Negotiating the intangible heritage of Awka traditional paraphernalia in modern society

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ABSTRACT

Awka traditional paraphernalia is the product of many centuries of artistic traditions. Such great works of art may seem lifeless to non-natives but are functional in all spheres of Awka community life. They depict the various tangible and intangible features of Awka culture. Despite the intricacy and functionality of these traditional artworks, they are gradually losing potency and relevance in Eurocentric post-colonial Nigerian society. The focus of modern museums and contemporary artworks has challenged the intangible essence of traditional paraphernalia. This study employed the historical research method and thematic analysis to explore the intangibility of the tangible heritage of the Awka traditional community. The mimesis theory of art was used to buttress the relevance of the intangible heritage represented in Awka traditional paraphernalia. The study found that its intangible heritage is the essence of Awka traditional paraphernalia. In addition, it found that traditional artworks were the mainstay of various cultural institutions and activities in the Awka community. It concluded that traditional artworks embody the beliefs and practices of the Awka community. The study suggests that contemporary artworks should be designed to reflect the intangibility of traditional paraphernalia in modern society.

Keywords

traditional paraphernalia, traditional religion, tangible and intangible heritage, art, woodcarving

Introduction

Awka traditional paraphernalia comprises artworks that showcase the lived and living experience of Awka people. Works of art in any society are windows into the cultural life of that society (Essel and Acquah 2016). An understanding and appreciation of African works of art depends fundamentally on having knowledge of meaning bestowed on the object, especially by its makers and the society that considers that object part of its cultural story (Ezenagu 2023). Art forms and or paraphernalia are tangible cultural objects that house the intangible practices of the community. Although these objects may seem lifeless to foreigners, to its makers they are sophisticated, powerful and functional objects used in everyday life. Traditionally, they are made to serve the needs of people —be those needs physical, social, cultural, religious or educational (Essel and Acquah 2016) – in both Western and non-Western cultures (Walker 2009).

Considering the functional role of these artworks, they were not intended to be viewed in a museum (Walker 2009). In Africa, artworks were not originally destined to be displayed in homes or museums for aesthetic contemplation, in the way that contemporary Western drawings and paintings are exhibited (Tachana 2017). Consequently, they are housed in special spaces designated to preserve their intangible characteristics. It is only within these special spaces that sacred figurines are venerated and displayed in public processions (Figure 1), and mask heads (Figure 4) are worn as masquerade regalia. African art objects are not created only to be gazed upon but rather for use in various aspects of daily life. This contradicts the widely held opinion of Westerners that art is a luxury and serves no vital purpose (Cole 1972). The Western view holds that art is primarily aesthetic, utilitarian and traceable to Europe, unlike the African school, which views traditional art as a religious necessity and rooted in African civilisations (Tachana 2017). The functionality of these seemingly lifeless art forms which constitute their intangible characteristics simplifies the complexities of most African traditions. They depict traditional societies and the prevailing circumstances that necessitated their creation.

Traditional paraphernalia were created to replicate the intangible African worldview (religion, politics, economic and social interaction). Hence, the meanings concealed in art forms are only visible to the community of makers. Accordingly, Ajaebili, Okonkwo and Omeje (2020) assert that the *ọfọ* is a wooden figurine, but to the Igbo of south eastern Nigeria it is a mystical symbol of truth, purity, justice and authority. Moreover, foreigners might see an *ikolo* wooden drum (Figure 2) as a musical instrument, but for the makers it is a sacred item. Similarly, Yoruba twin (*ibeji*) figures are regarded by some, especially cultural outsiders, as little more than charming dolls. They are, however, capable of operating as power objects (Chappel 2018: 75). In other words, the *ibeji* figurine is not just a wooden object but a replica of a deceased twin. Thus, the intangible features of these artworks find their essence in the traditional way of life of the people.

The intangible features of tangible wooden objects were one of the mainstays of African art, and the medium through which African art has best come to be known by the outside world (Balogun 1979). Wood carving craft flourished in most communities of pre-colonial Nigeria. One such community is Awka in south eastern Nigeria,

Figure 1
Figurine on public display
Source: Author's collection

which in ancient times was known as the centre from where numbers of woodcarvers producing artworks travelled out to various Ibo communities (Ilogu 1985). Many scholars both Western and African affirm that pre-European Awka monopolised certain specialised professions: carvers, native doctors, and smiths (Basden 1966; Dike 1979; Neaher 1979; Nwnanna and Nwanna 2020; Okafor 1992). Given this, Neaher (1981) affirms that Awka is a community where men of certain *umunna* (kinsmen) specialise in carving objects such as doors, shrine imagery and other ritual objects. They carve different types of paraphernalia connected with institutions and societies. These paraphernalia are cultural accessories and or items produced from metals, ivory and wood associated with different cultural institutions. This study is concerned with carved wooden paraphernalia of the religious cult where figurines are placed on every altar, the title society known as 'holders of the title stool', the masquerade cult known as 'keepers of the mask heads', and the *ikolo* house – also a religious cult but keepers of the sacred drum. Each of these objects is associated with certain aspect of Awka Igbo cultural life. The mask head (Figure 4) is important masquerade regalia for the sustenance of the masquerade cult. However, the above cultural objects are gradually losing their social and religious functional roles and are instead being used for aesthetic purposes. For instance, the title stool is owned by title men, who are cultural guardians of the community. To them, the stool signifies cultural beliefs and practices, but today many homes use such prestigious stools merely as decorative objects.

