Bambɔlse as Commodity: The Revival of Wall Murals in Sirigu, Ghana

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An essay submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in Sociology

Middletown, Connecticut February 2014
For miles, the dry savannah landscape seems endless. Traveling along the dusty red road, the plain mud forms of the local architecture appear and disappear swiftly, leaving no significant impression. The villages begin to blur as the hours pass. Then suddenly, the walls no longer vanish into the scenery. Adorned with elaborate wall decorations, the picturesque deep reds, strong blacks and bright whites of these walls interrupt the natural landscape and take center stage. This is Sirigu, the renowned home of the revived bambolse tradition.

The Gurensi people of northeastern Ghana have a long-standing tradition of elaborate geometric and representational wall decoration known as bambolse (Smith 1978: 36). Women are the primary creators of the paintings, which are found on both the interior and exterior walls of family compounds (See Figures 1, 2, 3). While no formal history of the subject exists, bambolse likely has its origins in the mural arts of Mali, Mauritania, Eastern Nigeria and Southern Sudan and spread throughout the region by means of the Sahel caravan route (Anyelom 1995: 8). According to local oral tradition, the murals date back to the ancestral days.

For centuries, mural arts were prominent in many communities throughout northeastern Ghana and southeastern Burkina Faso. During their travels to pottery markets in Burkina Faso, women traded for and collected various materials that they used to decorate their walls upon their return home. The women adorned the walls of their compounds to show love and dedication to their husbands, to build a positive reputation, to impress their visitors and possibly to pay homage to ancestral spirits

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1 The term bambolse literally means "embellished," "decorated" or "made more attractive." The
(Wemegah 2009). The wall murals were linked to important social values and in many ways were an important form of social and cultural capital.

In the mid to late 1980s and early 1990s, shifting cultural values associated with globalization caused the paintings to lose much of their social value. As people in older generations who believed that wall decorations were important became too old to paint, these “custodians of culture” also began to die without bequeathing their knowledge to the present generation (Anyelom 1995:1). When people in younger generations failed to continue the traditions and adopted new building techniques, the paintings became much less common.

The influx of imported goods in northern Ghana eliminated regular trading in nearby Burkina Faso, and as a result, many of the raw materials needed for the paintings had to be purchased in the local market at inflated prices. As formal education became more common and families began to invest in schooling, the cost of wall paintings became difficult to justify. Further, for this population of mostly subsistence farmers, poor rainfall patterns during these years led to low crop yields and additional significant financial hardships.

The process of wall decoration requires “sufficient labor resources and financial means to allow women the time to devote to this activity” (Smith 1979:123). The murals, which can be thought of like frescos, are applied on top of a wet layer of plaster. Once the plaster sets, the painting becomes part of the wall.

Intense patterns of rain and drought in the Sahel require the walls in the region to be either rebuilt or replastered every three to five years to prevent them from collapsing (Eustace 2002). In the process of fixing the walls, the murals are necessarily
destroyed and then must be recreated. While replastering walls fulfills a need to strengthen a building’s structure, the independent functional value of wall painting is negligible. Ultimately, although walls must be replastered every three to five years, “whether or not they are decorated or redecorated depends in good measure on the women being sufficiently motivated” (Smith 1979:123).

Wall decorations are produced within the context of a complex art world and creating them requires the careful coordination of a substantial number of materials and actors. Gathering materials for the plastering and wall decorating can take a number of weeks, as certain materials are difficult to find in large quantities, and others, which are non-renewable resources, are no longer readily available. Costly replacement materials are only found in the market during certain seasons. Further, wall paintings are not executed by an individual artist but rather by a group of skilled artist laborers led by a master decorator. In order for a wall painting to become a reality, the woman in charge must organize these individuals and have enough food and drink to feed them; wall paintings cannot occur if a compound owner is not able to provide adequate sustenance.

Only when all the actors and materials are simultaneously in place can the processes of applying plaster and wall designs begin. Depending on the size and shape of the walls and the number to be decorated, the activity is an all-day if not multi-day affair. The processes are physically exhausting and time consuming.

2 These materials include loam soil, soft sand, cow dung or bitumen plaster (coal tar), water, small and large quartz pebbles (saasa stones), black earth (kug-sable), white limestone (kug-pele), small red oxide pebbles (gare) and locust tree pods (dawa dawa) (See Figure 4).

3 The first step of the process is to mix the plaster. Boiled water and heated coal tar or well mixed cow
Today, in many communities in northeastern Ghana and southeastern Burkina Faso, the wall painting tradition has ceased or the paintings have dramatically altered in form due to the negligible functional importance of the wall murals, the relatively large expense associated with producing them, the labor-intensive nature of this production, as well as a number of societal and climatic changes. In some compounds, people apply coal tar, a thick black paint-like substance to sections of the wall most prone to water damage, instead of making the tri-color wall designs. While this method is more functional than “traditional” bambolse, as the coal tar forms an impermeable layer over the plastered walls, it is void of the beauty and historical significance associated with bambolse. In much of the region, the entire concept of wall decoration remains only a memory.

In Sirigu, a small village in northeastern Ghana, the history is a bit different. Wall decoration and a number of other “traditional” art forms have been revived during the last fifteen years by the Sirigu Women’s Organization of Pottery and Art

dung are combined with the loam soil and soft sand using a combination of a hoe and feet to “stomp the mortar.” Once an even consistency has been established, the plaster is applied with by hand until the entire wall is covered with about an inch of wet mud. After the mud has been applied, it is smoothed with large stones and left to dry for about an hour until it is semi-firm. During this time, the kug-sable (black pigment) and gare (red pigment) are pulverized by hand. Sometimes the kug-pele is pulverized, but at other times, it is left whole. The pulverized pigments are then mixed with water in a calabash bowl. Using either a paintbrush or a collection of guinea fowl feathers, the master painter first applies the black pigment to establish the design. She then indicates where the red and white pigments will go. The other women then join in and fill in the red and white cells, applying the red pigment first with a brush, and the white second. If the white pigment has been pulverized and mixed with water, it is applied with a brush but if it has been left whole, it is applied like a piece of chalk. Once the red and white pigments have been applied, the black pigment is reapplied to define the lines. The entire painting is then smoothed over with small saasa stones to allow the mud and pigment to fully mesh. About two days later, dawa dawa pods are boiled in water to create a varnish that is applied to the entire wall using a broom (See Figure 5).

As the murals, by nature must be recreated every few years, the question of whether the artistic tradition has been continued, preserved, recreated or revived is subject to personal interpretation. Throughout this essay, I have chosen to use the term revive as I feel it best represents the way there has been a renewed interest surrounding the wall murals which has spurred the creation of new murals within the community.
(SWOPA), a community-based non-profit women’s empowerment organization. In 1997, Melanie Kasise, a retired schoolteacher who grew up in Sirigu, founded SWOPA to promote traditional pottery, art and craft as an income generating activity. Along with seven other local women, Kasise sought to preserve the traditional art forms and culture of the village and simultaneously improve the social standing of the women in the community.

Today, SWOPA has over 500 members, a visitor center, a gallery/gift shop, a guesthouse and a restaurant (See Figure 6). In 2011, the organization had 1,647 visitors and made 22,346.20 GHc ($11,173 USD). Of the 1,647 visitors, 943 were from outside of Ghana (Manu 2012).

International visitors in Sirigu were documented as early as 1973, when a local Catholic priest brought Europeans to see the murals (Smith 1979). However, since the founding of SWOPA in 1997, the number of tourists in the village has dramatically increased, and as a result, the effects of tourism are much more significant. As the SWOPA website explains, “Sirigu’s story is typical of farming villages in Northern Ghana; several years of intensive farming and poor rainfall has degraded the land to the extent that even subsistence farming is threatened. This is where the similarities end though…” (2013). Through commodification and entry into the global marketplace, the artistic traditions of the region can be seen in Sirigu today.

5 The conversion rate between the Ghanaian Cedi (GHc) and the US Dollar (USD) is approximately 2 to 1. This figure has been used in all conversions throughout the paper, and is only meant to provide reference.
Bambolse murals, which by definition are affixed to a permanent wall, cannot be sold and as a result, are not subject to direct commodification. Historically, the wall murals in Sirigu were almost entirely separate from the market. While it is understood that pre-colonial art in the region was largely client driven, and that talented women were and continue to be paid to adorn walls for other women in the community, the scale to which the wall designs have been commodified in Sirigu in the past fifteen years is unprecedented, and the audiences are entirely new (Woets 2011:436).

The establishment of a formalized tourist organization in Sirigu has created an infrastructure whereby the murals are linked to a clear cycle of commodification. The wall murals, and photographs of them that circulate within the international media, help to shape the identity of the village and drive tourism, which in turn, helps the women sell their goods in the SWOPA gift shop. Specifically, the symbolism found on the murals has been transposed onto portable canvases and local pottery to appease the touristic “desire to somehow buy the designs” (Woets 2011: 436) (See Figure 7). Tourists can also pay to learn how to create local crafts through canvas painting, pottery making, basket weaving, and wall painting workshops (See Figure 8).

Every visitor who enters Sirigu through SWOPA’s headquarters pays a community contribution fee of 5GHc ($2.50 USD). These funds support the organization and facilitate the purchase of painting materials for local women. Select

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6 The founding of SWOPA therefore does not mark the beginnings of tourism or commodification of art in the region but marks a dramatic rise in both tourism and the commodification of local art.
households also profit by allowing visitors to enter and photograph their homes, through SWOPA’s community house tours. Further, the influx of visitors in Sirigu has led to an increase in market sales of food and transportation services, and a plethora of new community projects, such as a waste management program and a community library.

National and international praise for the wall murals has generated a new sense of pride within the community in regard to their artistic traditions. With help from foreign institutions, international NGOs and the Ghana Tourist Board, the women of Sirigu have been able to exhibit their pottery and canvas paintings at a number of galleries throughout Ghana and the Netherlands. Most notably, the women have exhibited their work at the National Museum of Ghana in Accra and at the World Art Foundation in the Netherlands (Woets 2011). A series of private commissions have also allowed the women to decorate the walls of various tourist destinations and hotels throughout Ghana, such as in the Tietaar restaurant in nearby Bolgatanga and in the Golden Tulip Hotel in Accra.

