

## **“African Art and the New Humanism”**

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### Abstract

The following essay examines African art in line with the philosophy of New Humanism, and how it fulfils human dignity and value. The relationship of man and his creator is examined through art, vis-à-vis religion and man’s constant search for the reason for being. The theory of creationism which attributes the existence of everything in the universe to the direct creative act of the Supreme Being, and presents man as the apex and pinnacle of God’s creation is discussed. New Humanism is discussed as it aims at reconciling people to the original humanism, the sort of humanism pursued by the Renaissance Humanists. The paper takes a careful look at African art as an art of culture, philosophy and personality, as realistic views of life expressed in the symbolic structure of the work of art, IMAGE being the link. African art is characteristically humanistic, as what constitutes arts is determined by its effect on man, either positively or negatively. The paper concludes that, in structure, African art can be seen to consist of the following features; belief and ancestors. It is important to note that outside of God, full human dignity and values cannot be realized.

### Introduction

Man has been the preoccupation of any humanistic theory, hence its insistence upon a proper orientation of the relationship between God and man, the New Humanism takes a keen interest in the avowal of the brotherhood of man. When we talk about the brotherhood of man we are referring to the realm of human values – good human relationships where man does not lord it over another man. No wonder Schaeffer (1968:63) in recognition of the dignity of man points to the fact that man was created in the image of God. He avers, “To say that I am only a machine is one thing, to live consistently as if this were true is quite another.”

Accordingly, Etuk (2006:20) affirms that “a philosophy of man that is consistent and sees him as a creature of God, endowed with unique attributes by that creator, will also have something to say about the relationship of this man to his creator. This is the realm of religion ”

Religion is believed to play a prominent role in the New Humanism, as there might be really no religious vacuum in any human life. Man is constantly searching for and probing existence. Man’s environment also plays an important role in the New Humanism, which leads us to the realm of art. The question “What is man?” can only be explained by the understanding of how man came into existence. Certain theories explain this phenomenon. The theory of creationism which attributes the existence of everything in the universe to direct creative act of the Supreme Being; presents man as the apex and pinnacle of God’s creation, full of dominion dignity and value (Etuk, 1999:40). Another theory as Etuk (1992:63-71) posits, is the theory of emancipationism, which accepts God or some kind of supreme principle as the starting point, which recognizes every other thing in existence as an outflow or emanation

there from. Since man was formed in the likeness and image of God, he is endowed with superiority, dignity and value.

Modern Humanism, according to Banjo (2006:2), is not an easy concept to define in terms, especially as one considers the apparent contradiction contained in the fact that we have the religious strain, such as Christian humanism, in contrast to secular modernism. New or modern humanism is, indeed, also known by a few other names, namely; naturalist, ethical, democratic and scientific humanism. Carliss Lamont, a humanist philosopher as cited by Banjo (2006:2) describes modern humanism as; “a naturalistic philosophy that rejects all super-naturalism and relies primarily upon reason and science, democracy and human compassion. “Based on the above assertion by Carliss Lamont, humanism is essentially human oriented, relying as it were, on secular variety, exclusively on the capacity of man to improve his lot in order to produce a happy and egalitarian society. To do this and to be able to harness the value of humanism, in modern times, as it relates to Africa, African art becomes a ready tool for the actualization of this new humanistic tendencies, which places great confidence in man’s capabilities, and lauds his ability to challenge, dare and defy in a promethean style.

Edwards (1989) considers humanism as “one of those philosophies for people who think for themselves. There is no area of thought that a humanist is afraid to challenge and explore.” This leads us into the consideration of the relevance of art (African Art) to humanism. If the above assertion is true, then, humanism must provide a critical tool, for the reflection of humanity provided in a work of art, must, among other things, occasionally show the extent to which the artist subscribes to, or has been influenced by the philosophy of humanism. Humanism, as Brockett (2003:6) postulates is primarily the ability of human beings to manage their own affairs. This explains why humanism presents the view of an organized, developed, inhabited, exploited and managed universe for the total benefit of mankind. In order for us to have a full grasp of African art and the new humanism, the discourse that follows below will no doubt espouse us to the subject.

