Religion and African Art: Vehicles for Development in African Society

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Abstract:

Religion is man's relationship to God (gods) and his fellow man. This calls for right morality and a pious life. Art in Africa involves creativity which is evidential. Religion and art inter-depend on each other for society's development and taste. The problem is that adequate funding of these two entities by the government is very poor. Obviously, this paper addressed religion and art as concepts in the light of their definitions or meanings. It went further to x-ray African art, the social cum spiritual perspectives of Mask in Africa, relationship between religion and art in Africa and viewing religion and African arts as vehicles for development in Africa. The research made use of analytical method as well as textbooks, journals and internet sources and caped it up with the recommendation that proper funding should be given to these disciplines for maximum impact in African nations and society by the government and pious organizations.

Introduction:

During and after the 19th and 20th century colonial period, Westerners long characterized African art as "primitive." The term carries with it negative connotations of underdevelopment and poverty. Colonization during the nineteenth century set up a Western understanding hinged on the belief that African art lacked technical ability due to its low socioeconomic status. In a situation where the above established constraints on African art, then African art demonstrated the power of supremely well-organized forms; produced not only by responding to the faculty of sight, but also and often primarily, the faculty of imagination, emotion and mystical and religious experience. These artists saw in African art a formal perfection and sophistication unified with phenomenal expressive power. The study of and response to African art, by artists at the beginning of the twentieth century facilitated an explosion of interest in the abstraction, organization and reorganization of forms, and the exploration of emotional and psychological areas hitherto unseen in Western art. By these means, the status of visual art was changed. Art ceased to be merely and primarily aesthetic, but became also a true medium for philosophic and intellectual discourse, and hence more truly and profoundly aesthetic than ever before.

Any society without artistic work lacks creativity and developmental power. Art announces a given people, culture and activities in a nation. Africans are very creative in such a way that arts, symbols, painting speak and as well pass messages to the society. So many societies do not attach values to their religions and artistic works, hence, creating their mortality. Hardly can you find the government granting scholarship to religious and artistic students either in the country or abroad, but we find sponsorship in Law, Medicine, and Engineering etc rapidly and consistently. Religion and African art can solve the problem of employment in African if the government yields to their call for help. So many can be self-employed without scrambling for white collar jobs. Art work here includes: drawing, painting, carvings and casting etc. Olumati (2012) says the religious

functions of art covers mainly ritual, ancestral worship, worship of deities and rite of passage to loved ones. It is however imperative that religion is the relationship between man and the superabundant being believed to be the controller of the universe. Also, religion shows man's reverence to God(s) and seeking his/their blessings. Arts function at several levels which the Church, Mosque and Traditional Religion cannot do without. Hence, religion and arts are needed and should be encouraged for national development in African Society.

Definition of Religion:

Religion is a concept that is very difficult to define. However, so many authors have given some definitions which will be x-rayed. Etim (2001) opines that religion is a complex phenomenon. It is not just a belief that some mysterious beings exists. It is on the contrary, a purpose of life, the nature of the individual, and the ultimate explanation of things. Yinger Milton (cited in Danoye 2006:7) states thus:

> As a system of beliefs and practices by means of which, a group of people struggles with ultimate problems of human life. It is the refusal of capitulate to death, to give up in the face of frustration, to allow hostility to tear apart one's association.

Emile Durkheim (1912) clearly states that religion is based on a unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things, that is to say things set apart and forbidden. By sacred thing, one most understand simply those personal things which are called gods or spirit. Oconnel (2002:25) simply defines religion as "The belief in spiritual beings". James Frazer (cited in Idowu, 1973:28) sees religion as "a propitiation and reconciliation of powers believed to be superior to man".

Idowu (1973) sees religion as resulting from man's spontaneous awareness of and spontaneous reaction to his immediate awareness of the living power, wholly other and infinitely greater than himself, a power

mysterious because unseen yet a present urgent reality, seeking to bring man into communion with himself. Sibani (2014:5) says that:

> Religion does not have a unified definition. The more you attempt defining it, the more you become confuse in your position, so in the midst of this confused confusion, suffice it to say that religion is the quest for humanity to have an object of worship which directly or indirectly becomes their God or god and is the basis of their belief and driving force.

