

In Search of true African Art

from the Perspective of relative disciplines: case study of Architecture and Archaeology

Abstract

African art is a term typically used for the classification of the art of Sub-Saharan Africa. It appears casual, amateurish and primitive by the classical proportion of European art, which is the way “traditional” African art is regarded. But of course, the continent comprises ideas from different cultural groups and civilization, each with a unique art tradition, architecture and lifestyle. It is on this basis, we cannot talk about African Art without reference to the impact of some related disciplines, i.e. architecture and archaeology. Studies have shown that before the advent of European and American influences on Africa culture, the people have already made significant contribution to develop themselves in the areas of ancient architecture, traditional medicine and technology. Existing scholarship addresses documented evidences of ancient civilization in the archeological records. This study traces the history of some of the African art traditions, architectural styles, belief system, foreign impact and their usefulness in the communities that produced them, vis-à-vis what they connote in the present society. Therefore, this work intends to showcase the beauty and importance of the traditional African art and architecture, and how they would enrich our knowledge of history, research as well as serve reference purpose to generations yet unborn.

Key words: African and traditional art, Architecture, Archeology, history

1.0 Introduction

Art in its broadest definition is refers to all human creative endeavours. It includes action directly or indirectly relating to work production and survival. Art is simply a generic term for the creative impulse out of which sprang all other human pursuits such as architecture, science, religion and disciplines. African art covers quite a number of cultures and tribes, each with its unique art tradition and styles. In other words, African art objects are derived from divers group and cultures with similar but mostly divergent perspective. Therefore, it is complex and difficult to understand, inquiry into this complexity and the basis for understanding requires in-depth and precise knowledge of the people’s philosophy and indigenous way of life of the people (Rom Kalilu 1994).

In many African cultures, art is an integral part of people’s lives. Although, form presentation and significance of art varied from one cultural setting to another; over the years, art in its various forms has played a vital role in the lives of African people. It serves as a major form of communicative expression of religious beliefs and socio-cultural norms (Opoko, Adeokun, and Oluwatayo, 2016). However, Lawuyi (1994) observes art as a historical record and embodiment of the culture of a particular people. He points to artifact as representing a historic period of a particular people. Rom Kalilu (1994) also stresses that African art is a combination of various collections from different groups and traditions which have close

affinity but with diverse view. Citing examples from Yoruba art, the study argues that objects are made to be seen more as historical artefacts than being cited as historical reconstruction. However, the roles of archaeologist using artefacts to reconstruct history cannot be glossed over because it has served as pointer to some historical facts in most cases. Lawuyi (1994) corroborates this statement as he notes that: “In constructing Yoruba historiography, historian made use of archaeological statements, oral traditions, and available written and mythological sources to established reliable truth”. However, African art explores tradition and arouses emotional feelings of the people. The expression comes in different forms such as beauty of wood carving, iron working, bronze and brass casting, terracotta, mud sculpture, painting and ancient architecture. Traditional African Art does not only beautify the environment, but rather transmits laws, moral codes and history. It is made to communicate between people and the spirit world; and also signifies wealth and status of personality. It encompasses total way of life: birth, initiation, work, marriage, childbirth, death and afterlife (Tetteh, 2010). Therefore, in many cultures, art and craft are vital means of human perception of their world view and survival.

Therefore, the study attempt to answer questions such as: what is the place of Art in African society? Does African art still reside in the kings’ palaces as the custodian of culture and traditions? What are the influences of Western worlds and Colonization on African arts? Qualitative research method was adopted for this study. Photographic materials were also used to substantiate the discourse. Limited secondary data were obtained, while information collected were reviewed, discussed and presented descriptively with suggestive recommendations and conclusion.