### New Humanism

New humanism is a critical and cultural movement that affirmed freedom of the will and necessity of standards in life and art. The movement gained prominence in the late 1920s in opposition to ‘Secular humanism’s’ belief in deity not considered important as most of the proponents were atheists. Contemporary New Humanism believes in the existence of a supernatural Being-God, as the measure for the dignity of man. Etuk (1999:167) states that “for the brotherhood of man to make sense, it must be predicated on the fatherhood of God.” Furthermore, Etuk (1999:104) avers; “Where the new humanism differs from the old is that it maintains that full human dignity cannot be realized outside of the God who created man in his image...”

To this, Etuk (1999:4) submits that the dignity of man is conferred on man by the one who created man in his own image, and that to discount this factor is to devalue man”. New Humanism’s primary concern is to return people to original humanism; the sort of Humanism pursued by the Renaissance Humanists who, in their turn, had sought to return the people to real human values such a truth and goodness, respect

for goodness, respect for the dignity of persons, justice and fairness in human affairs; which African art seeks to promote.

#### African Art

African art is identified with socio-religious concepts and it spontaneously exercises the fullest measure of its view point through recreating activities. It is art of culture, philosophy and personality...It is a continuous evolving art through change and adaptation to new circumstances... it is the realistic views of life expressed in the symbolic structure of the work of art, IMAGE, being the link (Ochigbo, 2006:3).

Based on the above assertion by (Ochigbo, 2006), African art is informed by African culture and beliefs. Hence, the functionality of art that acknowledges the Supreme Being – God, in tandem with New Humanism postulates that God designed the earth for the benefit of mankind. Africans see God as the measure of man's dignity and value, hence in every African society, there is a name for God who created the universe. Example, the Idoma call God 'Owoicho', and so it applies to every distinct socio-linguistic group in Africa. African beliefs about the supernatural hold that even gods can fall out of use and new forces and gods may appear without warning. Therefore, Ochigbo (2002:20) affirms that "the practical purpose of art is to transform such spiritual forces into artistically satisfying forms that also portray the qualities of the spiritual forces." Furthermore;

It stands to reason, therefore, that new physical forms, new art forms, must be called into being as often as new spiritual forces appear on the scene because new forces are likely to be threatening to life or at least to contain elements of danger. New art harmlessly draws off the new spiritual dangers and ensures the safety of the people (Ochigbo, 2002:20).

Traditional African art was thus an art of belief, symbols influenced by function. The artist is therefore regarded as the creator of African iconography. Art for the African thus becomes a way of interpreting all human experiences in ways that make the new and strange more understandable and therefore humanity benefits. This can be understood from the point of view that Africans are much more sensitive to spiritual dimensions of life. African beliefs are inconsistent with materialism. They cling tenaciously to beliefs as reincarnation and veneration – the very purpose for which their works are centred. This culture sets a higher premium on cooperation, team work and help to one another. African culture is synergetic as its art is mostly expressive and an embodiment of its cultures.

African art has been produced to meet both physical and spiritual needs simultaneously in the various African culture. They do not separate art from the rest of life. That is, they seldom separate the practical function of an art object from its spiritual and aesthetic significance. Healing, beauty and spiritual benefits accrue within the context of African art. The arts express important traditional values and give form to the spiritual life of both the individual and the community. The arts often acts as ritual, magic, entertainment, and practical technology all at once as it embodies creative

energy by bringing participants into unity with nature's forces and giving access to the creative energy of the universe.

African art is fundamentally a collective art. It is a communal property whose spiritual qualities are shared and experienced by all mankind. As philosophy, the search for wisdom is guided by reason; African art, which seeks to express views of life, is accompanied to a large extent by reason through the choice of artforms. Artforms are carefully selected to portray the functions of such art. For example, as human passion art, African art exhibit the following characteristics as expressed by Oditia (2003); it must serve as a means to channel a message; must be decoded by its recipients; must function in a situation of societal harmony between two or more persons; the object must be visually powerful and realistic enough to provide its user with a psychological release from further anxiety and it must be symbolic of its function.

Other characteristic attribute of African art that enables man to integrate and dialogue with his given environment include; functioning in an act that bridges the gulf between the physical and spiritual world; elements of form of the object must contain certain magical symbols to make the object potent particularly when cleansed. In order to uncover the hidden knowledge, the object must be such that manifests only particular family or lineage ancestral spirits.

