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# **Transposing Ahenema Footwear in Contemporary Ghanaian Youth Fashion**

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**ABSTRACT:** The Ahenema footwear in spite of its cultural significance among the Akan ethnic groups, is still facing poor identity and fashion value in contemporary youth fashion. This paper is based on findings, conclusions and recommendation deduced from an earlier research which assessed the causal reasons underpinning the poor interest and utility of the Ahenema footwear among the youth in Ghana through the use of questionnaire, interviews and observations. As a further study by the same authors, this study is studio-based research which aims at redesigning the conventional features of the Ahenema footwear towards repositioning the footwear in contemporary youth fashion in Ghana for recognition and acceptance. The reengineering process emphasized on doing away with the indigenous features identified as factors impeding the interest in the use of Ahanema footwear as gathered from the youth. The researchers paid particular attention to reduce the weight, increase the height of the footwear a bit, create variety to avoid the use of monochromatic colours and encourages the use of suitable materials which prevent scratches on the foot. The findings revealed that, after reshaping the conventional features of the slippers to portray and characterize youthful fashion trends, the footwear gained some appreciable attraction when the samples were presented to some youth for their comments.

**KEYWORDS:** Ahenema slippers, culture, modification, youth fashion

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Ghana is endowed with rich traditions and cultures in which footwear fashion forms an integral part. With particular reference to the Akans who form the ethnic majority in the country (occupying the southern, eastern and western), footwear has seen some transformations over the years into what is currently preferred and used as Ahenema. It is a local slipper highly valued and cherished particularly by southern Ghanaians as traditional footwear which commands respect, majesty and authority in society. In spite of the cultural and aesthetic significance it conveys, its utility is limited to royals, elders and affluent in society, thereby alienating the youth. Today Ahenema lacks utility in contemporary youth fashion, since its usage is predominately limited to the chiefs, queens, elderly people in society and the rich or well-to-do in society, during traditional occasions like funerals [1].

As observed by [1], currently, the interest of the youth in the use of footwear tilts more towards those designed and imported from the western world, this is due to the dynamism in design which constantly associated with the production of such footwear. The resulting effect is that traditional footwear which conveys the cultural identity of the Ghanaian and also could influence the economy of the country in terms of employment creation and potential export outlet is relegated to the background and considered outmoded among the youth. As identified in an earlier paper, the lack of interest in Ahenema among the youth stems from several characteristics and perceived concepts associated with the footwear. This paper is therefore challenged to revisit the traditional mode of footwear and reengineer it to design and create other versions of the footwear to suit contemporary youth fashion.

With reference to an earlier by [2], the researchers investigated the causative factors inhibiting the interest of Ghanaian youth in patronizing and using Ahenema footwear. The findings of the research unearthed the following:

1. **Heavy Weight of the footwear:** this has to do with the sole being heavy and the uppers of the footwear having large strips. This happens to slow down movement which deters the youth from going in for the footwear.
2. **Lack of Comfort in Utility:** this has to do with the types of materials used for the nose. Some producers use nails in fixing the uppers to the sole of the footwear which results in the scratching of the feet upon wearing.

3. **Social Obligation Attached to the Wearing of the Footwear:** some elders see the footwear as something they have to put on in attending festivals, durbars and funerals.
4. **It is deemed as Occasional Wear:** there is a limited number of programmes or occasions to which the footwear can be worn to. It is normally worn to funerals, durbars and festivals, and outdoorings. Again most of these occasions are attended by the elderly.
5. **Lack of Colour Variety:** most of the ahenema footwear seen on the market are either in black or red colour. And since these colours happen to be dull, the youth do not prefer using the footwear.

By basing on the outcome of this study to reengineer the indigenous Ahenema footwear concept to boost its fitness into youth fashion for improved socio-economic advantage, [3] have explained that to solve a persistent problem through research, continuity of an ended research based on findings and recommendations is very essential. The success of the study will enhance the creativity in the designing and production of Ahenema footwear, and present a hope to the sustenance and improvement of the economic aspects of the footwear industry in Ghana. This study does not have any intention of devaluing the cultural significance of the Ahenema footwear and its status of nativity and originality.

