

OUTDOOR SCULPTURE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF CULTURAL IDENTIFICATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The rate at which African cultural identity is being relegated to the background is quite concerning to the artist. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine outdoor sculpture as an instrument of cultural identification in Nigeria. A survey research design was adopted for the study. The population comprised all 356 Fine Art lecturers in public universities in the South-East region of Nigeria. A sample of 102 Fine Art lecturers was selected using a convenience sampling technique. Data were collected using a researcher-designed instrument titled *Outdoor Sculpture as an Instrument of Cultural Identification Questionnaire* (OSICIQ). The data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation. The findings of the study revealed that outdoor sculpture serves as an instrument of cultural identification to a high extent in Nigeria. Based on this finding, it was recommended that the government should actively promote the use of outdoor sculpture as a means of preserving and enhancing cultural identity.

Key Words: Sculpture, Cultural Identification and Instrument.

Introduction

There is hardly any human being without an identity in the society. It is identity that differentiates an individual from another. Interestingly, culture plays a pivotal role in bringing about this identity. Put differently, the identification or distinction of an individual from another could be traced to their culture. Thus, every culture is quite good in itself and by extension, identical to itself (Ndubuisi, 2019). A people's culture forms the pivot of their identification. For instance, Igbo people possess a culture that serves a means of identification as a tribe among various other tribes in the world. It is instructive to note that one of the ways in which a culture could be identified is via their outdoor sculpture.

Outdoor sculpture refers to art works that can be made with clay, stones, sounds or light, and kept in an open place. They retain the capacity to bring about refinement of cultural information in the environment's main body while "allowing for the creation of a matching scheme of theme, content, and even formal structure, resulting in a harmonious and interdependent relationship between them (Oh and Wi, 2017)" In other words, outdoor sculpture is a medium of cultural identification. Donkor, Boakye-Yiadom, Ankrah and Micah (2024) observed that these outdoor sculptures have aesthetic value, imbued with commemorative, cultural, historical and landscape meanings as they are

seen as artistic creations. However, the cultural significance of these sculptures should be the cardinal focus, which can be demonstrated via their creative concept as well as artistic achievement (Boakye-Yiadom *et al.*, 2022b).

In certain cultures, the exterior of vital buildings were adorned with low relief designs and decorated with a lot of outdoor sculptural elements, monuments as well as relics (Anifowose & Olatubosun, 2020). This is a way of cultural identification. In Igbo land, Alu (2017) noted that the earliest forms of outdoor sculptures to emerge were those situated in traditional architecture; figurine-columns, panel doors, wall relief motifs and by extension, thatch roofs. In Yoruba land, terracotta heads are unique on their own and serve as a means of cultural identification.

The rate at which African cultural identification has been relegated to the background is quite concerning to the artist. This is because, the African artist is quite conscious of their identity (Ikwuemesi, 1996:56). An artist's work at any time or place is usually influenced by physical, social and historical factors within the environment in which they work. Thus, it will make for research worthiness to unravel outdoor sculpture as an instrument of cultural identification.

Literature Review

Culture refers to belief and values shared by a group of people of a particular geographical location within they can be identified. Asikaogu (2018) sees culture as a set of habits which are shared by members of a particular society, be it a primitive tribe or a civilized nation. Asikaogu added that these habits that are shared within a society fall under two major headings viz: customs (etiquettes and the techniques of manipulating material objects) and collective ideas (practical knowledge, religious beliefs and social values).

What is Cultural Identification?

Cultural identification refers to unravelling of what values and beliefs a group of people within a geographical location is known with. Vivian (2014) perceived it as the spotting of what constitutes a sense of belonging to a specified group based on different cultural categories, nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and religion, inclusive". Lustig (2013) pointed out that "cultural identification is at the center of an individual's sense of self." This as a result of the fact that the cultural identity of an individual is a reflection of the various facets of their self-concept. Cultural Identification is never done without recourse to the individual's beliefs as well as life values. For instance, Igbo men are known by their language (Igbo), attire (Isiagu and okpu agu) and music (usually done with various percussion instruments such as udu, ekwe, ogene and opi).

What are outdoor sculptures?

Outdoor sculpture refers to art works done with clay, stones, sounds or light and kept in an open place. Outdoor sculpture entails an artistic expression form within the urban environmental space (Donkor *et al.*, 2024). Morgan—Thorp (2019) defined outdoor sculpture as an expression of art that coordinates with the architectural appearance and plays a role in the enrichment of active environment. These outdoor sculptures are used to adorn open places which further beautify and give a face lift to the architectural technological and social prowess of such places.

