

AFRICAN ART AND SYMBOLISM, TRADITIONS AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

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Abstract

African Tradition is expressed through many different art forms, such as creative arts, music, dance, sculpture and beadwork. Oral tradition is very important in African culture, as it insures the passage of cultural practices from one generation to another. These traditions are deeply ingrained into the whole African culture. Music is a form of communication and it plays a functional role in African society. Songs accompany marriage, birth, rites of passage, hunting and even political activities. Music is often used in different African cultures to ward off evil spirits and to pay respects to good spirits, the dead and ancestors. The African masks that are used in dances have religious, ceremonial and functional origins. The artist who carves the mask will ceremonially purify himself and offer prayers to his ancestors for guidance before he begins the actual carving of the mask.

Introduction

Visual images, which can create a presence and stir emotions, have a natural magic that makes them the immediate ally of religion. Dance is an integral part of the African culture and it utilises symbolic gestures, masks, costumes, body painting and props to communicate. The dance movements can be simple or complex with intricate actions including fast rotation, ripples of the body and contraction and release. Dance is used to express emotion, whether joyful or sorrowful and it is not limited to just the dancers. Often spectators will be encouraged to join in the dance.

The African mask represents a spirit and it is believed that the spirit possesses the dancer as they wear the mask. The chosen dancer goes into a trance-like state in order to receive guidance and wisdom from the ancestors. The dancer will utter and moan the messages received and a wise man, who accompanies the dancer, will translate the message. Although music and dance are extremely important African traditions and are very common forms of communication, many African people express themselves in other art forms as well.

Almost every civilisation before the modern era was permeated with religion's sense of the mysterious, and many natural events received supernatural explanations. Since the arts have powerful resources to stimulate the imagination, from the start most societies seem to have used visual images to reach unseen forces to control their power or

solicit their help. Works of religious art such as the Iroquois mask and the statues of Aphrodite and Yakshi, make tangible the gods, goddesses, and spirits of a people, as well as their beliefs and hopes. This crucial role dates back to the very beginning of art, when Stone Age cave dwellers drew animals on the walls deep within the earth, example of such works can be found in the Hall of Bulls, at Lascaux, France, done to secure the well-being of the community by controlling, through art, the forces that were beyond human powers.

Many religious objects, now displayed for aesthetic pleasure, have been disconnected from the context where they once elicited spiritual forces. The striking Antelope Dance *Headdresses*, made by the Bamana people of Mali, Africa, and now on display in the Art Institute of Chicago, were actually worn in ritual dances to honour the heroic creator of agriculture, Chi Wara. The Chi Wara association teaches the cooperation of Bamana men and women in food production. However, only the men participate in the initiation rite in which the male and female Antelope dance headdresses are won.

Roy Sieber, (2006) an authority on African art, explains the meaning of the performance:

The animals carved on the headdresses are composites of different species of antelopes. To the Bamana, these forest animals, with their grace and strength, embody the ideal qualities of champion farmers. The male is the sun, and the female is the earth; the fawn

on her back symbolizes human beings. The fiber costumes worn with these headdresses represents water. As there must be a union of sun, earth, and water for plants to grow, there must be cooperation between men and women possessing the requisite physical and moral qualities to ensure that agricultural processes take place on schedule to ensure successful harvest.

All these works lose something when they are isolated in private collections and museums and appreciated merely as pieces of art. In fact, groups of people have protested that their sacred objects do not belong in such displays and have demanded that they be returned. Art and sculpture are prevalent in African culture, and the most common themes depict a couple, a woman and child, a male with a weapon or animal.

The Zulu people for instance, are well known for their intricate beadwork. The colour of each bead carries a specific meaning. The beads have been used to carry messages known as “ucu,” a Zulu term loosely translated as “love letters”. It is an African tradition for young girls to send a boy a beaded bracelet of different colours. The boy will court her for a while and at the appropriate time he will ask her the meaning of the beads. Couples are usually freestanding figures of the same size, representing the importance of “two as one.” A male and female couple in African art usually depicts strength and honour rather than love and intimacy, as it is uncommon for African men and women to publicly display their affection. A mother and child couple can represent “mother earth” and her people or the strong bond between mother and child. The male figure with a weapon or animal, represent honour to departed ancestors. African men are often honoured in warfare and there is a great emphasis on weaponry in African art, as it depicts survival and power. The exaggerations of the features of the face were intended to squeeze as much power as possible from the impersonation.

