

BOOK REVIEWS

Pat Oyelola

Nigerian Artistry

xxxii + 328 pages, copiously illustrated in colour and b/w

Mosuro Publishers, Ibadan, 2010

Art scholars and culture enthusiasts are often familiar with titles that focus on art as a product expressing human creative talents. For example, we are used to book titles such as *Nigerian Art*, *Art of Nigeria*, *Contemporary Nigerian Art* etc. In fact, the author of the book reviewed here had also contributed a timely and unique book of historical and artistic relevance in 1976 titled *Everyman's Guide to Nigerian Art*. However, for the first time in Nigeria, Dr. Pat Oyelola, a pace setter in contemporary history of visual culture, has added a new dimension to content analysis of books by exploring art beyond its product value.

The title *Nigerian Artistry* is connotative of both the socialising process and the creative product of art. It pragmatically suggests a dynamic social relationship between art practice and its functional end-use. Pat Oyelola situates the identified art/craft objects and motifs within their historical and social context, thereby highlighting the peculiar and common cultural norms and values of the ethnically diverse Nigerian peoples. *Nigerian Artistry* as used here emphasises not only creativity, but also the skill exercised in the process.

The paucity of researched books on the various art practices in Africa has been lamented. It has equally been emphasised that there is the need for scholars who have a deep knowledge and understanding of indigenous cultures to write on the arts of their people. It is therefore most timely and appropriate that Pat Oyelola, a widely experienced and distinguished teacher, researcher and creative writer through her usual dedication to industry, has produced a book of tremendous cogitation in *Nigerian Artistry*.

It is important to point out the significance of researching and documenting craft practices in Africa. Apart from a few books and journal articles mostly written by foreign scholars, only a passing mention has been accorded to the skill and creativity embedded in craft forms and motifs. We must however note that the barriers dividing art and craft in European thought do not exist in African culture. Pat Oyelola has been at the forefront, emphasising the need to understand that for Africans, art and craft share a generic origin. For example, the Yoruba word for art *ona*, means not only art but also craft, design and even the profession of the artist/designer. In most cases too, art and craft are made for both functional and aesthetic purposes. This new book, *Nigerian Artistry*, is a major work that further unifies the diverse conceptual and creative aspects of visual culture in Nigeria.

The hardcover book has a rich cover design that explicitly expresses the fundamentals of the content. Apart from the thirty-two pages that contain interesting and complementary

readings such as the painstaking list of figures, the insightful foreword written by the foremost Nigerian printmaker, Bruce Onobrakpeya, the endearing acknowledgements and the concise introduction, there are 309 pages of text with illustrations on almost every page, plus 9 pages of comprehensive bibliography and index. Within the 309 pages of legibly laid out text, there are 432 figures, mostly picture plates and a few illustrative drawings. The plates are creatively and contextually placed by the text in order to enhance symbiotic understanding. The good quality of the pictures, the elaborate graphic layout, the appropriate typeface and the glossy paper grammage used for the book are eloquent testimony to the high professional standards of the publisher. The book is not only rich in content, but also in form, thereby justifying the claim to being a "collector's treasure and reference guide".

There are nine chapters in the main body of the book. Each chapter sings a song and they are inextricably woven together using the most descriptive and explicit language to create contextual narrative. Man is at the centre of the story, whose art forms and craft practices make life more luxurious. The skills displayed in the use of various materials and methods are a manifestation of human technical genius. The art and craft products are evidence of exceptional creative talents. Art is not only an instrument for functional fulfillment but also the fruition of aesthetic intent. The chapters are classified in sequential order that reflects human daily activities based on decorative and functional necessities.

Chapter one, "Body Arts", focuses on the human canvas which, by association with ancient art objects, is shown to be as old as the society. Body painting, tattooing and scarification are various forms of body adornment with the diverse purposes of kinship affiliation, status index and aesthetic appeal. The art of coiffure is creatively discussed in relation to fashion and other socio-religious uses. Traditional art forms showing special hair-styles are used as reference points to establish their ancient practice, while the modern and emergent styles are contextualised within contemporary society.

