

TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY VISUAL ARTS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper points out that there is imprecision in the nomenclature, which characterizes discussions on African visual arts and that it is an unfortunate tendency to identify the nature and origin of African visual arts regardless of their formal or functional qualities. The paper identifies the discussions to establish two primary contexts of creativity: the traditional and the contemporary. To determine the imprecision, the paper discusses African visual arts in their traditional and modern modes, establishes their intersection and divergences made recommendations.

Introduction

Today nomenclature characterizes discussions on African visual arts. The discussions established two primary contexts of creativity: the traditional and the contemporary. As a result, humanity now uses contemporary and traditional as common descriptive adjectives for African visual arts. African past in terms of the visual arts is still much alive and when this is compared with the present Africa, the division is only natural. Nevertheless, the nomenclature has an unnecessary imprecision that deserves urgent attention. This unnecessary imprecision is a problem to Africans. This has been an oversight, which must not continue. The reason is that the nomenclature and the response of none Africans to it show an unfortunate tendency to identify the nature and origin of African visual arts regardless of their formal or functional qualities. It is time to direct attention to generic discussions on the nature and origin of African visual arts and establish precision on the nomenclature. Truly, there is little or no point calling a goat an animal in order to differentiate it from an antelope or a dog. Nevertheless, to refuse to distinguish between a goat and sheep however structurally similar they may be, will make one incapable of dealing effectively and measurably with neither of them.

Indeed, human culture draws a division between events because of time and mode. Because of time, humanity often refers to events in their tenses. This is in respect of past, present and future. On mode, there is a shift to tradition (al) and modern/contemporary. In the tradition (al), such phrases as custom – ritual, institution, habit, convention, belief, folklore and establish practice – are illuminating. Tradition is a headword to traditionalism, which connotes conventionalism as conservatism, conformity, orthodoxy and fundamentalism. Traditionalist, meaning purist, fundamentalist and conformist, is another word that forms a suffix to tradition.

Established practices based on ethnicity, kinship, language and social institutions define the traditional context. Each cultural area accepts unconsciously a distinct body of practices that creates and maintains its own art forms. Ozokeraha (2009) posits that the cultural area may evolve clear stylistic preferences above the common operational principles and the fundamental forms it shares with other cultural areas; and added that the stylistic forms that manifest unconsciously on the part of the people are attributive to them.

Humanity sometimes refers to the arts that traditional context cultivates as historic or ancestral. Ozokeraha (2009) emphasized that they are historic because not only they existed or happened in the past or they can describe events or people from the past and relate to the past or to the study of history but because they are important in history. He added that they are ancestral arts because they relate to events or personalities in former generations in someone's family, that this is true when we look at the arts from modern perspective, and that their modes of transmission, materials and conventions humanity carries from generation to generation. Indeed, humanity also refers to them as classical traditions of Africa. This is not only for their historical dept but also for their intrinsic nature as models of forms and structure to the contemporary expressions.

The traditional arts are neither static nor obsolete since the traditions that support them are dynamic (Nketia, 2005). History, shared experiences, beliefs and values are sources of inspiration to traditional arts for they find energy, power and vitality to remain constantly as repertoire of knowledge and prestige of a cultural area. Their other values as aesthetic enjoyment and as referent to modern creativity offer them the opportunity to challenge everyday our individual and collective inputs to the world of arts and therein renew our experiences (Ozokeraha, 2008).

Contemporary, on the other hand, connotes equal as colleague, match, partner, associate, mate and fellow that exist about the same time. Another word that strikes the mind when exposed to contemporary is modern. Modern connotes current, up-to-date, present, prevailing, state-of-the-art and innovation. Modern, perhaps, best contrasts tradition with respect to this discussion. If this opinion serves, then this paper will prefer modern to contemporary for modern context of creativity lends itself to the cultural life of new social bodies established by affinity beyond ethnicity and kinship. These bodies that are scientific and technological have influences on life in the areas of political parties, churches or mosques, educational institutions, sports, clubs, and other professional formations. Changing and evolving philosophy and acculturation also lends a voice to the modern genre of creativity. Arts supported by the experiences of these bodies and philosophy comment on issues nationally or internationally.

