

Influence of Traditional Art of Africa on Contemporary Art Praxis: The Ibibio Funerary Art Example

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Abstract

African art, with exception of Egyptian art, has suffered scholastic neglect as only a little scholarship has been done regarding them. This has resulted in the misconception that traditional African art contributes little or nothing to the development of contemporary art. This paper, in an attempt to dispel such misconception, projects an aspect of indigenous Ibibio art praxis - funerary art to reveal Ibibio art culture's influence on contemporary art praxis. The objectives are to identify traditional Ibibio funerary art forms; highlight its transformation; and examine its influence on contemporary art praxis. It benefits from analogue and digital library sources, and information sought from interviews of knowledgeable persons in the locality. Findings reveal that traditional Ibibio funerary art forms, which include ekpu carvings, paintings and drawings on 'Nwommo' and 'Iso Nduongo' shrines and ekpo mask carvings, form a bedrock on which a great deal of contemporary art praxis within Ibibio land and its environs rests, as contemporary African art is an extension of traditional African art. The paper, therefore, recommends that more scholastic work be carried out on African art cultures for more revelations of their contributions to the development of contemporary art.

Keywords: Ibibio funerary art, contemporary art, African art, art praxis.

1.0 Introduction

The term 'African art' is broad as there are different perspectives to what constitutes African art. It can be seen as art produced by a contemporary African artist. It can equally be any art with African setting produced by an artist who is well vested with African cultural experience, in line with Udechukwu (1985)'s assertion cited in Ochigbo (2002: p.62) that "any art done by an artist, with an African setting, to which experience which originates in Africa, is African art". It can also be the art of indigenous people of Africa, the indigenous art traditions that were viable and active prior to the colonization of Africa by the Europeans, (Klemm, 1998). Whichever way one looks at it, the bottom line is that there must be 'Africaness' in an art form for it to be termed African art; either by artist's origin, experience or content of the work. For the purpose of this paper, African art is seen as the art of the indigenous people of Africa.

Art production in pre-colonial Africa was a recurring decimal as art was an integral part of the diverse African cultures. They explored whatever materials that were readily available to them based on available knowledge of them as materials for art production. Although they also drew inspiration from the environment, their main inspiration was spiritual as they produced mainly to appease the gods and ancestors who were regarded as intermediaries between the living and the gods. They also produced for other purposes as expounded by Willett *et al* (2018) that some of the traditional African art pieces had value as entertainment; some had political ideological significance; some were instrumental in a ritual context while some had aesthetic value. In most cases, a work of African art combined several or all of these elements. Given these facts, there is no doubt that the African artists produced so much of art.

In spite of the products of efforts by the diverse African cultures, a few cultures are more notable than others especially Egyptian culture which is the most heard of. This does not, in any way, suggest superiority in terms of artistic dexterity or how numerous their works were, rather it is a case of advantages derived from civilization and technological advancement. These advantages placed the Egyptian culture higher whenever African art is considered. The Egyptian artists were civilized. They took advantage of their civilization to create art works mostly with durable mediums. More so, they were more advanced technologically, for instance, the technology of embalming the dead was very much known to them.

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Given such premise, it was possible to also preserve works of art produced with nondurable materials like wood. The Egyptians could also keep records of their works as they were educated. Such advantages were not possible with most African cultures like the Ibibio speaking people of the present day Akwa Ibom State in Nigeria, as they were not formally educated and never took into consideration durability of medium in their art praxis. Their choice of media was always informed by whatever material(s) that was readily available in their locality, (Ukim, 2015: p.55). Wood carving, for instance, was commonly practiced in the tropical rain forest of West Africa because of availability of timber. This accounted for the Ibibio artists using more of wood for their art.