Thus, the woodcarving heritage for which pre-

colonial Awka town was renowned has been eroded in contemporary society. On the one hand, Eurocentric museums in Nigeria neglect the intangible characteristics of these artworks by displaying and preserving their physical forms. Disregard of the intangible features of these traditional paraphernalia has distorted and eroded many cultural beliefs, institutions and activities in various communities in post-colonial Nigeria. On the other hand, the aesthetic features of Eurocentric contemporary art forms challenge the relevance of traditional paraphernalia in the society. Contemporary art does not seek to fulfil traditional purposes; rather, it is considered only to be emotive and relevant, and as telling a story or aiding social movement (Business South Africa, 2018). Consequently, this work explores the intangibility of the traditional paraphernalia of the pre-colonial Awka community and how to infuse these features into contemporary art forms.

Literature review: traditional paraphernalia in pre-colonial communities

Traditional paraphernalia comprises wooden carved tangible heritage through which Africans communicate their intangible heritage to all generations. Kwame (2009: 43-45) affirms that

> aspects of the intangible Akan heritage are expressed in tangible art forms to make...intangible content visible and 'readable.' These intangible narratives accompanying artworks are considered to be an important part of the work, and are preserved as part of Akan history and culture,...As a result, Akan artworks are not just tangible and visual, but are also important works inseparably bound together by intangible information about their culture, which, upon investigation, reveal the history, social, religious and political life and experiences of the Akan.

Similarly, Oyinloye (2017) avers that traditional paraphernalia are designed for specific purposes and functions. In the past, most such items were carved either to fulfil a physical function, such as doors, house-posts, stools etc., or to connote spiritual beliefs and traditional rites, such as ancestral figures, divination bowls, ritual drums and so on. The production of most of Nigeria's wood carvings and sculptures served one or other of these two purposes. However, Bascom (1973: 6) observes that

> most African sculptures appear to have been associated with religion[,] which pervades most aspect[s] of African life. The [religious] genre include[s] votive figure[s] which [adore] shrines, reliquary figures, charm figures, stools used for initiation to the cult, apparatus for divination, dance staff, musical instruments and a variety of other ritual paraphernalia.

This implies that many wooden sculptures produced are fashioned after particular spiritual beliefs in which case, some artworks may be believed to possess a spiritual essence and/ or to house powerful spirits – gods, ancestors and spirits (Kwame 2009; Strickland & Boswell 1992). Amongst the Yoruba of western Nigeria, the *ibeji* carved wooden sculpture symbolises dead twins, or one of the twins (Oyinloye 2017). Such carvings kept in the home of twins are revered, because the twins are believed to share a single soul that is housed in the figurine. Buttressing the soul tie of twins, Leroy, Olaleye-Oruene, Koeppen-Schomerus and Bryan (2002: 134-135) assert:

> the Yoruba believe that twins share the same combined soul, when a newborn twin dies, the life of the other is imperilled because the balance of his soul has become seriously disturbed. To counteract this danger...an artisan will be commissioned to carve a small wooden figure as a symbolic substitute for the soul of the deceased twin. If both twins have died, two of these figures are made. These effigies are called *Ere ibeji*. By virtue of his immortal soul hosted by his *ibeji*, the departed twin remains as powerful as the living one.

The *ibeji* figurine imbued with the spirit of the deceased twin receives the parental care and attention of the living twin. Much attention is given to the *ibeji* figurine to harness the positive powers of twins for prosperity. Affirming the care given to the *ibeji* figurine Clarke and Farr (1998: 53) state that 'in some areas, mothers dance in public at least once a year, cradling the twin figures in their arms or carrying them in wrappers around their waists. The mothers cradle the figures as if they were children while showing respect for their power through this public display'. Similarly, the Akan use a wooden doll sculpture known as Akuaba (Akua's child). According to Kwame (2009), the object was created to address infertility problems.

From the preceding, we see that traditional

paraphernalia showcases intangible characteristics. As Mbiti (1975) states African art expresses religious ideas, be it through wooden items, stools, calabashes, stones, sticks, pots, handicrafts, domestic animals, human bodies, masks, and carvings of wood and ivory. Ogunsanwo, Aiyeloja, and Owowa (2007) concur that art forms provide visual symbols for organising rituals and communicating an essential idea. On this note, Beier (1960: 6) summarises the religious root of traditional objects as follow: '[T]o the African, the art of creation is a sacred service rendered to the gods'; yet it is not only rendered to the gods, but also to humanity, as it serves as a medium for social interaction and integration. This is why various art forms constituted a rich system of communications in pre-colonial Nigeria. Attesting to this, Balogun (1979: 34-5) states:

> [A]rt is essentially a vehicle of communication in any society...[I]t...not only belongs to the level of human activity connected with spiritual values, but is also an active component of social organization, hence of man's ability to influence and modify his environment.

In other words, during the pre-colonial era, Nigeria had no written testament; instead traditions were documented orally within the functionality of paraphernalia. Systems way of written documentation could only be read by the makers. Based on this assumption, Africans express their worldview in various dimensions through art forms. Biobaku (1973: 105) summarises this as follows:

> [C]arving illustrates the life of the people in detail...[I]t enables the historian to build up a detailed picture of the dress, weapon, stools, utensils, ornaments, occupation and ceremonies of the...people...[H]owever, it is not concerned with individual sore events. As a source therefore, it is of value not as a chronicle but as a record of the cultural background...[I]ts selection of the themes and emphases, therefore represent a picture of...culture made by the whole people and not by courts or priests alone. It illustrates incidents and antidote of traditional life...[T]he subject matter of carving is confined almost entirely to man, his accessories and animals with which he comes into particular contact.

