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## **Tourism and Facilities Development in Three Art Traditions of Benin Kingdom (Pp. 560-571)**

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### **Abstract**

*The three traditions of Bronze casting, wood carving and the royal costumes have given an endearing identity globally to the ancient city and kingdom of Benin. Yet, the bronze casting and wood carving traditions have not received as much encouragement from the government and corporate organizations as they have continued to receive from the royalty, nobility, diplomats, pilgrims, business visitors, researchers and all travelers who, meaning to return, travel in the capacity of consumers of these works of art rather than producers of them. On the other hand, the royal costumes worn by the monarch, his chiefs and nobility are beautiful sight to behold during the major ceremonies involving the palace especially the Ugie (an annual ceremony of the Oba). This ceremony attracts a lot of dignitaries and tourists. The plastic art works to a large extent form part of the airport or tourist art of the locality which are original in style, customized with unique group identity that are properly finished to international standard. Thanks to the symbiosis of the use of traditional and modern tools and equipment. Sadly, the government has failed to realize the full potentials, tourist expenditure in this area of our economy can generate. The paper therefore seeks to bring to the front burner some of the problems associated with the production of some Benin traditional art works, vis-a-vis sales, their studios, motivation of the artists and how their work environment can be improved upon in order to sustain the vocation using the art historical survey method. The survey revealed that*

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*the materials and technology are abundantly available locally. In addition, weather condition, facilities and patronage are important factors to be considered in the production of the works and sustenance of the two plastic traditions while the government is expected to show more interest in the sponsorship of palace ceremonies.*

**Keywords:** Sponsorship, Festivals, marketing Facilities

### **Introduction**

The three art traditions that are being looked at are the bronze castings, ivory and wood carvings as well as the royal costumes in Benin kingdom. The plastic arts traditions have become very important in the history of the ancient Benin kingdom since the past eleven decades or so. They are all over the world in reputable collections, galleries, public and private places. The paper examined the three art traditions in relation to tourism, climate and facilities development

These works generate so much attention and interest that a lot of collectors, scholars and tourists continue to visit the ancient city to patronize the artists. Sadly, the environment and conditions under which these artists work have not witnessed any significant change in the past fifty years or so. Meanwhile, for now, there is no conscious effort on the part of the government to provide a congenial atmosphere for these groups of artist to work.

On the other hand, the uniqueness of the varieties of royal regalia and the ceremonies, festivals and other royal functions associated with their use have continued to attract tourists to the kingdom. Past governments have not shown the much needed encouragement towards the sponsorship of the programmes that involve the use of these customized costumes. This lackadaisical attitude of government is indirectly costing the Edo State Government and the kingdom much economic loss.

The three Benin art traditions being examined in relation to tourism, like other African traditional art which the study of Avins and Quicks (2001) which was cited by Oladimeji (2006:242-3) in general serve the following functions: as a means of universal language or other types of social communication, as an entertainment form: used for religious practices, as a mirror of the society, a link to the past, as a code of ethics, as a badge of leadership and as a metaphor for knowledge and wisdom.

## **Methodology**

To examine the three art traditions of Benin Kingdom in relation to tourism and facilities development, the researcher made use of the art historical survey method to obtain the relevant information. In addition, the researcher has been a participant observer at the annual value – loaded Ugie ceremonies. He is a collector and connoisseur of art and culture. Oral interviews were mainly based on generic questions.

## **Benin Art**

### **a. Bronze Casting and Wood Carving**

By way of definition in the concept of this paper, **art** is to be understood as the reflection of the socio-cultural practices of any given social group which in this case is Benin art. Further more, art defines the culture of the people and contributes to its existence and its identity as well as its ability to function as a social group.

