

Contemporary Bronze Casting Tradition of Benin: A Case Study of the Aigbe Group of Casters

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Abstract:- Documentation of Benin art is mostly focused on the antiquated objects. While some of the literature concentrate on the history and reparation, others focus on materials, methods, and museology. None however, is directed towards the new forms emerging from the contemporary bronze casters of Benin. Consequently, the new forms are not given proper attention, and the contemporary bronze casters remain anonymous, waiting to be expositied through art historical documentation. This study was designated to document the Aigbe group of bronze casters in Benin, with a view to identify new forms emerging from the group, and to spot their similarities and dissimilarities with the antiquated objects. The study was earmarked to unearth how the guild system of apprenticeship has expanded to include new membership; to ascertain the level of sponsorship received (if any), and to determine the level of advancement of the work of the group through the adoption of modern technology. Adopting the descriptive non-experimental design, the field study employed the art historical method of inquiry in the humanities, and the approach was basically contextual.

Keywords:- *Cire Perdue, Guild, Heritage, Reparation, Restitution, Dynasty, Bronze.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Ample research and documentation of art and its history have been carried out across the globe, covering a period from 30,000 BCE to the present. This has brought to the fore, myriads of artistic endeavours not known before. Insofar, human creativity has expositied a deep insight to past human cultures and civilizations. In sub-Saharan West Africa, a rich art tradition has been surveyed, especially the royal arts; since kings and queens historically have been important patrons of the arts. The British Punitive Expedition of 1897 succeeded in expositied a rich bronze casting tradition of the Edo-speaking Binis in present-day Nigeria to the global stage; a practice which was initiated and exclusively sponsored by the Oba (King) of Benin, and has survived till present.

The Edo-speaking kingdom of Benin was a political power for more than a thousand years in the southern forests of present-day Nigeria. It saw the rise of two important dynasties. The first dynasty, the Ogiso (Rulers of the Sky), was approximately founded around 900 BCE; and the second and current dynasty approximately came into

existence in the thirteenth century CE after the arrival of Prince Oranmiyan, son of Oduduwa, from the ancient Yoruba capital of Ife (Blier, 1998). Oral tradition has it that it was during the reign of Oguola, the sixth oba of Benin, in the late fourteenth century, that bronze casting started in Benin (Eyo, 1980). Eyo intimates that the enormous wealth of the Oba enabled him to maintain a specialist guild of bronze casters who produced objects exclusively for the King himself, and stored in his palace.

The bronze casters were forbidden on pain of death to make these bronzes for anybody except the King. The tradition of bronze casting flourished in Benin until the British Punitive Expedition of 1897, when the Oba's palace was sacked, with the treasury of royal ivory, brass, and other arts forcefully taken to London. However, Nevadomsky (1997), as cited by Ononeme (2004), states that the ascension of Oba Eweka II to the throne in 1914 saw to the revival of the carving and casting tradition of the Binis, although this time, it was as commercial industries rather than guilds that were sustained by royal patronage. Albeit a change in the mode of operation, the Bronze Casters Guild of Benin continue to exist, located at Igun Street of the city. Presently, Igun street is replete with duplicates of antiquities produced by the ancestors of the bronze casters. Some of the bronze casters work as individual artists, while others work in groups as family members. One of such families is the Aigbe family.

Using the lost wax (Cire Perdue) method of casting, the Aigbe group of brothers in Igun street are just one of the numerous bronze casting families which constitute the bronze casting guild of the kingdom. This makes them an exemplum of the generic bronze casting tradition of the Binis. This study is therefore earmarked to identify new forms emerging from the Aigbe group. It will establish what sort of sponsorship is received (if any) by the Igun guild of bronze casters in present day Benin, especially the Aigbe group of brothers. This research will critically examine the objects produced by the artists, with the intent of indentifying existing similarities and dissimilarities of works produced during the ancient times and works produced in contemporary times by the Aigbe family. Hence, this study adopts the Aigbe family as a case study of the bronze casting tradition of the Binis.

