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The Art of Blacksmithing in Uneme: An Overview of Contextual Elements of Some Traditional Iron Artworks

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Abstract: The art of blacksmithing in Uneme is an artistic genre that has spanned centuries. There is at least a smithy in every family compound and every adult male is considered a blacksmith. These blacksmiths operate in an environment where their ironworks are fulcrum upon which the community's socio-political, cultural belief system and economic as well as technological wellbeing are anchored. There have been stylistic shifts as they interact with different change agents overtime. These stylistic changes have greatly manifested in their final ironworks which solicit contextual analytical engagement. This study therefore took an appraisal of the contextual elements associated with some of the blacksmithing ironworks with a view to highlighting their inherent meaning for better understanding. The formalistic and iconographic art historical methods were employed to articulate the inherent qualities of these metal works. The study showed that the artworks are embedded with socio-cultural icons that are still relevant in contemporary Uneme in particular and Nigerian artistic landscape in general.

Keywords: Blacksmithing in Uneme, Traditional Iron Artworks, Uneme Socio-Cultural Context, Iconographic Analysis of Ironworks, Uneme Cultural Heritage.

1. Introduction

The art of blacksmithing is a traditional occupation of the people of Uneme that was handed to them by their ancestors. It is an artistic genre that has spanned centuries and every adult male is considered a blacksmith as they all engage in the forge work. They operate in an environment where their ironworks are fulcrum upon which the socio-cultural, political, religious and economic as well as technology of the community is based. There has been stylistic shift in their ironworks as they interacted with different change agents over time. However, the stylistic pattern is domiciled within the artistic nuances of the community. Although, they work independently, their works seemed to share similar configurations. These styles have greatly manifested in their final iron works which solicited contextual art historical analysis.

The people of Uneme who are mainly blacksmiths and hunters by occupation are said to have migrated from the North-East of the Niger Benue confluence region of Nigeria [1]. They settled in Benin with other Edoid speaking people during the Ogiso era as special blacksmith caste. While in Benin they practiced the art of blacksmithing which earned them an enviable position in the heart of the Ogisos [2]. They eventually migrated from Benin to their present location in the rocky area of Edo North where there was availability of iron ore which could support their metallurgical industry. They presently occupy Ten (10) towns and villages in Uneme, Etsako land in Edo North Senatorial District in present day Edo State. The towns are currently situated in three local government areas in Edo State [3]. According to Aashikpelokhai and Haruna they "moved to virgin lands where

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they could find what they called ‘Rocks–Meltable-To-Iron’ [2]. In contemporary times with the availability of imported metal the traditional blacksmiths of Uneme have fully depended on these cheap metals [2]. “Today (in Africa), very little ore is mined from the ground for smelting, as the smiths acquire their raw material from many more easily available sources, including large numbers of junked automobiles” [4]. The Uneme blacksmiths have been acclaimed to be part of the Benin blacksmithing guild during the Ogiso and early Oba dynasties of Ancient Benin Empire. During which time, their works were centred or made to glorify the monarch. To the Benin, the royal art is a means of enshrining the past rulers, their socio-cultural and political maneuverings as well as war exploits [5]. After the migration and independence from the watchful eyes of the palace, the corpus of Uneme blacksmithing practice and products changed. They metamorphosed from being mostly royal objects and context of history to object of artistic contemplation addressing issues that confronted them in their new environment. This rugged, rocky and near hostile environmental geography created new challenges such as security, religious, food, socio-cultural and health. These needs therefore engender new creative thoughts and focus which led to the production of new artistic objectifications. Although some of these items were already been produced before the Uneme exodus, more emphasis was now placed on items of domestic everyday life rather than social products. The blacksmiths engaged more with daily production of agricultural tools such as hoes, cutlass; hunting and defense weapon; and very rarely traditional swords. These materials and products seems neither appreciated, understood nor given adequate scholars attention. Therefore, this has elicited art historical enquiry. This study thereby took a contextual analytical survey of some of these new iron works with a view to harnessing, synthesizing and highlighting the overall Uneme blacksmithing art as well as its meaning and value. The iconographic and formalistic art historical methods were engaged in articulating the intrinsic qualities embedded in these iron works.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework models of triopied [6], the Panofsky’s (1939) multi-dimensional approach to iconography and Ben-Amos tendency to the study to Benin art were adopted [5]. They were distilled through the conceptual framework of eclecticism by Drewal [7]. It provided an expounded logical structure for the examination of the study problem.

