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Abstraction and the Sublime in Art: Bridging the Gap between 'Modern Art' and Ewe Vodú Aesthetics

Sela Kodjo Adjei

This paper examines the contributions of African art to the rise of global modernism in art. The concept of 'modernism' in art history remains inordinately attributed to Western male artists, and often ignores the creative contributions of African women in indigenous communities. These academic lapses highlight the need for more critical research, analysis, and documenta-

tion. The paper includes a photographic presentation that captures the creative practice of Ewe artists in South Eastern Ghana. These photographs are the outcome of a collaborative research process and serve as supporting visual ethnography for a discussion of several recurring issues and debates in African art scholarship.

Keywords: aesthetics, African art scholarship, Ewe, exclusion, modernism, photography, Vodú art

1.0 Preliminary Remarks: Methodological Constraints

One of the main challenges African art researchers encounter in their study of art history and visual cultures is the paucity of archival records and research materials on modern artists in remote, indigenous societies. Just one example of this is the absence of comprehensive art-related documentation pertaining to, or created by, Ewe women, which remains a major gap in scholarship on Vodú art and aesthetics. These omissions have created academic lapses in the study and appreciation of Vodú aesthetics, lapses that are replicated across the study of African art more broadly. Consequently, the need to fill such epistemic gaps, and to produce critical documentation, has been a matter of increasing concern for African art scholars in recent decades. In addition to insufficient research materials, both art historical research methods and ethnographic approaches to African art have largely been influenced, even dictated, by Eurocentric aesthetic constructs. This problematic approach has been a major issue of contention among critical art historians, anthropologists, philosophers, and African art scholars.

In response to these methodological shortcomings, as well as the prevalent, often prescriptive Western paradigms in African art scholarship, the Nigerian art historian, Rowland Olá Abiòdún (1990, 1994, 2014) has emphasized

the need for scholars to harmonize anthropological approaches with art historical perspectives on African art. He has placed African philosophy at the center of such studies, with particular emphasis on what he refers to as the element of 'soul.' The critical question then follows: is there an African aesthetic? With this elusive question still marginal in the analyses of many African philosophers, conducting critical research into African aesthetics remains of paramount importance. The Nigerian art historian Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbecchie (cit. in Salami, and Visonà 2013) and the Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye (1996, 2013) have both challenged African art scholars to carry out further research in order to deepen their understanding of African art and aesthetics. The following discussion offers a philosophical perspective on some of these longstanding debates, and an analysis of the ever-present Eurocentric bias within the evaluations, categorizations, and representations of African art across art history, criticism, and curatorial practices.

1.1 Is There An African Aesthetic? Towards a Definition of African Aesthetics

In his definition of aesthetics, the Dutch anthropologist Wilfried van Damme (1991: 167) advances the notion that aesthetics 'originated' in Western culture and philosophy. Western scholars often refer to the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten as the 'founding father of aesthetics' due to his coinage of the term in the 18th century. The British philosopher Malcolm Budd (2005: 4) credits Baumgarten with having derived aesthetics from the Greek verb, *aisthanomai*, which signifies 'perception by means of the senses.' Budd (2005) further categorizes aesthetics into two distinct branches: the philosophy of art; 'the philosophy of aesthetic experience and character of objects or phenomena that are not art' (p. 4).

This historiography remains markedly Eurocentric. There has been a reluctance to apply the Western category of aesthetics to the artistic practices of those indigenous societies customarily studied by anthropologists—and yet aesthetics constitutes an intrinsic part of the artistic traditions of non-Western cultures (Tatarkiewicz 1982). The German philosopher of art Fee-Alexandra Haase (2008: 7) has argued that although Baumgarten coined the term 'aesthetics' in 1753, the study of the nature of beauty—which attained such importance in the thought of the 18th century European aestheticians—had already been pursued within different cultures for centuries.

In the Western context, aesthetics initially emerged as an area of inquiry chiefly reserved for philosophers. Artists, too, from the 19th century onwards, began to contribute their perspectives to the field. The European philosophical canon of aesthetics endeavored to answer such questions as, 'What is art?' and 'What is beauty?' The Ukrainian philosopher of art, Dagobert David Runes (1966), defines aesthetics in this vein, as the branch of philosophy that deals with 'beauty' or 'the beautiful,' especially within art; with taste, and standards of aesthetic judgement (p. 6). This definition of aesthetics appears compelling at first glance, yet it is distinctly narrow in its intellectual

scope. Runes restricts the definition of aesthetics to the notion of 'beauty' and confines aesthetic experience to 'the good,' that which is 'pleasing to the eye,' and so forth. This definition, still anchored in European, 18th century notions, fails to encompass the rich diversity within the field of aesthetics grasped in a cross-cultural perspective. In our contemporary era, evolutionary psychologists (Sapolsky: 2017) have advanced the argument that certain behaviours and cultural attributes exist universally in all cultures. One of the most cited categories of 'cultural universals' in the works of the American anthropologist Donald Brown (1991) entails 'the existence of and concern with aesthetics,' magic, body adornment, dance, concepts of fairness, music, color terms, and symbolism (p. 115).

We can immediately discern the limitations of the prevalent European philosophical canon of aesthetics if we turn to artistic practices beyond its Eurocentric frame of reference. The American art historian Fred T. Smith (cit. in Perani and Smith 1998) observes that 'among the Frafra of northern Ghana, there is a recognition of creative ability as well as a mastery of technique and style' (p. 7). Frafra wall painting, which is a woman's activity, 'exhibits highly creative and individualistic treatment.' Although 'the Frafra do not have a term that translates as "art," they do recognize skilled or creative behavior, *gano*, and two aesthetic concepts, *bambolse* and *pupurego*.' Most African societies, in fact, do not have a separate category designated as 'art.' Smith (cit. in Perani and Smith 1998) further emphasizes that:

'It is important to point out that for the Frafra, *gano* is not restricted to those skilled in producing or decorating material forms, but also includes other activities such as soothsaying, dancing, playing a musical instrument, or hunting. *Bambolse* as a concept that means 'embellished, decorated, or made more attractive,' but it can also refer to any design or motif that has no specific name. In addition, this concept conveys more than just the placing of a motif on a particular form. The intention of that action must have been primarily to increase the aesthetic merit of the form if the decoration is to be classified as *bambolse*' (p. 7).

