

## Conceptual Framings in Scenography: A Comparative Study of Set Design Philosophies in Theatre Practice in Ghana

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**Abstract:** This study offers a comparative analysis of the design philosophies and creative processes of two leading contemporary Ghanaian set designers, Johnson K. Edu and Prince Kojo-Hilton, as evidenced in their respective 2024 productions of Martin Owusu's *The Legend of Akusika*. Framed within the theoretical lens of Comparative Aesthetics and informed by concepts of hybridity, the study employs a qualitative case study methodology, utilising semi-structured interviews and visual analysis. It examines how each designer negotiates the triad of Ghanaian cultural heritage, global scenographic trends, and material-economic constraints prevalent in local theatre production. Findings reveal a fundamental divergence in philosophical orientation shaped by their distinct backgrounds. Edu, an academic and fine artist, advocates for a naturalistic and observational approach, prioritising realism and authentic cultural representation to foster audience connection through historical fidelity. In contrast, Kojo-Hilton, a self-taught visual artist, employs a more declarative, synthesis-driven philosophy, viewing design as an emotional "bridge between tradition and modernity." His work actively integrates indigenous symbols with digital and global aesthetics to create culturally assertive experiences. Despite these differences, both designers demonstrate a core commitment to centring Ghanaian cultural identity, illustrating that the field's characteristic hybridity is not monolithic but a spectrum of strategic negotiations. The study also highlights how practical constraints directly shape innovation and how a mentor-mentee relationship facilitates the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and technique. By moving beyond descriptive documentation to a process-oriented analysis, this study contributes a nuanced understanding of artistic agency in Ghanaian scenography, bridging theoretical discourse with applied practice and offering implications for scholarship, professional development, and pedagogical frameworks within African theatre.

**Keywords:** Set Design, Ghanaian Theatre, Comparative Aesthetics, Design Philosophy, Johnson Edu, Prince Kojo-Hilton.

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## Introduction

Set design practice in Ghana is a dynamic and layered artistic discipline, shaped by a complex historical journey from environmental adoption to constructed scenography. Its origins lie in pre-colonial communal performances, where storytelling, rituals, and festival enactments took place in organic spaces such as village squares and natural clearings (Agovi, 1990). In these contexts, the environment itself was integral to the scenography, with minimal yet potent symbolic elements, such as Adinkra motifs and Kente cloth patterns, prompting audience imagination rather than literal representation (Pantouvaki, 2010). The colonial introduction of the Western proscenium stage, however, fundamentally altered Ghana's theatrical landscape, imposing conventions of illusionistic realism and a formal actor-audience divide (Tordzro, 2021). This encounter did not simply replace indigenous forms but initiated a prolonged period of artistic hybridity. The post-independence era saw a conscious drive, championed by cultural pioneers such as Efua T. Sutherland, to decolonise the stage and cultivate an aesthetic vocabulary rooted in African realities (Banham, Hill & Woodyard, 2005). Consequently, contemporary Ghanaian scenography is defined by a negotiated fusion, a continuous blending of indigenous aesthetics with global techniques and

technologies, forging a distinctive theatrical language that speaks to both local identity and cosmopolitan consciousness (Koomson, 2024).

The trajectory of this practice reveals a marked evolution from communal intuition to specialised professionalisation. In pre-colonial settings, the arrangement of space, such as the central bonfire during Anansesem (spider story) sessions, constituted intuitive set design, involving spatial thinking and environmental manipulation to foster communal engagement (Addo, 2013). The colonial project formalised theatrical roles, introducing set design as a discrete discipline learned through apprenticeship. The post-independence expansion of theatre institutions, including the National Theatre Movement and university-based Theatre Arts programmes, catalysed the field's institutionalisation. Today, set design is an academic discipline, with training encompassing technical drawing, model making, and digital visualisation, reflecting its maturation into a recognised artistic profession.

Operating within this hybrid tradition, contemporary Ghanaian set designers navigate a triad of influences: a rich cultural heritage, the pervasive flow of global media and trends, and persistent material-economic constraints (Ayensu, 2003;

Sowah, 2020). Designers actively mine Ghana's cultural reservoir, integrating proverbs, folklore, traditional architecture, and festival iconography to anchor productions in a familiar milieu and assert cultural sovereignty (Adjepong, 2020; Ofori-Asare, 2024). At the same time, they engage with international scenographic trends and digital technologies, responding to the eclectic tastes of a globalised, youthful audience (Agyemang, 2022). This creative negotiation is, however, tempered by the material realities of theatre production in Ghana. Chronic limitations in funding, technical infrastructure, and material access necessitate extraordinary resourcefulness, often elevating the innovative use of local, affordable materials into a defining feature of the practice itself (Artaud & Taylor-Batty, 2022).

Despite this vibrant evolution and the growing stature of its practitioners, scholarly engagement with Ghanaian set design remains disproportionately focused on historical surveys or documentation of individual productions. A significant gap exists in comparative, practice-led analyses that probe the conceptual frameworks and creative processes of individual designers, particularly when interpreting the same dramatic text. This study responds to that gap by offering a focused comparative analysis of two leading contemporary figures: Johnson K. Edu and Prince Kojo-Hilton. Edu, an academic and fine artist, is renowned for detailed, socially resonant designs that emphasise adaptability and naturalistic nuance. Kojo-Hilton, a self-taught visual artist and former protégé of Edu, distinguishes himself by integrating digital and virtual elements, with a pronounced focus on crystallising national identity in visual form. Their divergent yet culturally grounded approaches to staging Martin Owusu's *The Legend of Akusika* in 2024, at the National Theatre of Ghana and the University of Education, Winneba, respectively, present a unique opportunity for critical comparison.

Therefore, this study aims to systematically investigate and compare the design philosophies and creative processes of Johnson K. Edu and Prince Kojo-Hilton. It seeks to: (1) identify the core philosophical tenets underpinning their individual practices; (2) examine how indigenous Ghanaian and global design concepts are synthesised in their work; and (3) assess how their distinct backgrounds, experiences, and production contexts informed their specific design choices for *The Legend of Akusika*. In doing so, this study contributes a nuanced, context-sensitive understanding of artistic agency in Ghanaian scenography. It addresses calls for deeper scholarly engagement with African designers' methodologies (Bongmba, 2018; Nketia, 2020) and bridges theoretical discourse with applied artistry, ultimately enriching both academic scholarship and the professional and pedagogical frameworks within Ghana's theatre community.

## Literature Review

This review situates the study within existing scholarly discourse by examining the theoretical, historical, and practical dimensions of set design, with a particular focus on the evolution and contemporary practice in Ghana. It explores the conceptual frameworks for comparative analysis, the core principles of scenography, and the specific socio-cultural context that shapes the work of Ghanaian designers.

## Theoretical Framework

The systematic comparison of creative processes demands a robust theoretical scaffold. Comparative Aesthetics provides such a framework, moving beyond the description of individual works

to establish a structured analysis of how aesthetic concepts, values, and practices are constructed and perceived within different intellectual and artistic traditions (Davies, 2018; Sheppard, 2005). Its core tenet, that aesthetic values are not universal but profoundly context-dependent, is essential for this study (Ginsburg, 2011). It compels an investigation into how the specific cultural milieu, individual backgrounds, and professional training of Johnson K. Edu and Prince Kojo-Hilton fundamentally inform their design philosophies.

