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YORUBA TRADITIONAL ART: SYMBOLISM AND INTERPRETATION

Moses Fowowe

> Art is the best indication of what a culture thinks about itself, what value it places upon man and his acts. It reflects beliefs and values. In the absence of other documentation. . . particularly the written word, it is often all we have to reconstruct the substance and not just the sequence of the past (Roy Sieber, 1973)

Much has been said and written on African art. Most of what we have is in the area of ethnological studies and art history. In fact, anthropologists and art historians, who seem to have had unchallenged monopolies in this area, have written quite a great deal on African art. A number of authoritative sources on African art are in the area of sculpture. Most students of African art seem to have left the world in no doubt, at least from the data available, that sculpture is the only authentic art the Africans produce, and as the major contribution Africa has made to the progress of world art and culture (Frank Willett, 1981). This, I think, does not seem to be the true position of the artistic tradition in the continent. This age-old, a priori judgment seems to have raised important cultural, aesthetic, and educational problems. One of the problems is lack of indepth research in other areas of artistic traditions of the people, hence a paucity of authoritative sources in these areas. In order to find solutions to some of these problems, I have embarked on a research project designed to investigate the origins, growth, and development of traditional pottery in Southern Nigeria. This main purpose of my research is to investigate the aesthetic meanings of this pottery form. For the purpose of this paper, however, I shall base my discourse primarily on the concept of symbolism in art among the Yoruba-speaking people of south-western Nigeria, since this is one of the key issues I shall be addressing in my research project. Although this paper will cover a broad spectrum of tribal art in Yorubaland, greater emphasis will be placed on traditional pottery.

Before I go into the discussion of the traditional art of the people, I shall state briefly their background history. This, I think, will enable us to have a much clearer view of their art traditions. Many stories had been told about the origins of the Yoruba (Johnson, 1921), but none of these stories has, until now, been fully accepted as an authentic account of the origins of these people. Nonetheless, it is generally believed that the ancestors of the Yoruba, under their leader Odua (later called Oduduwa), came from Arabia (William Fagg, 1983) and settled at a place named Ile-Ife. According to oral history, Oduduwa had sixteen children. Each of them became a natural ruler in different parts of Yorubaland on the death of Oduduwa (J.S. Eades, 1980; J.D.Y. Peel, 1983).

The pattern of settlement, expansion and integration of the Yoruba witnessed a long period of strife, tribal and inter-tribal wars, details of which, I think, are beyond the scope of this short paper. As J.S. Eades has put it, "The Yoruba form one of the largest cultural and linguistic groups in West Africa, numbering about fifteen million. They form the bulk of the population

of five of Nigerian's nineteen states, and they extend into the neighbouring countries of Benin and Togo. In the present century, a large number of the Yoruba migrants, particularly traders, have settled throughout West Africa" (Eades, 1980, 1). Today, most Yoruba live in the south-western part of Nigeria. "The area they now occupy extends from Ondo state in the east to Oyo, Ogun, Lagos and southeastern part of Kwara states. In the northwest, it extends across Benin Republic into central Togo. The main neighbours of the Yoruba are the Edo, Igbo, Igbira and Igala to the east, the Nupe and Bariba to the north, and the Fon, Mahi, Egun, and other Ewe-speaking group to the west" (Eades, 1980, 1).

Pottery, unlike painting, sculpture, dance, music and architecture, seems never to have been recognized as art, but rather as craft, especially in the West. When treated as art at all, philosophers and aestheticians are somehow reluctant to call pottery a pure art, probably because of the classification which artifacts have been subjected to by Western theorists. What is the implication of this for art education in a society that does not believe in the conpartmentalization of art?

In a society where art is not treated as separate from life, art possesses pervasive symbolic meanings. These symbolic meanings cover a broad spectrum of Yoruba traditional art. But my major concern as a professional potter, art educator and researcher is to investigate the symbolic meanings pottery has in the Yoruba traditional society, and to examine their implications for art education in that society. Professor Robert Farris Thompson of Yale University (an authority in the studies of Yoruba traditional art), in a study of the work of a traditional potter called Abatan, a master potter in Oke-Odan, Nigeria, has shown how Yoruba's beliefs in the cult of the ancestors are vigorously interpreted in their art media. Eyinle, according to Professor Thompson, was a local god, believed to be one of the pantheon of Yoruba gods and goddesses.Eyinle was a man; but he lived a heroic life. After his death, he was deified as a god. He is worshipped by the members of the Eyinle cult. The pottery used in the worship of this god is built by Abatan, and only the members of the cult can use the pottery.

Eyinle's pot is a fairly small pot, with a lid decorated with tiny figurative symbols. These symbols have specific meanings. The symbolic nature of Abatan's pottery lies in its ritualistic function, that is, in the worship of Eyinle. As Thompson has presented the story, Eyinle seems to belong to the hierarchy of the Yoruba deities. Thompson's reference to crown 'Ade', which Abatan uses as a decorative symbol with reference to Eyinle, seems to suggest that Eyinle was a king in Yorubaland. As Thompson has indicated, there were three versions of the story of the legendary Eyinle. One version said he was a farmer (Thompson, 1973, p.136). Another said he was a herbalist at Ile-Ife (Thompson, 1973, p. 137). And yet another said he changed to a stone, and married a woman named 'Oten'. She became his queen. And as Thompson has put it, "her face was compared in praises to the countenance of 'Ogun', the god of war and iron" (Thompson, 1973, p. 145). From these stories, it can be reasonably concluded that Eyinle did not wear a crown at any time in his life. In Yorubaland, crowns are worn by kings 'Oba Alade', who are descendants of Oduduwa, the progenitor of the Yoruba (Eades, 1980 p. 6). The symbolic use of the crown by the potter could, therefore, be due to her intuition. Nonetheless, what is of concern to us here is the significance of this art to traditional

