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**ANCIENT AND CONTEMPORARY BENIN BRONZE
– DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES:
THE CONTENT, CONTEXT
AND THE JOURNEY SO FAR**

Introduction

All over the world, Benin bronze sculptures continue to reverberate and resonate wherever and whenever they are exhibited. This is as a result of their definite and unique nature, contour and texture. Benin bronze artists in ancient and contemporary time goes the extra mile to making sure that their creative resourcefulness, imaginativeness and definiteness as regard their sculptures remain profound and authentic in all its ramifications and configurations.

These artforms remain profound and still continue to strike familiar cord in contemporary time because of the enormous care, attention, great craftsmanship and adroitness always brought to bare on their composition and finishing. Aside and beyond this, the significant and traditional story line surrounding their formation and formulation despite living in modern time, some of the idioms, aphorisms, and storylines continue to act as a beacon of hope, light in a dark tunnel and a guide on how to survive in these troublesome and turbulent times.

For example, some of the sculptural artforms epitomize the folly and vanity of greed and corruption. This we can observe with a sculpture of a man carrying elephant on the head and using his leg to search for cricket. We have also appreciated the sculpture of the three wise monkeys – see no evil, hear no evil and think no evil. Again, this appraises the danger and nothingness associated with harmful gossips. They are indeed very spectacular and profound. Regardless of the fact that these sculptures come in various stylistic form and concept, they have not lost touch of their distinctiveness, deliberateness and decisiveness in their production and finishing. However, after a critical observation and study, it has been observed that there are some profound and significant similarities and differences between what was produced in the ancient time (between 11CE and 1900) and those produced in contemporary time (especially from 1930 till date). What therefore are these already created significant differences and similarities? And what can be done to add to the ancient and contemporary artforms? These are what this paper seeks to unearth, establish and encourage.

Differences and Similarities between Ancient and Contemporary Benin Bronze

Over the years, Benin bronze sculptures continue to attract much publicity and critical academic reviews. This has a lot to do with their peculiar and idiosyncratic nature of manipulating their forms. At the end, what is exhibited and presented most time continues to attract and fascinate all those that appreciate iconic and quintessential works of art. But despite the resonating and profoundly nature and texture of these works, differences and similarities have been unearthed, spotted and noted.

In contemporary times, it has been discovered that sometimes bronzes are adulterated; finishing is not perfect; bronze sculptures are heavier; themes are often repeated and become monotonous; they lack depth in storyline; contemporary antiques most times are forged; old themes are repeated and so lack in-

spiration; most bronze artists today are not committed; most bronze casters lack patience, integrity and resilience which is the hallmark of the ancient sculptures. Let us therefore explain these profound outstanding and potent characteristics.

Adulterated Bronze

In the formulation and formation of artforms in bronze, the Benins cannot be equaled in Africa as they have mastered their craft over the years. Unfortunately, most of the bronze artforms produced can be said to be forged. Often time, the artists, especially those at Igun Street will profess to have used bronze materials in their production of these fascinating artforms. On critical study, the materials used are often brass not bronze. Even the brass sometimes is further adulterated with zinc materials, so that at the end of the production, what is observed is a whitish brass sculpture. To the uninitiated and uninformed, the casters classify all their works as bronze pieces.

Finishing is not Always Perfect

As a result of the impatient nature of the contemporary artists, finishing and detailing of their sculpture becomes a second placed endeavour. Unfortunately, this is the hallmark of quintessential and iconic sculptures. Deliberate effort is not paid to minor and smaller forms in a given configuration of an artform. Sometimes, these lesser or little forms are classified most time by modern artists as insignificant but these are what foreign tourists appreciate and esteem when making a purchase. It is only on few occasions that one stumbles into hardcore traditional bronze casters and artists that have paid their dues and know their onions. Coming into contact with these type of bronze artist open up a whole new idea of iconic and profound traditional sculptures.

Modern Sculptures are Heavier

In the quest to urgently churn out several works in bronze, contemporary bronze artforms are heavy and cumbersome to transport from one place to another. They are heavy as a result of lack of imagination and resourcefulness.

