

## **Igbo/African Artistic Creativity And Anonymity Of Artist/Genius**

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### **Abstract**

This essay explores the unique, but anonymous nature of an artist/genius in Igbo artistic creativity. The uniqueness itself stems from a response by an artist to his vocation/call from the forces, gods/nature that are beyond him and, in turn he compromises his freedom. As nature's endowment, the Igbo attach a great value to the artist, who communicates the mind of the gods to the community. In doing so, he forgets himself in the service of others and the purpose for which he is called. I argue that an artist/genius is far removed from his artistic work and, he does not claim ownership of it.

### **1. Introduction**

Undoubtedly, art touches and permeates a shared life and culture of the Igbo/African. It serves as a conservator and vehicle of Igbo historical consciousness and understanding. To this extent, it captures and symbolizes the images of life within the domain of the present, past and future. In doing so, art gives the Igbo hope, aspiration and courage to live his life through in the context of meaning which has been given in tradition. Thus, in Igbo/African artistic creativity, the genius/artist assumes a significant, but enviable place as a custodian of all that the gods bestow to the community. The community in turn interprets the work of art. Interestingly, the genius does more than just the job assigned to him by destiny. This essay explores the anonymity of the Igbo artist who, in his creative process, disclaims and disowns the fruit of his artistic gift. In other words, he bequeaths or makes available his artistic talent to the community which appreciates it with sizzling zeal.

The genius, however, donates his artistic gift as a response to a vocation from gods/nature that invariably does not seek his consent. Apparently, this puts the freedom of the artist at stake. In the estimation of the Igbo/African, the individuality of the artist/genius is not compromised. The question remains as to how we can reconcile anonymity with the freedom of the artist. In this paper, we intend to address this issue and the individuality or the uniqueness of the artist.

Our approach to this essay falls under four headings: the first part deals with the nature of Igbo/African art. This will examine, among other things, the functionality of art, the symbolic meaning of art and the relationship between art and beauty. The second section dwells on the vocation of the genius/artist. It considers the person of the genius and how one becomes an artist in Igbo/African set up—community. The third part examines the anonymity of the genius/artist within the Igbo/African art. It will also examine the place, role and contribution of the community/gods towards the anonymity of the artist. It is also our intention to reflect and explore the implications of Heidegger's artist and Ricoeur's authorship of text to the anonymity of Igbo artist.

The essay will conclude with a reflection on the impact of anonymity on the question of the freedom and individuality of the artist/genius.

## 2. THE NATURE OF IGBO/AFRICAN ART

Generally, art in Igbo/African is called "*ime nka*." It literally and limitedly can be rendered as "skillfulness." Art as *ime nka* have nuances of meaning and comprising many things. An analysis of the word *ime nka* shows that it means an ability to create or to represent something new out of what already exists. The term "*ime*" means "to." Thus, *ime* can be translated as "to do," "to make," "to create" or "to recreate." The other term "*nka*" in "*ime nka*" means "skillfulness" or "perfect-ness. In a sense, "*nka*" can even be equivalent to creativity. As creativity, it expresses the hidden things in nature and individual experiences. Ultimately, it is almost impossible to exhaust the meaning of Igbo art. In its wider sense, it has also the same meaning as vocation, precisely because it is a gift. Responding to a call, an artist embodies in his work the values, preferences and emotional responses of the community. K.C. Anyanwu observes that "art objects are living forces in the minds of the African artists and community. They represent the ideas, thoughts, feelings and emotions of the ideals held by the people. These objects summarize the complexity of beliefs entertained by the African people."<sup>i</sup>

Just as the notion of "*ime nka*" has meanings in the Igbo/African context, it has also various significances and purposes. One of its outstanding significance is that art reflects man's dynamic being, who is ever creative. Intriguingly, "*ime-nka*" brings out the contradictory reality of man's existence: man is both a finished and unfinished product. Though man is, he is always becoming. Evidently, it supplies active enjoyment by conveying pleasurable impressions and pleasant emotional experiences. It brings together and unites minds in common appreciation of artistic values. In Igbo/African community, '*ome nka*' (artist) engages in critical encounter with the society by exposing its social ills and, drawing attention to alternative values. In this respect, he arouses the emotional responses of the community in the areas of moral values. For instance, he composes songs aimed at discouraging theft, adultery, incest and gossip.