Yoruba religion. Thompson stated that Abatan's pottery was used in the worship of Eyinle. Some important questions arise here: of what importance is the metamorphosis of this legendary man to the Yoruba? Why worship a man who had lived like any other person? From the beginning of time, the Yoruba believed (they still hold this belief strongly) in honoring their dead heroes and heroines, or ancestors. Before some of these ancestors died, they usually handed down instructions to their children, or the entire members of the family lineage concerning what they should do in remembrance of them. Such instructions were never taken lightly, for a failure to keep, or honor the filial duty would be seen by the members of the traditional society as a mark of disrespect to the dead. This could spell doom for the members of the family lineage. This sums up the totality of the importance of ancestor worship among the Yoruba. Again, ancestor worship among the Yoruba can be looked at from another angle; the Yoruba believe in life after death. Festivals are held in memory of the dead with symbolic objects, some of which could be an effigy of the dead. During the period of the ceremony, these objects become objects of worship, or ceremonial symbols. This is one of the main functions Abatan's pottery has served. As Thompson has observed, the "Awo Ota Eyinle was carried around, well balanced on the head by one of the worshippers in a dance in honor of Eyinle during the celebration of the feast." The importance of Abatan's pottery further lies in its religious use. Thompson states that the 'Awo Ota Eyinle' is owned by individual members of the Eyinle cult, and as a rule, one fluvial stone must be put in the 'Awo' once a year. The belief, according to Thompson, is that the stones bear children every year (Thompson, 1973, p. 140). The importance of this seems to lie in Yoruba's strong belief in procreation (Peel, 1983, p. 27), even though Thompson has classified the significance into four categories (Thompson, 1973, p. 141). The Yoruba place high value on a large family, and this is one important factor that has made the institution of marriage of great significance among the people. The idea of increase in 'stones' seems to suggest Yoruba's great love for children, and their willingness to have as many children as it is biologically possible to have.

Yet another symbolic nature of the Eyinle cult is its initiation ceremony. Although traditional religion and Christianity are two separate doctrines, the call to membership and worship of Eyinle could be compared to God's call to Abraham (Genesis 12: 1-3; 17: 1-6). A pragmatic demonstration of this was reference to 'sand' which God compared to the number of Abraham's children. It is the same philosophy which the Eyinle worshippers seem to have shared. The word 'sand' has a symbolic meaning for them. It suggests the endlessness of the believer's family lineage. In further illustrating the symbolism of Abatan's pottery Thompson states that "the water in the vessel suggests the primordial stream. . . The vessel closes the river. It brings the power of the river and the sea to the hearth" (Thompson, 1973, p. 137). This interpretation appears plausible, but a more logical conclusion can be drawn from the main thesis. The vessel held the water. Water is considered as one of the essentials of life. As an object for the storage of this item, pottery plays a significant role which seems to step beyond the boundary of mere domestic satisfaction.

The introduction of Christianity to the country by the middle of the 19th century by the Church Missionary Society, and the spread of this religion to many parts of Yorubaland seem to have reduced some of the values of tradi-

tional art and customs of the people. According to Beier, "The missionary. . . played an important role in undermining local values, and this contributes towards the decline of traditional art" (Beier, 1968, p. 7). Traditional art absorbed this challenge for a long period of time, but this almost resulted in its total collapse. Commenting on the destructive stance of early Christian mission, Thompson noted: "The Reverend Henry Townsend may have destroyed the figurative lid to a vessel at Oshiele. . ." (Thompson, 1973, p. 124). One conclusion that can be drawn from this is that the traditional art of the Yoruba had passed through a trying period. But it did not give way completely to the assault of the Christian faith. Nonetheless, its influence on the members of the society seems to have waned. But as a tradition of the people it has not died as William Fagg seems to have suggested.

As a people, the Yoruba have a living tradition. This tradition finds expression in the symbolic art which they produce. Nevertheless, the Christian faith and the Islamic religion, both of which have gained wide acceptance among the Yoruba since the turn of the century, seem to be threatening the continued existence of this ancient tradition. However, the few traditional believers scattered in different parts of Yorubaland are proof that the tradition is still very much alive. In order for that art tradition to live , and for the culture to survive the influence of imported religions, the average Yoruba man must seek to go back to the fountain-head and re-establish a mutual relationship with the traditional culture that was a vital force in the lives of his ancestors.

One might ask: Of what importance is this study to art education? I think art education has an important role to play here. "Education," according to Webster's New World Dictionary, is "the process of training and developing knowledge." Knowledge of what? Is it the knowledge of things known it develops, or the knowledge of things unknown, or both of them? Things that we know about, and see around us, do not create as much a problem for us as those things outside our immediate experience. Even then, experience not properly rooted in the true knowledge of a particular phenomenon can be misleading and dangerous. Isn't it this imbalance true art education is supposed to correct? If we can find meaningful answers to the few questions I have raised so far in this paper, then the need for this study becomes obvious. The study of traditional pottery is a challenge to true aesthetic education.

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