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**“ART FOR LIFE’S SAKE:  
LIFE FOR ART’S SAKE”**

By Babatunde Lawal

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**ART FOR LIFE'S SAKE:  
LIFE FOR ART'S SAKE**

by

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An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at the University of Ife  
(now Obafemi Awolowo University)  
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To the layman, art is any colourful, intricate or skillfully rendered object which is displayed solely for private or public admiration. Little wonder, it is regarded by many Nigerians as a luxury which a developing country like ours can do without. Thus, for a long time, the teaching of art was relegated to the background in many of our institutions of higher learning. Of the 13 universities in Nigeria, only 4 – namely Ahmadu Bello University University of Nigeria, University of Ife and University of Benin – have full-fledged departments of fine arts. Even then, these departments have not been given the necessary facilities to enable them make the kind of contributions which their counterparts in other parts of the world are making to their respective societies.

In this inaugural lecture, the first to be given on the subject in any Nigerian university, I shall endeavour to throw some light on the nature of art and why it should be given a much higher place in our national order of priorities.

Though it is normally recognized by its visual or aural aspects – namely, sculpture, architecture, painting, textiles, graphics, dance, drama, poetry and music – art is much more than its material representation. It is an embodiment of a special “intelligence” with which man refines his immediate environment, transforming common-place materials into something of a higher value. Although this special “intelligence” is latent in all men, it is **highly developed** in certain individuals either as an inborn endowment or as a result of some training. These individuals are called artists. What differentiates an artist from the ordinary man is his high imaginative-cum-creative power which enables him to get at the roots of nature in order to create a new *reality* from it. This new reality is an epitome of Order, Unity, Proportion, Harmony, Rhythm, Beauty and such other ideals that generate a feeling of pleasure in man. “Because the various arts arise from two great aspects of being, time and space, artistic unity expresses itself in diffe-

rent ways, depending on the type of art in which it is sought".<sup>1</sup> Dance, drama, poetry and music are known as the *temporal arts* because they depend on movement, action and sound for their expression. They therefore exist only in the duration of their performance. On the other hand, painting, sculpture, architecture and so on are known as the *spatial arts* because they exist physically in space. They are therefore static in their representation.

When artistic unity or expression is cultivated as an end in itself, that is, for sheer pleasure, we have what is called "pure" or "fine" art, as in certain categories of abstract painting, sculpture and music. When it is only a means to an end, as in architecture, ceramics, textiles and graphics — the emphasis being on functional utility — we have what is known as "applied" art. However, the distinction between "pure" and "applied" is very difficult to maintain in real life, since all art is functional. Even when it is created for sheer hedonistic pleasure, this in itself is a function. In non-Western cultures, most especially in Africa, there is hardly any clear-cut distinction between "pure" and "applied"; for even when it can be admired purely for certain artistic qualities, the same object has specific socio-religious functions which constitute its *raison d'être*. As a result of their increasing involvement with mechanical reproduction, ceramics, textile design and graphics are grouped together in some educational institutions under a Department of Applied Arts or Industrial Design. Similarly, since architecture needs a special technology for its execution, it is now studied more or less as a science in a separate department of its own.

Given the fact that an extreme interpretation of the term "applied" art can lead to rigid craftsmanship, some universities prefer to subsume both the "pure" and the "applied" arts, including architecture, under a Department or Faculty of Fine Arts in order to protect their creative elements from being stifled under the "mechanized" atmosphere of a

separate Department of Applied Arts. This is why all the visual arts belong to the same department here at Ife. Although architecture has a separate department of its own in the Faculty of Environmental Design and Management, some fine arts courses are compulsory for all architecture students. Music and drama have separate departments of their own, while poetry is studied in the literature department.

However, since it is absolutely impossible to do justice to all the arts within the span of a single lecture, I will hereafter confine myself to the visual or spatial arts, although many of my observations may apply, *mutatis mutandi*, to the others.

As already mentioned, what is most significant about art is how the artist has succeeded in transforming commonplace materials into something of a higher value. In the spatial arts, this feat is achieved through a skilful organization and manipulation of LINE, SHAPE, SPACE, COLOUR AND TEXTURE to achieve a unity of expression in which the individuality of the parts is lost in the total effect of the whole. It is important to point out, however, that this unity of expression and the striving for Order, Proportion, Balance, Rhythm and Beauty, so treasured in art abound in nature and, in fact, constitute the basis of life. As the biologist has shown, it is the order and harmony inherent in the physiology of all living things that enable them to live and survive in a given environment. Death results when this balance is disturbed. The observable symmetry in the external forms of most plants and animals (Plate 1) as well as the inter-relationship of the parts to the whole strongly show that design in nature is functional, just as in a work of art. Not only are forms and shapes dictated by function — as in the streamlined bodies of birds and fishes — patterns and colours have survival implications. By their colours, flowers attract pollinating agents; certain animals, birds and

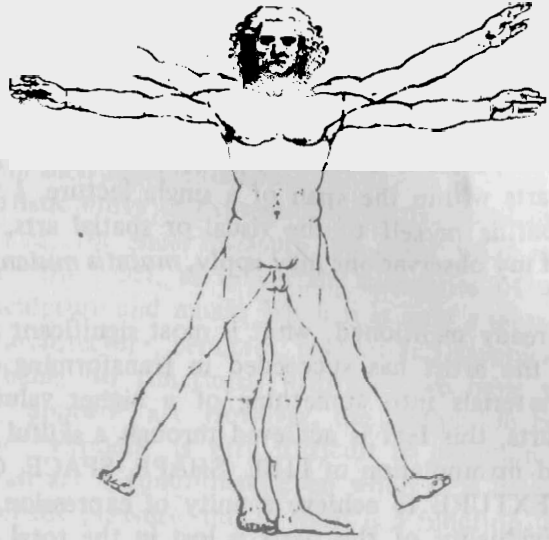


Plate 1: Drawing by Leonardo da Vinci showing the bilateral symmetry of the human figure.

