

Urhobo Wood Sculpture of the Niger Delta: Its Structure and Its Therapeutic Tendencies

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Abstract

This study examines the structure of Urhobo Wood Sculptures and it's healing properties. With certain illnesses on the rise and still no known cures to some of them, this form of therapy offers a new dimension to global medicine. The solutions lie not only in numerous herbal and psychological attributes but also in the structure of these art works. Certain traditional codes as well as iconographic formations which are engraved on these works, speak volumes on some healing processes. An acceptance of this form of treatment may raise the hopes of numerous persons at globalized levels.

Keywords: Structure, therapy, illnesses, global medicine, iconographic formation.

Introduction

The Urhobo, taking into cognizance those within the Nigerian entity and in the Diaspora, number over two million people². They are located in the western fringe of the Niger Delta in Southern Nigeria³. Their neighbours include: the Isoko to the South-East, the Itsekiri to the West, Benin to the North, Ijaw to the South and Ndokwa to the North-East⁴ (Fig. 1). Traditionally, the origin of the Urhobo culture is often linked with Benin. Of all its twenty-two political units, just a few trace their origins to diverse areas. Commonly engraved on the Urhobo culture; are Benin-type of political structures, titles as well as kingship patterns and ceremonial regalias⁵. But when it comes to their art forms, the similarities seem to differ considerably from those of Benin descent.

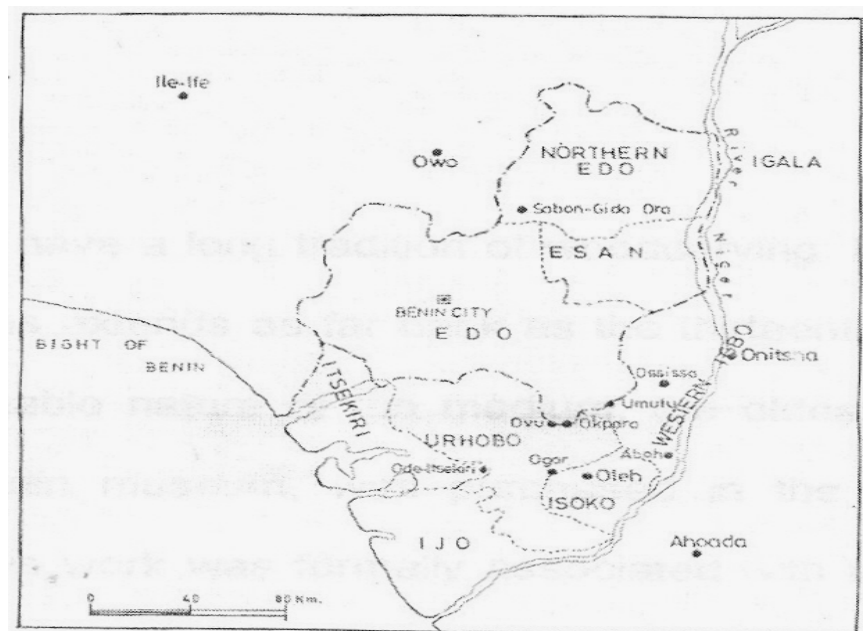


Fig. 1: Map of Urhobo Kingdom surrounded by its neighbors

The Urhobo have a long tradition of woodcarving. Dates associated with these art forms extend as far back as the thirteenth century. But as regards the perishable nature of the medium, the oldest so far which is located in the Berlin museum, was purchased in the early nineteenth century. Initially, this work was formally associated with the Jukun ethnic group⁶. These works attest to the originality of the people resulting from its style and form. More often than not, the structure of these art works tends to perform certain functional roles (fig. 2). They also seem to speak of the origins of the people as well as containing both medicinal and psychotherapeutic attributes. These figures are not idolatry as perceived by quite a number of persons. They are our histories and mysteries which are engraved and shaped into certain human forms.



Fig. 2: The Statue of Umogun
Wood, Native Chalk (Orhe) Ht. 6ft, 21st Century,
Artist: Charles Ebrude; From Igun Town,
Ethiope East, Delta State, Nigeria.

Quite a lot of scholars have made major contributions to the study of the Urhobo culture. They include: Foss, Erivwo, Otite, Nabofa, Ikime, Onobrakpeya, Ojaide, Darah, Ekeh just to mention a few. However, not much has been done in the area of their wood sculptures and its therapeutic potentialities. So far, Nabofa studied the symbolism of some specific divinities in Urhobo land. He also extrays the practice of magic and medicine in some Urhobo communities⁷. Foss (2004: 17-29) continues to make great inroads into the arts and culture of the Urhobo. Despite these outstanding efforts, a lot still needs to be done in the relationship between the arts and medicine in Urhobo culture. This paper therefore attempts to explore the healing properties embedded in these wood sculptures as well as its accompanied herbal and psychotherapeutic attributes. It also intends to contribute to global medicine, particularly in the remedies to some health problems, which “today” seem to have no noticeable cures. For this purpose, intense investigation has been carried out in some selected communities in Urhobo land. They are: Ovu, Okpara, Igun, Eku, Ogor and Orerokpe.