Outdoor Sculpture as an Instrument of Cultural Identification

Given the rapid advancement of modernization, outdoor sculpture has increasingly become a considerable facet of cultural identification. Beyond being employed as a visual art form, outdoor sculpture serves as a cultural medium, conveying a city's history, and social values via artistic expression (Li, 2024). For example, in Tokyo, Japan, modern and minimalist sculptures have a way of harmonising with classical architecture with a view to creating a distinctive urban aesthetic, while in Paris, sculptures interact with modernist architecture to bring about a romantic French atmosphere (Kaya, 2024). Some communities have integrated artistic elements of outdoor sculptures rooted in local traditions to ensure a resonance with their cultural identity. For instance, In Igbo land, Alu (2017), noted that outdoor sculptures such as figurine-columns, wall relief motifs, panel doors and thatch roofs became means of cultural identification. Sabouri *et al* (2015) opined that the art of outdoor sculpture promotes citizens' visual culture while improving the quality of urban environments. More so, outdoor sculptures in addition to bringing about the beautification of urban spaces can promote cultural identification in urban spaces, build mental image, transfer valuable messages, transfer culture and history within community, cause more interaction of citizens at urban spaces via creation of interesting (Alu *et al.*, 2019).

It is instructive to note that outdoor sculptures considerably serves various social purposes, including education and cultural dissemination (Zheng, 2021). This multi-functionality has to all intents and purposes, reinforced the place of outdoor sculpture as a vital element for the promotion of cultural identity. Well-designed outdoor sculptures foster a deep sense of appreciation of local culture, helping residents develop a strong sense of connection with their urban environment (Wang, 2022). The function of outdoor sculpture goes beyond emotional resonance, encompassing areas such as cultural identity as well as social critique (Cui and Misdi, 2025). Cui and Misdi added that through artistic expressions that resonate with the local cultural context, sculptures can evoke emotional responses in its viewers; thereby reinforcing their connection to the local culture. Ijeomah, Abere and Onwuma (2018) averred that visitation of tourists goes a long way to promote the cultural identity of the host communities by bring to the awareness of people from various their cultural dances, festivals, history, food, languages and traditional attires.

Outdoor Sculpture in Nigeria

Between 1900 and 2005, a sum total number of 166 existing outdoor sculptures were churned out across the South-western Nigeria (Akintonde, 2013). Going further, Akintonde stated that virtually all the states of the zone has at least eleven public outdoor sculptures within this period. Their types are apparently defined by technique, themes, materials form and style. Reinforced concrete outdoor sculptures were the highest in number with 113 and then, fiber glass sculpture with twenty eight. There were 13 Pre-Cast works while the sole welded metal sculpture did get a whole expression in metal. No metal cast sculpture nor wood and stone carving sculpture existed. Glass and ceramic were not utilised as vital materials for outdoor sculpture within the south-west.

There was a sharp drop in the use of outdoor sculpture for public environment in this period 2000 – 2005. Themes of the quite a few sculpture made within the stipulated period were mostly hinged on politics and economy. The sharp drop could be attributed to the emergence of the fourth republic which saw the government's passionate commitment for poverty-alleviation, capacity building, infrastructure production as well as maintenance in lieu of environmental beautification programmes targeted at ameliorating the military-inflicted plight on the nation. Interestingly, a good number of outdoor sculptures made at the time were commissioned and by extension, erected in Lagos State. Prominent among them is the fiber glass cast of images depicting the struggle for democracy, *Monument to Kudirat Abiola*.

Benin and Ife Art

Benin and Ife towns or dynasty have most things in common to further validate their historical relationship. Songs and rituals are performed in both towns today to praise somebody or something very highly. This, they get pleasure in doing and pride is another common thing among them. Some of the practices have similar meaning e.g the Olokun (river goddess) worship is same for the two towns. The symbols, objects, costumes and significance of this worship are similar with only a thin line of difference. As a measure of self defence against invaders, the two ancient cities were both noted for digging moats around their walls.

The two dynasties both operate divine kingship system especially on the area of succession with some slight difference. The royal fathers, Oba of Benin and Ooni of Ife are said to be next to Osenobua (God) and Olodumare (God) respectively. They serve as custodians of culture and traditions of the people and as mouth-pieces of the gods and they both exercise an almost unlimited power and unquestionable royal authority (Fagg, 1963:31-32).

The Oba of Benin and Ooni of Ife are considered to be art patrons. The popular court art known with Benin is further an integral part of Ife art tradition, and some art work produced in Benin and Ife speak a lot about kingship tradition and history. Royal figure, symbols, head dress, regalia and other paraphernalia of office are some of the art features and depiction of the kings, queen mother, courtiers in the palace (Adepegba, 1995: 20, 21, 31).

