EKPU-ORO: STUDIES IN ORON COSMOLOGY AND CULTURAL HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to study the religious background of Ekpu-Oro, the ancestral figurines of Oron people of Nigeria from the framework of the people's cosmology and cultural history. The greatest problem that confronted Oron people in prehistory was that of record keeping and preservation of cultural values for posterity. The transmission of the people's history, cosmology and social values to the new generation was of paramount importance to the ancients. In traditional Oron society, historical memories were preserved and transmitted through Ekpu wooden figurines. Art as a product of human impulse and a reflection of society in whose framework it is created was inspired and affected by religion. Art in Oron was applied to the service of religion. There was a symbiosis between art and religious beliefs.

KEYWORDS: Religion and arts, cosmology, cultural history, Ekpu-Oro, Oron

INTRODUCTION

Oron people traced their ancestral lineage to Egypt - the cradle of human civilization. The idea of preserving the memory of the dead in Ekpu carved icons probably originated from Egypt, where the process of mummification was developed to scientific precision and admiration. Ekpu-Oro the ancestral figurines of Oron people were cultural and religious symbols. The history of Oron art reveals that the carving of Ekpu icons was necessitated by the need to preserve the memory of the dead and pass it on to future generations. Cultural transmission was motivated by the need for cultural continuity. For many decades, religion exerted pervasive influence on art. Art as a basic element of social life has also affected religion. The convergence between art and religion has led to the deification of icons in most societies.
Early in prehistory, man sought for ways to either preserve or transmit cultural heritage. Society perpetuates itself through transmission of primordial cultural values, which is the basis for socialization. Social and cultural perpetuation is necessary for the purpose of achieving continuity. Jack Goody writes:

...society passes on its material plants, including the natural resources available to its members. Secondly, it transmits standardized ways of acting... But the most significant elements of any human culture are undoubtedly channeled through words, and reside in the particular range of meanings and attitudes which members of any society attach to their verbal symbols (28).

Customary behaviors which are always transmitted include ideas of space and time, collective goals and aspirations, and the Weltanschauung of the social groups. Cultural and social preservation can be in graphic form, cave painting, rock engravings and wood carvings, which morphologically, are presumably, the forerunners of writing. Writing as an ancient art, originated with the necessity of record-keeping and historical documentation.

Religion has played a pivotal role in the development of writing. As the art of human civilization, writing was often associated with temples. Temple priests occupied prestigious positions in the early centuries of Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilization. John Lewis writes:

Writing has an early association with temples...The priests formed permanent colleges or corporations, accumulating power and property and engaged in much economic enterprise. They organized schools, which were provided with scripts and copybooks. At first confined to the servant of the temple walls; and when the monopoly on writing disappeared, the reins of temporal power began to pass from priestly hands (203).

The magico-religious history of early writing was also attested to by Jack Goody:

In certain ways writing encouraged the growth of magico-religious activity. The priest was the man of learning, the literate, the intellectual, in control of natural as well as supernatural communication... what was formerly oral now gets set down in writing and just as religious myths become crystallized in the words of the Holy Book, so too magical formulae become perpetuated in the spae-books, grimoires and numerological treatises that spread throughout the literate world (16).

John S. Mbiti has said that life in traditional African society was a religious phenomenon. The African is deeply and incurably religious. The African in a social setting cannot survive without religion:

Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it. A study of these religious systems is therefore, ultimately a study of the people themselves in all complexities of both traditional and modern life... Religion is the strongest element in traditional background, and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned (1).

S. N. Ezeanya corroborated the assertion of Mbiti when he said that in Africa, "Life is religion, and religion is life", and that it is unimaginable for the African following his environment and culture, to think of human life divorced from religion (324). Religion is not only culture-bound, but also a complex cultural phenomenon that is best understood within a specific cultural context. In academic classification, religion is subsumed under culture. Culture is a reflection of the spiritual dimension of social life. It is the key to understanding the people's cognitive world and primordial wisdom.