2.0 Critical appraisal of African Art and Architecture

There is no gain saying the fact that documentation of African art is pioneered and dominated by Western scholars who are anthropologists, ethnographers and archaeologists. They have in no small measures contributed to the theoretical reflections. However, Rom Kalilu (1994) observes an underscoring of historical, contextual and most importantly, the formal qualities of African art objects. In the same vein, Egonwa (1994) mentions that some anthropologists and ethnographers who are interested in African can hardly account for the paucity of the art historical value and aesthetic insights. The actual interpretation of forms, symbols and iconographic representations as it really relates to most artistic creations were not accurate. Lawuyi (1994) observes an under-utilised value of African art in the analysis of European scholars. Unlike the oral traditions and written sources, the language of African art is “unfamiliar”, not easily readable as text of systematic relations of signs that corresponds to that of everyday speech. Therefore worthy to note that most African arts take inspirations and values from religious practices and culture which influences total ways of people’s life, and it is difficult to understand by non-Africans. Lawuyi (1994) further explains that if African arts were to be properly situated by historian, one would have been able to use heritage in our

museums to determine clearly origin and possibility of most cultural diffusion of contents, styles and forms.

According to Smikle (2008) who observed that many of what is known of Africa's rich heritage today can be attributed to information gathered from archaeological findings traceable to art. Artworks are an essential part of initiation rituals, planting prayers, harvest festivals, divination ceremonies and funerals. Humans and animals, the primary subjects in African art, depict desirable and undesirable aspects of human behavior. These traces are now eroded by civilization and modern technology of the western world.

Despite the avalanche rich cultural heritage advantage from the traditional African art, this paper observed the disappearance of the depth of rich meaning-laden traditional motifs and symbols from contemporary art works and architecture, and their replacement with contemporary forms and elements influenced by several forces including colonialism, expatriation of slaves and more recent forces of globalization and industrial mass production or technology. It is in the light of this expression that this study appraises African Art from the perspective of Architecture and Archaeology with a view of finding the present position of true African art which seems to be gradually going into a state of oblivion; and which can be used as basis for launching Africa into and all-round development long for.

3.0 Perception of African Art and Architecture

There exists initial misconception that Africa had no art identify. The term 'African Art' is seen as primitive and childlike representative art. Thus, Gates (1996) asserted that whatever was considered African art is termed 'primitive.' Despite reference to African art as primitive and fetish, archaeological discoveries and existing traditional communities prove such assumptions untrue (Opoko et al., 2016). A cursory look at the value of African art shows it has not been adequately represented in the record of world art history. There has been gross misappropriation of the subject matter. Suffice to say the Western scholars no doubt contributed to publicizing African art among their expeditions in Africa but the values and motifs originally was underscored. Their accounts and judgments was bias and has its root is euro-centrism and egoism which is also incomprehensive (Lawuyi 1994).

In the late nineteenth century, African art objects were initially kept and labeled by European museum curators only as part of sample of materials culture of foreign people (Rom Kalilu 1994). They were regarded as curio objects. It was also about this time that we began to witness development in the study of historical perspective to the African art but in a slow progression. Today, many museums all over the world are enriched with art works of African origin. Among the earliest surviving examples of African art are images which were painted on rock slabs found in caves in Namibia. Other examples of early African arts include the terra-cotta sculptures by the Nok artists in northern Nigeria between 500 BC and 200 AD (see figure 1a), the Nok terracotta human head and kneeling figure (See Figure 1b), equestrian figure and bronze bell of human face, Benin (See Figure 1c), terracotta woman figure and bronze head of an Oni of Ife, Osun State (NCMM, 2009).

