



Awogbade Mabel
Ibenero Ikechukwu

The Use of African Traditional Art Symbols and Motifs

Study of some selected Paintings of
Tola Wewe



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PREFACE

This study is a documentation of the use of African traditional art symbols and motifs by Tola Wewe in his artistic expressions. It discusses and analyses the art symbols in some selected works of Tola. It also recognizes *ona*, and artistic movements that are commonly seen in the Yoruba and Igbo traditions. It also traces the origin and meaning and context of use. Today, Wewe is one of the few artists in Nigeria who not just employ the use of traditional art symbols and forms for the beauty alone but to preserve and protect the Nigerian culture and traditional believes. The photographs of Wewe's paintings revealing different kinds of motifs were also analyzed for a clearer understanding of how these motifs can be truly manipulated and creatively exploited to form masterpieces. This ceaseless, never-ending, persistent and relentless practice to art experimentations and production has made Wewe a man with an indelible landmark on the sands of time. Thus, the background of the artist and his immense contribution as an artist were also documented.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	i
Table of contents	ii

CHAPTER ONE

1.1	Background to the Study	1
1.2	Problem Identification	4
1.3	Scope of the Study	4
1.4	Aims and Objectives	5
1.5	Methodology	6
1.6	Significance of the study	7
1.7	Limitation of the Study	8

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

2.0	Traditional African Art	11
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2.1	The Concept of <i>Onaism</i>	14
2.2	<i>Uli</i> and the Contemporary Art Expression	15
2.3	<i>Nsibidi</i> and its Origin	16
2.4	Motifs and its Classification	16
2.5	Contemporary Yoruba Art	17

CHAPTER THREE

3.0	Data Presentation	19
3.1	Background of the artist	21
3.2	His voyage into art	22
3.3	Contemporary Contributions and Achievements	23
3.4	Shows, Exhibition and Workshops	27
3.5	Outstanding Awards	29
3.6	Techniques and Materials	29
3.7	Oral quotes on Tola Wewe	31

CHAPTER FOUR

4.1	Summary of findings	34
4.2	Motifs analysis based on their meanings and usage	54

4.2.1	The geometric motifs	54
4.2.2	The organic motifs	56
4.2.3	The techno morph motifs	58
4.2.4	The animal motifs	59
4.25	The bird motifs	61
4.26	The nature inspired motifs	62
4.2.7	The utilitarian motifs	64
4.2.8	The lettering motifs	65
4.2.9	The motifs and symbols derived from sculpture	67
4.3	The <i>Uli</i> motifs and its classification based on their origin, meaning and usage	68
4.4	The <i>Nsibidi</i> symbols and motifs	71
4.4.1	Animal types	71
4.4.2	Bird types	73
4.4.3	Floral types	74
4.44	Inorganic types	75
CHAPTER FIVE		
5.0	Conclusion	79
5.1	Recommendation	80

5.2	Areas for further research	82
	Bibliography	84

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

All over Africa, visual images and ordinary objects are used symbolically to communicate knowledge, feelings and values. Symbols play an important role in the African conception of reality. Traditional symbols and motifs are those characters, figures or marks used to represent an idea, thought or believe. Traditional art symbols are an essential part of a long artistic tradition in Africa and they remain the visual form to retain and record significant information just as the traditional art motifs. Africans use symbols to indicate a sacred site, the location of a waterhole and the means to get there, a place where animals inhabit and as a way to illustrate moon time stories. To understand and appreciate traditional art symbols imagine how you would indicate, record and recall essential information or place names or events in a non material world.

Since Africans travelled vast distances across their continent, significant information was recorded using symbols in regular ceremony. Sand painting and body painting ceremonies kept the symbols alive and remembered. Later, these symbols were transformed into a more permanent form using acrylic on canvas but the meanings behind these symbols remained the same. Generally the symbols used by African artists are a variation of lines, circles or dot. Similar symbols can have multiple meanings and the elaborate combination of these can tell complex stories. Combining the stories the African artist tells about the painting with an understanding of the meaning behind the symbols can lead to a greater appreciation of the work.