In his categorization of the significance and quality of various types of cloth among the Ewe people, the Ghanaian Ewe composer George Worlasi Kwasi Dor (2015) notes that although *Vinɔko Akpalu*¹ (also a composer) 'privileges only one type of cloth that the Ewe use,'

'the process of mapping in order to invoke and parallel a variety of Ewe song types will normally juxtapose other kinds of cloths with their attendant cultural and sociopolitical values to *agovo* (the ago or "velvet-type cloth"), which Akpalu had implied as a superior body wear' (p. 22).

Dor (2015) provides a further explanation of the different types of cloths among the Ewe, noting that

'*avo*, the Ewe word for cloth, may carry prefixes or suffixes that serve as adjectives that qualify the type, quality, monetary and social value, and/or its contextual functionality. Hence, *hovivo*, [...] which literally and taxonomically means inexpensive cloth [money-little-cloth], is the opposite of *hovivo* [low-high-

high], which stands for expensive cloth (money-big-cloth). In the same vein, *fsivivo* [high-high-high] or “money-small-cloth,” whose cheaper quality is also evident in color or dye of the cloth that fades faster and more frequently when washed, is diminutively implied in the designation and is directly juxtaposed against *fsigavo* [high-high-high], or “money-big-cloth,” which the Ewe consider as a cloth type that is produced with good quality color and dye [...]. Another Ewe name for an expensive cloth is *avofufui* [low-low-high-high], which semantically translates “the dried-cloth” and means “well-processed cloth” (p. 23).

Ewe culture varies across different communities, and even countries; it is not one homogenous unit. Just as there are distinct dialects, aesthetic tastes may slightly differ between communities. Broadly, across these variations, Ewe people assess a work of art using various aesthetic judgements or simple expressions such as *'edɔ atsyo'* ('it is aesthetically pleasing') or *'me ɔo atsyo o'* ('it lacks aesthetic grace or qualities'), *'adanukaka'* ('intricate design'), *'edze nunye'* ('it satisfies me,' 'I really appreciate it'), *'me nya akpɔm o'* ('it is an eyesore/distasteful'), *'eɲunyɔm'* ('it is repulsive'), and so forth.

In his discussion of Yoruba religious aesthetic canons, the American art historian Robert Farris-Thompson (1984) refers to 'character' displacing 'beauty' as an everlasting aesthetic quality. He cites an elder of Ipokia, who defines beauty as 'a part of coolness,' but notes that 'beauty does not have the force that character has. Beauty comes to an end. Character is forever.' The aforementioned Ghanaian philosopher Gyekye (1996) identifies the concept of 'fittingness' (*'nea efata'*) as an important criterion of aesthetic value and judgement in Akan aesthetics (p. 127). Such aesthetic concepts have been observed and passed on for several generations.

In his wider delineation of African aesthetics, Gyekye (2003) outlines various and multi-faceted notions within African aesthetics, analyzing their application to that which is deemed worthy of aesthetic contemplation in Akan societies. In his view, objects that are aesthetically valued are works of art in the fields of visual arts and the performing arts. In his discussion of aesthetics and criticism of textile art among the Akan, the Ghanaian researcher Isaac Kismet Sagoe (1981) has observed that the Akan are a people imbued with a keen sense of aesthetics, a knowledge that accrues through their protracted interaction with works of art. Akan critics posit clear criteria in order to judge the qualities of art works with objectivity and accuracy, and have forged a strong, articulate art critical vocabulary. These aesthetic considerations and perspectives, frequently ignored in European art historical literature, demonstrate that aesthetic practices and a critical application of aesthetic concepts were at the center of African art long before Western aesthetic theories were canonized. African art reflects a multiplicity of philosophical concerns—engaging questions related to metaphysics, divinity, existentialism, and aesthetics—yet Western art historians and art critics continue to cast doubt upon the 'authenticity,' and even the existence, of an aesthetic system intrinsic to African art.

1.2 'Tradition' versus 'Modernity' in Art: Myth, Reality, or Mirage?

Ever since the West 'discovered' African art, various African art forms have inspired art movements, theoretical studies, and art historical research—yet the breadth and depth of scholars' understanding of this historical relationship remains uneven. In his doctoral thesis, Buckner Komlar Dogbe (1989), a Ghanaian art historian, demonstrates how African art and its influence upon British art during the latter's modernization has not been thoroughly studied. This understudied connection between African and modern Western art, according to Dogbe (1989), is most conspicuous in the case of French and German artists and the modern movements that developed in Paris, Munich, and Dresden (p. 4). In Dogbe's view, research remains limited to the connection between African art and French and German artistic movements, to the exclusion of other contexts. Dogbe further laments that, among the many publications on African art, only a few include any material on its extensive relation to and influence upon the wider Western art world. In the decades following the publication of Dogbe's thesis, further research has accordingly been undertaken by some scholars (e.g., Salami and Visonà 2013).

A fundamental challenge that art historians, practitioners, and researchers encounter, even in their use of research derived from the adjacent disciplines of ethnography and visual anthropology, is the absence of comprehensive archival records and materials relating to artists in indigenous societies. The case of Ewe women is a stark example of this, where the scarcity of documentation contributes to a major gap in scholarship on African art, and Vodú aesthetics in particular. Raising a similar concern, the American feminist anthropologist Sandra Morgen (1989) has observed that dominant anthropological understandings of gender are revealed not only within anthropological, theoretical discussions of women and/or gender, but also in the marked absence of such discussions altogether (p. 10). These omissions have adversely impacted the study and appreciation of Ewe religious art, which still lacks critical documentation.

