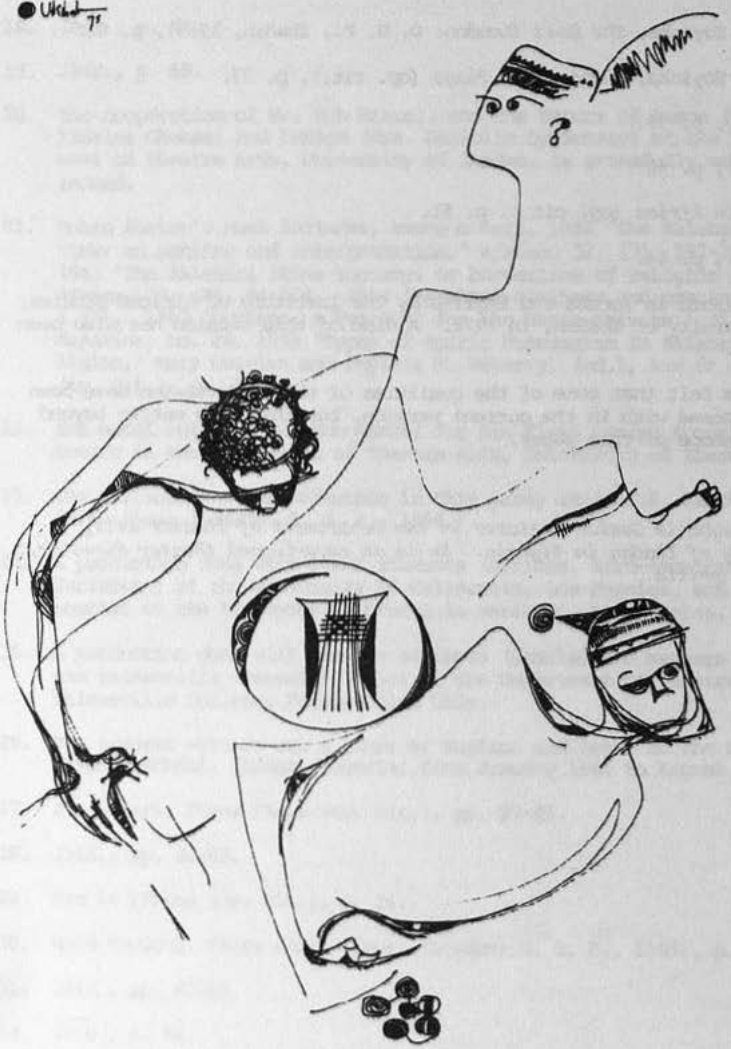

Obiligbo, pen and ink, 1975

THE CHILDHOOD OF AFRICAN ART*

by

Simon Ottenberg

The study of traditional African art by anthropologists, art historians, and others, has changed in recent years from external and largely Western views to a greater interest in the conceptions of particular African peoples of their own art and aesthetics. Western-oriented stylistic analyses of traditional art, studies of its social functions, and of art as an aspect of ritual, all continue to be made and are valuable, but now we have some works which stress the Africans' own conception of artistic acts, their evaluative and judgmental bases for understanding their own art and life histories of artists revealing artistic intentions and desires.

I applaud the move to study traditional African art from the "internal" point of view. It is part of a general move among intellectuals toward some de-Westernization of scholarships in African studies, while still allowing work to be carried out in a language intelligible to all scholars. In Africa it is also associated with a deepening understanding of African history and traditional political relations among groups, and with a growing awareness of African points of view in the struggle for life and survival as individuals and groups in a Dark World rather than just one Dark Continent.

In the process of studying traditional African art from African perspectives one kind of analysis has been almost totally lacking and deserves attention. This involves the twin questions of how Africans of any given generation acquire their aesthetic viewpoints and in what manner they learn their artistic skills. These related queries take us into the world of children in the context of art. How do Africans acquire aesthetic beliefs, a sense of good and bad quality, of the beautiful and the ugly (if they employ these particular concepts), of skilled style and poor workmanship? How do their artistic skills develop?

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*This paper grows out of writing that I have been engaged in in recent years and also derives from conversations with Mitchell Strumpf, Rene Bravmann and my wife Nora, who has all stimulated my interest. The research at Afikpo was carried out with the aid of grants from the Program of African Studies, Northwestern University, the Social Science Research Council (New York), and the National Science Foundation. A Guggenheim Fellowship in 1970-71 allowed me to begin to work with some of the materials presented here.