Existing literature on Benin art is usually focused on the antiquarian objects which were forcefully taken away to Euro-America during the punitive expedition of 1897. While

the foci of most of the literature is usually on the historical aspects, others focus on the materials, processes, and features of the antiquities and their contemporary duplicates. It is almost as if the contemporary artist operating along traditional lines in Benin is non-existent. It is more like an affirmation to the common postulation that all creative endeavor from the Binis ended with the sack of the Obas palace. The gap here is an obliteration of contemporary forms, and the persistent anonymity of the contemporary artists still operating through the guild system. Insofar, the distinctive features of the works of individual artists of the guild system, and their stylistic developments are not known. A work by Osaigbovo Ogbebor, one of the members of the Aigbe group, was used as the cover page of a workshop publication by the National Gallery of Art, Nigeria; however, it addressed the artist as unknown. It is therefore the interest of this research to redirect the dialectics on the subject from the generic antiquated prototype, to contemporary forms of the guild produced in present-day society. The study is therefore an attempt to exposit the contemporary artistic currents flowing in Benin, using the Aigbe group of bronze casters as a case study. The questions to be considered in this study are: What new iconic forms, similarities and dissimilarities exist between the antiquities and contemporary bronze productions of the Aigbe group? How has present day technological development affected the trade or profession? Since the ancient guild was exclusively sponsored by the Oba, what sort of sponsorship is received by the guild in present day, especially the Aigbe group of brothers? How has the traditional bronze casters guild of Benin expanded to include new membership?

The review of related literature was carried out under the following sub-headings: Theoretical framework; Africa Reparation Movement, The Journey So Far; Igun Street, A Citadel of Bronze Casting? The Apprenticeship System of Igun Eronmwon. The theoretical framework of the study is hinged on the Postcolonial theory. The Postcolonial theory is a literary theory or critical approach that deals with literature produced in countries that were once, or are now, colonies of other countries (Lye, 1998). The Postcolonial theory originated during the late 1970s, and has its foundation rooted on Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1978), which kicked against Western domination, and the stereotypical views of the West against the other (Mahault, 2017). For a study such as this, which deals with the aftermath of the punitive expedition by the colonialists as it affects the artistic tradition of the Binis, it is befitting and expedient that a theory such as the postcolonial theory be adopted in order to guide the study.

II. AFRICA REPARATION MOVEMENT; THE JOURNEY SO FAR

The effort of the Africa Reparation movement which started in earnest in 1992 seems to be bearing fruition in recent times. The Reparation Movement sought for the return of stolen goods, artefacts, and other traditional treasures (such as the campaign by the African Reparations Movement in Britain to have the Benin bronzes presently housed in the British Museum returned to Africa. Jones

(2021) postulates that a statue of a cockerel is one priceless artefact soon to be welcomed home, after Jesus College handed it over to a delegation from Nigeria at a ceremony at Cambridge University. It is one of thousands of metal sculptures and ivory carvings made between the 15th and 19th Centuries and looted by British troops in 1897 from the West African kingdom of Benin, in modern day Nigeria's Edo State.

TRTWORLD (2021) posits that Nigeria has been striving to repatriate these artifacts for years, a challenge that several other origin countries, including Turkey, has taken on. The magazine site reveals that the cockerel statue called The Okukor has been held by the Jesus College of the University of Cambridge since 1905. It reveals that the university had decided on the Okukor's repatriation in late 2019. It states that the artifact was planned to be delivered to a delegation from Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments with a ceremony on October 27. Consequently, two bronze objects, the Cockerel and the Oba's Head, has been returned and received by the Nigerian government. It sits majestically at the Oba's Palace, Benin. TRTWORLD hints that this will be the first instance of an institutional return of a Benin Bronze from the UK.