The Ibibio, like many other cultures that employed nondurable materials for their art without a means of preserving them, had equally produced much although so many could not survive till date. Beyond inability to preserve works, the Europeans caused additional problems to the survival of Ibibio art. Ekanem (2000: p.15) asserts that “with the advent of Christianity, erosion and adulteration of the traditional culture ensued; the missionaries burnt objects they linked to paganism completely, while other white colonialists plundered such treasures as curio and souvenirs, thus taking the art of the Ibibio out of its context.” These facts never encouraged much scholarly work to be carried out on Ibibio art and by extension other similar cultures that suffered similar fate. The failure to carry out studies on these cultures gave rise to a wrong notion that apart from Egyptian art, African art has contributed little or nothing to the development of contemporary art. This paper, attempts to dispel this misconception by projecting an aspect of Ibibio art - funerary art to unearth its influence on contemporary art praxis. It seeks to identify indigenous Ibibio funerary art forms; highlight its transformation and examine its influence on contemporary art praxis. The paper relied on library sources, interviews, and descriptive research approach.

2.0 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this paper is built upon Plato’s theory of mimesis, as propounded by Barad (2014). The term ‘mimesis’ is derived from Greek word which means ‘imitation’. Although ‘imitation’ literally means ‘copying’, it is not seen from such perspective rather in the sense of ‘representation’. The theory holds that “all art is mimetic in nature; art is an imitation of life”. Plato believed that ‘idea’ is the ultimate reality which exists in the ‘world of ideas’.

In his explanation, Plato drew analogy of a carpenter who produces a chair. The picture of the chair first existed in the mind of the carpenter as an idea. He then imitates (represents) the idea by producing the chair. Before an art is created, the artist must have had it existed in his mind, in the “world of ideas”. It is that idea in the artist’s mind that is the reality. He depends on it to create his art by imitating (representing) the idea in a physical form to be seen, touched or heard using any medium(s) of choice.

Given that mimetic theory centres on ‘idea’ and the artist’s idea is shaped based on influence(s) from the environment and learning processes he or she undergoes. The Ibibio contemporary artist’s mind is flooded with ideas, which a great deal of them is traceable to traditional art of Africa like in the case of indigenous Ibibio funerary art. Ocvirk *et al* (2006) cited in Ukim (2019: p.30) observes that in art praxis today, we are flooded with new media and new techniques, some of which are extensions of traditional approaches while others are without precedent. Contemporary Ibibio funerary art is an extension of traditional approaches and concepts. The contemporary artist’s idea on Ibibio funerary art is influenced by traditional Ibibio funerary art processes and products.

3.0 Ibibio Funerary Art

The Ibibio people are found in Akwa Ibom State in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria with a population of about four million people. It is said to be the fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria, (Okonofua and Ukim, 2016: p.24). According to Minahan (2002: p.757), Ibibio is not a single group but several networks of independent communities with local unity, as affirmed by Ekanem (2000: p.14), who reiterates that Ibibio covers all the sub-groups of Oron, Eket and Annang. Citing the authorities of Talbot (1914), Burns (1949) and Udo (1983), he submitted that homogeneity in cultural practices and language are sufficient reasons for such generalization of the sub-groups as Ibibio. The Ibibio occupied almost the whole of what is now known as Akwa Ibom State. They are said to have originated from the area now known as Cameroun, (Noah, 1994: p.25).

Like any other group of people in pre-colonial Africa, the Ibibio had a culture; the sum total of their way of life expressed in their economic, social, religious, technological and political institutions, structures and belief system. The Ibibio were very firm in their belief system. Very remarkable was the belief in life after death, as death was viewed as continuation of life, rather than an end. Thus, the expression ‘ekpo akpa ayin, ikpaha utong’ presupposes that the dead hears and could, therefore, intervene in matters of the living. It was not unexpected, therefore, for such a belief system to provide for the dead, (Ekanem, 1994: p.98).

Such provision was made with the belief that the dead lives on in the land of the ancestors as occasioned by their respect for the ancestors both in worship and in artistic creations. The belief in continuation of life after death was so strong that the Ibibio people regarded their ancestors as the invisible part of their lineage. As a result, they developed a tradition of making funerary art forms as repository for the dead ancestor, (Umoanwan and Nyah, 2015) as evident in ekpu carvings which were created to immortalize male ancestors during ceremonial burial. Ceremonial burial which is also referred to as second burial was a funerary practice in Ibibio land which involved much pageantry in veneration of the deceased. It was believed that failure to carry out a ceremonial burial, the spirit of the deceased would be hindered from joining the ancestors and would cause malignant mischief like sickness, infertility and even death for the family members, (Quin, 2016).

