

## A CRITIQUE ON THE UTILIZATION OF INDIGENOUS MATERIAL CULTURE AS AN ART FORM OF COMMUNICATION AND EXPRESSION AMONG FEW COMMUNITIES IN KENYA

*Okeyo Jacqueline Achieng & Xianyi Yang*

*Wuhan University of Technology, Wuchang Qu, Wuhan Shi, HubeiSheng, China*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Initially, it was believed that Africa as a continent did not have art, at the onset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after it was established that African art did indeed exist, it was termed as Primitive art. Traditional African culture has always incorporated art forms in their daily lives as a way of communication for various reasons. The following article is intends to give a brief review of how art forms have been utilized by various communities in Kenya and what meanings those communities derive from their artworks with relation to culture and tradition. In the hope that it will reveal to the rest of the world what Africa defines as art and how they incorporate it into their daily lives. The study was conducted in Kenya using quantitative data collected from libraries and museums and past recordings on Kenyan culture.*

### **KEYWORDS:**

**Body Art:** *Art made on the body as a canvass to express feelings, ideas and for communication. In some instances, the art is considered one with the body. Examples include: tattooing, scarification, painting, piercings, etc*

**Circumciser:** *An individual who performs circumcisions in traditional African society during the rites of passage circumcision ritual*

**Colonization:** *Establishing control over natives initially occupying a certain area.*

**Indigenous:** *Also known as native of natural occurrence.*

**Laibon:** *A ritual, spiritual leader of the Maasai community who uses mystical powers to heal the sick and perform protection rituals before heading for war.*

**Material Culture:** *Symbolic and functional objects a community uses in daily life, such as bones, leather/hides, natural beads, seeds, wood, coconut shells, ostrich eggshells and feathers, guards, iron ore, pottery, animal teeth, sisal, etc. that are relevant to that particular community.*

**Mother Tongue:** *The local language is spoken in the community from which one is born/ originates from.*

**Rain Maker:** *A ritual leader in African societies whose purpose was to conjure up rain at the beginning of planting season or when needed or stop rain if they caused calamities to their environment.*

**Rites of Passage:** *The cycle of life according to African culture: childhood- adulthood-marriage – death*

**Scarification:** A form of tattooing that has a symbolic meaning practiced by some communities in traditional Kenya. Also known as cicatrization.

**Witchdoctor:** Someone (male/female) who is believed to heal through magical/ spiritual powers.

## INTRODUCTION

Before Kenya was colonized, communities roamed freely practicing their cultures and traditions while leading their nomadic lifestyle. These cultures used various forms of art as a medium to communicate not only amongst each other but also outside their territories.

Initially, Kenyan communities like the Maasai, Luo, Tigania, Mijikenda etc, were recognized by their mode of dress, mother tongue (language), beliefs and traditions. The cultural diversity of these communities is what may have kept them estranged from each other initially. However, when Kenya became a British colony and various religions, e.g. Islam and Christianity began to spread within the country, there came about some form of cohesion. These communities were united by studying in a *madrassa* (Islamic classes) or by attending Christian schools together on common grounds in order to learn how to read and write. This made them begin speaking a common language like English or Kiswahili as opposed to their mother tongue when they interacted with each other. This cohesion was good because it brought about unity among various communities. However, the downside of this cohesion was that some cultures like the Agikuyu for instance abandoned their traditions in favor of British Culture.

Colonization by the British meant that Kenyan communities would adopt a European way of life and therefore the communities that settled close to the British and their church missions were taught the English language so that they could read and understand the Bible while some of the Kenyan communities that had settled close to the Arabs learned the Islamic culture. Due to these influences, the Kenyan communities that neighbored the Arabs or the British began to adopt a different lifestyle from their traditional way of life in order to fit in with the new culture introduced to them.

