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Femininity and Nudity: A Synthesis in the Works of Asuquo Alfred Akpabio

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Abstract:

Nigerian art has been practiced not only by professional artists but Artisans as well. Undoubtedly, many successful artists did not receive formal education but may have passed through apprenticeship before advancing their art education in schools. Qualitative and significant art have been produced from this informal school but unfortunately with little or no recognition. Some of the artists started their practice at an early age having been exposed to art environments early enough, or through genetic transfer. The objective of this paper is to project one of such artists from Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, Asuquo Alfred Akpabio. It discusses his works from the perspective of culture and lifestyle as it concerns women and their individual roles. Using the case study method of descriptive research, it peruses Akpabio's feminine sculptural works based on the functional and representational theories of visual art. It becomes imperative to art study as a visit to the gallery discovered that the artist under study appreciates the feminine gender as co-creators with the artist and God. Based on this, this study recommends that no disparity should be created between formally and informally borne art, for art is art.

Keywords: *Femininity, nudity, sexuality, Akpabio, Graeco-Roman, Judeo-Christian*

1. Introduction

Various aspects of culture and lifestyle depict African community consciousness and undeniably provide endless expressive opportunities to the artist. The ubiquitous roles of women over the ages become uncontested as feminine images dominate almost every aspect of visual art. Concomitantly, sculptural forms of women feature in Alfred Asuquo Akpabio's works, significantly rendered in nudity. Conflicting reactions and ideas have trailed this art style and philosophy because of the conservative religious and social control on immodesty, nudity and sexuality. Akpabio is one of Nigeria's endowed indigenous artists from Akwa Ibom State, whose artistic message and impact is still untapped. This study then makes an attempt to present his works as necessary for the illustration of womanhood (femininity) as it was in the times and culture of Akpabio's society. This study focuses on Akpabio's society because there may be variations culturally or socially from other societies and/or at other times.

Many contemporary and indigenous Nigerian artists over the years have made efforts to reflect or rediscover Nigerian art tradition as well as leave legacies for art continuity and sustenance, and Akpabio is not left out. McPherrin (2005) discussing the necessity to sustain art says that, art aids survival by telling a story from which we can learn or reminding us of past struggles to stay alive. It becomes exigent therefore to look at the meaning of art, as this study underpins it on the visual representational theory and functionality. In the view of Okore (2008) art forms and indeed the art tradition as we have it today in Nigeria is a synthesis of both indigenous and western art traditions. In line with this, Akpabio's works transverse the pre-colonial and postcolonial periods, with high moral and cultural inclination. Whenever morality is mentioned, every thought focuses on sexuality and then femininity. Through logical examination and interpretation, they have become significant to this study. This study discovers that female forms and renditions are a common spectacle in Akpabio's creative collection as products from thoughts bedecked with the circumstances of the rustic life of a typical African woman. He expressed the "ingenuity of the womenfolk grasping to support the family and tied to the burden of raising her children" amidst the high moral expectations that existed in a traditional African society like Akwa Ibom (Akpabio, 2019). These sculptural pieces have assisted Asuquo relive some of the long-gone Ibibio cultural beliefs and practices, as expressively documented and represented. This paper is therefore expected to highlight African culture as it pertains to women's roles and their relevance towards marital sustenance. Every interpretation made on the works is majorly from an intellectual and academic standpoint. The presuppositions from any theory serve as prerequisites to cultural history or any historical circumstance.

The functional theory upon which this study is anchored holds the view that one very important idea about art is that it should serve a purpose, which is called 'functionalism' or 'instrumentalism' (Keifer & Maitland, 2000). It holds another idea that art must be the unique product of an individual artist, not mass-produced. It also believes that art should have content and a purpose which may be used to influence, educate or teach; and this is where the function comes in. McPherrin (2005) purports that no one theory can explain the phenomenon of art, but in combination of concepts and theories, a better explanation and understanding can be achieved.

