

Striving for Sustainability: Tangible Art and Cultural Signifiers in Africa Literature

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ABSTRACT

Art and culture in forms of body adornment, household objects and furnishings, metallurgy as well as creative artistry portrays a people's social, political, economic and religious life. African artistic cosmology is part of the context of African literary texts as Literature is the representation of life. This paper examines African hair coiffures of varied styles and hair wears, costumes of assorted textiles, animal skin, beads worn as crowns, necklaces and bracelets, forged metal bands or anklets, circlet of *jigida* beads worn along the waistline by females, body masking, artistic embellishments on door and walls, interior furnishing items located in the homes and public or ritual places like shrine, pottery, horns of animals, raffia, rafters and iron or bronze objects as they are presented in some selected African literary texts. It also canvasses for re-orientation and attitudinal change of Africans in the promotion of their art if its sustainability must be achieved in our societies today.

Keywords: Metallurgy, hair coiffures, household and furnishing objects.

INTRODUCTION

Africans are known by their body adornment of costumes of assorted textiles, painted designs on the body, forged metal bands and anklets, lines of circlet along the waistline worn by the females, beads of assorted types as crowns, necklace, earrings or bracelets. The bead materials are mostly royal costumes and often royalty is complemented with george materials, leopard skin, red caps and eagle feather etc. Female Africans carry hair coiffures in varied styles and these varied hair styles are sometimes decorated with

beads to add to the beauty of these women. This body adornment as part of the culture of a people is their cultural identity.

Artistic embellishment including paintings on walls and items of furnishing chip-carved doors and panels which adorn the family entrances of the houses of rich people or palaces which [1] in his "Art in the Culture of Igboland" points out that they communicate to the passerby the high status of a man who owns the compound and also represent parts of a people's architecture and arts.

Interior furnishing items inside the house; some in the house of the family head that assert the social and ritual presence and house of the women and children are part of art and culture of Africans too. These embellishments portray the beliefs of the people like the images of natural objects in the forms of the crescent or full moon, the star and images of some living creatures that serve as an emblem of a tribe, clan or family (totems) also represent part of the people's arts.

Assorted types of clay pots used for cooking, serving foods as plates, for storing water, wine or oil, for musical

reinforce their male-associated functions like *Ikenga*, *chi*, shrines and some in the instruments and for decoration of shrines are parts of Africans' artistic works. Calabash of different sizes and shapes which are used as cups, bowls, containers of wine, lamp stand, musical instruments, costumes for religious and ritual activities are among the representation of the Africans' artistic works.



Fig 1: Pottery and calabash of different sizes used to decorative shrines

Other decorative art works kept in houses like horns of animals, mats or local fans made from raffia, brooms, varieties of baskets for different purposes in the



Fig 2: Pottery used as water containers

house, bamboo bronze materials got from art and metallurgy used as war equipment

and among the art and culture of Beds chairs and tables, palm frond and grass for roofing materials, iron and farm implements are all products that reveal the people's art and culture. Masks (male and female) which [1] posits as artistic representation of incarnation of mysterious forces and potent spirit forces that are achieved through costumes are These mask costumes which are either portent symbols of carved animal forms such as lion, snake, elephant, eagle, deer, antelope etc. The different artistic objects like knives or *oji* or chieftaincy fans the masquerades use to make gesture at the people and the ones they wear on their

African art and culture also incorporates metallurgy or metal and bronze works. Many iron/metal/bronze works produced by blacksmiths are for the people for war arms and ammunition as well as their farm implements. Some of the metal works sometimes in the past served as a means of exchange (money) while some according to [1] formed the foundation of Igbo civilization. Africans also have talented artists like traditional poets, lyrists, orators, drummers, flutists, and

The people's social, political, economic and religious life therefore cease to be what it is supposed to be; instead they have fragmented cultural identity. This

Africans.

sharp metal studded on clothes or raffia are arranged in tiers or traditionally woven clothes; the headdresses of the masquerades are also of different tiers or levels. These tiers are made of legs to engage in dance movements like *izere* or *izaga* are all Africans' artistic objects that make the masks depict the prestige, the social and economic prosperity of the town or communities they come from

other performance artists who perform during their festivals or public activities. These artists and artistic objects are context and enriching to African literary works because literature is representation of life.

