

## Material Culture, Maternal Culture: Peju Layiwola's Art and Its Obligations

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### Introduction

With artistic creativity, the artist in society scopes the events of the present and the past into works that relive significant concerns that have a bearing on the future. The female artist is widely acknowledged for bringing the female experience into artistic creativity. It may be as a result of the rendering of most material experience by male artists. Therefore, a woman's stance may be a welcome addition to the provision of this reality. This dialogue is often revisionist and considered a welcome alternative. The involvement of Peju Layiwola in installation art and sculpture with emphasis on the art of bronze casting shall be the focus of this paper. Again, the revisionist stance she undertakes in the *Benin1897.com* project becomes an opportunity to look at some aspects of her involvement in the move to make the world recognise the significance and import of the date 1897.

### Material Culture

The material culture of a people concerns the aesthetic manifestations that embody the whole of their concrete and tangible culture. It concerns the artefacts and crafts in their various divisions and subdivisions, structures and forms. The materiality of culture that concerns the present writer is one of forging realities through natality and maternity, but letting the natal culture have dominance in the artist's consciousness. The maternal relates to motherhood, or that which is motherly, procreative, or creation-related. Natality connotes birth or circumstances surrounding birth with regards to the place or time. One considers the material culture of a people as a two-way street that involves the art as communication and the receiver or consumer of the art as the audience. Both are engaged in a materiality that may provide aesthetic satisfaction.

Culture seeps through the activities of human beings. It is passed down from one generation to another through learnt or acquired instruction, interaction and other means of cultural transmission. The role of material culture in making life a workable project reflects in every pertinent event or inaction in this millennium. Material culture has a crucial role to play in people's relationships, code formation and the making of meaning. Within Nigerian society, it becomes clear that material culture exists alongside the lore of the people to shape the people's past, present and future. This is evident in the preserved art forms and the processes of entrenching them in the people's memory, be it collective or singular. The vision this memory carries along has a major 'return' to written or unwritten account of the people. We see this in the inclusion of cultural variables in government and society. Culture, is therefore, imperative for transmission of morals, values and norms from the present to the future by drawing on cultural antecedents. According to E. B. Tylor, culture subsumes all the 'capabilities' and 'habits' of man as a part of society (Tylor, 1871: 1). This would concern the things which are part of man's life, and are concrete (material) and the ones which are abstract (non-material).

Every artist exists within a cultural setting by which she/he is influenced and *vice versa*. In this regard, the artist cannot be said to be a passive being, but a contributor of a quota to the making of history. Mckee (1974:52) regards culture to be 'an ordered system of symbolic meanings and understandings'. Mckee's conceptualisation of the term presupposes that disordered behaviour and lack of refinement do not show culture. Therefore, culture can refer to a people's way of doing certain things where a particular discipline is concerned. Culture is also contingent on any society, or any group of people sharing common views, involved in any interaction in order to achieve a

particular goal. Here, the agents of education—the home, the school, peerage, government and community—can have cultural roles imputed to them. To Taiwo (1988:32) ‘culture is transmitted by learning and learning requires social interaction’.

### **Maternal Culture**

The concept of culture often captures the essence of a people's living even as it concerns their concrete and abstract ways of life. Maternal culture subsumes matriarchy, maternity and motherhood. A culture that is maternal is often ascribed weak heritage strains where inheritance and the tracing of lineages are concerned. In Africa, except in a few exceptional cases, the paternal culture carries more weight in terms of the two factors mentioned above. For a male child, a concentration on the maternal side of the family is often considered a waste of time as the son cannot inherit from the mother's side or bear the name of that side of his progenitor. In art, this is different, as the artistic culture a son bears from his mother is there to sustain him for life perhaps. For a female child, it is slightly different because she is most likely to be married and bear the husband's name. Therefore, the nurture of a female child in art and its forms by a mother, is appropriate here, as the line is still traceable along the maternal side. The art can be seen as a part of the 'things' brought from her family, irrespective of what side it is from, and a means of self-affirmation. In contemporary times, such artistic females are seen to have a source of livelihood, *'isé owó'*, *'iwina obo'*, and are not total liabilities on the families they marry into. It may be asked here: ‘From whom does a female child learn an art form?’ Some may argue that the mother is best suited for this task. With Peju Layiwola, the mother provided a life in art for her as a form of expression, and perhaps now, a veritable source of income. It is for this reason that nurture is a means of transmission of culture from generation to generation. In its material form, sculpture, smithing and casting are means of coding a people's ways of life in concrete and tangible forms.

Peju Layiwola's maternal culture is the Benin culture. The Benin kingdom retains its dignified heritage in the display of material and non-material culture. The materiality of this culture is evident in centuries old sculptures in different media. Many of these are in museums all over the world and their inestimable value proves the sterling significance curators across the world accord them. The maternal culture of Layiwola shows a gender bias towards women in certain art forms. A maternal debt can be traced to her mother Princess Elizabeth Olowu, the first Benin woman to go into one of such 'banned art forms', bronze casting. Elizabeth Olowu became famous for this, and her daughter, Peju, has extended the frontiers of this fame by according the art form international and academic eminence.

Furthermore, femaleness reflects in her art. The portrayal of women in art can be considered to be the prime obligation for the female artist because, pertinent to her particular function as the conscience of the society, is the task which, to Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie (1987:8,9), entails informing her audience what it is to be a woman. In Ogundipe-Leslie's view, this information must relay to the woman, what it signifies to be a woman, ‘in the real complex sense of the term’, as well as highlighting facts of biology and society as they impact on the form, content and technique of her writing. This primary duty is a construct on strong historical foundations which are central as well as fundamental because every female artist targets an audience that necessarily connects with her creative output. Here, the consumer may not be her fellow woman, but the anticipation is for her response to the relations depicted within the artistic output, whether they primarily target, influence women mainly or not. The art target or consumer discloses significance as a 'perceiving subject' because of the important locus she/he occupies in the channel of reception of art forms. Here, pleasure and satisfaction become cardinal points. The female artist and the receiver of her art become 'alternatives' to the masculinist decoding of women's issues. Here, they can be

