

Art, Religion and Symbolic Beliefs in Traditional African Context: A Case for Sculpture

Akpomuvie. Orhioghene. Benedict (PhD)

Sociology Department

Delta State University

Abraka

Abstract

Nigeria has produced a great variety of art traditions and her size, diverse geography and people have contributed to sculptural richness. Studies on these traditions have been restricted to materials from the ethnographic present and generally lack time depth. The reasons for this is probably the paucity of material from archeological excavations and the fact that some objects, notably made of wood, fiber and mud, cannot survive for long periods because of humidity, termites and other natural or human agencies. This paper which utilized relevant secondary sources of data is aimed at examining the motivation for making art, particularly sculpture in African society until recently. It revealed that the main motives for making sculpture in Africa particularly Nigeria, until recently, was religion, prestige and festivities. However, religion more than anything else provided the primary stimulus for the making of sculpture. The paper however, recommended intensification of archeological excavation in parts of Nigeria to generate new evidence on art traditions especially sculpture.

Introduction

A people's art represents cultural symbol system as does language. Art has certainly been one important way in which Africans have expressed their perception of nature. Andah (1988) asserted that among the several media by which people express their artistic perceptions of nature, oral literature, plastic and graphic arts and music have been among the most prominent, although western anthropologists often see art as a more vague symbol than language. According to the western view, art has often been used as specifically as language by Africans however, "style" in art is more diffuse than is the grammar of language. Meyer Schapiro expresses it thus "style is the constant form and sometimes the constant elements; qualities and expression in the art of an individual or a group".

In this sense, style is regarded as the code in which a message is communicated and as such, is subject to examination divorced from the message. In contrast to the Western individualistic and fragmented approach to art, art like religion is central to most African cultures. Not only is the African view of art a communal one, it is clearly an integral part of every other thing. In any case, for most peoples, art forms fall into three principal categories; figurative, expressive and syncretic. Examples of figurative art are painting, sculpture and miming. Music, dancing and architecture are expressive arts while literature is a good example of the syncretism. It is both figurative (e.g the epic) and expressive (the lyric) and it shows a variety of combinations of both these forms.

The figurative arts or rather the figures represented by sculptors, painters and mimers are either silent and motionless or simply silent while expressing themselves with gestures (miming). Music and dancing on the other hand, convey emotions and sentiments and changing impressions; music by the power of sound and dancing by that of bodily movement. According to the Federal Department of Antiquities (1977), the main motives for making sculpture in African society until recently and indeed in Europe until the late nineteenth century, were religion, prestige and festivities. However, it appears that it was religion more than anything else that provided the primary stimulus for the making of sculpture.

Religion, the Federal Department of Antiquities contended, has had a pervading influence on human life probably since man began to grapple with the problems posed by his environment and to confront the awesome issues of life and death. Nearly everywhere, men believe that there is a great life force outside them which is supreme and invisible. Its presence is felt in the many extraordinary and inexplicable things which they experience.

Most human societies believe that this supreme force or being is benevolent but that there are other lesser forces which are less benevolent. In fact, their nature is unpredictable and may be aspects of natural phenomena like lightning, thunder, mountains, rivers or even trees; or they may be ancestors or heroes who once lived with man on earth but are now extra-terrestrial. It is also believed that they can act as intermediaries between the supreme force or being and man. Thunder and lightning, for example, strike fear into human beings and could be a manifestation of the Supreme Being's anger against mankind. Their devastating effect can be curbed by placation with sacrifice.

As far as ancestors and heroes are concerned, their deaths do not terminate their association with the living. Everyone must live properly or incur their displeasure and be punished. Ancestors must therefore be propitiated with sacrifice. On the other hand, like the natural phenomena, they can intervene between the Supreme Being and the living and through prayers, thanks and offerings are made through them to Him. In turn, the Supreme Being communicates His blessings and curses to the living through both natural phenomena and ancestors. In all these rituals, sculpture plays an extremely significant role (Federal Department of Antiquities, 1977:12).

Religion: A Conceptual Note

It seems that a complete definition of religion has not been possible because it is so complex and varied in nature. The best people have done, has been to recognize its traits or common denominators. And even these are often differentially emphasized by different scholars. Religion was first defined by Sir Edward Tylor over a hundred years ago as the belief in supernatural beings. Durkheim (1915:47) also defined religion as a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things". In his view, religion involves a set of beliefs and practices that are uniquely the property of religion – as opposed to other social institutions and ways of thinking.

Durkheim (1912) (2001) argued that religious faiths distinguish between certain events that transcend the ordinary and the everyday world. Emile Durkheim emphasized three aspects of religion (1) the social context of religious systems; (2) the sacred aspect of religion; and (3) the moral basis of religion in society. The third point made by Durkheim, is that religion imposes a moral compulsion upon people to act in a certain way. As a part of the system of beliefs about the nature of the universe, religion offers a guide to behaviour among people, including a system of rules they must follow. Furthermore, because the religious beliefs are so deeply ingrained in the individual through his cultural training, religion offers a pattern of social control.