Culture enriches man's intellect through spiritual values. It expresses man's creativity, aspirations and hopes. It is the summation of all the positive and transforming experiences of mankind. The fact is that modern man must possess "historical memory", that is the
understanding and ability to evaluate the past of his people. The principle of historicism encourages continuity between the past and the present as the basis for change and innovation. Arthur Leonard has rightly said: "To get a clear and thorough insight into the characteristics and temperament of a people, it is, I think, essential first to obtain a comprehensive grasp of their religion, even before attempting to master their laws and customs" (79).

N.S.S. Iwe has argued persuasively that "Religion and culture are twin essential, inseparable and interdependent aspects of human life..." For Iwe, religion and culture are constantly in a reciprocal mutual services "As religion vivifies and illustrates culture, culture gives flesh and substance to religion; as culture incarnates religion, religion redeems and saves culture" (58,59). Writing in the same vein, Eric Sharpe posits that:

...the greater part of religion is far more culturally conditioned than most believers realize. What there is of the treasure of religious truth comes in the earthen vessels of culture. The attempt to distinguish between the one and the other may be difficult...(141-142).

ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF ORON

Oron people of the lower Cross River basin occupy the coastal stretch bordering the Ibibio of Uyo Local Government in the north and Eket in the west. Oron shares a nautical boundary within the Atlantic Ocean in the south with Cameroon Republic. The south eastern nautical boundary is with the Efik people of Old Calabar. Oron lies 80 kilometers away from the Bight of Bonny, between latitudes 04 30' N and 5N and longitudes 08 30'E and covers an area of over 219.60 square kilometers (Mary Essang 1). Oron lies between 0 and 90M above sea levels and is situated in the equatorial climatic zone, surrounded by thick and gigantic vegetation. As a leading coastal city in Nigeria, Oron serves as a sea route and major emporium in the West African sub-region.

Oral tradition has shown that Oron people originally migrated from the Bantu race of the Mediterranean world, specifically, from Egypt to the Cameroon as a result of the forced Bantu migration which occurred throughout Africa. The distinguished African-American historian, Okon Edet Uya has this to say:

Oron traditions insist that they left the Cameroons and crossed over to their present locale in rafts or canoes...the Oron people capture the confusion resulting from the movements set in motion by the Bantu migrations in their saying that this was the event that scattered the whole world (Ekung Amaisim asuan odubit)... It should be recalled that the initial movement of the Bantu has been dated to 200 A.D and that the movement continued to about 1600 A.D. (History of Oron People 29).

The migration story is silent on who were the aborigines in the area presently occupied by Oron people, it is also not clear whether the said land mass was a virgin area. Uya has however suggested that Oron migrations from Cameroons to their present location occurred between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries (A History of Oron People 30). It is also certain that the actual occupation was not through conquest. Mary Essang in A Study of Oron Community identified "Abang" as the father and founder of Oron nation:

...Oron people call themselves Oro, or Oro Ukpabang in full. Oro Ukpabang means Oro, the people of Abang. Ukpabang itself means "the space of Abang". Ukpabang being the space, or area of land founded by Abang. This shows then that the progenitor of Oron people was Abang who, it is believed, came from the Cameroon. The names Abang, Mban, Manga are common both in the Cameroon and Oron (5).

The late paramount ruler of Oron, Chief O. E. Isong, and the Ahta of Oron declared authoritatively that: The Ukpabang people migrated away from conversion to Islam in the general area of Egypt and under their leader Abang arrived the Cameroons. There, Abang begat Do, Do begat Doni, Doni begat Oro and Obolo (qtd. in Uya, A History of Oron People 10).
Okon Edet Uya in a synthetic analysis of all traditions of migration and settlement, with the unique skill of an oral historian affirmed the Egypt-Cameroon version of the story:

...Abang, the putative father of the Oron people, came from the Mediterranean world, more specifically from Egypt, before the advent of the Moslems in that region. Abang supposedly wandered with his children and followers through the Sudanic belt, possibly into Zaire before he made a major stop in the Cameroons (A History of Oron people 26).

In an address presented to the visiting Federal Inspector of Education of Western Cameroon, Mr. G. Nseke in 1972, Oron Traditional Rulers Council said:

You must have heard of the legend among Oron people that Cameroon direction is our original home when Abang, the great ancestor of Oron migrated into this land now occupied by his descendants. As tradition last longer than city walls, it is then reasonable and correct for the Oron man to regard anything Cameroon as native (qtd. in Uya, The Oron Nation in Contemporary Nigeria, 15-16).

