
IGBO TEXTILE SCULPTURE: A TRANSITION FROM TRADITIONAL TO MODERNITY, A REVIEW

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Abstract

The continual spread of change in the use of materials and processes in art encourage experiments and explorations that result in today's art in general and textiles in particular. The advent of technology and innovative thinking were the springboard of these creative processes among the guilds and artisans. The divergence of Igbo textile sculpture from the tradition to the modern is a progressive movement that depicts the innovativeness and creativity of the people in their involvement with the technological development.

Key Words: Technological, Creative, Textile Arts, Development, Sculpture

Introduction

Textiles have been defined by Wingate (1964) as all materials that can be or have been formed into yarns or fabricated into cloth. It is mainly concerned with fabrics and the materials from which they are made (fiber). This could be either man-made or natural. For instance, mattress is a textile product produced from coconut fiber. Also things like carpets, drapes, towels, and their likes found in various homes are mostly textile materials, which are of various types decorated with variety of colours. Textiles, also cover such industrial products such as boat sail, book-binding materials, conveyor belts, tapes, bagging and sound proof pads. Also in automotive industries, textile products are used in the production of tires, seat covers etc. Some hospital equipment such as adhesive tapes, bandages and surgical threads are made of textile materials.

The above mentioned materials boat sail, conveyor belts, tires, seat covers, bandages etc deal with textiles either in processing the raw materials into yarns or cloth construction. These

can be achieved through the process of spinning and twisting of yarns while fabrics are constructed by the interlacing method, interloping, knitting, braiding, felting, bonding or by lamination. Therefore, textiles can be described as any material which method of production involves one or a combination of the aforementioned processes.

Sculpture on the other hand is generally described as the art of creating three dimensional works of art of hard materials by carving, modeling, and casting, cutting and joining. There seems to be an extension of media in sculpture process. At present, sculpture involves creative works which are developed using wide range of materials and media, including textile based constructions and any other found objects that can be woven, assembled or built into sculptural forms. An example is the work of Robert Smithson Christo, a Bulgarian sculptor who created a short-term project surrounding a group of island

off the coast of Florida in the United States with bright pink poly propylene fabric in an attempt to show how space, movement, and time affect form. The merging of voluminous forms and tactile effects of sculpture and textiles respectively is a unique dynamic expressive medium which should be explored extensively. Kasten in an interview with Irene Waller, described these fusion between these two areas as the marriage of fiber and dimensionality (Waller 1977). Textile Sculpture is therefore, a medium of expression with fiber, thread, fabric and moveable objects through which sculptural forms are achieved by weaving and other creative processes. Therefore, the assistance of loom or any mechanical device may be of little or no use in textile sculpture. Artists have developed many ways to weave without mechanical loom. For instance, paper has been used as material for weaving to create decorative works for interior decoration. These include mats, belts, sashes, and wall-hangings.

Furthermore, some artists weave assorted reeds, yarns, and other materials through flexible wire screens which can be bent into sculptural forms. Obodo, (1998) in his project report observed that sculpture is now so open that there is an “Unlimited freedom of expression for the modern sculptors in terms of media”. This “Unlimited freedom” has widened the scope of textiles, ceramics, and other related art, hence, Textile Sculpture is an art movement involving artists of different arms especially painters, sculptors and of course textile artist.

Traditional means relating to the old or ancient practice or based on tradition. It is a long-established action or pattern of behaviour, belief, guarding a group of people, which has been accepted from one generation to another. On the other hand, it is a long-practiced custom or belief. The traditional practice of weaving and cloth production in Igbo land is a long time practice revealed through the excavation activities of

Shaw (1959) in Oghu (2002). Cloth construction was a normal activity of especially Igbo women, with several weaving centers in the Igbo axis as was confirmed by Afigbo and Okeke (1985). The weaving technique was also described by shaw (1970) in Oghu, (2002) as of high technology.

Technology is science or knowledge put into practical use to solve problems or invent useful tools. Innovation is an idea that has been transformed into practical reality. Innovation is a human-centered perspective and process which can be applied to our everyday activities is witnessed in various arms or sections of creativity. Technology can be used to implement innovation, but the technology itself doesn't produce innovation. Consequently, technological innovations in creative is being driven by innovative ideas using technological knowledge or invented tools. In creativity, tools and knowledge may not be new but they can be used in different and artistic manner for new impression. Technology is the drive behind social change and hence contemporary art referred to as textile sculpture. The united workforce (2020) noted that technological innovation does not come from nowhere, but usually owe much to our predecessors and their achievements. They also iterated that the transition of knowledge to the next generation allows human culture to keep on evolving without having to start from the scratch every time.