## II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In Ghana especially the Akan's, the evolution of footwear over the years have gone through transformations into what is currently preferred and used as Ahenema. Historically, Ahenema was initially believed to have originated from the use of leaves as soles and climbing plants as upper until a more convenient way was introduced which made use of tree backs as soles. It is gradually improved upon until leather from various animals were discovered and used [4]. He explains further that History has made clear that leather for footwear were first brought from the northern region. Historians say it took footwear makers from the Ashanti kingdom six to seven months before it could get leather for footwear. However, this footwear which were known historically as 'chawchaw' were made for the kings and a few queens in the kingdom. Other personalities walked barefooted. Even though the 1847 era of slave trade is known to be havoc among the people of gold coast, it turns out to be associated with a great merit in terms of footwear.

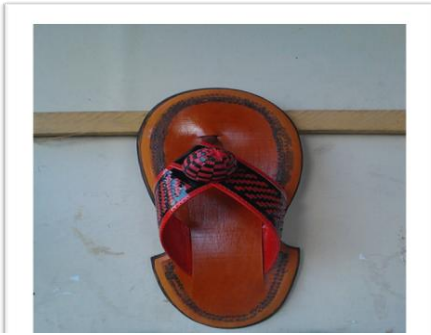
According to [5] a renowned shoemaker has emphasized that Achimota sandals was brought into the country by these European traders dating back as far as ex-president J. A. Kuffour's school days at Achimota. He also said that, the type of animal skins which were then used by the Ashanti kingdom for making the "chawchaw" footwear was called 'tromoo', or 'sonson' hides of great animals like elephant and cows were used for the soles and goat skins were used for the inner soles and the uppers. However antelope skins were used as thread for the sewing of the inner sole to the sole on the edge level. Some few years ago during the era of vehicles, car tyres were discovered as a long lasting material for making the soles of footwear than other materials. [6] talks about the three types of sandals and names them locally as 'chawchaw', 'mpaboa tratra', and 'mpaboa pa'. He refers to the first one as being lighter in width and the second one as having an increase number of layers of soles and the third is what the chiefs use and wear till date. However, he also says in his book that there has been an addition of gold and silver colours to further enhance the position of the one wearing the footwear. An important aspect of the sandals of the chiefs is the symbols on the strips of the upper which are mostly ornamented with gold and silver [9].



Source: From Manhyia Archive (an old sandal for the chief)

**Plate 1: Traditional Sandals with Gold Strips**

According to the Manhyia Palace curator of the Asante Kingdom of Ghana, there are two main types of the native Ahenema footwear of the Ashanti's: namely the *Asansan tuo* and *Atine*. The '*Asansan tuo*' is significantly is designed to bear with a curved shape, whilst the '*Atine*' is identified by its straight shape.



Source: Manhyia Palace Mesuem  
**Plate 2: The *Asansan tuo***



Source: Manhyia Palace Mesuem  
**Plate 3: The *Atine***

Others are also referred to as '*chawchaw*' with the name being derived from the sound the footwear makes when one wears them. And there is also the Ahenema which also derived its name from the fact that when the footwear was being made for the chiefs and a few queens, it was supposed to be named after the king but during the era, the name of the King was not supposed to be mention in vain so they decided to name the footwear after the children of the king locally known as '*Ahene mma*'.

#### **A. The Characteristics of the Ahenema Footwear**

The Ahenema footwear according to [7] and a historian such as [4], the entire ahenema footwear is categorized into three main parts: namely the *sole*, the *uppers* and the *nose*. They explained that further that the sole or base is historically designed in the form of the numerical letter eight (8). History makes us understand that the 8 shape is for stability during its usage in walking. The olden type of base made use of skins known as tromoo and goat skins for the inner sole. There are two main types of the sole. They are '*Asansan tuo*' which is the general one and '*Atine*' which is being used by the chiefs [12]. Antelope skin was made into a thread which was used for sewing the inner sole to the base. In the picture in plate 4, antelope skins for thread was not used but rubber thread was used instead.



