

IS AESTHETICISM POSSIBLE IN AFRICAN ART?

--Ezeiyoke Peter Chukwunonso

Introduction:

Among African art critics and aesthetics philosophers there have been a raging debate whether or not aestheticism (that is enjoyment of art for its own sake) is ever possible in an African art? Most of these theorists seem to favour the opposite stand, that is, that aestheticism is never possible in an African art. They all argued that all the arts in Africa are instrumentally oriented (that is 'art in service of something else'). For instance, Anyanwu wrote, 'impressionist art is a rare thing in African culture. The African does not take wandering dogs, apples in dishes, burning lanterns, as the theme of his work'. (Anyanwu, 1984; p.272) Senghor shares a similar view when he wrote 'black Africa art is not a separate activity, in itself or for itself: it is a social activity, a technique of living, a handicraft in fact.' (Olaniyan and Quayson (ed.), 2007; p. 200). For Ngugi, the reason is political. He wrote, 'I looked forward to the day when all the preoccupation of African writers with colonial problems and politics would be over and we would all sit back and poke sophisticated irony at one another and laugh at ourselves... we would then indulge in the luxury of comedies of social manners...or explore the anguished world of lonely individuals abstracted from time and actual circumstances'. (Olaniyan and Quayson (ed.), 2007; p. 477). And for Brutus, to avoid this stand is to produce unaesthetic artwork. He wrote, 'an artist, a writer is a man who lives in a particular society and takes his images and ideas from that society. He must write about what he sees around him and he must write truthfully about it or he must come to terms with what is ugly in it and pretend that it is not there or that it is not bad. Having done that, he cuts himself off from large areas of experience, large areas of expression. This is the price he must pay because he has cut himself off from his fellow men. He has denied himself access to their feelings, the ability to enter into their experience and sympathize with

them. Once he has deprived himself of this, his work must suffer as a consequence'. (Brutus, 1976; p.100). In other words, any artwork that is not instrumental in value (that is, does not express the political, moral or cultural experience of the people etc.), has no aesthetic merit.

But how correct is this view? Our aim in this essay is to critically expose this view, and to show the weakness and the strength of their argument.

The Forces behind Instrumentalism in an African Art

In Dewey's thought, art values spring from the experience or function that gave rise to that art. He wrote, 'by common consent, the Parthenon is a great work of art. Yet it has aesthetic standing only as the work becomes an experience for a human being. And, if one is to go beyond personal enjoyment into the formation of a theory about that large republic of art of which the building is one member, one has to be willing at some point in his reflections to turn from it to the bustling, arguing, acutely sensitive Athenian citizens, with civil sense identified with a civic religion; of whose experience the temple was an expression, and who built it not as a work of art but as a civic commemoration... the one who sets out to theorize about the esthetic experience embodied in the Parthenon must realize in thought what the people into whose lives it entered had in common, as creators and as those who were satisfied with it, with people in our own homes and on our own streets.' (Dewey, 1980; p. 4)

In the ancient African society, religious experience seems to call forth most of the African arts. Anyanwu affirming this wrote, 'is art the result of religious inspiration? ...the themes of artistic expressions have mythical origins. Myths about the origin of things, man, society, universe, social institutions abound in African communities. In spite of their variations all have common characteristics. They speak about God -creator or organizer of the world, His ministers or divinities, spirits and ancestors, man and animals, etc. all these myths express and sustain human altitudes towards extra-human forces, life forces, believe to permeate the whole universe. ...art and music are some of the mechanism for understanding and expressing the life forces of the non-visible world. The

artist re-creates the force as the myths and society expresses them. His artistic works have to resemble the mythical forces'. (Anyanwu, 1984, p.270-1) Elsewhere he wrote, 'any visible art form has other invisible relation and all these must be viewed as a whole. Given an art object, there are life-forces, ideas, dances, rituals, worlds, myths associated with it'. (Ibid p. 272)

Since African arts springs from religion experience, one will see African arts performing and having religion values. Anyanwu noted that African 'mask are carved to represent or handle the force of death ...since the Africans do not want their ancestors to wander without abodes, masks are made to harbour ancestors spirits.'(Ibid, p. 271-2) So also African folk lore, Nnoruka analyzing one of such folklores sang during childbirth wrote, 'stanzas one and two refer to God who has answered her prayer by giving to the [sic] child.'(Nnoruka, 2009; p. 207)

