

Exploration of Artistic and Cultural Links between Ancient Egypt and Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

Despite being geographically located in Africa and the fact that the Egyptians themselves referred to their country as 'Kemet', meaning 'black land', as evident in inscriptions and documentation found by ancient archaeologists in Egypt (World Encyclopedia, 2005), Egypt has often been excluded by European art historians in discussions on the history, culture, and art of the African continent. Furthermore, Egypt is often erroneously identified as the root of European art history. However, as Jefferson (1973) rightly observed, the question of Egyptian influence on Africa or Africa on Egypt cannot be easily dismissed, as they must have shared or borrowed certain cultural elements. This paper provides a cursory examination of ancient Egyptian art forms and the underlying cultural philosophies to highlight the artistic and cultural exchange between Egypt and other African countries. Ancient Egyptian arts refer to the art created and utilised in Egypt from 3000 BC to the 3rd century AD, during which there was relatively little strong outside influence despite Egypt's early exposure to external influences. This paper uses secondary sources to establish the cultural and artistic similarities between Egypt and other African nations. It concludes that Egyptian art forms are not European in style and form, as they bear similarities with many African arts in form, content, symbolism, and philosophy.

Keywords: Affinity, Ancient Egypt, Art Forms, Culture, Philosophy, Sub-Saharan Africa

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1. Introduction

Africa has a great diversity of art forms and rich cultural, historical, and aesthetic significance. Egypt, a country in the northwestern part of the continent, is not only geographically African but also artistically and culturally linked with forms from other African countries since its inception. Ancient Egypt was a nation of great prosperity economically, politically, culturally, and artistically, as they lacked neither labour, workable materials, nor financial resources. Ancient Egypt was thus a border state of tremendous power and respect among neighbours, also credited with advancing many new technologies worldwide. These include writing, mathematics, architecture, pharmacy, mummification (embalming), medicine and surgery. It is also credited with inventing the first calendar, astronomy and literature (the earliest example of fairy tales) (Microsoft Encarta, 2009). This impressive cultural legacy has made Ancient Egypt a timeless source of fascination, captivating cultures worldwide.

The ancient Egyptian arts encompass a vast array of creative expressions produced in Egypt from approximately 3,000 B.C. to the 3rd century A.D. This period, spanning over three millennia, was characterised by a relatively isolated cultural development despite Egypt's early exposure to external influences. As a result, ancient Egyptian art forms retained a distinctiveness and continuity, shaped primarily by indigenous traditions, values, and beliefs.

2. Raison D'être for Omission of Egypt in Discussions on Africa

The deliberate omission of Egypt is due to the European's inapt perception of Africa as a place of barbaric cultural practices, as well as the adverse application of Charles Darwin's theory of biological evolution and similar theories of social evolution that wrongly sanction that African societies represented a lower level of humanity. Early European writers and researchers, having consequently erroneously classified Africans as primitive and inferior beings, did not expect that people so labelled were capable of anything as spectacular as Egyptian sophistication (Ali, 1997; Mudimbe, 1990).

However, a prolific tradition of artistry, culminating in rich and diversified artistic skills, is not new to Africa. This is evident in the gorgeous artistic traditions of the Ife, Benin, and Nok in Nigeria, the Ashanti in Ghana, and the Bambara and Dogon in Mali, among others within the African geographical zone. By the 15th century, the Ashanti of the Gold Coast (now Ghana), the Yoruba of Nigeria, the Hausa Empire, and the Songhai possessed highly organised and complex artistic traditions long before their territories came under British political and military

control. However, it is typical for Europeans to attribute any extraordinarily sophisticated ideas or techniques among Black Africans to European influence or presence, perpetuating the notion of racial superiority (Willett, 1971).