Barnes (2008) summaries art to be “the product of creative human activity in which materials are shaped or selected to convey an idea, emotion, or a visually interesting form”, he concludes by opining that art implies value – monetary, social and intellectual. In attaching value and identity to a work of art, Barnes opines that the Navajo blankets produced by anonymous weavers are more or less regarded as craft or as cultural artifact rather than as art because of their seemingly non artistic materials as well as their usefulness, the anonymity and female gender of their makers and their origin in “tribal” culture. Could the low monetary value attached to the carvings produced by the wood carvers in Benin kingdom be as a result of the anonymity of the carvers and the medium used too?

Both woodcarving and bronze casting are done on a large scale on a daily bases. Nevadomsky (1997) in his article on “Studies of Benin Art and Material Culture, 1897-1997” noted that John Picton (1995:338) observed that “although there is now more brass casing activity in Benin City than ever before, it is as yet undocumented”.

The increase in the production of art works when the new society emerged from the ruins of the massacre was due to the enhanced value of the existing antiquities that led to increase in demand which in turn encouraged the artists to produce similar works. This marked the beginning of the massive reproduction of old works to date.

It should be noted that shortly after Eweka II ascended the throne in 1914, he encouraged craft production and the colonial government established an arts and crafts school through which technical changes and new motifs emerged.

The *Igun Eronwmon* (the bonze caster of Igun) and the *Igbesanmwon* wood and ivory carvers were among the sixty-eight art guilds with specialties that were affiliated to the palace (Ezra 1992:23). As a result of the products and activities of these guilds, the kingdom is celebrated for its art tradition and culture especially in the areas of bronze casting (fig. 1), Ivory and wood carvings (fig. 2), royal costumes as well as the monarchy and the splendour of its royalty. The art of bronze casting and wood carving have been major professions and big industries that are closely linked with the culture through which the people express their belief in these art forms. For example, they believe in life after death and the unique positions of the monarchy in their lives. The art works also perform utilitarian and decorative functions and production activities have been largely concentrated in the City.

#### **b. Royal Costumes, Palace Festivals and Ceremonies**

During palace festivals and ceremonies especially when the Oba or monarch observes his annual ceremony called *Ugie* the City and Kingdom are places worth visiting. During this period, the palace ground and other parts of the city are tastefully decorated with collaboration from corporate bodies, government agencies, individuals, and multi nationals operating within and outside the kingdom.

At the occasions, the Oba and other celebrants made up of the Oba's family members, chiefs, and other palace functionaries are gorgeously dressed with elaborate adornment of beads, customized flowing garments and headdresses (fig. 3). There are variations in the size, decoration and colours worn by them depending on the social standing or ranking of the individuals.

The highlights of the annual ceremony of the Oba in which the costumes are used include:

- i. **Otue Ugie-Erhoba:** This is the period when all the chiefs pay homage to the Oba at the ancestral shrine and also pledge allegiance to their ancestors.
- ii. **Ugie-Erhoba:** This is the day all the chiefs dance and process with their swords (*eben*)

- iii. **Otue-Igwe Oba:** All the chiefs pay homage to the reigning Oba
- iv. **Igwe Oba:** This is the day the Oba serves his head and entertains all the chiefs that visit him. It is the festival that heralds good luck and favour to the devotee. According to Eweka (1992:163) it is the belief of the Benin man that the luck of their monarch is intertwined with the people over which the monarch reigns. The Oba is the embodiment of the Benin culture and his luck becomes their own. It is for this reason that the *Igwe* festival is celebrated between November and December every year. The festival usually begins with the anointing of the Oba's head with chalk signifying purity and of the sacrificial animals which are usually slaughtered during the festival that is characterized with merriment.
- v. **Ugie-Emobo:** This ceremony is performed at the main entrance gate to the palace. It essentially involves prayers which are said to ward off all evils and usher in good tidings, blessing, peace, progress and so on to the kingdom. This is the period when all the surviving children of the extant and previous obas are expected to serve their heads.
- vi. **Igwe-Edohia:** This is the day all other Benins who are not members of the royal family and interested non indigenes resident in the city also serve their heads.
- vii. **Ugie Ewere:** This is the day the young ones in the City symbolically drive away evil from the City with fire wood. They return to the city with the *ewere* leaves to usher in peace and progress to the kingdom. In the evening, the *Ihogbe* society led by Chiefs Ihama and Isekure take the *ewere* leaves to the Oba.

