

THE LITTLE SCULPTURES OF KEMWIN-KEMWIN ARTISTS

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ABSTRACT

The tradition of apothecary in Benin may be as old as the need for medication itself and kemwin-kemwin sellers are those who trade in apothecary. Their relics include the skulls of dead animals, bones of alligator, bones of dogs, snakes or lizards, cowries, calabashes, clay pots of different sizes, little molded figures in clay or laterite, live chicks, live tortoise, pumpkin pods, cotton fabric of red, black and white colours, mirrors and many more odds and ends. This is a possible choice for the name kemwin-kemwin that could be translated to 'bits and pieces' or 'this and that'. Many researchers have written on apothecary but not very few have focused on the craft of sculpture done by these kemwin-kemwin traders. Very soon the tradition of kemwin-kemwin may become moribund as most traders and artists, are affected by a possible decline in patronage. The study is aimed at popularizing and cataloguing kemwin-kemwin figurines as part of the collection of reliquaries by kemwin-kemwin market women practitioners. The researcher described their cultural significances, religious and decorative functions to the buyers and users of these figurines.

Keywords: kemwin-kemwin, figurines, reliquary, laterite and apothecary.

Introduction

There are over a dozen traditional markets in Benin City today. Some of these markets may have started out as periodic four-day markets, but many of them have evolved to become daily markets in addition to their periodic market days. Markets like Agbado and Oba market are some of the oldest markets in Benin; they have been around for centuries, and in some of these markets have age old commercial practice of stocking and dispensing medicinal and ritual items known as kemwin-kemwin or apothecary shop.

The practice of apothecary is an age-old tradition in Benin; and kemwin-kemwin sellers are those who trade in apothecary. The Edo (Bini) word kemwin-kemwin loosely translates to 'bits and pieces' or 'this and that' refers to the wide range of medicinal and ritual items sourced or produced and stocked in Benin traditional apothecary shops. The term kemwin-kemwin is also used to refer to the practice of collecting all sorts of medicinal and ritual items as well as the apothecary shops where the items are dispensed.

In this study, the practice of kemwin-kemwin was examined to see how long the tradition has existed and how much they are patronized in modern times. While reviewing the practice of collecting and dispensing apothecary items, the study examined the role played by gender in Benin tradition. In the same vein, looking at the items collected and stocked by kemwin-kemwin practitioners, the study also examined and catalogued the common items found in kemwin-kemwin shops based on non-artistic consideration as well as on their artistic value as sculptures; and in turn

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described the little sculptures from the point of view of the common materials used in their production and to what extent the detailing on the sculptures are rendered.

There has been scanty research interest on the practice of kemwin-kemwin in Benin. Since Nevadomsky's seminal study of kemwin-kemwin in 1988, it took another 27 years to be followed by Ogene's study published in 2015. While Nevadomsky's (1988) study focused on the varieties of ritual and medicinal items available at kemwin-kemwin, Ogene's article examined the artistic creations of two kemwin-kemwin practitioners. Besides these studies, there is a research vacuum on cataloguing and describing the range of little sculptures produced and/or sourced by kemwin-kemwin practitioners. This is the vacuum that this study aims to fill.

Research Objectives

In surveying the practice and tradition of kemwin-kemwin in Benin City, the following objectives were formulated for the study.

1. To determine how wide spread kemwin-kemwin practice is in Benin City.
2. To determine the role of women in kemwin-kemwin practice.
3. To ascertain the range of objects found in kemwin-kemwin shops.
4. To determine the range of materials used in the production of kemwin-kemwin sculptures; and
5. To determine the level of detailing in kemwin-kemwin sculptures.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide this study.

1. How wide spread is the practice of kemwin-kemwin in Benin City?
2. What are the predominant roles of women in kemwin-kemwin practice?
3. What array of objects are commonly found in kemwin-kemwin shops?
4. What are the common materials used in the production of kemwin-kemwin sculptures?
5. What details are reflected in kemwin-kemwin in sculptures?

Research Findings

Through the guide from the set objectives, the following are the findings in the course of this research;

How widespread is the practice of kemwin-kemwin in Benin City?