This framework is particularly adept at analysing cultural hybridity, a key feature of postcolonial artistic expression. As Homi Bhabha (1994) theorises, hybridity emerges from the negotiation between colonial inheritance and indigenous tradition, creating a "third space" of enunciation. In scenography, this manifests as the blending of indigenous visual languages (e.g., Adinkra symbolism, Kente geometry) with Western-derived techniques of perspective, construction, and, increasingly, digital media. Comparative Aesthetics offers the tools to dissect how each designer differently occupies this third space, assessing the unique "aesthetic balance" (Sheppard, 2005) they strike between local resonance and global fluency.

Furthermore, the framework aligns with the auteur theory as applied to design, which posits the set designer as a primary author whose personal vision and cultural identity are imprinted upon the production (Lapsley & Westlake, 2024). By treating Edu and Kojo-Hilton as distinct auteurs, the study can critically examine how their individual "signatures", shaped by Edu's academic fine arts background versus Kojo-Hilton's self-taught, technology-driven practice, interpret the same dramatic text. This moves analysis beyond technical execution to the core of creative agency and conceptual framing.

## Scenography From Pictorial Background to Narrative Agent

The role and philosophy of set design have evolved significantly from its Renaissance origins. The pioneering work of Sebastiano Serlio codified perspective scenery, introducing illusionistic depth and establishing the stage as a pictorial frame (Kaiser, 2022; Aronson, 2023). This tradition of pictorial realism was radically challenged by Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig, who advocated for a symbolic and three-dimensional stage. Appia (1899) argued for the unity of space, light, and movement, envisioning the set as a dynamic, emotional environment that interacts with the actor's body, a philosophy that shifted focus from representation to evocation (González Cid, 2022).

Contemporary scholarship reinforces this view of scenography as an active, narrative agent. Parker, Wolf, and Block (2003) define its central purpose as creating an environment that "reflects and supports the action," while scholars like Boyle (2023) and Ercan & Hendriks (2022) emphasise its role in shaping audience perception and actor movement. This aligns with a broader understanding of design as a problem-solving process governed by fundamental principles (contrast, balance, rhythm, perspective) that translate thematic concepts into visual-spatial experiences (Rusmann & Ejsing-Duun, 2022; Aldaghlawy, 2024). The designer's process, as outlined by Gillette (2000), moving from analysis and research through incubation to implementation, is thus a form of embodied critical thinking, where philosophical stance, cultural knowledge, and material constraints are synthesised into a tangible visual argument.

## The Ghanaian Context: History, Hybridity, and Constraint

The trajectory of Ghanaian set design is a microcosm of the nation's cultural history. Pre-colonial performance, embedded in rituals, festivals, and storytelling like Anansesem, utilised environmental adoption where the village square or fireside circle formed an organic, symbolic performance space (Lokko, 1980; Agovi, 1988; Addo, 2013). "Set design" was communal, intuitive, and deeply integrated with other performance elements—a holistic aesthetic that prioritised symbolic resonance over literal depiction.

Colonialism imposed the proscenium arch and the aesthetic of Western realism, institutionalising set design as a specialised role (Tordzro, 2021). The post-independence period, marked by the cultural nationalism of the National Theatre Movement and visionaries like Efua T. Sutherland, initiated a conscious project of decolonising the stage (Banham, Hill, & Woodyard, 2005; Ampontsah, 2013). This historical pivot is crucial; it transformed the colonial legacy of hybridity from a passive condition into an active, often politicised, artistic strategy.

Current practice is characterised by this intentional synthesis. Designers are documented as deliberately mining Ghana's cultural reservoir, using Adinkra symbols, traditional architecture, and festival iconography, to anchor narratives in a local milieu and assert cultural identity (Adjepong, 2020; Mawuli, 2019; Ofori-Asare, 2024). Simultaneously, they engage with global scenographic trends, digital tools (e.g., projection mapping, virtual scenery), and the eclectic tastes of a modern audience (Agyemang, 2022; Parker et al., 2003; Morandini, 2021). However, this creative ambition operates within a framework of significant material constraints. Chronic limitations in funding, technical infrastructure, and material access are well-documented (Sowah, 2020), necessitating what Artaud & Taylor-Batty (2022) might term a "theatre of resourcefulness," where innovation is driven by necessity.

## Identifying the Gap from Documentation to Comparative Process Analysis

Existing literature provides a solid foundation on the history of Ghanaian theatre (Agovi, 1988; Diakhaté & Eyoh, 2017), the significance of cultural symbols in design (Adjepong, 2020; Koomson, 2024), and the overarching challenges of the field (Sowah, 2020). However, a critical lacuna persists. Studies tend towards historical survey or individual case study documentation, often celebrating outcomes without critically deconstructing the processes that led to them. There is a lack of focused, comparative scholarship that systematically applies a theoretical framework like Comparative Aesthetics to the work of contemporary Ghanaian designers. It also foregrounds the designer's creative process, examining how philosophical tenets, cultural influences, and personal biography are negotiated from page to stage.

Again, it directly contrasts two distinct approaches to the same source material, allowing for a controlled analysis of how variable artistic visions solve identical narrative and production problems. Therefore, this study directly addresses this gap by employing Comparative Aesthetics to analyse the philosophies and processes of Johnson K. Edu and Prince Kojo-Hilton in their stagings of *The Legend of Akusika*, and it moves beyond descriptive documentation. It offers a granular, theory-informed examination of how Ghana's hybrid design ethos is materially and conceptually enacted by leading practitioners, thereby contributing

to a more sophisticated understanding of agency, innovation, and professional identity in African scenography.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, comparative case study design to investigate the design philosophies and creative processes of two prominent Ghanaian set designers, Johnson K. Edu and Prince Kojo-Hilton. Grounded in an interpretive paradigm, the research seeks to understand the meanings, experiences, and contextual factors that shape their artistic choices, particularly in their respective stagings of Martin Owusu's *The Legend of Akusika*.

### Research Design

A comparative case study design was adopted to facilitate a structured, in-depth analysis of two distinct yet related instances of creative practice (Stausberg, 2021). This design is particularly suited for identifying patterns, similarities, and divergences in how individual artists navigate shared challenges, in this case, interpreting the same dramatic text within different production contexts (Mello, 2021). By systematically comparing Edu and Kojo-Hilton, the study highlights how personal biography, training, and venue-specific constraints converge to produce distinct scenic outcomes, offering insights into the broader field of Ghanaian scenography.

### Sampling and Participants

Participants were selected via purposive sampling to ensure rich, information-laden cases central to the research question (Rahman, 2023). The sample comprises the two leading Ghanaian set designers under study. Their distinct philosophies, generational perspectives, and the contrasting venues (academic vs. national professional stage) provide a robust basis for comparative analysis.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews (Alshenqeeti, 2014). This method allowed for focused exploration of design philosophies, influences, and processes while permitting flexibility for participants to elaborate on salient points (Roulston & Choi, 2018). Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented with analysis of production photographs and design materials.

Data was analysed using thematic analysis (Peel, 2020). This involved a systematic process of coding the transcripts to identify recurring themes related to cultural influence, material practice, conceptual framing, and responses to production constraints. The analysis followed a comparative logic, constantly moving between the two cases to delineate points of convergence and divergence in their approaches (Thorne, 2000).

### Ethical Considerations and Positionality

The study adhered to standard ethical protocols, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and granting participants the right to withdraw (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018). Interview data were anonymised in reporting, and all visual materials were used with permission.

