MUD SCULPTURES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN URHOBO AND WESTERN IGBO PROTOTYPES

Odokuma, E.

ABSTRACT

The claim of Benin origin by neighbouring communities has since been of crucial historical discourse. Enquiries into the veracity of these claims have taken diverse forms, since the turn of the century. While some are historical, others are anthropological, archaeological, ethnological or art historical. This study aims at comparing Mud sculpture of two cultures in the Niger Delta with related historical ties with Benin. It attempts to examine the forms and styles of their Mud sculpture with those of Benin origin. The purpose is to identify if these cultures actually derive from the ancient Benin Empire. A formal analysis, comparative approach as well as classified interpretations would be adopted for the study. It must be mentioned here why mud sculptures was chosen medium for this purpose? This is because the deity it represents is widely distributed across the region; that Western Igbo Mud sculptures are closer in form and style to those of Benin origin. The Urhobo prototypes are more stylized as compared to those of Western Igbo descent which are semi-naturalistic.

INTRODUCTION

Between 1997 to 2001, I became involved in the art forms and styles of the cultures between Benin and the lower Niger. I visited a number of shrines, temple houses and various Museums across Nigeria. In this way, I was compelled to study the origins, structures and meaning of their art-forms. It was during one of my visits that I became interested in the topic of and sculptures of the Niger Delta. The very interesting information about these forms is that they are widely spread in many parts of these communities particularly in Delta State. Moreso, they appear in diverse styles ranging from naturalism to stylized forms. Of interest are those of Urhobo and Western Igbo tableaus. The Urhobo claim three major cultural areas of origin namely: Benin, Ijo and Western Igbo (Erivwo 1974) and (Odokuma 2001).

The Western Igbo on the other hand, point at Benin, Igala, Esan and Yoruba origins (Onwvejeogwu 1981, Isichei 1977, Uchendu 1965, Hatch 1971, Odokuma 2001)

Amongst these two cultures, the common indices is Benin. For this reason, some works of Benin origin would be examined to ascertain if, the styles of these cultures originate from Benin. It must be noted that, art works are encapsulations of the historical, cultural and religious belief systems of a people. That is why they can be seen as the cultural signatures of a people.

The approach used to ascertain this possibility, is through the integration of formalism, comparative analysis and a classified interpretational technique. The intention is to compare Mud sculptures of Urhobo and Western Igbo types with those of Benin origin. The facial features proportion as well as the structural observation of the body would form part of the analysis. The historical

Department of Fine and Applied Arts,Faculty of Arts, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria. eseodokuma2@gmail.com

origin of both areas as well as a comparison between the two art forms would be cross-examined.

The Urhobo

The Urhobo are situated within the Western fringe of the Niger Delta (Foss 2004, Odokuma 2006, 2008, Adjara and Omokri 1997). They are one of the most numerous ethnic groups in Delta State and fifth in population in Nigeria (Odokuma, 2006). They are traditionally farmers and fishermen. Aweto and Igben (2003) opine that the Urhobo where engaged in lumbering, hunting, mining, trading and craft. Culturally, they have a vibrating masking and sculptural tradition which stem from the past.Concerning the origin of the culture, diverse claims of Benin descent are common. In fact, most of the Urhobo clans, point at Benin, while a few others trace their origins to Ijo and Western Igbo cultures (Odokuma 2006, Odokuma 2006b), Odokuma 2009, Eriviwo 1974.

A Number of scholars including, Egharevba (1968), Otite(2003) Ekeh (2006), Adjara and Omokri (1997) Odokuma (2006 b), Erivwo (1974), Foss (2004) just to mention a few, have written extensively about the origin of the Urhobo or art forms of the Urhobo.

In my previous articles, I have explained and documented some of these views. These articles include, Odokuma 2006 a, 2006 b, 2008, 2009 and 2013.However, the objective here, is to look at the styles of these two mud sculpture traditions which mention similar historical origins but have a different formal structures. Attempting an examination of these cultures, may compel some salient questions particularly concerning the origin and development of the Urhobo Mud sculptures.

Urhobo Mud sculpture styles.

Mud sculptures amongst the Urhobo are common in many of their clans. Some outstanding examples can be seen among the Orogun, Oghara and Agbaraha-otor groups

Orogun seated figures

The figures from the Orogun tableaus for example are highly stylised. (Figure 2). In many parts of Africa, the head is considered the seat of wisdom. The heads of the Orogun figures are stylized with semi-naturalistic facial features, hair or coiffure and possess cultural marks.



