

WEST AFRICAN ART IN CONTEXT

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A one day meeting organised by the Nigerian Field Society
and the Cambridge African Archaeology Group

Saturday 20 September 2014

8.45 a.m. to 6.30 p.m. at

THE McDONALD INSTITUTE FOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Downing Street, Cambridge CB2 3ER



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Figure 1. Cambridge symposium poster.

A joint meeting of the Nigerian Field Society (UK branch) and the Cambridge African Archaeology Group was held at the McDonald Institute in Cambridge, on Saturday, 20 September 2014.

This event had its origin in the suggestion that there might be a road show where Nigerian Field Society members could showcase some of the artefacts they had acquired during their time in West Africa. It was decided to broaden it out and instead have a symposium, of which the road show could be a part, to discuss art in general and its role in West Africa. The Cambridge African Archaeology Group agreed to collaborate on this project and, thanks to them, it was held at the McDonald Institute, which functions as a research school in the Division of Archaeology, University of Cambridge. Thanks are due to Matt Davies, Jacke Phillips, Laurence Smith, and Shadia Taha for all their help in this respect. There were eight speakers at the event, including Pat Oyelola, who acted as the chairperson for the round-table discussion, which incorporated the original idea for the meeting. Thirty-four people were in attendance, most but not all Nigerian Field Society members, as well as 10 speakers and organizers. The day was rounded off by a reception at the McDonald Institute, and most people went on to have dinner at a restaurant in Newnham.

Fiona Savage

Introduction and Regarding the Other

The proceedings were initiated by Dr Fiona Savage (Sainsbury Research Unit, University of East Anglia), who invited the audience to consider the meaning of art and context in the West African milieu, before presenting her paper on *Regarding the Other: The Power of Representation and the Representation of Power*.

Dr Savage noted that over the last ten years, a small number of scholars and museum professionals have called for the rejection of geographic, thematic and historical approaches to African art, including 'West African Art', which they perceive as having negative connotations, restrictive and essentialist in nature. She was of the opinion that if we were to ditch these approaches, we would be in danger of ignoring the physical, cultural and social connections that are shared by many communities in West Africa.

She went on to consider a more fundamental question: what do we mean by art? In attempting to define it, we are immediately confronted with the inappropriateness of applying Eurocentric distinctions that differentiate between the so-called art and craft, the tribal and the modern, and the traditional and the contemporaneous. This issue can only be addressed by the development of a more complex, rich and reflexive vocabulary that draws on, and adapts concepts and terminology from a wide range of sources. In this way, it is hoped we will be able to express more clearly nuanced and accurate ideas

about art and artistry that also embody and convey West African and diasporic West African perspectives.

She observed that context is used by archaeologists, anthropologists and art historians to situate artefacts, art works and artists within wider networks of associations and relationships that are rooted in time and space. The consideration of different types of context (chronological, cultural, geographical or philosophical) enables us to push the boundaries of our knowledge of West African artistic creativity, production practices, social organization, belief systems and relationships by tracing transformations and changes that occur between people, their material culture and the physical environment. She concluded her introduction by saying that she hoped the symposium would engender in the audience an even greater appreciation of the sheer ingenuity, resilience and virtuosity of West African art and artists, past and present.

These remarks served as an excellent introduction to the themes which were encountered in the rest of the day's proceedings. Fiona Savage then examined the way in which cross-cultural interactions between Europeans and local communities in West Africa generated varying depictions of the other over a 500-year period, as shown in three case studies.

She began by stating that as a student, she had benefitted from an inter-disciplinary academic training, specifically in art history, anthropology and archaeology and, as a result, found it intellectually stimulating and rewarding to apply concepts and analytical frameworks originating from other disciplines to the interpretation of art. She therefore wished to apply the concept of intrusion (commonly employed within the discipline of archaeology) to compare and contrast three very different case studies originating from Sierra Leone, Ghana and Nigeria. After giving a brief overview of different types of intrusion, she presented her first case study of Sapi-Portuguese ivories from Sierra Leone, which were carved within a 40-year period from AD 1490-1530. Focussing on two 'salts' in the British Museum collection, she explained that ivories of this type were carved in response to demands from Renaissance Europe. It was thought that ivory salts were modeled on cast metal cups and covers that were fashionable in Europe during the late 15th and early 16th centuries; but while continental European renaissance aesthetics may have played a part in informing the overall physical shape and some of the embellishment of the salts, the addition of human and animal figures is of purely West African origin.