Modern, in Encarta dictionary is defined as relating or belonging to the present (Encarta 2008), while Longman family dictionary defines it as involving recent techniques, styles, or ideas (Longman dictionary 1989). Therefore, Modern Textile Sculpture relates to the sculptural form of textiles as practiced in the modern time. This may come as wearable, as in body adornment, abstract or functional hangings mobiles, or scarecrows as identified

by Udeani (2008). The divergence of Igbo textile sculpture from traditional to what it is now is a progressive movement that cannot be underestimated. It is a progressive movement that denotes the innovativeness of the people and their involvement in the technological development of the recent times, Igbo textile sculpture has ultimately foregone shrines and farms for home and body decorative items that non-vocally speak of positions and personality. This is due to the innovation in thinking, modern technological development and explorations, experimentations of alternative media of expression.

All along, textile sculpture has been seen more as a form of decorative piece instead of functional item or vice versa. This paper studies Textile Sculpture in form of functional and decorative sculptural pieces being used in various ways and events as wearable and silent indicators of status as it is being used in the Igbo modern/contemporary time.

Dynamics of Modern Textile Sculpture

The exploration in textile sculpture is a free experimentation on the loom or out of loom to produce abstract statements in materials, texture and structure. It can equally be the stitching together of pieces of fabrics in both fashionable and decorative manner to as to create realistic or abstract form in space (see plate 1).

The production of textile sculptural pieces emanates for several purposes and as such assumes varying functions where they are found. The activity or change in any situation of existence of these artistic pieces depends so much on the motive of its creator, which may be functional or purely aesthetics. On this note modern textile sculpture can be seen in wearable form, inform of festive regalia created majorly from fabrics (see plate 2); scarecrows which is a combination of fabrics, wood, and found objects (Udeani, 2008); wall-hanging made up of yarns of fabrics incorporated into woods (see plate 3) and

finally mobiles formed with garments used on human sculpture or in painted form for promotions (see plate 4).

The quest to produce art has always been gingered by either historical, religious or quotidian events, which may be political, entertainment, etc. Throughout the history of culture, art has demonstrated that, Universal beauty does not arise from a particular character of the form, but from the dynamic rhythm of its inherent relationship (Hall, 1967).

If art is self-expression, then the mode, method of production, and the media with which the art work is being produced should not matter so much. The fact that artists, especially African artists, generally work in the crudest of media and far behind in technology compared to the advanced technology of the contemporary artists do not disprove the usefulness of their recent works. As noted by Redstone in Hall (1967), who argued that then as now that, art fulfilled spiritual needs, a function as important as the utilitarian needs. Then as now, art served to stimulate the thoughts of the on lookers and satisfy his or her aesthetic requirement, this particular aspect of study is also not far from this same objective of the contemporary counterparts and as such provides even more than good living environment. Through the Igbo textile sculpture, especially mask and masking costumes, there is a good maintenance of peace and order in the community where found (Cole and Aniakor, 1984). The fact that Igwes, chiefs, or community leaders are recognized and respected is due to their respective costumes or regalia, which undoubtedly accord them their status in their various societies in the land.

Entertainment, protection, and status identification were fully provided in Igbo community due to the role these works art has taken. Destruction of plants in the farm was and

is still controlled with the aid of scarecrow (Udeani 2008). Also scarecrow helps as a guide and controls the activities of the trespassers. The Igwe's regalia which is a flowing gown, highly decorated with either gold or silver or a combination of the two (plate 2) marks his status in the community. There are various types in Igbo communities, all pointing to the important attributes of the culture and tradition. In the shrines, textile hangings and objects create glooming and sacred feelings due to the sacredness of the environment. At homes, blooming and beautiful feelings as well as happy environment are created with sculptural textile hangings (see plate 5).

The contemporary textile sculpture in all ramification bears some similarities with the traditional textile sculpture as noted by Waller (1977). She listed several materials used by modern artists such as fibers, fabrics, jutes, wood and bronze, which were also used extensively in the production of traditional textile sculptures in the past years. Also, processes like weaving, braiding knotting, knitting, twisting, and wrapping were also employed by both traditional and contemporary sculptural textile artists for emphasis and aesthetic purposes.