The triopied model of conceptual framework for art historical study by Egonwa places the significance of an artwork on three stands- contextual or non-formal content, techniques or skill of its idea of form depicted and formal content or the exegesis of the form [6]. While Ben-Amos examined the Benin art from a general perspective. She emphasizes on artistic forms and creativity [5]; and contextualizing the formal styles and meanings of the artworks. Panofsky’s (1939) iconographic approach was also engaged to reconstruct stylistic and contextual elements to properly situate these iron artworks within their socio-political and historical context.

2. Materials and Methods

This study, therefore, utilized a qualitative art history method in analysing the contextual factors amongst traditional blacksmithing works of art in Uneme. The nature of the research being largely interpretative, concerned with meanings, symbolism and cultural significance and not with numbers, lent itself well to this approach. Data primarily derived from field observation, photographic documentation of selected iron works, and oral interviews with local blacksmiths, community elders, and traditional authorities, including the Oba. These sources offered invaluable information regarding the objects, including their functions, significance, and socio-cultural context. The study utilized formalistic analysis of the artworks based on visual/structural features such as form, shape, design, and material composition in addition to iconographic analysis, which is the interpretation of the symbolic meanings and cultural narratives that objects convey. Finally, a contextual analytical method was employed to place the artwork against the backdrop of the Uneme people's historical, socio-political, religious, and economic

circumstances. An eclectic framework was offered as a starting point for the methodology, which integrates multiple art historical perspectives and promotes a holistic understanding of the artworks from both intrinsic and extrinsic perspectives. Methods: We conducted a descriptive analysis, including using close visual reading and narrative analysis that allowed for artistic characteristics and cultural significance to be deeply read together. This methodologically allowed for more than just the analysis of physical forms, it allowed for a contextualisation of the traces of ironworks, as expressions of the identities, beliefs systems and experiences that underpin lived experience in Uneme.

3. Results and Discussion

Theoretical Framework

D'Allen theoretical framework (view) on art historical interpretation and understanding of artwork was handy in this research [8]. She observed that to achieve better understanding of the artwork, it should be viewed from the artwork itself; so that it can provide its own evidence and from the general knowledge for a more robust interpretation.

Analysis of the Contextual Elements

An overview of contextual elements of some traditional Uneme iron artworks are hereby analyzed below

Traditional Sword I (Udoko)



Figure 1. Traditional Uneme Sword (Udoko) Ofeosi Yakubu's Father. Iron. 30cm, Uneme-Osu. Photo by F. Ophori

The production of traditional swords in Uneme is a very rare occurrence in modern times because the patronage is low. This could be due to the shift in importance and consequently the demand of such item. This sword which is the Uneme equivalent of the Ada of Benin is about 78cm in length. It has a narrow, slightly curved blade of about 8cm wide at its tip. It narrows towards the upper part with a sharp transition into a thin rectangular shape which terminates with a square shape block. On this block is rested a metal rod-like handle that ends with a spherical form that has a hat shape on. It seems to convey a metaphor of a head with crown which probably places it on the items of social status symbolism. The whole sword may have been configured from a single iron plate. The handle is painted oxblood color and the blade is coated with wall paper. It seems like the paper is a leftover of the paper which was used in wrapping the blade for preservation from dust. The handle engenders an organic form while the blade is a flat in-organic shape.