Secondly, the Egyptians' ability to document events in writing and two-dimensional forms made it difficult to categorise them as primitive. This is because European scholars traditionally associated primitive cultures with a lack of historical records and low levels of technical achievement (Thompson, 1973). Similarly, cultures that employed two-dimensional art forms were deemed superior to those that solely produced sculptures in the round, which were consequently regarded as inferior (*ibid*). Consequently, the Egyptian paintings and relief sculptures significantly elevated their cultural standing in this regard.

The remarkable technological inventions of Egypt and its preeminence in many technological fields have been complicated for Europeans to comprehend, making it challenging to categorise Egypt alongside Africa, a continent often misclassified as primitive. However, this unfairness can also be attributed to the fact that early researchers were predominantly European, leaving them with the biased option of forcibly associating their continent, Europe, with Egypt, a nation revered by many. This has led to numerous research studies that exclude Egypt from Africa and instead seek to establish Egypt as the root of European art history.

While it is undeniable that Egypt and Europe exerted artistic influence on each other, it is unacceptable to deny that Egypt must have interacted with its African neighbours, influencing and being influenced by them, before extending its influence on Asian and European cultures. Historical records confirm that Egypt was ruled by Nubia from 770-657 BC and by Libyans between 945-712 BC (Microsoft Encarta, 2009), making the influence of African art on Egyptian art inevitable.

3. Shreds of Evidence from the Historical Finds of Egypt

The artistic findings on rock engravings and illustrative decorations on pottery from ancient Egypt (depicting oared boats and water plants, Fig. 1) provide evidence that, prior to the desiccation of North Africa, the Sahara was a lush grassland inhabited by large populations of fishermen, hunters, and herdsman. The subsequent hostility of the desert environment led to these populations' dispersal, which profoundly impacted the emergence of ancient Kemet (Egypt). Similarly, numerous studies indicate that human beings originated from Africa, where hunter-gathering technology also evolved. Archaeological evidence suggests hunters inhabited Egypt over 250,000 years ago when the region was still a fertile grassland (*ibid*). The Paleolithic period (25,000 BC) brought climatic changes that transformed Egypt into a desert, likely forcing populations to migrate southward in search of water and arable land. However, the desertification of Egypt was temporarily halted by rainfall, which enabled communities of farmers to settle in the Nile Delta of Egypt. According to Talbot (1926), migrations of people from Egypt were also triggered by events such as the Nubian War of 1870 and the conquest of Egypt by the Hyksos.

4. The Historical Development of the Egyptian Arts and Affinity with other African Cultures

The Early Dynastic period was marked by artistic experimentation, paving the way for developing Egypt's distinctive artistic and religious conventions. The art of this period, as evident in archaeological excavations, consisted mainly of painted pottery featuring elaborate animal and basket motifs, which bear similarities to ancient African works (Figs 2 and 3). Various standing and seated sculptures were created, adhering strictly to the principles of frontality, symmetry, and reduced movement, akin to African artistic traditions. In a manner consistent with African arts, Egyptian paintings complemented sculptures, with tombs adorned with scenes of everyday life, believed to be continued by the deceased for eternity.



Fig. 1: Affinity of early Egyptian pot with African style



Fig. 2: Affinity of another pot with African basketry design

5. Similarities between Egyptian Belief Systems and Cultural Practices and those of other African Regions

Egyptian art encompasses numerous distinctly African elements regarding usage, functions, and materials. A comparative study of African monarchical traditions reveals a widespread attribution of legendary origins to the East (Denyer, 1978). It is, therefore, not surprising that numerous cultural practices and belief systems are shared, with many values evident in their art forms, which serve as a means of documenting events and cultural values since primordial times.

