

## **SOCIO-POLITICAL RELEVANCE OF TRADITIONAL ART IN AFRICA: A SNIPPET REVIEW**

Ladi Onyi Andrea AGADA  
Department of Fine Art  
Faculty of Environmental Design  
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria  
[agadaladi@yahoo.com](mailto:agadaladi@yahoo.com)

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### **Abstract**

This discourse on the socio-political relevance of traditional art in Africa is a broad based topic, hence the need for the snippet review of the subject matter. This article dwells more on the West African region and its attendant influence of art on the people's social and political structure. The deviant case is used in this study for the purpose of analysing the functions of art and how it relates to the society. The discussion also centres on some selected African societies where art is fully established and still thriving in contemporary practice. The art forms, artists and patrons serve various functions in the society, helping to improve knowledge and existing art practice in Africa. The article concludes by drawing inferences from the discussions and proposes the need for constant engagement of art historians to refresh the younger generation on the need to glean from the past, in order to improve on contemporary visual art practice.

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**Key Words:** Traditional Art, Africa, Socio-Political, Forms, Review

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### **Introduction**

Africa is the second largest continent on earth; embracing one fifth of the earth's land area. The continent is bounded on the north by the Mediterranean Sea, on the west by the Atlantic Ocean, on the east by the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, and on the south by the confluence of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans off the Cape of Good Hope. According to Clarke (2006), throughout the continent, there is found a diversity of societies, languages, and cultures. It is estimated that there are well over 1,000 distinct languages in Africa, making it the most linguistically varied of all the continents. In Nigeria alone, more than 250 different languages are spoken.

The varied nature of languages and cultures has also informed the art forms and the functions within the various societies in Africa. According to Roberts (n.d), systems of social organization in Africa range from highly centralized states to non-centralized communities. Centralized systems have a chief or king at the apex of a complex and well-ordered political bureaucracy. Non-centralized systems are more democratic, in which councils of elders representing each of the families in a community meet to make decisions about the conduct of life.

Robert (1980) asserts that, "art in Africa fulfils a multitude of functions; it may be a symbol of status and prestige, a means of acquiring and maintaining political power, a stimulus to farming or trading, a piece of entertainment or" for religious purposes. Brian also states that, art in Africa has always been very much a part of the people's life, manifest in every aspect of their working, playing and believing worlds. Yet most surveys by art historians have been primarily devoted to the aesthetic appeal of the work of art, the peculiarities of its style and form, the socio-cultural or the religious aspects of traditional art in Africa, all of which have enjoyed a far-reaching discourse. It is also important that the art works of Africa be explored in their socio-political context. In Africa, the socio-political context of art ranges from the dynastic kingdoms and confederacies to communities governed by councils of elders and institutions of social control. Hence, the review of the socio-political influence on the production of art works in traditional African societies is critical.

### **Socio-Political Relevance of Traditional African Art**

Egonwa (2005) defines African art as the creative objectification of Africans which bear the imprints of African aesthetics on their styles and subjective content. The subjective content deals with the various aspects of African life and hence, works of art are produced for various functions. There are some basic components of art objects, around which all questions that could be asked in order to understand it are centred on. These are the styles, the way an art work looks, the iconography, its subject matter and symbolism, and its historical context. Trowell (1964) classifies African sculpture into three groups, namely: (a) spirit-regarding art; (b) man-regarding art, and (c) the art of ritual display. Trowell sees man-regarding art as sculptures used for the glorification of kings and rulers expressed in terms of personal portraits. This deals with the social aspect of the society and also the political powers of the various rulers

in African society which usually lead to the leaders being deified after death. Trowell also talks of spirit-regarding art as comprising sculptures with ritual values only and devoid of aesthetic qualities. The art of ritual display is believed to form a link between spirit-regarding and man-regarding art, for it can be used in both contexts.

Egonwa (2005) also notes:

African art cannot be fully considered without reference to the influence of the political set up. Specifically, this entails the rule of African leadership systems and of her leaders in the patronage, distribution and the stylistic evolution of art. When we consider that the art with which Africans were initially associated and recognized outside Africa were art works from the great kingdoms of Benin, Kongo, Asanti, Yoruba, Bakuba, this statement becomes important (P.71).

