

African Aesthetics in Motion:
**The Probability of a Third Jumbie
Aesthetic in Antigua and Barbuda**
Mali Adelaja Olatunji

Introduction

In most West African cultures, aesthetic sensibilities are associated with all things. For example, the Yoruba people of Nigeria assess everything aesthetically. For them anything that exists with the essential attributes as sustained in the history of their tradition has character and character is beauty, *ewà*. *Ewà* is the essential foundation upon which aesthetics principles rests. *Ewà* is the essence of existence. It is the essential character associated with moral excellence and goodness of virtue. For the Yoruba people, *Ewà* is the *spiritual aesthetics* of things in their own being thus the embodiment of social harmony and personal grace.¹

The aesthetic awareness, as I conceive it, is a *magical impulsion* that is the incorporeal embodiment of the corporeal. In other words, this *magical impulsion* serves to sensitize humans to the spiritual element of things. In sum, the aesthetic awareness is a full account of the imaginative and thingly characteristic of things and ideas.

African aesthetic has been in motion functioning in a variety of ways in the service of humans perhaps since Stone-age times. Indeed, the works of African stone painters served to inform and to inspire their community members in several ways. One common belief among community members was that their ancestors utilized the artists as messengers. Thus, the works of the artists were visual spiritual narratives from their ancestors. Many in those communities revered the artists for their perceived special connection with the ancestors. Another important aspect of the stone paintings was their aesthetic attributes, the joyous poeticism of the crocheted arrangements of forms, space and colors signifying a visual narratives of ancestral truism. For these people, the aesthetic impulsion, be it derived from: stone paintings, singing, dancing or mime, brought them in touch with their ancestor's spirits and motioned their emotional anxieties in a variety of comforting activities.

Even a gigantic leap from the Stone age to the Modern age will show African aesthetic is still in motion. For in the same way that African aesthetic compulsion served as a medium for psychological comfort to the Stone age African, it worked as an anodyne to sooth or relieve the brutalities meted out to the enslaved Africans in the cruel

prolonged circumstances of “Slavery” across the Atlantic Ocean from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. For instance, the spoken art of Jumbie² Storytelling made a seamless transition from Africa to Antigua in the bosom of the Africans the Europeans transported there as chattel. Moreover, since then, Jumbie Storytelling has occupied a paramount and longstanding position in Antigua’s art history.

The primary goal of this paper is to identify the three major aspects (storytelling, playacting and woodism) of the Jumbie Aesthetic of Antigua. In addition, it will attempt three other undertakings. First, I will look very briefly at some historic moments of African art from pre-colonial to contemporary times to get some understanding of its significance in the affairs of human activities; secondly I will look to see if indeed there is spirituality in the Antiguan creole aesthetic, and to specify the character of that spirituality. This I will do by examining some of the artistic performances of the elders who masqueraded on the streets of St. John’s, the capital of Antigua, during the Christmas celebrations before the 1960s to get a sense of what hidden impulses motivated their artistic activities. Then we will look at the mood of contemporary aesthetics in Antigua in an effort to discern what is its nature, and what, if any, influences bear the marks of the elder’s aesthetic sensibilities. Finally, I will posit for critique, and further discussion, an aesthetic idea that I have chosen to call “A Third Jumbie Aesthetics.”

Africa: Mother of Art

African art and accompanying aesthetic sensibilities have been in continuous motion since the Stone Age. The African rock paintings and engravings that have come to us reveal a mastery of artistry in their execution, spiritual aestheticism and excellence in narrative capability similar to much of the work created by contemporary artist. Based on my readings for this paper, and my long-term study of African art, African people’s religious and sociocultural lifestyles on the continent of Africa and elsewhere in the Americas, Antigua not least among them, the experience compels me to conclude that African art is a significant element of the African’s lifestyle. I have also come to understand the paramount role African aesthetic theories play in the development of character formation in the social and cultural orientation of the youngsters in preparation for their adulthood. Contrary to the postulations of many Westerners of note that the art native to Africa was merely child’s play and without significant social meaning, the facts indicate that African art from its inception has been in active operation continuously as a visual narrative of social importance.