fishes develop special colours or patterns either to attract the opposite sex or as a form of camouflage to prevent their being easily noticed by an enemy or a potential prey. As Dr. Cott, an eminent biologist of Cambridge University, has put it:

(The) biological need of security, subsistence and reproduction have exerted, through the operation of natural selection, striking modification which involve form, coloration, and behaviour. Moreover, . . . in producing such effects as concealment, disguise or advertisement, the particular arrangements of colour and pattern, posture and habit, which for theoretical reasons are those best adapted to reduce, translate or increase visibility, are those that have in practice been evolved.<sup>2</sup>

The organization of space in the bee-hive and the ant-hill reveals characteristics similar to those of planned human settlements, while the flight formation of certain birds are a pleasure to behold, just like a well-choreographed human dance. So pervasive is the "design factor" in nature that philosophers of the teleological school have argued that the universe could not be otherwise but the creation of an intelligent artist, who is the Almighty God himself.<sup>3</sup>

Be that as it may, the question that logically arises is: What is so significant about art when all its constituent elements already exist in nature and when certain works of art are outright reproductions of nature?

The simple answer is that art is very important because it epitomizes man's grasp of the essence of nature for the purpose of mastering his environment. Whereas the lower animals adapt *unconsciously* to a given environment through what the biologist has called "natural selection" and may perish if the odds outweigh their physical endowment, man adapts *consciously* to his environment as a result of his dis-

covery that he could “reproduce” or refine aspects of nature to serve as “functional substitutes”<sup>4</sup> for his own survival. This led him to a conscious production of tools with which to cope with the vicissitudes of living. He uses deliberate make-up to attract the opposite sex (Plate 2), or to serve as a form of camouflage to stalk (Plate 3) or conceal himself from an enemy. Most of the earliest works of art seemed to have evolved as a kind of tool with which prehistoric man attempted not only to gain mastery of his immediate environment but also to influence the supernatural in his favour. Thus, in the paleolithic cave paintings of Lascaux (France) and Altamira (Spain), estimated to be about 20,000 years old, there is a strong indication that some of the animals represented had been deliberately “wounded” with pointed instruments, so that, having been weakened symbolically, they would, in real life, fall easy prey to their prehistoric hunters. On the other hand, certain sculptural representations of human figures with exaggerated female features suggest that nature herself was personified and worshipped as a Mother-Goddess with a view of stimulating human and animal fertility.

By the time prehistoric magic developed into organized religion, art had become so involved with rituals as to virtually acquire an autonomous power of its own, partaking of the essence of the phenomenon it symbolizes. In monotheistic religions like Christianity and Islam, it is used (most especially in architecture) to glorify the image of the Almighty, and also to inspire a feeling of piety in man. In the history of religion, we are told that the gods made men in their own likeness; through art, this myth is reversed with man “re-making” the gods in his own image,<sup>5</sup> so that he could attribute human reasons to them, thereby obliging them to be favourable to mankind. Simultaneously, art has continued to enrich the quality of living not only through the creation and development of basic necessities of life such



Plate 2: Yoruba girl wearing coloured beads.

as shelter, utensils and clothing, but also in making them more pleasant in appearance and use. Thanks to the artist, human civilization, as it is today, is the result of a high aesthetic consciousness which his creations have engendered in man.





Plate 3: Hausa dancers wearing bird-masks used to camouflage during hunting.

So far, Africa has made one of her greatest contributions to human culture in the visual arts.<sup>6</sup> The ancient Greeks, who laid the foundation of Western artistic traditions, did not hide their admiration of Ancient Egyptian sculpture and so copied it directly, most especially in the Archaic and Geometric periods of their artistic development. Also, the current forms of modern European Art have been influenced by traditional African sculpture. It is inter-

resting to note that before the twentieth century, European art was judged solely in terms of the degree of its closeness to natural appearance. As a result, the un-naturalistic proportion of a good majority of traditional African sculpture was dismissed by the early European anthropologists as an abortive attempt to imitate nature. It was only towards the end of the nineteenth century when some *avant-garde* European artists became disillusioned with the imitative naturalism of their Greek heritage that the artistic qualities of African sculpture became more and more apparent. In their bid to break away from the shackles of Greek naturalism, these revolutionary European artists engaged in all kinds of artistic experiments. For instance, the French artist, Paul Cezanne, began to treat nature, most especially the human figure, in terms of cones, spheres and cubes, thus inaugurating the CUBIST movement. On their part, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque not only carried this geometricization of nature to a radical extreme in synthetic cubism, but also attached real objects to their paintings; and this led to a new form of artistic expression known as *COLLAGE*. Thus about 1906 when they came in contact with traditional African sculpture for the first time, these European artists were amazed to discover that their radical experiments were already there even in a more advanced form. For instance, the artists of the Nok culture of Northern Nigeria had been treating nature in terms of CONES, SPHERES and CUBES as far back as about 500 B.C.! (Plate 4). The fore-runners of *COLLAGE* can be observed in the African tradition of attaching seeds, shells and fabrics to painted sculpture. All told, the African influence in modern European art has to do with the opening of a new plastic vista to Western artistic vision by removing the cataracts of imitative naturalism. It is easy enough to draw parallels between the plastic qualities of traditional African sculpture and those of modern European art. It must be pointed out, however, that their