In this case, African and European iconography is married in a harmoniously balanced composition, which reveals an underlying African agency at work. The eclectic mix of imagery allows for multiple readings from different cultural perspectives. The imagery is intertwined, as is its culturally embedded and constructed meaning. It is perhaps no coincidence that many of the architectural elements on salts take the form of twists,

plaits and knots. The iconography challenges us to unravel, separate and straighten it out, but this is a fruitless and impossible task. Rather, one should allow oneself to be simply caught up in this enigmatic blend of imagery.

Dr Savage's second case study focussed on a single image entitled, *The First Day of the Yam Custom*, which was created by Thomas Edward Bowdich. It depicts an event that took place during the first British mission to Kumase, the Asante capital, in what is now modern-day Ghana, in 1817. Evidence suggests that Bowdich selected those elements that demonstrated the best and the worst aspects of Asante culture as he had encountered and experienced it. His depictions of the Asante were structured in accordance with several sharply opposed binary extremes (good/bad, civilized/primitive, innocent/bestial, godly/ungodly) implicitly and explicitly conveyed in the way some of the figures are arranged and re-presented in the composition. In effect, Bowdich invites readers to compare and contrast the appearance and bearing of both parties, and to make value judgements on the behaviour and conduct displayed. This image therefore constitutes a clever piece of personal and political propaganda.

Finally, she considered an instance of how colonial intrusion was represented and resisted through the use of imagery carved into sets of door panels that were created by the Yoruba artist, *Olowe* of Ise-Ekiti (c. 1875-1938) during the colonial era in Nigeria. While other carvers such as Dada Areogun concentrated on depicting generic and iconographic representations of colonial authority in the same period, Olowe portrayed actual personalities and events. By examining in detail the scenes on two door panels in the British Museum collection, Fiona demonstrated the subtle and not so subtle strategies that were employed in creating and developing ambiguous and divisive imagery that can be interpreted in divergent ways. The imagery reveals the use of a basic dichotomous organizing principle, whereby the indigenous and colonial regimes are represented separately on opposing panels. Significant differences in the structure of the two government systems are deliberately juxtaposed, thereby exposing them, inviting visual comparison of the contrasting regimes. Each and every time the doors were opened, the act of pulling them apart disrupted the dialogic relationship. In this way, Olowe's composition served to metaphorically echo and reflect the deep ambiguity, divisions and tensions that surrounded this official intrusion in particular and colonial rule in general.

In conclusion, Dr Savage returned to the theme of the great potential involved in borrowing from other academic disciplines and adopting a cross-disciplinary approach to the interpretation of West African art.

Pat Oyelola

Remembering with Cloth

The next presentation was by Dr Pat Oyelola, a former editor of the *Nigerian Field*, on *Remembering with Cloth*, an explanation of the ways in which cloth is used by the Yoruba and others to mark an event, recall history or commemorate a person.

The speaker began by pointing out that too much should not be made of the supposed distinction between art and craft. When we look at the Yoruba word for artistry — *ona* — the barriers between the two crumble and disappear. One who has *aju ona* has an eye for design, in whatever medium. The aesthetics of cloth and clothing are an essential ingredient in the success of any social gathering, particularly those connected with weddings and funerals. Much time, energy and money are spent on buying or commissioning appropriate cloth, which will enhance the occasion and elicit the admiration of participants and observers. The custom of wearing matching cloth at an

event is known as *aso ebi* (family cloth) or *aso egbe* (society cloth). With numerous examples, the speaker demonstrated that the custom is flourishing, but the fabric now used tends to be printed calico or *ankara*. Hand-woven strip cloth *aso oke* (cloth of the hinterland) is nonetheless still highly regarded and is worn on ceremonial occasions. It may serve as a betrothal gift for a bride or be used as a grave offering. In Yoruba thought, cloth is associated with the idea of permanence or immortality: cloth endures when the body is long gone, an idea vividly illustrated in the costume of the *egungun* (ancestral spirits).



Figure 2. One of Yinka Shonibare's headless figures.