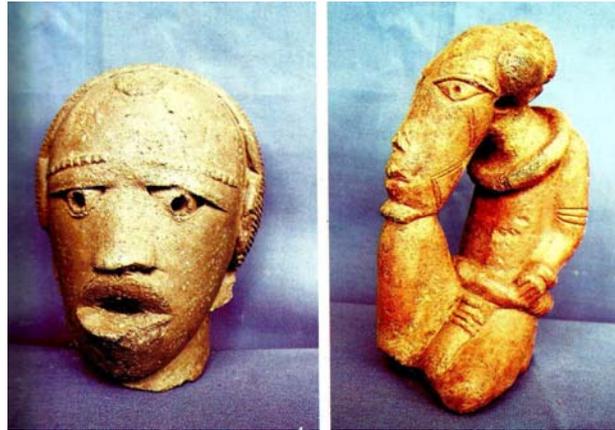


Figure 1a: NOK Terracotta Human Head and Kneeling figure, Kaduna State
Source: NCMM (2009) ALL IS NO LOT: A national treasure worth preserving



Figure 1b: Equestrian figure and Bronze bell of human face, Benin, Edo State
Source: NCMM (2009) ALL IS NO LOT: A national treasure worth preserving



Figure 1c: Terracotta woman figure and Bronze head of an Oni, Ife Osun State
Source: NCMM (2009) ALL IS NO LOT: A national treasure worth preserving

The case of African architecture, on the other hand like other aspects of the culture in Africa, is exceptionally diverse. Many ethno-linguistic groups throughout the history of Africa have had their own architectural traditions. The architecture of Africa has been subjected to numerous external impacts from the earliest periods for which evidence is available (Tetteh, 2010). The history of African art and architecture spans a vast period of time, beginning as early as 25,500 BC and continuing to the present. Traditional architecture has been seen as the house building styles of indigenous people (Okeyinka and Odetoye, 2015) and factors such as social, economic and climatic influences of such architecture. They further argued that culture is the most important of these factors since it enables what is acceptable to the community. Emphasizing that in traditional architecture, the decisions involved in the activity of building are pre-determined by the tradition and the customs of the people.

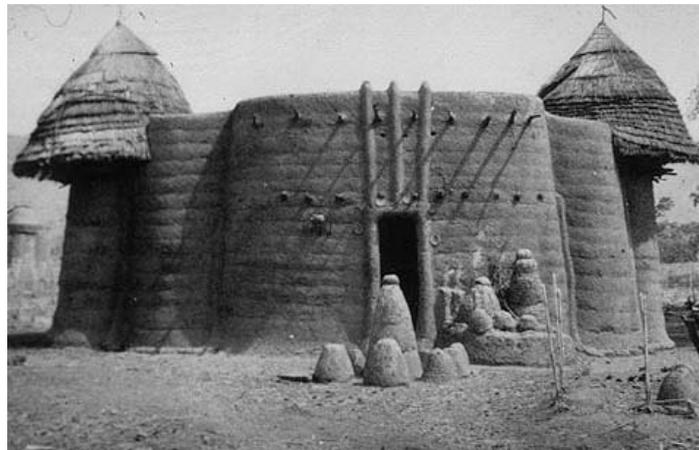


Figure 2: Traditional earthen roundhouse of Tamberma (Batammaliba) region of Togo and Benin, portraying the anthropomorphism of African art and architecture.

Source: Tetteh, (2010) <http://pitt.edu/tokerism>

African art does not constitute a single tradition since Africa is an enormous continent with hundreds of cultures with their own languages, religious beliefs and political systems. Each culture produces its own distinctive art and architecture, with variations in materials, intentions and results. Whereas some cultures excel in wood carving, others are also known for casting objects in metal and bronze. In one culture, a decorated pot might be used for cooling drinking water, while a similar pot is used for ritual ceremonies in another culture (Tetteh, 2010).

Traditional buildings across Africa's geographical zones are known to have demonstrated a thorough response to the climate, local technology and socio-economic pattern in which they evolved (see figure 2). The origin of these different traditional buildings were associated with the natural materials, their availability to the local builders, as well as customs, religious and cultural belief and also taboos (Agboola and Zango, 2014). Areas where art featured in African traditional buildings include exterior and internal walls, posts, beams, lintels, ceiling boards, furnishings, furniture, decorations and artifacts used in domestic activities including traditional altars located within the houses (see figures 3 and 4). Africa's architecture was

known to be supported by elaborately carved wooden posts often depicting the human body (see figure 4).