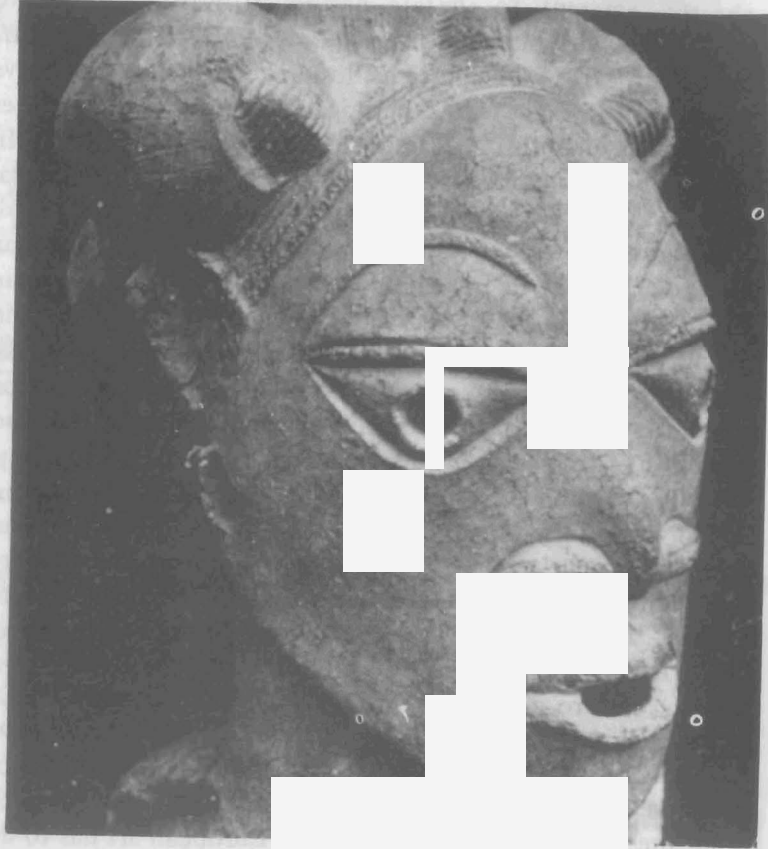


Plate 4: Nok Terra Cotta head.

backgrounds are different. While modern European art **has been motivated by the concept of art as an end in itself** (namely for hedonistic appreciation), traditional African sculpture was for the most part *a means to an end* – “a reinforcement of values centering on the security of the individual and the group”.<sup>7</sup> From spiritual authority focused on ancestral figures and masks to social prestige communicated through elaborate architecture and dress, the traditional arts of Africa “echoed the positive aspects of a world view and served actively in the fulfilment of material and spiritual needs”.<sup>8</sup> The emphasis placed on the spiritual aspects of reality is partly responsible for the ‘un-naturalistic’ proportion of traditional African sculpture. To arrive at this proportion, the traditional artist employed a special method of *Selective Realism* which enabled him to emphasize the most important elements in a given situation.

In Benin bronze plaques, for example, the image of the Oba is almost always the **biggest** because he is the most sacred person in Edo society (Plate 5). The attendant figures are reduced in size simply because they are subordinates. In most traditional African sculptures, the HEAD is the most prominent because, in real life, it is the most vital part of the human body: it contains *the brain* – the seat of wisdom and reason; *the eyes* – the lamps which illuminate man’s paths through the dark mazes of life; *the nose* – which serves as a source of ventilation for the soul; *the ears* – with which man listens and reacts to sound, and *the mouth* – with which he eats to keep body and soul together. The other parts of the body are abbreviated to emphasize their subordinate positions<sup>9</sup> (Plate 6). So important is the head in many African societies that it is worshipped as the seat of a man’s personality and destiny. Among the Yoruba, it is regarded as the repository of a man’s life-source; hence the saying, ‘*orí ẹ̀ni ni iṣẹ̀se ẹ̀ni*’. However, a slightly different tradition obtains among the Igbo, Igala and Edo who, while recognizing the





Plate 5: Benin Bronze plaque



Plate 6: Bakota reliquary figure (Gabon)

However, it is in the field of art history, which I have taught in Nigeria and abroad, that my contributions are more widely known. Since charity begins at home, I have concentrated much of my research work on deciphering the significance of art in Yoruba culture.

Among the Yoruba, art is **identified as *iṣẹ́ ọ̀nà*** – embodiment of skill. The artist is *oniṣẹ́ ọ̀nà* – producer of skillfully made objects. Sculpture is called *ere* (statue) or *aworan* (picture), while surface decoration is designated as *òṣọ́* or *àrà* (ornament). My first major contribution to the study of Yoruba art centres on the symbolism as well as the historical implications of the sculptures used in the worship of **Ṣango, the Yoruba *òrìṣà* of lightning and thunder.**<sup>10</sup>

According to Yoruba oral tradition, **Ṣango** was the third **Alaafin (King)** of the ancient Yoruba kingdom of **Oyo-Ile**. He was so powerful that when he spoke, fire and smoke came out of his mouth and nostrils. He is said to have been a great warrior who, on the battle-field, often used his magical power to attract lightning to strike down his opponents. After his death, he was deified and identified with lightning and thunder. At any rate, his war exploits sowed the seeds of what later became known as the ancient **Oyo empire** which extended from the bend of the River Niger in the north, to Togo in the west, Benin in the east and down to the coastal regions of south-western Nigeria. The **Oyo empire** reached the zenith of its glory in the eighteenth century when it became one of the richest black kingdoms in Africa and its fame spread outside the continent. During this period, the worship of **Ṣango** was organized on an empire-wide basis, with **Ṣango** priests serving as provincial governors in conquered territories. Any vassal king who refused to pay tribute to the **Alaafin** was threatened with the wrath of **Ṣango**.

In essence, **Ṣango** worship is divine kingship with a

thundergod aspect. For after the **death** of **Ṣango**, subsequent **Alaafin** of **Oyo** were to regard themselves as his **descendants** and earthly representatives. The success and spread of **Ṣango** worship **would be better** appreciated once it is realized that Yorubaland is situated in the rain-forest of the Guinea coast which ranks second in the whole world for lightning frequency.<sup>11</sup> And being regarded as the custodian of this deadly weapon (lightning), **Ṣango** easily became the most popular *òrìṣà* among the **Oyo Yoruba**. His worship is that of appeasement and supplication. In spite of his violent nature, however, he is believed to be very generous, and to have the power to give good health, wealth and children to his devotees, in addition to sparing them during thunderstorms. With rain, **Ṣango** ensures the fertility of the earth; he replenishes lakes and streams, thereby providing humanity with many of the basic necessities of life. Besides, he helps to regulate the moral conduct of the society by using lightning to kill thieves, traitors and anti-social elements.