Tourism has led to a profound change in Sirigu; the wall murals, which once yielded social prestige amongst local women, have been (re)discovered as a valuable economic resource and have been exploited as such (Woets 2011:434). The case in Sirigu parallels similar situations in cultural villages that exist in different historical

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7 They women have also shown their work in various gallery spaces in Accra and Kumasi, and in and a number of other Dutch galleries in The Hague, Winschoten and Groenlo (Woets 2011).

8 The women have also decorated parts of walls at the Aid to Artisans Ghana (ATAGA)/United States Agency for International Development (USAID) craft village, the Ghana International Trade Fair Center, and Alliance Française in Accra.
and spatial contexts as an increase in commodification has caused the wall murals to become subject to global expectations and demands. Sirigu and SWOPA provide an exciting case study for the exploration of cultural tourism and its effects on an indigenous art form because of the way wall murals cannot be precisely commodified, but are instead linked to a clear cycle of commodification. While SWOPA’s work focuses not only on reviving the wall painting tradition in Sirigu, but also on revitalizing the pottery and basketry tradition of the village, this essay will focus exclusively on the wall murals in order to explore the impact of cultural tourism when economic impetus is not a direct factor.

Arts of the Fourth World

The people of Sirigu are clearly situated within the “Fourth World,” a term used to describe “aboriginal or native people whose lands fall within the national boundaries and techno-bureaucratic administrations of the countries of the First, Second and Third Worlds” (Graburn 1976: 2). Throughout history, art produced by these individuals, who as a result of colonialism and/or displacement often lack control of their own lives, has been most frequently termed “primitive,” “folk,” and “craft” and has been seen to exist outside of the realm of contemporary art worlds (Graburn 1976; Becker 2008). However, these terms, developed by colonial anthropologists and art historians of the nineteenth century, are both Eurocentric and pejorative as they draw distinctions between themselves and “fully fine art” (Davis 2007: 197). Linked to essentialist claims about identity, contextualization, and placing emphasis on the skill of the producer versus the genius associated with the
artist, these terms depend on the “very quality that they purport to eschew: cultural Otherness” (Graburn 1976:2; Davis 2007:197).

Terms such as “arts of the Fourth World” or “arts of acculturation” provide more accurate ways to describe this type of art, which by no means is created for the benefit and consumption of an exclusively local audience (Graburn 1976:2) As the globalizing modern world is no longer characterized by isolated small-scale non-industrial societies with only inner-directed traditional arts, inner-directed traditional arts have almost ceased to exist and have been replaced by new forms that take into account multiple symbolic and aesthetic systems. These arts “are rarely free of the influences of the artistic traditions of the dominant societies that engulfed them” (Graburn 1976: 4).

In fact, most of the arts of the Fourth World are produced by one group with the intent of being consumed by other groups of people. Often, the cultural traditions in question were “threatened” by the penetration of industrial goods or Westernized tastes but have been “salvaged” via the economic benefits of tourism (Graburn 1976; Cohen 1988). Many forms have been revived in order to respond to a demand or to create interest within the tourist market through a process known as “heritage commodification” (Cohen 1988). New audiences “provide contexts for the commoditization of things that are otherwise protected from commoditization” (Appadurai 1986: 15).

While heritage art often is associated with conservation, preservation, restoration, reclamation, recovery, re-creation, recuperation, revitalization and regeneration, it actually “produces something new in the present that has recourse in
the past” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 149). Therefore, studies of the arts of the Fourth World are centered on “emerging ethnicities, modifying identities, and commercial and colonial stimuli and repressive actions” (Graburn 1976: 2).

The Effects of Commodification

Heritage commodification gives objects a “second life as exhibitions of themselves” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 150). However, the extent to which such commodification of culture alters or shifts the “meaning” of a cultural product as it is reoriented to an (inter)national audience is highly contested. Scholarly perspectives of the political impact of commodification of art range from “exploitation of locals and their cultural resources by outsiders” to enabling people to “maintain a meaningful local or ethnic identity which it might have otherwise lost” (Cohen 1988: 381, 382).

From a Marxist perspective, cultural tourism is seen as the culmination of capitalist development. Capitalism is felt to have already taken land, labor and capital, and through cultural tourism, it takes history, ethnic identity and culture and sells them alongside natural resources (Greenwood 1977: 136). Greenwood argues that this leads to the expropriation of local culture and exploitation of local people (1977). By participating in the capitalist division of labor, the producers become alienated from their product. Through tourism, the consumers, who are already alienated, continue to search for an unalienated world they will never find (Greenwood 1977).

According to this logic, tourism-related projects, like the one in Sirigu, alter the meaning of cultural products and human relations, essentially rendering them culturally meaningless. As “culture in its very essence is something people believe in
implicitly,” then when it is subjected to tourism and becomes explicitly about the object, people are robbed “of the meanings by which they organize their lives” (Greenwood 1977: 137). Further, commodification is often paralleled by profound changes in the distribution of wealth and power, as well as destructive changes to the local culture (Greenwood 1977; Appadurai 1986). Substantial environmental impact may also accompany this social upheaval.

Assertions that tourism corrupts culture, transforms the sacred into the profane, and takes what is authentic and presents it as a spectacle are challenged by scholars who argue that these ideas are based in an “unspoken presumption” that the people of the Fourth World once existed in a segregated and unchanging space of cultural purity (Shepherd 2002: 195). These scholars argue that while there is “an increasing tendency to essentialize one’s own cultural repertoire and that of the Other,” every society evolves naturally and changes over time (Woets 2011: 433). Societies have never been free of contact; before tourists, there were missionaries, traders, political agents, explorers, and anthropologists (Shepard 2002: 193).

This competing perspective highlights the way that cultural commodification can stimulate the revival of local interest in traditional forms. Old meanings do not necessarily disappear, but can remain salient for an internal public despite commodification (McKean 1976). In many cases, locals do not perceive change as being destructive and some may not even notice gradual change. Instead, despite the changed context, they perceive “an astonishing degree of continuity between the old and new situation” (Cohen 1988: 382).
Further, the process of cultural tourism can allow tourist-oriented products to acquire new meanings for locals, “as they become a diacritical mark of their ethnic or cultural identity, a vehicle of self representation before an external public” (Cohen 1988). Over time, products produced initially for tourists and visitors can become widely recognized as an “authentic manifestation of local culture” in a process known as “emergent authenticity” (Cohen 1988: 380). In fact, if “tourist demand increases the material (and by extension, the aesthetic) value of those objects or practices classified as authentic,” then perhaps the resulting products become “somehow more real” (Shepherd 2002: 194). In a reference to Baudrillard, Bruner argues, “There is no simulacrum because there is no original.” Interactions with tourists and the tourist market can lead to the creation of an entirely new product that arises from within the ever-evolving cultural matrix (Bruner 2005:5).

The Alienated Tourist

In the modern world, tourism has evolved as a fundamental element of “middle-class leisure” (MacCannell 1976: 7). The desire to find a primitive, natural landscape, untouched by modernity has become a prominent motive of present day tourism as “reality and authenticity are thought to be elsewhere: in other historical periods and other cultures, in purer, simpler lifestyles” (MacCannell 1976).

Tourists’ interest in finding authenticity in these “purer, simpler lifestyles” is inextricably linked to issues of Otherness and what bell hooks calls “imperialist nostalgia” (1992). By essentializing members of the Other within a romantic fantasy
of the past or “primitive,” bell hooks argues that dominant groups assert their power and privilege to “enhance the blank landscape of whiteness” (1992: 372).

In their desire to assert power, dominant groups try to “consume the Other” (bell hooks 1992: 372). In the context of tourism, cameras become guns where tourists go on a “photo safari, substituting the camera for a gun and shooting a picture, capturing an image” (Bruner and Kirshenblatt Gimlett 2005). Art objects become consumables and “tokens of an imagined virginal world which the tourists can access and acquire” (Cassiman 2011: 202). The disparity between the consumers and producers, who are “designated respectively as modern and traditional, developed and undeveloped, empowered and disempowered, technological and natural” are bridged through what Davis calls “PC shopping,” where tourists demonstrate their politically correct ideological commitment to development and women’s empowerment through interactions with “perceived disempowered Others” (Davis 2007: 204, 213). Regardless of the specifics of what is acquired, tourists “return home with trophies that confirm their own, often romanticized stereotypes” (Cassiman 2011: 202).

Tourists acquire cultural capital in their encounter with the Other, during which they become connected to ideas of “national travel, exploration and multiculturalism” (Graburn 1976). In this situation, “group identities of producers are tokens for the status politics of consumers” (Appadurai 1986: 47). The objects they acquire, or pictures they take, function as status markers once they return from their travels.
The gaze directed upon Fourth World groups by tourists is “structured by specific notions about what is extraordinary and therefore worth viewing” (Urry 1990: 59). In the quest for both recognition and economic benefit, Fourth World groups often engage in a variety of negotiations to please tourists and in doing so further economic and development aims (MacCannell 1973; Davis 2007). In this process, “marginalized groups, deemed Other, who have been ignored, rendered invisible can be seduced by the emphasis on Otherness, by its commodification, because it offers the promise of recognition and reconciliation” (bell hooks 1992: 360).

In order to be successful, Fourth World groups often establish services and products that “take a form which does not contradict or undermine the quality of the gaze, and ideally should enhance it” (Urry 1990). One of these negotiations involves the creation of professional tourist organizations, like SWOPA, that not only help to more efficiently mediate the tourist experience but also ensure a more continuous flow of tourists (Cohen 1984). These organizations, through experimentation, quickly come to understand what experiences and products are received positively and negatively amongst tourists. To succeed, commercial arts must satisfy the aesthetics of the foreign consumer and must “project a clear image, either ethnically relevant or suitably exotic” (1976: 21). Further, the products have to be transportable and not too fragile (Graburn 1976: 21).

