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African Traditional Sculptures: An Appraisal of Classification Paradigms (Pp 29-39)

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Abstract

Understanding and appreciating traditional African sculptures was one of the early problems encountered by strangers to the producing culture when they first encountered the works, and when the study of these works of art became intense in the early years of the 20th century. This problem was partly due to the variety of styles in which these sculptures were expressed, the volume of sculpture-production in the continent, and the numerous uses to which the sculptures were put. In an effort to simplify the understanding and appreciation of these objects, scholars have attempted various forms of classification. Two main approaches have been adopted in the classification efforts. These are the aesthetic (form and structure) and the ethnological (function) approaches. These approaches, however, seem to be bedeviled by inhering weaknesses. In this paper, both approaches (the aesthetic and the ethnological) are appraised and their hermitic and misleading characters are highlighted. It is then suggested that the aesthetic and ethnological approaches needed to be complimented by a historical consideration in order to arrive at the formulation of classification paradigms that take into account the degree of mobility and interaction that took place in the continent in the historical past.

Keywords: African, Traditional Sculpture, Classification, Paradigms

Introduction

Since the 1950s, scholars of traditional African art have made various efforts to classify the traditional sculptures. These efforts were embarked upon principally for the purpose of simplifying the body of data that have become available from the large number of sculptures from the continent in order that the sculptures can be packaged for better understanding and appreciation.

African traditional sculptures are very significant in the study of African art generally. It is through the sculptures that much of what is known today, of the cultural context of the sculpture traditions in Africa has come into being. From these sculptures also, it has been possible to garner information about the artists that produced the objects and the attitude of the public for which they were produced.

The commencement of the practice of sculpture-production, in Africa, is pre-historic. But, African sculptures became known in Europe only from about the end of the 16th century when Portuguese seamen began taking back to their European country startling and striking works from the continent. The main interest of the Portuguese 'collectors', at this time, was to provide evidence of their visit to sub-Saharan Africa. The arrival of African sculptures in Europe stimulated an interest that led to commissioned productions. The most famous examples of these commissioned productions are the ivory ladles, hunting horns, and salt-cellars which can be found in several Portuguese museums today. It was, however, not until the late 19th century when sculptures from the Gulf of Guinea and the Congo basin started arriving in Europe that the sculptures from Africa were considered as works of art.

The arousal of interest in traditional African sculpture was as dramatic as their emergence in the world art scene. Grottanelli (1975: 4) reports how Maurice de Vlaminck took "a sudden fancy of certain figures found on the shelves of an Argenteuil wineshop or bistro and bought them." According to Grottanelli, Vlaminck gave Derain one of these figures which later became instrumental to the "conversion of Apollinaire and Picasso." Much later, according to Grottanelli, other artists, including Ferdinald Leger, benefited from this singular event of an encounter with African art objects. In the account of Gerbrands, the arousal of interest in African sculpture in Europe is traceable to a simultaneous encounter with the sculptures from by Ernst Kirchner in Dresden (Germany) and de Vlaminck in France. Subsequent influences of these sculptures on the *Die Brücké* and *Der Blaie Reiter* in

Germany, as well as Modigliani and Picasso in France are said to have further heightened interest in African art.

If the foregoing response to the contact with African sculpture was dramatic, the comments and reactions of Andre Derain, Georges Braque, and Juan Gris in response to the arrival of traditional African sculptures in Europe were even more dramatic. Their reactions illustrate vividly the impact of the objects on the artists of the time in Europe as well as on public aesthetic taste. Derain was reported to have been 'speechless' and 'stunned' when he was shown a Fang mask. Braque, on his part, confessed that *les masques nègre...m'ont ouvert un horizon nouveau* literally meaning Negro masks... opened a new horizon for me. Juan Gris is said to have been so fascinated that he went out of his way to make a cardboard copy of a funeral figure from Gabon to decorate his apartment (Willett, 1971: 35 - 36).

The coincidence of the arrival of African sculptures in Europe and the emergence of a new European aesthetic consciousness at the beginning of the 20th century made the collection and repatriation of African traditional sculptures to Europe more intense and indiscriminate. In this manner of acquisition, the objects were collected without related background information about them. This invariably led to the wholesome ascription of magico-religious function to virtually all the objects from the African continent. According to Grottanelli (1975), "in the 16th century, any African statuette was simply labeled 'idol' in Europe. In the 17th century, however, when more information became available and it became obvious that no idolatry was involved in the use of these figures, that name was gradually replaced by the hazy but less compromising one of 'fetish'. Now, the same pieces are described in European museums as ancestor figures."

