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Gone but Not Forgotten: The Commemorative Arts of Benin

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Abstract

This essay focuses on how the people of Benin (Nigeria) use their traditional art to formally memorialize major historical events and the life and deeds of notable citizens in their society, especially their Kings (Oba). For this purpose, they evolve diverse enigmatic symbols and artforms in sundry media and styles. In this essay, an effort is made to examine some of these artforms and the symbols used as embellishment on them, in order to determine the context in which they are utilized and how they perform their function. In the process of doing this, the stylistic and iconographic significance of the artforms and symbols are also expounded.

Introduction

This essay focuses on the commemorative function of the art of the people of Benin (Nigeria). It demonstrates how the Benins use their traditional art to formally memorialize major events that mark their history and the life and deeds of noble citizens in their society, especially their monarchs. For this purpose, they evolve enigmatic symbols and diverse artforms in varied media. In this essay, an effort is made to examine some of these artforms and symbols in order to determine the context in which they are utilized and how they perform their commemorative function. In the process of doing this, the stylistic and iconographic significance of the artforms and symbols are also expounded. In this regard, some selected key historical events, notable people and royal court ceremonies that are commemorated in Benin art are examined in this analysis.

Historical Events Commemorated in Benin Art

Several social, political and religious events are commemorated in Benin art of which a few are singled out for consideration due to space limitation. These include: festivals and ceremonies, royal war exploits, internal civil disorder, succession disputes, et cetera, that occurred in Benin, particularly those that involved Benin kings.

Internal Civil Dissensions

One of the major challenges that Benin Obas had to contend with, as Benin history reveals, were the incessant internal civil dissensions that occurred in ancient Benin which threatened the peace and stability of the kingdom. As a result, the Obas were duty-bound to expend huge human and financial resources in their efforts to establish their supremacy over their subjects within their sphere of influence. Thus the subjugation of rebels who undermined their authority became one of their preoccupations. One of such cases is the tussle between Oba Ozolua (c.1481) and Ise ne Utekon, his stepson who also served as a sword bearer (*Omada*) in the royal court. Benin oral history reports that Ise, a native of the Benin town of Utekon, was a deviant who interminably undermined the power of his king and master. During one of his confrontations with Oba Ozolua, Ise attempted to murder him, but the Oba escaped by climbing up a kolanut tree (*cola-acumata*), thus thwarting his enemy's plot. In Benin, *evbea* or kolanut tree is sacred and any person who finds refuge in its branches is protected. However, the Oba was able to slay the recalcitrant Ise. As a visual reference to this incident and to

immortalize Oba Ozolua's victory, Ise's image is depicted in brass holding a small sword (Fig. 1). The statuette is part of the complex sacred artforms that furnish royal ancestral altars.

Another commemorated incident also involving Oba Ozolua is the conflict between him and Egbaen, the powerful ruler of Iwu, a town in Benin. Oral history reports that during one of their conflicts the rebel ruler captured the Oba and imprisoned him.



Fig. 1: A Brass Image of Ise ne Utekon

Source: *The Royal Art of Benin*

To secure his release, Oba Ozolua appealed to his chiefs for help and they, in response, demanded for various titles and gifts as payment for their assistance. However, after their demands were met, the chiefs reneged on

their promise and engaged instead in a protracted period of merriment in celebration of their new titles. After Oba Ozolua's escape from prison, he waged a war against Egbaen, captured him and slashed off his head.

The archetypal depictions of Oba Ozolua in Benin art allude, to the subjugation of rebels such as Ise and Egbaen and numerous others, and by extension, they also allude to other Benin Kings who equally conquered those who challenged their authority. The artforms serve as a proclamation of royal victories and are also intended to intimidate potential enemies of the Oba of Benin. Artforms of this nature are a major feature in Benin art, firstly, because of the constant struggles that were so rampant in Benin, especially in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. As the power of the Kings waned, they need to create more artforms to boost their ascendancy. Secondly, because Benin art is a court art and it exists largely to glorify the life and deeds of Benin Kings. Hence Ben-Amos (1983a) asserts, that the Benins "are profoundly concerned with their history, which is above all the saga of kings and Benin art serves as a means of enshrining the past in the metaphorical and literal senses of the term." Consequently, she adds, the artistic innovations and political maneuvering and war exploits of Benin Kings are not only recorded in Benin oral history, but "they are equally chronicled tangibly in the people's court art." Her assessment is absolutely correct and is attested to by the numerous court artforms such as figural sculptures, brass memorial heads and plaques, and carved ivory tusks, et cetera, that immortalize Benin Kings.

