

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL TEXTILE FORMS AND IDEAS: AN ASPECT OF EL ANATSUI'S CREATIVE SOURCES

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Abstract

Traditional textiles from Africa are suffused with rich aesthetics and riddled with conceptualism in their diverse themes and designs. Indigenous African textiles, no doubt, have inherent motifs, rhythmic patterns and other forms of artistic designs that are symbolic to the different cultures and traditions that produced them. These rich African cultural heritages have been identified by art scholars as possessing the fundamental artistic features that many contemporary Nigerian artists constantly allude to, in making their successful art pieces. It is therefore not surprising that these cultural motifs and design patterns have inspired the recent metal sculptural works of El Anatsui; whose exceptional creations have placed him as the most successful contemporary African artist. The study and documentation of the growth of contemporary Nigerian art cannot be complete without the examination and understanding of the vital influences of African indigenous textile motifs and symbols to the success of the series of metal sculptures that are recently produced by El Anatsui. This paper, therefore, focuses on the influence of African traditional textiles in terms of their symbolic forms and rhythms on El Anatsui's recent sculptural installations series.

Keywords: Metal sculpture, African traditional textile, symbolic forms and rhythms, El Anatsui

Introduction

The art of many notable European artists during the early 1900s, were influenced by the aesthetics of sculptures from Africa, especially works of artists that pioneered the avant-garde approach in the developmental trend of modern art. Traces of these influences could be found, for example, in the works of Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and their colleagues from the Paris art school. These artists combined the different creative approaches of African abstracts with the postimpressionist works of Ganguin and Cezanne, to initiate a new genre of painting called cubism, which consequently pioneered the early precepts of modern arts. Artists like Picasso, who was said to be the painter of the millennium, has indirectly attributed the major influence of his artworks to the African sculpture shown to him by his friend and colleague, Matisse and also to the visits he had made around 1907 to the Trocadero where he collected lots of African sculptures. The forms and styles of these sculptures changed his previous orientation to art in very remarkable ways and induced in him the motivation to be more experimental with art forms. Consequently, other artists such as, the artists of the Paris school like Amedeo Modigliani and the American artist Max Weber followed suit.

These new creative approaches was not relegated to African sculptures alone, over the years, most artists; both within the continent and beyond, have made reference to African traditional fabrics in their art installation ideas and indeed, in other forms of artistic expressions. Henri Matisse is known to have possessed several kuba cloths in his collections, which he came in contact with in the early African art shows he had attended. The Kuba people (also called the Bakuba), are cluster of

Bushong-speaking ethnic groups of the larger Bantu ethnicity living in the southeastern Democratic Republic of Congo, are known to be the most artistic and highly technological indigenous cloth makers of East Africa. These cloths were woven from the fibers of raffia palm. They were believed to have been used as dowries although the larger ones were adorned by the locals as festive attires during funerals. The works he had produced, especially his final major ones, like were allusions to these textiles. Matisse was also known to have credited the inspiration for some of his later works like "Snow Flower"s (created in 1951), to the kuban cloths. On the other hands, Paul Klee, the German painter, also developed a distinctively individual abstract style with strong inspiration from, not just the works and masks of the Bwa culture of modern Burkina Faso, but also the Bambara fabrics of Mali while teaching at the Bauhaus.

Although other international artists of African descent artists tapped enormously from the rich exhaustive conceptual reserves of the traditional African art forms to create profound contemporary art works, artist like Yinka Shonibare, Sokari Douglas Camp, Seidou to mention a few, El Anatsui's recent collections, *The Gawu Series*, have stood out among these. This is, to a large extent, as a result of his unorthodox creative transposition of forms, like found tin cans, bottle tops into installations. With provoking metaphorical themes, Anatsui address issues such as Africa's attitude towards recycling of waste, corruption and greed of political leaders. The interesting aspects of these installations is how the artist takes full advantage of these artistic elements; that is, their peculiar motifs, forms and symbolic connotations inherent in African traditional textile designs which he transforms into relevant statements about the issues plaguing society today. The paper examines how Anatsui, working within modern art context, is able to, objectively, situate indigenous design motifs and pattern; borrowed from traditional African textiles, into his metal sculpture. As the paper discuss El Anatsui's sources of inspirations and the conceptual strength of his recent explorations, it also examines the gradual evolutionary executions of his earlier works in wood and clay and their diverse themes to the most recent works in the *Gawu Series* and many others.