Figure 3: Decorated house facade in Zaria, Nigeria: painted facade and mud relief.
Source: Tetteh, (2010) <http://pitt.edu/tokerism>



Figure 4: Caryatids at the end of a court hall
Source: Dmochowski, (1990).

4.0 African art from the perspective of archaeology

Archaeology is the study of the past society, that is, the entire remains that could be gathered in order to reconstruct various aspects of life of a people. Archaeology in the recent past does not just stop in what is seen at site of past society but goes ahead to preserve evidence of material culture from the ancient civilization. Thus, cultural resource management is conceived as practicing archaeology with emphasis on conservation and better use of the archaeological data-base (Folorunso 1996). It is in this regard that managing cultural heritage becomes the objects to reconstruct past societies. The role of archaeologists over the artifacts that have being excavated include identified and valued resources, the essence of this is to prevent exploitation, decay, and theft.

Archaeological findings in form of cultural resources are rich as non-material and material attributes of different cultures in Africa, transmitted through generations. This includes diverse belief, festivals, diets, architecture, iron working, wood and stone carving, etc. Some

of these resources may remain in actual use as do some historic and ethnographic materials, or they may consist only of partial remains and the traces of the past use, as with archaeological sites (Lipe, 1984). For examples, some of Nigerian art traditions recovered at archaeological sites are from Nok, Ife, Benin, Igbo-Ukwu and Esie soapstone, among historical buildings are Keffin Madaki and Ilajo Bar, etc. (Okpoko and Okpoko, 2002). Nigeria's traditional architecture is represented by various palaces. In the palace of several kings and chiefs in part of Nigeria there are mini museums which associated with crown and other objects of cultural significance (Momin and Okpoko, 1990). In the palaces, collections comprise mainly hereditary ceremonial objects. The royal patronage of the work of arts (for example, Benin) led to the accumulation of cultural objects of various kinds. Many of these collections were looted by Europeans, but are later found in various museums and rich people's homes in Europe.

The anthropological study of ancient African art and culture were study by scholars as Leo Frobenius, Kenneth C. Murray, Bernard Fagg among others. Their exploration brought to light the creative ingenuity of African artistry and craftsmanship which are not only created for religious purposes but also as a source of prosperity for people. The famous discoveries with astonishment were the Ife arts, most of which were discovered by means of archaeological excavation. Through this work, Frobenius drew people's attention to the outstanding historical and archaeological importance of Ife and naturalistic sculptures found there (Famoroti, 2010). The discovery of Ife, Benin, Nok, Esie soapstones arts and its study has helped in understanding of the history and ancient civilization in Nigeria.

5.0 Disservice of foreign religions to African art

African arts were predominantly traditional before encounter with the Arabians and later Europeans through trade and colonization. The European influence was limited to coastal towns and the middle belts. In Nigeria for example, Interactions with the Arabians through the trans-Saharan trade explain the predominance of Islamic architecture in northern Nigeria (Garlake, 2002; Allan and Tengan, 2014). The interactions with European missionaries explain the predominance of gothic or Christian Architecture in the Southern part of Nigeria (Allan and Tengan, 2014).

Babalola (1994) observes that prior the European or contemporary art representation; African art was fashioned after the aesthetic and cultural norms of the people. The art idea revolved round the total way of the people's life. The concepts of forms were spiritually and skillfully fashioned by experienced craftsmen in the community. The traditional craft was purely a family or lineage affairs pass down from one generation to another. In this order, those in charge of art production then were knowledgeable about the community's philosophy, legendary, aspiration and belief of the people. Therefore, they produced works that are acceptable by the people both in beauty, value and form representations. The task of craftsmen, goldsmiths, carvers, and the likes are to meet the needs of the people whether domestic, social or religious.

