



# Deconstructing African Tribal Art and Society Demystifying Its Domination and Disentanglement with European Art

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.2023.4152>

## Abstract

The European interest in Africa had a significant impact on Africa's art and culture, including contemporary African art music and dance, description, materials, subjects, and purpose, all of which was influenced by the European presence in Africa and have an impact on what is now African tribal art. This has opened up numerous new options for contemporary African tribal art by demonstrating to the rest of the world that creativity associated with the past has resurfaced in modern-day Africa. African tribal art provides information into their current society. In those days, the Europeans saw Africa as the real deal, full with potential, which they believed was only found in Africa. Because of its differences from European values on art, African culture and art has been branded as 'tribal,' 'primitive,' or 'inferior,' and it continues to remain so. Today, the term 'tribal' conjures up images of 'old fashioned, primitive, and ignorance.' Westerners have used and continue to use the term 'primitive' to characterize African art, although African art continues to play an essential part in the world today, which critics accept. Our goal here is to speculate on how colonization influenced African civilization and, in turn, influenced African tribal art.

**Keywords:** African Tribal Art, Colonialism in Tribal Art, Deconstructing Tribal Art, European Art, Moral Assumptions in Tribal Art

## Introduction

Colonization is not only a part of African history, but it has also influenced African art today. The European presence in Africa had a significant impact on African art and culture, including current African art, music, and dance, as well as descriptions, materials, subjects, and purposes. In those days, the Europeans saw Africa as the genuine deal, with a lot of possibility, which they believe is available in Africa. People still consider African culture, society, and art to be 'tribal and primitive or inferior'. This has been the case since the time of colonial rule. African modern art was labeled as tribal and inferior because it deviated from the value placed on it by Europeans. The term 'tribal' conjures up thoughts of the past, primitiveness, and ignorance in today's world. The myth of racial purity has shackled most of Africa.<sup>1</sup> It's the kind of obliviousness that underpins Manichean oppositional thinking, which divides the world into good, us, and evil, oppressors and those who don't realize how evil they are on the one hand, and oppressors and those who don't realize how horrible they are on the other. On the other side, oppositional thinking generates bogeymen against which African leaders behave tyrannical over their own people while claiming to love and defend them. The racial innocence fallacy is rooted in Africa's violent contacts with the West, in which Africa has been a clear victim. From colonialism to the current day, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin define postcolonial as a term that characterizes civilizations that have been influenced by European imperial and hegemonic expansion. Because there is still a "preoccupation throughout the historical process began by European imperial aggression," the phrase refers to present events in the formerly colonized countries.<sup>2</sup>

In that sense, applying the term to an age-old cultural activity that has maintained its form and content prior to colonization but is progressively opening up to modernity may be a stretch. What is the difference between post-colonialism and modernity? Is the impact of globalization the same as the impact of post-colonialism? As a result, it could be more accurate to use the phrase to describe those components of life in the formerly colonized globe whose character is undeniably influenced or affected by violent interaction with the West: statehood and state institutions, language, and religion. These aspects of life are postcolonial to the extent that they bear the imprints of colonial contact with the West. Most Africans' minds have been molded by this interaction, particularly in reference to African culture and discourses, and it continues to do so in more subtle, subconscious ways that are not totally healthy to African self-perception.<sup>3</sup>

## Deconstructing the Codes of Colonialism on Africa

Most enlightened and morally conscious Africans and African scholars throughout the world are concerned that Africa is not politically and economically developed to its full potential. What is perhaps more troubling than the level of societal dysfunction in Africa is the amount of effort that

has been expended, and is still being expended in some quarters, to explain the African situation by some innocuous reference to the experience of colonialism, thereby avoiding the most obvious link between individual people's lack of sense of responsibility for their societies and societal dysfunction. Almost every discussion of Africa's problems and potential, strictly speaking, inexorably leads to the Western attack on Africa. The mere invoking of Africa's colonial past appears to provide an argument a decisive point – at least emotionally – in these conversations, both on interpersonal levels, on Internet List services, and in professional and intellectually more rigorous forums.<sup>4</sup> Even as recently as 2010, there have been attempts to explain Africans in their thirties and forties' incompetence and brazen instances of corruption and embezzlement of public funds as the result of some kind of colonial trauma, an explanation that finds some justification in what Chinua Achebe referred to as Africa's wound in the soul.<sup>5</sup> According to the stated mindset, the “*aftermath of colonial discourse*” and other repeated attempts by the West to portray Africa as the Dark Continent are to blame for the image of Africa in the West, and possibly even in Africa.<sup>6</sup>