The two figures are Bronze work but each is distinctive and unique on its own, considering the flamboyant royal ornamentation of the Benin royal head, which when found among sculptural art in Africa can easily be picked as depicting and identifying the culture of the Benin people. Likewise the Ife Bronze wearing of beaded crown with plume as a royal figure of the Ife.

Method

Research Design: Descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. Nworgu (2015) defined survey research design as one in which a group of items or people are studied by collecting and analyzing data from only a few people or items considered to be representative of the entire group.

Procedure: This study was carried out in South-East, Nigeria. The population of the study comprised all the 356 Fine Art lecturers in public universities in South-East, Nigeria. The sample size for the study comprised 102 Fine Art lecturers who were conveniently selected based on their disposition to respond to their items in the instrument. Data collection was carried out using Questionnaire titled “Outdoor Sculpture as an Instrument of Cultural Identification Questionnaire (OSICIQ). OSICIQ is Likert-scaled and contains seven items. The response options are Very High Extent (VHE), High Extent (HE), Low Extent (LE) and Very Low Extent (VLE) with numerical indices of 4, 3, 2 and 1. Copies of OSICIQ were given along with the purpose of the study and the research question to two lecturers in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, and the other in research methods, all at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka for the purpose of face-validation. Their inputs led to certain modifications such as removal and addition of some items in the final production of the OSICIQ.

Data Analysis: Statistical measures that were used to analyze the data collected were mean and standard deviation. The decision on the questionnaire items of research questions were based on item and cluster means relative to real limits of numbers as shown below:

Response	Rating Scale	Real Limit of Numbers
VHE	4	3.50 – 4.00
HE	3	2.50 – 3.49
LE	2	1.50 – 2.49
VLE	1	1.00 – 1.49

RESULTS

Table 1: Extent to which Outdoor Sculpture Constitutes an Instrument for Cultural Identification

Outdoor sculpture:	Mean	SD	Remark
1. Promotes cross-cultural understanding.	3.61	.80	VHE
2. Strengthens the nation’s cultural fabric.	3.54	.84	VHE
3. Preserves Nigerian’s cultural heritage by providing a tangible link to the country’s past.	3.17	.90	HE
4. Creates distinctive works that celebrate the nation’s cultural continuity.	3.02	.94	HE
5. Depict cultural narratives.	2.93	.98	HE
6. Depict cultural myth.	2.85	1.02	HE
7. Depict cultural narratives.	2.70	1.14	HE
Grand Mean	3.12	.95	HE

Data in Table 1 show that items 1 and 2 have mean scores above 3.50; indicating that the respondents agree that outdoor sculpture promotes cross-cultural understanding and strengthens the nation’s cultural fabric to a very high extent. Other items such as 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 have mean scores above 2.50; indicating that the respondents are in agreement to the above-listed items to a high extent. The standard deviations of .80 and .84 of items 1 and 2 show that the respondents were more homogenous in their responses to the afore-mentioned items than other items with higher standard deviations. The grand mean of 3.12 shows that the agreement of the respondents that outdoor sculpture constitutes an instrument for cultural identification to a high extent.

Discussion

The revelation of the finding of the study is that outdoor sculpture constitutes an instrument for cultural identification to a high extent. This points to the fact that outdoor sculpture is given its right of place within the Nigerian context. It further shows that Nigerians have not altogether become victims of cultural imperialism. Thus, even amidst the infiltration of western culture into the nation’s cultural fabric, the nation has found a way of promoting its culture to the admiration of other cultures. Aligning with the findings of the current study, Ikwuemesi (1996:56) observed that

the African artist is quite conscious of their cultural identity. In other words, the African artist; Nigerian inclusive has never at any point lost sight of their cultural identity despite the seeming relegation to the background by the western culture. Similarly, Alu (2017), noted that outdoor sculptures such as figurine-columns, wall relief motifs, panel doors and thatch roofs became means of cultural identification within the Igbo community.

Conclusion

Outdoor sculpture could be quite appealing if well garnished with cultural contents. Much as the sculptural works might be similar as a result of co-existence, the cultural identification is never-distinctive. It is worthy of note that inspite of the roles that art forms have been playing in Nigeria, outdoor sculpture specifically have been performing leading roles as far as issues of cultural identification are concerned. This is understandably so, given that outdoor sculptures serve as an instrument for cultural identification to a high extent within the Nigeria cultural milieu.

Recommendations

Based on the finding of the study, it was recommended that:

1. Nigerian artist should make conscious efforts towards proper documentation of sculptural role in cultural identification.
2. Government should promote the use of outdoor sculptures for cultural identification.

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