

## BOOK REVIEW

THE LIVING CULTURE OF NIGERIA edited by Saburi O. Biobaku

Lagos: Thomas Nelson (Nigeria) Ltd., 1976, C.86  
Color Illustrations, 55. pp. N10.

*The Living Culture of Nigeria* edited by Professor Saburi O. Biobaku and funded by Shell B.P., is an anthology devoted to an interdisciplinary exposition of the many facets of Nigerian culture by scholars well grounded in their various disciplines. These scholars include an archeologist, a playwright, an ethno-musicologist, an art educator, an architect, a novelist and a choreographer. The publication of this volume is appropriate at a time when Nigeria is the host organizer of the FESTAC - a symbol of the ideological strength of black creativity and civilization.

*The Living Culture of Nigeria* consists of ten sections, preceded by a forward and an introduction viz: Sculpture, Arts and Crafts, Music, Dance, Dress, Drama, Architecture, Hausa Literature, and Contemporary Literature. What all the sections share in common is the major stress on the Nigerian culture as a historical reality borne out by archeological evidence, (eg. the visual arts) and its continuity through time as a living culture which continues to inform the Nigerian institutions with new vitality. Each section is a concise commentary, synthesizing existing literature in the subject area, followed by magnificent color illustrations that explore the pictorial dimension of each subject.

The main objective of this volume is clearly stated in the forward by the Oba of Benin. In his introduction, Professor Biobaku draws attention to the state of cultural studies in Nigeria. While noting the absence of any meaningful documentation in this area as opposed to the political history of Nigeria which has been well studied, he observes that: "No time can be more appropriate to attempt to redress this imbalance than now when world interest in black arts and culture is increasingly evident (p. 10)." The mistaken view in Nigeria that culture means traditional music and dance is corrected. For "culture is more than traditional dances; it manifests itself in a variety of forms and those who wish to comprehend it must look into the totality of a people's way of life (p. 10)."

Professor Biobaku then examines (as a noted historian) those factors of historical significance behind the interplay of

tradition and change in Nigerian culture. Such factors derive from the two dominant religions: Islam and Christianity. "They also include internal and external trade and colonization." The growth of church music, and Islamic literature; churches, and mosques in their marked variety have all resulted from the above influences. In other words, the historical reality of Nigerian culture and its continuity in time also accepts the reality of culture contact and change.

The first section 'Sculpture' written by Dr. Ekpo Eyo takes on the bronze and terracotta traditions and works in other media. The bronze traditions are dealt with in their new temporal sequence: Nok, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife and Benin.

In his analysis of Nok art, the author sketches briefly its context of discovery and makes meaningful deductions about the culture and society that produced these objects. The discovery of such items such as "Quern stones and grinders, oil-palm nuts, seeds of atili and of clay figures carrying hoes on their shoulders" is highly suggestive of a well organized agricultural society with well differentiated social roles. Stylistic and thematic dimension of Nok art is offered, while the author regards the view that Nok art objects may have derived from wood-carving as tenuous since there is no direct evidence in support of this.

Discussing Igbo-Ukwu bronzes, Dr. Eyo outlines their circumstances of discovery, their use context and offers some iconographic hints. His suggestion that these bronze objects may have been imported is certainly not true. For example much evidence from Jeffreys (1934) and Onwujogwu (1972) has shed much light on Nri theocracy with which the Igbo-Ukwu bronzes are associated. Moreover, Professor Hartle's archeological survey of former Eastern region provides a broad archeological landscape within which stylistic comparison of Igbo-Ukwu bronzes and bronzes excavated from other Igbo areas would suggest that Igbo-Ukwu bronzes belong to the brasswork traditions of south-eastern Nigeria (see also Ekejiuba 1967).