Functions

The modern textile sculptures perform several functions especially as wearable and decorative items. Their need in the general society cannot be under estimated. The scarecrow as earlier mentioned provides protection over the destruction of crops in the farm. Also, it helps as a guide and controls the activities of the trespassers. Some wall-hangers in some homes are pieces of decorative items while in shrines, they are abode of the ancestral spirits. The regalia help to maintain social and political status. For instance, the Igwe's regalia, the Ozo costume are some of the best examples in this regard. The Igwe and Ozo title

holders are the most highly respected leaders of the Igbo community. In that case their attires are always outstanding and vibrant especially the Igwe's. Their costumes alongside with beads always speak of their position as the royal father of the community. They also direct or monitor the norms and traditions of the community as their views and opinions are highly uphold in the community. They are seen as the wisest and most truthful member of the community. Their costume/apparel gives them a sense of propriety and of secured self-esteem. When these costumes are worn, they assume the likeness of dressed sculptural pieces (plate 2.).

Undoubtedly, numerous functions are assigned to these art forms, but these functions are better discussed under what the form does when in use, what the presence and use of it do in creating an effect or in conveying an idea. For instance, an Igwe cannot be recognized and honored during a festive period without his full regalia. The same goes for Ozo titled holder. In other words, what the works of art serve is the motivation that leads to its creation. In view of this, it can be suggested that the contemporary textile sculpture is mainly used for decorative purposes void of cultural relevance. The contemporary textile sculpture as decorative items can be found in many homes, hotels, restaurants, and other public places, while the ancient textile sculptures, though decorative, are essentially for utilization purposes. Some of these utilitarian purposes could be achieved through masking tradition, ritual sacrifices and other social events which encourage greatly the use of these costumes.

Although there is a radical difference between the use of art in the ancient and the contemporary world, the most important thing is that textiles no-longer limit its boundaries to two dimensional arts. It has spread its tentacles to other directions in arts to accord it a three dimensional stance. The fact that contemporary art expresses itself in every phase of our enviro-

ment is not the issue, but that people in every work of life seek the joy and excitement that art can bring and this you find in textile sculpture in particular and other forms of arts in general.

Another obvious and glaring difference between the modern and the ancient textile sculpture is the application of technology in the production of modern sculptural textiles. Due to the advancement in textile production, works are produced purely for commercial purposes, while the constrained labor laden method of producing traditional textile sculptural works make it virtually impossible to commercialize. Most importantly the works are always out of communal effort unlike the contemporary works which are efforts of personal aggrandizement.

Conclusion

In the course of this study one can also denote the similarities and differences, in this direction of art, between the contemporary and the traditional types. It is most important to note at this juncture that the outlook of these arts has changed drastically. The influence of the foreign invaders on the recent production of these works of art is recognized. Due to the destruction of the peoples' belief in the power of the spirit and the efficacy of rituals, the old philosophy and art has been suppressed and broken to some extent. With the introduction of new philosophy and belief by the Christian missionaries, new art form has risen, which is definitely a cross-fertilization of ideas to enrich the local art. Although the former works were crudely done, there, emanated in them that natural and posterior aura that is greatly lacking in the works of the modern or contemporary artists which encouraged consumer's demand and marketing. Due to the increase in local and foreign demand, the artists now attempt to work to satisfy tourists' choice and patronage. This change of attitude towards arts also brought a total change in their technology. This technology, when applied to

the production of scarecrow and other related art forms improves its functionality for instance, scarecrows can now be used in the gardens, amusement parks, homes, including indoors and children centers to create additional aesthetic appeal. Scarecrow in the gardens helps to elevate the area aesthetically and also bring about variation as well as balance in the environment. They could stand for satire and pleasure alike. People also decorate their cars, home interiors with mobile and immobile textile sculpture) plate 6).

The exhibited works of Ifedioamma Dike in 1985 and Diogu in 2000, bear testimonies to this change. The works of Udeani in 2002, 2006 follow suit in this testimony of change. It is an indication that artist no-longer labour in their work of art production but celebrate in the uniqueness of their efforts in producing these works. The change in the outlook of these works does not mean a total over-hauling of the philosophy or world view; rather it is definitely a cross-fertilization of ideas to enrich the local art. According to Hall (1967), the present carries the past and the future's universal beauty. We need only to continue and develop what already existed before in the present so as to create the future. The essential thing is that the fixed laws of art must be realized.

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Plate 1: Royalty



Plate 2: Festive Regalia

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Plate 3: Wall Hanging (Ruffles).



Plate 4: Garment Human Sculpture for promotion.



Plate 5: Wall Hanging (where you stop, I stop)



Plate 6: Mobil Textile Sculpture (Hang on, on me)