Admittedly, "...art is especially educational for the African. Through the event of encountering art-works, the young person is initiated into the culture's themes, meanings and ideals, and the adult individual finds cultural confirmation on his insertion within the culture."<sup>ii</sup> In a sense, however, Igbo art, in its symbolic meanings, transcends the reality of merely art-work. Thus "...the arts afford a perspective on human experience as they are created to channel or express the powers of super-human world on which men recognize their dependence."<sup>iii</sup> In this way, they drive home to the community "the abiding message of that encompassing transcendence which being is."<sup>iv</sup> Obviously in the wake of this message, the Igbo/African is deeply grounded and existentially in union with his being. Although art has a metaphysical and symbolic sense, it has also a practical function. "The African people however know nothing of 'art for art's sake.' For them, art is bound up with the whole of life..."<sup>v</sup> To this extent, artistic appreciation is not a value in

itself. Any art-work instills in the people a striking delight and wonder that enables them appreciate the awe-inspiring sense of mystery around their lives. If it does not reflect life itself, art remains valueless and meaningless. Thus, art "...must be a moving piece of work so as to transmit the cultural overpowering reality that has been transfused into its form."<sup>vi</sup> We must quickly note that it is not only the artist that enjoys intimacy with the art-work. "Living is the art of association, expression, integration and appreciation of life. Art is a general rule of life."<sup>vii</sup> Thus, the community in turn has a tremendous rapport with art, since it touches on the existential being of the people and reveals a deep sense of their culture.

Furthermore, the functional dimension of art finds expression in the African notion of beauty—functional beauty. The African does not seek proportionality in art. "If proportionality is the criterion of beauty then African art is not beautiful."<sup>viii</sup> In other words, the African appreciation of beauty is a far cry from the Western aesthetic which is informed by the adage that: 'beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder.' Instead the African aesthetic beauty has a symbolic meaning. "A carving...is aesthetically beautiful in African standard if it functions well as stimulus in the worship of the deity, the community of worshippers being the judges."<sup>ix</sup> Ultimately, an art-work—such as a mask—though it is ugly in appearance, it can be considered beautiful if its function in the dance shows the divine power and presence among the people. Fidelis Okafor remarks that:

Masks worn by masquerades are artistically designed to induce certain emotion in the beholders during the performances of certain rituals or other traditional ceremonies. The success of the masquerade in achieving this objective is the basis for the qualifying it as beautiful. This concept of beauty may be safely referred to as ontological beauty or in simple expression, functional beauty. This is so because it is beauty derived from the inner meaning and being as well as the function of the object<sup>x</sup>

From the foregoing, we can glean that beauty of any art-work lies in depicting its qualities. So, the Igbo/African artist succeeds to the degree that he projects the ontological meaning of his community's religious values and beliefs. It can be said that the artist reveals the truth of Igbo being. In this respect, the Igbo perception of beauty can be likened to Heidegger, whose insistence and concern is not so much on the beauty of art as the happening of truth. He explains that "the nature of art would then be this: the truth of beings setting itself to work. But until now art presumably has had to do with the beautiful and beauty, and not with truth."<sup>xi</sup> Arguably, Heidegger does not judge art in terms of beauty and ugly. Rather what appeals to him is art reveals truth. Thus, for Heidegger and the Igbo art manifests the intrinsic nature of things.

### **3. ARTIS/GENIU, VOCATION AND ENDOWMENT**

Having discussed the nature of Igbo/African art, we now turn to the person of the genius/artist. The need arises precisely because, it is through the artist that the

community's cultural values and beliefs are perpetuated and communicated. Thus the questions are: who is a genius/artist? How does one become an artist? These questions may be addressed differently, depending on various affiliations—namely, Western and African cultures. For Immanuel Kant, “a genius is the talent (or natural gift) which gives the rule to art...Genius is the innate mental disposition...through which nature gives the rule to art.”<sup>xii</sup> In other words, a genius is nature's endowment. He is also “that peculiar guiding and guardian spirit given to a man at his birth...”<sup>xiii</sup> Unquestionably the Kantian notion of a genius speaks eloquently of the Igbo/African. In all estimates, the Igbo ascribe a destiny or ‘*chi*’ (the god in everyone or the guardian spirit) that is responsible for chartering the course of every individual.

