Egypt And The Rest Of Us: The Relatedness Of Belief System And Art Forms

by

Ademuleya, Babasehinde A. Ph. D
Obafemi Awolowo University

Abstract

This paper is an attempt at provoking a re-examination of the history of the ancient Egyptian art with a view to questioning the exclusion of Egypt from the historical and cultural study of African art in spite of its being part of Africa geographically. The paper examines the ancient Egyptian art beyond its physical appearance and aesthetic, it explored commonly shared African belief systems, a major reinforcement to traditional African art, to reveal the relatedness of the ancient art of Egypt with that of the rest of African art in form and content. The paper submits that the ancient art of Egypt should be included in the main stream of the study of African art.

Introduction

Egypt is located at the North eastern most part of Africa and being the only Africa’s over land link with the Middle East and the rest of the world, it can be referred to as the African main gate to the world. Its strategic geographical placement notwithstanding, whenever the adjective “Africa” is to be discussed in cultural studies, Egypt (along with other ‘light skinned’ peoples found in the Northern part of Africa) is usually excluded. Some scholars have argued that the Pharaonic Egypt age were not Negroes and therefore can not be seen as African neither their civilisation (Davidson, 1972:29). Some others have also argued that the present day North Africa belong to a larger Muslim and Arabic entity that stretches well beyond the African continent thus seeing Egypt as an extension of the Middle East (Philip, Feierman, Thompson, and Vansina, 1978:39). To some others, they are white Africans best described as dark-skinned Caucasians (Oyebola 1986:26). This attitude of leaving ancient Egypt out of the history of Africa perhaps explains why Egyptian culture has often been studied independently of its African origin. It is within this context, that African art is being defined as the art of the black people of Africa, constituting of “the people south of the Sahara – together with the Sudan and Ethiopia and some where west of them, all inhabited by black population (Adepegba. (2002:3).

It is a fact that Egyptian art, in form, shares affinity with the western art, considering the gigantic structures, the pyramids, massive sculptures and other innovations of the ancient Egypt and its noticeable generative influence in the later Greco-Roman civilisations. Influences of this nature are not noticeable in the rest of African art, this perhaps informs Oyebola’s (1986:28) claim that Egyptian civilization may be truly African but not of black race, which further gives justification to the study of ancient Egyptian art in the mainstream of western art.

The above stated notwithstanding, It is here contended that Egypt can not be part of Africa geographically without some kind of historical and cultural link with his neighbours, neither can
the art of ancient Egypt be studied totally out of African context. How justified is it to excise the Pharaonic art that was a hybrid of African and Asiatic art traditions from the history of African art? Is there no relatedness in the art of Egypt and that of the rest of African people, especially the so-called black race? The answer to these questions is the preoccupation of this paper.

Scholars like Henry Drewal and Adepegba encouraged that Egyptian art be studied as part of African art, if not for its similarities – for its differences, basing their argument on scope (Adepegba.2002:3). Both scholars’ calls yielded a good result in Werner Gillon’s A short History of Africa (1984) and the publication of the award winning A History of African Art co-authored by Visona, Poynor, & Cole (2000) which included the study of ancient Egyptian art. While these efforts are commendable, the publications however could not prove the relatedness of the arts. Examining the Egyptian art beyond its physical appearance and aesthetic will reveal the relatedness of the art with that of the rest of African art forms. It will also remove O’Connor and some other scholars’ doubt in the existence of any serious contact between Egypt and the black Africa (O’Connor in Jefferson 1974). Apart from further creating a better understanding of the art of the rest of the continent, specifically the culturally defined Africa, this effort is capable of revealing more knowledge of Egyptians lost origin.

It is not the intention of this study to engage in the politics of theory. It must however be noted that many western scholars find it difficult to believe that Africans are capable of certain inventions or ideas they considered ‘sophisticated’ hence, such achievements or innovations are often attributed to influences from ‘a superior culture’ out side the culturally defined Africa. This application of theory of diffusion often employed in linking other Africans cultural achievements with that of Egypt (or other nations or cultures) is not only inadequate and untenable; it is capable of further blurring our understanding of their cultural relatedness.