In his book, “*Experiencing Art Around Us*”, Thomas Buser, (2006), opined that African Art, like other arts around the world, usually served a function in society; divorced from its function, it loses a part of its meaning. African sculptors carved many masks meant to be worn in rituals in which the wearer could be empowered with the spirit of the god or person the mask expressed.

Art from Zimbabwe

Art from Zimbabwe dates back thousands of years to the San people who used the rock faces and caves across the country as a canvas for their unique and extraordinary art known as Bushmen paintings. Today this small nation has produced so many outstanding world-renowned artists, it would be impossible to list them all. But they include stone sculptures, wood carvers, landscape and wildlife painters, photographers, singers and dancers.

Philosophy

The Arts, as an expression of the people, reflects the society, the environment, and aspects of their culture, including the folklore and the pragmatic nature of the people. The Arts in traditional culture, music, dance, drama, fine and plastic arts, are usually integrated and are often performed and presented together at appropriate occasions, including festivals thus promoting the cultural heritage.

African Traditional Religion

African traditional religion is called '*African*' due to certain reasons. First, it is called 'African' because it is indigenous, aboriginal, foundational or handed down from generation to generation (Adasu, 1985). Again, the religion is part and parcel of African life. It was founded by the Africans and is handed down on from one generation to the other by word of mouth. Not only that, the religion has been in existence long ago before the advent of Islam and Christianity on the African continent.

Furthermore, it is only practiced by the Africans. The Africans are “incurably religious people”. The religion was founded by the Africans and it is practiced by the Africans on the African soil. It is a community affair and not limited to an individual. Religion is a part and parcel of life in traditional African society (Parinder, 1962).

Religion from a Philosophical Perspective

Kegley in Mbiti (1965), believed that the basic features of religion are beliefs about God or gods, which differ from one religion to another, feeling and action (i.e. worship), while philosophy dwells more on reflective thinking, religion involves action. Thus, religious ideas, doctrines, and beliefs are put into action.

Therefore, every believer knows that he/she is to live according to the tenets (teachings) of his/her religion. Religion is thus a very important source of morality. It upholds moral values such as patience, honesty, responsibility, loyalty, love, truthfulness, accountability, mercy, kindness, tolerance, etc. Religion and faith define a strong aspect of Nigeria's culture both in the traditional and modern-day fashions. "Nevertheless, while religion is not a new phenomenon in textual analysis, the ideological framework behind its presence is an indicator of a somewhat revelatory value in the identity construction and cosmology of the African" (Ebere 2010)

African mythology in Zimbabwe of the local Tonga tribe of the [Zambezi](#) Valley for instance, states that *Nyaminyami the River god* who lives in Lake Kariba is believed to be a serpent-like creature. He is said to be about three metres wide, but nobody dares to guess at his length. Legend has it that the *water stains red* when he swims past. The river god has been in hiding since the white men arrived in the country. According to African mythology he lived under a large rock close to the present-day Kariba dam wall. They called the rock Kariwa, the "trap" and hence the name of the lake, Kariba. The tonga people also believe that [Nyaminyami](#) is married and that the building of Kariba Dam wall would separate him from his wife, this would anger him greatly and the river god threatened the peace of the valley.



Fig. 1: *Nyaminyami the river go*

The concept of God in African communalism is revealed by the names given to Him in African

languages. Following the principle of 'agere sequitor esse' (acting according to being), God is conceived as an unfathomable being, a force that creates all others and beyond whom there is no other. On the other hand, he is personally involved in his creations, so that it is not outside of his reach; God is thus simultaneously transcendent and immanent" (Mbiti, 1969, Ebere 2010). This image of a being that is involved in the totality of African life is a force that recreates everything. Some of the epithets as outlined by Mbiti in some African languages which describe Africa's religious concept of God include the many definitions of His name: 'He who is of himself' (Zulu), 'the first who has always been in existence and would never die' (Bambuti), 'who has no father and is not a man' (Herero), 'the greatest of the great' (Ndebele), 'the great spirit' (Shona), 'the fatherless spirit' (Ashanti), 'marvel of marvels' (Bacongo), 'the unexplainable' (Ngombe), 'the unknown' (Massai), 'the "He" of the suns'. In Nigeria, the Yorubas have the following names for God: Ila/Baluba, 'mighty immovable rock that never dies', Olodumare - the Creator, Almighty, Supreme, Olorun Owner or Lord of heaven (Mbiti, 1969: 25).

