

# A Practical Assessment of the Modes of Visual Narratives in the Art of Benin in Nigeria

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## Abstract

*African narrative art is characterized by a complexity of style, iconography and functions, hence scholars of sub-Saharan African art often find it difficult to identify, interpret and appraise this fundamental genre of African art. This is especially true of scholars who utilize Western yardstick in their interpretations. Thus scholars pay a cursory glance at this aspect of African art or ignore it outright. Consequently, there is a dearth of literature on the nature and cultural significance of this genre of African art and little is known of it outside the continent. It is therefore no surprise that a common perception in the West is that African art is devoid of narrative art. Such an erroneous impression needs to be corrected in order to promote a better understanding and appreciation of the arts of African cultures. This is the motivation for this art-historical appraisal which employs the stylistic, functionalistic and iconographic analytical methods to elucidate the form, content, functions and meaning of African narrative art. The art of Benin (Nigeria) provides excellent exemplars of this unique African mode of expression. Thus this paper focuses on an analysis of the visual narratives that are depicted on principal Benin royal artforms, and their significance in the cultural life of their creators and users.*

**Keywords and Phrases:** Narrative art; Benin art; carved tusks; royal stools; African culture.

## Introduction

Simply put, narrative art is art which depicts components of a story in visual form. This mode of expression is an imperative and fundamental genre of African creative objectifications. However, the identification, interpretation and appraisal of the genre usually pose great challenges for scholars of sub-Saharan African art. This is attributable to many factors. Firstly, this genre of African art is characterized by a complexity of style, iconography and functions. Secondly, scholars often use Western standard in their appraisal of African art generally, and they tend to favour an appraisal of African art, detached from the socio-cultural background that engendered it. The use of such interpretative schemes in the evaluation of African art makes it difficult for analysts to understand fully African artforms in their symbolic, art-historical and socio-anthropological totality. In this regard, African narrative art is no exception. Some non-Africans usually misconstrue the contextual meaning of this African genre, consequently; they fail to appreciate fully its significance. This exceptional African mode of expression has remained, hitherto, inadequately explicated and insufficiently exposed, in terms of

analysis of its nature and significance, to non-African cultures. Thus, there is a dearth of literature on its nature and cultural significance in the life of their creators and users. It is therefore not surprising that the general perception of some Western scholars, for example, Laurie Adams (1984), is that "there is virtually no narrative in African art." Contrary to this view, the truth is that based on the standards by which narrative art is judged in African cultures, there is no doubt that Africans produce veritable narrative art. As Dzobo (n.d.) correctly stated, "Africans have been using both visual and oral "picture words" for a considerable time to express, transmit and store their thoughts, emotion and attitude"<sup>1</sup>. In actual fact, not only is narrative art a prevalent mode of expression in African art, the genre is also a crucial and indispensable aspect of African art traditions because of the functions they serve in their cultures of origin.

Therefore, the main aim of this art-historical appraisal, which employs the stylistic, functionalistic and iconographic analytical methods, is to elucidate the form, content, functions and meaning and significance of the narrative themes in African art with a focus on the court art of Benin in Nigeria. This

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.crvp.org/book/series02/ii-1/chapter\\_iv.htm](http://www.crvp.org/book/series02/ii-1/chapter_iv.htm)

appraisal is aimed at expanding further knowledge about this mode of expression of African art outside the continent. In this regard, this essay examines some specific Benin court artforms that convey themes that are explicitly or implicitly narrative in nature. The art objects under consideration are: carved royal stools and carved ivory tusks. But first, what characteristics distinguish Benin visual narratives.

### **The Nature of Benin Visual Narratives**

Benin visual narratives are meticulous depictions, rendered in great details, of factual stories, historical events, the life experiences of Benin Kings as well as imperative facets of Benin culture, especially as they pertain to Benin kingship institution. The themes are diverse and expansive and they are portrayed copiously in low-relief on the surfaces of both secular and religious court artforms. They are rendered in varied forms without focus on perspective scale or spatial relation. Superficially, the depictions seem to be arranged randomly and not overly concerned with organization, but in actual fact, the forms are deployed in a systematic manner that is readable and meaningful to persons who have adequate knowledge of their nature and connotations.