Contrary to Nevadomsky (1988: p. 2), the practice of apothecary in Benin is older than the age of Shakespeare. Nobody knows exactly when the first Kemwin-Kemwin shop opened in Benin, but its origin may be tied to the practice of traditional religion among the Edo people. Some of the common shrinal items found in Kemwin-Kemwin shops today can be traced back to the 10th century AD. Egharevba (1968, p. 1) informs that Ogiso Ere introduced the carved wooden heads placed on ancestral shrines. During the reign of Oba Ewuare in the 15th century AD, there was an upsurge in the practice of traditional religion, especially the arts of sorcery and magic (Egharevba 1968, p. 74). This upsurge in traditional religion also created the need for medicinal and shrinal items; as such, Kemwin-Kemwin shops came into Benin markets to satisfy that need.

All the major traditional markets in Benin City, have Kemwin-Kemwin sections. This suggests that the practice of kemwin-kemwin is endemic to Benin culture and it is still as popular as it was in the 1980's when Nevadomsky first researched the Institution. The name Kemwin-kemwin suggests what-so-ever one needs in relation to traditional religion, sorcery and magic. These items can still be found today in any kemwin-kemwin apothecary shop and river sides where traditional religion adherents use these kemwin-kemwin items for ritualistic purposes (see plate 1)



Plate I: An Olokun river side ceremony in which kemwin-kemwin items are used. (Photo source: researcher 2021)

Nevadomsky (1988), posits; Kemwin-Kemwin caters to:

...the medicinal and herbal requirements of the trado-medicine men in their everlasting struggle against demons, gonorrhoea, maledictions, gynecological disorders, failure in examinations, misadventures, specters, and the marital conflicts endemic in polygamous households. (p. 73)

The predominant roles of women in kemwin-kemwin practice

Since the beginning of the craft and trade in kemwin-kemwin, women in Benin have been at the forefront of the profession as stockists of ritual relics. Besides stocking medicinal and ritual items, the kemwin-kemwin women themselves are not only involved in the practice of traditional religious rituals, but they are also involved in the production process of some of the little sculptures they stock. As traditional gate keepers and custodians of traditional Benin reliquary, they consider themselves a privileged source for the goods. Osarenmwinda (2021), who as a kemwin-kemwin practitioner, supports this fact when she states that evil people cannot stand against the powers of kemwin-kemwin; “that Kemwin-Kemwin stands for good and wards off evil”. Indeed, women who practice kemwin-kemwin believe that they stock only good things in their shops: medicines to heal the sick and amulets to protect the weak. Kemwin-kemwin practitioners also see themselves as curators of traditional culture and religion. Their shops could be likened galleries in which they stock potent art

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pieces or artifacts and they have enough knowledge to prescribe for users how to use these items or direct them to specialist doctors that can attend to their needs. Importantly a number of kemwin-kemwin practitioners have also established themselves as resident traditional artists involved in the production of miniature objects and figurines in their shops. Ogene (2015) informs that a number of these traditional resident artists professionally produce items not only for their shops but for other kemwin-kemwin market traders within and outside their markets. From Oba market to Edaiken market, and from Agbado market to Oliha market, you find women involved in the commercial practice of stocking and dispensing ritual items.



*Plate 2: A kemwin-kemwin practitioner at her shop at Oba Market in Benin City
(Photo source: Researcher, 2020)*

Objects that are commonly found in kemwin-kemwin shops

In a typical kemwin-kemwin shop, you find common medicinal items like edible clay, alligator pepper, pumpkin pods, melon pods, gourds of the calabash tree bark, roots and herbs, on one hand. On the other hand, they also stock ritual items such as; dried birds, live chicks, skulls and bones of dead animals, as well as miniaturized figures and figurines. Although the distinction between medicinal and ritual items are not clear cut but the bulk of the items studied in this work may be categorized as ritual items. It is therefore relevant to sieve out the items that are curious to sight, copied from nature but miniaturized. These figures are the little sculptures produced by kemwin-kemwin women.