Many more use of these traditional art symbols can be found on painted and carved wood, leather, jewelry, tattoos, textiles and pottery. African women play a vital role in the development of African traditional art symbols. They use these symbols on the walls of their homes and on their pottery. These traditional symbols are believed to represent magical protection against adversity and the evil eye and are also believed to possess healing capabilities.

Another reason for developing these art symbols was that Africa was ridden with different types of sicknesses and parasitic diseases that devastated the ability of the people to resist other diseases, the same diseases that were little or of no threat to the people of the developed countries and so they try as much as possible to relate with the spirit world through this medium. Spirits protect man, they ensure success in life and provide security to man. These art symbols and motifs were used to bring the spirits closer to mankind as they serve as intermediates and provide secular communication between them.

The origins of African art lie long before recorded history. African rock art in the Sahara in Niger preserves 6000 year old carvings. The earliest known sculptures are from the Nok culture of Nigeria, made around 500 BC. Along with sub Saharan Africa, the cultural arts of the western tribes, ancient Egyptian paintings and artifacts, and indigenous southern crafts also contributed greatly to African art. The art often depicted the surrounding of nature and was often more of abstract interpretation of animals, plant life, or natural designs and shapes.

In a country with more than one-seventh of the continent's people and by far the most populated of Africa's continent, Nigeria is not just blessed with natural mineral resources but also rich in art. Nigeria is a country with diverse ethnic groups. These groups contribute greatly to the fact that Nigeria has a very rich culture and diverse art interests. In the traditional Igbo

society, *Uli* art forms, materials and ideas are often employed as some of the methods of objects the society used to motivate the people to prestige and class. *Uli* is a traditional and indigenous visual art forms, motifs and symbols that are used by the Igbo people of south eastern region of Nigeria to achieve the desired psychological and aesthetic satisfaction. Some argue that *Uli* is an expression of the people's capacity for creative design, which is firmly rooted in their experiences of life in the past, present and future. The design elements of *Uli* are cultural bound and deep rooted on the folklore of the Igbo cultural experiences. *Uli* is a style employed in a complex system of body painting and creation of wall mural using a vast catalogue of signs and symbols, and pattern to a distinctive representation of the Igbo Universe. Membership of certain in groups or age grades can also seek aesthetical satisfaction through the use of *Uli* designs and motifs.

The history of Nigerian art cannot be complete without making reference to *Uli* art forms and design. It is one of the major indigenous and rich cultural heritages that have transported a people's belief, values, communicative elements and creative ideologies into a unique and aesthetic art phenomenon. Many art forms have emerged during the years since Nigeria got her independence and even before her independence. Such art forms include textile, sculpture, ceramics, visual communication otherwise known as graphics and painting among others. Painting is that branch of the visual arts in which colour, derived from any of numerous organic or synthetic substances is applied to various surfaces to create a representational or abstract picture or design and so this research work analyses the use of these African Traditional Art symbols and motifs on some selected paintings from a contemporary and renowned Nigerian artist by name Tola Wewe.

1.2 Problem Identification

The essence of any research work is to intensively as well as extensively make proper enquires in order to find facts. Painting in our own traditional art symbols will go a long way to develop our culture and give us a sense of belonging but many art schools today lack that traditional art culture and prefer to associate themselves with realistic works forgetting that realism is a borrowed culture. This is indeed a threat to the growth and development of traditional art symbols and motifs in the country.

Another problem is that among the few artists who try to introduce these traditional art symbols and motifs in their paintings still fall victim of “chanciness usage of these forms”. Therefore, this research endeavor will make an effort to encourage the use of these symbols in paintings and identify the problems that artists commonly encounter in representing traditional art symbols in their paintings. Traditional art symbols and motives cannot and should not be used indiscriminately or haphazardly on paintings or else they stand to lose their true meaning in respect to the entire work.