To achieve these qualities, products are often simplified, made miniature or reproduced using different (often foreign) materials (Graburn 1976). Sometimes, goods are even specifically created to be taken apart to meet airline regulations.
(Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2005) Iconographically, designs often change. Changes in traditional designs are rarely inspired by spontaneous impulses; rather, they are invented to attract the eye and suit the new audience (Cohen 1983). The final product often is representative of the collaborative product of the tribal producer and external agent (Cohen 1983).

In the context of the experience itself, professional tourist organizations help to create “professionally staged” experiences where locals “play the natives” (MacCannell 1973). Through the creation of a continuum between front spaces, which are public and clearly within the tourist domain, and back spaces, which “generate a belief that there is something more than meets the eye,” outsiders associate back spaces with authenticity and seek entry into these spaces. However, in many instances, especially in cases where professional tourist organizations are in operation, “what is taken to be real might, in fact, be a show that is based on the structure of reality” (MacCannell 1973: 593). Back regions can actually be front regions that “have been totally set up in advance for touristic visitations” (MacCannell 1973: 597). This is known as “staged authenticity” (MacCannell 1973).

Development and Empowerment Potential

Fourth World groups often choose to engage in cultural tourism projects, such as art revival and historical preservation, as these projects frequently present opportunities for development and empowerment, especially for women. Craft skills that within the “traditional context” are seen as a reflection of domestic status and a way of enhancing their prospects for marriage, are viewed differently within the
“contemporary context” where they are seen as giving women a way to maintain a measure of control in their lives (Ateljevic and Doorne 2003: 137). Entry into the tourism marketplace allows for the realization of goals like “education, freedom from work on land, and flexibility with the domestic obligations of extended family households” (Ateljevic and Doorne 2003:137).

In the most recently released Millennium Development Goals for 2015, the United Nations identifies eradicating extreme poverty and hunger and promoting gender equality and empowering women as goals one and three respectively (United Nations 2013). Cultural tourism projects which use artistic preservation to ensure poverty reduction and/or women’s empowerment not only fit neatly within the mission of the UN and its specialized branch UNESCO, but also can enable countries, especially those with a history of colonialism and oppression, to “establish a new identity or reassert an old one, to ameliorate the past and secure the future” (Graburn 1976: 32).

Countries with such histories often seek to establish a recognizable image based on highly romanticized characteristics of their peoples (Graburn 1976: 32). One poignant (and especially relevant) example can be seen in Ghana, where following the independence movement led by Kwame Nkrumah in 1960, the government began to “instrumentalize discourses on pre-colonial cultural identity, ancestral tradition, authenticity and a return to – often reinvented and reified –

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9 Following the decolonization of many countries in 1972, the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) World Heritage Committee began to identify and locate places of cultural or physical significance to support throughout the world (Cassimman 2011). The Navrongo Cathedral, which features bambolse murals painted by the women of Sirigu in 1977, was added to the tentative World Heritage Site List in 2000.
autochthonous cultural pasts” (Cassiman 2011: 194). The dual aim of this program was to simultaneously bolster the economic development of the country while also helping citizens “mentally detach from the British” (Cassiman 2011: 194). In 2010, tourism represented Ghana's fourth largest industry and made up 6.2 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Profit (Manu 2012).

While using Fourth World identities to bolster national development can be positive, “ethnicization of disempowered groups within nations can have depoliticizing effects that serve powerful interests in the state, especially when it comes to class, caste or racial redress” (Davis 2007). To this effect, tourism is often characterized by uneven development and unequal income distribution. Profits are sometimes extracted rather than contributed to sustained development and community benefit (Davis 2007).

In the context of women’s empowerment, Davis argues that the inclusion of women in international development often has more to do with meeting national development goals than actually improving the lives of women, which is viewed as a secondary priority (2007). When art is inserted into development schemes, often to appease a liberal feminist discourse, Davis argues that a number of fundamental disconnects occur:

The discourse of art asserts the oneness of humanity, so when the Other is appraised as having created art, ‘he’ is raised to the station of fully human in fine art discourse. Primitive Art and perhaps ethnic or traditional art brings its maker halfway to the common humanity conceptually constructed within this discourse…Yet a wrench is thrown into the system with the insertion of ‘developing women’, which like Primitive Art, in a way, asserts the possibility of a common humanity...while at the same time asserting devalued difference...What ensues is a toggling, whereby western superiority (with its
fantasy of Other) and pan-humanism are held, each in one hand (Davis 2007: 210).

While women’s empowerment initiatives can allow for women to accumulate wealth and knowledge, and thereby gain some agency at the household level, Swain argues that they often fail to transform any kind of meaningful gender ideology at the community level. Often, despite their so-called empowerment, women continue to conform to the dominant gender and ethnicity ideologies present within their communities (Swain 1993: 48).

The Case of Sirigu

The success of SWOPA in the past fifteen years exemplifies the ways that “cultural preservation offers possibilities for local development and for furthering local agendas” in cultural villages around the globe (Cassiman 2011: 204). Scholars have largely attributed this success to the ways that Sirigu culture has been carefully “constructed and constantly adjusted in the (mainly) Western encounter” despite the narrative of tradition continuously repeated by the organization (Woets 2011: 432). In Ann Cassiman’s *The Commodification and Touristification of Architectural Pride: A Case from Northern Ghana* (2011) and Rhonda Woets’ “This is What Makes Sirigu Unique”: *Authenticating Canvas and Wall Paintings in (Inter)national Circuits of Value and Meaning* (2011), the authors offer competing perspectives as to the amount of agency local women possess in this staged cultural encounter.

SWOPA identifies themselves as an organization that “provides a unique opportunity for women to come together to share problems, strengthen social ties and
solidarity, to modify power in family relations…to produce pottery and art, to improve marketing and the income situation” (SWOPA 2013). In their eyes, “art and craft also present opportunities for women to develop and express their individual qualities and identity” (SWOPA 2013).

In her dissertation chapter, Woets argues that while “the increased interest in ‘cultural’ art forms has presented opportunities for women,” it has also led “to the freezing of their ‘aesthetic traditions’” (2011: 469). She presents Melanie Kasise, SWOPA’s founder, as a “cultural broker” who negotiates the demands of tourists and art buyers to “fix and freeze a dynamic practice into a static cultural repertoire” (Woets 2011: 441). Referencing Becker, Woets explains that the art world in Sirigu is one characterized by ”social relations of power and dependency” (2011: 451; 2011: 428).

Woets showcases Kasise’s desire to maintain control over the art world in Sirigu by illustrating Kasise’s reluctance to allow Asokipaala Aberinga (a SWOPA member) to participate in the 2010 SaNsA international art workshop in Kumasi, Ghana. At the workshop Asokipaala would be seen as an individual artist and would be given “as much artistic freedom as she needed” (Woets 2011: 451). According to Woets, sending Asokipaala to the workshop was a point of contention for Kasise because:

Melanie Kasise’s most important aim was to generate income for the women, not to encourage their artistic freedom or expression. There was no harm in satisfying tourists [sic] demands of what a ‘traditional’ African village should look like as long as it contributed to the success of the project (2011: 455).
Kasise sought to stress the preferred image of “communal identity” where each individual woman is presented as being a “living sign of ‘Sirigu-ness’” (Woets 2011: 451).

Cassiman advances a different view. While she acknowledges that on the surface it may appear “that through the commodification and touristification of local vernacular architecture the people in Sirigu are being recolonized and captured by an imperialist gaze,” she argues that the Kasena invert and capitalize upon the primitivist and essentialist discourse imposed upon them in order to insert themselves “into the same global space as the tourist” (Cassiman 2011: 202).

By “turning the gaze,” and adjusting their culture to the “reified expectations of the commodified spectacle of Western tourist fantasies” Cassiman argues that the Kasena emerge in a position of power:

Despite offering themselves to the tourist gaze and turning themselves into a commodified spectacle of Western tourist fantasies, the local Kasena are still in control of these strategies of the spectacular, and they use them as a conscious mode of self-fashioning that holds the promise of material gain and offers them the possibility of circulating their own self-representations far beyond the horizon of their local world (2011: 202).

According to Cassiman, adapting to Western influences allows the actions of the women in Sirigu to “affect larger politico-economic and cultural realities” (2011: 191).\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{10} Cassiman uses the term Kasena instead of Nankani as the majority of her research is focused on the Kasena ethnic group; the cultural differences between the two groups are minute.

\textsuperscript{11} In the context of shifts in local architectural practices and the introduction of new materials into the building and decorating process, Cassiman similarly argues that the “introduction of new ‘modern’ architecture does not necessarily signify a rupture or breach, but can sometimes be understood as the strengthening of local continuities” (Cassiman 2011: 72). New materials “do not uproot standard (female) modes of displaying wealth, but actually continue and strengthen them” (Cassiman 2001: 71).
The links between traditions, tourism and financial gain posed by cultural tourism in Sirigu raise a number of questions about the influence of tourism on the value ascribed to wall murals. Do the murals retain their value despite commodification or are they culturally irrelevant? Have they gained any new value within the community? What is the motivation behind the production of the murals in Sirigu and what are SWOPA’s role and the tourists’ role in this process? In this cultural encounter, do the women have agency? What are the effects of linking the continuation of bambolse to larger schemes of development and empowerment?

**Background**

Sirigu is a rural village in the Upper East region of Ghana. Nestled directly on the border of Ghana and Burkina Faso, the community is situated in the eastern part of the Kasena-Nankana District, and has between 4,000 and 5,000 inhabitants (Woets 2011). The people of Sirigu belong to the Nakarisi tribe, although many simply identify as Fra-Fra.\(^{12}\) The language of the village is called Nankani and is very similar to Kasena and other Fra-Fra languages.

Sirigu is made up of five sections known as Guwonkor, Busongor, Wugingo, Nyangolgo, and Basengo. Each section features wall decorations, although some sections have more painting than others. The most heavily concentrated areas of painting lie in Guwonkor, the home of both the Sirigu Women’s Organization of Pottery and Art and the Sirigu market.

