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Author(s): Sidney Littlefield Kasfir

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ONE TRIBE, ONE STYLE? PARADIGMS IN THE HISTORIOGRAPHY
OF AFRICAN ART*

Sidney Littlefield Kasfir
Boston University

I

Introduction

While the historiography of art as an academic discipline can hardly be construed as a science, it is nevertheless governed by certain dominant paradigms in both of the senses that Thomas Kuhn intended.¹ First, at any point in time there is a constellation of beliefs, values, and techniques shared by the community of scholars who comprise the discipline known as art history. This can be further broken down, altered, and refined for the various sub-fields, but taken together, the separate facets constitute a "way of seeing" art history which differs substantially from the "way of seeing," say, political history.

Applying Kuhn's second and more rigorous sense, the historiography of art is dominated by certain paradigms which serve as exemplars or models of puzzle-solutions. While these change over time (it is no longer permissible to ascribe German expressionism to "national character," for example), they are so powerful that they function as unquestioned assumptions when in force. Even more importantly, they are frequently invisible because they are rarely made explicit. In European art history, the dominant paradigms have coalesced into entities such as "The Baroque" or "Mannerism" which are largely ontological models used to simplify the otherwise intractable complexity of European art styles and movements.

In African art history, the dominant paradigm has derived not from art history itself, but from anthropology, and has manifested itself most clearly in the "one tribe-one style" model. In this paper I attempt to trace the development of this conceptual model and the subsequent failure to dislodge it with other, more heuristically-derived ones, despite the recognition that it is no longer adequate. One reason for this is that the newer models are themselves flawed; but more fundamentally, the broader underlying paradigm used by historians and anthropologists to explain the entity called "traditional African society" has not itself been overthrown. Rather, it continues to provide tacit support for explanations which we know empirically to be false. The

paradigmatic "traditional African society" is culturally and linguistically homogeneous. It occupies a single niche in the ecosystem. It has a single migration legend and a myth of origin; a putative founder with the status of Culture Hero; a clearly defined political system; hierarchies of gods and ancestors in their proper places; strict gender division in the sacred and secular spheres; and so on. But the Idoma of central Nigeria, in very many ways a modal West African society, violate all of these rules. Who then are the Idoma? And how useful is the paradigm?

First, the cultural and linguistic boundaries of the Idoma do not neatly match. There are non-Idoma-speaking groups (Akweya, Orri, Igede) who have been politically assimilated under the Idoma ethnic label, and Idoma-speaking groups (Alago, Etulo) who have remained culturally distinct owing to their location outside colonially-imposed administrative boundaries.² Second, as part of the Kwa language family, the Idoma are presumed to share primordial cultural features with the Yoruba-, Igala- and Igbo-speaking peoples to the west and south. At the same time, their geographic position in the Benue Valley has brought about a long period of contact with the pre-Islamic Hausa and the Jukun to the north and east. Thus, even though a part of the Kwa/southern Nigerian configuration, Idoma also has important affinities with the savanna cultures of the Benue northward. This latter fact, now obscured by the presence of the Tiv, has to be elicited from Idoma history.

Accordingly, Idoma is neither a paradigmatic "savanna culture" nor a "forest culture."³ It is located in the savanna-forest mosaic often found in the northern reaches of southern Nigeria. Near the Benue, the sparse population lives in scattered hamlets with nearby farms. As one moves southward the hundred or so miles to northern Igboland, the population density increases, and villages are found in stands of protective forest along river banks. Finally, in Agila there is a heavily-nucleated settlement in the midst of high forest, surrounded by outlying farm hamlets. These represent variations not only in cultural geography, but in political structure and symbolic systems. Yams, grown everywhere, have been ritualized only in the southern districts, while millet and guinea corn remain at the center of the mythopoeic imagination for the central and northern savanna groups.⁴

Idoma myths of origin and migration legends are equally ambiguous: what appears in oral traditions as a migration from Apá, the putative Kwararafa of the Kano and Borno chronicles, was probably a much longer and more gradual dispersal westward into better hunting land, accelerated after the late sixteenth century by Borno and later Fulani expansion from the north, Chamba from the east, and Tiv from the south. The Tiv expansion, which continues today, cut off any further direct contact between the Idoma and their earlier home some one hundred miles eastward on the Benue. There is nonetheless a strong political ideology that the Idoma, along with their Igala, Ebira (Igbira), Alago, and Jukun neighbors are "people of Apá." This is not

merely an artifact of colonial historiography in the style of Sir Richmond Palmer, for the correspondences in political and religious life are too obvious to ignore. But the historicity of Apá/Kwararafa, as well as the chronological framework in which these events took place, are still unresolved problems in Nigerian history.

Finally, Idoma political organization is equally difficult to typologize. In one sense, it is transitional between the centralized Igala kingdom to the west and the non-centralized Tiv and Igbo to the east and south. Until the British appointment of a paramount chief to help implement the concept of Indirect Rule in northern Nigeria, Idomaland consisted of 25 to 30 independent "lands" (*aje*), each governed by a chief or king (*ocaaaje*) and a council of titled elders (*igabo*), the former chosen by rotating succession among eligible lineages. Real political power resides with the lineages, which are corporate, landholding bodies for whom the king is spokesman.⁵ Yet, within this system there is significant variation from one land to another, so that while Agila, the southernmost kingdom, approaches the usual definition of a "state" in its organizational complexity, other lands are small homogeneous chieflets. Some contain sizeable stranger lineages, others are wholly "core" Idoma.⁶

It was in the face of this complex reality that I attempted to understand the dynamics of Idoma art history. When it became obvious that the old "one tribe-one style" model would do little to elucidate the complexity of Idoma art, I tried others which have emerged in recent years in the form of rival explanations. These did not fit either, but doing so led me to explore in more general terms what has not only been my experience but that of many art historians--namely, a refusal to categorize and a retreat to atomistic explanation when faced with a paradigm which clearly fails to work.

II

History and Anthropology: Where the Twain Meet

As a discipline derived equally from history and anthropology, African art history has managed to combine the worst failings of both. One of the common weaknesses of all historical studies is that underlying conceptual models are rarely articulated. Anthropologists have frequently taken this to mean that historians do not work from models at all. M.G. Smith, an anthropologist deeply committed to the historical reconstruction of sociopolitical change, states emphatically in *The Affairs of Daura* that for social scientists interested in the theoretical analysis of change, historical accounts are seldom useful due to "the general disinterest [*sic*] of historians in such questions, and the characteristic absence of an explicit conceptual framework in their treatment of these phenomena."⁷ The crucial word here is "explicit," since, as Vansina has pointed out, any reconstruction of the past has to be a model of one kind or another.⁸

Smith further states, by way of explanation, that historians are committed to the documentation of the *particularities* of historical situations, which inevitably disinclines them "to consider whether historical structures or processes exhibit significant general *regularities*."⁹ The social scientist, he concludes, is committed to precisely the opposite view.

It is therefore not surprising that art historians studying African art have tended to neglect explicit conceptual models. What *is* surprising is that the implicit models used have been largely ahistorical, in the prevailing manner of anthropological studies. The time-depth attempted in most studies is seldom more than two or three generations. This becomes more understandable when one realizes that adequate historical documentation of art in the precolonial period is extremely rare, and that it has largely been anthropologists or ethnologists who have conducted the pioneering field studies of African art. While both art history and anthropology had their beginnings as academic disciplines in the late nineteenth century, the field study of African art by specialists is still very new.¹⁰ Consequently, art historians have usually adopted not only the field methods of anthropologists, but also their limited parameters of time and space.

Since Malinowski, the most common spatial unit chosen by anthropologists has been the "tribe," or its nearest determinable equivalent. The temporal unit has been the "ethnographic present," which, in intention, has usually meant an extrapolation backward from the present to an idealized time prior to significant European contact. Since some aspects of the culture being investigated are more amenable to change (as well as to the study of change) than others, the emerging picture is frequently ambiguous with regard to its time frame. The description of weaving or architecture may be relevant for a considerable time-depth, while that of brass-casting may be a borrowed technology which is much more recent. These differences cannot be suitably articulated in a synchronic study.

Following this approach, art scholars have also chosen the tribal group as the unit for analysis, and the ethnographic present as its time frame. Thus, while a recent bibliography includes 3488 entries on the Yoruba, with important studies of the style, functions, distribution, typology, and symbolism of Yoruba art, there is as yet no real *history* of Yoruba art to include.¹¹ The same can be said, with few exceptions, for virtually all African art which has been the object of scholarly investigation by either art historians or anthropologists.¹² Indeed, it would appear that art history in the conventional sense is a discipline which in Africa has been left almost entirely to archeologists.¹³ Without the excavations of Bernard Fagg at Nok, Frank Willett at Ife, and Thurstan Shaw at Igbo-Ukwu, what would we know of Nigerian art history? Yet the time lapse between these cultures and those typically studied by art historians leaves a crucial gap of several centuries.