Most time, when works to be cast in bronze are sent for firing and casting, as a result of the traditional and perhaps careless way of casting, the works fail in the process. This means starting all over again. This is to say the least burdensome and crushing. To avoid this therefore, the wax mould is deliberately made thick. And it is the shape of the wax that will be replaced with bronze on the final analysis. In ancient times, according to Chief Henry Igiehon of Igun Street, the bronze casters can afford to repeat the whole process of casting from laterite (red sand), wax and finally into bronze. This was because the materials were readily available. Again, they believe in the quality of works and not the mass production of them.

Themes are often Repeated

A visit to Igun Street in Benin City today would reveal that great works in bronze are still prevalent and casters are smiling to the bank. However, most of the concepts and themes are often repeated or copied so that when you have seen one, you have seen all. Often times, we come across sculpture of Oba and his attendant, the queen mother's bronze head, ram heads, court officials with cross pendants, head with four legs, Oba with ceremonial sword, roaster, rattle snake, Altar Bell with Portuguese face, Altar rings, several plaques and pectorals, hip ornaments and waist pendants. Yes they are fascinatingly profound and alluring but they have severally been repeated or copied. Does it mean there are no other themes or concepts? In the words of Izevbigie, an art historian and former Head of Department, Fine and Applied Arts, University of Benin – “the tourists or collectors often come with their pictures and concepts in mind. They determine which artform they intend to collect because some purchase these works only to be resold in their private galleries here in Nigeria or elsewhere – abroad”. Why will a caster cast what is not purchasable? Therefore to make themselves relevant and survive in the all competitive market, according to Osadolor Ogieva, themes will continue to be repeated.

Contemporary Bronze Sometimes Lacks Deep Storyline

In ancient time in Benin, according to Emmanuel Ineh of Igun Street, bronze sculptures produced most time possess very thought provoking traditional storylines. For instance, we have heard of the deep story regarding Adesuwa and Oboro, the story of the war between the ancient Benin Kingdom and Idah, the three wise monkeys, the Portuguese Horseman, three men striking clappers with the bird of prophecy, priests with cup, bowl and jug. All these possess very profound, thought-provoking and penetrating traditional stories which impacts positively on the lives of the people both in ancient and contemporary times.

On the other hand, today's theme always borders on ephemeral and flirting themes. The sculptures we find today are bust of a chief, politician or perhaps a man committing suicide. How can this impact positively on the people?

Contemporary Bronze Antiques most times are Forged

Although the bronze antiques found today can be said to be significantly traditional and deep rooted in terms of concepts and finishing, most times they are not genuine in terms of the word ANTIQUE. They are processed in such a way that to the uninitiated, detecting it becomes absolutely arduous, complex and impossible. In an interview with a traditional caster at Igun who begged for anonymity stated that the practice of faking bronze to look like an antique has been in practice for many years. First, the bronze is robbed with a certain chemical and later buried in the ground for days, weeks or months depending on the nature of ageing one wants to achieve. The more time it stays underground, the more it is aged or appears ancient. When finally they are exhumed from the ground, they are further reworked to meet the required standard. Incidentally, some of the buyers are aware of this intrigue, which means it becomes the co-operation between the casters and some gallery owners here or abroad.

Most Bronze Casters (artists) are not adequately trained

In contemporary times, most of the bronze casters are not adequately trained. Some who ought to be an apprentice for four to five years become impatient. They only stay for some few months and later establish their gallery where works they have hurriedly cast are displayed. And of course, many buyers and collectors do patronize them, but for hardcore collectors that have been in the trade for a long time, according to Izevbigie, can still spot the difference.

Most Works today lack sensitive and commanding forms

An appraisal of some ancient bronze sculptures reveals that the forms were definite, sensitive and significantly commanding. Time and effort can be observed as being spent on them. All the forms, contour, texture, nature, stature and even colour were all adequately attended to, which means all the departments of a particular sculpture were vibrantly and adroitly treated. But in today's bronze sculptures, many forms are glossed over in the name of impatience or abstractism. This is especially true of college-trained sculptors or casters. In the words of Erimona Ellis, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Benin –

Contemporary bronze casters cannot in any way be compared with their counterparts in ancient time. Some contemporary casters are only interested in sometime creating meaningless abstracts. And these bronze abstracts are given high sounding names or titles. To me, this is vanity and unnecessary.

