# Street Communication: Documentation of Two Graffiti Artists and their Works in Akropong Akuapem

# Street Communication: Documentation of Two Graffiti Artists and their Works in Akropong Akuapem

[1*]Isaac Horsu,[2] Samuel Manasseh Yirenkyi,[3] Obeng Kelvin Kwabi Osae

[1]University of Professional Studies, Accra

[1]Department of Communication Studies

[2]University of Media, Arts and Communication

[2]Institute of Film and Television

[3]Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture

horsui@yahoo.com https 0009-0006-6337-4239

## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The study documents the works of two graffiti artists in Akropong Akuapem, Ghana, and how their artworks communicate. It explores how their creative practices reflect cultural identity, social commentary, and youth empowerment.

**Methodology:** A qualitative case study design was used. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, field observations, and photographic documentation. Thematic and visual analyses guided the interpretation of findings.

**Findings:** Results show that the two artists come from different personal and educational backgrounds but share similar motivations. They use graffiti to preserve cultural heritage, promote youth development, and spark conversations on social and political issues.

**Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice:** Their works incorporate Akan symbols, traditional proverbs, and festival imagery. At the same time, they blend these with contemporary influences such as music culture, digital design, and Afro-futuristic aesthetics. The graffiti pieces function as cultural archives, educational tools, and platforms for dialogue. The study also reveals challenges. These include limited access to resources, lack of institutional support, high material costs, and persistent public misconceptions about graffiti. The study concluded that graffiti in Akropong is more than decoration. It has contributed to education, cultural preservation, and social transformation. Through the theory of symbolic interactionism, the study added a formal recognition of graffiti, provision of resources, mentorship for young artists, and community initiatives to strengthen its developmental and tourism value.

**Keywords**: *Art, Artists, Graffiti, Street Communication, Culture, Documentation, Akropong-Akuapem*

## INTRODUCTION

Art has always been a mirror of society, reflecting its struggles, dreams, and identity. From ancient cave paintings to modern urban murals, art has remained a timeless expression of human identity, history, and resistance. Across generations and geographies, creative expression has been used not only to beautify public spaces but also to challenge power, spark conversation, and forge collective memory. Today, one of the most dynamic and controversial forms of public art is graffiti, an art born in rebellion, thriving in the streets, and challenging traditional notions of creativity (Schacter, 2024).

Graffiti has evolved from its early days as illicit tagging in the 1970s into a globally recognized art form. Major cities such as New York, Berlin, São Paulo, and Melbourne celebrate street art as cultural heritage, with festivals such as Upfest in the UK and Street Art Alive exhibitions attracting millions (Reinecke, 2021). Governments and corporations now commission murals, signalling a shift from vandalism to legitimate art (Ganz, 2018). According to a 2022 report by Statista, the global street art market, including graffiti-related works, was valued at over $1.5 billion, reflecting its growing economic and cultural influence (Statista, 2022). Commissioned murals also boost tourism (Art Market Report, 2023). Moreover, Governments and urban planners increasingly acknowledge graffiti as a tool for tourism, urban revitalization, and community engagement (Schacter, 2024). For instance, a 2023 report by the European Street Art & Graffiti Association highlighted a 15% increase in tourism revenue for cities actively promoting street art initiatives. The social significance of graffiti extends beyond aesthetics; it often serves as a powerful medium for social commentary, political protest, and community building, reflecting the pulse of contemporary society (Das, 2023). Terms like "muralism," "street art," and "urban art" are now commonly used to encompass the diverse practices within this expansive field, distinguishing it from illicit tagging while acknowledging its roots (Chang, 2023; Das, 2023).

In Africa, graffiti has taken on an even more profound role and has merged tradition with modernity. Numerous studies transcended its conventional perception as urban art, emerging instead as a potent medium for cultural expression, political activism, and social transformation (Soudien, 2019; Adeyemi, 2022). Historically rooted in resistance, graffiti gained prominence during South Africa's apartheid era, where murals in spaces like District Six served as visual protests against systemic oppression (Soudien, 2019). This legacy persists in contemporary African street art, where artists seamlessly merge indigenous motifs with global urban aesthetics, creating a unique visual language that speaks to both local and international audiences. For instance, South African artist Faith47 blends traditional symbolism with modern street art techniques (Zimmer, 2017), while Falko One reimagines African iconography through a contemporary lens, garnering global recognition (Mikhaila, 2023). Beyond aesthetics, graffiti has become a critical tool for activism, particularly in addressing pressing societal issues. In Lagos,

initiatives like Murals for Change harness public art to confront police brutality (Adeyemi, 2022), while in Nairobi, street artists transform entire neighbourhoods into open-air galleries, amplifying voices often side-lined in mainstream discourse (Khamati-Njenga, 2020).