3.1 Ekpu Carving

Before ceremonial burial is carried out, an ekpu carving which portrayed the deceased is produced. Such was believed to contain the spirit of the departed ancestor. More so, it was a means of keeping visual record of the family lineage as the ancestors could be identified individually, as observed by Uya (1994: p.20) that the elders of each village and clan were expected to be knowledgeable enough to identify the ancestors so immortalized by each of the ekpu carvings which were created to immortalize male ancestors.



Fig. 1 Ekpu carving
Medium: Wood Carving
Source: <https://collections.org>

3.2 ‘Nwommo’/‘Iso Nduongo’

Abodes of the spirit of the ancestor were carefully constructed and equipped, as in the case of ‘Nwommo’, (Ekanem 2000: p.15). This was a form of traditional architecture which equally housed all personal belongings of the dead such as machet, plates and climbing rope, to connote prestige and achievements of the deceased so immortalized. The inside walls and ceiling of ‘nwommo’ were plaited with bamboo split and decorated with cloth wrapped on the inside of the hut. The cloth was dyed with contrasting colours, cut into desired shapes and sewn on the cloth to be wrapped. In this way, pictures of animals, objects and war instruments were depicted thus justifying the artistic quality of the applique design and the motifs employed, (Umoanwan and Nyah, 2015). ‘Nwommo’ was constructed for members of Ekong cult who by implication were only male. There was a similar shrine constructed for the female members of repute in the society. Ekwere (2000: p.26) expounds that it was known as ‘Iso Nduongo’. Such women must have attained certain age range, must be a member of Iban Isong Cult and Ebre Cult and had passed through ‘mbopo’ ritual - a pre-requisite qualification for public marriage. She must have undergone female genital mutilation amongst other stringent conditions.

The walls of ‘Nwommo’ and ‘Iso Nduongo’ were very much decorated, given that it took so much for a person to be listed into such honour roll. It had many decorations with more of paintings. Ekwere (2000: p.26), citing the authority of Cole and Aniakor (1984), avers that “of all the artistic decorations, wall paintings are the

most common and the most varied with several regional styles and scores of motifs combined in hundreds of ways". He further explains that the wall paintings were never duplicated.

This accounted for variations in different paintings on the walls of 'Nwommo' and 'Iso Nduongo' but with same thematic, symbolic and motif constancy. These ranged from geometric designs, naturalistic drawings to body decorative motifs such as seen in Uli. In addition, 'nsibidi' - a picture writing used for communication in Ekpe Society, evolved by the people of former Cross River State in Nigeria (which Ibibio was a part of), (Ukom, 1987) cited in (Ekong, 2000: p.9) were also drawn on the walls of 'Nwommo'.



Fig. 2 "Nwommo"

Source: <https://www.iiste.org>

3.3 Ekpo Mask

The ancestors were known to intervene in matters of the living when called upon. To enable the ancestors to physically partake in ceremonies of the living, the mask was invented. The mask was not used for display rather it was seen as a masquerade which was known in Ibibio as 'ekpo' which means ghost or spirit and was believed to be communicating to the living via the masks. The Ibibio mask effectively covered a range of ancestral spirits. The mask types, ranging from the grotesque to the beautiful, provided all categories and types of ancestors, (Ekanem, 2000: p.15). Ekpo mask was a sacred object, a piece of art carved in wood. Only members of Ekpo Cult could carve ekpo mask as it was not like any other carving but one linked with ancestral spirit. Enobong Ukpa (Personal Communication) (2020) argues that much as ekpo mask was a medium for making visible the spirit of the ancestor, the inspiration of the ancestral spirit was inevitable in its production.

Ekpo masks were used by members of Ekpo Cult - a sacred cultural institution for ekpo masquerade. It was believed to symbolize the continuing existence of people who had physically departed and were living in the spirit world, as affirmed by Enobong Ukpa (Personal Communication) (2020) that the traditional Ibibio people believed that the spirit world, where the ancestors lived, was a world where strict laws and justice prevailed. Ekpo masquerade was an effort to make visible the ancestors from the spirit world, meant to physically intervene in some matters of the living. Thus, Ekpo masquerade was a symbol of law and order in Ibibio land.