On the stylistic and technical achievement of Igbo-Ukwu the author offers an exuberant view: "Whatever interpretations may be given to these finds, the bronzes themselves remain unparalleled in Nigeria, and indeed elsewhere in Africa. They are of delicate workmanship and the ornamentation is often applied in very fine threads of material in the modelling stage. The fact that their composition is mainly of leaded bronze sets them apart from the bronzes of Ife and Benin." (p. 13)

Ife art is divided into three categories: bronze, terracotta and stone. Their stylistic analysis is mute, only history

of discovery is discussed. The archeologist in the author takes over from the art historian, aptly pointing out the strategic position of Owo in the artistic relationships between Owu and Benin (and the diaspora).

Of Benin art (bronzes) the author accepts the stylistic periodization offered earlier by William Fagg (1963) although this view still awaits re-evaluation. Art objects in other media are briefly discussed. There is no doubt that the 'Sculpture' section is difficult to write given the fact that no systematic picture has emerged of archeological excavations in Nigeria. Yet Dr. Ekpo Eyo does a fairly good job of it with his engaging style of analysis.

The continuity of Nigerian art in contemporary life in the form of art and crafts forms the core of the section titled 'Arts and Crafts' written by Prof. Irein Wangboje. Itemizing the various uses and distribution of crafts such as weaving, pottery, leatherwork, embroidery, and calabash carving, he demonstrates the impact of the colonial system of education on the history and development of contemporary art in Nigeria. The major void is the author's failure to discuss how these factors affect the emergence of identity for the Nigerian artist, his or her philosophy and stylistic responses to tradition.

The music dimension is provided by Akin Euba who has made distinctive contributions to Nigerian music. His theme is on the broad synthesis of Nigerian music vis-à-vis their use in social events while "stylistic differences are also attributable to the different types of instruments used in music making" coupled with "the influence of speech on musical style." The impact of the Church and the development of church music is discussed including contemporary musical trends.

Peggy Harper brings her expertise and many years of study to bear on her analysis of Nigerian dance. Her theme is mainly on the typology of Nigerian dance, its functions and other institutional patterns of usage, including problems of adaptations of traditional dance to a modern social milieu.

Not much has been written in the past about dress, the only publications dealing with it being Dr. Roy Sieber's *African Textiles and Decorative Arts* (1972); Thelma Newman's *African Contemporary Arts and Crafts* with accent on craft techniques and Herbert Cole's *Vital Arts of Northern Kenya* (1974). In the section titled 'Dress' Titi Euba offers the reader a panoramic view of the fascinating variety of dresses and their uses, of the diverse peoples of Nigeria. To achieve some time depth in her analysis she examines some artifacts in order to distill from them past dress modes such as the earlier use of draped cloths by Benin and Yoruba kings. There are

glimpses into the significant roles of dress, whether for prestige, symbolic, ritual and leadership purposes. External factors of change such as the trans-Saharan trade with its impact on Oyo kingdom which led to the monopoly of trade goods by monarchs and the resultant new modes of dress, are discussed. Why a similar phenomenon for southern Nigeria evident in the cross-cultural influences of trans-Atlantic trade were not discussed is unfortunate because missed out is the rich and fascinating dress culture of the Ijo and Efik-Ibibio of the Niger Delta and Cross River.

With a primordial view of drama (in terms of definition) Ola Rotimi takes on the theme of drama in Nigeria:

*Drama is a kinetic reflection of the innate imitative impulse in man. It is a phenomenon that harks back to creation itself. It is therefore idle to attempt ascribing a date for Nigeria's earliest dramatic manifestation. (p. 33)*

His is mainly a historical view of the development of Nigerian drama, factors responsible, characteristics, organizational features sometimes in relation to some social issues of the time.

Of the first aspect, the dramatic ritual, he notes that it is "the imitative part of a ritual usually or religious proceeding, originally aimed at realizing for our forebears a much desired object. In effect they tried to 'actualize' through imitative gesture aided by sound and dance." (p. 33) This faith instilling aspect of the dramatic ritual parallels Robin Horton's *Gods as Guests* - a dramatic ritual in which water spirit visitors re-enact in ritual and musical sequences the ideological elements of creation that have come as they do from the primordial deep. An outgrowth of the dramatic ritual is the ceremonial drama which utilizes the resources and ingredients of ritual drama but is essentially 'fun-imparting.'