Plate 1: *Orogun* seated figure Mud, 2012

Unlike most sculptures in Urhobo culture, the mouth is closed like those from Western Igbo origin. The eyes are widely opened while the nose is slightly pointed. The widely opened eyes may be suggestive of an all seeing ancestor or god. Besides the facial attributes, the Orogun figure in question is distinguished by a short neck, and chest laden with beads with upper and lower limbs. The figure seems to be conducting a concoctional mixture.

Ugono Shrine Orogun

Historically, the Orogun Urhobo claim both Igbo and Benin origin. Just besides, this figures are two other figures wrapped with white clothings. These figures sit firmly in an upright position.



Plate 2: Two prominent Ugono Orogun figures mud, 2012

Their faces are more stylised than the seated Orogun figure (figure. 2). These figures are heavily beaded and have cultural marks. One of the figures from the montage seems to be emerging from the floor. Similar emerging figure types exist in *Urhonigbe*, *Abavo* and *Abbi* in Edo and Ukwuani area respectively. The hierarchical traits evident in most African pieces is common (Odokuma, 2011).



Plate 3. Figure emerging from the floor Ugono Orogun shrine.

It must be noted that, the figure emerging from the floor resembles the priestly figure on figure 2. Thus, they may be a relationship between figure 2 and 4, not only in its physical representation but also in its function. The other tableau of the study, derives from the Oghara group.



Plate 4: Ikpakpa and Ikanyan (Warrior) Otumara Oghara 2014 Courtesy: Awaegbe Charity 2014

This piece consists of bulky stylised figures representing gods and goddesses. Facially, most of their forms are not articulately defined. Their heads are joined to their bodies and the sex organs of these figures are openly displayed. These figures are heavily coated in white chalk.

In Urhobo culture, white chalk is a therapeutic medium symbolizing purity (Onobrakpeya, 2014). Ogberaghe figure, Otumara Shrine Oghara.



Plate 5: Ogberaghe figure from OtumaraOghara, 2014.

Observing more of their figures evidence shows fleshy arms, body and lower limbs. Their faces lack expression. One cannot comprehend the mindset of the figures. What is evident is a plain depiction of their face and body gesticulations.

Agharho Shrine, Delta State
Another montage from AgbarhaOtor shows multiple figures clothed in white and red costumes.



Plate 6: Agbarha group

These groups of figures, are stylized. Looking at the facial features, it is obvious that less attention was paid to the physical form of the montage. The ears are wide, eyes small and the mouth is none expressive. Even the body forms seem to consist of lumps of clay. Some of these forms are completely coated in white, while others are in red.

The seated posture common in most Urhobo wood sculptures are common here. The cultural paraphernalia on the chest of these figures are similar to their wood sculptures. These works are also related to water spirits like those of Benin and Western Igbo origin.

Western Igbo Mud Sculpture Styles
Most of the Western Igbo Mud Sculptures point toward a cross between naturalism and stylisation. Before examining Mud sculptural styles, a brief description of their origin would be attempted. The Western Igbo group refers to cultures from Ukwuani, Agbor, Issele-uku all the way to Asaba in Delta state and Onitsha in Anambra state respectively. The designation is historical rather than geographical. These cultures have one thing in common, their claim of Benin origin. Despite having influences from other neighbouring cultures, "Benin" seems to be common, in their historical claims. Onwuejeogwu (1981), Isichei (1977), Afigbo (1981), Eghaevba (1968), Odokuma (2001, 2011) all seem to mention Benin as origin for many Western Igbo groups. Even some of the cultural insignia, dance steps, and clothings all show Benin influences. One of such figures which is widely spread across southern Nigeria is the Ikenga concept. Cole and Aniakor (1984) opine that similar concepts exist in Igala, Edo, Ishan, Isoko, Urhobo and Ijo areas, all in Nigeria.

Composition of the Western Igbo Mud-sculptures
Amongst the mud sculptures to be analysed are the; *Abavo*, *Agbor* and *Owah-Abbi* montages. The Abavo oral tradition traces its history to Benin during the Ogiso period (Akpasubi, 2007). Figures 7, shows a statue of *Omodu* from the *Omodu* shrine.

***Orodu* figure of Abavo**
This figure in question is dedicated to Olokun worship (Odokuma, 2011).



Plate 7: *Orodu* of *Omodu* shrine of Abavo, Delta state. Courtesy: Akpasubi (2007).

The formal structure shows a more naturalistic facial feature of the eyes, nose and mouth. Only the ears seem a bit exaggerated. The neck forms part of the red cloth drapes that flow around the chest. The limbs are proportional to the body. Below the stomach is a shirt-like projection. The seated figure is surrounded by symbolic pots. Akpasubi (2007) suggests that these pots contain concoctions and diverse medicines of a sort. Behind the figure are geometric paintings with colours ranging from blue, brown and black.