Does this really matter? It might be argued that, in a specialized study describing the art of a single African culture, a synchronic approach says nearly all that there is to say, and

the introduction of a diachronic dimension would be so speculative as to be of little use. The answer to this objection is that, in comparing or relating the art of one African culture with that of others, a diachronic model becomes extremely useful and even essential. One of the limitations of the synchronic, single-culture, study is "the tyranny inherent in the very notion of units."¹⁴ This unit becomes the effective "universe of description," Vansina argues, and there is no good way to break out of it without introducing a historical dimension. For example, if one wishes to relate Idoma art to that of the neighboring Igala (a relationship of many centuries' duration), this cannot be articulated in a synchronic model, since it contains nothing but a momentary "end result" of a long and complex historical process.

This lack of a historical framework for comparative research in most single culture studies of African art has made larger, area-based studies much more difficult, and continent-wide comparisons virtually impossible. In theory, every field monograph should contribute to an understanding not only of the art of a particular people, but to its place within the larger system of art as a whole. In practice, the lacuna between these two levels of knowledge continues to remain very wide, both for Africa and elsewhere. In casting about for a usable paradigm to classify the hundreds of isolated "descriptive universes" of African art, scholars have adopted a series of criteria over the past half-century that have been drawn from ethnology, anthropology, and linguistics. Their greatest inadequacy has been their failure to incorporate history into this scheme.

III

Early Conceptual Models for African Art

The first classificatory models for African sculpture (the only visual art which has been given serious attention) emerged from cultural diffusion studies in the early years of this century. While rejecting the methodology and the historical inferences of the *Kulturkreislehre* developed by German and Austrian scholars,¹⁵ American anthropologists nonetheless accepted the usefulness of cultural distributions, provided that they were employed with caution, and proceeded to map the cultures of North America in terms of trait-complexes.¹⁶ A "trait" could relate to social institutions, rituals, language, material culture--could be, in fact, any separable characteristic of a culture. Geographical regions in which trait-complexes were densely clustered in due course became "culture areas."

Herskovits adopted these principles and applied them to the African continent, devising a "culture area" classification which has persisted up to the present in the taxonomy of African sculpture.¹⁷ In this system the major culture areas which have produced sculpture are the "Western Sudan," the "Guinea Coast" and the "Congo." He emphasized that it was not the appearance of

individual traits, but complexes of them in combination, which justified this particular cultural subdivision of the continent. For example, the Congo culture area traits included secret societies, masking, agriculture, craft-guilds, etc. By a process of reification over time, these areas have come to seem natural, not artificial, divisions. While Herskovits himself warned against the unduly mechanical application of his *schema* without regard for the much greater diversity that actually exists in each area, this warning has been largely ignored in much of the subsequent writing on African art.

The methodological weaknesses of the "culture area" concept have been summarized by Kuper and Van Leynseele: first there is no apparent principle by which one trait is selected, and another rejected, in the formation of the "complex"; second, material culture traits are not particularly helpful, in that they are more easily diffused in isolation; third, the boundaries seem intuitively drawn.¹⁸ Despite these drawbacks, culture areas have become axiomatic, and lie behind the classification of African sculpture in nearly every contemporary handbook, survey, and catalog.¹⁹

Writing at the same time as Herskovits, Eckart von Sydow used Ankermann's *Kulturkreislehre* as a point of departure for a two-part division of the sculpture-producing areas of Africa into "West Africa" and "West Sudan."²⁰ The first of these, which encompassed not only coastal West Africa but Central Africa as well, was published in 1930 as the first of two volumes of the *Handbuch der Afrikanischen Plastik*.²¹ Distinguishing between West Africa as "geographische Bezeichnung" and "kulturhistorische Bedeutung," he adopted the latter as the justification for using the term to describe a much larger region, corresponding roughly to Herskovits' Guinea Coast and Congo culture areas. While his projected volume on the sculpture of the West Sudan materialized only posthumously in 1954, von Sydow made it clear in the earlier volume that the two terms "West Africa" and "West Sudan" corresponded to a dual stylistic classification of African sculpture. The criterion he employed was to contrast two opposing principles of ideal form, simplicity and complexity, which were to be found dominant in the "West Sudan" and "West Africa" (Guinea Coast and Congo) culture areas respectively.²² Within these two major divisions, works of art were further compartmentalized into two regions, some political (e.g., French Equatorial Africa, Liberia), others cultural or geographical. Finally, they were broken down into tribes (and even, in the case of the Yoruba, sub-tribes) as primary style units.

Von Sydow's *Handbuch* was followed in 1935-38 by Carl Kjerfve's four-volume work which set out the major "style centers" of African sculpture, conforming to tribal boundaries.²³ Von Sydow's and Kjerfve's writings attained the status of classics in their field, and established the principle that style should be the "trait" selected for sub-classifying sculpture within "culture areas." At the same time, the notion of "one tribe-one style" was accepted implicitly. To put it another way, style was assumed to be closely linked to ethnic identity in some primordial--

if unprovable--sense. While such a position was perhaps intellectually justifiable at a time when very little information about African sculpture had been collected, by the 1960s it had attained the status of dogma. Field studies which call this assumption into question are still regarded as idiosyncratic cases, and not challenges to the paradigm itself.²⁴

Naturally, the concept of "tribal style" is vulnerable in precisely the same way as the concept of "tribe." However, the crucial point to emphasize here is that the "tribal style-culture area" model which has been in use since the 1930s is essentially ahistorical.²⁵ In Western art history, style is assumed to have both spatial and temporal dimensions. One might profitably compare Florentine and Venetian painting styles in 1500, but the same comparison a century earlier would yield very different results. Part of this difference would be attributable to the internal dynamics of stylistic change itself, but an equally important part has to do with a radically-changing perception of what it meant to be a human being in the world. To deny that African societies have undergone the same internal dynamics and changes in perception is to deny them history itself. Despite this, the working model of art styles adopted by most Africanists precludes any possibility of stylistic change.²⁶

One justification usually made for this approach is that in 'traditional' cultures, styles undergo change very slowly, and therefore fixed style-models are accurate over long periods of time. The other is that the sheer paucity of examples forces scholars to adopt this no-change model for lack of a sufficiently large basis of comparison. In the cases where style changes clearly do exist (e.g., in Benin court art), they can be dealt with only by discarding the model, making it difficult to relate these cases in any useful way to those which "fit" the model, or by dearth of information, appear to fit.

IV

Style and Genre as Expressions of Art History

A history of art, in the broadest sense, is much more than a history of style. Since historical style is nothing but an evolving set of conventions about form and its apprehension, it sheds little light, *by itself*, on the conceptual structures which underlie it. For this we must turn to the symbolizing attributes of art, which remain at the core of its meaning, despite changes in style. Particular combinations of form and iconography give rise to particular *types* of objects which may tell us more than the study of styles alone. Medieval triptychs and African bush-cow masks are special types (or genres) of representations, and while they can be studied as culture-specific phenomena, they also have another existence as finite sets of objects we could characterize as "all European religious triptychs" and "all African bush-cow masks." These sets, moreover, exist in a time frame (known for triptychs, unknown for bush-cow masks).

Sieber has suggested that a study of "types" of African sculpture could yield valuable information:

...groups once related culturally may continue to hold certain basic values and beliefs and, concurrently, continue to use the same basic forms (or types) even while other cultural traits such as style and language change. Furthermore, ideas and, concomitantly, types may be transmitted through peaceful contact or through conquest. It is also obvious that types may move between cultures with few or no value associations (as in the case of an object whose utility is apparent in itself).²⁷

But once again, where Africanists have taken up the study of types (e.g., ancestral staffs, twin figures, the white-face mask, the bush-cow mask), they have concentrated primarily on their spatial distribution. While clearly the most accessible dimension, this ignores the difficult questions of origin and diffusion. Which agenda scholars choose to regard as important is largely determined by the dominant paradigm of the moment. For many years, the concept of diffusion has suffered the taint of having been repudiated by the British functionalists as a basis for explanation. Regardless of its strengths or weaknesses as a theory, this has had unfortunate consequences for African art scholarship, since it has further eroded the already narrow base for comparative studies. Clearly, diffusion (whether of style, type/genre, theme, or motifs) cannot be ignored except by shrinking the "universe of description" to the *oeuvre* of a single artist.

V

The "One Tribe-One Style" Model

Before analyzing the concept of tribal style, it is necessary to inquire further about what has been understood by the terms "tribe," "tribal," and Fagg's concept of "tribality" as they relate to art. In the social science literature of the past fifteen years it has become widely recognized and accepted that the concept of "tribe" as it applied to Africa was closely tied to the exigencies of colonial rule. In the sense of discrete units with well-defined societal structures, tribe, language, and territory were essential elements in the implementation of the British system of Indirect Rule. Where they did not exist, they were sometimes artificially created, for purely administrative reasons. Where they did exist, they underwent considerable change.²⁸

In one of the seminal contributions to the social science debate on "tribe," Southall lists the most widely accepted characteristics of a tribal society. It is a "whole" society (that

is, highly integrated), with:

- [a] political autonomy
- [b] a distinctive language, culture, and sense of identity
- [c] a relatively simple technology which excludes writing and literature
- [d] a religion coterminous with the society
- [e] a high degree of self-sufficiency at a near-subsistence level.²⁹

The advent of European rule, and in some areas an earlier Islamic presence, irrevocably changed the patterns of political authority and introduced both foreign religions and foreign technology, as well as literacy in a foreign tongue. Therefore, societies exhibiting all these characteristics could not be said to exist, except in the precolonial, and in some cases also pre-Islamic, period, *if they ever existed at all*. The difficulty, then, in applying the idealized "tribal society" concept to the classification of African art is that the body of data relating to the latter--the actual artifacts found in collections and in the field--is largely a product of a post-contact, transitional phase in African culture. In fact, the collection and documentation of art is *predicated* on contact (though not necessarily colonization). The optimal situation is usually a collection made in the early contact period. But such objects make up only a small percentage of most collections at best. The question then inevitably becomes: how legitimate is it to use "tribe" as the conceptual unit in making generalizations concerning styles of African sculpture? Is this not the imposition of an overly-rigid model, historically unsuited to the reality?