Of significance is the author's discussion on the emergence of two forms of drama in 19th century, 'the folk theater and the Nigerian drama in English.' Of the former only "managerial skills in the true business tradition" distinguish it, in the sense that the performers work full time.

The author goes on to discuss the social, political and religious issues of the forties which transformed what was a folk theater with christian flavour (eg. Ogunde's *The Garden of Eden*) into a distinct theatrical phenomenon (see Ogunde's *Bread and Bullet*) as a result of the general workers' strike in 1945. The second dramatic form 'the Nigerian drama in English' is a child of the colonial system of education with a textual bias

"of the period principally for Gilbert and Sullivan, Moliere and extracts from contemporary English music halls." (p. 36)

The rest of the section is devoted to the explication of the true emergence of Nigerian drama in English and the roles of the first and second generation of playwrights who brought this about. The significant role of Nigerian independence in this development followed by such events as the formation of drama clubs, the founding of Mbari writer's Club and the production of Nigerian plays in English (eg. Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* and Clark's *Song of a Goat* is well discussed. In all a clear picture of Nigerian drama emerges in historical sequence backed by Rotimi's literary resources.

The section on Architecture is written by David Aradeon who has had wide field experience of West African Architecture. Pioneer works in this area include *Yoruba Palaces* (1966) by A. Afolabi Ojo, Arthur Foyle's *Nigerian Architecture* (1950) and a few other documents including Talbot's (1909) Vickery's (1962) and Godwin's (1966).

First, the author provides a glimpse into the geographic of Nigeria with some graphic details of physiographical features. Against this setting, his discourse centers on the analysis of Nigerian architecture on three levels viz: traditional, colonial and religious by exploring with good examples house forms, their spatial and structural functions and articulation, material and building techniques including some hints on aesthetics. Prominent in his analysis are the rectangular "floating" houses of the Ijo, the Yoruba and Benin courtyard houses, the Nsukka Igbo houses, the "gigantic earth domes" of the Gobir landscape and the "exterior - interior oriented houses" of the Kano city with their structural innovations such as the "sophisticated system of load-bearing walls and wood-reinforced earth arched to span the walls." (p. 35)

The author's assertion that Nsukka Igbo houses have their roofs supported on a system of one interior central column and a series of load-bearing columns on which the roof 'floats' seems an oversimplification of Nsukka architecture. This reviewer's experience in field research into Igbo architecture (taking into account early documents) shows that in a greater part of Nsukka in the areas from Ukehe to Eha Alumona up to Enugwu Ezike, houses are rectangular structures, with roof crest internally supported at two gable ends by two load-bearing columns. Roof structure therefore 'floats' on exterior wooden columns outside the perimeter of space-enclosing earth walls. The building conception and technique the author refers to obtains only in the southern part of Nsukka around Okpatu up to Aboh which is a transition zone between the predominantly Nsukka Igbo rectangular houses

and the cone-oblong, cone-cylinder constructions of the Nkanu and Awgu divisions further south.<sup>1</sup> A similar building expression is also found on the cultural margins of Nsukka in the area of Ete and Aku contiguous to Idoma and Igala territories to the west and north.

Of significance is the author's analysis of the impact of Brazilian architecture with facades of houses reflecting the tradition of 'Iberian Baroque Art.' So also is the impact of early colonial architecture and of Christianity and Islam coupled with new architectural challenges posed by the "new pace of industrialization."

The section on Hausa Literature is contributed by Umaru Ladan, who traces the development of Hausa literature with the introduction of Islam facilitated by the use of Arabic script *ajani*, while the introduction of British rule in Nigeria led to the emergence of works in prose. Islam the author points out was (and is) the major force in the literary output of Hausa writers with the corpus of early works mainly in poetry.

Chinua Achebe, Africa's leading novelist brings this anthology to a fitting close with his section on 'Contemporary Literature' written with his usual satirical sense of humour and an engaging style of analysis. His is the only section which while tracing the growth and development of Nigerian Literature, offers the reader critical evaluation of writer's works in order to place these (whether negative or positive) as important features of Nigerian literature.

