

Towards a Modernist Main Streaming-Oral Tradition: A Tool for Art Historical reconstruction

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Abstract

The unavailability of data and good historical sequence of all traditional art (South of the Sahara) have not only made it impossible to establish true origins of African art traditions but also militated against the emergence of a suitable art historical methodology which will establish a perfect historical sequence of all African art. The popular approach to the study of traditional art is anthropological (not art historical) with emphases on cultural extra-aesthetic functions of the objects. This approach places these African art objects lower than its Euro-American counterparts. This study therefore advocates for an indigenous art historical approach based on oral tradition in order to fill the existing gap in written evidence and chronology of these works of art. The work observes that the indigenization of African art was caused by the western powers viewing African Art through the prism of Euro-American methodology. The paper therefore challenges the African historians to evolve more art historical methodologies that can fill the existing gap mentioned above.

Introduction

The study of African art can be loosely divided into two, viz: the traditional art and the contemporary art. The African traditional art also refer to the pre-colonial art of Africa while the African contemporary art points to their art during and after the colonization of the African continent by the western powers. While contemporary African arts have documentary evidences, no document exists for the traditional arts and the true origins of the art traditions are equally untraceable. Adepegba (1995) declares that”

The traditional sculptures, made mostly in local materials and for extra aesthetic cultural uses are quite different from Euro-American Art. Their forms vary not only according to individual objects but also according to culturally significant typological artifacts and their ethnic origins. They are also not descriptive of events or social activities.

Frankly speaking, African contemporary art relates to the Euro-American art in many ways, especially in the aspect of availability of documentation (which traditional African Art Lacks), hence the same formal approach used in studying Euro-American art can also be applied to African contemporary art.

Unfortunately, the art historical methodologies used for both Euro-American and African contemporary art has not been found suitable for African traditional art. To break this dilemma in art scholarship, ethnological and anthropological approaches were applied to the study of African

traditional art. Thereby bringing in anthropologists and ethnographers to the domain of visual art scholarship.

While some African art historians reject the interference of non-professionals like, Anthropologists and ethnographers who are neither artists nor art historians in African art space, they have not waken up to the fact that African traditional art can best be studied through a “structuralist approach” since they cannot be detached from their cultural matrix. Part of this structuralist approach is the use of oral traditions in traditional African art reconstructions.

Oral Tradition as a Critical Evaluation Methodology

To a layman, oral tradition connotes fantasy, falsity, wrongness, and distortion. These negative notions have not removed the fact that oral tradition exists in most African cultures as a living phenomenon. Oral tradition is what a society say about the origin of their people, institutions, and works of art, among many others. It is very vital to the reconstruction of history in a non-literate society. They are handed down form generation to generation and they also change from time to time. Since they will form the super structure for other traditions (in a non-literate society): we do not expect them to be monolithic. Against this backdrop it becomes imperative for scholars in this discipline to document as many traditions as possible, for posterity stake.

Chronology/Dating Past Events from Oral Tradition

While a lot of historians agree on the possibility of dating past events from oral tradition on one hand, and criticize it on the other hand, for lacking a sense of chronology. They argue that most events are not presented in sequence. Henige (1974) asserts that “The search for chronology in a non-literate society is a chimera”. Henige went further to define chronology as....The placing of historical events in time with regard to one another (relative chronology) and with regard to whenever possible to a fixed calendar (absolute chronology).

It is not proper to dismiss chronology in a non-literate society as a chimera because there are many ways of establishing chronology in the oral history of non-literate societies. Amongst traditional African societies, most cultures have relative chronology; although they are not absolute historians can still use them in establishing chronology in African oral tradition.

In highly centralized societies in Africa. We have people who are specially trained for oral tradition. In the Sahel regions for example they are known as “groits”. They are the traditional oral historians of their societies, no wonder why great contemporary art historians are also given the appellation, “Groits”. The role of a groit in an African traditional society is so serious that sanctions for forgetfulness is often severe. This is especially true when we consider the pains Manadou Kouyate, a Mandingo groit, goes through to ensure the authenticity of his stories. In one of his stories, Kouyate assured his audience thus:

I am groit. I am Djeli Mamadou Kouyate, son of Bintou Kouyate Master of the art of speech, since time immemorial, the Kouyate have been at the service of Keitas princes... the art of speech has no secret for us, without us the names of kings would sink into Obilivion. We are the memory of men; by the word, we give life to the actions of our dead kings for the benefit of the present generation... my word is pure and striped of all untruths, it is my father’s word, it is my father’s fathers word. Naine (1990).

