

THEMATIC ALLUSION TO IGBO CULTURAL VALUES: A STUDY OF WORKS OF THE AKA CIRCLE OF EXHIBITING ARTISTS

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Abstract

Following the end of the Nigerian civil war, and alongside its extremely intensified experiences, emerging contemporary artists of the Igbo descent found expressions in the various aspects of the visual arts. From painting, sculpture, ceramics, textiles and mixed media, many of these young artists created works that directly or indirectly reflect on the Igbo cultural values. Cultural motifs, symbols, patterns, forms and even materials were often employed in the creation of art forms by these artists. During their various academic careers, many of them were able to translate the successes they achieved in the transformation of the traditional Igbo uli wall and body painting into the contemporary creative phenomenon that has been widely recognized and appreciated globally. This paper analyses some selected works of the AKA circle of exhibiting artists in order to reveal, through their various working themes, the meaning and content of their works in respect to their allusions to the Igbo cultural heritage. The paper reveals the various attempts by this circle of exhibiting artists to preserve the different aspects of the Igbo culture and tradition through their respective chosen media. It also show how they, like many other Igbo artists, are representing and promoting these cultural values to the rest of the world.

Keywords: Aka circle of exhibition, Igbo cultural heritage and practices, Thematic allusion

Introduction

Igbo culture includes all the various traditions, customs and the general socio-political, religious and economic way of life of the people of Igbo descent. It involves all of the ancient, indigenous and historical practices as well as all the new or borrowed cultures that evolved over the years to become an integral part of the peoples' cultural. These cultural practices of the Igbo people are often expressed through music, dance and drama, folklores, visual art, language dialects, architecture and also through their different types of food. Chike Ebebe (1987), one of the founding members of the AKA group, in describing the traditional Igbo artists, states that the traditional artists were not in the business of creativity for material gains, as they were artists and farmers, "dibias", priests as well as community leaders. To him, "their art activities were not known to all: the "ofekes", the un-initiated and women did not know the artist who worked with the "spider" to produce the masquerades, not to talk of knowing who carved the community deity.

The traditional Igbo art refers to great variety of visual art styles, and cultural practices that include ivory, stone and wood carving, iron and bronze smiting, pottery making, raffia works, weaving and painting that are done on either body or on wall of mud houses. Some natural or artificial materials such as bones, feathers, cloths, cowry shells and variety of other such substances are often used to complete their animalistic and decorative powers. According to Odita (1995), until quite recently, this general approach to traditional African art had accustomed westerners to a peculiar appreciation of weaving without a weaver, painting without a painter and sculpture without a sculptor

wrenched from an exotic and unreal world – the realm of “primitive people”. This western approach to traditional African art came to be because the traditional African artists are largely anonymous and their professional activities as well as their training, to Odita have been the subject boundless speculations.

Aniakor, (1987), explains that creativity is the wondering of the human spirit from one level of experience to another and because the artist chooses which experience to tune him to, he has the full responsibility to employ good craft to communicate them effectively. For the artist’s experiences, according to him, ultimately constitute his vision of society. All aspects of the visual art in traditional Igbo society have become, not only an integral part of her culture but an eye through which Igbo traditional society views the universe as an essentially harmonious entity, where the physical and the spiritual spheres exist in balance. It is important, whenever one analyses or studies a piece of traditional Igbo visual art, not to lose sight of its spiritual motivation. This, according to Odita, (ibid), each piece of traditional African art was created for the purpose of visualizing important spiritual and social concepts. It is important to also note that any work of art created in the style of another cultures outside the Igbo nation has no significance to members of her society. Forms or styles in which an art piece is created must be recognized by members of her society in order to drive meaning from it. This means that every art piece or visual images produced must be based on known traditions or social process within the Igbo society. In this way, an art object can be a symbol of age, status or role in the community. It can become a realistic representation of what it stands for in the society. Such representation, therefore, becomes one of the major role visual art plays in the preservation of Igbo traditions and culture from generations to generation.

Visual Art and Contemporary Igbo Society

According to Asika, (1993), the end of the Nigerian civil war, in 1970, saw an emergence of many contemporary Igbo artists with deep sense of cultural nostalgia, renaissance and resentment against the suffering of “Ndi Igbo” during and after the war. Undeterred from the defeat and losses from the civil war, these growing number of formal and informally trained Igbo artists alluded to the different Igbo cultural forms, motifs, symbols and other creative imageries to produce very fascinating works of art that have attracted lots of respect from the international art communities around the world. As many of these Igbo artists did not restrict their professional careers to studio art practice alone, some were engaged in the training of younger artists within and outside the Igbo nation. Obiora Udechukwu, Chike Aniakor, Chris Afuba, Ifediora Dike and a few others, were able to successfully combine their academic career with full studio portfolio of works of art that alluded to the Igbo culture and traditions. Through their many academic and professional art developments, the Aka Circle of exhibiting Artists emerged as one of the formidable studio art professional group that came together for the purpose of holding an annual group exhibition. They were made up of thirteen professional artists living and working within the Igbo communities; which make it easier for them to directly or indirectly make creative or artistic references to the Igbo cultural and traditions in the selections of their working themes.

