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Equestrian Forms in Traditional and Contemporary Nigerian Art

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Abstract:

The prevalence of equestrian forms found in both traditional and contemporary Nigerian art has been traced to the fascination for the horse as an animal possessed of agility and strength as well as providing companionship, wealth and status symbol for humans. The horse rider having been immortalised in wood, ivory, bronze and recently on canvas, provides an enduring source for modernist expressions. Aside from the adulation and the obvious romantic appeal of horse and rider for this age, the paper wonders if the adaptation of its prevalent symbols can help solve the problems of the nation state of Nigeria. For those interested in iconography; a lexicon of decorative motifs has been provided.

Key words: Equestrian, horsemen, deification, motifs, court art, wealth, traditional, contemporary

1. Introduction

Equestrian forms constitute a reasonable proportion of visual art. In Nigerian art, on both the traditional and modern arenas their occurrence is not exceptional. Horseman figures have been depicted in wood, bronze, ivory, as murals on walls, as door panels and as pendants, staffs and other religious regalia found on the rich repertoire of the country's traditional arts.

Yoruba wooden sculptures feature prominently on ritual pots and bowls supported by horsemen (called *agere ifa*) used in Ifa divination. Wooden veranda posts from the palaces of obas and chiefs of Ekitiland and Epa masks also bear horse riders, showing high levels of craftsmanship. These figurines that usually possess spears and shields were mostly carved between the 17th and 20th centuries. From the annals of an earlier age emerge the 10th century A.D. bronze fly whisk handle of Igbo-Ukwu origin, which depicts a horseman with pronounced *ichi* facial scarification. This bronze piece is an example of Igbo arts in the service of leadership. The bronze equestrian figures from Benin of circa A.D. 1600 and the 18th century show emissaries from Hausaland and Benin warriors with sheathed knives on their belt bearing spears, shields and intricate headgears. Their structures rest on platforms with motifs of interlacing ridges. Their dresses are elaborately designed. They have cat whisker facial marks. The horseman shown in Figure 1, below, has large decorative feathers, armour and bridle.



Figure 1: Horseman On A Visit From The North, Bronze, Middle Period, Height 56cm,
(Source: Leuzinger, 1976)

The 16th and 18th century Benin Ivory armllets, staffs, pendants and the lids of salt containers are richly adorned with the carvings of horsemen. In some cases they chronicle Afro-Portuguese encounters whereby the horsemen wield swords and sceptres, keep long beards and don helmets on oversized heads.

In the 1960's in Iboland in what can best be described as the transitional art period, the paintings of equestrian forms, with mostly European and modern day subject matter found on the communal walls leading into the village of Olokoro near Umuahia seem to attest to the viability of the horse rider as a potent artistic form.

The Modern Nigerian art practice has continued to glorify equestrian art in different media of expression ranging from printmaking techniques to acrylics and oils on canvas. Beginning in the 1950s with the experiments of the pioneer group of artists

trained at the then Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology now Ahmadu Bello University (A.B.U.) Zaria; equestrian forms have now been explored to elastic limits by younger generations of artists. They generate their ideas from traditional themes, dance motifs, folklore and other cultural derivations that seem to agree with the “natural synthesis” theorem. However, the trend within the contemporary Nigerian art practice focused on the horse and rider idiom seems to oscillate around the Durbar races of Northern Nigeria and the polo games of the royal class. In most cases, though a twinge of historical romanticism with the glories of the past dominate these compositions.

Jimoh Akolo’s *Horseman* (Figure2), a colourful 1954 oil painting on hardboard, executed in bold primaries is a celebration of typical Northern Nigerian horsemanship. The artist was definitely inspired by the annual Durbar of the Zazzau emirate in Zaria which is highly patronized.



Figure 2: Jimoh Akolo, *Horseman*, Oil Painting, 1954, (Source: Deliss 1995)

Friday Afternoon in Zaria (Figure3) is Joshua Akande’s 1974 depiction of the equestrian theme. He uses subdued tones to reduce the glare of the afternoon sun, but introduces the umbrella, a leitmotif of equestrian art.