**Egypt and its origin**

It is not very certain when people started arriving along the Nile, however by the 6000 and 5000 B.C there have been evidences of settlements along the bank of the Nile (Encyclopaedia Britannica: 1976). It has also been asserted that the original occupant of the Nile were Negroid who migrated up the Nile because of the aridity of climate and the encroachment of the desert sand (Ibid). Chambers, Grew, Herlihy, Rabb, & Woloch (1979: 9 – 21) also claim that the Negroid was succeeded by the Hamites and a later group of Semites immigrants, who fused with the Hamites, of whose background is unknown. These positions suggest the presence of two distinct groups simultaneously at the bank of the Nile. One is the Negroid who occupied the Nile valley and the other, the Hamites and Semites, possibly the descendants of migrants from the Near East, who occupied the delta area.

Before unification and the epoch of the Dynastic period, the settlers with their distinct cultures formed the foundations of what later turned out to be the Upper and the Lower Egypt. The initial arrivals were believed to have settled in typical small African farming village settings, scattered along the Nile. This period filled the gap between the northern African rock painting of between 10,000 – 6,000 B.C and the Dynastic period of about 3,000 – 31 B.C. Chambers et.al (Ibid) attribute a gap of about 5,000 years between the earliest farming villages and the first urban civilisations. It is certain that the ideas and concept of the universe, man, religion and kingship, which later form the basis for Egyptian culture and instructions were derived from the commonly shared belief system among the villagers and their numerous neighbours before the desiccation of the Sahara when the desert was habitable where desert now exist.

There was no dramatic moment in history when civilisation suddenly arose. The Egyptian civilisation, which certain scholars often describe as sudden, was attributed to the arrival of new
people and rulers from elsewhere who brought with them the foundation of what is today known as Pharaonic civilisation (Davidson, 1972: 30). This cannot be very true. There can be no question of civilisation being introduced to ‘a backward Egypt’ of which Herodotus once called ‘the gift of the Nile. In a way, nature (influence of Nile) itself propelled the formation of Egypt (as well as its civilisation), from village settlers who had to move away from a once fertile plain, where herds of cattle grazed, towards the Nile for survival, at first into two kingdoms and subsequently into a single kingdom under King Menes also known as Narmer. The event is captured in the palette of Narmer (Plate 1). What could be said to be the true Egyptian culture actually evolved towards the end of the old kingdom during which a merger of cultures could be said to have taken place.

The palette, which is a symbolic representation of the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt, also depicts the supremacy of the Upper Egypt over the Lower Egypt. This simply explains why the Upper Egyptians (of Negroid extraction) were able to project and sustain their belief system within the new formation, which later became the basis for life and social order for the Pharaonic Egypt and a great influence on arts and architecture of the Egyptians. Apart from the conquest story depicted on the palette, Egyptologists also acknowledged the early dominance of the ruling class with Negroid features between 5869 – 3500 B.C. that covers the era of settlement to the early reign of Dynastic Egyptians.

The “Africa (ness)” in the art of Egypt

An important guide to note in the study of the various arts of Africa is the fact that the objects are not just of aesthetic significance but objects whose functions are multi-dimensional (Visona et al., 2000). African art evolve round the issue of life and death closely interwoven with all phases of human existence. A proper understanding of African art requires a sound knowledge of the various factors that motivated the making of the art works. Unlocking the essence and the meaning in African art therefore requires our knowledge of the people’s belief system and worldview that reinforces the art. Without this, it will be difficult to appreciate the Africaness in Egyptian art. A careful study of content in Egyptian art will not only reveal its “Africaness” but also it’s contextual meaning and functions which form the basis for its relevance to the people who created it, and its relatedness with other arts of Africa.

