Ghanaian modern painting space.

### 3. Methodology

The primary data for the study was obtained from a series of personal interviews with the artist. During the interviews, the voice recording approach was also employed to collect the necessary data from the artist. In addition, a visit was made to the artist's studio to observe his works. Further research was conducted at the library including reading of journal articles and other scholarly materials on the internet. The procedural steps in the iconographical analysis propounded by Erwin Panofsky (Abdullah, Ibrahim, & Halid, 2020). Views from other people including an internationally acclaimed professional Ghanaian painter, Samuel Prophask Asamoah were gathered.

### 4. Results and discussions

#### *Typical Asante Village*

The landscape painting titled, "Typical Asante Village" was created in 2012 by Nana. The medium used is acrylic on canvas and, the size measuring 18 x 27 inches. The painting depicts the social and domestic scenes of indigenous Asante villages at the setting of the Sun (evening).

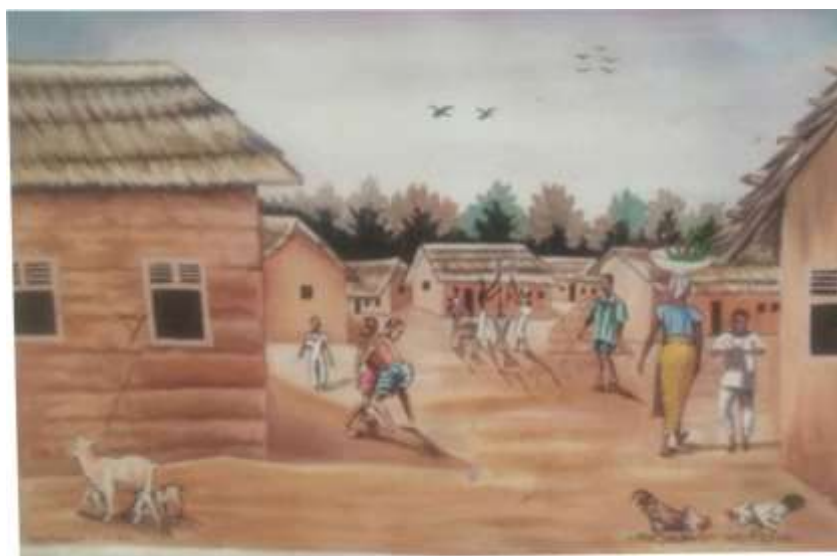


Figure 2- Typical Ashanti by Nana Frimpong, acrylic paint on canvas, 18" x 27", 2012. Courtesy the artist's collection.

The Ashanti region which is one of the largest in Ghana is located at the forest belt of Ghana's landscape, was previously made up predominantly of rural dwellers, who live in small towns, villages and hamlets, and farmed the lands that surrounds these habitats extensively (Johnson & Adams, 1970). Scenes of an indigenous Asante village reveal a cluster of mud and thatch houses occupied by a number of different ethnic groups particularly from the Northern part of Ghana who travel down south of the country (mostly to the Ashanti region) in search of greener pastures. These travellers are usually warmly received at the Ashanti settlements and they co-exist peacefully. In the evenings, series of events happen ranging from cooking, pounding, children playing around, people returning from their farms, loitering to feeding animals etc. This phenomenon was what Nana captured on his canvas for future generations.

The painting reflects events at the early parts of the evening. The trees, the birds and the sky formed the background of the composition. The middle and the foreground of the composition are occupied by the houses, humans and animals. In most Ashanti villages and Towns, the sun does not often shine so high particularly towards the evenings due to heavy clouds resulting in low intensity of colours of objects. Nana timeously captured this impressionist experience by his choice of brown, dark and pale colours as images precede into the background. The two women in the middle of the composition, backing babies with one of them pounding together with a man and the two boys wrestling, are people from the Northern part of Ghana. These activities; pounding and wrestling are attributable to the people of the Northern Ghana. Wrestling since time immemorial, has been one of the games among the young people of the North.

A small boy (left) looks on as the wrestling continuous and the man in a light green and blue shorts moves towards the wrestling boys. The woman in the blue dress and yellow cloth at right-hand side of the composition carries a pan with plantain (typical of the Asante people) is believed to be returning from the farm. The small boy (right) beside the woman also moves towards the two cocks engaged in a fight. At the lower left of the composition is a nanny goat breast feeding its three kids. The blend of the people (Ashanti and other ethnicities) is an indication that the Asante are a peace-loving people, Nana posits. Though the painting depicts a visual representation of a typical Ashanti village scene, the clothing the human beings is a strong indication of the influence of modernity on the life of the typical Ashanti and by extension, the traditional Ghanaian cultural life.