By and large, as a result of the frequent public ceremonies held in his honour, coupled with the desire of his devotees to woo him with all available human resources, **Ṣango** priests (Plate 8) are the most colourfully dressed of all Yoruba priests, while shrines dedicated to him are the most elaborate in terms of their sculptural decorations and symbolism. Art is used both to glorify his image and to facilitate communication with him. In many of his praise-songs (*oríṣi*), **Ṣango** is said to dwell in a huge, celestial palace which has a stable of 10,000 horses. It is from here that he hurls down the thunder-bolt (*edun àrà*). A typical **Ṣango** temple is a microcosm of this celestial palace, of which the **Alaafin's** palace itself is a reflection (Plate 9). The thunderbolt in the carved wooden bowl (*opon*) on the altar represents **Ṣango's** presence. The carved, inverted mortar (*odó*), on



Plate 8: Şango priests dancing to bata music.

which the bowl containing the thunderbolt is placed, serves as a throne. The attendant altar figures (representing a cross-section of society – priests, devotees, servants, drummers, hunters, warriors, and so on) can be seen not only as courtiers or retainers waiting on Şango, but also as humanity seeking Şango's protection. The role of the sculptural representations at this level is to enhance Şango's majestic presence.

In addition to their decorative function, many of the sculptures are loaded with meaning. For instance, the carved inverted mortar (*odó*), because of its weight, is intended to serve as a symbolic support for the massiveness of Şango; hence it is a symbol of his might. The *oşé-Şango* (the double-axe staff) symbolizes the destructiveness of Şango's power. It is a sculptural representation of two thunderbolts facing opposite directions, embodying the notion that it is Şango who hurls down the thunderbolt from the sky when lightning strikes, the splitting potency of lightning being likened to that of an axe. The *oşé* is therefore carried by Şango worshippers both as an emblem of their intimacy with Şango, and as a visual assertion of their own power to invoke and direct the course of lightning (Plate 10). The motif of the 'mating couple' not only underscores Şango's role as a fertility god, it is also intended to stimulate at the cosmic level a pro-creative union that will lead to an increase in plant, animal and human lives.

Perhaps the most important function of the altar sculptures lies in their use as a vehicle of communication. As already mentioned, the thunderbolt represents Şango on the altar. But it is too abstract a symbol to afford the worshipper a full comprehension of Şango's anthropomorphic essence. It is the human representations on the altar which help in a way to suggest Şango's humanity to the worshipper. The need for a 'human focus' on the altar has resulted in Şango himself being occasionally represented in person as an equest-

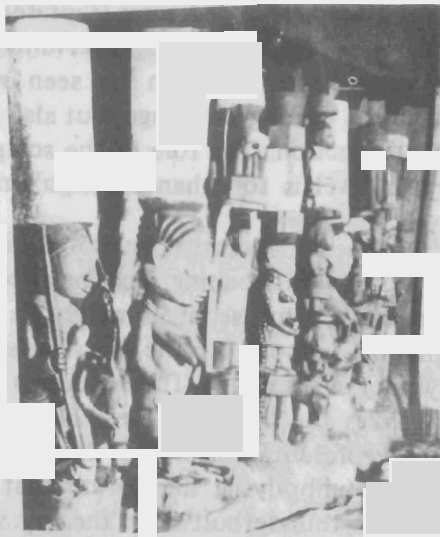


Plate 9: Sculptured facade of Sango temple, Agbeni, Ibadan.



Plate 10: Initiates carrying Ose Sango in a procession.

rian warrior—an allusion to his earthly life as Alaafin of Oyo. In any case, since the Yoruba regard the altar as 'oju egún', that is, 'the face of the spirit', the totality of the sculptural representations constitutes the 'face' (oju'bo) of Sango. This point is very important because the thunderbolt is frequently concealed in a covered bowl, in consequence of which the carved human face (Plate 11) on the bowl, mortar, or the sculptural representation of Sango himself easily becomes a focus of prayers and sacrifice, intensifying the presence of the god at the moment of invocation, and telescoping the astronomical distance between him and the worshipper. Through art, the *invisible* becomes, as it were, *invisibly* visible. Consequent upon a regular face-to-face contact, Sango and the worshipper become familiar with one another.

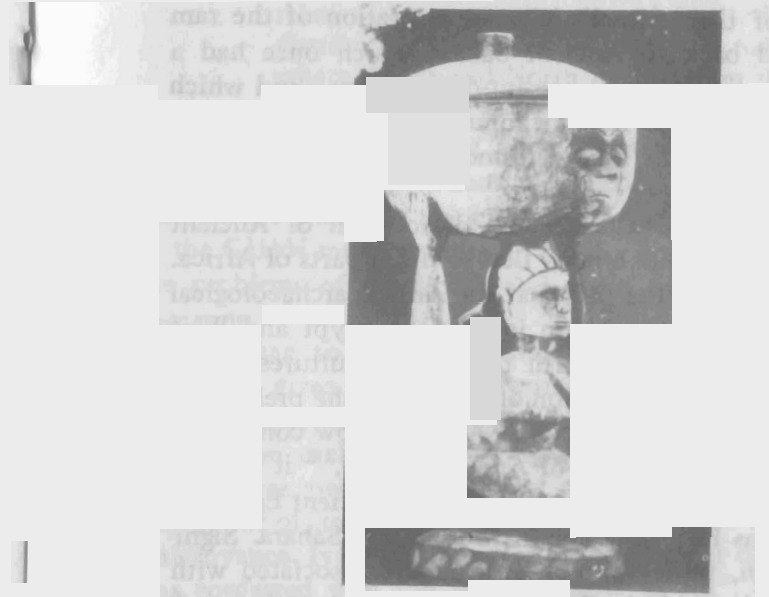


Plate 11: Female caryatid figure (*arughá*) concealing Sango's thunderbolts.

