Fleeting Identities: African Worship Objects and or African Art?

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Abstract

The present study grapples with the emerging status and narratives of African art objects as victims of contemporary development in museums and private collections. This status has overshadowed the original intention of the producer cultures. The study does not in any way condemn the developments occurring to Africa art, as it recognises that culture would always evolve, however, it bothers about the insincerity of the museum in displaying the objects; almost totally out of context. The study therefore highlights and demonstrate in practical sense, the salient features of African art as it obtains in reality as a corrective measure for museum display. The study employs the theory of dividuation in its investigation, the theory of dividuation aptly applies to how the technologies and inventions of our becoming world, of which the museum is an example, have defined us and our culture more than we imagine. In applying the theory here, the study identifies the museum as a Western invention that that projects African art our contemporary world. This new trend was occasioned by the need for African Art to adapt to the culture of the people and geography to which it has been transmitted. The paper concludes that in this new context African art has taken on new identities as defined by the galleries and museums - institutions which are decidedly invention of Western culture and our "becoming world".

Introduction

The emerging status and narratives of African art objects as objects for the self, rather than objects for communal existence and perpetuity is a development of concern. This new trend was occasioned by the need for African Art to adapt to the culture of the people and geography to which it has been transmitted. In the new context occasioned by our "becoming world," African art has become a subject in the galleries and museums - an institution which is decidedly an invention of the Western culture. The appearance of African art objects in these new showcases forcibly transformed them into an "art to look at". The present study, employed the theory of dividuation, points at the emerging status and

narratives of African art objects in museums, but importantly highlights the germane features that in reality defines African art, not captured by the museum and equally beyond the museum. According to Ott (2018) dividuation envisions human participation and relatedness within a world of numerous man-made devices that impinge on our daily living and define us as well as our culture much more than we imagined. The theory states that our lives and cultures are more defined by the bio(techno)logical and socio(techno)logical inventions in our modern world. In the same vein, the present study grapples the problem of the redefinition of African art by the Western invention called the Museum.

The discussion in this paper stemmed out of the way African art objects are displayed in the museums with no indication of their primary status as liturgical objects. I observed that traditional African art objects in the museums have been showcased in the same manner with Western art-type. It must be noted that objects referred to as African art are not 'art' in the Western sense of the word. In the museums that I visited, just like their counterparts all over the world, African Art objects have been showcased as 'art to look at,' rather than objects in the service of religion. This new status emerged as a result of the commodification of African art objects and the need to display them in the same way (accepted fashion) as Western art. This situation is very similar to Ott quoting Okwui Enzewor on the globalised standards for the artistic styles and tendencies from all over the world (Ott 2018: 229). She describes the situation where artists all over the world aspire to paint or sculpt in a particular manner because the adoption of Western standards is fast becoming a new normal in the arts. Art has stopped being regional and a thing of cultural reflection and it is now targeted at fulfilling the standards set by collectors, especially from Europe and America. In a similar vein, the presentation of African art in collections is fast towing a West-dictated exhibition orientation.

African Art are Insignia of Office

My argument in the present paper is to differentiate premised on the fact that the majority of the objects tagged African art are concomitant liturgical objects of worship in the services of African religions, and their religion function supersedes any other thing they may superficially appear to be; their artistic characteristic is a good an example. First, I put forward that the majority of these objects are not

'art,' but instruments in the hands of traditional religion mediums, which concurrently serve as icons of the religion they represent and insignia of the offices of the various priests in the service of such religion (Pogoson and Akande 2010: 53). To buttress my point, I will like to cite the experience I had. I witnessed the performance of the *ẹlégùn* (Ṣàngó priest) at the Ṣàngó festival at the palace of the Alaafin of Òyọ́ in late 2019, when the *ẹlégùn* was possessed by the spirit of Ṣàngó, he became wild and exhibited the characters associated with Ṣàngó. He emitted smoke and fire from his mouth and ran wildly around brandishing the *osé* (plate 1),[1] the emblematic Ṣàngó dance-wand (Akande 2019:68). At that point, it is important to note that the *osé,* usually confused as art from the Euro-Western perspective, became a spiritual instrument in the hand of a 'spirit being (*ẹlégùn*).' An observer of the same event from another clime may fail to see the *osé* as part and parcel of the transformation process which turned the *ẹlégùn* from an ordinary being into a religion medium that spits smoke and fire. The *osé* is an essential ingredient in the transformation, ensuring a successful Ṣàngó performance. I am greatly concerned by the following question: how can the *osé* be displayed in a museum in a show-case? This certainly will not reflect its essence and encapsulate its powers to re-enact the spirit of Ṣàngó.