\(^{12}\) Fra-Fra is a non-traditional term commonly used by Europeans and Southern Ghanaians to refer to all the different groups in the areas surrounding Bolgatanga; the British coined the term in the twentieth century (Smith 1979). Today, it has replaced a more accurate, specific and traditionally coined term Gurensi, which is used in much of the research on the subject.
Northern Ghana is characterized by a Guinea-savannah landscape; the majority of the people in Sirigu are sedentary subsistence farmers. Over 90% of the population is involved in cattle rearing and crop cultivation (Smith 1979). Their primary crops are millet, maize, sorghum, rice and groundnuts and many also maintain herds of cattle, goats, chickens and guinea fowl (Cassiman 2006). The area has two intense seasons: one excessively dry and one extremely rainy.

The people of Sirigu cultivate the land that surrounds their residential homestead or compound. The compound is the home of the extended family (See Figure 9). Families are organized in patrilineages and “marriage takes place according to the residential rule of virilocality” (Cassiman 2006). Men live in their father’s houses and women are subject to strict rules of exogamy, where women are not allowed to marry men within their section (Cassiman 2006). As a result, many of the women living in Sirigu today did not actually grow up in the village. Polygamy is commonly practiced and a rigid age hierarchy is ever-present.

The predominant religions in the village are Catholicism and Islam, although many individuals practice traditional ancestral religions concurrently. One of the fundamental elements of Kasena life is reverence for one’s ancestors. Traditional chieftaincy practices of the village and more democratic systems established by the government also occur in parallel.

In Sirigu, women are primarily responsible for maintaining the house, preparing food, selling goods at the market and taking care of the children. The
majority of their lives revolve around the domestic sphere.\textsuperscript{13} They share farming tasks with their husbands, who are expected to manage these spaces, build houses and generate income for the family.

Today, a significant number of children have entered the formal education system, and within Sirigu there are a number of schools that students from Sirigu and surrounding communities attend. As work within the community is difficult to find, especially for those who are educated, national migration has become a reality for many families in Sirigu. During the dry season, many men move away from the village, literally for greener pastures, to find work in the South. Most venture to large cities such as Accra and Kumasi in search of odd jobs and return during the rainy season to help their families with the harvest. When they return, they bring gallons of bitumen, emulsion paints, packets of roofing sheets and other building materials for the reconstruction of their homes (Anyelom 1995: 71).

Architecture throughout the region today is thereby characterized by a “growing diversity of building materials, designs and settlement patterns” (Cassiman 2011). Intensified exposure to urban and western housing styles has led many round adobe buildings to be gradually replaced by rectangular rooms made of sun-dried bricks. These new rectangular rooms, or those made of concrete or covered with corrugated iron sheets, make each house “a unique merger of inherited expertise, local knowledge, external (Western and Other) influences, and of the personal tastes and worldviews of the inhabitants” (Cassiman 2011).

\textsuperscript{13} During the dry season, crafts may be sold in the local market or to buyers in the South in order to secure additional income (Smith 1979).
Methodology

The research in this paper is grounded in two month-long visits to Sirigu, Ghana. In November 2012, under the guidance of the School for International Training Ghana Social Transformation and Cultural Expression program, I lived and worked in Sirigu for four weeks and performed a general explorative study of the process, materials, social dimensions, meanings and motivations behind the production of wall paintings in Sirigu. During a six-week follow-up visit in July 2013, funded by the Wesleyan University Davenport Grant, I focused more specifically on interviewing community members about their motivations for producing the wall murals and trying to gain a better understanding of SWOPA’s role in constructing a tourist experience. To collect data, I used a combination of non-participant observation, participant observation, and both formal and informal interviews.

During both trips, I used snowball samples to select an initial group of female informants. The November 2012 snowball sample consisted of 15 female informants and the July 2013 snowball sample consisted of 20 female informants. There was some overlap between the two samples, as I re-interviewed particularly knowledgeable women. After speaking with the women in each of these initial sample groups, I expanded my pool to include men, women from under-represented areas within the community, and all of the members of the SWOPA staff, including the founder, director, art director and head tour guide. In total, I completed 73 formal interviews.14

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14 November 2012: 15 women, 2 men, 6 SWOPA staff members, July 2013: 20 elderly women, 5 young women, 6 old men, 6 young men, 12 SWOPA staff members, 2 past researchers
Formal interviews were conducted, when necessary, with help from one of four different translators, each of whom was a teacher at a local school. Questions were adjusted throughout each of the interviews and between sessions. Interviews lasted anywhere from 15 minutes to 2 hours. Informal interviews were used as a follow up technique and also to gauge interest in wall painting among younger generations and identify potential sources of bias.

Observations of the wall murals in Sirigu were critical in exploring issues of materiality, painting placement, frequency of painting in various locations and the influence of SWOPA. Living with a host family on the roof of a mud compound also allowed me to clearly observe the roles of men, women and children within the community and also enabled me to shadow my host mother, one of the SWOPA artists. I also traveled to a number of the communities adjacent to Sirigu, to compare the impacts of a village with a professional tourist organization to communities that either didn’t have one, or had others focused on different issues.

During my time in Sirigu, I participated in five wall paintings, two-canvas painting workshops, a pottery-painting workshop and a wall-painting workshop. The wall paintings ranged from one that was partially completed upon my arrival to three that were scheduled by my host family to include my participation. At SWOPA, I also helped to repaint a wall before an event. All workshops in painting were taken at SWOPA with different community members serving as assistants. A Belgian tour group organized the wall painting workshop.

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15 Female translators were used whenever possible to promote openness in discussing gender issues among a predominantly female interview pool. One of the four translators was male.
Limitations

There are many limitations to my research, most significantly the problems created by the language barrier. In many cases, it was incredibly challenging to gauge the sentiment of Sirigu's women without speaking their language, as through translation, nuances and important information are inevitably lost. Additionally, even in interviews I did in English without a translator, this problem was also present, as English was a second language for all of my informants.

Further, when talking to both SWOPA staff and SWOPA members, I was frequently concerned that I was not getting accurate information, as these individuals were interested in providing a positive view of the organization that either employs them or helps them financially. Additionally, because many people in the community I interviewed frequently interact with tourists, I sometimes found it difficult to explain that I wanted more than the simplified tourist narrative.

Ultimately, with an understanding of these limitations, my final conclusions stem from a combination of my interview data and my observations in the community. My experiences living in Sirigu for a substantial period of time, as well as the significant relationships I formed with members of the community, have helped me to contextualize my data and question whether or not to take informants’ responses at face value.

The State of Wall Decoration in Sirigu

In northeastern Ghana, an environment where conserving energy and resources is critical, bambolse is an art form that seems to defy logic. The process is
expensive, time consuming, and physically intense, and the result, while beautiful, has negligible functional importance and lasts for only a few years. While to some extent, bamberische may be understood as an art form created simply for the sake of art, its existence under such extreme circumstances, both past and present, highlights the strength of the factors that motivate women to make wall decorations. Thus, as Smith observes, “discussion and a considering of the variables do play a role in the process of deciding whether or not a compound is decorated” (1979: 124).

A woman’s decision to paint her walls or simply leave them plastered can be logically understood in the context of a cost-benefit analysis. As Apolalla, a local woman, explained, “Although painting is important, other things are more important and so sometimes it gets left out” (interview by author, July 19, 2013). In the “Sirigu cost-benefit equation,” the cost represents the financial, logistical and physical hardships posed by the process of wall decoration. The benefit represents the value, importance, worth or usefulness of a wall painting. Ultimately, when the benefits outweigh the costs, the creation of a wall mural can be justified.

While few of the variables in the “Sirigu cost-benefit equation” are quantifiable, they can be understood as being relative to the costs and benefits of the past. The revival of wall painting in Sirigu is clearly linked to the establishment of SWOPA and the rise of tourism at an unprecedented rate throughout the past fifteen years. This has facilitated a shift from interest in painting almost exclusively at a “compound level” towards interest in painting at a larger “community level.”

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16 All names of informants who are not employed by SWOPA have been changed in compliance with Wesleyan IRB regulations.
Importantly, the new values or benefits linked to painting at a “community level” did not displace the values previously associated with painting at a “compound level.” In fact, the values of the past were considered important under the new circumstances established by SWOPA. These new circumstances helped to alleviate the costs and hardships associated with painting and helped women to justify producing wall murals. Therefore, wall paintings today continue to exist and be actively reproduced because of the way they retain established value at a “compound level,” gain value through tourism at the “community level,” and are created through a process that thanks to SWOPA and donations from tourists, minimizes hardship transparently.

Value at the Compound Level

Throughout history, wall paintings have been and continue to be strongly linked to the constitution of womanhood. Women in Sirigu often define their identities in the context of the spaces they live and work in, and creating murals is seen as an important part of fulfilling expected gendered norms. From a young age, women are given “both informal and non-formal education purposely for preparing her for one of her life’s most important occasions, which is marriage” (Anyelom 1995: 16). Women are taught to aspire to be pogmenka, or a “real woman.” While there is no exact translation in English, pogmengre should have “knowledge of her society, live by its customs and be quite resourceful” (Anyelom 1995: 16).¹⁷ An alternate

¹⁷ The literal translation is “a real woman, a dainty or refined women” (Anyelom 1995: 16).
meaning to the term is one who maintains a neat and tidy house, plasters her walls, washes her pots, sweeps the floor, etc.

Being considered a pøgmenka is seen within local culture as the “epitome of virtue and the paragon of excellence” (Anyelom 1995: 16). In my interviews, a large majority of women identified that they painted their walls to be considered a pøgmenka. To this point, Anyelom even goes as far as to suggest “the desire to practice the positive virtue of pøgmengre created the art of bambølse” (Anyelom 1995: 17).

As Apupelu, a woman living in one of the compounds with the most established wall painting traditions explained, “A woman who does this is more than even complete. She is exceptional because she knows what she is about. Having the vision to do these things is not common” (interview by author, July 19, 2013). In my interviews, women expressed interest in being considered pøgmenka because of the way having this status or recognition helped them to gain a positive reputation among other women they knew and in the larger community in general.

Interestingly, despite the strong association between pøgmenka and wall decoration, the relationship is not causal. In theory, by keeping a neat and tidy house through wall painting, a woman asserts her female identity. In actuality, having a painted wall does not necessarily make a woman pøgmenka; one can keep her walls neatly plastered but not painted and still be considered pøgmenka. As Smith explains, “although an undecorated compound is never criticized, a decorated one is mentioned with pride” (1979: 123).