To the Yoruba, the face (*oju*) connotes ACCESS. Hence what has a solution is said to 'have a face' – *ó l' ójú*; the unsolvable 'has no face' – *kò l'ójú*; a deadlock or an entanglement has 'a difficult face' – *ó di' jú*; to pacify or tame is to 'cool the face' – *tù l'ójú*. Thus, providing the non-figurative symbol of a god with a sculptured face is to facilitate communion with the *òrìṣà*. For what has a face is ACCESSIBLE.

One of the highlights of this study is my use of archaeological, faunal, climatological and mythological evidence to disprove the time-honoured assumption that the ram symbolism in Šango art and, indeed, in the whole of West African art, was borrowed from the cult of Amon-Ra of Ancient Egypt. In West Africa, the ram is associated with thunder because of the popular folk belief that the clap of thunder is caused by the head-on collision of two heavenly rams.

A critical analysis of the available evidence reveals that the history of the 'ritualistic' representation of the ram can be traced back to Ancient Sahara which once had a much wetter climate than present-day Sahara, and which also supported a large human population and a variety of plants and animals no longer found in present-day Sahara desert.

But as a result of the gradual desiccation of Ancient Sahara, many of its inhabitants fled to other parts of Africa. This is confirmed by the fact that the earliest archaeological evidence of human occupation in Ancient Egypt and West Africa has strong affinities with the ancient cultures of the Sahara. Since the representation of the ram in the prehistoric rock art of the Sahara and North Africa is now considered to be much older than that of Ancient Egypt,<sup>12</sup> it is more than likely that both the West African and Ancient Egyptian ram symbolisms have a common root in the Sahara. Significantly enough, while the ram is generally associated with rain and thunder gods in West Africa, in Ancient Egypt it was associated with Amon-Ra in his dual capacity as a

thunder and sun god. Given the fact that Ancient Egypt became habitable only after the drying up of the Nile Valley and the cessation of heavy rainfall in the area, it is evident that the thunder attribute of Amon-Ra was a "carry-over" from Ancient Sahara. In the extremely hot, dry and almost "rainless" climate of Ancient Egypt, the rain/thunder symbolism of the ram was soon eclipsed by that of the sun. The original thunder association of the animal has been retained in West Africa because of its wet climate and frequent thunder-storms. Other details of my findings are too complex to be discussed in this lecture. It is enough to say that my methodology has been widely commended, and has been described in a review in the journal, *African Arts*, as:

... an exemplary line of enquiry that can be used for a number of similar situations, and which has even broader potentials for ascribing relative dates to objects and institutions whose distribution patterns include, the Sahara, sub-sahara Africa and North Africa, from the Atlantic to Asia Minor.<sup>13</sup>

In another major study, I have examined the aesthetic and socio-political functions of *Gèlèdè*, the most popular masquerade (Plate 12) among the Ketu and Egbado Yoruba.<sup>14</sup> In the *Gèlèdè* masquerade, the Yoruba attempt to deal with the problems of witchcraft and social control, using art as a weapon.

According to Yoruba mythology, the power of witchcraft was given to the first woman at creation. When the gods were first coming to the earth, *Olodumare*, the Supreme Being, gave each of them a special attribute; for example *Ọbatala* was given the power of command called *àṣẹ*; *Orun*, the power of iron; and *Orunmila*, the power of wisdom and clairvoyance. *Iyá Nlá*, the only female member of the group was conferred with the title: "Mother of All", the insignia of this title being a calabash containing a bird. On reaching

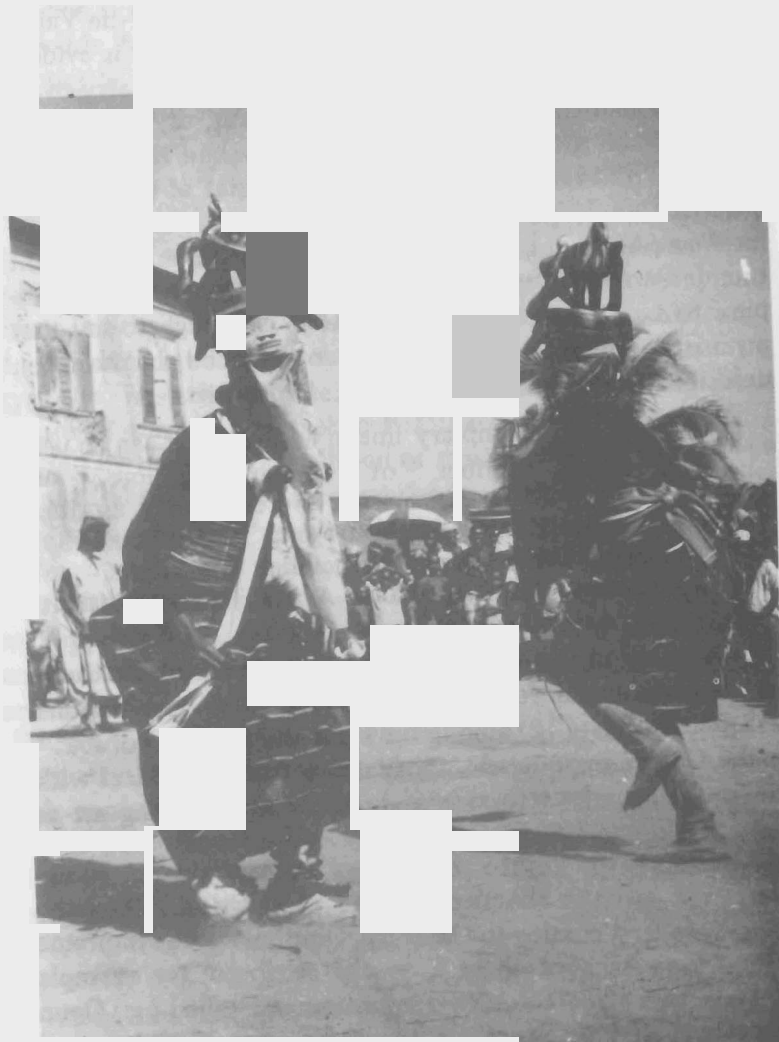


Plate 12 Gèlèdè masqueraders at Ijio.

the earth, the gods used their respective powers as they pleased, but mostly for the welfare of mankind.

