A VISUAL RECREATION OF KWAGH-HIR PUPPETS INTO PAINTINGS

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Abstract
Tiv Kwagh-Hir means Tiv folklore it originally started as a revolt cult in the early 1950. This paper outlines a brief history of the Kwagh-Hir puppetry theatre and the Tiv people. It also examines the aesthetic qualities of the Kwagh-Hir puppets; bearing in mind the assemblage of these aesthetic attributes, as sources of inspiration for the creation of paintings. The essay looks at the interrogation of colour and costumes of the Kwagh-Hir sculptures, as liable compositional influences for the use of the artist. The main thrust of the paper is the use of images of the Kwagh-Hir to create paintings, and as a consequence the setting of paradigms for the exploration of indigenous sculptures.

Keywords: Kwagh-Hir, Puppets, Recreation, Storytelling, Two Dimensional Paintings

Introduction

The Tiv *Kwagh-Hir* started as a revolt cult in the 1950s. The revolt assumes the form of a celebration, with the adherents of the cult gathering to drink and eat together as well as play music and dance. They eat uncooked eggs, with a special brew of Tiv Msorom (local beer) to which is added various herbs, white ants and hot pepper. After the concoction, the cult members respond in dance to drum music (Hagher, 2003).

The effect of the percussion, alcohol and other herbal drugs on the brain is to induce a state of trance. During this trance, the cult members are supposed to have acquired occult powers to detect witchcraft. This power is exercised with a lot of zeal often degenerating into charlatanry as Makar in Hagher (2003) noted that sometimes the entranced members would harass those they didn't like by accusing them of *Tsav* which means witchcraft.

The *Kwagh-hir* theatre was born a decade later. It was in 1964, the year of *Atem-Tyo*, the most brutal Tiv revolt that *Kwagh-hir* spread like wildfire round the whole of Tiv land. The *Kwagh-hir* comprises many art forms, namely: storytelling, poetry, puppetry, music, dance, and dramatization. *Kwagh-hir* as a theatre is performed at night times, as an event which provides secular entertainment, education, and socialization through the enactment of the past and contemporary events by human performers. The *Kwagh-hir* theatre uses puppets, which vary in size and style. These puppets can be made to perform a number of intricate movements; for example, soldiers executing an armed robber or a puppet doctor operating on a pregnant woman and removing the child. The *Kwagh-hir* has both rod and string puppets as well as masquerade puppets which have one or more persons inside the puppet operating its movable parts (Hagher, 2003). By 1981 the theatre was made into an annual competition, with participants drawn from all the fourteen Tiv Local Government Areas in Benue state.

The puppets in their original state are sculptural. These sculptures are grouped into three, namely, giant puppets, masquerade puppets and miniature puppets. These sculptures possess certain characteristic features that are common to all. Features such as their African proportion (disproportionateness or technical inefficiency). In this regard, Enem (1976) states that some puppets are naturalistic, some grotesque and others ridiculous. They appear primarily in pungent colours, with white bulgy eyes almost Nok-like and pure black pupils. Enem further argues that the puppets reflect the moral prejudices and sanctions of the community (Enem, 1976). It is this paper's desire to transform the puppetry aspect(s) from their sculptural state into two-dimensional works of arts.

The Tiv are a people whose history has been traced to the Congo. Though there is no single universally accepted version of the origin of Tiv people, they are said to have descended from a progenitor called "*Tukuruku*". Oral traditions have so far been more plausible and appealing, except that views differ as there are so many oral traditions. Others have accepted that *shon* was the first person that originated from the original deity or Supreme Being. *Aondu shon* said to have given birth to, many children amongst who were the Tiv, *Uke* (foreigners) and later the whites *Buter*. Tiv is further said to have given birth to two sons, *Ichongu* and Ipusu. This prestigious man called Tiv, left Congo to Cameroun, and settled at a place called Swem in Cameroun. Where he died and his children not happy to bury their father or leave him behind burnt his corpse and packed the ashes together with that of his father Takuruku Nyamazenga in a small pot and traveled along with it to this part of Africa where today they are called citizens (Igirgi, 2007). The group is largely homogenous, speaking one language with only tonal variations and exhibiting (with the exception of minute peculiarities) similar cultural traits throughout the land. They occupy over thirty local government areas spread across Benue, Nasarawa and Taraba states, with large migrant communities also found in Plateau and Adamawa states. All members of this ethnic group regard themselves as descendants of the great patriarch Tiv (Hagher, 2003).