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### **Interrelating the Moral Assumptions with African Tribal Society**

Inside the moral world of slave narratives and slave preachers' exhortations, we detect hints of slave morality that Nietzsche would clearly formulate. Except for the African people's desire for justice, there is nothing to substantiate the hope of the West's demise. The oppressed seeing the oppressor gnash his teeth in hellfire becomes synonymous with justice for the oppressed. It's no surprise that Nietzsche regarded Christianity as the propagation of slave morality, and St Paul as the leading priest of resentment. Blyden, on the other hand, gave the spiritual and moral tones of Ethiopianism's tradition a naturalist interpretation. As he claimed in “*African Life and Customs*,” the African's position is not always a result of his experiences, but rather of his character from the beginning. The implications of Africa's guilt-driven discourse, as well as its obvious moral assumptions, were probably more damaging to the continent than colonialism's legacies.

The most evident of these repercussions is intellectual and cultural bankruptcy, a state in which the mind practically refuses to engage reality in a creative way that could open up new possibilities. There is an official condoning, and in some cases celebration, of ineptitude and uniformity of ignorance and mediocrity, as shown in Nigeria's government's decision to rebrand the country in order to combat corruption and other issues.<sup>7</sup> “*The most obvious of these consequences is intellectual and cultural penury, a condition in which the mind virtually refuses to engage reality in a creative way that could open more possibilities than there have been*” (Eze, 2011). The rebranding frenzy was clearly fueled by the idea that Nigeria was ugly, not because of the country's near-absence of modern amenities like good roads, power, drinkable water, or even strong governance, but because the Western media had spun a single bad tale about it.

While other formerly colonized parts of the world, such as India, Brazil, Indonesia, and Singapore, have consciously imitated and improved on Western development paths, Africa, fearful of losing its authenticity and prized victim role, fans the ember of guilt and blame on the West on the one hand, while soliciting aid from the West on the other. While most Asian and Latin American countries signed trade agreements with the US in the 1990s, accords that put most of their civilizations on the route to modernity, Bill Clinton could only offer some African countries apologies for slavery and promises of aid. It is therefore deeply disturbing that African leaders settle for symbolic victories despite the fact that there are numerous serious battles to be fought, including the fight for the continent's fundamental survival, eventual thriving, and competitiveness; and the fight for economic and social justice. Most African leaders, it turns out, were blinded by justified rage toward their colonial masters, and never made a concerted effort to grasp and conquer the economic, technological, and probably even socio-cultural institutions that enabled their invasion and tyranny.

These leaders, with a few exceptions, never tried to be lords of their own worlds in order to make them environments where people could thrive.<sup>8</sup> The ease with which African states have welcomed the management of their resources by developing Asian powers, once colonized people who did not wish to wallow in the balm of victimhood, but instead took up the responsibility of governing their own communities, is alarming.<sup>9</sup>

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### **Europe's Conduct on Africa: Impressionism and Cubism**

After being captured by Portuguese explorers, African artifacts began to appear in European collections as early as the 15th century. However, these facts were seen as ethnological curiosities rather than creative inventions, a viewpoint that persisted until the end of the nineteenth century. Several colonial exhibitions were held in Europe around the turn of the century, mainly in France and Germany. The general audience was able to see a wide range of African, Oceanic, and American material at these events. A number of artists who were beginning to play key roles in the development of early century art were among those drawn to the aesthetic features of objects. “*As a result, a curious double interaction took place. On the one hand, the artists' imagination was caught by the primitive artifacts which came to be read by them as works of art rather than exotic curios; on the other hand, the viewpoint of the artists themselves was radically changed and their work was proudly influenced by their discovery. During the last decades, the interest of the general public in prime, or tribal art has tremendously increased, a fact rated in the establishment of many such collections in art museums, a large increase in the number of eries dealing in this material and a flood of well-illumed books.*” In the United States, a resurgence of non-Caucasian ethnic consciousness may have contributed to the current popularity of African and other tribal art styles. The traditional art of black people must now be viewed as a substantial contribution to hu1 culture in general, given its influence on modern Western art.