From all indications, traditional paraphernalia made by the indigenous peoples of Africa replicated intangible heritage in tangible forms. The Awka wood carvers create artworks that are intended to perform different functions in the community. Thus, whatever aesthetics merit the wooden carved objects may possess is obviously of secondary importance. What matters most in traditional paraphernalia is the object's intangible relevance to the community.

Awka traditional Paraphernalia: historical overview

Wood carving is a traditional handicraft practised for centuries in most parts of Africa. Ogunsanwo, Aiyeloja, and Owowa (2007) noted that the practice of woodcraft in West Africa is prominent in Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria. Similarly, Nwanna and Nwanna (2020) affirmed that Awka town in eastern Nigeria has been known as an arts/craft centre since pre-colonial times. The act of carving is an intangible heritage of the Awka people, learned primarily through apprenticeship. Akturk (2020) concurred that the craft of woodcarving is transferred from generation to generation. It employs complex craft techniques requiring religious, symbolic, and social knowledge. However, most wooden paraphernalia of Awka origin is rooted in religious knowledge. Attesting to the religious origin of Awka paraphernalia, Ilogu (1985) stated that the Awka people's skill in wood carving is connected with their position as special messengers of *Agbala* (goddess), the great oracle. Their traditional religious and cultural activities gave life and meaning to traditional paraphernalia. In the early 1960s, the religious and social importance of carved wooden objects saw the formation of the Awka guild of carvers. According to oral tradition, the carved wooden objects made by members of the guild of carvers were unique in the Igbo region of south-eastern Nigeria and beyond. During this period, their main work centred on carved entrance doors used to decorate title men's compounds and title men's prestigious stools. Their work was of such a high quality that people came from far afield to commission them, especially Europeans who used their stools as gift objects.

Theoretical framework

The premise for the theoretical framework of this study was drawn from Plato's theory of mimesis. Mimesis is a Greek word meaning 'imitation' or 'representation'. The act of representation is a concern crucial to arts (Frigg and Hunter 2010). This is because art turns a virtual subject into a representative object (mimesis), which is transformed into a subject again (existing in the mental universe of the artist and receiver) through the aesthetic

process (Donovan 2019). Minsaas (2005) following Ayn Rand's theory of mimesis, deduced that art is primarily a medium for the representation of reality. Plato theorised that all art is mimetic by nature, and that art is an imitation of life (Jonaqani 2022). Given this, art is restricted to the production of simulacra that is the creation of objects that resemble other objects (Juan-Navarro 2007). Plato's theory of art is derived from his ontological/metaphysical and epistemological/ethical view of reality (Amadi 2022). In expounding his theory, Plato gives a visual example of a carpenter and a chair to explain mimesis.

> The picture of the chair first existed in the mind of the carpenter as an idea. He then imitates [represents] the idea by producing the chair. Before an art[work] is created, the artist must have had it existed in his mind, in the 'world of ideas'. It is that idea in the artist's mind that is the reality. He depends on it to create his art by imitating [representing] the idea in a physical form to be seen, touched or heard using any medium[s] of choice (Ukim 2020).

Thus, what the artist has created is not real, but rather a copy of the original. Therefore, the carver is an imitator, what he carves are ideas of his unseen world. Given this, mimesis shows how an artist perceives the world. It implies that the carver represents perceived images with objects. The perceived images are within the realm of the carver's worldview. The carver's worldview is the summation of his perception of his cultural and natural environment. The perception answers the question of the relevance and potency of traditional paraphernalia. These artworks are supposed images or reflections of the carver's worldview. In other words, traditional artworks depict the intangible heritage of the Awka community wrapped in obscurity. Given this, Awka beliefs and practices were recreated into tangible form as traditional paraphernalia. Thus, the originality of traditional artworks depends on the intangibility reflected. Consequently, traditional paraphernalia that does not reflect any particular belief or practice is culturally irrelevant. Therefore, artworks are created by Awka carvers to represent a concept. In view of this, Awka do not consider art for art sake, because the physical object is not important; what *is* important is what the object represents. Against this background, the object is left to decay since the tradition it represents can be recreated in a new, tangible form. Therefore, the theory of mimesis posits that traditional paraphernalia is the representation of the Awka worldview recreated in tangible form.

Methodology

This study explores the intangibility of the tangible heritage of the Awka traditional community made manifest in the production of traditional paraphernalia. The study area is Awka metropolis, Anambra state, Nigeria. Awka town is of great interest to this study given its pre-colonial fame as a home of specialised craftsmanship. The study adopted the historical research design under the qualitative research method (Jovita 2015). This type of research involves a process of examining events in order to uncover accounts of what happened in the past (Berg 2001). The study attempts to uncover the historical functional role of cultural objects (title stool, figurines, *ikolo* drum and house) in Awka town. It is clear that historical research provides a window to understanding today, various symbols used in the past (Berg 2001). Given this, the study is set to showcase the historical relevance of cultural objects in the community. As Shafiee (2015) affirms, the historical research approach involves the systematic collection and evaluation of data in order to describe, explain and understand actions or events that occurred in the past. This method affords the study the opportunity to elicit data using oral tradition to describe and explain the functional role of cultural objects in the past. This is because knowledge of the past provides necessary information to be used in the present in order to determine how things may be in the future (Berg 2001). The purpose of using this approach is to infuse past meanings into the present-day function of Awka cultural objects. The instrument employed to achieve the above is oral tradition while the population of the study consists of the traditional orators at festive occasions. It is at traditional festive occasions that the intangibility of tangible heritage is expressed through narrations.