Presently, Oron is politically located in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria with five local government areas.

**ORON COSMOLOGY**

Emefie Ikenga-Metuh has defined a people's world-view as "the complex of their beliefs and attitudes concerning the origin, nature, structure of the universe and the interaction of its beings with particular reference to man". (48). World-view is the sum total of people's opinion concerning life, happiness, fears, purpose of life, death and after life. It is the fundamental commonalities of a given culture such as folkways, mores, language, human productions and social structures. James Downs elucidates further:

Man living in coherent groups... defines the world around them, deciding what is real and how to react to this reality. Failure to grasp this simple fact about culture not rocks or trees or other physical surroundings... dooms any attempt to work in a cross-cultural context (128 - 129).

World-view can be categorized as materialistic, which holds that matter and space just happened and everything is as a result of chance. The implication is that the universe has no inherent meaning. There is a religious world-view which reads meaning into the universe. It is Metuh's opinion that... "a people's world-view is a significant part of their system of religious belief" (49). Robert Redfield has described world-view as society's picture of reality and the most reliable platform for answers to existential questions of life:

Of all that is connoted by "culture", world-view attends especially to the way a man, in particular society, sees himself in relation to all else. It is the properties of existence as distinguished from and related to the self. It is in short, a man's idea of the universe. It is that organization of ideas that answers to a man with questions: "where am I? Among what do I move? What are my relations to these things?" (30 - 36).

The Russian word for world-view is mirovozzrenie which has the same meaning with the German Weltanschauung. Soviet Philosophical Encyclopedia has defined mirovozzrenie as:

...a generalized system of man's views on the world as a whole, on the place of separate phenomena in the world, and on its own place in it, man's understanding and emotional evaluation of the sense of his activity and the fate of mankind, the aggregate of people's scientific, philosophic, political, legal, moral, religious and aesthetic beliefs and ideas (454).

There is an unwavering and taken-for-granted believe in the existence of the supreme God in Oron. God is immanent, transcendent and at the same time ubiquitous. There is a pantheistic description of God variously as:
Abasi Odung Onyong - God who dwells in heaven
Abasi Isong - God of the earth
Abasi Uko - God of the bush
Abasi Odikhi - God of the road
Abasi Esuk - God of the beach
Abasi Utei - God of farming
Abasi Inam - God of prosperity
Abasi Okoro - God of the compound
Abasi Ufok - God of the family

Below the supreme God, there are lesser divinities called Olukhu or Oluhu. Each village has its unique symbol, shrine and priest. There is also a strong belief in ancestors' veneration.

Oron people like other Africans are deeply, and incurably religious. From the platform of traditional religion, the cosmos is interpreted as precarious and vulnerable. Human existence is loaded with risk. The average Oron person struggles through rituals to maintain a balance between the spiritual and physical universe. Ogbu Kalu has described man's vulnerability in the African Weltanschauung as a precarious vision; that is, an existence that is liable to failure or catastrophe, insecure or perilous (10). John Beattie explains further:

"Everyday existence is surrounded by unpredictable and sometimes terrifying hazards, of which mortal illness is not the least. And there exists no adequate body of empirical knowledge which might enable man to cope with these hazards, or even to hope to cope with them, by means of practical, scientifically proven or provable techniques. So they must cope with them symbolically and expressively instead. One answer is to spiritualize the universe (qtd. in John Lewis 177)."

In Oron cosmology, man is not free spiritually. There are many spiritual obstacles that man must overcome, although God is totally good and loving, there are diabolic forces that man must appease, or control. The gods are vindictive, capricious and whimsical looking for every opportunity to punish and inflict pains. Janres Packer et al has this to say:

"The ancient man struggled against forces in nature that he couldn't control, forces that could be either beneficent or malevolent... Life was quite unpredictable especially since the gods were thought to be capricious and whimsical capable of either good or evil (107)."

