

Towards Thematic Replication Of Traditional Values In Clay And Wood Forms: Asuquo Alfred Akpabio In Focus

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Abstract: Thematic replication of traditional values in art forms is a causal result from interaction and experiences within an environment. This interplay often informs artist in the direction of their themes as they creatively express in various forms of artistic expression. To this end, this paper sought to identify with the medium of clay and wood as exemplified in Asuquo Alfred Akpabio's art works. The objectives identified the thematic replication of traditional values in works; the skillful manipulation in the process and created awareness on Asuquo Akpabio's contributions through Stone Age Gallery. Survey approach to research was employed where interview schedule was used for gathering data. The data were analyzed through descriptive techniques. Findings reveal strong connection between themes, forms and valued concepts. Thematic replications of traditional values are found in Akpabio's works such as "the "Philosopher", "Chain of Love" and "Abang Ndisa. This titles aptly represents themes of knowledge, love, marriage, child bearing as well as food preservation, sustenance and primitive to ancient. The creative dexterity involved in the procedure of his masterpiece, "Chain of love" and the legendary sculptor's contributions to art were documented. The paper concluded that there is need to create a network support system between government and the artist. Such collaboration is also critical between academic institutions and the legendary artist. The need to use Stone Age Gallery as a resource centre for Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES) was also highlighted.

Keywords: Asuquo Alfred Akpabio, Themes, Traditional Values, Clay/ Wood Forms

I. BACKGROUND

Ceramist (potters) and sculptors (carvers) are artists who work with clay and wood, respectively. Their themes often reflect core and universal values within the society. These may be socio-culturally expressed in hand built pottery forms or with assorted wood carving. Both medium of rendering are ancient with simple techniques involving hands, fingers and simple tools. Prominent amongst the hand building methods are pinching and coiling. While traditional wood carving are executed with hand, chisel, knife and sanding medium. Since traditional values are universal as well as cultural, thematic replication of a generation's fore bears is unavoidable. The thematic replication of love, childbearing, farming, education, food preservation, hunting expedition as well as festivity are readily featured. Understandably, thematic expressions of this

nature are an integral part of practicing artists' experiences. The implications, thereof, is that forms expressed in clay and wood are largely influenced and or a replicated of norms within one's socio cultural context. A quintessential representation of the aforementioned values is the clay and wood art works of Asuquo Akpabio of Stone Age Gallery Uyo, Nigeria. His works are ultimate example of themes drawn from traditional values. They represent a reenactment of familiar traditional concept especially within Ibibio community of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Akpabio has been a wood carver in the last five decades. However, the legendary traditional artist has consistently struggled with professional touch though not recognized for his immense contribution. These art pieces are overlooked and denied recognition within contemporary art setting. The statement problem therefore is; can thematic replication of

traditional values in Asuquo Alfred Akpabio's art works be recognized in the contemporary art settings? To this end, this paper sought to create awareness and identify with Asuquo Alfred Akpabio's clay and wood art works. The objectives identified the thematic replication of traditional values in works found in Akpabio's Stone Age Gallery. The thematic replications in traditional values are found in Akpabio's works such as "the 'Philosopher'", "Chain of Love" and "Abang Ndisa. These titles aptly represent themes of knowledge, love, marriage, child bearing as well as food preservation, sustenance and primitive to ancient. The creative dexterity involved in the procedure of his masterpiece, "Chain of love" and the legendary sculptor's contributions to art necessitated this documentation. In addition, the skillful manipulation in transforming a rigid piece of wood to a flexible interlocking chain as depicted in "chain of love". Survey approach to research was employed where interview schedule was used for gathering data and analyzed through descriptive techniques. The study was delimited to thematic replication of traditional value as exemplified in Akpabio's clay and wood forms. The study sets to maximize the creative potentials of the legendary sculptor as well as recommending Stone Age Gallery for Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES). This will develop and enhance the historic functionality of Stone Age Gallery beyond its current stage.

Asuquo Alfred Akpabio was born on the 17th of July, 1956. He is a native of Mbiaya Uruan, Uruan Local Government Area. He attended St. Augustine Primary School, Uruan. Being a skillful youth, he learnt tailoring in Uyo. However in 1972, Akpabio discovered and developed his talent of Wood carving. His basic themes were based on his deep contemplation on traditional values within his environment, and the origin of life at large.