Data was elicited from oral traditions through recording, note taking and direct observation from May 2018 to May 2021. Oral traditions was employed, because all the intangible elements of culture are stored in human memory and transmitted through direct and indirect conversation. It is generally known for every society to spread its literature, history, rules, norms and other knowledge across generations (Halim et al. 2021) through oral narration. Africans in the pre-colonial era preserved their beliefs and practices in unwritten form in the memory of cultural performers (carriers). Therefore, oral tradition is the transmission of cultural items from one member to

another or others (Rosenberg 1987). It also refers to the dissemination of cultural materials through oral or oral discourse (Halim et al. 2021). The oral traditions of Awka town are usually recited by traditional orators (men with a vast memory of community cultural practices) at special events. These men chant in an orderly manner to entertain and educate the audience on the history of Awka town. Curtin (1968) aver that pre-colonial history will continue to lean heavily on the sources these men preserve, as tales and histories that are recited appear to have a better chance of survival. Festive occasions in post-colonial Awka are a platform where traditional orators chant the town's cultural history narrating the relevance of its cultural elements and products. During traditional festivals when a masquerade parade takes place in the community square, orators chant about the different villages' mask heads, naming each mask and its carvers, and telling the story of the relevance of the mask head to the community. This narration is designed to eulogise the mask bearer. Similarly, title stools are displayed on this occasion, with the orator eulogising, in the same vein, the stool and the title society it belongs to. The *ikolo* drum is beaten on such occasions while an orator narrates its history and its relevance to the community. Given this practice, oral traditions are particularly useful for understanding some aspects of African history (Curtin 1968) as elements of culture are transmitted through such a medium.

The study analysed thematically the data elicited from the oral traditions of Awka town. The goal of a thematic analysis is to identify themes or patterns in the data that are important or interesting and to use these themes to address the research or to say something about an issue (Maguire and Delahunt 2017). In order to achieve the above, the authors read through transcribed data and information elicited from direct observation on the usage of the cultural objects at traditional festive occasions. The reliability of the transcribed data was vetted by secondary historical documents from Awka town. Patterns among the functional roles of these objects were noted. As Braun and Clarke (2012) affirm by focusing on meaning across a dataset, thematic analysis allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences. The patterns were categorised into meaningful interpretations of the functional roles associated with the cultural objects both in the pre-colonial and contemporary Awka town.

Findings and discussion

Awka traditional paraphernalia

Awka traditional artworks are the products of cultural heritage. These resources not only possess intrinsic beauty and value but are also one of the main assets of tourism (Ezenagu 2020). They comprise tangible objects made by people for whom the objects played vital roles in their life (Ezenagu 2017). The traditional paraphernalia discussed here include the *ikolo*, traditional title stool, and masquerade mask heads. These traditional artworks performed functional roles in the ancient Awka community and are still relevant in modern-day life.

Ikolo

In traditional Awka society, the drum is a means of communication and information dissemination, as well as a means of commemorating different stages of life (Oyinloye 2017). Specifically, Kwame (2009: 54) observed that 'drums call the community together and are used to sound out histories, warnings and to praise chiefs and play tunes for royal, religious, secular and social dances and occasions…The drum becomes the medium through which the intangible heritage of drum language is expressed and communicated.' The *ikolo* drum (Figure 2) is a colossal wooden gong carved from a large Iroko tree. Basden (1966: 78) described the *ikolo* as the

> ancient tom-tom six feet in length and about three in diameter. One end shouldered off and shaped to represent the head and neck of a man[;] the other end was similarly carved with a woman's head. On one side, the drum was ornamented with six faces and three at each end, carved in high relief.

Basden further stated that the big tom-tom is not intended to be an instrument of music but rather is designed for spreading information and ritual enactment. In other words, the *ikolo* is a large musical wooden drum of the gods. Its beating is sacred and sounds like an invocation of duty to ward off danger. Ordinarily, its sound instils fear and awe in those who hear it. This is because the language of *Ikolo* in Awka is the quest for human needs. In the pre-colonial era, the beatings of an *Ikolo*, according to oral tradition, start with an incantation to awaken the ancestors and the gods. It then calls the towns' people in heroic way, naming the villages one after another, in each case narrating the activities and fame of each. It then switches to calling on the heroes – the warriors,

Figure 2
Ikolo
Source: Author's collection

the best gunmen (hunters), the best wrestlers, carvers, blacksmiths, orators and others. Such calls are intended to alert the community to the current emergency, to boost morale, and to prepare the towns' people for action. The sound of the *ikol*o in times of need is taken to be the voice of the gods. In this vein, one would agree with Agada-uyah (1983: 27) that an *Ikolo* is truly

> the drum of the heroes, the drum of the great, the drum of the brave, exclusive to the other type of hero, the war hero. A war hero is one who has successfully been to war[s] and returned victorious with human heads. Also the concrete symbol of military powers or one who has killed a tiger (Agu) or accomplished a super-human feat, to him the *ikolo* drum calls. The magnitude of the achievement echoes in the call of the *ikolo* drum.

Hence, *the ikolo* drum is socially restrictive and never danced to, but only calls people to action. Other occasions for the beatings of an *ikolo* include the commencement of a religious ritual ceremony and (rarely) at on death of a person of importance in the community (e.g. a title man, elder or priest).