When an individual violates a religious rule governing his behaviour, he feels guilty, whether or not he is actually caught and punished. At the same time, when he follows the rules, he feels good about it and his beliefs are reinforced. We are all familiar with this notion of religion, in which a belief in salvation and an after life (heaven) is directly linked to the proper adherence to a code of behaviour during one's earthly life. DeCraemer, Vansina and Fox (1976:459-60) defined religion a "a system of symbols, beliefs, myths and rites experienced as profoundly significant, primarily because it provides individuals, groups and societies with an orientation towards ultimate conditions of existence. Religion provides an individuals collective self-definition.

It shapes man's cosmology and related patterns of cognition and is a fundamental source of social solidarity. Some of the problems of meaning to which religion is addressed are trans-cultural in the sense that they are confronted and experienced by members of every society. Other problems of meaning are more culture-bound. Given the traits mentioned and the attempts at definition, we shall view religion in this context as man's total reaction to the challenges and impressions of life (Andah, 1988). According to Andah, one can also understand why the investigation of religion is beset by what Ruth Benedict sees as a fundamental difficulty. Broadly speaking, religion performs a function in collective and individual human life of integration either of group life as described by Durkheim, or of individual life.

It helps give meaning to many aspects of life which require meaning in relation to others to form a cohesive harmony for social solidarity, as well as delineate between right and wrong and good and bad in effort to contain 'evil' according to each society and following from this, universal man's definition of these categories. Religion provides the normative moral code clearly demarcating the good from evil. Religion also serves as positive integrative function through prescribed rites and beliefs which guide behaviour in most other events in human life, especially situations such as conception, pregnancy, birth, puberty and marriage and death. Due to its nature and function, religion pervades and embraces almost all areas of life.

Religion as Source of Social Control

Gods and ancestors serve as witnesses and guarantors. According to Andah (1988), many Africans believe that one may swear by a god to convince people that what he is saying is true. If not true, the sanction is punishment by the gods within a stipulated period. If someone's things are stolen, the person can invoke a curse publicly and if the things are not returned within a stipulated time, the culprit is expected to be punished in a specific way as requested (e.g fatal accident, mishap, etc).

Andah further averred that ritual ceremonies and magical performances are often used in the economic sphere for organizing and controlling things and communal economic work itself (e.g farming, hunting, smiting, etc). For instance, among many peoples, it is a taboo to carry out such strenuous work during special festivals and if one breaks this, one faces punishment from the gods and ancestors. In marriage among many African peoples, girls were expected to remain virgins till marriage and after marriage, they were expected to remain faithful to their husbands or else childbirth would be impaired by the gods. The shame of being declared impure often acted as a deterrent to young girls since the girl and family would be lowly rated after. This served as an effective curb to sexual excesses and infidelity.

Idol Worship: A Pejorative Term

It is recognized that there are many different communities in Africa with different historical experience, cultures and religions but such studies as have been done on religious beliefs and rites of different communities reveal certain common traits and assumptions about the universe which are widespread in Africa. These provide a world view that may be described as African Religion and has public and private aspects.

According to Andah (1988) there are different ideas of God but two which appear to be common to most African communities, are the idea that God is an Immanent Presence. He is everywhere; and yet God is far away. These ideas are vividly conveyed in an Ashanti myth. Myths teach that it is not possible for man to reach up to God; or to grapple totally with the nature and dimension of God. This probably accounts for the polytheism in Africa. There are gods and intermediaries between man and the far removed divine creator, who is present in the whole of the universe, in everyone and everything. He is the Vital Force that animates and energizes all created things; the pantheon of gods, of rivers, trees, rocks, pebbles, all derive their power from the same source. They are all parts of the universe and aspects of the one reality.

Ray (1976) asserted that there are two fundamentally different types of divinity in African religion; the one creator God, who is usually remote from daily religious life and the many lesser gods and spirits which are constantly involved in everyday religious experience. Although many have tended to see African religions as either fundamentally monotheistic or essentially polytheistic, or a kind of pantheism, recent studies according to Ray (1976;50) suggest that African religions are better understood as involving elements of monotheism, polytheism and pantheism at different theological levels and in different contexts of experience.

Ekpo (1977) observed that it is because the Supreme Being is too far away for His influence to be readily felt, that for one to gain access to Him, intermediary forces are used. Yet it is still difficult to localize the energy of these forces before it can be harnessed in the service of man. An interesting study of Kalabari religion by Robin Horton reveals how sculpture is so important as a vehicle for bringing down the spirits to the level of the worshippers. Here, the sculpture is regarded as the “forehead” of the spirit and before blessings are requested, the spirits must be induced to take their dwelling in the sculpture. Once these spirits are thus localized, communication becomes possible.

