

## Socio-cultural Environment as Impetus for Art: Adapting Fish Forms for Mask Production

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**Abstract:** *From primordial times, it has been natural for artists to adapt forms and subjects common in their natural environment or cultural spaces. However, literature indicates that contemporary artists in Nigeria no longer produce art inspired by and adapted from parameters inherent to Africa. Rather, they now produce what is referred to as 'airport art', which is shallow, kitsch and dictated by (and directed at) global but western art patrons. Against this backdrop, this study sort to find out whether, as it was in the production of African arts in pre-colonial times, it is possible that the same inspiring process of adapting elements from African environments can take place among visual artists today. Taking an abundant and naturally occurring subject like fish, the study uses masks adapted and made from skeletal properties of fish to interrogate the core issues. The study suggests that, by propagating foreign content and contexts of art production and abandoning inherent social and cultural capacities of Africa in producing African art, we continually lose the 'Africaness' in the continent's art, until nothing is left eventually.*

**Keywords:** *Africa, Art production, Adaptation, Fish form, Mask*

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### 1. Introduction

While nature's aesthetics can be appropriated into the production of art, arts as cultural products are also deeply involved in man's daily activities in functional ways too. As Ebeigbe (2010) notes, these functions can be summarized as being personal, social and physical. There are critical African examples that can illustrate the personal (micro level), social (macro level) and physical functions of art.

In terms of the personal uses of art two examples will suffice. The first is the *oriki* (praise poetry) among the Yoruba of southwest Nigeria. Oriki has several functions, one of which is personal between members of social groups like families, age grades and between elders and younger ones, say a father and a child. Oriki serves as emotional and psychological easement/motivation and is also a tool for bonding to prevent relations from getting sour between individuals (Abimbola 1968, Adeniji 1982). In essence, art can and is employed for personal uses to motivate, encourage and emotionally ease tension between people with close micro-level connections.

At the macro social level, art also performs critical functions. If we take for instance masquerades owned and used by African communities for coronation ceremonies, we realise that the ceremony is not a personal event of the new king but that of the whole society. Coronations are the time to acknowledge the passing of the old king and prepare for a new beginning with a new king for the community. Now, for a traditional African community the notion of 'community' is a holistic one that involves the realms of the living, the dead (ancestors) and the animal kingdom, which is also part of this elaborate but ubiquitous sense of community (Osborne 1976, Gillon 1979, Mbiti 1992) within which arts play macro social roles.

At a third level, art plays very physical roles in the daily lives of Africans generally. Aside from farming and domestic implements and furnishing made from artistic processes such as carved doors and frames among

the Yoruba, Uli drawings and paintings among the Igbo (Willis 1987 and 1997) and wall reliefs and decorations among the Hausa/Fulani of Nigeria (Ottenberg 1983 and Schwerdtfeger 2007), carved stools, walking sticks etc. This context of art use does not involve any deliberately social or personal use. Rather, works of art are used purely for their physical or decorative potential. That art can function in virtually all facets of African life is perhaps a reminder that art is an integral element of human existence. Whether the works are sculptures, embroidery (Picton and Mack 1989), precious metal, poetry (Uzochukwu 2001) or any other medium for that matter, African arts have an organic nature that is often non-western in character (Greene 1941 and Abiodun 1994) and also requires a certain element of mystery to appreciate (Osborne 1976, Aniakor, 1988). Insofar as art subsumes all these qualities, it can be said to have the potential for providing insights into a people's history and civilization. Thus because art is embodied in life itself (Jefferson 1965) and it is an expression of a people's culture, it is therefore a signifier that provides subtle but useful insights that can aid the evaluation of human consciousness.

