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Sculpture as objects of divination among the Urhobo of the Niger Delta, Nigeria: An Overview

Austine Emifoniye¹

ABSTRACT

Among the Urhobo of the Niger Delta in Nigeria, divination is common practice. Within the traditional mode, divination is an avenue for soliciting answers to questions that are seemingly beyond the devotee's comprehension. Within the shrine are ritual objects that are believed to facilitate the divination process. These may include sculptures, installations, crafts, beads, shells, ornaments and other items. Sculptures as works of art, may adorn shrines, but they also have ritual and other functions, which has received some scholarly mention. However, not much has been done about the use and efficacy of sculptures as objects of divination. This paper studies the use of sculpture in the divination process, and the basis of belief in its efficacy for divination among the Urhobo. The research adopted exploratory methods, using unstructured interviews, analysis of visual elements in selected shrine sculptures and a number of literary sources. The findings show potentials, which may trigger a re-thinking of sculpture as objects of divination in contemporary art discourse.

Mots clés: Urhobo, Sculpture, Divination, Ritual Objects, Traditional, Contemporary.

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1. Introduction

The Urhobo consists of a group of autonomous communities situated mainly in the present day Delta State, in the Lower Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. The Urhobo are the fifth largest ethnic group in Nigeria with a population of over two million people (Ekeh, 2006)². They are a homogenous mix of about twenty-two autonomous groups of people with varying dialects within a common language and cultural framework. The Urhobo occupy eight local government areas in Delta State of Nigeria (Ojaruega, 2015). The cultural practices of the people are similar to their neighbors, notably the Ijaw, Itsekiri and Isoko probably because of close proximity and historical affinity³. Consequently, aspects of

¹ University of Lagos, emifoniye@yahoo.com

² Peter Ekeh was a retired professor and foremost authority on Urhobo History. His book - History of the Urhobo People of the Niger Delta, published by the Urhobo Historical Society, New York has been cited several times on Urhobo history and culture.

³ This is also true for many cultures in the entire sub-region of Delta State.

their belief system bear similarities with others, and tend to be valid and tenable for the larger group. Ikime (2006:498) observed this in his study of relations between Isoko and Urhobo groups.

Among the Urhobo people, divination is an essential part of the people's socio-religiosity and cultural life. Many visitors to shrines do so for divination purposes, although tourism and other factors can be important reasons too. Diviners are believed to have an ability to look into the spirit realm, and to see what other humans cannot through a divination process, which involves the use of ritual items and imagery. Nabofa (2004:37) examined this in his study of how visual imagery and practices are developed from religious beliefs among the Urhobo. The visual language of Urhobo art forms was also the subject of a study by Odokuma (2009). Art especially sculpture plays important roles in the shrine, and is essential to the rituals, as well as the people's social and religious life in general as with many African cultures. This can be deduced from social and religious ceremonies where three-dimensional wooden sculptures, masks and masquerade forms play important roles.

There has been some scholarly discuss on the connection between Urhobo sculpture and religion. Omatseye and Emerienwen (2010:530) observed, as with many African cultures, the Urhobo believe that ancestors and spirits, which are represented in sculptures act as intermediaries between the human community, the gods and their creator. The existence of the supreme God who is creator of the lesser gods and all things is at the peak of the Urhobo religious belief⁴. This concept, which includes ancestors, spirits and deities as part of the lesser gods (Orhero, 2017), are part of the Urhobo religiosity. Divination is done on the premise that lesser gods and spirits can be contacted through it to get solutions to everyday life problems. The fear of the unknown and the quest to control natural causes drives those so inclined to find answers through divination in shrines. The fear of the unknown is also the reason why, as Agbegbedia (2015) puts it, every dead person is accorded a proper funeral rite among the Urhobo, for if it were not done, the spirit of such a dead person wanders round the community, and posts danger to those still alive. Odokuma (2013:241) describes the presence of sculptures in shrines as therapeutic in reference to their functionality. She gave instances of small sculptures used in conjunction with herbs for the treatment of infertility in women.

There are different shrines according to the deities they represent among the Urhobo. Diviners who are usually priests, herbalists or spiritualists are available in the shrines for the divination requests of devotees. Although each shrine has its ethos, the presence of sculpture and/or artefacts within the shrine appear to be common to many of them. The research examines this against the background of belief on their relevance in divination, which as a process, involves feedback from the spirits to the devotee seeking answers to specific problems. It will show how morphology of the sculptural forms, individual experiences, myth and faith enhances belief in the potentials of shrine sculptures as objects of divination. It briefly examines the deification process of sculpture, draws parallels from interviewees' experiences with the visual analysis of selected sculptures to arrive at its conclusion.

