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Ijo Art Theory: An Exposé

Mangiri, Stanley Golikumo, Ph.D.
Department of Fine and Applied Arts
Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island
Bayelsa State, Nigeria
E-mail: Golikumo@yahoo.com

Abstract

Nigerian traditional arts have received tremendous attention from individual researchers, writers and research institutions. These arts speak about those ethnic communities, which help to communicate and interpret their ideological framework. The traditional identity of the Ijo in her artistic culture and ideological foundation has not been documented enough by artists and critics. This paper therefore, attempts to bring to bear the philosophy, cosmogony, thoughts, beliefs, and myths of the Ijo, which forms the basis of their art style. Qualitative research methodology was used to achieve the desired objectives through photographic recording of visuals and literary studies. This will serve as a call for further research and analysis of Ijo art, for the growth and development of Nigerian arts tradition.

Introduction

Prior to the present time, traditional art had been perceived to be aesthetically pure and technically excellent. The artists by the ethics of their profession were aware of the philosophy, aspirations and beliefs of their ethnic societies, which formed part of the settings cherished by the people. Art works were made according to the aesthetics and cultural norms of the people.

For some time, traditional art was seen as native and primitive therefore, Western and far Eastern concepts and styles were being adopted for the mere sake of modernity. This had worsened the matter coupled with Eurocentric anthropologists and art critics that Africans were generally sub-standard compared with other types of humans, African arts were referred to as “images” and or as “tribal art”. Further still, Africans were seen as people who have no highly developed forms of thoughts in the sciences, arts and philosophy (Eyo, 1977; Layiwola, 1994).

African artists before the advent of the white were great carvers of wood, stone and smelters of precious metals. Their works were so perfect that the explorers and missionaries never believed that they were works of indigenous artist and considered such works of Greek origin (Eyo, 1977; Egonwa, 1988). The question one would ask is – how can someone without high forms of thought and less creativity produce works that astounded the Western world?

African Philosophy

No human being does anything of creative venture without thinking. The thinking and production are a result of the myths, folktales and world-views of such people, which method of application could be referred to as philosophy. The philosophy of the works of art in any community of people reveals the various cultural areas and values attached to them; because, traditionally art is synonymous to culture.

The art works from any part of the world were and are guided by the philosophy or thoughts system of that place and that influences the artist. The African artist applies the principles of reasoning (African thought) in his work. Mbiti (1969), and Horton (1977) confirm that African philosophy existed before colonization. Philosophy, according to Oduwole (1999), is a conscious, rational, critical, and systematic study of the existence of things around us as well as the place of Man in the Universe. In understanding the philosophy of Africans, Durkheim (1912) in Dasaolu (1999) opined that some African religious beliefs appear to be rational in methods, purpose and forms. Mbiti (1969) in support of the above said “Africans are notoriously religious and that the study of traditional religions gives us an indepth understanding of African philosophy”. Okolo (1990) in Okaba (1998) defined African philosophy as:

a path to a systematic, coherent discovery and disclosure of the African as a being in the African world. Through this knowledge or disclosure of himself and his world by critical reflection, the African grasps reality that is to say, attains the truth about man and the cosmos in its entirety.

The African through his religion and the discovery of himself indulges in much thinking and creative practices. Ijo tribe, the earliest settlers in the Niger Delta (Wills, 1976) is not isolated from the philosophy and creative practice of the Africans. It is on this premise that this paper examines the beliefs, nature of art and style of Ijo art, which will provide an ideological context for a theoretical document.

Ijo Art and Cosmology

Ijo art is referred to, in this context, as the traditional arts of the Ijo speaking people of the Niger Delta. The arts often executed on their ideas “the cultural heritage as a source of ideas for their arts”. Some works express their historical and personal experiences. Their works deal with the themes of social concern, societal injustice, religious beliefs, myths, ancestors, heroes and leaders.

The Ijo early forms of art were of clay, wood and metal sculptures and scarification in body adornment. Some works were based on the Ijo traditional religious concept of reincarnation and elaborate myths about the creator (*woying*), ancestors (*opuaduwei*), deities (*amateme-suo*) divinities and spirit (*teme*).

The Ijo believe in only on God and make a clear-cut distinction between God and creatures, the creator and the created. Omoregbe (1996), affirms this greatness of God and said.

Although conceived in anthropomorphic terms, God is believed to be a supreme and transcendent being. In fact, God is so high above man in African traditional philosophy that in their religions, African does not worship God directly nor is He represented with statues or images. Thus, the absolute transcendence of God in their philosophy underlies their religious attitude and practices.