The response of many historians has been to avoid the problem of "tribe" by substituting the even vaguer concept of "people(s)," or by optimistically equating culture or polity with language, as in "the X-speaking people(s)." Still others have clung to the adjective even while discarding the noun. Thus we frequently encounter "tribal art," but without "tribes."

The most influential advocate of the tribal model in the study of African art has been William Fagg. From his field experience in Nigeria and a lifetime of work with museum collections of African art, he extrapolated a classificatory device which he calls the "tribality" (not to be confused with "tribalism") of African art.

"Tribality" is taken to mean a creative dynamic flowing directly from the tribal culture and its own well-defined aesthetic attitudes. To put it more anthropologically than he would probably wish to hear it stated, "tribality" could be understood as a set of "rules for creative behavior" generated by the matrix of the tribal culture itself. In his classic and much quoted *Tribes and Forms in African Art*, and in many other publications, Fagg argues for the separateness (and separability) of tribal styles, arguing that from the point of view of art, every tribe is a universe unto itself and that, furthermore, the art of one tribe is quite meaningless to the members of another tribe.³⁰

Fagg at first emphasizes that a tribe is not a static entity,

but a dynamic and constantly-changing phenomenon, difficult to pin down by the categories of social science.³¹ Later, however, he attempts to set parameters for his definition by arguing that the two surest guides to tribal (i.e., ethnic) identity seem to be language and material culture. In the latter, which of course includes the plastic arts, the data are, he asserts, "concrete and incontrovertible" evidence, unlike the sometimes unreliable observations which must be drawn from human behavior. Fagg therefore advances art as one of the principal criteria for the identification and delimitation of tribes, thereby creating a kind of *petitio principii* in his argument.

In contrast to the more radical social scientists, who argue that the neat entities called "tribes" were, as often as not, artificial partitions made and then legitimized by colonial administrators, Fagg sees them as actually having been stronger before colonialism. Arguing that the spread of colonialism was a process engendering "social decay," he speculates that linguistic and style boundaries would have coincided in up to 90% of the cases prior to about 1918. Presumably this argument rests on the assumption that before colonial rule, there was necessarily less political security, more intergroup rivalry, and therefore more restricted arenas of contact between neighboring peoples.

Nonetheless, these conditions did not create a stronger sense of "tribe" among the Idoma peoples prior to colonialism. Quite the contrary, among the thirty-odd Idoma-speaking lands, one's more circumscribed identity as an Edumoga or an Adoka or an Otukpo was more immediately relevant than any overarching identity as an Idoma. A specifically Idoma identity was strengthened quite intentionally by the British in their reorganization of administrative districts under the newly-created office of Och'Idoma (paramount chief of Idoma) where none had existed before. Fagg is quite possibly correct in stating that most African societies were more highly integrated before the onset of colonialism and subsequent modernization. But whether this also implies that they were self-contained units in which the boundaries of language, art, and other aspects of cultural identity neatly coincided, is surely questionable.³²

Unfortunately, statements concerning precolonial cultural identity and cultural boundaries must remain in the realm of speculation. But evidence gathered by anthropologists since the 1930s suggests a much more equivocal definition of these parameters and boundaries. Southall cites the examples of Labouret, Fortes, Goody, and Tait, all of whom have concluded that in the stateless societies occupying adjacent parts of Ghana, Ivory Coast, and Upper Volta, definitive boundaries drawn between one "tribe" and another were likely to be arbitrary and misleading. These peoples were indeed differentiated, but the boundaries were drawn in many subtle and complex ways for different purposes.³³

Fagg's model for precolonial art and linguistic boundaries more nearly fits the Yoruba city-state, in which political, linguistic, and style boundaries do tend to coincide.³⁴ However, the Yoruba, despite their dominance in the literature of African

art, are by no means a typical African society. Fagg's argument would be less vulnerable if it were limited to centralized political systems, which might be expected to exhibit a higher degree of cultural cohesion. To account for the apparent contradictions to this self-contained tribal-style model, he then goes on to give numerous examples of exceptional cases, in which the art of one tribe or group has either influenced or overshadowed that of another. Fagg argues that, far from detracting from his position, these many exceptions illustrate perfectly the dynamic character of both "the tribe" and tribal styles. Oddly enough, his argument runs, they are really the best proof of "tribality," for one can always trace each style modification to its particular tribal origin.³⁵

There are three criticisms to be made of Fagg's argument *per se*, aside from the contradictions raised by empirical data. First, while material culture is *itself* "concrete and incontrovertible evidence," its *interpretation*, even its mere identification, is subject to the same errors of judgment as less tangible types of data. This includes such well-known problems as that of the stylistic attribution of objects which find their way into museum and private collections without any field data to accompany them. A case in point is that of the famous mother-and-child figures in the Horniman Museum (London) collected in the Benue Valley, and labelled at first Yoruba, then Afo-Jukun or Afo, but still of less-than-certain identity.³⁶ There are thousands of such ambiguities of interpretation in the study of African art, given the scarcity of reliable documentation.

Second, precisely because artifacts are usually portable, they can diffuse over unusually long distances in ways that social and political institutions cannot. A Bida, Nigeria, brass tray was found in Lamu, Kenya, three thousand miles away. Masks from Ikot-Ekpene are found everywhere in Nigeria. Fulani *khassa* blankets are found all over West Africa. The first example is an extreme case, and probably very rare, but the latter two are straightforward examples of trade items, hence very common. In between is a whole spectrum of possibilities, very many of which can cause difficulties of interpretation. Artifacts are indeed concrete evidence, but no less controvertible for that.

Third, defining tribe in terms of language and art style and then asserting that each art style has a traceable tribal origin is, as we have seen for Fagg, a tautological argument. In effect, it says that a "Yoruba" carver is one who works in the Yoruba style (and speaks the Yoruba language), and that a "Yoruba style" is one created by a Yoruba carver! Clearly, art cannot be used *both* as the premise *and* the proof of tribal identity. Art styles can be seen either as a criterion for, or as a consequence of, ethnic identity, but scarcely both.

VI

The Linguistic Approach to Style Boundaries

Fagg's view of discrete style units was called into question

by Roy Sieber and Arnold Rubin in 1968 in their catalog of the Tishman Collection.³⁷ In what he referred to as the "hermetically sealed" approach, adopted from anthropologists, Sieber deplored the absence of a historical dimension in the essentially geographical classification of African art styles, and suggested that oral tradition, linguistics, comparative ethnology, and ethnography are all necessary to understanding the relationships of these objects to one another. He noted that wars, pilgrimages, migrations, and trade are all instruments through which styles may travel.³⁸

Arguing, like Fagg, that language and art are factors of major importance in distinguishing cultures, Sieber and Rubin proposed that correspondences between the two could be used to suggest historical relationships not otherwise documentable.³⁹ They began with the classification of African art styles into four main regions: the first two, the Western Sudan and the Guinea Coast, correspond to Herskovits' first two culture areas. The third and fourth, the Equatorial Forest and the Southern Savanna, correspond to Herskovits' Congo culture area, somewhat enlarged to include the Cameroon Grasslands and southeastern Nigeria. These regions are conceived of as stylistic entities--large "meta-styles" analogous to von Sydow's earlier dichotomy of abstraction versus particularization. Unfortunately, while some of these areas also exhibit linguistic continuities, others do not.

For example, the Western Sudan is divided into a Gur linguistic sector and a Mande linguistic sector, and it is claimed by Sieber and Rubin that these in fact form two major stylistic groupings. If this were true, an important style-language correlation would be established. But from the evidence, this seems questionable. In the art of the Gur-speaking peoples, notably Dogon, Kurumba, Mossi, and Bobo--there are demonstrable stylistic affinities. But it has been questioned whether the category "Gur-speaking group" can be justified *linguistically*.⁴⁰ As to the Mande-speaking sector, this consists in the Western Sudan of mainly Islamicized peoples, who produce little sculpture for traditional patronage. Therefore, there is equally little basis for stylistic comparisons. While the Baga and Bamana styles are in some ways comparable, it is not within this linguistic context, since the Baga speak a language classified in the Atlantic, and not Mande, linguistic subfamily, though they trace their origins to Mande in their oral traditions.⁴¹

The linguistic-stylistic correlation is stressed again in the Guinea Coast style region, though it is admitted by the authors that there are linguistic differences between coastal and inland Mande, and very marked differences in style as well.⁴² But the very fact that the Mande styles of the coast--Mende, Guro, Dan, Kono, Kpelle, Vai, Ngere(We)--bear little resemblance to the Mande styles of the Sudan is surely an indication that, in this region at least, language is *not* the crucial variable after all. Here too it is dangerous to ignore the complexities of coastal history resulting from European contact.