Murrel (2008) observes that "in the contemporary postcolonial era, the influence of traditional African aesthetics and processes is so profoundly embedded in artistic practice that it is only rarely evoked as such...the increasing globalization of the art world, which now includes contemporary African artists such as Malian photographer Seydou Keita and El Anatsui, renders an increasingly moot to any term that assumes a distinct divide between Western and non-Western art." In other words, certain global views that once delineated African arts as primitive and mere decorative crafts have long been discarded. Having discovered the relevance of these African art forms, in recent times, many researches by art scholars are being initiated to investigate the full extent to which African art has influenced the modern arts. This form of investigation into the direct and indirect influences African traditional art has on the development of contemporary art in the continent is also one of the major objectives which this paper attempts to explore, from the perspective of Anatsui's recent art forms.

Anatsui's Artistic Inclinations

Emanuel Kwame Anatsui, or El Anatsui as he popularly called, was born in 1944. He started his venture into art as a young artist in Ghana, where he built sculpture primarily from wood (Binder,

2011). El Anatsui trained as a sculptor at the College of Art, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana (1965–68). He became one of the leading members of the Nsukka art school which he joined in 1975.

For a long time, especially during his early years as lecturer of sculpture at the department of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Anatsui continued using wood to express himself as a sculptor. However, he eventually explored other media as his art developed. Over three decades he has incorporated found metal and other media, infusing the work with references to personal, cultural, and global histories. In the richly illustrated exhibition catalogue, *When I Last Wrote to You about Africa*, with contributions by Kwame Anthony Appiah, a Laurance S. Rockefeller University professor of philosophy at Princeton University; Lisa Binder, an art curator at the Museum for African Art, New York; Olu Oguibe, a professor of art and art history at the University of Connecticut; Chika Okeke-Agulu, an Assistant professor of Art and Archaeology at Princeton University and Robert Storr, the Dean of the Yale School of Art. Here, the artists' creative odyssey and transitions is revealed in a fascinating visual narrative (Binder, 2011). These works range from his early wood trays that are references to the traditional symbols of the Akan people of Ghana; to early ceramics from the artist's Broken Pots series, driftwood assemblages that refer to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and wooden sculptures carved with a chainsaw and finally to the luminous metal wall-hangings of recent years, which have brought the artist international acclaim.

Review of Traditional African Textiles in Modern Art Context

Traditional African textile can be define or viewed from different perspective. There are schools of thought that would view some of these textiles as borrowed crafts. This opinion is often based on the fact that the medium itself, identified as African, were originally not produced by Africans; since the technology for creating these works, were not readily available in the continent before colonial era. As a matter of fact, the art of batik making actually originated from Indonesian, while other forms of prints and machine—woven fabrics were also produced by the Dutch and British for the African market. They became associated with Africa based on patronage, as well as the employment of the conception and representation of what African art was believed to be. The significance of Yinka Shonibare's textile collection is how it satirically diagnoses which he employed to demonstrate the ineptitude of the previous Western understanding and reviews of art from Africa, based on socio-cultural and historical context. His use of batik in this regard is deliberate and fundamental in accomplishing his satirical ideas. He believes that the marketing of batik and machine printed fabrics from manufacturer in Europe to the consumers in Africa, imposes certain assumption in the African mentality that these alien products were African. It is noteworthy that although the technology behind their production is alien or foreign, the concepts are still African nonetheless since they were inspired by African ideas and stylized art.

If recent identification of modern art, based on the artist' intent as a vital definition, then African textile could be comfortably described as contemporary art, because they actually represent traditional cultural expressions and consist of characteristic elements that define the traditional artistic heritage of different African communities. In the past, folklores and existence of common artistic patterns like motifs and styles by African communities provide unique identity, as well as portray

visual narrative of African unique traditions and life styles. The motifs and stylized approach to creativity among traditional African artists also provide evidences of aesthetic and functional inclinations; especially, since most of these designs were made for specific functions and societal purposes. Western description of these traditional textile works are often based on their subjective, prejudiced and limited understanding on African art and not based on how the indigenous perceived or defined their art.