Every artist belongs to a cultural area. Ozokeraha (2009) holds that new social bodies do not replace an artist's sense of his cultural area rather the social bodies serve as complements and that by this an artist's way of looking at the world is enhanced and thereby relates better with his immediate environment and the world as a whole.

While African artists in the past relied solely on the tradition and custom of their ancestors today, artists have a choice between the tradition and secular or a combination of the two. The combination invalidates any claim that a work of art may lay on nomenclature. This indeed goes to demonstrate the serious analytical difficulties that myriad forms of art present to the scholar. Beginning with ritual, this paper sets out to discuss African visual arts in their traditional and modern modes, determine the imprecision in the nomenclature and establish their intersection and divergences.

Tradition/the Traditional African Ritual

The religious belief system in traditional Africa lends credence to the supernatural. However, there is no adherence to any single doctrine. While some attribute the supernatural to the Almighty God, others do to gods, goddesses, and some forces such as ancestors and spirits. Whatever forms the supernatural assumes the belief system attributes magical powers, omnipresence and omniscience to them, serving as strategies for reinforcing life, fertility, and power. Man believes that he could get close to the supernatural by appeasing it to control or influence it in order to reorder his world (Horn, 1981). In this course, man then sought to make what is intangible tangible, immaterial material and superhuman individual. Since African religions sought to harnessing powers and channel them for the good of the community, Africans employ rituals to achieve these. Ritual, therefore, helps to ensure a community's and individual's relationship with ancestors, who are guardians of order, with spiritual forces within nature, and with the gods. For ritual, man began to create images to symbolize the supernatural. In most cases, the images are mud sculptures and carved cult figures believed to inhabit the supernatural. Man visualizes the supernatural in these images, invoke it, and appease it in order to reorder his world.

Man seeks to appease the supernatural in invocation and or in worship and then takes on costumes and masks. The costume may be all red, all white, or a combination of the two with body adornment. The masks are in two forms, head masks and facemasks carved of wood. They may be painted and attached with raffia fiber. Masks are in themselves work of art, but when men wear them in performance, they transform into a powerful spiritual force of religion that command great respect. Man uses these ritually during the celebration of traditional festivals.

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Most traditional African festivals intertwine with ritual dance, just as ritual dance and religion in Africa are difficult to separate. Nevertheless, ritual dance appeases, heals, protects, brings about fertility, entertains and communicates. Man performs ritual dance as a group or as solo. As a group, the dance conforms to formalized patterns of straight or circular lines. As solo, the individual performs with near muscle-braking poses on straight lines, curve and double curve lines or a combination of them. With rituals in many traditional African cultures, people master the complex verbal, musical and memory skills after years of specialized training. However, the training requires spiritual and classified efforts in order to have a strong control both of the word/songs and of the audience. The dancer in performance may employ mining or voicing to tell a story, after undergoing spiritual training and rehearsing for a period. From the foregoing, therefore, ritual dance is dramatic. Both solo and group dance, even the carnival dance associated with traditional festivals, are a drama of sort.

Ritual artifacts, ritual dance, and the visual arts are reconciled in function, subject matter and the use of poses. The patterns of lines that delineate the poses of the different steps in ritual dance are very rewarding in the visual arts. In one respect, they speak straight from the oral tradition, norms, myth, folklore, language, and dress code of the people. These people have over time created and maintained peculiar style of expression, forms and motifs that take supremacy over general principles and forms. In another respect, those dance steps recall those memories that only they as repertoire preserve for renewal of experiences. In the visual arts, both the creator and the viewer interpret and pass judgment on forms on their formal elements. Marrying the poses of ritual dance with the formal elements of the visual arts embellishes the function, disposition and symbolism of forms. In this way, the visual artist easily communicate message and the viewer/reader easily deciphers meanings especially if both the creator and the viewer have almost the same dept in the same tradition.