Being an endowment from nature/god, a genius/artist is revered and esteemed by his community. As such, he is a public figure who does not rely on art to make money; he does not produce art for its monetary value. On the contrary, he has the responsibility or onus to present to his people the message from nature/gods. In doing so, he is cut in the image of the deities—radiating optimism and glory. His role is likened to high priest, whose primary role is mediation between ancestral world and the people. Just as the priest goes to the spirit world to commune with the gods and bring solution to the people, so does the genius/artist. Thus, he has a special sensitivity that enables him to weigh behind the problems of the community with careful scrutiny. This man also hymns the glory of humanity and the world, joining them together before the ancestral cult. To this end, he is more than just a messenger who does the bidding of the gods—the Hegelian model of the ‘cunning of reason.’ Furthermore, the artist puts as much intensity and devotion to his work, given that his very existence essentially depends on art which gives meaning to the entire culture. Because of the strictness with which he attends to his job, the Igbo say that an artist at work is apt to wear an unfriendly face (*Onye nakwa nka na-eme ka ona-adu iru*). It shows that an artist is not a social person; he is always withdrawn from the company of men to enable his creative process.<sup>xiv</sup>

With this image of an artist/genius, we can conclude that he produces original work of art. In other words, his work does not itself to imitation. For Kant, “genius is opposed to the spirit of imitation.”<sup>xv</sup> It implies therefore that the artist/genius neither knows how he comes by his gift, nor can he impart this talent or knowledge to another individual. According to Kant “...artist skill cannot be communicated; it is imparted to every artist immediately by the hand of nature; and so it dies with him, until nature endows another in the same way...”<sup>xvi</sup> For the Igbo, becoming an artist is solely an endowment from the ancestral world. This endowment, however, can sometimes be hereditary in a particular lineage. Art is mysterious in a sense that an artist cannot exhaustively explain how or where he got his skills, because it is obvious that it is not from mere experience. A genius/artist cannot teach another individual, though he could do more than just give some techniques involved and not the skills. The reason is obviously because the gods use him to bring out the varieties and beauties in nature. He also actualizes the hidden potentials in nature and man.

Rapping up this section on the person of an artist/genius, we can dwell a little bit on how a person becomes an artist. In this way, we shall see a link between the

artist and his community. For the Idoma people of Nigeria, prior to the public presentation of an artist to the community, certain sacrifices are made to the “*Owo*,” (i.e. the god), who is responsible for such gift. The “*owo*” then empowers the artist with the necessary mandate to commune with both the ancestral cult and the sensible world. In the wake of this empowerment, he is welcomed with honor and dignity into the “*Ikpo’alekwu*”—that is, the realm of the unspeakable or incommunicable. By this very fact, he is seen as the guardian of what is bestowed by the gods to the community. Indeed whatever emerges as his creative art-work is accepted and valued by the community, because it bears the imprint and approval from the ancestral world. The community in turn interprets the work of art. Of course art work gives inexhaustible joy, because it acts as the creative drive to worship and devotion to various gods that Idoma people believe.

The Igbo/African artist has a similar experience with his community. One such experience is seen in the peculiar nature of *Mbari* art which features or reflects art from one part of Igbo-land—namely, Owerri. The *mbari* artistic creativity arises as a request or demand by some deities—notably, the earth goddess—on the community that chooses some of its members with a view to erecting a suitable “home of images,” which are filled with sculptures and paintings in honor of the god or goddess.<sup>xvii</sup> It has to be noted again that it is the community, recognizing the hidden talents of its members, chooses them to discharge this feat in the name of the people. In discharging this duty in *mbari* art centre, these artists have a responsibility towards the goddess and the community. This is example of a group artist working a goal of given service to the goddess. This relationship of the artist to the community and his art-work brings us now to the question of the anonymity of the genius in the Igbo/African artistic creativity.