Crucially, this study requires a transparent account of positionality. One of the researchers and co-authors of this article is Johnson K. Edu, a primary subject of the study. This insider position presents both unique advantages and reflexive responsibilities. Edu's deep, embodied knowledge of the Ghanaian

theatre scene and his specific design process provided invaluable, nuanced access to the cultural and practical nuances of the case. This insider status facilitated a level of detail and contextual understanding that might be less accessible to a complete outsider.

To address the potential for bias and ensure analytical rigour, several steps were taken. The interview with Edu was conducted by a co-researcher not involved in the design analysis, using the same semi-structured protocol as with Kojo-Hilton. The primary thematic analysis of all interview data was led by co-authors who are not subjects of the study. Furthermore, the interpretive framework of Comparative Aesthetics provides an external, theoretical structure against which both designers' accounts are analysed. Throughout the process, the research team engaged in continual reflexive dialogue, explicitly questioning assumptions and scrutinising interpretations to ensure the findings represent a balanced, scholarly comparison rather than a subjective endorsement. This acknowledgement of positionality does not undermine the study but rather strengthens its credibility by demonstrating a commitment to methodological rigour and reflexive honesty, turning a potential complication into a documented aspect of the research context (Prosek & Gibson, 2021).

## Discussions

The discussion is focused on a comparative analysis of the design philosophies of the two understudied Ghanaian set designers. The core of the discussion examines how each designer's unique artistic vision is fundamentally rooted in a commitment to Ghanaian cultural identity, yet expressed through divergent creative lenses.

### Prince Kojo-Hilton's Design Philosophy and Artistic Vision

The set design approach of Prince Kojo-Hilton stands as a powerful embodiment of cultural integration, reflecting a distinctive vision rooted in Ghanaian identity. His creative philosophy, centred on the notion that "*set design is a bridge between tradition and modernity*," speaks to the broader cultural dialogue between Ghana's traditional artistic heritage and the demands of contemporary theatre production. For Kojo-Hilton, this fusion is not a mere aesthetic choice but a deliberate, intentional act of cultural storytelling. His designs are more than decorative; they are vehicles for expressing cultural values, narratives, and historical consciousness, reinforcing his belief that theatre should resonate with the cultural fabric of the society it serves.

The notion of cultural continuity is central to his design philosophy. His commitment to preserving and promoting Ghanaian cultural identity through set design is underscored by his incorporation of traditional elements, such as national symbols, local materials, and indigenous motifs, into his work. This approach reflects his belief that theatre serves as a platform for reinforcing and celebrating culture. Kojo-Hilton's designs thus act as a cultural statement, embedding Ghanaian heritage within the production while simultaneously engaging with the modern world. As he stated:

*"In my work, set design is a deliberate reflection of our culture. It is important that the visuals tell a story that reflects our identity as Ghanaians and as Africans. Art is not just for art's sake; it must serve the purpose of reflecting who we are, where we come from,*

*and where we are heading as a people."*  
(Personal Interview, 2025)

This perspective aligns with Thompson's (2022) argument that African artists, in particular, use their work to negotiate and reimagine cultural narratives, positioning themselves as active participants in the construction of national identity through their creative practices.

Furthermore, his assertion that "art is not just for art's sake, it must have a utility base" reflects a pragmatic approach to set design that prioritises the functional, communicative, and thematic roles of the stage environment. This philosophy illustrates a purpose-driven approach to set design, where the visual elements are carefully constructed to serve the plot, deepen the audience's understanding of the production, and support the director's vision. He expands on this idea by saying:

*"The set is more than just a physical space for the actors to perform on; it is a dynamic element of the storytelling process. A well-designed set can carry the themes of the play, it can amplify the emotions of the characters, and most importantly, it can communicate the essence of the story. Without this, a production feels incomplete."* (Personal Interview, 2025)

This reflects a functional understanding of set design, one that aims to support and enhance the storytelling process rather than merely decorate the stage. Cohen, Torshizi, and Zamindar (2023) contend that postcolonial art often explores the intersections of tradition and modernity, blending the two to create a hybrid form that both celebrates cultural identity and adapts to contemporary global contexts. His design work embodies this concept, integrating cultural references within the functional and thematic requirements of the play.

In line with this, the idea of the set designer as an auteur is particularly relevant in understanding his design philosophy. Just as directors are often seen as the central authors of a film or theatrical production, set designers like Kojo-Hilton exert a similar level of creative authority in their domain. Anderson (2022) highlights that the set designer, like an auteur, imprints their personal vision and perspective onto the production, ensuring that every aspect of the stage environment reflects their artistic intentions. Kojo-Hilton reinforces this idea by noting:

*"When I design a set, it is a reflection of my own personal vision, my connection to the cultural elements of Ghana, and my understanding of the play. My designs are not just about creating an environment but about creating a narrative within the design itself. I view the set as a co-narrator of the story, one that gives voice to the characters and amplifies their experiences."* (Personal Interview, 2025)

His designs demonstrate this auteur-like control over the visual aesthetics of the production, underscoring the importance of the set as an essential narrative tool. His work can also be analysed through the lens of hybridity, a term introduced by Bhabha (1994) to describe the blending of cultural elements from both local and global sources to produce new, hybrid forms of expression. His approach mirrors this notion of hybridity, where he negotiates between indigenous Ghanaian aesthetics and global theatrical practices. This hybridisation is not a simple blending of elements

but rather a dialogue between past and present, tradition and modernity, local and global. As he explains:

*"The idea is not just to impose tradition but to find ways of integrating it meaningfully into contemporary theatre. We have a responsibility to create something relevant for today's audience while remaining true to our heritage."* (Personal Interview, 2025)

This approach highlights how he uses traditional forms as building blocks for contemporary narratives, demonstrating that culture is a living, evolving force that transcends mere replication of the past. A key element of his design philosophy is his emphasis on cultural relevance. His statement that "set design should reflect the theme and story of the production while remaining true to the cultural setting" emphasises his belief that a set should be an authentic representation of its cultural setting. His designs do not simply serve the functional purpose of setting the stage; they act as cultural artefacts that communicate the essence of Ghanaian life, values, and history. As he elaborates:

*"When I work on a set, it is important for me that it does not just represent the story being told but also the cultural setting in which that play exists. My sets are a direct reflection of the community, the country, and the history that we come from."* (Personal Interview, 2025)

Dekker & Giannachi (2022) support this view by stating that cultural heritage should not be viewed as static but as a living, evolving force that can shape modern artistic expression. His works exemplify this by ensuring that his sets are not just historically accurate or culturally respectful, but actively engaged with the ongoing process of cultural expression and identity formation.

Moreover, his integration of local materials and indigenous symbols into his designs enhances the authenticity and cultural resonance of his works. He draws from a wide range of Ghanaian cultural traditions, such as folk art, architecture, and oral traditions, to create stage environments that feel both rooted in local culture and accessible to a wider, contemporary audience. As he explains:

*"I am always keen on using local materials in my sets. It is important that we celebrate what is indigenous to us. Whether it is wood, fabric, or even pottery, these materials have a story of their own, and they speak to our heritage. Using them connects the audience to the essence of who we are as a people."* (Personal Interview, 2025)

Kojo-Hilton's works ultimately demonstrate that set design is not just a technical or aesthetic practice but a profound cultural act that can communicate, challenge, and reshape cultural identities. His design philosophy emphasises that theatre is a space where cultural dialogue and expression can occur, and his works exemplify how theatre can serve as a site of both cultural affirmation and cultural innovation. By maintaining a strong connection to Ghana's cultural heritage while embracing contemporary design practices, his set designs reflect the complex, hybrid nature of modern Ghanaian identity, contributing to the ongoing conversation about cultural continuity and cultural transformation in postcolonial Africa.