As noted above, this need for critical documentation has been an area of increasing concern among African art scholars in recent decades. In the Euro-American context, 'modern art' connotes specific art-historical readings of a given period and style: 'modern' movements, among them Futurism, Expressionism, and Dadaism, all diverged from the realistic representation of form. It must be emphasized that the tendencies of these movements are the unique, historical, and culturally-embedded products of the Euro-American artistic canon, and cannot thus be used as a historical backdrop for emergent 'contemporary African art' with the same clear meaning and reference.

Interestingly, for certain African critics and scholars, the choice of, and identification with, 'modern African art' over 'contemporary African art,' still means more than life itself. These African critics appear eager, consciously or unconsciously, to achieve international or Euro-American 'status,' and their adherence to the notion of 'modern African art' thus counts for more than African ideas and ideals (Oditia et al. 2011). Such 'labels' evidently call for revision

and a more nuanced and inclusive approach. Proponents of 'modernization revisionism'— following the work of Reinhard Bendix, Joseph R. Gusfield, and Lloyd I. Rudolph—have argued that

'the concepts of modernity and tradition were inadequately defined and never elaborated sufficiently to allow comparisons between societies; secondly, lack of precise conceptual definitions generated unwarranted generalizations and neglect of variation within the orbits of modernity as well as tradition. The degree of variation with any so-called "traditional society" was more substantial than differences between modern and traditional societies, and the suggested dichotomy was meaningless, as was the tendency of modernization theorists to adopt a kind of zero-sum view of the relationship between modernity and tradition' (Randall and Theobald 1998: 45, cit. in: Hernae 2012: 643-656).

The American sociologist Gusfield (1967) had argued that pitting 'tradition' against 'modernity' or 'innovation' becomes overly abstract, falsifying, and ultimately, unnecessary (p. 361). In the wake of critiques of terms such as 'primitive' and 'tribal,' 'traditional,' has meanwhile been proposed as a more 'acceptable,' or palatable, term for use in descriptions of African art (Hackett 1994: 296). Such approaches within ethnographic and anthropological scholarship have sought to eschew the West's notion of 'fetishism' or 'primitivism' in African art—yet misrepresentations and falsehoods continue to pervade the artificial distinction drawn between 'modern' and 'traditional' art by Western scholars.

These limitations warrant a rejection of the partial, West-centric definition and history of 'modernism' until its underlying premises have been sufficiently analyzed, within both academia and the art world. Prevalent definitions of the 'modern' movement simply ignore or, at best, undervalue the significant contributions of modernism's non-Western custodians, many of whom remain unrecognized, or are yet to be properly documented. It is equally untenable to uphold 'modern art' as a Euro-American movement of 'civilized art,' while condescendingly relegating African art to a 'primitive,' 'fetishistic,' 'tribal,' or 'pre-modern' status. A fitting example may suffice to illustrate these multiple lacunae and displacements: Alfred Burdon Ellis (1890), a colonial era British Army officer and ethnographer, in describing an Ewe shrine, reported that

'the images of the gods are placed inside, usually on a raised rectangular platform of clay; and before them are the earthen pots and vessels, smeared with the blood, eggs, and palm-oil of countless offerings. Many of these images have long since, owing to exposure to the weather, become *mere heaps of rubbish*, but no one would dare to remove the *sacred dust*' [emphasis added] (p. 81).

Almost three-quarters of a century later, the Polish Jewish, later British, artist and political activist Gustav Metzger would be hailed by the European art world for 'inventing' a new 'modernist' style, called 'auto-destructive art.' Metzger's 'artistic invention' is strikingly similar to that which Ellis had, decades earlier, dismissed as '*mere heaps of rubbish*.' Several, erudite art historians (Abíóḍún 2014; Ogbechie 2010; Okediji 2009) would acknowledge the fact that this form of 'abstract' art installation had already been prevalent in ritual

spaces and sacred sites, such as the shrines of Vodou practitioners and other indigenous religions, for several centuries. Yet such historical and cross-cultural contextualization is, more typically, omitted in Western histories of art. The grand philosophical idea that 'gave rise' to 'conceptual' art is often 'credited' to Marcel Duchamp, who is regarded as the 'pioneer' of the ready-made:

'With his first ready-made, Duchamp redefined the essence of art. The avant-garde movements before him, up to and including cubism, were preoccupied with form. Although they tried out new things, they nevertheless all spoke the same language. Thanks to Duchamp, the language of art was thoroughly changed: no longer was it the form, but the content, the 'what', that took front stage. This change from "appearance" to "conception" marked the beginning of true "modern" art. It also heralded conceptual art. After Duchamp, all art became essentially conceptual' (Kosuth, cit. in Van den Braembussche 2009: 53).

Kosuth's formulation may sound 'plausible' within the context of the exclusionary canon of Western art history, yet it palpably lacks historical depth and cultural breadth. Divergent views and perspectives render such claims untenable for the critical art historian. Indeed, the Ghanaian art scholars Osuanyi Quaicoo Essel and Ebenezer Acquah (2016) have disputed these highly Eurocentric views, and further delineated the creative foundations of the true origins² of conceptual art:

'Conceptual art takes its roots from Africa and [is] therefore not an *emerging art* in the African experience as it is perceived. The adoration and idolization of Marcel Duchamp as the father of conceptual art is also contestable since the art was many centuries old in Africa before he began to practice it in the West. Duchamp's attempt at dematerialization of art and conceptual exploration was in practice in African art. Duchamp and his contemporaries adapted the conceptual art of Africa hook, line and sinker (p. 1219).'