2. Art is God and God is Art: Akpabio's Art Philosophy

Alfred Asuquo Akpabio his concise belief in God as an artist. To him, Art is God and God is Art. From this point of view, imitation and functionality occupy a major scene in the definition of art. From the beginning, art (creation) came into being and since then, man has exhibited the drive to imitate God in the art of creation through representation. In trying to define art, McPherrin (2005) emphasizes that man has been trying to define art and separate non-art perhaps from its origin, while many great philosophers have had lots to say about art. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica (2019), Plato and Aristotle spoke of mimesis as the representation of nature. Plato sees all artistic creation as a form of imitation: that which really exists (in the "world of ideas") is a type created by God; the concrete things man perceives in his existence are shadowy representations of this ideal type. Weiten (2001) also observes that art is a wish fulfilled in a physical, tangible way (like Freud's dream theory). Therefore, an artist imitates by representing nature or what is already in existence. These will go a long way in providing an understanding of Akpabio's art and philosophy

3. Femininity, Nudity and Sexuality?

Browmiller (2013) describes femininity as a socially constructed phenomenon which begins in childhood with parents or guardians mainly to socialize them to take up specific roles in life. The female specific roles as culturally contrary to the males' have seriously become an issue of global discourse. They include girl child acceptance syndrome, genital mutilation, marriage, and child birth. Being a socially constructed phenomenon as rightly put by Gadzikwa (2019), the journey to arriving at femaleness is rigid, full of dos and don'ts that are imposed on the female sex. For instance, a woman is not supposed to be involved in land matters, climb a palm tree, eat certain animals or some specific parts of animals. Meanwhile, she is expected to perform all the house chores whether it suits her health or not, take care of her husband and the children, and every blame on the failure of the child(ren) transferred to her.

In support, Browmiller (2013) adds that any flaw on the societal expectations from the woman is seen as a case of being insufficiently feminine, considered as a failure on the part of the woman, and this failure can even be extended to the whole family where she comes from. By virtue of this, images of women from traditional and cultural history are depicted with a child/children, pregnancy or bearing head loads. Akpabio therefore, attempts to portray the woman as a strong gender, emotionally and physically energetic, evident in her daily multitasking activities. A great number of Akpabio's works feature female images in the nude with scintillating contours, not for any form of arousal or sexuality but in conformity with African traditional concept of nudity and lifestyle.

Nudity may be perused as a cultural way of life but can succinctly be differentiated from nakedness. According to Bakare-Yusuf (2011), the unclothed body, which in many Nigerian cultures was previously read in a non-sexual way, is now overburdened with sexual meaning and anxiety that acts as a prelude to sexual intercourse. Culture, as defined by (Oti 2005:4) in Okore (2008) is the customs and beliefs, art, way of life and social organization of a particular country or group of people. The source describes it as that complex whole and system of ideas which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, values, morals, customs, technology, etc., which are shared by almost everyone in a particular society and transmitted from generation to generation. Based on this, this paper discusses Alfred Asuquo Akpabio's works from the perspective of the culture of the people as it concerns women and their invaluable roles.

In the primitive era, near nudity or nudity was the lifestyle because of the absence or the existence of a few clothing items. The available items included a piece of spun fabric tied round the groin, for the men. The women covered the privates while the girls that have reached puberty had dresses in the form of ritualized and significant body decorations accompanied with waist beads. According to Willis (1989:65), the body decoration emphasizes the girl's well-being and health as well as her beauty and sexual attractiveness. A typical example is *Mbopo*, which portrays the cultural rite of passage of womanhood from birth to adulthood, celebrated in Akwa Ibom and Efik communities (Akpabio, 2019).

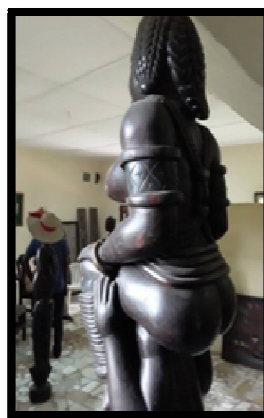


Figure 1

Artist: Asuquo Alfred Akpabio

Title: *Mbopo (Back View)*

Medium: Wood

Size: 6ft 10inches

Year: 1982

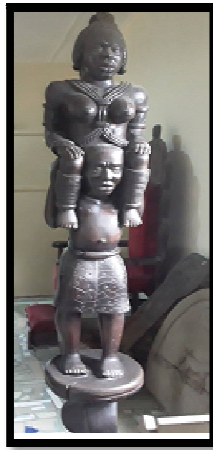


Figure 2
Artist: Asuquo Alfred akpabio
Title: Mbopo (front view)
Medium: Wood
Size: 6ft 10inches
Year: 1982