The following examples will attempt to demonstrate how art forms manifested in some Kenyan communities through culture and tradition by utilizing indigenous material culture in order to convey a message, express ideas and feelings before the influence of Arabic and European culture. OF indigenous material culture within some Kenyan communities.

According to the Routledge (1910), in describing the Akikuyu (central Kenya) clothing had a significance that was influenced by the day to day life experiences of a community as a whole; the same concept applied to several other Kenyan communities. Clothing signified and symbolized rites of passage, status in society, wealth, leadership and various roles in society.

An observation made in this excerpt was that the indigenous materials utilized in the production of these cultural objects were often obtained from the environment or borrowed or traded from various communities that interacted with each other. These indigenous materials usually had their own symbolic significance. Another observation made was that the majority of indigenous Kenyan material culture was used mostly for functional purposes, which was the primary concern in society. The secondary purpose was for beautification and in some communities for pleasure ,for example, a snuff box.

## FUNCTIONAL PURPOSE OF INDIGENOUS MATERIAL CULTURE

In traditional society, the main function of indigenous material culture was for identification within that particular society. They were worn daily to distinguish status in society and the different levels of rites of passage a community member had undergone. They were also used to differentiate the various occupations e.g. ‘witch doctor’ (uses spirits to heal or protect), medicine man (uses herbs to heal), circumciser, rainmaker among others; they were also worn on occasions like weddings, funerals, and initiation. An example is a married Turkana woman’s attire from the *Ngikos Omoroko* clan (Barrett, 1998).

Turkana women wore a pinafore (over-garment) made from the leather of a young black goat and for unmarried girls, they would attach their pinafores with *ngidany* (black metal studs). When a Turkana woman got married, their pinafores were smeared with red ochre or black soil. The skins that all married women wore came from animals with horns unless the husband died and the reason for this was that it signified bad luck if a woman wore skins from a hornless animal while the husband was still alive (Barrett, 1998).

The Turkana women also shaved the sides of their hair and twisted at the top into little strands like tassels from the crown down the neck. They perforated their ears all along the edge onto which they put iron rings or oval-shaped plates through the lobes. Their shoulders, neck, and breasts were covered with coils of small discs chipped from ostrich eggs. They wore a narrow hide apron decorated with beads that formed a slit hide skirt at the back. The skirt was held in position by a belt of metal beads (Adamson 1967).

The Turkana women used indigenous material culture like ostrich eggs, iron rings and oval-shaped plates as part of their fashion and accessories. The functional significance of incorporating the above items was for the Turkana women to purposely be recognized in society as married, but the items were also considered as part of jewelry to enhance a woman’s beauty.

The above examples indicate that the Turkana community had a system of identification which had significance in acknowledging one’s marital status and at the same time involved the incorporation of indigenous material culture as part of fashion and accessory that also served a functional purpose. Indeed, even today, the Turkana still maintains these traditions.

From the Kikuyu community residing in the central part of Kenya, the use of material culture was evident in a Kikuyu bride’s attire. The bride was adorned with various accessories made out of indigenous materials. Among her jewelry was *hang’i* – which was made of a thin ½ mm gauge iron wire with circles of thin iron wire on to which were threaded very small pink, red, dark blue-black and white beads. *Hang’i* was worn by young women and initiated girls on each ear (300 to a bunch) (Routledge, 1910). Its function was not only for aesthetic value but also served to identify a young initiated woman in the Kikuyu community.

A necklace from the Kikuyu community qualifies as a fashion accessory made from indigenous material as it was worn for aesthetic purposes. The piece of jewelry from a plant known as *Malilichua* (Akikuyu) was a valuable necklace made of leaves that had a pleasant scent. The plant came from Lake Naivasha and was obtained from the Maasai through trade. According to the Routledge (1910:32), the Akikuyu made the necklace, each element consisting of a section of one or more leaves compressed into a solid cone. Each cone was held tightly against its neighbor by a knotted cord encircling

its larger end (Routledge, 1910:32).

