

African Art through the Ages
Art Seminar Group
Lecture Notes

January 28, 2020 | MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY AFRICA (1900 CE - Present)

History of Colonialism in Africa

- Europe's colonization of Africa is generally thought to have begun at the **Berlin Conference (1884/1885)**. At this meeting, the major European powers divided the continent between them.
- Importantly, it was declared that rights over land would only be given if each nation state only after they could prove that had exercised what was deemed as 'effective occupation.' This meant that they had sovereign control over the territory as granted to them by treaties with African leaders or military occupation.
- Although Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Belgium, and Spain were given rights to land, Britain and France took the lion's share of the territory (and were given all of Germany's land in the Treaty of Versailles after World War I).
- The colonial strategy of each nation state can be summed up as follows:
 - Britain (**Indirect Rule**)
 - External relations were controlled and directed by the British state (e.g. military matters, international trade, etc.)
 - The British also collected taxes from the citizens of each "protectorate."
 - Internal relations were controlled by "pre-colonial" authorities under the supervision of the British colonial administrators.
 - Based on a logic of absolute "otherness." Colonial subjects were incapable of ever being citizens of British Empire. Also, it was administratively much easier to implement.
 - France (**Direct Rule**)
 - External relations were controlled and directed by the French state (e.g. military matters, international trade, etc.)
 - The French also collected taxes from the residents of the colonies. Certain residents (the citizens of the 'Four Communes' in Senegal—Saint-Louis, Gorée, Rufisque, and Dakar were given citizenship in the French state and sent representatives to the French Chamber of Deputies. These communes were thought of a *départements d'outre mer*)
 - Internal relations were also controlled by French officials.
 - Based on a logic of French cultural dominance and universalism. All citizens, should they choose to adopt French traditions and the speak the French language, were capable of being citizens of the French Empire.
 - Portugal, Italy, Belgium, Germany, Spain (**Exploitative Rule**)
 - Belgium, Germany, Portugal, Italy, and Spain did not have large colonial holdings in Africa.
 - Their attitudes were all slightly different, but in general all three countries viewed their colonies through an extractive logic (i.e. they were only there to provide raw goods to the metropole).
 - As a result, there was little thought about the "natives" at all. These regimes were incredibly brutal.

Effect of Colonialism on Art in Africa—Restrictions on African Behavior/Movement

- One of the biggest changes that colonialism brought was a new set of standards and norms, namely European standards and norms. Missionaries, working in consort with colonial administrators, began to force different communities to change the ways in which they operated.
- The **IDOMA** ethnic group from north-central Nigeria, for instance, invented a new artistic tradition in response to colonial meddling on the part of the British. Prior to the 1917, the Idoma warrior society danced with the skulls of defeated enemies at celebratory ceremonies. In 1917, the British outlawed this practice as a way of “civilizing” Idoma men and women.
- In response to this, the Oglinye society, the men’s warrior society that hosted the masquerades and dances, began to carved wooden crest masks in the shape of miniature human heads. This was an attempt to still practice historically-important traditions, all while still obeying British colonial policy.
- Although masquerades such as Oglinye changed and adapted as new power structures implemented by colonialism were put in place, other masquerades—such as Itorokwu, the elephant mask symbolizing the chief’s authority did not.

Effect of Colonialism on Art in Africa—Penetration of Capitalism, Tourism, and Anthropology

- In order to make the colonies profitable and not a drain on the treasuries to the metropole, European power worked *very* hard to introduce a cash economy and capitalist mode of production into the colonies (using taxes and forced labor)
- This changed the ways that
 - The decorative art of nomadic and semi-nomadic societies of inland, eastern Africa (**MAASAI, SAMBURU, TURKANA** to name a few) were entirely transformed by British colonialism reaching the inland parts of eastern Africa.
 - Prior to the mid 19th century, the vast majority of these groups wore jewelry and other decorative works that were monochromatic, in large part because they were made from local, organic materials like hide, leather, iron, and ostrich egg shells.
 - The introduction of colored-glass beads—first from Venice and then, later, from Czechoslovakia—changed all of that.
 - These beads allowed artists—mainly women—to craft an entirely new designs, ones that could be differentiated and specialized by both color and shape.
 - As time wore on, the relatively fluid ethnic identity of inland, eastern Africa began to be more and more concretized. In part, this was because of the introduction of “native reserves” (discussed above). However, what also helped with this transition to a more fixed and static ethnic identity, was the creation of ethnically-distinct jewelry design and color patterning. Indeed, it was through jewelry and design that social identities across the board (e.g. ethnic identity, marriage status, gender, etc.) were defined.
 - **IGBO** ethnic group of southeastern Nigeria
 - Southeastern Nigeria is a dense, forested region that is home to many people. The largest ethnic group in the region is called Igbo.