Traditional Sword II



Figure 2. The throne of Oba of Ekpedo-Uneme with a traditional sword II and pole on both sides. Iron .photo by F. Ophori

This tradition sword is one of the two blacksmiths works that flanked the left and right hand sides of the official royal throne of the Oba of Ekpedo-Uneme, Oba Obabori, the Onose of Ekpedo land [3]. The sword is similar to the Benin eben but with an elongated pipe handle that forms a long iron rod stand, it is about 180cm in height and is reminiscence of the traditional Ijaw canoe paddle. It could metaphorically epitomize a symbol of authority meant to paddle the ship of Uneme Ekpedo socio-political, religious and cultural well-being. The upper part has a flat oval shape that looks like the petal of a sun flower with perforated edges into which tiny iron rings are inserted. Along the middle on both sides runs a ridge of convex iron form symmetrically dividing the surface plane into equal half. At the apex of this form perched a bird. The bird represents an eagle which is regarded as king of birds in Uneme cosmology. In most traditional cultures in the southern part of Nigeria, the white quill feather of the matured eagle is pegged to the cap of royals, nobles and warriors as a sign of royalty, bravery, courage, victory and might. Since the eagle quill feather is widely believed to have unusual spiritual powers in Africa especially amongst the Benin, Ife (Yoruba), Igbo, Urhobo, Uneme, Igala and many others, this feather usually appears as part of the official costumes and regalia of kings, warriors and religious priests. They represent the number of human heads he may have killed during wars. The eagle is a rare and revered bird among my people and it is therefore used as a sign of leadership and power (Oba Obabori, 2017: pi)

A little below this flat wide plain are welded two short iron rods to both sides of the rod forming a cross shape. On these rods rests two stylized birds, one on each end of the rod respectively. They seem to compliment the bird above in a tripartite or triangular design configuration. This formation seems to suggest that the birds may represent some deities that support the Oba in the daily adjudication of justice and smooth running of the Uneme-Ekpedo kingdom.

About 50cm below the pair of eagles along the same rod stands is another rod intercession on which hung a pair of traditional Uneme chandelier. Their placement on these horizontal shafts could be a symbolic depiction of the spiritual lights of the ancestors

and deities that watches over the throne and the kingdom. Chandeliers are light vessels which uses oil as fuel with a roll of wick made of cotton wool place in it to hold the fire light that illuminates the surroundings.

On the same vertical shafts downward are attached two inverted bells or gongs which emphasize the flow and transfer of supernatural power and information to the Oba. As a link between the spirits of the deities, his ancestors and the people, the Oba connects the spirits world to his people for divine blessings. This elongated sword seems to reminiscence the iron staff (the Osun ematon staff) among the Benin and Yoruba people. Although the Uneme sword or staff differs remarkable from that of Benin and Yoruba, they seem to share formal similarities in their configuration which may connote a common or shared relationship.

Crown (Ede):



Figure 3. Uneme Traditional Crown (Ede), Iron, c. 1940, 20cm by 13cm, Ekpedo, Uneme. Photo by F. Ophori

Crown is usually an ornamental hat configured in a spherical or semi-spherical shape worn on the head by kings and queens on ceremonial or official occasions. They are usually made of coral beads or metal such as gold or silver adorn with jewels or precious stones. In Uneme, the kings put on the beaded crown. However, fig. 3 above is made of iron in Ekpedo – Uneme. The year it was produced and the purposed or functions is still a myth, it seem to be the type in use by the Uneme royalty in pre-colonial period before the cross cultural integration of the Yoruba style beaded crown. The crown is wrought in flat iron bar folded into a 15cm diameter circle. The lower part of the circular rim is adorned with tiny pear-shaped iron pendants dangling downward. On the upper part are attached six tiny flat iron bars curved inward that terminates at the middle of the circumference about 12cm above the base. On this point rests a short cylindrical shape iron which serves as the apex of the crown. The crown symbolizes the authority and sovereignty of the king over his subjects and independence from other kingdoms. However, in contemporary time, the Oba of Uneme- Ekpedo puts on a crown made of coral beads.

Iron Stand with Accessories



Figure 4. Iron stand with Accessories, 80cm, Oba of Ekpedo's palace. . Photo by F. Ophori

This iron stand has a round head on a long rod of about 120cm standing on a circular shape flat bar. The vertical rod is attached to it by the side and little above this base is another circular shaped bar. The first circular shape seems to serve as the base for the figure. At the middle of this vertical square shaft is a horizontal intersection forming a cross shaped on which are attached two gongs horizontally at both ends. Gongs are struck with a stick or piece of iron rod. In the traditional setting, they are mostly employed as musical instrument, to disseminate information and give signals. They could also be used to invite and venerate spirits during traditional religious worship. During annual festivals in Ekpedo, the gong is struck as part of the ceremonies to signals the beginning of the Avalor Lore festival [9][10]. On the upper part of the square iron rod are also welded two traditional swords of authority/ceremonial swords standing vertically on both ends next to the gongs. Traditional ceremonial swords are common symbols of authority among the Ediod speaking group especially the Benin. These types of swords appearing in far north of Edo State indicate a Benin sphere of influence.