Textiles, being the most vibrant and visible of all the arts practised in Nigeria today, are given extensive attention in Chapter Two. Clothing and textiles are the most dynamic art form in Nigeria because they respond to the dictates of a robust contemporary fashion industry. The various materials and techniques used in the creation of textiles and the creative tailoring that produces inexhaustible styles have become a reference point in global fashion.

The various types of fabrics and techniques of production are traced to their indigenous origin, thereby reflecting the complex dynamics of change and continuity in textile making and uses. The textile art forms include pattern dying, with elaboration on the resist techniques of tie dye and batik known as *adire* in Yoruba.

Weaving is another major textile form in Nigeria, and it has been practised since ancient time still date across several ethnic groups in the country. Men use mainly the horizontal

loom while women use the vertical loom. Woven fabric is socially significant, since it serves as a symbol of status and prestige. It was even used as currency in many areas of Nigeria. The most popular woven cloths are the Yoruba *aso-oke* and the Igbo *akwete*.

Pat Oyelola also elaborates on embroidery, the skillful art of threading the surface of fabrics, a complement to the patterns created on textiles. The Hausa/Fulani decorative designs on caps and garments are typical examples of the best in Nigeria. Appliqué, the art of cutting motifs from pieces of cloth and sewing them onto larger fabric surface to create designs and patterns is also mentioned. The functions of textiles in their varying forms reveal a complex relationship between art and economic, religious and socio-political activities in both past and recent Nigerian history.

Beads and bead-work are the focus of attention in Chapter 3. Using the ancient sculptures of Nok and Igbo-Ukwu, dated to around 900 BC, to establish ancient practice, the author documents the use of beads for body decoration and as materials for royal paraphernalia such as staffs of office and crowns.

Pottery, an essential utilitarian craft, treated in Chapter 4, is one of the oldest art forms in Nigeria, probably dating back to 3000 BC. Ladi Kwali, the Gwari born contemporary potter, exemplifies the continuing culture of excellent crafting in Nigeria.

The diverse techniques of moulding and decoration distinguish this art form from one locality to the other. It is also noted that the skillful handling of clay and the successful firing system led to the creation of the remarkable terra cotta heads of Nok and Ife.

Chapter 5 expands our knowledge of calabash decoration. The calabash or gourd in Nigeria is very versatile. It can be made into decorative bowls, trays, ink pots, cosmetic or charm containers, water bottles, spoons, rattles, musical instruments etc. Patterns are scraped, carved, engraved, burnt or dyed to create simple or elaborate designs. Apart from the practical values as identified, calabashes featured prominently at ceremonies connected with puberty, marriage and death. The calabash also served as a significant symbol in religious and political institutions.

Mat making and basketry constitute the focus in Chapter 6 of the book. The abundant variety of plant fibres provides raw material for making utensils, mats, baskets, bags, furniture items, fabrics, costume, roof thatch and fences among other functional products. The materials are usually woven in complex combinations to form technomorphs, patterns resulting from thematic techniques. Other designs are made by the craftsmen's dexterous manipulation of motifs.

Abundant literature exists on the art of wood carving in Nigeria, nay Africa. Chapter 7 vividly describes the rich repertoire of the famous Yoruba carvers and those from other areas in southern Nigeria, where wood carving excels as an art. The continuing tradition

of carving through the apprenticeship system is also documented. Modern adaptations peculiar to some contemporary Nigerian artists illustrate the dynamics of art and functionality.

Metalwork is examined in Chapter 8 with its various processes of fabrication. Iron smelting, bronze and brass casting were used to produce social, ritual and royal insignia. The famous Ife and Benin bronzes are the pride of Nigerian cultural history. Brass works across the country, especially those produced by the Nupe smiths, display the best craftsmanship in Nigeria.

