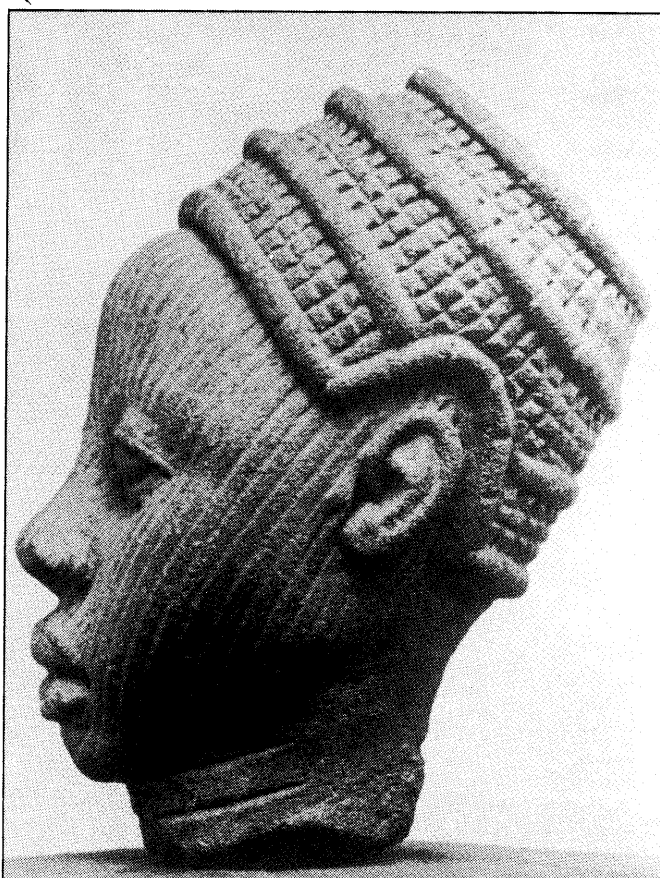
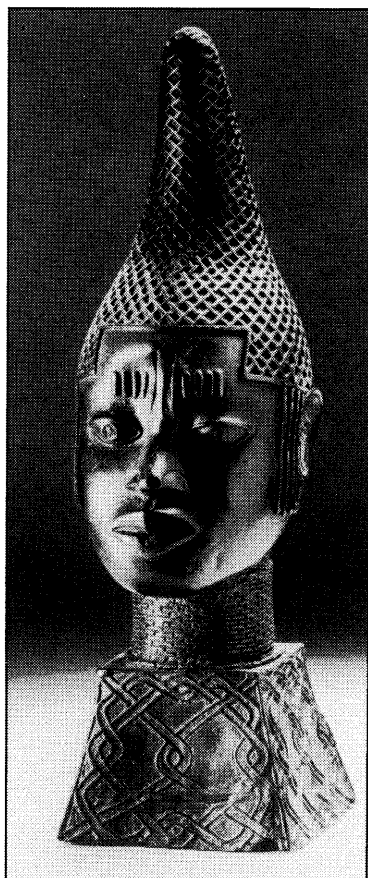


The diversity of the peoples of Africa is manifest in their norms and mores, in the religions, languages and cultures as well as in the political apparatus evolved for governing, particularly in pre-colonial times.

In the 19th century, colonial adventurism imposed artificial boundaries on Africa and enforced the assimilation of alien values. Yet, before that happened, the apparent diversity of tenets, practices and cultures was in reality superficial; underlying it one can discern in varying degrees, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, an unmistakable homogeneity.

A widespread device which enhanced the enforcement of the rule of law in several African societies, for example, is the series of associations of initiates, known by various names but which have been categorised under the rubric: "secret societies" – a term which in itself is a reminder of Africa's colonial past. The point should be stressed, that these so-called "secret societies" are perhaps no more secret than the various political systems now in Africa, which often advertise their democratic pretences but which, in general, enforce laws that are enacted by an elected or selected few. The Dogon of Mali, for example, call their own society Awa, while the Mande-speaking Bambara, also of Mali, have the Komo, the most powerful of the six such societies there. These societies are not always restricted by ethnic boundaries, as is demonstrated by the case of the Lower Guinea area, where the Simo society is recognised by the Susu, the Baga and the Nalu, just as the Poro wields its authority beyond Guinea extending it to Sierra Leone.

One of the most popular societies is the Ogboni on account both of its extensive study as well as the recognition of the awesome power which it exerts among the Yoruba of Nigeria. All of these societies are basically concerned with the maintenance of societal equilibrium through the institutionalisation as well as the enforcement of checks and balances of ingenious means which almost always include a



The Queen Mother head, an early 16th century Benin bronze (left) and a terracotta head from Ife: despite historical links, no stylistic similarities

Culture and change in Africa

Can we speak of a homogeneous African culture despite former colonial and other external influences?

sequential and tightly controlled programme of education and initiation, some of which may last many years.

One other area in which a basic, homogeneous pattern is discernible is traditional religion. Before the advent of Islam or Christianity, various African societies had clearly articulated precepts which sought to relate man to his environment and make him come to terms with natural and supernatural phenomena. Ancestors are in some instances deified, perhaps so they could assist mortals in the transmission of supplications. Various

avenues are created through which almost every conceivable interest group is encouraged to propitiate acknowledged forces, seen, felt or assumed. Sacrifices are offered and traditional ritual ceremonies are performed, occasionally or at regular intervals as the society or occasion may warrant.

