

# Chapter Two:

## AFRICAN SCULPTURE IN TIME PERSPECTIVE: A FOCUS ON IGBO SCULPTURE

*Contributed by*

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### INTRODUCTION

**T**his study reveals the nature of African sculpture, over time focusing on Igbo sculpture. Sculpture has been referred to as an unbroken mass of work that contains the essential aesthetic idea and body, which is the relationship of solids and spaces that define each other. This space is displaced as the mark of traditional sculpture; rather, it is pieced and held in tension, since spaces and shapes form a complex of which the parts are, of course, interdependent, but not centred. The above may help one to explain the relationship between sculpture and architecture, which both share the principle of space and space organisation. Aniakor (1989, p. 48) succinctly explain that architecture has been referred to as the art of space organisation. Aniakor argues that this probably explains why other categories of art objects found in the African sub-region, such as sculpture, whether in wood, gold, ivory or bronze/brass and other forms, are grouped under the plastic arts, whereas architecture is described aptly as spatial arts.

The African continent, with a population of millions that is subdivided into several racial and linguistic groups, is a huge region in the globe. All African people have provided artists in various areas from prehistoric times till the present; the surviving sculptural pieces have evidenced this. Several archaeological sites collectively labelled Nok, however, have more precise radiocarbon dating of 500 BC-AD 200. These Nok (terracotta heads and figures of humans), the Igbo-ukwu among others, showed African sculpture before history. There are several records of works from different parts of Africa done by artists of different ages, which reveal the activities of different generations.

### **African Sculpture**

The art of the Africans (Negros) living south of the Sahara may be divided into two classes: The decoration of utilitarian objects, which is mainly non-religious, and the representation of figures, which has socio-cultural and religious attachments. For this study, the representation of figures (sculpture) is emphasised. The figure carvings and masks of West Africa and Congo are now recognised as important works of art. They represented supernatural beings, and their purpose was religious to be used in religious ceremonies and dances. Their markers never thought of them as isolated from this context, to be looked at simply as works of art.

Wood is the favourite medium of African sculpture, though ivory and horn are also used. The figures are and were always hewn out of a single block of wood with adze, knife and chisel; this helps to explain the stiff shape of some carvings since they have to fit the shape of the tree

trunk. Sometimes the tool marks are left visible, breaking up the surface into many small facets; sometimes the surface is scraped smooth and polished.

The art of modelling figures in clay is also widespread in West Africa, and pottery vases representing the dead are made in the upper Congo region. Modelling in clay is perhaps the most highly developed by the Igbo people of Nigeria, who fill their "Mbari" houses with vigorous figure scenes for special religious occasions. In parts of West Africa, bronze objects are cast from wax models. Wonderfully realistic portrait heads used to be made at Ife in southern Nigeria, and more stylised heads, figures and reliefs portray the court life of Benin City (Nigeria) as it was in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. In Ghana, the Ashanti made miniature brass figures and groups to use as gold weights; these give a vivid picture of their daily occupations. There is scarcely a stone sculpture today in Africa, but old soapstone carvings from Sierra Leone and Rhodesia and stone figures in southern Nigeria show that it was practised locally in ancient times.

In addition to sculpture in the round, there are many interesting examples of carving in relief on large wooden doors and house posts, ivory tusks, bowls and armlets in Nigeria. In northern Nigeria, intricate geometric patterns are modelled in relief on the walls of mud houses, and the Ashanti used to practice a similar art. Carved surface decoration is seen at its best in the beautiful wooden cups, boxes, pipes and other domestic objects found in the central Congo region.

Both the figures and masks generally serve religious and magical purposes. The figures are often believed to contain the souls of ancestors or other protective spirits, and offerings are made to them. However, sometimes they are merely symbols of gods, memorials of the dead, or naturalistic protective figures of chiefs. The small fetish figures of the Congo are believed to bring good luck or avert disease when treated with medicine, and they were sometimes used for divination. Masks are chiefly used by secret societies, and the wearers impersonate the spirit of good or evil in religious rites, which are held in honour of the dead, to promote the fertility of crops, or at the initiation ceremonies. Broadly, African sculpture does not aim at complete realism in the sense of accurate reproduction of natural form. At times, the artist does achieve realistic effects, as in some masks and figures from southern Nigeria and lower Congo, though none of these is comparable with the bronze of the Ife for fidelity to nature. In general, the treatment of human figures is governed not by the scientific study of anatomy but by traditional formulae of a more or less facial kind which differ from tribe to tribe. The natural shapes and proportions of the bodily features are modified and distorted in an endless variety of abstract forms. The head cases develop into unrecognisable abstract forms. The head, hands, and feet are often exaggerated, and the features of the face are reduced to symmetrical patterns. The effect of these arbitrary changes in the features of the sculpture may seem grotesque to our eyes, but the people who used them have familiar meanings. Though the tribal conventions were followed fairly closely by the artist, he felt free to express his individuality in matters of detail, and no two carvings are exactly alike. The result is that African sculpture shows an amazing richness of invention in this treatment of the human forms.