Chapter 9, being the last chapter, illuminates the spirit of change and continuity. Aptly subtitled "Connections", it testifies to the continuing dynamism of Nigerian visual culture. The creative adaptation of traditional forms and motifs by contemporary Nigerian artists does not hinder them from modernist styles and expressions. The art works created by Bruce Onobrakpeya, El-Anatsui, Agbo Folarin, Sokari Douglas-Camp, Olu Amoda, Susanne Wenger, Nike Okundaye, Jimoh Buraimoh, Tola Wewe and Kunle Filani among others, may have drawn inspiration from indigenous traditions, but they are nevertheless unique in terms of establishing cultural identity without being atavistic.

The bibliography and index are a reflection of the tremendous effort put into *Nigerian Artistry* by Dr. Pat Oyelola. The error-free text is the hallmark of her rigorous commitment to editorial work. Condoleezza Rice, the former Secretary of State, United States of America, during the 2010 This Day Awards, stated: "Things that seem impossible just seem inevitable, after they have been achieved."

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David Okpako
Kpeha's Song
Bookbuilders, Ibadan, 2010
xv+171+CD of songs

Kpeha's Song by David Okpako is an unusual biography. Although its focus is the artistic career of Kpeha Kopako, the great *Udje* exponent of the ancient Owahwa community in Urhoboland, Delta State, the work is a part historical, part biographical account of the life and times of the artist, spiced with autobiographical references. The author writes from the vantage position of a participant-observer, combining personal reminiscences with accounts provided by some of the key players in the unfolding saga, in resolving some of the inherent contradictions of the oral medium. Both the narrative and the art are part of the great oral

tradition of indigenous culture, which forms the bedrock of literary achievements. *Udje* is a composite folk art of song and dance, requiring vocal and physical dexterity, inspired by profound intellectual thought and artistic creativity. Kpeha's outstanding achievements are rooted in his proverbial proficiency and versatility in this traditional art, in spite of his limited formal education. As the author puts it,

Kpeha was the complete exponent of *Udje*; he was an *obo-ile*, *orori ile*, as well as a dancer (*ogbe Udje*). In *Udje*, these are the three main classes of artistes: the *orori ile* (literally, the thinker of songs) is the composer, the one who puts the story together in the poetic form; he is the one who chooses the words that would make the most memorable satirical impact; he was the creative artiste, the poet. The poet's product may be modified by others when it is first released. Quite often, the person with this talent (the *orori ile*) does not have the singing voice to put the poem to song; he must take the composition to an *obo ile* (the *obo* or doctor of songs) who would take the words and put them to song with the appropriate melody; the *obo ile* was the musician, the one with the sense of rhythm and melody... The other class of performer was the dancer (*ogbe udje*), who may not be an *orori ile* or *obo ile*. Kpeha combined these three talents. (pp. 41-42).

Thus, Kpeha composed, sang and danced to his own tune with remarkable ingenuity and spontaneity. Indeed, the name 'Kpeha' sounds like a dialectal variant of *gbeha* which, in Urhobo, means 'to dance'. He was the naturally talented artist who literally lived and died for the art he loved so well. It was disclosed at the book presentation that the name 'Kpeha' was actually derived from Edo.

In fluid, simple and animated prose, the author provides the social, cultural and religious contexts, which act as an appropriate backdrop to the content of the *Udje*, described as 'an important source of information on Urhobo cultural history and ethics' and 'a veritable source of material on Urhobo thought on various important aspects of life—ethics, morality, religion, love, etc.' (p.7). This is consistent with the author's earlier remarks that the melodious *udje* songs 'constitute historical counterpoints to the prevailing onslaughts of foreign values on Urhobo culture and ethics' (p.2). As pointed out in the author's Preface, 'Kpeha was concerned with ideas that have to do with life and death, morality and dignity of the human person,' (p.xi), which made him an artistic philosopher of sorts, employing his songs to reflect on the deeper meanings of life. Thus, the songs have historical, cultural, ethical and religious values, in addition to their being an important source of social entertainment. Furthermore, *udje* art, described elsewhere by G. G. Darah as 'a battle of songs', is fundamentally satirical. Acting like a self-appointed gadfly, the *udje* artist stings all moral and political miscreants to a point of social embarrassment. This scurrilous and acrimonious attribute, the author notes, possibly contributed to the ultimate decline of *udje* in the later half of the twentieth century.