Source: From Manhyia Archive (an old sandal for the chief)

**Plate 4: The '*asansatuo*' and '*atene*' types of sole used in the olden days**



Source: Ahenema Manufacturers at Manhyia Palace

**Plates 5 and 6: Modern types of sole used for making designed Ahenem**

Traditionally, the upper part of the footwear keeps the legs of the wearer firm, and the **shape of the upper and designs (symbols) displayed** on them determine the name given to the footwear. Some examples are as follows:



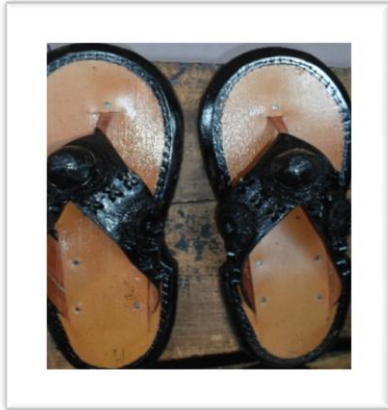
**Plate 7: Abusua te se kwai**



**Plate 8: Anibre nso gya**

In a study conducted by [1], 30 youth aged 15 to 35 years were interviewed to identify the factors impeding their interest in the Ahenema slippers and went further to demand suggestions to improve the Ahenema footwear to suit their fashion taste. He found out that Ghanaians in that age category do not fancy the aura around the footwear. According to the study, although the majority (65%) appreciated the shape as unique, 80% of them expressed dissatisfaction about the characteristics, particularly, the designs, colours, weight, materials used and symbolic significance for both males and females. Since the study was conducted in the Ashanti Region of Ghana where the Akans are the dominant ethnic group, tribal and religious disparities clearly manifested. As emphasis as opined by [1], the Akans are mostly Christians and they wear the Ahenema footwear during weddings, durbars, funerals, outdoorings and other public gatherings.

In plates 9 and 10, the two types of Ahenema slippers displayed are occasional wears: black for funeral and the white for joyous moments. In spite of the symbolic functionality of the two colours, the Ghanaian youth are not seen wearing them. It has been identified that elder people usually put them to feel majestic and well placed in society [13]. The youth however feel that wearing such slippers will demand from them an elderly responsibility and social respect which they cannot offer at their age [10].



*Plate 9: Atamfo atwa me ho ashia*



*Plate 10: Kwasiada nsuroma*

Owusu-Ansah saw the inequitable utility of the Ahenema footwear among the youth and the elderly in as far back as 19781 and proposed for separate designs and versions to increase usage and popularity of the slippers, and also create variety for improved patronage. With the aim of boosting youthful interest in the footwear, the researchers needed to factor all the necessary findings of other researchers in the designing and production activities.