Apart from religious value, African arts traditionally have a moral value. The linking point between African art and morality is religion. Religion has much to contribute to African morality, as Arinze noted, 'the earth spirit, is the most important spirit after Chukwu. She is the great mother spirit, the queen of the underworld, the 'owner' of men, and custodian of public morality in conjunction with the ancestors.'(Arinze, 2008; p. 27) In a similar vain, Oluwole though arguing that the gods are not the legislators of morality in the Yoruba culture, they yet have a strong role to play, 'their role is to ensure absolute just by enforcing sanctions...' (Omeregbe, 1993; p.137) All in all, religion has a strong connection in African morality.

We have seen above how African arts spring from religious experience, perform religious function and thus have a religious value. Thus, religion which is inseparable from African arts and morality has brought morality and arts together. One can see how, for instance, mask used in masquerade serve a religion purpose by being the abode of the ancestors; it then performs its artistic function by given enjoyment to those who beheld it. At the same time, it has moral duty since masquerade is used in disciplining different offenders in Africans tradition. Ekpo masquerade of Calabar for example.

Music also serves a similar purpose of moral value. Women quickly compose scornful music which they sing and dance during festival mainly against a man who committed a public scandal against the morality of the land. This reprimand's the culprit and serves as a deterrent to other people.

It is because of this trust between Africa morality and arts in Africa cosmology made an African not to fear or envy arts thus he uses it for moral education. He is unlike Plato who argued for abolishment of art in moral education.

Before the modern sophistication of things in villages, children do gather to listen to moonlight tale. In moonlight tales, an elderly person will narrate stories usually of animal persona. The tale which is not only entertaining will always end with a moral lesson on why this bad thing happened to a moral deficient person or value of love and why hatred should be abolished.

Art is used also in traditional African setting to transmit cultural value and the community history. Apart from tales of animal persona told in moonlight tales, tales of wars fought by the community and the community belief on how they originated is sometimes told.

This functionalism approach of experience of arts, that is ontologically inherent in African experience of arts, made arts value in Africa even in this modern time to still have a functionalism approach. It is not then surprise to see art linked, for instance, with politics, in the modern African experience of arts. Lindfors has this to say in that regard, 'the new literatures in English and French that have emerged in black Africa in the twentieth century have been profoundly influenced by politics. Indeed, one could argue that they have been generated and shaped by the same forces that have transformed much of the African continent during the past hundred years. Writers have served not only as chroniclers of contemporary political history but also as advocates of radical social change. Their works thus both reflect and project the course of Africa's Cultural Revolution.'(Olaniyan and Quayson (ed.), 2007; p.23) Achebe even believed 'that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of the

contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant like that absurd man in the proverb who leaved his house burning to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames.’(Achebe, 1975; p.78)

Little wondered why Achebe’s novels have political undertones. *Things fall Apart*, for instance mirrored the shock Africa culture had when it had contact with the political force of the colonial masters. A similar theme ran through *Arrow of God*. In his *The Man of the People* and the *Anthills of Savannah*, the political scenario changed. He then focused on how Africa leaders handle their gotten independence from the colonial masters. He is not alone in this, Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* or *Fragments* is on similar part. So also is Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s *Devil on The Cross* or *A Grain of Wheat* to name but few. Poets like Dennis Brutus, Senghor, and Odia Femi etc handled a similar theme.

Apart from political value, contemporary Africa artists see their work as having moral value also. Gordimer for instance believed that ‘morals have bedded with story-telling since the magic of the imaginative capacity developed in human brain.’(Olaniyan and Quayson (ed.), 2007; p.115) But the moral value arts have is not that of Sunday Sermon. Fiction’s morality lies in taking the freedom to explore and examine contemporary morals, including moral systems such as religions, with unafraid honesty.’(Ibid, p.111) Achebe saw the moral power of art in its power to touch our sensibility and to make us to relive the life of the character. ‘Why does Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* offer us a better, stronger and more memorable insight into the problem of excess than all sermons and editorials we have heard and read, or will hear and read, on the same subject?