In the realm of death, art, being a funerary object in design and function, exhibit a complex of associated meanings, as well as solving to accommodate and locate ancestral spirit of the living dead and buttress the theory of reincarnation. At the realm of religion the characteristics of art of the spirit world include; being symbolic of a deity; its scope must be able to function on either the personal, family or ethnic level; and it must assume an esoteric cult object that assures human control of supernatural agencies in an individual or groups life, as in shaping circumstances, events or opportunities. The Idoma 'aleku' ancestral spirit is an example of this characteristics.

#### African Art and the Legacy of New Humanism

Based on the postulates of Etuk's (1999) New Humanism, African art can be classified as meeting the ideals of New Humanism. The art of Africa acts as a means of education, religion and entertainment. The arts concerns itself with the search for another world where man can enjoy himself in the company of the many gods he has created to meet his needs. Example; the god of harvest, fertility, thunder, rain, sky and earth. Among the Idoma, Igbo, Yoruba of Nigeria, the Dan from Liberia and Sierra Leone; the Kuba of Zaire, the Dogon of Mali the Songye of Zaire; the Shembe in KwaZulu-Natal South Africa and the Kwaluseni of Swaziland, these gods are believed as being capable of protecting them when they produce art objects to venerate them. With particular reference to the Igbo, Onwuanaku (2007:1) submits that; " Other natural forces include Ofo, Ogu, and Amadioha to evoke rite of justice and good deed. It was the desire to create and immortalize gods and deities in the Igbo culture that led to... carving or modeling these spirit gods by artists for...traditional religious worship. "

Furthermore, Onwuanaku (2007:2) states that "The traditional practice of art and magic is an attempt to venerate the ancestors... The traditional worship needed ritual images and shrines... to represent spiritual forces as agents to convey prayers to God.

In his endless search for ritual creations, man has reached high levels in the use of clay, wood...for making ritual objects... in the struggle to satisfy his endless needs, he has reached high levels of achievements in arts.”

The art of Africa is firmly grounded as a form of link between the living and the dead, the family, cult groups, educational institutions and the society at large. This gives vitality and meaning to existence in any community. Modern African art is an anomalous mix of the traditional and the most sophisticated on the other hand. A cue from African regional and ethnic pantheons, symbols, rituals and festivals, reveals a careful response to new materials and new metaphors derived in part from the old artistic heritage. In the modern artistic idioms, the ancient and modern is incorporated to give vent to the new art that everyone benefits as a result of the old and new.

Perhaps closest to contemporary western concepts of recycling are the ways in which African peoples use modern materials to create objects whose basic form retains its historical and traditional character...many of the materials may, however, also have been bought for the specific purpose of creating modern versions of traditional objects (Nettleton et al, 2003:68).

Furthermore, Nettleton et al (2003:68) submits that

The use of different materials may liberate the maker from some of the demands associated with more customary traditional materials and techniques...The selection of more easily available materials reflects modern pressures on time, and some historical symbolic associations are relinquished in the creation of a new form. New symbolic associations have, though, probably accrued to the new materials, and some of these may be connotative of modernity.

Such connotative modernity is devoid of the traditional rituals which an art work must go through for the benefit of the individual or society. New humanist African art can be shared externally as in the example of the South African “Lipotho” (married women’s apron) – a plastic textile in the collection of the standard bank. This clearly indicates that art here has been moved out of its traditional context to be enjoyed by all. Other examples include the use of “Uli” – traditional Igbo symbols; “Nsibidi” – traditional Ibibio symbols; and “Ifa” – traditional Yoruba symbols of Nigeria by modern painters, sculptors and designers in their works. The symbols of these cultures are esoteric, but externalized by modern artists like Obiora Udechukwu, Chika Amaefuna, Ben Ekanem, Bruce Onobrakpeya among many other African artists combing traditional techniques and new materials for an art that is eclectic and engaging. African artists today are interpreting the social, political and cultural changes in the African continent as reflected in their subject matter, media and technique.

Humanism, as a philosophy of life is all about man’s concept of life, and the need for and to discover his lost glory and dignity. While New Humanism posits that full human dignity cannot be realized outside of the God who is his creator. African art has been able to express African beliefs in deity as reflected in their works based on the day-to-day needs of Africans. A functional approach based on typology as

suggested by Bogatryrev (1971), that art objects can be viewed as both object and sign is imperative.

A functional approach based on typology makes it easier to classify African art objects based on their significant functions and meanings. This reveals the various artist concepts which lie at the root of their use patterns, making processes, multiple functions and meanings if need be, whether religious, ideological, symbolic, aesthetic or social. Thus, a functional approach reveals several artistic and cultural perspective of African art. For easy development and analysis, African art has been structured along these lines: art for communication; art for day-to-day living; and art for spiritual sustenance.