Prince Kojo-Hilton's set designs offer a compelling example of how contemporary theatre can engage with cultural identity and history while pushing the boundaries of artistic expression. His works embody the principles of cultural integration, hybridity, and artistic authorship, and they showcase the potential of set design to serve as both a cultural and narrative tool. In blending traditional Ghanaian cultural elements with modern theatrical practices, he creates a rich, layered visual experience that speaks to the complexities of identity in a globalised world. His designs, therefore, not only shape the visual world of the production but also contribute to the ongoing project of cultural redefinition and affirmation in Ghanaian theatre.

### **Johnson K. Edu's Design Philosophy and Artistic Vision**

Johnson K. Edu's approach to set design, grounded in realism and naturalism, positions him as a designer who seeks to create art that is deeply connected to the physical world and cultural identity. His work adheres to principles that advocate for the faithful representation of nature and the environment, creating a direct interaction between the audience and the space they inhabit. His strong emphasis on observation as a core principle of his creative process also emphasises his commitment to providing an authentic experience that is not only visually compelling but deeply contextual and culturally resonant.

Furthermore, he emphasises observation as an important aspect of his creative practice, stating that he "keenly observes the world and retains those observations as references for his works." His commitment to observing the natural world as the primary source of inspiration is not merely about replicating external forms; it is an effort to ground his works in an understanding of the cultural and environmental elements that shape the context of the play. This aligns with the work of theatre designers like Essin (2012), who argued that realistic acting must be supported by a realistic environment that mirrors the lived experiences of the audience.

Edu's insistence on accurately representing nature in his sets, from the texture of rocks to the portrayal of natural plants, enhances the realism in the work and makes the performance environment more immediate and relatable. As Bumpus (2023) notes, the faithful reproduction of natural forms on stage can create a "coherent and engaging world" for the audience to immerse themselves in, heightening the emotional impact of the performance.

Drawing from his observations of reality, he not only anchors the design in naturalistic traditions but also establishes a connection to the cultural underpinnings of the narratives he represents. His sets are never arbitrary; they are vehicles that transport the audience into the Ghanaian cultural setting, with real-world references underpinning the work. As he states:

*"The set is more than just a physical space for the actors to perform on; it is a dynamic element of the storytelling process. A well-designed set can carry the themes of the play, it can amplify the emotions of the characters, and most importantly, it can communicate the essence of the story."* (Personal Interview, 2025)

He believes that the set should communicate the essence of the story, aligning with Jacob's (2022) concept of epic theatre, where set design is not a passive backdrop but an active participant

in the theatrical dialogue, challenging the audience to engage critically with the themes and narratives presented.

Also, Edu's commitment to naturalism and realism extends beyond the visual accuracy of his sets to embrace the cultural significance of the elements he represents. His work is not only concerned with the truthful representation of physical space but also with embedding the Ghanaian cultural ethos into the design, thereby ensuring that his works represent the values, beliefs, and symbolism of Ghanaian culture. In *The Legend of Akusika* (2024), he incorporated natural materials and culturally significant references, such as transforming fabric to resemble rocks for the king's palace and using gripping plants to evoke a sense of authenticity in the Ghanaian setting. The focus on cultural representation speaks to his broader commitment to enhancing Ghanaian traditional theatre. As he asserts:

*"My design philosophy also significantly influences my work in promoting and enhancing Ghanaian traditional theatre. I strongly believe that my focus on realism and naturalism elevates the representation of Ghanaian cultural elements in theatre."*

(Personal Interview, 2025)

This idea is consistent with the views of Svich (2021), who suggests that theatre should serve as a mirror to the society from which it emerges. Edu's sets are designed to reflect not only the physical environment but the cultural spirit of Ghana. Through this, he contributes to the preservation and promotion of Ghanaian heritage, enabling the audience to connect with historical and cultural stories that may otherwise be marginalised in modern productions. While his primary design philosophy is rooted in realism, he acknowledges the role of symbolism in enhancing the cultural significance of his work. As he reflects, "*while I occasionally incorporate symbolism, my primary focus remains on presenting nature in its truest form, and this is evident in my stage designs.*" (Personal Interview, 2025)

This philosophy suggests that while naturalism serves as the foundational approach in his design process, symbolism plays a secondary yet central role in reinforcing thematic elements or expressing cultural touches. Symbolism in theatre allows for an abstract representation of cultural truths and collective identities, enabling the audience to engage with the play on a deeper, more emotional level. For instance, Edu's inclusion of natural materials like gripping plants in *The Legend of Akusika* speaks to the symbolic connection between nature and Ghanaian identity. In many African cultures, nature is often imbued with deep spiritual and symbolic meaning, representing ancestral connections, cosmic forces, and the interdependence between humanity and the natural world (Ndasauka, 2024). His use of naturalistic design not only reinforces the physical reality of the play but also symbolically connects the characters and their struggles to the broader cultural heritage of Ghana.

This use of symbolism is also tied to his broader goal of cultural promotion, as he seeks to instil national pride and enhance the collective identity of his audience through the powerful symbolism of natural elements. This approach reflects the ideas of Robertson (2023), who maintained that theatre should not merely entertain but should transform the audience by engaging them in the social realities that inform the play.

In his earlier career, his work on the *Mr Ghana bodybuilding competition* set in 1998, demonstrated his ability to combine realism with theatrical spectacle, incorporating lifelike dragons and rocks to create a dramatic yet believable stage. In describing this work, he stated, "*I used polystyrene for the rocks and foam to construct the dragon, ensuring that the dragon's movements of its paws and head were realistic.*" (Personal Interview, 2025)

This attention to detail, where even fantasy elements like dragons are treated with the same realistic care as natural elements, demonstrates his understanding that even in fantastical settings, the audience's emotional connection to the physical environment is important. The use of realistic props and stage elements ensures that the audience remains grounded in the world of the play, despite the more imaginative aspects of the production.

This notion of creating an environment that reflects both the fantastical and the real echoes Jablonski & Martincich's (2023) belief in the importance of authenticity in design, whether the play is rooted in the real world or the realm of fantasy. The power of design, in his philosophy, lies in its ability to enhance production by creating a cohesive and believable world, regardless of its naturalism or symbolism.

In all, Johnson K. Edu's design philosophy, with its emphasis on realism, naturalism, and cultural identity, highlights his commitment to creating sets that are not only visually accurate but also deeply connected to the social and cultural fabric of Ghana. His use of observation and symbolism ensures that his designs remain both faithful to the natural world and responsive to the cultural accounts they are meant to convey. Through his works, he continues to preserve and enhance Ghanaian traditions, ensuring that the authenticity of the cultural story is never lost in the pursuit of modern theatre aesthetics.

His designs demonstrate that set design is more than just a functional element of performance; it is a medium through which the artist can project cultural values, shape audience perceptions, and create spaces of meaningful connection. Adhering to realistic principles while also embracing the symbolic potential of his materials, his works exemplify how the designer can shape the theatrical experience to reflect and elevate cultural identity and social purpose in contemporary Ghanaian theatre.