### ***Tropical Hunter***

The painting is titled, 'The Tropical Hunter' rendered in acrylic on canvas. The size of the work is 14" x 21" created in 2007. The artwork depicts a hunting expedition by two indigenous Northern Ghanaian hunters.



Figure-3- Tropical Hunter by Nana Frimpong, acrylic on canvas, 14" x 21", 2011, Courtesy the artist's collection

The composition consists of two abstract human figures rendered in tints of red yellow and white returning home after a successful hunting. The catch (meat) include a bird, antelope and a fish all hanged on a stick and carried by the hunters on their shoulders. The hunters are dressed in a typical olden-day costume. The figure in front (right) wears a piece of fabric around the waist, same piece tied at the elbow and neck with a horn-made



helmet worn on the head. The waist, wrist and ears are adorned with beads and a spear held in the left hand. The figure behind (left) is dressed in the same manner with a bow in the left hand and a sack of arrows worn across the back. Both figures held to their shoulders, the stick with the meat.

Two trees painted green are captured apart at the extreme ends of the composition on a small park of grass. In Northern Ghana, the land is vast and plain with less densely populated trees and hunting has been an age-long activity amongst the people usually undertaken in a communal manner than individuals. The dressing of the hunters and the type of weapons used suggest the painting truly depicts an indigenous way of life in Northern Ghana. The three different kinds of animals show the versatile hunting prowess of the hunters- in the air (*the bird*), on land (*the antelope*) and even in the water (*the fish*). The horns and beads are believed to be fortified with power and worn for protection as warriors against wild animals and the enemy. In Northern Ghana, the implements for hunting and the hunter himself are usually fortified with power in order to domineer over wild animals and evil spirits during hunting (Personal conversation with the son of an indigenous hunter, May, 2021).

### *The Northern village*

The painting is titled, 'The Northern Village' rendered in acrylic on canvas. The size of the work is 14" x 21" created in 2012.



Figure 4- The Northern Village by Nana Frimpong, acrylic on canvas, 14" x 21", 2012, Courtesy the artist's collection

A good number of Northern dwellers are still settled in villages without electricity but heavily dependent on the brightness of moon light for visibility and social life at night. During such times, economic activities extend late into the night. It is a common phenomenon to find animals loitering even at night because of the moonlight and it is equally easy to sight birds flying at night. Nana depicts these experiences by rendering a half-moon shape in the middle of the composition and the walls of the buildings in red and its tints in sharp contrast with a dark background and foreground. The effect of the moonlight is also seen on the shrubs at the horizon and the trees. The four conical-shaped buildings made of mud and thatch are truly the architectural structure of the traditional Northern Ghanaian settlements.

The two semi-abstract figures in the middle of the composition are a man and a woman pounding and the other woman with baby going about her chores. Goats and fowls also still loitering in the yard of the compound under the influence of the moonlight. The depiction of only two trees in the composition affirms that the typography of Northern Ghana reveals, there are but a few and scattered trees and shrubs. Painted in green suggests the composition was a scene captured during the rainy season. In the Ghanaian settings, colour green among other things symbolizes life. In Communities without electricity, evening activities are done quickly and everyone and everything goes to sleep very early during such times of the month when there is no moonlight, thereby making the environment look like ghost-towns during those dark days in the month.

### *Dipo puberty rites*

The artist, Nana used the medium of acrylic on an unprime black canvas. The size of the work is 14 x 21 inches produced in 2007. The artwork is a realistic depiction of the Dipo puberty ceremony. In Ghana, puberty rites are commonly practiced as it is the norm in many other African countries. The figure with the right foot placed in a forward position and fully adorned in a variety of ceremonial costume is a young girl going through a transformation (Dipo) process to become an ideal krobo woman (kloyo). The artist in his bit to help the learned class, accompanied the composition with the text 'Dipo Puberty Rites' at the lower right of the composition. The birds flying at the upper right is a notable characteristic of Nana's paintings

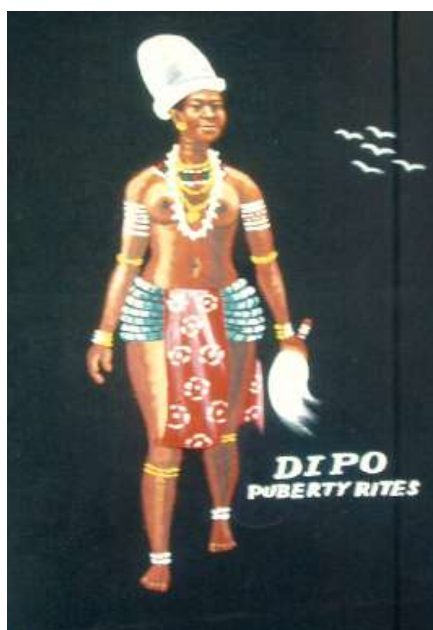


Figure 5- Dipo Puberty Rites by Nana Frimpong, acrylic on canvas, 14" x 21", 2007, Courtesy the artist's collection