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18 Pøgmengre is the plural form of pøgmenka.
Being considered a pɔgmenka is synonymous with being a good wife, which is another motivation many women identified as being a driving force behind their desire to paint. Because the dowry system in Sirigu officially makes a woman the property of her husband, wall paintings can help women establish themselves, especially in the early stages of marriage. When a woman is married in Sirigu, a room is built for her within her husband’s family compound. Early on, if a woman decorates her room and fulfills other rules of Fra-Fra etiquette, she can establish herself as pɔgmenka and prove to her husband’s family that she cares about herself and the way the house is kept, and therefore is worthy of respect. The painting serves as a “mark of a woman’s ability to care for both the members of her household and the building where they live” (Asante 2011). 19

In Sirigu, as the state of one’s household is a reflection upon the male compound owner, women, thorough their wall paintings, can help their families to gain status in the community. People in the community are constantly moving between their homes, farms and the market and therefore,

While women’s wall embellishments are contained within the compound, the designs have considerable public impact by virtue of their visibility to individuals beyond the compound walls. Recognizing this potential, women use the medium to communicate information about their social status and the status of the owner of the compound (Aronson 1984).

Specifically, as wall paintings are expensive to produce, the number of wall paintings a family has may be indicative of their social position. Knowledge of bamlɔlsɛ also

19 In certain instances, excelling in these tasks can help one women set herself apart from other wives living in the compound.
indicates a particular type of habitus, and can thus speak to the amount of cultural
capital present among the women in the house.

Women strive towards being considered pɔgmenka while consciously avoiding
the converse, “pɔgwenge,” a term that refers to a women who is careless or slovenly
(Anyelom 1995: 3). Being lazy is “abhorred by the Nankana” as “any husband who is
unfortunate to marry such a wife becomes an object of pity and ridicule” (Anyelom
1995: 16). According to one of Anyelom’s informants, “In the past, there used to be
competition for recognition and everyone plastered her home, varnished it with am
(varnish) to make it shine because anybody who failed to make her home a place of
admiration would be made a laughing stock in the village” (1995: 69). After all, being
industrious and hardworking are not only critical to survival in the harsh climate, but
also are seen as being important characteristics of a desirable partner.20

Due to the rules of vitrolocality, where women in Sirigu are not permitted to
marry men from their area or district, a large number of women who live in the
community did not grow up in the village. As such, the idea of a female tradition in a
community where women are constantly in flux may seem counterintuitive. However,
historically, wall paintings were created throughout the majority of northeastern
Ghana and southeastern Burkina Faso. As Anyelom explains, “each women designs
her home in the manner that is applicable to her father’s home town. In this way,
murals serve as marks of identification as the style of decoration reveals the origins of

20 The contrast between pɔgmenka and laziness likely developed at a time when everyone had access to
similar natural resources and the hardships associated with painting were less noteworthy. However,
today, as the materials are no longer available in the same way, they “must” be purchased in the market.
Therefore, today, laziness is often used as a synonym or excuse for poverty (Grace, interview by author,
July 8, 2013).
the designer” (Anyelom 1995). At that point in time, or likely in an earlier period, women would have arrived in Sirigu with an understanding of some of the techniques of wall painting and each women might have had her own design ideologies.

Today, the situation has changed. Women who move into Sirigu often come from communities where the tradition of wall painting has dwindled, if not died. So, to expect that women would reproduce a tradition when they may have limited or no background knowledge of the tradition is unlikely. In Sirigu, younger women learn to paint from older women in the community and through SWOPA. The tradition is typically taught in an “apprentice-like teaching and learning format” (Wemegah 2009: 84). In general, experienced decorators outline the motifs on the walls before other decorators, who are less proficient, join them to fill in the appropriate colors. The experience can be a valuable way for women in the community to form relationships, especially with the other women in their households as:

Mural decoration is a social event that brings women together to share ideas, sing, dance, and drink together. This fosters community cohesion and instills the values of good-neighborliness. It also precipitates a healthy competition among the women in the performing arts, since mural decoration sessions are used as platforms for launching new musical compositions and dance formations (Wemegah 2009: 100).

By learning to paint, women immerse themselves in the community and develop an important camaraderie while learning about the traditions of their new community.

As the quality of murals is strongly tied to the state of the household, it is not surprising that the connection between wall painting and social status is also strongly linked to other architectural qualities of the space:

The size and ornamentation of a particular compound can easily reveal the status of the members living within its walls. While multiple compounds paint
a picture of large, polygamous, influential, wealthy, or royal families, smaller homesteads may either indicate the beginning of a new family, a poor family or a family with very few members. The general ornamentation of the homesteads may reveal the creativity, economic capabilities or managerial abilities of the woman or women living within the confines of the compound (Wemegah 2009: 84).

The link between ornamentation and social status is complicated today by the fact that wealthy families tend to live in large cement houses that are equated with high social position. While cement houses can be adorned in the Sirigu style, the process is different and the materials are dramatically more expensive. As a result, this type of painting is much more unusual.

Wall paintings on mud structures today are therefore less important as indicators of fiscal status, but rather as indicators of the combined fiscal status and cultural capital of families. In fact, in some ways, the revival of wall murals in the era of expensive cement houses can be seen as an opportunity for families living in mud houses to gain prestige through decoration. Families living in cement houses might only be able to achieve this type of cultural capital with a considerable expenditure of resources.

Interestingly, while a majority of young people prefers to live in cement houses and praise paintings on these structures, many individuals in older generations assign higher social value to paintings executed with local materials on mud walls. This is the case because this method, which requires more frequent renewal, is more strongly linked to being industrious and hardworking, the qualities of a pɔgmenka. As my host mother, an established SWOPA painter explained, “The cement one is just for life, for beauty, and the traditional one proves that I am a real woman of the
house” (Awinbesa, interview by author, November 23, 2012). By contrast, use of coal tar or bitumen plastering instead of the tri-color designs is described by one of Anyelom’s informants as “pogwenge-bole, because she has no time to make bambɔlse” (Anyelom 2005: 69).

Older generations may also favor this more traditional method of wall painting because it is more strongly linked to ideas of tradition and ancestry. In Sirigu, the ancestors are considered an extension of the living family, and as a result pleasing them and respecting their wishes to uphold the family reputation is strongly related to the desire to adorn one’s walls. As Apupelu, a woman living in a compound with the most historically well-established wall decorating traditions explained, “Our mothers were hardworking and we want to show that they have passed the heritage to us” (interview by author, July 19, 2013). For women from houses like Apupelu’s, maintaining a family’s wall painting reputation appears to be of critical importance. In Sirigu, “the veneration of important personalities and immortalizing their contributions to society is another role played by murals” (Anyelom 1995: 63).21

Establishing this type of reputation should be distinguished from the social status gained by being thought of as a pɔgmenka, although understanding and respecting traditions are certainly a crucial element of being considered a pɔgmenka. The idea of being recognized as an established wall painting compound began decades ago through praise and recognition from early ethnographers, photographers

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21 Two common motifs within the community immortalize specific individuals.
and visitors.\textsuperscript{22} In the early 1970s, a Christian priest in Navrongo singled out specific households in Sirigu for their elaborate and complete decorations (Smith 1979). In one particular interview, members of a compound spoke of Margaret Courtney Clarke, the photojournalist author behind \textit{African Canvas} (1986), a book that was the one of the first to visually document the tradition. As one of the women explained, “People have been coming to this house for years. We were doing it before SWOPA. They came before SWOPA” (Apupelu, personal interview, July 19, 2013). Close observation of \textit{African Canvas} reveals that the homes of many of the women in SWOPA were featured long before the organization was created.\textsuperscript{23}

While women in Sirigu identified tradition as a reason they valued the paintings, it is important to question where these women learned the importance of such preservation. After all, these women were excited to have visitors in their community, as it allowed them to make new friends and meet people from around the world. They also enjoyed the attention and praise, and validation of their work from people on the outside. Some touched on the ways these visitors paid them a small fee in exchange for taking photographs. Many showed off tokens, such as coins, brought from the first Westerners they met. As a women in her mid-thirties explained,

\begin{itemize}
\item The first admiration for the wall murals and local vernacular architecture can be seen as early as 1909 and 1932 in the writings of colonial ethnographers such as Frobenius and Rattray (Cassiman 2011). The wall decorations were applied on the nearby church in Navrongo as early as 1906 (Smith 1979).
\item More substantial studies by ethnographers and photographers, such as Smith, DeCarbo, and Clarke throughout the 1970s and 1980s helped to put Sirigu and the traditions of the entire region in the global consciousness. Photographs from these times continue to circulate today.
\item Interestingly, Melanie Kasise, the founder of SWOPA, received the first international funding for the organization from a group of Dutch donors from the Felix Foundation in the Netherlands. These individuals presented Kasise with the book \textit{African Canvas} and when she explained that this was the artistic tradition she was planning to revive, the donors agreed to fund the project.
\end{itemize}
In old days, the white people used to come to our house when we are kids. They will enter in our house, they will take pictures, they will give the old ladies money, and they are our pen pals. They used to make friends with them. We were very happy to be close to some of them (Linda, interview by author, July 7, 2013).

Importantly, the question of audience and praise has always been relevant in the context of wall murals, even before the expansion of tourism, as historically women saw the murals as a way to impress local visitors. As a high school student and granddaughter of one of SWOPA’s founding members explained, “Everybody is making sure they have a painted house so if they have a visitor, she will praise me” (Sadia, interview by author, November 23, 2012). These local visitors would often pass through the community on their way to and from markets in other places.

While fewer people pass through the community in this manner today due to the formation of new roads and presence of motorbikes, the desire to impress local visitors remains important. During funerals, women often paint walls in the days immediately before the festivities commence. The motivation behind this type of production is twofold: to show respect towards the ancestors and to impress the visitors who will enter the compound during the funeral celebration.

*Value at the Community Level*

While local visitors and members of the community consider the importance of the wall murals pertinent at the “compound level,” in the context of an (inter)national audience wall painting has become more important at the “community level.” Recognition of the wall murals on a global scale has led the community to assign new value to the murals. As Melanie Kasise, SWOPA’s founder, explained,
“The money aspect is the value added” (interview by author, July 23, 2013). In Sirigu, the revitalization of wall painting has “served both the community and as a means to attract outsiders” (Woets 2011: 442).