The display of objects, considered to be beautiful or expensive, has always been man's way of displaying wealth and social status. The Fon of Dahomey (now the Republic of Benin), for instance, made brass castings of animals (Fig. I) and of people at work or in processions (Fig. II), which have no religious or didactic intent. They had a social function which was entirely independent of the subject represented, establishing prestige. Brass was being regarded as a semi-precious metal, only the wealthy could afford to buy them, and they were displayed in the home both as objects of beauty and as status symbols.



**Fig. I: Buffalo (Bocio), Republic of Benin, Fon People, 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Silver, Iron and Wood, Height: 30.5cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Source: Clarke, C. (2006)**



**Fig. II: A Fon Processional Group, Republic of Benin, Fon People, 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Brass, Height: 29.7cm. Source: [www.artkhade.com/en](http://www.artkhade.com/en)**

In Yoruba land in Nigeria for example, to express ostentation and royalty, chiefs and noble men normally commission art works like veranda posts and carved relief doors which they incorporated in their houses. The Benin bronzes are also an excellent example of the use of sculpture for the glorification of the king (Fig. III). The bronzes are a collection of plaques and sculptures from the royal palace of the kingdom of Benin. It is true that the Benin bronzes are a record of life in the royal palace, but they were also used to decorate the royal palace, despite their symbolic meanings.



**Fig. III: Plaque, Nigeria, Edo People (Benin Kingdom),  
Bronze, Height: 53.5cm, National Museum Lagos.**

**Source: <https://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/peoples/show/Benin%20Kingdom>**

Masks are used as instruments for the discharge of religious, executive, judicial and entertainment functions in Africa. Clarke (2006) asserts that, among village-based societies, in which governance is distributed among local associations, art works do not glorify a particular leader. Instead of lavish displays of royal regalia, masks and figures are used as agents of social control or education. Such works are generally commissioned by a group of individuals, such as a council of elders or members of a religious association.

The grotesque masks which are forceful and fierce looking help to create distance between the masquerades, representing the spirits or ancestors, and the members of the society. These masks help to exercise political or judicial power over the community, and are therefore law-enforcement objects. On the other hand, the more refined masks are used for entertainment and they serve in social functions and hence attract a large following of women and children. Among the Ibibio in Nigeria, both kinds of masks are present, that is, the grotesque looking mask (Fig. IV) which carries authority to enforce law and order and also the refined mask for entertainment (Fig. V).



**Fig. IV: Idiok Ekpo Mask, Nigeria, Ibibio People,  
Wood, Height: 24.2cm, University of Iowa Museum of Art.  
Source: <https://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/peoples/show/Ibibio>**



**Fig. V: A Carved Wooden Entertainment Mask, Nigeria, Ibibio People,  
Height, Width: 24.8x14.3cm.**

**Source: [www.liveauctioneers.com](http://www.liveauctioneers.com)**

According to Brian (1980), the Kalabari Ijo of the Niger Delta in the coastal region of Nigeria erect memorial screens in honour of departed family heads. These memorial screens are made for the most prominent ancestors, always traders, kept in a prominent position in the assembly

hall of the house. His role as leader and chief, as well as trader, is exemplified in the screens, a ship reflects his power in commerce and heads indicate that he traded and owned slaves (Fig. VI). Art works like the aforementioned, help to establish political or leadership roles in a family clan or in a society.



**Fig. VI: Ancestral Screen, Nigeria, Kalabari People, Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century,  
Wood, Fiber and Cloth, Height: 3' 9 1/2", British Museum London.  
Source: Kleiner, F. S. (2011)**

African societies are characterized by numerous social activities involving ceremonial dances and festivals. Costumes of various colours, body decoration and masks feature in most social activities in traditional African art. Among the Dan who live in Cote d'Ivoire and also in Liberia, some masks are produced which are classified according to the social functions they provide. The functions of masks determine their form and masks could rise in social status, and could graduate from simple to complex functions. Sometimes, a hair style made of woven black raffia or hair could be added to some of these masks. Occasionally, the face could just be made of two abstracted flat planes with eyes at the meeting point. The Tankagle masks of the Dan people (Fig. VII) are characterized by an oval face, protruding mouth and narrow eyes and are usually worn during village festivals to entertain the audience with varied dancing, singing and pantomimic sketches. The Dan also produced brass objects meant for contemplation. They are usually placed by the fire place of the rich people for easy perception by their visitors. This also serves a social function as well as hierarchical placement in the society. All these functions were made possible through the production of traditional art works.



