

## THE ICONOGRAPHY OF IGBO TRADITIONAL ARTS

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### Abstract

*It is observed that Art in Africa is characteristically different from the academic art of some advanced societies which has been distilled or purified and refined to the point where it has lost all traces of real life, lost the vitality of the street. Igbo Art captures deepest feelings of the people- their sorrows, joys, values, aspirations and beliefs. Art is history for the Igbo (Achebe, 2012). Igbo Traditional Arts is used to demonstrate the tendency of the Igbo to recount the history or life experiences of the society- telling the story of their achievements, their failures, their religious relationships, as well as strange developments such as epidemics and the colonial invasion. Achebe views Igbo Art in predominantly aesthetic terms, describing it as "Art in celebration". He argues that by bringing Art into the celebration of life, the Igbo invariably bring life into Art. Hence, Igbo Art even when it is found in the context of religious worship- naturally satisfies the people's aesthetic curiosity, providing them with entertainment or recreation. So, African Traditional Artworks are not altogether lacking aesthetic qualities. It also reflects the individual vision of the artist who tries to make the best of what is already established in the community as the artistic style appropriate to particular objects. The principle reason for studying African/Igbo Traditional Art says Willett, is the same reason for studying any other Art. According to him, Art is one of the highest expressions of human culture, which can bring us continual refreshment- recreation in its strictest sense. Most African Arts satisfy the aesthetic need of the people who own them.*

**Keywords:** Iconography, Igbo Traditional Arts, Aesthetics, Culture, Recreation

### Introduction

As a matter of fact, some Traditional African sculptures have been deemed fit to be juxtaposed with the works of modern or *avant-garde* European artists in Western Museums and Art exhibitions. It is a juxtaposition that makes tacit comparison of both. Examples of such Exhibitions include the 1936 Museum of Modern Art, New York; as well as the 1939 and 1940 exhibitions by the Institutes

of Contemporary Art in Boston and London respectively. The mention of these old exhibitions is important because they happened at the very time when African Art was scarcely recognized by the Western experts and critics. Considering the limited technology available to the Traditional African/Igbo artist, the intensity of the black man's creative energy looms large. Lawal (1980) notes with an air of astonishment that "Apart from serving as vehicles for supra-physical actions, the best in African woodcarving displays a phenomenal plasticity in its formal structure-quality which invests it with an aura of timelessness and which makes many an African woodcarving look still modern today" (p. 61). Be that as it may, a comparison between African Traditional Art and Western Art is not completely out of place. This is because most of the themes that feature in modern European Art have parallels in Traditional African/Igbo Art- expressionism, cubism and surrealism or abstractness. Expressionism refers to the freedom of the African Traditional Artist to express ideas in a non-naturalistic and symbolic manner. That is to say that their works do not need to resemble a definite human being. As such, African artists are prone to abstractness or surrealism. Cubism relates to the three dimensionality of the Artwork. Some scholars actually hold the view that these Traditional African artistic themes were antecedent to their European counterpart, and the African styles may have influenced the works of some 20<sup>th</sup> Century European artists (Fagg & Plass, 1964; Metuh, 1985). For example, Picasso's bust of a *Woman with a Hat*, a 1937 work on Marie-Therese Walter, is believed to reflect the influence of African carvings and masks. This is most evident in the Cubistic feature of the painting, a painting style that was not common among Western artists.

### **The Representation and Meaning of Igbo Art**

Culturally, Igbo Traditional Art has archaeological value. Every piece of artwork is bundle of knowledge. The epistemology of representation implies that images and artworks embody worldviews and meanings that can be understood by most Igbo people. Put differently, artworks in traditional Igboland/Africa are concepts in forms. In them the abstract ideas of the Igbo worldview are successfully transcribed into materiality. In the days of no modern writing techniques, the Igbo represented their ideas in drawing and sculptures. At that time, art was a veritable literature that must be read to access the traditional Igbo thoughts and worldviews. The beginning of the attempt to transcribe ideas and concepts into tangible forms is uncertain in the traditional Igbo culture. What is certain is that the Igbo have highly sophisticated phenomenological mindset.

This means that they have the natural tendency to make concrete what is rather fluid, indescribable and intangible was remarkable. With the exception of the spoken language, art was the Igboman's earliest means of making the mind's content perceptible. In addition to the making of sculptures that depict spiritual personages, there are also signs that represent ideas and values. The common instance of the epistemology of representation in some part of Igboland is probably the *Ikenga* effigy embodying the idea of a man's achievement. There is the case of *Mbari* house that looms in some areas as large as an artistic documentation of the activities and values defining the people's history, culture, religion and worldview (Cole, 1988, Metuh, 1985). The *ofo* stick is a pan - Igbo material symbol encapsulating the concepts of justice as well as ancestral and moral authority. In the larger African scene, the Golden stool of the Ashanti people of Ghana is a well celebrated example of this concept in form.