Moreover, the panoptical study of art indicates that Africa is the mother of art. In the light of art's contemporary panoptic history, these partly anecdotal and wholly un-scholarly postulations are fading in the dark shadow of scholarship. In Southern Africa, for example, the stone art painters shouldered the responsibility to inform the people of their communities about their relationships with the spirit world. They were master artists whose visual narratives spoke metaphorically by means that symbolically juxtaposed stylized imagery of humans, animals, and a variety of other shapes, by impressive creative means.

The Museum of Cape Town in South Africa has one of the largest collections of rock-art paintings in the world. This collection includes the rock arts of the so-called San and Pygmy hunter and the Khoi and Nilotic pastoralists. W.J.J. van Rijssen, of the South African Museum, suggests this:

The art is a key to our understanding of the complex symbolic rituals and ceremonies and although at first glance many paintings may be seen simply as records of everyday occurrences, further study will reveal deeper meanings. Symbolism and ritual played an extremely important part in the lives of these people, who possessed no written language. Story telling, mime and dance were all used to express emotion and control stress, and the trance dance was an important aspect of these activities. The art was the only way in which mental images could be shared, and the sharing of trance experiences increased the unity of the group and so improved its chance of survival. Thus the development of the various styles of art was governed by ritual requirements and not by a desire to create beautiful paintings.³

The fact of this quote is quite germane to the thesis of this paper in that it comprehensively addresses the spectrum of the active operation of African art among African peoples the world over. Over the great expanse of time since the stone-ages, African art and artistic offerings have served as storyteller, ritual facilitator, aesthetic agent and beautifier of suffering. As if not enough, the all-embracing history of art is decisive in its declaration that Africa is the mother of art. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's timeline of art history substantiates the claim. I must say this however, the claim is based on scientific testing of pigments and other materials the stone art painters probably utilized in making the images. The following quote is from the Metropolitan Museum's timeline posted on their web site. It reads this way:

The seven slabs of rock with traces of animal figures that were found in the Apollo 11 Cave in the Huns Mountains of south-western Namibia have been dated with unusual precision for ancient rock art. Originally brought to the site from elsewhere, the stones were painted in charcoal, ocher, and white. Until recently, the Apollo 11 stones were the oldest known artwork of any kind from the African continent. More recent discoveries of incised ocher date back almost as far as 100,000 B.C., making Africa home to the oldest images in the world.⁴

African art is always depicting sociocultural matters such as ceremonial acknowledgements relating to the Deities, issues concerning values and the well-being of the incorporeal and the religious. It is a manifestation of an imaginative presence that bears the particulars of events be they ethical, historical ontological or transcendental. African art is a 'verb.' It does something, *Àshe*. For the Yoruba, *àshe* is archetypal and the embodiment of the ultimate character of a person place or thing. Certainly, art that has *àshe* reaches the highest level of excellence. African art and the resulting aesthetic sensibilities are ancient. In addition, they have never ceased to be conduits for allegorical hermeneutics since antiquity. In sum, art bears *significant meanings* in the life of the African as a whole.

This notwithstanding, Western philosophers and aestheticians have compiled an enormous body of work seeking to articulate a single definitive theory that will encompass the necessary and sufficient conditions of art. To date, no one has accomplished this task. Richard L. Anderson, Professor at the Kansas City Art Institute, has examined this subject ably in his book, *Calliope's Sisters*. He writes:

During the long course of Western history, countless views have been aired concerning many of the same questions that have challenged thinkers in the nine societies discussed in the preceding chapters. Although many writers claim that theirs is the sole embodiment of truth, in fact distinct patterns of aesthetic thought are evident; and close inspection reveals that virtually all Western philosophies of art fit fairly neatly into one of four traditional categories. Indeed, although the historians of philosophy who have attempted to systematize Western aesthetic theories have sometimes used different labels in their taxonomies, there is a surprising amount of agreement that there has been a "quartet"

of aesthetic traditions in the West, with each voice in the ensemble representing a tradition that can be traced back to ancient Greece and that remains viable today⁶

The following is the “quartet” as Anderson sees it beginning with the Mimetic theory:

Mimetic theories focus on the relationship between the work of art and some material object in the sensible world which the art work “imitates,” either literally or else by capturing it in an idealized form that transcends the mundane world.