1.3 Scope of the Study

This research will analyse the images that appear in the paintings of Tola Wewe and will try as much as possible to focus on the use of traditional art symbols and motifs on his works. It will also partially discuss *Uli*, Yoruba traditional symbols and onaism as a movement because there is a way one can discuss Tola Wewe without mentioning onaism. This is because he is a founding member of the Yoruba symbol (*Ona*) and most of his works reflects the use of the movement.

Furthermore, all the works to be analysed here were randomly selected from 1998 to 2010. Such works include “once upon a time” 2004, “family” 2003, “marriage” 2004, “heavenly

guest” 2001, “folktale” 2002, “polygamy” 2001, “in the beginning” and many others including some untitled works but really interesting paintings. This research will also focus on the themes of these works and how Tola has been able to achieve these themes using these traditional art symbols. Furthermore, the researcher will try to analyse the originality, simplicity, surface texture and mastery of colours of these paintings in view.

1.4 Aims and Objectives

This research work is aimed at achieving the following objectives.

1. To show to the world the real meanings of these symbols through Tola Wewe’s paintings. Tola Wewe has shown mastery in the use of these symbols and signs combining them with *onaism*. Many artists today use these traditional symbols without really knowing the meanings of the signs. Take the famous comb symbol in the Yoruba culture for instance or the marriage symbol of the Igbo *nsibidi* culture. The marriage symbols means union, togetherness, oneness and other closely related themes can come along, but you discover that a painter can finish a work and feels the background needs more touch or is looking empty and needs to fill up the background with “stunts” what he does is browse through the symbols maybe from a book or an archive, looks for the one that is interesting to or that catches his eyes without necessarily checking up the real meaning of these symbols and use them. This is indeed a problem and this research is aimed at trashing out that injurious act in painting as it stands as a threat to not just the whole theme of the entire work but to the artist as he runs the risk of not been able to face intense criticism.
2. The research also tries to encourage the use of our traditional art symbols in painting and other forms of art. In Nigeria today, not many artists use these symbols in their paintings as means of expression or as a part of the painting. This is not encouraging as many art

institutions and colleges prefer to teach and encourage more of realism rather than abstractism in paintings, having in mind that abstractism encourages the use of these traditional art symbols. Painting in our own symbols and styles rather than copying the western people will go a long way to give us that sense of belonging and make us feel home and help preserve our culture than letting it go into gradual extinction. This research work will go a long way to encourage the use of traditional African art symbols as it clearly analyses its importance.

3. The final aim of this research is to emphasize the benefits of these traditional art symbols and signs on paintings and on the artist as a whole using Tola Wewe as a case study. It is significant to state here that Tola Wewe is well known today because he did his homework well. He has mastered the use of these traditional signs and symbols, mastered the right colour combinations and mastered abstractism in general. This has indeed favoured him as it is argued that what Chinua Achebe is to Nigerian literature is what Tola Wewe is to the visual arts of his country. Both are respected, have enjoyed international recognition and serve as an example to others. Both, too, go back to the traditional African culture. Wewe reverts his figures to elementary, colourful forms and symbols and makes them the main characters in the stories that he remembers from his childhood. Just as Achebe mirrors the Igbo culture, all kinds of symbols from the Yoruba culture can be found in the paintings of Tola.

1.5 Methodology

Here, the ways, means, approaches, systems and procedures exercised by the researcher to carry out this research work is analysed. Intensive library research, field investigation and questionnaire based on structured questions were carried out. Photographs and illustrations of the

artist's work in galleries, private and artist's personal collections were taken and used as an instrument of analysis to establish the indigenous sources of his forms and motifs. Journals, exhibition catalogues and newspaper publications were reviewed to establish facts about the artist's background, artistic creation and contribution to contemporary Nigerian art.