Despite the ever-evolving cultural matrix within which the wall murals are situated, perhaps the most basic and obvious reason the murals are created is for their beauty. As Anyelom explains, “the purpose of indigenous wall painting in Northern Ghana is primarily for face lifting the home” (Anyelom 1995:15). The bright and cheerful tri-color wall murals provide contrast with the otherwise dry and arid savannah landscape and in the process appeal not only to the local community but also to tourists. “The decorations by themselves beautify the environment, define private space, and instill a homely and welcoming effect on anyone visiting the Sirigu community” (Wemegah 2009: 100).

In Sirigu, the “revitalization of wall painting in the village and the introduction of canvas painting made women proud of themselves in the face of fellow Ghanaians and tourists from a number of foreign countries” (Woets 2013: 434). For groups of women who had painted in the past, this has encouraged them to continue. As the husband of a SWOPA member explained “Few people were doing it in the past. Only a few could do it. But of late, all the houses want to paint because visitors are coming” (Michael, interview by author, July 15, 2013). As a result, according to SWOPA director, Bridget Adongo, in regards to wall painting:

To some extent it has shifted from compound to community. Initially, we did not have the economic reasoning behind the wall designs. It was more or less an individual’s initiative to paint or not to paint. But now that we want to take our tradition, something that can earn us something it is becoming a community thing because if your house is chosen among those they visit at the
end of the month some amount is realized” (interview by author, July 24, 2013).

Especially among men and young people in the community, who previously were uneducated about the murals, praise from the West has generated new interest in wall murals. Since the expansion of tourism in Sirigu, these groups have begun to value the murals.

Throughout Ghana, there is a well-established desire to adopt Western practices including clothing and housing techniques, as well as other larger cultural ideas. This is especially the case for young people. Most youth from Sirigu who receive “formal education turn to cherish imported customs and traditions, to the detriment of the indigenous ones. To many of these people, anything that has to do with the indigenous culture is considered archaic and primitive” (Wemegah 2009: 136). However, the shift from a predominately local to a national and international audience has caused the village’s name to enter a new context, one in which tradition is highly valued. In this process, the youth of Sirigu, through the formal educational system and coursework in history, have been exposed to the importance of maintaining cultural traditions. As a result, they are more likely to understand the financial benefits of tourism and the developmental potential of the murals, even if the paintings have little cultural significance to them.24

Therefore, it is not surprising that tourism has caused young people and men to become interested in local cultural traditions, although for different reasons than their mothers, who value the paintings at the “compound level.” As Wemegah

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24 A tourist club has even been established by SWOPA in one of the schools in Sirigu.
explains, “some very few men are however, currently engaged in mural decoration due to its commercial viability” (2009: 84). In addition, many men participate because of the close relationship they have with their mothers.

In terms of individuals in younger generations, Woets notes “many homesteads have been adorned with patterns since the project took off and the older women happily expressed how young girls now begged them to learn the tricks of the trade” (Woets 2011: 444). Contrary to Woets’ findings, my research showed that while interest in wall decoration was present among members of the younger generations, I did not find young girls begging to learn. Instead, I found a more calm rational interest demonstrated by young people, and in large part by young men who wanted to involve themselves in making wall murals and teach their children to do the same.

While interest among male and younger populations is growing in general, this is especially the case in the areas surrounding SWOPA and the Sirigu market, areas where tourists travel most frequently. Five or six compounds within the vicinity of SWOPA and the Sirigu market participate in SWOPA’s house tour program, which allows visitors to view and photograph the wall murals and enter into certain spaces. Through the tours, the featured households receive a share of the proceeds from SWOPA for allowing people to view and photograph their wall murals. Specifically, the male head of each of these households is compensated monthly. This is interesting considering SWOPA’s role as a women’s empowerment organization. While part of the idea behind paying the compound owners is to help them to maintain the decorations and the compound in general, SWOPA also supplies these
houses with materials to adorn their walls. In fact, in 2013, a donor funded the repainting of an entire compound found on the house tour (See Figure 10).

Individuals within the community can also derive financial benefit from their wall murals when visitors, unaffiliated with SWOPA’s tours, come and take photographs of their walls. For some, especially those who frequently interact with tourists, this is a clear incentive to paint. For example, the Chief’s wife explained to me that she decorated her home simply “because you people come to snap” (Evelyn, interview by author, November 25, 2012). It appears that within the community, the general sentiment, “because the white people come and appreciate it, we keep on decorating” holds true (John, interview by author, July 25, 2013).

For people who would not have previously painted their walls, the linked possibilities of economic gain and tourism further the notion that wall painting is to be valued. As a local male teacher explained, before the establishment of SWOPA,

> The paintings were few because many people, especially the young, were not taking them to be anything important. They were not attaching any importance to it. But now, because we have been able to understand the importance, the essence of it, more people are into it. At first, painting wasn’t anything, but because now when you paint your house and a white like you happen to come round you will come and give some money. That alone is a very big incentive that has made people to come out with more painting these days (Patrick, interview by author, November 16, 2012).

While individuals in Sirigu make money from wall painting, it is neither incredibly frequent nor highly lucrative, even if those in the community believe it is or should be. Tourists rarely ask proper permission to take photographs, and so in a majority of cases there is rarely a direct economic return.
Realistically, the majority of money made from wall decorations belongs to SWOPA and the families of the surrounding compounds, many of which are featured on SWOPA’s house tour. While the amount of money earned through the tours is not especially significant, the women who live in these five or six compounds also serve as the primary assistants in SWOPA’s workshops. This means they receive additional income by assisting tourists. As these women spend dramatically more time at SWOPA than the average member, they are praised by the organization and have access to additional opportunities and benefits such as travel and extra materials. This appears to have created some resentment within the larger community and among SWOPA members in general (Atampoka, interview by author, July 22, 2013).

Interestingly, the intimate connection between this group of approximately ten women and SWOPA is not simply based on proximity. In fact, many of these women, and a majority of the SWOPA staff are related in some way to Melanie Kasise and the other seven founding women of SWOPA. In some ways, SWOPA can be seen as being a partially dynastic organization that has taken the tradition of a community and harnessed it for family gain. For example, the first president of SWOPA is the grandmother of the head tour guide. The head tour guide’s stepmother is the most prominent SWOPA member and their house is the centerpiece of the house tour; this home was the one that was rebuilt and repainted using funding from a donor in 2013 (See Figure 10). Members of this extended family and members of Melanie Kasise’s extended family work in the kitchen at the SWOPA restaurant/guesthouse and hold other minor positions within the organization.
Still, the wall murals do fit into a larger cycle of community gains, where their presence draws outsiders into the space and leads them to spend money in the village. The village as a whole benefits when visitors enter the local market (SWOPA even has a special market tour option), stay at the guesthouse, and most importantly to the average SWOPA member, purchase pottery, baskets and canvas paintings. As Ferreol Agombire, the head tour guide explains, “If Sirigu is painted, tourists will come. And if tourists come then tourists help to give money” (interview by author, July 6, 2013). SWOPA sees the equation as being this simple.

The SWOPA gift shop sells goods at a fixed rate, unlike other larger craft markets in the area, like the one in Bolgatanga. Whereas in larger craft markets, where a middleman often profits dramatically at the expense of the producer, in Sirigu, SWOPA acts as the go-between. For example, while a woman would make approximately 15GHc ($7.50USD) independently selling a basket in the market and about 12GHc ($6USD) if she sold the basket to a middleman, the same woman can make 20GHc ($10USD) if she sells the basket to SWOPA. Although like the middleman, SWOPA will mark up a small basket in order to benefit and pay their workers, with less competition and instability than is present in local markets and craft markets, by selling to SWOPA the women prosper more on a consistent basis. Women who actively produce can earn between 50 and 70GHc ($25USD to $35USD) per month (Melanie Kasise, interview by author, July 23, 2013).²⁵

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²⁵ According to Francesca Akampoi, SWOPA’s store manager, the cost of living in Sirigu varies by family but is about 500 GHc or $250USD per month (interview by author, July 28, 2013).
The SWOPA gift shop sells not only pottery and basketry, which are almost a direct transplant of the goods seen in the local market and other cultural markets throughout Ghana, but also canvas paintings, which are unique to Sirigu. During SWOPA’s early years, “Tourists admired the wall paintings during SWOPA’s tours and expressed the desire to somehow buy the designs” (Woets 2011: 445). In 2001, a Dutch development organization paid two Dutch artists to teach a group of women how to transfer the wall designs onto canvas, making a previously uncommodifiable object commodifiable. After a period of experimentation where materials were tested, acrylic paints and locally woven strips of cotton were chosen as the vehicle for displaying the motifs of the wall designs, sometimes with colorful and stylistic additions.

The presence of wall murals in Sirigu importantly legitimizes the sale of canvas paintings and helps to construct the idea of an authentic but still commodifiable form of tourist art. The wall paintings are the “‘real thing’ in the compounds, and the acrylic paintings are only a reference to a ‘traditional practice’” (Woets 2011: 459). Many tourists are eager to buy goods from SWOPA because of the clear relationship they see between the wall murals and the canvas paintings, as well as because of the appeal of the organization’s women’s empowerment ethos.

Many individuals in the Sirigu community also envision the increase in tourism as a path towards development beyond tourists’ purchases at the SWOPA gift shop. As Ferreol, SWOPA’s head tour guide, explained, “If they continue this wall painting, when more tourists come in they may put up a school and they may put up something in the community and people within the Sirigu boundary will benefit
from that.” (Ferreol Agombire, interview by author, July 27, 2013) Many tourists continue to support Sirigu once they leave the village through yearly donations. Others have returned to the community to implement a variety of projects, such as a waste management project, a community library and various schooling programs.

In addition to the community as a whole benefitting from tourism in Sirigu, individuals have also prospered from the renewed interest in wall paintings. For example, a number of years ago, a tourist saw a girl reading a book under a tree and the woman wanted to help give her more books. Today, this tourist has financed this girl’s education through senior high school and has helped her to support herself and find a job as a secretary. Additionally, The Mother of Mercy Orphanage, featured on the SWOPA market tour, is adorned with wall murals and is often visited because of its paintings. While there, tourists are known to donate to its cause.