Pragmatic theories emphasize the functional (or “instrumental”) capacity of art, requiring that art make some sort of positive contribution to the well-being of individuals or society. Religious art, with its goal of enhancing the spiritual condition of the art audience, constitutes the most common type of pragmatic art, but political art also has a pragmatic goal.

Emotionalist theories focus neither on the material nor the social world but rather on the psychological realm of inner experience and the feelings of the individual. Again, the specific locus of interest varies. Emphasis may be on the artist’s expression of emotion, on cathartic purging of audience members’ emotions, or on the creative act itself.

Formalist theories do not deal with the material, social or psychological worlds, but rather with the stylistic world manifest in the art work itself. Art is thought to be a unique manifestation of “significant form,” a manipulation of an artistic medium that is capable of producing a unique and definitively arresting response in the aesthetically attuned audience member.⁷

As we can see one can argue in a variety of ways regarding what aesthetic conceptions are alike or different, but that is not the function of this paper. I have included them in this paper because of their intellectual wealth and acknowledged excellence in their effort to define the essence of Western aesthetics. This quartet of Western aesthetics is indeed a summary of a vast body of works of art created by European master artists.

In August of 1974, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), in New York City employed me as a full-time Fine Arts Photographer. I worked there in that capacity until my early-retirement in December of 1995. In all probability, I have photographed over thirty thousand of the world's Modern Masterpieces over my twenty-one year tenure. I have photographs that detail areas of many of these works. I have also made infrared and ultraviolet photographs of several of these works of art in order to gain information of the works that could not have been revealed otherwise. My position as a Fine Arts Photographer necessitated regular discourse on the best ways to reproduce the *fact* of each artwork. In this regard, I worked closely with the Conservators, the heads of departments, the Curators and the artists in many instances. This, I did for seven and one half hours per day, five days per week. In short, my privileged position at MoMA gave me intimate access to the ultimate substance of many of the widely acclaimed visual masterpieces of the minds of the world acclaimed European artists.⁸ Nevertheless, when I retired from MoMA I left wondering, and to this day, a fundamental question lingers. Do European aestheticians base their theories on the physiological elements of works of art?

This question has become more perplexing for me now that I am studying African aesthetic theories. This bewilderment sometimes seems to be transitioning into a vexing problem with roots firmly planted in MoMA's soil. The question arose after I had been working at MoMA for several years, but I had not fully understood the weight of its importance in the study of aesthetic theory at that time. Here is the core of the problem: No one with whom I interacted while working at MoMA ever engaged in aesthetic discourses. It was as if aesthetic theories did not exist. For them, the physicality of the work was paramount. The vibrancy or paleness of the color, the triangularity, circularity or cubistic shapes of the pictorial forms in relationship with each other was intriguing. At other times, they marveled at the economic powerbase behind the art. Alternatively even the warmth of the naturally charismatic personality of the artist was often a fleeting pleasure of self-satisfaction for my colleagues. At MoMA, works of art were delicate, delightful wonders of Eurocentric manifestation. Art was an artifact of the master race with little or no groundings in incorporeality. Indeed, I did not realize until my latter years at MoMA that there was a set of accepted principles and methods of analysis devised to investigate aspects of artistic phenomena.

The Power of Ewà

Undoubtedly, ewà has overwhelmingly invalidated my perception of MoMA's per-

spectives on their collection. Certainly, the Westerner's mass appropriation of African art and aesthetic ideas for European museums and private collectors indicates that Westerners have finally come to appreciate the magic of *ewà*. On the positive side, it could also be that many European have come to favor African art and aesthetics as delicate, delightful wonders of African manifestations of visual narratives of artifactual and incorporeal dimensions. Still, in light of the fact that the foci of Western aesthetic theories are primarily based on the material, the functional, the psychological and the stylistic elements of works of art, as the quartet of aesthetic theories suggests, what are the characteristics in African art that is so compelling to European artists and art collectors?