Several expressionist art groups arose in the first decade of this century, in part as a reaction to the sterile academic art that had emerged from the Romantic, Naturalistic, and, eventually, Impressionistic schools of the nineteenth century. Kirchner, Heckel, and Schmidt-Rottluff created the German band ‘*Die Bruecke*’ in 1905, with Pechstein, Mueller, and Nolde joining later. Their strong use of clashing colours and twisted forms was echoed,

independently, by the efforts of radical young French painters Matisse, Derain, Vlaminck, Rouault, and Dufy, whom a critic derided as *'Fauves'* at the Salon d'Automne in Paris in 1905.

The term *'Cubist'*, which can also be derogatory, was coined by the former rebel Matisse to describe a series of paintings by Braque that were shown in the Salon of 1908; it came to be used as a label for a new direction in art pioneered by Picasso and Braque, who were soon joined by others such as Gris and Leger. Another German group, *"Del' blaue Reiter"*, was influenced by Cubism. It was created in 1911 by Kandinsky and Marc, and later joined by Macke, Campendonk, and Klee. The Italian Futurist school of Severini, Boccioni, and Carra was also influenced by Cubism. African influence, which was prevalent at the start of Cubism, is no longer visible in the final two movements. Cezanne and Gauguin, Van Gogh, Munch, and Ensor were all considered forerunners and models by several of these painters. With the exception of Gauguin, none of them had ever seen primitive painting.

On the one hand, the Fauves and Cubists, and on the other, the Bruecke painters, learned to know and love African art from contrasting perspectives, formal vs emotive, respectively. Take a moment to consider the context in which these points of view arose: By breaking up forms into colour planes, Cezanne attempted to bring structural stability to the ephemeral nature of impressionist paintings in the last part of the nineteenth century. His paintings were always on display in the gallery of the dealer Vollard during the early years of this century, and they were primarily admired by young artists, some of whom would go on to become Fauves and Cubists. These artists were also aware of Cezanne's advice in a letter to Emile Bernard to *"treat nature by the cylinder, the sphere, the cone, everything in proper perspective..."* Knowing Cezanne's work and ideas, it's no surprise that when Vlaminck, Derain, Matisse, and Picasso first acknowledged African sculpture's aesthetic potential in 1905-1906, they were immediately attracted by its formal qualities: Cezanne's ideals were perfectly realized here, with natural forms reduced to geometric analogues. The early geometric phase of Cubism, which began in 1906-1907, had distinctively African characteristics; it was *'cubistic'* in the literal sense and contrasted substantially from the later analytic and synthesis stages of Cubism.

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### **Paving a Deeper Way into African Tribal Art**

The German painters, on the other hand, appeared to value tribal art more for its sentimental value than for its formal impact. They were drawn to a resurrection of mediaeval German woodcarving, as well as a return to religion, nature, and basic values as found in children's and primitive people's art. Several of them went excursions to foreign regions and were encouraged by their direct contact with aborigines, similar to Gauguin's concept of a *'noble savage.'* While several 19th-century French painters travelled outside of Europe, none of the modern French appear to have been interested in doing so and developing personal connections with natives who created the works they admired in Paris, far from their natural surroundings.