Relatedness of belief system

The principal message in Egyptian art and that of the rest of African people is continuity. African religious activities and belief systems are chiefly focussed upon the relationship between the human being (living) and the departed (ancestor) and the Deity (Creator). Like their kindred in the rest of Africa, ancient Egyptians’ faith in these three was based on a collection of ancient myths, nature worship, and innumerable deities. They believe in a God (Deity or Creator) who seems far away but His presence is felt in all things, hence, Egyptians like other Africans discovered God everywhere – in the Nile, in the sea, in the sun and in the rulers Pharaoh himself (Chambers et al. 1979:22). There was in Egypt, religious diversity (as in the rest of Africa) with each of the smaller original kingdoms (long before unification) having its own gods and local priesthood.

Art generally in Africa, as noted by Elsen (1972:20), is associated with belief in God, gods and goddesses and their worship and it is intended for man’s well being in this life and afterlife. It cannot be denied that the departed occupy an important place in the African religiosity (Mbiti 1969:11). To Africans the departed form part of the family and through him, the family is able to sustain continuity and control. It is certain that the belief in many gods, the concept of afterlife,
of the universe, man and kingship that was to be later portrayed in Egyptian arts were generally accepted system of thought among Africans. They are commonly shared belief systems by the inhabitants of that area at a time before the desiccation of Sahara when the desert was habitable and the scattered villages (Kingdoms) had more numerous neighbours.

Art to Africans is an agent of control over things men could not govern by themselves i.e. rain, planting, growth (and increase) of crops and human health, childbirth, successful living and death. We have often read that the religious belief in “afterlife” being the basic concept underlying the making of ancient Egyptian art, but this is not the same with the art of Mesopotamia its contemporary or in its offspring, the Greek art2(Chambers et al. 1979:13-82). That ancient Egyptian art often dealt with mythology and the concept of “after life” is indeed not alien in Africa. The concept is commonly shared among the peoples of the Sub Sahara region generally referred to as “black Africans”. To majority of African people, the afterlife is but a continuation of life more or less, as it is in its human form. Africans believe in the abyss of transition of which Soyinka (1976) referred to as the “fourth stage”. He described the forth stage (death) which completes man’s transition cycle of the ancestral, living and the unborn, as the dark continuum of transition where occurs the inter-transmutation of essence, ideal and materiality In his play, Death and the King’s Horseman, Olonde offered to take Elesin’s (his father) place. in a transitional process that is expected to ease the passage of the dead Alaafin, of which if not allowed to be completed, would not only have brought a terrible calamity on the people, but also prevent the ‘unborn’ from coming (Soyinka 1976:218).

Death and burial, among the African people, are associated with ancestor worship or beliefs about the afterlife. Funeral rites and customs observances connected with death and burial are a distinctive human characteristic. Both are concerned with not only the preparation and disposal of the body, but also have important sociological and symbolic functions for the survivors’ well-being and with the persistence of the spirit or memory of the deceased.

**African concept of afterlife and art in Egyptian burial**

The Egyptians burial system is influenced by their original belief in the essence of man. To every African, the life force is composed of two elements, the physical i.e. the body and the metaphysical i.e. the spirit, known as the very essence of man. From culture to culture, this essence is interpreted in different ways and as cultures interact with other cultures, it is given a different meaning and perhaps assuming a different dimension. The concept of ka in Egypt is synonymous with the concept of ori among the Yoruba or chi (represented in Ikenga) among the Ibos. They represent the very essence of the physical man. Among the Yoruba, ori is associated with choice and supervision of destiny hence an accomplice of man from creation until afterlife (Idowu 1962:182). In addition, the ka in Egyptian belief system like ori among the Yoruba is the ‘duplicate’ of the body; it accompanied the body throughout life and, after death, departed from the body to take its place in the kingdom of the dead. The ka, however, could not exist without the body. After arriving in the kingdom of the dead, the ka was judged by Osiris, the king of the dead (Encyclopaedia Britannica 1976). This is also synonymous with the Yoruba concept of ibode where at death, the ori stands in judgement answerable to man’s deeds. The Egyptian Merikereic system issued around 2500 BC, further established this in one of the instructions which says