The authors of the book, *African Art*, wrote about what they called, "the first great finds." In 1897 and again in 1910 an expedition of Europeans "found" several African works of art in Benin, Nigeria. One of the works was an Ife head. In the authors' words:

So powerful, indeed was the appeal of the Ife heads that it was even questioned by some that they could be the work of Africans. One of the more remarkable theories advanced to account for their origin was that they might have been made by some visiting Renaissance artist, because of their almost classical elegance. The abstract work did not receive its full measure of appreciation until it was discovered by Picasso and Braque in Paris, and Kirchner and the Expressionists in Germany. Much later its influence became apparent in the work of Brancusi and Henry Moore, but it is only since about 1945 that its artistic merit has received its due.⁹

Even though one hundred years have gone by since the 1897 find when those Europeans first experienced the power of *ewà*, their attitude in response to the fact that the Ife head equaled or surpassed the European Renaissance standard of excellence was prototypical of what I am calling the *attitude of supercilious justification*. At the core of this attitude lies a dangerous and chronic incongruence. For while on the one hand many European professionals: anthropologists, historians, researchers, sociologists, art collectors, and artists are fully aware of the unexcelled sophistication of African art, disparaging terms such as 'primitivism' are used to categorize African art in these circles. The *attitude of supercilious justification* therefore speaks out of a mouth with two tongues. It demeans the sophistication of African art with tongue, and with the other, it manages to talk Africans into selling their masterpieces to private collectors in the West, or allowing the archeological "finds" to be housed in Western museums.

It is remarkable how I consistently fail in my attempts to make reasonable the practice of the *attitude of supercilious justification*. It is similar to an attitude Antiguans call *Badmindedness*.¹⁰ I have been trying to rationalize this seemingly arrogant superiority since 1983. In 1983, I started to photograph African art for the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition at MoMA called, "Primitivism in 20th Century Art." I am credited in the book for photographing about twenty works. I also photographed the entire exhibition, covering each work of art therein. Therefore, this was my grand exposure to the mastery African art juxtaposed with the mastery European art at an intimate distance. This experience compelled me to understand the position of the Europeans who were on the expositions in 1897 and 1910. Shoulder-to-shoulder, the African art stood out. What the exhibition showed, and the book chronicles, is the fact that African art, the power of Ewà, has influenced much of European contemporary art. The work is an important manifestation of a hybrid Afrocentric / European art. Put another way, the power of Ewà has overcome the *attitude of supercilious justification* thereby producing art with a compelling aesthetic compulsion.

No doubt, the character of African art has been foundational to art making in, and since Stone Age times. In addition, its resulting aesthetic offerings have influenced the frameworks of many aesthetic notions. African art is not, nor has ever been "Primitive" in the sense suggested by numerous European art professionals: unsophisticated, crude, simplistic and a host of other pejorative characterizations. In fact the converse is true. However, it would be unmindful of me to conclude this phase of the paper without some discussion on the importance of the art of Africa to the survivability of Dada and Surrealism in Europe during World War I.

The Dada and Surrealist movement comprised a number of European and Anglo-American artists. Marcel Duchamp was among the New York group. In addition, a group of artists and intellectuals congregated in Zurich, Switzerland. Evan Maurer, Director, The University of Michigan Museum of Art, writes, "The first two years of the war had led to a deadly pattern of attrition among armies of millions of men who were blowing one another apart with seemingly endless artillery duels along the front line slashing across Europe. On February 21, 1916, just weeks after the opening of the Dadaists Cabaret Voltaire, the German armies attacked the heavily fortified positions around the small city of Verdun in a calculated effort to force the French into the largest concentration of artillery ever assembled."¹¹ The Cabaret Voltaire was a place where the Dadaists and Surrealists artists congregated. They vehemently rejected the state of traditional European aesthetics and embraced the character of *vernacular art*. In other words,