### **Cultural Identity and Integration in Prince Kojo-Hilton's Design**

Prince Kojo-Hilton's works exemplify the powerful integration of indigenous Ghanaian elements with foreign influences, reflecting both a strong sense of cultural identity and openness to global artistic expressions. His creative process reflects how set design can serve as a bridge between local traditions and international influences, with both influencing and enriching each other. Through weaving together Ghanaian cultural symbols and global techniques, his approach demonstrates how set designers can remain deeply rooted in their heritage while also engaging with the wider world of contemporary art.

Basically, one of the key aspects of his works is his deep connection to Ghanaian culture, which remains a foundational aspect of his creative vision. Central to his design philosophy is the use of *Adinkra* symbols, which carry profound meanings tied to Ghanaian identity, history, and values. As he explains:

*"I incorporate Ghanaian symbols, especially Adinkra symbols, into my designs as they carry deep meanings and cultural significance. These symbols, which resonate strongly with the Ghanaian identity, are a vital part of my set designs." (Personal Interview, 2025)*

Adinkra symbols, which are traditionally used in textiles, ceramics, logos, and advertising, are associated with an ethnic

group in Ghana. And by embedding these symbols into his stage designs, Kojo-Hilton ensures that the work communicates not only the narrative of the play but also cultural stories and values. This use of symbols in the set [see figure 1] serves not only as a formal aesthetic choice but as an embodiment of the collective identity of the Ghanaian people.



**Figure 1: Kojo Hilton's Set design infused with Adinkra symbols**

Sources: <https://www.facebook.com/profile/1671277289/search/?q=aku%20sika>

The integration of indigenous design elements into his works provides an enduring connection to the culture, reinforcing the social relevance of the performance. This approach reflects Smith's (2022) assertion that designers must interpret and expand upon the ideas of the playwright, adapting the text to visual representations that evoke specific cultural and emotional responses. Kojo-Hilton's use of *Adinkra* symbols can be understood as his personal method of interpreting the script, one that is informed by his own cultural experience. His designs go beyond mere aesthetic choices and become a form of cultural storytelling, speaking directly to the audience about Ghanaian values, traditions, and worldviews.

Kojo-Hilton, while rooted in his cultural heritage, is not confined to local traditions. His extensive travel and exposure to different cultures have broadened his artistic perspective, allowing him to incorporate global influences into his work. He highlights the impact that international exposure has had on his approach to design:

*"I have been fortunate to travel to more than 10 countries, which has had a profound impact on my approach to art and design. One such impactful experience was my time in Nairobi, Kenya, where I had the opportunity to collaborate on a Hollywood production. During this time, I was introduced to the concept of 'matatus', Kenyan public transport vehicles, often painted with vibrant graffiti depicting the driver's personal hero or cultural icon. This encounter broadened my understanding of how art can transcend conventional boundaries and merge with everyday life, and it's an influence I've integrated into my design philosophy."* (Personal Interview, 2025)

This revelation speaks to a broader trend in contemporary art and theatre design, where international exposure and cross-cultural exchange are increasingly shaping creative work. The matatu graffiti that Kojo-Hilton encountered in Kenya represents a form of public art deeply embedded in everyday life. This exposure challenged traditional boundaries of art and design, showing him the value of integrating vernacular, everyday experiences into high art. The vibrant, expressive graffiti on these public vehicles embodies a form of "art in the streets" that transcends conventional boundaries of art, reminding us of Forsey's (2013) assertion that a designer's emotional reaction to the world around them informs their artistic practice. Inspired by the matatu culture, he broadened his approach to design, embracing a more eclectic aesthetic that is not bound by traditional design conventions.

Moreover, the core of his set designs lies in a delicate balancing act between indigenous Ghanaian elements and global influences. His approach is characterised by the seamless blending of these two influences, ensuring that his designs remain culturally specific while engaging with global artistic currents. This fusion is clearly visible in productions such as *The Legend of Akusika*, *The Adventure of Sasa and Esi*, and *Dilemma of a Ghost*, where he draws on traditional Ghanaian landscapes and architectural features while incorporating modern, international design elements. In these productions, he navigates the tension between authenticity and innovation by carefully selecting design elements that communicate both the local context and broader, universal themes.

For instance, in *The Legend of Akusika*, Kojo-Hilton created a setting that was deeply rooted in Ghanaian culture, incorporating indigenous design elements such as traditional village environments with rocks which have gripping grass on them, with water running through the rocks, to depict a stream in the Ghanaian village. This grounded the performance in its cultural context [See figures 2 & 3].

His approach to designing village settings, reflecting both the simplicity and complexity of everyday life in Ghana, served to maintain the play's authenticity while allowing the audience to feel an immediate connection to the narrative. He reflects, "*This production allowed me to delve into indigenous design elements to create an authentic atmosphere for the performance.*" (Personal Interview, 2025)

While rooted in tradition, Kojo-Hilton's designs for *The Legend of Akusika* reveal a more modern approach. The use of minimalist, contemporary set pieces alongside traditional Ghanaian elements demonstrate how global influences shape his work. He recognises the importance of merging traditional Ghanaian motifs with modern theatrical elements to create a hybrid aesthetic that is both rooted in local culture and attuned to international design trends.



**Figure 2: traditional village environments with rocks which have gripping grass**

Sources: <https://www.facebook.com/profile/1671277289/search/?q=aku%20sika>

Furthermore, his designs are deeply influenced by his own life experiences, background, and the mentorship he received from his uncle, Johnson K. Edu. These formative experiences have shaped his artistic voice and continue to inform the way he integrates indigenous and foreign design elements. As Kaufman & Glăveanu (2025) note, the life experiences of creators significantly impact their artistic output. For Kojo-Hilton, his exposure to global art forms, combined with his Ghanaian roots, has given him a distinctive edge in the set design world. His designs are marked by

a signature style, one that speaks to his personal identity and worldview. From both his personal history and the collective history of Ghana, his designs are a visual manifestation of his worldview, shaped by both local and international experiences. His work stands as a testament to the power of cultural integration and artistic hybridity, offering a clear understanding of how set design can function as both a reflection of cultural identity and a dynamic response to global artistic trends.



**Figure 3: A fountain gripping grass and running water**

Sources: <https://www.facebook.com/profile/1671277289/search/?q=aku%20sika>

In sum, his designs are an intricate blend of indigenous Ghanaian cultural elements and global artistic influences. His deep

connection to the Ghanaian cultural identity is visible in his use of *Adinkra* symbols and traditional architectural elements. Yet, he remains open to incorporating global influences that expand his

creative boundaries. His works exemplify how set design, as an art form, can simultaneously reflect the authenticity of local traditions and engage with global trends. Via integrating local cultural expressions and global design influences, Kojo-Hilton not only creates visually stunning sets but also fosters a rich dialogue between Ghanaian cultural heritage and the broader world of contemporary design.

His creative journey, shaped by his travels and mentorship, reveals how cultural identity and artistic innovation can coalesce, leading to designs that resonate with diverse audiences while remaining anchored in the cultural values and history of the designer's homeland. His work is a powerful example of how theatre can be a site for the blending of local and global artistic languages, offering rich insights into the evolving nature of set design in contemporary Ghanaian theatre.

### Cultural Identity and Integration in Johnson K. Edu's Design

The career journey of Johnson K. Edu offers a compelling example of how cultural identity and global artistic influences can converge in the practice of set design. From his beginnings as a dance student to his current position as a respected academic and practitioner, his work exemplifies a continual engagement with the fusion of indigenous Ghanaian design elements and Western influences. His development as a scenic designer has been shaped by both his personal experiences and broader academic and cultural trends, which have led him to advocate for a balance between tradition and modernity in his work.

