

The Role of Art in Traditional Cultural Patterns

Gyegwe, Aonover Gabriel¹ Anaso, Kenechi¹ Haruna, Charles²
1. Department of Fine Arts, University of Maiduguri, BornoState. Nigeria
2. Department of Art and Design, Kogi State Poytechnic, Lokoja, Nigeria

Abstract

The paper explores the various ways which art impacts on the culture with focus on patterns in Nigeria. Through a historical overview, the subject brings to fore various art forms and media including Painting and drawing as evident in both traditional and the contemporary. In the final analysis, art finds itself positioned in the service of culture.

Introduction

In primordial times, the subject of art was first broached on cave walls with examples in Spain, North Africa and other parts of Africa as shown by Kleiner (2011). Examples of such art extends beyond painting examples sighted on cave walls in Tassili in Africa, Lascaux in France and even Beji in Bauchi, Nigeria. They include sculptures, textile designs, ceramics, body adornments, architecture and other postmodern art expressions in contemporary times.

Culture on the other hand has been described as the totality of a people's way of life. Benedict (1946) reasons that; "a culture, like an individual, is a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action". (1934, 46) it is this consistency in collective thought and actions of a group of people that translates into culture, however, its change is inevitable with time. It therefore brings to fore the patterns of culture which can be seen in light of values, beliefs, taboos, determination, relativism, rituals, religion among others.

The direction of this paper therefore is to explore the various roles of art in traditional cultural patterns, in view of the conflating characteristics of art, culture and anthropology. The following questions are therefore asked. How does art effect on traditional cultural patterns? Is art important in a people's culture? What is the role of art in traditional cultural patterns?

The following objectives were also set; to identify some cultural patterns in Nigeria, to show how both contemporary and traditional art have effected on cultural pattern. Highlight the benefits of art to cultural patterns.

The methodology involved a qualitative approach. Data was mostly gathered through secondary sources of books, and the internet and primary sources of paintings or artworks that expressed cultural pattern. A subjective approach to analysis was borrowed in the analysis of gathered data, as supported by Sambo (2008).

Over the years, the subject of culture has been variously defined by various scholars. In their definitions of culture, it is evident that the structure or patterns of culture can be extracted. The definition of culture by Baldwin et al (1999) states that culture "proliferate not only within anthropology... but also across the social sciences and humanities", thus it is possible to see culture from different perspectives with a unity of concept.

Jenks (2003, p.12) in Baldwin (ibid) defines culture as "whole way of life", similarly, Victor Barnouw (1973) defined culture as "a way of life of a group of people, the configuration of all the more or less stereotyped patterns which are handed from one generation to the next through the means of language and imitation". "It involves the forms through which people make sense of their lives", (Rosaldo, 1989 p. 26). The Union of International Association (1986) provided this definition: "The complex whole of the system of concepts and usage, organization, skills, and instruments by means of which mankind deal with physical, biological, and human nature in satisfaction of its needs". Also, Benedict (1958) defined culture as a pattern of thought and action, of which the total is "more than the sum of their traits" (p. 47). While there are several definitions of culture that cuts across disciplines, the earliest definition by Edward 'B' Taylor (1871) in O'neil (2006) provides that; culture, or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". Baldwin (ibid) further notes the definition by Samora and Porter (1991) as the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relation, concepts of the universe, and material objects and Possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group Striving. (p. 5)

Furthermore, Geert Hofstede, again in Baldwin (ibid) referred to culture as a "collective [program] of the mind". Cronk (1999, p. 12) states that, "culture is neither the act of baking a cake nor the cake itself but the recipe, the socially transmitted information that tells a person to bake a cake". Culture therefore is ingrained in a group, even though it is susceptible to change.

From the various definitions of culture presented so far, it is possible to discern the various patterns of

culture as they can be peculiar to particular or different groups. Cronk's definition puts it as the "recipe", which can be understood as those patterns upon which a culture is developed. Therefore, the pattern of culture can be enumerated to include the following; morality, values, art, motives, emotions, order, religion, custom or belief, attitude and a host of others that may be subsumed under certain headings.