Figure 3: Joshua Akande, *Friday Afternoon In Zaria*, Oil Painting, 91.5cm X 118cm, 1974, (Source: Nucleus 1981)

The deep etching by David Dale aptly titled *Durbar* (Figure4) gives a clear picture of the durbar race. This print captures the warriors simulating a war charge with their spears pointing forward. The spirals beneath their feet indicate the dust they stir. The whole composition is wrapped in an earthy ochre with light shades of orange; a classic northern umber.



Figure 4: David Dale, *Durbar*, Deep Etching Print, 39.5cm X 66.5cm, (Source: Nucleus 1981)

Ben Ekanem’s life-size fibre glass sculpture of Queen Amina of Zaria (Figure5) has a superficial affinity to the traditional art of the ancient empires of Benin and Igbo-Ukwu simply for being three-dimensional.



Figure 5: Ben Ekanem, *Queen Amina of Zaria*, outdoor life-size sculpture, 1974, (Source: Nucleus 1981)

Erhabor Emokpae's immortalisation of Mai Idris Alooma of Bornu, Sultan Mohammadu Bello of Sokoto and Queen Amina of Zaria (Figure 6) are hinged upon the horse rider as a warrior. The shiny, golden and metallic colours of the horses' ornaments blend with the gay regalia worn by the eager mounted soldiers.



Figure 6: Emokpae, E. *Queen Amina Of Zaria*, Oil Painting, 76 X 122cm, National Gallery Of Modern Art, Lagos, (Source: Nucleus 1981)

Gani Odutokun's contribution to the deification of equestrian forms remains an un-paralleled feat. His *Durbar-The Race* (Figure 7) has the semblance of a biblical reference point for his contemporaries and sapling artists. For he captures the mood, the drama and excitement, the fever, the atmosphere, the architecture of Zaria, the azure sky and above all, the colour of the race as it cascades down on the people, their robes, their horses and even their identity as a coherent group made more manifest at such festivities.

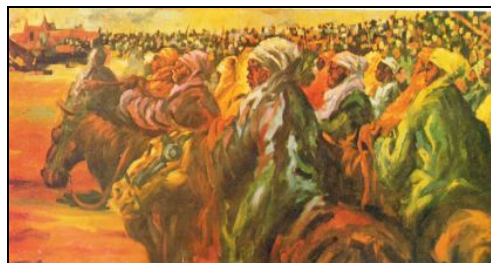


Figure 7: Gani Odutokun, *Durbar-The Race (Segment)*, Oil Painting, 122cm X 488cm, (Source: Nucleus 1981)

- **Mythos:** The choice of horse rider is intricately tied up with the fascination for horses as subject matter not only in visual representation but also in real life. The horse (*Equus caballus*) is a large solid-hoofed, domesticated, herbivorous, mammal used by man as a beast of burden, draft animal, symbol status and for sport and leisure.
- **Agility:** The horse is a graceful, well-formed animal with coordinated muscular function and streamlined movement. In motion, it seems to glide through the air. It is adaptable to both environmental and human needs. In this capacity the agility, speed, mobility, stamina and sheer strength possessed by this creature endears it to human hearts. For pleasure and practical purposes, which require endurance, the horse is chosen.
- **Royalty:** The horse is highly valued for its superior quality over other domesticated animals. For this the royal class, the rich and affluent in society have adapted it and bestowed the regal status and elements of nobility upon it. The horse is

difficult to breed and maintain, such that only the very able in society keep them inexpensive stables and on proper feeds. In this manner it has come to be associated with affluence.