Writing in the same rein, Osadolor Imasogie observed that:

"The African sees life as a mystery to be lived out on a mysterious planet ruled by spiritual forces of good and evil. There is no event without spiritual/metaphysical cause; hence, man must look beyond physical events to their spiritual etiology. Each man may have a chosen destiny to actualize, but this may be thwarted by malevolent forces which operate either as evil spirits or through witches and sorcerers (67)."

There is a strong belief in the power of witchcraft in Oron cosmology. This belief has resulted in fear and insecurity. Every physical abnormality is attributable to malevolent spirits. Failure, disappointment and misfortune are attributed to witches and wizards who are seen to be blood-thirsty and satanic. Members of witchcraft cult are isolated and feared as harbingers of terror, misery and pains. Witchcraft operations are mostly nocturnal. But that does not mean that they cannot operate in the day time.

Natural hazards like thunder blast, infant mortality, miscarriages and all forms of accidents are linked to the evil spirit of witchcraft. The generally accepted means of detecting a suspected witch or wizard is through idion that is through an oracular invocation of the dead through the art of necromancy and geomancy. Whoever is identified with witchcraft in Oron is
forcefully made to chew and swallow ekpese (physostigma venosum), with gallons of water. Two things are expected, that is death or life. If the person after consumption of ekpese beans is able to vomit out the substance, the accused person will be declared innocent and reintegrated into the society. Those who die in the process are dumped in the forest. The belief in witchcraft in Oron is real, far above superstition. Witchcraft is a negative religious phenomenon.

ART IN THE SERVICE OF RELIGION

Philip Goldman has defined art as "...any activity that rises out of the human impulse toward creation and self-expression" (248). Art as an integral part of human existence covers the concept of beauty that is aesthetics. Man as a social being is inherently artistic and the normative notion of art flows into this basic dimension. Joseph Chiari has described art as:

...the incarnation of the spirit of man in perceptible forms. It exhibits both diachronic continuity and synchronic interrelationships of essential elements of life at given moments in time...Art expresses essential aspects of existence; philosophy and politico-social action...while religion underlies them all. Together they constitute stages of human knowledge (viii).

It is through art that the focal and symbolic representation of religion is achieved. Religion cannot thrive without symbols. The artist is a seeker for truth, and the truth that is revealed is different from scientific truth. Art translates and interprets all facets of the people’s religion and cosmology. Chiari writes:

Whatever the domain of art, the spiritual structure of the work must assert its preeminence over its respective component elements and material and must therefore adjust and shape them so as to convey and render apprehensible its own organic life...(41).

Art is a product of mental structures and imagination. Art whether creative or interpretative is a subjective activity with social and historical meaning. It exhibits the unfolding of the changing aspects of social existence. It is a platform for self-knowledge and fulfillment. Art suggests a reality that can be neither perceived nor objectified, but can be apprehended only through imagination. Chiari has defined imagination as "a mental activity through which ideas, concepts, are brought together through words, musical notes or pigments or other material and given an existential shape in symbolic, organic entities"... (31).

Another dimension of art is its subjective nature. Knowledge is a fusion of subjectivity and objectivity. Epistemological questions on art bother on issues of subjectivity:

Subjectivity is the individuate mind, intuition or uncontaminated spirituality knowing itself as objective truth, part of the totality of being... whatever reality we grant to the phenomenal world, it cannot be reduced to pure phenomenalism sense-experience and empiricism, without falling into materialism, and finally into irrationality (Chiari 71-72).

Like in any other African society, creative art played a significant and symbolic role in the religious life of Oron people. Art expresses personal emotion, subjective feelings and state of mind. The age long quest of man to achieve self-transcendence and the nostalgic curiosity for visions of reality in an invisible spiritual universe led Oron people to devise an artistic miniature to domesticate their forebears.

The desire to retain the blessed memories of the glorious past, led the ancients to carve a wood sculpture to immortalize the dead. Such artistic works have a powerful emotional effect. The sculpture is not just a work of art, but an artificial personage portraying the spirit of
the person it represents. Such sculptures are mostly located around the grave side of the deceased. There is a frantic effort to recapture a glimpse of the person's physique to make for easy identification and psychic recollection. In view of the fact that artists are servants to their societies, there is a problem that bothers on cultural conditioning and individual creativity. Cultural constraints have over the year's stultified creativity and freedom of expression. There is always a desire to implement the inner drive against externally imposed regulations.