Brief Review of Selected Installations from the Gawu Cloth Series Their Inclination towards African Traditional Textile Ideas

Some of the early sculptural works of El anatsui foreshadowed his inclination towards exploring African traditional textile patterns and ideas, wood sculptures like *"Sleeping Cloth I"* (1993) (see figure 1) and *"Kente Rhapsody"* (1993) for example, are actually among the wooden panel installations upon which the artist applied motifs borrowed from native cloths of Ghana. In the wooden sculpture, *Adinsibuli Stood Tall* is crafted from wooden mortars and adorned with linguistic symbols to represent the union of different cultures *"El Anatsui Stands Tall: One Artist's Love Letter to Africa,"* (2010). Still in another installation, *Chief in Zingliwu* (1999), which consists of driftwood (representing the warrior) wrapped in corrugated, metal sheets with maroon fabric peeping through the armour, a visual statement about his revealed vulnerability.

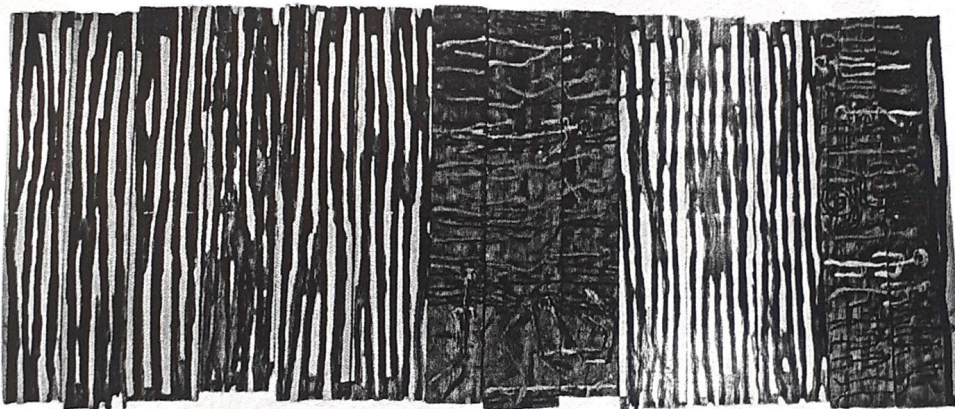


Fig 1. El Anatsui. 'Sleeping Cloth I'. Acrylic on torched tropical hardwood.
61cm x145cm.1993

At the Venice Biennale in 2007, El Anatsui exhibited two captivating installations of monumental sculptures, made from thousands of liquor-bottle tops stretched between columns, one of the few notable sculptural installations in the Gawu cloth series by the sculptor, (Okeke-Agulu, 2011). In these art works, Anatsui wove discarded aluminum tops from Nigerian liquor bottles together, creating large-scale sculptures called *gawu* ("metal" or "fashioned cloth" in Anatsui's native language) which display an interesting interplay of color, shape, and fluidity. The interesting aspect of Anatsui's approach is the dynamic exploration of the theme of recycling in the way materials are being reused. For instance, when liquor bottling firms reuse emptied bottles, the bottle caps and labels

are usually the waste products of such procedures. Reuse is also evident when people use the cylindrical cans of milk cans after the lids are discarded as small cooking pots (Cook, 2007). Cook also states that “the sculptures also embody his thoughts on capitalist consumption and the trash it creates in developing countries and the lack of ability, in some countries, to melt down empty containers for recycling”.