Ritual Costume: The Traditional

Only few human cultures, if there are that do not find the cloth an appropriate cover for nudity. However, cloth is more than that in religion and in the visual arts. The cloth, like adornment, is both definitive and indicative. In this respect, cloth transforms from the ordinary to costume, which serves a special function. It is an expression of status, rank, membership, protection, assurance, and inheritance. The cloth with beads, cowries, raffia fiber, and rattles enrich creativity, embellishing the visuals more than paint does to a building. Costume is not only wood fiber related. It embraces metal, too. The *Eben* and *Ada*, a scepter of authority of the *Oba* of Benin and of *Ovie* of Ozoro, are made of metal. They are ritual objects. Ozokeraha (2009) posits that once the cutlass of a warrior has been bath with medicine, it ceases to be ordinary but becomes a costume of war and that when rattles, drums and their accessories are bath with animal blood at the shrine, they are no longer ordinary, but religious musical costumes. He added that when a man in initiation to become a chief eats the cola nut and the native *chalk*, he transforms ritually.

Costume, on the other hand, enriches the visual arts with sense of folds. To the creative arts, the cloth in action extends the scope of costume. It makes literature and drama richer. The visual arts find the *cloth* in action very rewarding. Linear forms and patterns that the *cloth* in action offers make art forms expressive and dynamic.

Ceremonial/Cult Figures

Religion originates from man's inability to access the unknown. To access it, man resorted to visualizing and symbolizing his imagination. In this respect, he began to think of controlling his world, and that this is possible with concretizing the unknown so that he could address and appease it. Man reconciled traditionally the unknown and known in works of art mostly in mud and wood figures, nature and animal. In the Niger/Delta area, man attributes good luck to the "hand", bad luck to "spirit husband/wife, long life to "ancestors", and fertility to "land". A body of water, mountain, large trees and certain animals also command respect so much so that man worships them in Africa. The people symbolize these with miniature carvings with wood. In the Isoko cultural area, the people symbolize these with "Ivri, "Emema", and ancestral staff. In this respect, "Ikenga" is very popular with the *Igbos*. While the *Ivri*, *Emema* and *Ikenga* are personalized, the ancestors are lineal.

Ivri, a cult figure, is carved as one or two figure standing on the back of a four-legged beast, which represents the hippopotamus. Some features evident in this sculpture are caps on the head, vertical scars on the forehead and the navel on an elongated stomach. The character of the figure on its pose, proportion, axis and stasis is formal. The figure is standing with an overall plane of reference. This introduces rigidity to the sculpture. The symmetrical disposition of its forms enhances this rigidity inherent in the sculpture. The sculpture is a derivative of African proportion with an enlarged head, elongated trunk and short legs.

The *Ivri* figures have cubic character. The minor features are very clear in this regard. The eyes disappear sometimes for drooping upper eyelids to replace. They are shaped like half moon. The nose is a triangular block with sharp transition. The mouth is set at a lower portion of the face, replacing the chin with a curve-linear shape that runs from one end of the face to the other. The hands and legs are made of cubic forms. The volumes have abrupt transition.

Like the *Ivri*, *Emema* is also associated with good omen. The most popular ones are the female figures, believed to have feminine control on the owners. The figure is carved usually as a single unit. Naked sculpture as it were, shows the breast and the reproductive region with a vertical scar that begins the division of the two legs. These apart, the sculpture have similar formal dispositions and characteristics with those of *Ivri*.

Divination/Sculpture

Man attempted to reconcile the unknown and his desire to know in producing miniature sculptural receptacles. In Nigeria, it is part of life spiritually to diagnose the cause of death, sickness, misfortune, and infertility in a family. The facilitator is an expert only in spirit *mediumship* but not in the tools involved in divination. The tools are artistically carved wood or nuts or bones or a combination of them by sculptors. Were tusk and pine are added to the tools; the carver still works on them. While some of these items are used separately in a carved wooden flat bowl, others are used collectively as artists weave them together in form of a mat by drilling holes on each of them and passing threads through to hold them in place.

Adornment/Ornamentals

Religiously and culturally, body adornment has spiritual connotation in Nigeria. Body adornment is not only indicative but also definitive. This is in respect of status, rank, membership, protection, assurance, and inheritance. Body adornment whether in tattoos or in bangles, embellishes beauty and accelerates spirit *mediumship* in celebration or invocation or worship. Once one is adorned, one ceases to be ordinary mortal, who is limited but becomes immortal and may explore the unknown as spirit takes possession of one. The use of armlets, beads, bracelets and pendants has their roots in religion and culture. These objects are visual art.