The necklace described above is another example of a functional fashion item made from indigenous material culture and at the same time used traditionally as a piece of jewelry for adornment due to its pleasant scent and considered an expensive one at that.

The Tigania, a sub-community of Embu in Mt. Kenya region, had a fashion item known as *Gitaita* for young women. It comprised a fringe of tiny metal chains worn across the eyes and was worn immediately after circumcision. At initiation, the girls were secluded for two years during which time an older woman instructed them about their future duties of married life. According to Adamson (1967) the girls were to behave in a 'helpless' manner, speak in whispers and keep their eyes downcast under a fringe of metal chains- they were made as far as possible and if they wanted to leave the hut they would be led by their 'mother' and would walk extremely slowly. All these indicated a symbol of rebirth and the *Gitaita* fringe represented they had not yet learned to see, and the whispers implied that they did not yet know how to speak, nor that they could walk alone. The girls also had their skin smeared with charcoal and decorated with cowries and blue seeds (Adamson, 1967).

In the book 'Africa Adorned', Fisher (1984:14) states that East African communities lived a nomadic lifestyle that required them to have a minimum of material possessions so they would pack them easily and travel light when necessary. This lifestyle contributed to some communities like the Maasai and Samburu focusing on beautifying and adorning themselves by highlighting their features with paintings, scarification and wearing less clothing. They also wore elaborate headdresses and added on jewelry to accentuate their body features. The significance of body art was that it acted as a form of sign language that communicated the wearer's age, achievements and social standing.

The women from the Gabbra community (Northern Kenyan) wore leather pouches strung from their necklaces containing charms against evil spirits. Their beads were carved from natural materials found locally (Fisher, 1984). The functional purpose of those leather pouches was to store charms that they believed would protect the wearer from evil spirits. These pouches made of indigenous material were attached to necklaces that had beads carved from soapstone.

## **SYMBOLIC PURPOSE OF MATERIAL CULTURE**

The following examples demonstrate how material culture was incorporated into traditional fashion and accessory to represent an idea that could be expressed symbolically.

According to Fisher (1984), in East Africa, body art had always been the main outlet for artistic expression and jewelry and color were used to accentuate and highlight this form of art. The author further notes that all these forms conveyed information about the wearer. For instance, the Turkana (Northern Kenya) and Maasai (Rift Valley) preferred scarification using thorns to adorn their bodies. For the Turkana scarification signified initiation into adulthood and also helped to distinguish between the various sub-tribes. Warriors from Turkana would scarify their arms to signify that they had killed an enemy. Indigenous material such as ivory, giraffe hair and snake vertebrae were made into ornaments to indicate status and achievements.

## **COLOR AS MATERIAL CULTURE**

Interestingly, the color was considered indigenous material culture. For instance, the Kikuyu and Maasai communities used color-coordinated sequences in their ornaments. The Kikuyu community had an ornament worn on the neck made of strings of beads that were a dark blue which were considered a most valued color. The extremity of each length of the fringe of chain was terminated by two milk- white beads tied to it. It was worn by both men and women, but never by children. They also had a collaret that was worn by older girls and married women. (Routledge, 1910).

The Maasai community used white markings in different patterns to identify the rank in society; for example; the *Laibon* whose eyes were circled in white paint, were leaders whose authority were based on mystical powers. During the pre-colonial period, *Laibon* sanctioned raids and provided magical protection for the warriors by performing sacred ceremonial rituals. (Routledge, 1910).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

There was a worldwide misconception that traditional African society was primitive and art was not in existence until when few painters drew inspiration from African art like Picasso when African art gained some form of prominence.

Art was key in African society, though it did not have the same definition as art found in the rest of the world; it manifested itself in all aspects of African society from hair, fashion and apparel, body, ritual, rites of passage and architecture.

The materials used to create these art forms were ordinary indigenous materials, but once assembled and ritually blessed for the utility they became valuable and authentic to that particular community.

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