The Structure and Therapeutic Properties of Urhobo Wood Statuaries

The structure of Urhobo wood statuaries vary in form as well as in function. For instance the figure of the “hand altar” (*Obo*) is not depicted like the figure of “aggression” (*Iphri*). Or are the founding father assemblages (*edjorakare*) like the “hand altar” (*Obo*). The “hand altar” (*Obo*) is sometimes part of the paraphernalia of the shrine.

Each of these divinities possess their unique compositional traits as well as their functions in the entire layout of the Urhobo Culture. In most cases, the figures are divided into three segments. The head torso and lower limbs. The head consists of a hat, facial features, a neck and expressive dentition. The neck which is adjoined to the torso is thick while the torso has two upper limbs attached to its sides. The torso is also long and it consists of a bulky chest with a medicinal object, a naval, stomach and upper limbs. The upper limbs are often shown carrying full military paraphernalia⁸. The nude depiction of both male and female figures are evident. White cloths are eventually used to cover the pudendic area of the female and male genitals. Feet are commonly shown. The Urhobo figural pose which displays the half sitting and half standing characteristics are in most times stylized and geometric in shape.



Fig. 3: Ovughere Shrine Assemblage.
Wood, Native Chalk and White Cloth,
Ovu Inland, Agbon Clan, 21st Century.

Among the Ovughere group at Ovu-Inland, more than six figures are represented (Fig. 3). These figures reveal the spirit of the land in physical form. Each of these figures perform specific functions. They have names associated with them. In Eyagomare's oral interview he stresses that although in some cases they all have the ability to protect, heal and make judgements, others are made specifically for curative purposes⁹. The structure of these wood figures is highly therapeutic. As each of their forms consist of certain traditional codes (Fig. 3). These codes may not only be understood by the Chief Priest but also by a devotee or any one skilled in deciphering the objects. If one is not skilled then a special concoction is prepared and used to wash the eyes of the person for the purpose of spiritual insights. It is at this point in time, that the wood sculptures are seen as coded languages, consisting of numerous healing processes. Eyagomare also believes that these art forms which possess both curative and protective properties, can be used in the treatment of diverse health problems like some reproductive, psychological and physiological cases¹⁰.

The answer may eventually lie in the belief of a particular divinity which is housed in the wood sculpture. A good example can be seen in the Ovughere shrine where a little figure representing a child (*Omo*) is often used along-side some herbal concoctions in the treatment of some fertility cases (Fig. 3). To buttress this view, Nabofa (2004:38) affirms that a community can infuse a sense of life, power and consciousness into a natural or artificial object such as a concoction of herbs and other symbolic elements. These concoctions and symbolic elements are used in the treatment of very serious health problems. From the head down to the toe of these wood figures, diverse areas that can be treated by these divinities are revealed. The elongated head structure with scarifications may not be accidental (fig. 4). The geometricized neck and exaggerated chest may all point at specific illnesses. Therein lies the solution. There is the display of weaponry carried by these divinities (*edjos*) which may symbolize drugs (Fig. 4). These works act as psychological antidotes sent against certain illnesses. Even the wood used in the construction of these figures is medicinal. Such wood include: red wood (*esene*) and Iron wood (*Okpagma*) just to mention a few.



Fig. 4: The Ovughere Shrine Assemblage
Wood, Pigment and Cloth,
Ovu Inland, Agbon Clan 1875.
Courtesy of Perkins Foss;

Where Gods and Mortals meet continuity and renewal in Urhobo Art.

Utuyo In his oral interview posits however that sometimes these sculptural pieces are accompanied with certain herbal preparations in form of native chalk (*Orhe*), herbs (*eberevwosivwoma*) and prayers (*Erhovwo*)¹¹.

Herbal Components

The herbal preparations are not usually revealed to the clients. Only the materials needed are sometimes listed. These herbs are not used alone. Certain prayers and incantations are required for the treatment to work. Other substances like native chalk (*Orhe*) or peeled tree barks (*Akpobis*) palm oil (*Ofigbo*) and even in some cases water (*Ame*) is required¹². These medicines are not used haphazardly, specific measurements are required in each case. The relationship between the divinity (*edjo*) and the herbal preparation is evident as the divinity shows the Chief Priest (*Osedjo*) or devotees the herbs and processes of drug usage. This is often communicated through dreams, visions or intuitively.