Close to the swords are two traditional lamps (chandelier) attached to the same horizontal square pipe. These lamps seem to have the same function like the ones in the elongated ceremonial sword in fig 2 above. Two of these iron stand flanks the royal stool (throne) of the Oba of Ekpedo to the left and right sides respectively. Although the one to the left of the picture does not have any gong attached, they both share similar artistic configurations. According to Oba of Ekpedo (2017: pi), informed that this staff is used by the Oba of Ekpedo for royal proclamation which are mostly done at night.

Hoe Head



Figure 5. Traditional Uneme Hoe Head, Iron, 15cm by 18cm, Uneme-Ekpedo. Photo by F. Ophori

Hoes are agricultural tools with a flat or concave shaped iron blade and a long wooden or iron handle. It functions as a tool for tilling the ground or soil and removing grasses. The production of agricultural implements became the major focus of the Uneme blacksmiths after they departed from Benin, in order to meet up with food security which is paramount for their survival. The blacksmith fabricates only the iron blade in most cases unlike their Benin counterparts who also attached metal handles. The Uneme hoe is a piece of shovel-like blade fabricated from iron sheet. It has a curved sharp edge with a concave smooth surface that transits inward into two shallow 'C' shape curves. These curvilinear upper edges terminate at the middle into a tiny pointed tail like rod. This rod functions as a hook or peg which is driven into the carved wooden handle by the client or the trader who sells them at the market. The concave surface makes for the easy removal of the soil. But how the conceptualization of the hoe started in Uneme is still a myth.

Nevertheless, agriculture has been a primordial occupation of man since the fall of Adam when God made him to till ground from which he was made [11]. As man began to multiply, it became pertinent for man to cultivate farms and crops to sustain his large community. This may have promoted the need for tools such as hoes necessary for such activities. Farming tools were made from wood, stones, fired clay and finally metal (iron). The development trend may be observed, but the Sumerians used harvester's sickle made of baked clay about 3000 BCE (history of agriculture, para 6)

Gongs:



Figure 6. Uneme Traditional Gong. Iron. 36cm. Produced by Alikali, Ekpedo-Uneke. Photo by F. Ophori

The Uneme-Ekpedo gong (fig 6) is configured in an inverted 'U' shape with a handle forged into a tiny round rod with a circular form at its apex. The circular void is the point for hanging the gong. They could be fabricated into a pair of gongs. This iron gong is made

up of two single gongs joined together by the tail-like handles forming 'C' shape curve as the handle. The usual plain surface of the gong is decorated with color pigment gotten from lime stone which could have been sourced from the rocky environment. The design is a simple horizontal linear design running across the surface of the gong with another line tracing the outer edges or outlining the shape of the figures. Alikali an Uneme blacksmith states that the design is purely for aesthetic purpose, although he believes that the white colour signifies purity and that the gong could also serve as a purifying instrument to cleanse the land [12]. As earlier stated in this study, the gong is an instrument of communication, information disseminations, music and call to solemn and political assembly. The formal objectification seems to suggest an inverted 'U' configuration.

Uneme Knife (Agada)



Figure 7. Traditional Uneme Knife (Agada) by Alikali, 25cm, iron and wood, Uneme-Ekpedo. Photo by F. Ophori

The African continent is richly endowed with corpus of skillfully and artistically crafted iron blades. They come in variety of shapes and sizes and they service a retinue of purposes which includes weapon of defense, tools, and dance wand for social or religious ceremonies, as symbol of power and social status, a unit of currency, medical treatment and aesthetics. It meant different things to different people simultaneously. This Uneme knife (Agada) which has only the function of medical treatment is made up of a short curved blade of about 20cm in length with both edges blunt. The tip is the widest part of the blade which translates into curvilinear shape. This shape further transit into a square angle that ends in a tiny pointed rod. The tiny pointed rod is pierced into a carved wooden handle decorated with motifs and patterns created through wood burnishing technique. This is one of the two Uneme blacksmithing work that possesses artistic surface design finishing. The upper end of the handle is wrapped with a strip of iron close to the blade and it serve as a firm grip of the handle and the blade.