The works of some modern artists, e.g. El Anatsui (born: 1944) and Yinka Shonibare (born: 1962), in their technique show the influence of cloth. El Anatsui is from Ghana, but has been mainly resident in Nigeria from

1975. The Ewe people also make hand-woven *kente* strip cloth, and his work references this material in wood and metal, including constructions formed of liquor bottle tops. Shonibare is well-known internationally for his tableaux of life-sized European figures, all dressed up in high quality African prints, but all headless, symbols of the end of empire perhaps. Pat Oyelola concluded her presentation by asking the audience a question posed by someone in response to one of Shonibare's works exhibited in

London in 1995, "How does a girl like you get to be a girl like you?"

Charles Gore

Early Photography in Lagos Colony

The final presentation in the first part of the meeting was by Dr Charles Gore (School of Oriental and African Studies, London) on *Early Photography in Lagos Colony*. He concentrated particularly on the career of Neils Walwin Holm, who was originally from the Gold Coast, but who settled in Lagos in the 1880's. He had an active business as a photographer in the period up to 1910, when he left to train as a barrister in London. He returned to Lagos in 1917 and practised as a lawyer there for the rest of his working life. Charles explained how this change of direction reflected changes in the colony over the period in question. In the latter part of the 19th century, photography offered a skilled professional status in a situation where there was considerable social parity between Africans and European 'old coasters'. But at the beginning of the 20th century, this situation underwent a transformation to the disadvantage of the Africans. Holm understood this, and many of the postcards he produced, e.g., that of the reception of Yoruba messengers by Sir Alfred Maloney in 1887, acted as a reminder of the parity which had been lost.

Modern Nigerian Arts and Crafts

Pat Oyelola then chaired a session on *Modern Nigerian Arts and Crafts*, which incorporated the original idea of a road show" in which for the most part, slides were shown of artefacts which are in her possession and that of other members of the Nigerian Field Society. Some cloth and a few actual pieces were on display, including an Afikpo mask given to Dinah and Geoff Partridge by Simon Ottenberg, the author of the book, *Masked Rituals of Afikpo* (1975). Pat Oyelola presented a copy of her book, *Nigerian Artistry* to the McDonald Institute in recognition of their help in staging this event.



Figure 3. Pat Oyelola presenting her book, *Nigerian Artistry*.

Angela Fagg*Nok Terracottas in Context*

The first part of the after lunch session was devoted to the Nok culture. Angela Rackham (née Fagg) presented a paper on *Nok Terracottas in Context*, in which she discussed the internal diversity which they display. She linked this to the different circumstances of their initial discovery, from the activities of the tin mining industry, through construction of roads and buildings, to subsistence farming. She recalled that it was her father, Bernard Fagg, who coined the term Nok culture in 1966, following discoveries by himself and others in the Nok area and its environs since 1944, although the first find was made as far back as 1928. The excavation of three non-alluvial sites, i.e., sites in primary context at Katsina Ala, Taruga and Samun Dukiya in the 1960's already indicated that the terracottas were the work of a society that utilized iron. These were people who adorned themselves with beads and bangles, as well as lip and ear plugs, used ground stone axes, and had a range of domestic pottery styles. Although nothing could be said about the origins of these people, the work conducted in the 1960's had, on the basis of radiocarbon dates, already established that they were present in the area during the first millennium BC.

Philip Allsworth-Jones*Nok, ein Ursprung Afrikanischer Skulptur*

Dr Philip Allsworth-Jones followed this with a paper entitled, *Nok, ein Ursprung Afrikanischer Skulptur*—the exhibition concerning the work of the German project held at Frankfurt from October 2013 to February 2014. He explained that a German team led by Peter Breunig had renewed work on the Nok Culture from 2005 till date. The exhibition showcased what has been achieved so far and the German language catalogue provided a comprehensive account. It should be noted that since then an English version of the catalogue has been produced, with the title: *Nok: African Sculpture in Archaeological Context*, and it is intended that this work will accompany a new display of the same exhibition material (which has all been returned to Nigeria) at the National Museum in Kaduna.