- **Authority, Power:** The horse is associated with the exercise of authority in its various ramifications of leadership, ruler ship, power and the command of social thought and political opinion in human society. Some of the equestrian figures of Benin were representations of chiefs recognised by their attire, headgear and demeanour. The whole of Benin art is referred to as “court art” as its patronage was absolutely monopolised by the ruling Oba. In present day Borno, the insignia of the Shehu El-Kanemi mounted on horseback in warrior garb bearing a sword is the symbol of the Borno royal class presided by the Shehu and is emblazoned on his royal chair.
- **War:** The horse is an excellent war machine. Its introduction into the resolution of human social conflicts, commencing from prehistoric times, defined victory for its owners. The conquests of sahelian lands by Mai Idris Alooma of Borno, Rabeh, Queen Amina of Zaria and the Islamic Jihads of Othman Dan Fodio could not have been achieved without the skills of the horse. The deified Alafin of Oyo, Sango, is believed to have ridden off into the bush on horseback to commit the prescribed ritual suicide. These great warriors and heroines of Nigeria’s historical past were horse bound as they crusaded and vanquished, sharing a common bond despite the division of time and space.
- **Emissary:** For its speed and resilience, the horse has served as the bearer of messengers. Some of the horse riders depicted in Benin court art are representations of emissaries from Hausaland and Igalaland. They were probably sent to deliver messages concerning trade agreements, peace treaties or issues of mutual benefit. These messengers were highly respected.
- **Wealth:** The possession of horses is a clear indication of wealth. They give the owner the proper radiance of his rank among his peer. Being mounted on horseback, as depicted in the Igbo-Ukwu flywhisk handle, meant a high elevation in society; asserting the superiority of the person so honoured. Cole and Aniakor (1984) state that as these horses were imported into Iboland from the north they signified obvious wealth and long distance trading acumen. The man on horseback was regarded as a “rider or power” imbued with the entire social, political, economic and religious attributes the phrase musters. In Tiv traditional society the horse, nyinya, was a symbol of majesty, of prestige (shagba). To attain the status of a shagbaor (a prestigious man) meant that the man had climbed the ladder of society, had surplus wealth, was hospitable, possessed power, authority, tsav (witchcraft potential) and was indeed a great farmer with many wives and children to show for it. Buying the horse, therefore, signified the crowning glory for a fulfilled life among men.
- **Durbar:** Sallah in the north of Nigeria is celebrated with pageantry. It offers the emirs the opportunity to parade their empires’ large retinue of horses and entertain guests with Durbar races. From the preparations of the Hawaiian Doki to the furious dusty expensive races, the splendor of the horses is displayed for public consumption. This festival of agility and grandeur displaying the king’s prowess and military might is the most commonly used stereotype for modern Nigeria paintings.
- **Sports and Leisure:** Polo utilizes horses at the centre of its game of power and stamina. The race courses that abound in Nigerian cities bear testimony to the importance of the horse as a source of recreation. It is possible too that the past traditional societies also used the horse for leisure and relaxation. There exists a large body of polo art in the contemporary painting scene.
- **Motifs and Symbolism**
- A number of visual elements can be identified from the equestrian forms in this study. The motifs found in the antiquities do not necessarily differ from those employed in executing the modernist art forms. Below, the principal ones have been analysed based loosely on stylistic and iconic parameters.
- **Armour:** definitely of metal construct, decorated with leaf motif, triangles, circles, cowries, ovals, lines and other geometric patterns — all in clear relief on the surface. The modern art works present flowing gowns of multiple colours. Worn for protection.
- **Bracelets:** of indeterminate mould: worn on wrists and tied round biceps.
- **Bridle:** of chains or leather rope: with triangular plates attached in some cases.
- **Eyes:** of rider and horse -- bulging triangulated eyes (on Yoruba figurines); facial features bear marks on cheeks and by the side of the eyes and cat whisker scars (as in Benin).
- **Headgear:** helmet with broad ends raised at the edges (Portuguese); plaited hair tied into a bunch: conical shape with squares on it aside with sharp tip (EPA); helmet of feathers (of northern horsemen); symbol of class, rank and for protection.
- **Knife:** usually short and handy sheathed into waistband.
- **Ornaments:** decorative plates of silver and gold extractions: on horses; attractive and of geometric formulations. Signifies wealth and also ranks of rider and horse.
- **Saber:** one-edged long and curved metal blade, some with a hole at the tip (Portuguese).
- **Sceptre:** usually wooden short baton fitted into the right palm or held in both hands; the wooden staff (long when it is a staff) on the Epa mask horse rider has a humanoid form at the base. Signifies authority and rank of the bearer.
- **Shield:** of metal construction; thick animal hide; with interlacing sheets to prevent external penetration.
- **Sickle:** long handles with scissors-like metal blades (Portuguese)
- **Spear:** short; long; with tip pointing upwards, backward, downwards or forward (indicating a charging position).
- **Sword:** double-edged; valour, strength; when raised high up above head indicates call to battle (Queen Amina’s army wields swords).