Among the Yoruba, Ekpo further observed, a cult priest may refer to his sculpture as the Orisa (god) himself, but the implication is not that people worship this particular sculpture. As in the Kalabari case, the sculpture is simply the focal point of his worship. For example, the emblem for the Sango (thunder) cult is a carved wooden double-headed axe, which is also carved on other sculptures associated with Sango worship. One of the rare representations of a deity in Yoruba land, is the ancestral figure of Eruile at the small Osun village of Ilobu near Oshogbo. It is represented in the form of an equestrian figure. In the shrine for Sango are figures which are said to represent his wives.

Another Orisa, Esu, is also represented by a carved wooden figure. But these are very rare instances where sculptures were made to represent the lesser spirits, let alone the Supreme Being. It has been necessary to stress this point because it was customary for those who had not enquired into this matter to refer to African religion as idol worship and to say that the African does not recognize the Supreme Being. The fact is that these sculptures are not the object of worship: they are shrines in which fleeting spirits are temporarily localized in order to concentrate the worshipper's attention.

They serve the same function as the Christian Crucifix or the Muslim Prayer Beads. In most cases the sculptures in a shrine are mere furniture to glorify the spirit concerned or to embellish the shrine itself. For example, again in Ilobu, Ulli Beier observes that “the carving merely embellishes the shrine and stimulates religious feeling: it is never confused with the living spirit of the Orisa”. The carvings are usually brought out and washed every four days while rituals are being performed (Ekpo, 1977).

Classification of African Art: Sculpture

Classification generally speaking, is the making of distinction or finding uniqueness or similarity. It is always carried out to avoid generalizations. Classification also helps in understanding inter-relationships as well as in drawing attention to the characteristics of an item that would not have attracted any attention. Classification may also be used in ordering the totality of what is already known in any discipline as was the case in the classification of plants and animals during the 18th century that led to the discovery of evolution in the 19th century (Munro 1975). The earliest efforts however, made to classify the arts may be traced to Franz Boas’ categorization of art into the representative and the symbolic (Boas, 1927).

The objects studied and classified by Boas an anthropologist, were American-Indian ornaments and his methodology has remained the guiding principle in classification over the years and for all the arts. The pioneering effort in the classification of works of art from Africa is credited to Marcel Mauss who categorized African arts into arts of the body; ‘arts of the surrounding and autonomous figurative arts. It is in keeping with this tradition of classifying the arts that later efforts were made in the classification of traditional ssAfrican sculptures.

Margaret Trowell classified African sculpture into three groups, namely (a) spirit-regarding art; (b) Man-regarding art; and (c) the art of ritual display. Trowell (1964) sees man-regarding art as sculptures used for the glorification of kings and rulers expressed in terms of personal portraits and spirit-regarding art as comprising those sculptures with ritual value only and devoid of aesthetic qualities. The art of ritual display is believed to form a link between spirit-regarding and non-regarding art, for it can be used in both contexts.

This kind of classification Ekpo (1977) asserted might be a useful analytical tool in the hands of an art historian. However, Trowell gives the impression that for a society to have man-regarding art, it has first to pass through the stage of spirit-regarding art, for she said this about the art of Ife; “here we find an art which differs in techniques, form and content from all surrounding types of art. No longer do we find an emotional, childlike, romantic expression of the subjective reaction of the earlier artist to an unknown and rather frightening outer world, nor the spirit-regarding concentration on ritual values regardless of aesthetic results, but rather a carefully calculated and studied type of personal portraiture which suggests an intellectual approach entirely un-African in its outlook”.

Ekpo (1977) observed that it seems fallacious first to associate the so-called man-regarding art exclusively with portraiture or naturalistic art and secondly to believe that man-regarding art developed out of spirit-regarding art. It is to be expected that in centralized state, the artists would attempt to make portraits of individuals who perform important roles in the community but their art may not be exclusively naturalistic. Some of the Nok heads are almost naturalistic but among them, one finds some stylized heads like the one from Katsina Ala.

Yet it is conceivable that Nok art may well have been the product of a people with an overlord who held sway over a large area which the sculpture type has been found. The correlation between naturalism and centralised society on the one hand and art which has only ritual value and acephalous society on the other, must therefore be regarded as tenuous.

Secondly, Trowell gives the impression that abstract art, which she can find only in societies with no centralized government, has yet to develop into naturalistic art. This impression supposes that just as acephalous societies have yet to develop a centralized form of government, so abstract art is also waiting to develop into naturalistic art. As Ekpo (1977) rightly noted, such an evolutionary scheme for art has yet to be demonstrated.

