

BOISTEROUS NATURE OF AFRICAN ART: IMPLICATIONS FOR WESTERN PERTINACIOUSITY

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Abstract

The paper encapsulated the boisterous nature of African art mostly as it cuts across the spiritual and embodiments roles it played in our traditional communities. Time was taken to identify the sources of the Western dogmatic and ethnocentric views from the early anthropologists and Art – historians and quickly point out the implications of the Whiteman's pertinacious views. Conclusions and recommendations were made that may help reduce these negative Eurocentric perceptions on African art.

African art has been maligned in the writings of Western scholars who have failed to understand its source and origin. This failure has led to the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the artistic production and expression of African people. African art cannot be meaningfully attempted within a western framework. The beauty of the true appreciation can only arrive through an understanding of the culture and environment that influenced the Art.

Since the first contact and exposure of African art to the western world in 1897, though the Whiteman marveled at the sophisticated and epistemological perfection of the Benin art, but they instead attributed the production of these artifacts which were in form of bronze, brass, copper, lead, gold, ivory, wood carvings, terra cutta, textile and other ornaments to the lost tribe of Israel, or the Egyptians or the Portuguese. The dogmatic inclination of the Whiteman did not allow the Westerners to believe that African art could equally compete, and even be better than the Western arts. In a forward made by Segy (1969), in an art exhibition of the Royal Benin art, at the metropolitan museum in New York it was affirmed that the Benin sculptures were seen by the outsiders for the first time after the British invasion of Benin Empire. He concluded that, the naturalism and royal imagery of these artworks could be compared to the masterpiece of the renaissance Europe.

Despite the level of development of African art in the 21st century, the Westerners still find it difficult to completely accept African art as equal to theirs because of two major reasons, firstly, because of the Whiteman ethnocentric and dogmatic inclinations, secondly, because of the different standards used in assessing aesthetics in the West. Ngumah (2008) noted that:

Despite the noticeable growth of modern African art and despite its encouraging degree of internationalization, African art has not really been accepted by the Western world. Even the contemporary African art is not popular in Europe because of that age old stereotyped belief that the Africans have no creative potentials like the Whiteman. The more the African artistes try to project themselves, the more the Western world makes the Africans to live in the past centuries. P: 45

Boisterous Nature of African Art

African art is tied to life, in other words, it is an 'art for life sake'. It is a visible factor that makes the societal homeostasis functional. In the theorization of Bronislaw Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown argued that, cultural practices had physiological and psychological functions, such as the satisfaction of desires. Radcliffe-Brown's structural functionalism focused on social structure and that, the social world constitutes a separate "level of reality distinct from those biological forms (people) and organic forms".

We do not need to be laconic when discussing African art, because African art is boisterous, energetic, enthusiastic and full of action. O'Hare (1991) noted that, African art is tied to life, it represents the physical translation of philosophical, religious and aesthetics tenets. The submission here is that African art addresses African cosmology. In many instances, it is a physical manifestation of abstract and subjective doctrines, a metaphor for socio – religious ethos.

Another area of interest is that African conception of art is a communal conception as against the European individualistic expression. To the Africans, the community exists prior to individual, and the individual is just a small part of a long tradition. Traditional African art is what it is today because of its powerful emotional content.

Simon (1983), highlighted that African art explains the past, describes values and a way of life, helps to relate to the supernatural force, mediates his social relations, expresses emotions and enhances man's present life as an establishment denoting pride or status as well as providing entertainment.

African artists are considered to be special spiritual personalities. They are respected and given honour in the community. The Egyptian people for example, regard the artist as those "who – keep – a life". The content of the pyramid can testify to this belief. The African artist is not really considered just an artist, he could be a farmer who carves or from any other profession. The traditional artist takes directive from the Oba's and Chief Priest over the form of art to produce. The artist's duty is to obey and produce what the community desires and not his personal creative expression. To inscribe personal names and address were not relevant, opposite of what we may find with Western artists (see fig. 1 below).



Fig 1
Ahianmwen – oro Bronze Staff
Author’s personal collection

African art was felt in every life activity of the people, in songs, that is, war songs, marriage songs, praise songs for the kings, religious songs, play songs and mourning songs, idioms, poems and adages to help teach moral values, customs and to ensure the continuity of tradition. It is pertinent to take a closer look at some other embodiments of African art.