The knife is traditionally use as a cure to the medical condition of sleeplessness and 'Ojo (Abiku). Ojo popularly referred to as 'Abiku' in other cultures in Nigeria (Yoruba, Benin, Igbo) is a condition of health where a child that is born dies at its infant stage and it is believed to be reborn to the same family only to repeat the same process of birth, life and death again. According to www.medicinenet.com, the above condition is a medical condition where persons born with sickle cell disease known as sickle cell anemia dies at their infancy. This disorder is transmitted from both parents with AS genotype. "It is a disease in which the body produces abnormally shaped red blood cells" which shorten life expectancy (www.medicineneto.com).

The Abiku phenomenon is an aspect of African belief system that connotes spiritual manipulation of humans by unseen forces. This has elicited artistic theme from both the literary and visual arts. Iya Abiku wood sculpture by Erhabor Emokpae highlights the Abiku concept with formal tendency that reminiscence the Akuaba fertility figures of Ghana [13]. The sculptures piece symbolize the Abiku's mother with swollen eyes mourning the death of Abiku child who comes to be born, dies and returns at will to cause sorrow [14]. The routine coming and going leaves as vacuum in the heart of the mother

which the artist symbolizes with human shape void on the chest of the work. While J.P Clark pleaded with Abiku to stay because of the mother's agony in his poem Abiku thus:

Coming and going these several seasonal, no longer than bestrides the threshold/but step in and stay/for good. We know the large scars/seriating down your back and front/like beak of the sword fish/ are all relies of your first coming/then step in and stay/for her body is tired/tired, her mild going sour" [15].

However, Onobrakpeya's print Abiku (Burglar Spirit) and Soyinka's poem Abiku, seem to eulogize the Abiku's stiffneckedness in coming and going at will and malevolence only leaving in its trail, sorrow, tears, impoverishment and confusion respectively.

This seemingly grotesque picture of Abiku is common in most African societies. But this knife by Alikali seems to want to proffer a lasting solution to the Abiku phenomenon by putting a stop or curing it permanently through the instrumentality of the knife that has been fortified with herbs and spiritual sacrifices and incantations [16]. The design and patterns on the handle is basically an artistic contemplation to create visual aesthetics [17]. But how efficacious this might be is a matter of time. However, the motif or symbol on the handle which is 'X' sign, in the local parlance could denote to cancel and of course anything bad should be cancelled. Ojo or Abiku is bad and must be totally annihilated therefore this sign seem to connote the final blow to sickle cell anemia in the community. The handle has black colour on both ends against the white natural colour of the wood and that could indicate the gradual fading away of the evil (sickle cell disease) because white and black colours in African cosmology suggest purity peace/good and bad/evil respectively. The knife (Agbada) is place under the child's pillow on the bed where he/she sleeps. There the spiritual osmosis takes place and the efficacy of the knife permeates through the pillow into the child for him to get well.

Pole with Eagle and Reptiles



Figure 8. Uneme Pole with eagle and reptile, Iron, 160cm, Oba of Ekpedo's Palace, Uneme-Ekpedo. Photo by F.Ophori

Uneme pole is an iron staff that seems to reminiscence the Benin Osun Ematon staff. The 65cm staff has a long vertical wrought iron pipe with a surmounted figure of a bird at its peak. Staff of similar formal configuration could also be found amongst the Yoruba. It is revered as symbolic object of divination, healing and proclamation by the Ogun and Osun priests. "Ogun is worshipped as a link to other deities and for his assistance to herbalists and diviners looking for secret herbs in the bush". "The Yoruba Opa Orere is a shaft which end with upward flaring cones or bells upon which sits a bird on a flat disk".

