BENIN THINGS OF THE RIVER: THE ART OF MARGARET OMORAGBON AND ROSE IGBINOBAN

John Ogene

Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Benin, Nigeria

Abstract

The history of Benin and its arts organizations, the predominantly patriarchal guilds of bronze and wood workers, has resulted in other art forms, especially those involving women, being marginalized in mainstream research. Female artists have also been ignored in Benin’s art history, a problem of gender bias worthy of further examination. This essay focuses on the role of women in Benin art by looking at chalk, mud and alternative materials as medium, and the work of such artists as Margaret Omoragbon and Rose Igbinoba who produce “river items” (evwin eze) that they sell in the kevwin kevwin market in Benin city. Among these items are abstract images of the male and female body, reminiscent of the woman of Willendorf which, though religious and ‘medical’ in focus, have their own aesthetic appeal.

Keywords: Art, women, Benin, river items

Introduction

Firstly and often, discussions on Benin art, is predominantly based on Benin tradition, and the “traditional canons and assumptions of Western art history… which values the notion of genius and confers it exclusively on men.” (Adams 1996). This Patriarchal dilemma is further described by Kaplan (2007) with the fact that “women are the least known and represented segment of society in the royal court art of Benin, Nigeria”. Hitherto, it is common place to discuss the Iguneghae or the Igbesamwan guilds of Benin, which pride in the exclusivity of males in the art making traditions and the taboo of female participation. The singular example of Elizabeth Olowu having broken the age-long male exclusivity in bronze casting is yet to offset the stereotype. Secondly, while a lot may have been written about Olokun related art, attention is seldom focused on individual artists (particularly women) who engage in the production of artworks for his worship. While (Ben-Amos, 1995) elaborates on Olokun mud shrines, there is no mention of amaze figurines and other miniature items produced by women for Olokun worship. It is hereby considered that traditional female artists in contemporary Benin City are ignored by omission and unaccounted for, and that creating boundaries of canon diminishes the inclusive potentials of their participation. This critical pattern applicable to women artists in Benin City whose visibility and representation have been ignored by omission, justifies the need to locate and document them. This is so because, the contribution of women at various levels of development in society is paramount and their omission in creativity is injurious to society.

Evwin Eze Art

Besides bronze, ebony wood and ivory which form the core of Benin artforms, there have been other materials with which artworks are created by artists in Benin City. These range from raffia, mud, kaolin, beads, cloth, shells, and cowries to animal skins and others. Some of the works produced from this array of materials are often seen displayed for sale in numerous markets in the city. These market lines operated mostly by women are popularly known as kevwin kevwin. These assortments of items are mainly sold to worshippers of such deities as Ogun, Sango and Olokun who use them for rituals. These items differ from various mud sculptures often found on community shrines in places like Urhonigbe in Orhionmwon local government (Gore, 2007). Popular among the artworks in the Kevwin Kevwin are evwin eze - literally translated as “things of the river,” or “river items” used by Olokun believers. It has been canvassed in certain spheres (Ononeme, 1995) that the dearth of literature on the art of Olokun which is hereby classified as evwin eze may be due to their temporal and or fragile nature. Nevertheless, the fragility or temporal nature does not diminish their status as artworks in their own rights.
Samples from which this research was derived were drawn from Oliha market in Benin City. Items found were of particular importance because of the variety of objects displayed for sale. Besides various objects ranging from monkey skulls to tiger skins, there were creative miniature objects such as amaze (human image), ekpoki, ukuse (gourd rattle), oko (mini coffin), ada vwe eben, (sword) ugbukpon (red and white clip of cloth), aza vwe gogo,(bells) ema (drum), orhue (native chalk), isaen (key), igo ovwohon (eagle feather), ikpigho (cowries) emaba, oghoye, ebawhue (parrot feather), igheghan and several other items. Mrs Eguavoen informed the present writer that some of the listed items are produced by women. According to Mrs Vero Eguavoen who owns shop 1002, evwin eze objects are usually packaged by women in the shops and cannot be purchased separately. She further said that the objects are for Olokun worship and that although they may appear small in size, they become enlarged upon being presented to Olokun in the river. Confirming Mrs Eguavoen’s claim was Mrs Margaret Omoragbon (nee Ogbomwan) who also owns a studio and shop where she produces her miniature amaze sculptures of chalk and mud. The amaze sculptures according to the women are used for sacrifice in case of ailments and spiritual affliction. It is important to appreciate these women and their works as vital aspects of Benin art. Although this article focuses on two women artists of this genre, it is only a representation of the numerous traditional contemporary female artists in Benin City who are engaged in the practice of making or selling art for a living.

Margaret Omoragbon: 1947 - 2013

One of the creative evwin eze artists of note in Kevwin Kevwin market is Mrs Margaret Omoragbon (nee Ogbomwan). She was born in 1947 at Uwelu village of Benin City. Her interest in art according to her dates back to 1955 in primary school at Ogida, where she studied English, vernacular and art. She concentrated on art instead of sports as an option for pupils of her time. Because Margaret had limited formal education, she was only able to secure a job with the then Specialist Hospital in Benin City as a cleaner. Because of her artistic gift in drawing, she ventured into sculpting – a talent she copied from her elder sister Mrs Rosa Idehen, whom she later surpassed in the art. She uses kaolin to produce her sculptures. This is a deviation from the usual trend of using plain native chalk for worship. Her art gives shape to belief in the sense that by creating a resemblance of the image, worshipers can identify with their gender needs. Her works include male, female and female with child. The male figures are presented with genitals and low hairline and differentiated from the female ones often presented with developed breasts, ear rings and sometimes lipsticks which she coloured with nail polish. According to Mrs Omoragbon, she supplies her wares to New Benin market. Her customers therefore were far beyond Oliha market where she had her studio and shop until her death in April 2013.