For the rest of the continent, Sieber and Rubin drop the linguistic correlation (since Bantu languages dominate throughout), and isolate style areas which correspond to geographical-

morphological features. In particular, river systems such as the Cross, the Benue, the Ogowe, and the Lower Congo are stressed. While it is unquestionably true that river traffic has served as an important vehicle for the diffusion of styles, one is left wondering how the great Niger would fit into this scheme rather than the linguistic one used to describe its cultures in the Western Sudan style region. Another difficulty is the lack of linguistic correlation to regional style in the area of south-eastern Nigeria, in which the Igbo peoples speak a Kwa language and the Ibibio, despite many stylistic and cultural affinities with the Igbo, speak one of the languages classed as Benue-Congo. From this and numerous other isolated examples, it appears that language-art style correlations are not reliably predictable. While language may be one vehicle for the diffusion of styles, it is clearly not the only one, nor always the most important.

Adopting Sieber and Rubin's scheme in his exhibition catalog *West African Sculpture*, René Bravmann cautions that a purely linguistic approach to classification is no more adequate than a purely cultural or geographical one, but in combination with other factors "is more valid and more flexible than the others that have been attempted thus far."⁴³ Like Sieber and Rubin, he decries the loss of a historical dimension in prior systems for the comparison of African art styles, and hopes to use language as evidence of this historical dimension. And like Fagg, all three base their assumptions concerning style on a precontact model of African society in which style and language boundaries are presumed to coincide largely.

Rubin has since put forward a more highly elaborated style model, deriving from the earlier scheme. In *The Sculptor's Eye: The African Art Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Chaim Gross*, he has retained the linguistic correlation for styles in the Western Sudan and the Western Guinea Coast (Gur and Mande).⁴⁴ In addition, he notes that the Central Guinea Coast is a Kwa language area (though part of the Eastern Guinea Coast style region is, too). However, in this longer and more detailed analysis, he finds no linguistic correlations for the Central or Eastern Sudan, Eastern Guinea Coast (formerly included in the Equatorial Forest style region), or most of Equatoria (Herskovits' Congo culture area). This seems to preclude any forceful argument for pervasive style-language linkages.

Relating styles to river systems appears even less conclusive. Rubin notes that settlement and interaction patterns followed river systems in equatorial forest areas where overland travel was difficult, but he points out that this was also true in the more accessible equatorial savanna regions.⁴⁵ If this is so, should we assume that river systems outweigh language groupings as style-setters? But once again, the river system hypothesis is not tested against the Niger Bend, where linguistic correlations are made, or against the Lower Niger and Benue regions.

In the stylistically complex regions of the Guinea Coast, it is political structure, rather than language or morphological features which Rubin attempts to correlate with style re-

gions. Thus the *poro* areas dominate in the western sector, hierarchically organized kingdoms in the central sector and in the Cameroon Grasslands, and segmentary systems in the eastern sector comprising the Lower Niger and Cross River Basins.⁴⁶ To complicate the central Guinea Coast problem even further, it is not a recognizable cluster of *style* traits that defines it as an entity, but rather the widespread use of two *materials*--gold and beads--and their attendant *techniques*, which characterize the arts of prestige and high political authority. Here the evidence itself has broken free of the paradigm imposed upon it, and style becomes ancillary to technique.

VII

Art and the Ecosystem

The attribution of style complexes to vegetation zones and river drainage systems derives from a larger view often propounded by anthropologists--that culture is decisively shaped by its surrounding natural habitat. Since the publication of Daryll Forde's *Habitat, Economy and Society* in 1934, ecological adaptation has gradually become the dominant paradigm used by anthropologists to account for the modes of production and societal structures which can develop in any region.⁴⁷ The degree to which these in turn inhibit or favor certain types of cultural features (such as woodcarving, and the use of masks) has been a subject of considerable debate, though obviously, the availability of raw materials is basic to craft production of all kinds. Forde later draws a clear distinction between the forest and savanna zones of West Africa and contrasts them in terms of language, political organization, beliefs, and skills.⁴⁸ Forde argues that the elaboration of art and ritual symbolism is predicated on a high degree of craft specialization, itself a by-product of a complex and stratified sociopolitical structure. This, he concludes, was characteristic of the savanna, where ecological and other features favored the rise of states. Forest states such as Asante, Benin, and Ife are explained as northern incursions and not typical of the forest zone.

This argument has been repeated uncritically and, along with von Sydow's division of the forest and savanna into two stylistic tendencies, particularization and abstraction, has overdrawn the cultural contrasts of these two ecological zones.⁴⁹ Savanna as well as forest peoples live in many types of societies, with varying degrees of craft and ritual specialization. Some produce sculpture, some do not. Even so basic a factor as the availability of wood for carving is not a reliable predictor, since it is a necessary but scarcely sufficient condition.⁵⁰ Neither the presence of plentiful forests nor a complex state structure coupled with sedentary agriculture seems to have produced a sculpture tradition among the interlacustrine kingdoms of East Africa.⁵¹

All of this is not to say, of course, that art has no relation to its environment, but rather that sweeping generalizations

based on such a relation are usually wrong. In the specific case of the Benue Valley, it is possible to show that the Benue itself has acted both as a barrier and as a corridor for style and genre diffusion, at different times and for different peoples. Most of the time, it serves as an inhibitor of contact, through not really a formidable one. Clearly, the Idoma-Afo tie would be stronger were the river not between them. The crossing must be made by pirogue, whereas Tiv markets to the east and Igala ones to the west are directly accessible on foot. On the other hand, during the disintegration of Hausa, Alago, and Jukun political alliances and after Fulani attacks along the Benue, the river was probably the safest migration corridor for people fleeing north bank settlements.⁵² This in turn created refugee enclaves along the shore which brought about inevitable culture contact, and the possibility for style and genre interaction.

VIII

The Problem of Artistic Geography

Boundary areas are in fact the real testing grounds for theories about style. In his important catalog *Open Frontiers*, Bravmann vigorously attacks Fagg's "universe of the tribe" and argues that tribal life is, and always has been, one of "open frontiers" or fluid boundaries.⁵³ While claiming earlier that linguistic-style correlations are generally valid, he now cautions that groups lying along the boundaries of a language area will display variations in art style from that of the "core members," an idea which has become familiar over the past decade with the notion of ethnic and linguistic shatter zones.⁵⁴ Presumably Bravmann means whole ethnic groups and language subfamilies, but his observation is readily transposable to a smaller scale, in which a group style will exhibit internal variations between its "core" area and its boundaries.

The reasons Bravmann gives for this "open frontier" include trade and other exchanges, motivated by political expediency. An example of the latter type is the exchange of gifts by important people, which serves as an avenue of diffusion for such items as chiefly regalia. Using two regions of West Africa as cases in point, he attempts to show the degree of swapping, influence, and penetration of one culture into another.⁵⁵

Here the dominant paradigm of anthropologists and historians concerning the precolonial past is implicitly challenged. Long accustomed to thinking of traditional African societies as highly integrated, self-contained, and culturally autonomous before the advent of Europeans, they are being asked to examine an almost diametrically opposite possibility: that precolonial cultures were mutually dependent, interacted frequently, and shared many of their artistic traditions across ethnic boundaries. Twenty years ago, that point of view would have been clearly subversive. By 1973, it was an idea whose time had come. But dominant paradigms are not so easily dislodged, and in 1983

most art historians are still working on tribally-bounded case studies.

While Bravmann's style model seems compelling as an explanation which is both simple and appears to fit the observable facts, it can be criticized on three grounds. First, it does not maintain sufficiently the distinction between style diffusion and genre diffusion. Sometimes these are transmitted simultaneously, but at other times they diffuse independently. What is being defined may not be a style area at all, but what Biebuyck has called "readily observable occurrences of highly distinct objects rather than the clear-cut isolation of precisely-defined style elements."⁵⁶ Then, too, while there seems little doubt about the fluidity of these material culture boundaries today, this is by no means proof that the same situation prevailed in the precolonial past, although there is no real reason to doubt that it often did. With the exception of stone, metal, and pottery, most traditional artifacts are made of organic materials which decompose rapidly in tropical conditions. Therefore, establishing concrete evidence of past exchanges is extremely difficult. The most that can be done is to document the present and extrapolate to the past, using whatever earlier accounts may exist as a form of corroborating or testing evidence.

Finally, characterizing boundary areas as "open" in comparison to the more stable core area suggests that stylistic changes would occur first in boundary areas and move inward toward the core. This contrasts with the older "age-area" model of artifact distribution, in which styles, genres, or motifs are assumed to diffuse outward from the center of a culture area to its periphery.⁵⁷ For example, the center of diffusion for a masking complex may happen to occur very near an ethnic group boundary. This mask may diffuse radially in all directions and, seen from the perspective of the neighboring ethnic group, it represents an inward diffusion from its own periphery.