The reason is that while editorials and other preachments may tell us all about excess, Tutuola performs the miracle of transforming us into active participants in a powerful drama of the imagination in which excess in all its guides takes on flesh and blood. Afterwards we can no longer act as hearers only of the word; we are initiates; we have made our visit; we have encountered ourselves in the Drinkard in much the way the

Drinkard has encountered himself in the course of a corrective quest -albeit unknowing- in that preposterous clump of unpleasantness that is his own son, the half-bodied baby...things are then not merely happening before us, they are happening, by the power and force of imaginative identification, to us. We not only see; we suffer alongside the hero and are branded with the same mark of 'punishment and poverty'. (Olaniyan and Quayson (ed.), 2007; p.110)

But why did the contemporary African artists accord art a moral value? Their answer can be seen by the fact that they believe that arts have truth-value. And because of this truth value, it 'can assault our sensibilities with certain contradictions and comfort us with social realities that set us thinking.'(Nwahunanya, 2010; p. 1) Achebe presented it thus, '...but if art may dispense with the constraining exactitude of literal truth, it does acquire in return incalculable powers of persuasion in the imagination. Which was why a single canvas, *Guernica*, by Picasso himself could so frighten the state machinery of Spanish fascism. For how could a mere painting on canvas exercise such awe unless in some way it accorded with, or had a disquieting relationship to, recognizable reality? Unless, in other words, it spoke a kind of truth?'(Olaniyan and Quayson (ed.), 2007; p. 107)

Why arts is believed to have truth-value can also be found in Aristotle's thought when he wrote, 'hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars.'(Aristotle, 1941; p. 1465) Here, Aristotle's prizes the value and truth content of arts more than history which in a lay man's view takes to day-to-day account of man's activity and so must be nearer to truth than arts. This Aristotle's view in locating arts nearer to philosophy may have been the reason why of recent, an African aesthetic thinker, Nnoruka proffered that an African experience of arts should include philosophical import. He wrote, 'our contention is that literature could be read as philosophy.'(Nnoruka, 2010; p.13) And to tell us he meant business he went ahead in comparing Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart*, which he affirmed 'as an excellent

example of a work of imaginative literature which has philosophical relevance' to the philosophical work of Heidegger, *Being and Time*, which he also admitted to be quite influential in the 20th century dialogue of philosophy.' (Ibid, p.13) According to him, 'Thing Fall Apart' is a philosophical work in as much as it deals with the meaning of life as a whole: the life of a community as an entry and the life of individuals within that community.' (Ibid, p.13) A similar character he found in Heidegger's work.

Little wondered why Achebe believed that arts can be used for education purposes. If an art is valued as philosophy or better put, arts have philosophical value, why should arts not be tenable to be used for educational purpose? Achebe wrote, 'for once, I would not wish to be excused. I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past -with all its imperfections, was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them. Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure. But who cares? Art is important but so is education of the kind I have in mind. And I don't see that the two need to be mutually exclusive.' (Olaniyan and Quayson (ed.), 2007; p. 105)

In sum, in an Africa experience of arts, arts seems to perform a particular function, that is, Africa experience of arts is instrumental in value. It is on this ground that you see why most of African art critics always search in an art work an instrumental value. Gbogi in analysing one of my poems published in *ANA Review* wrote, '*Just Dead* is another song of sorrow... the person in this poem mourns the death of a friend and in this, interrogates life and its transient constancy. He says: 'one thing did I learn from this/that I am not too young /to die /thus I should always be ready'. (Gbogi, 2011) Gbogi being an average African art critic must find something instrumental in a work of an art.

But should we accept that all African arts must be instrumental in form?

Aestheticism in African Arts

Why do we value arts? Is it because of its instrumental function or because of a property it possesses which is unique as no other thing on earth possesses that? If it is because of its instrumental function, it implies that when we will find any other thing that performs that same function, art goes. Experience tells us that we have a lot of other instruments that perform even better this work attached to arts, yet arts remain. So what we value in art is more than its instrumental value.

