

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL FUNCTIONS OF IFE TRADITIONAL SCULPTURES

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Abstract

Arts and culture have played a big influence and role in society and public discourse and participation in politics. Traditional African art serves diverse political set-ups. This is based on belief of “life after death”. The political functions of art are prevalent among the cultural arts of Egypt, Cameroon, Benin and Ife in Africa. Ife art works are based on their socio-political values; beliefs of the artists that created them and their artistic expressions and representation through images that depict their philosophical ways of life. This paper attempts to examine the functions of Ife art. Attention was given to the socio-political functions of their sculptures based on religious beliefs and society’s influences.

Key Words: Traditional Sculpture, Ife, Sculpture, Socio-Political, Functions

Introduction

Art is everywhere and it plays an active role in politics. Banjoko (2009) defines art as universal language of self-expression of man in his cultural and natural environment through the use of some materials, skills and techniques to produce various works of self-satisfaction, utility and beauty or aesthetics. The forms and means of expressing people’s basic philosophy of life are seen in traditional African culture. The art of African societies and cultures cannot be separated from politics due to the belief that the king is a divine being who has control over them (Okachi, 2015). This belief, in African societies is what makes artists to create images of their kings and nobles, which ensure their continued existence. Traditional African art and culture represent the ideals, norms and standards as well as acceptable group behaviours with which people identify with and are obliged to comply for the sake of social harmony and co-habitation. Across history and societies throughout the world, art has been used to support the authority of sacred and secular leaders and to legitimize the concept of leadership itself as a social institution. Leaders commission art, dispense it, send messages with it, and use it instrumentally both to perpetuate the status quo and to affect change (Visona, Poynor and Herbert, 2008).

Sculpture is a branch of visual arts that has in three dimensions. Sculpture is also traditionally concerned with the manipulation of relief and three dimensional visual expressions. Sculpture is derived from a Latin word “*sculpere*” which means to ‘carve’. It is a three-dimensional art concerned with the organization of masses and volumes’ (Michele, 2009). According to Anidi (1998), in modern times, a sculptural work could include more elements such as colour, sound, fire, wind, water and gas. Sculpture has the ability to transform the abstract, the tangible or the unseen potentials in the universe to some concrete state, and has through the millennium, mobilized some intrinsic consciousness to action”. Sculpture is one of the plastic arts which involves carving (the removal of material) and modeling (the addition of material) in clay,

stone, metal and wood. Sculpture has been at the centre of socio-political devotion in many cultures. The cultures whose sculptures have survived in quantities include the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean, India, China, Italy, Egypt, Greek, France, Nok, Benin and Ife among others (Michele, 2009).

Blier (2012) reports that, "Ife pronounced (ee-feh) according to Yoruba myth, was the centre of the creation of the world and all mankind. Ife was home to many sacred groves, located in the city's forests". The author added that the spiritual heartland of the Yoruba people living in Nigeria is rightly regarded as the birthplace of some of the highest achievements of sculptural art. Ife art functions in meaningful ways, relating to political and social structure, to religion, economics; indeed to all factors of human experiences. The approach observed in Ife sculpture, potentially includes all of the factors in their diligence, form, style and modes of production and functions of their products. These also include their sculptures on socio-political issues that are studied not only independently but as aspects of their cultural dynamics.

Ife Sculpture

Ile-Ife is known worldwide for its ancient and naturalistic bronze, stone and terracotta sculptures, which reached her peak of artistic expression between 1200 and 1400 A.D, in the period around 1300 C.E (Emu, 1993). The artists at Ife developed a refined and naturalistic sculptural tradition in terracotta, stone and copper alloy, brass, and bronze many of which appear to have been created under the patronage of King *Obalufon II*, the man who today is identified as the Yoruba patron and deity of brass casting, weaving and regalia (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, 2009). Ife sculptures range from abstract, semi-abstract, realistic and highly naturalistic in appearance they are rendered in terracotta, bronze and stone. The technical sophistication of the casting process is matched by the artworks' enduring beauty. The human figures portrayed wide cross-sections of Ife society and included depictions of young and old people, health and disease, suffering and serenity. Many Ife sculptural works emphasize a larger-than life size scale of the head in relationship with other parts of the human body, head privileging ratio is seen as reinforcing the importance of this body part as a symbol of ego, destiny, personality, essential nature and authority (Abimbola, 1975).