Here I am not so concerned with the training of the specialist professional as with the ordinary person, both male and female.

We have generally viewed African art as an adult phenomena, something that grown-ups do for and with other adults. If we talk or write about children and art at all it is in terms of an oft-repeated statement rarely explored in detail; children in African societies are free to emulate adult dancing, singing, and sometimes the playing of musical instruments, and they are encouraged to do so rather than being restricted. Or we may say that much folklore is a thing for children, learned from adults or older children--especially tales, riddles and some proverbs. Or we suggest that the artistic exposure of the child occurs during his or her puberty initiation. Or we note that some work has been done on children's games.[2] But the general view has either been one which neglects the study of African children in terms of artistic matters, and that assumes that aesthetic knowledge, skill and experience, is somehow the product of adult life, or that its acquisition in childhood is irrelevant to the understanding of adult artistic activities.

These views are the consequence of a variety of social and intellectual forces. There has been the prevalence in African anthropology of the conceptions of British and French scholars who have been largely concerned with adult social forms, rules, rituals, and conceptions of the world. Another factor has been the "flat" rather than developmental view of the African in general--of a people who had no history of their own, nor knowledge of the history of others. If there was no African history why should there be an interest in the history of the development of creative skills and artistic ideas in individuals? Perhaps underlying the lack of interest in children and art is a racist view of Africans. Being close to nature (whatever <u>that</u> means!) they have natural rhythm, natural dancing and singing skills, natural woodworking abilities; artistic qualities come easily with little or no learning. African art has thus sometimes been seen in contrast to the acquired and artificial nature of Western art. From this viewpoint there is little need to study how African art and aesthetics are learned and have come to be understood by Africans.

Curiously, some of the statements of the *negritude* writers come close to this "naturalness" viewpoint, insofar as they stress the natural quality of African social relations as against the artificial qualities in the West. This suggests that perhaps African intellectuals themselves, by their own experiences and training in European-style missions and government schools in Africa and in Western universities, have failed to understand much about the individual acquisition of aesthetic conceptions and artistic skills by Africans at home.

My own perspective is that African children, probably from the age of five or so, become consciously involved in artistic matters and that throughout their childhood there is a strong interest in art and the acquisition of artistic skills through practice, experimentation, and emulation. By the time the child becomes an adult he has had ten to fifteen years of exposure to artistic matters. This does not necessarily make him a skilled or professional craftsman but it does allow him to be an active participant in the arts as an adult. Aesthetic knowledge and general artistic skills are *not* initially acquired in African societies by persons as adults although they are sharpened and extended and given tones at that time. Thus it makes sense for us to look more closely at the artistic experiences and activities of children.

I take materials from my own fieldwork in 1952-53 and 1959-60 to illustrate my argument. I use the past tense in some sections since the situations that I am describing have changed since then. I don't think my examples are exceptional for Africa, nor are they necessarily typical, but they represent features probably common to a number of African societies. Anyway, we don't yet know what is typical or common in this field.

Afikpo consists of a group of twenty-two Igbo villages in the East Central State of Nigeria, organized into what was traditionally a loose political federation with both matrilineal and patrilineal descent groupings and a strong age grading system.[3] The Afikpo have traditionally been farmers and fishermen. Their artistic activities are to a large extent executed on a village basis, a unit made up of a number of patrilineal groupings organized as compounds. The core of the adult male aesthetic life centers on the men's secret society of the village, a grouping of all adult males in the settlement in contrast to females and uninitiated boys—not a very secret organization. The society puts on a series of plays, dances, initiations, and other events, during the course of a year[4] using wood, calabash, and net masks, in which body costuming is very important and where variously dancing, walking, singing, playing music and acting occur. These events are generally open to the public; women and uninitiated boys, as well as non-participating adult males of the village and persons from other Afikpo settlements form the audience.

Most wood carving at Afikpo is associated with this secret society masking tradition, but a few wood sculptures also are found generally of human figures, located in the village men's rest houses.[5] There is no artistic metalwork done at Afikpo.