Benin narrative art is highly distinctive. It is characterized by a variety of strikingly diverse styles, and a highly complex iconography. The modes of expression in Benin narrative art are in accord with the atypical nature, complex style, inherent multiplicity of meanings, and intellectual complexity that characterize African art generally. It is usually difficult for observers who are not acquainted with the nature and functions of these narratives to discern their narrative content. This is due to the seemingly lack of apparent narrative elements in the themes, motifs and symbols that constitute the narratives. Therefore, it must be pointed out that in order to secure a correct identification, understanding, appreciation and interpretation of the narrative content of this African idiom of expression, it is necessary to search for in-depth information on local conception of the elaborate and rich iconographic coding of the traditional allegories and imagery as conceived and intended by their creators.

Generally, narrative arts are executed in a variety of styles or modes. This is true of Benin visual narratives, which manifest four main styles, namely: (1) simultaneous narrative, (2) monoscenic narrative, (3) multiple narrative, and (4) continuous narrative.

It is perhaps expedient to refer to some definitions of these types of narrative styles. As Petersen (2010) explains, a simultaneous narrative often centres on geometric or abstract designs in addition to the arrangement of items within the work of art, and it focuses on repeatable patterns and superfluous schemes with emphasis on dualities. He adds further that a simultaneous narrative exhibits minimum visually distinguishable organization to viewers who are not acquainted with its purpose, therefore, its interpretation depends on its creator, or the underlying principles for its creation. On the other hand, a monoscenic narrative, according to Dehejia (1990), portrays a single scene without the repetition of characters, it has only one action taking place, and it depicts one scene of great importance that is easily identifiable in the context of the narrative. In contrast, a continuous narrative illustrates multiple scenes and actions in a single visual field without any evident demarcations, and the sequence of the events within the narrative is defined via the repetitive use of the main character or characters. Simply put, a continuous narrative uses the repetition of figures to convey multiple scenes of a story in single composition. These definitions appropriately capture the fundamental essence of the styles of Benin visual narratives, and they serve well as a background for appraising the depictions.

A striking feature of Benin narratives is that they exhibit a dominance of the themes and symbols that have a prevalent use in Benin art. This is because the established artistic convention in Benin art requires the creators of the narratives to draw inspiration from the rich repertoire of Benin traditional themes. Also, in accord with the typical nature of Benin art, the formal configuration and iconography of the narrative themes are inspired by the basic concepts of Benin kingship because Benin art is court art, and as such, it is produced principally for the glorification of Benin Kings. Consequently, a majority of Benin narrative themes illustrate factual stories regarding the life and experiences of Benin past Kings, royal ceremonies and rituals, and other socio-political activities and historical events connected with Benin kingship institution, as well as themes that evoke the fundamental aspects of Benin culture. Some Benin narrative themes communicate social messages, while others are visual commentary and criticism of anti-social behavior aimed at edifying Benin people. Additionally, there are also themes that are visual allusions to historical events, Benin folklores, proverbs and mythologies.

An additional important point to note is that the motifs and themes in Benin narratives are not used purely for decorative purposes. The formal elements deployed in the narratives have meanings within the context in which they are employed. The way the images are configured (their style), their complex iconography (meaning), context of use and functions demonstrate adequately (as shall be shown in our examples) that they are veritable visual chronicle of the social, religious and political aspects of Benin culture, especially as they pertain to Benin kingship institution.

Perhaps the strongest collaboration and indication of the narrative nature of these visual depictions is the fact that there exist an evident correlation between formal evidence and Benin oral tradition. Put differently, the visual information conveyed in the narratives are also enshrined and corroborated in Benin oral history. Thus it is imperative to first secure adequate knowledge of the social and historical contexts of the themes depicted in the narratives in order to decode the precise meaning of their inherent symbolism. As is the case with all true visual narratives, the interpretation of Benin visual narratives is dependent on the reason for their creation, and the intentions of their creators.

Furthermore, Benin narratives consist of symbols, motifs and patterns that are characterized by abbreviation, stylization and symbolism. In this, they concur with the fundamental nature of Nigerian ethnic arts. As Udosen (1998) observes, Nigerian (African) arts usually underline "the universal elements of form rather than the particulars," and this tendency is typical of Nigerian traditional artists because like other African artists, they focus on establishing the symbol of the essence of a thing unlike the Western artist who "struggled to represent the true appearance, from a particular perspective, of a material thing" (Udosen, 1998).