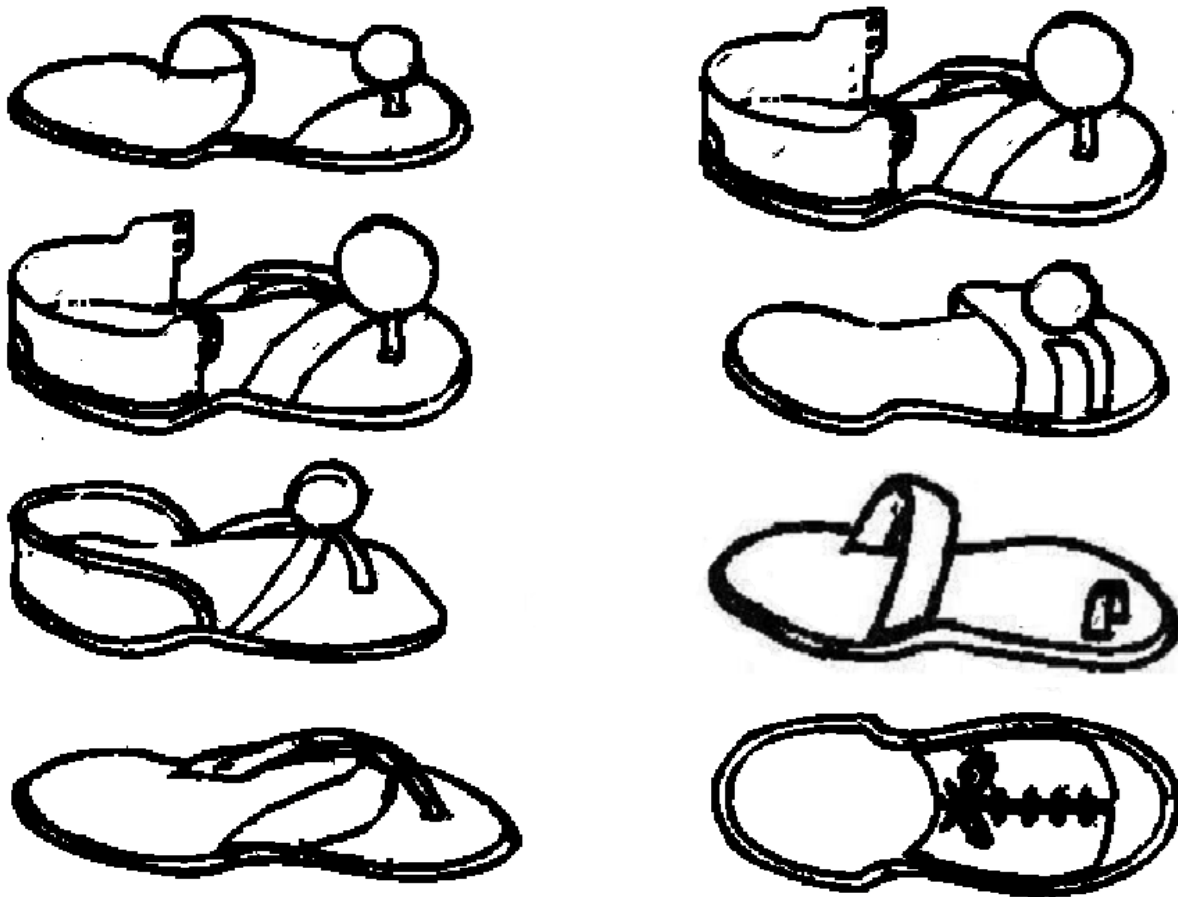
### III. MATERIALS AND METHOD

The study employed the studio-based experimental method to reengineer the Ahenema footwear to befit youth fashion. towards repositioning the Ahenema footwear in contemporary youth fashion in Ghana. To ensure accelerated recognition an acceptance, there was the need to consider the causes of the poor attraction, patronage and utility of the ahenema footwear as identified by earlier researchers to guide the modification process. The following were outlined as factors prerequisite for consideration to make the outcome fit for the intended purpose:

- ❖ Designing for comfort
- ❖ Special design
- ❖ Designing to match
- ❖ Designing to meet target choice
- ❖ Design to suit most occasion
- ❖ Designing with colourful materials
- ❖ Designing to suit groups and organisation
- ❖ Design to reduce weight

#### B. Designing Stage and Prototypes

In the brainstorming process, several sketches were made by the researchers with the above factors serving as guidelines. Eight of them were selected, refined and converted into prototypes as shown in the following figures. The designs were made to depict the features of both sandals and slippers characteristics as worn by the youth [10]. The lacing portions were included to project contemporary fashion trends as found with most sandals and long boots used by the youth. In addition, all the designs follow the easy wear concept of footwear, and were meant to be produced through the use of specifically selected materials desirable for the target users (the youth).



**Figure 1: Samples of sketches made at the preliminary stages of the redesigning process**

After making the paper prototypes, the researchers selected mercury and light bonna as materials for the sole part of the footwear and varied materials such as colourful kente fabric, colourful marbled leather, cords and macramé materials for the upper parts. Also, black velvet fabric was used as lining to contrast the selected upper materials.

### C. Construction Process

As shown in the plates, having made the prototypes in paper and studied them, adjustments were made and the soles were marked using templates and cut. The nobs were made with variety of colours in both leather and fabric. The uppers were also measured, marked with the right templates and cut. They were reinforced with straw board and the nobs were attached. The edges of the soles were covered grinded to achieve smoothness, and with the black velvet fabric they were covered by wrapping. Holes were made and the uppers and soles were assembled through lasting. To ensure good finishing, excess glue was removed, and the velvet fabric was cleaned.



*Sample paper Prototypes*



*Cutting marked soles*



*Samples of nob (nose)*

**Lasting Uppers to soles****Sample of lasted Ahenema****Sample of modified ahenema**

#### IV. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

As a further study by the same authors, and with reference to other studies by [4], [5].and [1], who studied into the Ghanaian Ahenema footwear, and came to the realization that the youth are not interested in patronizing and using the footwear despite its popularity among the elderly, there are various recommendations agitating for youth version of the Ahenema which befit their fashion taste. The study has based on studio research to design youth version of the slippers projects the conventional concept but devoid of traditional features of the Ahenema footwear. The reengineering process emphasized on doing away with the indigenous features identified as factors impeding the interest of the youth in the footwear, with the intention of repositioning it in contemporary youth fashion in Ghana for recognition and acceptance.