Traditional title Stool

Traditional title stools are wooden stools designed for specific titles in most ethnic groups in Nigeria and Africa. They are among the regalia of office of title men and represent the spirit of the user. Among the Akan, artwork in the form of a stool represents the spirit of the dead. It is a physical reminder of the past chief and his deeds, and is venerated at festivals and other appointed times (Kwame 2009). However, title stools are not only channels to bridge the gap between the living and the dead; they are also staff of the office of the ruling class. In pre-colonial and post-colonial Awka communities, title men constituted the ruling class. The power, status, and right of title men to rule are attached to their regalia of office, which includes leopard skins, head-dresses, staffs, and a title stool (Clarke and Farr 1998). This regalia of office is worn by title men to signify and demonstrate their power and authority in the community. Highly placed title men of the *Ọzọ* title society sometimes may have their children or slaves carry the stool for them. Upon initiation into any stage of the Awka title society, a specific title stool attached to that position is made available to the new initiate. Oral tradition has it that there are four stages in the Awka title office: *Amanwulu*,

Figure 3
Ajaghija title stool
Source: Author's collection

Chi, *Ajaghija* and *Ọzọ*. However, only the *Ajaghija* and *Ọzọ* title positions have a stool of office.

Ajaghija stool

The *Ajaghija* stool (Figure 3) is also known as an Awka stool by the Europeans. The stool has an appealing simplicity of form and a unique carved pattern. It is the most elegant of all the Awka stools of title office. *The Ajaghija* stool looks like a wide wooden bowl resting on a stretching neck; it has four tripod-looking legs spread to the ground in a carved manner. The form of this stool and its beautifully carved pattern appealed greatly to the European settlers of the colonial era. The stool is traditionally intended only for *Ajaghija* title holders, but the colonialists broke with that custom and used the title stool for home decoration and gift purposes. This action increased the market demand for title stools and commercialise its previous cultural significance in Awka.

Ọzọ stool

The *Ọzọ* stool is an intricately carved stool with a depressed seat pad. The seat stands on intricate projections that serve as legs. Many of these 'stools are incised with geometric patterns which add textural interest to the forms' (Cole 1972: 80). This technique is known as chip-carving and is frequently dubbed the 'Awka style'. The style is by no means confined to the Awka area but is symbolic of the aristocracy in Awka. The stool described is the *Ajaghija* title stool. The *Ajaghija* title holder presents the stool during the *Ọzọ* title initiation ceremony.

The *Ọzọ* title stool is a symbol of Awka heritage depicting the sacredness of the society. In the pre-colonial Awka community, the *Ọzọ* title holder always sat on the title stool during any event. Frazer and Cole (1972: 85) observed that 'not only is an *Ọzọ* man forbidden to sit on the ground but also in some areas his stool accompanies him to the grave...[He is] buried sitting on it.' This assertion is supported with the findings of the excavated Igbo-Ukwu burial chamber of Igbo Richard in 1959 by Thurstan Shaw. In Ray's (2022) re-analysis of the excavation, the Igbo Richard burial chamber was said to contain the richly adorned corpse seated upon a wooden stool that had been decorated by two rings of bronze studs at the top and base. In Ray's opinion, the Igbo Richard burial chamber was potentially most appropriate for a rich secular leader such as a high-ranking titled *Ọzọ* man.

Masquerade Mask head

The mask head (Figure 4) is a piece of sculpture that is both artistic and functional (Fai 2010). The mask heads are facial coverings used to conceal the face of the wearer, who takes on a new identity. In other words, a 'mask head is a camouflage, covering, or disguise used to hide one's physical appearance either wholly or partially during a public performance' (Njoku 2020: 20). Asigbo (2012: 2) asserts

> [T]o non Africans, the sight of a 'masked man' might be interpreted to mean a simple disguise, an eccentric or in fact, a clown catching his fun; but to the African, masking is a serious engagement that requires not only mental and physical alertness but also spiritual fortification. This is because ancestral masks or spirit manifests are not mere human beings but manifestations from the spirit realm – of the ancestors and other disembodied beings seeking communion with mortals.

Hence, the traditional mask head is primarily the 'face of the gods'. It is an emblem of disguise used to conceal the human face through whom the spirit being has manifested. Thus, the mask serves as a medium for communion and communication between man and the supernatural (Fai 2010). Therefore, 'the mask, as a form of spirit-regarding art, is supposed to represent either the spirit of the ancestors or the gods of the land. This is why

Figure 4
Igbo mask head
Source: http://www.hamillgallery.com/IGBO/IgboObjects/IgboObject13.html (2021)

the Igbo referred to the mask as the "head of the spirit" (*isi-mmụọ* or *isi-mmánwu* in Igbo, *ekpo etubọm* in Ibibio)' (Njoku 2020: 53). In this guise, they invoke spiritual emotion. Mask heads are made from various materials. Including clay, bronze, brass and stone but are primarily carved from wood. These facial coverings were created within the perspective of the African worldview to fulfil the following purposes not limited to initiation, rituals, entertainment, celebration, healing and worship. Though the mask heads can be used for other purposes, they come alive only when used together with masquerade regalia. In other words, wooden mask heads were used in ritual performances with complex musical rhythms, dances, and costumes. For their full impact, they should be thought of as being in motion, surrounded by colourful garments and the rapid swaying and rustling of raffia skirts and arm fringes (Ferriers 1989). In this guise, 'a mask is nothing without the choreography that animates it' (Jean-Loup 2004: 85).

Thus, the African masking tradition is incomplete outside the masquerade regalia and the wearer. In Njoku's (2020: 20) opinion 'the masquerade is the theatrical or performing art form of the mask – that is, wearing the mask and its accessories and costumes – which electrifies the participants into a festive spirit.' This implies that the mask head cannot perform a public role without the full masquerade regalia. It is only in such appearances that the masked figure represents a spirit being. Njoku (2020) affirmed this stating that when the Igbo or Ibibio mask appeared with all the customs and paraphernalia of a masquerade, it was called 'spirit'. For this reason, oral tradition has it that masquerade in Awka is generally known as the 'living dead' and is sometimes addressed as the 'spirit of the ancestors' which cannot be seen without the mask head and masquerade regalia. Oyinloye (2017) attested that the mask represents the deities in the spiritual realm and the spirits of the departed ancestors. Since mask heads are facial representations of spirit beings they are infused with powers. Consequently, they are kept in the shrine and taken out only on specific occasions when they are intended to be seen during fleeting moments amid the whirl of dance, costume, and crowds (Clarke and Farr 1998). For such special occasions, the masks were removed from their shrines, washed, anointed with palm oil, and decorated with beads and cloth (Strickland and Boswell 1992). In essence, the African masking tradition is rooted in the masquerade cult.