The author devotes a whole chapter (Chapter 5) to Ughievwen religious beliefs which find ample expression in *udje* songs. There are ample references to 'major issues that pertain to human experience; questions of life and death, of good and evil, poverty and wealth, life after death, life before birth, of reincarnation, predestination and death' (p.71), a further evidence of their philosophical and sociological significance. Owahwa, where Kpeha hailed from, was one of the four sub-clans that made up the larger Ughievwen clan in the political geography of the old Delta Province. The belief in life after death and in the controlling influence of witchcraft for good or evil are fully attested to in the *udje* songs, which derive inspiration from the world view of the indigenous people. Similarly, the dead have merely exchanged physical presence for spiritual life in the *erinvwin* (the world of the dead) where they continue to exercise significant influence on the living. All of these beliefs, are held as unquestioning articles of faith by a typical traditional African community, of which the people of Ughievwen are no exception.

The book also provides an insight into the life and times of Kpeha, his triumphs and travails, his close associates and members of his immediate family of which the author is one. Hence, there are snippets of biographical and autobiographical references from which the author's family history can be reasonably reconstructed. The sad aspect of Kpeha's life was his failure to produce an offspring which, in the African context, amounted to a wasted existence. As Emeritus Professor Paul Richards remarks in his Foreword, Kpeha's long and lonely working periods was 'a labour of love, rewarded with some fame, but no fortune' (p. viii). As he was no professional artist, he made no fortune from his art, while his fame was invariably limited to his immediate community. The present book is the first major effort to call attention to his prowess and posthumously confer on him the honour and glory that he missed in his life time, and we have Professor David Okpako to thank for that. But beyond giving honour to whom honour is due, the work is a landmark contribution to the study of *udje* song as a typical folk art of an indigenous African community. It is pleasantly ironical that such an intellectual contribution to creative scholarship is being made, not by some potential art laureate, but by a professor of pharmacology.

But even the author's discipline is not completely left out of this great tribute to *udje* art and artists when he underscores the psychological and trado-medical significance of Kpeha's reference to *erinvwin* (after life) and its spiritual link with the health and wellbeing of the indigenous people. In spite of Kpeha's scepticism as expressed in one of the songs, *Kpolodje*, the author firmly believes in the psychological link between the emotional stress of ancestral intervention in the affairs of the living and the management of life-threatening illnesses (p. 149). It is this type of discovery that has strengthened his belief in the validity, indeed, the efficacy, of traditional medicine, and the need to integrate it into orthodox medicine for the treatment of illnesses that have a psychic or spiritual dimension. This line of thinking deserves to be further investigated upon.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution of the book from the purely artistic perspective is

the author's documentation of thirteen select *udje* songs, mostly Kpeha's, fully transcribed, translated and annotated (on 22 July 1974) for a deeper understanding and preservation of an ancient art that is threatened with extinction. This confirms that the book has had a remarkably long gestation period of nearly forty years in the mind of the author. Thus, beyond its immediate objective of celebrating a worthy but uncelebrated hero, the book is a valuable retrieval and documentation of folk art which, as a purely oral art, is prone to transience and ephemerality, and capable of dying with time. Whatever becomes of the *udje* as an art form, it is now guaranteed that it will, at least, live on, on the pages of David Okpako's little book as a modest contribution to the preservation and propagation of a worthy artistic heritage.

