

Cosmologies, Opacity and Inventions: Notes on Sela Adjei and the Ewe Vodu Art

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How do we know? This essay considers how we know Art (or think we know Art) and our evaluation of it. In our positivist mode, we look for patterns, paint broadly and impose totalising deductions. What sort of epistemic violence do we commit? How do we theorise traditions, even those that do not appear to have genealogies? Rather, how do we render genealogies illegible to theory? How do we theorise a tradition on its own terms, in spite and despite of others? Using a deconstructionist approach, this essay considers the aforementioned questions.

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Consider this story.

Long in the forgone years, the Supreme Being's people were looking for a place to settle. Their journeys would take them through different times and spaces. It was said that human life originated from where they came from. They came from the Oyo Kingdom. But they would move and move again when the restlessness that wars bring saturated their hearts. To the East, they would journey on. They would gather their priests, seers, and singers. On their journeys, the Ewe peoples would encounter eclipses—Zadokeli. Their priests, and seers, and singers would present themselves before the higher beings, offering prayers and sacrifices. They would sing with tongues that were inherited from their ancestors. One of the singers would say:

*We cry for meaning
Knowing not
Where to lay our heads*

*The diviners sharpen their art
Cast their cowries
To no avail...*

~ Mawuli Adzei, Zadokeli



Zadokeli (2022)
220cm x 220cm
Acrylic on Canvas

When Sela Adjei invokes *Zadokeli* as the title of a series of paintings (accompanied by a collection of poems bearing the same title by Mawuli Adzei), he is grounding these poems in Ewe cosmology. In Ewe cosmology, eclipses foreshadow bad occurrences. So, when the eclipses happen, those with spiritual expertise are summoned to offer explanations. Adjei uses his art as a form of eclipse to forebear various themes of humanist interests. The titles of the paintings include *Children of the Universe, Masks and Masquerades, Strange Times, Fantasies, Lovers Rock* and *Internal Combustions*. On the surface, Adjei's spontaneous use of bold colours are evocative of abstract expressionism with the dripping and pouring of paints and distorted figures. Or even, the tradition of Black American abstraction (the artist's *Black Power Series* is especially reminiscent of the action art subgenre of abstract expressionism).

Yet, the artist does not duly claim these placements. His abstraction aesthetic is what he has gleaned from the Vodou religious abstract art as well as geometric symbology from African societies including the Akan's Adinkra, Kemetic symbols, masks and masquerades. The Vodou artist is a messenger. S/he is the one who delivers object lessons that are the manifestation of the spiritual realm in physical creative energies including murals, and bodily paintings. These physical manifestations are important in religious practices. But for the uninitiated, our consideration is the art-ness of the practice.

In our consideration of the art-ness of the practice, we need to first decenter—decolonize—our knowledge of arts. Since the late 1980s, art history

has had some reckoning with its knowledge of art movements and what they mean. Curators like Okwui Enwezor who emerged in that era enlarged the terrain to show the contemporariness of African artists. Suddenly, African artists were showing side-by-side with their colleagues from elsewhere. But that change happened only for the modern and contemporary African artist. It never happened for the street artist nor the so-called traditional artist, who for want of formalist aesthetic quality, is still at the mercy of the anthropologist. It is our position that art is art.

It has been expertly shown elsewhere that major European and American artists were influenced by traditional African arts. Take Pablo Picasso, for example. His encounter with African masks in Paris led to what he dubbed as the 'Black Period' (1907-1909) in his life. Among other things, he co-founded the Cubist movement which owes its geometric forms to African masks. Therefore, our current reading is to find the language for a would-be canon, the Vodou art, which has developed in spite and despite of other movements. By this, we mean the elements, something that Picasso best describes when he says:

But I forced myself to stay, to examine these masks, all those objects that people had created with a sacred and magical purpose, to serve as intermediaries between them and the unknown and hostile forces that surround them, thereby trying to overcome their fears, giving them colour and shape. And then I understood what painting really meant.¹

Beyond the ethical and religious aspects of aesthetics of the tradition-based African art, practitioners have a sense of formalist quality. Taking a naturalist approach to his carving, Asante sculptor Osei Bonsu (1900-1977) remarked:

Look at that crooked head carefully and correct it. Is this how God created you? Correct that ear that looks like [a] hare.

He would add:

If a girl has this type of breast, would you take her for a wife?

He would also say:

Feel the surface with your hands; it is just like fufu which has fallen into the gravel. Do away or scrape or sand off the rough surface which looks like fufu which has fallen into the gravel.²

Bonsu also taught at Achimota (as an assistant to H.V. Meyerowitz) where the would-be eminent artist Kofi Antubam studied. Antubam also studied with Meyerowitz. It is possible that Bonsu influenced Antubam on his conception of the ideals of beauty. Other Ghanaian modern artists including Vincent Kofi and Kofi Bucknor would go on to theorise their own aesthetics based on their perceptions of an African worldview. Asafo flag makers, and textile weavers are some of the traditional artists that have been widely studied in Ghana.

Even when the objects made by these artists are used in veneration, the artists themselves are

not involved directly. But the Vodou artist is. His/her practice is intricate and intertwined with the religious process. How then do you study the Vodou aesthetic within itself when the artists do not talk about it? How do we build a canon of Vodou art on its own? How do we, the uninitiated, know the canon with its unique language?

Let us continue our story.

As the priests went about their duties, they would get possessed. And see things. They would reveal what is hidden to the ordinary eyes. They would divine and call things to being. The people would hail, as they heard the voices of the priests. Their worship would fill the corners of the earth and when they got tired, they would retire to their abodes, with thanksgiving to their ancestors.

Adjei describes a similar process with how he creates his art. He gets overtaken-possessed—and is led. The energy that he is possessed with is what he transfers onto the canvas. He begins with no intention as to what the pictures will look like. As such, he does not consider anything as a mistake. You will see drips of paints that have been left on the canvas, interspersing the picture, conjuring their own forms.

In the *Black Power Series*, red brushstrokes form geometric shapes on a black background. In the *Fragments* and *Simulation Series*, elongated human figures populate the large-sized canvases. Some of the figures are pointing their fingers at the others. In the *Fragment Series*, the drips of red paints spill over to the various body parts. In the *Simulation Series*, we see the red figures wielding

weapons like guns and sticks. The postures of the figures suggest that they are on the move, protesting, maybe. Maybe, they are confronting a racist order as we read titles like *Make Racists Afraid Again (Mr. A.A.)*, *This is Amerikkka*, and *Death in the Land*.

Like the Vodou artist, Adjei does not proffer meanings to his work. Rather, he leaves those who engage with the works to make meanings out of them themselves. We then become part of the divination audience that we met earlier. We wail and plead at the sight of our own *Zadokeli*. What is there to know? How do we know in spite of the uncooperating nature of the artist? How do we use the spiritual as a material?

We face a similar methodological complexity that led Edouard Glissant to think about the right to opacity – the poetics of resistances. To which he says:

[...] if we examine the process of "understanding" people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgements. I have to reduce.

He further adds:

Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these

*truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components. For the time being, perhaps, give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures.*³

To deal with opacity means that we must evaluate our relation with Vodou art, not as the other to the established canons. We ought to go beyond our conventional modes of knowing. That in an essence means that we will have to speculate and invent methodologies. As art connoisseurs, we proclaim to have answers. We claim to see what the ordinary eyes do not see. But with Vodou arts, we do not know it at all. And that should be okay.

References

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