When European missionaries penetrated the interior of Africa for the purpose of converting Africans to Christians, one of the first things they did was to rid the tribes of their tribal idols and ancestral spirits. These were represented by the carved figures and masks. Thousands of sculptures and masks were burned by missionaries, and others were hidden away by the natives. The artists of some tribes turned to making new carvings that represented the figures in the new Christian religion. Since many of these figures still had the primitive style of the traditional cultures, they, too, were looked upon as pagan, primitive style of the traditional cultures, and were not accepted in the mission schools and churches (Gates, 1996).

The status of African art has a negative impact on contemporary artist in modern society. Art is not as highly exalted in a society where people believe in money, power and social status. There is little or no appreciation for African art in a society that is driven by modern religion belief. Art has being regarded as a medium of propaganda for indigenous religions, especially by the Christian and Muslim faithful. The artistic works of wooden sculptures are regarded as graven images, unrefined art concepts with fetish powers. Art and artists in Africa suffered tremendous setbacks and opposition from some section of individuals and majority in the society (Oyinloye, 2006). While the Western worlds were attempting to help Africans to be more religious and as well advance in technology, they were not careful enough to guide some of the African arts jealously. Since then, many smaller communities have lost their cultural identity to modern religion and civilization. Appreciation must be given to the effort of the Nigerian antiquity services that helped safeguard most cultural object that are preserved in our national museums today (Oyinloye, 2015).

6.0 African art in palaces and courtyards of traditional rulers

In the ancient African culture, it is the Kings and nobles that usually commissioned traditional craftsmen and artists to work for them in the community. Therefore, most carvings were fashioned after myths, philosophies and ancestors of the land. In this regard, traditional rulers are usually the custodian of most African arts. The important and useful objects such as stool, staff, house-post, panels are all found in the palaces of the King or paramount rulers. However, carved objects of worship, image of ancestor are kept in shrine or altar of the deity.

According to Adejumo (1994) the Yoruba images used by Osun worships in Osogbo, initially 36 in number are not carved after the deities; but as representation of priestesses and worshippers of some particular deities. Further investigation suggested that the images were not actually the representation of any deity (Adejumo 1994). They were all kept in the shrine of Osun and repainted yearly at every festive period. It is mostly utilitarian object of arts that are the palaces because they are used for one purpose or the other. The Yoruba images can hardly be considered as idol because they were not carved after the semblance of gods. The images involved in the celebration of African festival are the visible and tangible manifestation of the spiritual conception. After all, many deities in Yoruba culture can be worship without images. Most carved images were purely objects of beauty to be admired or appraised during cultural festival in the community. This is the reason why there has not been any record of worship or manifestation of spirit in any cultural heritage preserved in our

national museums. All objects kept in the museums are not worshiped but preserved for their socio-cultural importance.

The case of African palace architecture is built to assume a more permanent structure with thicker walls, more elaborate designs and larger spaces. In Yoruba land, southwest Nigeria the palaces are more defined by spatial variation of its sections such as verandah, courtyards etc. Yoruba palaces are relatively dedicated to the gods, *Orisa*, and could be termed the dwelling places of the gods. The task of ornamentation and decoration of Yoruba palaces lies on the communities and the priests in charge of the gods which the kings represent on earth (Okeyinka and Odetoye, 2015; Fajuyigbe, and Okunade, 2015). African people generally have their own respective religious places which are not for common use, they are considered sacred or holy. The kings and paramount chiefs in the society usually reserve certain areas in the palaces where they express their religious feelings. These places are specially decorated with religious emblems to go with the tradition of the land. The architecture of the African palaces is traditionally embedded in the use of art as the main source of aesthetic embellishment. Art is totally linked to architecture both in structure and interpretation. For this reason most African culture are deliberately protected by creating custody for them within the palace with the king or specially appointed chief as the custodian of such culture.

7.0 Foreign influences on African architecture and artistic expression

In the early 1990s the beauty of traditional African sculpture became a powerful influence among European artists who formed an avant-garde in the development of modern art. In France, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and their school of Paris' friends blended the highly stylized treatment of the human figure in African sculpture with painting styles from post-impressionism artists. The attention of modern artists was drawn to African sculpture because of its sophisticated and unique approach to the abstraction of the human figure. This feature inspires the European artists to develop a painting style for their art.