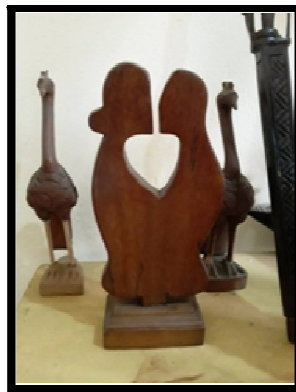


Figure 3
Artist: Asuquo Alfred akpabio
Title: One Love II
Medium: Wood
Size: 1ft 1inch
Year: 2007

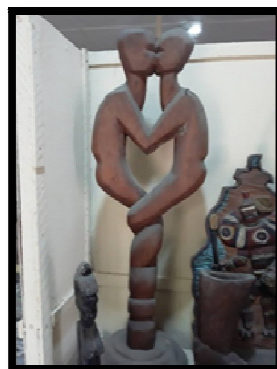


Figure 4
Artist: Asuquo Alfred akpabio
Title: One Love I
Medium: Wood
Size: 2ft
Year: 2005

Any part of the body that leaves its private confines to an unimpeded spectacle must attract some level of criticism. Apart from being significant in the traditional African context of fertility, nudity evokes some feelings of sexuality. The World Health Organisation (WHO) in 2002, conceptualized sexuality as "a central aspect of being human

throughout life which encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction (Izugbara, 2011). Though female nude figures or those that exhibit likely images of sexual organs reify and fuse sensuality, eroticism and beauty as they seem to lure the mind into sexual illusions or allegory.

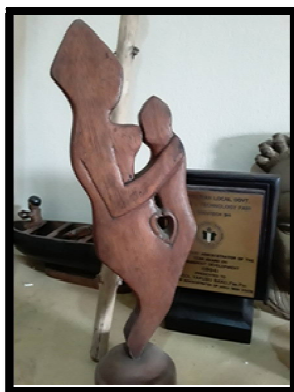


Figure 5
Artist: Asuquo Alfred akpabio
Title: Mother and Child
Medium: Wood
Size: 5ft 6inches
Year: 2009

In "Mother and Child" (above) depicting fertility and love, the gender roles are fused with sensuality because a closer look at it gives off the genital organ of a woman while also signifying love. The artist's intention may have been to express the love bond between mother and child or the delivery of a child but it is seen serving a multifaceted description which may also present a couple in coitus. Here, Opara (2018), rightly posits that works of art referencing sexuality are culturally universal, making their interpretations varied and sometimes conflicting.

In conformity with the Graeco-Roman philosophy of nudity which Judeo-Christian theory of modesty and shame has transformed overtime, the human body according to Opara (2019) becomes the perfection of all creation while man is the measure of all things. The Judeo-Christian principle has affected the representation of sexual organs in art, condemning the artist and frowning at the art piece. Bakare-Yusuf (2011) terms this new reaction as part of a pattern of "culturally and historically" shifting ideas about shame. However, symbolism of the sexual organs cannot be overemphasized in African art. To this, Smalls (2004) affirm that breasts signify women's roles as mothers and all it entails; sensuality, nurture, emotional warmth, intimacy and domesticity. Akpabio unwittingly expresses these outlined roles of a mother in his works. These roles are vividly summed up in Luke (2017), thus;

The mother can be fierce like the lioness with her cubs, but she always places the care of the cub above her own well-being and protects at all cost. The mother's job is just that- a mother and while there are still other aspects to the role of a mother- nothing comes above the care of her children. A mother feeds and nurtures her children, softly corrects them when they are wrong and shows her children how to nurture themselves and others. A mother carefully treads the line of softness and strict boundaries, she is a guide, but also a throne to her child. A good mother guides, but also gives space for mistakes so the child/ren can grow. The mother also learns when her cubs are grown and ready to go out and fend for themselves, but still fully embraces the role of mother when the children need to return to the den.