Being the archetypal “Mother of All”, Ìyá Nlá (also known as Yemoja) has been apotheosized by the Yoruba as the source of fertility, with a mystical power of life and death over all her off-spring. In the Yoruba view, this mystical power is latent in all women, although only those initiated into the cult of Iya Nla can exercise it. These initiates are popularly known as àjé. The àjé are believed to be so powerful that they cannot easily be affected by ordinary charms. Only the collective power of the spirits of dead ancestors institutionalized in the Egunún and Orò societies can conquer them. But this is no easy task. Most Yoruba would rather prefer to placate them, referring to them euphemistically as “Our Mothers” – *awon Iya wa*. Unlike the European conception of the witch as a personification of the devil, the Yoruba àjé can easily be influenced to use her mystical power towards the well-being, rather than the destruction of society. One of the most potent means of bringing this about is Gèlèdè. The Gèlèdè dancers are men who frequently masquerade as women to entertain the àjé. On the eve of the Gèlèdè festival, a special masquerade called *Èfè* or the joker, performs at the market square, invoking the blessings of all the gods and the àjé on the society, entertaining the audience with songs, jokes and satire. Anti-social elements are exposed and criticized – all in an attempt to refine the society. For the next seven days or so, after the *èfè* ceremony, Gèlèdè masquerades in multi-coloured costumes will dance at the market-square in honour of Ìyá Nlá and the àjé.

The origin of the Gèlèdè can be traced to a fertility dance originally performed by housewives and young maidens to honour the gods, most especially Ìyá Nlá, the ‘Mother of All’. During the dance, woodcarvings and other



objects were balanced on the head. On the advice of Ọrunmila, the god of divination, the men adopted this dance of the women to pacify the *àjé*. In the process, an elaborate masked costume was developed to create a spectacle of the 'ideal' and the 'beautiful'. An important aspect of the Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ costume is the metal anklets (*ikú* or *ṣaworo*) which clang rhythmically during the dance. Notwithstanding their musical function, it is significant that small versions of these anklets are worn by a category of children known by the Yoruba as *àbíkú*, which means 'born to die'. These children are identified by their excessive demands on their parents, fainting or threatening to die if their wishes are not met. Therefore, once a child is identified as *àbíkú*, it is given preferential treatment to encourage it to stay with the parents. One of the symbolic functions of the metal anklets worn by the *abiku* is to immunize the child against evil spirit, or more specifically to prevent the soul of the *àbíkú* child from being enticed away by the spirits of its unborn companions. By wearing anklets similar to those of the *àbíkú*, the Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ masquerader, at one level of interpretation, would seem to be impersonating an *àbíkú*, seeking from the *àjé* the preferential treatment that is normally accorded this category of children.

Perhaps the most vital function of Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ is its covert attempt to resolve a major tension in Yoruba society. Since it is a patrilineal society, women do not enjoy the same rights as the men; they are denied access to the inner-most secrets of certain important religious institutions such as Orò, Egúngún and Agemo which are symbols of male dominance among the Yoruba. This dominance is however relaxed in Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ which is exclusively controlled by women, even though it is the men who wear the masks. Hence the saying: "*oun àmúlò ni okùnrin jé fún obirin ní idí ijó Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀*" (Men serve women as a tool in the Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ dance). Also relevant here is the fact that the men monopolise most of the highest

political offices in Yoruba society. Women's subordinate position is hardly commensurate with all the troubles, risks and anxieties which a woman has to face in the process of nurturing a child from pregnancy to adulthood. Through Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀, the men make up for this disparity by diplomatically conceding spiritual superiority to women, while still retaining effective political control of the society. Euphemistically addressing the *àjé* as 'Our Mothers' – *àwọn Iya wa* – the men masquerade as 'children' whose excesses should be pardoned. This can be inferred from the following song:

E kúnlẹ̀, o, ẹ kúnlẹ̀ f'óbìrin, o,  
*Hen, obirin ló bí wa, k'áwa tó d'èniyàn*  
 Ọgbón aiyé t'obirin ní. . .

(Offer respect, offer respect to women  
 Yes, women gave birth to us, before we became somebody

The secrets of the world belong to women. . .)

Because of its emphasis on a peaceful rather than forceful solution to any kind of human problems, the Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ exemplifies one of the highest ideals of Yoruba moral philosophy: *Èsò l'aiyé* – which means "Take life easy". To the Yoruba, what is handled with care or restraint is more easily accomplished than what is tackled with force. Hence the popular saying:

Oun tí a bá f'èsò mú kì í ní ni l'ára  
 Oun tí a bá f'agbára mú ní í le koko.  
 (What is handled with care becomes easier  
 What is tackled with force becomes harder.)

In other words, social harmony depends for the most part on patience, restraint, diplomacy as well as doing good and being fair to your fellowmen. In pursuit of these ideals, painting, sculpture, textile design, music, dance and poetry are blended with great expertise, so much so as to communicate a strong element of *art for art's sake*, even though within

a larger context of *art for life's sake*. In this quest, art serves not only as a kind of social medicine for peace, unity and human development, but also as a vital instrument in man's endeavour to subject his society to some kind of order. The call on the *àjé* to use their power for the benefit rather than the destruction of mankind and all its achievements may be likened to the current appeal to the world super-powers for disarmament, and for a peaceful use of nuclear power.