Ife terracotta works constitute a large and diverse corpus. These include sculptures and vessels depicting human, animal, and other-worldly subjects. Ife terracotta sculptures vary in sizes from nearly life size, full-length figures to tiny figurines, range in style from extreme naturalism to abstract forms. Their terracotta's are associated with royalty as a symbol of supremacy and shrines as images of worship to the supreme one, while most of their bronze sculptures are associated with gods and kings. For example, the bronze sculpture of the early king, *Obalufon II* rendered in naturalistic life-size mask, portray the artists believe of power as a symbol of royalty and supremacy. Ife bronze and terracotta sculptures created for civilization are significant example

of socio-politic African art and are distinguished by their variations in regalia, facial marking patterns, and body proportions (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, 2009).

Brief History of Ife Socio-political Sculpture

Many of the ancient Ife sculptures are identified with individuals who lived in the era of King *Obalufon II* who participated in the civil war associated with his reign (Lange, 2004). This suggested that *Obalufon II* was a key sponsor or patron of these ancient arts, an idea consistent with this king's modern identity as patron deity of bronze casting, textiles, regalia, peace, and wellbeing. The ancient Ife sculpture which were created have a form of campaign tools for the impact, popularity and the achievement of *Obalufon II*, who is seen as a leader who brought peace to the long embattled city of Ife (Adediran, 1992).

Blier (2012), further observes that as part of his plan to reunite the feuding parties, *Obalufon II* is also credited with the creation of a new city plan with a large, high-walled palace at its centre. Around the perimeters, the compounds of key chiefs from the once feuding lineages were positioned. King *Obalufon II* seems at the same time to have pressed for the erection of new temples in the city and the refurbishment of older ones, these serving in part to honour the leading chiefs on both sides of the dispute. Ife's ancient art works were likely functioned as related temple furnishings (Stride, 1971). One particular art-rich shrine complex that may have come into prominence as part of *Obalufon II*'s truce is that honouring of the ancient hunter *Ore*, a deity whose name also features in one of *Obalufon*'s praise names. *Ore* is identified both in sculptures of Ife royals and also as a god and often shown in 1:4 ratios, most non-royals are depicted in proportions much closer to life

In ancient Ife art, according to Blier, the higher the status, the greater likelihood that body proportions will differ from nature in ways that greatly enhance the size of the head. This does not only highlight the head as a prominent body part and authority marker, but also points to the primacy of social difference in visual rendering. The Ife sculptural heads are privileged in relationship to the body and also important to the body or do sometime is often overlooked. The Ife sculptural belly is equally important because the artist's belief in well-being of the king as a sign of political power. The belly is identified in sculptures of Ife royals and also as a god. Attention is paid to the belly by making it not proportional to nature but in the ways that enhance the size of the belly while most non-royals are depicted in proportions much closer to life.

The Socio-Political Interpretations of Ife Sculpture

The beliefs about health well-being, wealth and power have served diverse socio-political interpretation of Ife sculpture, which is based on Yoruba traditional belief of "life after death". Ife sculptures are usually

associated with royalty as a symbol of supremacy and shrines as a symbol of worship to the supreme one (Kings and gods are depicted with large heads and belly because the artists have an understanding that power is held in the head while riches in the belly). Ife sculptures are created to represents leaders and rulers in relation to their political function.



Plate I: Bronze (Leaded brass) sculpture of Oni (Rulership), <http://hum.lss.wisc.edu/hjdrewal/Ife.html>
Rulership

Plate I is the sculpture of Oni with full plump torsos (chest and stomach). The sculpture is an example of Ife socio-political sculpture, depicting rulers and deities that complement modern Yoruba beliefs about health and wellbeing on the one hand, and wealth and power on the other hand. The sculpture is created with a royal cap beads and wrapper. Attention is given to the belly and the head; ‘full belly’ which is understood to be vital to royals and deities as a reference to qualities of wellbeing which is socio-political belief to have associated with the royals, is portrayed in the sculpture.