Puppets

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (Hornby, 2000) defines puppets as small figure of a person or an animal that can be made to move, for example, by pulling strings attached to its limbs, or by putting one's hand inside it. Puppets are used for telling story or as a form of entertainment.

Hurwitz and Michael (2007) observed that, although puppetry is generally not taken seriously as an art form in the United States and Canada, it occupies a very high position in many other cultures. In Moscow, the national puppet theatre is intended for adults rather than children, and in Spain and Italy, no public park is complete without an adult puppet theatre. In Indonesia, Japan, and other Asian cultures, puppeteers begin their careers in childhood as apprentices, learning not only the intricate processes of construction and operation but also the roles to be enacted, many of which date back to many generations. The puppets

theatre engages in plays recounting the myths of creation and the battles between good and evil carried on by warriors and figures of royalty.

There are mainly two types of puppets; hand puppets and marionettes. Hurwitz and Michael (2007) observed that, to produce a successful puppet play, the group as a whole must reach certain decisions, and each member of the group, although maintaining a personal identity, must give full cooperation if the enterprise is to succeed. Puppets range in technical complexity from the very simple to the very intricate.

Hand Puppet: A hand puppet is a type of puppet that is controlled by the leg or face that occupies the interior of the puppet. Some hand puppets require one of the puppeteer's hands inside the puppet glove handling a rod which controls the head, and the puppet's body then hangs over most or all of the forearms of the puppeteer and possibly extends further. Other parts of the puppet may be controlled by different means, for example by rods operated by the puppeteer's free hand, or strings or levers pulled from inside the head of the body.

Marionette: A Marionette is a puppet controlled from above using wires or strings depending on regional variations. A marionette's puppeteer is called a manipulator. Marionettes are operated with the puppeteer hidden or revealed to an audience by using a vertical or horizontal control bar in different forms of theatres or entertainment venues. They have also been used in films and on television (Hurwitz and Michael, 2007).

Aesthetic Qualities of the *Kwagh-hir* Puppets: The *Kwagh-hir* puppets possess aesthetic characteristics which the essay at hand finds valid for discourse. The geometric formations like their triangular noses, Nok-like eyes, small lips and triangular nostrils. The colours used in painting the puppets are pungent. Costumes for the masquerade are elaborate and are also coloured. The paper employed the use of the near geometrical appearance of the puppets to create paintings. The vibrant colourations of the puppets imbibed formed the palette for this research in discuss. The reduced proportions of the figures served as a model for the accentuation of the emergent paintings.

Conceptual Framework

Modernist concepts, theories and formats have influenced the development of painting and art generally. Cubists dissect forms and place them in interaction with the space around them for example continuously freeing painting from the traditional practices of pictures (Buser, 2006). The cubists rejected naturalistic depictions, preferring compositions of shapes and forms abstracted from the conventionally perceived world. Kleiner (2011) says that for the cubists, the art of painting had to move far beyond the description of visual reality. Having studied these therefore, the major theory put forward as a conceptual framework is the 20th century art. The researcher implored the reduction of forms of the *Kwagh-hir* puppets and their interaction with space in executing paintings.

Review of Related Literature

A number of Nigerian artists have used aspects of their speech art, wooden sculptures, story-telling art among other things as sources of inspiration, which has drawn the artist's attention to the importance of the aforementioned terms. However, none has particularly dealt with the Tiv aspects as a source of inspiration for painting as provided by the study at hand. For instance Bruce Onabrakpeya a pioneer Nigerian artist gained his inspiration for some series of paintings from "*Urhobo*" myths and legends. Stories for him are "themes" which he employs to "expresses and accentuate the various stylized and abstract forms" of Africa. To paint his pictures, Onabrakpeya uses abstractions and stylizations in telling stories. For Bruce, stories are very stimulating source of inspiration for the artist (Jegede, 1984).

Bruce Onobrakpeya's' (1932) use of myth and legends as sources of inspiration relates to this research to a large extent. Both studies take up subjects within a story and story-telling art and explore the aesthetic possibilities. As such, Bruce's prints series cannot be said to have touched on the Tiv Kwagh-hir on a specific level (Buhari, 1984).