Figure 6
Artist: Asuquo Alfred akpabio
Title: Destiny creation
Medium: Wood
Size: 5ft 16.5inches
Year: 1982

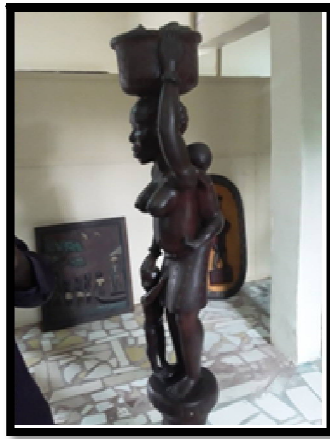


Figure 7

Artist: Asuquo Alfred akpabio

Title: Burden of womanhood

Medium: Wood

Size: 5ft 9inches

Year: 1989

According to The Gale Group (2005), female fertility and motherhood, as well as gender relationships, are prevalent themes in ancient depictions. It gave an instance of one of the earliest examples of gender representations with the faceless Paleolithic female statuette, *Venus of Willendorf* (c 28,000-25000 b.c.e), in a symbolic and conceptual context, representing feminine fertility.

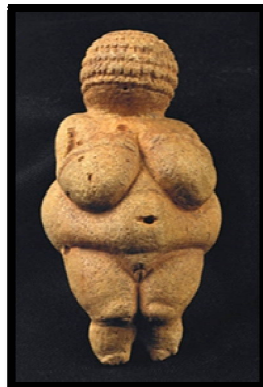


Figure 8

Title: Venus of Willendorf

Medium: Limestone

Size: 11.1 cm (4 3/8 inches)

Year: 1808

Photo: Joseph Szombathy (archaeologist)

It is interesting to note that the presence of sexual organs plays significant roles in an African context, especially when it pertains to fertility. An example is given with the Igbo sky consort *A/a* (mother goddess), as a symbol of fertility.



Figure 9

"Ala"- Igbo Earth Mother Goddess with her children at Mbari Cultural Center, Owerri, Imo State before its demolition by the governor, Rochas Okorocha. (March 2016).

On another note, the image of the phallus *Ikenga* (a symbol of a man's valour) dangles a big male organ, as a fertility figure. It was used to perform rituals for the daughters of the community who could not bear children in their husbands' house. Opara (2018) confirms that there is little evidence to suggest that traditional Igbo female nude figure functioned as erotic objects in their times and therefore warns that reading eroticized meanings into the forms in the present times may be tantamount to libidinizing bodies that were traditionally normatively neutral.



Figure 10

Early 20th C. African Igbo Wooden Alusi Ikenga Figure

Photo: Artemis Gallery

Year: 2018

Size: 13.5" H (34.3 Cm); 14" H (35.6 Cm) on Included Custom Stand

Source: <https://www.bidsquare.com/online-auctions/artemis-gallery/early-20th-c-african-igbo-wooden-alusi-ikenga-figure-1073762>

Exonerating nudity from sexuality, William, (2011) acknowledges the words of Andrew Stewart, Chancellor's Research Professor of Greek Art and Archaeology at the University of California, explaining the aims of nude sculpture; "If one had asked a Greek sculptor what he really aimed at, he would probably have replied beauty... perfect beauty can only come about through the exact commensurability (symmetria) of every limb and feature to every other... They served his own and his immediate client's fantasy of "the most beautiful". Chadwick (1990) surmises that the subject of the nude in art brings together discourses of representation, morality and female sexuality.

4. Conclusion

The works of Akpabio are culturally multifaceted, but this study pins its interest on femininity as a cultural discourse. As earlier stated, his works revolve around the inclusive and selfless nature of a typical woman which may also form subjective analyses about women. His works reveal women as radiators of love especially as agents of procreation, sexuality and power. An analytical assessment and societal recognition of the works would definitely reveal their feminine ideological undertones. Burk & Raffel (2015) in Opara (2018) agree that sexuality has been a recurrent subject in the history of art and then state that such sexually explicit images were created "often in the context of spirituality or rituals concerning fertility. Ricia (2014) attempts to highlight certain conventional female forms of communication as well as to a recognition of the power these forms hold. No longer in her adulation of women's bodies hidden under layers of formalism or expressed through aggression; instead they are visualized through traditional women's domestic crafts and with symbols unique to women's languages. In accordance, Alfred Asuquo Akpabio has expressed himself through the representation of his culture in sculpture, which he began with a borrowed knife and matchet. It is therefore recommended that no disparity should be created between formally and informally borne art, because art is art.

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