The AKA Group

According to Frank,(2004), one of the important elements that give contemporary artworks its force, its meaning and its credibility is the understanding of the historical background and other visual elements that defines its content. Such works of art are often defined not just through paintings, textiles, sculptures and ceramics but through representation of issues and cultural element found within the social and cultural environment that inspired its production.

The AKA Circle of Exhibiting artist is a group of exhibiting artists that is made up of 13 professional artists who were also art teachers in different higher institutions of art learning in the Eastern region of Nigeria. These professional artists, according to Aniakor, (1986) were bound together for the purpose of holding annual art exhibition. He went on to raise some rhetoric questions regarding the reason for their coming together as a group. Aniakor questioned if this coming together suggests a common congregation of interest, if such interest also suggest a fruitful meeting of minds in the arena of creative activities, if this find ultimate resolution in the creative act of which their works are the final products, weather one can infer from this a fostering on common ideological concern, and if their coming together is simply a case of a group of artists working together in the same geographical area and deciding to pull their resources together for a group art exhibition. Taking a survey of the activities of these group of artists decades after their formation, one can say for certain that a sure answer to all the questions raised by Aniakor in his maiden writing on the group is that these 13 professional artists of the AKA Circle came together for a common interest in the art creative arena. One can observe from their activities over these years, a fostering of common ideological concern. Besides these observations lies the fact that these artists live and work within the same geographical area before deciding to pull their resources together for the purpose of an annual group exhibition.

In line with Aniakor's thoughts or ideas about the formation of this group, one can identify the social and historical conditions that influenced, shaped and amplified their creativities. As no art is created from a vacuum, these artists, naturally, responded to the social, cultural and political activities around their geographical area. Although, there are couple of members of these group of artists who were originally non-Igbos, however, due to their long interaction with the Igbo communities and with deep interest and close observations of the Igbo cultures and traditions, they were able to easily integrate themselves with the cultural and creative motivations of the group. They had the privilege to engage in creative allusion to Igbo traditional and cultural ideas, motifs and values in the production of many of their highly acclaimed works of art.

For Aniakor, (ibid), that these allusions to Igbo culture reflect part of the artistic concern of these groups is not only episodic but derives from the fact that most of the artists are of Igbo origin and therefore have strong Igbo cultural background. Again, the fact that many of these artists are teaching at the Nsukka Art School provides that they simply experimented with the creative ideology of natural synthesis which is highly promoted in the Nsukka Art School. This ideology was a call for artists of the Nsukka School to engage in mixing the best of the Igbo traditional or cultural materials with those from the Western influences for the creation of their works of art. In this respect, these artists have over the years, used their different range of materials and media to engage in the exploration of indigenous Igbo cultural forms, ideas and materials in expressing their creativities. One

observed a wide range of creative ideas and directions and emanating from the Igbo *Uli* body and wall paintings, folkloric art forms, and traditional architecture and their decorations in the works of these Aka artists.

Tayo Adenaike and El Anatsui are two non-Igbo artists in the group, however, the fact that they have been living and working among the Igbo communities for a long time and have also experienced deep or strong social and cultural integration with the Igbo people, provides an easy integration into the Aka circle of artists. Evidence of cross cultural or multicultural exploration of artistic ideas, forms and materials can also be found in their works. One can also observe that synthesis of different cultural ideas further gives credence to the cultural dynamism that is inherent in the rich Igbo culture.

During the one decade the AKA Circle of Artists exhibited their works together, they have individually and collectively demonstrated deep interest and concern for the preservation of the Igbo cultural elements and values. Obianyido (1992), in her introduction to the groups' 1992 exhibition catalogue, describes them as having contributed immensely in creating an artistic awareness of the inherent Igbo cultural values and most importantly, in its preservation and for posterity. She describes Aniakor's painting "*The falcon descends on the people*", as a piece of visual philosophy that seems to have borrowed from the Biafran war experiences.

Many of the AKA group of artists have, within this period, reached that exotic point in their career where they do not have to decide how their art works should be seen. In this respect, Samson Uchendu, Chike Ebebe and Christ Echeta who were all ceramic artists, abandoned the physical and cultural development in ceramic art forms to evolve a more dynamic approach that provided a multi-dimensional perspective to the appreciation of their works without losing its inherent Igbo cultural dimensions.