Nature is the pool from which all creative activities draw. As Masterfield (1984) writes, no new forms are created because whatever is made has already been conceived at other times and spaces. The dynamics of nature are interesting and overwhelming, thus compelling Rothschild (1960) to assert that artists are intrinsically endowed with creative virtues of instincts, inspirations and motivations that bestow mankind with analytical and intuitive response towards adopting forms. Such impulses give the creative mind the impetus to assimilate and explore the embodiments of the natural environment, with a view to appreciate and understand nature as an art source. In highlighting this notion Masterfield (1984) further asserts that, while it is impossible for artists to improve on what is subsumed in nature, there is a compulsion for them to interpret the inspiring and fascinating aesthetics inherent in nature. Consequently, the creative personality continually seeks to express the infinite aesthetic potentials of nature in virtually every artistic endeavour, be it music, literature, performance, sculpture, painting among others. Traditional African artists did not depart from this multidimensional frame of art, which gives it essence to be used on virtually all daily activities of individuals. However, as Egonwa (2005) hints, contemporary artists in Nigeria have departed from this frame. They no longer produce art inspired by parameters inherent to Africa. Rather, they now produce what he refers to as 'airport art', which is shallow, kitsch and dictated by (and directed at) global but western art patrons.

As it is natural for artists to adapt forms and subjects common in their natural environment or cultural spaces, this perpetual potential for adaptability suggests that nature is the covert source for artistic production. And, if traditional African artists of pre-colonial times adapted natural forms in their environment to produce art, is it then possible that the same process of adaptation can take place today? Taking an abundant and naturally occurring subject like fish for instance (which comes in different species), are there peculiar aesthetic potentials in its visual, fleshly or skeletal properties that can be effectively adapted for the production of sculpture? This paper seeks to address these questions by using masks adapted from skeletal properties of fish to interrogate the core issues.

## 2. Objective of the Study

Since African traditional artists have always sourced materials and inspirations for their works from their environment this research seeks to adapt the cranium of the croaker fish (*micropogonius undulatus*) and the African catfish (*clarias gariepinus*) for the production of masks. For this study, fish is selected because it is an abundant species in the African environment while the mask is chosen because, as Duerden (1974) notes, it is one of the oldest and most ubiquitous art forms in Africa. In scope, this study is delimited to the forms adapted from the cranium of the croaker fish and the catfish respectively. In terms of justification it is important to note, as Schaedler (1995) does, that artists have always been imbued with the responsibility to broaden horizons and see new forms of inspiration. As part of its objectives, this study seeks a new form of sculptural inspiration from fish craniums.

### 3. Materials

Catfish and the croaker fish were purchased from the market. Plaster of Paris (POP), cement, sand, 12.7mm iron rods, wood, nails, sand paper, electrodes and binding wire were bought from building materials stores. Black, white and copper paints, brushes, paper and pencils were bought from art suppliers. Fibre glass, resin, catalyst and activator were purchased from chemical suppliers. Clay was dug-up freely from a nearby location and used car engine oil was collected free from an auto mechanic workshop.



Plate 1: The croaker fish (*micropogonius undulatus*)



Plate 2: The African catfish  
(*clarias gariepinus*)

### 4. Methods

The fish were cooked and all cranial bones extracted and placed under the sun to dry, along with scales and fins from the croaker fish (Plate 1 and 2). After the cranial extracts were completely dried (Plates 3 and 4), they were used for extensive drawing studies (2-dimensional) from which a range of detailed pencil sketches and initial ideas were outlined (compare Plates 1 and 2 with Figures 1 and 2). The pencil studies were important to this research because, as Onians (2008) and Plowman (2003) posit, drawings are tools that do not just help us to understand but also to develop the visual forms. The extensive study of the catfish and the croaker fish generated several drawings. 3-dimensional studies (maquettes) were made by sculpting both the cat and croaker fishes in Plaster of Paris (POP) and fibre glass, as a way to more fully understand the fish forms (Plates 5 and 6). For, as Plowman (2003) points out, maquettes help to pre-test the intended creative form to see if it will succeed three dimensionally. The fish that were cast in POP were sanded and finished with a layer of clear lacquer, while that cast in fibre glass was finished with paint. Further pencil studies and lineal sketches were made as studies for wrought iron work (Plates 15-17). Using the pencil sketches made, clay was used to sculpt several masks in deferent sizes and according to the textures, forms and visual narratives gleaned from the analytical studies of the fish bones.