Art has played such a vital role in traditional Yoruba culture partly because of a recognition of its infinite potentials for the human race, and partly because man himself is regarded as a work of art. According to the Yoruba myth of creation, when Olodumare (the Supreme Being) decided to create the first man, he commissioned Ọbatala to mould man's physical body from primordial clay. After Ọbatala had finished modelling the image, Olodumare breathed life (*ẹ̀mí*) into it, thus making it human. The newly created man was later taken to Ogun who used his iron implements to put the finishing touches on the body, namely, putting lineage marks on the face, tattooing the body, performing circumcision and such other operations that may be necessary to keep man in good health, and to make him socially acceptable in Yoruba society. Here, we are reminded of the final stage of the Yoruba carving process (*finfin*), when the carver uses knives (the symbol of Ogun) to refine and delineate forms.

That man's physical body is a divinely inspired work of art is implied in the greeting addressed to a pregnant woman:

“Kí òrìṣà ya ọ̀nà re ko ni”<sup>15</sup>

(May òrìṣà fashion for us a good work of art.)

The important point to note in the Yoruba creation myth is that man is made up of two components – the material or physical body (*ara*) which is the handiwork of Ọbatala, and the spiritual force (*ẹ̀mí*) with which Olodumare infuses life into the body. In other words, man is substantially a piece of

sculpture animated by *ẹ̀mí*. The human body (*ara*) remains alive so long as the *ẹ̀mí* dwells in it. Withdrawal or loss of *ẹ̀mí* results in death; the body becomes static and, when buried, decomposes into the clay which it was originally. However, to the Yoruba, death is not a finality, but rather a transformation from earthly to spiritual existence, where the de-materialized *ẹ̀mí* assumes more power which can be harnessed for the benefit of the living. It is this belief that the human body is a divine work of art that has led the Yoruba to equate it with man-made sculpture, which is then used to localise the *ẹ̀mí* or the de-materialized souls of the dead, most especially at the moment of invocation. In this way, art helps the Yoruba to concretize their belief in life-after-death, enabling them to face the future with some hope – a hope that is further reinforced by their belief in re-incarnation (*àtúnwá*). For example, children born after the death of their parents or grandparents are given the name Babatunde (Father comes again) or Yetunde (Mother comes again), depending on the sex of the child and that of the deceased parent.

Certainly the most dramatic demonstration of the Yoruba belief in life-after-death is to be found in the Egungun masquerade (Plate 13). It is through this masquerade that the soul of a departed ancestor returns to earth in a physical form to inquire about the welfare of his living descendants, blessing the sick and the barren, cleansing the community of witchcraft and disease and settling outstanding disputes in the family.

In the image of Egungun, the Yoruba celebrate the triumph of the human spirit over death. The actual presence of the dead among the living provides a psychological boost for the community: everybody is thrilled at the prospects of immortality. In the excitement of the moment, the young sometimes whip one another almost to the point of severe injury while the old, especially those in the evening of life, may occasionally be so moved by the spectacle that they soon begin to imagine the time when their own Egungun



Plate 13. An Egungun masquerade.

would be welcomed with the same pomp and pageantry. For the Egungun is a dream-come-true to the Yoruba, a dramatization of the strong bond between the living and the dead. A typical Yoruba 'extended' family comprises not only the living members but also the dead ones. To the Yoruba, therefore, the *dead* are not dead; but will soon be back, either as grandchildren or as Egungun.

Although many people are aware that a human being is behind the mask, yet there is the belief that the rituals which the masquerader must undergo before putting on the mask must have de-personalized him, converting him into a sort of sculptural medium (or a human receptacle) for the soul of the visiting ancestor. Consequently, the masquerader functions as a *mask* withing a masque; he is no longer himself and cannot be held personally responsible for his actions, which, at times, may include the execution of criminals and witches. To accord with his other-worldly aspect, the masquerader speaks in a guttural voice. His identity is kept secret.

Although and Egungun may be identified with or named after a particular ancestor, the wooden mask on top of the costume does not attempt to recapture individual resemblance which is a function of his historical existence and which has been cast away during the burial ceremonies. Here the stylization of the human face is evocative of a transformation of the spirit of the ancestor from historical individuality to eternal humanity. The voluminous costume of the Egungun conceals the unknowable and yet reveals man's infinite potentials for spiritual transformation. Since the human soul is part of the breath of Olodumare, it antedates the creation of the human body by Ọbatala. Man's earthly existence is therefore a temporal manifestation, through Ọbatala's artistic creation, of the eternal spirit of Olodumare, who is known figuratively as *Ọta Aikú*, "the mighty rock of immortality."<sup>16</sup>

By and large, to the Yoruba, art is more than a ritual, social or aesthetic symbol. It is a vital part of being. Man is a reason-

able being because he is a divinely *ordered* and *proportioned* creation. Hence he is known as *èniyàn* or *èni a yàn*, 'the specially chosen one'. Ever since his creation, he has been pre-occupied with imposing his own sense of order and proportion on the earth, personifying different aspects of nature as divinities, each with specific responsibilities; organising space for human habitation and comfort; and creating a socio-political framework where the individual must see himself as an inseparable part of a whole. Without these constructs, human existence would hardly have risen above the level of primitive animality. In short, while the *order* in nature forms the basis of life, the *order* in art is the bedrock of human civilization which in Yoruba means *òlájú* or 'awareness'. To be civilized therefore is to be aware of this *order* and of its benefits to the human race.

In different publications, I have looked into the various ramifications of art in the African continent and also among black communities in the United States of America, Brazil, Cuba and the Carribean Islands.<sup>17</sup> Currently, I am working on contemporary art in Nigeria with special reference to its social, political, aesthetic and industrial implications.