The Ijos have strong conviction that God the supernatural Being look after and sustains the universe. They have that strong conviction because of their limitations and weaknesses particularly in the face of death, calamities and the forces of nature (such as thunderstorms, earthquakes, mighty rivers and great forests), which man cannot control or can only control in very small way. This led to the thinking that people need help of one who is greater than themselves and greater than the world.

Again, it is forces of nature, which attract people’s attention and marvelled at the powers of the weather, storms, thunder and lightening, and the phenomena of day and night. The sky with its sun, moon and stars was a mystery to them. They therefore associated these heavenly forces or powers with the creator – God. The earth, the seas and all that are in them were believed to be creations of God. Man sees himself as one who is between heaven and earth, who attempts to understand and

explain the visible and the invisible universe. The Ijos also think that there are different powers governing the universe because of the manifestation of those powers in human life, with God as the head of the universe. According to Idowu (1976) and Egonwa (1994) in African traditional religions, the hierarchy of powers is: God, the deities and divinities, spirits and ancestors.

The spirits are seen as having powers from the Supreme Being or Deity. They are not created; they came into being in accordance with the divine ordering of the universe. So the spirits are thought of as powers, which are almost abstract, who take on human form. They are immaterial and incorporeal beings.

The Ijos believe in the way of the spirit. To them life is not complete without the harmonious relationship of the living with the spirits. They sought for answers to their daily problems from the All-Knowing-Spirit. They therefore create, fashion and express themselves with clay or wood and sometimes metal, the experience and activities, knowledge about things around, depicting the qualities and character of the spirit. This has become part of their lives. Then, the images, objects or masks created become instruments or agents for identifying the individual consciousness with the force or those forces – deities or divinities (Mangiri, 2000). The art of the Ijo is centred in and out of religion. Besides, other factors that influence their arts are through geology, methodology and cosmogony. Aesthetics is actuated by ethics.

Ijo Art Style

The Ijo art-sculptures in particular, are in geometric forms generally. Most of the masks are in abstraction. The arts are being translated according to the spirit's movement as being guided in the rhythmic operation of the creation. The spiritual rhythm is expressed in the movement of life. The life movement of the spirit is represented through the same rhythm as it governs other creation. The Ijo do not consider imitation of natural phenomena and the mirroring of life around us as important. But their fundamental aim is to empower the work with the elements of life i.e. movement, inspiration and communication. The traditional artist who in most times being possessed by the spirits, creates his art by the instructions of the spirits thereby carrying the breath of the spirit into the materials which is believed to have had life and energy. At other times, the traditional artist works by the instructions of the spirit through the diviners. The same effect on the works is achieved as being explained above. That is why it is believed that the images or masks in the shrine can kill someone, because it takes the qualities and character of that spirit being. Hence, most of the Ijo arts are symbolic.

There are two basic categories of sculptures among the Ijo. They are the nature and or bush spirits represented in naturalistic and or anthropomorphic features. The second group is water spirits. They are expressed in naturalistic and zoomorphic

features which are used as masquerade in traditional festivals and/or ceremonies (Anderson, 1999; Mangiri, 2000). Alagoa (1969) in Anderson (1999) asserted that there are naturalistic masks in the Niger Delta region.



Plate 1: Isobowei (1978)



Plate 2: Osuwowei (1979)



Plate 3: Edisibowei (1978)



Plate 4: Edewei (1978)

Courtesy: Ways of the Rivers: Martha G. Anderson - 2002



Plate 5: ‘Opu-Adumu’ Kula-Village

Apart from the images in human figures, which have the characteristics of African art style, the Ijo are known for their horizontal headpieces. These types of masks are more commonly fashioned, designed, or created by the Ijo tribe than any other tribe. There is no noticed influence from any region. These headpieces are carried on top of the head instead of covering the face as most conventional masks which signifies the spirit’s rhythmic movement – floating on the surface of the water and or fishes’ movement against the current or with it showing various activities of their life style. The costume the masqueraders wear also suggest the idea that spirit beings have come out of the water to play. There are also water spirits represented in anthropomorphic features.

