

JOURNAL OF AFRICAN ARTS & CULTURE

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<https://jaac-sca.org>

ISSN 2637-3610

Volume 4 Issue 1

March 31, 2020

Kinetic Art: An Appraisal of Kinetic Sculpture Practice in Nigeria

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Citation: Ogheneruemu, U. S. & Onoruarome, O. F. (2020). Kinetic art: An appraisal of kinetic sculpture practice in Nigeria. *Journal of African Arts & Culture*, 4(1), 21 - 36.

Abstract



Kinetic art is a genre that artists explore to create motion in their works. There are two types of kinetic sculpture practices existing in Nigeria. The first is the traditional kinetic sculpture practice which is the earliest type. The second type is the contemporary kinetic sculpture practice. The first is generally referred to as traditional masquerade that requires human actuation. It is currently being threatened by the emergence of foreign religion and modernity that has classified them as fetish. While, the second type of sculpture practice that needs stimuli such as mechanical, electrical devices; or natural means such as wind or air-current has not been fully entrenched in Nigerian artistic environment. This paper therefore x-rayed these kinetic sculpture practices in Nigeria with a view to highlighting their importance to the socio-cultural and economic development of contemporary Nigeria. Some selected traditional and contemporary kinetic sculptures were critically

appraised to determine their character, roles and prospects in contemporary Nigeria society. It was observed that masquerades which were found in most cultures in Nigeria are gradually going extinct. While very little impact has been made in contemporary kinetic sculpture. If both traditional and contemporary sculpture practices are preserved, harnessed and synergised, they would bring about radical kinetic art sensibility in Nigerian artistic landscape and boost tourism potentials for Nigeria.

Keywords: Kinetic, Masquerade, Motive Power, Integral, Movement, Festival.

Introduction

Most visual artists have always strived to avoid rigidity in their art forms, and this makes them to be concerned with the intent of depicting movement in their artworks. "From the earliest times artists have been concerned with the representation of movement, the movement of man and animals: galloping horses, athletes running, lions leaping on their preys, birds in flights"(Guy,1968, p. 14).Guy states further that "Kinetic artist is concerned with movement itself, making movement as an integral part of the artwork". The distinction between representation and actual motion is not sufficient in itself to differentiate kinetic art form from other forms of art which involve movement. Kinetic art form is expected to contain movement that produces a special kind of effect. In some cases kinetic art form may not move itself: the effects of movement of the work can be produced by the viewer handling or manipulating it. In the case of OP art, neither the work nor the viewer, (spectator) moves it and yet the effect may still be kinetic. Guy (1968, p. 14) posits that

a work of OP art whether it should be considered as a branch of kinetic or not, represents movement: it gives an impression of the work actually moving. Thus, in kinetic art, actual movement is expected to happen. In OP art, the work usually appears to move. In representation of movement only the object represented appears to be moving.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2018) states "*kinetic* is derived from Greek words *kinosis*; meaning movement, and *kinetikos*, meaning mobile". The New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language, defines kinetic as "of or relating to motion". While, the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, defines kinetic art as "art form such as an assemblage of sculpture, made up of parts designed to be in motion caused by internal mechanisms or external stimuli such as light or wind". Ukweku (2018, p.123) posits"

In three dimensional art such as sculpture, the application of technology and digital stimulation is a feature that brings refreshing experiences to the art. The quest to create mobile or movable components in three dimensional art has given birth to kinetic sculpture". Kinetic sculpture is a direct opposite of static sculpture. Static sculptures are motionless, while kinetic sculptures are those art works that possess the dynamic character of bodies in motion or mobile. Kinetic sculptures are therefore, sculptures that move or have their parts designed to be in motion so as to create mobile or dynamic effects.

Kinetic art is believed to have started in America and Europe (Guy, 1968, p13). Kinetic art movement may be said to date to Alexander Calder (1898-1976), an American best known as originator of the mobile type of sculptures, that are delicately balanced or suspended in response to motor or air current (Calder, 2013). Another pioneer of kinetic sculpture is Yaacov Agam (b.1928). Agam is an Israel sculptor and experimental artist who is currently living in Paris. Critical studies of Agama's artworks, particularly sculptures, revealed that they are mostly abstract kinetic art forms. Movements in most of his kinetic sculptures are generated by viewer's participation, and are known for frequent use of sound and light. One major kinetic art work Agam produced in Israel is the popular "fire and water fountain", installed at Dizengoff Square, Tel Aviv in Israel. According to Matandme (2013)

the fountain is composed of several big jagged wheels, which were designed in the kinetic style. A technological mechanism is automatically activated at different times of the day and night, turning the wheels on their hinges. The fountain injects water in various forms, spitting fire upward and playing music.