The focus on stylization in Benin narrative art is not totally unexpected because Benin art (in the manner of African art generally) is not overly concerned with the simulation of nature in its verisimilitude. Thus, in their distinctive character, Benin narrative themes are configured in a highly stylized manner, and the forms are purposely schematized and limited to depictions that capture, express and record visually only the most important aspects of the subject-matter that is symbolized. This is in accord with the established artistic convention in Benin art, which emphasizes these styles of expression. Intriguingly, even though the

themes are simple and emblematic in nature, they consist of carefully selected patterns, motifs and symbols that have a multiplicity of compelling meanings. The inclusion of such elements is purposeful as they are intended to make up adequately for what is not captured visually in the depictions. For example, in a typical Benin monoscenic narrative, a single motif is used to symbolize the entire story or event being relayed, and only the scene that is most significant and easily identifiable within the context of the narrative is depicted. As a result, Benin visual narratives are: (1) remarkable from an art-historical perspective for their composite style, their rich multilayered iconographic content, and their lucid graphic legibility, and (2) they are outstanding for the details that their creators include in each subject-matter represented such as: careful detailing, the use of biographical information about the personages depicted and the astonishing accuracy of the rendering of their emblem of identity, office and status, in addition to the use of convincing pictorial portrayals of their actions, poses and gestures. For instance, in Benin narratives, the human figures in group compositions are arranged in a hierarchical manner with prominent size given to elevated status. This is exemplified in the larger size given to the images of Benin Kings to denote their iconic royal status in contrast to the use of smaller figures for their subjects to denote their subordinate status. Another example is the use of insignias of office to indicate the ranks and roles of the personages depicted as typified in the figures of Benin Kings wearing royal regalia, crowns, body adornments, and holding spiritual objects such as ceremonial swords, royal staffs and royal talismans. Such distinct regalia items, body adornments and handheld implements are used not only to indicate their status as Kings, but also to indicate their roles as spiritual heads of their people, and their role as the custodians of the customs and traditions of their land. In addition, to aid identification of the people depicted, several items such as ritual objects, musical instruments, hairstyles, and court objects that indicate rank or status are depicted explicitly on the figures of Benin personages.

This meticulous attention to details is also observable in portrayals of historical events. For instance, a variety of symbols are used as appropriate imagery to signify the major aspects or the most critical moments of the events or stories being relayed in the narratives, and the key attributes of the persons involved in the events or

stories. All the aforementioned unique features make the informative narrative content of the depicted themes distinctly perceptible to those who are conversant with the connotations intended in the depictions.

Furthermore, a significant aspect of Benin narratives that cannot be ignored is the fact that it is impossible to get full appreciation of the contextual meaning of these visual expressions without adequate knowledge of the stories they illustrate, and the circumstances in which they were created because their interpretation is dependent on the underlying reason for their creation and utilization. This knowledge is needed for their full enjoyment and appreciation because the intention of their creators and users cannot be deciphered simply by mere physical examination of the formal qualities of the narratives. Also, it is clear from examples cited in this paper, that the meaning potentials in the themes and symbolism in Benin narrative art are significant because they convey complex socio-cultural information in easily decipherable form to those who have access to specialized information about their exact meanings.

Benin narrative art is also characterized by richness of forms and decorations. Generally, Benin narrative art manifests a perceptible compulsion to treat forms ornately and to fill surfaces copiously. This style which Dark (1973) referred to as "horror vacui" style, is a hallmark of Benin art. Hence when Benin craftsmen depict the themes in their art, as he correctly noted, they decrease the open space to a minimum and a richness of design which falls short of being jam-packed (Dark, 1973). This is also a prime quality of Benin narrative art.

Other important factors that determine the way Benin visual narratives are configured are also worth mentioning here. For instance, Benin craftsmen are guided by the dictates of the established artistic conventions that are prevalent in their society, and they often imitate the precedents laid by their predecessors in the profession, however each artist also portrays his personal idiosyncrasies in his creations. Thus the personal inclinations of the makers of Benin narrative art also impinge on how they decide to depict their themes, the manner in which they represent the space, and how they configure time within their works of art without digressing too far from the acceptable idioms of expression in Benin art.

All the aforementioned characteristics not only underscore the importance of the themes depicted in Benin narratives, they also indicate that beyond their

aesthetic functions, the narratives are symbolic and didactic in nature. These key distinctive features jointly ensure the communicative success of Benin visual narratives, and they make the informative narrative content of the depicted themes distinctively logical, perceptible and easily comprehensible.