The *Ugie* is climaxed with church service at the Holy Aruosa Cathedral (the place of worship where the Benins believe to commune directly with God Almighty and not through anybody). This is the traditional church of the kingdom. It is directly under the supervision of the palace.

### **c. Benin Art and Tourism**

Many people seem to be unaware of the values of art and the concept of tourism in the growth of the economy of any nation. The realization of the importance of tourism to any nation in the areas of recreation, entertainment and economic potentials of great developed countries made the Federal

Government of Nigeria under the presidency of Alhaji Musa Yar'Adua to include tourism in its seven-point agenda of his government. The tourism agendum is expected to create wealth, foreign earnings and generation of labour. What exactly is Tourism?

Tourism as a concept is the term used to describe a kind of travel or movement from one place to another as it affects the transport, hotel, entertainment and other services like art which for them has two characteristics: that the travelers concerned mean to return home after a comparatively short time, and that the money they spend abroad or wherever they have traveled to is money derived from home, not earned in the places visited. The Microsoft Encarta 2009 (DVD) summarizes tourism as “travel to benefit from a particular service or activity that is unavailable at home”.

Tourists thus, are not only holiday-makers but also religious pilgrims, business visitors who patronize art works, invalids in search of health, diplomats, students and researchers like the numerous foreign scholars that continue to visit Benin Kingdom since the Punitive Expedition of 1897 in search for knowledge and the acquisition of genuine traditional art works (fig. 4) which they use to establish the numerous galleries abroad.

It should be noted that all the travelers who meaning to return, travel in the capacity of consumers rather than producers. Tourist expenditure in this sense has been the main livelihood of whole towns and local governments, states and many countries at various times and since the 1930s have been recognized as a vital element in international balance of payment. According to the World Tourism Organization Provisional Data of 2006, captured in the Microsoft Encarta 2009, the following five countries spent most on tourism.

Germany	-	74.8 billion U.S. dollars
United States	-	72.0 billion U.S. dollars
United Kingdom	-	63.1 billion U.S. dollars
France	-	32.2 billion U.S. dollars
Japan	-	26.9 billion U.S. dollars

According to the same source the following are the five World's Top Tourism Destinations

France	-	79.1 Tourists arrivals in millions
Spain	-	58.5 Tourists arrivals in millions
United States	-	51.1 Tourists arrivals in millions
China	-	49.6 Tourists arrivals in millions
Italy	-	41.1 Tourists arrivals in millions

It was observed that the developed arts of these counties were some of the attractions responsible for the above high tourism destinations' figures.

As earlier observed, tourism is the exhibition of culture. To this end, it is worth mentioning that Nigeria and indeed Benin Kingdom are endowed with numerous and diverse tourist attractions which are categorized into natural (eco-tourism) and man-made resources. Benin traditional art objects, the production centres at Igun Street, the new carving centres that emerged since the reign of Oba Eweka II when the carvers relocated from their traditional base at Igbesanmwan Street, the Benin artistic museum where some of these Benin art works are kept for the viewing public as well as the other numerous galleries and artistic museums that have these treasures of time scattered all over the world, fall into this category of man-made resource attraction. The conquest of Benin Kingdom in 1897 led to the seizure of treasures by British soldiers that soon became the most highly prized of all African art, their value undiminished to this day.

The three art traditions of Benin Kingdom and their factors of production which include their production materials and methods, working environment comprising the workshops, showrooms or galleries can meet the desires and aspiration of her numerous visitors if the art traditions are well developed, equipped with modern state of the art recreational facilities and the entire art business is properly managed and preserved.

A lot of people travel to obtain service from the Benin art works. For example, scholars visit art museums and galleries worldwide where Benin art can be consulted and if possible purchased in search of information. Art collectors are not left out as traveler continue to visit the production centres and showrooms to buy and commission the production of specific works of their choice to adorn both private and public places. There is however room for improvement if the facilities and conditions of service/production are

improved upon. This brings to mind the issues of climate and facilities development in Benin art.