Works of art in Oron religious history reflects reality with cognitive values and promotes mental development by transforming a person's feelings and emotions into the realm of creativity and innovation. Art has made significant contributions to the development of the over-all aesthetic consciousness in Oron society. Apart from the religious connotations, art was employed as a channel of moulding and shaping man's creative attitude to reality. Art has a positive influence on the formation of man's world outlook, tastes, aspirations and interests. Commenting on the educative influence of art work, I. S. Kulikova posits thus:

Through contact with a work of art the reader, viewer, listener not only perceives the phenomena, objects, subjects, embodied in it, and the images the artist creates, but also the position of the artist, his vision phenomena, and his attitude to and appreciation of them...(98).

Art leads the viewer towards profound thoughts and independent reasoning. Art theoreticians and practitioners create intellectual competition among keen observers of progressive works of art. Being conscious of the existence of the spirit-world and the indispensable paternal services which the living-dead could render to their families here on earth, Oron people used art as a precision instrument to capture the numinous and project a potent force that could be relied upon in times of communal pressure and external aggression. In view of the religious undertone of artistic works, the carving was more of a spiritual exercise with meticulous rituals to attract the benevolence of the incorporeal ancestral spirits. The artist made use of cultic music to create an aura in which the divine can fully participate in human activities.

Apart from the needed expertise, the artist was equally expected to dedicate himself in the spirit realm to survive moments of ecstasy and cultic personification, which was inevitable at a certain stage of the art work. The use of music by artist in Oron deserves more in-depth analysis, since music is a part of African art. In the words of Udobata Onunwa, music:

...tries to 'humanize' the divine and 'sacralize', or 'deify', the human, bringing both to the same wavelength and level of communication. Herein lies the spiritual atmosphere which facilitate communication with the divine, the experience of His presence and influence... (43).

Art was therefore a necessary aid in the service of religion, granting concrete illumination to the people's traditional religion. Art was a 'school master' serving a pedagogical function through creation of faith objects. As a visual aid for communal indoctrination, and cultural transmission, art was a veritable instrument for social cohesion and continuity. Religion on the other hand, venerated art into an object that represented the divinity. Art is the outward manifestation of man's spiritual vision and a confirmation of the spiritual nature of homo sapien. Over the ages, religion and art have often shared common grounds and indissoluble union. Onuora Enekwe has identified three predominant characteristics of art in Africa:

One is hedonistic, being purely sensual pleasure and essentially of an abstract (geometric) nature. It could be purposive, hence propagandistic or utilitarian. Finally it may be expressive (emotive) and essentially organic (50).

Oron art was both symbolic and representational. The ancients did not see a clear-cut boundary between the sacred and the profane. To them, everything had a spiritual dimension. Every picture in Oron art tells a story and represents a genuine experience within the context of the religion, myth and
customs of the people who created it. Representative art is an instrument for social awareness and mass mobilization of the entire populace.

THE ANCESTRAL CULT IN ORON

Ancestral cult is one of the most revered and time-honored religious institution in Oron. In the words of Mary Essang:

... In the olden days when the chief of a village or head of a family died, the living believed that the dead would return from the world of the dead, to visit the village or his family constantly in a spirit form. So he is believed to be always with them, taking care of them and protecting children, set up a shrine where this former chief or family head was represented in the form of a wooden carving (45).

Only durable types of wood were used for the carving. The carvings were usually done in secret by a reputed professional artist. The carving process started in earnest immediately after the funeral ceremony of any man who was privileged to have at least one male child. It was mandatory for the deceased family to pay the appropriate fees to the carver as a professional charge. After the carving, appropriate sacrifices were made to venerate the creative art work to a sacred object. It was a pertinent socio-religious practice to consult and placate the ancestors through libations on occasions of births, marriages and good harvest, failure to obtain the expressed approval of ancestors in serious family decision could spell untold hardship and disaster to family members.