The immense variety and quantity of African sculptures arriving in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century appears to have compounded the problem of a full understanding and appreciation of the objects. It was in an effort to simplify the process for understanding and appreciating the sculptures that their classification was embarked upon. Unfortunately, the outcome of these efforts seems to have thrown up even more problems. This is because the parameters (form/aesthetics and function/ethnology) deployed for the classifications presented the objects in hermitic strait-jackets, and thus made them visible but inaudible.

It is against the foregoing background that the aesthetic and ethnological approaches to the classification of the traditional African sculptures is here

appraised with a view to finding out the adequacy, or otherwise, of these approaches in their attempt to make traditional African sculptures better understood and more appreciated.

Appraisal of Classification Paradigms

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 made to classify the arts may be traced to Franz Boas' categorization of art into the representative (representational art) and the symbolic (geometric art) (Boas, 1927). The objects studied and classified by Boas were American-Indian ornaments but 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 African sculptures.

As mentioned earlier, two approaches have almost always been adopted in the classification of African traditional sculptures. This is not all together surprising because early studies of African traditional sculptures had been carried out in this pattern (form and function). The formal approach to the study of African art was espoused by a number of scholars including Carl Einstein, Guillaume, and Munro. This approach does not consider knowledge of the content of the sculpture; that is, the purpose, the period of production, the producer, and even the producer's opinion; requisite for understanding of sculpture or for its appreciation. On the other hand, the ethnological approach, as employed for example by Griaule and Grosse, considers such knowledge necessary. It would therefore be considered natural that classification efforts also followed the aesthetic or ethnological paths.

The cultural diversity of the people of Africa inevitably stimulated to a diversity of art forms. This was essentially because the objects are means of

cultural identity and separateness. This may have informed the captioning of William Fagg's 1964 exhibition in Paris and Berlin as *Africa: 100 Tribes - 100 Master pieces*.

The earliest use of the aesthetic approach for the classification of African sculpture was its adoption by Carl Kjersmeier. In the book titled *Centers de style de la sculpture Nègre Africaine* (Centres of styles of African Negro Sculpture), Kjersmeier based the classification on formal similarities in objects of same ethnic origin (Kjersmeier, 1935). Frans M. Olbrechts' study of objects from the Congo, which was published as *The Art of the Negro Peoples*, also presents a classification based on formal similarities of the objects. But in addition, Olbrechts super-imposes provincial boundaries and came up with terms like Fang art, Luba art, etc (Olbrechts, 1946).

Another major attempt at the classification of traditional African sculpture based on form was that by Roy Sieber and Arnold Rubin in *Sculpture of Black Africa* (Sieber and Rubin, 1968). Here, rather than employ ethnic or provincial parameters for their classification, Sieber and Rubin used vegetation/linguistic grouping. The entire sculpture-producing area of Africa was thus classified into four zones, viz: -

- a. The Savannah area bordering the Sahara Desert and stretching from the West Coast to Northern Nigeria. The Baga and the Mumuye sculptures fall within this class.
- b. The Guinea Coast area stretching from Sierra Leone to the Niger River in the East. An isolated exception is the Urhobo whose sculptures bear closer affinity to sculptures of the Equatorial Bantu. In this zone are the Mande, Dan, Baule, Ashanti, Fon, Yoruba, Bini, etc.
- c. The Equatorial Forest area which is peopled by the Northwest and equatorial Bantu. This is made up of the Bamileke, Bafo, BaKota, BaKete, BaKwele,
- d. Southern Grassland or Savannah Region inhabited by the BaPende, BaYaka, BaSonge, BaKuba, etc. This area stretches from the West Coast of central Africa to the East Coast

Three models have emerged from the ethnological approach to the classification of African traditional sculptures. Margaret Trowell employs function parameter when she splits the sculptures from the continent into three categories - spirit-regarding, man-regarding, and art of ritual display.

Trowell considers the figures used for religious purposes as spirit-regarding. These include ancestor figures and visual representations of deities and spirits. Objects such as door-posts, decorated doors, and wooden boxes are categorized as man-regarding. The third category is 'art of ritual display' which is made up of masks (Trowell, 1964).

The second model from the ethnological approach is conveyed in a film - *God Dance, Man Dance* that was directed Frank Aig-Imuokhuede which tended to categorize African art into the secular and the religious. The third model is Roy Sieber and Roselyn Walker's classification based on the use of art objects at different stages of the life of the African (Sieber and Walker, 1987).