The internet was also used as a means of data collection to establish facts. For a better understanding of the origin and meaning of the motifs used by Wewe, Igbo wall paintings, Yoruba shrine paintings, calabash carvings, traditional wood carvings and body markings were studied. The researcher also deemed it fit to extract, identify and reproduce in detail these forms and motifs. Later they were put together to form the appendix.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The study of the use of African traditional art symbols on some selected works from Tola Wewe's paintings will bring into lime light the real meaning of art symbols and motifs. People will also understand art from another perspective. Many people especially non-artists see art as just drawing or panting something beautiful, beautiful in the sense that it must appear real and have the natural colour. For instance they believe that if you want to paint a landscape then the sky must be blue, the foreground must have that sandy colour, the trees must be painted with the same as nature and the human forms if any must appear real. This notion must be changed and this research work is geared towards making sure that people would understand beauty not just from natural colours but from colours that are not physically present in what they are painting like the landscape for instance. They would also see beauty in abstractism and in the usage of these traditional symbols.

One can actually paint that same landscape using a different colour from the normal sky blue for the sky, using a different colour for the foreground and a different colour for the trees.

He can introduce some motifs and symbols in the scene maybe on the back of the trees or even in the skies. This does not mean he has not interpreted the landscape before him but he has done it in an extraordinary way and this time in the traditional way. If the two landscapes are placed side by side and an art critic is called upon to appreciate them, it would not be surprising that he would prefer the one with the symbols and motives applied to it rather than the other one that looked just exactly or close to nature.

Furthermore, this study will go a long way to encourage artists to use the right symbols and motifs for the right idea to be represented. Some artist have very good abstract paintings but still run into problems with their finishing and some have good abstract ideas and still have that problem of interpretation. These are indeed problems and this study is bent on providing solutions to the problems. However, this research will encourage teachings of abstract art in higher learning institutions, art schools and colleges. Many art schools today hardly practice their own native art and would rather prefer to teach realism to their students. Some of the schools already have the culture of traditional art but because they are not encouraged by the larger society they tend to derail from it.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

Every research work must have a limitation. These are the restrictions, shortcomings or drawbacks that hinder the researcher from carrying out the research work as he or she would have wanted to. Tola Wewe is a very busy person and one of the major drawbacks of this study was his unavailability. Many art critics believe that most visual artists have little or no time for themselves, their families and not to mention interviews. If they are not in one exhibition or the other they are working on personal projects, contract works or they might just be working in their studios. This will really make it difficult for the researcher to get in touch with his target.

Another factor that stands as a stumbling block to this research work was his location and distance. Tola was formally based in Lagos state and has relocated to Ondo where he is presently the Commissioner for Culture and Tourism and so the researcher might find it uneasy to travel to Ogun state to visit him.

Another thing that stands as a setback for this research work is the time frame. The given time is short and this type of research requires a lot of time, time for the interview, time to collect the data and time to adequately study the data. Finally, the worst of all limitations is the money factor. The finance to travel, the finance to hire a good photographer who will take and print all the pictures involved for the research and the finance to book for a room in Ogun state because the researcher will not only be travelling to Ogun state but be prepared to find somewhere to stay or even rent a room around because he is not certain if the interview would last for only one day.

Despite all of the shortcomings mentioned above, the researcher has decided to take every prospective limitation very serious. He promises to go on the extra mile and makes sure that he arranges an interview with Tola regardless of his instability in movements. The researcher will make it known to Tola the importance of the research and the countless benefits people would stand to gain when the research work has attained full completion. The researcher has equally deemed it fit to carry the responsibilities of providing the finance by him. He would seek for financial assistance from friends and loved ones by making them see reasons with him and encourage him in carrying out this research work and in the absence of cooperation from these people he is willing to fall back to his life savings to carry out the research work. Indeed travelling to Ogun state could be stressful but the researcher has deemed it fit to carry upon his shoulders the inconveniences, stress and above all willing to take the risk.