Oron people have high regards for their ancestors and everything is done to ensure that they are not abandoned or provoked. Even after death, they are still regarded as being part of their human families. They serve as intermediaries between men and God. Children are named after them and there is a strong belief in the recycling of life which gives the ancestors the privilege of coming back to their families. John Mbiti writes:

The living-dead are still people and have not yet become things', 'spirits' or 'its'. They return to their human families from time to time, and share meals with them, however symbolically. They know and have interest in what is going on in the family... they enquire about family affairs, and may even warn of impending danger or rebuke those who have failed to follow their special instructions. They are the guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethics and activities (83).

People swear by their ancestors and at times, invoke the spiritual personalities of their ancestors to validate a controversial issue. Some people claim to have seen or held communication with the living dead. Occasionally, the ancestors are given food and drinks as evidence of good relationship. Geoffrey Parrinder writing on a similar practice in other West African societies observes:

... Others put a mouthful of food on the floor before eating, and at evening meals pots are not entirely emptied, nor washed till morning, in case the dead come and find nothing to eat. Particularly in the evening, the ancestors are believed to draw nearer and so after nightfall people will not sweep the house, or throw water out into the yard without first calling out a warning (116).

The Ekpu-wooden carvings were representatives of the heroic spirit of Oron ancestors. It possessed the force of an invocation and has the potentials to usher in super-human forces into the human sphere, making it possible for the ancestors to commune with their family members and also display their amazing powers. The physical display of Ekpu carvings at festivals depicted a state of general wellbeing and cordiality between the living and the dead and reassures family members of close affinity, lineal continuity and social solidarity with the deified spirits of ancestors in their chronological hierarchy. Onuora Enekwe making allusion to the mystical background of African art asserted thus:

Spirit is the prime mover of the world, while matter is inert, malleable and perishable, the spirit is active and perpetual. However, the spirit world and the
material sphere are not antipodal. There is a constant interaction between them. This interaction is possible because the dead can travel freely between their abode and the earth, since they are homologous (51).

EKPU-ORO IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

History of Nok terracottas has been traced to 500 B.C. while the more sophisticated art of Ife can be dated as early as A.D. 900. The art of Benin dates back to pre-twentieth century West African religious carvings. Writing on the historicity of Ekpu-Oro. Uya posits thus:
Ekpu carvings are almost as old as the settlement of Oron people in their present location. In the 1960's, Kenneth Murray, the Director of Antiquities, estimated that some of the Ekpu carvings were more than 500 years old, thus, tracing them back to about the middle of fifteenth century (30).

Some keen observers of Oron art, including the elites have disagreed factually with Murray's dating, arguing that the samples presented to him, were 'the latest carvings' and that the earliest carvings like Ekpu Odu-Oro were more than 900 years old. Such carbon dating will take us back to the beginning of the eleventh century A.D. Keith Nicklin writes:
In the Oron area, when a man died a carved wooden image was made before his ceremonial burial. This was placed with others in a special building called the OBIO... it was believed that the spirit of the dead man, now an ancestor resided in the carving. According to the religious beliefs of the Oron people, the ancestors participated in the affairs of the living, and could be approached through the Ekpu shrine to bring fertility to their women and farms, and banish epidemics. Therefore, twice a year, at the time of planting and harvesting sacrifices of food and drink were made to the carvings. Sacrifices could also be offered at other times under the direction of the diviner...(16-18)

The carving of a new wooden image commences after the burial of a man who had at least one male child. In the words of the late clan head of Ukwong, Chief A. M. E. Mba: “In Oron it was mandatory for each son or daughter in the family to know and identify his or her ancestors (Ekpu) or else such a child was considered irresponsible” (53). The physical structure of the actual carving reflected the social status of the ancestor represented. A gigantic and highly decorated Ekpu with variegated carved details was a replica of a famous traditional ruler in pomp and pageantry. The style of Ekpu carving was uniform in nature.

... the head is topped with a hat and scarification of the temple regions, and a long beard, are represented. The bodies, especially the waists, of the carvings are narrow, and the stomachs bulbous. The sexual organs are portrayed, and these and the legs are proportionately small. The Ekou carvings have composed, serene expressions and there is great variety in the portrayal of facial features...(Nicklin 18).