Thus while the age-area concept does not necessarily contradict Bravmann's model, it does represent an analogous type of diffusion in the opposite direction, which is usually more dominant. Art styles, however, are a rather specialized culture trait, quite different from house-types, hoes, or yam cultivation. One might speculate that the age-area model works most effectively in explaining style changes in centralized, but far-flung urban societies such as ancient Rome, in which the art of the provinces was clearly a delayed reflection or refraction of developments at the center. But in low-density, basically homogeneous cultures lacking a class of literati and an urban base, change may be as likely to occur first at the boundaries with neighboring cultures. As Bravmann recognizes, more African societies fit the second type than the first. The Idoma illustrate this very well, underlining the fact that quasi-centralized as well as "stateless" political systems may fall into this category.

The other geographical style model which rejects the dominant one tribe-one style paradigm is that suggested by G.I. Jones for southeastern Nigeria.⁵⁸ It is particularly relevant for the case of the Idoma and their neighbors, since the two areas are

geographically and culturally proximate. Jones argues for a strictly spatial distribution of styles, but is careful not to extend this to a generalization for all of Africa or even all of Nigeria. In southeast Nigeria, he claims, it makes little sense to assume that art styles coincide with ethnic boundaries. Rejecting the concept of "tribe" in the Nigerian context, he notes that it refers sometimes to political and other times to linguistic groupings. The area over which a particular cultural trait--in this case, a sculpture style--is distributed may or may not coincide with either of these.⁵⁹

Contrasting the southeast to Yorubaland, where the coincidence of political, linguistic, and style boundaries is high, Jones characterized the former as ". . . an area devoid of large, centralised kingdoms. . . and one where each village or group of villages considered itself autonomous, and free to make its own choice regarding its political, religious, and recreational institutions." This eclecticism extends to its sculpture.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, most writers have ignored this complexity and have followed the accepted practice of sub-dividing the sculpture of southeastern Nigeria into four major tribal styles--Igbo, Ibibio, Ijo, and Ekoi (Ejagham)--and a number of marginal sub-styles, including Idoma and Oron. Some of these are political and others are linguistic units.⁶¹

To make matters worse, the groups of the area have employed a wide variety of different materials and techniques, insuring stylistic variation: the Anang style of carving masks is quite different from their style of painting *ngwomo* (ghost houses); in turn, Anang figures look very different from their masks, and are similar in style to those of the neighboring Ogoni. The Ogoni masks have no resemblance to Anang masks. Thus not only changes in medium, but even in object types, engender style shifts.⁶² Furthermore, performative genres such as masquerades (with or without the secret societies who own them) diffuse over broad areas, carrying with them characteristic styles.⁶³

To clarify the actual style boundaries in this region, Jones proposes the substitution of geographical labels for tribal or ethnic ones. Thus, instead of an "Igbo" style, one can speak or a "Lower Niger" style which is not confined to the northern Igbo, but is also found among people on both sides of the Niger, including the Edo, western Igbo, Igbira, Igala, and Idoma. The substitution of "Cross River" style for "Ekoi" implies that the style is distributed not only among Ekoi, but among many communities on this river, including Mbembe, Ekuri, Igbo, and Ibibio.⁶⁴ In like fashion "Ijo" style would be replaced by the more encompassing term "Delta" style, and would include those southern Edo and southern Igbo who use it, as well as Ijo. Finally, the so-called "Ibibio" style would be replaced by the term "Kwa Ibo," referring to the river of that name and limiting the style designation to those adjacent groups who actually use it: the southern Ibibio and western Anang, and sometimes the Ogoni.⁶⁵

Of the writers considered so far, only Jones has seriously questioned the almost reflexive correlation between language and art style. Working in a linguistically and stylistically complex

region has forced him to reconsider the validity of either language or ethnicity as a vehicle for style. By implication, this is also a criticism of synchronic style models, since diffusion involving both selective borrowing and uncritical adoption of styles and genres has clearly taken place in this region. Four or five generations ago it is possible that there *were* distinctly Igbo, Ibibio, Ekoi, and Ijo styles, to the degree that these cultures were autonomous. But synchronic models reveal only the product, and not the process, of stylistic change.

It is necessary to examine briefly the conditions which gave rise to this very complicated picture of style diffusion in southeastern Nigeria, in order to assess how widely applicable its principles may be. In Sapir's classic formulation,

A culture element is transmitted with a maximum of ease when it is conceptually readily detachable from its cultural setting, is not hedged about in practice by religious or other restraints, is without difficulty assimilable to the borrowing culture, and travels from one tribe to another living in friendly, or at least intimate, relations with it, particularly when these tribes are bound to each other by ties of intermarriage and linguistic affinity and are situated on an important trade route.⁶⁶

In this case it is essential to add high population density and relative ease of communication. Jones stresses that the communities in question are not isolated from each other, but closely interconnected through an elaborate network of trade routes and markets.⁶⁷ The population density ranges from several hundred to more than one thousand per square mile. Indeed, the areas lying between the valleys of the Cross and Imo Rivers, and between the Imo River and the Niger, contain the highest densities in West Africa.⁶⁸ This high density of peoples, and their subsequent degree of interaction, is undoubtedly an important factor in explaining the fluid art style boundaries found in the same region.

But how exportable is this hypothesis? Are the particular conditions found in southeastern Nigeria replicated anywhere else? And how much weight does one assign to demographic factors compared with historical or political influences? Testing this population-density model against the Idoma and their Tiv, Igala, and Igbo neighbors, one first notes that the Lower Benue valley is an area of considerably lower population density than southeastern Nigeria, owing to its greater distance from major trading entrepôts, as well as to centuries of slave-raiding by the Fulani. According to the 1952 census, average densities were 86 per square mile for the Idoma, 72 for the Igala, and 73 for the Tiv, compared with 269 for the Igbo.⁶⁹ Within both Idomaland and Tivland, there is a steady increase in population density from the Benue River southward, ranging from a modest 25 per square mile in the extreme north to well over 300 in southwestern Idoma⁷⁰ and over 500 in southern Tivland.⁷¹ Relying solely on a density model,

one might expect to find evidence of significantly more cultural borrowing between southern Idoma and northern Igbo boundary peoples than with Igala or Tiv in more scarcely populated northern boundary areas. But the reality simply does not fit the model.

For, while it is true that Idoma and Igbo trade together in borderland markets and possess a similar substratum of primordial beliefs, such as an earth cult, the Igbo do not share the strong Idoma ideology of being descendants of Kwararafa. Indeed, they claim no historical connection with the Benue region aside from Igala influence in the Onitsha area.⁷² The greatest amount of borrowing seems to occur in the masquerade systems, though even here, the differences in social structure and political institutions give masking different roles in the two cultures. Forms are frequently borrowed without their earlier meanings and attached to pre-existing mask complexes. In southern districts, such as Agila, political tensions provoked by the constant encroachment of the Igbo farmers into the more sparsely settled Idoma lands acts as an inhibitor of cultural borrowing.

The Idoma-Tiv border resembles southeastern Nigeria even less. The Tiv are relatively recent immigrants into the area and unrelated to the Idoma historically, politically, and linguistically. Because of the much lower population density nearer the Benue, markets are fewer and trading networks less developed. On the other hand, the general features of Idoma and Tiv material culture are very similar, partly in response to the same environment and subsistence methods. There have been instances of both style and genre diffusion, but these appear in relative isolation, since they usually involve adaptations by a single artist.

It is only in the Idoma-Igala case that interconnectedness begins to approach that found in the southeast. With both linguistic and historical affinities to draw on, as well as geographical contiguity, cross-cultural borrowing comes as no surprise. Both the Idoma and Igala claim descent from Apá (Kwararafa) which, whether mythical or real, creates a strongly-felt sense of shared experience. Even more fundamentally, the absorption of the same indigenous "Akpoto" proto-culture has provided both the Idoma and the Igala with a common well of ancient belief and ritual. In more recent centuries, Idoma groups have accepted Igala notions of kingship, even in some cases journeying to Idah to receive symbolic legitimation. But, despite these very close and numerous ties, one is speaking here of a low-density population interaction.

In summary, one finds cultural (including stylistic) diffusion between the Idoma and Tiv scattered and less frequent, between the Idoma and Igbo, frequent but usually at a superficial level, and between the Idoma and Igala, historically intense and deep. None of the style models under discussion, whether based on language, ethnicity, geography, demography, or political structure adequately describe this phenomenon.

IX

The Problem of the Individual Artist in a Unitary Model

Aside from the enormous complexity of style as it operates *within* a culture, there is also the fact that style emanates from individual artists. While this aspect of collective style has been recognized widely, it is nonetheless very difficult to incorporate into a transcultural model, since it is of a different order than language, ethnicity, and other group characteristics.⁷³

Most recently, Vansina has advocated a style model which has its basis in the notion of atelier rather than in the ethnic group.⁷⁴ In cultures where the workshop is or was the dominant mode of production for artifacts, this allows the analysis of style to be pursued to its ultimate source, the individual artist who trains and passes on his style to apprentices. On the other hand, there are numerous sculpture-producing African societies which do not consider woodcarving to be a full-time occupation worthy of an apprenticeship system and a workshop form of organization. It is practiced during spare time by certain individuals who have discovered a talent for it, but who may not have a strong impact on other carvers.