Finally, an equally crucial fact is that in Benin art, form and functionality are indivisible, thus a majority of Benin artforms have functions that determine their formal configurations. Function is also a major determinant of the forms deployed in Benin narrative art. Therefore, it is relevant to examine the functions of these narratives.

### **The Functions of Benin Visual Narratives**

Benin visual narratives are created with specific purposes and functions for their culture of origin. Firstly, reminiscent of any artistic creation, the purpose of these narratives is expression. Benin craftsmen, like all artists worldwide are born in and nurtured by the society they live in, thus, naturally they constitute an essential part of their society consequently, and their creative objectifications are a reflection of their society. Accordingly, the purpose of the art that the Benins produce, their narrative art inclusive, is to reflect their society.

Secondly, Benin narrative art is a mnemonic communicative device. Basically, the Benins, like other Africans, largely produce art that attempt to instruct or edify, hence a large corpus of their artforms have religious or didactic intent although they sometimes produce artforms that serve only aesthetic functions. Undoubtedly, Benin narrative art is intended to serve an edifying function because their inherent meanings are instructive, well-reasoned and explicit, and they transmit coherently, the complex socio-cultural facts that they embody. The fact that Benin narrative art performs a communicative function is not totally unexpected because in Benin, as it is in most parts of Africa, narrative art was, and still is, a primary means that the people use as a means of communication. In the typical manner of African narrative art, the type that the Benins produce is able to reflect and explain vital aspects of Benin culture, the spiritual and religious beliefs of the people inclusive. The Benins use this mode of expression effectively to explain their relationship with, and perception of, the natural world, and to explain the nature of things. Thus when Benin craftsmen illustrate stories in their visual narratives, they use enigmatic symbols in their distinctive forms and characteristics to convey

potent diverse social, moral, political or religious messages to aid them in narrating stories, and more importantly, to help them pass down religious and cultural information. This style of representation is reminiscent of the way Benin storytellers utilize many dramatic techniques such as meaningful gestures, diverse dance steps, elaborate costumes, melodic songs, varied tones of voice, and drum beats to assist them in the dramatization in order to bring the stories they are narrating to life before their audience. Given that Benin visual narratives, like their story-telling, is a means that they use to educate people on the values of their culture, naturally the narratives are carriers of diverse meanings, and they convey various information, messages, lessons and warnings.

Moreover, Benin narratives are visual documentations of imperative aspects of their culture of origin. By means of these narratives, the Benins are not only able to express and preserve their cultural heritage; they are also able to address the problem of transmitting information about their culture from one generation to another.

The narratives serve also as practical aids to memory on which Benin oral traditions rely for cultural transmission and permanence; consequently, the themes that constitute the narratives are rendered in a simple stylized mode which makes it easy for their viewers to memorize and recollect the information that the narratives convey. Benin narratives are a form of disguised symbolism that encodes and encapsulates the various ideas that are fundamental to Benin societal ideologies and worldviews; therefore, the themes that the depictions convey are depicted in a figurative manner by means of expressive symbols that are imbued with a multiplicity of enigmatic connotations.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the Benins make diverse demands of their art. The fact that they utilize their art in the atypical manner they do is not strange, given that the iconographic exploits of the Benins are derivatives of their mystical and social beliefs, and they are purposefully conceived to express their treasured cultural values. The various functions that these narratives serve are expedient and of great importance to the Benins because Benin traditional society is oral-driven, has no written language and is largely without a written history. Judging from what has been said so far, it is obvious that indisputably, these narratives play a significant role in traditional Benin. Take for instance, the way the custom and tradition that give the Benins their

distinct cultural identity as a people have been kept alive for thousands of years in this genre of their art, the same way they have been enshrined in Benin oral history, myths, legends, folktales, rituals, prayers, festivals, proverbs, songs and dances.