Some of these prestigious diversities of African art and culture instead of being promoted and improved by Africans for the development of Africa are discarded for western art and culture.

paper identifies the signifiers of art and culture in some selected African literary texts, ascertains the writers' application of literary tools in expressing African art

and culture in their literary works, and highlights factors of sustenance of African art and culture because it is our identity. The study ascertains that Africans should be made to understand that no amount of acculturation, naturalization, indoctrination or assimilation of the western cultures will make them cease from being Africans therefore they have no option than to join the literary artists in re-emphasizing and strengthening the importance and sustenance of art as an important part of their cultural identity.

[2], in his "Issues in the Study of Literary Theory in Africa" (1992) posits that literary theory deals with issues such as the meaning of literature, approaches to literary criticism, literary history, literary influences and reception, literary production and consumption. He further stresses that literary criticism deals with the practical explication of literary texts and examines the various critical modes (perspectives) through which it is possible for texts to be given several meaning which do not essentially invalidate one another. Therefore the literary theory adopted in this study is Textual Analytical Approach to literary criticism which its

Tangible Art and Culture in the Selected African Literary Texts through Festival Theatre and Ritual

As one reads African literary works, one would identify a lot of signifiers of African art and culture. [4], in his 'Women

principal aim is to view the literary texts as a 'structure of meaning', to describe not only *what* the texts mean but also *how* the meaning is derived.

The 'theory' of textual analysis hypothesizes that the meaning of a text is inherent *in* each individual text, and that this meaning can be perceived through so-called "close reading" or close attention to the formal and technical aspects of a text. [3], in his *Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*, opines that Textual studies analyze and interpret as 'text' any cultural artifact produced by human beings, be it the high fashion products, sculptures, music, hairstyle, holidays, clothes, household furnishings etc. With this regards, this study considers the extent to which and the ways in which the art and culture of the people of different literary, cultural and social historical periods are presented as backgrounds for understanding the texts. The incorporation of African cultural artifacts of different types gives the necessary skills to analyze and interpret the selected literary texts. This theory, Textual Analysis as a theory is therefore very relevant to this study.

and Masquerade Tradition in Idoma Indigenous Theatre' opines that theater is a culture. Paulina [3], in her "Expanding the Performance Area: [3], points out that modern day theatre has been restricted to a particular building or arena but it has

moved beyond the four walls of a building and if given necessary attention, it can retrace its steps to the village squares, streets, markets places, town halls and other unconventional places where it could make possible impacts on the people. She further stresses that theatre as an art form naturally concentrates on human problems and aspirations and it is used as an important tool of civic and social value. Theatre is therefore an artistic institution where people gather to promote and learn their culture.

[5], in his "Festival, Ritual and Drama in Africa" posits that in many African communities, the foremost indigenous cultural and artistic institution is the festival and festivals are sprawling multimedia occasions incorporating diverse forms such as singing, dancing, drama, drumming, masking, miming, puppetry, with episodes of theoretical enactments ranging from the sacred and secretive to the secular and public. [4], further stresses that masquerade is a material culture and masquerade performance is an art that is practiced in many parts of the world and differences in history, environment, philosophy and cultural orientation, masquerade tradition differ from one part of the Africa to another. Masquerades carry hand fans, metal staff or *oji* as they perform and these add to their aesthetics of their performance.

Masked spirits or masquerades are represented in [6], novels as the ancestral spirits, therefore, the masquerade cult is treated with honour, "the ancestors of the clan who had been committed to Mother Earth at their death emerged again as *egwugwu* through the ant-holes" (*Things Fall Apart*, 116). It is mostly a masculine cult in most parts of Africa and demands a lot of initiation rites before a man becomes a member. Masquerade performance is generally viewed as strictly for entertainment but in most parts of Igbo traditional society, masquerade performance is for other deep cultural meanings. The masquerade cult is seen as an institution where social and moral mannerism is inculcated to the people and that is why the masked spirits serve as the highest judicial body and social control of the people. It also portrays the aesthetics of the people's work of art. The masquerades try cases and apportion punishments to offenders of the people's set rules and laws. This is depicted in [6], in the case of the judgment of the case between Uzowulu and his wife in which he beats her until she lost her pregnancy and his wife's brothers beat him up to stupor. After hearing from both parties, the *egwugwu*, after some dramatic display, passed the verdict and the case ended. [7] in her "Indigenous Art Performance and Igbo worldview in Nigerian Literature" stresses that the undisputable verdict of the