### **Igbo Sculpture**

The ancient Igbo sculptural concept was of a traditional people with representations of figures, worldly or divine, and on the whole of solid, massive human and animal forms. Apart from changes we have in sculpture in our time, the Igbo sculpture is all-embracing because it includes what may be described as "centripetal" by borrowing this concept from Herbert Ferber on "sculpture" 1954 since the sculpture lies at its centre. Ferber argues that in our time, however, this canon of tradition and taste has been overthrown, and sculpture has now become an art of

extension. It has become centrifugal, and in the work that he admires, its sculpture violates the centre. This revolution, as Ferber noted, has brought new life to an art which had been mired in tradition.

The Igbo monolithic sculptures express a representation of the animate world, man and animal, and, however transformed or transcended, they present the close forms of biological life as a source of sculptural forms. Though Westernisation has broken the tradition of holding the human or divine body as either sacred or inviolable, it has brought in a new era in the realm of art generally and sculpture specifically. Agreeing with Herbert Ferber's "On Sculpture" in 1954, Selz and Taylor (1968) state that in the new era, cubism fragmented the object in creating the work of art from its parts. The Bauhaus and the constructivists made a fetish of materials and logical structure. Surrealism and expressionism re-evoked the fantastic and non-rational. Ferber argues that "together they brought new forms and new subjects to an art which need no longer follow physiological channels; it can carry its strength through lines of forces" which are not necessarily enclosed in a biological envelope. Thus, contemporary sculpture has opened a new way, which marks a radical divergence from the old. The above is true of Western sculpture, which has been inspired by African abstract art and led to the advent of cubist art in the twentieth century. A good example of this is Pablo Picasso's work "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon", inspired by a mask from Gabon.

The ancient Igbo monolithic or centripetal sculpture seems to possess the idea of mass presence and continuous surface, enclosing a volume which is motivated from the centre. Ferber (1954) and Selz and Taylor (1968) argue that sculpture of extension, centrifugal sculpture, is neither massive nor monolithic, nor does it present a continuous surface; its elements are not oriented to a centre nor are they projections from a central mass. Ferber says that, where sculpture had been solid and closed, it is now an art of open, airy, discontinuous forms, suspended in space.

Igbo sculpture, like other African sculptures, represents art for life more than art for art's sake because art for art's sake begins where art for life stops. Igbo sculptures, like architecture, certainly organise space as well as the details of the organisation of space used daily by people in their social environment. Aniakor (1989, P.48) has noted that in this sense, the build-up environment, whether it refers to the village or town structure, is a product of the skilful organisation of space to express in one instance, a people's social ideals (Smith, 1939) and in another man's notion of reality (Riviera, 1954).

Igbo sculptural expressions in the round are the making of concrete representations of the spirit deity popularly known as "Alusi". Wood and mud are mostly used for this particular type of visual expression. The most popular Igbo art before this era was Mbari. Mbari means an enclosure where one or a series of gods are worshipped. It is a shrine, a wide palace built for gods. It was a common feature around the Owerri zone of Imo state. In some other parts of Igbo land, it is called "Okwu-Alusi". This place is erected under the supervision of the chief priest. Often, especially in Owerri, an oracle foresees the establishment of a Mbari in a community. It is erected when trouble occurs, for example, infant mortality, famine, high death rate, or poor harvest. The elders meet to consult an oracle or diviner who might say that some gods are displeased and need community attention. This means erecting an Mbari for the gods. The work demands that the gods be modelled and carved by the chosen artists. The most important thing here is the connectivity between art and religion; this is to say that religion in Igbo land was through art, mainly sculpture.

Other Igbo sculptures, which were for both religious and socio-cultural purposes, included: masks of different types, ancestral figures, and fetish figures, among others.