III. IGUN STREET, A CITADEL OF BRONZE CASTING

Igun street is replete with contemporary duplicates of the antiquities which found their way to Euro-America in 1897. Oriakhogba & Fenemigho (2019) hints that Igun street forms part of the area in Benin City declared as world heritage site by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Education (UNESCO) in 1999. In affirmation, the Blueprint (2021), posited that in 1999, UNESCO listed the Oba of Benin's palace and Igun street, Benin City, as citadel of bronze casting and cultural heritage sites. The paper posits that unarguably, after several centuries, artifacts churned out from Igun street has continued to attract global attention. However, in his *Ancient and Contemporary Benin Bronze Differences and Similarities: the Content, Context, and the Journey So Far*, Frank Egwali (2016) highlights the quality of most of the bronzes at Igun street as imperfect in terms of finishing, monotonously repeated themes, and adulterated sculptures which are heavier. Egwali notes that contemporary Benin objects lack depth in storyline, are forged versions of antiquities, and old themes are repeated. Egwali feels that most bronze artists today are not committed, lack patience, integrity and resilience, which is the hallmark of the ancient sculptures. However, some bronze casters in Igun street have exhibited technical proficiency in their art. The Aigbe group of casters fall in this category. Their contemporary modifications of the objects have attracted attention to their foundry, where several expertises have visited with the aim of seeing work done by the direct descendants of the primordial casters, and with an enthusiasm of collecting some of the objects.

IV. THE APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM OF IGUN ERONMWON

The apprenticeship system of Igun Eronmwon was established as an informal mode of training. Inneh (2009), states that the Bronze Casters Guild, Igun Eronmwon is affiliated to the Royal Society of Iwebo in the Palace of the Oba of Benin. Iwebo Society is the most senior of the three societies namely, Iwebo, Iweguae and Ibiwe. Each of these societies is specialised in the areas of responsibilities assigned to it. Arts and crafts guilds are normally affiliated to Iwebo. Inneh reveals that bronze casting is one of the most important cultural trademarks and inheritances of the ancient Kingdom of Benin. They keep the Omo N'Oba's wardrobe and through Igun Eronmwon, provide all ritual ornaments which in present day, have come under the expression Benin Art Works."

As noted by Inneh, the Bronze Casters Guild of Benin is composed of select families, which are all situated at Igun Street of the State Capital, a place apportioned to them by the Oba himself. Inneh reveals that historically, Benin art was arranged as court art. It was organised to principally serve the religious, socio-political, and economic needs of the palace and by extension, the empire. For this purpose, the monarch organised the artists into different art guilds which still exist today. The guilds include the bronze casters guild (IgunEromwon), wood workers guild (Owina), dancers guild (Ogbelaka), ivory and wood carvers guild (Igbesanmwan), weavers guild (OwinaNdo), pot makers guild (Emakhe), the leather workers guild (Isohian), among others. Blueprint (2021) hints that the craft is the exclusive preserve of certain Bini families namely: Inneh family, Ehanire family, Akenuwa family, Ihama family, Obadolaye family and Osa family. The paper reports that it is not allowed for any outsider to join the guild. If you are not a freeborn, you cannot be initiated. Only members of the privileged families are permitted to learn the trade. Blueprint notes that in 1999, UNESCO listed the Oba of Benin's palace and Igun street, Benin City, as citadels of bronze casting and cultural heritage sites. It posits that after several centuries, artifacts churned out from Igun street has continued to attract global attention.

V. METHODOLOGY

This section is concerned with the methods adopted for carrying out the study. The design adopted for this study is the non-experimental descriptive design, which involves the process of gathering data that describe events. (Association for Educational Communications and Technology, 2001). The rationale behind this design is imbued on the descriptive nature of the work, since it basically reports on the state of affairs surrounding the phenomenon under investigation. It employed the art historical method of inquiry in the Humanities, and the approach was basically contextual.

The study was conducted in Benin City, the Edo State Capital, Nigeria. The Aigbe group of bronze casters which is the core of this study, is domiciled at Igun Street of the city. Igun street is the home to all families associated with the

bronze casters guild of Benin; a place purportedly allocated to them by the Oba himself. The method of data collection was by personal interviews. Data from secondary sources including text books, journals, and internet sources were immensely utilized. In addition, a video camera was used to collect data which covers the bronze casting process.