Sculpture and Dance in the Generation Of Force For Worship

In most ethnic systems, it would seem that the source of all the life force of the world is the creator, a generally remote being who is not always the object of worship and whose function may perhaps be loosely compared with that of the queen ant in a nest of termites. As Fagg and List (1990) rightly noted, the channels through which the force passes to man and the material world, vary from one ethnic group to the other; in many cases, there are high gods such as Sango, the Yoruba thunder god or Ala, the earth goddess of the Ibo; in others, there are lesser nature spirits; in others again the ancestors – are a main source; or it may be drawn upon more directly by means of other channels (shrine).

The purpose is in all cases the same – the procurement of increase of force, necessary for the propagation of the race, the means of subsistence and the ability to cope with life. The arts in Africa are no mere decorative embroidery on the fabric of religion: they are vital parts of the process of the generation of force. This becomes especially clear if we consider dancing, a universal African art closely related in several different ways to sculpture. For there is strong reasons to believe that in traditional society, all dancing, whether sacred or profane, is held to increase the life force of the participants, that a person in stylized movement, is ipso facto generating force, which can be physically passed on to others by a laying-on of hands (as Fagg saw done, most strikingly in a woman's cult dance at Ilesha in Yoruba land).

There is no doubt that much of dancing in traditional society is “recreational”, but this word itself is a clue to its function in the recreation of force. Above all, the addition of sculpture in the form of masks raises the intensity and efficacy of the dance to the highest degree and masks, though seen in museums in unnaturally static form, must always be thought of in their dynamic context. They are in fact designed as mobiles: in the Epa festivals of north-east Yoruba land, the grotesque face of the mask proper, suddenly becomes dominant in a most unexpected way over the more naturalistic figures above it (Fagg and List, 1990).

Fagg and List further contended that aspects of the concept of increase provide the subject not only of masks but of figures and of virtually all African sculpture, as is notably demonstrated in Nigerian art; of all the sculptural forms given to the concept, the most striking is the exponential curve described in the growth of the horns of rams and antelopes, the tusks of elephants, the claws and beaks of birds and the shells of snails. Such curves are by their nature, a record of growth in time and sculptures based on them, though having only three dimensions, convey the fourth as well; it is by this means above all that they are given their remarkable intensity and sense of movement and their deep affinity with the dance. It is certain that ethnic groups with their profound understanding of nature see in these animal excrescences potent symbols of growth.

Sometimes, the artists incorporate actual horns in sculptures; more often they carve them more or less realistically but almost always emphasizing the exponential character of their carve. But they go far beyond this in composing whole sculptures under their influence: and it is no wonder that modern artists, deeply moved by their intensity and directness, have failed to rival them because of the inaccessibility of their informing belief.

Conclusion

Five dark centuries of continued misunderstanding of African sculpture have only been illuminated by some brief flashes of objective and lucid comprehension: the “discovery” of African art. The history of Europe’s views on the arts of Africa is tantamount to an almost undiluted ethnocentrism, the product of Europe’s persuasion of its universal vocation to spread the ideals of western civilization; monotheistic religion and monogamous family life, private property and material possessions, Christian morality and Academic art.

Western art is always on display, hanging on the walls of houses or in museums or illustrated in books. The African society which produced the masks and figures which we see in museums and books hid them away for most of the year. They were only brought out very briefly on special occasions. Masks and figures were used on a great many occasions throughout the year but each one was usually made for a specific ceremony and therefore very few appeared on several successive occasions while fewer of them were openly displayed in a public place. The decorative arts existed openly but the art which has been prized in Western museums since the end of the nineteenth century is the art of the ritual ceremony, which was usually kept hidden away when not in use.

Old or traditional African art is the product of a society which did not regard a work of art as an everlasting memorial to the genius of the man who made it or to his patron. Individual artists gained a reputation during their lifetimes and people may have come from as much as a hundred miles away to buy their work but this work quickly disappeared and the names of the individual artists were forgotten in two or three generations. Nevertheless, the skills of individual artists were handed down with the most remarkable continuity of tradition because it can be seen to have lasted for over eight thousand years.

Archaeology testifies to the existence of well developed art traditions in various parts of African from at least, Early Iron Age times. In some parts, this event dates back to the middle first millennium B.C., while in others it was later (in some places as late as first millennium A.D). However some of the more important elements were ornate pottery, sculpturing in different materials (days, bronze, brass, wood etc). African art forms in traditional settings came to symbolize spiritual authority in a ritual context and bring about an order of reality through their presence in everyday affairs.

It was as if in their utter helplessness and defenselessness, beleaguered African peoples realized that the only answer to their real need for security and survival lay in the laps of a spiritual power beyond man. The resultant effect was the establishment of certain trends which continue to this day. One of such is the carrying of a carved wood, akuaba doll, a blackened stylized human figure by pregnant Asante women. The Akuaba portrays the Asante ideal of beauty and its purpose is to ensure a handsome child.

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