William (1960:50) holds that religion is "the feelings, acts and experience of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to in relation to whatever they may consider the divine". Madu (2003:46) opines that "religion means man's recognition of the existence of a power or powers beyond himself, who as it were created the universe, sustains, preserve and provides for this universe". However, Omeregbe (1993:3) categorically states that "religion is essentially a bipolar phenomenon… an encounter between man and a transcendent deity conceived as a personal being; capable of communication… is not a relationship between equals". Having viewed some scholarly definitions above, we can say that religion is horizontal and vertical in its operation (that is) man relating with God or gods and man to man relationship for protection, worship and emitting of love and peaceful co-existence with the use of sacred objects and mediums.

Art in the Light of Definition:

However, if we look at the Western definition of 'art', it pertains to 'imitative or imaginative skill applied in design' and alludes to 'skillful execution as an object in itself.' All of these descriptions can be applied to the beautifully crafted objects and fine forms of the art of Africa as stated by Uche, (2018). According to Suzanne, (2017), African art describes the modern and historical paintings, sculptures, installations, and other visual culture from native or indigenous Africans and the African continent. The definition may also include the art of the native Africans and African in Diasporas.

Despite this diversity, there are some unifying artistic themes when considering the totality of the visual culture from the continent of Africa. According to African Craft-African Art (2018:1):

> Immediately, with the phrase 'African craft' one enters into the realm of: ... Instead, African painting consisted of decorating surfaces like rock faces, hides, bark, pottery, mud huts, sculptures and human bodies. Africa had functional and utilitarian craft along with textiles, fetishes, idols and cultural artifacts.

Omatseye and Emeriewen (2016) opine that the very nature of African art stem from their themes of religious symbolism, functionalism and utilitarianism. In the various Traditional African beliefs, Africans draw from their artistic traditions as sources of inspiration. These images have religio-metaphysical themes, which serve as the focal point of power, which links the African's physical world to his beliefs on his essence and existence. Indeed the African art reflect images of ancestral spirits, and pantheons of indigenous gods and goddesses. According to O'Riley (2006), African art takes many forms and is made from many different materials. Jewellery is a popular art form and is used to indicate rank, affiliation with a group, or purely for aesthetics. African jewelry is made from such diverse materials as Tiger's eye stone, haematite, sisal, coconut shell, beads and ebony wood. Sculptures can be wooden, ceramic or carved out of stone like the famous Shona sculptures, and decorated or sculpted pottery comes from many regions. Various forms of textiles are made including chitenge, mud cloth and Kentecloth. Mosaics made of butterfly wings or colored sand are popular in West Africa.

African Facts (2018) posit that even after narrowing down the people we will consider African, for the sake of defining African art, the answer to the question "what is African art" is still not easy. This is because of the huge diversity of the sub-Saharan people and the art they produce. However

there are some common traits that do define most of the art found in sub-Saharan Africa. These traits are:

- The creation of art for use by the people, not just for display. This use may be for everyday life such as pottery or for ceremonies such as a funeral.
- Sculpture and other 3 dimensional arts was a preferred art form as opposed to paintings.
- The creation of very colorful works of art.
- Abstract art was favored.
- The human image is a favorite subject.

An X-ray of African Art

In Africa, arts are very importance and show significantly a peoples' culture and values. The buildings of Africans were made of mud, clay, wood, bamboo and thatch among others. Today, modern technology has taken over and these arts now modernized due to technological development. Sibani (2014) stipulates that in the area of transportation, Africans used carved out wood materials for water transportation (canoe).

African arts are most popular and studied and they are typically found in Museum collections. Africans construct wooden mask which are either human or animal or mystical creatures and are most commonly found in West Africa. In Original Context according to Sibani (2014), commercial marks are used for celebrations, initiations, and crop harvesting and war preparation. The masks are worn by a chosen or initiated dancer. During the mask ceremony, the dancer goes deep into trance and communicates with ancestors or the gods to which the mask is dedicated. These masks can be worn in three different ways: Vertically covering the face: as helmets, encasing the entire head and as crest, resting upon the head, which was commonly covered by material as part of the disguise. African Mask often represents a spirit of the ancestors possessing the wearer.