One of the ways by which religious rituals communicate in African society is by maintaining cohesion in the culture. They connect participants to richer meanings and larger forces of their community. Even in representational models, rituals create solidarity in the form of subjective experiences of sharing the same meaningful world ...which is attained by participants through the condensed nature of symbols used therein. Traditional religion is one ritual that despite the influence of westernization and scientific developments in Africa, still holds meaningful implications in people's everyday life. Thus, from day break to evening, people have religious rituals with which they...

... communicate with their God or gods, deities and ancestors. Also from weeks to seasons, months to years, there are festivals and rituals both in private and in public situations which the African still celebrate in connection with the 'living dead' or those in the 'spirit world' (Ebere 2010).

Africans traditionally believe that “man is a product of a universe in which all energy and everything is interconnected, born out of a “Primal force” which has spread a little of itself into all it has generated” (Barlet, 1996). By this is meant that Africans believe in a world that is unified between all beings, whether material, spiritual or metaphysical.

The ritual of faith and religion in African traditional worship is seen among Africans in almost every religio-social ritual. It enhances their identity as a people and offer clues to understanding their cosmological framework and thought patterns. Since people believe that God is a higher spiritual force that is involved in their affairs as a community and individuals, they reach out to him through a pantheon of other gods and minor deities.

Traditional African Medicine

Traditional African medicine is a holistic discipline involving indigenous herbalism and African spirituality, typically involving diviners, midwives, and herbalists. Practitioners of traditional African medicine claim to be able to cure various and diverse conditions such as cancers, psychiatric disorders, high blood pressure, cholera, most venereal diseases, epilepsy, asthma, eczema, fever, anxiety, depression, benign prostatic hyperplasia, urinary tract infections, gout, and healing of wounds and burns.

Diagnosis is reached through spiritual means and a treatment is prescribed, usually consisting of an herbal remedy that has not only healing abilities, but symbolic and spiritual significance. Traditional African medicine, with its belief that illness is not derived from chance occurrences, but through spiritual or social imbalance, differs greatly from Western medicine, which is technically and analytically based. In the 21st century, modern pharmaceuticals and medical procedures remain inaccessible to large numbers of African people due to their relatively high cost and concentration of health centres in urban centers. In recent years, African medical practitioners have acknowledged that they have much to learn from traditional medical practice.

Medicinal Plants

Africa is endowed with many plants that can be used for medicinal purposes to which they have taken full advantage. In fact, out of the approximated 6,400 plant species used in tropical Africa, more than

4,000 are used as medicinal plants. Medicinal plants are used in the treatments of many diseases and illnesses, the uses and effects of which are of growing interest to Western societies. Not only are plants used and chosen for their healing abilities, but they also often have symbolic and spiritual significance. For example, leaves, seeds, and twigs that are white, black and red are seen as especially symbolic or magical and possess special properties.

Spirituality

Some healers may employ the use of charms, incantations, and the casting of spells in their treatments. The dualistic nature of traditional African medicine between the body and soul, matter, and spirit and their interactions with one another are also seen as a form of magic. Onwuanibe (1979), gives one form of magic the name “*Extra-Sensory-Projection*.” This is the belief among the Ibos of Nigeria that medicine men can implant something into a person from a distance to inflict sickness on them. This is referred to by the Ibos as *egba ogwu*. To remove the malignant object, the intervention of a second medicine man is typically required, who then removes it by making an incision in the patient. *Egba ogwu* involves psychokinetic processes. Another form of magic used by these practitioners, which is more widely known, is sympathetic magic, in which a model is made of the victim. Actions performed on the model are transferred to the victim, in a manner similar to the familiar voodoo doll. “In cases where spirits of deceased relatives trouble the living and cause illness, medicine men prescribe remedies, often in the form of propitiatory sacrifice, in order to put them to rest so that they will no longer trouble the living, especially children. Using charms and amulets to cure diseases and illnesses is an uncertain and clouded practice that requires more scientific investigation.

Conclusion

Finally, in African cultures, the act of healing is considered a religious act. Therefore, the healing process often attempts to appeal to God because it is ultimately God who can not only inflict sickness, but provide a cure. Africans have a religious world view which makes them aware of the feasibility of divine or spirit intervention in healing with many healers referring to the supreme God as the source of their medical powers.

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