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Rethinking the "Anonymous:" Simeon Agbetuyi and the Yoruba Example

Caroline Bastian
Miami University - Oxford

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“Rethinking the ‘Anonymous’: Simeon Agbetuyi and the Yoruba Example”

The “traditional” and “contemporary” dichotomy plagues African art history, especially as one considers the place of the so-called traditional artist, construing them as static and living in the past. Discussing three generations of Yoruban artists each living within a different era of Africanist art history, this paper will demonstrate that traditional artists always responded to modernity. Indeed, the work of *Olówè of Isè*, Dada Areogun, and Simeon Agbetuyi challenge the traditional/contemporary divide with their incorporation of long-standing ideas fused with elements of contemporary reflection. With these three artists, my paper further blurs this disciplinary split, arguing that traditional artists have always been contemporary and that colonialism gave rise to such misunderstandings.

Throughout colonization, Western ethnographers exposed African art, depriving cultures of their heritage and stripping pieces from their historical and anthropological context. Scholars including Roslyn Walker, Sidney Kasfir, William Fagg, and others have challenged the anonymity of the African artist by highlighting individual artist agency in their work.¹ Kasfir poses a detailed explanation of how Western precedent created the “authenticity” of African art in her article, “African Art and Authenticity: Art with a Shadow.” Quoting an interview between Sally Price and Henri Kamer, Kamer expresses: “the object made in Africa...only becomes an object of art on its arrival in Europe.”² Kasfir explains this as, “the ‘primitive’ artist...[being] controlled

¹ Roslyn Adele Walker, *Olówè of Isè: A Yoruba Sculptor to Kings* (Washington DC: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1998), 6-7. This section was inspired by the Introduction written by Roy Sieber, Ph.D. who is a Research Scholar Emeritus at the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.

² Sidney Kasfir, “African Art and Authenticity: Art with a Shadow” *African Arts*, Vol. 25, No. 2, (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center, 1992), 40-53.

by forces larger than himself...in such an equation [that] the Western connoisseur is the essential missing factor that transforms artifact into art.”³ This colonial mentality has led Westerners to categorize African art on a scale of "tribal-ness," rather than the privilege of cultural importance to the artist. Sally Price, author of *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, exposes a collector for saying: “It gives me great pleasure not to know the artist’s name. Once you have found out the artist’s name, the object ceases to be primitive art.”⁴ The idea of the “anonymous artist” sprang from this culture of collecting, allowing the West to generalize art strictly as an example of “exotic Africa.”

In her article “Ọlọwẹ̀ of Isẹ̀: ‘Anonymous’ Has a Name,” Roslyn Walker, former director of the National Museum of African Art, catalogues a biography, educating readers of Ọlọwẹ̀ of Isẹ̀ and his prodigious impact on both African and global art history. In addition, she confronted Western misunderstanding of Sub-Saharan art, revealing how the authorship of a specific artist from a specific locality was indeed well known.⁵ From the traditional era, Ọlọwẹ̀ is known for his intricate carvings including his elaborate wood-carved doors from Ogoga's palace in Ikere now on display at the British Museum. Ọlọwẹ̀ depicts a scene of Captain W. G. Ambrose, one of the first British commissioners, and the king of Ise. On the right door, Ọlọwẹ̀ compares Captain Ambrose to the Fon culture, Yourba’s enemy. On the left, the king of Ise is depicted wearing his crown and surrounded by his people, asserting dominance and unity. Through both doors, it is

³ Sidney Kasfir, “African Art and Authenticity: Art with a Shadow” *African Arts*, Vol. 25, No. 2, (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center, 1992), 40-53. This idea comes from an interaction between Sally Price and Henri Kamer, a well-known dealer.

⁴ Sidney Kasfir, “African Art and Authenticity: Art with a Shadow” *African Arts*, Vol. 25, No. 2, (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center, 1992), 44. Quote originally from: Sally Price, “Our Art, Their Art,” *Third Text* 6 Spring, (1989), 65-72.

⁵ Roslyn Adele Walker, “Ọlọwẹ̀ of Isẹ̀: ‘Anonymous’ Has a Name” from *African Arts*, Vol. 31, No. 4, Special Issue: Authorship in African Art, Part 1 (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center, 1998), 38-47.

obvious of Ọlówẹ's personal reaction to the integration of Western culture into Yorubaland and his desire to comment on colonial occupation of Ise. Though his success is monumental in Yoruba culture, his works were rarely attributed to him prior to Fagg and Walker. Even despite colonialism paving way for the misrepresentation of African art and the African artist, Walker concluded that, though context and history of a piece may have been ignored, local villages are able to produce a detailed history of each work as well as its creator.