Fig. 3 Ekpo Masquerade

Source: <https://www.goggle.com>

4.0 Influence of Ibibio Traditional Funerary Art on Contemporary Art Praxis

Art is a medium of self expression and a visual means of communication which the artist employs to communicate his feelings to the public. To arrive at art as a product, a process is involved. The initial and bulk of the creative process involved is carried out in the artist's mind based on inputs he gathered from the environment. He processes them to arrive at a mental picture within his subconscious mind for further development into a visual art form, in line with Plato's theory of mimesis. It also involves the employment of styles, techniques and exploration of mediums in diverse ways to bring forth the product. In most cases, the artist builds upon an already existed style, medium, technique or concept to come up with a new reality. Such also amounts to inspiration for a new work of art, as in the case of traditional Ibibio funerary art forms which serve as inspiration to a great deal of contemporary art praxis.

The emergence of the Europeans in Ibibio land affected the way of life of the Ibibio people, as observed by Esema (2002: p.126) that "without doubt, the improved and modernized environment created by the Europeans in the course of colonization has helped in no small measure to obliterate the traditional way of life of the people". The Ibibio people became enlightened having benefitted from the schools, hospital, churches, etc built by the colonialists. They embraced Christianity and formal education which affected their thoughts and beliefs. They no longer believed in the continual existence of a dead person as a spirit to be worshipped. Rather than discard their artistic dexterity and art which were originally driven by their traditional religious belief, the Ibibio artist drew inspiration from his previous works to create new ones in ways that were different from his previous religious belief and practice. He had to alter his approach, medium and style where necessary in order not to go against his new found faith.

In recent times, funerary art in Ibibio land has taken a greater dimension in terms of transformation given the advancement in technology and exposure of the artists. In spite of its dimension, it is still an extension of traditional funerary art forms, as affirmed by Ocvirk *et al* (2006) cited in Ukim (2019: p.30) that "today we are flooded with new media and new techniques of art, some of which are extensions of traditional approaches while others are without precedent". The contemporary funerary art of the Ibibio is an extension of traditional funerary art forms that have experienced transformation to the extent that some of its art forms have been developed into other forms of art. In spite of this, all of them are extension of traditional Ibibio funerary art forms, given that the idea and inspiration originally came from the ancient art praxis.

Portraiture in sculpture, for instance, was part of Ibibio funerary art praxis as the ekpu figures were seen as such in spite of the absence of physical resemblance. The Ibibio laid emphasis on character, just like Auguste Rodin who emphasized truth of character in his master piece "Moment to Balzac". It started as carved figures before its metamorphosis. Ekpu carvings which were produced to immortalize the deceased were created as portrait statues of the deceased persons that they represented. Mayer and Mayer (2017) maintain that ekpu figures were carved to reflect the deceased importance and wealth. The size of ekpu figure and elaborateness of the carving reflect the importance of wealth of the ancestor who was portrayed. A childless junior member of a family would not be represented by a figure but by plain stick. This affirms that ekpu figure was a portrait of the Ibibio deceased elder which portrayed the subject's fame and wealth rather than physical resemblance.

More so, as the carvings could be identified individually by the elders of the village further suggests that the carving were created as portrait statues although physical resemblance was far from being achieved. Ekanem (2000: p.15) observes that:

as Christianity converted the Ibibio, rather than completely throw over board the idea of ancestors as carved statues, new materials and new forms emerged to serve the same purpose. The Ibibio adopted cement as a new material to model the departed ancestor in a way acceptable to the new found faith.

As new materials emerged, the Ibibio sculptor took advantage of them, and gradually portraiture, a prominent feature of Ibibio funerary art, has been transformed from a symbolic statue carved in wood to portrait sculpture cast in cement, glass fibre, bronze and other suitable mediums. The contemporary Ibibio sculptor targets both resemblance and character of the subject as he has the advantage of making use of photographs, videos and other reference materials. He makes use of them to ease his effort to achieve both physical resemblance and character of the subject. He produces the image of the subject in either relief or free standing form. No matter the type or form the contemporary artist chooses, he ends up producing a portrait sculpture of a deceased person - an extension of ekpu carving (an Ibibio traditional funerary art form).