Also, his journey into scenic design was deeply influenced by his early exposure to Ghanaian dance and the performing arts, which played a fundamental role in shaping his understanding of visual expression in performance. Though initially focused on dance, his involvement in various aspects of theatre productions, including set design, costume design, and makeup, laid the groundwork for his later specialisation in scenic design. His interdisciplinary approach, blending dance with visual arts, has consistently informed his works in set design. As he reflects:

*"My journey into scenic design and technical theatre began unexpectedly, rooted in my initial studies in dance at the University of Ghana's School of Performing Arts in 1991. Although my focus was on dance, I naturally found myself assisting my peers in the drama and music departments with various aspects of visual arts." (Personal Interview, 2025)*

His early exposure to the fusion of dance and visual arts was a basic point in his development as a set designer, one that allowed him to engage deeply with the visual aesthetics of Ghanaian culture while honing his technical skills. His interdisciplinary involvement also aligned with his growing awareness of the role that set design plays in translating cultural narratives to the stage. His training and early career highlight his commitment to representing Ghanaian cultural identity through design, which becomes particularly evident in his exploration of indigenous symbols and elements in his later projects.

A significant moment in his career was his Master of Fine Arts (MFA) project, where he sought to merge traditional Ghanaian symbols with Western design principles for the Ghana Music Awards. This project, which combined traditional Ghanaian instruments with Western elements like Piano keys and Compact

discs (CDs), serves as a typical example of his approach to cultural hybridity in design. He explains:

*"I designed stage props that combined traditional Ghanaian instruments, such as the Goonje and Xylophone, with Western elements like Piano keys and CDs. This hybrid approach not only highlighted the richness of Ghanaian culture but also created a dialogue between traditional and modern artistic expressions."* (Personal Interview, 2025)

In this instance, he sought to create a *dialogue* between the local and the global, blending indigenous Ghanaian aesthetics with Western design elements. This approach highlights the importance of maintaining cultural authenticity while engaging with global artistic practices. By combining Ghanaian instruments with Western symbols, he constructed a culturally rich stage design that preserved and celebrated Ghanaian heritage while ensuring it was accessible to an international audience. This hybridisation resonates with Hou, Zhang, and Zhang's (2023) assertion that the designer's emotional and intuitive response to a project plays a key role in guiding their work. For Edu, his personal investment in Ghanaian culture informed his design choices. It led him to push for an aesthetic that both honoured tradition and acknowledged the evolving global artistic landscape.

Also, Edu's work exemplifies the tension often present in design practice between local identity and global influence. He acknowledges that there was initial resistance from producers who preferred a more Western aesthetic. Yet, he successfully navigated this challenge by presenting designs that respected both Ghanaian and Western visual languages. His ability to mediate this tension is reflective of a broader cultural negotiation in contemporary design, where local traditions are reinterpreted to fit within a more globalised context. He stated:

*"While there was initial resistance from producers who favoured a more Western aesthetic, I successfully navigated this tension by presenting a balanced design that respected both Ghanaian and Western visual languages."* (Personal Interview, 2025)

This ability to find a balance between tradition and modernity is a key theme in Johnson Edu's work. Through the integration of Ghanaian visual culture into contemporary theatrical spaces, he emphasises the importance of cultural preservation in the face of global artistic influences. This approach speaks to the ongoing debate in theatre design about how much of local culture should be preserved and how much should be transformed to appeal to broader, international audiences.

More so, Edu's academic career has also been a significant platform for promoting the integration of indigenous and global design elements. As an educator and former head of the Department of Theatre Arts at the University of Education, Winneba, he fosters an environment where students are encouraged to explore the duality of tradition and modernity in their own creative processes. His own journey as a student, practitioner, and academic serves as a model for his students, demonstrating how one can blend cultural identity with contemporary design while navigating the complexities of the global artistic marketplace. As he asserts:

*“In my teaching role, I encourage my students to embrace this duality of tradition and modernity in their own creative processes. My personal journey serves as a source of inspiration for students, demonstrating the value of interdisciplinary learning and the importance of integrating cultural identity into artistic practice.”* (Personal Interview, 2025)

Through his teaching, he has influenced a new generation of set designers who recognise the significance of interdisciplinary learning and cultural integration in their work. By encouraging students to embrace both local and global influences, he prepares them to create works that are not only culturally relevant but also able to engage with international artistic trends.

Again, his designs are deeply shaped by his own personal experiences and background. His initial training in dance provided him with a unique perspective on visual storytelling, one that emphasised the interconnectedness of all aspects of a performance. His later involvement in set design, both as a professional and an academic, allowed him to fuse his interdisciplinary background with his personal understanding of Ghanaian cultural traditions. As a result, his designs consistently reflect his commitment to preserving Ghanaian identity while engaging with global artistic trends. His career path exemplifies the dynamic intersection of cultural identity and global artistic influences in contemporary set design. His works are marked by a commitment to cultural authenticity, as seen in his integration of indigenous Ghanaian elements with Western design aesthetics. Through his own creative journey and teaching, Edu has shown how set design can function as a powerful tool for both cultural preservation and artistic innovation. His designs serve as a bridge between local traditions and global practices, ensuring that Ghanaian cultural identity is not only preserved but also continues to evolve in response to broader global artistic movements. Through his personal and professional contributions, he has positioned himself as a key figure in the ongoing conversation about cultural hybridity and global engagement in the world of set design.

#### **Prince Kojo-Hilton’s Personal and Professional Influence**

The designer, Prince Kojo-Hilton’s perspective on set design in the production of *The Legend of Akusika* provides a rich intersection of personal and professional influences that inform his creative process. His background deeply influences his design choices in visual art, Ghanaian cultural heritage, and his professional experience in mentoring young artists, all of which significantly shape his approach to scenic design. The responses reflect how his personal artistic journey and professional philosophy blend to create a set that was not only aesthetically compelling but also resonated emotionally with the audience. His professional journey as an artist and designer is profoundly shaped by his visual art background. He credits this foundation as fundamental in the development of his design philosophy, particularly in the way he conceptualises and handcrafts his sets. He mentions that nothing in the set for *The Legend of Akusika* was purchased or rented, and everything was “handcrafted from scratch.” As he says:

*“In designing the set for The Legend of Akusika, my background in visual art played a key role. This foundation gave me a significant advantage when conceptualising the design because everything on stage was handcrafted*

*from scratch. Nothing was purchased or rented. My deep understanding of art, coupled with my experience in art direction and production design, empowered me to use materials and resources around me to bring the design to life.”* (Personal Interview, 2025)

This creative process, where he makes a point of working with the available materials to build something unique, demonstrates how personal mastery over artistic techniques shapes his design. His visual art training serves as the foundation for his ability to transform simple materials into an immersive, highly realistic environment, exemplifying his personal artistry and hands-on expertise. The hands-on nature of his process also highlights how a designer’s personal approach to their craft influences the outcome of their work, making the set more authentic and reflective of the designer’s personal aesthetic values. As Radbourne (2023) argues, personal experience and skill set strongly influence artistic production, leading to the creation of unique and meaningful works that reflect the artist’s background.

As an experienced designer, he stresses that a significant part of his design philosophy involves creating sets that evoke an emotional response from the audience. This approach emphasises that theatrical design should go beyond mere functionality and aesthetic beauty: it should be an emotional conduit. In his view, “the set design constitutes about 75% of the production’s impact.” This perspective emphasises his belief that set design is central to audience engagement, capable of shaping emotional responses and amplifying the production.