The speaker pointed out that the circumstances in which the research work was carried out was not entirely favourable. The German team decided to concentrate on an area of 300 km², with about 250 sites, but it was estimated that 90% of them were disturbed by looting. Nonetheless, significant results have been obtained. One hundred and thirteen new radiocarbon dates are available, all with a sure provenance from 79 localities. These have allowed a more detailed chronological picture to be built up. Three Nok phases have been distinguished, which in calibrated calendrical years, are as follows: Early

1500-900 BC, Middle 900-300 BC and Late 300-1 BC. The terracottas for which the Nok culture is most well known are associated with the middle phase, and it is at this time too that the use of iron started. Perhaps the most remarkable discovery so far was that made at Utak Kamuan Garaje Kagoro in 2008. Nine self-contained blocks of finds were found at about 1.5m distance from each other, the ground between them being sterile. The excavators believe that each block was originally contained within a basket, which was sunk into the ground. Each consisted of jumbled terracotta fragments belonging to several different figures, none of them complete. It is clear that they were destroyed before being buried. Hence, as the excavators say, this looks like a ritual process, and it may help to explain why we have no complete Nok terracottas (at least, not authentic ones). In seeking to explain this phenomenon, Breunig and his colleagues are inclined to speak in terms of ancestor worship — “discourse with the ancestors” — or of sacrifice leading to a renewal process. It should be noted that a pattern of breakage and burial of this sort is not confined to Nok. It was demonstrated at Ife by Peter Garlake, where at Obalara’s land he found a group of already damaged terracottas covered with red clay, which had been deliberately buried as such. The site was interpreted as a shrine and is radiocarbon dated to about 1190-1470 AD. This is not to suggest that there is any direct connection between Ife and Nok, rather the sites share a common symbolic expression of a belief system.

The terracottas themselves are abundantly illustrated in the volume, with high quality photographs and drawings. In the authors’ view, the figures were created in a basically uniform style, most being of adult men and women, although there are also human-animal combined figures and, among the animals, snakes and lizards are clearly significant. Snakes shed their skin, an indication of immortality. Ancestors can appear as snakes, and they have connections to the underworld. It should be pointed out that such ideas are common in Africa, and appear among other things in literature, such as Camara Laye’s novel, *L’enfant noir*. In order to establish the properties of the raw materials from which the Nok terracottas and pottery vessels were made, a geochemical analysis was conducted by Christina Beck. The results clearly show that while local clay was used for everyday objects, a single or at least limited sources were employed for the creation of the terracottas. The implication that there was centralized production is somewhat at odds with Angela’s emphasis on the variability they display, and is a pointer to how much we are yet to learn about this culture and its makers.

Charles Gore

Commemoration and Brass Casting in Benin City: Reconceptualizing Art(efacts)

Charles Gore’s paper considered the way in which royal art objects made by the brass casters of Benin have been the major focus of attention since their removal from the

palace of the oba in 1897, an event which changed European perceptions of African material culture in quite significant ways. But the canon thus established has obscured much of the true range of artefacts made by the brass casters, who are still active in Igun Street. The Kelvingrove museum in Glasgow is the only British institution to have commissioned one of their recent products. The artefacts still play a great role in Benin City in terms of commemoration of the deceased and funerary rites, which is crucial to how the Benin kingship is perceived. A longer description was given of one such rite that involves the use of *isoton* boxes and brass cutouts, which are hired from the craftsmen in Igun Street. This is but one example of the dynamic and innovative role which indigenous religion still plays within the present urban environment.

Nikolas Gestrich

Style, Grammar, and Techniques: Archaeological Approaches to Decoration on West African Pottery

The last two presentations of the day were more strictly archaeological. Dr Nikolas Gestrich (University College London, Institute of Archaeology) spoke on the topic, *Style, Grammar, and Techniques: Archaeological Approaches to Decoration on West African Pottery*, on the basis of his experience in Mali. According to him, most archaeological and ethno-archaeological work on pottery have its own particular take on artistic expression. Rather than asking what the artists want to express in their work, these disciplines have instead tended to focus on what works of art can tell us about their unknown makers. In contrast to approaches founded in the history of art, which often see decoration as the locus for very personal expression, individuals feature less in archaeological treatments of the subject. Pottery decoration is generally used to approach questions on a society-wide scale, e.g., socialization and learning patterns, or, more obviously, ethnicity and cultural boundaries.

He illustrated this point by reference to the site of Tongo Maaré Diabal, a medium-sized tell site near the town of Douentza, occupied in the period c. 400-1200 AD. Here, two different traditions of pottery making were distinguished. The final products do not differ in size or functional attributes, but they are clearly distinct in technique of fashioning and decorative finish. The technological difference suggests a different learning environment for the two traditions, and recent ethnographic studies indicate that they probably represent distinct genealogies of teachers and learners. A situation in which multiple such traditions exist in one place is not unusual, and can easily arise through marriage patterns, migration and other forms of mobility. What is more surprising is the persistence of difference in decoration over 800 years of occupation. Statistical comparison with archaeological sites in the surrounding region shows that the two styles (mat impressions and cord roulettes) were associated with clearly bounded

regional traditions, one to the east and one to the west. It seems, therefore, that regional cultural differences were definitely an important influence on pottery decoration, and that it served as a vehicle for group identity, as well as individual expression. All told, this and other evidence suggest that Tongo Maaré Diabal was the home to several lineage groups within a culturally diverse region.