egwugwu proves that it is the highest court in the land. [7], also points out that the aesthetic performance of the *egwugwu* gives the people great joy, fulfillment and excitement. The decorations of different colours and patterns, its agility as it jumps up at regular intervals after walking few steps, its staff of authority raised in different directions, the poetic chants and praise songs bring a lot of honour and admiration from the audience and this is seen at the burial and funeral of Ezendu presented in *Things Fall Apart*. Also, in [6], Emenike's age group displayed a lot of art performances in honour of their departed comrade. The announcement of the death of Ezendu by *ekwe* the talking drum, the tempo and variation pattern of the crescendo of the talking drum, the dancing performance of *egwugwu* masquerades in *Things Fall Apart*, the glamorous dancing of the warriors during burial of their age mates, the dancing steps of women and children to the music of the men playing drums and flutes and the melodious poetic chants during Emenike's burial and funeral ceremonies in *The Concubine* are the people's cultural heritage that make life meaningful in Igbo/African society.

Painting or engraving artistic objects on walls and entrances to royal palaces is

also widespread in African culture. Most of the objects painted are nature objects, cosmic objects and animals who are mostly worshipped as the sacred representation of the people's ancestors. These paintings are not only evidence of the belief of Africans in deified of cosmic and other objects of nature but also the historical records of African art and culture which are context of African literary works. In [6], such drawings and paintings on walls are seen on the temples of masquerades and they are done by women under the supervision of men because the masquerade *egwugwu* is a masculine cult: "The *egwugwu* house into which they emerge faced the forest, away from the crowd, who see only the back with many coloured patterns and drawings done specifically by chosen women at regular intervals" (63). These drawings are mostly totem or revered symbols of the deities or ancestral gods of the people which give them inspiration and also remind them of their protective powers. Some of the drawing patterns are also images of cosmic objects, the sun, moon and stars, which revered and worshiped as gods in African culture because the people see the cosmic objects as sources of life and inspiration.



Fig 3: African architecture and arts, paintings on wall; Source: Dept of Fine and Applied Art UNN.

Africans also use many items for beautification. These artistic objects make them look beautiful and attractive. Men and children use these beautification items but they are mostly used by women. Some of these beautification items are designs painted on the body and dyeing some part of the body. Some of these paintings are mostly done during ceremonies. The Hausa, Nupes and Fulanis of Nigerian for instance dye their feet and left palm. The face receives more attention and the different designs depict the part of Africa the person comes from. Hands and hairdo (hair styles) add beauty to people's look. Africans have different styles of hairdo. These include plaiting, weaving, pleating. Beads and cowries are



Fig 4: Painting on walls of prominent people of a typical traditional Igbo village in South Eastern Nigeria

used by different Africans in decorating the hair. This beautification is one of the criteria for recognizing princes and princesses or other members of the royal palace like the palace guards. This is represented in [8], when Rikku identified Princess Kantuma and how influential she is just at first sight because of how she is dressed, "... she was dressed in oriental fashion, with glittering bracelets on her slender wrists and something like a crown on her head" (86). Embroidery or decorative stitches made on cloth to make it look beautiful are also used by Africans and it adds to their aesthetics. Different parts of Africa have different types of embroidery and the embroidery is a form of their cultural identity.