- **Umbrella:** acts as shade for emir during procession; multi-coloured.

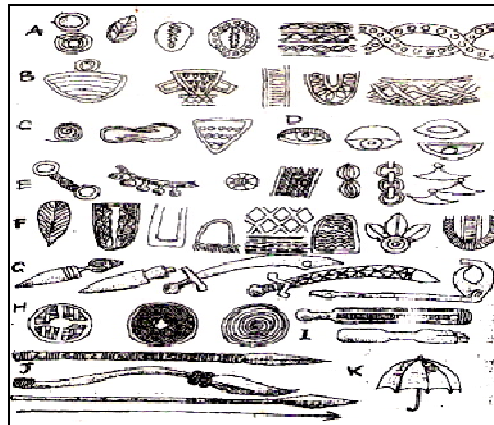


Figure 8: Motifs found on antiques and contemporary paintings of equestrian forms.

Key: A and B = armour; C = bracelets; D = eyes; E = bridle; F = headgear; G = knives, sabers and swords; H = shields; I = sceptres (batons); J = spears; K = umbrella.

2. A Critique

The truth that emerges from this analysis points to the fact that almost all the tangible objects found in equestrian art - the armour, the spear, the sword, knife, saber - are all weapons of violence, of mass destruction and warfare. And yet they have fascinated artists and the patrons of the arts all through the centuries.

Why the fascination for destruction? One sure explanation, is that the nation states and ethnic mix that produced these arts were constantly engaged in battle for the maintenance of their territorial borders, the conquests of new found land and sheer struggle for survival against the harsh realities of their age and time where the political climate was less organised. The weaker nations were subsumed by the stronger ones. From the immaterial perspective judging by the number of animal forms in the cave art of prehistoric times where they were created to be controlled, worshiped and subsequently consumed, it is possible to deduce that physical representation of warfare paraphernalia predetermined victory on the battlefield. The potency that art objects embody makes these equestrian forms vital organs of the functioning machinery of society as viewed from the spiritual dimension affecting also the political and economic spheres. In Iboland, the art forms served as personalised gods bringing wealth and prosperity to the individual and his household. In Benin, they functioned under the auspices of the court imbuing authority to the ruling class and most probably helping to maintain equilibrium in governance. The Yoruba employed the art forms for divination purposes, not only on a personal scale, but also for congregational elevation to spiritual attainment of their collective goals and aspirations. In Hausaland and other northern states where the horses themselves were raised, for certain victories in the wars of conquests were assured. The Political dominance of the social fabric, long distance trade in goods and human slavery, jihads, pilgrimages to Mecca were made possible with these media.

3. Conclusion

For modern Nigerian artists, the motivations for creating art based on the potent equestrian imagery may harbour no direct bearings to the persuasions of the moulders of our traditional artifacts. Much of 21st century art is guided by the dictates of commercialism, where mass production of stereotype themes for monetary recompense is the order of the day.

The traditional artist created for the fulfillment of the spiritual needs of his people, whether embodied in their deities, the ruler ship or in the communal propensities of import. Thus, whereas the products of our traditional past served salvific roles, modern art works tend towards mere romanticism with an historic ideal.

What this paper advocates are simple. Fine tuning the treasured experiences and translating the rich cultural imagery posterity offers us into the contemporaneous experiences of today would suffice more than piously recreating the past; a negating and retrogressive act. But of even greater value would be progressive, conscious attempts at extrapolating the spiritual essence of these artifacts and the practices surrounding their existence into new territory. This can only be attained via understanding the present circumstance of our existence. The political atmosphere is rife with disillusionment; the economy is in a lamentable detritus; religion offers excuses for genocide; wars abound; there is moral decay.

Can the weapons of equestrian art, if employed gainfully, solve these social problems? Or is it that for peace to be gained, wars must be fought? When would all the swords that hinder the progress of the nation (ethnic feuds, corruption, religious violence, human rights violations) be beaten into ploughshares? Till this takes place, the true valour and grandeur of equestrian art would remain, albeit, remote artistic romanticism based on a past never to be regurgitated.

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