The stylized bird with elongated beak on the Benin Osun-ematon represents the witches. However, the bird on the Uneme pole represents the eagle which is accorded symbolic significance as the king of birds in Uneme cosmology. While the Edo Osun ematon is movable, the Uneme pole which also has two figures of reptile along the vertical pole is welded permanently to a circular iron rod base which makes it a stationary object adorning the Oba of Ekpedo's throne. The eagle bird at the apex of the pole apart from displaying the majestic splendor and might that is associated with the Oba seat which the eagle's personage exemplifies, it also epitomize the Oba sitting on high to watch over his subject like the eagle soaring high in the sky over other animals. In traditional Africa cosmology, the white feather of the eagle alludes to the socio-religious myth about the strength and power of the eagle. Therefore the white eagle feathers can only be attached to the crowns of kings, the caps of very senior chiefs, warriors and religious priests. It signifies their physical and spiritual might and exploits in battles. This pole flanks the right hand side of the throne of the Oba of Ekpedo-Uneme could be a reassurance of the presence of the gods and ancestors of the land.

Uneme Gun



Figure 9. Local gun by Okhagbuzo 56cm, Iron c 2010. Photo by F. Ophori

Gun is a creative art work of the blacksmith, which is made of a long iron pipe known as barrel, mounted on a metal or wooden handle with a trigger point. It is a weapon used for both hunting game and warfare (defense) in traditional Uneme by mostly adult males because of its importance to the socio-political well-being of the community. The production of gun in Uneme started in their former home among the Igun ematon in Benin Kingdom where they copied and developed the gun technology from the early, now primitive guns supplied to the empire by the first white men, the Portuguese.

However, Damesa, Momoh and Obabore stated that the Uneme got the first sample of gun which they copied from a captured soldier in the army of the Benin/European soldiers. This may be during their slave raid on the Uneme community or on the march to persecute the Benin-Idah war.

After the exodus to their present home, the peculiar geography, the need for survival and the circumstances surrounding the migration of Uneme from Benin may have engendered creative objectification of weapon for defense and hunting in their new

environment. Tradition has it that after the migration of Uka and his group of blacksmith from Benin, there was a man hunt for them on the orders of the Oba of Benin.

Since primordial time, man has continued to create and develop defense mechanism such as weapons for self-defense, territorial integrity and survival. During the Stone Age, man-made weapons of stone and when metal was discovered, they made copper spear heads attached to irons or wooden handles. The discovery of iron a stronger metal led to the proliferation of weapons of warfare in different types, shape, sizes and usage by man. Gun (fire lance) and gun powder (black powder) were invented by the Chinese between the 9th and 10th centuries AD. The technology later spread to the Middle East in about the 14th century. Africa and Europe is where the earliest surviving fire arm artifact was found in Otepee, Estonia in 1396. But the earliest evidence of gun was a 12th century Chinese sculpture found in a cave in Sichnam depicting a figure carrying a vase shaped bombard with flames. This technology may have entered North Africa from the Middle East.

However, fire arm and its technology entered into the South part of Nigeria (Benin Empire) after the contact with the Portuguese in the later part of the 15th Century AD during the reigns of Oba Ozolua and Oba Esigie. Also the regular slave raids by the Benin and probably Yoruba warriors on Uneme may have further necessitated the need for more frequent production of guns for the defense of the community. Guns in Uneme, like the world over is useful as it is dangerous, therefore it is feared, revered and preserved for the exclusive use by the warriors and hunters.

4. Conclusion

The blacksmithing culture of Uneme has been a primordial artistic activity of the people. It has continued from one generation to the other with their stylistic configurations and general inspiration drawn from the Benin royal art tradition. Nevertheless, after the migration of Uneme from Benin, the change agents they encounter in their new location inspired new creative objectification that have impacted the community since then. They have engaged in the production of items that caters for their immediate needs such as agricultural implements, weapons of defense, hunting, health and socio-culture. This new artistic trajectory is anchored on the physical and spiritual strength of iron which makes the material crucial in Uneme art. Since iron is associated with every aspect of the lives of the Uneme, the stylistic characteristics of the artwork epitomizes the socio-cultural nuances of the people. The works amplifies the conjugation of similar formal configuration in spite of the fact that they (the artists) works independently, The formal and iconographic symbolism inherent in these iron works are the instruments of communal crafts that has brought together the socio-cultural, technological and spiritual identity of the Uneme.

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