2. Deification, myths and shrine sculpture

The performance artist, Jelili Atiku recounts how through a special ceremony, small wooden figurines can be embodied with the vital force that evoke spiritual presence and energy during his performance⁵. The process Atiku stated, involves the use of incantations, and special rituals with specific herbal concoctions that attract the vital force into the wooden sculptures. This process is collaborated by Pa Edematie⁶ speaking on the process of deification of a ritual image for an ancestral shrine. As part of an elaborate ceremony, libation is poured; the blood of the animal sacrifice is sprinkled on the image (sculpture) as the ancestor or deity is invoked by calling out the names. This process embodies the image with the presence of the invoked spirit for divination and other purposes. The same process follows all sculptures used as objects in shrines. The awe associated with them are further enhanced by myths of particular deities, which may be family, clan or community based. These could be stories of exploits in times of war like *Iphri*, protection of family members like *Irinwin*, and the visions of individual protective spirits like the *Oran*. These stories are passed down from one generation

⁴ This belief is consistent with other indigenous cultures in the Niger Delta of Nigeria.

⁵ Jelili Atiku (May 2020). Online interview with the author. Jelili spoke about his personal experience with embodying images with the vital force before using them for his performance art.

⁶ Pa Edematie (Jan, 2021). This assertion was made during an interview with the author on deification and ancestor worship among the Uvwie Urhobo.

to another until it becomes established as family or communally accepted myths, which form the basis for certain ritual actions.

A typical Urhobo shrine is a confluence of several objects, images and ornaments. However, because shrine sculptures are symbolic images of deity, they appear to be the more important and dominant. Sculptures in wood and copper alloy are present in many shrines, but wood is the most prevalent perhaps due to its availability naturally in the area. It is also light-weight and easy to move around when the need arises during religious ceremonies for instance. Many of the known Urhobo wood sculptures of antiquity are shrine figures. This fact underlie the relevance of wood as a sculptural medium and their role in the shrines. Wood is easy to paint on and can be replaced easily when it becomes degraded due to age, weathering or insect attack. Not all shrines have sculptures in the sense of carved or modeled images or figurines; however, this study focuses on shrine sculptures relevant to the divination process.

3. Morphology and analysis

An understanding of the morphology of shrine sculptures is central to their perception as objects of divination. Visual components of shrine sculptures are replete with symbols that enhance perception and encourage faith or fear, both of which are essential to belief and individual experiences. The morphology of sculptures differ according to the type of shrine and the spirits or deity they embody. This is done following established perceptions and the myths surrounding the existence of the deity. This essay analyzes sculptures in three different types of shrine: *Oran*, *Iphri* and *Irinwin* (ancestor). Usually, a shrine may have several sculptures with the same or similar morphology.

Plate 1. An *Oran* sculpture is for divination related to personal protection and well-being. Typically, they are small sculptures usually of abstracted human forms in seated position. A divination related to the personal protective spirits or *oran* is not complete without the *oran* sculpture. Most *oran* are less than a foot high, frontal, with arms resting on the knee. The *oran* is basically sculpture in the round, which convey the appearance and impression of alert deities watching over their devotees in a seated position. The *Oran* is carved from wood, which becomes tainted with gin and kaolin with its usage in divination over time.

Plate 2. The *Iphri* sculpture symbolizes the deity of war, aggression, revenge and all malevolent attributes. The morphology is a mixture of geometric and biomorphic forms carved from wood. The biomorphic forms are half-animal and human with protruding teeth, sharp edges, fierce and imposing superstructure. The sculpture could be up to four feet high depending on the social and religious significance given to the particular shrine housing the *Iphri*. The mythological perception of *Iphri* is that of a fierce and mysterious creature, vengeful and generally malevolent. Divination using *Iphri* as medium is also in line with its perceived attributes. Because of *Iphri's* malevolence and other attributes, devotees are usually cautious when divining through *Iphri*