There is also singing and dancing at certain non-secret society events. At the feast of the Turtle (*Mbe*), generally held about October there is in some Afikpo villages, the sexually satiric singing and dancing of masses of males and females separately grouped by age and sex. At certain title events and *rites de passage* (including second funeral ceremonies), men, women, or both sexes dance and sing. At the wrestling period in June male drummers play special wrestling music to arouse the contestants' spirits, and these men hop and dance about in characteristic styles.

Nevertheless the emphasis of the Afikpo artistic tradition is upon a strong masking and costuming tradition focussed on the village secret societies. The tradition stresses singing and dancing, with a strong emphasis on satire. The musical instruments are few--wooden gongs and drums, raffia rattles, iron gongs, occasionally xylophones or a flute, but music is a crucial part of much of the aesthetic life. The art tradition is multiple rather than single-form; almost invariably two or more forms (music, dance, song, acting, masking, costuming) occur together. In all or many of these features Afikpo differs little from some other traditional African societies.

The art emphasizes not only satire but humor in general. This is a core aesthetic element. There is also a conception of art as associated with religious beliefs--secret society spirit, ancestors, other spirits--but it is an aesthetic not highly religious in tone, nor tied to the reenactment of great myths or folkloristic elements, for folklore seems largely set apart from the other aesthetic forms. The aesthetic life leans toward the secular rather than the mythic and the sacred. The art involves mass participation in many of its forms, rather than professionalization and a spirit of exclusiveness. Beyond some musicians, praise singers, and carvers, there is little overt specialization; restrictions on participation are largely based on age, sex, and membership in the adult secret society. Many of the aesthetic aspects listed here are common to other African societies.

How then does the Afikpo child come into this rich world of adult aesthetics and art forms? Let us first look at each sex separately.

Traditionally, boys were not initiated into the adult secret society until their late teens, although now they are often entered at an earlier time. From the age of about five until that time they had their own boys' societies, in operation for some six months of the year, at the time the adult secret society of the village was functioning. These boys' groups were generally located in back of their compounds of residence, and were emulative of the adult societies.

The boys, by the age of five or so, were living together in their own houses--not in either parent's home--located in the compounds. From then until their initiation into the adult secret society they were relatively autonomous of their parents, although fed by their mothers and helping their fathers in the farms and with other work. In this state they organized their own boys' secret societies by ages, one type at roughly 5 to 10 years, a second at 10 to 15, and a third from 15 years until initiation; each grade autonomous and isolated from the others, each one keeping its own "secrets" (the same as the others on the whole). The two younger societies were organized separately in each compund, the oldest often by boys of a group of compounds in the village.

It is in these societies that much of the aesthetic and art-form learning of young males went on. Many of the societies had their own rest houses and a shrine with its own priest, a member of the group. Each society held its own initiation rites. Each had its own masquerades, often similar in form to the satiric plays and other masquerades of the adult societies. These were organized by the boys themselves, without adult supervision, relfecting boys' happenings and personalities. The masks--not of wood but of coconut shell or bark, cloth, leaves, and other materials--were made by the boys and they also produced their own costumes, gathering materials in the bush and borrowing cloths and other costume elements from siblings and other relatives, or from friends, in many cases from both sexes. The boys made their own wooden drums, and gongs, xylophones, and raffia rattles, learning to play them by themselves or with the help of other members of their own society. They made up their own music, words, and acts, sometimes drawing on materials from previous masquerades, and sometimes innovating within accepted forms, but almost always with an eye to the nature of the organizations and aesthetics of the village adult secret society.

In fact, these boys' societies were, in a sense, three earlier autonomous stages of the adult society. As in the latter, some of the boys' events were restricted from females; any females, regardless of age, violating the taboos had to sacrifice at the boys' society shrine on penalty of infertility for failure to do so, brought about through the action of the boys' shrine spirit. The boys' masquerades were public and girls and sometimes adults of both sexes watched and enjoyed them.

In short, by the time that the boys were initiated into the adult society that had ten or more years experience in organizing their own aesthetics, largely free of direct adult control, they had had plenty of experience in mask making, although not in wood, in making musical instruments and playing them, in preparing and wearing costumes and in dancing, singing, and acting before substantial audiences. They had also, the benefit of critical audiences, for viewers at Afikpo are likely to be vocal about their response to masquerades, when they are

going on and afterwards. There was also competition between boys' societies to put on good performances--thus standards were evolving in the boys' minds.