Dipo is a puberty rite performed by the Krobo ethnic group in the Eastern region of Ghana to mark a transition of young girls (chaste or virgins) from girlhood to womanhood. Its history can be traced to a mysterious woman named Klowki between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries (Ostrow, 2011). In the past, the processes lasted between one to three years but in recent times, the processes only last for five days during which period the young girls are taught a lot of morals of an ideal woman (Ostrow, 2011; Boakye, 2010). The artist, Nana captures a young girl at the climax of the Dipo processes performed on her. The entire figure which seem to be stepping

out of the background, symbolically marks the departure of the young girl from her pass life into a new one. The bigger white necklace is a palm leaf usually worn around the neck at the beginning of the process. The rest of the beads in different colours are believed to be made from the innards and intestines of the slaughtered animal (goat or sheep) during the processes and are worn at the final ceremony as a sign of protection of the spirits (Ostrow, 2011). Nana in his bit to capture the dipo process from start to finish, portrayed both palm tree leaf and the beads. Beads are a significant part of the ceremony as they are considered as a spiritual protection and also a sign of wealth among the Krobo people.

The red loin cloth that droops front and back from the waist to cover the private parts signifies the menstrual cycles and femininity of the girl (Ostrow, 2011). According to the artist, Nana, the head-cover and the flywhisk in the left hand of the girl are a part of the process and rendering them in white just like the palm leaf is a symbolism of the purity or consecration of initiates. Birds specifically doves are regarded in the Ghanaian settings as a symbol of innocence. The white painted flying birds in the composition symbolizes the innocence of the girls. As the existence of this traditional puberty practice is threatened by religious beliefs and modernity, Nana artistically captures the practice on canvas for posterity.

### *Kɔasɔ Næbɔ Ahena*

The title of the painting is 'Kɔasɔ Næbɔ Ahena' rendered in acrylic on canvas. The size of the work is 14" x 21" created in 2007. In the foreground of the painting is one female figure in a loin cloth carrying a pot of water returning from the river side. In the background, are an abstracted river bank, trees and birds (a common feature of Nana's paintings). At the lower right of the composition is a rendition of an Akan maxim which is the title of the work.



Figure-6- kɔasɔ næbɔ ahena by  
Nana Frimpong, acrylic on canvas, 14"  
x 21", 2007, Courtesy the artist's  
collection



The painting is a depiction of a typical traditional young girl engaged in her daily chores of fetching water for domestic use. Pots are an integral part of the indigenous Ghanaian daily life – for cooking, storage, washing, fetching of water (as seen in the composition), etc. Even in these contemporary times, the usage of pots persists in rural Ghana. The dressing of the young girl (wrapping a cloth and a head-gear with necklaces and ear-rings) is in conformity with indigenous or traditional Ghanaian dressing. The abstractly depicted river, trees and birds, best describe the scenes and a perfect indication of rivers and streams been the sole sources of water for the indigenous or rural dwellers of Ghana.

Proverbs are an important aspect of Akan life just as it's across almost every African ethnicity. Proverbs are knotty statements that are an embodiment of the belief systems, values, determining the attitudes and behaviours of an individual or society as a whole (Agyemang et al., 2015). Nana, an Akan himself, rendered the theme of the painting in a proverbial manner **Kɔasoɔ Nɛbo Ahena** at the lower right of the composition. **Kɔasoɔ Nɛbo Ahena** literary means, 'he/she who carries the pot is the one who breaks the pot.' This akan maxim according to Nana could mean, the one who labours or toils is the one who enjoys the benefits there off. Or it could also mean that one who keeps yours hopes high, is the same person who is bound to let you down. In which ever context or situation the maxim is used, it is meant to teach some moral lessons. Nana therefore uses his painting as narrative art to re-echo the moral values that these proverbial statements teach for contemporary youth to imbibe.

## 5. Conclusion

The academic training of artists in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) which started at the beginning of the twentieth century marked the development of modern art and for that matter painting in Ghana. Unlike the art modernism in the western world, modernism in Ghana rather saw a merger of the preceding (traditional) art practices and the European techniques of naturalistic representations. Easel painting was a significantly new feature of the time. Despite the newness in approach to painting, maintaining a Ghanaian identity was paramount. This new development though started with a privileged few, grew to encompass the self-trained artists and Nana Yaw Frimpong is one of them. The five artworks by Nana discussed are in no doubt and it's not unimaginable to consider these paintings as outcomes of the influences that underpinned modern Ghanaian painting. This manuscript has highlighted existing knowledge on Ghanaian modernist paintings done by self-trained artists from 1960's of whom very little is known. It also serves as a form of retrospection in the academic discourse in the field of visual arts and culture.

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