For Kojo-Hilton, emotional connection is the core of his design philosophy. He expresses this as a goal to give audiences an experience that they will remember long after the performance, not just a visually pleasing stage. As he mentions:

*“In the world of theatre, I believe that audiences attend performances seeking to be ‘wowed’; they want to experience something they have never seen before. This is what makes theatre so captivating.”* (Personal Interview, 2025)

His belief that audiences seek to be “wowed” aligns with his desire to create memorable experiences. This philosophy links directly to his professional ethos, in which he sees his role as a designer not only as a creator of physical spaces but as a translator of emotions. This aligns with the work of Malloy (2022), who suggested that set design must enhance the emotional and psychological experience of the audience, supporting actors in their performance by grounding them in a realistic and evocative environment. Similarly, Zhu & Cao (2024) argued that theatre is a space for emotional transformation, where the set, as part of the overall production, plays an important role in generating an immersive experience for the audience.

Again, his perspective on mentorship and youth development further emphasises the professional influences that shape his design choices. He speaks about the importance of sharing his knowledge and guiding younger generations of artists in Ghana, which aligns with his broader mission of nurturing future talent in the creative industries. He frequently visits schools and universities to mentor students, ensuring they understand the power of creativity in shaping their careers and communities. As he states:

*"In addition to my design work, I have a strong commitment to sharing my knowledge and experiences with the younger generation. Over the years, I have mentored many aspiring artists and designers, helping them find their creative path. I regularly visit universities, senior high schools, and even primary schools to offer guidance and share my journey."* (Personal Interview, 2025)

This professional role of nurturing young talent shapes his understanding of how his designs can inspire and influence both current and future generations of artists. His commitment to passing on knowledge not only supports the growth of the arts but also shapes the next wave of designers, influencing the future of Ghanaian theatre and design. Siegle, McCoach, and Gilson (2021), the importance of mentorship and education as a means of enabling individuals to express themselves fully and creatively. In this sense, his dedication to sharing his knowledge is a way to empower young creatives to engage with the arts on their own terms, contributing to the wider artistic landscape.

Similarly, Kojo-Hilton's deep connection to his Ghanaian roots significantly impacts his design choices. He stresses the importance of researching cultural references to ensure the sets authentically reflect Ghanaian culture. His involvement in cultural research for the production of *The Legend of Akusika* informs his work, as seen in his study of waterfalls to replicate their natural beauty in the set. As he notes:

*"Culturally, my Ghanaian roots are a key inspiration in my design process. I engage in thorough research to ensure that every production is deeply connected to its cultural setting. For instance, when designing the set for *The Legend of Akusika*, I studied reference images of various waterfalls to accurately capture their flow and natural beauty. So, I used a water fountain to create the waterfalls effect, which I made to run down the rocks I created"* (Personal Interview, 2025)

His cultural influences also manifest in his design style, which blends Ghanaian heritage with contemporary design principles. This cultural grounding helps him create sets that resonate with audiences by ensuring the work is rooted in a cultural context that is both familiar and meaningful to local viewers. This reflects on the concept of how set design should serve not only as a visual representation but also as a tool to enhance cultural and societal engagement.

One notable example of how he integrates both personal and professional influences is his approach to blending international and local design elements. In a set created for the *Café de France* TV show, he integrated French elements while maintaining a distinctly local aesthetic, including using perspective drawing to create a Parisian backdrop. He explains:

*"For example, in a set I created for the *Café de France*'s TV show, I needed to incorporate French elements while maintaining a distinctly local aesthetic. The set featured a bar scene with a distant view of the Eiffel Tower, using perspective drawing to create the illusion of a Parisian street. This fusion of international*

*and local influences helped convey the essence of France while keeping the design grounded in my African artistic perspective."* (Personal Interview, 2025)

His combination of global trends with local aesthetics underscores how geographic or cultural boundaries do not constrain his personal artistic vision. This ability to fuse foreign influences with his local heritage speaks to his understanding of globalisation and the need to maintain a rooted cultural identity within the evolving world of contemporary design. An art design should respond to both local and global trends, weaving the global into the local to create more universally resonant work. This fusion approach will confirm the artist's ability to navigate multiple cultural influences while maintaining their unique artistic voice.

So, Prince Kojo-Hilton's approach to designing the set for the production *The Legend of Akusika* testifies how personal experience and professional development intertwine to influence design choices. His background in visual art allowed him to handcraft the set from scratch, creating a deeply personal connection between his design and the materials he worked with. Professionally, his belief that set design should evoke an emotional response from the audience shaped the way he structured his set to enhance the play's impact. His commitment to mentoring young talent and incorporating cultural references further underscores the importance of both individual and professional experiences in his approach to design. Ultimately, his design philosophy demonstrates that personal experiences and professional responsibilities are not separate but mutually reinforcing, with each influencing his creative process in profound ways.

#### **Johnson K. Edu's Personal and Professional Influence**

Johnson K. Edu's insights into set design for *The Legend of Akusika* reveal the significant influence of both personal experience and professional expertise in shaping his design choices. His background as a set designer at the National Theatre, combined with his experience as an academic lecturer in scenic design, directly impacted the decisions he made throughout the production process. His discussion underscores how a designer's individual journey, shaped by both past work and personal philosophy, affects the creative process, while also highlighting the importance of collaboration and material resources in achieving a successful set design.

His personal experience as a set designer and lecturer deeply informed his approach to the stage design of *The Legend of Akusika*. He attributes his ability to translate ideas into tangible environments to his years of practice and education. As he states:

*"For instance, in *The Legend of Akusika*, my background as a set designer at the National Theatre and my academic experience as a lecturer in scenic design greatly informed my approach. These years of experience have allowed me to refine my craft, particularly in translating ideas into tangible stage environments."* (Personal Interview, 2025)

This is an indication that his academic and practical background highlights how his personal experience, through both teaching and hands-on design, contributes to his ability to visualise and execute complex stage elements. His background in teaching also suggests that his approach is not just about personal creativity but also about instilling this knowledge in future generations. This

resonates with the idea of “cultural capital,” wherein his accumulated knowledge and skills, developed over time, become a resource that influences both his own work and the broader theatre community (Julier, 2013).

Also, Edu draws from his previous work on similar projects to inform his design choices for *The Legend of Akusika*. A typical example is his earlier use of fabric to simulate rocks, a technique he had previously employed at the Ghana National Theatre. He notes:

*“In The Legend of Akusika, my previous work on similar projects, such as the carved stones and rock formations I created for the Ghana National Theatre, served as a clear reference. These elements, specifically the use of fabric to simulate rocks, were techniques I had explored years ago.”* (Personal Interview, 2025)

The reuse of established techniques illustrates how his personal artistic history shapes his current creative decisions. His ability to revisit and refine previous approaches allows him to combine innovation with familiarity. This continuous evolution of technique mirrors the concept of the “reflective practitioner,” where experience becomes a tool for ongoing refinement, helping to shape both current work and future possibilities (Jiang & Ahmadpour, 2021).

Again, he argued that set design is a collaborative effort, a viewpoint that reflects both his personal philosophy and professional experience. He recognises the significant role played by various other departments, including lighting, sound, costume, and makeup designers, in creating a unified and immersive production. He highlights:

*“I do not work in isolation; instead, I value the contributions of my colleagues, whose expertise in lighting, sound, costume, and makeup all enhance the stage environment.”* (Personal Interview, 2025)

This perspective underscores the importance of teamwork in achieving a cohesive and effective design, with his leadership facilitating the integration of diverse artistic ideas. He believes in the collaboration of ideas through collective action and the value of shared knowledge in creating something greater than any individual could achieve alone. This emphasis on collaboration indicates that, to him, personal influence on design is never isolated but always in conversation with the professional community.