Fig 5: Beads used as beautification by some Kings and Queens in Africa



Fig 6: Beads used for Beautification by some Elders and Title Holders in African

Ojuju Calabar. Film Directed by Ekenna Igwe (2015)

Sources: Diamond Kingdom. Film Directed by Emeka Jonathan (2014) and

Some of the artistic objects used for aesthetics in the theatre and ritual, are sculptural objects made from bronze, iron, copper and gold. Blacksmithing or

the production of iron/bronze/gold objects is a noble work in Africa. The mastery of the art of metallurgy according to [1], is well certified in African

cosmology and of all forms of African art, the earliest known in the production of iron/bronze work. The bronze objects like altar stands, roped pots, bowls pendants of elephant heads, ram heads, leopard heads, python and human heads etc. They are also part of royal and ancestral treasures. [1], also points out that these bronze objects are used for symbols which are a shared feature by other forms of art. Chinua Achebe in support of this points out in his [9], that the snake-python is sacred in Igbo and has important links with Igbo cosmology. Achebe therefore incorporated this snake-python in his [10] for the development of the central theme of the novel. The snake-python is a totem, a revered symbol of a valuable god, Idemili, which is described as 'Pillar of Water' in Umuaro. 'As the pillar of this house holds the roof so does Idemili hold the up the raincloud in the sky so that it does not fall down' (41). The central theme of the novel, Arrow of God is power tussle between Ezeulu and Ezidemili as well as between Ulu and Idemili deities. The two priests are driven by the desire to have power. The drama and tension the priests display in the novel help in the development of the novel to its tragic end. Also in [11], the photograph on the front cover shows part of Epa mask surmounted by a figure of a warrior on horseback. This is a symbol of evoking the mystery and ritual of Yoruba

life, a world of the living, the dead and the unborn.

Even though no other occupation is seen as so noble as blacksmithing in Africa, it is also a hard and stressful job. It is such a lucrative job because kings, rich people in the society and women patronize the blacksmith especially during festivals to transfer their gold into trinkets. One of the things that make blacksmithing the most noble of all other works in Africa is that the goldsmiths employ praise singers for their works and they chant their praises as they do the work. The chanting of their ancestral names and deeds gives them strength for the hard work. [12], in his *The African Child* puts it

Of all the different kinds of work my father performed, none fascinated me so much as his skill with gold. No other occupation was so noble, no other needed such a delicate touch, moreover, this sort of work was always a kind of festival. It was a real festival that broke the monotony of ordinary working day (22).

They would request the services of an official praise singer... The praise singer would install himself in the workshop, tune up his cora, which is our harp and

would begin to sing my
father praises (23).

he shaves off hairs from his
left arm with it (29).

These artistic objects made by blacksmiths and sculptors are presented by,[13] in *The Great Ponds* when he describes the small room Olumba, the great warrior of Chiolu keeps for his *ikenga* - his personal god, his other gods and powerful charms that protects him and his family. This small room adjoining his reception was specially constructed to house "costly images of gods and powerful charms" (28). The artistic objects as war equipments are also presented when Olumba and his group of warriors are preparing to fight with the people of Alikoro in order to claim their ownership of the Great Ponds.

He (Olumba) was not much worried because his quivers were always full of arrows and his knife sharp... he felt he ought to use the family fighting knife, The knife was many generations old and had beautiful designs on it, There was no sign of rust on it in spite of its great age, There were only two types in the whole village, Eze Diali had the other. Olumba sharpened the knife carefully and nodded for satisfaction as

African's body adornment of costumes of assorted textiles especially of the royal costumes is represented in [13]. This is seen when the *Eze* (kings) of eight communities of Ezekwi clan gathered together at Isiali for a peace talk over the war between Chiolu and Alikoro for the rightful owners of the Great Ponds. The royal regalia of the eight kings depict the richness and aesthetics of African art and culture. This is seen in Amadi's description of the king of Omokachi:

Eze Wosu of Omokachi was perhaps the most richly dressed. The colours of his wrapper dazzled the eyes. One woman said: "Eze Wosu's wrapper should provide enough bride price for four wives." Massive rings of gold graced the Eze's ten fingers... Eze Wosu's walking stick was a real wonder. The gold head was so intricately worked that it defied description... Wosu's hat was tall and charcoal-black. The eagle feather gracing it needed no explanation (83).

Carved works are also used for household items. Mortar and Pestle used for crushing, pounding and grinding food are

examples of these carved works. Basket which is a functional art used for storing things are produced in Africa. Mats are also produced in different parts of Africa. These baskets are of various sizes and shapes and are used for carrying farm implements and food items. Some fanciful ones are used for storing of jewelry and cloths. Mats are also of different sizes and shapes and are used for decorations especially in royal palaces.