A second problem is the still considerable disagreement about the latitude for creativity afforded the artist working in a traditional context. Biebuyck summarized this lack of consensus more than a decade ago:

The feasibility of the expression of individual taste, skill, and temperament in artistic productivity is a much debated question in regard to communities that focus heavily on corporate solidarity and collective action, and doubts are raised as to whether or not it is possible to speak about creative originality and conscious innovation.⁷⁵

Despite the early arguments of Boas that traditional artists are indeed creative, there has been little empirical data either to defend or to deny the claim.⁷⁶ When this question is approached through the study of aesthetic norms held by an African community, very clear limits on artistic invention tend to emerge, though these limits may not be applied uniformly to all types of art, leaving certain genres "open" and others "closed" to innovation.⁷⁷ While it is true by definition that 'traditional' values are supposedly conservative, and do not hold originality *per se* in high regard, every art tradition obviously has an origin, and certainly not all of these are primordial. Indeed, the degree of artistic innovation found in present-day masquerade complexes casts serious doubt on the idea that, until recently, they consisted of a stable and unchanging repertoire of forms. Here again, a dominant paradigm has prevented us from making this very simple deduction.

Among the Idoma, several innovative artists have introduced new forms as well as working in distinctive styles. While these

were not radical departures from traditional prototypes, they were enough so that in a museum context some would not have been attributed to the Idoma. Young men's dance groups were (and are) frequently the patrons for these new mask genres, which tend to be highly localized, often limited to a single village.

With Idoma mask genres of wide distribution, there is still considerable stylistic variation. The important mask headdress called *ogrinye* or *oglinye* retains a standard format--human head of small size atop a long neck--but varies significantly in style and iconographic detail. In some cases, it is geometricized into a disc-shape, with the neck given over to surface ornamentation. At other times, it is anthropomorphic, with tribal scars and plaited cotton "hair." One carver added a European cap in place of hair. On being questioned as to the extent of permissible variation, both artists and laymen state that it has to be "recognizable" as *ogrinye* and not some other genre. In other words, the fundamental iconography has to be preserved, along with strictures relating to size and material. Beyond this, the artist is free to interpret the subject as he wishes.

One possible explanation for the creative freedom enjoyed by Idoma artists has to do with the lack of any formal apprenticeship system. Boys and young men often learn to carve by watching carvers at work, but they do not undergo systematic instruction or become assistants. In contrast to the workshop apprenticeship, this non-directed learning gives greater latitude to individual expression, because it allows the possibility that there is more than one "right way" to carve a particular mask or figure. While it is probably true that the well-established sculptural forms of the Idoma are the results of several generations of collective efforts by different artists, it is equally true that others are the invention of a single carver working within this tradition. The importance of the individual artist tends to be discounted and downplayed in discussions of traditional style, perhaps because he represents an irreducible individual rather than a generalizable norm. Yet he is the "carrier" of that style. Indeed, a collective style is nothing more than a convenient abstraction for dealing with something which is, in reality, much more diverse.

Ackerman has emphasized that stylistic change results from the interplay between two opposing tendencies within the artist: the instinct to conform to established stylistic norms, and the human urge to create something new.⁷⁸ In contemporary Western culture, with its emphasis on individual achievement, innovation is considered the *sine qua non* of serious art. Conversely, African cultural values reinforce the stability of collective aesthetic norms. Yet both proclivities are felt, even by the most traditional artist.

Given the scarcity of examples from the *oeuvre* of lesser-known peoples, what is assumed to be a collective style may in fact be an individual one. For example, "the" Basa Nge style turned out to be the work of a single artist.⁷⁹ Or the work of highly independent individuals may not coalesce into a collective style at all, as in the case of many Tiv and Igbo artists.

Or the style of a particular sub-group who are widely patronized becomes known as the collective style of the entire culture. Precisely this has happened in Idoma, where the politically assimilated but culturally distinct Akweya peoples have produced most of the sculpture known as "Idoma" in museum and private collections. Furthermore, these pieces are largely the work of two prolific artists from a single village.⁸⁰

The works of highly successful artists raise a closely related point regarding style. In what might be called the "masterpiece syndrome" in the collecting and publishing of African works of art, pieces of exceptionally high quality and technical excellence are obviously preferred to mediocre works which may be far more widespread and representative of the culture. While this is understandable, it does have the effect of limiting judgments about collective styles to the output of a handful of master carvers, and not of a more broadly-based sample.

X

Toward a Historical Process-Model for Art

What conclusions can be drawn from such seemingly inconclusive results? First, it would seem that, despite the punctilious application of linguistic, morphological, and political-structural *schemata* to the observed distributions of styles in African art, no single one of these organizing principles correlates well enough with style areas to be acceptable as a *sole* explanatory model. Style configurations are too complex to be reducible to a single paradigm. Rather, the concept of style region, like those of culture and ethnicity, appears to require a definition which is both fluid and situational. Even more than this, it requires a historical dimension in order to explain present-day distributions.

Second, it is clear from Rubin's analysis of the central Guinea Coast region that style is not always the most salient point of comparison for African sculpture, and indeed may be far less useful in some areas than the comparison of materials, techniques, and genres. Delineating the boundaries of a beadworking complex, for example, may be more meaningful to the art historian than delineating style boundaries in the same region, which may show far less a degree of coherence. Even within a single culture, style variations owing to different media and techniques may be very marked.⁸¹

Third, style boundaries may be drawn very differently as a result of the criteria chosen for comparison. The Idoma, for example, belong politically in the eastern Guinea Coast region, linguistically in the central Guinea Coast region, and both historically and geographically in the central Sudan region, as they are mapped in Rubin's essay. While most ethnic groups would not occupy such an ambiguous position, there are bound to be some discrepancies in many particular cases. This is simply evidence that the precontact model of a highly integrated society in which

linguistic, cultural, political, and style boundaries neatly coincide fails to fit the postcontact reality.

What then, if anything, is the vehicle by which style is transmitted from one culture to another, even from one community to another? It appears that language, political structure, or ecology may be the foci around which styles cluster, but these are broad, sweeping categories. Biebuyck has indicated that one may have to look at a much more restricted level of culture to make sensible style correlations:

. . .specific categories of objects or specific art styles are often correlated not with whole cultures but with particular institutions, such as initiation systems, cults, voluntary associations, restricted belief systems, and myths. These institutions represent only one dimension of the entire culture; sometimes they have a local rather than a pantribal distribution; sometimes they are trantribal.⁸²

He then illustrates this point with the Bembe, for whom it is meaningless to speak of a "Bembe style." Some Bembe masks are for associations shared with Luba groups (trantribal), some are found only in certain clans and lineages (local), some are of Luba origin (borrowed), and some are indistinguishable from Lega art of the same type.⁸³ The same phenomenon can be observed in Idoma art, particularly in border areas. In Owukpa, a southwestern Idoma district bordering the Nsukka Igbo area, for example, the *ekpe* society masks made by Idoma carvers have adopted both the style and iconography of the Igbo prototype. Conversely, certain mask genres are unique to particular clans and lineages, such as the Agila *ekwaja* mask or the Akpa *akpnmobe*.

While Biebuyck's search for the locus of art styles and genres within specific societal institutions certainly brings one closer to their source than the older one-tribe, one-style model ever could, there is still the same inherent danger in the "tyranny of units" as before, giving rise to the same set of boundary problems, even if on a much smaller scale. Like water in a sieve, style is very resistant to the notion of boundaries, and style models based on binary oppositions of any kind are likely to be overdrawn, hence inaccurate.

All of these paradigms work with varying degrees of success in describing the dynamic of style and genre, but all lack a historical dimension. While the importance of history is presumed by each of the above writers, their conceptual models do not contain any avenue of approach to this problem. They might with justice argue that where there is no chronology, there can be no history. For example, the absolute chronology of Idoma art is unknown and probably unknowable. But by using a variety of methods, a possible relative sequence can be established. This cannot pretend to be other than a rough estimation, based as it is on unverifiable oral traditions and fragmentary documentation. Nonetheless, it is the essential first step in reconstructing a history of Idoma art.

By using Vansina's concept of process-models in historical reconstruction, a relative chronology of events, and the changes which these bring about, may be extrapolated from two or more static models of the culture at different points in time.⁸⁴ Thus, one synchronic picture of Idoma art can be formulated for the present time, another for the time of initial European contact around 1910, and a third for the period of upheaval caused by the Fulani campaigns of the early nineteenth century. At a much more conjectural level, earlier synchronic pictures can be hypothesized, all the way back to the putative links with Abakwariga and Jukun prior to 1700.⁸⁵ While these pictures each represent a different degree of reliability, and are therefore of unequal weight in any historical reconstruction, they at least allow a model of change to be constructed. Within each "vertical" time-frame, it is then possible to consider "horizontal" explanations of style, and more frequently, genre interaction, such as those suggested by Bravmann and Jones. For example, the Idoma ancestral cult masquerades can be compared to Igbo, Igala, and Yoruba counterparts using an "open-frontiers" paradigm, but within the limits of a probable time-frame. In this way, a variety of interpretations can be utilized, while at the same time preserving an essentially historical overview.