#### 4. ARTIST/GENIUS AND ANONYMITY IN IGBO/AFRICAN ART

That Igbo art is a gratuitous gift or a privilege from the gods cannot but inexorably lead the artist to a collision course with the community to which art belongs. This immediately raises the question: how does the artist stand in relationship to his work? At the first instance, we can maintain that there is a harmonious co-existence of the artist, his work and the community. For someone new to Igbo worldview, the idea that the individual is subsumed in the community might seem, curiously, strange. However, from the ‘*mbari*’ art experience, we observed that it is the community that selects some of its members to erect the “home images,” which filled with sculptures and paintings in honor of the gods. To this extent, the selected individuals for this work are responsible to the community. The community in turn is responsible to the gods that demand these images as a sign of homage to them. Since art is a privilege, the artistic creativity goes with responsibility. Indeed, the artist is responsible to his creative work to the extent that he is at the service of the community.

Coming back to the place of the artist in Igbo community, it is good to note that the genius does not clamour for recognition of any sort—that is, financial and fame.

Anyanwu remarks that:

In the authentic African cultural context, the personality of the artist has not as much importance as the art objects themselves. In most cases, the artists remain anonymous because the myths are more pronounced than individuals who represent mythical symbols in concrete objects. The artist does not project his personality into masks, for example, being solely at the service of the collective spirit or community.<sup>xviii</sup>

Obviously, the artist is far removed from his work because he cannot claim ownership of his art-work. As it were, the work belongs to the general community. Meanwhile, the artist is always at the background of his art-work. He disappears behind his work precisely to enable the vision of the community to radiate the content of the art-work. As we have pointed out earlier, the content of Igbo/African art is symbolic and, it finds expression in the beliefs, values, ceremonies and mores of the community.

The disappearance of the Igbo artist behind his art-work itself reminds us of Heidegger, whose artist remains inconsequential in the face of the work. According to “it is precisely in great art...that the artist remains inconsequential as compared with the work, almost like a passageway that destroys itself in the creative process for the work to emerge.”<sup>xix</sup> In this regard, Heidegger assuredly, shows the anonymity of the artist in relationship to his work. Going a step further, he remarks that

Precisely where the artist and the process and the circumstances of the genesis of the work remain unknown, this thrust, this ‘*that* it is’ of createdness, emerges into view most purely from the work.<sup>xx</sup>

Even as Heidegger recognizes the role of the artist in the creative process, he strongly maintains that the work is more important than its author. In his estimation, what matters is the appreciation of the work by the preservers—the guardians. In this same vein, Paul Ricoeur’s interest in the text that opens to world and independent of its author, is all in the attempt to raise concern over the anonymity of the author, who does not have a monopoly of determining meaning of texts. In other words, the meaning of a text which is open to the world—the wider audience—is rescued from the author’s subjective meaning. In view of these indices of anonymity of the artist/author in Heidegger’s and Ricoeur’s views, can we imply that both encourage communal ownership of art-work? What then becomes of individualism in artistic creativity in the two Western philosophers?

In the Igbo/African thought, the ownership of art work is not in doubt. The ‘*mbari*’ art experience reminds us that art does not belong to the artist. Rather, the artist is...careful to disclaim all credit for making, which rightly belongs to gods; or even for initiating homage for what is made, which is the prerogative of the community....They are no more than vessels in which the gods place their gifts of creativity to mankind and which the community afterwards make their token return of sacrifice and thanksgiving.<sup>xxi</sup>

That the artist maintains some distance from his work is clear indication of his denial of ownership art. By this very fact, it shows that the individualism of the Igbo artist is at stake.