Political Embodiment

Art symbols were produced and used as instruments for governance. Crowns were well knitted, staff of office, regalia, carvings of wild animals, chairs, cutleries, houses/ palace and other ornaments were creatively prepared and reserved for the kings and other nobles. In Benin Kingdom for example, artifacts and praise songs were used to portray the Obas influence, power, wealth, fame, visibility and invisibility of the universe. In Africa, artworks were created to help keep in memory the achievements of the ancestors.

Religious Embodiment

Traditional religion in Africa usually goes with one form of art symbol or Marquette, birds, humans, animals, and ornaments used in representing deities, ancestors, Local gods, and invisible powers. In most cases these symbols were widely accepted in the families or at the communities as the case maybe. In the periodical and annual ceremonies, the kings and the Chief Priest were usually in charge of the activities in the purification sessions. For instance during the *Ugie Emobo* rites in the Benin annual Igue festival, the ibis bird, popularly called *Ahianmwen oro*, the *bird of prophesy* made into a bronze art symbol with an over exaggerated long break, is a noticeable art symbol in this religious rite. The Oba and the high Chiefs dances around with the *Ahianmwen – Oro* art piece proudly and confidently believing that their prayers will be been answered by the ancestors (see fig. 2 below).

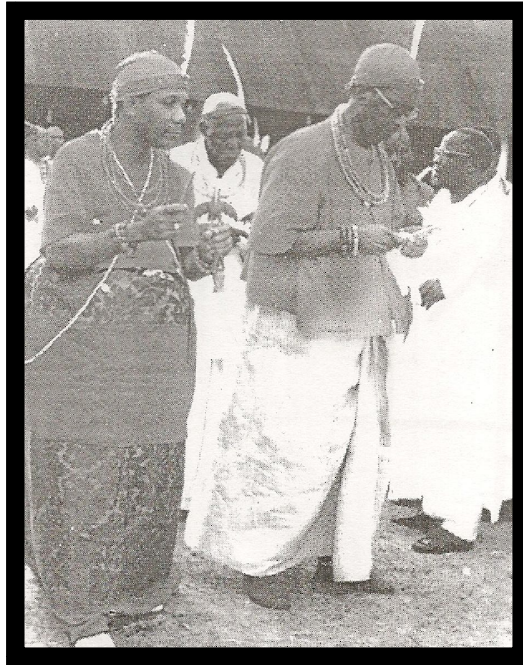


Fig 2
Oba of Benin and Chiefs Dance with Ahianmwun-oro bronz Staff
Author's personal collection



Fig 3
Benin Chiefs at the Emobo religious rite
Author's personal collection

Agricultural Embodiment

In the agricultural sphere, art symbols were created to represent the gods of farming. Their expectations were that, when these art symbols are well appeased and purified, there will be abundant harvest at the end of the season. A good example of these agricultural practices was that of the Kissi and Bambara cultures in the West African Region. The Kissi farmers created small art pieces with soap stones, popularly called the *pomdo* artifacts – eight inches in height, distributes them at different locations within the rice farm. At the end of the farming season, when there is a good harvest the *pomdo* artifacts were brought together with celebrations, bathed them with local gin and the provision of abundant food.

But when the opposite arises and there was poor harvest, these artifacts were also brought together and beaten or flogged with cane, in other to ensure a bountiful harvest next season. In that of *Bambara* culture, the *Chiwara* Head – dress artifact was created to represent a mystical Antelope who descended from the sky to teach the *Bambara* people how to farm. The *Chiwara* head – dress were created in different forms to represent the male, female and the youth folks in the community. These were done in order to bring together and attract larger participation in the agricultural ceremony. Outside the above illustrations, many other communities celebrate the new yam festival with performing arts.

Economic Embodiment

In African communities, artworks in form of artifacts, music, dance, textile works and ornamentation were created to serve as economic life line for the individuals, families and the entire society.