A San-Francisco sculptor known as Wally Bill Hedrick can also be counted as one of the pioneers of kinetic art. Hedrick contributions to art include pioneering artworks in psychedelic light art, kinetic sculpture, junk/assemblage sculpture and pop art (Wikipedia, 2018).



Figure 1. *Fire and Water Fountain*. Dizengoff Square, Tel Aviv, Israel.
Produced by Yaacoy Agam. 1986.
Source: Matandme, (2018).

In Nigeria, kinetic arts have emerged from the various cultures where mask dances (masquerades) are practiced. Consequently, the earliest type of kinetic art could be said to be masquerade; which is an art form in itself (Traditional kinetic sculpture). Although, this traditional art form is still being practiced in Nigeria; it is gradually going extinct because of the adaptation of foreign religious practices and modernization that has classified them as fetish. This article, therefore, examined the kinetic sculpture practice in Nigeria with the aim of bringing to the fore its relevance to the socio-cultural and economic development of contemporary Nigeria. Some selected traditional and contemporary kinetic sculptures in both visual and literary forms were employed in the study.

Nigeria Traditional Kinetic Sculptures

The earliest type of kinetic art form in Nigeria may be traced to the mask dance which is commonly referred to as masquerade. It may be argued that masks themselves are not masquerades. However, they are regarded as art forms because masks are creative works of artists. O'toole (2015, p.6) states that "the facial characteristics of African masks show astonishing diversity. Despite this fact, they also show the many similarities. Masks can be distinguished by the following characteristics: naturalistic, idealized human feature, frighten expression, abstract feature, animal feature, or combination of animal and human features". Masks themselves remain static art forms until they are employed in mask dances whereby costume are incorporated and maskers are made to become integral parts of the forms created (masquerades) to introduce movements and sometimes sounds.



Figure 2: *Urhobo Mask, Nigeria* Photograph: Tim Hamill.
Source: Tim Hamill Gallery of Tribal Art.

Masquerades in Africa consist of four vital elements which include, mask, costume, movement and sound. Therefore, the ancient masking traditions that produced mobile art forms that were involved in mask dances in Nigerian may be regarded as the earliest traditional kinetic art works. Francis (2005, p.9) opines

in areas of Africa with masking tradition, mask dances in dramatic performances or masquerades occur during important occasions such as funerals, initiations, or for entertainment. Masquerade involves music, dance, acrobatics, rituals, sacrifice or prayer with an audience that interacts through call and response.

When in performance, the dexterity, and the effects of the précised, prescribed, or improvised movements (dance steps) can be perceived as the aesthetic provisions that the audience enjoys. It is believed by some scholars that mask and costume put together forms an art work when placed in a static condition. However, it cannot be regarded as a masquerade in African context. Therefore, it cannot also be regarded as kinetic art.

In an interview, Odiboh (2013), posited that “the masks and costumes that usually constitute masquerades are works of artists and the degree of effects of the movements the masquerades produce are by the manipulating artistic skills of the maskers who have also automatically become an integral part of the masquerade.” In the same vein, in another interview, Izevbigie (2013) stated that “mask that forms part of masquerade is a work of an artist and the costume is also a work of art. When the mask and the

costume are worn by a man and is made to stand still in front of an audience without producing any sound, the figure at this point in time could only be seen and regarded as a piece of sculpture". He posited further that "if the man wearing the mask and the costume causes movement and sound to occur, thereby producing some kind of mobile effects, a masquerade is created and therefore, becomes a mobile sculpture, a kinetic art object".

