



Visual Anatomy And The Art Of Ancient Igbo Societies Of Southeastern Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

Anatomy is a visual science based on vividly describing the observations seen, at times, through a medium. Hence, the philosophy of visual art might well offer an epistemological basis for the complexity of study of human anatomy in a meaningful way.

In this paper, we present the first part of our research work on some aspects of structural anthropology associated with the Igbo societies of Southeastern Nigeria. This work gives information on the visual anatomy as depicted by the artistic impressions of the *Ikenga*.

Keywords: Visual anatomy, *Ikenga*, Igbo.

In general, human appreciation of his environments, images have always been important not just for the message they conveyed but also for their inherent aesthetic appeal. Among the Greeks and European renaissance, the art medium human figure was more important than the message (Boardman 1944).

Leonardo da Vinci coined the phrase "sapere come vedere" to know how to see, which is indicative of the fact that visual anatomy has its roots in the ability to appreciate what is seen in the right context. Hillowala (2000) in this regard mentioned that one needs to see not only what is apparent to the eye but also to understand the use of the human form (the medium) to convey the message of the work of art.

The Archaic Greek period spanned approximately 170 years to the start of the classical period. This period depicted art laced in human anatomy. Anatomical depictions of young men called *Kouroi* went from the rudimentary to those that were perfect specimens and were narrative in that visual anatomy was used to convey feelings and emotions (Hillowala, 2000). Even the Greek god, Apollo was synonymous with numerous statues of the standing youth.

In recorded history, Hillowala (2000) observes that the provenance of human anatomy in art dates back to more than 5000 years in the cave art of the stick figures with exaggerated limbs. Their limb exaggeration was supposed to

be in proportion to their expected spirit function.

Greek art was a direct legacy of Egyptian art. Evidence to support this was profuse in Herodotus (484-425 BC) (Carpenter, 1960). Artistic transmission from one culture to another can be accomplished through trade, active interest by craftsmen and through colonization, emigration or plunder. Boardman (1994) mentioned that transmission of Egyptian influence to Greece was by trade and active interest by Greek craftsmen in cross-country trading centers.

In this paper, we present the first part of our research work in the structural anthropology of the Igbo societies of Eastern Nigeria. This work give information on the visual anatomy as depicted by the artistic impressions of the *Ikenga*. The second part of the work will draw comparisons of cross-country stylistics and religious connotation of art in human anatomy among the Igbos of Southeastern Nigeria.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Ancient art collections of the *Ikenga* were studied. The collections were from four sources, namely:

- The National Museum, Enugu where variations of ancient and modern *Ikenga* statues were examined.
- Ogbaja Onuata in Ezeagu, Enugu State where ancient collections of *Ikenga* were studied.

- Art gallery of the Institute of Management and Technology, Enugu where *Ikenga* art works were compared with the ancient collections.

The art works were topographically studied. The authors tried to examine the works of art and analyze the evolution in style from the early to the modern sculptures and how they can be attributed to advances in the sculptors' knowledge of human anatomy. Where possible photographs of the *Ikenga* were taken especially when it has not been kept as part of the shrine of a deity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In all, 40 *Ikengas* were examined. All the statues examined presented similarity in general structure and form of human anatomy. The general artwork presents the image of a youth. Thirty two of the artworks were similar to the observations in Fig. 1. This image from Umunbo (Courtesy of National Museum) presents the image of a sitting youth with both arms flexed at right angles to the forearm. The left hand is in a supine position holding a little pot while the right hand holds a matchet (Fig.2: Courtesy Ogbaja Onuata). Although there appear to be a disproportionate sizing in the sculpting of the anatomical regions, when compared with human body anatomy, the artworks show a good understanding of anatomy. Sinews and muscles, which had been rendered by grooves and ridges incised to differentiate anatomical features, show more subtle and realistic modelling. The sculptured models represent an idealized anatomical figure based on the relative laws of proportions and exemplifying the power of physical beauty.

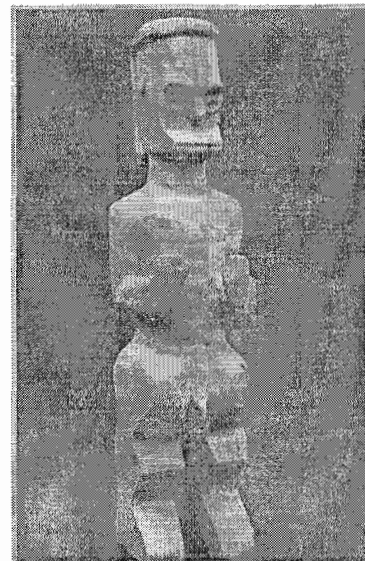
In the *Ikenga*, the Igbos through the image has demonstrated the acquisition of sophisticated sculptural skills and the urge to express more complicated feelings and emotions (at times religious) through visual anatomy. This is so because in Igbo mythology, the *Ikenga* is associated with the spirit of the personal god,



Ikenga Umunbo, Courtesy: National Museum, Enugu



Ikenga, IMT (Arts Dept.) Wood 150cm



Ikenga attributed to Afikpo Wood 145cm National Museum, Enugu

chi and the artistic impression conveyed in the *Ikenga* show human anatomy more profusely rendered. Clear examples abound from the artworks. For example:

- The clear recognition of the indentations of the rectus abdominis (Fig.1).
- The observed curvatures of the deltoid and the conical base of the anteriorly positioned pectoralis major muscle were vividly recognized (Fig.3)
- The sculptured neck showed a cylindrical structure holding the head with grooves indicative of a fair anatomical appreciation of the sternocleidomastoid and the trapezius muscles (Fig. 1). In one of the art works which is found in Ogbaja Onuata (not photographed), the symmetry of the sternocleidomastoid as it leaves the posterior aspect of the ear to the sternal head is beautifully rendered. This shows a near natural rendition of the muscles.

It is clear that in both past and present artists of the *Ikenga*, anatomy was paramount in Igbo statuary. Although ancient sculptors presented works with less body proportionality as observed mainly in the collections at Ogbaja Onuata, there were clear indications of the appreciation of visual anatomy. Better accomplishments of later artists became possible by the acquisition of advanced skill that allowed the integration of various features into a holistic figure. Moreover, the artistic impressions of ancient artists reflected other religious connotations apart from physical beauty of the human figure. Among the Igbos

Boston (1977) stated that the *Ikenga* imagery is explicitly oriented to male power and accomplishment which is drawn from the personal god, *chi* Anibeze(2003) expressed the qualities of *Ikenga* power to be many and complex and reflect the nuances of masculine ethos.

Anatomy is a visual science based on vividly describing the observations seen, at times, through a medium. Hence the philosophy of visual art might well offer an epistemological basis for the study of the complexity of human body anatomy in a meaningful way. It can be firmly assumed that the current use of animated powerpoint as a tool in the teaching of anatomy may well have its origins in the early attempts at human art. Today, the project of animated images from a computer is a medium that offers great promise in effecting improved communication of anatomic information.

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