The Modern/Contemporary

This paper established earlier that the modern/contemporary context of creativity lends itself to the cultural life of new social bodies established by affinity beyond ethnicity and kinship and that arts supported by the experiences of these bodies comment on issues nationally or internationally. However, it is not just issues commented on that determine the nature and genre of the visual arts. When the visual arts are discussed in the realm of their kinds of critical judgment, the critical mind addresses them in their different artistic executions. Therefore, expression is a determinant in the nature and genre of what is traditional or modern. The critic considers formalism, expressivism and instrumentalism as the major kinds of artistic execution or value. To the critic who may or may not be an artist, these serve as grounds of evaluation.

Formalism

The arts have some standards with respect to elements and principles of artistic execution. Every artist and his critic stay with these elements and principles to judge a work of art excellent or worthy. The standards require a formal organization of elements and principles. However, formalism breaks away from these standards, that the idea that a work of art is excellent or worthy of serious

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attention only when the excellence or worthiness carry with it accurate imitation. It holds that artists design successful relationships of elements in a work of art and that such successful relationships result from careful planning and calculation.

Formalism seeks value in subject matter and sensory nature of materials of an overall form. For sensory appeal, while some find the luster of bronze take-away, others find the smooth and shining ebony wood a must-have, and still, some others see the lightness and ant-proof of fiber mat the in-thing. Excellence in a work of art is viewed against its overall organization (form) as it relates perception of meaning to sensory appeal. Formalism relies on artisanship for good finishing and organization of individual forms in an overall form in order to appear to the human sense as logical and convincing. In formalism, artists have a show of mastery of both tools and materials. Here they prove the effectiveness of unity in variety. They establish that properties of materials are neither symbolic nor cognitive.

Expressivism

Expressivism finds excellence in the ability of a work of art to communicate ideas and feelings clearly. Unlike formalism, expressivism shows no interest in formal organization of elements for itself. A good example of expressive work of art is that of children, which must sacrifice aesthetics for communication of feelings. A child's work of art may not follow the principles of design yet the adult takes delight in it for its penetration into an ideal world where his feelings are not inhibited by cultural twist as typical of the adult's world. The inference one can draw here is that the adult's focus is on the feelings and the emotions the child depicts rather than his artisanship in the work of art. However, since every work of art communicates some form of idea the expressivists go beyond the ordinary by offering intensity of experience in their work of art. That is, the work of art must arouse in one that intense feeling or emotion in a degree that the ordinary work of art is incapable of doing. However, it is the subject but not the technicality of the work of art that arouses feelings and emotions. Nevertheless, when a work of art leads one to such feelings and emotions about a life subject one infers that that work of art has governed one's intellectual and emotional reactions.

Instrumentalism

Instrumentalism sees art as a veritable tool for the advancement of moral, religion, cultural, educational, political and corporate purposes. Instrumentalism is concerned with the consequences of ideas and feelings that a work of art expresses. The artists here employ art to serve an end, an end that is more important than the work of art itself. A common example of this is a backdrop of the scenes of a drama in the theatre. Though this serves to emphasize the theme of the drama, it does not interfere with the role of the actors. The never calls attention to itself but supports the dramatic action, heighten its meaning and anticipate climatic moment. This is also the purpose of music to home theatre in Nigeria or elsewhere. The relation of a work of to the moral, religion, cultural, educational, political and corporate institutions is the same as backdrop and music are to drama either at the theatre or on television screen.

Commonalities

The truth to materials dictates forms. Sometimes the material suggests clearly the forms it takes so much so that if the artist tries to adjust them the product puts his artistry in doubt. This is common with wood. The artist just follows the suggested forms with tools and artistry. The final work of art may not agree with the artist's initial imagination. However, the new image will certainly challenge his power of imagination and the experience will be very rewarding. A work of art that manifests from such suggested forms could break the division of nature and genre with respect to the traditional and the modern. Indeed, it reconciles the two both in subject and in execution.