Moreover, masquerades are regarded as sculptures because of their contents: structure, element of culture content in their beautiful or horrifying looks, and also because they are three dimensional art forms. Interestingly, masquerades are found in most cultures in Nigeria. They appeared to have evolved from the religious and social activities of the communities and by extension cultures where they are found. They are often used as Objects for entertainment during ritual ceremonies and commemorating social events. In some cultures the spectators who are the members of the communities perceive masquerades to be the spirits of the dead (their Ancestors) in performance. In some cultures, they serve as checks and balances in the communities where they are practiced. At the same time they are seen and assessed as works of art that have evolved from their culture. They perform during celebration of events so as to add colours and grandeur to such events for aesthetic enjoyment. They often attract huge tourist attention. For instance, the Utuo- Ukpesos-Festival-Itu-Masquerade (Figure 3) and Eyo festival marked with traditional masquerade which is unique to the Yoruba of Lagos are major events in Nigeria that attract tourists from different parts of the World (Figure 4).



Figure 3: *Utuo- Ukpesos-Festival-Itu-Masquerade: Nigeria.*
Photograph: Nelso Ikheafe
Source: Dreamstime .com

The Eyo festival which is unique to the Yoruba of Lagos state is a major traditional masquerade and a contemporary tourist event in Nigeria (Figure 4). This festival which is known traditionally as *Adamu Orisha* play, showcases the Eyo masquerade. The masquerade is costumed in pristine white flowing robe (Agbada) from the head to the feet. The facial part of the Eyo is clothed with perforated lace fabric to create room for a clear vision (visibility) of the masker. While underneath the flowing gown is a traditionally woven *Aso-Oke* textile fabric sown into a long flowing skirt (*Aropale*) wrapped on the waist to cover the legs of the masquerade. The head of the masquerade is covered with a big white hat known as *Akete* made from local materials. The hat bears the colours and shield of the *Ipa* from which the masquerade comes. Eyo festival is held as part of the final burial rites to escort the soul of the departed Lagos king or chief (Eyo festival, 2018). It also has as part of its costume, a long big stick (*opambata*) which is held firmly with both hands and resting on shoulders. The stick is made of wood covered with synthetic beads but for the rich and affluent, it is covered with coral beads. However, in contemporary time colourful textile wool material also forms part of its surface decoration. Historians claim that the cultural festival inherited from *Ibefun*, a town in Ogun state where according to folklore, the Oba of Lagos, Oba Akinsemoyin, set out to assuage the Eyo deity so that his childless younger sibling, Erelukuti can bear a child. The Erelukuti did eventually bear two children whose line to date determines an Oba's ascension to the throne in Lagos (History, Arts and Culture in Nigeria, Eyo Festival in Lagos, 2018).



Figure 4: *Eyo masquerade (Bajulaiye Ineso) Crouching Eyo*: a typical pose during Eyo festival in Lagos, Nigeria. 2011.

Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CrouchingEyo.jpg>

Another type of traditional kinetic art form typical of Nigeria that is also found in some western African countries is the *Ikenike* (Stilt- dancer) (Figure 5) which had evolved from traditional stilt dance. Stilt dance involved the use of carved and embellished wooden poles. The stilt dance is a spectacular type of dance whereby someone balances on footrest on pole, walks and displays some unspecified dance steps. In most occasions, persons who are involved in the walk-dance with the stilts are masked and adorned with colourful costumes to create glamour. *Ikenike* therefore, is a kinetic art piece. To the Urhobo speaking people of Delta State, Nigeria, *Ikenike* is an art form that is composed of person, stilts, costumes and, or mask that walk-dances. The person that balances on the stilts' footrests high off the ground is the stimulus that causes the *ikenike* to be mobile. The *Ikenike* like most masquerades is seen during important occasions such as traditional festival, funeral, or for entertainment. He dances to rhythm of the drums which are instructive to every dance step taken by the *Ikenike*.



Figure 5: Agere Masquerades on stilt during 'Asa' Festival 2017.

Source: <https://youtu.be/QaGS1VnrC2g>

Nigeria Contemporary Kinetic Sculptures

There also exists another kind of kinetic art form that can be classified as contemporary kinetic sculpture. In this type of kinetic sculpture, the stimuli needed to produce movements are either mechanical or electrical device, or natural means such as wind or air current. This is at variance with the traditional masquerade which demands human being as an actuator. The Nigerian artistic landscape witnessed a four dimensional art configuration in sculpture when the Nigerian born British-based Douglas Camp Sokari exhibited her Clapping Iriabor or Church ID. The work conquered the initial paradigm configuring motion into the formed element, thus creating kinetic sculpture. However,

in recent times, other Nigerian sculptors have also dared this erstwhile seemingly apathetic mobility of forms. They include Kenneth Njoku (b.1968), Samson Ukweku (b. 1964), Stanley Mangiri (b. 1956) amongst others.