Admittedly, the application of the aesthetic approach for the classification of traditional African sculptures has, no doubt, facilitated their study. Knowledge about the objects would have been almost impossible without reference to the cultural groups that produced them. For example, Sieber and Rubin's vegetation/linguistic approach broadened Olbrechts' scope by considering wider and larger areas. In 1989, Christopher Roy adopted the vegetation/linguistic parameters of Sieber and Rubin in the classification of 'the Stanley Collection' in the University Of Iowa Museum Of Art to shed more light on the objects. Also, the application of the linguistic parameter by Sieber and Rubin introduces greater flexibility to the classification efforts as opposed to a purely cultural (ethnic) approach or a purely geographical approach as in Kjersmeier and Olbrechts respectively. This flexibility is because the linguistic parameter has higher validity.

The aesthetic model however fails to take cognizance of certain variables and limitations of the approach. The cultural/ethnic and provincial parameters employed by Kjersmeier and Olbrechts respectively are weakened by the fact that some ethnic groups have more than one form. The Dogon, for instance, possess three distinct forms; the simplified forms used on masks, the solid cubist figures of ancestors used as decorative motifs, and the knobby style of freestanding ancestor figures.

Also, art-producing societies do not exist in-vacuo given that isolation, self-containment and self-sufficiency are relative concepts. Therefore, a single form may cut across ethnic groups through formal and stylistic diffusion or as a result of direct borrowing. For example, the white-face masks of the Bakota, BaLumbo, BaPunu, and Mpongwe are similar to each other in spite of the differing ethnic provenances and cultural contexts of their use. The

'BaYaka eyes' and the elbow-on-knee pose of BaPende caryatid figures appear to be derivatives from the BaJokwe. The masks of the BenaLulua are different from their figures but similar to the masks of their neighbour - BaKota. Other examples of forms that cut across ethnic groups include BaPende masks which are also wide-spread among their neighbours - BaKete and BaSuku. The heart-shaped face, which is a principal character of masks of the BaKwele in the northern Congo region, is also a feature of Igbo masks from Abiriba in eastern Nigeria. The Ibibio masks of south-eastern Nigeria have also found use in the masquerading tradition of the Esan (a northern Edo people living in central Nigeria). Derivations from Benin are also discernable in Owo sculptures.

Furthermore, we find that though Aig Imuokhuede's secular/religious classification eliminates the apparent over-lapping lapse in Trowell's classification, that model is still wobbly because the line between that which is secular and that which religious can often be very thin; that which is ordinarily intended for secular purpose may find itself in religious use.

The linguistic parameter also has its own shortcomings. These lie in the possible confusion that could arise as a result of historical circumstances. Frontier territories pose a problem to the linguistic approach in the classification of art objects. The Degha, for instance, is a culture of the Gur language sub-family but are culturally, politically, and artistically 'Akanised'. Any culture group, like the Degha, lying along the boundaries of language area will invariably display variations in their art forms from the core members of their family.

Formal and stylistic similarities among diverse cultures and regions, therefore, make classification grouping along ethnic and vegetation/linguistic hazardous, and indicate that a strict application of the aesthetic approach to the classification of sculptures from the African continent could result in misleading conclusions. In addition, the unwieldy nature of a classification based on this approach negates the very essence of classification, which is to make handy a subject for analysis and appreciation.

Similarly, strictly functional classifications can be very specious given the differences that sometimes exist between intended functions and eventual uses. The function that an object performs may sometimes include the amplification of the uses to the roles of the objects. There are multiple examples of objects that function in aspects distinctly different from the purpose of their manufacture. When categorization is, therefore, based only

on the obvious; that is, its use at the time and place of collection; such categorization could become superficial. A close examination of Trowell's classification parameter, for example, reveals weaknesses which arise from the possibilities of over-lapping. There are, many instances of objects without defined social purposes as we may find in an earthenware pot which serves as a ritual object, and a similar earthenware which may serve the purpose of storage.

The use of masks of diverse origin in a single mask spectacle is another of problem which scholars employing the functional approach may encounter. For instance, this problem is confronted in Igbirra (Nigeria) masking tradition. According to Willett (1971: 197), Picton reported observing that "on Igbira masquerades I have seen the following types of masks: native Igbira carving, masks in the style of the Northern Edo peoples, Yoruba Gelede masks from near Lagos, Ibibio masks from Ikot-Ekpen (these later two are types presumably traded by diverse route), an ebony face carved for Europeans and a mask carved by Basa Nge."

The classification parameters applied by Trowell, Aig-Imuokhuede, and Sieber and Walker tend to compartmentalize the objects. But such compartmentalization is, at best, artificial. This is the point which Elkin et al (1950) try to make when they state that in Arnhemland, 'the *Waninja* ritual objects of the same design are used in more than one totemic ceremony'. A similar situation presents itself in Lega art where single objects of specific form and design are used constantly in totally different contexts of initiation, and possess different association of meaning. Indeed, compartmentalization is antithetical to African world-view of life. Life, to the African, is an interrelationship of activities, and the African would not want this divided into water-tight compartments.