In other parts of the world, artists (painters) inspired by the arts of Africa abound. Several 20th century painters/artists adapted in their works the Africans approach to creating art. Movements such as Cubism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Futurism, Constructivism and Kinetic art at different times have drawn inferences from African ideas. But none has particularly dealt with the Tiv aspects as a source of inspiration for painting as provided by the study at hand. Canaday (1981) in "The Mainstream of Modern Art" posits:

> Picasso in woman with leaves, the Strein portrait, and his own portrait, Picasso was influenced by Iberian sculpture, the archaic sculpture of pre-roman Spain. But the two portraits look as if Picasso has already discovered African sculpture, at about this time and the ingredients for Cubism were assembled (P.428).

For Picasso, African proportion was the stimulating source of inspiration for the artist. Picasso ignored conventional perspective and spatial relationship and also gave monster heads to two of his five figures in the *Les Demoiselles d' Avignon*. These grotesque masks were derived from his interest in African sculpture. As such, Picasso's paintings cannot be said to have touched on the Tiv Kwagh-hir on a particular level.

Review of Related Works

An Armed Robber at the Stakes (1976)

Fig.1, Artist: unknown, An Armed Robber at the Stakes, Woods, Size Unknown, 1976, (Source: Nigeria Magazine No.120, 1976)

The kwagh-hir, puppets here reveal in their aesthetic intention abstracts from reality. Those situations, attitudes and social behaviours which are not only seen in Tiv communities but represent something of the universal human situation.

Hagher (2003) says:

> The kwagh-hir theatre uses puppets which vary in size and style. These puppets are highly advanced and can be made to perform a number of intricate movements. For example, there can be soldiers executing an armed robber or a puppet doctor operating on a pregnant woman and removing the child. (P.13).

Enem (1976) explains:

> The quality of actuality is often achieved by the literal representation of essential details of a situation presented. For example, in the vignette of the execution of an armed robber by a firing squad, an actual shot is fired and at the same time the Robber's head jerks suddenly and drops to one side. An ironic edge in that situation is pointed by the presence of his helpless relations (presumably his parents) at his execution. (P. 42).

As such the research imbibed the aesthetic qualities of the kwagh-hir puppets and their theatrical attributes to create paintings. It also sees this related work as core to chartering a course of action.

First Step

Pablo Picasso (1881 - 1973)

Fig.2, Artist: Pablo Picasso, First Step, Woods, Size Unknown, 1943 (Source: The world of Picasso, 1881-1973)
First step is a dramatic depiction of a mother and child situation. Picasso uses his cubist style to compress both figures into the picture plane in a style of rendition which came about as a result of his interest in African sculptures. There is a general use of dull colours, the yellows, pink and blues are all in their grey tones, alongside all the other grays. Perhaps the artist intended to create the atmosphere of time, owing to the look on the mothers face. Wertenbaker, (1980) says: "The hopeful scene of a child learning to walk with his mother's help. The woman's sad eyes and the jagged outlines of the child's body convey the grim atmosphere of the times, but a sense of optimism is clear". This essay sees a close affinity of this painting to the study at hand. The short limbs though twisted and turned are quite exemplary of the *Kwagh-hir* puppet figures. Even the eyes and eyebrows are rendered in the same manner. The drama evoked by the painting reminds one of *Yion* and children.

Methodology

The research is *practice-based*. According to Sullivan (2005), the imaginative and intellectual work undertaken by artists is a form of research. In recreating the *Kwagh-hir* puppets on two dimensional surfaces, the researcher unpacks a considerable amount of form, and in doing so stacks together a considerable amount of content. The researcher appropriates to the study at hand, a research design that is practice- based. This practice-based research is undertaken as a studio exploration. The data for this research is made up of *Kwagh-hir* figures, pictorial images of the *Kwagh-hir* figures from the researchers still camera, magazine pages and sketches of the *Kwagh-hir* puppets from Gboko L.G.A. in Benue State.

Studies of Sketches/Drawings

Plates I and II show images of the Kwagh-hir puppets sketched with pencils, and charcoal from separate sources and collectively arranged for the pilot study. These sketches and drawings make up the preliminary stages of this research.