Interpretational analysis

The red and white depictions on the *Orodu's* body accentuate purity and divinity. This is related with the worship of *Onoku*.

The Agbor Style

About the 1440s, Benin soldiers conquered some neighbouring Ika clans of Western Igbo. Agbor was inclusive. The name "Agbor" was derived from one of the soldiers' names (Ofuzim, 2014). Amongs the Agbor, diverse forms exist. The tableau on figure 8 is an adviser ***Odibo***. *Iyiekpen*



Plate 8:
***Iyiekpen* and Adviser *Odibo* mud, Ezemusa shrine, Agbor-obi.**
Shrine of *Ezemusa* Agbor-obi

The shrine of *Ezemusa* shows a more stylized piece, unlike the Abavo type which was near-naturalistic. This montage seems a little abstracted. These figures are characterized by Oval heads, spread-out ears, almost no necks with less facial features. Beads are evident with upper limbs resting loosely on the body frame.

The formal placement of these figures are geometric and tightly packed. The hierarchical distribution of the major figure is evident in this tableau. Colours of blue- brown and white are often used as background for the montage.

The Statue of *Nneonisha,* Agbor

This figure represents the minister of defence. The pose is rather protective. From the head down to the lower limbs the protective stance is prominent. The figure rests his head on two of his subjects. He seems to posses a kingship and leadership posture.



Plate 9: *Nneonisha* from the shrine of *Alijenatan Alishime,* Agbor, Delta state, mud-sculpture.
Courtesy: Ofuzim, 2014

There seems to be a blue pigment on the figure as well as on the wall. The eyes of the figure are accentuated with the blue colour. The facial features including the nose, mouth and eyes are expressive, as they show elements of geometricism. The body tends towards cubic proportions. The out stretched hands connotes its role in the montage. On his lower chest, is an elevated structure. Covering his lower limbs (legs) are signs like the Benin *Eben* and *Ada* (cutlasses of royalty).

In Agbor, it is called *Ada le Eben* (semitar and sword) (Ofuzim, 2014). At the foot of the statue are snakelike projections which accentuate his role. Even on his left arm is a snake.

Three colours seem to project from the work. They are blue, red and white. In most Niger Delta cultures, white symbolizes purity. Red stands for dignity, and the presence of ***Olokun*** (god of the sea). Infact, more of white is used in the worship of *Olokun*. It must be noted that however, that in southern Nigeria, the worship of *Onoku* or *Olokun* is wide spread. The Yoruba, Benin, Edo, Urhobo, Western Igbo, Isoko, Ijo just to mention a few, all recognize Onokun or Olokun as a water deity. The blue colour splashed or smeared on the wall or figure of these Agbor pieces represent protection.



Plate 10a: *Oke Ogu* female fertility figure from Agbor Delta State Mud Sculpture.

The *Okeogu* Fertility Figure of Agbor

Another significant figure from the *Agbor-obi* group is the *Oke-Ogu* statue. This figure, measuring about four feet, shows a female nude with the emblem of the *Ada le Eben*.



Plate 10b: A more detailed view of the herbal concoction.

The head of this statue is more stylized than others. The head is inclined towards the left. The headgear on her head is very similar to the style on the Benin queens costumes. She seems to be carrying some humanistic objects on a grinding stone, while her legs are widely opened. Below, is a bow containing some herbal concoctions.

Onoku Soldiers from *Owah-Abbi* in Ukwuani area

This picture was taken in 2006 by Esimike Uche. It represents guards of *Onoku*. The *Onoku* tableau is often protected by armed security agents dressed in Western and military costume. This makes one wonder most times if, the concept of *Onoku* is not of Western origin. First, white cloth or paint is always associated with it.



Plate 11: *Onoku* soldiers from the shrine at *Owah- abbi*, Ukwuani, Delta state 2006, Courtesy: Esimike Uche.

Particularly, among the Western Igbo of Delta State and *Urhonigbe* of Edo State, soldiers are depicted. They are often shown emerging from the floor or standing. Looking closely at these *Owah-abbi* soldiers, one is forced to see Europeanized features (Odokuma 2011).

As one critically examines the two soldiers displayed, the one standing expresses certain functions. As confronting attacks coming from above while, the one on the floor, is stationed to subdue attacks from below.

The Benin Style

The Benin culture has quite a repertoire of Mud sculpture. Some are located in major towns and others in individual houses in Benin. Ranging from abstract to naturalistic forms, the *Olokun* deity is common in most of these montages.

The *Urhonigbe* Montage from Edo State

The worship of the *Urhonigbe* deity has been traced to the Ethiope River (Odokuma 2011). However, the sculptural form of this tableau needs to be further investigated.