In the redesigning process, the researchers paid particular attention to the causal reasons underpinning the lack of interest in the Ahenema footwear as unearthed in other studies. The researchers made it prerequisite to reduce weight, increase the height of the footwear a bit, create variety to avoid the use of monochromatic colours and encourages the use of suitable materials which prevent scratches on the foot [14]. By factoring the ethics of youthful fashion and its demands, particularly in footwear, the researchers have designed another version of Ahenema by reshaping the conventional features into slippers and sandals to portray and characterize youthful fashion trends. Through the careful selection of appropriate materials and techniques, youthful taste, expectations and characteristics have been induced into the youth version of the Ahenema footwear to brand and set it apart from the indigenous one. The version of Ahenema created possess and project desirable fashion taste of the youth.

The footwear is designed to be lightweight of the footwear; they are flexible and devoid of rigidity; there is the choice of flat and raised heels; there is diversity of material utility: they depict direct replication of the original Ahenema: They are attractive: materials used are light in weight: there is variety of designs: relative durability: they project fitness for the purpose: they are easy wear and present colour variety for matching different types of clothes.

***Samples of Modified Ahenema with Kente Fabric Uppers***



*Samples of the modified Ahenema Footwear for youth fashion*

#### **D. Social Acceptance Test and Results on the Redesigned Ahenema Footwear**

The test was basically about subjecting the redesigned Ahenema to society as a means to secure their views on the level of acceptance and marketability. According to the responds gathered from 50 youth whose comments were sought, it was obvious from 40 of them that the redesigned footwear possessed the characteristic features desired in their fashion trends. From a societal point of view, they could find a link between a society's material requirements and its [economic](#) patterns of response, especially, judging from the readiness of the 35 of them to make orders and purchase. It was found obvious that the redesigned footwear could fill the taste gap of the youth and had repositioned it appropriately.

The following are samples of pictures representing the fitness and fashionable nature of the footwear being used by the youth to match-up the colours of their apparel.

#### **E. Market Response Test**

The market survey and market test conducted ended up with the following results. The groups of people sampled for the test included the old and the youth (70 youth aged 15-40 years and 30 elderly aged 45-60 years) Out of the 100 respondents, 5 people who happened to be the youth did not like the product whilst 30 people of the old group also didn't like the new product. Perhaps due to the focus of the product and target being the youth, the researchers were impressed with the huge number of 45 being the youth and a partial number of 20 being the liking the product.

### **V. CONCLUSIONS**

In summary, critical analysis made into the study has proven that, the antiquated design of Ahenema is the cause for its poor utility in contemporary youth fashion. The study has confirmed that the Ahenema in its indigenous form has poor recognition and utility in contemporary youth fashion in Ghana because it possesses peculiar characteristics detested by the youth.

The redesigning of youthful version of Ahenema has reshaped and positioned the footwear to project and reflect the characteristics befitting youth fashion trends; this is a positive attempt to rekindle the existence of Ahenema footwear in today's youth fashion. The footwear gained some appreciable attraction when the samples were presented to some youth for their comments on acceptance level.

Considering the results obtained, the pursuit for youthful version of Ahenema to promote their interest to patronize and wear the footwear has been achieved successfully, since the reengineered Ahenema is devoid of the undesirable characteristics of conventional Ahenema. In this sense, it is concluded that the Ahenema footwear concept with its popularity in Ghana, and other indigenous footwear types which are considered as old-fashion can be tapped as source of ideas for developing variety of and compact porosity weave characteristics, becomes an ideal addition to Ghanaian's shoe industry aside cotton printed fabrics.

### **VI. RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended that footwear designers and producers pay attention to dwindling and dying-out indigenous fashion trends and consider creative and innovative ways of resuscitating them to fit into contemporary lifestyle to promote socio-economic benefits.

Also, whenever an attempt is made by fashion designers to adjust or modify any indigenous idea into modern form, it is recommended that for the sake of cultural heritage, the original concept should not be left out entirely, but be maintained.





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