The role of graffiti extends further into cultural preservation and community development. Across the continent, from Senegal to Kenya, murals commemorate historical figures, critique corruption, and highlight challenges such as youth unemployment. Community-led projects, such as those documented by UNESCO (2025), demonstrate how graffiti fosters social cohesion and addresses environmental concerns. Events like the Soweto Street Art Festival exemplify this dual function, using graffiti as both a creative outlet and a catalyst for youth engagement and local empowerment (Desk, 2025). These initiatives underscore graffiti's evolving significance not merely as a global urban phenomenon but as a localized force for storytelling, heritage conservation, and grassroots mobilization.

Graffiti has increased significantly in Ghana, particularly in urban centres like Accra, Kumasi, and smaller cultural towns. From kente cloth patterns to Adinkra symbols, the use of art as a communication tool is deeply rooted in Ghanaian traditions. In recent decades, graffiti has quietly gained traction in cities like Accra, Kumasi, and Cape Coast. While often under-documented, this emerging art form reflects the voices of a new generation navigating identity, globalization, and urban transformation

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Graffiti has become a vital form of artistic and cultural expression across African cities, serving as more than decoration; it conveys social commentary, resistance, and identity. In Ghana, public and academic focus on street art largely centres on Accra, leaving smaller towns like Akropong-Akuapem underexplored. Akropong presents a unique space where graffiti blends tradition with modern identity and civic expression. Yet the meanings behind these visual narratives remain undocumented, limiting understanding of how informal art contributes to community dialogue in semi-urban settings.

Studies have examined Ghanaian painters (Adom, Osei & Adu-Agem, 2020; Akutsu, 2020) and traditional artistic influences (Labi, 2013), but graffiti has received little attention as a visual art form. Existing research often focuses on its linguistic (Gyasi Obeng, 2000) or political aspects (Sokpoli, 2023), overlooking the artists and their creative journeys. In contrast, Mikhaila (2023) showed how Cape Town's Street art fosters resistance and civic identity, presenting the potential of such work. However, no such study exists for towns like Akropong. This research, therefore, seeks to explore the works and experiences of four graffiti artists in Akropong-Akuapem to fill this gap in Ghana's visual art discourse.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore the works of two graffiti artists in Akropong Akuapem in the Eastern Region of Ghana.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Symbolic Interactionism, formulated by Blumer (1969), is the process of interaction in the formation of meanings for individuals. The inspiration for this theory came from Dewey (1981), who believed that human beings are best understood in a practical, interactive relation to their environment. Symbols in this perspective are defined as social objects that are used to represent whatever is agreed to be represented. This documentation provides researchers with primary data on Ghana's emerging street art scene, filling a critical gap in African art history. The study's outcomes empower local artists by validating their work as legitimate cultural expression, potentially inspiring younger generations to engage in creative storytelling through graffiti. The symbolic interactionism theory reveals how public art reflects community concerns such as youth empowerment and heritage preservation. The study encourages stakeholders to leverage graffiti in initiatives that foster cultural dialogue and societal change. Through these contributions, the research validates graffiti as a legitimate and impactful form of artistic and cultural expression.

## CONCEPT OF GRAFFITI ART

Graffiti art, commonly associated with markings or inscriptions on public surfaces, has undergone significant conceptual evolution. Historically, graffiti can be traced back to ancient civilizations such as Egypt, Rome, and Greece, where inscriptions on walls were used for communication, commemoration, or protest (Schacter, 2024). However, in its modern form, graffiti emerged prominently in the 1960s and 1970s in urban America as a visual response to political oppression, social inequality, and identity struggles (Schacter, 2024). Over time, it has transitioned from being viewed primarily as an act of vandalism to being recognized as a complex and dynamic form of contemporary urban expression.

Most scholars define graffiti not merely as informal or unauthorized markings, but as a visual language that communicates identity, resistance, and social commentary in public spaces. For instance, Schacter (2024) defines graffiti as a form of "monumental public expression" that democratizes urban aesthetics by extending artistic practice beyond institutional boundaries such as galleries and museums. His research emphasizes that graffiti creates opportunities for marginalized voices to engage in urban discourse, often through large-scale murals and site-specific interventions. In a similar vein, Das (2023) conceptualizes graffiti as a "cultural and communicative act," emphasizing its capacity to articulate social discontent, cultural pride, and political ideologies. He notes that graffiti embodies a tension between art and illegality, where its meaning is shaped by context, audience, and intention. This aligns with Gyasi Obeng's (2000) earlier study in Ghana, which interprets graffiti as a "discursive tool" used by youth to express language attitudes and cultural identity, especially in academic and urban environments.

# GRAFFITI AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL AND CULTURAL COMMENTARY

Graffiti has evolved from a form of marginal expression to a legitimate medium through which individuals and communities articulate their lived realities. Its capacity to convey layered meanings in public spaces makes it a powerful tool for social commentary, cultural expression, and political activism. In the African context, including Ghana, graffiti increasingly serves as an outlet for confronting systemic issues and promoting dialogue among diverse populations.