The masks were produced to enable the souls of the dead or the protective spirit of the village or society to make appearances in tangible and visible form, or for a dramatic representation of mythical actions. Masks may be made in such a way that they either cover the face or the head like a helmet, or again, they may be placed as a headdress upon the head. In addition to this, there are also masks which are not worn but are only venerated as sacred objects or in a miniature form, serve as badges of the societies and spirits. Masks are consecrated and imbued with power. They are inviolable, and doing them harm will be mortal danger. The moment the initiate conceals himself with the mask costume, he is no longer a human with limited powers. He is now imbued with divine power like an electric current pushing through his body. The dancer believes like a spirit speaking in a disguised voice and comes forth with a solemn gait, sometimes in stilts or a dynamic wailing dance to the exciting rhythm of drums, rattles, flutes and singing. In a nutshell, masks have important sociological, psychological and political functions, not least of which is that they reduce people's tension from time to time. In areas that have not developed strong centralised kingdoms, masks are important means of social control as well as the means of reinforcing the sense of group identity through initiation and cult of the ancestors.

### **The Ancestors Figure**

The ancestor's figure is a dignified and solemn symbol of the tribal hero imbued with power, or of the first mother of the tribe and the ultimate dwelling place of the tribal souls. It provides a link between man and god. Ancestors' figures have all kinds of special characteristics, the pattern of the tribal scars, coiffures and emblems. They must be made in such a way that they please the spirit and invite him to make his dwelling in the figure. If the first prayer is made to the spirit and sacrifices offered to him in the form of the blood of animals, kola nuts, wine or first fruits of the harvest, he takes part in the lives of the community. If the figure is imbued with power, it mediates fertility, riches and blessings of children and makes its advice known by certain signs.

### **Fetish Figures**

It is an object enriched with magic substances, usually of indeterminate form, manufactured and consecrated by the medicine man himself. It projects the person who calls upon it in every imaginable situation and from all dangers; some fetishes may be found with the features of the sacred tribal ancestors or a powerful and dynamic leader, and this can be counted as a work of sculpture.

This has been the ancient Igbo sculpture, but today, due to some influential factors, like geographical factor, political factor, social factor, religious factor and economic factor, there is a shift in both philosophy of sculpture production, sculpture media and utility (purpose). These factors are believed to have either ameliorated or strengthened our belief and socio-cultural activities and art itself.

### **Geographical Factor**

The geographical conditions here refer to the physical features of the earth's surface in terms of vegetation, natural habitation, and minerals, among others. This is the determinant of the sculpture media to be used for production, for instance deforestation has brought about scarcity of wood, discoveries and the emergence of polyester (fibreglass) has brought alternatives for sculpture production and media.

### **Political Factor**

In places whose leaders are patrons of art, especially sculpture, there is encouragement for sculpture production for environmental beautification. Where the leaders don't love sculpture, the production suffers. In Imo state, for example, some past leaders demolished many sculptural pieces, which included the "Ikenga" statue in the city of Owerri, while the present government seems to encourage sculpture.

### **Religious Factor**

Religion is an important condition for the production of sculpture. Some religions abhor the use of sculptural pieces in their worship, while others are in favour of it. Before the advent of Christianity in Igbo land, traditional religion was predominant, and there existed several sculptural pieces (icons) used by those religious to represent their deities.

### **Social Factor**

In every culture, just like in Igbo land, there exist social activities which is incomplete without sculpture. These social activities in Igbo land include Ekpe cult, masquerades, iriji, ofoala, and even Christmas, among others, dances which use different masks to entertain people.

### **Economic Factor**

It is a recognised fact that art can generally be developed and produced in high quality where patrons are willing to pay or patronise artworks. In an area with a viable economy, the tendency to patronise art, sculpture in particular, will be high, and where there is a depressed economy, the reverse will be the case. This is to say that the availability of money encourages the development of art. During the era of 419 (OBT in Nigeria), the production or creation of sculptural works was encouraged as a way of displaying affluence.

### **Conclusion**

This study on African sculpture from a time perspective, with a focus on Igbo sculpture, was to present the change in Igbo sculpture due to certain factors as time passed. The Igbo sculpture now propagated the modernist ideology of art for art's sake, presenting purely formalistic and aesthetic matters, thereby relegating the spiritual and esoteric in Igbo sculpture to the background, and insistently debunking the fact that sculpture has been informed by mystical or spiritual influences and experiences. It noted all efforts by the Igbo, Nigerian and African artists to resist the Westerners' realistic ideology of an African abstract model, remained trapped in the same materialist ethos of the naturalistic style they challenged. Thus, contemporary artists shifted from an art concerned specifically with the spiritual dimension to an art that has begun to cultivate a vested interest in stylistic and physical aspects. There are indications that Igbo sculptures may retrace their step back to their age-long metaphysical and cosmological complex and parentage within the original notion of our creativity, which they are best presented.

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