what many art professionals call, "Primitive art," "Folk art," or "Tribal art." Here again, we see the power of Ewà triumphant over the attitude of supercilious justification. Maurer again tells us: "Negro music, dance, and poetry are frequently listed as major elements of the Zurich Dada performances accompanied by the incessant drumming of Richard Huelsenbeck, who was obsessed with African music, Tzara and others recited their own African-inspired songs"¹² The Dadaists and Surrealists soon realized that the Western civilization was on the verge of destroying itself. Their self-acclaimed superiority over totemic cultures faded rapidly, and with it their *attitude of supercilious justification*. They soon realized that the primitivism could not have been as unsophisticated and simplistic as before postulated. There were some philosophers, anthropologists and psychologists, Sigmund Freud in particular, who come to see primitivism in a different light. Primitivism, in this new light, now had redeeming qualities. These European professionals finally discovered that the so-called primitive peoples of the world embraced the fullness of their conscious and unconscious existence. The Dadaist and Surrealist artists in Europe acquainted themselves with the revised postulations of primitivity, and conducted their artistic activities accordingly. In short order, the philosophy of Dada and Surrealism incorporated dreams, as an extension of human consciousness. Dance, chant and singing became a necessary ritual practice and fundamental to their art making. This revised interpretation of the pejorative view of the "Primitive" changed much of the basic conceptions, thus style of European art. One such concept was the "belief in the creative power of the unconscious, and an acceptance of the universal need for myth which arises from a common factor of human mentality and unites the peoples," according to Maurer. Maurer continues: "Primitive society found the answers to the questions of life in the spirit world and the realm of the dream. The Surrealists, in studying Primitive arts and cultures, followed a similar path. It has been recognized that in Primitive societies the relationship between art and the creative process is closely influenced by magic."¹³ Africans, as far back as the stone-age artists understood the power and influence of magic. Art has always a voice of magic, and aesthetics the conduit through which mime, dance, singing, painting, carving and storytelling flow for the African. African Art and aesthetics of the right character, Ewà, have contributed enormously to the well-being of humans the world over, from Stone Age to contemporary times.

The Oriki: Praise Poems and the Yorúbà Talking Drums

Art is not the only thing that deserves heightened attention. Animals, plants, and all things, animate and inanimate have discernable characteristics that are worthy of our aesthetic faculty. All elements of nature are naturally connected, at least, in the

mystical and temporal realms of existence. Thus, the aesthetic qualities of their innate character and their active functions in social dynamisms deserve human's praise. The ways of the animals, the movement of the willow tree, the edge of an ax, the finality of death, the fondness of love, the beauty of thought and emotion, and the voice of the drum are all elements of nature and are all worthy of praise.

Not long ago, I experienced three Yoruba Master Drummers playing three talking drums in Harlem, New York. The occasion was the funeral of the late, Master Drummer, Babatunde Olatunji at the Riverside Church. The drummers played Olatunji's Oriki. In 1996, Olatunji visited me in Antigua for about a week. There he continued to school me in Yoruba customs, an activity he begun in 1995 in New York City. While in Antigua, Olatunji expressed his delight that Antiguan reminded him of the Yorùbà people. He once said, "Antigua is like a Yorùbà village. Everywhere I go, I see Yorùbà people." However, it was not until his death that I really came to realize the essence of his remark. Two occasions brought me to this realization: (1) I was one of a group of Yorùbà men who planned several aspects of the formalities for his funeral; (2) I was asked to function as a member of his family at the funeral services. After all was said and done at these occasions, I thought I had been among Antiguan.