Graffiti, as a form of public art, has consistently been utilized to express dissent, construct identity, and spark dialogue on pressing social, cultural, and political issues. In many urban and peri-urban settings, it serves as a grassroots communication tool through which artists critique power structures, amplify community struggles, and project alternative narratives. Particularly in contexts where formal platforms for expression are limited or inaccessible, graffiti becomes a powerful method for civic engagement and resistance.

## SOCIAL COMMENTARY THROUGH GRAFFITI

Studies affirm that graffiti functions as a medium through which communities engage in social critique and awareness-building. According to Das (2023), graffiti is often deployed in urban areas as a reaction to societal challenges such as inequality, youth unemployment, housing crises, and lack of social infrastructure. His study underscores graffiti's role in voicing public frustration and in creating a bottom-up discourse, particularly in underrepresented or neglected communities. Likewise, in Ghana, Sokpoli (2023) provides empirical findings on how young people in urban and peri-urban settings use graffiti to raise awareness about education access, sexual violence, and economic hardship. His findings suggest that graffiti walls function as informal platforms for civic engagement, particularly among youth who feel alienated from mainstream media or political institutions. Moreover, a report by Zimmer (2017) on Cape Town's District Six illustrates how graffiti projects can also foster social healing and remembrance in post-traumatic contexts. Street art in this space contributes to rebuilding social identity after the trauma of forced displacement, transforming physical space into a narrative of shared experience and resilience.

Aikins and Akoi-Jackson (2021) offer a critical empirical lens on how Ghana's creative arts, particularly murals and other public artworks, functioned as vital tools for public health communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on arts and health frameworks as well as critical health psychology, their study analysed various art forms, including comedy, cartoons, music, and large-scale murals created between March and July 2020. The analysis revealed that murals in particular played a significant role in enhancing the aesthetic appeal of healthcare environments while also serving as visual instruments for disseminating prevention messages. To them, the murals did more than merely transmit biomedical information; they evoked emotional connections, promoted cultural resonance, and deepened social awareness of the pandemic. Importantly, the study also critiques the limitations of certain artistic interventions, such as state-

sponsored visuals that overlooked socio-economic realities, thereby diluting the effectiveness of the health messaging. Together, these studies underscore graffiti's evolving function as both a tool of resistance and an informal platform for civic pedagogy, enabling underrepresented communities to engage in discourse, assert agency, and foster resilience in the face of socio-political and public health challenges.

## CULTURAL COMMENTARY AND IDENTITY FORMATION

Graffiti is also a cultural language through which artists explore and affirm collective identity. It offers a medium for representing local traditions, values, and histories that are often excluded from dominant cultural narratives. In this regard, Labi (2013) argues that contemporary Ghanaian graffiti often incorporates Afro-Ghanaian symbols and indigenous aesthetics, bridging the gap between traditional art and modern urban expression.

Adom, Osei, and Adu-Agem (2020) further support this perspective, showing that graffiti artists often draw on folk motifs, proverbs, and spiritual themes to articulate Ghanaian identity in the urban context. Their study highlights that such practices challenge the westernized lens through which graffiti is often understood and instead promote a culturally grounded visual language. Similarly, Adeyemi (2022) observes that graffiti in Nigeria is increasingly being used as a form of cultural affirmation in response to globalization and cultural homogenization. Artists use graffiti to reclaim indigenous narratives, celebrate local heroes, and resist cultural erasure, particularly in gentrified urban spaces. Graffiti, therefore, becomes not only a tool for identity formation but also a means of cultural preservation, especially in areas like Akropong-Akuapem, where indigenous values are intertwined with modernization.

Evidently, in Ghana, Mensah and Djan (2024) and Obeng (2000) offer substantive evidence that graffiti and public murals in Ghana function as critical mediums for cultural commentary and identity formation. In their case study of murals across Accra, Mensah and Djan (2024) offer a nuanced exploration of how public art serves as a medium for cultural commentary and identity formation within the urban Ghanaian context. Drawing on qualitative interviews with muralists and community members, and supported by visual and thematic analysis, the study reveals that murals in Accra are not merely aesthetic interventions but culturally embedded narratives that reflect the city's rich historical, social, and folkloric heritage. These visual installations incorporate indigenous symbols, traditional motifs, and socio-historical references that collectively function as a living archive of Afro-Ghanaian identity. Importantly, the study highlights how these artworks foster a strong sense of place and continuity, creating a visual dialogue between past, present, and future. The murals also serve as tools of cultural resistance, challenging the erasure or dilution of local identity in the face of globalization and urban homogenization.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to document and explore the experiences, techniques, and social impacts of four graffiti artists in Akropong Akuapem. Qualitative methodology is best suited for this study as it facilitates an in-depth understanding of the subjective meanings, socio-cultural contexts, and artistic processes embedded in the graffiti works of these artists (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through direct engagement with the artists and observation of their works, the study aims to generate rich, narrative-based insights that would otherwise be inaccessible through quantitative methods.