He makes it clear from the start that English is the national language of Nigeria given the factors of British colonialism and the fact that "if you let a language 'knock round' a place long enough people begin to use it as just another human resource. And one of the ways mankind has found in recent times to exploit the possibilities is through literature." (p. 47)

Given the above factors, the first novel *The Palm-Wine Drunkard* by Amos Tutuola (1952) marks the official birth of Nigerian literature. Yet the acceptance of English as a national language exposed it to endless interaction with the plurality of Nigerian languages leading to the "domestication of the language." This reached "a stage of sufficient confidence to break out in print." Examples are "the pamphlet literature of Onitsha", the circulation of Nigerian newspapers in English and the use of pidgin as "the third ingredient of the linguistic stew-pot of Nigeria."

The author then goes on to discuss two major aspects of

Nigerian literature, Prose (the Novel) and Poetry all in historical development. Prominent among the prose works discussed are *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), by Amos Tutola, Cyprian Ekwensi's *People of the City* (1954) Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *The Voice* (1963) by Gabriel Okara, Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, and *The Concubine* by Elechi Amadi. Of these, the first three are the most significant in terms of their contribution to the development of Nigerian literature. With their publication, "The main elements of the Nigerian novel were now in place - folk tradition, fantasy (resulting from Amos Tutola's 'resonances of a new mythology) modern urban realism and the exploration of Africa's historical confrontation with Europe." (p. 49) Mention is also made of those students "at the new University of Ibadan whose work is fiction, poetry and drama finally established Nigerian writing as a major (indeed dominant) stream in African literature." (p. 49)

When Achebe indulges in literary criticism he seems at his best. Of Okara's experiment with syntax he points out the inconsistency "even in a mere two-sentence passage as this description of the fire before which Tuere and Ukule, the cripples hold their conversation:

*It was not a proper fire be.  
It was like a leper's fire.*

Where, one may ask, is the second "be"? Mere tinkering with word order distracts and the impressive thing about 'The Voice' is that it survives in spite of it." (p. 49)

Of Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* which has generated a lot of literary heat and controversy, the author offers a dispassionate view (which he regrets as a personal view): "In my view it is dense and overwrought playwright's novel with many fine parts and Soyinka's well-known verbal pyrotechnics. But it is ultimately unsatisfactory, lacking focus or clear direction." (p 49)

The rest of the section is devoted to the discussion of poetry with focus on the works of Gabriel Okara, Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, and J.P. Clark. While Gabriel Okara "leave no signs of struggle in his work or of tools lying around after its accomplishment," J.P. Clark "can be rich and vital, drawing his strength from a very lively mind," even though *Casualties* "is something of a disappointment." Yet there is "a hint of greater flexibility." Soyinka's *Idanre* is viewed as "a fine piece of work rising often to epic heights." Of Okigbo's works "His best poetry is more appealing with every reading, starting always new ripples of significance."

In spite of the problem posed by the fact that major works in Nigerian literature continue to be published overseas, the author is however optimistic that African literature will continue "to create through works of the imagination a new social order."

In all, it is rather amazing how much the authors have succeeded in condensing a considerable body of materials on Nigerian culture into fifty five pages in spite of many full page color illustrations that accompany the text. *The Living Culture of Nigeria* amply demonstrates how good scholarship can become a formidable tool in interpreting a people's culture.

---

### Footnotes

1. Even in this area, there are two co-existing house forms and building techniques; the rectangular and oblong houses. In terms of building techniques, the Nsukka mode co-exists with what the author describes and attributes to Nsukka (though rather wrongly). In other words, in this area there is a mixture of rectangular and oblong houses, the former with thatched gable roofs and the latter with pyramidal roofs which begin to taper off at the four corners as one gets to the Okpatu area south of Nsukka and finally becoming conical around Aboh where they now merge with the cone-cylinder houses of the Nkanu division, Awgu Division and the Ezzangbo area. The use of thermal beds is common to all the human groups that inhabit these areas.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Chike C. Aniakor obtained his M.A. in Art History from Indiana University where he is presently a doctoral candidate. He was formerly a lecturer in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.*