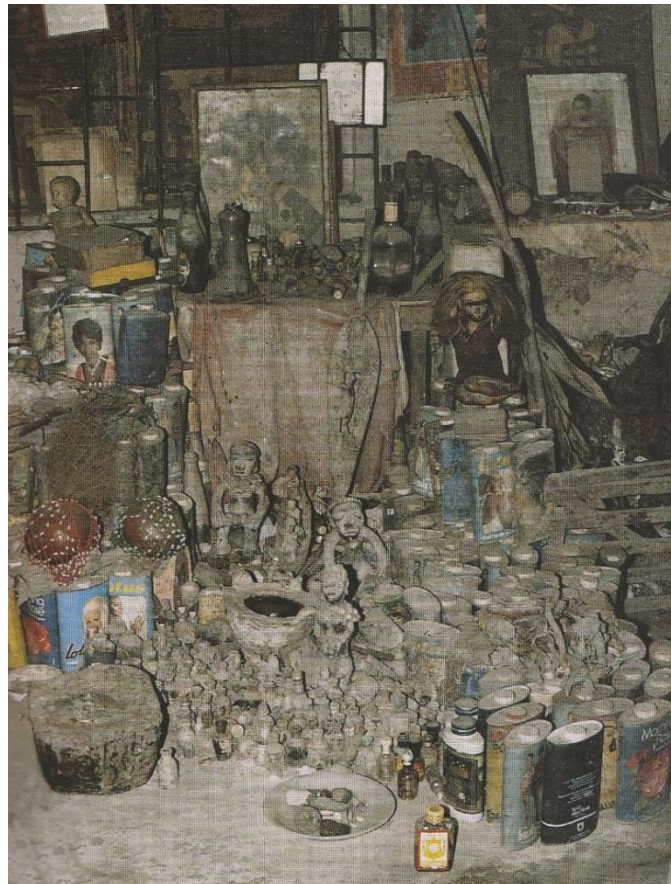


Plate 1. An Orhan shrine with several Eran (pleural for Oran) Sculptures from Orho-Agbarho in Urhobo land (2001).

Photo Source: Perkins Foss – ‘Where Gods and Mortal Meet’.

Plate 3. *Irinwin* or Ancestor is for divination on family matters, fortunes and protection of the family lineage. Believed to be means of receiving messages and direction from the departed elders of the family, *Irinwin* is a highly revered shrine. Sculptures of *Irinwin* are both male and female, usually sculpted to realism in wood, clay or cement. The *Irinwin* is also painted mainly in white, which symbolizes peace and purity, sometimes wearing a hat (for male), seated or standing and adorned in normal family dress modes. Attempts are made to incorporate items that are considered proper dress mode in the *Irinwin* sculpture. The environment of the shrine may be decorated too to please the *Irinwin* to ensure favorable divination. Like most Urhobo sculptures, the *Irinwin* sculptures are frontal and rigid, may be holding a staff or other ritual instruments, or simple at alert with arms straight downwards aligned to the sides of the body.



Plate 3. An Urhobo Ancestral (*Irinwin*) Shrine
Photo Credit: pintest.com



Plate 2. An *Iphri* Personal Shrine Sculpture.
Photo Source: pinterest.com

4. Importance of shrine sculptures

One of the salient purposes for the institution of personal, family or community shrine is to solve problems by providing avenue for divination. Perhaps the main significance of sculptures in the shrine is their position as symbolic images and representation of deity. *Iphri* sculpture for instance is 'the personification of aggression and malevolence'⁷ that is symbolic of the *Iphri* deity, while an *Oran*, sculpture is a protective spirit personified. The belief that continuous ritual action strengthens the persona embodied in the sculptures encourage elaborate ceremonies, which in turn strengthen faith among practitioners. Sculptures act as ritual objects within the shrine. It is not unusual for priests to place gifts brought in by devotees in front of the sculptures as an offering to the deity personified in the sculpture. The priest is able to tell by divination if the gifts or sacrifices are accepted. This may come as a prelude to further consultation and divination.

Sculptures aid exoteric communication with the deity represented. Chief Priest Monije in an earlier interview with the author on the *Ohworu* deity of Uvwie, recalled the incidence of a sculpture stolen from a certain shrine and sold to some foreigners⁸. All attempts to make the shrine function normally afterwards proved abortive because of the absence of the particular sculpture, reported to be over a hundred years old. The priest could not communicate anymore with the deity, which the sculpture personified. Further to communication, sculptures act as objects of focus within the shrine. It

⁷ Perkins Foss (2004). *Where Gods and Mortals Meet* is a valuable book covering many aspects of Urhobo art and culture.

⁸ Ameh Tatare Monije (1988). Statement was made during an interview on *Ohworu* deity in Effurun

is not clear, from Monije's account, whether the inability of the priest to communicate with the deity is because of the priest's inability to focus as a result of the absence of the sculpture (which was his object of focus), or that the deity as Monije puts it, simply became inaccessible to the priest henceforth. The point to note here is that the absence of the sculpture stalled the priest from continued consultation and divination with the deity concerned.