While traditional African art (most especially sculpture) is internationally acclaimed as one of the masterpieces of artistic creations, it is hardly appreciated by the modern generation of Africans. The reason for this is twofold. First, the traditional culture which nurtured that art has been considerably eroded by new religious, social and economic forces, so much so that the modern African no longer sees its relevance to his new experience and aspirations. Second, in the new educational system introduced by the colonialists and administered by the missionaries, the teaching of traditional art was simply ignored, being identified with 'paganism', which the missionaries were all out to eradicate. In its place, a new art was introduced which emphasized imitative naturalism for its own sake – ironically,

the very tradition which European artists like Picasso had revolted against. In any case, within two or three generations after the introduction of Western education, the fate of traditional African art had been altered; it has since been ostracized in the show-case of the museum of antiquities.

The first generation of contemporary African artists were either trained abroad or locally in European-type art schools. As a result, much of the early phase of contemporary African art was imitative of Western art. It is only in recent times that this 'Western mentality' is beginning to change, following the realization among independent African states that political independence is not complete without a cultural identity. This led to a revival of traditional dress, music, dance and festivals. Institutes of African Studies were established in many African universities to conduct research into all aspects of indigenous African culture with a view to adapting some of them to contemporary usage.

However, since Islam, Christianity and increasing westernisation have deprived traditional African art of its cultural matrix, attempts to revive it have not been too successful, having resulted in the production of tourist art which is now sold in supermarkets, airports and hotel lounges. In a bid to find a solution to the current crisis of identity in contemporary art, some European art enthusiasts like Pierre Lods, Frank McEwen, Julian Beinhart and Ulli Beier of Osogbo art fame set up informal art workshops where people without any formal training in art (either traditional or modern) were encouraged to give free expression to their artistic impulses. The unfortunate consequence of this approach is that most of the artists created at the workshops pandered to the tastes of their supervisors, producing Western stereotypes of what contemporary African art should look like.

The onus now rests on institutions of higher learning in Africa to influence the destiny of art in the continent. Since art is a mirror of the age and society which produced

it, an imitative revival is out of the question; for this may lead to anachronisms. All that is needed is a contemporary, art that will not only reflect the realities of the African present, but will also forge a link with the past, while at the same time sowing new seeds for the future. The fine arts programme of the University of Ife (whose moto is: FOR LEARNING AND CULTURE) is poised in this direction. In addition to giving students a strong practical training, it requires them to take courses in allied subjects in the humanities and social sciences, so as to sharpen their awareness of the socio-cultural ramifications of art. The course in traditional African art is compulsory, since it is intended to enable students to assimilate the forms and symbolism of their artistic heritage, so that they could adapt them to contemporary situations. Our Department of Fine Arts is well-equipped for this task because it is fortunate to have among its staff members at least 5 Lecturers who have spent no less than 6 years in the former Institute of African Studies of this University, researching on a full-time basis into the different aspects of African art. So far, the department has produced over 200 graduates in the fields of sculpture, ceramics, textile design, graphic design and painting, many of whom now occupy important positions in the public and private sectors of our economy. Plans are at an advanced stage to start a post-graduate degree programme to produce high-level man-power in all areas of fine arts.

Finally, given the important role which art has played in the evolution of human civilization, its importance to a developing nation like Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized. Apart from the fact that the development through art of manual skills and critical value judgement fosters individual and national self-sufficiency, the principles of *order, unity, harmony, balance* and *free expression*, which characterize the arts, will be found to have even greater relevance in our daily life. The future of any nation depends on the cultiva-

tion of similar principles, namely, *maintenance of law and order; political unity; social harmony; balanced judgement; freedom of expression; improved personal and environmental appearance*; which will lead to clean, healthy and beautiful surrounding, as well as *respect for those political, social and spiritual values* without which a society will disintegrate.

Admittedly, art can easily lose its relevance to human aspirations when cultivated for its own sake. Yet it is in this very concept of *art for art's sake* that human creativity can be expected to re-vitalize itself. Nevertheless, and as our case studies of art among the Yoruba have shown, human creativity is most profound in *art for life's sake*, that is, when it is used to foster human hopes and desires. In dedicating his life to art, therefore, the professional artist is performing one of the greatest services that a man can render to his fellowmen, for the creative process is a mentally arduous voyage of 'discovery' for the goodness and dignity of man.

In the past, art helped old Africa to cope with the complexities of living (no matter how simple these may seem to us today), shaping human behaviour and values and enabling man to find a purpose in life, and also enriching his experience. These functions are even more relevant to young Africa today. For, in the hustle and bustle of this age of technology, young Africa will need all the cultural, social as well as the creative resources she can muster to maintain her sanity, and also to exercise a conscious control over the destiny of man in the Africa to come. If only developing African nations will realize this fact and give him all the necessary encouragement, the contemporary African artist — as a creative force in society — has a big role to play not only in projecting positive humanistic values in his works, but also in ensuring that, at least, the external forms of modern technology are well adapted to the socio-cultural as well as the ecological conditions of man in Africa.



By and large, for a developing nation like Nigeria to reap its maximum benefits, art must be understood first and foremost as CREATIVITY, and as something which adds breadth, meaning and satisfaction to life, serving as a catalyst in all fields of human endeavour, be it social, political, scientific, technological or spiritual. To this end, art must be taught in all our educational institutions, most especially at the primary and secondary schools' levels. The intention here is not to make professional artists of everyone, but rather to inculcate in the young, a spirit of creativity which will motivate them in their future professions. Needless to say, creative and imaginative thinking will make better lawyers, economists, engineers, diplomats and public administrators, to mention only a few. More funds should be made available to university art departments and other higher institutions offering art to enable them to procure the necessary facilities to train more artists and art teachers, and also to conduct research into all aspects of traditional and contemporary art with a view to harnessing our rich artistic resources for national development. No economic or industrial programme can succeed if it fails to explore the potentialities of local resources.

Finally, the government should increase its support for art by building more art galleries and museums, acquiring important works of art for the national collection and commissioning public monuments not only to beautify the environment but also to inspire selfless and heroic thoughts in the people. Once Nigerians begin to appreciate the values of Art, they are likely to be more constructive in their attitudes to life and their environment, and in their utilization of the diminishing resources of the earth,

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