Arguably, this experience of the artist with his work touches all spectrum of Igbo art: music, dancing, painting, poetry, carvings, sculpture and proverbial language. In short, his artistic creativity is determined by the needs of the community. Indeed, the artist/genius "...cannot draw his own motifs, his themes, his obsessions from the very essence of his arts. The needs of the community determine the artist's production. His art is never 'art for art's sake. He is responsible to his society."<sup>xxii</sup> In Igbo artistic creative process, the artist not only submits to community—giving expression to the moral, social and religious values—he 'disowns' his very work. This is true of proverbial language and song, where the composers are anonymous. "The origin of specific language of proverbs is unknown or uncertain, because no author in the community can be traced or ascribe to it."<sup>xxiii</sup>

## 5. CONCLUSION

As it stands, the relationship of the artist to his work raises a striking question of the individuality and freedom of the genius. How does one assure the uniqueness of the artist with this overwhelming communal dominance in all art works? It will be a blatant disservice to the artist, if we deny that the Igbo encourage uniqueness of individual in all its ramifications. Or else how can we explain an individual has his '*chi*' (the god in everyone) that allows him some space to be creative. The individual creativity of '*chi*' is reflected in the Igbo dictum that: '*Otu nne na amu ma otu chi adi eke*' (born of the same mother but not created/made by the same *chi*). Even as an individual artist submits to the symbolic content of his art-work, he enjoys some freedom in the manner in which he fashions or creates his images, songs and proverbs.

So, there is a sense in which we can say that the individual artist strives to maintain a balance between his unique freedom and submission to the community. After all for the Igbo, it is in the community that the artist lives and has being; it is here also that he discovers and develops his person. Although we can speak of the depersonalization of the Igbo/African artist, the community does not stifle the initiative and uniqueness of the genius. Hence, the anonymity of the Igbo artist does not hamper or impair the creative ability of the artist/genius.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> K. C. Anyanwu, "Artistic and Aesthetic Experience" in *African Philosophy* (Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1981) p. 272

<sup>ii</sup> Innocent I. Egbujie, "The Hermeneutics of the African Traditional Culture" (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston College, 1976) p. 151

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- iii Innocent C. Onyewuenyi, "Traditional African Aesthetics: A Philosophical Perspective" in *International Philosophical Quarterly* 44: 3 (1984) 239
- iv Innocent I. Egbujie, "The Hermeneutic of the African Traditional Culture, p. 152
- v Benezet Bujo, *African Theology* (Kenya: St. Paul Publication, 1992) p. 41; cf. also Chinua Achebe, "The Igbo World and its Art" in *Hopes and Impediments* (New York: Anchors Books: 1989)
- vi Innocent I. Egbujie, "The Hermeneutics of the African Traditional Culture," p. 151
- vii K. C. Anyanwu, "Artistic and Aesthetic Experience," p. 272
- viii *Ibid.*, p. 272
- ix Innocent C. Onyewuenyi, "Traditional African Aesthetics: A Philosophical Perspective," p. 242
- x Fidelis U. Okafor, "African Aesthetic Values: An Ethno-philosophy Perspective" in *Frontiers of Transculturality in Contemporary Aesthetics* (Nsukka: University of Nigeria, 2000) p. 154; cf. also <http://ww2.unibo.it/transculturality/files/16%20okafor.PDF>
- xi Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1975) p. 36
- xii Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*. Trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1951) p. 150
- xiii *Ibid.*, p. 151
- xiv Chinua Achebe, "The Igbo World and Its Art" in *Hopes and Impediments* (New York: Anchor Book, 1989) p. 63
- xv *Ibid.*, p. 63
- xvi *Ibid.*, p. 152
- xvii Chinua Achebe, "The Writer and His Community" in *Hopes and Impediments* (New York: Anchor Book, 1989) p. 48
- xviii K. C. Anyanwu, "Artistic and Aesthetic Experience, p. 273
- xix Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," p. 40
- xx *Ibid.*, p. 65
- xxi Chinua Achebe, "The Writer and His Community," p. 48
- xxii Innocent C. Onyewuenyi, "Traditional African Aesthetics: A Philosophical Perspective," p. 243
- xxiii Matthew Chukwuelobe, "Language and Igbo Philosophy: Towards an Igbo Phenomenology of Language" in *Philosophy Today* 39: 1 (1995) 26