#### Art for Communication

Through artistic representation, information becomes more didactic, accessible and memorable than it would through verbal language. The purpose of African arts in the New Humanism are multivariate as it educates, enlightens and entertains in the various societies. Because art is clearly understood by a broad spectrum of any particular society, it is often used to impart information. African art are an enrichment of the cultural powers, whereby words are condensed into simple art objects for the symbol users. This makes communication to become more sophisticated and scientific as art can be understood by those for whom it was created in order to make the society a better place to live.

#### Art for Day-to-Day Living

Utilitarian objects in Africa are crafted to bring pleasure and efficiency into our daily lives as environmental arts, depending of course on the availability of peculiar local resource materials. Utilitarian art objects in the African landscape reveal the nature of the people of a particular area, making statements about who they are and the kind of world around them.

Art for day-to-day living exists to meet and satisfy the needs of its creators. The arts have thrived because the people gave it strength to survive for the benefit of all, as it has become part of a cultural patrimony.

#### Art for Spiritual Sustenance

In most of the African culture, majority of the arts have a spiritual component. Spiritual or magical purposes apparently inspired the making of most cultural effigies that spread across Africa, as art and religion developed simultaneously. Traditional art has been the pivot of tribal spiritual awakening; “They serve as instruments by which the living made contact with the supernatural for spiritual inclination. Art expressed... ethnic beliefs and ideas (Ochigbo, 2005).”

When we refer to ‘traditional art’, we are referring only to the continuity – conscious or unconscious – and the coherence of a system, as much in the dimension of space as in that of time. In this context, reference is made to the spread of religious beliefs through art. The legends of the Yoruba gods of Sango and ‘Olokun’ could not be kept alive and perpetuated if each generation of the Yoruba had not intimate reasons for believing in them. According to Cirlot (1962: xiii), “The symbolist meaning of a phenomenon helps to explain these ‘intimate reasons’, since it links the instrumental

with the spiritual, the human with the cosmic, the casual with the causal, disorder with order, and since it justifies a word like universe which, without these wider implications, would be meaningless, a dismembered and chaotic pluralism; and finally, because it always points to the transcendental.”

African art is characteristically humanistic, as what constitutes arts is determined by its effect on man, either positively or negatively. Man is a being with two dimensions – physical and spiritual, hence art which is inseparable from the rest of life serves both subjective and objective qualities, thus providing the perceiver with the knowledge of the inner working of reality. Art in the African context evokes a sense of awe, wonder, and appreciation akin to what can be described as a mystical experience.

The significance of the religious function of art should not be lost on us; because it greatly informs the spirit and thesis of the New Humanism. Humanism’s interest in religion emphasizes the civil function and religious tolerance in order to make man’s life here on earth very comfortable. Man had an obligation, insisted humanism, to replicate as much as possible the characteristics of the heavenly city in his earthly city. This, man has been able to achieve through his art for the sustenance of the spirit. Principally, African art is religious, which fits into the sphere of the New Humanism as it projects values such as truth and goodness, respect for goodness, respect for the dignity of persons, justice and fairness in human affairs.

### Conclusion

It is evident that, in structure, African art can be seen to consist of the following features; belief in the Supreme Being-God, belief in the divinities; belief in spirits; belief in the ancestors; and the practice of art for day-to-day living, each with its consequent significance for the upliftment of mankind.

African peoples believe in the existence of the Supreme Being-God, as expressed, proven in their artforms. By the art of Africa; we can see clearly their belief in retributive justice and vindication from God in circumstances of their daily life experiences.

The paper has been able to situate the concept of art as a gift from God and its communicative ability and linked it to the philosophy of the New Humanism that extols man as God’s most valued creature that is happy and fulfilled. For as God said, “Let there be...”, his word had the power to create. And all God created, the Bible says, and God saw that it was beautiful. It is this beautiful universe that the African artist seeks to recreate for the full enjoyment of mankind by bringing order to the chaotic environment in line with New Humanism’s principles. New Humanism points to the fact that outside of God, full human dignity and values cannot be realized. African art, in tandem with New Humanism expresses the belief of Africans as partner in progress with New Humanism ideals, as God is the measure for man’s dignity.

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