The idea of epistemology of representation may explain the connection of art to the origin of writing in human culture. In the absence of a writing culture, most ancient people had developed mnemonic devices used as communicative techniques. Durkheim, (1995) recognizes in the totemic drawings of primitive Australians not only an early form of written language but also an early form of art. Durkheim therefore suggests that the origin of writing can be traced to the primitive man's attempt to express his thought through drawings. More literate cultures and religions, like Christianity, had equally to apply art in instructing its then vastly non literate population. (Boss, 2009). Boss affirms, in his report on the iconoclastic controversies of the 8th and 9th Christian centuries that images help to instruct the simple; it is a substitute at the disposal of the educated for reading the scriptures. For instance, in the Basilica church of St. Francis of Assisi, in Italy, a visitor is immediately confronted with two parallel frescos of Jesus hanging on the cross almost naked and St Francis also half naked as he hands his clothing over to his father as a sign of reassignment to the will of God. It is believed that this juxtaposition would help even the dullest illiterate see how Francis has tried to imitate Christ. Primarily, imagery is a form of visual aid which helps neophytes to grasp religious and cultural ideas.

### **Forms of Art in the Traditional Igboland**

Igbo traditional life can be said to be suffused with works of art of various categories. The commonest forms of artistic shows found in Igboland are as follows - the Verbal (chants and songs): acoustic (music or instrumentals): Visuals (paintings and drawings): Kinetic (drama, acrobatics and other mask

performances), and especially the palpable art- forms (sculpture). In the past these art- forms – though secular in nature – have religion and ritual as the major context of their display. In recent times however, some of them have managed to develop into professional careers with or without religious undertone.

### **Music and Song - Minstrelsy**

Minstrelsy refers to the chants or song – performances rendered during festivals. It is as popular as the traditional drama among the Igbo especially during masquerade festivals. Its major component is the human voice, which chronicles or advises, exhorts or condemns or praises or criticizes (Okafor, 2006). Minstrelsy be it in Europe or in Africa is always a combination of songs, music, folklore as well as entertainment and education (Enekwe, Udechukwu & Okafor, 2002). The minstrel, who may be a masked performer or human being, speaks for the community and draws from the collective wisdom. He is a traditional singer or music maker, who tends to know every family line off by heart and while he reels out the names of his subject’s ancestors, he interjects praises or warnings in a fascinating manner that entertains his audience but also admonishes them.

### **Dramatic Art**

According to Amankulo (2002) dramatic art is the art of mimesis or imitation in which actors are used to tell story for an assembled audience by imitating or reliving the actions the character in the story. Drama is an essential aspect of traditional Igbo social and religious life. It is a source of entertainment as well as a veritable means of moral education. Amankulo associates Igbo traditional drama with religious festivals, arguing that,

Dramatic art in Igboland exists primarily within the context of festivals, the myths of which it concretizes. It is frequently used, like dance and music, to embellish such cultural festivals and ceremonies which may not have their own myths dramatized. Available research in Igboland reveals that dramatic art can hardly be said to exist outside the context of festival and ceremonies (p. 400).

In the traditional setting, there is no formal theatre made of actors and audience in the manner of modern theatres; instead, as Enekwe (1981) observes, everybody is involved in Traditional Igbo drama- the young and the old, men and women, humans and spirits. The commonest occasion for dramatic

performance in traditional Igboland is usually during masquerade festivals when the ancestral spirits engage their living progeny in a highly inspirational performance that is entertaining and at the same time character moulding. The masked spirits achieve their aims through songs, satires, and real dramatic actions. Other forms of mask performance are dancing and acrobatics.

### **Traditional Painting or Drawing**

Traditional paintings and drawings are concerned with two dimensional spaces. They are usually done on the walls of homes and shrines, and may sometimes decorate ritual instruments such as masks, gongs, and Ikoro. In the shrines, painting may include drawing of animals and other symbols that relate to the deity. For example, in *Imoka shrine*, one sees a variety of drawings of- monkey, trees, even *Mami wota* symbols. Traditional drawings also include *Uli*, *Mbu* and *Ichi* designs used as body adornments. While *Uli* entails sketch drawing with paint on the human body, *Mbu* and *Ichi* are knife-cuts on body parts. In particular, *Mbu* is a design given to young women, either on the hand or on the belly. In *Abor*, Udi L.G.A., young girls receive *Mbu* designs when they visit a newly born baby girl. The paints are derived from natural substances in the Igbo environment. For example, the *Uli* colour is extracted from the seeds of *Uli* tree or from the body of an insect such as *egu*, the moth (Okeke, 1978). Other traditional colours include the *Ufie* or *Obara* (red camwood derived from the bark of some trees), the *Odo* (yellow pigment derived from flowers and plants) and *Nzu* (cohoise chalk derived from a species of clay). Some of these colours have ritual symbolism.

Painting is usually associated with festivities. People decorate the walls of their homes as well as their own bodies during festivals for the purpose of beautification. Decorations are for enhancement (Fagg, 1967). Yet painting a mask or shrine may serve to civilize the spirit or lure it into the object (Hachett, 1988; Horton, 1966; Willett, 2002).