Relatedly, Ghana's first Prime Minister and President Kwame Nkrumah (1944) had already alluded to how the 'unusual,' the 'sublime,' and other rubrics of aesthetics were already deeply embedded in African art (p. 197).³ To the African artist, 'beauty' does not necessarily mean an exact expression of what is perceived in the physical world; there is beauty even in the abstract and 'imperfect.' Nkrumah's theory elucidated the aesthetic and sensory breadth in African artists' understanding of that which is worthy—or 'unworthy'—of sustained aesthetic contemplation. Aesthetics here is not confined to 'the beautiful,' nor to 'pleasurable experience.'

Nonetheless, many scholars (Dutton, 2009; Sarpong, 1971) continue to restrict aesthetics to superficial notions of 'beauty,' or even to mimetic concepts of art. The aforementioned Dutch anthropologist van Damme (1991) critiques those approaches to aesthetics that exclude the rustic, the mundane, and the imperfect (we can note here the concept of *wabi-sabi*—an acceptance of transience and imperfection—in Japanese aesthetics). Similarly, African art and aesthetic practices are not limited to 'beautiful' aesthetic constructs. Beyond these, they engage the sacred, the spiritual, the sublime, and the mundane.



↑ Figure 1. Vodou shrine sculpture installation (2017). Brékété shrine, Dansoman, Accra (courtesy of the author)

← Figure 11. *Dzawuwu* (thanksgiving or first-harvest offering to ancestors and divinities). Entrance to the shrine of Dumega Koku Nyonator (2017). Añiteti, Volta Region (courtesy of the author)

In fact, certain African art forms purposefully harness 'mundane' aesthetic practices to express concepts of 'imperfection,' or an intentional 'ugliness.' In the ever-expanding field of aesthetics, van Damme (1991) cautions researchers against the exclusion of 'intentional ugliness' in their study of aesthetics and of diverse aesthetic categories within the discipline (pp. 167-181).

1.3 Is Abstract Painting Indigenous to Ghana?

For critical academics, it is crucial to trace and emphasize the influences of African art on European art and global 'modernism.' Dogbe has pointed out that Western art historians have primarily focused on the ways in which African art was influenced by European colonialism, and have remained rather silent on African art's influences upon European artists. Aside from their problematic relegation of African art to its 'tribal,' 'functional,' and 'exotic' aspects, early Western writers remained largely preoccupied with the ways in which colonialism and the activities of Christian missionaries influenced African art.

In analyses of the European modern movement, scholars have acknowledged and studied the extensive influence of African art on Picasso's Cubist paintings—yet this high-profile example can be seen as the exception that proves the rule. As Nkrumah had emphasized, African art laid the very foundations for Surrealism and Expressionism, as the Expressionist painter Wassily Kandinsky (2008) himself attested in his 1911 treatise on spiritual art (pp. 134-135).

The art movement that ushered in the post-WWII triumph of American art, Abstract Expressionism, is closely associated with the artist Jackson Pollock. Pollock, who was also influenced by Picasso, is credited with shaping a style within Abstract Expressionism known as 'action art,' which involves dripping and splashing paint onto a substrate. Pollock had taken part in a workshop run by the Mexican artist David Alfaro Siqueiros in 1936, where he experimented with the use of industrial paints. The American artist Axel Horn (cit. in Karmel 1999) later recalled the painting techniques in Siqueiros's workshop: Abstraction in art has a long history in the complex evolution of *homo sapiens*. Nearly all ancient artworks involve some level of abstraction. The contemporary British artist Sarah Simblet (2009) has emphasized that abstraction is not easy to define, as it has been in existence for so long. It was not invented in the 20th century, only rediscovered. From one perspective, all pictorial representations are already abstractions from reality. From another, many non-Western cultures have, for centuries, given primacy to highly sophisticated abstractions in art: Japanese calligraphy, for example, as well as Indian mandalas, and Aboriginal art (Simblet 2009: 219).⁴

The lack of written records on Africa's art fed Westerners' descriptions of African art as 'distortion to forms.' They were not privy to the conceptual and contextual hybridity of African aesthetics, celebrated in the ideas expressed in African artworks. As well as dismissing African art's influence upon, and rejuvenation of, Euro-American modern art movements, Westerners dwelled

solely upon African art's symbolic nature, functionality, religio-magical, and sociopolitical dimensions—to the exclusion of its aesthetic qualities. They thus implicitly posited its inferiority to 'autonomous' Western art, thereby sustaining the apparatuses of colonial power (Nkrumah 1963, 1964a, cit. in Essel and Acquah 2016: 1203-1220).

It is necessary to emphasize that abstract painting has been practiced for generations in Ghana. There has been very little documentation of the abstract painting that is so prevalent in Ghana, particularly in the southern and northern regions.



Figure 1.2. Researcher painting on the wall of an Adzima shrine in Torgodo, Volta Region. This is a variation of one of many abstract painting techniques within Vodun shrines, which involves dripping, soak-staining, smudging, sprinkling, stenciling, dabbing, splattering, splashing, and the smearing of mud, oil, blood, alcohol, paint, or other water-based solutions (2017) (courtesy of the author)

The distinction of African aesthetics and its continued influence on contemporary art worldwide is significant. The various photographs presented in these pages show modernist shrine murals created by artists who have no formal training in Western art academies.

In their re-examination of the cultural, symbolic, and aesthetic aspects of indigenous art, the Ghanaian art educators Eric Appau Asante and Nana Afia Amponsaa Opoku-Asare (2011) study cultural identity in the murals of Sirigu women, as well the role of mural art in art education and social sustainability. Asante and Opoku-Asare (2011) observe that:

'Although mural art, unlike pottery, is not widely practiced by African women, the predominantly female art known as *Bambolse* in the indigenous language of Sirigu, in the Upper East Region of Ghana, performs a number of important social functions, from adornment and communication to the assertion of cultural identity and the preservation of traditional values. The murals employ traditional motifs and symbols, and are either representational, geometric or a combination of the two. Despite *Bambolse's* significance in the local culture, however, there has been very little formal chronicling of its aesthetics and iconography' (pp. 187-202).