In all of these, traditional African religious practices, regardless of apparent cultural divergencies, share remarkable similarities which strongly encourage the probability that they may perhaps have originated from one primordial source.

Perhaps it is in the arts that this homogeneous trend becomes most glaring and pervasive. When we talk of homogeneity here, we are of course applying the term in its most liberal and relative sense; because, we single out one country, just one African nation and examine its art forms, what may initially strike the observer is the amalgam of art works remarkable, not only for their aesthetic power, but equally for their heterogeneous features.

In Nigeria, for example, an attempt at classifying the variety of traditional arts in existence under one "national" style cannot but lead to frustration. The celebrated Nok pieces, for instance, with their flared nostrils and dilated pupils have nothing in common, stylistically at least, with the naturalistic bronze and terra cotta works of Ife, other than that both Nok and Ife are in Nigeria. We may go further, and cite the instance of ancient Ife and Benin and note that, in

spite of the historical link between them which resulted in the latter learning the art of bronze casting from the former, there is virtually no stylistic similarity between these two art forms.

Even within one linguistic grouping, say, the Yoruba, a surfeit of forms often assaults one's sensibilities as each sub-group has its own iconographic peculiarity – in a manner akin to, and probably co-terminous with, subtle gradations in the various dialects spoken in Yorubaland. Among the north-east Ekiti people, for example, the Epa masks have their features which are peculiar to this area but distinct from those of the Gelede of the Egba/Egbado peoples, to the south-west.

The claim, however, that African art is homogeneous not weakened by its heterogeneous manifestations. Whereas it is instructive to resort to smaller pockets of culture in order to highlight the diverse elements which lend culture its wholeness, the case for homogeneity must rest on a continental appraisal. It is only on this plane that one learns to appreciate and identify recurrent features in most of Africa's traditional art.

In the Western Sudan, for example, a generally slim and attenuated style prevails, as best elsewhere exemplified by the graceful Tellem figures of the Dogon in Mali, whose features are often simplified and abstracted. Falling within this category also are the elegantly poetic antelope configurations of the Bambara, also of Mali. In Burkina Faso among the Mossi, the Bobo and the Kurumba and, in particular, among the Senufo of Ivory Coast, some of their masks and figures conform to this slim-style categorisation.

In contradistinction, a roundish and sometimes assertive style is noticeable among the various groups to the east of the West African sub-region – Ghana, Benin Republic and Nigeria – as well as amongst the Cameroonian and Zairean peoples. One must concede that an exercise that categorises the hundreds of styles noticeable on the continent into a slim and/or round style cannot be entirely flawless. But this, perhaps, is the most obvious device to

which one can succumb, given the fact that Africa, quite unlike Europe, does not categorise its arts into epochs or identify them on the basis of "schools" or "isms."

When we look at the arts of other continents – of Pre-Columbian America or of the South Pacific, for example – it becomes transparently clear that African arts, slim or round, belong in one capsule and share a stylistic affinity more with each other than with the arts of Papuan New Guinea, Fiji, Samoa, Haiti, the Easter Islands or any such non-African groups.

We have been speaking of some of these institutions and practices as though they were intact and unaffected by other external influences. In actuality, Africa has been

invaded and overwhelmed by a myriad of interests and values, some of which are undoubtedly beneficial and a host inimical. The political system which African nations have embraced are a mirror, as well as a residue, of the colonial experience shared by most of them. Any "educated" African would feel almost ashamed if he were to renounce his Islamic or Christian faith and proclaim adherence to traditional religion – either as a diviner, a chief priest or simply as a worshipper.

As a result of the indiscriminate embracing of foreign systems, indigenous organs of social control and judicial management were outlawed after they have been tagged with that opprobrious prefix, "secret." This is a

practice that prevails till today in most African states: indigenous "secret societies" are continually banned or whittled down while, on the other hand, there is a steady increase in the establishment of "clubs" which owe their primal allegiance to the doctrines of foreign parent bodies.

Apart from these apparent changes in the political and religious sphere, the artistic domain presents a pathetic picture. To understand the extent of the assault on traditional African art, one would need to look beyond the superficial manifestations of the effects and probe deeper into the extent to which the extinction of the arts has been guaranteed through a systematic erosion of the systems which sustain them.

Although religion has been singled out as constituting a major prop around which traditional art flourishes, it is by no means the only prompter. Art is, in fact, the handmaiden of religion as much as it is of prestige, social status, agriculture and the judiciary. There abound several examples all over Africa where art is associated with education, rulership and authority. Western intervention and the legacy of colonialism, however, altered the social, political and religious system. This produced several ripples which affected many other sectors.

Powerful campaigns were launched at different times from Islamic and other religious fronts, aimed at ensuring proselytisation. The abandonment of traditional religion resulted, with the active encouragement in particular of the Christian overlords, in massive destruction of important art works which were burnt because they were "idolatrous." Over a period Western education denied the traditional carver a regular supply of apprentices. The concept of power and rulership changed with the embrace of new political concepts. New economic orders altered local taste and promoted new value systems. Modern architecture substituted concrete pillars and glass or plywood doors for carved posts and doors. It would be unrealistic, given this deluge of extraneous cultural incursions, to expect the arts to remain intact ☐ *Dele Jegede*