The Flute Man-Statue

The flute man is a highly stylised piece. The hat on its head although modern, shows a mixture of naturalism and stylised features. The facial features are geometric. The wide ear style common in most Western Igbo tableau is evident here. The eyes are slantly, the nose is small and the mouth pushes forward as if speaking proverbial words. The entire body structure is bulky and massive.

In 1973, Ben-Amos studied the *Urhonigbe* Mud sculptures. Among the montage, was a flutist (figure 12a). The hat shape was different from the type present today.



Plate 12a: Flutist in 1973.



Plate 12b: Flutist in 2012.

Even the *Eziomo* figure on figure 13a is different from the one on figure 13b. Changes have occurred possibly as a result of influences from a different artist and migration.



Figure 13a *Eziomo* figure (1973

Figure from the *Ekpekpe* Shrine in Benin Oka

This assemblage of seated figures are naturalistic in proportion. They consist of a central figure, two female statues, and two smaller figures in front of the central figure. The three major figures all have naturalistic faces and body. They are dressed with red beads.



Plate 14: The Ekpekpe figures of Oka, Benin.

Compared to the *Urhonigbe* tableau, the *Ekpekpe* montage is where highly naturalistic, female figures are dressed in red robes.

A Comparative Analysis between the Urhobo and Western Igbo Mud-Sculpture

A comparative study of the cultures shows certain similarities and dissimilarities. The similarities are as follows; both cultures consist of multiple statues. Male and female figures are depicted in both cultures. Female figures breast feeding are prominent.

Hierarchy in their works is evident. The Benin influence is seen in their swords and scepters were diverse variations are common. The popular red and white colour in Benin culture is obvious among the Urhobo and Western Igbo cultures. A few selected Western Igbo tableau, the blue pigment is used along- side red and white. Emerging figures from the shrine-floor, like those of Benin origin is evident in both cultures. The presence of beads is obvious. The depictions of multiple wives are prominent. The geometric and bulky nature of their forms are similar. All the works portrayed are functional.

Varied forms of cultures are presented in new tableaus.

Dissimilarities in Style, Form and Colour.

The differences can be seen in their unique styles. For instance, while Urhobo mud sculptures are stylized the western Igbo types tend towards semi-naturalism. The western Igbo tableau are more detailed as compared to the Urhobo forms.

The Urhobo montage from *Orogun* type has incised marks on their faces. The ears of the Urhobo pieces are more naturalistic than those of western Igbo origin but their forms are stylized. Another significant trait is the direct moulding of clothes on the figures. While the Urhobo works are completely made nude the western Igbo types are partially clothed.

For instance, the *Alisimie* figure from Agbor, the security guards from *Owah-Abbi* (figure 11) and *Orodu* figure from Abavo (figure 7) are all fully dressed. Accept other minor figures like the females figures which are depicted nude (figure 10a).

Many Benin tableaus have fully dressed attires attached to them. Examples exist in figure 13a & b and 14 respectively.

Among the Urhobo, red and white colours are most common. Other colours like black and earthy colours exist. While amongst many western Igbo corpuses, yellow, brown, black, blue, red and white colours are prominent, the Benin also uses white, red, blue, black and brown colours to enhance their tableaus. In African tradition, it must be noted that these colours play specific roles in these religious depictions. These roles have been elaborated on previously within the text.

CONCLUSION

From the fore-going, it is evident that the Urhobo and Western Igbo mud-tableaus have one thing in common. These figures are numerous. It consists of males and females performing diverse roles. Hierarchy is evident and children are shown. Security is prominent and the belief of diverse deity are evident. The Benin influence is obvious, particularly in the names of their deities, such as *Onoku* or *Olokun*, god of the sea. However, the Urhobo figures are considerably stylized as compared to the western Igbo types. The western Igbo montage shares more stylistic semblance to those of Benin types. It is however surprising to note that, despite the closeness between Oghara and Benin, in terms of history and nearness, there is a lot of variance in their forms.

The claims of Benin origin by this Urhobo clan did not prevent the height of its stylistic relationship. It therefore shows that within their works (Urhobo) traces of originality exist. In other words, the Urhobo people are not Benin people, but may have lived with them centuries ago.

As for the western Igbo, despite their languages a more parallel connection seems to exist between them. Their works for instance show more Benin-like influences than those of Urhobo origin. Oral history traces relationship between Benin and Western Igbo through their kingship pattern (Egharevba 1968). Therefore, one can see formal connections between Benin and western Igbo on one hand and Benin and Urhobo on the other. However, the Urhobo connection is not as deeply rooted as those of western Igbo origin. The relationship between the Western Igbo forms and Benin forms, show a close connection in the past. A relationship based on father and son relationship while that of the Urhobo are slightly different. Their artistic form shows the level of relationship between them.

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