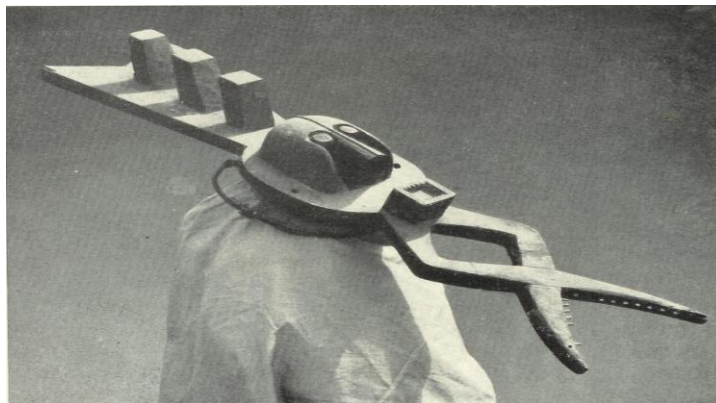


Plate 6: ‘Gbabu Pele Mask’ Kolokuma Clan

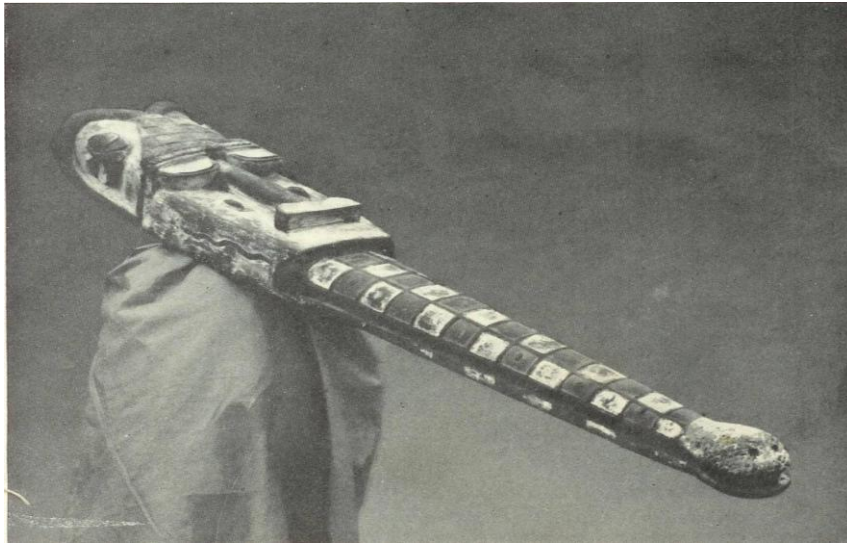


Plate 7: 'Segi Mask' Nembe

Courtesy: Kalabari Sculpture: Robin Horton - 1965



Plate 8: 'Ugonzu Mask'

Picture by the author

Characteristically, the Ijo images do not portray proportions of a living person. The presentation makes one believe that what the statue represents is not necessarily the truth in physical terms of a human body, but a vital truth about spiritual beings symbolically in human form. They are exaggerated because the content of most works is spiritual and portray some features as spiritually guided. The features are semi-human, and are therefore, semi-naturalistically treated.

Horton (1965) talking about Kalabari sculpture said “Kalabari sculpture is first and foremost an Ijo style, its abstract character, its addition to rectangular block and cylinder, its strict adherence to the vertical axis of the log: all these are typical of Ijo sculpture generally”.

All the masks are of Ijo style – the horizontal headpieces. They have the combination of abstracted human facial form and fish, bird or some sea animal features except the vertical masks, which have the same stylistic features as those of the images. Besides, there are masks that are constructed and or assembled – “constructive sculptures”. These are masks that are constructed or assembled with various materials such as fabrics, feathers, wood, metal, raffia, etc. The aesthetics of such masks are more pleasing and elegant. There are obviously some masks that have naturalistic treatment, depicting fishes, birds or other sea animals. These are found all across the Ijo region.

Conclusion

Ijo art tradition seeks to evolve a visual language of expression to portray the rhythmic vitality of spirits, which conceptions were rooted from religious beliefs, myths about the creator and his creation, and of social concern.

There is distinctive art style of the Ijo art culture. Though, it is the same geometric application as any other African art but the abstraction, structure, harmony with the forms of nature, use of colour, composition or space division of the masks are designed according to hierarchic order, as instituted by their philosophy and principles of life.

Symbolism as Udosen (1998) rightly said, is the means through which the traditional art seeks a compromise between the apprehended idea and his materials, strikes a balance between the possible and the actual, and between utility and enjoyment. The rhythm alone constitutes the subject matter, which reflects cosmic order.

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