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West African Archaeology: New developments, new perspectives

Edited by Philip Alsworth-Jones

BAR International Series #2164, 2010. 170pages. £39

Order from: Archaeopress, 276 Banbury Road, Oxford, UK OX2 7ED

e-mail: bar@archaeopress.com

This work provides a fascinating and varied glimpse into West Africa's past in a part of the world probably believed by many to have no recorded history. It emphasises the urgency of archaeological research and as one of the authors describes in a sobering article, modernity and globalisation are steadily eroding cultural remains in all parts of the world probably at a faster rate than ever before, leading to a disregard for the past.

The 15 research papers in this volume formed the basis for the summary by Philip Allsworth-Jones appearing in the *Nigerian Field* in 2009 (Volume 74). The papers were originally delivered at a meeting in Sheffield in June 2009, co-sponsored by the UK branch of the Nigerian Field Society and the Department of Archaeology, University of Sheffield. This is not a book for the casual reader, containing detailed research findings presented by committed research workers. Most of the papers are presented in standard research style, with an abstract, introduction, methodology and results, ending with discussion, conclusion and list of cited references. They are very well illustrated with excellent photographs, line drawings and maps. There is no index.

The papers cover a wide range of topics: human and other animal remains, stone and iron artefacts, pottery, crop plants and forestry, "chiefly residences", refuse, trade and languages. There is an emphasis on recent field research findings, but there are also four review papers:

- an overview of stone age stone workings throughout Africa, pressing for reinvestigation of existing sites using modern archaeological techniques;

- an attempt to determine the origin and spread of domestic cereal plants, diverse varieties of which have been in use for at least 5,000 years in West Africa;
- the difficulties & uncertainties of interpretation of iron workings;
- linguistic classification and geography in Nigeria, where there are over 500 languages.

The papers are helpfully arranged in a chronological sequence. The first is devoted to recent discoveries in Mali from the Middle Stone Age, between 150,000 and 25,000 years ago, suggesting amongst other things a greater heterogeneity in industries in West Africa than existed north of the Sahara. Interestingly the range of techniques used in manipulating stone appears to have alternated across the years in no logical sequence. Stone is also considered in another paper based upon research in Mali, this time devoted to stone bracelets where the question arises as to whether the techniques used have persisted since the Late Stone Age or have been more recently reinvented.

Nigerian sites are featured in five of the articles, in addition to the linguistic review. The first of these is based on the 11,000 year old human skull excavated from a rock shelter in Iwo Eleru—the earliest known burial in West Africa—showing forest occupation during the Stone Age. The skull has now been subjected to a very detailed examination using sophisticated statistical techniques and proves to be structurally distinct from the skulls of subsequent human populations, calling for further study of the relationship between the two. A second paper looks at the evidence for Nok cultures, named after the village near Akure, where the first terra cotta—in the form of a head—was discovered, an industry involving the use of iron smelting as much as 2,500 perhaps even 3,000 years ago. Evidence on trends in forestation in southern Nigeria is the subject of another paper, which comes to the surprising conclusion that the forest in coastal West Africa was not necessarily present until the twentieth century. In a further Nigerian paper studies of remains from an abandoned settlement at Abaja, within the last 750 years, show evidence of forest clearance and exotic ornamental plants. Pottery remains indicate no clear links with other Yoruba groups. The final Nigerian paper brings the subject into the twentieth century with the analysis of a midden mound, at Adura Oja near to Ibadan, relating to activities and changes during colonial rule from 1893 onwards.

Overall the book is a tribute to the efforts of the participants. Frustratingly, a result of the inherent difficulties of the subject, many of the papers appear to raise as many questions as they solve, emphasising the need for continued research. Despite the hard work, in almost every case the papers convey the impression that the researchers are scratching the surface of the subject and crying out for more funds, especially poignant in today's economic climate.

—Rob Oldham