[1] *Osé* Ṣàngó is the Ṣàngó dance wand; it is usually carved with wood. It has three sections, the top section depicts a two faced axe. The middle section may bear figurative or abstract forms while the last section is the handle with which the *ẹlégùn* holds the wand.



PLATE 1
Ẹlégùn Ṣàngó holding the *osé.*
Photo Collection of Akewusola Ibrahim Bolaji, the official photographer to the Alaafin of Òyó.
Photo Credit: Akewusola Ibrahim Bolaji

African Art are Sacred and not for Public Exhibition

Equally important is the fact that some African art objects in their original context are not meant for public perusal. It is shocking, except for the fact that it has become a new-norm, to observe the *èḳú egúngún* (*egúngún* regalia) (plate 2) on display in museums or galleries. The *èḳú egúngún* in its original context is never on display for public viewing... never! It only comes to public glare when worn by the human agent in worship or performance. Another object *which* I find its public showing questionable is the *orò*[2] bull-roarer. Indeed, it is a taboo for women to see *orò* objects or to have knowledge of their operations.

[2] *Orò* is the Yorùbá cult that is saddled with the task of carrying out militant tasks for the executive arm of traditional Yorùbá government. They were saddled with the task of brutal



PLATE 2

Èkú egúngún, Mixed Media, 179cm x 111cm, Aworilewo Museum, Collection of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts in the Department of African Cultural Studies, Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), Ile-Ife, Nigeria

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Photo Credit: Yinka Okunade (OMAKID), OAU, Ile-Ife

Many of the so-displayed African art objects in museums can arguably be considered inauthentic. This is because, in Yorùbá belief, their public appearance is considered a breach of *awo* (secrecy), an important obligatory reverence that is essential to their potency. Secrecy also adds enchantment to the objects, making

killings, aggressive arrests and the likes. The bull-roarer is the flat wooden object used to produce a shrieking sound used by members of the orò cult to warn people of the impending presence of *orò*.

them in what Rudolf Otto describes as *mysterium tremendum et fascinan* (Otto 1917). A corroborative experience of the secrecy in African art is expressed by Vogel (1997: 36) when she explained her shock when she found out that among the Baule, where she had at that time lived at one time, and some art objects are not seen or discussed at all. It took her some time to observe such arts. She discussed such objects like the *mamla* ancestral figures among the people; these art objects are usually kept and venerated in the bush.

African Art Objects are Spiritual Objects

Another feature of African art that is negatively affected by the ongoing dividuation of African art in galleries and museums is the failure to recognise their characteristic encapsulation of the material and the spirit. In Africa, it is believed that art objects can only retain their essence, potency and, consequently, their authenticity only when the material (the plastic) continue to be inhabited by the spirits of whichever deities for which they were made and were initially invoked into them. Basil (1966: 153) warns that without the presence of the initially invoked spirit, a piece of sculpture had little *or no* value [my emphasis]. He explains that in traditional African communities, when a piece is heavily cracked and weak, it is discarded and another piece is carved in its place. When the new ones are carved, an apposite spirit is invoked into it. Yet to keep the spirit continually inside the art piece, constant and consistent propitiation is observed. All of these protocols are impracticable when it comes to African arts in private collections.

African Art's Spiritual Purpose Supersede their Archetypal Form

At this point, I wish to categorically mention, from practical knowledge, that the artistic beauty or the conformity of African art objects with their archetypal counterparts and age cannot be used as determinant factors for their authenticity. However, these are some of the significant standards employed by collectors to determine what African art stuffs to acquire. I wish to submit that the most important elements in the determination of the authenticity of the objects are their consistent and continuous reverence and propitiation. Equally important is their application in religious worship for the purpose which the object was made. Indeed, their conformity with archetypal models may, on occasions, be overlooked. If a worship object (African art) that is not in conformity with its archetypal counterparts is found outside its context of use (such as the museum),

