

**A REVIEW OF PLATO’S REJECTION OF ART IN
RELATION TO THE IGBO/AFRICA’S ARTISTIC
TRADITION**

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ABSTRACT: This paper argues that the Igbo artistic tradition, contrary to Plato’s, represents authentic Igbo cultural traits, and fills the gap between the abstract reality and the physical world. There is some obvious difficulty encountered by most of the expatriate scholars in understanding the new meaning of art, especially, with regard to professions. Traditionally, artistic forms are simply derived from specific objects in nature, or as an illustrative symbolic representation of a specific abstract being. Plato’s account of arts as imitation doubted the capacity of art to represent reality as it were, and thereby creating a lacuna between the abstract and the physical. On the contrary, most Igbo and traditional African artistic works were to collaborate between what is thought of and what is seen. There is some obvious difficulty encountered by most of the expatriate scholars in understanding the new meaning of art, especially, with regard to professions. Traditionally, artistic forms are simply derived from specific objects in nature, or as an illustrative symbolic representation of a specific abstract being. We argue, therefore, that the traditional Igbo, and African art works represented reality and serve as a vehicle of conveying knowledge, and truth about reality. To characterise art in terms of style and attribute would put the origin and purpose of art works to dereliction.

Keywords: Plato, Art, Igbo/Africa’s Artistic Tradition, Epistemology

INTRODUCTION

According to Ekwuru (2009) in most traditional cultures, artistic forms are simply derived from specific objects in nature, or as an illustrative symbolic representation of a specific abstract being or god. The Igbo, and African structural compartment (clans or community) did not deter their unit-system artists from bringing in and concretizing the understanding of reality, as symbols, artifacts, music, wood carving, dancing were all made to capture the way of life of the people. This approach of each clan or kindred making concrete the concentric-unit system of arts” helps to fill, re-situate and determine the ideological system of the various forms of the arts within their traditional cultural contexts as a unique and dynamic form of meaning.

The purposes of art were found in the meaning of the artistic works and not styles. The traditional Igbo, and African art demonstrated the understanding of the peoples’ beliefs in ethics, epistemology, theodicy, and science. Here, the significant aspects of African art do not lie in the use and styles of the art but in the meaning and ideas that give birth to artistic expressions.

Consequently, in interrogating the place of art in the ideal society, Plato rejected aesthetics and banished poets. He contends that the prerogative of governance belongs properly to philosopher kings and not poets, and thereby accused the subject of art as not capable of imitating reality.

However, one of the central issues in aesthetics is the question of the purpose of art. In response to this question, philosophers of art have come up with different theories to account for the nature of art. One of such is Plato's imitation theory of art. Plato's theory accounts for the nature of art in terms of the limited capacity of art to imitate truth or reality (mimesis). Here, it is important to note that Plato's mimesis doubted the ability of arts works to reproduce or represent reality. He argues that, the artist who produces imitations of things seems to be some kind of deceiver, at best concerned only to represent appearances and not reality itself. He insisted that things are already imitations of their forms and that imitations of imitations take us a long way from knowledge and therefore, artists are collaborators in deceit.

One of the challenges of Plato's position is that he presents the world of forms as if there is a place one could point at and say, here is the world of forms. Again and most importantly is that Plato did not explain how he arrived at the knowledge of the world of forms. Probably, he relied on intuition or *apriori* means of knowledge acquisition. However, most traditional Igbo/African cultures relied on *apriori* or mythical means of knowledge acquisition at arriving to some reality. In other words, reality could be made manifest concretely through *apriori* or mythological means. According to Ekwuru (2009) and his asked, how do the traditional Igbo perceive their meanings as exactly that which is predicated and conventionalized? He further answers the question by saying, these question point directly to the exigence of what has been designated as the mythical-metaphysic is of the traditional artistic meaning. In fact, our whole effort and project has been to arrive at this conclusive part of the work, which articulates the overt esotericism of the traditional Igbo arts as embedded in their attributions of mystical or mythical-metaphysics as the background ideologies of meaning... In consideration of the origin and purpose of the artist ideology, it was explicitly clear that the traditional Igbo did not just admire the mythical imageries" in their abstract narrative essences as objects for intellectual or aesthetic contemplations, but transformed them into concretely effective modes and presences.

With this particular understanding, the traditional Igbo had, and still have the contrary notion of Plato's about the origin and purpose of art. That: Igbo artistic beings represent the understanding of reality: That Igbo artistic beings are symbols and were perceived out of Igbo epistemology: And that they are educative, enlightening and describes the world view of Igbo people.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Aesthetics is the study of the feelings, concepts, and judgments arising from our perception of the arts. Aesthetic theory concerns itself with questions about what constitutes a work of art, when, and how could a work of art be adjudged successful? Can art be a vehicle of truth? What is the difference between understanding a work of art, and failing to do so? What is the origin and purpose of art?