Dada Areogun who is noted as being second only to Ọlówẹ, earned his success by carving the trunks of fallen trees when sculpture demand fell in Yorubaland during the mid-twentieth century. Areogun's artistic peak spanned from the end of colonialism to a freed Africa, within both traditional and contemporary art eras. During this time, he carved a door for Ola via Omu Aran. Within Areogun's door, themes of modernity are portrayed through various symbols including a bike, pipe, and multiple colonial officials.⁶ Within the lowest register, Esu, the Yoruba "trickster god," greets the official at the door with a pipe, conveying the importance of crossroads and the question of British authority. Here, Esu smokes a tobacco pipe, which is a common symbol of modernity. Smoking was introduced into Yoruba culture during colonialism. Because of this notion, I believe Areogun uses smoking as a symbol of Western culture and its influence.

Bamidele Areogun, Areogun's son, offered apprenticeships to talented sculptors and carvers within Yorubaland, ultimately disseminating a cohesive mesh between both traditional and contemporary styles. One of his most successful apprentices is Simeon Agbetuyi.

⁶ John Picton, "Art, Identity and Identification: A commentary on Yoruba Art Historical Studies," in *The Yoruba Artist: New Theoretical Perspectives on African Art*, Edited by Rowland Abiodun et al, Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994.

Agbetuyi, born in Ekiti, Nigeria in 1951, is a Yoruba master sculptor who was an apprentice under Areogun in the 1960s. Today, Agbetuyi works at the Centre for Cultural Studies at the University of Lagos and trains his own apprentices.

Starting with Agbetuyi's *Yoruba Equestrian Figure with Pipe and Braid*, the male figure portrayed is riding a horse with a structured posture and a straight face looking ahead, evoking a sense of intimidation within the viewer. In Yoruba culture, a male riding a horse conveys Yoruba warriors, inspired by the wars that broke out in Benin within the early fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These warriors were typically depicted on horses wearing armor, portraying their superiority and overwhelming power, as seen in Agbetuyi's sculptures. During this time, families with loved-ones at war commissioned votive sculptures to venerate Orisha, or deities. This sculpture protected the warrior and provided security to the family. To further analyze Agbetuyi's work, the rider holds a "pipe" in his right hand while his left hand is opened with his palm facing upward in a cupping formation. The geometric stylization of the piece is seen within the pronounced facial features of the rider and his body armor, which covers his legs and arms. His head is smooth, with a tight braid that lands near the rear of the horse.

Yoruba Equestrian Figure with Flag conveys a sense of ownership, power, and respect through the facial features and overall posture of the subject. Similar to the aforementioned work, this piece is also a man riding a horse with deeply set eyes and thick, protruding eyelids, alluding to Benin warriors during the 1400s. In addition, both riders wear a full body suit of armor and clearly illustrate Agbetuyi's geometric style and the idea of being a fierce warrior. Different from the other work, the rider is wearing a cap with a cylindrical pattern carved into the

skull. In his right hand, he holds a small flag with a 'U' shaped pattern of alternating lines facing the shaft which has a spiraling line down to the hand of the rider.

It is prevalent that the sculptures created by Agbetuyi illustrate the direct collaboration between contemporary and traditional art. Though this has been mentioned, further elaboration is required to fully encompass the importance of bringing together both realms of African art. In contemporary African art, artists reflect on traditional styles and often embed colonial and historic politics into their works. Because these works were completed in 1987, it can be questioned why they so closely represent traditional style. I propose that Agbetuyi is commenting on the strength of Yoruba people and their perseverance in maintaining their faith and culture throughout colonialism and Western rule and that these sculptures create an image of Yoruban vitality within the face of past and present changes. Furthermore, I argue that Agbetuyi was aware of both Olówè and Areogun's ambiguous political commentary within their works. In doing this, I believe Agbetuyi mediates a deeper dialogue between Western culture and contemporary African art, addressing the West's misrepresentation of African culture.

On the bottom of each work, Agbetuyi's name is found carved into the side of the base. This, though traditional for Western artists, is uncommon to Yoruba culture. Carving, as opposed to simply signing, cannot be removed and is challenging to alter. This instills a permanent tie of Agbetuyi to his work and Yoruba culture. Because of this, the questions of ownership arises. Is it possible that Agbetuyi signed his works because of his desire to be known and remembered? Did he do this as a form of empowerment? Could Agbetuyi have signed his name anticipating his works to be displayed in a museum or is he referencing the future of African artists within museums? Is he responding to suppression from colonialism or is he catering to the Western market?

It is clear the signature is intentional, as means of tying his name to the work, however it is unknown where his desire to sign it came from. Because of the irregularity of this within Yoruba culture, it cannot be overlooked and left undiscussed. In addition to the political commentary symbolized within Agbetuyi's works, his signature aids in its analysis.

In analyzing these three generations of Yoruba sculptors, their work and context has aided in breaking the barrier of Western intervention in African art and the understanding of it. Between these works, it is clear the impact history and tradition have within African art, however, they more explicitly show how, historically, these artists have commented on colonization as contextual support to convey personal beliefs and political exploitation. Overall, these works successfully illustrate how Yoruba artists are able to use cultural history and tradition in creating new art, with current themes of suppression and freedom. These artists have helped collapse the dichotomy between traditional and contemporary African art through themes of modernity and exposing the truth behind a misrepresented culture.