A multiple case study design guides this research. This design is appropriate because it allows an intensive, holistic examination of each artist's background, techniques, and the thematic messages within their artworks. Similar to the approach taken by Chang (2023), who utilized an ethnographic case study to understand mural practices in residential spaces, this research also emphasizes context-specific knowledge. Semi-structured interviews, site observations, and visual documentation of the graffiti works will form the core of data collection. This triangulation of sources ensures depth, rigor, and trustworthiness in the findings (Yin, 2017). On the other hand, adhering to this methodological approach, the study ensures rigor, objectivity, and validity in addressing its research questions.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcripts will be coded inductively to identify recurring patterns and themes across the artists' narratives and artwork. Visual analysis will be employed to interpret graffiti aesthetics, symbolism, and cultural markers. The combined insights from interviews and observations will form case summaries for each artist and a cross-case synthesis to identify broader trends and contributions. Moreover, photographs of graffiti works will also be analysed visually to interpret symbolic elements, techniques, and themes. Sample images will be included in the final report to illustrate key findings and enrich the analysis.

## Analysis and discussion

## THOMAS KOJO ALICOE APPIAH

### *Personal Background*

Thomas Kojo Alicoe Appiah grew up in a culturally vibrant community where festivals, oral storytelling, and collective celebrations shaped his creative identity. His early fascination with cultural performances and traditional symbolism nurtured an artistic curiosity that gradually evolved into a passion for visual expression. Unlike some of his peers who were influenced by Western media, Appiah's inspiration was deeply rooted in indigenous customs. He recalls how watching drummers, dancers, and chiefs during annual festivals made him conscious of the

richness of Ghanaian heritage and motivated him to find a medium to preserve it. These formative experiences became the foundation of his artistic journey.

Reflecting on his beginnings, he explained:

> *"I was fascinated by our traditions, so I wanted to use my art to showcase them. Graffiti became my way of keeping our culture alive. When I look at the durbars or listen to folk tales told by elders, I feel an urge to capture those memories visually before they fade away."*

Unlike Emmanuel Boateng, who is largely self-taught, Appiah pursued basic visual arts training in school, where he was introduced to drawing techniques, color blending, and spatial design. This formal foundation gave him the discipline to refine his craft and the confidence to experiment. Over time, he began incorporating digital tools into his process, sketching concepts on a computer before translating them into large-scale murals. He notes that this hybrid approach allows him to balance traditional aesthetics with modern design techniques, producing works that speak to both older and younger generations.

Appiah's motivation lies in storytelling and the preservation of heritage. He frequently paints murals that highlight Ghanaian festivals, customs, and collective memory, positioning his work as a living archive. As he shared in one interview:

> *"When I paint our festivals and cultural symbols on walls, I feel I am preserving history for the next generation. Some of the children who see my murals may not experience Odwira or Homowo directly, but through the art they can still connect with the stories behind them."*

His career has not been without obstacles. Securing spaces to paint has been a recurring challenge, as property owners and local authorities sometimes misunderstand or undervalue graffiti. He recounted one particular experience where a mural-in-progress was painted over because the landlord claimed it "spoiled" the look of the building. Despite these setbacks, he continues to pursue his mission of educating, entertaining, and celebrating heritage through visual art. As Labi (2013) emphasizes, public art plays a crucial role in embedding cultural festivals into communal memory, and Appiah's works exemplify this principle by bringing Ghanaian traditions into public spaces where they can be seen, remembered, and passed on.

### *Styles and Themes in the Graffiti Works of the Artists*

The graffiti works of Thomas Kojo Alicoe Appiah demonstrate a conscious engagement with cultural identity, political expression, youth empowerment, and community participation. His artistic style, often combining bold lettering, indigenous symbols, and digitally aided designs, reflects a hybrid approach that connects tradition with modernity. Through interviews, field

observations, and visual documentation, it became evident that Appiah not only sees graffiti as an art form but also as a social instrument for communication and education within Akropong Akuapem.

One of the most recurring themes in Appiah's work is cultural heritage and identity preservation. Growing up surrounded by festivals and storytelling traditions, he developed an appreciation for the symbolism embedded in Ghanaian culture, which he now translates into vibrant murals. As he explained:

> *"I was fascinated by our traditions, so I wanted to use my art to showcase them. Graffiti became my way of keeping our culture alive. When people walk by and see Odwira or other cultural themes painted on walls, they remember their roots."*

This aligns with Emmanuel Boateng's philosophy of embedding Akan stories into his works, both artists seeing graffiti as a living archive for transmitting heritage to younger generations. Scholarship reinforces this point, as UNESCO (2021) stresses that intangible heritage risks disappearing unless it is actively preserved and adapted to contemporary contexts. Similarly, Mensah and Osei (2022) observed that festival-based street art in Ghana sustains cultural memory by embedding traditional motifs into public spaces where communities continually interact with them. Appiah's murals, therefore, serve as educational and cultural reminders, blending indigenous knowledge with modern visual styles to make them attractive to the youth.