5.1. Notable Areas of Egyptian Shared Cultures with African Arts and Architecture

The Egyptians believed in the divine authority of the Pharaoh and attributed extraordinary powers to paramount kings, who were not only earthly representatives of gods but also gods themselves. This concept is comparable to practices in many African societies, such as Benin, Bamileke, Ashanti, Igbo, Fon, and Yoruba cultures. The cultural significance of holding horns as a symbol of authority, observed in Egyptian statues of Pharaohs (Fig. 3), is similar to the ceremonial appearance of the Oni of Ife and the depictions in Ife bronzes from Yoruba, Nigeria (Fig. 4), as well as the sculptures of the Chokwe in Angola. The use of symbols of authority, albeit in different forms, is also observed in the golden stool of the Ashanti in Ghana and the Bamileke in Cameroon. Furthermore, the Egyptians' reverence for powerful queens and their representation through magnificent sculptures (Fig. 5) parallels practices in Africa, evident in the cultures of the Ashanti in Ghana, as well as the sculptural depictions of queen mothers in Benin, Nigeria (Fi. 6).



Fig. 3: Statue of Pharaoh with horn in the left hand



Fig. 4: Statue of Ooni of with symbolic horn



Fig. 5: Egyptian Queen (Limestone)



Fig. 6: Benin Queen Mother (Bronze)

Many ancient Egyptian artworks are religious, depicting gods and goddesses considered divine, in line with the African principle of revering deities. Statues of these gods were used in Egyptian temples, enabling worshippers to envision the gods in bodily form. This practice is comparable to the use of statues in shrines across many African cultures, including the Senufo of Ivory Coast, Bamileke of Cameroon, Ashanti of Ghana, Fons of Benin Republic, as well as the Yoruba and Igbo of Nigeria. Similarly, artistic pieces were employed for worship and as decorative shrine objects throughout Africa. Furthermore, placating sculptural images of the deceased, such as Rahotep and his wife (as noted in Microsoft Encarta, 2009), parallels the common African practice of periodically appeasing ancestral figures, sometimes annually.

Symbolism was vital in establishing a sense of order in Egypt, just as in Africa. This is evident in the icons of various gods and goddesses across Africa and in kings' regalia and paraphernalia of office, symbolising the power to maintain order. In Egyptian art, animals and birds were also highly symbolic, much like in almost all African cultures, including Igbo, Yoruba, Senufo, Bambara, Baule, and Ashanti. Unique uses of zoomorphic representations of gods and associative icons are also notable. Specific rules governed the appearance of every god and individual, as well as lineage identifiers, were also depicted in Egyptian art, much like in other African cultures.

Royal diadems and double-plumed crowns are common in the depictions of pharaohs (Figs 7 and 8), which Durden (1974) suggested to have been designated sometimes with a snake on her forehead. Similarly, double-plumed crowns and royal diadems in the form of a spike with a disc (believed to symbolise clairvoyance) are common on the forehead of sculptures depicting *Oni* of Ife (Figs 3, 4, 7, 8 and 9).



Fig. 7: Depiction of Pharaoh with royal diadem



Fig. 8: Mask showing pharaoh with royal diadem



Fig. 9: Statue of Ooni of Ife with royal diadem

The iconographic motif of horns and sun disk, associated with the goddesses Hathor and Isis, is exemplified in the 19th Dynasty Egyptian relief sculpture from the Temple of Seti at Abydos (Fig. 10). Notably, this motif, featuring a sun disk enclosed by a pair of cow's horns, bears striking resemblance to a rock engraving from Tasilli N'ajjer, Algeria (Fig. 11). This similarity underscores the shared cultural and symbolic heritage of ancient Egyptian and North African artistic traditions.



Fig 10: Relief sculpture with horn and disc symbol



Fig 11: The horned lady of Tasilli N'ajjer, Algeria

Colour had extended meanings throughout Africa, though with variations in the symbolic associations. This is observed in colours in the Egyptian Tree of Life (Fig. 12), where blue and green are said to represent the Nile and life, yellow for the sun god, and red for power and vitality (Shaw, 2016; Joshua, 2009). This interpretation is similar to colour symbolism among the Yoruba, Ashante, and many African cultures.