However, in attempting to answer these questions about art, different philosophers of art had made salient contributions to what a work of art ought to be. However, most of the theorists did not give a holistic purpose of art, unlike the Igbo artistic tradition which brings all aspects of the Igbo cultural identity, heritage, and solidarity.

For instance, the expressionists (Collingwood, Croce and Tolstoy) conceptualise art in terms of the capacity of the art work to communicate. Collingwood (1989) argues that, a work of art is imaginative and communicates the feeling of the artist. Here, his position is challenging because what is communicated could be the expression or feeling of the artist about certain situations which could in reality differ from the state of affairs. Rather, a work of art ought to represent a people's ideology about certain realities and not just for an individual's consumption.

Again, Collingwood and the expressionists had ignored what the source of art is and how it influences the purpose of the work of art?

This is also part of what was omitted in both the formalist and expressionist theories of what art ought to be. The formalists theorists like Clive Bell (1989) characterize art in terms of its formal attribute. However, what is evident in each case is that the key strategy in defining the nature and purpose of art and focusing on a specific feature of art and constitute it into a point of reference for determining the nature of art but what is the origin on which works of arts are derived remains very important to the African artist.

Again, Plato's account of art as lacking the capacity to imitate or capture reality is divergent to the Igbo artistic tradition because and Ekwuru (2009) puts it, for the traditional Igbo, myth as the dynamic originator of artistic forms and modes is rather a metaphysics of presence. This suggests that artistic works are symbolic representations of images by which the transfer of thoughts and concepts become concretised. Thus, conceptualizations of art become more plausible when it fills the gap between the abstract and the concrete. It is because of such a conviction that mythical contents or imageries, (conceived as real), were transformed into practical-visible modes and forms of arts. According to Iheancho (2012) since the end of the Nigerian-Biafra Civil War", *Abigbo* Cultural Dance has grown to the status of being almost the epitome and sum-total of the culture of contemporary *Mbaise* people. It was *Abigbo* Dance more than any other aspect of pre-colonial *Mbaise* culture that had helped to burnish the besmirched image of *Mbaise* people as well as boost their sagged morale in the aftermaths of the lost civil war which they had supported with their whole heart. Supporting Iheancho on the importance of art to any community, Ekwuru (2009) for the traditional man, myth is an authoritative proclamation, in which case then, mythical propositions and assertion are never doubted as they are accepted as nothing but the truth. It could be said from the traditional view-point that realty is *mythophanic* that means to say that it manifests itself through mythical narratology. The traditional myths in this sense are not just empty words, but sacred and efficacious. They possess depth and extension that are transmitted into their analogical transpositions in various iconographic symbolisms.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted as its framework, what Ekwuru (2009) calls Expository Analysis Theory. According to him, by expository analysis, and with particular emphasis on the term "analysis", we intend in line with Radclif Brown, to separate out reality and thought, the

components of a complex whole and thereby discover the relation of these components to one another within the whole. It involves therefore, a process of deconstructive-reconstruction. By deconstruction, we intend to present how useful the works of art is, especially in most African cultures, which is contrary to Platos'', and the reconstruction is to reiterate the traditional understanding of the Igbo culture heritage with regard to their artistic tradition. From our examination, we find that myths and reality meet at the point of artistic representations in Igbo artistic tradition, which make use of symbols or images. We also find that art works reflect the metaphysical presence, expressed powerfully by sculptures. In other words, there is a connection between myth and reality. According to Ikwuegbu, (2017) the Igbo artistic tradition appears to tie with their myth of origin when yam and cocoa yam, bread fruits and palm oil originated.

Afigbo (1981) corroborated with Ikwuegbu while explaining the myth of origin of Igbo agricultural products. He says, the Igbo agriculture is linked to yam and cocoyam production which are in turn tied to *ifejioku* or *ahiajioku*. *Nri* myths link the beginning of agriculture to the emergence of yam and cocoyam in the Igbo agrarian culture.

The idea of reconstruction is to situate the narratives of the Igbo and the African cultural heritage. Narrative is an aesthetic entry into the African experience as it is. Narrative in this context stands as the locus of cultural authenticity.

Igbo artistic tradition is predicated on its spiritual and esoteric order. According to Ikwuegbu (2017) the mode and character of creativity underlying the concept of art (*nka*) is made manifest through the idea of the spiritual and esoteric. This is seen through the creative ingenuity of the gifted or talented artist who are moved by the spirit to distinguish himself as a master artist (*dinka*) par excellence.