- The British brought the region under their control around 1906 and moved quickly to exploit the region's natural resources—mainly timber and tin. They were also eager to tax the individuals living in this densely populated region
- This early capitalist interest affected the art forms of the region greatly
- The *mbari* architectural complex from the Owerri region exemplifies this perfectly:
 - *Mbari* is a mixed-media religious structure, one that combines architectural artistry with a *horror vacui* of sculptural forms
 - *Mbari* is created by communities in times of distress (famines, droughts, disease epidemics) and uncertainty. The structures are earthen shrines of a sort and are meant to appease the village's chief deity, known as an *agbara*
 - The process of creating an *mbari* was thought to symbolically renew the world. As a result, the complex is meant to represent what life was like at one particular point in time
 - However, once created *mbari* were not allowed to be touched, even for repairs. They were meant to disintegrate and sink back into the Earth
 - All of this changed as a result of colonialism, which introduced new products such as iron roofs and cement—which communities purchased using the money that they were earning
 - *Mbari*, which once would have disintegrated, became permanent structures the land. Some art historians have speculated that this transformation meant the end of the tradition. I disagree.
- **YORUBA** ethnic group of southwestern Nigeria
 - There are prolific artists in Yorubaland and examples of the sculptural forms—from devotional sculptures to temple posts are found in museums around the world. These firmly religious sculptures—which are dedicated to the pantheon of deities known as *orisas*—did not change as dramatically as a result of colonialism.
 - However, in addition to these sculptures, there are also various masks that are danced in various masquerades each year. One of the most well-known is a two-part ceremony collectively called *Gelede*:
 - Held annually during the beginning of a new agricultural cycle
 - Composed of *Efe* (opening night) celebration and *Gelede* (daytime) celebration, both with costume, song, dance, and performance.
 - *Efe* masks—the sacred masks—remain relatively fixed and unchanging in terms of form. The daytime *Gelede* masks, however, are an enormously inventive
 - Festival honors “our mothers, our witches,” the female powers of creation and destruction.
 - Only males perform as a way of appeasing females in a patrilineal community.
 - Encompasses all realms of life – physical, spiritual, supernatural. Praises deities, comments on current social events in the community.

- Given their close location to the coast and the wealth of natural resources found on their land, the Yoruba have long had contact with Westerners (both tourists and anthropologists).
- This has altered the iconography (symbols) found on the Gelede headdresses. One can see this in the
- DOGON ethnic group of southern Mali
 - Members of the Dogon ethnic group historically lived in a remote part of central Mali known as the Bandiagara Escarpment, which their ancestors fled to escape the slave raiders
 - On the Escarpment they developed an extensive masquerade complex, one that was, according to prominent anthropologists, supposed to be deeply engrained within the spiritual universe of the Dogon people. Some of the most important masks:
 - *Kanaga*: Thought to represent the movement imposed upon the universe by Amma (supreme God)
 - *Amma tā*: Thought to depict the opening from which all beings were birthed from Amma
 - *Sirige*: Represents the stars in their infinite nature
 - The first European to become aware of this masquerade complex was the French anthropologist Marcel Griaule, whose book *Conversations with Ogotemméli* became a bestseller and introduced the world
 - The success of this book prompted tourists to pour onto the Bandiagara Escarpment, seeking to catch a glimpse of the masquerades. Over time, this fundamentally altered the nature of ceremonies and of the people who danced them. As Dogon artists and viewers became increasingly exposed to Western ways of life, the beliefs faded.
 - The masks are still danced, but really only for tourists.