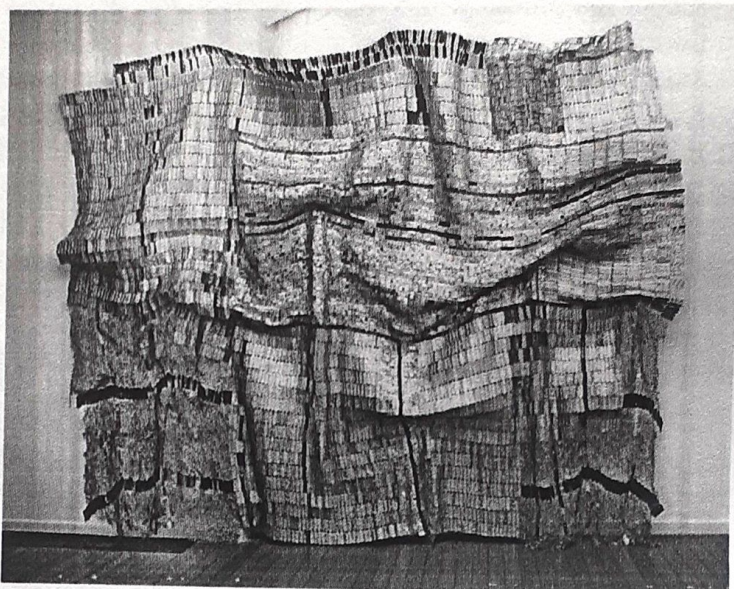


Fig. 2.: Dusasa I. From the Gawu series

The works in this exhibition received lot of commendation from art scholars, writers, historians all over the world, so much so that one writer, Doug Harvey, after observing one of the installations titled “*Crumbling wall*”, 2000, describes the show in the *LA Weekly* as “optically and emotionally stunning” (Harvey, 2007). Goldman (2007) at first glimpse of the work at the Seattle Art Museum, was so deceived by their fluidity from a distance that he mistook them for traditional African textile. A writer, in his description of the works, remarks that “El Anatsui is a genius; he uses castoff things to make a statement about castoff lives.” “El Anatsui Gawu”, (2007). Heather Mallick, reechoing the artists descriptive analogy of a parallel between cloths and monuments from the African and Western perspectives, in her article titled, “*Mallick: Life's shimmering jigsaw puzzle.*”, observes that there is also a connection between the shimmering rhythmic patterns of the installations and the rhythms and philosophies of present day contemporary social life styles (Mallick, 2010).

One of the works in the Gawu cloth series tagged “*Between Earth and Heaven*”, alludes to the kente prestige cloth from Ghana (a recent acquisition in the collection of the British Museum). Using folded and linked aluminum caps from liquor bottles, Anatsui echoes the rhythmic tension between warp- and weft-face stripes exemplified in the kente cloth. The works also share a palette of red, indigo and gold, although gold dominates in Anatsui’s shimmering metal “tapestry.”

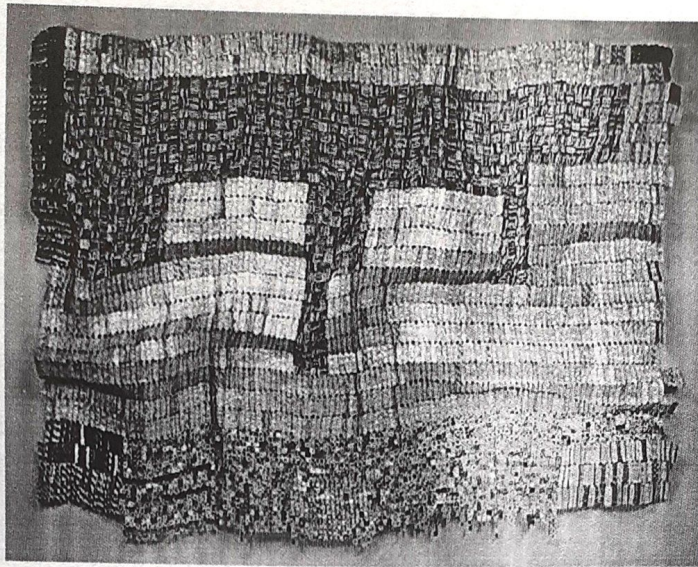


Fig.3: *Between Earth and Heaven*, El Anatsui, 2006,
Aluminum, copper and wire; 230x 320 cm,
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Conclusion

African traditional textiles, when analysed as a form of artistic expression, have unique features that many prominent western artists have derived inspirations from, to create outstanding masterpieces. One reason for this is because of the strong form of aesthetics and abstraction that characterizes those, features which long before modern art had been the natural way of creative expression in the social life of the indigenous. Although many would argue that textile itself was really not an African invention and as such much credit should not be given to the continent in terms of originality, on the contrary there are proven cases where many African fabrics were made locally without any western influences whatsoever. Also, even if the medium is foreign the creative designs are indigenous.

El Anatsui is one of the most influential artists in our generation that have been able to exploit the rich arsenal of conceptual possibilities inherent in the basic features that characterize traditional African textiles, as well as prove their prowess as a strong relevant voice in modern art with dynamic thematic capabilities of addressing contemporary issues in the world today when explored and employed into art concepts.

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