It should be clear by now that there can be no single definition of Idoma art that will be valid for all levels of investigation. Whether using the simplest one-tribe/one-style model or the most complex historical process-model, it is essential to define the parameters of inquiry by stating what is taken to be "Idoma" and what is to be included as "art." By defining each narrowly (say, only core Idoma lineages and only ancestral masks) it is possible to construct a plausible development sequence which is internally coherent but which may not mesh successfully with a hypothetical regional model for ancestral masks. Conversely, a much wider set of parameters which includes peripheral Idoma groups and all types of masking might yield a less internally coherent but more broadly connective process-model. Inevitably, the choice of parameters depends on the set of questions one is trying to address.

In adapting this approach to African art history, it is necessary to move beyond style *per se* as the main vehicle for investigation, since in most instances the evidence for stylistic change will not exist over such long time spans. One alternative is to concentrate upon the introduction, diffusion, and demise or survival of particular institutions which are directly symbolized by concrete forms such as sculpture or regalia of office. In this way, the use of a particular type of mask, figure, or ceremonial artifact can be linked chronologically to the adoption of certain ideas. For a time depth of two or three generations, style comparisons can be incorporated as well.

A second alternative is to use the historical parameters of technological innovations such as weaving and metal-working as well as the importation of European materials and fashions. Tiv brass snuff-rings cannot antedate the introduction of snuff-taking as a social practice, nor could the more intricate Yoruba *adire*

cloth patterns have been executed on homespun prior to the importation of commercial cotton. With durable materials such as metal, terracotta, and stone, style and iconography can be added to technology and institutional change as vehicles for making comparisons.

Clearly, neither the history nor the geography of African art can be studied in isolation. Population movements, coupled with political fragmentation and the absorption of non-indigenous peoples, as well as the impact of European trade goods, has resulted in many stylistic and typological accretions to the core of once-local art forms. These can be understood only in relation to the arts of surrounding peoples with whom the group in question have interacted. To this, the relative freedom of many African artists has added the dimension of individual style variation and the invention of new genres. The process-model approach, because it incorporates a way of explaining both vertical (diachronic) and horizontal (synchronic) change, can accommodate these complexities as they appear today and at the same time isolate possible times and places of origin.

NOTES

*I am grateful to Jan Vansina for his encouragement and the shared conviction that art is a powerful and valid form of historical evidence.

1. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (2d. ed., Chicago, 1970), 181-91.
2. Robert G. Armstrong, "The Idoma-speaking Peoples" in *Peoples of the Niger-Benue Confluence* [Ethnographic Survey of Africa: Western Africa, Part X] (London, 1955), *passim*.
3. Daryll Forde, "The Cultural Map of West Africa," reprinted in Simon and Phoebe Ottenberg, eds., *Cultures and Societies of Africa* (New York, 1960), 124.
4. An important Otukpo ancestral chant speaks of "Apá that originated guinea corn, Apá that originated millet." A number of masks, even the origin of masking itself, are associated with the millet and guinea corn harvests.
5. Robert G. Armstrong, "The Dynamics and Symbolism of Idoma Kingship," paper presented at the IXth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, Chicago, 1973, 10-15.
6. Erim O. Erim, "A Pre-Colonial History of the Idoma of Central Nigeria" (Ph.D., Dalhousie University, 1977), 11-17, 55.
7. (Berkeley, 1978), 9-10.
8. Vansina, "Cultures Through Time" in Raoul Naroll and Ronald Cohen, eds., *A Handbook of Method in Cultural Anthropology* (New York, 1970), 170.
9. Smith, *Affairs of Daura*, 9, with emphasis added.
10. These field studies are basically unlike the early diffusionist works which relied mainly on secondary sources and were focused on ethnology rather than art. See, for example, F.

- Graebner, *Methode der Ethnologie* (Heidelberg, 1911), or W. Schmidt, *The Culture Historical Method of Ethnology* (New York, 1939).
11. David and Charlene Baldwin, *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria: An Indexed Bibliography* (Boston, 1976).
 12. Even the exceptions tend to be European historians or ethnologists. Jan Vansina has applied the methodology of the historian to an examination of Kuba art: "Ndop: Royal Statues Among the Kuba" in D. Fraser and H. Cole, eds., *African Art and Leadership* (Madison, 1972), 41-55; *Children of Woot* (Madison, 1978). Tamara Northern has done seminal work in uncovering the precolonial art history of parts of the Cameroon Grasslands: *Royal Art of Cameroon* (Hanover, 1973); *The Sign of the Leopard* (Storrs, Conn., 1975). In Nigeria, the Oyo historian Solomon Babayemi has reconstructed the origins of the Yoruba *Egungun* cult. Denis Williams, a Guyanan art historian, has combined archeological, ethnographic, and art historical approaches in his landmark study of Nigerian iron and bronze arts, *Icon and Image* (London, 1974). Most recently, the American scholars Henry and Margaret Drewal have begun to construct a history of Yoruba art through the study of the cult life of selected families over several generations. See their "An Ifa Diviner's Shrine in Ijebuland," *African Arts*, 16 (1983), 60-67, 99-100.
 13. That is, the invention, propagation, replication, variation, duration, and retention of things. See George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven, 1962).
 14. Vansina, "Cultures Through Time," 175.
 15. See B. Ankermann, "Kulturkreise und Kulturschichten in Afrika," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 37 (1905), 54-90.
 16. Edward Sapir, "Time Perspective in Aboriginal American Culture: A Study in Method" [1916], reprinted in David Mandelbaum, ed., *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture and Personality* (Berkeley, 1949), 475-32; Clark Wissler, *The American Indian* (New York, 1917), 342-54; Alfred L. Kroeber, *Cultural and Natural Areas of Native North America* [University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology, 38] (Berkeley, 1939), 1-19.
 17. Melville J. Herskovits, "A Preliminary Consideration of the Culture-Areas of Africa," *American Anthropologist*, 26 (1924), 50-63; idem., "The Culture Areas of Africa," *Africa*, 3 (1930), 59-77.
 18. Adam Kuper and Pierre Van Leynseele, "Social Anthropology and the Bantu Expansion," *Africa*, 48 (1978), 335.
 19. While Herskovits' culture areas were followed (and superseded in levels of complexity) by Baumann's monumental synthesis in *Les peuples et les civilisations de l'Afrique* (Paris, 1948), the latter's ethnohistorical model has not been widely used by English-speaking scholars.
 20. Both were included in Ankermann's fifth culture area, called "Sudan Beyond the Upper Nile."
 21. A. Von Sydow, *Handbuch* (Berlin, 1930), 1:2.