II. TRADITIONAL FORMS IN CLAY AND WOOD: ASUQUO AKPABIO'S THEMATIC REPLICATIONS

Stone Age Gallery is a derivative from world's oldest art forms, Stone Age Art. Asuquo Akpabio, draws inspiration from this early human creativity. According to this legendary artist, the motivation is to creatively replicate Ibibio ancient and traditional values in clay and wood (see fig I and II). This is obvious in the various thematic works on knowledge, education, human settlement, farming, sustenance, growth, love, marriage, childbearing as well as merriments. The implication as observed in fig I and II only narrows down to man's ongoing quest for knowledge across ages. Thematic pottery works like refrigerated pot (*Abang Ndisa*) and wooden wall hangings (*Chain of Love*) are contemporary reminiscent of food preservation and love respectively. The former in settlement, farming and sustenance; the later in love, marriage and childbearing. Stone Age Art from which Akpabio is inspired are works of the Paleolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic age. These are works of paintings and carvings found on natural rock surfaces and small carvings of stone, bone, ivory and clay. These were early human creativities through small portable objects. The oldest known Stone Age Art is the Blimbetka Petroglyphs. It is a 10 cupules and a groove discovered in Auditorium rock shelter in India. They are cup-

shaped hollow pound out rock found in random groupings. These cupules date as far as 290,000 BCE. Another example is 'thinker of Cernavoda' c. 4000-3500 BCE, a terracotta sculpture of the Hamangia culture replicated in Akpabio's wood sculpture 'the Philosopher' is akin to this masterpiece.



Figure I
Title: "The Thinker of Hamangia" found in Cernavoda, Romania. 4,000-3,500 BCE
Medium: Terra cotta sculpture
Source: National Museum of Romania



Figure II
Title: The Philosopher, 1982
Artist: Asuquo Akpabio
Source: Stone Age Gallery, Nigeria

Obviously, this theme has bearing with the vast knowledge within and beyond human realm. The implication is seen in man's constant contemplation on the vastness of the universe and traditional values. Unarguably, such meditation must have motivated Akpabio's thematic replication of "the philosopher", a 21st Century wooden sculpture. These works are quintessential examples of the cycle and relatedness of themes through the ages. "Abang Ndisa" is another work

representing an earthenware refrigerated pot by the legendary artist. It is a globular form with a lid to preserve food (boiled and baked plantain) during farming season. In an interview with Chief Akpabio, the legendary artist's candid observation revealed strong ties to his Ibibio roots. The making of this pottery ware through hand building process was a reminiscent of traditional values of Uruan people. Being a native of Mbiaya Uruan, the socio-cultural background greatly influenced his themes on the Socio-cultural activities as replicated in clay and wood.



Figure III
Title: Abang Ndisa (Refrigerated Pot)
Artist: Asuquo Akpabio
Medium: Terracota
Size: 50x40cm
Source: Stone Age Gallery, Nigeria

Akpabio's representation of sustenance in "Abang Ndisa" for preservation of plantain, calls to mind the utilitarian purpose of refrigerators within the contemporary setting. The boiled plantains (local snack) are kept in this earthenware pot for as long as three months. Since these pots were placed near the fire, the boiled plantain often became baked. During farming season, after a hard days labour, the baked plantains were consumed as snacks with palm wine. Such refreshment gave the workers a renewed zeal to return to work. Akpabio's thematic replication of how Ibibio forebears survived during farming season heightens ones imagination of a rich history worth documentation.

III. CHAIN OF LOVE

Akpabio's creativity and masterpiece, 'Chain of Love,' like every other carved work is executed from a single log of wood. It is an epitome of continuity and enduring cycle between man and woman in love; enduring in the sense that the originator from the garden of Eden is the everlasting maker, mankind's creator, Jehovah. The sculptor, Asuquo Akpabio's dexterity in transforming a rigid piece of wood to a flexible interlocking chain as depicted in "Chain of Love" is the hall mark of carving. In this masterpiece, the sculptor painstakingly captures the essence of the theme, "Chain of Love."