Sibani (2014) has it that most African masks are made with wood and can be decorated with Ivory, animal hair, plant fibers (such as raffia), and pigments (like Kaolin) stones and semi precious gems also are included in the Masks. In Kenya and as well Nigeria, we have arts such as sisal baskets, elephant hair, bracelets, massai bread jewelry, musical Instruments, silver and gold jewelry, soap stone sculptures etc. All these things (items) are available in the arts and Crafts markets and shops throughout the main tourist centers in Kenya and Nigeria.

The Social/Spiritual Perspectives of Mask in Africa

In African environment, majority of her arts emanates from communal activities. Anyangaor (2009) declares that environment of art in Africa follows upon interaction between players, objects and audience, several different art forms or expressive media appears simultaneously or at least are overlapping and interdependent form, such as masks and figures in African context. The cultural dimension of mask gives aesthetic and religious effect since they derive their forms and disposition within the design which can be evaluated as arts objects. Hence, Olumati (2012) gives six various social organizational set-ups of masks and their socio-religious importance in any African Community. They are:

a) Mask of Initiation:

In some societies, masks are used to mark the passage of childhood to adulthood in boys and at circumcision in girls. The initiation masks are worn by officials of initiation ceremonies. Mask is also worn at the burial of the initiated and used for their rites of passage and this is found in Balwalwa, Congo etc. Among the Dogon of Mali, mask is used in rites to expel the soul of the recently dead.

b) Masks for Witch Hunting

Witches are all over African societies and there are ways in which they are expelled or removed via masking societies that identify them. Some wear

masks so that witches will not identify them. The Ngi society wear mask in Gabon and among the Fang when detecting and punishing sorcerers within the society.

c) Masks used by Secret Societies

Expensive taste with beads, bronze and precious stones and wood are worn by wealthy social class cults. They are identified by carved drums and heavily embroidered dress with example: Ogboni, Ozo Okpalas etc. They put on these masks to hide personal identities. It is used to designate social stratification and ranks and exert political power.

d) Commemorative/Funeral Mask

Some use mask to cover the face of the deceased as mark of honour and establish relationship with the spirit world. In some burial customs, there are important/anthropomorphic masks used in ceremonies associated with the dead and departed spirits.

e) Fertility Masks

Procreation is seen as very important in Africa which cuts across seasons of agricultural year, sowing and harvest of crops. Pregnant women in Ghana carry the Akuoba doll for save delivery. Dance mask is worn among the Igbo community and Ogoni people.

f) Law Enforcement Masks

Mask serves as a symbol of authority and instrument of law enforcement agent. They are also embodied authority – full of powers of the ancestral spirits.

Relationship between Religion and Arts in Africa

The traditional arts in Africa is basically for worshipping purpose, except in the area of pottery and textile where some of the works are for utilitarian purpose, that is for domestic and daily use; some religious beliefs see

textiles and ceramics as spiritual. Olumati (2012) says that arts could serve as means of expression in religion as well as an object in the process of worship and sometimes exhibit similar features. Arts like religion recreates by offering assets of symbols of our own being, of community and of sacred. Verbal arts like (recitations, songs, praises and worships) and visual arts (scriptures, paintings and decorations) are religiously used to provide avenue for expression.

Pyramids and rock tombs in Egypt are built very costly as work of arts with spiritual and religious significance. Some build such places for ancestral resting place of their loved ones. Religion was the major cause of the reason for the Egyptian art. Olaomo Azeez (cited in Olumati, 2012) states that Christianity has influenced painting and sculpture to the degree that images have played a part in the Christian religious experience. It has influenced architecture through building dedicated to worship and through the founding of religious communities. Some use Crucifix, Cross and the image of Mother Mary (the mother of God) as arts work in Christian worship to indicate a type of veneration which differed little from that of fetish object.

Olumati (2012) holds that Islamic art is the art of Middle East. It is associated with the religion of the Mohammedan conquerors of Persia, Mesopotamia, Egypt, North Africa and Spain. Islamic art forbids making of images or anything that could be used to represent Allah. This is as a result of their belief that there is only one Allah and Mohammed is the prophet. He has no rival or competitor. Later on, some sects among the Mohammedans were less strict in their interpretation of the ban on images and generally, Muslim did allow the painting of figures and illustrations as long as they had no connection with their religion. Among the media in Islamic art are textiles, carpets, mats, jewelries, and silk brocade.