The African mask head that is kept in a museum and is isolated from the masquerade cult is considered a mere object of amusement. Thus, in the absence of the intangible characteristics of the mask head, tangible heritage is incomplete. Given this, Clarke and Farr (1998) asserted that masking is an aesthetic experience whose excitement cannot be conveyed by a museum display. Therefore, only when accompanied by drummers, orators and music can the glamour of traditional mask heads be appreciated. On such occasions, the gods were said to be on stage, at which point the mortal performer, whose true identity is concealed behind the mask head, is possessed by the gods. Through this medium, the wearer receives messages from the gods, and sometimes the gods speak through the wearer by means of a strange language or performance.

From the preceding, Awka mask heads are appreciated for their spiritual features. For this reason, understanding the religious functions of these mask heads reveals their cultural, symbolic, and aesthetic significance. Performing mask heads in Awka (mask heads in masquerade regalia) include some of the following *Izaga, Okwonmma, Agaba,*

Idu, Oshiashili, Ajo-anu, Ijele, Ugo, Ojisiabaofia, Akum, Ojionu and *Adanma*.

Preservation technique of traditional paraphernalia

Generally, African traditional paraphernalia is housed in sacred spaces shrines, family altars, sacred groves, etc. Sacred spaces are designated for certain activities (Ezenagu 2016). Some sacred spaces serve dual purposes, as a centre for worship and as a living museum. Hence, the Awka *ikolo* drum is kept in one such sacred space to maintain its sacredness and prevent unauthorised usage. The *ikolo* special house (Figure 5) situated at *Umudioka* village square an open space where people can congregate at the sound of the *ikolo*. The sacred space where the Awka *ikolo* drum is kept was not dedicated to any god or goddess but to the entire community; consequently, it is hedged with sanctions. The building housing the *ikolo* could be described as a living museum because it preserves the intangibility of the object rather than its tangible features. Based on African curatorial practice, such objects were neither preserved nor conserved but were used as occasion demanded and replaced as needed.

Therefore, to the Africans, the object itself is meaningless and is left to decay. Only the function of the object is preserved, unlike the in Eurocentric museum where curators preserve the physical object. The totem poles preserved in the Canadian Museum of History were meant to die back into the ground or into nature and not be preserved in the museum (Nehaa 2023). Costa (2020) also affirms that, following ceremonial feasts in the customary house *(jeuw)*, sculpures were left in the forest to rot to release their ancestral power. It is not considered strange that, at designated sacred spaces paraphernalia is left untended in a tropical climate that is destructive of natural materials. This is because the Awka custom has it that carving is a skill bestowed upon them by the gods, so any service offered is to the gods. Therefore, [I] 'f the object is attacked by white ants, no attempt is made to preserve it because when it is destroyed, a new one must simply be made. It is an attitude that keeps the art alive instead of prolonging the life of the objects' (Beier 1960: 6). Because of this, worn-out ritual mask heads and termite-infested *ikolo* drums are burnt, and title stools especially that of *Ọzọ* society are – buried along with the owner. The worn-out artworks are burnt because the Awka community believes that the destruction of an object is not the termination of its value; instead, it creates job opportunities for the makers (Ezenagu and Oluwole 2014). Although traditional paraphernalia is kept in restricted