There was a parade of drummers and well-wishers behind Olatunji's body up 125th Street in Harlem that reminded me of the parades of brass bands and well-wishers behind the body of Lodge members in the 1940s and 1950s in Antigua. In Antigua, the eulogy at a funeral is a religious ritual prescription, a laudatory speech on behalf of someone who has died. It is usual for the eulogy to begin with the birth of the person and end with the person's death. Everyone expects the eulogy to enunciate, and no doubt praises the person for the *good things* he or she has done in life. The Yorùbà, on the other hand, lauds the *good character* of all of nature in a poetic idiom. It is this process of praising they call Oriki. The Awùsè of Òsogbo, Chief Priest, Ifáyemí Elébuibon, writes this in his book, *The Adventures of Obàtálá*

. . . Oriki are praise names and in every Yorùbà home, Oriki serve an important role. It is Oriki that enable us to know which ancestral lineage to which we belong and what this lineage has contributed in the past. Yorùbà culture/people, give Oriki to Òrisà, Kings, individual persons, warriors, farmers, lazy men and some lifeless objects. When we study Oriki, very carefully, we will be able to understand the Òrisàs and which characteristics represent them. This also applies to individuals.¹⁴

In addition, Akinsola Akiwowo, former Professor and Chairman of the Department of Sociology and anthropology, Obafemi Awolowo University of Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria, explained the meanings of the Oríkì and the responsibility of the master drummer to his community: "A drummer has his own Oríkì. Each drum has its Oríkì. Each instrument, each everything has its own *Praise Poem*. Each lineage, each ethnic group, each chief, on and on, has its own Oríkì. One must know what attributes God has endowed thing, animal, or persons with, and that is what makes thing, animal or person what they are."¹⁵

As I gathered in my schooling from Babatunde Olatunji and Akinsola Akiwowo, the Oríkì is the essence of the poetic literature of what a thing, animal or person is. Among the Yorúbà, the Master Drummer is expected to know most of the literature, and be able to express it through the language of the people in the voice of his drums. Thus, the drum recites the Oríkì of a particular aspect of nature or things of nature, their *Praise Poems*. Members of the village traditionally memorize, and learned to identify the poetic dictions of a particular Oríkì over time by attending the appropriate celebrations. The Master Drummer had the responsibility to evoke the emotions of the participants to the point where they transcend the palpability of the moment.

Here, we see the objective, the immediate cognition in the form of the drum, and the drummer's knowledge of the subjective Oríkì coming together in the manifestation of the inner sphere. The voice of the drum poeticizes the Oríkì consciousness to a point that transcends the process of the celebrations to spheres beyond. The chant-like sounds from the talking drums certainly transformed my objective presence of the church's physicality to realm I had never before experienced. The drums spoke sometimes in rapid rhythmic intonations while at intervals their utterances quieted in lingering spaces. In addition, I intuitively adjusted as though I was receiving a musical reiteration of the undulations of Olatunji's life-stories. Only now, the stories are not in his words as so often was the case while we were together in Antigua. Is the Yorúbà's Oríkì a form of aesthetic conceptualization? Truthfully, I do not know. However, in light of the far-reaching character of the aesthetic faculty, the principles of Oríkì fit well within the general constructs of aesthetic ideas.

I dedicate the following praise poem (Oríkì of a female elder) to all the African Antiguans who were great-grandmothers in Antigua during the years of the 1940s. I have selected great-grandmothers because by the time they had become great-grandmothers they would have already mastered grandmother-hood. To them I say posthumously, I could not have been here had it not been for your strength, tenaci-

ty, and wisdom. Without any doubt, you have done exceedingly well in spite of the colossal inequities of *life* in the circumstance of the brutish British colonialism of your time. I thank you. Your spirit is with me.

-----0-----

Ancestors Oriki

Whatever they do in heaven, you are pure among them.
Your soul was free of the blemishes of the earthly realm.

You descended from Obàtálà with the blessings of Òlódùmarè.
You coped with the rigors of colonialism to provide us a better day.

You molded our character and nourished our souls.
You guided our spirit in the ways of the old.

Sternly you did so, for the lessons had to be clear.
For they come from successive ancestors year after year.

If you spit up in the air child, it will fall back in your faces.
Walk with your heads high, you are of a proud and mighty race.

Never trouble trouble, until trouble troubles you.
Always strive to be noble, in the things you do.

Monkey knows which limb to jump on he is a cleaver creature.
Always be discreet on life's path to the future.

Hold on to a crooked stick, until you get a straight one.
No one can promise you life will always be fun.

Solemnly we grieved when your body was confined.
But your teachings remain the foundation of our body, spirit and mind.

-----0-----