Given their ethnocentric approach to evangelism, the white missionaries in Ibibio land were intolerant of any competing institutions and values especially the traditional religious ones and stridently condemned them as

cultist, fetish, barbaric, devil worship and so on, (Uya, 1994: p.21). One of such was ‘Nwommo’/‘Iso Nduongo’ which practice was altered as the Ibibio’s belief in continuation of life after death - the belief that gave birth to the creation of ‘Nwommo’ and ‘Iso Nduongo’ was weakened. The Ibibio had to recreate ‘Nwommo’ and ‘Iso Nduongo’ with cement as tombstone, with or without figures, to put to rest the fears of being seen as idol worshippers by the missionaries, see figure 4. It has since metamorphosed into well designed aesthetic monuments. Ekwere (2000: p.30) avouches that today it has become an important feature of landscape development particularly in the premises and the pathways leading to the houses of the deceased. The contemporary Ibibio artist, who is more skillful coupled with availability of new materials, could design and produce very appealing tombstones with marble, granites and other suitable materials of choice, see figure 5. Such great strides are inspired by and traceable to the ancient funerary art. This also gave birth to design and construction of other memorial stones which may not necessarily be funeral in nature. These include memorial sculptural monuments for inauguration of projects by government and corporate bodies in Ibibio land, see figure 6.



Fig. 4 Funerary Tombstone in Cement
Source: Akwa Ibom State Compendium



Fig.5 Contemporary Tombstone in Marble
Artist: Ani Udosen
Year of Production: 2019
Source: Artist’s Collection



Fig.6 Project Commissioning Stone
 Artist: Ime Frank
 Year of Production: 2015
 Source: Artist's Collection

The belief that ekpo masquerades were ancestors appearing physically to partake in ceremonies of the living was wiped away as Christianity prevailed in Ibibio land. Ekpo masquerade was rather seen as a cultural display. The artist then saw the mask as an art object, as such, could carve it for aesthetic purpose. The Ibibio artist, being inspired by the traditional funerary mask recreated it as purely an aesthetic object. Today it is one concept in art explored severally by contemporary artists both within and without Ibibio land. It is produced as wood carving, wood cast, glass fibre cast, bronze and other mediums of sculpture.

‘Nsibidi’ symbols employed in Ibibio funerary art has so much been borrowed by the contemporary artists although not necessarily for funerary art but as symbols, motifs and resource base for ceramics, painting, sculpture, textiles and graphic arts production. Ekpedeme Eka (Personal Communication) (2020) reiterates that there is hardly any Ibibio contemporary artist who has not drawn inspiration from the concept of ‘nsibidi’, after all, contemporary African art generally is a blend of the traditional and the new in terms of concept and style, as the contemporary artist continually borrows from traditional art.

Conclusion

Ibibio traditional funerary art forms which include ekpu carvings, paintings and drawings on ‘Nwommo’ and ‘Iso Nduongo’ and ekpo masks were created for the purpose of veneration and worship of the gods and ancestors given their belief in continuation of life after death. As the indigenous Ibibio culture changed when it came in contact with European culture during colonization and the emergence of Christianity in Ibibio Land, rather than throw overboard the traditional art praxis which was mostly condemned by the missionaries, the Ibibio modified the approach to their art and traditional practices. New media were employed where necessary to keep their art going. It kept metamorphosing till recent time where the Ibibio sculptor, although he acquires western education, still draws inspiration from the pre-colonial Ibibio funerary art to produce works which are extension of traditional Ibibio funerary art like portrait sculptures, tombstones, commemoration and project commissioning stones, and the concept of mask explored in numerous media. Therefore, Ibibio traditional art culture can be said to be the bedrock on which a great deal of contemporary art praxis within Ibibio land and its environs rests.

Recommendation

The paper recommends that more scholastic work be carried out on traditional African art cultures to reveal more of their contributions to the development of contemporary art.

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