Miniature Puppets

Plate I, **"Yion"**, 2012, Pen and Ink, 21cm x 25cm

Plate II, **"Yion Tema"**, 2012, Pen and Ink, 21cm x 30cm

Photographic Extracts from the Field Work

Fig.3, **Drummers**, Miniature Puppets,
Size Unknown, Date: Unknown,

Fig.4, **"Ashawe" (Prostitute)**, Miniature Puppets,
Size: Unknown, **Date:** Unknown,

Source: Kwagh-hir Theatre, Television Broadcast

Discussion of works Produced

A total number of forty eight works were produced in this research however; three of these paintings have

been brought forward for discourse.

Plate: III, Agaku Saghevwua Amos, Yion and Children, Oil on Canvas, Size 95cm x 100cm, 2011,
(Source: Artist's collection)

Yion and Children (Plate III) is a painting of three standing figurines in a triangular composition. Yion is

seen enjoying his pipe while discussing with his children. This painting is a product of the advanced

composition course. The intention is to evoke a feeling of drama. Yion was placed in the middle to create

balance. While the other smaller puppets on the left and right are placed to complete the triangular formation within the picture plane.

The form of the puppets body is representational with bulgy eyes, pipe, '*angeer*' cloths, bag and slippers are clearly identifiable. The fusion of the figures and landscape (background) was approached through the placing of the figures on the same line, and on the foreground. The greenish atmosphere and the houses in the background create a village evening scene. The expression on the face of Yion's children is dramatic and says much about their character. The figure on the left side of the painting seems to be a curious child, standing at attention and asking questions. While the figure on the right side is mischievous standing behind the father, with a look that is not clear what it wants to do or is doing.

Plate IV, Agaku Saghevwua Amos, Yion I, Oil on Canvas, Size 85cm x 100cm, 2011, (Source: Artist's collection)

In *Yion I* (Plate IV), the representation of the puppet is life-like as if one can actually begin to manipulate it. Plate IV shows the puppet well dressed in complete *angeer* attire, whilst a smoking pipe is in its right hand. The forms are embossed with paper mache in relief form, so that the figure bulges out from the two-dimensional surface of the canvas. The puppets body is painted in brown, while the forehead, the nostril, the chick, the neck, the arms, bag and pipe, there are short brush strokes of yellow that indicate the highlight. While on other areas of the reliefs are allowed without the highlights tones but with this, the whole picture is a visual feel of solidity. The background is painterly rendered with shades of yellow and red in wide brush strokes.

Plate V, Agaku Saghevwua Amos, Portrait of Tor Ijov, Oil on Canvas, Size 70cm x 89cm, 2011, (Source: Artist's collection)

The *Portrait of Tor Ijov* (Plate V) is titled as such, because the researchers' intention is to view further into the relief mould. It was also influenced by the technique of Pablo Picasso. It is one figure of a man presumed to be the researcher. The figure is bare chest, looking to the left side of the painting. The figure has wide awake eyes that express inquisitiveness and attentiveness while staring into space. The dark background indicates a night scene. The same type of proportion used by the *kwagh-hir* sculptors is used by the artist in this painting. Here, the researcher also moulds the figure in relief, making it to stand out from the surface of the canvas. The material used here was sawdust mixed with Poona (carpenters) glue. After oxidation the figure was filed with sand paper and painted in the family of purple and blue. Highlights are created by the short brush strokes of tinted purples, conveying the light that is shone and brandished in the arena. The portrait is synonymous to a *kwagh-hir* puppet figure itself with bulgy eyes (Nok-like), small ear, small month and small body which are characteristics gotten from the *kwagh-hir* puppets figures.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper research explored the dynamic relationship between painting and sculpture. It has permeated the vistas of theatre art through a presentation of the *Kwagh-hir* puppetry tradition as paintings worthy of public appreciation.

Apart from its theatrical significance, *kwagh-hir* puppets can present the artist with a variety of forms with which successful as well as creative transformations can be made to represent various aesthetic designs worthy of public and individual patronage and appreciation. Within the course of this study, the essay finds strokes, patches of colour, and repetition of such elements as useful for creating images. In most cases, such images created took the resemblance of the *kwagh-hir,* thus the similarity in the produced works to their source of inspiration. Paintings created at the end of the research which are worthy of public displays and appreciation, can promote the rich and colourful culture of the Tiv people.

It is this paper's hope also that artist (painters) can begin to use other aspects traditional sculptures for example the *"Nyam Tsuem", "Ere Ibeji"* among others to create painting. Through a study of the combination and fusions of traditional proportions and use of repetition of lines, shapes, colour and form of images in paintings can bring to the fore artworks worthy of public appreciation.

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