And among the boys of one society criticism of one another was common and expected and helped to establish standards of skill and of aesthetic quality, based upon adult performance as a reference point, which activities the boys also viewed. Afikpo say that in former times some of the boys' masquerades were even better than their adult counterparts. All boys took part in many of these children's masquerades. Some became skilled carvers, other excellent musicians, still others developed skills at preparing costumes, at dancing and singing, or at preparing new songs and skits. Some remained inept in all skills. There was room for the growth of several talents, rather than a restricted vogue, room for the full aesthetic participation of all boys.

In the context of this experience boys came to associate aesthetics with a number of basic principles that were to dominate their way of behaving as adult artists the remainder of their lives. These emphasized maleness as against femaleness, that there were really two art worlds--one for each sex--separate and yet associated. Stress was also placed on physical strength--the stamina to stand long periods of physical movement and other artistic activities and yet to maintain a high level of body and other skills. Humor and satire and sex-role reversals were very important. The use of multiple art froms at once rather than a single form, and the considerable emphasis on the male body as the center of a total and overall aesthetic focus were important. A sense of organized autonomy from older males played an important part in the aesthetic--an art form of independence, even though the boys were doing much as other boys or adult males did.

There was the association of secrecy with art forms--especially rehearsals, costuming and mask preparations before public performance, through the association of the boys' masquerades with their own secret societies, which kept away females and younger boys from some activities. A particular sense of time at the performances, of the scheduling of events, and the open rather than restricted nature of the aesthetic experience to all boys, with a strong peer-group stress, were also major features. The boys' masquerades had few or no overt sexual references in them and the night of the day of a performance the players had to sleep away from any contact with women, thus without the possbility of sexual relations, among other things. Yet the masquerades symbolically reflected certain sexual elements. These features were also characteristic of the aesthetics of the adult secret societies.

These girls' songs were not emulative of adult female styles in a specific sense, although in general pattern the songs and dances were. Again, the girls competed against the boys while joining with them at the moonlight dancing, and they took part in the more sexually satirical singing and dancing of the Feast of the Turtle. Girls at these various events wore plastic waistbead bands (formerly cowry shells), bright cloths (largely of European manufacture), and had special hair styles. They were elegantly female in dress; girls and women never masquerade at Afikpo.

Girls' skills thus favored dancing and singing; rarely did they play musical instruments, only occasionally a musical pot was heard. Their aesthetics was almost entirely non-religious in nature, did not emphasize physical strength but womanly virtues and the female sex role. Females made pots at Afikpo but although famous throughout the Cross River area of Nigeria, these were almost entirely without design elements. No one made cloth. Adult women's songs and dancing tended toward the satirical, the critical—especially of men—and women even aped male secret society songs while pretending not to know that they were doing so, as a way of teasing males. Female aesthetics thus had some features which differed from that of males and others which were alike or close in feeling.

Females were also tied very much into male art forms in that girls and women formed an important part of the audience, although they were more passive and less explicit in their public comments than males in the audience. Nevertheless, they played a major role by their presence there. The masqueraders played to the females who, I believe, would recognize them by voice, physical appearance, or manner of movement. The players often made fun of females through dress, song, or acts, and the knowledge that women were there was important to these male performances. Thus females were an integral part of the male masquerades from which, in a certain sense, they were also excluded.

In this context girls, who were in the audience from the age of five or more, generally sitting with females rather than with boys or men, came to know and to appreciate the rich masquerade acts which they could not join in directly. They developed critical standards and taste, ideas of style and form, much as boys did. They were in some sense, more a part of the male aesthetic than males were of the females' for often when females were dancing and singing male groups were as well in complementary opposition, whereas at the masquerades women did not generally sing and dance but played passive observing roles.

Thus not only artistic skills but the aesthetic sense of boys were well formed by the time that they joined the adult secret society in their late teens.

There were other occasions not associated with secret societies of any kind when boys sang and/or danced. These included the already mentioned Feast of the Turtle and wrestling matches (especially inter-village ones). In the feast the girls of the village, or a section of it, sang as a group in competition with boys of roughly like ages, and in the presence of older groups of separate males and females who also sang and danced. Many songs were explicitly sexual. In addition, for several months following the secret society season, from about April to June, boys and girls danced and sang separately in groups in the village centers employing art forms that were largely non-sexual; the children often later slept in the village center though this was in general not sexual in nature. These popular evenings, called in English "Moonlight Dances" gave the males a change to compete in art forms as against females, to strut a bit, to show their skills in dancing and singing, and to develop restrained relationships with girls.