without a label, it may be difficult to tell what the object is. Therefore, an object can easily be misinterpreted outside the context of usage. I wish to cite an example of an *ère ìbejì* that I came across in Ife-Ana, a Yorùbá community in the Atakpame region of Togo. The said *ère ìbejì* (plate 3) bears not characteristic archetypal similitude with its conventional counterparts (plate 4) but was found in the worship of *ìbejì.* Who dares negotiate or question the authenticity of the Ife-Ana *ère ìbejì*? Its atypical features are results of extemporisation occasioned by an urgent need in 'diasporic' space. Unfortunately, however, such objects like the *ère ìbejì* from Atakpame are unlikely to be accepted by collectors as *ère ìbejì*, because their features do not succumb to the market standards arising from the need for their commodification.

I will like to discuss, briefly, the *ère ìbejì* mentioned above. Typical *ère ìbejì* (plate 3) have general features; these are that the head is proportionally overblown in comparison with the torso, and detailed rendition is given to the head and its frontal parts, the features of the head are bold, the eyes are protruding and the nose is pointed. The arms are mostly at the sides of the body, but sometimes they extend out from the thighs or are left dangling. In some cases, the wrist and waist of the figures are bedecked with cowries, beads or coins. Sometimes the images are clothed with small beaded or fabric jackets. The peculiarities of the male figure include the penis standing erect over the scrotum, while that of the female include their usual depiction of elaborate coiffure, exterior vagina lobe parting rendered obvious and the breasts pointed. Although the highlighted features are accepted canons among Yorùbá wood-carvers and, consequently, collectors, to hold the standard unflinchingly is to err.

Contrary to the archetypal standards of *ère ìbejì* as demonstrated in plate 3, the Ife-Ana *ère ìbejì* has radically different features from the 'norm.' The Ife-Ana *ère ìbejì* is carved with draperies on. It has a cap carved on its head; the cap appears like the traditional Yorùbá *gòḅì* type of cap. The head is proportionally bigger than the body, as usually found in Yorùbá *ère ibeji* and all other human figures. The facial features are round and robust, unlike the usual angularity that characterises Yorùbá *ère ìbejì.* On the torso, the figure is carved wearing a clothing style that looks very much like a *dashiki*. Around the neck and ankles are beads. In considering the marked difference between the conventional *ère ìbejì* and the *ère*

ìbejì from Ife-Ana, I wish to observe that in the face of the emerging dividuation parameters of African art objects, such objects as the Ife-Ana *ère ìbejì* may be confused outside their context of application, and at some points, it may not be accepted as an authentic *ìbejì* figure.



PLATE 3
Ère Ìbejì from Ife-Ana
Photo Credit: Abiodun Akande



PLATE 4
Typical Yorùbá *Ère Ìbejì* figures
Photo Credit: Abiodun Akande

My argument highlights the variances that the ongoing dividuation of African art objects in private collections and museums can create. The emerging new presentations, contextualisation, authentication criteria, narratives and, more devastating, the commodification of African art have inflicted misperception on statuses of the objects. My position, therefore, because of the highlighted unethical practices of the museum against African art objects, queries the audacity of the museum, which in itself is arguably a western invention (indeed an art) to hold another form of art. Agreed that dividuation is inevitable, however, humans must

be conscious of its oddities to pervert meanings and erode the essence in some areas of endeavour.

Conclusion

This paper is a bilateral application of dividuation theory to African art objects and ways of life. It observes that emerging trends have occasioned the commodification of African art objects by museums and private collectors; trends that forcibly remove African art from its service to religions - the very function that authenticates the object to an 'art to look at' (decorative) on the walls of museums and galleries. This paper also queries the unrestricted display of some African art objects, which in their original context are not meant for public viewing. It then submits that the discontinuation of the veneration of the objects has let out the spirit in them and that their public display is a plausible excuse for the disqualification of their genuineness. Wistfully, the paper calls to question the legitimacy of these museums - unarguably a Western installation art form by its very nature - to hold African art objects. This check on the ongoing dividuation on African art objects in museums and private collection shows the possible misrepresentational downtrends that may in the far future posed by dividuations. This may, from an angle, be viewed as development, influence, dynamism, growth and/or evolvement. But from another angle, it can be viewed as interference.

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