The widespread neglect, often silence, about African aesthetics and art history has piqued many African art scholars' interest in African art, who

carry out research in an attempt to uncover the still 'unrecognized' or 'suppressed' modern art movements in Africa. The lack of proper documentation of African art by African scholars prior to the evolution and formalization of the art historical discipline ceded the ground for Western scholars to assert their 'originality' and to take credit for anything 'modernist' within art. So 'artfully' have such 'conceptual' guises and the so-called 'high modernist' Western artworks insinuated their way into the 'modern art' world as the 'pace setters' of the 'highest' epitome of 'civilized art.'

An inherited colonial art curriculum creates further confusion in this particular matter. One observes that some 'art historians' associate the 'beginning' of painting in Ghana with the moment when colonial educational training in the arts was reformed in Achimota, during the 1900s. As a result, many are erroneously led to believe that the Western model of canvas painting is all there is to painting in Ghanaian culture. However, several ethnic groups are known to have indigenously practiced one form of painting or another. Some of the early Ghanaian art scholars (e.g., Kofi Antubam) who propagated the erroneous notion that painting is not an indigenous form of Ghanaian art were either misinformed or simply 'conforming to a colonial art education.' Other, recent claims within academic circles have also insinuated the notion that 'modern art,' in its various forms, was introduced into the Ghanaian art curriculum by colonial educators (e.g., 'stretched canvas on easel painting,' 'abstract painting,' 'installation art,' and so forth). This is a rather bizarre proposition at best, taking into consideration the rich modernist painting customs and installation art forms that existed across Ghana prior to the introduction of the colonial art curriculum.⁵

The painters educated during the colonial era were essentially objective realists with strong expressionistic undertones, despite the long tradition of abstraction in Ghanaian decorative arts. There is, therefore, no doubt that their approach was very much inspired by Western pedagogy, characterized by academic 'hand and eye' training. This required that the student observe and represent 'objectively,' thus privileging figuration within painting. The works of Kofi Antubam, Sam Ntiforo, and Philip Amonoo all suggest an attempt at a realistic rendering, in the genre of traditional life painting. Later, with these painters' exposure to the various styles of Western modern art movements—and through their engagement with the concepts of neo-colonialism and Africanization propounded by Nkrumah—they were encouraged to retrieve the lost culture and to develop the African image (Kudowor 1981: 8-9).

In a related essay, the Ghanaian art historian Atta Kwami (2013) presents a biographical study that examines Antubam's critical relationship with Nkrumah's philosophy of the 'African personality,' and the artist's stance on *Sankofa*—a return to the aesthetic principles and artistic values of the past—as his strategy for understanding modernist expression. Kwami (cit. in Salami and Visonà 2013) notes that

'Sankofa was widely discussed during the period surrounding independence and is what ultimately allowed Antubam to create his own "natural synthesis," that is, to bring his misconceptions and

contradictions to a resolution. *Sankofa* occurs in Asante art as a bird looking back towards its tail, with the implication that there is nothing wrong with learning from the past; it is also the name of a stylized pattern and *adinkra* symbol' (p. 232).

Situating the issue in its historical context, *ƙarɪ'ƙaɕhã* Seid'ou, George Ampratwum, Kwaku Boafu Kissiedu, and Robin Riskin (2015) present a chronology of the colonial educational structures that led to the creation of the Achimota Art Department, which later evolved into what is now known as the College of Arts and Social Sciences (KNUST):

'KNUST was established in 1961, succeeding the colonial Kumasi College of Technology (KCT) which was set up in 1952. However, the College of Art has a longer history than KNUST itself. It began in colonial Gold Coast as a small art department in Achimota College in Accra in the period between the two World Wars where Kwame Nkrumah, who was later to become the first President of Ghana, was among the students of the first art master, G. A. Stevens. Before Stevens, there was the vocation list curriculum called Hand and Eye Work [...] which was introduced c. 1909. Hand and Eye was an outgrowth of Scandinavian *Slöjdf*, the German *Gewerbeschule* and the drawing by rote Somerset House-South Kensington system of the Victorian Era' (pp. 131-132).

Seid'ou et al. (2015) further explain how such colonial art curricula in the West African region led to creative revolts, such as 'the 'Natural Synthesis' of the Zaria Art Society, led by Uche Okeke and his collaborators' (p. 133). This, and several other oppositional creative practices by artists undergoing colonial art training, was a critical response to the 'ostensible Eurocentrism' prevailing in African art colleges and institutions at the time (Seid'ou et al. 2015: 133).

'Politicized' meanings of the 'traditional' and the needless compulsion to categorize several critical African art schools under the label of 'traditional art,' have inadvertently obscured many of the rich modernist African art movements. This sort of loaded marginalization has denied major African modernists visibility and sustenance, obliterating the overall significance of Africa's greatest modernist art movements, most of which flourished in remote villages. Such developments further emphasize the need for art historians and philosophers of art to fully embrace the entire scope of modern art and to integrate the important achievements and contributions of certain artists, especially senior African women. Asante (2009) has documented the significant contributions of Ghanaian women to the national and socioeconomic development of art in Ghana. The immense creative contributions of African women both to national development and to the rise of and global 'modernism'—and consequently, to what is popularly known today as 'contemporary' or 'conceptual' art—require further documentation and analysis.