Beyond cultural expression, Appiah also employs graffiti as a form of political and societal commentary, particularly addressing issues of governance, unemployment, and environmental neglect. He emphasized:

> *"Graffiti gives me a way to talk about what's wrong in society. People stop to look and think about the message behind the images. Sometimes words alone don't work, but when the message is on the wall, everyone has to see it."*

This perspective resonates with wider academic discourse that frames graffiti as counter-hegemonic communication (Mbembe & Nwankwo, 2020). Occupying public walls, artists like Appiah challenge dominant narratives and open space for marginalized voices. Hyperallergic (2019) similarly argues that even the simplest graffiti tags are political acts against restrictive public norms. In Ghana, Bawakyillenuo and Agyei (2023) found that murals stimulate civic engagement by presenting sensitive social issues in ways that invite reflection without confrontation. Appiah's political murals, therefore, transform walls into platforms of dialogue, subtly but effectively drawing attention to societal challenges.

Another striking dimension of Appiah's work is youth empowerment and social awareness. His artistic practice is not confined to personal expression; it extends into mentorship and collective

www.carijournals.org

creativity. He frequently involves younger boys in his projects, teaching them basic painting and design techniques. In his words:

> *"I teach some of the younger boys how to paint and design. If we train them early, they won't be afraid to dream big. Graffiti is more than art; it is education."*

This philosophy echoes Anku's (2021) findings that participatory street art fosters alternative career pathways for Ghanaian youth. Similarly, Gadsby (2020) conceptualizes graffiti as a form of visual pedagogy, where young people develop both critical awareness and creative competence. By creating opportunities for apprentices to learn and contribute, Appiah transforms graffiti into a tool of empowerment, ensuring that his artistic legacy extends beyond his own practice.

Finally, Appiah's works embody the theme of community cohesion and public engagement. Many of his murals are created in open, collaborative settings where residents participate either as helpers or observers. He reflected on one such project:

> *"During one mural, people I didn't even know came to join in. Some fetched water, some helped paint, others just shared stories. It brought us together, and the wall became more than art, it became ours."*

This collaborative dimension underscores graffiti's social role in building connections across community members. The International Organization for Migration's (2020) report on participatory mural projects in Ghana confirms that collective art-making enhances social bonds, allowing communities to reclaim public space and shape their environment together. Bengtsen (2018) further argues that such collaborative authorship challenges individualistic notions of creativity, while Tebes et al. (2015) highlight its role in promoting collective well-being. Appiah's practice reflects these insights, as his murals not only decorate walls but also foster belonging and unity within Akropong Akuapem.

### *Documentation of the Artistic Works of the Graffiti Artists*

*Cultural Heritage and Identity Preservation (Figure 2)*

The second documented artwork, Figure 2, illustrates Thomas Kojo Alicoe Appiah's strong commitment to preserving Ghana's cultural traditions through graffiti. The piece features symbolic Akan motifs and striking visual references to community festivals, particularly elements drawn from Akuapem celebrations. Through carefully chosen colors, bold outlines, and culturally grounded designs, the work conveys a narrative of pride, resilience, and continuity within indigenous heritage. For Appiah, graffiti is more than an artistic practice; it is a form of cultural storytelling. As he explained:

*"Graffiti gives me a way to talk about what's wrong in society, but also to highlight who we are. When I paint our festivals and cultural symbols on walls, I feel I am preserving history for the next generation."*

His mural resonates with the argument of Mensah and Osei (2022) that festival-based graffiti acts as a living archive, embedding indigenous knowledge into public spaces where communities interact with it daily. This makes the work accessible and relatable to both older generations who recognize its cultural depth and younger audiences who find inspiration in its visual appeal. Similar to Emmanuel Boateng's Odwira mural, Appiah's Figure 2 reinforces graffiti's role as a bridge between ancestral heritage and modern identity, sustaining cultural memory while adapting it for contemporary social contexts.