Appraising some of the sculptures

As we appraise the contemporary and ancient sculpture, we will also be appraising few successful and fascinating modern bronze sculptures.



Fig. 1 – Uwaawa (Pot) delicately configured in contemporary time. There are still some few successful bronze sculptures.



Fig. 2 – Head of a queen mother showing a lackluster casting and finishing.



Fig. 3 – Nigeria Coat of Arms. We also observe a half finished and unsuccessful sculpture



Fig. 4 – The Traditional Bell. Here, the sculpture lack adroitness peculiar to sculptures of ancient time



Fig. 5 – The Oba at Igue. Here, we also observe a sculpture executed in a hurry. It therefore lacks originality and innovativeness



Fig. 6 – The Oba at Igue (side view). The same also applies here, the sculpture lack adequate finishing

First to be x-rayed here is the typical Benin bronze pot (Uwawa). This 50cm pot was executed in 2005/2006. It is a sculpture that has as its motif flowers, snakes and at the mouth of the pot we observe a rope design. This delicately woven concept circles the mouth of the pot. A critical observation reveals what (Egwali:2003), (Egwali:2004) and (Egwali:2003) call lack of critical dexterity, adroitness and skillfulness. This essential expertness is prevalent in most ancient bronze sculptures of Benin. It is also instructive to note that as asserted by (Egwali:2002), (Egwali:2006) and (Egwali:2009), the ancient bronze sculptures have a definite type of profoundness, astuteness and deepness. It is that trait that gave them their penetrating uniqueness and definiteness among other sculptures of the world. An outstanding feature of the ancient Benin traditional sculpture is their definition and articulation of lines. These lines which help to define and perhaps compartmentalize the essential forms is what Gardener

(2005:89), Kosetenevich (2000) and Magnum (2004:76) will call sensitive and adroit lines of assertions. These lines help to give strength and audacity to any given work of art. They also define the various cultural accoutrements in these concepts as they appear firm and audacious. But most of the bronze sculptures of today lack these resourceful and forceful lines and forms. Figure 2, Head of a Queen Idia, is a typical example of Benin contemporary bronze sculpture. As can be observed, the forms and the lines defining the beaded crown of the queen mother lacks proper and critical articulation. The nose, mouth and general surface texture and contour is deficient of that mien and imaginativeness common with the old bronze sculptures. Figure 3, Nigeria Coat of Arms; Figure 4, The Traditional Bell; and Figure 5, The Oba at Igue, in the words of Egwali (2005:46), Egwali (2006:69) and Egwali (2006:49) attest to the half hazard, impotent and lackluster attitude and tendency of some Benin contemporary bronze sculptors and casters. The creative and resourceful configuration of forms is in correlation with what Hopkins (2001:29), Waldberg (2003:79) and Gardener (2005:47) will define as articulate resolution and definition of essential forms. It is such affirmation and critical categorization that resonate and fascinate those that appreciate and collect the artform itself. Supporting this view, Trilling (2002:76), Kennedy (2004:29) and Egwali (2005:69) stated in their separate accounts that to uplift works of art to a very formidable artistic essence and quintessence, the essential and potent forms must clearly and cleverly be defined and sustained. This to a large extent has to do with time, experience and staying power. It is also pertinent to note that some essential and significant principles of designs like contrast, lines, highlight, movement and originality to a large extent is absent in today's bronze sculptures. For example, as we can observe in Fig. 3, Nigerian Coat of Arts, Fig. 4, The Traditional Bell and perhaps, Fig. 5, the Oba at Igue, is bereft of serious deep thinking, imaginative and articulation. As posited by Egwali (2006:77), Egwali (2007:69) and Caroline (2002:99), an ingenious manipulation of these principles of design add to the overall creative sensibility of the artform. The cognitive properties, nuances and definiteness is indirectly highlighted in most traditional Benin bronze sculptures. This is as a result of their holding rigidly to their pattern and artistic

seriousness. It is as if they have their fixed, explicit and clearly determined template which they must follow rigidly and creatively. However, as argued by Egonwa (2008:79), Vogel (2003:75) and Egwali (2008:79), there are pockets of contemporary bronze sculptures that can still be compared with the traditional ones like the one in Fig. 6, called *Idia the Queen Mother II*. This notwithstanding, efforts should be made by contemporary Benin bronze casters to improve in their creation and general articulation and rendition of their priced bronze sculptures; an act and art that have continued to reverberate and resonate in the mind of art lovers the world over.