So when we value arts, we value it primarily because of its intrinsic character. 'For when we value art, we value it primarily for its own sake: when I engage with a musical piece such as Chopin's G minor Ballade, I appreciated it primarily for the experience independently of any relation it may bear to another experience. In other words, I listen to the rising and falling volume, the increase in intensity with each restatement of the main theme, the sense of release at the end, sense of dramatic anticipation at the beginning, and I seem to do all this without necessarily inferring anything else on behalf of the work, such as its relation to Chopin's other pieces, or indeed to other performances of the same work. And, on the face of it at any rate, the fact that the work may have a value in terms of its documentary interest to musicologists, or from the fact that it discourages teenagers from loitering in Newcastle's underground system, seems irrelevant to my experience of the Ballade as a work of art in its own right.' (Schellekens, 2007; P. 39)

In the case of arts, if it is because man needs to transmit cultural value, or to educate, even to impact moral character did art come forth, we will know that surely art would not be in the human history. This is because; we have other means, which is more precise, and more effective means which human being uses to carry out those functions. Why cloth morality in arts while we have wonderful ethical philosophy as well as theological treatises that can do this perfectly well? Why cloth our history and culture in fables and mythical stories why a proper documentation of history is possible either in written or oral form? All these point out that the value that made human to invent art is

beyond this function. In case the historical text or ethical treatise misses the functions that call them out, they cease to exist. But remove all these instrumental functions attached to arts, arts will still exist. Examples to illustrate this fact abounds. We have a lot of artistic works that have no instrumental value. Gabriel Okara's *The Call of The River Nun* or *New Year's Eve Midnight*; Kwesi Brew's *The Mesh* or *The Dry Season*; Frank Parkes' *Apocalypse*; Christopher Okigbo's *Idoto* or *Watermaid* ii; J.P. Clark's *Abiku* and Chinua Achebe's; *Chike and River*, to name but a few.

The simple fact this points out is that arts exist prior to the instrumental function attached to it. One can confidently say that it is after human being has seen the intrinsic power possessed naturally by artistic forms, did he contemplated employing the art to achieve other instrumental purposes he later attached to art. Hence, these instrumental values they attached to art are not ontological to it. Art ontologically has value/s which is/are intrinsic to it. These values builds in whoever that is involved in it satisfactions that are sometime not easily expressible, especially orally.

In conclusion, we can strongly affirm that just as instrumental value of art is present in African art; aesthetic value is as well present. To treat African art as only instrumental in value is a mistake of a highest order and that cannot exhaust the rich values embedded in an African art.

Bibliography

Achebe, C. *The African Writer and The Biafran Cause*, in 'Morning Yet On Creation Day', London: Heinemann, 1975.

Anyanwu, K. C. *Artistic and Aesthetic Experience*, in 'African philosophy' A. E Ruch, Ome and K.C Anyanwu (ed), Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1984.

Arinze, F. *Sacrifice in Igbo Traditional Religion*. St. Stephen Press, Onitsha, 2008.

Aristotle, *De Poetica*, in 'The Basic Works Of Aristotle'. New York: Random House, 1941.

Brutus, D. *Protest Against Apartheid*, in 'Protest and Conflict'. Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse (ed), London: Heinemann, 1976.

Dewey, J. *Art As Experience*, New York: Perigee Books, 1980.

Gbogi, T. www.independentngonline.com. January 29, 2011.

Nnoruka, S. *Literature as Philosophy*, in 'Philosophical Reflections on African Issues'. Enugu: Delta Publications, 2010.

Nnoruka, S. *Solidarity: A Principle of Sociality*. Owerri: Living Flame Resources, 2009.

Nwahunanya, C. *Literary Criticism: Critical Theory And Post Colonial African Literature*. Owerri: Springfield Publishers, 2010.

Episteme: an online interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary & multi-cultural journal

Bharat College of Commerce, Badlapur, MMR, India

Volume 2, Issue 4

March 2014

Omoregbe, J. *Ethics: A Systematic and Historical Study*. Ikeja: Joja Publishers, 1993.

Olaniyan, T. and Ato Quayson (ed); *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007.

Schellekens, E. *Aesthetics and Morality*, London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007.

Bio:

Ezeiyoke Chukwunonso is an MA student, Creative Writing, Swansea University, Wales. His poems and short stories have appeared in: *Criterion Journal*, *ANA Review*, *Ground's Ear Anthology*, *Future Lovecraft*, *African Eyeball*, *Sowetan Magazine*, etc. He has been shortlisted in *Ghana Poetry Prize* and *Quickfox Poetry Competition*. His essay in literary criticism has appeared in *Texts on SAVVY Journal for Critical Contemporary African Art*. His essay was 4th in a national essay competition organized for Nigerian undergraduates by the *Nation Newspaper*.

Email Address: ezeiyokechukwunonso@yahoo.com

BCC-ISSN-2278-8794