

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

## SUB SAHARAN AFRICAN CULTURE – 19<sup>th</sup> Century

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**Overview** By these two ‘modern centuries,’ Sub Saharan Africa begins to enter the dialogue of cultures which eventually build the wide horizons of the modern world.. Missionaries, commercial traders offering commodities in exchange for slaves, such intellectuals--both black and European-- as formed the dynamic cultural life of restless cities like Lagos--all these elements played into the opening up of a Sub Saharan Africa of which little was still known in the wide world. Writing and reading were in Sub Saharan Africa, even in the 19th century, still a privilege of the few, as of course were travels outside the continent, yet intra-African commerce and migrations were growing common, and the southern Africa of 1700 will be unrecognizably different from even the Sub Saharan Africa the Great Powers would find spread out before them in the 1880’s. Cities would be there, governments with armies would be there, and there would be rich agricultural land waiting to be effectively exploited.

**Architecture** Frank Willet, in his *African Art*, illustration 104, reproduces a photo of action from late 19th century Jos, in central Nigeria. (I am going to reference Willett’s book, here, for the sake of examples and specificity. I recommend it highly, for its careful insights. There are of course any number of alternative texts.) A farmer is constructing a granary, onto which the thatched lid is being lifted. There is a drying hole in the side of the granary, and around the hold a decorative motif. The storage unit is conical, well aerated off the ground, and, odd to say, as beautifully simple as an ancient Greek vase. Such natural taste for the shapely is sharply marked onto certain African domestic structures which have found their ways into Willett’s illustrations: in the late 19th century house exteriors began to be painted, leaving to art history the extraordinary vigor of the kind of daring ochre-walled Muslim domestic façade (Illustration 108) into which are embedded ‘prestige motifs’ like a bicycle and a motor car; while, in Illustration 118, we look at small mud mosque, in which as often in Africa, the plastic (or weavable or rammable or vertical) of simple available building materials is exploited with ravishing taste.

**Sculpture** Willett’s book, as does any good study of African art, exposes the reader to slick well photographed images, to which we must ourselves add the turmoil and dust of the living art situation. (Note Willett reference in Readings, below; for convenience we have made generous reference to illustrations in that book.) Four illustrations of 19th century sculpture from Willett drive benchmarks into the temporally loose fabric of the two centuries before us:

*Illustration 162:* Just over two feet tall, this black bronze Yoruba figure of Onile was (we think on evidence) made in the 18th century. It represents the female spirit of the earth--counterpart to the male Olorun. Found in a sacred Ogboni Society House, this figure was consecrated to the harmony of male and female--though how this awareness played out in its sculptor we have to guess. Bulging eyes and bulging breasts interweave with severe dignity. While the sculptors of African ‘masterworks’ are known for distinctive individual skills, they seldom put their feelings on the line.

*Illustration 185:* Ba Kuba mask, 16 inches tall, ‘worn at initiation rites to symbolize the culture hero Woot,’ and to be worn only by men of royal descent. While #162 concerned cosmic harmony, the present instance concerns royal legitimacy.

*Illustration 160:* BaBembe 10 inch wooden fetish figure with medicine hidden inside the trunk through a hole between the legs. Heavy formal scarring on the torso. When not in use, as a source of priestly ‘powers,’ this type of fetish would typically be emptied of its medicine--awaiting a new occasion and new power dose.

*Illustration 153:* Wooden figure, 18 inches tall, from a reliquary of Fang ancestors’ bones. We view a statuette of an infantile ancestor, marks of physical maturity under the enlarged childlike head of a moustached and bearded man. Thus the Fang dwell on the intertwined power of the ages on an ancestral level.

The above samples illustrate four different worldview dealings, in four small figurines: cosmic male-female harmony; royal legitimacy; fetish medicine power; the dignity and infancy inherent in the ancestral.

**Painting: masks and culture** African masks, which form a history of sculpture as well as of painting, are of three kinds: 'those that are worn over the face, those worn on top of the head, and the 'helmet' type masks, which fit down over the head.' To date or to interpret a particular painted tribal 'over the face mask,' in view of the (usual) absence of either written information or reference points outside the mask's history--like events indicated by the mask--involves comparison with other masks' style history or with reports--say by missionaries, or, later, anthropologists--concerning the movements, challenges, and values of the tribe. Such painted-mask related information as is made available, along the above avenues, will lead us to back interpret into the uses of a given mask. The painted masks illustrated in Willett, #s 172 and 173, have individual histories, both of which derive from the creative period before us, 18th and 19th centuries, and pertain to the activities of the Ekpe Society, in Cross Rivers State, Nigeria. This secret society, sacred (and still ceremonially existent) is designed to preserve and if needed placate the god-force of the founder Ekpe, who supervises and if needed punishes tribal ill doers. To appreciate/date the energy and weight of Willett's #172 is to work with tribal memory to recreate the inception of the Ekpe drama in the city of Onitsha, where (centuries earlier) the mask was initially used; the elephant spirit mask (#173) is a 'symbol of ugliness,' derives from the activities of the Aba Asa Clan in Owerri, and will have been created as an expressions of evil. Both of these masks (172, 173) are now in the Nigerian Museum in Lagos, but neither of these masks is truly *there*, for their authentic existence is in the inherited from-the-inside experience of their original use. The same can be said for the innumerable painted masks generated by Sub Saharan tribes for the length of the 'modern period.'