Plate 3: Dried bones from the fish cranium



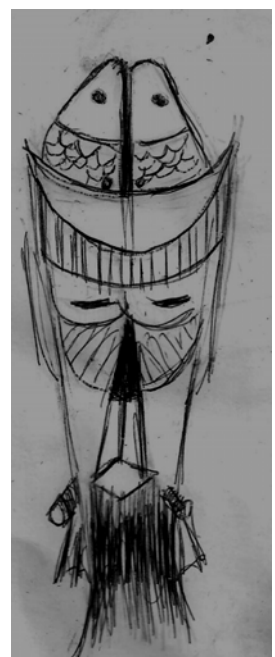
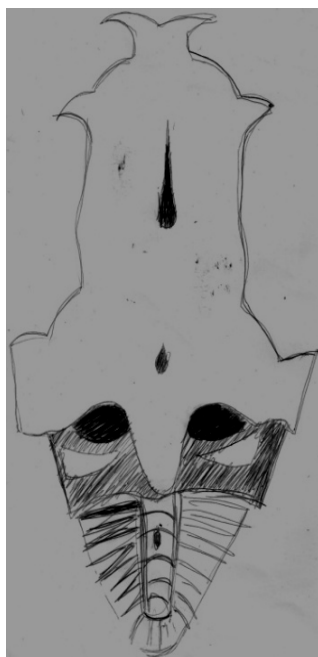
Plate 4: Dried fins and scales from the croaker fish



Figure 1: Detailed pencil drawing of the croaker fish



Figure 2: Detailed pencil drawing of the catfish



Figures 3-6: Sketches made from the fish craniums



Plate 5: Fibre glass sculpture of the catfish



Plate 6: Fibre glass sculpture of the croaker fish

The used car engine oil was employed as separator and applied to the surfaces of all the clay models. The engine oil is so used to ensure that the clay is able to separate from the mould. To make the mould, a thick mixture of cement and water was applied to the surface of some of the clay models and left to set. Simultaneously, a mixture of POP was also applied to another range of clay models of the mask, which had very detailed patterns and textures. This was done because POP is finer and captures more details than cement mixtures. Both cement and POP moulds were left to set. Thereafter, a mixture of sand and cement was applied to both the masks previously covered in POP and those covered in cement to attain 4' thickness for the moulds' strength. All the moulds were left to completely set and dry. Thereafter, the clay models were extracted from the POP and cement moulds respectively. The moulds were then cleaned to remove all traces of clay and debris, washed and left to dry.

After the moulds had dried, a fresh layer of engine oil was applied on the inside of all the moulds. An initial thin layer of pure resin, catalyst and activator was applied to the inside of all the moulds and left to set and harden. Thereafter, fibre glass was carefully applied to the inside of all the moulds using a brush to fuse-in the mixture of resin, catalyst and activator. The process was done carefully to ensure that all the corners and undercuts in the mould were evenly covered by both the glass fibre and the resin mixture. All the fibre glass applied in the moulds was then left to set and completely harden. After the fibre glass had set and hardened in the moulds, the casts were removed from all the moulds, the engine oil was washed-off with soap and water, and the casts were left to dry before sandpapering. Black paint was sprayed on the fibre glass casts