‘A man surviveth after death and his deeds are placed beside him like mountains. For it is eternity, abiding yonder (in the next world)... and a fool is he who disregards it’ (Danquah, 1986:39).
For this reasons therefore, graves are seen as passages of transition, and for the journey to be thorough and the dead (about to become an ancestor) to have an enjoyable ‘afterlife’ he is buried with materials and possibly aids (often slaves or subjects) befitting his status. The concept of burying the dead with ‘grave deposits’ which include art works, for use in the afterlife, is therefore not peculiar to Egypt, it is a shared burial system common to African people. Among the Ndebele, personal belongings are buried with the body to accompany the deceased so that he does not find himself poor in the afterlife (Mbiti 1969:196)

Kings in most African kingdoms are sent into eternity, fully equipped with everything they would need including slaves, to continue life in the sumptuous style they had known on earth. The place of the so-called Elesin-oba or abobaku to whom tradition has bestowed such ‘honour’ to go into the grave and the world beyond with the diseased Alaafin in Oyo as captured in Soyinka’s earlier referred play further established this. The practice was still prevalent in Oyo until the middle of 20th century. Another trace of this practice is evident in an excavated Igbo-Ukwu site, which revealed a burial chamber of an Eze-Nri buried with grave goods and slaves (Cultural and creative arts, 1990:78). The grave art accompanying the dead and other African ancestral figures as well as images representing personal spirit or gods (i.e. Ikenga or ere-ibeji), are related in function, they serve as repository of supernatural forces (be it spirit or soul). They are providers of residence for the spiritual essence of the man represented.

**Kingship systems and relatedness in art forms**

The unification and the standardization of the Pharaonic period not withstanding, Curtin, Feierman, Thompson and Vansina (1978:39) noted that the Pharaonic Egypt was one of the many African states with classified divine kingship institution. While African people regard the Supreme Being as God, the Deity, Master and Judge, King of kings (Zulu), Ruler of the Sky (Akan), the Lord of heaven (Yoruba), One who does all (Barundi), the Sun God (Egypt), they also referred their rulers as God’s earthly viceroys and their thrones as divine. They are supreme (with small ‘s’) rulers and the highest level spiritual leader representing human kind’s link with God and the gods.

The ancient Egyptian king, therefore, was seen as the son of RE( the sun God) just like the Ooni of Ife, Oba of Benin, the Ashantihene and several other black African kings are either seen as the son of God or being next to God, what is known as the Igbakeji Orisa among the Yoruba meaning ‘God’s deputy’. This explains why the god-king in Egypt, as in most other African societies of divine kingship institution, was not merely a king but a mystical and religious head, the divine symbol of his people’s health and welfare whose personal and physical well-being were peculiarly and intimately associated with the land and the harvest (the buoyancy of the state). This may also explain why the art in this areas are mostly to glorify the king.

Furthermore, to the Egyptians, the King (Pharaoh) was the owner of all Egypt. This is equally common to all societies with centralized system as in Jukun, Akan of Ghana, Ife, Benin, and in most ancient towns of Yoruba land. These communities thus owe it a duty to keep the ruler in good health. A process of rejuvenation called ‘Hebed’ in Egypt or ‘bebe’ in Oyo is often done to celebrate peaceful long reign and keep the ruler healthy and fit (Johnson 1921:163), this may take different forms from place to place. This informs the representation of the ruler’s portraiture or memorials in his prime age and in naturalistic form in Egypt as well as in Ife and Benin further reinforces this belief (Plates 2&3). The noticeable rigidity of form and lack of facial expression in the pre-Dynastic Egyptian sculptures are characteristics of most African sculptures.
Also worthy of note and study is the relatedness in the social hierarchy in composition of figure and materials used. In the Egyptian relief sculptures, the images, being conceptual rather than realistic, present the most characteristic anatomical features and thus combine frontal and profile views of the same figure, which is an attempt at presenting the two dimensional image in profile yet revealing the frontal view. Egyptian artists by this effort as as Getlein (2002) puts strive to show each part of the body to best advantage, so it could be ‘read’ clearly by the viewer. This is characteristic of African sculptures, which presents carved images to be viewed frontally. Presentation of images in hierarchy of importance is another noticeable relatedness of form. The scale used in painting and relief sculptures often indicates hierarchy of importance in which the Pharaoh, the main character, is shown taller than his consort, children, or courtiers. This is essentially an African characteristic noticeable in Benin plagues in which the Oba is depicted larger than the less important ones and it is equally noticeable in the sub Sahara freestanding woodcarvings where there are more than three to four figures (see Plate 1 and Plates 4 & 5). The social hierarchy also reflects the choice of material used in the production of such art works. While the Pharaohs are carved in stone or cast in bronze and the figure made as ideal as possible, portraying the king as a perfect being without blemish, the commoners and the peasants are carved in woods and modelled in clay respectively and the figures rendered as naturalistic as possible. Also in Benin, Ashanti and all other ancient traditions of royal court, the Oba enjoys the monopoly of the most precious material available within their reach e.g. gold, bronze and even ivory, while wood is used for the subjects. A typical example is the use of the golden stool by the Ashantihene and that of the wooden stool by the heads of units in the confederacy that makes the Ashanti kingdom.