Benin court art is extremely concerned with the commemoration of Benin Kings because they were, as Benin oral history documents, dynamic leaders who made great impact in the political, religious, economic and social spheres of life in their Kingdom. As a result of their military labours, for instance, they succeeded in expanding their realm into a vast Kingdom. Their political strategies and war triumphs ensured that they were greatly revered at home and feared by their neighbours. For example, as reported by Egharevba (2005), when Oba Ozolua marched against his foes, entire villages became deserted as people fled into the bush at the sound of the drums and fife that announced his approach. He adds also, that due to their prominence, Benin Kings acquired the title: *Oba Nokhua* or *Ogie-Akpolokpolo*, which translated means, "Emperor." This epithet is still in use till date.

Benin art is crowded with artforms and symbols that connote the martial nature of these great warrior-kings and which demonstrably celebrate them

and their war successes. Some excellent examples are depictions of the earlier mentioned Oba Ozolua whose war successes earned him the epithet: “Ozolua the conqueror” or “*Ozolua n’Ibaromi*” (Egharevba, Ibid). His depictions commemorate him and his achievements, and also allude to every Benin Oba. His image is acknowledged in Benin art as the archetypical portrayal for all Benin Obas.

For understandable reasons, Oba Ozolua is portrayed, as Borgatti(1990) correctly described, wearing a battle coat of chain mail instead of the distinguishing ceremonial beaded regalia of Benin Obas, and his distinct emblems such as a magical shield, arrows and spears. In some other depictions, Oba Ozolua is seen holding a sword in one hand and a severed body in another. In others, he is shown amidst tethered captives or dismembered bodies. These portrayals signify his uncanny penchant for war and his fondness for chopping off the heads of his victims.

Themes of war and violence and those with political undercurrent were proliferated calculatingly by Benin monarchs and were employed as effective tools in the execution of their socio-political agendas. In sum, the use of such themes was premeditated and designed to promote royal policies and personalities, and to amplify royal status and sustain their ascendancy.

Other types of artforms that commemorate the suppression of oppositions of royal power and which underscore the said unconquerable power of Benin Kings are brass memorial trophy heads. They are depictions of executed insurgent rulers whose heads were severed and replicated in brass as tradition demanded in ancient Benin. Some of the trophy heads were sent to the successors of defeated rulers who were particularly intractable while some others were placed on the royal altars of war in the Oba Palace (Nevamdosky, 1986). The brass head of the Enoje of Uzea, a ruler of the Ishan village of Uzea near Benin, who was a victim of this royal decree, is presently in the Benin National Museum (Egharevba, 2005).

Royal War Exploits

Apart from the internal civil conflicts, another dilemma that confronted Benin monarchs was the daunting task of protecting the territorial integrity of their kingdom against external aggressors. Thus the Obas were constantly engaged in a series of wars which lasted for protracted periods as affirmed in a letter written by Duarte Pires, one of the early Portuguese missionaries who came to Benin. The letter dated 20, October, 1516 to King Dom Manuel of

Portugal read in part, “the missionaries went with the King of Benin to war and remained a whole year; the King could not do anything until the war was over” (qtd. Egharevba: Ibid). The Obas also personally participated in the wars and commanded the Benin Army until Benin military commanders abolished the Oba’s right to command during the reign of Oba Ehengbuda in late sixteenth century (Duchateau, 1993). The life and war exploits of Benin Kings are dominant themes in Benin commemorative art. Some well-documented examples are the war escapades of the Obas of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries whose main focus was on the expansion and defense of Benin kingdom. Notable amongst these are the wars fought by Oba Esigie (1504) as exemplified in the legendary battle against the Attah of Igala, North of Benin. Themes that immortalize these wars, and which proclaim the military might of Benin Obas and their Army include: Benin kings and warrior chiefs in battle gears wielding long cutlasses or swords (*Umozo*), spears (*Ogan*), and bows and poisoned arrows. There are also figures of the Portuguese mercenaries who aided them in some of their battles who are depicted dressed in European clothing and holding European weapons (Fig.2). Generally, these artforms evoke and immortalize Oba Esigie’s battle victories, and on a broader level, those of other Benin Kings. They underscore the martial might of Benin Kings and are meant to deter political revolts against the Oba.