Lifelong employments were created, art forms were also used for exchanges for those things a party may not be able to get. Ogois Ere (900 – 1170 AD) established the Art and craft technology – A strategy for Benin industrialization. He divided the kingdom into different sections and demanded that they should specialize on a particular craft with monopoly rights. The Ogois gave them patronage and even built an international market at that time, popularly called *Eki – Agbado* for products and goods exchanges; splendor and wealth flourished in the kingdom.

Socio – Cultural Embodiment

Art forms were used to identify socio – cultural groups in Africa. When you look at some artifacts, songs, dances and other art forms; you may not need the assistance from anyone to tell you where they originated. Some socio-cultural association in Africa identify themselves with art forms of their choices even during ceremonial occasions.

Communication Embodiment

African traditional art symbols and performance arts were created to help meet the communication needs of the people between the leaders and the followers, between the deities/ gods the worshippers. Art was used as instruments for governance in some communities, it was to serve as “*looking glass self*,” in Benin for instance, the *Ahianmwun-oro* bronze pieces were only handled by the Oba and chiefs during the annually celebrated *Emobo* rites, where the nobles beat the ibis beaks with short iron rods as they dance around thereby communicating to the enemies and detractors of the

kingdom that one day will be captured and suffer the same fate. The intricate design of the *Ahianmwun-oro* object communicates wealth and power of the Oba.

Art symbols in the Africa society act as intercessors between the people and the ancestors. The beauty and sophistication of the art symbols help to facilitate faster communication with the ancestors.

Other embodiments of African art include those for domestic, entertainments, educational and events documentation purposes.

Implication of Western Pertinaciousness

The position taken by some Western scholars against the Afro centric views on art was fueled by the cumulative effects from the doctrine of racial superiority. The Whiteman on arrival to Africa expected to see a replication western culture, albeit with minor geographical modifications, he saw instead a remarkable different race and culture. Neither frescoes nor etching nor prints of the European sorts were found. In place of the Cross and Crucifix he saw masks, in place of art exhibitions and galleries he saw families' and communities' shrines where art piece were displayed. The Europeans therefore concluded that African art was fetish, the religion pagan and the people primitive. David Hume wrote in an essay that – "*blackness denotes not only ugliness but stupidity as well*" (Ohuoba. 1, 2013). Malinowski considered to be one of the stalwarts of modern anthropology was also a victim of the evolutionary concept in the sense in which he used the word "*savage*" to address African people. Leach (1957) criticized Malinowski work and maintained that:

Malinowski habitually refers to third world nations as savage, implying thereby a category of value judgments about the superiority of European culture which few of us today would unhesitating not accept, but which were unquestionable anthropological dogma at as late as about 1925. P:16

The double standard the Whiteman exhibits when it comes to rating and assessing African art are all attributes of eurocentricism. Eurocentric, in the sense that, Western scholars only focus on their culture and institutions and arrogantly be dismissive of others. Researches are based on etic premises rather than emic premises. Lomax (1969) noted that, the dogmatic views of some of Western scholars have deprived their researches the critical attitude necessary for the application of scientific methods.

Biased interpretation from the Western scholars no doubt, led to misrepresentation of African art and thereby reducing its values.

Conclusion

The spiritual and other embodiments of African art are the basic aesthetical functions, which are almost absent from the Western art.

Despite the Eurocentric position of the West against the Afro centric views, Wasilly Kandinsky – the first artist to champion the non – objective art, came out with a different opinion

from that of his colleagues. For him, he held strongly in support to how the African artists perceived art forms and the spiritual content.

Kandinsky noted that, form is nothing but an outward expression of the artist's inner needs – form is matter, and the artist is involved in constant struggle against materialism. He believes that, it is the spirit that rules over matter and not the other way round. African and Western artist operate on separate platforms.

Recommendations

One of the major factors that contributed to misinterpretations and misrepresentations of African art emanated from the early subjective writing of Western anthropologist, Art – historians and Sociologists who doctored their findings to the Eurocentric perceptions of art.

African scholars therefore, need to face these challenges by conducting more in – depth researches into African art and to come out with erudite findings that may help debunk the Western negative views on African art.

- 1) African leaders need to periodically organize local and international conferences on African art from one region of the world to another, for enlightenment purposes.
- 2) There is need to encourage more people to embrace the–Art History career.
- 3) Government should set aside incentive packages that may help the art – historians meet up their local and international obligations.

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