Fig. 12: Egyptian's Tree of Life

The notion of continuity of life after death is a pervasive belief in African cultures, wherein physical death is perceived as a transitional phase rather than a definitive endpoint. This conviction underlies the prevalence of funerary arts across the continent. Hackett (1996) observes that conceptions of death and reincarnation exhibit

regional variations. Nevertheless, this fundamental belief informs the artistic traditions of numerous African cultures, including the Egyptians, Senufo, Akan, Igbo, Ashanti, and Yoruba.

Archaeological evidence substantiates the widespread practice of burying personal items and sculptural forms with the deceased across various African regions. The Egyptian artistic endeavour to preserve the present for posterity is closely paralleled by cultural practices in Ghana, such as the Akan's *Aowin* terracottas. Furthermore, the Yoruba interred goods with the deceased and certain associates, like the *Abobaku* (Olokun Esin), who were duty-bound to accompany the king in death. Excavations at the Igbo Eze burial site in Eastern Nigeria have yielded seated fossil remains surrounded by intricately crafted art pieces and other skeletal remains, suggesting the burial of goods and individuals with a superior, as described by Adepegba (1995).

In accordance with the African tradition of new kings creating novel art forms to distinguish their reigns, each new Pharaoh would initiate a set of art pieces that marked the beginning of their reign and continued throughout their rule.

There are similarities between the Egyptian eyelid enhancers and makeup styles and those of the Yoruba, such as the "tiiro" eyelid enhancer. The Egyptian use of charms, amulets, and symbolic magical devices as talismans to ward off evil and bring good fortune (Microsoft Encarta, 2009) parallels practices found throughout Africa. Similarly, the creation of elaborate art objects associated with land spirits, worn as protective charms, is comparable to the practices of the Senufo and Ashanti cultures.

The practice of sleeping with one's head elevated on a carved wooden headrest is common in many African societies. Headrests are believed to facilitate communication with ancestors through dreams (Microsoft Encarta, 2009). The carving of curved wooden headrests is a shared tradition among the Egyptians (Fig. 13), the Shona of South Africa (Fig. 14), and the Benin people of Nigeria.



Fig. 13: Egyptian Headrest



Fig. 14: Headrest, Shona of South Africa

5.2. Similarities in Architecture

The famous Egyptian architecture is entirely funerary, consisting mainly of tombs of kings and nobles. However, the mastabas, flat-topped rectangular graves containing compartments built over the mummy pits in the early Egyptian dynasty, bear similarities with the burial culture prevalent across Africa today. The primary difference lies in the fact that African sepulchres have remained bench-like. In contrast, Egyptian tombs evolved into various styles, such as graves with sloping sides, step-sided graves, and massive, smooth-sided pyramids. This transformation was driven by the quest for permanence and the need to create barriers to prevent theft. The construction of magnificent tombs was also motivated by the availability of materials and abundant labour.

A correlation has been established between the features of the impluvium-style (rainwater storage courtyard) domestic architecture in Egypt and the traditional domestic architecture of the Yoruba and Benin people of Nigeria (Denyer, 1978). Similarly, constructing temples or shrines is a common practice among all Africans. According to Denyer (1978), this phenomenon is observed among the Ashanti, Sogo, Shona, Bamileke, Igbo, and Yoruba.

5.3. Similarity in the Languages

The language of ancient Egypt is said to be in the *Afro-Asiatic* family, which is also spoken in many African cultures such as Berber and Hausa, and it is also related to the *Nilo-Saharan* languages, spoken in the *Niger-Congo*

Bascom (1977:18, Microsoft Encarta 2009). Similarly, the Egyptian hieroglyphics are compared with the Sudanese writings and Nsibidi from Eastern Nigeria, as they developed from crude inscriptions before growing into their elevated state today, along with Greek letters.