Treatment Procedure

In most cases, the Chief Priest (*Osedjo*) calls for a meeting where health and other social issues are discussed. He then sends persons afflicted with various illnesses to a specialist in specific areas for treatment. The specialist are often devotees. The devotee then sees the client and orders for some listed items. These items are usually disclosed to the devotee through divine revelation. Amongst the shrine divinities, it is believed as in the case of the “Ovughere Assemblage” all the shrine objects have healing potentialities (Fig. 3). But when it comes to specifics, the one which can tackle the problem is often approached. The name is called and the (devotee) communicates with the divinity for the solution. It is only the devotee or the Chief Priest (*Osedjo*) that comprehends what the divinity requires (Fig. 5). When this is finally achieved the client in most cases stays with the devotee until the treatment is completed. Several cases of expectant mothers have proven positive through this encounter. The healing process here is not just herbal but also psychological. The belief in their divinities is evident. That strength is passed from the devotees to their clients. Similar processes are common in other Urhobo towns such as in: Okpara, Eku and Igun Communities. It should be noted that the procedure of treatment varies from community to community.

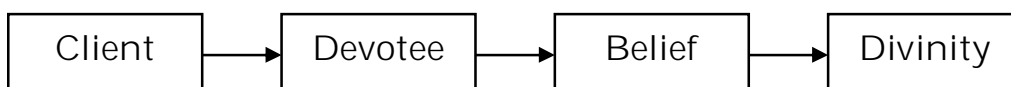


Fig. 5: Chain of Belief System

Conclusion

The structures of these wood works, their herbal preparations, prayers and the psychological aspect of belief can be used along-side orthodox medicine. Of course, these listed items may be seen as been “Paleolithic” but “nothing new exists under the sun”. Up till today, the Egyptian culture is still been studied in the area of medicine; particularly in the science of embalming. Their arts are regarded as coded messages or questions of hidden solutions. Though it took centuries to decode. Similar interests can be carried out on our art forms in order to discover certain hidden facts. Even devotees as well as some Chief Priest cannot fully comprehend the entirety of the symbolism contained on these art pieces. The truth is that, these sculptures are not just art pieces to be appreciated aesthetically. They are functional works which houses certain healing properties. If properly incorporated into global medicine a lot of mysteries in curative medicine would be solved. Infact illnesses such as cancer, stroke, Epilepsy, diabetics, Rheumatism, infertility, just to mention few would become thing of the past. Also if the traditional practitioner is given a recognizable measure of acceptance and were both parties work together, solutions to serious illnesses would easily be achieved. As for the traditional practitioner, if their works (Medicines) are properly packaged with little or no incantations recited on them than it would become more globally acceptable.

End Notes

1. This work was carried out in (2006) by the writer. It grew out of a larger research project on the “Enquiry into the variations between art styles of Benin and the Niger Delta neighbors at University of Ibadan, Institute of African Studies.
2. Aweto Albert, and Igben Jomata Lucky have made major contributions in the geographic distribution of the Urhobo people.
3. Since 1966, Perkins Foss has dedicated his life and study to the Urhobo people of the Niger Delta. Some seven to eight years ago on his arrival to Ibadan, he suggested that I focus my study on the arts of my people.
4. The boundaries of the Urhobo area has been cited by Onigu Otite in his book the “Urhobo people”.
5. In 2003, to be precise, at one of the Agbarho-Otor workshops in art, organized by Prof. Bruce Onobrakpeya I presented a paper which compelled by interest in Urhobo art.
6. According to Perkins Foss, the first published piece of Urhobo art was not collected in Urhobo land. In 1895, a German explorer named Siegfried Passage published a small Urhobo statue, now in Ethnologisches museum, Berlin, that he identified as made by the Jukun peoples of Benue State, some 350 miles from northeast of Urhobo land.
7. Nabofa looks at the practice of magic and medicine in some Urhobo Communities.
8. In Perkins Foss 1976 publication of Urhobo Statuary for Spirits and Ancestors, he described one of the fathers of the Urhobo figures as depicted carrying full military paraphernalia.
9. Jacob Eyagomare is the current Chief Priest of the Ovughere Shrine in Ovu Inland Delta State, Nigeria.
10. The Ovughere Priest believes that apart from protective properties the spirits possess, it also offers curative attributes if approached.
11. Peter Utuoyo is the current Priest of Omwe Shrine. This is the female group of worshippers in Inland whose spirit resides in the Omwe stream in Ovu Town.
12. Igbinoba Freeborn is both a Priest in Eku and traditional carver. He also claims to be a traditional healer who uses just natural herbs and materials for certain curative purposes.

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