Practice in the art indicates three groups. These are the traditional – that which relates African conventions in Western style of art; formal art school – that training in the Western style of art but finds its roots in African context; and, non formal art school – that of studio training. However, artists often juxtapose the works of art of these groups by synthesizing their forms to become African and Western. In this respect, Aradeon in Stanley (1987), while discussing Nigerian art genre, posits that

when the themes in art draw on traditional life, mythology and designs, creativity serves to forge a national identity, even across ethnic and art groups. She invalidates the claim of Hugh and Fleming (1982) that objects are made in accordance with preference for certain forms developed within a social group as part of its traditional way of life. Supporting the view of Aradeon, Price (1975) observes that the artists of West Africa today are shaping an art that will be neither an imitation of the West nor a dead copying of the African past. She added that their work is their own creation, and that their horizon is as wide as the great sky over forest and grassland and city, but their feet are firmly planted on the red soil of their ancient land. Furthermore, she added that through their art they could speak with a clear voice, not only to their own people but also to the world.

It is easy to infer that to Hugh and Fleming, the nature and genre of art exist while to Aradeon and Price, it is difficult to determine them today for their synthesis of forms. However, there is little or no point calling a goat an animal in order to differentiate it from an antelope or a dog. Nevertheless, to refuse to distinguish between a goat and sheep however structurally similar they may be, will make one incapable of dealing effectively and measurably with neither of them.

Divergences

African traditional visual arts are in most case spirit medium. The spirit mediumship is inherent in the cult figures, mud sculptures, ancestral staff and objects of burial rites. The traditionalists actually believe that the traditional visual arts take possession of potential powers. Since the traditional visual arts become symbolic of the unseen forces, the traditionalists worship the forces through them. To the traditionalists, these visual arts exist as the intermediaries between man and the unforeseen forces. Man actually invokes such forces that he believes abide in the visual arts. In this respect, the visual arts are only functional. Their aesthetics is almost or completely meaningless to the traditionalists. The artists, who are often natives of the communities that use the arts, have a sound knowledge of the function and are guided by it while creating the arts. It is right to argue that this account for lack of anatomical details that prevails in the execution of traditional visual arts. The overriding desire is the skill to create images that could attract the forces and make possession possible so that man could control and reorder his world. This is why traditional African sculptors make sculptures with big heads, eyes and mouths. This lack of proportion in African sculptures lends credence to the head as the seat of intelligence that the big eyes see through grey areas and that the big mouth speaks loud and clear. This philosophy further holds that since the head can meet this condition the short arms and legs only appear so because size is not a determinant of strength.

Contrarily, modern visual arts are more of aesthetics. Where function is the reason for the creation still aesthetics is equally important and this is made clear on the object. In this respect, modern visual arts play double functions, utility and aesthetics.

Both the nexus of communication and the operative function of the Traditional and modern visual arts differ. The ultimate end of the traditional is to have an effect on the forces, attract them for possession and ensure that they act. Therefore, the primary purpose of the traditional is magical effect. However, effect of the modern is on man and his physical environment. The modern stimulates thought, feeling and then action in only human culture.

The way the traditional and modern artists see themselves also differs. Even the way the public sees them also differs. The traditional artists see themselves as those that talk to the forces through their art. Their public also sees them and treats them in this manner. The modern artists see themselves as those that talk to people living to stimulate their thought, feeling and then their action to correct vices in society.

Conclusion

Times have changed drastically. Though, there is little or no point calling a goat an animal in order to differentiate it from an antelope or a dog yet, to refuse to distinguish between a goat and sheep however structurally similar they may be, will make one incapable of dealing effectively and measurably with neither of them. Since the nomenclature has an unnecessary imprecision, determination of where it lies becomes imperative. The fundamental problem of nomenclature in the examination of the genre of African visual arts, therefore, lies in the distinction between tradition and modernity, between traditional and modern, and between their nature and genre in the context of Africa and Nigeria in particular.

Recommendation

- 1 Society of Nigerian Artists and other associated bodies should reexamine their objectives and pursue them with vigour to reawaken the visual arts in schools.
- 2 Society of Nigerian Artists, Cultural Centers, Galleries, Museums and Fine/Applied Arts Departments of higher institutions should organize scholarly discussions on African arts.

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