Religion and African Arts: Vehicle for Development in African Society

There are several ways that religion and African art have become catalyst for the development in African society. They are as follows:

1) Development in the World of Education:

Religion brought education to Africa and it made Africans to improve on their technological developments. Arts in Africa have greatly been modernized through education. Sibani (2014) apparently states that prior to the early 40s, African arts had been mainly seen or taught in oral terms. This showcases that it takes only the elders who actually knew what the arts stands for to intimate the younger generations about their values and sacredness and spirituality. However, Africans have started putting down art in black and white. In our major institutions of learning, we have arts as a discipline, as such; many have trained and are out there displaying their dexterities in arts which enhance African development.

2) Creation of Tourist Centres

African art and technological development has helped in the creation of tourist centres and has brought a place called Museum – a place or building in which objects of historical, scientific, artistic or cultural interest are stored and exhibited. Ihenacho (2012) says from religious component of culture, tourism products are derived. So religion, arts and culture are interdependent. The potency of religion as a universal social institution in nexus with tourism is forthrightly asserted by the UNESCO blueprint on cultural heritage conservation.

Iheanacho (2012) posits that across the boundaries of religion and cultures of the world, tourism attracts and destinations annually account for thousands of turnover of pilgrims and sundry tourist interests, ranging from missionary journeys to adventures, to sacred institutions and sites. The Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Hajj pilgrimage to Makkah

are annually out-bound tourism practice in Nigeria. The importance of these out-bounds tourism in Nigeria led to the establishment of Pilgrims Board for the two dominant religions in the country. Each year, Federal and State governments spend a significant chunk of money on these religious tours. Sibani (2014:123-124) says

> In these tourist centres, there are various sides of attraction like some of the African arts. It makes people to gather together during the weekend to enjoy themselves, thereby enhancing socialization and knowledge of the yet unknown. All these bring about appreciation of the art as students, families; individuals pay certain amount before they are let into the tourist centres and Museums.

3) Creates Employment Opportunity

The African art has undoubtedly helped in ameliorating the high rate of unemployment in African society. Sibani (2014) is of the view that many are self-employed whereas some are gainfully employed in various tourist centres and museums. For instance, in world Museum Umuahia, Nok culture area, Igbo-Ukwu, Daima, Benin, Rop Rock Shelter, Owo, Ife, Ugwuele, the Benin Valley, Brinin Kudu Rock Painting, and Iwo Eleru etc; one will discover that there are people working there who are employed and adequately paid. This leads to African development.

4) Helps in the preservation of certain norms and customs of the people.
5) Serves as integrating factors among people of diverse cultural milieu.
6) Helps in understanding and appreciating people's culture; for instance in Nigeria, cultural festivities like masquerades festival done in national, state and local levels occasionally.
7) Makes for identification of individuals (tribe).
8) African art and culture leads to the development of the environment in which these areas are place for tourism.

Conclusion

It is clearer that religion cannot be separated from arts in African society. The romance between religion and arts is very important and the interrelationship between them goes a long way to affect development positively in African nations. Either religion or art creates job opportunity for people and make them independent. They also point to identity of a people. If art expresses realities in images and religion, expresses ultimate reality in symbols, then art expresses religious symbols in artistic images. Art and religion could therefore be designated as ritualistic art. It is very imperative that values should be given to African art and they should be preserved for unborn generations to see and learn from the culture of the past.

Traditional art describes the most popular and studied forms of African art which are typically found in museum collections. Wooden masks, which might either, of human, animal or mythical creatures, are one of the most commonly found forms of art in western Africa. In their original contexts, ceremonial masks are used for celebrations, initiations, crop harvesting, and war preparation. The masks are worn by a chosen or initiated dancer. During the mask ceremony the dancer goes into deep trance, and during this state of mind he "communicates" with his ancestors and dieties. The masks can be worn in three different ways: vertically covering the face: as helmets, encasing the entire head, and as crest, resting upon the head, which was commonly covered by material as part of the disguise. African masks often represent a spirit and it is strongly believed that the spirit of the ancestors possesses the wearer. Most African masks are made with wood, and can be decorated with: Ivory, animal hair, plant fibers (such as raffia), pigments (like kaolin), stones, and semi-precious gems also are included in the masks. Statues, usually of wood or ivory, are often inlaid with cowries shells, metal studs and nails. Decorative clothing is also commonplace and comprises another large part of African art.

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