*Environmental Awareness, Agricultural Heritage, and Youth Empowerment (Figure 3)*
The third documented artwork, Figure 3, shifts attention to environmental stewardship and agricultural pride, two themes that are central to Appiah's creative vision. The mural depicts lush vegetation, cocoa plants, and a hopeful child at the center of the composition. By intertwining agricultural imagery with youthful optimism, the artwork communicates the interconnection between natural resources, cultural identity, and the empowerment of future generations. Appiah emphasized during interviews:

*"My graffiti is a tool to inspire children to dream beyond their current environment. Through art, they see possibilities, and they also learn to value nature and where we get our livelihood."*

This mural aligns with Marful et al. (2023), who assert that street art can serve as an informal educational platform, helping communities engage with themes such as environmental conservation and food security. Likewise, Boateng and Adomako (2021) highlight the role of visual art in shaping community perceptions of agriculture and sustainable development. Through vibrant imagery and symbolic representation, Appiah transforms graffiti into an environmental teaching tool, motivating the younger generation to both protect the land and envision broader opportunities for themselves. Collectively, Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate Appiah's dual focus on cultural heritage and sustainable futures. His artworks move beyond decoration to embody narratives of identity, resilience, and empowerment.

**Figure 1: Thomas Kojo Alicoe Appiah's artwork**



**Source: Field work, 2025**

**Location Akropong -Akuapem(okuapemman junction)**

**Date graffitied: 20/09/2019**

**Figure 2: Thomas kojo Alicoe Appiah's artwork**



**Source: Field work, 2025**

**Location Akropong -Akuapem(Abananim)**

**Date graffitied: 13/10/2019**

 **MICHAEL OBENG**

*Personal Background*

Michael Obeng is recognized for his experimental and futuristic approach to graffiti. Born into a family of storytellers and craftspeople, his childhood was filled with traditional folktales, woodcarving sessions, and cultural performances that shaped his creative curiosity. From an early age, he sought to blend this indigenous aesthetics with modern artistic practices, developing a unique vision that set him apart from his peers.

He explained his process, stating:

> *"I always research my concepts before starting. I sketch on paper, finalize the designs digitally, and sometimes use projectors to ensure precision. For me, preparation is as important as the final artwork."*

This statement reflects his strong commitment to combining discipline with creativity, ensuring that every piece he creates carries both technical mastery and symbolic meaning.

Unlike the other artists, Obeng incorporates highly advanced tools such as airbrushing, stenciling, and projection mapping, which give his murals a futuristic quality. His inspirations come from Afro-futurism, urban culture, mental health awareness, and technological advancement. For instance, he once shared how the futuristic designs in his art were partly inspired by his experiences visiting cyber cafés in his teenage years, where he became fascinated with digital imagery and virtual spaces.

In addition to his painting, Obeng has carved a niche for himself in the digital space. He manages a YouTube channel where he documents his creative processes, produces tutorials for aspiring graffiti artists, and advocates for the recognition of graffiti as a legitimate art form in Ghana. His online presence has brought him wider exposure, leading to radio interviews and invitations to community exhibitions, where he uses his platform to highlight how graffiti can contribute to cultural preservation and mental well-being. As he put it:

> *"Graffiti is not just about walls; it is about ideas, healing, and connection. When someone stops to watch me paint or comments on my videos, I know I am starting a conversation that matters."*

Despite his success, Obeng faces challenges similar to the other artists, including the high cost of materials, lack of sponsorship, and bureaucratic hurdles in securing public walls for painting. Nevertheless, he continues to produce transformative works that turn neglected spaces into vibrant cultural landmarks, fostering dialogue and inspiring young artists who follow his work online and in person.

### *Styles and Themes in the Graffiti Works of the Artists*

Starting with graffiti art in Akropong Akuapem reflects the artists' desire to preserve cultural heritage and celebrate local identity. Their works frequently incorporate Akan symbols, traditional proverbs, indigenous patterns, and visual narratives that connect contemporary audiences to ancestral roots.

Michael Obeng approaches cultural identity from a futuristic angle, integrating Afro-futuristic aesthetics with traditional Ghanaian storytelling. He explained:

> *"I like to take Adinkra symbols or historical images and reimagine them with futuristic elements. It reminds us that our culture is not only history, but it is also part of the future. By doing this, I make sure our heritage speaks to both the older generation and the younger ones. People who see my work often say they feel*

> *connected to their roots, even when the designs look modern. That is the balance I try to create through my art."*

This corroborates with UNESCO's (2021) recognition that cultural expression must adapt to remain relevant for future generations. Embedding local heritage in modern forms, artists like Obeng create living archives that resonate with both older and younger audiences.

Also, graffiti in Akropong Akuapem functions as a tool for political discourse and societal critique. The artists frequently address themes such as corruption, environmental neglect, youth unemployment, and governance issues.

> *"Sometimes words alone don't work. I put the message on walls so everyone passing by can see it and decide for themselves. My art talks about issues like mental health, technology, and corruption in a way that is hard to ignore. I believe when people see the colors and figures, the message stays with them longer than just hearing a speech. It is my way of opening conversations that people might otherwise avoid."*

Scholars argue that graffiti often challenges mainstream power narratives and provides visibility to marginalized voices (Mbembe & Nwankwo, 2020). This reflects Obeng's choice to paint futuristic images that critique how technology and social neglect affect youth mental well-being. Hyperallergic (2019) underscores this political power of graffiti, noting that even the simplest tags carry anarchic undertones against social restrictions. Similarly, Bawakyillenuo and Agyei (2023) confirm that Ghanaian murals act as catalysts for civic engagement, provoking reflection on sensitive issues without directly confronting authority.