It is pertinent to add that it is because of the important functions that these narratives serve, that the Benins, as a matter of necessity, had to develop remarkable idiosyncratic ways to ensure that their narratives perform the functions ascribed to them effectively. To do these effectively, they imbue the visual themes with inherent connotations to help facilitate proper interpretations of the narrative themes. And as noted earlier, the Benins also evolved distinctive ways to aid identification of the each subject-matter that they portray as exemplified by the numerous vital narrative and pictorial cues and clues that they include in the forms deployed in their visual narratives. Some examples of such elements are: careful detailing, the inclusion of biographical references to aspects of the personality of each person depicted and an amazing accuracy in the rendering of their regalia, hairstyles, scarification marks and emblems of identity. These distinct features not only ensure that the meanings of the depicted themes are not forgotten or misinterpreted over time, they also make the intended connotations easy for viewers to decode.

To further elucidate the points made in the preceding texts, a selected few of Benin artforms that have typical Benin visual narratives are appraised presently. The appraisal focuses on the form, style, and the content, context of use, and iconography of the narrative themes. The artforms involved in this analysis are: carved ivory tusks and royal stools.

### **Benin Royal Stools**

Benin royal stools are two types, namely: the wooden rectangular stools called *agba* that have their seats, legs and connecting stretchers completely covered with narrative themes (Figure 1), and the round stools referred to as *erhe* that have visual narrative themes on their two reversible circular seats and central supports. As Ezra (1992) reports, both types of stools are symbolically and functionally significant in royal context, because they are central in the affirmation of Benin royal authority. According to Hess (1983), the *agba* initially was a symbol of legitimate authority that Oba Ewedo (c.1255), one of the Kings of Benin, used to establish his authority after he appropriated its use from the

representatives of the regime of the Ogiso dynasty, which existed in Benin around 900AD. At present *agba* stools are used in Benin only by the Oba (King), chiefs and high priests as emblems of prestige, status and statecraft. Ben-Amos (1980) reports that the intrinsic political significance of the *agba* is expressed in the Benin adage, "*fi agba*" ("to bring out the *agba*"), which translated means, "to summon an assembly." The phrase originated from the use of *agba* as a "Judgment Seat" by the Ogiso rulers whenever they presided over civil cases in their courts in ancient Benin.



Figure 1: Agba Stool  
Source: [www.stevenson.info](http://www.stevenson.info)

The forms deployed on Benin royal stools are specially selected to indicate their major functions since they are seats of kingship and authority. Consequently, they are embellished with distinctive symbolic political, religious and secular themes, and symbols that are connected with the Benin kingship institution. The narrative themes consist of several diverse motifs that typically have deep narrative content as exemplified in scenes from Benin history, palace ceremonies and traditional Benin motifs. For example, the seat of the stool below (Figure 2) alludes to *Igue* (*ugie*) festival, a royal annual ceremony performed by the Oba and the people of Benin. This ceremony that is extant in Benin often attracts a huge crowd including non-Africans from within and outside Benin. The narrative theme portrayed on the seat of the stool (Figure 2) shows the figure of the Oba portrayed larger than the other figures in hierarchical proportion typical of Benin art. The Oba's arms are held by arm-supporters and the group is under a huge umbrella held by a palace attendant, while the sword bearer (*omada*) standing beside the Oba holds the royal ceremonial sword, *ada*. The Oba never appears in

public without the *ada* because it is the symbol of authority of the royal ancestors.



Figure 2: The Seat of an Agba Royal Stool.

Source: <http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/colonial/item58.htm>

Also depicted on the stool is a male figure looking sideways at the central group, and another man holding a hat in one hand and a walking stick in another. These male figures symbolize European nationals and other foreigners who usually attend the yearly festival. Additionally, the top left corner of the seat of the stool has the image of a leopard, which is a symbol of the Oba. In Benin, the Oba is referred to metaphorically as "Leopard of the House" ("*Ekpen ne owa*"). The leopard motif, being a royal icon, has a prevalent use in Benin art, and it is an enigmatic visual metaphor with multiple meanings that are interpreted according to the context in which the motif is used. For example, the leopard motif is used as a monoscentic narrative on many royal stools (Figure 2) to relate a true life experience of Oba Ewuare (c.1440). As Benin oral tradition tells the story, before he became Oba, Ewuare went into exile where he lived in the forest to escape the assassins of his father, Oba Ohen (c.1334). It is said that one night, as he slept under a tree in the bush, he felt liquid drop on his head, and on inspection, he found that it was blood dripping from a prey that was being devoured by a leopard up on the tree. As he moved to leave the spot, he discovered that he had lain down on a huge coiled viper all night. The story further reveals that Oba Ewuare killed both animals, used their blood to anoint his head to mark his narrow escape from death. Oba Ewuare interpreted his escape from death from the viper and leopard as a good omen, and after he regained his throne, he chose the leopard and the viper as his identifying symbols. It is said that he also introduced *Igue* festival during which he sacrificed a leopard to propitiate his head and his good fortune. *Igue* festival, which is still performed annually by every Benin Oba, memorializes Oba Ewuare's victory over

death in the forest. The Benins consider Oba Ewuare's escape from death as a divine salvation. During the royal annual rites of *Igue*, the propitiation of the head of the reigning Oba takes place in Benin.