## **Theater**

The popular modes of Colonial era African theatrics.

New theatrical forms--*Concert Party* and *Yoruba opera* are keys to look for here--grew out of the late 19th century's rich anti-colonial awareness in West Africa, and out of the area's exuberant discovery--in the century of colonialism which prevailed far into the 20<sup>th</sup> century--of the unique blends of theater latent in African popular culture. Especially in West Africa (Ghana, Togo, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria) there was during the period in question a fermenting of new theatrical forms--its components were anti-colonial satire and mockery, vaudeville, high life music, dance cabaret urbanity, a sense of the then 'trendy'. Travelling theaters, stock-performing theater groups, mountebank and acrobat enriched stage dramas drew turbulent crowds into explosively growing (and politically restive) cities like Accra, Lome, and Lagos.

*Concert party* and *Yoruba opera* 'The *concert party* play is basically a slapstick musical comedy, with a strong seam of pathos, and a very prominent moral tone running through it. It is performed in indigenous languages and the drama is shot through with highlife music, which continually punctuates it...' The narratives are involved with issues of daily life, for ordinary Ghanaians or Nigerians, and the audience is very much part of the point of the whole, as it had been already in the early Malian dance mentioned above, and as it tends to be throughout the evolution of African theater. *Yoruba opera* for decades served as travelling theatrical entertainment in the Yoruba language, and throughout Yoruba land. Interestingly, though the narrative, acting, and music are largely derived from Christian liturgical themes, the everyday, often slapstick, themes of Yoruba life are held up for high fun, laughter, and mockery.

**Music** The development of instrument technology, fitting to various regions and available materials, marches hand in hand with the growing refinement, and local difference, of the kinds of music (and occasions for that music) manifesting themselves from the Berber north to the Bushman click songs of the deep south. By the 18th and 19th centuries the instrumental repertoire now comprises ample representation in each of the four basic types of African music: membranophones (drums); chordophones (harps, fiddles); aerophones (winds); idiophones (rattles, shakers). The individual musician begins to achieve full recognition, the instruments themselves are honored as high quality art, decorated (sometimes) with the finest craftsmanship of sculptors and painters. (In Buganda, reportedly, the royal drums had higher status than the King himself.) Rumor circulates in Lesotho that the cows graze more contentedly, and productively, when entertained by the *lesiba* mouth bow.

**Written literature** Pre-Colonial A milestone text, for this period in which Africa is only gradually entering the literary mainstream, is *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 1789, written by a freed slave who--born either in Nigeria or South Carolina--passed his life in Britain, where he played an active role in the abolitionist movement.

Colonial With the scrambling intervention of European cultures into Africa, a movement taking speed in the eighties of the 19<sup>th</sup> century C.E., the consistent dominance of oral culture diminishes on the continent of Africa. (The world of bureaucracy, public notices, and organized writing-based education asserts itself where orality had formerly ruled, with its older versions of the place of memory and social clock time.)

What can we know about sub Saharan African Culture in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19th centuries?

Music, theater, and the arts of painting and sculpture--much of it assembled around mask-making--bear the imprints of increasingly individualized creators, to whom we can relate personally. Self-consciousness and artistic risk spring out at us as parts of a new world. By the end of the 19th century, with the advent of colonial bureaucracy, sub-Saharan African culture comes against western organizational styles, and begins its long slow process of adopting an 'industrial world' perspective.

#### Reading

Asante, Kariamu Weish, ed. *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical, and Philosophical Inquiry*, Trenton, 1996.

Bédouin, Jean-Louis, *Les Masques*, Paris, 1967.

Kubik, Gerhard, *Dance, Art, and Ritual of Africa*, New York, 1978.

Titon, Jeff Todd, *Worlds of Music: An Introduction to the Music of the World's Peoples*, New York, 1984.

Tracey, Hugh, *The Evolution of African Music and its Function in the Present Day*, Johannesburg, 1961

Willett, Frank, *African Art: An Introduction*, New York, 1993.

#### Discussion questions

What role did writing play in the development of a modern culture in sub-Saharan Africa? How was writing introduced into sub-Saharan Africa?

What was Olaudah Equiano's attitude toward the African continent which he had left behind in order to fight slavery?

What was the role of music in the development of Yoruba opera and theater? Were solo musical performances popular in the period we are considering, in sub-Saharan Africa?

What kind of art creation is a masquerade? Do masks reflect cultural development and change? Or are they frozen relics of the past? Do individual mask makers have their unique trademarks?

Is there a distinct change in domestic architectural styles, in the 19th century? Are there any large scale structures dotting the skyline of the developing larger cities?

Are Concert party and Yoruba Opera forms of political expression, or rather of evolution of African theatrical tradition? Does the element of slapstick lie embedded in ancient African traditions?