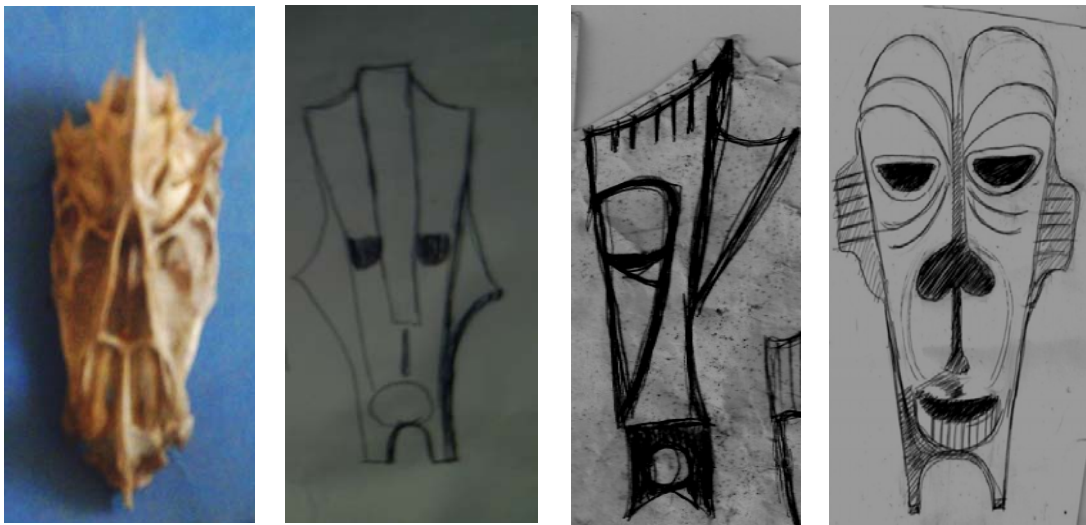


and left to dry. Gold and copper paints were then used to guild some of the masks painted in black to give them gold, bronze finish.

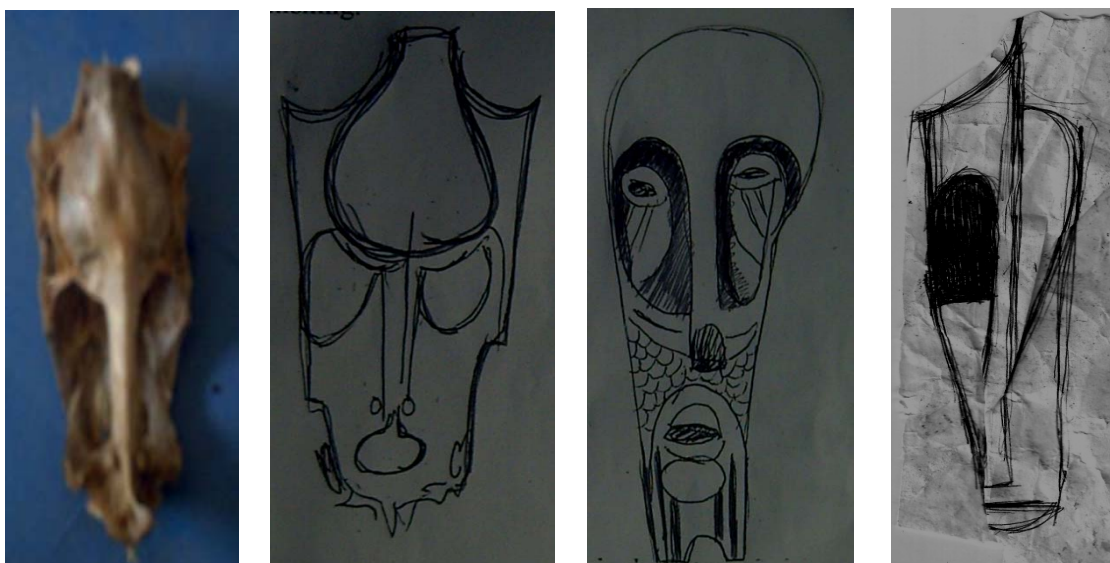
Using some of the linear mask drawings from the fish cranium studies as template, the 12.7mm iron rods were cut and used to trace-out the lines and wrought several masks. The cut and wrought iron rods were then welded as applicable and then finished by grinding and sanding. Paint in the desired colours was then sprayed on the wrought metal masks before mounting them on stands.