Kenneth Njoku in his doctoral research examined kinetics as complement to statics. He experimented with various media in the configuration of motion energies into his forms. The creative adaptation of movement using external motive in energies which could be mechanical, electrical, wind and participant or beholder's involvement signposts the ingenuity of the artist in his voyage into kinetic sculpture genre. His work titled "Ugomma" is an anthropomorphic bust executed in brass and other metals (Figure 6). The figure has a naturalistic head with a feminine facial features carrying a spike or spin-like hairdo that is segmented into four columns terminating in a half moon shape. The head is hung on a steel metal spring neck that is attached to a triangular shape volume. This geometric form is the body on which the neck and the head rests. At the lower part of this form are attached two steel metal springs with round ball heads hanging perpendicularly on both sides. The whole figure is seated on a short steel metal spring mounted on a wooden base. Movement in this figure is actuated with the touch of the hand by the beholder (viewer). When activated, the head and the round balls (which represent the breasts) dance in a rhythmic manner thus creating a spectacular dance movement.



Figure 6: Kinetic Sculpture. Title: *Ugomma*. Medium: Mixed media. Artist: Njoku (Nigerian) (Produced during Ph.D Programme in Delta State University, 2015).

Source: Kinesis A New Garb Exhibition Catalogue 2016

The art work titled "Memories" is another kinetic sculpture by Njoku in 2013. It is a masquerade figure in which movement is stimulated by an electric motor energy. It is a mixed media work configured with synthetic raffia, discarded plastic bottles, drinking straws, electric bulbs and motors. The mask head is resting on the torso made with discarded plastic bottles. From the shoulders protrudes two short limbs also made of plastic bottles with a female shape ends that is made with bunch of plastic drinking straws (Figure 7); at the middle of the flower shape volume are fixed electric bulbs. The torso is formed with plastic bottles arranged in three courses. While the waist region down ward is also arranged like the torso, but in a flared skirt formation with synthetic raffia underneath it. When electrically activated, the electric device attached to the inner part of the figure produces a vibration which in turn energizes the different parts of the figure into dance frenzy while the dynamic and colourful visual effects of the light bulbs leaves the viewer in a visual ecstasy.



Figure 7: Kinetic Sculpture,
Title: *Memories*. Medium: Mixed media, Artist: Njoku (Nigerian)
(Produced during Ph.D Programme in Delta State University, 2015).
Source: Kinesis A New Garb Exhibition Catalogue 2016

Ukweku Samson's studio –based research effort in the making of *Ono-ejor* (mother masquerade) was targeted to promote and contribute to the efforts put up by few artists in enhancing the practice and production of kinetic art in Nigeria. Ukweku sees the practice and production of kinetic art from the technological and economical points of view. He envisages the situation where the rich cultural African art forms (particularly our dynamic and colourful masquerades) would be transformed into art pieces that could create additional utilitarian values through the adaptation of locally developed technology and use as robots in the industry. Such developed technology would be of immense benefits for Nigerians and other African nation's economy. His foray into the production of kinetic sculpture is also aimed at encouraging artists to be more involved in the practice and production of kinetic arts, particularly sculptures. Such involvement will bring about remarkable impact and help to engender the desired radical visual sensibility, inspire serious scholarship, and inter-disciplinary collaborations for future technological development in Nigeria and Africa in general.

Consequently, the production of *Oni-ejor* was centered on the design concept derived from Urhobo culture of Delta State, investigation and adoption of discarded ceiling fan motorized component which was used as actuator (mobile stimulus) in the production of the mobile sculpture.

The idea behind the *Oni-Ejor* masquerade is to design and produce an electric powered colourful kinetic masquerade that bears cultural traits to the Urhobo people of Delta State, Nigeria: Also that the masquerade should be aesthetically pleasant, entertaining and portable, such that it could be used for homes interior and also in public places as an indoor and outdoor piece. Deliberate efforts were made towards selecting very light and colourful but strong and suitable materials for its production, so as to achieve commensurable weight, and also to allow un-interrupted motion when the masquerade sculptural piece is performing (Ukweku, 2018).