### *Documentation of the Artistic Works of the Graffiti Artists*

Michael Obeng's graffiti works, represented in Figures 5 and 6, demonstrate his deep engagement with culture, identity, and community empowerment. In Figure 5, he portrays a smiling child surrounded by cocoa plants and flourishing greenery, a powerful reminder of the link between youth, agriculture, and sustainable development. The use of vibrant colors and organic imagery reflects Ghana's agricultural heritage while encouraging the younger generation to embrace environmental stewardship and education as pathways to empowerment. As he explained,

> *"My graffiti is a tool to inspire children to dream beyond their current environment. Through art, they see possibilities. I want them to know that farming is not only about survival but also about pride and progress. Every child can see themselves as part of something bigger when they look at my work."*

This perspective highlights his intention to transform graffiti into more than decoration. It becomes a visual teaching tool that conveys lessons about sustainability, resilience, and the potential for

progress within rural communities. Scholars such as Marful et al. (2023) and Boateng and Adomako (2021) affirm this role of art as an informal educational platform that makes complex themes like agriculture, food security, and conservation accessible to broad audiences.

Equally significant is Figure 6, where Obeng shifts from environmental and agricultural themes to the celebration of traditional festivals and collective memory. This artwork captures scenes of Akuapem chiefs, ancestral figures, and warriors, adorned in indigenous regalia and presented through vivid colors and rhythmic compositions. In doing so, Obeng immortalizes cultural practices and fosters unity among viewers, turning neglected walls into living archives of community history. He observed,

> *"Our festivals tell stories about who we are and where we come from. My art tries to bring those stories to life on public walls. I want young people to feel proud when they see their heritage celebrated in bright colors. It is my way of saying our culture is not fading but growing stronger."*

Through this approach, his work sustains traditions while reimagining them within contemporary spaces, ensuring cultural narratives remain visible and relevant to future generations. As Labi (2013) notes, public art can embed collective memories into permanent forms that both educate and inspire.

Together, the figures reflect Obeng's unique ability to blend environmental awareness, agricultural heritage, and cultural celebration within his graffiti practice. His works transcend the boundaries of visual art, serving as dynamic platforms for education, cultural preservation, and social empowerment. As he further explained,

> *"When I paint, I want the walls to speak. Each mural must tell a story that people can connect with. If a child, a farmer, or even an elder stops to reflect, then my purpose as an artist is fulfilled."*

These findings show that Obeng's graffiti practice is not merely aesthetic but deeply intentional, designed to communicate values that shape identity and strengthen community. They demonstrate how graffiti, often dismissed as marginal, can evolve into a powerful tool for preserving heritage, reinforcing community values, and sparking dialogue in Akropong Akuapem.

**Figure 3: Michael Obeng's artwork**



**Source: Field work, 2025**

**Location Akropong -Akuapem(okuapemman junction)**

**Date graffitied: 20/09/2019**

**Figure 4: Michael Obeng's artwork**



**Source: Field work, 2025**

**Location Akropong -Akuapem(Abananim)**
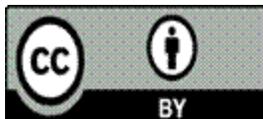
**Date graffitied: 17/11/2019**

**Conclusion**

This study explored and documented the personal backgrounds, artistic styles, and creative works of four graffiti artists in Akropong Akuapem. The findings show that graffiti in the community is more than just street decoration. However, it is an important form of cultural expression, education, and social communication. Each artist's personal experiences, education, and inspirations strongly influence their creative styles and techniques, resulting in unique and diverse graffiti artworks. While some artists work with traditional sketching methods, others combine digital tools and experimental designs, creating a vibrant mix of visual expressions.

## References

Reinecke, M. F. B., & Sonnekus, J. C. (2021). Insurance policies, the Matrimonial Property Act and alienation of assets of the joint estate without value to the detriment of the non-consenting spouse. *Journal of South African Law/Tydskrif vir die Suid-Afrikaanse Reg*, *2021*(1), 123-135.

Adeyemi, J. (2022). *Contemporary art from Nigeria in the global markets: trending in the margins*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Adom, D., Osei, M., & Adu-Agem, J. (2020). From Ghanaian Modernist Painting Genre to Contemporary Functionality: A Spotlight on Samuel Prophask Asamoah. *Journal of Urban Culture Research*, *21*(1), 67-89.

Aikins, D. A., & Akoi-Jackson, B. (2024). Applying arts to health interventions and health research in Ghana: a scoping review. *Arts & Health*, 1-20.