Some Ancient Sculptures of Edo, Benin



Fig. 7 – Head of an Oba
 Executed: 17th – 18th Century
 Medium: Brass
 Height: 45cm
 Location: British Museum, London



Fig. 8 – Head of the Queen Mother
 Executed: 18th – 19th Century
 Medium: Brass
 Height: 61cm
 Location: British Museum, London



Fig. 9 – Another Head of an Oba
Executed: 17th Century
Medium: Brass
Height: 58cm
Location: British Museum, London



Fig.10 – Yet Another Head of an Oba
Executed: 17th Century
Medium: Brass
Height: 58cm
Location: British Museum, London



Fig. 11 – Handheld clapper with Bird of Prophecy
Executed: 16th Century
Medium: Brass, Height: 20.3cm
Location: British Museum, London

Conclusion

From the foregoing, a lot of water have definitely passed under the bridge. So many facts have emerged as regards the ancient and contemporary bronze works of Benin. As these differences between the ancient and contemporary Benin bronze are appraised and established, the bronze casters at Igun Street, Benin City, are busy and profusely churning out their bronze pieces and buyers, collectors and tourists are flocking into the city to admire and perhaps purchase the very latest of creations. However, in the words of Freeborn Odiboh, a Senior Lecturer and Head of Art History Section, Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Benin –

Contemporary bronze casters should go back to the drawing board to reorganize, re-strategize and re-evaluate their fascinating creations with their forebears. This is with a view to improving their technical and creative fecundity as it were in ancient period. The modern artists should be more resourceful, imaginative and adroit in their configuration of works. They must also learn to be more patient, painstaking in their formulation and formation of concept in terms of content and context. This can be achieved by close ranking with the hardcore old traditional artists that see art not only as a profession, but as a way of life and religion. The patience of contemporary artists will obviously give room to more quintessential works that could become iconic both in nature and statute. It would also enable them to give more attention, mindfulness, reflection and devotion to their act and art.

Indeed, the casters could engage themselves in more research by unearthing other outstanding and thought provoking traditional storylines that could impact positively on the lives of contemporary people. As asserted by Ezra (2005:75), Ben Amos (2005:65) and Egwali (2010:79), the cooperation and understanding of traditional chiefs, Odiowere (the oldest man in the villages and quarter) would be useful and advantageous in this regard as they would be in a better position to educate the younger artists and casters. The contemporary casters must understand that it was the undying love of the art of their people that enabled the ancient bronze casters and artists to put in their best in their

profession not necessarily the financial remuneration. While the financial gains can be beneficial to some extent, at the end, it would be flirting and transient. According to Dele (1986:25), Gani (1992:17) and Jimo (1993:63), when the art is successful, recondite and thorough in content, context and contour, then the act and art would continue to resonate and reverberate whenever and wherever they are exhibited. It is the art of the ancient that some of the impatient contemporary artist is building on. Therefore, what will the contemporary bronze caters leave behind for the incoming artists? What positive heritage would they be bequeathing to their incoming apostles? Indeed, the answers to these penetrating questions lie in the hands of contemporary artists. They must sit up and be in the vanguard for the propagation, formulation, formation and promotion of our cultural heritage, idiom and afforisms.

Summary

In recent times several features have emerged as regards the contemporary sculptures of Benin. These features have either overtly or covertly created the differences between the ancient and contemporary bronze sculptures of Benin. These unfortunate features includes (1) careless finishing, (2) contemporary bronze are heavier, (3) themes are repeated, (4) lack deep storylines, (5) most times, bronze antiques are forged, and (6) most lack sensitive commanding forms. Indeed, these are the traits which made ancient Benin bronze sculptures resonate, reverberate and resound both in ancient and contemporary time. What therefore should be done to move the contemporary Benin bronze sculptures to a higher artistic level is what this paper seeks to appraise and critically establish.

Key words: art, sculptures, forms, artistic level

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