Darylf Forde and G. I. Jones in The Ibo and Ibibio Speaking Peoples of South Eastern Nigeria, have paid glowing tribute to the creativity of Oron artists and described Ekpu carvings as 'unique', in no way like other, Ibibio works' (87).

Ekpu has a strong and symbolic similarity with the mummification of ancient Egypt. This cannot be far from the truth, considering the fact that Oron people have consistently traced their ancestral root to Egypt; Oron people preserved the blessed memories of their departed ancestors in wood for posterity. The Oko tree which was used in the carving is a totem in Oron traditional religion. It was self-destructive for anybody to use it for any other purpose. The sacrosanct nature of Oko tree made Ekpu carving a spiritual business for the dedicated few. Uya has this to say:
Each Oron family had its shrine where the carved wooden image made from Oko tree representing each ancestral father was kept. In some villages, these were gathered together in the village shed, Obio Uduna. Because of the importance of these Ekpu carvings, the Oko tree from which they were made
was regarded as sacred wood and it was not used for firewood... It was believed that the spirit of the dead father dwelt in the Ekpu... (History of Oron 52).

ESTABLISHMENT OF A MUSEUM AT ORON

In appreciation of the rich cultural and religious heritage of Oron, the colonial government decided to open a museum for the preservation and projection of Ekpu carvings to the international community. The immediate impetus and awareness was created through the untiring zeal and dedication of Kenneth Murray, a colonial art instructor at the then Teacher Training College (now University of Uyo). The initial intention of Murray was to renovate some of the shrines where the Ekpu figures were stored; he successfully removed some carvings to avert the risk of damage. From the outset, it was clear that Murray had an herculean task, for although the interest of the people in the Ekpu cult had waned, and the shrines were so abandoned so that the carved figures were being destroyed by insects and rain, Oron people were generally reluctant to release their ancestor figures to a foreign curator who was in search of monuments.

Between 1947, Murray wrote many articles to draw the attention of the international community to the deplorable conditions of art works in Nigeria. With the assistance of the District Officer at Oron and the Oron Clan Council, Murray was able to collect over three hundred specimens, which were assembled in the old Rest House at Oron. Silas Okita has aptly described Murray as the 'founder of Nigerian Museum'. Writing in the Journal of the Royal African Society with the title 'Art in Nigeria: The Need For a Museum', Murray lamented on the dilapidated state of the artifacts in Nigeria and commented thus:

About the art works in every province a tale of destruction could be told... The ancestral figures in the Oron district are every one damaged... many of the large slit-drums of the Annang are becoming neglected and are left unsHELTERED in the open... In many parts the Ibo no longer use the carved doors but have thrown them on the ground. The old bronzes remaining in Benin are left lying on a mud altar without satisfactory protection. The magnificent Ife bronzes are piled in a broken glass-case along with delicate terracottas, and others are heaped in an old petrol box. In all parts masks and head dresses for dances are rotting away or thick cover of soot covers an interior eaten by borers (241).

The lamentations of Murray brought Ekpu wooden carvings to world recognition and there was a positive pressure from the international community urging the colonial government to site a museum in the ancient city of Oron.

A museum was founded at Oron primarily as a means of preserving the Oron carvings, which are some of the oldest and finest wood sculptures in the whole of Africa. These portray the male ancestors, Ekpu, and are carved from special hardwoods (Couls Edulis and Pterocapus Soyauxii) which are relatively resistant to the destructive effects of termite attack and weathering. Some Ekpu figures are believed to be between two and three centuries old. They are the unique artistic achievements of the Oron people (Nicklin 4).

Commenting on the opening of the new museum to the public, the prolific African historian and distinguished curator Ekpo Eyo has this to say:

Oron Museum was first opened to the public in 1959, but it mainly housed most of the eight hundred known ancestral figures (Ekpu) of Oron people which were placed there on trust. The Museum was destroyed during the Nigerian Civil War and the carvings were scattered, destroyed or stolen for sale abroad ("Forward" to Keith Nicklin).