In addition to these activities boys participated, but generally more passively, in adult artistic activities. They saw almost all of the adult masquerades from about the age of five or so, and they enjoyed these very much. As uninitiated boys they were also chased about by and played with by certain masked and costumed figures of the adult secret society. They watched singing and dancing at other adult events, as we have already listed them. They absorbed adult aesthetics and art forms through observation, uniting this experience with what they were learning from one another in their peer-group boys' societies. Each type of experience reinforced and strengthened the other. The pattern of learning adult aesthetics through observations and emulation but separate from direct adult control or guidance, may or may not be peculiar to Afikpo, I am not sure. One sees it even in carvers there; there is little of an apprentice system. Most males develop carving skills on their own, copying adult art pieces and occasionally seeking the advice of a skilled carver. At any rate the Afikpo pattern led to a rich accumulation of skills and aesthetic ideas by the time that the boy was a young adult.

The case of girls is somewhat more restricted and there was more likely to be some direct adult supervision. Many of the compounds had a girls' singing and dancing society which was often also a group which kept the compound clean. This was generally guided by a married woman living there who had herself been an active singer and dancer in such a society as a youth and who had liked to keep her hand in. The group sang praises of themselves, of female beauty, of the joy of children; the songs were on the whole virginal and non-satiric, unlike some of the songs that adult married women put forth in other situations.

What is clear, then, is that girls, by the time they married, traditionally in their teens but now often later, and boys, by the time they joined the secret society, traditional by also in their teens but now sometimes earlier, both had developed a full and rich set of art skills and a thorough sense of aesthetics--judgmental, evaluative, sensing style, form and performance qualities. This was a process that started as soon as the baby period was over and involved active participation of the children in their own full-blown art forms as well as a great deal of observation of adult art. The argument is converse to the view that adult art forms and aesthetics need only to be understood as adults know and understand them. From that view childhood experience is unimportant. This is not my conception.

The different view at Afikpo of each sex of what is proper to do in art and what is only to be observed suggests that the growing children's awareness of his or her identity as a male or as a female is linked to artistic as well as to other matters. I am not arguing that there is a different aesthetic for males and females at Afikpo--this difficult matter was not tackled by me--but that there are differing artistic experiences for growing boys and girls and that these are linked to sex role and sex identity.

Children's intense experiences with art forms also occur to a considerable extent in the period of puberty at Afikpo. I am not sure what the connection is between sexual awakening and art at Afikpo. I do believe that the considerable interest of boys in their secret societies occurred at a pubertal time when despite moonlight dancing and the Feast of the Turtle there were not many opportunities for actual sexual experimentation. Girls married young but boys not until as men in their late twenties. Masking and other artistic forms for boys may have served at that time as a substitute for sexual energies--this is, of course, conjecture, but the boys' societies did occupy a good deal of their time and interests during at least part of the year. Further, boys dressed up in certain masks and costumes and played around the compounds where girls taunted them in song and were gently chased away, only to reappear again to continue the game, a sort of pleasant bisexual teasing as was the moonlight dancing. These kinds of events suggest that Afikpo art forms are much identified with a growing sexual awareness and with sexual differentiation, and in many ways are symbolic markers and guides for the maturing person.

Thus I think it is unfortunate that the understanding of the acquisition of art skills and of aesthetic principles by growing children in African societies is so little known, consequently so

difficult to relate to the study of the African's perceptions of their own art. Childhood artistic experience throws much light on adult forms and experiences. The Childhood of the arts occurs in the childhood of living persons, not in some mystical past period of mankind. It is deserving of much greater study than it has received so far.

The traditional forms of art at Afikpo are changing as a consequence of Western influences, especially schools and religion, but also through the presence of different social forms, and of new art in writing, music and the radio. There is less emphasis on the human body as an art focus and more on the mind alone. Community art gives way to other social art forms. At Afikpo the boys' societies are dying out, the girls' groups changing. But I do not suppose that the principles which I have put forth here have changed much. The acquisition of artistic skills and aesthetic knowledge is a function of childhood maturation. It is tied in with the growth of knowledge and experience in social relations, with developing sexual feelings, and with the acquisition of non-art skills. No full understanding of adult art and creativity is possible without an awareness of this childhood element.

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