Matthew Davies

Potting, Smelting and Art: Thinking about African Material Culture

The final talk was given by Dr Matthew Davies (McDonald Institute) on *Potting, Smelting, and Art: Thinking about African Material Culture*. He pointed out that, while archaeologists have long studied African material culture traditions, they have largely tended to do so from a historical and technological perspective, with specific focus on those materials most likely to survive in the archaeological record, notably the products of metal working and potting. But over the last 30 years, a more limited range of African case studies, coupled with varying theoretical trends in archaeology, have pointed towards the ways in which African material culture transcends the technical/functional and plays into expressions of identity and status.¹ These studies have for the most part viewed material culture, especially iron smelting and potting, as passive 'symbolic representations' of the nature of the society that produced them. More recent approaches to 'materiality' across the humanities and social sciences argue for a more active role of material culture as a source of agency in its own right.² In this view, material things do not just communicate or speak, but rather they "do"; they have causative effects in the world.

An early study from West Africa on this topic relates to the Mandara mountains in Cameroon.³ The study shows how pottery decoration does not merely indicate the identity of its makers or users, but rather that decorations such as rouletting act as 'barriers' at the interface between what is contained within the pot and what exists outside. This barrier is not just symbolic, but is actually believed to protect cooked foods from malevolent forces in the world, or conversely to protect the 'world' from

¹ For example, I. Hodder, 1982. *Symbols in Action: Ethnoarchaeological Studies in Material Culture*. New Studies in Archaeology. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, with reference to Baringo, Kenya

² For example, C. Tilley, 2004. *The Materiality of Stone: Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology*, Bloomsbury Academic, New York.

³ N. David, J. Sterner and K. Gavua, 1988. Why pots are decorated. *Current Anthropology* 29: 365-389.

malevolent sprits trapped within pots. In a similar vein, many researchers have considered the symbolic and often gendered elements of African metal working. The work of Peter Schmidt and his colleagues in Tanzania is particularly relevant.⁴ They emphasized the presence of ritual offerings placed in the bases of African smelting furnaces, with meanings ranging from interdiction of ancestral spirits and witchcraft to the infusion of the furnace with attributes of fertility. Ritual treatments of iron smelting show significant continuity through time as far back as the middle of the first millennium BC. But less attention has been paid to how these symbols actually work. Rather than just communicating, it is clear that to the smelter and his audience, these elements had causative and transformational powers within the world. The speaker illustrated this point with an analysis of iron slag from two furnaces in Pokot, northwest Kenya, which he recently studied in conjunction with a graduate student.⁵ In one instance at this site, the slag was clearly viewed as a useless waste product, while in the other site, the slag was cooled, broken up and removed, probably for use in charms or amulets. He argued that in this case, the slag acquired potency through its ability to harness the transformational powers inherent in smelting.

Overall, Matthew Davies suggested there should be a more integrated appreciation of African material culture, which focusses not on what material culture says, but rather on what it does. In general, we need an appreciation of African material culture that transcends any simple dichotomy between art and other material crafts, since both communicate and do things in holistic ways.

From the above account, it should be clear that this was a meeting with a highly varied and intriguing agenda, which provoked a good deal of debate among people who perhaps normally do not get together. As one of the members of the audience put it, it was a “powerful day which pulled you in.”

⁴ e.g. P. Schmidt and B. Mapunda, 1997. “Ideology and the archaeological record in Africa: Interpreting symbolism in iron smelting technology.” *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 16: 73-102

⁵ Alexander Walmsley. 2014 Waste Products? Technological Style and the Creation of Slags in Indigenous African Iron Smelting. Unpublished MA dissertation.



Discussants at the Cambridge symposium.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the speakers who agreed to come to Cambridge and participate in this meeting. Thanks once again goes to the members of the Cambridge African Archaeology Group who collaborated with the Nigerian Field Society to make this occasion a success, and to the McDonald Institute for hosting it.