On the other hand, traditional architecture has continued to experience rapid revolution due to factors ranging from trade exchange, colonialism, and return of slaves, industrialisation to globalization and others. In religion, especially Christianity and Islam also played significant role in this revolution. From the religious point of view, many of the art works were fetish and mystical (Hardy, 2003; Adeyemi, 2008; Opoko et al., 2016). Therefore, converts were consequently expected to denounce them and embrace other religious symbols than the fetish traditional items. Consequent upon the abolition of slave trade for example, Nigerian slaves were repatriated back to Nigeria via Lagos. Opoko et al. (2016), observed that the returnee slaves from Sierra-Leone and South America had a defining impact on the lifestyle of people of South west Nigeria which was very evident in the built environment's architectural style. Most of these returnee slaves have perfected their craftsmanship skills from South America. They introduced the ornate Afro-Brazilian domestic architectural style of Portuguese antecedents into the region, beginning from Lagos where they settled to other parts of Africa (Osasona, 2007). Skills in the use of wood for relief murals as well as elaborately carved

balusters and door panels were at their command. They were also specialist at carvings around windows, portals, quoins, plinths, column capitals, shafts and bases. This Afro-Brazilian style then began to grow from Lagos and extended to other cities in Nigeria such as Abeokuta (see figure 5, 6a and b).

While the Western worlds were attempting to help Africans to be more religious and as well advance in technology, they were not careful enough to guard and guide some of the African arts jealously especially those that were not fetish. Since then, many smaller communities have lost their identity.



Figure 5: Gate view of the Alake Palace Ake, Abeokuta-Nigeria (Elements of European, Yoruba and Jewish motifs combined to produce new hybrid aesthetics). Source: Authors, (2016).



Figure 6a: Pictorial view of the Cathedral Church of Saint Peters Ake, Abeokuta (The first Church in Nigeria) (This architecture was built in the style of Brazilian cathedrals. A great influence of the Afro-Brazilian style) Source: Authors, (2016)



Figure 6b: Pictorial view of the Centenary Hall Ake, Abeokuta-Nigeria built in 1930
(The building typifies the obliteration of traditional architectural styles by European influence).
Source: Authors, (2016.)

8.0 Concluding remark and recommendations

The future of any art and Architecture depends on the extent to which it is acceptable to the people for whom it is intended. The notion that art works or buildings of traditional materials are substandard is the main obstacle to the development of an authentic African art and Architecture that is truly indigenous to the people (Adeyemi, 2008). He further cited the quote of Richard Martin in the story of the African past as one of destruction of traditional values and their replacement with alien ones. Many even consider this trend as inevitable. The visual manifestation of the African fondness of alien culture is confirmed in the picture painted by Richard Martin – the picture of the “Wabensi” in Kenya, the “Apambwaba” in Zambia the “Nana Benz” in Togo and in recent times the “Mandarin Millionaires” of Nigeria.

African artists place a high value on fine workmanship and mastery of the medium (Blier, 2006). The form and detail of African artworks and architecture are very crucial in their designs. Balance and symmetry are also prominent in most African artworks and architecture. The textures of their finishes are taken into greater consideration in order to make the works appreciated in their community. Smooth finishes are mostly given to the end products of most traditional African artworks and architecture. This element of African aesthetics is very conspicuous in African art and architecture.

By and large, despite the diminishing rate of the traditional African art, this study emphasized that not all valuable African arts has been lost. Indeed, the best of what can be called African arts today can still be found in most African ancient palaces and national museums nationwide. The study therefore recommend among others, that primary and secondary schools curriculum should include courses that will take pupils to traditional palaces, museums and archaeological sites, especially at secondary school level, so that historical art works can be seen, appreciated and studied appropriately.

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