This story connected to Oba Ewuare is illustrated on Benin royal stools, as it is depicted on the stool (Figure 2), as an image of the leopard rendered in full face in contrast to the usual profile depiction of the leopard as seen on other Benin artforms. According to Ben-Amos (1980), when rendered in this form, the motif serves as a challenge to the viewer because it recalls the Benin adage of awe for authority, which asserts that "*one never looks the leopard in the eyes.*" This motif is a typical Benin monoscenic narrative that serves a dual function. Firstly, it tells the story of Oba Ewuare who is recorded in Benin oral tradition as one of the greatest rulers of Benin, which earned him his epithet: "Oba Ewuare the Great" ("*Ewuare Ogidigan*"). Secondly, the monoscenic narrative is an explicit proclamation of royal power, because the leopard motif also denotes the fierce and lethal power of Benin Kings. This particular variant of the leopard motif being a characteristic Benin monoscenic narrative uses only a lone motif to represent a story. The theme gives further insights into the remarkable nature of Benin monoscenic narrative style. For instance, it reveals how Benin craftsmen relay, using a lone inert image, a story that is linear in form and which unfold in time. It also shows clearly that in their narrative, the Benins use specific elements to evoke the entire sequence of an event or story. Furthermore, the motif shows that Benin visual narratives convey content through the use of disguised symbolism, details loaded with individual, cryptic meaning, and complex images that reflect not only the complex underlying factors for their creation and utilization, but also the circumstances of their creation. One thing remains obvious from the forgoing, that is, the fact that Benin visual narratives are not easy to decipher by the casual viewer without the full understanding of the narratives which the scenes allude to, because the stories that the narratives relay are disguised, and not often sufficiently evident in the physical elements depicted. Furthermore, the example reveals how the Benins use their narratives to keep records of the lives, exploits and experiences of Benin past Kings. Like many of the dominant themes in Benin art, the narratives illustrate stories that are linked with Benin kings. Such themes, apart from being records of events, are also intended to proclaim the grandeur, power, centrality and nobility of Benin

Kings. Thus in such themes, Benin Kings are portrayed dressed in meticulously portrayed royal regalia of coral beads, the emblem of their divinity, and they are portrayed flanked by their retinue of chiefs and palace courtiers who are also depicted in costumes that reveal their ranks in Benin society. Such themes imply social status, power and authority. Many of the themes in Benin narratives purposely focus on themes that illustrate various historical events that underline the authority, mystical power and sacrosanct office of Benin Kings, and other themes document and evoke the major contributions that various Benin Kings made to their kingdom's art, rituals and politics. The aim of such themes is to preserve for posterity the achievements of Benin Kings.

One key function of Benin royal stools that gives further insight into the nature of Benin narrative art is their use by past Benin Kings as communicative objects which they used to transmit coded cryptic messages that were interpreted pictorially. A fine example is a round stool (*erhe*) that is still in the custody of Benin National Museum in Nigeria that was carved for Oba Eweka II (1914–1933) for such a purpose. The archival record of the Museum describes this artifact as a 'telegraphic stool' and it reports that it is one of the several stools that Oba Eweka II (who ruled Benin from 1914 – 1933) commissioned to convey coded messages to his father, Oba Ovonramwen (who ruled Benin from 1888–1914). The British punitive expedition team attacked Benin in 1897 under the command of Rear Admiral Rawson, as correctly reported by Awodiya (2003), and they deported Oba Ovonramwen to Calabar (Nigeria). After his heir, Oba Eweka II ascended the throne after his father's demise in 1914; he commissioned many stools that had themes that were mainly visual narrations of the events that took place in the royal court in Benin, and he sent them to his father in exile in Calabar to keep him fully informed of the events that took place in his absence.