Akpabio's skillful manipulation of forms in the process of carving the mahogany is worthy of documentation. The interlocking chain does not have jointed parts. It is rather a single wooden trunk of mahogany transformed into a flexible wooden chain intertwined with stylized forms of male and female figure. They are held together with a connecting wooden heart shape. The interrogating question of course, lies in how a wooden rigid trunk becomes a flexible wooden chain as seen in fig iv and v.



Figure IV **Figure V** **Figure VI**
Title: Chain of Love (Endless Chain of Love)
From the left is a picture of "Chain of Love"
A rigid piece of wood transformed to a flexible interlocking
chain at the middle, picture of interlocked "Chain of Love"
hung on the wall
The far right shows detailed stylized forms of male and female
figure in Chain of Love.
Size: 76x8cm
Artist: Asuquo Akpabio
Source: Stone Age Gallery, Nigeria

These works seem to be the quintessential of Akpabio's carved art works in the last two decades in Professional practice. In comparison, it is the most sought after by tourists. The nude figures have broad foreheads with raised chick bones as well as thick lips. The female nude figure has pointed breast to indicate innocence and womanhood from inception in the Garden of Eden. Both figures are limbless with highly stylized waist, thighs and legs that flow into the interlocking chains. Both figures are held together with a heart shape as in a permanent blissful wedlock.

This informs the resiliency expected within the complex interlocking web of love with no separation. The fact that the forms of chain are not broken further stresses the unending quality of love. (1 Cor.13:4-8)



Figure VII



Figure VIII

Title: Chain of Love (Endless Chain of Love)

Left picture showing pointed breast and limbless stylized male and female figure in Chain of Love

Right picture, back view of male and female with plaited hair.

Size: 76x8cm

Artist: Asuquo Akpabio

Source: Stone Age Gallery, Nigeria

This particular work is not for sale although similar work has been carved on demand. A typical example is the customized logo like the Mbarokas have been incorporated into such demands. The duration for the transformation from rigid stem of mahogany to flexible chain is two weeks of single focused attention. The medium is mahogany wood while the tools are knife, chisel and sand paper. There is a giggling sound to show that each wooden chain is attached to one another yet with no joining. Undoubtedly, great effort was required to arrive at this feat.

IV. INTERVIEW WITH ASUQUO AKPABIO

What was the motivating force behind the carving of "Chain of Love"? In his reply, Akpabio traced the origin of Love (*Ima*) from the Garden of Eden between man and woman. He also acknowledged this phenomenon of love as a socio-cultural activity of the contemporary Ibibio tradition.

Why was a single log of wood carved in chains?

According to the legendary artist, Love endures and ought to remain continuous regardless of challenging situation that could separate couples. That explains the intertwine transformation of forms as depicted in the figure. Other related themes have been endless chain of love. This art piece is certainly one of the most sought after souvenir because it is flexible and can be folded or hung on the neck by tourists. The price ranges between N30,000 and N50,000 depending on the time it is commissioned.

Are there contributions through exhibitions for the State? Chief Akpabio has represented Akwa Ibom in National competition (NAFEST). The artist has also featured in professional exhibition such as "Usoro Uso" 2017, Celebrating Creativity in Akwa Ibom State. He has also been conferred the royal title of "Obong Uso" by Uruan Clan Council (see Appendix).

V. CONCLUSION

The thesis statement has been the thematic replication of traditional values in clay and in wood. The focus was on the

legendary artist, Asuquo Akpabio of Stone Age Gallery, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. His works reflect themes on both universal and traditional values. They encompass knowledge, education, love, sustenance childbearing, communication amongst others. Conversely, a network of support of all stakeholders (artist, scholars, art historians) would maximize these potentials. Stone Age Gallery should be used as tourist centre, art workshop and seminar. The centre should be recommended for Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES), and should be developed beyond its current stage.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

The following are recommended.

- ✓ Stone Age Gallery should be used as a resource centre for Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES).
- ✓ There should be a wood carving seminar/workshop with Asuquo Akpabio as facilitator.
- ✓ There is need for the establishment of support network between contemporary and traditional artist.
- ✓ Asuquo Akpabio of Stone Age Gallery should be used as resource person in sculpture unit of tertiary institutions.

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