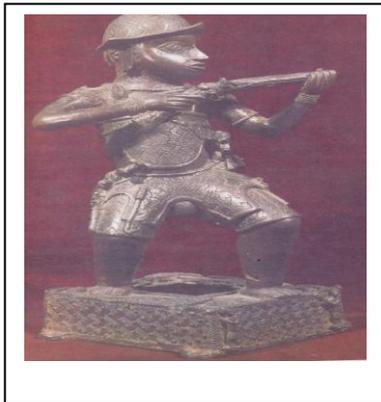


Fig.2 Portuguese Warrior

Source: *Two Thousand Years Nigerian Art*

Perhaps, a pertinent point that needs to be made here is that artforms such as those described above serve, in addition to their commemorative function, as a kind of propaganda art; a form of visual communication that is aimed at influencing the attitude of the subjects of Benin Obas toward the cause or position of the royal fathers. And given their vast number, it can be conjectured that they must have played a very significant role in assisting the Obas to actualize their aims of creating effectively the desired result in their subjects. To appreciate the effectiveness of these artforms in the light in which they are being interpreted here, one needs only to examine the multifaceted information and the cryptic messages they convey; messages that were undoubtedly designed to produce a psychological response, in their subordinates. For instance, in the context in which the trophy memorial heads were used, as described earlier, one clearly sees the desperate aspiration of the Obas to influence the attitude of their subjects, particularly to extract from them the kind of unalloyed submissiveness and loyalty that they needed to realize their political goals.

Festivals and Ceremonies

Benin festivals and ceremonies are numerous and some key ones are equally documented in Benin art, especially palace rituals. This is unsurprising given the importance of the events in the cultural life of the people. Benin festivals and ceremonies are also propitious occasions for the display and use of various artforms (staffs, costumes, masks and musical instruments) that serve aesthetic, spiritual and symbolic purposes. More importantly, major religious festivals and ceremonies are memorialized in Benin art because such religious observances are an imperative and important aspect of Benin communal life. They play a critical role in the cultural continuity and survival of the society. Illustrative of these are the many sacred rites that are a vital part of the Oba's position as a divine traditional ruler. He performs them for himself and on behalf of his people by virtue of his sacrosanct office. Several of the rituals that constitute *Igue* festival, the most important and grandiose ceremony in Benin, are recorded visually on Benin brass plaques as exemplified in *eghute* ritual. This particular ritual, which was introduced by Oba Esigie (1515-50), is aimed at ensuring human and agricultural fecundity in Benin and it serves as a preventive measure against miscarriages and maternal and infant mortality (Emwanta, 2010). The *Igue* festival, which involves over twenty complex rituals which the Oba and the Benins perform yearly, is aimed at ensuring the personal welfare of the Oba, the stability of Benin kingship and the wellbeing of the entire kingdom (Ebeigbe, 2011).

True to form, therefore, Benin Kings enshrine in their art aspects of these festival and the officials who perform them to immortalize these vital religious obligations, to underline their importance and to ensure their continuity.

Political, Artistic and Religious Developments

The various innovative developments in politics, art and religion that were instigated by different Benin Kings which are documented in Benin oral history are equally recorded in Benin art. An example is the introduction of iron working and blacksmithing to Benin by Oba Esigie (1515-50). An unmistakable motif that alludes to him and this innovation is a cross-bearing figure holding a blacksmith's hammer (*umomo*). Another figure shows Oba Esigie in red parrot-feather regalia of a senior priest of *Ovia* masquerade cult to immortalize and symbolize his integration of this cult into palace rituals.

Furthermore, there are many artforms that document the historic innovations that were introduced by European nationals, for instance, the intercontinental trade which the Portuguese, Dutch, French, et cetera, introduced to Benin in the fifteenth century. Alluding to this development are figures of European merchants and the foreign products from their culture (parasols, barrels, boats, cannons, et cetera) that they traded for Benin slaves and goods. Also, memorializing the Christianity that came to Benin through the Portuguese in the same period, are depictions of European missionaries and imagery of their faith.

Commemorated Royal Personages in Benin art

Prior mention has been made in this essay of the fact that Benin art is excessively obsessed with the commemoration of the life and deeds of distinguished Benin royal personages. One enlightening example is the figural form that represents Prince Odogbo, who was later, crowned Oba with the title of Ohuan (1606). He was the only son and heir of Oba Ehengbuda (c.1578). Benin oral account states that he was born handsome and feminine-looking thus people speculated that he was a girl. Another tradition says he was actually born as a girl and transformed into a boy magically. Since Benin tradition precludes women from ascending the throne in Benin, his father ordered him to show off his true gender in a parade through Benin streets in complete nudity accompanied by his attendants (Dark, 1983). This episode is commemorated both in the rituals of *Igue* festival and in Benin art. Prince Odogbo is depicted either as a nude male figure to represent his real gender

or as a female to allude to the erroneous speculations about his masculinity (Fig.3).