African Writers Application of Literary Tools in Expressing their Art and Culture in the Selected Texts.

A lot of elements used in interpretation and appreciation of the African art and culture in African works enhance the better understanding of the works. These elements include diction, syntax, imagery, figurative language in form of symbol and metaphor, the sound effect words, like alliteration, assonance, rhyme, rhythm, repetition, onomatopoeia, ambiguity, allusion, hyperbole and formal pattern of the organization of the selected texts.

The authors of these selected works through diction and syntax represent art and culture using "the best words in the best order". To know what a word means is necessary in interpreting any work of art but it is more important to understand what the words imply or suggest, thus the denotation or dictionary meaning of the words of the authors used are important but the connotation which far outstrips

the dictionary meaning of the words is more important in evaluating the representation of art and culture in the selected texts. This is because creative writers often hint indirectly at more than words directly state. Syntax is an important element in literary evaluation because the arrangement of words in a sentence, phrase or clause conveys meaning and feeling. The authors' arrangement of words guides the readers' mind in the production of thought and these words are explored by the readers in interpreting the meaning of the whole text because of the ambiguity of language. The writers also achieve enriching their literary works with art and culture through creating these artists who make maximum use of all visual and musical resources at their disposal including linguistic and paralinguistic resources. Kofi Yankson [14], points out that the drum is the most popular instrument of communication among the same language community. He further stresses that the drum's signal is a direct transfer of the tonal features of the African vernacular into a musical medium and a mere knowledge of one's language does not guarantee an understanding of the drum language rather it has to be learnt. It is *ekwe* that was played at dawn to announce to all the villages the death of Ezendu, one of the great men of Umuofia. The crescendo of the drum or *ekwe* and the message conveyed are achieved

because of the perfection of the drummer as an artist. The masquerade *egwugwu* employs a lot of gestures which is an expression of the minds of the ancestors to the people to instigate fear and respect for them. The ritual staffs of the masquerades and kings also communicate a lot of messages to the people. These messages accompany the verbal because as it is their staff of authority or office. The royal kings in *The Great Ponds* carry this staffs to their meetings.

The writers use a lot of metaphors in expressing the accouterments or the dressings of the traditional art performers or the kings that distinguish them from other people in the selected literary texts. This is because in the literary sense, literature is language applied to creativity. These metaphors help to make the language speak to the readers. The language of Elechi Amadi in *The Great Ponds* is to represent the appearance of the Eze Wosu of Omokachi as most richly dressed: "The colours of his wrapper dazzled the eyes and one woman saying that Eze Wosu's wrapper should provide enough bride price four wives" (83) are all to highlight the wealth of the king. This is also the use of imagery because literature is grounded in concrete and specific details that stimulate the senses of the readers. Amadi uses visual imagery to give the readers the concept of Eze Wosu's wealth. He also uses the images of Ikenga, charms and shrine to depict how

powerful Olumba is as the great warrior of the people of Chiolu.

These literary devices the authors of the selected literary texts under this study used in representing African art and culture in their works to enrich the textuality of the texts. The devices help in the interpretation of the texts and also encourage the readers to go back over a line or even a page they have missed or misread to recover essential pieces of memory. This is because the more people understand that beyond the lines and pages of a literary work, a bigger story is unfolding, the more productive critics become.

Factors that have Reduced the Significance of Some of the Diversities of African Art and Culture

Factors like education, impact of foreign religion, urbanization, societal rating etc have reduced the significance of some of the arts like traditional singers or bards, some of the artistic objects and body adornment. Those that are uneducated for instance feel inferior and the educated do not want to associate with what they think are uncivilized practices. Less and less people want to be linked with some festivals that involve oral artists. For those who go to watch them, no matter how much they admire them, none of them want their children take into that. The colonizers introduced hegemonic system of education in a way of brain washing the colonized; in form of making

them hate their language. In the history of some African countries for instance, the European colonizers termed it abomination for African's language be spoken in schools in order to enhance their own languages. Their tricks help in making Africans think that some of their performing arts are uncivilized. Most Africans also prefer dressing like the Europeans than the African way. This attitude makes them to look down on the accouterments or the dressings of the traditional art performers that distinguish them from other performers.