The population of the study is composed of all the members of the Aigbe group. This includes the affiliate (non-Aigbe) members of the group. The Aigbes of the group include Monday, Wisdom, Etiosa, Patrick, Nosa, and Aiye. Other members of the group include Frank Akenuwa, Osaigbovo Ogbebor, Ebwoa Ihama; Festus Owhofasa, Ese Igbenoba, and Osaige Igbinosun. The Aigbe group of bronze casters in Igun street were randomly selected. The visual analysis was guided by the postcolonial theory. It is limited to a comparison between an antique and a recent object of the Aigbe group. The analyzed object serves as an exemplum of all other objects produced by the group.

In course of the field work, the researcher closely followed the process of bronze casting from the beginning stage to the finishing (it should be noted that the Aigbes cast in brass, albeit they are all referred to as bronzes). The Aigbe group of casters adopt the lost wax (Cire Perdue) method, which is a process of heating out wax from a mold, and pouring smelted metals into it to have a finished work. The caster starts by creating a form with red sand (Plate I). At this stage, details are not added to the form. Next, the new form is covered up with wax. At this point, details are added to the wax. The wax is then completely covered with red sand and allowed to dry. When completely dry, binding wires are used to reinforce the red sand to prevent it from breaking apart during heating. It is then sent to the furnace for heating (Plate II). This process could last for several hours depending on the size of the objects.

While this is ongoing, the metals to be used for the casting (zinc and copper) are put in a pot, which is placed in an electrically charged funnel (Plate III) at the foundry, for the purpose of smelting. When the objects are completely heated and the wax completely melted out, they are carefully removed from the furnace (Plate V) with special tools, and are allowed to cool off, buried in the earth (Plate VI). At this stage, attention is redirected to the smelting funnel. When the metals are completely smelted, all dirt is carefully removed with a metal filter. The smelted metal is poured into the mold and allowed to cool off (Plate IV). The red sand is carefully removed from the object with chisels, hammers, and any necessary tool. It is then properly cleaned and filed to have a finished work (Plate VII).



Plate 1 Detailed Wax being Covered with Red Sand at Aigbes Foundry



Plate IV Smelted Metal Poured Into the Mould and Allowed to Cool Off



Plate II The Objects are Placed in the Furnace for Heating



Plate V The Objects are Carefully Removed from the Furnace



Plate III An Electrically Charged Funnel for Smelting the Metals are being Heated for Casting



Plate VI The Objects are Buried in the Earth to Cool off



Plate VII Cleaning Process Commences

VI. VISUAL ANALYSIS

The visual analysis is focused on an antiquated Benin head and its contemporary replica. The framework adopted for the analysis is the postcolonial theory.



Plate VIII Osaigbovo Ogbemor Benin Head (2021) Brass
Size: 2ft. Aigbes Foundry



Plate IX Benin Royal Head

The above Head by Osaigbovo Ogbemor, cast in brass in 2021, is similar to the royal head from a Benin alter, cast in brass approximately in the fifteenth century. When placed side by side as shown above, a quick glance reveals certain similarities and differences as well. While there are noted similarities in the treatment of features such as the eyes, nose, mouth, the difference lies in the scarification, treatment of the hair, neck, and the addition of a serpent on the head by Ogbemor. The strands of hair on the antique are portrayed in a vertical manner, separated in three rows with dissecting horizontal lines parallel to each other. This is quite different from Ogbemor's treatment of the hairs, which are not well defined as the hairs are rather woolly and not treated as single strands. The three rows of hair in Ogbemors version are separated with crooked divergent lines. This could be a direct statement by the artist to reflect the enormous political and socio-cultural change experienced in the present postcolonial milieu of Benin. This change is also reflected on the addition of a serpent on the head. The serpent has been an important religious deity in Benin art. The repeated use of same iconology by the casters is affirmative of Huseman's postulation that the meaning of an image is firmly rooted in the culture that envisioned it (Huseman, 2013).