### **Sculptural Art**

The main bulk of traditional art in Igboland is probably the sculptural art, which are made for both secular and religious purposes. It ranges from the molding of deity- symbols or effigies to the carving of symbols of ancestral presence such as *nkwu* figures, *okposi*, *ofo* and *masks*; from the production of personal worship

paraphernalia like *okwa-chi*, *Ikenga* to other household utensils, stools, pots, ladles, and doors and so on. The epistemological principle of moving from the known to the unknown seems to explain the convenience with which the Igbo make images to depict spiritual beings. The *Mbari* comes up again as an illustration of the people's proclivity to exemplify the intangible contents of Igbo worldview by means of art. It is a display of artistry capturing graphically the activities and values of the day (Cole, 1988). Metuh describes *Mbari* as "an expression in art forms of ideas, beliefs, and myths which determine the traditions, practices and daily life of an African village community" (p. 11). The *Mbari* art illustrates what Udechukwu (1978) aptly refers to as concepts in form.

There is clearly the interplay of art and religion in the making of *Mbari*. In similar way, a piece of artwork can serve both domestic and ritual purposes. For example, a clay pot can serve for keeping water, oil, grains or for cooking; and it can also serve as a ritual container in the shrines (Okeke, 1978).

### **The Value of Art in Igbo Tradition**

The basic use of art in the traditional ancient societies is the expression, transmission and preservation of ideas. Art serve as a means of communicating with the spirit world. This is because within the religious context they acquire as symbolic representation of the spirits as well as their points of contact with men. Art helps man to visualize the invisible. It becomes the instrument for making contact with the spirit world. Sometimes particular spirits request for specific objects in contacting it or it may be the human mind in its natural tendency to access the invisible through the visible. In any case, such art work portrays a meaning that links man with the other world. Onunwa (1990) admits that with particular reference to Igbo traditional minstrelsy, that the art of music making in the celebration of Igbo festivals plays a role as a language of communication with deities. Whenever the musicians work themselves into frenzy during the sacred celebrations, it is believed that in that spiritual or emotional mood they more easily enter into close communication with the divine guests.

Art helps to articulate or visualize societal ideas or concepts, and it also remains basically an individual endeavour. It is an Igbo saying that *oha anaghi akwa nka* – that the society does not make art. It is the individual artists' ideas and feelings that are popularized by the people's tacit approval. In Aniako's (2002) view, society approves of individual enterprise . . . [but] it is in fact the later which

gives the former its ultimate expression. It is therefore the artist as an individual that is a veritable influence in shaping community ideas.

Secondly, some African peoples do use art as an antidote; that is for providing solutions to spiritual problems. Individuals with spiritual problems or sicknesses may be instructed through divination to create an icon or shrine for the appropriate spirit as a locus for contacting and appeasing the spirit.

Thirdly, art can act as enhancer of religious values. In most traditional societies, art as well as other physical displays that have little or no religious significance, is introduced into the religious context for the purpose of disposing worshippers to assimilate the value of religion. Some artistic displays of music, dances, paintings and sculptures, seem to intensify religion by projecting the spirit world in the light of the ontological themes of goodness, beauty and truth.

Fourthly, representation of the spirit world in an art is thought to render the spirit amendable to human manipulation. Metuh (1985) points out that there is a class of spirits that necessarily requires icons for effective control. While the production of carved images for deities may be a decision of those covenanted to them as a way to please their gods, some spirits actually demand that carvings be made for them. Divination reveals the deity's demand to worshippers' and specifies the type and form of the carving. The icon becomes a shrine or point where the people can encounter the spirit that is the medium of interaction with the spirit world.

In summary, the use of symbols can help in the psychological transformation of the users in terms of character building. A good example is the act of initiation of young boys into masquerade cult may instill male character into them. Ottemberg (1988) made bold to state that,

Art and craft, including masks and masquerades are mechanisms in Igbo country for socially distancing but not for totally isolating, the sexes and for symbolically indicating the supposed superior roles of males through a focus on the most ritually significant and the most publicly dramatic art. Without this psychological and social distancing, males would emotionally become mothers' boys again.

The art of masquerading generally mirrors social expectations for men and women. However, it does create in the people an appetite to become that which it projects.

## **Conclusion**

Most African/Igbo art seek to express ideas or emotion instead of imitating reality in terms of absolute naturalism. It therefore means they are not really for beautiful work from the perspective of foreign observer.

Art and religion have certain things in common. They both attempt to visualize the invisible and to communicate man's inner feelings and meanings. Thus they are functionally united and in Igbo culture they are naturally dependent. For, while religion tends in main to inspire Igbo arts, the latter gives expression to the people's religious emotions and ideas. Every object of art has its natural, ordinary meaning in normal human usage. Art, like religion, could be regarded as a means of revelation. Like religion, art recreates by offering assets of symbols of our own being, of community and of sacred. Again, like religion, art heals and recreates, just as it offers categories for evaluation in the society.

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