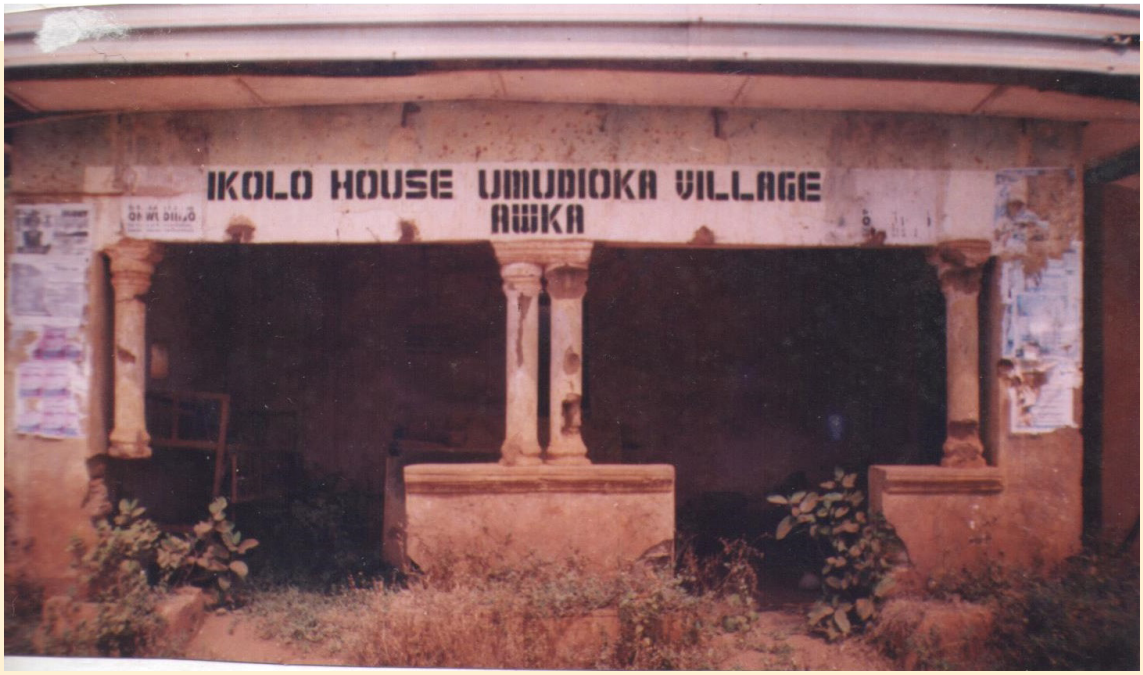

Figure 5
Ikolo special house
Source: Author's collection

spaces, no effort is made to preserve the items from destruction. Consequently, traditional artworks are preserved by the constant replacement of decayed objects.

Awka contemporary paraphernalia

'Contemporary' describes the 'latest' or 'current' art trends, differentiating what is being produced today from what came before (Ugochukwu-Smooth 2013). Such art forms depict different aspects of modern society, unlike traditional paraphernalia which 'expresses values, religious and philosophical, which the artist shares not only with his patron but with the whole community' (Fagg 2006: 74). In other words, contemporary Awka paraphernalia comprises artworks produced in recent decades by Awka indigenous artists. These artists have been exposed to western-oriented art programmes either directly or through attendance at institutions of higher learning. Hence, from the 1990s, African artists began to engage with contemporary reality in its most palpable form, exploring the political, psychological and sociological contexts of everyday life as fodder for creative expression (Ugochukwu-Smooth 2013). These artists are not institutionally controlled or guided; their works are based on personal expressions of modern society, a world away from the structures of Awka traditions. Their contemporary artworks are basically of aesthetic value and serve the purpose of drawing admiration. Such artworks are devoid of intangible characteristics unless they are attached to cultural institutions or activities in the community.

Such, modern artists abound in modern Awka society creating art forms that depict the current trend of events. The transition from traditional to contemporary art illustrates that artworks are not static, because 'for any art form to be valid must reflect the dynamics of its age' (Yusuf 1988: 44). By contrast, traditional paraphernalia reflected the then structures of ancient Awka community. In reality, traditional Awka evolved into a modern metropolis yet retained its essence – traditions. Thus, in keeping with the present age of globalisation, contemporary Awka artworks reflect the events of their time. Nevertheless, it is imperative to infuse in such artworks concepts of intangible heritage. Shaw, Bennett and Kottasz (2020) rightly stated that contemporary art provides a novel means to interrogate historical evidence and the institutions that conserve and curate it. Against this background, contemporary artworks play a vital role only when imbued with traditional concepts.

Traditional paraphernalia: the symbol of Awka intangible heritage

Traditional paraphernalia is Awka's symbol of its tangible and intangible cultural heritage. These invaluable works of art reveal the glamour of Awka's unique cultural identity. Segun (1988: 32) stated that 'a person needs to have a cultural identity, a point of reference'. Thus, as a marker of cultural identity, traditional paraphernalia is infused with the beliefs and practices of the community that differentiate one group from another. Hence, 'art is of the people, by the people, and for the people' (Fagg 2006: 74). Because of this, tribal art is functional only within the tribe and not outside it (Fagg 2006). Therefore, traditional paraphernalia was never regarded as mere works by a craftsman but rather as an embodiment of cultural beliefs and practices. For instance, replicating the gods and ancestors in carved wooden figurines not only manifests the human assumption of spiritual beings but also points out humans' belief in another world beyond the physical. This belief is similar to the masking tradition whereby the immortal possesses the mortal wearing the mask. The *ikolo* wooden drum is not a musical instrument. It serves the purpose of disseminating information for ceremonial, ritual and other sacred purposes. Sometimes, the beating of an *ikolo* drum proposes the voice of the gods and thus must be respected (Ezenagu and Oluwole 2014). In the past, homecoming warriors were greeted after a victorious battle with the beating of *the ikolo* drum.

Therefore, traditional paraphernalia tells the stories of its makers. In view of this, Morphy and Perkins (2006) agreed that artworks must be defined with particular traditions in their social and cultural context. Given this, Awka traditional paraphernalia embodies the community worldview. Awka's oral traditions are preserved and transmitted within its functionality. Hence, these artworks were the medium through which pre-colonial Awka natives documented and interpreted their traditions. This affirms the assertion that traditional paraphernalia is an embodiment of beliefs and practices. Therefore, Awka traditional paraphernalia 'is no product of romantic decadence [;] its image when properly understood, is rather that of a disciplined yet flexible classicism…[I]n traditional Africa[,] customary law is one of the ways in which a tribe distinguishes itself from its neighbours' (Fagg and Plass 1964: 7). Therefore, as a distinguishing trait, this paraphernalia gave Awka people a sense of belonging and a place in the global artistic tradition. Today, the Awka community takes great pride in its traditional paraphernalia.