**Fig. VII: Tankagle (Dan) Mask, Cote d'Ivoire and Liberia, Dan People,  
Wood, Height: 24.1cm, The University of Iowa Museum of Art.  
Source: <https://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/peoples/show/Dan>**

Several other societies and organizations employ masks as social and political emblems for initiation of new members, burials, marriages and annual festivals. For example, during the graduation of young girls trained in the art of womanhood, home economics, etiquette and personal grooming in the Sande or Bundo society of the Mende people of Sierra Leone; masks are paraded. The Sowo masks are characterized by elaborated hair dress, high forehead,

compressed narrow facial structure with sensitive thin nose, lips and chin, and carefully delineated neck fold (Fig. VIII). Some of the masks could be individually identified by the nature of hair styles of living or departed women whose achievements were to be emulated by the young girls. The primary role of the society is to teach the girls about the expectations of the community. Such organizations function to institute community morals and act as a means of social control.



**Fig. VIII: Sowo Mask, Sierra Leone, Mende People, Late 19<sup>th</sup>- Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Wood, Height: 40.2cm, Detroit Institute of Arts.**

**Source: <https://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/peoples/show/Mende>**

The Benin kingdom in Nigeria flourished between the fourteenth and nineteenth century which was led by a succession of dynastic leaders known as Obas. The Oba, who was considered to be semi divine during his lifetime, was the political and spiritual leader of his people. He governed a complex network of lesser chiefs with varied political, administrative, and ritual duties. Upon ascending the throne, one of the Oba's first ritual duties was to establish an altar commemorating the life and achievements of the previous king, his father. The heads cast in brass are idealized representations of the individual Obas. This head, which dates to the mid-sixteenth century, is among the earliest examples of the genre, as indicated by the thin casting and naturalistic style. Brass and ivory, both valuable and durable materials, symbolized the Oba's power and wealth.

Heirs to the Benin kingdom continue to represent their people as cultural leaders within the contemporary Nigerian state. The Oba or sacred king is known to be at the apex of an elaborate state organisation, including a ranked court with specialized hereditary and appointed titles as well as craft and military guilds. Historically, the Oba was the principal patron of the arts in Benin. The artists' guilds, which included blacksmiths, brass casters, sculptors in wood and ivory, bead workers, costume makers and leather workers worked under his patronage. Most of the art works created served chiefly to glorify the king, reinforce royal hierarchies, and enhance court life. In the Benin kingdom, power was often expressed by an art object frequently a sword. According to Bradbury (1957), when the Oba delegated to a chief, powers of life and death over his own subjects, this was marked by the presentation to him of the ceremonial sword, *Ada* (Fig. IX).



**Fig. IX: Ceremonial Sword (*Ada*), Nigeria, Edo People (Benin Kingdom), Iron, Brass and Ivory, Height: 102.5cm.**

**Source: [www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org)**

The use of swords as prestige emblems is characteristic of many African kingdoms, including the Akan kingdoms, the Baule and Asante who made and used iron, wood and gold swords for display. In Africa. One of the characteristics of rulers and leaders is their ability to commission, control and distribute works of art, and to interest them with meaning. It will be seen that the arts associated with absolute authority are used by leaders in their task, to exert influence over other people, whether this be in the moral, military, spiritual, economic, social or political sectors of life.

Sculptures, and to a lesser degree, paintings, which are however debatable, often served in ethnic Africa as a kind of cultural mirror, since they were largely produced in response to religious and social needs; and consequently reflected and gave visual expression to certain fundamental aspects of life (Mount, 1973). What gives art in Africa its special character is the general small scale of most of its traditional societies, in which one finds a more immediate interrelationship between art and other social forms and its wide-ranging variety of styles, each developed in its own particular ecological, historical and social circumstances.

### Conclusion

Works of art, including masks and figures in ivory and wood serve as didactic devices for issues of morality and ethics. Figurative staffs were sometimes carried by representatives of chiefs and kings, symbolizing their power and authority. As individuals accede from one level to the next in the course of their lifetime, these objects serve to pictorially represent precepts and maxims and to instil cultural values of the highest order in the society. Works created in the traditional era, serve as instructions to the people. In the same vein, contemporary artists can raise issues with their visual arts on socio-political themes in order to instruct and educate the society. Beyond the acquisition of visual art objects as social status and instilling fear for political control, the recording of events as practiced in traditional era, have stirred art historians to holistic thinking of gleaning from the past in order to make substantial future projections in the field of visual arts. These projections create a robust interphase between the traditional and the contemporary, thereby making room for continuous research and bridging gaps noticed in earlier traditional treasures of art.

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