Like several interesting and successful painters that emerged from the Igbo contemporary art scene, Obiora Udechukwu makes seemingly complex paintings that command an inherent ability to connect the viewers to the indigenous Igbo folkloric imageries. This is evident in his "*Nsukka Landscape*" series exhibited in their 1988 group exhibition. To understand the implications and creative ideas of Udechukwu's paintings, it is perhaps important to study them in the context of his other interest, such as poetry, drawing and Chinese calligraphy. In their précised executions, apparent simplicity of drawings and meticulous display of colour areas, Udechukwu carefully select his subjects or creative themes to reflect his cultural and social environment. These creative strategies are often understood as an effort to reaffirm the established relationship between his art and Igbo cultural values.

Nsirik Essien became very prominent as a growing artist among the Igbo communities. Long before he joined the AKA Circle of exhibiting artists as a foundation member in 1986, the artist, who was born at Uyo in the present Akwa Ibom State and trained at the Institute of Management and Technology, Enugu, inspired controversy through his mixed media paintings. His works, which is considered by many viewers to be provocative, essentially involves assemblage of unrelated objects as a form of mixed media work which he uses to make strong visual statements. His works are often used as visual commentaries. In his works titled *Oppressor* and *Armageddon*, which he exhibited in 1987, Nsirik demonstrated that art could be used as a veritable tool for social commentaries,

especially, as relate to the claim of marginalization by the Igbos during the prolonged military rule in Nigeria.

Another AKA artist, Obiora Anidi, belongs to the generation of post independence Igbo artist whose works are situated in a sophisticated conceptual process that involves a synthesis of Igbo traditional forms and ideas into contemporary significance. The use of simple sculptural materials and gestures make his works very outstanding. His sculptural piece also presents a carefully selected and meticulously reconstructed cultural idiom that easily connects the viewer to the Igbo socio-political, religious and cultural dynamics. In his works titled "*Before the Priest, Before the Sanctuary*" and "*The Last Bow*", exhibited during the 1988 annual group exhibition of the AKA Circle, directly showcased the role of Christianity in promoting moral values in the society. He also uses the later to demonstrate the ultimate punishment for criminal activities. He used these works to examine the intricate relationship between visual art and the people's social responsibilities towards moral values.

In all culture and history, painting has been easily associated with the issues relating to reality and illusion, the living, the dying and the dead. In this respect, the paintings of Boniface Okafor often connect the natural and the supernatural, the physical and the metaphysical. His well detailed surrealist paintings are often loaded with Igbo folkloric themes that bother on culture, moral and ontological issues. In his works titled "*Shrine to the Water Spirit*", (1991) and "*To the Unknown Chief*", (1986), "*Oracle*", (1996) and "*His Are the Time and the Ages*", (1996), he demonstrates a considerable depth and knowledge of visions, metaphysics, dream images and interpretations, the mastery of the Igbo universe and their realm of the spirit. Here, the dilemma of space, time and existence are contracted and reconstructed on his canvas so as to convey a cryptic layer of meaning.

In the absence of Christ Echeta and Chike Ebebe in 1992 during their annual art exhibition, the group admitted two young and talented new members; Chika Obiajulu Okeke and Tony Umunna in 2005. Years later, Echeta later rejoined the group.

Chika Okeke paints complex canvases that open politics up to wide rhetorical, philosophical and intellectual questions. By using similar design motifs, symbols and other cultural materials that also allude to Igbo cultural experiences, Chika chooses painting themes that refers to politics, history and self. His "*Naked Soldiers*", "*meditation II*", and "*Can You Kill the Song*", simply connect the viewer with the negative historical experiences of the Igbos during the civilian war and other attendant economic and humanistic issues that resulted to socio-cultural value disorientation. According to Oguibe, (1995), the AKA salon become the most anticipated and enthusiastically discussed event in modern Nigerian art after ten years the group exhibited together.

Conclusion

Over this period of ten years, that the AKA Circle of exhibiting artists have successfully worked and exhibited together, according to Odutokun, (1995), the group is bounded by the common devotion to creativity, and one can observe that a fair representation of their art came from clear allusion to the Igbo cultural materials as well as the Nigerian post independence social and political experiences. These creative experiences easily points to several attempts made by these artists towards the survival of the Igbo culture, traditions and customs in the face of a fast changing world. From their annual exhibitions, one can see a continuous attempt to bridge the past with the present,

the physical and spiritual. These cultural elements among other things converge through their different artistic media, to take the Igbo traditional and contemporary experiences well beyond this disappearing cultural dilemma that often occupy its discourse.

Although one can consider the possibility that some of the works of the AKA group, over these years, do not look particularly nostalgic to the Igbo or African traditional forms, yet we cannot overlook the support they have given to the development of an art creative culture that connect the Igbo cultural past with the contemporary world of creativity. They have and are still training many younger artists towards this direction. The works of the AKA group has continued to openly evoke the physical space of the Igbo social activities and cultural landscape. They still continue to use their creative experiences to reconcile traditional values issues with contemporary social, political and economic demands of the Igbo society.

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