Challenges of preserving traditional paraphernalia in Awka's contemporary community

Awka's traditional paraphernalia faces challenges from contemporary Eurocentric realities. Simpson (2007) states that colonial policies of Christianisation and assimilation sought to eradicate traditional languages, social systems, and cultural and ceremonial practices. Cormier-Salem and Bassett (2007) aver that modernity facilitated the spread of Islam and Christianity which transformed ancestral cults and profaned sacred places. Abungu (2007) concurred that the spread of Christianity and colonialism saw the mass plunder of African heritage right across the continent. This led to the looting of these artworks from sacred spaces. During colonial times, scientific expeditions carted off items of religious, spiritual, or cultural significance, and even everyday items related to people's wellbeing, in the name of ethnographic collection (Abungu 2007). The Nigerian colonial experience transformed traditional beliefs and practices within a Eurocentric paradigm. Following the transformation that came with Western culture, it is no exaggeration to say that Awka's contact with British colonial rule resulted in the modification of most of its cultural structures. Many examples of its tangible heritage, specifically ancestral shrines and wooden figurines, were burnt, while most of its intangible heritage – traditions – was abolished.

Therefore, Western culture 'contributed their share to undermining the traditional culture of Africa' (Seggy 1960: 32). African culture was undermined by and vulnerable to Western modification because of its roots in indigenous religions. Complex indigenous religious beliefs and practices that were at variance with Western culture were dismissed in derogatory terms. Thus, addressing indigenous religious practices as a fetish questioned the potency and relevance of traditional paraphernalia. Consequently, Stevens (1935: 7) lamented that 'what was definite in indigenous belief has become blurred, doubtful and discredited…[T]hus the conditions which fostered the old art are passing away and will not return. With them is passing the art which was sustained by the ancient traditions of ritual and worship'.

The role of traditional paraphernalia in indigenous religious practice undermined the relevance of artifacts in colonial society as they were misinterpreted as fetish objects and/ or idols. Buttressing the effect of the above association, Beier (1960: 10) opined that 'one of the difficulties the average Nigerian has in approaching traditional art is the fact that most of it is associated with traditional religion and this aspect of African culture has been so much maligned by Europeans, that some Africans actually believed that their fathers worshipped idols or fetish[es]'. Given this, missionaries were known to publicly burn fetishes not realising that they were destroying a great cultural heritage of the people (Beier 1960). Consequently, even today, some Nigerians will use the derogatory words 'primitive' and 'idol' in reference to artworks that are among world's the master pieces. Awka's traditional paraphernalia, enmeshed in the traditional religion, lost its place in the culture that created them. The above misrepresentation, misinterpretations and misconceptions of traditional paraphernalia were the consequences of Eurocentrism.

In addition, the Western-centrism of post-colonial Nigerian society promotes modern lifestyles. Such a lifestyle has brought about industrial manufacturing, which has replaced traditional carved production (Akturk 2020). In other words, modernisation has resulted in the obsolescence of craft in the practical world (Takuya and Takayama 2010). The introduction of modern art objects transformed the relevance of traditional paraphernalia from societal necessity to objects of curiosity in a museum – unlike in the pre-colonial Awka community, when these objects served various societal needs in sustaining and maintaining the different beliefs and practices of the community.

The museum, being a Western initiative for the preservation of cultural heritage proved unsafe for cultural objects – unlike African 'living museums' which are sacred spaces. In the sacred spaces, these objects were revered; but in a European museum, they were denied their primary duty and thus became dead. Against this background, Beier (1960: 6) argues that 'museums are necessary evils[;] they are, as it were[,] the mausoleums of culture. Museums are ideally suited to contain archaeological finds like Ife bronzes[,] but they are not the ideal place for works of art from a living culture'. Even so, the European-modelled museums have successfully preserved the tangible character of traditional paraphernalia, rescuing it from the threat of extinction but without its intangible features. As Fagg (2006) stated, the sculpture of one tribe is meaningless and unintelligible to people of another tribe because it is art divorced from its content of belief. Hence, the preservation and protection of traditional

artworks against modernity's destructive effects became a motivating factor for the existence of museums (Beurden 2015). Nevertheless, the African living museum that has engaged the intangibility of traditional paraphernalia stands to imbue contemporary art with such values.

Conclusion: the resilience of Awka traditional paraphernalia

Traditional paraphernalia across civilisations in Africa symbolise the culture of the makers. These objects were not mere artworks; rather, they were embodiments of the beliefs and practices of the communities that made and used them. Interpretation of these unique art forms simplified the complexities of African traditions that were wrapped in obscurity. This is the because traditional Awka community infused their worldview in their carved wooden forms. These unique pieces of art were the mainstay of pre-colonial Awka cultural institutions and activities. Despite the value of traditional paraphernalia in the pre-colonial Awka community, modernity, with its contemporary artworks, challenged the intangibility of these artworks. By preserving traditional paraphernalia in Eurocentric museums, Western civilisation viewed these intangible items merely as objects of curiosity. Nehaa (2023) rightly asserts that representatives of a living culture cannot be preserved within a museum exhibit. With the loss of their intangible characteristics, the tangible representations of traditional paraphernalia are transformed into lifeless contemporary artworks.

Therefore, the presence of contemporary artworks is not the challenge; rather, the problem has been the loss of the intangibility of traditional paraphernalia. Thus, one might say that the acceptance of Western civilisation led to the vulnerability of the intangibility of Awka's tangible heritage (traditional paraphernalia). Given this, Fagg and Plass (1964: 124) aver that 'the values of traditional art are being more and more undermined by the subtle changes of thought involved in the acceptance of western materialism, which is now battering on the remaining art traditions.' Despite, the loss of the intangibility of traditional paraphernalia, Martin (2010) opines that traditional practices will continue to be a vibrant part of the modern African experience. This is because Africans, and specifically the Awka community, cannot be separated from these elements of their cultural beliefs and practices. Against this background, traditional paraphernalia will continually be reproduced in contemporary art forms to embody and sustain Awka's intangible heritage. Under this guise, Awka's traditional paraphernalia represents the social environment of its makers at any given time.

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