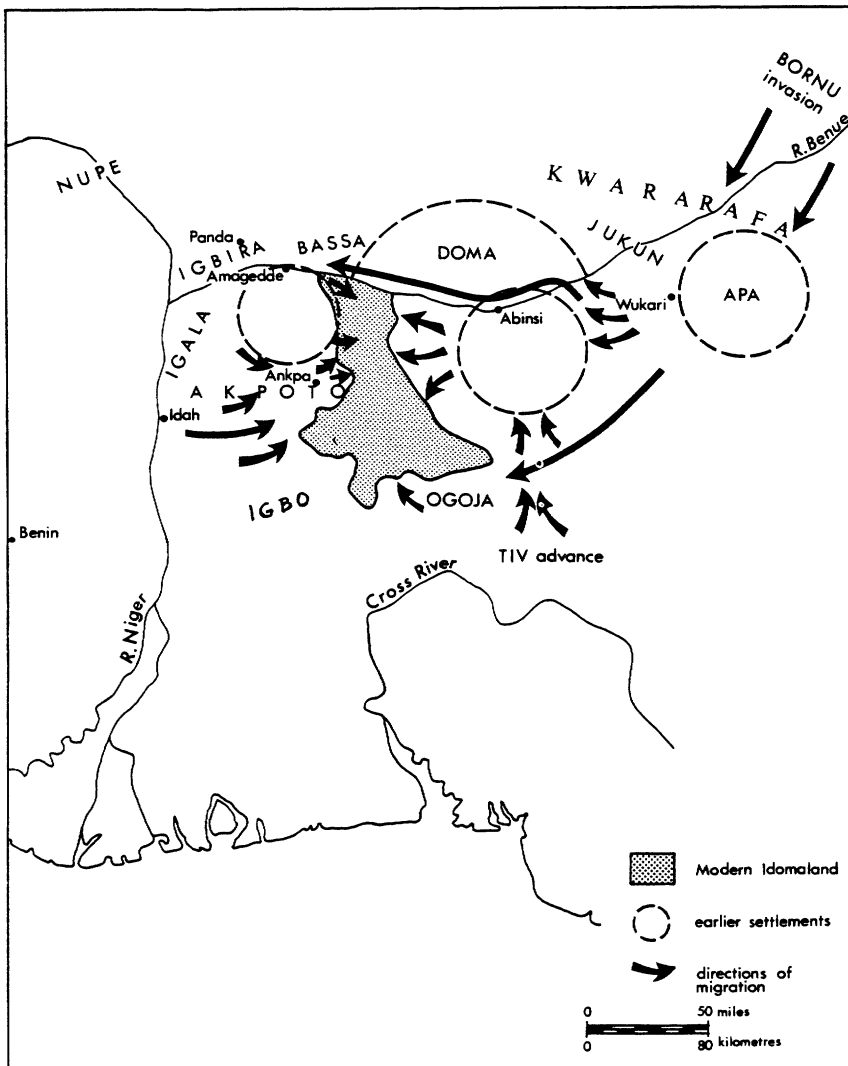
22. Ibid., 1:6.
23. Kjersmeier, *Centres de Style de la Sculpture Negre Africaine* (reprinted New York, 1967).
24. See, for example, G.I. Jones, "Sculpture of the Umuahia Area of Nigeria," *African Arts*, 6/4 (1973), 58-63.
25. The concept of tribal style is not logically connected to that of culture areas. They are in fact two separate paradigms, the first of which has been subsumed within the second to create a convenient, if unreal, system of style classification.
26. In a few isolated instances such as the Ife and Benin heads and the Kuba *ndop* figures, style sequences have been proposed. But these resist classification as pan-tribal styles, since they are examples of court art.
27. Roy Sieber, "African Art and Culture History" in Creighton Gabel and Norman R. Bennett, eds., *Reconstructing African Culture History* (Boston, 1967), 136.
28. See, for example, Aidan Southall, "The Illusion of Tribe," *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 5 (1970), 28-50; articles by Morton Fried, Michael Moerman, and Gertrude Dole in *Essays on the Problem of Tribe*, ed. June Helm (Seattle, 1968), 3-20, 153-69, 83-100. An excellent review of culture-trait vs. boundary theories is Anya P. Royce, *Ethnic Identity* (Bloomington, 1982), 20-24.
29. Southall, "The Illusion of Tribe," 28.
30. (New York, 1965), 11.
31. Fagg, *Tribes and Forms*, 13.
32. Early colonial reports yield references to many cults and mask associations over broad supratribal areas of eastern Nigeria at the onset of British administration. This in turn suggests considerable precolonial contact. On the other hand, oral accounts make it equally clear that travel in this area was far more restricted prior to the pax Britannica. See, for example, Elizabeth Isichei, *Igbo Worlds* (Philadelphia, 1978), 43-45, 50-52, 76-77.
33. Southall, "Illusion of Tribe," 32.
34. Jones, "Umuahia," 63.
35. Fagg, *Tribes and Forms*, 16.
36. See discussion by the author in Susan Vogel, ed., *For Spirits and Kings* (New York, 1981), 163-64; cat. no. 96.
37. The Tishman collection has been published at least four times. Reference here is to the third major catalog, *Sculpture of Black Africa*, prepared for the Los Angeles County Museum (Los Angeles, 1968).
38. *Sculpture of Black Africa*, 12.
39. Ibid., 20.
40. David Dalby, SOAS Seminar on Ethnicity, 11 December 1973.
41. René Bravmann, *West African Sculpture* (Seattle, 1970), 28.
42. Ibid., 52. Furthermore, the Eastern vs. Western Mande linguistic division does not fit perfectly the coastal vs. Sudanic Mande style division. See Joseph Greenberg, *The Languages of Africa* (Bloomington, 1963), 8.
43. Bravmann, *West African Sculpture*, 11.

44. (Washington, 1976).
45. *The Sculptor's Eye*, 62.
46. Ibid., 30-32.
47. (London, 1934).
48. "Cultural Map" (see note 3).
49. Using Forde's characterization, one should expect a greater elaboration of sculpture in the wooded savanna zone than in the forest. Jacques Maquet, on the other hand, describes the forest or "Civilization of the Clearings" as the primary sculpture-producing zone of Africa (*Civilizations of Black Africa*, New York, 1972, 68-69). Frank Willett has criticized writers such as Griaule for invoking an overly sharp and romanticized contrast between the art of the forest and that of the savanna (*African Art: An Introduction*, [New York, 1971], 26). It would appear that the relation of ecology to art and ritual is by no means as straightforward as many writers claim.
50. Willett lists forests, settled agriculture, and statehood as favorable preconditions for the proliferation of sculpture (*African Art*, 18). These are reiterated by Fraser and Cole in *African Art and Leadership*, "Overview," 321, along with Fraser's earlier observation that figure sculpture in Africa can be linked to the Niger-Congo language family (*Primitive Art*, [Garden City, N.Y., 1962], 46-47). Unfortunately this says very little, since most sedentary peoples in Africa speak Niger-Congo.
51. To be sure, the interlacustrine area may have had both masks and figure sculpture prior to the Luo migrations. But aside from the Luzira Head and a few other isolated examples, there is little evidence of a plastic art tradition.
52. See William Baikie, *Narrative of an Exploring Voyage Up the Rivers Kwora and Binue. . . in 1854* (reprinted London, 1966), 83; Adolphe Burdo, *A Voyage Up the Niger and Benueh* (London, 1880), 245-50; F.W. Byng Hall, "Notes on the Okpoto and Igara Tribes," *Journal of the African Society*, 7 (1907/1908), 168.
53. Rene Bravmann, *Open Frontiers: The Mobility of Art in Black Africa* (Seattle, 1973).
54. Bravmann, *West African Sculpture*, 11.
55. The first region is that comprising west central Ghana and, adjacent to it, the Cercle de Bondoukou in the Ivory Coast. The second is the Cameroon Grasslands.
56. Daniel Biebuyck, ed., *Tradition and Creativity in Tribal Art* (Berkeley, 1969), 1-2.
57. See Sapir, "Time Perspective," 410-12; Wissler, *The Relation of Nature to Man in Aboriginal America* (New York, 1926), 182-83; Kroeber, *Cultural and Natural Areas*, 4, 21. The wider the area of distribution of a trait, the older it is assumed to be relative to comparable traits with more limited distribution. This is because the innovation of a trait is assumed to begin in a core area, not at a cultural boundary.

58. Jones, "Sculpture of the Umuahia Area."
59. Ibid., 59.
60. Ibid., 63.
61. Ibid., 59.
62. Ibid., 60.
63. Ibid., 61.
64. Ibid., 59.
65. Ibid., 60.
66. Sapir, "Time Perspective," 419.
67. Jones, "Umuahia," 63.
68. Nigeria, Department of Statistics, *Population Census of the Eastern Region of Nigeria, 1953* (Lagos, 1953). For more recent figures see N.P. Illoeje, *A New Geography of West Africa* (London, 1972), 3-6.
69. Nigeria, Department of Statistics, *Population Census of the Northern Region of Nigeria, 1952* (Lagos, 1952). See also R. Mansell Prothero, "The Population Census of Northern Nigeria 1952: Problems and Results," *Population Studies*, 10 (1956), 166-73.
70. Armstrong, "The Idoma-speaking Peoples," 117.
71. Laura Bohannan, "Political Aspects of Tiv Social Organization" in John Middleton and David Tait, eds., *Tribes Without Rulers* (London, 1958), 34.
72. See Richard Henderson, *The King in Every Man* (New Haven, 1972), 76-90; Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People* (New York, 1976), 3-7.
73. See Biebuyck, ed., *Tradition and Creativity*, especially essays by William Fagg, Robert Thompson, Adrian Gerbrands and William Bascom and comments by Daniel Biebuyck, Ralph Altman and Roy Sieber.
74. Preface to François Neyt, *Traditional Arts and History of Zaïre* (Brussels, 1981), 6, and personal communication, 3 February 1982.
75. Biebuyck, ed., *Tradition and Creativity*, 7.
76. Franz Boas, "Style" in *Primitive Art* (Oslo, 1927; reprinted New York, 1955), 144-82.
77. For example, the Idoma *alekwaafia* or ancestral masquerade is a category "closed" to innovation by virtue of its ritual status, whereas secret society masks are considerably more "open," particularly those owned by young men's age sets.
78. James S. Ackerman, "Western Art History" in James S. Ackerman and Rhys Carpenter, *Art and Archaeology* (Englewood Cliffs, 1963), 175.
79. John Picton, SOAS Seminar on Nigerian Art, December 1973.
80. Sidney L. Kasfir, "Visual Arts of the Idoma of Central Nigeria" (Ph.D., University of London, 1979), 131-32.
81. Biebuyck, ed., *Tradition and Creativity*, 3.
82. Ibid., 2.
83. Ibid.
84. Jan Vansina, "The Use of Process-Models in African History" in Jan Vansina, Raymond Mauny and Louis Vincent Thomas, *The Historian in Tropical Africa* (London, 1964), 378-79. This stands in sharp distinction to the prevalent "ethno-

graphic present" approach in which all aspects of a culture's art are normalized to a single "eve-of-contact" synchronic picture.

85. See Kasfir, "Visual Arts of the Idoma," Chapters 4, 6, and 7.



Migrations into Idomaland from Apa and Igala

adapted from Erim O. Erim
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