How not to Compare Africa Ideal of Art with Platos'

Most scholars, oftentimes, would draw out differences in culture and thereafter make assertions about which culture is superior to the other. That is not the interest in this work. Rather, we are concerned and challenged to re-narrate the traditional values and understandings of the African personality, and the Igbo culture as our particular focus. Here, Ekwuru (2009) agrees with our focus, when he says, furthermore, it is important to indicate that the analytical expository framework intended here, would not be used as a weapon for cultural apologetics. That is, a tool for insinuating cultural judgment for or against the manifestation of false/true or subjective/objective cultural consciousness, emanating from a comparative cultural anthropology. Rather, it is geared toward the expository understanding of what once made sense, or constituted the cultural hegemony for the Igbo traditional artistic meaning.

The reason for this re-narration is because most modern Igbo art, do not focus and represent the true Igbo artistic tradition. The apprenticeship system which is a type of education and acquisition of some work ethics, mores, and norms in socialization, should be re-introduced to enable an authentic representation of the Igbo community.

The level of analysis is therefore intended to expose the nature and origin of Igbo artistic tradition, so as to evaluate it relevance to the modern times, and seek for ways to preserve of Igbo artistic narratives. According to Ihenacho (2012) this project thrives on the

presupposition that unless we find a way to keep a rich inventory of the different aspects of our cultural heritage, we will die rueing the fact that we missed a golden opportunity to pass the baton to the next generation of Igbo children. And unless we make real efforts to preserve our cultural heritage, we will breed a generation of confused people who will never be true foreigners or true natives.

However, to fully apprehend the reason behind the Igbo artistic tradition, one has to understand the spiritual colouration of ‘*Nka*’ the Igbo word for Arts. To cultivate *nka* remains a spiritual thing in the sense that the Igbo had the spirit or God that controls that controls art known as *Ofodinka* or *Ofodunka*.

According to Ikwuegbu and Ngumah, (2015) to acquire this spirit for effective inspiration, creativity, knowledge, and fame, one must traditionally request its ritual and image objectification, implore the creative and innovative spirits of *agwu nka* to activate or reactivate sound creative ingenuity needed to produce works of art as *nke*. The awe in terms of style, technique, skill and creativity exhibited by *the Igbo-Ukwu* bronze artifacts and finds is linked to *Ofodunka* with its psychic force of *agwu nka* which will continue to baffle the world.

This explains the mythical realities of the nature of the Igbo artistic tradition. According to Ekwuru (2009) citing Dagobert, noted that, the term ‘metaphysics as employed in this part of the work, should not be conceived in the Western philosophical meaning as “the science of being as such, but is used herein its applied and derivative meaning to qualify certain existential schemes of explanations within the traditional Igbo world view, which demands broader elaboration than the conventional Western philosophical thought allows... Unlike Western metaphysics, as practiced in academic conventional philosophy, which has the particular character of being a rational and logical construction which satisfies man’s intellectual curiosity, the mythical-metaphysics, we intend to express here is a lived metaphysics, practiced in the words and gestures of everyday experience as an acceptance of mythical framework that sustains and offers explanations.

It is a “mythical metaphysics that is not founded on and beyond a *physika*, i.e, it does not accept or even think of a dichotomy between the world of experience on the one hand and the invisible, meaning-giving world that lies beyond the empirical world and accounts for it. It rather considers the total experience of man-tangible and non-tangible as experienced as a *weltanschauung*. The quotation above captures the nature of the relationship between the spirit of *Ofodunka*, as made manifest in the art work of an Igbo traditional artist. Supporting Ekwuru’s view on the relationship, Ikwuegbu (2017), says, when one performs the ritual of *ofodunka* to acquire it, many see it as *alusi* role in creativity, it is that hope that the creativity spirit will inhibit one and improve his ingenuity in creative activities. Artists that lacks the blessings of *Ofodunka*, lacks the creative ingenuity, skill, and craftiness needed to produce a successful work of art.

Ofodunka is the oracle to be appeased for better artistic inspiration. Hence, it is our reasoning that this concept of “metaphysics of presence”, formed by the traditional myths also constitutes their morphological complexity and polyfunctionality. Every traditional Igbo myth presents itself as an answer to everything thereby constituting an absolute ontological meaning referent” behind every form of being or inquiry.

Conclusion

Therefore, Igbo arts must return to the idea of the spiritual and esoteric in order to preserve the art form for its value in affirming identity and for posterity. To reactivate the essence of Igbo artistic tradition, modern and contemporary Igbo art need to fuse in and reactivate the ritualizing of *ofodunka* which assures of creative continuity of generational transfer of knowledge. The Igbo traditional artist and other African arts, the Yoruba *Oshogbo* Shrine, the Cameroon's *Ntogoh*, should revert to the indigenous esoteric and spiritual views about inspiration and arts to balance the Christian initiatives and beliefs with Igbo sacred and esoteric belief thereby filling its metaphysical vacuum, as omitted in Plato's view about art.

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- Thurston, S. (1970). *Igbo-Ukwu: an account of archological excavation in Eastern Nigeria*. London: Faber and Faber. Here, Nri is regarded as the earliest centre of Igbo civilization.