The clearly commodified nature of the relationship between the tourist, wall mural, and producer/compound owner has to a certain extent established an expectation for a return on the wall murals, whether in the form of praise, donations or simply an expectation of spreading Sirigu’s name. As Francesca, the SWOPA store manager notes:

Tourists play an important role because the walls we paint, when you come you admire them and you admire us. And then most of all, when the tourists come and visit the houses, you pay a fee and this helps in their living. So you play a very important role in the community because if you have painted walls, and no visitors are coming, the walls are just sitting there you will waste your time your money your energy to put your designs there and nobody will come to give something (Francesca Akampoi, interview by author, November 15, 2012).
In fact, it is entirely possible that without some kind of return or exchange for the effort required to produce a wall mural, the paintings would no longer exist as they do in Sirigu today. Evidently, traditions, tourism and financial gains are inextricably linked in Sirigu as they are throughout cultural villages across the globe.

**Meeting Global Expectations**

In 2007, after being lauded with National Travel Awards from the Ghana Tourist Board for years, Sirigu and SWOPA were featured on the cover of Ghana’s most popular travel guide, the Bradt Guide (see Figure 11). Therefore, part of the desire to maintain the wall painting tradition is tied to maintaining the reputation that has been established within the international community. As Ferroel Agombire, the SWOPA head tour guide explains, “The first priority is to keep the tradition going because they know Sirigu is for the whole world and the tourism” (interview by author, July 27, 2013). Ultimately, people in Sirigu feel pressure to respond to the tourist gaze in order to continue the successes they have had over the past fifteen years; in turn, the murals have become highly subject to global expectations and demands.

The relationship between the interests of tourists, as advertised in travel guides, and the actions of SWOPA and its staff are well established.

The growing number of photographs with wall paintings of Sirigu circulating around the world enticed the interest of the Ghanaian government and tour operators and in response to this interest, in line with growth concern about preserving an ‘original beauty and traditional skill’, SWOPA decided to promote wall paintings through workshops, and to encourage the women to beautify their houses so as to make the village more attractive to tourists (Cassiman 2011: 197-199).
As Bridget Adongo, the SWOPA director, explains, “Sometimes we try to solicit funds and get a particular place painted and get it in order for a home visit. The motivation is to have a nice place for tourists and to keep the tradition alive” (interview by author, July 6, 2013). Once SWOPA attracts and satisfies tourists, they can “get more funds to have painting” and continue the cycle (interview by author, July 24, 2013).

Women in the community are not only knowledgeable about this type of cultural negotiation, they are, in fact, active participants in it. For example, when I asked one woman in the community why she had chosen to paint the outer wall of her compound, she explained how SWOPA’s founder has initiated and facilitated a shift towards bringing paintings from the inside of the compound to the outside in order to make them more visible to tourists.

We were doing it in our rooms. But Melanie said what we should do is paint the outside walls, especially the houses by the roadside. This way, when the tourists are coming they will realize that they are in Sirigu. Now that she united us, we are able to do it in large quantities at SWOPA. Doing the work is very tiresome and we feel reluctant doing it. But Melanie encouraged us that we should look at how difficult it is but we should have the habit of doing it no matter what. We want painting to be not just at SWOPA but everywhere (Theresa, interview by author, July 20, 2013).

Previously, women had been reluctant to paint the outer walls because of the tiresome nature of producing murals under such harsh weather conditions. Due to erosion and weathering, wall paintings on outer walls have an especially short lifespan.

In order to facilitate the continued production of wall murals, SWOPA has addressed the major threats to wall painting, which include a shortage of materials, the women’s inability to pay for those materials, and the lack of durability of the
paintings. Specifically, the black earth and white limestone needed for painting, found only in Burkina Faso, have been purchased in bulk by SWOPA using funding from specific donors. The red gare stones, which were once found in Sirigu but today are rare and are very difficult to find, are brought into the community by SWOPA’s pickup truck. Every few years, SWOPA takes four or five women to fields near Tamale and in other areas in the Upper East region to collect the stones.

SWOPA annually distributes these pigments to members, free of charge. Sometimes, they also distribute food for those who do the wall paintings. In addition to distributing materials, SWOPA has been involved in developing new plastering techniques using coal tar, bitumen plaster and a recently developed Parkia biglobosa based wall-plaster (Abagle and Twumasi 2013). The reason for creating a new type of plaster is to make the paintings more durable; less frequent re-application will help women to justify the significant investment in time and labor. The painting technique remains largely unchanged, although new materials such as acrylic paint, oil paint and paintbrushes have been introduced.

SWOPA targets specific areas where tourists frequently travel to provide materials and assistance; it is not coincidental that these are the areas of the village with the highest concentration of paintings. SWOPA distributes materials to houses along the major roads (for members and non-members) that lead to the visitor center, the market, and to other prominent areas such as the Chief’s palace. As a non-member living along the road explained, “We stopped painting and SWOPA told us we should keep on. SWOPA came here and helped us to do it. We did it because they came here with the supplies” (Linda, interview by author, July 7, 2013). In many
of these houses and locations, there are not enough women who possess the proper training and requisite skills to create a wall painting. When this is the case, SWOPA staff and SWOPA members will come and assist in the creation of these murals. Members will be paid using money that has been donated to the organization. Clearly as Woets notes, “keeping a village in a particular, seemingly natural, traditional state required constant negotiation and efforts from all the people and parties involved” (2011: 469).

In addition to supplying materials and making the process more efficient, SWOPA has also created a number of institutional structures to facilitate wall decoration. One example is the formation of small, formalized painting groups, called sectional groups, designed to encourage wall decoration by simultaneously establishing a support system and a system of peer pressure and accountability. Many women say they joined SWOPA “for unity” because “if all the women are in the community doing it and you cannot, it is isolating” (Renee, interview by author, July 6, 2013). Women cite the presence of these groups as being what distinguishes Sirigu from other communities in the area.

Altering the plaster technique to make the paintings more durable and providing painting materials and food that would otherwise have been unavailable are representative of other changes made by SWOPA, “changes that remained invisible to the buyer were and thus necessarily encouraged” (Woets 2011: 458). While “any visible change in style or design had to be rejected in the name of authenticity,” SWOPA accepted changes that maintained the “‘traditional’ character of their products” and hinted at continuity (Woets 2011: 458). Not surprisingly, visitors in
the community are not informed of ways in which the experience has been staged or altered for their consumption. By carefully choosing how to display the community, SWOPA is able to construct a narrative of authenticity that satisfies tourists and facilitates donations.

The village, which appears as a “back space,” is actually what MacCannell would call a “front space in disguise” (1973). SWOPA creates this “front space in disguise” to appease the Western audience. Ultimately, as Woets explains,

Melanie Kasise’s most important aim was to generate income for the women, not to encourage the artistic freedom or expression. There was no harm in satisfying tourists [sic] demands of what a ‘traditional’ African village should look like as long as it contributed to the success of the project (2011: 207)

For SWOPA, increasing the number of wall paintings in Sirigu will increase the number of tourists in Sirigu; increased tourism will lead to happier visitors and greater profits for SWOPA. More profit will not only help SWOPA grow as an organization, but also will help to generate more personal income for local women.

Interestingly, despite the way that Melanie Kasise imposes rules upon the women, SWOPA members idolize her and the rest of the SWOPA staff. Melanie Kasise has made it very clear that she wants to see the community fully painted, and so the women often feel pressure to respond to her demands or to impress her.

Although Kasise or SWOPA have never imposed any formal rules about mandatory wall painting, and members of SWOPA are not obligated to paint their houses, there certainly is pressure to do so. As the SWOPA art director explains, “SWOPA expects everyone to paint their houses. Around the center, SWOPA expects them to paint and then makes sure they do it because mostly the tourists go
there” (Faustina Akampoi, interview by author, July 22, 2012). On several occasions since its founding, SWOPA has validated its distribution of supplies with inspections, led by the SWOPA art director and other staff members. The aim of these inspections was to make sure that the materials had been used “properly” and applied in the “correct” locations. As the SWOPA director, Bridget Adongo explains, “We encourage them, we cannot force them” (interview by author, July 6, 2013). However, as Evelyn Akamboyuree, one of the founding members of SWOPA argues, “the law of SWOPA is that you have to paint and take care of your house” (interview by author, November 23, 2012). Women who did not comply with this “law” are subject to shame.

Ultimately, this fear of being shamed has helped SWOPA to reinforce the notion of wall painting as an expectation. As Atampoka, a prominent SWOPA member who lives in a compound on the house tour explains,

Because SWOPA is there they are sometimes compelled to do it. So when they come to your house and you have not painted they also say a lot of things about you that you would not like. As they have said that they have provided the stones and the coal tar for you. They will sometimes even grind it for you and as you collect it you cannot just sit down without doing it so that compels you to do it (Atampoka, interview by author, July 22, 2013).

Clearly, by eliminating the individual monetary burden of wall decoration, simplifying the process and capitalizing on the social pressure created in the small painting groups, SWOPA is able to make wall painting an expectation that is reasonable to fulfill and easier to justify than ever before.
Motifs and Their Meanings in a Changing Context

Each wall mural in Sirigu is made up of a series of common motifs comprised of diamonds, triangles, vertical, diagonal or horizontal lines or chevrons arranged into two, three or four horizontal registers. Throughout history, a number of scholars have argued that “complementing their traditional role of adornment, bamsolo serve as a medium of communication and preservation of knowledge” by means of symbols that represent larger societal ideas (Anyelom 1995). Supposedly, figurative and non-figurative motifs “convey something about the individual woman, either an object, event, or belief familiar to her world or – in the case of a figurative form – about a person or animal repressed” (Clarke 1986).