One should equally draw attention here to Ogbechie's (2010) critique of the Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor's curatorial approach to framing 'contemporary African art' within the context of Western iterations of 'modern art.' In a critical essay, Ogbechie (2010) characterized Enwezor's 'problematic' curatorial practice as follows:

'It is obvious that Enwezor's valorization of a contemporary African art largely defined through the work of African Diaspora artists has had the paradoxical result of validating a form of contemporary African art that negates critical engagement with the history and development of modern and contemporary art in Africa itself, or with indigenous forms of African art whose contemporaneity remains to be theorized. His curatorial work thus produces ahistorical interpretations of contemporary African art in general and advances a self-referential narrative of contemporary practice using [a] limited number of artists recycled in closed-loop exhibitions.'

Most of the 20th century's 'high modernists' and 'conceptual artists' in the West sought 'new' media and 'modernist' approaches to creative expression in the mechanical age, whether formal, conceptual, phenomenological, or philosophical. 'Modern' movements such as Expressionism, for example, emphasized art's spiritual aspects, as theorized in Kandinsky's aforementioned treatise of 1911. We can, here, observe important precedents and convergences in the work of African artists.

1.4 Conceptualizing Ewe Vodun Aesthetics: The Case of Kli-Adzima Shrine Murals.

Sacred Vodun aesthetics remains one of the most lucid manifestations of mystical creative expression. Vodun artists serve as creative messengers for the whole community by giving form and image to the unknown spiritual forces that surround them: a creative expression connecting the Vodun artist's inner soul to the divine and the metaphysical realm. The Ghanaian philosopher William Emmanuel Abraham (1992) has emphasized that the African artist assumes a priest-like role, serving as a medium to invoke spiritual energies, concretize unseen forces, channel spiritual messages, and communicate with deities and ancestors (p. 50). The African artist becomes a vital link that bridges the gap between the unknown spirit world and the physical world. These esoteric practices, spiritual communication, and mystical connections can be adequately grasped and appreciated within the context of Ewe spiritual beliefs and sociocultural practices. Integrating this sociocultural context should not, however, lead us to gloss over the rich aesthetic diversity of shrine art in Ewe Vodun religion, with its exploration of various artistic elements and creative expressions. One should note, among other aspects, that these art forms are not representative of a religion whose art is only, or predominantly, characterized by abstraction. In fact, it is very common to see folk narratives and legendary accounts of Vodun deities and their mystical powers captured in elaborate paintings, sculptures, and murals on shrine walls.

The abstract murals that decorate the walls of the Kli-Adzima cluster of shrines, are a striking example of a sacred site in Ghana where devotees do engage with abstract aesthetic canons. During the annual month-long Kli-Adzima Spiritual Renewal Festival, shrine artists exhibit their rich and varied abstract painting skills and techniques. The festival, which is celebrated in honor of the three Adzima deities, is held between July and August by the Klikor community

in the Volta Region in Ghana. The festival is integral to lives of the devotees, who view the festive period as a time to forge community ties, renew their inner spirits, and reestablish their personal connection with the deities and ancestors through veneration, supplications, service, spiritual devotion, and donations. During the festival, the creative process—deeply rooted in abstraction and generations of modernist artistic practices—is central to the devotees' renewal of their spiritual connections. The photographic presentation below shows the devotees, in their role as shrine artists, creating murals during the festival.



Figure 1.3. Ngogbada Sodolo Tekpe leading Mama Vena shrine (*Ablɔgame*) devotees in single file procession from the shrine to a sacred site to collect *kaolin* (2016). Klikor, Volta Region (courtesy of the author)



Figure 1.4. Kli-Adzima devotees pulverizing sacred *kaolin*, mixed with sacred water, into a fine paste while waiting for their turns to plaster the shrine walls. The sticky *kaolin* paste is used to plaster the shrine walls as a part of annual spiritual renewal rituals in the Kli-Adzima cluster of shrines during the festival period. It is common to observe the devotees saying prayers and soliloquizing while pulverizing and mixing the sacred *kaolin* with water (2016). Klikor, Volta Region (courtesy of the author)



Prayers, chants, and other supplications are made to ancestors and divinities during the creative process of plastering the shrine walls. The devotees believe that the act of saying prayers and making supplications during the plastering process 'cements' all the supplications to the deities within the confines of the shrines. The devotees have a strong conviction that the deities always remember all their supplications and act on them accordingly.

Figure 1.5. Kli-Adzima devotees in the process of *ballili* (plastering the shrine walls with sacred kaolin) (2016). Klikor, Volta Region (courtesy of the author)



Figure 1.6. The next stage of the creative process is exclusive to a single artist (known as the *Xanukplɔ*) for each of the satellite Kli-Adzima shrines. Mama Vena shrine *Xanukplɔ*, engaged in the process of dripping, splashing, and sprinkling abstract expressions on the plastered shrine wall (2016). Klikor, Volta Region (courtesy of the author)



Figure 1.7. Vodú devotee in a contemplative pose soliloquizing and making her final supplications to the Kli-Adzima divinities on the finished *ballili* mural. All the devotees who have participated in plastering the shrine walls engage in meditative prayers and make their final supplications to the divinities before leaving the shrine (2016). Klikor, Volta Region (courtesy of the author)

Through contemplative acts of supplication and meditative gestures, Vodou devotees make special appeals to the deities for their divine favor and blessings for good health, spiritual security, and a long life. Vodou devotees pay homage and respect to their ancestors through libation, prayers, songs, chants, and sacred aesthetic practices that span several generations. The aesthetic concepts that undergird several of the modern art schools that are still active within indigenous African societies date back several centuries. As noted by the Ghanaian art educator Stephen Avenorgbo Kquofi (cit. in Avenorgbo 2008),

'[i]n [the] Ghanaian indigenous or cultural context, aesthetic principles are mostly related to moral and religious values, and there is usually strong emphasis on the formal aesthetic aspects of natural objects and the moral in relation to the religious ideas they express' (p. 94).