Arguably, aesthetics was never a consideration for the use of sculptures for divination purposes. Functionality instead was the goal, as sculptures are put into service in the shrine following elaborate rituals. Odokuma (2008) collaborated this in her study of the structure and functions of some Urhobo wood sculptures. The artisanship and aesthetic qualities of many of the shrine sculptures are undeniable. However, irrespective of our concept of aesthetics which is today coloured by western idealism, the African traditional carvers must have worked within an aesthetic formula to make pieces of sculpture accepted for ritual purposes⁹.

5. Sculptures as divination objects

The divination process may begin with the presentation of gifts to the deity with the priest acting as an agent and the sculptures as the persona of the deity. In some shrines, there are specified charges for divination, which may be monetary, the provision of certain items or both. In many instances, these items are placed in front of the dominant sculpture in the shrine before prayers or incantations are offered. In the shrine, this introductory activity leads to questioning of the seeker by the priest on the purpose of their visit to the shrine. The priest then looks towards the sculpture and repeats the same words before throwing the oracle¹⁰ on the floor. Sometimes, the seeker may be asked to speak directly to the deity while looking at the sculpture after the presentation of gifts or consultation items. This signals the start of the divination process. The priest ask a few more questions before asking the deity for solutions. This process ends with an announcement of the acceptance of the items presented to the deity and the prescription of sacrificial items to bring on the next visit or what to do with the items to be procured. In rare instances, the diviner may announce that the deity refuses to accept the items. Where this happens, it is assumed that the devotee is unclean, evil or responsible directly for the issues at hand. They may be asked to go back home with the items they came with, or sometimes, appeals are made with the provision of more items.

Shrines are rated according to the jurisdiction of the deity associated with them. While family shrines are mainly for divination contact with ancestors of the particular family, there are larger ones, which have thematic reference, or territorial jurisdiction. Deities with thematic references are consulted on issues related to those areas. Territorial or community shrines are often bigger, containing one or several deities embodied in the sculptures. According to Pa Edematie, most shrines provide divination service as part of the daily routine of the priest¹¹.

6. Method

The study used Psychoanalysis and Iconography in its analysis of the shrine sculptures. While psychoanalysis deals with the unconscious significance of works of art (Adams 1996:176)¹², iconography on the other hand deals with the story the image tells from its visual attribute (1996:36). The research tied the results of this analysis to the deductions made from the interviews and the literary sources consulted for the study.

7. Findings and conclusion

This research looked at sculptures as objects of divination among the Urhobo. Its study of some of the roles sculpture plays in divination show they are vital to the process. That sculptures has always had a place in the socio-religiosity of the Urhobo and indeed other indigenous cultures of Africa is not in doubt and has severally been a subject of scholarly discuss. The findings show that beyond being objects of religious ceremonies and rituals, there are claims that shrine sculptures evoke a presence

⁹ This view aligns also with Magaret Trowell's submission on African aesthetics.

¹⁰ The oracle is the divination apparatus. It can be stringed cowries, kolanuts or beads.

¹¹ Pa Edematie (ibid)

¹² Adams quoted from Sigmund Freud's theory on Psychoanalysis.

that assists the diviner in the divination process. The diviners interviewed claims to hear the deity speak through the sculptures during divination. They also insist that only the initiated could hear the voice of the deity. They maintained that the elaborate rituals associated with the deification of shrine sculptures is responsible for this phenomenon. The satisfaction derived by devotees who patronize the system, encourages continuous practice by priests whose livelihood depends on it. The research also noted that claims of mysterious encounters after visits to shrines told by devotees, of mystical beings encountered in dreams or visions which they trace to sculptures encountered in the shrine during divination encourages further faith and patronage. Although the experiences are largely personal and metaphysical in nature, the strong impression on devotees psyche are worth investigating further.

The development of faith and the institution of elaborate rituals has over many years impressed on the consciousness of the diviner and the devotee alike, the sacredness and potency of sculptures in the divination process. The claims that deities speak through sculptures to priests and devotees during divination was difficult to verify empirically because of the metaphysical nature of the dialogue, but the information cannot be overlooked either. The insistence that only the initiated may have access to such privilege however, restricts an objective analysis of the claims for the uninitiated, but are viable reasons for further enquiry.

Based on the outcome of this study, there is evidence that shrine sculptures are considered objects of divination among the Urhobo via esoteric and metaphysical means. It is also clear, that diviners and devotees alike have a basis for believing so. The study therefore recommends further enquiry into the subject for more insight. The initiation of a researcher into the priesthood of a deity as suggested by diviners interviewed could be considered as a way forward in developing a deeper understanding of what goes on during the divination process, to enrich future researches. These enquiries may have far-reaching implications for the rethinking of sculpture in contemporary discourse as objects of divination.

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