As the writer has earlier noted, tourism is also boosted by researchers and scholars (both local and foreign) who travel far and wide in search of knowledge concerning the Benin culture. To understand these Benin traditional art works, scholars became interested in the social systems of Benin. The religious and leadership systems were of particular focus, the materials, techniques, working condition, facilities, aesthetic and the essence of the artist in the kingdom became very necessary in understanding the objects. An art object could then not be adequately studied and appreciated from its aesthetic point of view only, but also the insights into its social history and processes from which they were made.

#### **d. Benin art and climate and Facilities Development in Benin Art**

##### **Definition of Terms:**

**Climate** is defined simply as the long-term effect of the sun's radiation on the rotating earth's varied surface and atmosphere which can be annual or seasonal averages. In other words, climate is a place with a particular type of weather, for example, a warm climate. It could also be appreciated from the point of view of an indoor environment in an indoor setting such as an art studio/workshop or gallery/showroom.

**Facilities** as a word on the other hand, are ordinarily defined as something with particular function. By extension, it is something designed or created to provide a service or fulfill a need in terms of studios, galleries or showrooms.

##### **Working Environment:**

With the definition of the two operational terms above, it is clear that the issues expected to be addressed are the environment and working conditions of the traditional artists in Benin. What then is the state of the studios or workshops where the artists produce their works which have put the City and the Kingdom as a whole in the world map? Are the studios congenial for serious creative work? Are they of international or acceptable standard for tourists to see whenever they wish to patronize the artists?

The answers are certainly not far fetched. The ramshackle sheds are nothing to behold as they are real eyesore. The surroundings and interiors are very unkept and dirty, yet beautiful carvings and bronze casting are produced from them (fig 5). Most of the time, they work in the open air especially the bronze



casters because of the heat produced by the hearth used for casting, they are therefore exposed to the elements (sun and rain). Their showrooms are usually located at the front of the building facing the road usually in a store. The workshops are built detached from the main building behind, shielded from the view of unwanted visitors and their clients.

Modern technology is gradually being embraced by both the carvers and the casters. This introduction is making their production faster with better finishing while the artists are able to meet up targets better.

### **Conclusion**

Benin art in whatever form, medium and style have come to stay in world art history. The popularity of these great works have continued to generate interest and patronage among collectors, connoisseurs, scholars, tourists and all manner of persons from home and abroad. This is so because the works are qualitative, original in style, affordable, durable and because they are master pieces. Time they say tells the master piece: a genuine art work stands the test of time. Benin works are genuine and indeed master pieces that have stood the test of time. They abound in several notable private and public galleries and art museum at home and abroad. Most of these collections are the loots of the 1897 punitive expedition to the kingdom.

### **Recommendation**

The working environment of the artists is not conducive, therefore, the government, well-meaning individuals and corporate bodies should come to the aid of the artists by developing an area that could be known as an art village where all or most of the artists can practice. This will boost tourism.

Soft loans should be made available to the carvers so that they can upgrade their tools and equipments and also increase their production.

The government should show more interest in sponsorship of royal ceremonies and festivals in order to attract more tourists and if possible upgrade the Oba's annual festival to the status of the Argungun Fishing Festival in Kebbi State, Nigeria.

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## **QUEEN MOTHER, by Ogbemudia (2006) Bronze**



**FIG 2: Moses Ero, The LION KING, 1972, Ebony 60cm X 70cm X 45cm  
Artist Collection. Photo: Efemena Ononeme**



**FIG 3: Gorgeously dressed chiefs during a recent Igue festival.**





**FIG. 4: Sunday E. Owie's Showroom at 6 Airport Road, Benin City. 1999**

*A typical Showroom where well finished carvings are displayed on shelves, wall, columns and so on. Photo: Efemena Ononeme*