VII. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings to the study in relation to Question 1, which was to ascertain what new iconic forms, similarities and dissimilarities exist between the antiquities and contemporary bronze productions of the Aigbe group shows that traditional bronze casting in Benin has evolved with slight variations from the antiquities. Although the similarity lies in the use of traditional icons and symbolism, some refer to the new forms as duplicates, premised on their semblance to the antiquities. But the Aigbes have argued that the similarity stems from the nature of training derived from the same ancestors in the traditional guild system, which has remained the same from ancient to contemporary times. The dissimilarity however, stems from the detailing and poor finishing. The antiquities are noted to be more detailed than the contemporaneous productions of contemporary bronze casters of Benin..

The findings in relation to Research Question 2, which was to uncover how present day technological development has affected the trade or profession; determined that technological advancement has affected the profession in a variety of ways. Firstly, the use of an electrically charged funnel for smelting has made the entire process faster and less straineous. Secondly, the use of modern filing tools give the objects a faster finishing. The study also determined that the adoption of materials such as Plaster of Paris (POP), has enabled them to finish a job within a couple of weeks when ordinarily, it would have taken a couple of months, depending on the size of the work. Hence, technological advancement has helped in simplifying the profession in a less strainuous manner.

The findings in relation to Research Question 3, which was to identify what sort of sponsorship is received by the guild in present day, especially the Aigbe group of casters; suggest that no form of sponsorship is received, neither from the government, the palace, nor from nongovernmental agencies. Monday Aigbe, head of the group, decried the dearth of sponsorship as it affects the guild at present. He refers to the sophisticated nature of the ancestral antiques as a product of the mind, and linked it the level of sponsorship received then. "The then Oba provided all the materials and enabling environment for the casters to do their job. The casters were revered in the society since they served as local historians, and produced religious and ritualistic objects" (personal interview, 01/07/2022). The narrative has changed immensely in modern times as bronze casters scout for scarce materials which has become expensive due to the high level of demand. Sustained by commodification of their artworks, the casters now depend solely on local patronage, especially by tourists. However, travel restrictions in connection with the present post-Covid melange has ensured a decline in such patronage from tourists, a trend the casters hope will come to an end shortly.

The findings in relation to Research Question 4, which was to establish how the traditional bronze casters guild of Benin has expanded to include new membership; deduced that the contemporary guild system in Benin, which was initially preserved for selected families only, has expanded to include new membership. Wisdom Aigbe (Personal Interview, 01/08/2022), disclosed that before now, membership was restricted to the Inneh's family only (Inner, is the head of the guilds), afterwards, Osa family, which were in-laws to the Inneh family, was added. He reveals that presently, all Edo-speaking Binis who are interested in the art are free to join the guild; but must partake in certain initiation rituals, and must swear an oath of secrecy not to teach the art to non-members of the guild. The composition of the Aigbe group is not without such members, as the Aigbes are just five, out of the thirteen members of the group. Although not too sure if the expansion is a move to keep the art form alive, but the pressures of the post colonial milieu in Benin could be a key factor.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This study examined the contemporary bronze casting tradition of the Benin kingdom; using the Aigbe group as a case study. Precisely, the research aimed to study and document the bronze casting tradition of the Aigbe group of bronze casters. The design of the study was the descriptive non-experimental design. The sample consisted of all the twelve bronze casting members of the Aigbe group. The results showed that: the bronze casters of Benin produce new forms while retaining same iconology as their ancestors. There are existing similarities and dissimilarities between their work and the old objects. Technological advancement has affected and simplified the casting process in recent times. There is no level of sponsorship to promote and sustain the art form in Benin. The guild system has expanded to include new membership of all Binis interested in the art, due to the pressures of postcolonialism.

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions were made: That the cultural values upheld by the bronze casters of Benin has resulted in a retention of same iconology as their ancestors. Since their training is deeply rooted in culture. This has resulted in existing similarities and dissimilarities between their work and the old objects. The use of electrically charged foundry and modern tools have simplified their work in a shorter period of production time. The dearth of governmental or nongovernmental sponsorship to promote and sustain the art form in Benin is affecting the practice in a negative light. Since the guild system has expanded to include new membership of all Binis interested in the art, it is hoped that new forms will keep on emerging to reflect the intrinsic values of the society producing them.

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