However, the fact that African aesthetic canons and creative techniques have been passed down through several generations of indigenous pedagogies does not necessarily restrict African art to 'traditional art.' A close study of African aesthetics reveals the distinctness of the aesthetic values upheld within different cultures. Due to a fixation on the 'exotic' features and functional aspects of African art, most early European chroniclers overlooked the rich aesthetic qualities embedded in African creative expressions. The more profound esoteric aspects of African art were, too, distorted and lost in speculation and misrepresentations (Adjei 2020: 206).



Figure 1.8. A finished balili mural (2016). Klikor, Volta Region (courtesy of the author)



← Figure 19. Kli-Adzima devotees posing in front of a finished variation of bailli mural on the walls of a Kli-Adzima shrine (2019). Klikor, Volta Region (courtesy of the author)

← Figure 20. A young Kli-Adzima mural artist posing in front of a finished bailli mural in Mama Vena shrine. Apart from creating these impressive murals, women carry out many other acts of service in honor of the deities. Women are generally in charge of cooking, cleaning, sweeping, and running other domestic errands during the festival period; we should note that men, too, perform selected domestic roles in the shrines (Adjei 2020: 205). Women are also charged with maintaining hygienic and sanitary conditions within and around the shrines (2016). Klikor, Volta Region (courtesy of the author)



← Figure 21. Left: author painting the shrine walls of Torgbui Adzima ahead of the 2019 Kli-Adzima Spiritual Renewal Festival. Right: research assistants putting the finishing touches to the mural on the Torgbui Adzima shrine walls (2019). Klikor, Volta Region (courtesy of the author)

Body art also plays a prominent role in Ewe Vodun aesthetics and art practices. Integral to much of Vodun worship and performance, it incorporates a wide range of abstract designs, as well as symbolism. These are expressed in coiffure, scarifications, tattoos, incisions, and body markings, such as the smearing of *kaolin* on specific parts of the body of the performer, devotee, or Vodun priest/ess. During Vodun festivals, it is common to see the bodies of some devotees decorated with repetitive designs. Aside from their aesthetic functions, these body designs are also regarded as therapeutic art forms.



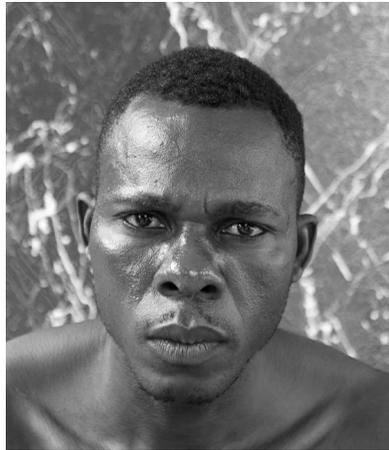
← Figure 2.2. Kli-Adzima devotee being decorated by body artist Afanyehu Nuwordu ahead of performances at Mama Vena shrine (2016). Klikor, Volta Region (courtesy of the author)

↓ Figure 2.3. Right: repetitive circles incorporated into the body art of a Vodun performer during the Kli-Adzima Spiritual Renewal Festival (2016). Mama Vena shrine, Klikor, Volta Region (courtesy of the author). Left: Young Ewe performance artists, Alakple and Klikor respectively (2017) (courtesy of the author)





← Figure 2.4. Close-up shot of an Amegashie (spirit medium) sitting in front of her spot-painted shrine (2017). Tsabashi Dorkenu shrine, Afiadenyigba, Volta Region (courtesy of the author)



← Figure 2.5. Mama Vena shrine Xanukpla and Noble Kunyegbe. Two of the principal artists involved in painting abstract murals on the walls of the Kli-Adzima cluster of shrines (2016). Klikor, Volta Region (courtesy of the author)



↓ Figure 2.6. Afanyehu Nuwordu and Rose AUadada. Both body painters (2019). Mama Vena shrine, Klikor, Volta Region (courtesy of the author)

1.4 Aesthetic Judgements as Means of Contextualizing and Appreciating Vodou Art

Finding verbal means to express the secret and hidden meanings of Vodou art has proven difficult. Phrases such as ‘*wo medé’a Vodou gome fia ame o’* and ‘*hutor mēFoa enu tso Vodou ntsi fuu o’* translate as ‘we don’t reveal all the “hidden meanings” of Vodou art’ and ‘Vodou priests don’t “speak too much” about Vodou art.’ Such positions are markedly different from other examples that arose in the course of my study of Ewe aesthetics, as when I was introduced to the notion of *atsyɔkoe*. A Vodou devotee spotted in an elaborate *yibotsi* or *atsifwifwi* hairstyle will simply respond, ‘*de ko me koe wo atsyɔkoe,*’ which translates as ‘this is merely meant for heightening my overall aesthetic effect, that’s all.’ *Atsyɔkoe* can thus loosely be translated as ‘aesthetics for aesthetics’ sake.’

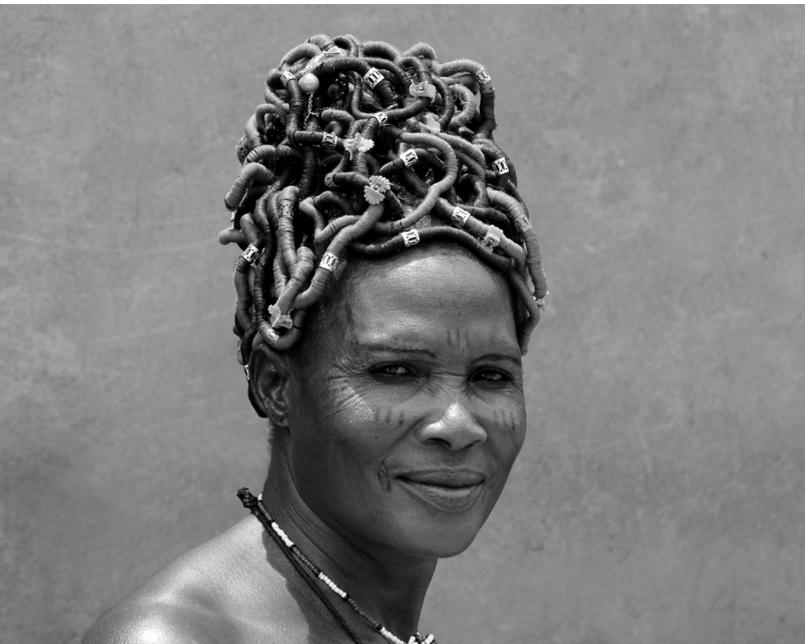


Figure 2.7. Kli-Adzima devotee adorned with *yibotsi* hairstyle (2016). Klikor, Volta Region (courtesy of the author)