Akutsu, F. A. (2020). *Documentation of two contemporary Ghanaian painters Felix Nicholas Hiengo and Godfred Asamoah Akrofi* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Education, Winneba).

Anku, K. (2021). *Street art and youth empowerment in Ghanaian urban spaces*. Journal of African Cultural Studies, 33(4), 482-498. https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2021.1893521

Bawakyillenuo, S., & Agyei, P. (2023). *Graffiti, murals, and civic engagement in Ghanaian cities*. African Studies Review, 66(2), 311–329. https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2023.14

Bengtsen, P. (2018). Street art and the nature of the city. *Bild och natur. Tio konstvetenskapliga betraktelser*, 125-138.

Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism* (Vol. 2, No. 6). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Boateng, K., & Adomako, B. (2021). *Visual art and sustainable agriculture: Exploring cultural representations in Ghana.* Journal of Community Development, 8(2), 45–59.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101.

Chang, R., & Wang, J. (2023, May). Color pattern analogy: AI-assisted Chinese blue–green landscape painting restoration. In *2023 8th International Conference on Information and Network Technologies (ICINT)* (pp. 1-6). IEEE.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). A Book Review: Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches. In SAGE Publications, Inc.: Vol. Fourth Edi. https://doi.org/10.13187/rjs.2017.1.30

Das, A. (2023). A Study of Scroll Painting in Indian Art With Special Reference of West Bengal Folk Art. In *International Conference on Emerging Trends in Design & Arts* (Vol. 4, No. 2SE, pp. 98-108).

Desk, L. (2025). *Welcome to Wakanda in Soweto: How Afro Geek hopes to ignite a continent:* LIFESTYLE&TECH.https://lifestyleandtech.co.za/just-life/article/2025-05-06/welcome-to-wakanda-in-soweto-how-afro-geek-hopes-to-ignite-a-continet

Dewey, J. (1981). *The later works, 1925-1953* (Vol. 3). SIU Press.

Ganz, D. (2018). Vor schwarzem Grund: Die Bildgewänder des Ordens vom Goldenen Vlies (2018). *Henriette Hofmann, Caroline Schärli, Sophie Schweinfurth (eds.), Inszenierungen von Sichtbarkeit in mittelalterlichen Bildkulturen*.

Gyasi Obeng, S. (2000). Speaking the unspeakable: Discursive strategies to express language attitudes in Legon (Ghana) graffiti. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, *33*(3), 291-319.

Hyperallergic. (2019). *The political power of graffiti and street art*. https://hyperallergic.com/526904/graffiti-political-statement

Labi, K. A. (2013). Afro-Ghanaian influences in Ghanaian paintings. *Journal of Art Historiography*, (9), KAL1.

Marful, A. B., Adzah, E., Nunoo, F. K., Duah, D. Y. A., & Anane-Antwi, E. (2023). Exploring street graphics: Strategies and challenges for city branding in Kumasi, Ghana. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, *10*(1), 2206235.

Mbembe, A., & Nwankwo, C. (2020). *Public art, dissent, and urban resistance in Africa*. African Journal of Cultural Studies, 32(3), 211–228. https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2020.1772148

Mensah, E., & Osei, K. (2022). *Graffiti and cultural preservation in Ghana: Narratives, symbols, and identity*. Ghana Journal of Visual Arts, 7(2), 89–107.

Mensah, R., & Djan, G. (2024). *Intangible heritage and the role of street art in Ghana.* Journal of Cultural Heritage Studies, 14(1), 33–50.

Mikhaila, W. (2023). *A history of resistance: The role of street art in Cape Town*. Cape Town Tourism. https://www.capetourism.com/street-art-in-cape-town/

Obeng, S. (2000). Doing politics on walls and doors: A sociolinguistic analysis of graffiti in Legon (Ghana). *Multilingua-Journal of Cross-Cultural and Interlanguage Communication*.

Schacter, R. (2024). *Monumental graffiti: Tracing public art and resistance in the city*. MIT Press.

Sokpoli, M. (2023). Arts, Communication, and Education: Beyond the Letters in Sociopolitical Landscape in Ghana. *Indonesian Journal of Educational Research and Technology*, 5(1), 39-46.

Soudien, A. (2019). Memory, multiplicity, and participatory curation at the district six museum, cape town. *Critical arts*, *33*(6), 67-82.

Statista, D. (2022). *Statista*.

Tebes, J. K., Bess, K. D., Isenburg, K., Feingold, A., & McGeary, J. E. (2015). *Community murals as health promotion: Evaluating a transdisciplinary and community-driven intervention*. American Journal of Community Psychology, 55(3–4), 122–135. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-014-9667-0

UNESCO. (2021). *Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage: A global framework*. https://ich.unesco.org

Yin, R. K. (2017). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods*. Sage publications.

Zimmer, L. (2017). *The art of spray paint: inspirations and techniques from masters of aerosol*. Rockport Publishers.