## 5. Results

In the course of this study several pencil sketches were made, inspired by forms/elements of fish craniums. It is from these drawings that masks were also adapted, sculpted with fibre glass and wrought iron rods. Plate 7 and Figures 7-9 with Plate 8 and Figures 10-12 below illustrates the process of adaptation. In all, thirty three sculptures were made as indicated in Table 1.



**Plate 7 and Figures 7-9:** Illustrating the development from fish cranium to pencil sketches



**Plate 8 and Figures 10-12:** Illustrating the development from fish cranium to pencil sketches

Table 1: The Media of Production and Finishing Techniques of the Adapted Masks

S/N	Medium of Production	Finishing	Quantity
1	Fibre glass	Black paint, gilded gold/bronze	25
2	Wrought iron	Black paint, gilded gold/bronze	8
Total			33



Plates 9-14: Showing six of the twenty five masks adapted from fish cranium and cast in fibre glass.



Plates 15-17: Showing three of the nine masks adapted from fish cranium and produced with wrought iron.

## 6. Discussion

It is quite clear that the appropriation of animal elements for art is not new because it has been previously observed in the production of traditional sculpture among several African peoples (Fagg and Plass 1964, Leis 2002). Also, Duerden (1974) observes that the use of animal forms in masks underscores Africans' unique understanding of art in its social context, by projecting two fundamental African characteristics: a strong affection and understanding of animals, including the idea of man as essentially nature's creation. It is in that sense that animal motifs are normally symbolic in African archetypal nature in which the connection with animals plays an essential part. However, this existential connection between man, nature, animals and art tends to have submerged or become moribund in the production of contemporary sculptures in Nigeria. Today, contemporary Nigerian sculptors are concerned primarily with what Egonwa (2005) has termed 'airport art', that is, art produced merely for the market (dictated by western collectors) and without recourse to socio-cultural parameters inherent in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. This departure among African artists from African socio-cultural parameters in the production of art may also have stemmed from colonialism and the influence of religions such as Islam and Christianity. While colonial governments were not essentially keen on the development of African culture and cultural artefacts, Islam and Christianity perceived art (particularly sculptures) as evil and primarily anti-God. So construed, the joint effect of colonialism, Islam and Christianity on African works of the visual imagination may be described as a 'cultural encroachment' in the sense that it eliminates from the artist, art and processes that which is essentially African in form, content and existential philosophy.

It is from the foregoing context that the processes and products of this study are more fully understood, as an empirical nudge in the right cultural direction for contemporary Nigerian (African) visual artists. While not



articulating or suggesting a reinstatement of the religious or cultic ambivalence of pre-colonial African works of art, the processes and products of this study (Plates 1-17) indicate that there are gains in reconsidering nature as sources for visual artistic production. And, in contrast with the 'airport art' that today's sculptors make in Africa, this study shows that it is still possible to produce works of art with global materials and visual principles but also with social, cultural and material parameters inherent in African cultures. As against the shallowness Egonwa (2005) observes in so-called 'airport arts' produced today in Africa, arts made by recourse to inherent African material and cultural basis, as this study has done, will subsume a differentiation and elevation over and above contemporary visual shallowness. Besides this, there is also the context that art made by using local knowledge, materials and ideas are more sustainable than those made purely in the frame dictated by the prerogatives and imperatives of foreign art collectors. For, in propagating foreign content and contexts of art production and abandoning inherent social and cultural capacities of Africa in producing African art, we continually lose the 'Africaness' in the continent's art, until nothing is left eventually.

## 7. Conclusion

By successfully adapting fish forms and elements for the production of masks, this study has shown that it is still possible to employ Africa-specific and nature-derived inspirations in the making of art in contemporary Africa. And, that art made in this context is still 'contemporary' in that it uses *global* materials, techniques and technologies to produce that which is truly African in a sense in which pre-colonial art may have been. Therefore, whether African artists seek to produce personal, social or purely physical works of art, it is still possible, more resourceful and insightful to appropriate materials, forms and elements from things inherent in the African socio-cultural environment.

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