Henige’s theses “that chronology do not exist in oral traditions of non-literary society is hasty, rash and pessimistic because in non-literate societies several types of data could be used as bases for chronology, these include, kinglist and genealogies, again many traditions, in non-literate societies give hints of events that the historian (as a chronologist) can use to reconstruct a system of time measurement. These include references to lunar and solar eclipses.

Domesticating Oral Tradition

The discussion on the use of oral tradition as an art historical research method solicits a question which was put, forward by Aniakor (2005); “is Art History?” Although it is not the aim of this study to go into such contest and controversy of whether history is art? Or art is history? It is obvious that one cannot understand the art of a historical period without a full grasp of underlying nature in the moment as phenomenon which relates to time and space. Against this background we make bold to say that art exists inside history, in other words, art and history are inseparable. Aniakor (2005) buttresses this fact when he states that;

The art historian is therefore one who faces the task of showing that art is in history and does not constitute history by itself. The implication is that for one to understand the art movement known as impressionism as a historical event, one needs to soak one’s self in the history of the 19th century, particularly the rise of industrial revolution in the second half of the 19th century, all historical events connected with social phenomenon and other related developments. In effect we should first immerse ourselves in the history of ideas.

Apart from the western theories of history and methodologies, we also have African Histrography with some of the methodologies differing from the western approach, for example oral tradition applies to the study of non-literate societies, such as the sub Saharan Africa. In using sub Saharan Africa as an example, one needs to bear in mind that the ancient Egyptians had a form of writing called hieroglyphics, North Africa also acquired the Islamic religion early and have their history written in Arabic.

Most African traditional art exists inside their oral traditions. And it is the view of this paper that African art historians should legitimize oral tradition, so that it can be managed and controlled better for art historical research purposes, instead of approaching it as an illegitimate historical phenomenon. In order to demolish the mechanisms of marginalization of non-western art like African art, we need to tell the story of African traditional art from an insider’s perspective. This stands as a challenge to African art historians especially when we remember that some of the first European art histories written in the fifteen and sixteenth centuries were produced by artists like Giorgio Vasari, Lorenzo Ghiberti, Michelangelo among others and not by anthropologists and ethnologists. Such a move will save traditional African art from the present Eurocentric bias which often describe African traditional art as “repetitive”. “Non-intellectual and “unimaginative”. King (1999).

In cases where there is an absence of written evidence. Oral data remain the sole material to historians in reconstructing the history of a given work of art. Vansina, a historians in reconstructing the history of a given work of art. Vansina, a historian, who is regarded as the father of the historiography of oral tradition by a lot of scholars is also of the opinion that, oral tradition is very important as a historical source in the book which he published in 1965-“De La Tradition oral (oral tradition: A study in historical methodology) vansina postulates that “Among the various kinds of historical sources, traditions occupy a special place yet little has been done towards analyzing their special features as historical documents.”

Presently some Nigerian art historians has come up with indigenous model of art criticism and methodology based on oral tradition. Omoighe (2006) declares that;

Though there were art critics in the traditional Nigerian context, it was not the specialist discipline that it has become today, any knowledgeable person in the field practiced criticism, not as a profession but as a social responsibility to the community. “Otota” in Edo speaking communities or Ewi” among the Yorubas, are well known vehicles for such criticism.

These “Ewi” and Otota could be very useful to formal trained Nigerian art historians in reconstructing Nigerian traditional artistic past. Filani (2004) also advocates the use of oral tradition, which are referred locally to as “Atowodowo” which translates to from “hand to hand” (among the Yoruba) as background to the study of African art and criticism. In spite of these efforts more work are still expected from African art historians Egonwa (2005) that “there has not been suitable gained independence”.

Conclusion

The western art critics have capitalized on the absence of written evidence in African traditional art study and the inability of African art historians to evolve a suitable art historical methodology to address the problem of absence of written history, to trivialize African traditional artistic merits. African traditional art are not given equal status with its counterparts in Euro-American art space, instead they are marginalized and referred to as exotic and magical.

This paper symbolizes a clarion call to Nigerians, albeit African art historians to come up with methods and techniques for establishing chronology in African traditional art and oral tradition which will provide the data for the reconstruction of such traditional art works. Efforts should be made to improve on the ones presently in use, a good example is the effort of Adepegba (1993) in broadening the scope of African art by laying emphasis on forms in his study of indigenous Nigeria art tradition. This study therefore calls for more researches into findings suitable art historical methodologies for traditional African art.

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