In contrast to these statements, my interviews and observations suggest that while wall murals contain symbols that have associated meanings, the murals were not created with the intent of expressing these particular meanings or telling stories. While to some, the symbols may retain relevance and meaning, a number of individuals within the community, especially young people, do not know such meanings. Additionally, to these groups, many of the meanings and stories may be less relevant to their lives.26 As Akoma, a local woman explained, “They do have cultural meaning but they have faded out. We didn’t come to meet our mothers who knew the meanings. Any wall they painted has a name but we haven’t learned that

26 This is not to say that the meanings of designs do not continue to shed light on larger cultural phenomena that prevail in the community. For example, the rigid gender division in Sirigu and issues of male dominance are well established in the zaalinga or calabash net motif where a horizontal orientation of the diamond represents the female while the vertical orientation represents the male. The horizontal diamond is meant to show the women laying down and showing respect to her husband who stands over her and thereby asserts his power. (Atandoo, interview by author, November 12, 2012).
from our mothers. A lot of them we don’t know” (Akoma, interview by author, July 19, 2013). In fact, designs are chosen primarily for their aesthetics, size and placement on the wall.

My findings challenge claims posed in earlier work, such as that of Smith (1979) who argued “Wall decoration becomes meaningful only when the range of motifs, the basic design principles, the nature of style and the degree of individual creativity are understood” (1979: 131). While Smith stressed the significance of the meanings of the motifs, today, motif recognition appears to be more important in its relationship to larger themes of maintaining a visual tradition. For example, a local woman like Atandoo, who knows the meaning of the motifs, uses the very rare bat’s wing motif on her wall not because of its specific message, but instead because her mother used it and she wanted to continue that family tradition (interview by author, November 13, 2012).

In an effort to document local symbolism, Corrie Harverkort, a Dutch artist who has worked extensively with SWOPA to develop new products, such as canvas paintings, published a book called *Wall to Wall*, which contains a glossary of a number of common motifs and their cultural meanings (See Figure 12). This book is not only sold to tourists at the SWOPA gift shop, but perhaps more interestingly, is given to local women by SWOPA staff while they are making canvas paintings or painting the wall designs on pots as a source of inspiration.

While Aneylom attributes agency to contemporary decorators, saying they “do not limit themselves with only the symbolism handed over to them from the past but utilize the medium of Bambɔlɛe and their own creativity to cover current and
important activities in the community,” I would argue that the circulation of
documentation such as *Wall to Wall* within Sirigu threatens this creativity (Anyelom
1995: 64). As Western tourists are attracted to the idea of African folklore told by the
African storyteller, and the history in Sirigu suggests a clear response by the local
women to the tourist gaze, it is possible that these motifs, frozen in time by
documentation, could become the only ones that are replicated. In fact, when
comparing wall murals associated with SWOPA to those that are not, the SWOPA
murals are generally confined to a more standard, structured and organized set of
motifs, and often only those motifs found in *Wall to Wall*.

The circulation of *Wall to Wall* in Sirigu highlights the degree of control
SWOPA has gained over the tradition of wall decoration in the community. To a
certain extent, the Westerner has also gained power and control over the community’s
traditions by documenting them. The authority of the elderly women who used to
control the tradition has clearly shifted into the hands of SWOPA, and in many
ways, directly into the hands of the tourist.

Conclusion

The history of Sirigu wall murals can be classified into three periods: the first
characterized by the proliferation of paintings, the second with decline, and the third
with revival. The founding of the Sirigu Women’s Organization of Pottery and Art
and the revival of wall murals in Sirigu over the past fifteen years indicates a new
alignment of costs and benefits than had previously existed. The success of the revival
is evidence that SWOPA effectively negotiated the various factors of the complex art
world in Sirigu to create a situation where members of the community can more easily justify the continued creation of wall murals.

Recent history in Sirigu suggests that the commodification of culture can allow for the continued existence of cultural traditions, which under non-touristic circumstances, would have disappeared. As traditions fade either because they become too costly or lose their social and cultural value, cultural tourism, with its power to defray costs and emphasize old values or infuse new ones can stimulate a revival of local traditions.

As is evident in the case of the wall murals, which cannot be precisely commodified, the revival of cultural traditions is not necessarily based on a direct commodity transaction; reviving a tradition is more complex than just simply increasing the economic value of the finished product or decreasing the costs associated with their production. Instead, through cultural tourism, new circuits of value, established by tourists, have the potential to take hold in communities. These new values, coupled with the direct and indirect potential for financial gain, can fuel the increased production of artistic traditions.

In Sirigu, praise from tourists, a renewed interest in the idea of tradition, and the concept of painting for indirect community development, combined with the potential for profits from community tours and sales within the SWOPA gift shop, gave the paintings new value and created interest in re-establishing tradition. In the words of Melanie Kasise, “it pays to be pogmenka” (interview by author, July 23, 2013).
While Greenwood has argued that commodification of culture renders cultural products meaningless, the women of Sirigu have many reasons they value their wall murals, demonstrating that as Cohen argues, old meanings can in fact remain salient despite the establishment of new ones. The social and cultural factors that drove production in Sirigu in the past, such as proving one’s womanhood, asserting oneself as a good wife, helping the family to gain social status, pleasing the ancestors and maintaining family tradition remain salient reasons for valuing and producing the wall murals among many women in Sirigu today. In the process of revival in Sirigu, there has been little to no displacement; cultural commodification has stimulated a revival of local interest in traditional forms and has “served both the community and as a means to attract outsiders” (Woets 2011: 442).

However, cultural negotiation by professional tourist organizations, a central component of cultural tourism, only allows for the continuation of traditions within a space carefully staged and constructed for the mostly Western encounter. To a certain extent, the continuation of the wall mural tradition in Sirigu can be seen as being fueled by tourists’ demands and funded by the tourists making those demands. Essentially, cultural staging places the focus on what the Westerner wants to see and has the potential divert attention from the community’s interests. In this process in Sirigu, individuality and creativity are to a certain extent lost in the shift from painting exclusively on the “compound level” to painting additionally on the “community level.” Therefore, while the art of Sirigu has indeed “become an intercultural and profoundly commodified artifact that is created together in the
interaction between tourists and the Kasena” (Cassiman 2011: 207), the women of Sirigu remain strongly influenced by tourist preferences and the tourist gaze.

In the exchange between the tourist and the local in Sirigu, it can be argued that both parties benefit, as the tourist acquires cultural capital while the local acquires status and fiscal capital. While to some extent, the local woman is empowered with the knowledge that the situation has been staged for the tourist, and gains power over the tourist who fails to realize they are actually in a “front space in disguise,” it is possible that in this process, the women of Sirigu are left with possibilities for only marginal empowerment. Striking a balance between presenting tourists with the culture they want to see and keeping the community engaged requires a series of complex negotiations, which in my opinion, by nature, only allow for a certain degree of artistic freedom and possible social change to be realized.

As such, questions of whether cultural tourism is an effective method for fostering ethical development, women’s empowerment and social change are important issues to ponder in the future. While the revival of cultural traditions can stimulate development and help women to improve their financial standing, a better understanding of these cultural tourism projects from a local perspective will help to determine if ultimately, they do more harm than good.
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Informants

Grace*. Interview by author. Sirigu, Ghana, July 8, 2013
Apupelu*. Interview by author. Sirigu, Ghana, July 19, 2013

*Name Changed in Compliance with Wesleyan IRB Regulations
Appendix

Figure 1: Exterior Wall Decoration Inside the Family Compound (Chief’s Palace)

Figure 2: Exterior Wall Decoration Outside the Family Compound (Market Road)
Figure 3: Interior Wall Decoration

Figure 4: Wall Painting Materials
Figure 5: Wall Painting Process
Figure 6: SWOPA Guesthouse, Visitor Center, and Art Gallery/Store
Figure 7: Canvas Paintings and Decorated Pottery

Figure 8: Canvas Painting and Wall Painting Workshops

Figure 9: Architectural Drawing of Sirigu Compound

(Smith 1978: 36)
Figure 10: Compound on SWOPA House Tour (Repainting Funded by Donor in April 2013)

November 2012    July 2013

Figure 11: Bradt Travel Guide (2007)
It is the recognition of changes in life: death, reincarnation, ancestral power, tradition and memories. Black clothes are worn at funerals, but, contrary to its meaning in western societies, this colour does not mean sadness. Black is the sign of power, red the sign of danger and white the sign of purity. The designs are made of abstract geometrical and stylised animal figures or objects. They can be painted on a flat surface or in relief. The colours used are black, red and white. These colours are made of the minerals and materials that are locally available. Black is the sign of power, red the sign of danger and white the sign of purity.

Female characteristics of life. Zaalin-n shows a c and Zaalinga-de ac. It is woven from kenaf fibre and hangs in her room. This tool gives women easy access to the calabash. Zaalinga is the traditional place where women keep their calabashes for safety. The hard skin is used for numerous purposes especially by women. Even when it is smoked or dried before use, the calabash is a fundamental object in traditional paintings. The crocodile is a special god. Crocodiles can sometimes be seen near dams in the Sirigu area. In traditional paintings, the crocodile can have one or two heads.

Cows help to bring prosperity to a family, are used to pay bride prices for women and are rarely consumed as meat. Fish are caught in rivers or nearby dams. Fish is commonly used in cooking but are most often used for their eggs.

The abstract geometrical figures all have symbolic meanings. Some of the most important geometrical figures and their symbolic meanings are presented below.

**Symbols in Wall Decoration**

- **Human symbols**: The human symbols are used in a double sense. They represent the people and are symbolic. The colour used is black. The body is painted as a male or a female. The lines are continuous and symbolize the life line. The horizontal line and symbolizes the origin. If two lines follow each other in a straight line without disturbing each other in their movement, the symbol is the male. If two lines follow each other in a straight line with disturbing each other in their movement, it is the female symbol. The vertical line in the middle symbolizes the birth. The design of the human being makes them stand together, a woman case and it appears nice to her. It is used to use the human figure like life in cooperation with each other and symbolizes the cooperation of the human being.

- **Females and Male symbols**: Zaa and Zaan. Zaa is the traditional place where women keep their calabashes for safety. It is a woman treasure that is kept in her work. The male figure never plays any role. It is a symbol of the chickens. The design symbolizes the male character of life.

- **Drum**: This symbol shows a continuous curved line and symbolizes the male characteristics of life.

(Haverkort 2007)