Materials used in the production of kemwin-kemwin sculptures

Kemwin-kemwin usually source or produce and stock miniature sculptures. These little sculptures are usually produced from a range of specific materials perhaps because of the ritual significance of the materials. Materials commonly used are, clay, kaolin, laterite, wood bark, animal skins, gourds, beads, certain threads, bamboo, brass, plastic sheets, and steel sheets, among others.

Prominent themes reflected in kemwin-kemwin sculptures

Among the common items that are produced by these market women are male and female figures in kaolin (Amaze Orhue), male and female figures in laterite (Amaze Ulakpa), female figures of both pregnant women and nursing mothers with babies at their backs, in clay (Amaze Obue) M. Ojo (Personal communication, June 1, 2021; Ogene, 2015).

METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS OF SAMPLES

The study employed a qualitative method of research. Data for the study was collected through primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are oral sources which include; personal interviews, observations and group interviews while secondary sources include written documents such as books, magazines and internet sources. Three (3) main traditional markets were visited (Oba market, Ekiosa market and Oliha market) and some items were collected, sampled and described. They include; shaped chalk, edible clay, molded human figures, miniature canoe, paddle and trust, wooden human figures, miniature drum, miniature pot, royal swords, miniature bell, miniature maracas and miniature ladder. Using a descriptive method of analysis, the sampled items were described based on the materials used, dimensions, colour, significance and use of the sampled items. Some of the kemwin-kemwin sculptures and objects were analyzed in this section.

1. Ugbalaka ne'khere



Plate 3: Title: Ugbalaka
ne'khere
Medium: Lead, Size: 7cm x
3cm (HxW)

Ugbalaka ne'khere is an 'A' shaped ladder cast in lead and partinated with silver colour. This object symbolizes growth and rise in status. Ladders are used for climbing

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heights. Ugbalaka ne'khere is usually placed on the shrine of osun diety (Aro'sun) where it is used as a ritual item.

2. Orhue



Plate 4: Title: Orhue

Medium: Kaolin, Size: 15cm x 4.5cm

Orhue is a piece of carved kaolin which symbolizes peace and goodwill. It is usually offered as a peace offering to invoke peace and divine blessings.

3. Eko



Plate 5: Title: Eko

Medium: Clay, Size: 10cm x 3.8cm

Ero is an edible clay with mixed colours of dark brown and grey. It could be used as a laxative when mixed with other herbs for a variety of stomach disorders. Pregnant

women are also expected to consume Ero to ensure safe delivery and avoid complications.

4: Amaze Ulakpa



Plate 6: Title: Amaze Ulakpa and Okpia Ube Okuo
Medium: Laterite, Size: Male- 7.5cm x 4.8cm; Female- 7cm x 4cm

Amaze Ulakpa, Okpia Ube Okuo are abstracted human figures depicting male and female. The figures were produced in laterite and show male and female genitals. The male figure was also depicted with a beard while the female had breasts. These figures are no doubt related to fertility and fecundity. Some of these figures are produced in kaolin.

5. Oko, Obele and Asa



Plate 7: Title: Oko, Obele, Asa
Size: Canoe- 7.5cm x 3cm, Paddle: 14.8cm x 2cm, Thrust: 13.7cm x 1.8cm
Medium: Softwood

This work consists of a (miniature wooden canoe, paddle and thrust). These objects are meant for shrines and altars of Olokun. The canoe (Oko) in particular symbolizes

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the medium of transportation, from the physical to the spirit world, while the paddle (Obele) and Thrust (Asa) merely help the canoe to move along the waters. Symbolically, the boat is used for storage of goods for the Igbakhuan (a spirit child) once the boat is full, the child gives up the ghost in the physical world, but journeys along the spirit world with its goods and properties.

6. Amaze Okpia Ube Okhuo



Plate 8: Amaze Okpia Ube Okhuo,
Medium: Softwood, Size: 18.5cm x
2.3cm, Female: 17.8cm x 2cm

Amaze Okpia Ube Okhuo consists of a pair of painted wooden figures; male and female. The statues were painted in red and black colours. The male figure is depicted with no obvious grooves except for the chest region, neck and face, while the female figure have prominent grooves below the navel which suggests the vagina and also on the upper part to mark out the breasts. It was more colourfully painted than the male figure. It can be used to bring a couple together in love or sever the relationship. It depends on the dilemma they are faced with. It is used for love charm. Other Amaze can be used but it is a matter of choice between Obue, Ulakpa or Orhue, as well as Erhan. Amaze Obue is usually produced on demand. They represent pregnant or nursing mothers. They are usually bigger than those of Ulakpa and Orhue. The male and female figures known as separation candle made in wax is imported from other places and not made in Benin. It is strictly for separation of spiritual husband or wife as the case may be.