Therefore, the moment *Oni-ejor* is energized, the chromed steel pipes- beads-costume (Figure 8) opens up and spreads out to assume airborne skirt-like form and revolves right-ward, while the installed colour electric bulbs revolve left-ward, and the portable musical device would automatically provide music.



Figure 8: *Kinetic Sculpture Oni-ejor in static position*. Artist: Ukweku Samson
Photo: Ukweku 2015



Figure 9: *The mobile Oni-Ejor during Daytime*.
Photo: Ukweku 2015

The quest for mankind to conquer his environment and to understand the multi energy source that continues to shape our lives, Mangiri's art work titled "Vibration of Life" examines this energy force. The work configured in a 'V' shape form is executed in mild steel flat bar which is twisted into thirteen rings (segments) spring mounted on a wooden base. It is mounted vertically with the smallest segment of the rings directly on the base. Every successive ring is slightly wider than the other in diameter. The kinetic force in motion is activated by the touch of the hand of the spectator. This singular action sends a vibration force that could last for about five minutes or more before it dies out. This vibration is likened to the life force in the Homo sapiens especially and other living things in general. According to Mangiri (2018), "it is this dynamic vibration of life that keeps the man going from the day of birth to the day he stops breathing".



Figure 10: Title: *Vibration of Life*. Artist: Mangiri, Stanley,
(Nigerian). Medium: mild steel.
Photo: Ophori Felix, 2018

Nevertheless, investigation revealed that contemporary Nigerian sculptors are now getting more involved in the production of kinetic arts, especially in the area of sculpture practice. For example, Victor Uwaifo produced a sculpture in which parts were designed to be in motion using internal mechanical actuator (figure: 11). Uwaifo (2013) in an interview stated that “the kinetic sculptural piece was completed and installed at the front view of Oba Akenzua II Cultural Centre. It was commissioned by Edo State government in 2003”. It was however, removed during the recent expansion of the Airport road in Benin. The sculpture’s concept was derived from the culture and traditional symbols of the Benin people of Edo State, Nigeria. The main body structure was produced in mortar while the Eben produced in bronze held in the hand and the one inserted in the torso within the spatial part of the work were designed to be mobile whenever the internal mechanical actuator is energized.



Figure 11: Kinetic Sculpture. Title: *Oba of Benin*. Artist: Victor Uwaifo, (Nigerian).

Photo: Ukweku Samson, 2016

There appear to be upcoming kinetic sculptors that may take the centre stage of modern kinetic practice in Nigeria. This crop of sculptors is emerging from Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Delta State University, Abraka. The department in recognizing the dynamism of Arts and the importance of Kinetic and Robotic Art in the technological and industrial development in the world all over created a course in the sculpture area of research that deals on contemporary robotic and kinetic sculptures. The aim is to engage and encourage sculptors cum researchers to appreciate and practice robotic and kinetic arts, particularly kinetic sculpture in the country. This efforts by Delta State University has offered a sculptor/scholar, Kenneth Njoku (see figure 6 and 7) the opportunity to

be involved in intensive production led research in Kinetic sculpture under the guide and supervision of professor Abel Mac Diakparomre an advocate of the practice and production of kinetic sculpture in Nigeria for futuristic industry application.



Figure 12: *Kinetic Sculpture, Ose-Ejor*. Medium: Metal and Beads. Artist: Ukweku Samson (Produced during Ph.D Programme in Delta State University, 2016)
Photo: Ukweku Samson, 2016.

Conclusion

Kinetic sculpture practice has been an integral part of Nigeria's artistic environment since primordial. The traditional kinetic sculpture has continued to serve its functions within the socio-cultural settings of the various communities where they were created. They have also acted as custodians of the rich cultural heritage with their colourful and dynamic masquerades during festivals and important social ceremonies. In spite of the strong interference from the foreign religious practices and modernisation, they still remain relevant and contributing to the socio-cultural development of their immediate environment and thus also preserving the cultural heritage of the people. While on the other hand, the contemporary kinetic sculpture practice appears to be at its lowest ebb of its engagement. It is the view of this paper that if both traditional and contemporary kinetic sculpture practices are preserved, harnessed and synergized, they will bring about radical kinetic art sensibility, sustainability and boost tourism potentials of the Nigerian artistic landscape.

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