5.4. Similarity of the Artistic Forms and the Cannons Governing the Forms.

Gombrich (1965) aptly observed the divergence of Egyptian art from European art, attributing this difference to the distinct purposes paintings from both cultures intended to serve. Just as Egyptian art forms are culturally and symbolically distinct from those of European art, they share close associations with African art regarding form, underlying philosophies, and symbolisms. African art does not constitute a single tradition, as the continent comprises multiple cultures, each producing its distinctive art with variations in materials, intentions, and products. However, African artists are united in their deliberate distortion of forms, conforming to established canons. Other commonly shared characteristics observed in Egyptian works include the deliberate distortion of forms in Egyptian human figures and the frontal representation of figures (Fig. 15), similar to the presentation in Abomey mud reliefs from the Benin Republic (Fig. 16) and numerous other African representations.



Fig. 15: Egyptian Frontal



Fig. 16: Abomey relief showing frontal presentation of figures

Despite the stiff poses of ancient Egyptian art, they are often highly realistic as Egyptian art is not based on what the artist could see at a given moment but on idealistic people or scenes (Figs 5, 7, 8 and 17), which compares with the realistic heads from Ife (Figs 4, 9, and 18). The Egyptian works are also always made of simple forms, while their depictions are always ageless, lively and full of life, like African works.



Fig. 17: Egyptian Realism



Fig. 18: A Realistic Head from Ife

6. Magnification of Hierarchy in Art:

Different techniques were adopted all over Africa to classify the social hierarchy. Figures were drawn to sizes based not on their distance from the painters' point of view but on their relative importance. In the Benin plaques, the kings were always centralised and made more prominent than others. In contrast, in the Oyo palace mural, the king was represented as an elephant, which is more significant than other figures. This is the same idea behind the

drawing of the Pharaoh as the most prominent figure in a painting, no matter his position and their depiction of a greater God larger than a lesser god.

6.1 The Form and Use of Fertility Dolls

The Egyptian fertility dolls (Fig. 19) not only have an affinity with the forms of the Ghanaian *Akwaba* figurines (Fig. 20), but they are both fertility dolls, rendered simple in forms, are related both culturally and in the belief system just like the *Omolangidi* of the Yoruba of Nigeria.



Fig. 19: Ghanaian Akwaba Figurine



Fig. 20: The Egyptian Fertility Doll

6.2 Mother and child figure:

The goddess *Isis* is always depicted seated with a child on her lap, held with her right hand (Fig. 21), while the left holds her breast for suckling in a typical African manner (Fig. 22).



Fig. 21: Isis with a Child on Her Laps



Fig. 22: A Mother and Child, carving, Senufo, Ivory Coast

6.3 The Display of Affluence in Artworks:

Egyptians' use of gold in the Tutankhamun mask (Fig. 23) and other works correlate with a similar show of affluence in the royal arts of Ashanti, Ghana. In contrast, the same *Tutankhamun* mask is related to that of *Anronanrhett*, Tassili N'ajjer, Algeria (Fig. 24).



Fig. 23: The gold head of Tutankhamun



Fig. 24: Mask Tassili n'Ajjer

6.4 Throwing Sticks

The throwing sticks and shaped knives found in ancient Egyptian paintings are observed by Vansina (1984) to be parallel to the objects found in the rock art of South Africa.

7. Conclusion

The myriad cultural similarities and established relationships between Egypt and the broader African continent are hardly surprising, given that numerous African nations claim ancestral migrations from the eastern region. Notably, the artworks from Egypt's pre-dynastic period exhibit striking similarities with various African forms and contents, suggesting that acculturation and diffusion played a significant role in shaping the distinctive Egyptian art style. Conversely, African art remained relatively uninfluenced until the 15th century, allowing it to maintain its early stylistic traditions. The dispersion of artistic influences accounts for the variations in content despite the similarities in form. Ultimately, a comprehensive understanding of Egyptian art forms can only be achieved through a nuanced examination of African art and culture, which will undoubtedly shed further light on the complexities of early Egyptian artistic expression.

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