Although his personal heritage from the Volta Region did not directly influence his design for *The Legend of Akusika*, he acknowledges the importance of Akan culture in shaping the production’s aesthetic. His design decisions were primarily informed by the script, which allowed him to draw visual cues from the dialogue and the play’s setting. He elaborates:

*“The script primarily shaped the stage design for The Legend of Akusika. As I read through the play, I carefully analysed the dialogue and setting to extract visual cues and elements that would inform the stage setup.”* (Personal Interview, 2025)

His approach to the design process indicates his understanding of how theatrical scripts can serve as a blueprint for

visual storytelling. This approach aligns with Langman’s (2022) philosophy of “poor theatre,” where the focus is on the essence of the performance and how every element, including the set, directly serves the production. His collaborative process and commitment to authenticity demonstrate a blend of personal expertise and professional rigour in interpreting the script visually.

He also underscores the significant role that materials and budget constraints play in shaping the final set design. He notes how the choice of materials, including plywood, acrylic paints, fabrics, and polystyrene, was determined by both the budget and space limitations. He highlights the practical aspects of design, stating:

*“The choice of materials such as plywood, acrylic paints, fabrics, and polystyrene was determined by both the budget and the space constraints. Financial resources, the available space, and the time allocated for the production are always key factors that influence the complexity of the set design.”* (Personal Interview, 2025)

This acknowledgement of the constraints placed on the design process reflects a professional realism, where the practical challenges of production, such as budget and space, must be integrated into the overall vision. During the creative process, restrictions can often spur innovation, and his approach exemplifies this by effectively working within the limitations of available resources while still delivering a compelling stage design.

Another significant professional influence is his role as a mentor to younger designers, such as Kojo-Hilton, who has continued to adopt some of his design techniques. He reflects:

*“As a mentor, I have also had the opportunity to train and influence other designers, such as Kojo-Hilton, who has followed a similar design approach to mine. Kojo, who is also a visual artist, worked under my guidance at the Ghana National Theatre and has continued to incorporate some of my design techniques in his own works”* (Personal Interview, 2025)

This mentorship highlights his ongoing influence within the field of Ghanaian theatre. It reflects his professional commitment to nurturing new talent and ensuring the continuation of strong, foundational practices within the design community. This reciprocal relationship of knowledge exchange is also evident in his collaboration with colleagues, demonstrating how his personal philosophy of knowledge sharing contributes to the growth of the industry as a whole. Evidently, Johnson K. Edu’s interview reveals the intricate ways in which personal experience and professional expertise converge to shape his set design choices for *The Legend of Akusika*. His personal journey, informed by years of practice as a set designer and academic, deeply influences his creative process. At the same time, his collaborative mindset ensures that his work is part of a broader artistic dialogue. His use of past techniques, understanding of practical constraints, and mentoring of emerging designers all reflect how an individual’s personal and professional experiences work together to shape the final design. Through his work, he exemplifies how collaboration, cultural authenticity, and innovative problem-solving are all central to effective set design, while also contributing to the ongoing evolution of theatre design in Ghana.

## Conclusion

This study set out to systematically investigate and compare the design philosophies and creative processes of two leading contemporary Ghanaian set designers, Johnson K. Edu and Prince Kojo-Hilton, through their stagings of Martin Owusu's *The Legend of Akusika*. Employing a qualitative comparative case study design and framed by the theoretical lens of Comparative Aesthetics, the research sought to uncover the core principles guiding their work, the synthesis of indigenous and global influences, and the impact of personal and professional backgrounds on their design choices. The findings reveal a compelling narrative of artistic agency within Ghana's hybrid theatrical landscape, demonstrating how two distinct auteurs negotiate the complex triad of cultural heritage, global trends, and material constraints to forge unique scenographic identities.

The comparative analysis illuminates a fundamental divergence in philosophical orientation, rooted in each designer's formation. Johnson K. Edu's approach is anchored in an academic and naturalistic tradition. His philosophy prioritises observation, realism, and the faithful representation of the physical and social world. For Edu, the set is a dynamic narrative agent that must communicate the essence of the story through culturally resonant, authentic detail. His process is one of careful translation, interpreting the script's cues into tangible environments using refined techniques honed over decades of practice and pedagogy. His work embodies a form of cultural preservation through realism, where the accurate depiction of Ghanaian landscapes and symbols serves to ground the narrative in a tangible, recognisable world, fostering audience connection through authenticity and historical fidelity.

In contrast, Prince Kojo-Hilton operates from a self-taught, visual artist's perspective that champions cultural assertion through synthesis. His philosophy is more overtly declarative, viewing the set as an emotional and ideological "bridge between tradition and modernity." For Kojo-Hilton, design is a deliberate act of cultural storytelling, where indigenous symbols like Adinkra motifs are not merely decorative but are charged carriers of identity, integrated with modern techniques and global aesthetics (such as digital fabrication and international design trends) to "wow" the audience and provoke emotional engagement. His work reflects a proactive, celebratory hybridity, where culture is dynamically performed and reimagined for a contemporary, cosmopolitan viewership.

Despite these distinct entry points, both designers converge in their deep commitment to Ghanaian cultural identity as the non-negotiable core of their practice. This study clearly demonstrates that the oft-cited hybridity of Ghanaian scenography is not a monolithic condition but a spectrum of strategic negotiations. Edu navigates it by embedding tradition within a realist framework, while Kojo-Hilton performs it through bold, syncretic visual statements. Both, however, are united in resisting cultural erasure and using the stage as a site for cultural reaffirmation and dialogue.

The study also highlights the profound influence of practical constraints and collaborative contexts on artistic outcomes. Both designers explicitly discussed how budgets, material availability, and venue specifics (the National Theatre versus a university studio) directly shaped their material choices and technical solutions. This underscores a defining characteristic of Ghanaian set design: innovation is often born of necessity. Furthermore, the mentor-mentee relationship between Edu and

Kojo-Hilton reveals a vital thread of intergenerational knowledge transmission within the professional community. This lineage illustrates how techniques, philosophies, and a respect for cultural content are passed down, even as they are adapted and transformed by a new generation with different tools and sensibilities.

In addressing the identified scholarly gap, this study moves beyond descriptive documentation to offer a granular, process-oriented analysis. It provides empirical evidence of how theoretical concepts like Bhabha's hybridity and auteur theory manifest in the concrete decisions of practising artists. The findings contribute significantly to a more nuanced understanding of Ghanaian scenography by foregrounding the how and why behind the what.

The study has several implications for theory, practice, and pedagogy: For scholarship, it validates the efficacy of Comparative Aesthetics and practice-led research methodologies for analysing African creative industries. It calls for more such comparative studies that treat designers as auteurs worthy of deep, individual analysis. Secondly, the study highlights the strategic value of clearly articulating one's design philosophy. Documenting the innovative approaches born of material constraints can serve as a vital resource for the broader African theatre community facing similar challenges. It also underscores the importance of training that balances technical skill with deep cultural literacy and philosophical reflection. Curricula should encourage students to define their own position within the continuum of tradition and innovation, preparing them to be both skilled artisans and cultural thinkers.

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