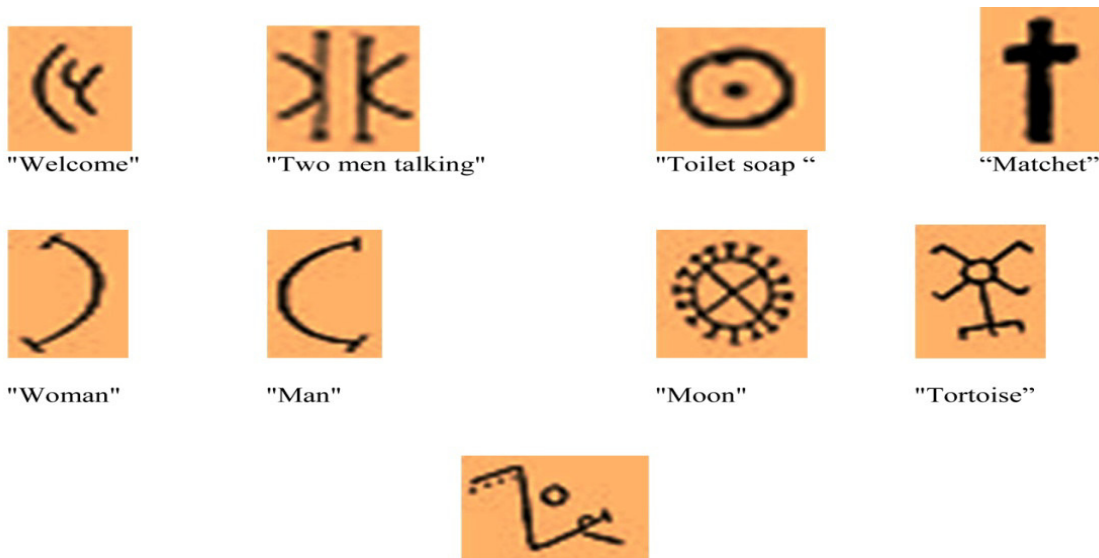
Art in culture

The term art has a broad sense that may sometimes be confusing as it embraces so many areas of human endeavour. It is no wonder that a common cliché of people about art is that; "Art is life". This implies that art is in everything. For example, art is seen in the way people eat, dance, dress, cultivate and learn. It is indeed difficult to separate art from culture as they conflate. The anthropologist sees art as, human endeavour and includes music dance, sculpture, painting, drawing, stitchery, weaving, poetry, wood carving, and others. a medium of expression where the individual and culture came together. In general understanding, the artist would define art as the expression of his feelings, emotions, through the use of an artistic medium which may be paint, clay, pencil, dance, music and drama. The two perspectives of definitions above, share an affinity.

The meaning of "Art is the product of creative human activity in which materials are shaped or selected to convey an idea, emotion or visually interesting form. The word art can refer to the visual arts, including painting, sculpture architecture, photography, decorative arts, crafts and other visual works that combine materials or forms". The definition of art by Barnes (2008) further includes art like dance, music and drama.

While art has been defined to mean a range of human activities meant for emotional expression, or aesthetic satisfaction, culture on the other hand is the generality of a people's way of life which makes art inseparable from culture. In a sense, it is art that becomes the medium through which culture is expressed. The role art plays in traditional cultural pattern can be seen in the following; communication, religion and worship, teaching of morals, historical record or documentation, maintenance of law and order, royalty, economics, among others.

Communication: among the Ekoi ethnic group who are found in the eastern Nigeria, the use of traditional graphical symbols plays a vital role to communicate. The Ekoi society developed the Nsibidi traditional graphical system shown in Plate 1 that dates to antiquity. The symbols are artistic and communicate effectively among the men of the society. Through the system, laws are defined and interpreted, economic transactions are carried out, marriages are brokered, as a result, the culture of the people revolves around their ability to communicate effectively.



Nsibidi Writing

Plate 1

Title: Nsibidi Writing

Source: Isichei, Elizabeth Allo (1997). *A history of African societies to 1870*. Nsibidi: Cambridge University Press. p. 357. ISBN 0-521-45599-5.

While these communication systems going out of use, contemporary artists are helping to conserve them through paintings. One of such example of artist is Ekpuk Victor. Gyegwe (2014) states that; Ekpuk uses

the Nsibidi to create ‘wailing woman’, a painting generated with the computer in Plate 2.



Plate:	2
Title:	Wailing Woman
Artist:	Victor Ekpuk
Medium:	Computer
Year:	2009
Source:	Victor Ekpuk

This, in another dimension, brings to fore the role of art in protecting and conserving traditional cultural pattern.

Still another aspect of communication that art impact on is in the area of disseminating information. For instance, in traditional African society, the use of the town crier was useful in how the society was informed about upcoming events, meetings at the village square, or palace, among others. An important instrument used was the gong. The gong was carried by the town crier and beaten or sounded to get the attention of every one before passing the message. In other instances, the mere sounding of a drum was indicative of a particular event. In the Tiv traditional system, a drumming of the ‘Iu’ [wooden drum] is indicative of the death of an old woman while the mere sound of the ‘ndyer’ [hollowed tree drum] was and still is a sign of the death of an old and important man. It also signifies an important event demanding people’s presence. In the instances stated above, the musical objects are all produced by the traditional artist, their social role in mass mobilization accords them their value in the traditional culture of Africa as exemplified in the Igbo culture by the gong and ‘Iu’ and ‘ndyer’ by the Tiv.