The museum which was officially opened to the public on 7th December, 1959, later faced myriads of problems including thievery. W. B. Fagg observed that Ekpu carvings "became more widely known in the most regrettable of ways, when more than 20...were stolen by an African dealer and dispersed over the world" (10). The stolen carvings have never since been
recovered. Perhaps this is another evidence to justify the demand for reparation. Commenting on the looting of Oron museum, Nicklin said:

It is strongly suspected that some of the pieces from the Museum as well as the few remaining in the villages around Oron up until the war were stolen and smuggled to Cameroon, where they were disposed of on the international art market... illicitly obtained Ekpu carvings are believed to exist in art collections in Europe and America (6).

CONCLUSION

Uya has rightly described Ekpu as the greatest contribution of Oron people to the cultural development of Nigeria "...one of the most enduring legacies of Oron to Nigerian cultural heritage are the Ekpu carvings. The Ekpu were carved from Oko to immortalize dead ancestors" (History of Oron People 30). The quest for a new society and African renaissance is not likely to materialize without a positive hermeneutical reflection. If the cultural engineering of Africa is to yield the desired goal, tradition and modernity must be integrated. The sociologist, E. Shils has said that traditional values are not anti-development, and that in many places, traditions have become vehicles of modernization:

Traditions often possess sufficient ambiguity and hence flexibility to allow innovations to enter without severely disruptive consequences... patterns of traditional beliefs do not form a rigorously unitary whole; some parts are more affirmative towards modernity, or at least less resistant towards innovation. Many traditional beliefs are not so much objects of zealous devotions to symbols of the past as they are the resultants of a situation without alternatives (404 - 405).

The contributions of Africa to the cultural development of humanity can be seen in the aesthetic attraction of African art. Apart from Egypt which had a reputation as the cradle of human civilization, the Nok terracottas, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife and Benin art works are among the best in the world. Benin art works were massively looted and taken to Western Europe during the ill-fated Benin massacre of 1897, when Benin was invaded by the British army. The ethnographer, Keith Nicklin has said authoritatively that illicitly obtained Ekpu carvings could be seen and identified in art galleries in Europe and America. "The loss of the collection at Oron Museum is now regarded as one of the major tragedies of this devastating period of Nigerian history" (6).

By the end of the 19th century, Oron art flooded European museums. This is another evidence of the colossal damage done to Africa by the west. Africa deserves compensation, having been exploited for over four hundred years by the west. The greatest problem confronting the continent is that of poverty which is aggravated by corrupt, inefficient and inept political leadership. The reparation can take the form of a comprehensive and unconditional debt cancellation and sincere affirmative actions on technological transfer.

To the African, throughout the continent, there is a clarion call for a rethinking and psychic re-orientation. The culture and the mentality of dependence and inferiority complex must give way to self-assertion, self-reliance and creativity. It is left for us to reassert our socio-economic and political independence to prove to skeptics that Africa is not a blank and untouched page of humankind where anybody can write anything. Uncritical reception of foreign values and rejection of things that are indigenous is counter-productive and retrogressive. Positive actions should be taken to resolve the crisis of the African conscience and the split of the African soul. African elites should rise to the challenge of scientific and technological creativity. They should speak with a united voice with a ring of practicality, proffering result-oriented solutions to the problems of Africa.

African governments should sponsor research into art, religion and cosmology of traditional Africa. Departments of African Studies should be established in all African universities. The Federal Government of Nigeria should exploit all avenues within international law to ensure the recovery of stolen art works from Nigeria. Government funding of museums
in Nigeria should improve. Curriculum development in Nigerian universities should treasure and recognize the indispensability and perpetual relevance of liberal arts both in nation building and in national development. There should be a reciprocal symbiosis between tradition and modernity especially a convergence between African traditional religion and modern Christianity. Africa must start from somewhere. The African must wake up from slumber.

Throughout history, great things have often had small beginnings... The times are changing and we must change with them. In doing so we must combine the best in western culture with the best in African culture... The African today is conscious of his capabilities. Educational and cultural backwardness is the result of historical conditions... As never before we want thinkers-thinkers of great thoughts. We want doers-doers of great deed. Of what use is your education if you cannot help your country in her hour of need? (Kwame Nkrumah 91-92).

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