This, for me, was a significant dimension of Ewe aesthetics, considering the reductive approach to African aesthetics in colonial-era anthropological writings, which primarily focused on the functional aspects of African art. It also validates Sagoe (1981) and Gyekye’s (1996) observations of Akan art appreciation, which engages notions of ‘pure’ aesthetic qualities in a work of art (e.g., *nea efata*, the concept of ‘fittingness’).

Taking into account all these discussions of ‘modern art’ in the context of African art and aesthetics, a critical question may suffice here. Were the Western aesthetic canons and characteristics of ‘modern art’ not embodied in African art long before these theories were even formulated? African art has profound philosophical dimensions. The African American art educator Chanda (1994)

notes that 'African aesthetics canons are grounded in spiritual underpinnings or belief. The criteria for the physical appearance and beauty of an object are dictated not by individual caprice and imagination, but by spiritual philosophies of the people' (p. 53).

Judgements of taste, aesthetic preference, or that which is deemed aesthetically 'pleasing' may be based upon emotional or spiritual gratification or contentment, rather than upon 'beauty' per se. The perspectives espoused by the scholars cited in this article reflect the intrinsic value and inherent aesthetic qualities embedded in the works of the African creative spirit. By embedding the delight of artistic creations in the elevated structures of the psyche and human mind, these scholars refrain from reducing the African aesthetic experience to the narrow idea that art appreciation or aesthetic contemplation is characterized merely by the 'beautiful' or the aesthetically 'pleasing.' In light of these arguments, one can deduce that when we judge something to be 'beautiful,' it is not because we perceive the property of 'beauty' in an object or artwork. The spiritual energy that an artwork radiates piques our interest and awareness, evoking within us powerful thoughts, associations, experiences, and emotions that subsequently lead to various sensations. Yet beauty does not yield pleasure in some direct, physical way: it is not a physical property (such as the emission of electromagnetic waves) that could affect us without us being aware of it.

Aesthetic appeal or judgment is a state of awareness driven by feelings based on the subjective grounds of how we appreciate a work of art. Art appreciation is also largely influenced by shared beliefs or personal experiences. All these conditions create a unique aesthetic experience for each individual, hence the 'common sense' notion that aesthetic appeal differs between one individual and another and from one culture to another. Again, 'beauty' is not necessarily situated in an artwork itself or in an object worthy of aesthetic contemplation. It is purely a spiritual sensation we become aware of. Returning to Greek etymology, we recall that both *aisthanomai* and its cognate *aisthesis* related to 'sense perception': how we perceive (and, simultaneously, create) our worlds through vision, taste, smell, touch, and hearing, among other possible senses (Plate 2005: 1). Yet as S. Brent Plate elucidates, the ancients' use of aesthetics encompassed all human senses, including extra-sensory perception. Aesthetic experience, in its Greek iteration, need not be restricted to inexact gauges—to our visual senses alone.

1.5 Concluding Remarks

The various arguments and aesthetic deliberations advanced in this discussion dismantle the faulty premise and fictitious binary of the 'modern' versus the 'primitive' or 'traditional' in art. The decisive, profound influence of African art and aesthetics upon modern European art has been established in the works of numerous scholars. Yet to this day, some Western art establishments still 'reject' works by African artists. Consciously or not, Western museums persistently refuse to acquire or to exhibit most contemporary African works

because they do not 'measure up' to stereotyped conceptions of African art. This is manifest in the policies of some museums, insofar as African art may be acquired 'only as long as the contemporary art of a region bears some relation to 'traditional art' (Oguibe and Enwezor 1999: 16). This paper's research findings challenge these prejudiced notions of creative 'inferiority' that persist in appraisals of African art and show that they are a 'clever hoax.' Given the scope and diversity of historical, modern, and contemporary aesthetic deliberations, one can conclude that it is impractical to uphold a 'standardized set of laws' for defining aesthetics or evaluating art in African and other contexts. This perspective demonstrates the need for further critical research and a reappraisal of non-Western art and aesthetic canons.

1. Dor notes that 'the Ewe letter "ɔ," pronounced "aw" as in awful, is also written "or" as in the names "Dor" or "Avorgbedor.'" However, I have chosen to write Akpalu's first name, as well as the Ewe word for cloth, with 'ɔ,' but have retained the 'or' in other names.
2. Kandinsky himself was also quite clear when he acknowledged the genuine roots of modernism in art. See (Kandinsky 2008: 43).
3. Kwame Nkrumah led the revolutionary struggle for Ghana's independence from colonial rule. He became the country's first prime minister and president. It is particularly important to refer to Nkrumah's doctoral thesis in the context of this discussion, given his central role in Ghanaian culture, politics, and the history of Ghana's independence.
4. Simblet clearly glosses over the contributions of African artists in her historical trajectory of the 'real' origins of abstraction (Simblet 2009: 219).
5. The central, southern, and three northern regions of Ghana share a long history of indigenous paintings styles and techniques. Unique indigenous painting styles and techniques have also evolved in various regions in other countries on the African continent (Antwi 2015).

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