7. Ema Ne'khere



Plate 9: Title: Ema Ne'khere,
Medium: Bamboo and Plastic Fabric, Size: 15.5cm x
2.5cm

The work consists of a small drum and a canopy made from Bamboo and plastic fabric. The plastic material was stretched over the top opening of the bamboo. These drums were formally designed with wood bark and animal skin, but later the crafts men devised improvised materials that are simple and can easily be found in the environment. Ema Ne'khere serves both spiritual and secular purposes. It is used as an altar piece and also in merry making. When used to make melody. It signifies spiritual dance. The drum is used in praise and honor of the patron diety.

8. Akhe Ame ne'khore or Ovia'khe



Plate 10: Title: Akhe Ame ne'khore or
Ovia'khe
Medium: Terra cotta, Size: 18.2cm
(Diameter)

Akhe Ame ne'khore or Ovia'khe is a sacrificial pot used for the worship of Olokun. It is used for storing medicinal liquids and other ingredients

9. Ukuse



Plate 11: Title: Ukuse
Medium: Calabash, Yarn and Plant seeds/beads

Ukuse is a roped calabash with beads. It is a percussion instrument used in the Olokun ritual performance.

10. Egogo nekhere



Plate 12: Title: Egogo nekhere
Medium: Bronze, Size: 14cm x
11cm (Diameter)

Egogo nekhere is a bronze bell used for ritual performances in sacred altars.

11. Ada Ube Eben nekhere



Plate 13: Title: Ada Ube Eben nekhere
Medium: Bronze, Size: Ada 17.3cm x
2cm, Eben 17cm x 2.7cm

These are Royal swords which could also be used in performing rituals.

Summary and Conclusion

The tradition of apothecary is still alive in Benin City. The need for medication is still as dire, if not more in demand in this era. The bustle in the traditional markets of Oliha, Oba market and Ekiosa market, refutes the idea or thought that the tradition has become moribund. It is even more prevalent at this time more than ever before. It is not going away. People are still seen by Ogba riverside sacrificing to their gods.

The markets in turn have become more sophisticated in their approach at packaging. They stock drinks as well as other snacks for Olokun worship and some of these items are wrapped up together to make them handy. Kemwin-kemwin shops are advertised online too.

The production process of these little sculptures of kemwin-kemwin artists, may not be as detailed. In the past much attention was not given to some of the subjects because they are not made to last. The sculpture, of amaze is an example because it may be thrown into the river. This action will make it disintegrate due to the material used, even though a certain volume of water is added to enhance its malleability in the production process. An amaze sculpture can be produced in seconds. A sizeable lump is made on the palm of the hand for the torso; a smaller lump is rolled up for the arms and attached to the body. The breasts are attached with two small protruding lumps for the female, while such lump is attached as fallows for the male figure. A broomstick is used to punch in the eyes for both the male and female figures, while the female has an extra that should be a navel but unfortunately, represents the vagina. The women sculpt these pieces in their hundreds in the morning of any dry day. They allow them to dry before sending them off by the next day for distributions and sales.

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It is observed that most of the wooden sculptures are given added beauty with red, black, green, on white paint, but they are not decorative objects. They are items of reliquary that are used for sacrifice in ritual performances. The users of these items usually make their choices in obtaining any of the laterite, clay, kaolin, wood or wax, sculptures. This depends on its function in the ritual process. Although beauty plays a role in their choice, it is not relevant to the ritualistic purpose.

Looking at the sculptures of amaze (Laterite), one is reminded of the ancient western sculpture, the Venus of Willendorf, which forms are indicative of the female torso, especially the ones that are produced in the form of pregnant women.

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