Many Africans who are linked with foreign religions do not want to be associated with oral poets or masquerade cults because of the prescription of foreign religion. Christianity and Islam for instance prescribe that those who indulge in traditional poetry (divination poetry), masquerades etc should not be associated with.

The migration to urban cities applies to both potential audiences and performers themselves. It also applies to potential members of masquerade cults and blacksmiths. These artists have lost their clients because of the depopulation of the countryside. The original credibility people used to give to some of these artists has also been lost due to societal rating. People wants to attend occasions they benefit from such as attending to politics than going to watch some of the performing artists. The mass media

produce programmes that are taken by the people to replace watching these performing artists thereby reducing the audience of the artists. Some people also prefer reading printed books and going into the internet, watching televisions than going to watch performing artists. These reduce the significance of these arts.

The Sustainability of African Art and Culture

Art and culture as earlier mentioned provide unifying aesthetics which is the craving of tourists; therefore, they should be preserved. There are many factors that enhance the sustenance of art and culture in Africa, Africans should be proud of their body adornment; our traditional outfits of assorted costumes which are worn during festivals, traditional marriage ceremonies, naming ceremonies or burial ceremonies. African traditional performers like traditional poets, dancing troupes, music masquerading etc should see their act as part of African heritage that should be allowed to exist with them. These arts should be transmitted from generation to generation through group learning. The younger generation of Africans should also participate in the celebration of festivals where these performing arts are performed in order to be acquainted with their culture and tradition. These festivals provide great opportunities for social interaction and a means of sustaining the arts. They bring people together in peace celebration and

this breaks the cords that bring disunity and destruction in a society. [15] in support of this in his *Igbo Mask: The Oneness of Ritual and Theatre* postulates: "By free association, through dance, musical performances, prayer with the person of gods and spirits of ancestors the society is rejuvenated. This promotes continuity" (37).

The ministry of Culture and Tourism of African nations should ensure that regular performances are undertaken in their countries. They should also encourage and facilitate the performances in their countries and abroad by organizing a form of cultural exchange programmes with other African countries. Such cultural exchange programmes will promote unity and peace among the participating countries as well as expose the participants to acquire new skills. This will also make it possible for the participants to learn new art forms by exploiting the benefits of a mixture of cultures.

The traditional artist, goldsmith, pottery, carving, painting, weaving, dyeing should be incorporated into primary and secondary school curriculum and also be taught in tertiary institutions so that the younger generation will learn them. If the younger generations acquire these skills at their tender age, the continuity of the skill will be sure. This will enhance the improvement on the artistic objects

produced because of the increase in technology. The governments of African nations should also organize cultural exhibitions in which African countries should showcase or exhibit their artistic objects. This will make individual countries to take the learning of these skills seriously. Their coming together in such exhibitions will promote development of their production. The art and culture of the participating countries will be enriched through blending with the positive aspects they learn from that of the other African countries.

There is a great need for documenting African architecture and embellishing arts, performing arts, body adornments and skills through media coverage like radio, television, Newspaper, magazines and other creative writings, audio and video recording and the internet. These promote continuity and opportunity for individuality and self centeredness of the modern age which are western orientation. African writers' incorporation of these tangible art and Culture signifiers in literary works to portray their belief system, customs and traditions should be promoted in creative writing. A good understanding of these tangible artistic elements is also a good understanding of Africa and Africans that produce them.

CONCLUSION

African nations like other nations of the world have artistic objects and performances that highlight their art and culture. Some of these objects and performances are neglected in these contemporary African societies and if the neglect continues, they may fade out completely. This research work depicts that this generation and the generation yet unborn depend on the knowledge of art and culture for the promotion of its continuity. Art is life and the ways of life of people are seen in their works of art. African art and culture as portrayed in

African literature in the form the traditional performing arts; music, song, dance, masquerade, poetic chants during festivals, naming and burial ceremonies prove that art and culture expose a culturally relevant situation. The analysis gives suggestions for continuity of these aspects of art and culture through transmission from generation to generation because being the people's heritage it has to be sustained. Sustaining it is sustaining the people's existence or their cultural identity.

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