### Benin Carved Tusks

In the past, every new Oba commissioned carved ivory tusks in addition to other art objects to commemorate his departed father. The tusks are mounted atop brass memorial heads and displayed on royal altars used in the worship of royal ancestors. The tusks bear (on their entire surface) images in relief sculpture that depict past Benin Obas, palace priests, warriors and

officials, foreigners, symbols of royalty and power, and themes that record the events of the reigns of Benin past Obas. The tusks are produced by *Igbesamwan* royal guild of carvers who portray, in the typical style of their creations, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic images that are typically disproportionate, thickset, frontally posed, rigid, symmetrical and highly stylized. Many of the themes are continuous narratives that use the repetition of figures and themes to convey multiple scenes of a story in a single composition.



Figure 2: Carved Elephant Tusk  
Source: commons.wikimedia.org

One remarkable example is the triad theme that consists of the image of an Oba with his arms supported by two attendants. There are different versions of this theme, and each one has specific pictorial clues that help the viewer identify the specific stories or events that each theme illustrates. For example, when the figure of the Oba in a triad is depicted with mudfish legs (Figure 3), the theme relates the story of Oba Ohen (c.1334), who, as Benin oral tradition reports, after becoming paralyzed, explained his problem as the consequence of having metamorphosed mystically into *Olokun*, the Benin fertility god. According to another legend reported by Ekuase (2013), it is said that Oba Ohen's paralysis was actually due to his being the son of *Olokun*, who sent him that when Oba Ohen's deception was later exposed by his prime minister (Chief Iyase), the Oba had him executed, which led to an uprising by the Benins that ended with the demise of the tyrannical Oba. The mudfish has symbolic significance among the Benin people because it can live on land and sea. It is also associated with *Olokun*, the giver of wealth; hence it is an icon of wealth and the divine powers of the Oba of Benin.

On the other hand, when the triad motif depicts an Oba with normal legs, it alludes to a different Benin Oba, and it relates a completely different story. The motif is a monoscenic narrative that alludes to Oba Ewuare (c. 1440–1473) and how he

supposedly appropriated the coral regalia of beaded crowns, vestments and necklaces of *Olokun* from under the sea, but later found, when he got back ashore and donned his booty, that the enormous weight of the mystical beads was too much for him to carry alone. This story, which is recorded in Benin oral traditions, adds further that Oba Ewuare had to implore the Benins to help him bear the crown because no Oba can rule without the assistance and support of his subjects. According to the interpretation based on this legend, the triad symbol symbolizes the responsibility of the Benins to assist the Oba in carrying out his duties effectively. It is a visual expression that alludes to the enormous task of governance.



Figure 3: Oba with Mudfish Legs Theme on Carved Ivory Tusk  
Source: www.mylearning.org

The examples of Benin narrative themes cited in this essay brings to the fore the unique characteristics of this unique genre of Benin art.

## Conclusion

This essay analyzed the form, content, functions and meaning of the themes portrayed in the narrative art of the people of Africa with a focus on Benin narrative art from Nigeria. It demonstrated that this genre is an imperative aspect of African art, and that African narratives consist solely of



metaphorical themes and symbols that signify key facts about the events, people and things that they symbolize. It also revealed that the narratives are highly peculiar in nature as they are characterized by a variety of markedly diverse styles, and a multilayered iconography. Additional facts that emerged from this appraisal indicate that to decode, interpret and appraise African narratives, it is vital to acknowledge them as genuine symbols that shape, and are in turn shaped, by the social vision of the socio-religious culture that created them. Furthermore, it is vital to recognize that the cultural significance and the stylistic and iconographic import of African visual narratives are as a result of the ideas and underlying principles that are behind their creation and utilization. Lastly, it was established that African visual narratives play a significant role in the cultural life of their makers and users because

they serve many vital functions. What the examples analyzed in this essay make clear also is that when African narrative themes, like other African visual depictions are properly decoded, it becomes unmistakably obvious that their creators have recorded their thoughts, aspirations, history, cultural heritage and treasured societal values in their narrative art through the use of enigmatic images and symbols. The above-mentioned facts underline the relevance, essence and contextual meaning of this exceptional mode of expression in African art. Therefore, to understand and appreciate this peculiar African mode of expression, the genre must not be judged from a purely aesthetic standpoint, instead, it should be analyzed, as this essay has done, in the context of the overall artistic production in the society that created it.

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