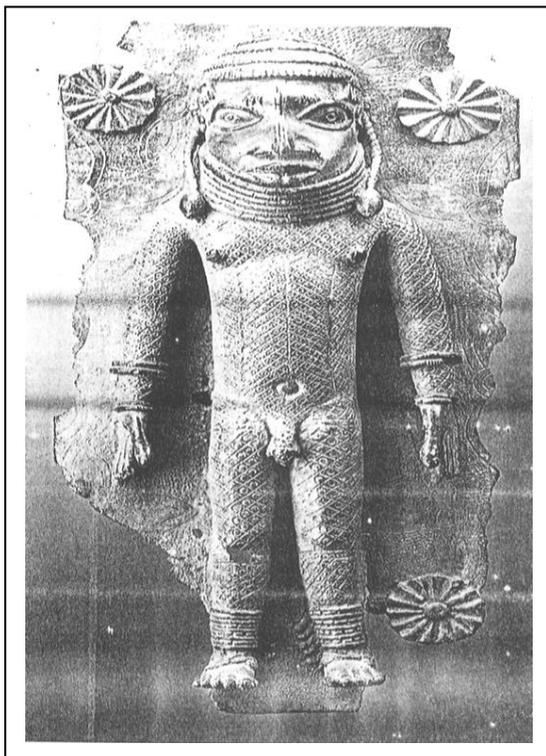


Fig 3: Brass Image of Odogbo

Source: The Art of Power

What this analysis has been underlining and which needs to be reiterated at this point, are the nature, meaning and significance of Benin commemorative art. Some additional example that would help greatly in engendering a deeper understanding of these aspects of Benin art are, Benin memorial sculptures of Benin kings. These sculptures as Ben-Amos (1983a) correctly reports, are emblematic portrayals that “function to memorialize *a* King and *all* Kings; they are testimonies to royal descent.” Such generic memorial sculptures are classical representations that symbolize the generality of Benin Obas. In

place of real physical likeness, the memorial figural forms actually exhibit explicitly aspects of the personality of their subjects and their identifying emblems as typified in the images of Oba Ozolua that were described above. An instructive remark emanating from Borgatti (1990) states that the Edo craftsmen are “unequivocal in their use of emblems to mark the identity of kings.” She reports Ben-Amos (1980b) as mentioning that members of the bronze-casters guild (*Igun-eronmwon*) informed H.F. Marshall, a colonial official, that every Oba has a symbol by which he is recognized and which the brass-casters can identify and the specific event in his reign visually denoted by merely scrutinizing an ancient brass artform (cited in Borgatti: Ibid). This information is utterly accurate given that these brass heads are true exemplars of Benin commemorative art.

The list of Benin commemorative artforms is extensive and only a few have been discussed in this essay for lack of space, nonetheless, from the foregoing, it is clear that a key function of these artforms is their intended use as reminders of real persons and their deeds and unforgettable events in Benin. Indisputably, the commemorative meaning of these artforms is unmistakable and the intention for their creation unambiguous. More than simply serving aesthetic purposes, they are veritable visual souvenirs that expressively convey calculatingly, a wide range of information about what or who they embody.

Actually, as Ben-Amos (1983a) reports, contemporary Edo (Benin) chiefs and craftsmen refer to Benin carvings and castings as “our olden days photographs” and she surmised that if Benins considered their castings and carvings in this light,” it is because “they not only capture but preserve images of and for the Edo nation.” Because of this function, she reports, royal artforms are usually made of enduring materials such as brass, bronze and ivory. Brass and bronze are symbols of permanence in Benin as expressed in the Benin adage which she quoted: “*eronmwon ei m-oton, oze ei keke*,” that is, “brass never rusts; lead never rots.” Particularly edifying also is her statement that a clue to the commemorative connotation of Benin royal art is inherent in the Edo idiom: “*sa-e-y-ama*” which means, “to cast a plaque,” “to make permanent” or “to preserve an image” (Ben-Amos: Ibid). These instructive remarks sum up forcefully, succinctly and lucidly the fundamental nature, meaning and significance of Benin commemorative artforms. The people, events and things that these artforms and symbols symbolize are gone, but they are definitely not forgotten.

Conclusion

Emerging from the examples examined in this essay is the fact that Benins have an acute tendency to memorialize people and events that are of great significance in their culture. For this purpose, they employ carefully selected symbols and imagery that are encoded with enigmatic connotations. A number of these artforms are examined in this essay in order to expose their nature, function, and meaning and how these artforms perform their commemorative function. The essay also demonstrates that the Benins possess an acute capacity to create and communicate through symbols. At least judging from the manner in which they use visual symbolisms to give visibility to immaterial concepts. The Benins themselves intended these artforms, as we revealed, to stand as a testimony of bygone eras, events and people that have been fixed permanently for posterity. Thus though they are gone, they are, however, not forgotten since they live on everlastingly in these tangible records.

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