Rose Iginoba: B. 1951?

Although Mrs Iginoba (Nee Ayusevbaihie) could not recall when she was born, she claims to be 63 years this year (2012). According to her, she was born in Siluko and her parents hail from Usen Utese and Okada. Her aunt took her away from her mother the day she was born and was taken to Okada. She only got to know her mother who was critically ill in Okada just before the civil war. That was the first and only chance of seeing her mother as she died two weeks after. On the day she was born, she dropped from the hands of her aunt to the ground at Okada and it was foretold that she would die if she was not removed from Okada to Benin City. Consequently, she grew up in Benin without knowing her parents. Mrs Iginoba worked with Okada Airline as a messenger and office personnel. She started producing sculpture after she left Okada in the mid nineties. Rose produces her works at home off Ehaekpen Street and has a shop where she sells her wares and pottery in Oliha market in Benin City. According to her, she remembered having produced a fourteen headed sculptural piece for her adopted father, one late Oni Nomaisi in GRA Benin City. It was Oni who warned her never to make more of the fourteen headed piece as a result of the dangers involved spiritually. She has been making miniatures even
though she was capable of producing bigger objects. Currently she stopped producing due to ill health. She said “those who mould the big ones don’t last.” Those who patronize these artists are as anonymous as their needs. Rose says her patrons often commend her as her wares always bring them good luck. According to her, she oblivious of the specific river her customers take the river items to. She also stated that she does not disclose their identities either, because some clients are known Benin Christians and Moslems. It was therefore difficult to speak to any of those who patronized her in my presence as they were too “shy” to speak or snappily rude. The assortment of items sold in the market can be said to reflect their varied sources. Some of the wares are a collection of rare fetish articles of ritual worship. This explains why these women’s works stand out among other items displayed for sale. These women’s works are unique in their own way because of the creative input and details. The female object in fig. 1 for example, is a common one on sale by another shop owner called Vero Eguavoen. If you compare the image with Rose Igbuina’s works in figs. 11 and 12 you will observe the outstanding difference even though they are both stylized. Like Margaret, some of Rose’s works are done in kaolin. Her figures are sometimes rendered with a serpent around the neck of the works. Her female figures are adorned with a more elaborate hairdo. Her chalk works display an attachment with duck tail unlike Margaret’s. Igbuina’s mud works exhibit some high level of simplicity that is at once intricate. Almost the size of a finger, they have a semblance of the ancient historical figurines known as Venus of Willendorf.

Plate 1a (left) 1b. (right) . 2012. Kevwin Kevwin items on sale for religious worship in Benin. Items include ukuse (gourd rattle), orhue (native chalk), ugbukpon (red and white pieces of cloth) and ema (drum) and animal skin etc. Compare 1.a with Igbuina’s works in figs 11 and 12. All photographs by the author.
Plate 2. A female trader producing a rattle gourd at Kevwin Kevwin market in Benin City. 2012.

Compare the size of the rattle gourd with plate 3.


Plate 5. mini drum (ema) at Kevwin Kevwin market in Benin City. 2012.
Plate 6. Margaret Omoragbon in her studio shop at *Kevwin Kevwin* market in Benin City. 2012.

Plate 7a. Margaret Omoragbon producing in her studio shop
Below (7b and 7c) are her drawings to explain her love capability for art. 2012.

Plate 7b

Plate 7c.

Plate 8. A collection of Margaret Omoragbon’s work in her studio shop at Kevwin Kevwin market in Benin City. 2012.
Plate 9. One of Margaret Omoragbon’s work in her studio shop.
Plate 10 a and 10b. Margaret Omoragbon’s works in her studio shop showing a mother backing a child and male and female figures. 2012.

Plate 11 a. and 11b. Rose Igbinoba in her shop at Kevwin Kevwin market in Benin City. Note how small her works are. 2012.

Plate 12. Rose Igbinoba’s figurines in her shop at Kevwin Kevwin market in Benin City. 2012.
Plate 13. Rose Igbinoba’s chalk works in her shop showing duck tailed figures

Plate 14. Rose Igbinoba’s ‘Venus’ works in her shop at
Plate 15. Rose Igbinoba’s chalk works in her shop.

**Conclusion**

Artistic legacies reposed in matriarchy in Benin Kingdom though manifested in the social and political structure within the culture cannot be said to enjoy equal attention given to popular patriarchal guilds of artists. Reason for this dichotomy may be partly due to the durable nature of bronze, ivory and wood as compared to the materials used by female artists in Benin. Besides being secluded from using these materials, it seems that the economic values of these materials are being denied the women in order to deprive them of social and economic benefits enjoyed by the men. The plight of the women is not also assuaged by art historians as they continually eulogize the male guilds and undermine the producing female community. The art of Margaret Omoragbon and Rose Igbinoba which revolves around things of the river (evwin eze) and Olokun worship represents the creative but excluded female population of artists in Benin City. Their works demand attention from art historians and museums to balance the gender inequality in artistic practice in the ancient Kingdom.

**References**