Furthermore, the invention of writing in ancient Egypt (Hieroglyphics), which was perfected during the old kingdom was said to have evolved from the Mnemonic device of writing probably used during the village era. This is also seen among the Ewe people in which proverbs are recorded in drawing. Also among the Eko, Igbo and Ibibio is a symbolic writing called Nsibidi. Means in Nwabara and Ofoegbu (1986:17) believes that the character compare favourably with Egyptian hieroglyphics (Plates 6 & 7).

The relatedness shown above all indicates the fundamental system of thoughts underlying the created forms in Egyptian arts. Thoughts that are commonly shared by Africans, the very essence of art of all Africans, “black” or “white” skinned. This goes beyond the theory of diffusion of which scholars like Olumide Lucas and Antar Diop and some others have employed in associating some aspect of African innovations with Egyptian civilization. If carefully studied with the rest of the art of the African peoples, Egyptians art will reveal the cultural ties binding the continent together.

Conclusion

That the civilization as well as the art of Egypt has a generative influence on western art is of no doubt. Furthermore, it is also true that there exist in no other place in Africa where gigantic structures and sculptures are found as in Egypt. It is however certain, that some basic ideas; religious belief in many gods, the concept of afterlife, the idea of kingship and the other system of thoughts were commonly shared among the people (Africa), probably before desiccation of the Sahara, when Egypt had more numerous neighbours where desert now exist. There is no doubt, that it is this body of shared worldview that fuelled the art of ancient Egypt and that of the rest of Africa people, hence the relatedness of content and function of their arts. This established the fact that the ancient Egypt was basically an African culture.
The buoyancy of the land where people are finally settled and the material available to them may have created differences in forms and sizes their art takes, yet, the philosophy and cultural elements that mirror the consciousness of the societies remains related. Hence, the ancient arts of Egypt and ancient arts of Ghana, Songhai, Mali, Dahomey (Now Republic of Benin), Yoruba, Hausa, Sudan and others, tell of some pattern of their lives which desiccation or migration, or even invasion or colonization can not take away from them. It is only when the ancient Egyptian art is carefully studied as part of the traditional “culturally defined” African arts that the relatedness of African arts in general can really be understood. Such study will not only aid our better understanding of the sub-Saharan art and culture, but also lead to our understanding of the arts of the peoples of north of Africa before the Roman occupation and the later ‘Jihadist’ conquest. It will also lead to better understanding of the Egypt before the “Pharaohnic” period and probably uncover the identity of the original occupant of Egypt before the Hermitic occupation of the land.

References


Plates

Plate 1: Palette of Narmer

Plate 2: Amenhotep III

Plate 3: Ife head of an Ooni

Plate 4: Benin Plague

Plate 5: Fragment of a wall (The Tomb of Nebanum)

Plate 6: Hieroglyphs
(from the Tomb of Queen Amonherkhepsf)

Plate 7: Nsibidi (a writing of the Ejagham people of Nigeria)

Department of Fine Arts,
Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, babaley@yahoo.com,
sehinadeemuleya@oauife.edu.ng