Another role of art can be seen in body enhancement. Art promotes beauty of individual in the society, during marriage ceremonies; women decorate their body with local dyes or colours. The hands and feet especially are absolutely decorated with appealing patterns. The designs are usually applied on the bride and friends and well-wishers. The place of beauty in the society cannot be wished away as many young girls have attracted their husbands through appealing and attractive body make-up and other body enhancements.

Furthermore, the desire of man to connect with his creator is activated and mediated through sculptural objects. Religion and worship thus open another avenue through which art plays a role in traditional cultural patterns. Eyo (1977) note that; through carved images, the African appease malevolent spirits. Similarly in the modern churches especially in the Catholic and other orthodox churches there is an attempt to mix Christianity with the host culture. The music or hymns are expressed through drums and other musical instruments which are products of the artist.

Moreover, a people’s cultural heritage is preserved by art. Art plays this important role through the various art objects that represents the value of such a culture.

An example is the traditional music and dances that are performed, such dances like the swange or ikyo dance among the Tiv ethnic group make use of the ‘angeer’ as the traditional costume. As a result, the ‘angeer’ is promoted as a cultural artifact which promotes the Tiv group. The black and white striped ‘angeer’ textile costume also reechoes history as Gyegwe (2011) related the stripes to the mythological green snake that rescued the Tiv and his sons from their enemies.

Art also plays an important role in agriculture. The farm implements like hoe, cutlasses, and baskets among others are carved by the blacksmith and weaver respectively which aid in the cultivation of crops.

Furthermore, art plays an important role in defining royalty. The king's regalia are art works produced by specialized artists who are usually in the employ of the king, Benin court art is an example. The king's beads, head gears and the entire objects that define his paraphernalia are works of art. As a role, such cloths or regalia are an exclusive preserve of the king. The emir of Zazau's costumes are peculiar to him so also the various traditional rulers in traditional cultures.

Festivals in traditional cultures are almost revered and also spiritually charged. The common art objects that feature in festivals are masks, raffia weaving among other objects. The mask plays important role in the African belief system. The mask could represent the spirit of the ancestors. In other cases, they are spiritually inclined to healings, as Leuzinger (1976) state that, 'the medicine men wear the mask and hair dress at burial or the sick members of the society. The role of the mask in ensuring social control among others is captured by Leuzinger (ibid p12) which states that; " there is a whole hierarchy of mask extending from the highest great spirit mask which appears only in the decisive moments of the life of the tribe, though smaller masks which may act, for example, as judges, peace makers debt collectors, policemen, nocturnal expellers of witches, the soul of the dead or personal protective spirits, right down to the masks which act as entertaining buffoons, ... without wholly abandoning the weirdness of the whole world".

Thus the mask have important sociological, political and psychological functions, not the least of which is that they reduce peoples tension from time to time and relieve their fear.

Foods eaten by an ethnic group are part of their culture, which art also plays a role. For instance, pounded yam is a common delicacy among Nigerian ethnic groups. To produce pounded yam, the mortar and pestle are used to pound the yam. It is the carver who also produces or carves the mortar and pestle with which the yam is pounded. This again portrays the role of art in traditional cultural pattern.

Furthermore, the woven thatch roof on huts is an artistic expression. Again art plays a role in providing shelter. Among the Tiv ethnic group for instance, the thatch mud houses are very important as they form the hamlet that dot all over the communities. The polygamous nature of a Tiv man in the remote times encouraged him to build a hut for each of his several wives and concubines which formed a hamlet. Similarly, many ethnic groups have developed and perfected the craft of weaving thatch, such that its role is not belittled.

Conclusion

The cliché that 'Art is life', is true in light of the far reaching role that art plays in the culture of a people. Among the several roles highlighted are:

Communication: with regards to the use of symbols as evidenced among the south eastern people in Nigeria. The use of the gong, drum is among the objects of art that help in communication. In textile, certain cloths are simply an exclusive preserve of the royalty. These kinds of cloths help to define the paraphernalia of the wearer. Farm implements like hoes, cutlasses, baskets among others play an important role in the cultivation of the farm, or agriculture which is an indispensable culture of a people. Similarly, the boats or canoes used in fishing are art works produced by carvers. The role of art in propagating religion was also discussed as well as the role of masks in maintaining social control, entertaining, healing among others. Finally, art is used to teach morals and pass down oral tradition as seen in folktales, drama and songs which constitute performance art.

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