There is also no strict division between religious and earthly life in traditional Africa like Aig-Imuokhuede's classification presents. Something religious may be meant to bring secular benefits. The *Egungun* mask performances among the Yoruba in southwestern Nigeria are directed at ensuring that ancestors will rest in peace. The *Ohworhu* and *Edjoto* masking spectacles of the Urhobo living in the Niger delta in Nigeria are used for supplications to deities to facilitate social stability and harmony in Urhobo communities. At the same time however, these mask performances aim at entertaining the living. The house-posts and sculpted doors of Yoruba palaces and houses are

intended for the glorification of their owners but similar carvings in shrines are for the honor of the spirits worshipped there.

Conclusion

The preceding analyses of the aesthetic and ethnological approaches to the classification of Africa's traditional sculptures show that in the absence of adequate relevant information from the field at the time of collection of many of Africa's traditional sculptures, it would be almost impossible to distinguish the secular (profane) from the religious (sacred), the man-regarding from the spirit-regarding, and the BaLuba from the BaKota. The flexibility of uses and meanings attached to objects of art from traditional African societies is very crucial to the aesthetic value of the objects as well as to its relationship with other objects and, therefore, very crucial to classification.

Studies of the thought-systems which inspire the creation of many traditional African sculptures also show that single forms or categories of form occur in a multiplicity of social and ritual contexts. These forms have different complimentary meanings attached to them; meanings which are not directly illustrated by the forms yet, are part of their iconology because of traditional association. In the foregoing circumstance, classifications based on solely aesthetic or ethnological parameters can, therefore, only be part of the story and not the entire story. The historical dimensions of the objects, therefore, need to be considered in order to minimize the weaknesses in either of the aesthetic and the ethnological approaches.

History shows that contact between the peoples of Africa, in the past, had been intense. The possibility exists that the similarity of the zodiac symbols produced by Ashanti goldsmiths to English ones (which are themselves traced to Chaldean origin) may have been as a result of ancient trans-Saharan contact. Also, the close analogies between certain Malagasy decorative motifs and corresponding elements of the Saadang Toradja or megalithic monuments in Sumba (Indonesia) suggest ancient trans-oceanic contacts. If these kinds of contact took place in ancient times, the evolution and development of African artistic traditions and heritage cannot, therefore, be a hermitic one as the strictly aesthetic and ethnological approaches tend to present.

The formal affinities observed by Emil Torday in the comparative study of the Bushongo of Kasai and the centres of artistic production of the lower Congo, for example, can be explained only by diffusion occasioned by the movement of people. According to Torday, actual contact may have taken place during the reign of Alvaro II (1574 - 1614). Also, formal similarities between the BaMbole of the

Lamami basin and the Fang of Gabon are attributed to a possible migration of the Fang from the upper reaches of the Congo.

It is these weaknesses that are highlighted when Kasfir (1984) stated that there is the need to dislodge the 'conceptual model' and adopt one that is more heuristically-derived because the former is no longer adequate, especially as "the broader underlying paradigm by historians and anthropologists to explain the entity called 'traditional African society' has not itself been overthrown". In order to get a complete story and to arrive at fool-proof classification, therefore, these approaches (the aesthetic and the ethnological) need to complement each other. This is probably why Radin (1933) stated in his work - *The Theory and Method of Ethnology* - that "the fact that a certain resemblance of form exists proves nothing about the contacts that may have taken place if the resemblance of form is not accompanied by a corresponding resemblance in the meaning of that form".

Furthermore, the benefits of considering the historical dimension in classification derives from the convincing results that it can yield because of its systematic exploration of the possibilities of history. A historically oriented classification system, therefore, would more adequately reflect the high degree of mobility and interaction of the various culture groups than does the geographical and the culture group system. In the words of Monti (1969), "classifications that do not take into account the inestimable possibilities of communication and exchange which exist even between geographically distant populations stand the chance of invalidating themselves because of stylistic mixtures that normally arise from historical and cultural contacts".

In view of the fact that the aims, interests, and philosophies of scholars engaged in classification efforts are significant factoring elements in their studies, a consistent application of the historical dimension, alongside the aesthetic and the ethnological approaches, would act as check against prejudices and hasty conclusions. This is even more so because every piece of traditional African sculpture is composite. Sculpture has different aspects: it may be talked of as a configuration of shapes or as a manifestation of structure, and shape, as well as structure, may be linear or non-linear.

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