Plate II: Bowl depicting a recumbent scepter-holding Queen atop a looping handle throne
<http://hum.lss.wisc.edu/hjdrewal/Ife.html>
Rests or Leans

Ife socio-political sculpture is also used for rests or leans. Plate II is a sculpture of queen Miremi. Miremi according to Yoruba history was a queen, said to have been the only bold queen who delivered her people from the hand of the prejudice. The image showed in Plate II

is the lying position of Miremi; a crowned female circumscribing with a vessel set atop a throne associating with the socio-political power and recognitions of a female leader. The image showed a sign of authority and positioning by holding a scepter in one hand; while the other hand grasps the throne's curve handle. Her seat depicts miniatures of the quartz and granite stool which show royalty. The composition is the transfer of power at Ife from the first dynasty rulership group to the new (second) dynasty line of the king.



**Plate III: Staff of *Oranmiyan*, <http://hum.lss.wisc.edu/hjdrewal/Ifé.html>
Symbolism**

Symbolism is another function of Ife socio-political sculpture. Plate III is a Staff of *Oranmiyan*, the staff is mounted on a base shares. *Oranmiyan*, according to Yoruba history is one of *Odudua* (father of all Yoruba) son who became the first traditional leader in Ife. The staff of *Oranmiyan* is a symbol of authority and power. The staff depicts the presence of a king even in his absence. Respect is given to the staff because it is believed that it is powerful. The Ife artists represent the staff depicting two gagged human heads positioned back-to-back, one with vertical line facial marks, the other with plain-face, suggesting the union of two dynasties. The staff is used for two functions; rituals and coronations. The staff also represents a youthful and elderly man head; signifying two different dynasty portrayals, and the complementary royal unification and division.



**Plate IV. This royal couple, <http://hum.lss.wisc.edu/hjdrewal/Ife.html>
Competition**

The royal couple is a good example of competition and one of the most striking works from Ife. The sculpture is a copper alloy cast of a king and queen with interlocked arms and legs with royal features for example crown, beard and regalia. Plate IV shows the pain and struggle involved in trying to outperform or put up reasonable contest between Ife families and the chiefs. The image portrays the common relationship and the deference of royalty and chieftainships in the Ife socio-political context. The image also promotes the socio-political power of *Obalufon II* in the political and religious marriage between the groups as part of his rulership.



**Plate V. Copper mask of Obalufon, National Museums, Ife,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bronze_Head_from_Ife
Civilisation**

Civilisation is another socio-political function of Ife sculpture. Ife sculpture is highly developed, advanced and populated. Plate IV is thought to be a portrait of a ruler only known as an *Ooni or Oni*. It was made under the patronage of *King Obalufon II* whose famous naturalistic life size face masks in copper shares stylistic features. The work is identified as the patron deity of brass casters. The period in which the work was made was considered an age of prosperity for the Yoruba civilisation. The work shows the royal with the facial stratification type of the particular society.



Plate VI: Head with facial striations and elaborate head gear,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bronze_Head_from_Ife

Identification

The Ife people believe in facial stratification. It is understood to be a sign of wealth and riches. Facial stratification is associated with royalty and chiefs because the people see them as god on earth and the representative of god. Facial stratification is also seen as a form of identification of kings and chiefs from region to region. Facial stratification in Ife also defers. For example the one for the king is deferent from the chief and from any other person. There are also notable distinctions in headdress details, the diadem shapes and cap tiers are two example of Ife headdress. The diadem shapes are with striated facial marks displays while cap tiers consists of a simple concentric circle surmounted by a pointed plume.

Ife ancient sculptural work is important; they serve to mark grade and status. According to *Ife Obatala* Chief *Adelekan* eight petal rosettes are associated with higher *Obatala* grades. That the *Wunmonije* king figure wears an eight-petal rosette while the *Aroye* vessel and *Olokun* head incorporate sixteen-petal forms, is based on power difference. Eight is the highest number accorded humans, suggests Chief *Adelekan*, whereas sixteen is used for gods (Blier, 2012).

Conclusion

Art and politics in Africa is still together as it is in the traditional African art. The art and culture of Ife cannot be separated from politics due to this belief that 'king is a divine being who has control over them'. Their artists make images of the king and nobles, to ensure his continued existence and represent the ideals, norms and standard acceptable group behaviours with which people identify with and are obliged to comply for the sake of socio-political harmony and co-habitation.

Ife socio-political sculpture art works of kings and gods have become iconic symbols of regional and national unity, and of pan-African identity. Reproductions of heritage items have increased from socio-political purpose and logo of numerous commercial, educational and financial institutions. Ife socio-

political images have become universal symbols of African heritage. For example The *Ori Olokun* head of the king was chosen as the logo for the All-Africa Games.

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