If the French and Germans differed in their reasons for appreciating tribal art, they also differed in the amount to which they expressed their excitement for it in public. *"In general, the Germans openly acknowledged their appreciation of the primitives as soon as they had discovered them. Figures with negroid facial features abound in their work even when the subject matter is not exotic, and still-life paintings often include tribal statuary or masks which they had collected. Although the French artists were also ardent collectors of such artifacts, these are never included in their paintings and one has learned about their interest in such objects mainly from writings published at a later time."* Furthermore, the French, as well as some of their followers, denied that the Africans had any influence on them. In many circumstances, though, such an influence is impossible to ignore. The parallels that will be discussed below are difficult to ignore as mere coincidences or examples of parallel but independent evolution. Furthermore, the recorded timeline of events shows that typical primitive design traits first appeared in the work of European artists only after they had become acquainted with tribal objects. The art we're talking about here is mostly wood sculpture made by hundreds of tribes in equatorial West Africa, mainly in the area drained by the Niger and Congo rivers. These people create masks and statues that are primarily used for ritual or devotional purposes, among other objects with artistic worth like as weapons, musical instruments, and household implements. The variety of styles available is vast, ranging from the bluntly ugly to abstract to naturalistic. Our study will not cover naturalistic things such as the life-size heads from Ife, Nigeria. The majority, but not all, is products of an African art tradition different from tribal art, especially regal or courtly art, which flourished in several powerful kingdoms. Unlike tribal painters, who were typically blacksmiths, medicine men, and amateurs, these artists were court-appointed and salaried professionals.

The above-mentioned French and German artists are best known for their paintings and graphics, however many of them have also worked as sculptors. The majority of writings on the influence of African art on Western art have focused on painting, with sculpture being cited relatively sporadically. However, numerous modern sculptors – Brancusi, Epstein, Freundlich, Lipchitz, Moore, and Giacometti – have also been fascinated in African art and have utilized primitive forms at different times in their lives. As a result, sculpture, painting, and graphic arts should all be considered. In the next paragraphs, we'll look at some examples of primitive design in works by contemporary artists.

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### **The Concept of Degenerated Art into African Tribal Art**

Many of the Bruecke-artists' works feature simple geometric or cubistic design, as well as coarsely grotesque elements typical of African art. In his print *Hloman* Coueted by Man, Pechstein may exhibit the Bruecke-style of woodcutting. The likeness of his figures to those of a Senufo carving of an ancestor-mother figurine is striking. Both of these sculptures have a formal monumentality to them that belies their small scale. Nolde is depicted in the image as a painting detail. Its features are extremely similar to those of an Ekoi tribe headdress doll. Art historians have barely noted his infrequent wood sculpture. It recalls a Kissi figurine carved from soapstone in its crudeness. Henry Moore, who was held up as a subject for contempt and ridicule in the exhibition of *"Degenerate Art"* organized in Nazi-Germany, also produced crudely featured images of stone early in his career, as did Otto Freundlich, who was held up as a subject for contempt and ridicule in the exhibition of *"Degenerate Art"*.

Henry Moore is one of the most well-known and versatile sculptors alive today. In the years leading up to 1930, he created a number of stone figures with concave, heart-shaped faces and eyes that protrude as little, elevated craters. Several African tribes, most notably the BaLega of the North-Eastern Congo, use this design in their art. This is an example of one of their masks, which indicates position in the hidden Bwame society. Henry Moore recalled the lengthy hours and days he spent appreciating and studying primitive and antique art on exhibit at the British Museum in his writings. As a result, he is open about his obligation to ancient models, which have expanded his artistic perspective.

African forms also inspired Alberto Giacometti at different times throughout his life. The stance of the statue, standing up with bent knees, and the facial features of one of his surrealist pieces from the 1930s have two unique African characteristics. Sculptures of attenuated, crudely moulded figures, some of which strikingly resemble the intricately textured figurines of the Bena-Lulua from the central Congo, were recreated over and over by Giacometti during the last fifteen years of his life. In articles discussing the early Cubists' formative influences, Picasso has been a frequent target. This topic, however, continues to be divisive.

Picasso also made a few wood sculptures around the time, which are only mentioned in passing. These carvings are not '*transitional*' in the sense that the picture Les Demoiselles d'Avignon is sometimes described, but rather full-fledged '*primitive*' constructions that exist outside of the Western tradition. Their resemblance to African art, such as the BaTeke's, is undeniable. Despite Picasso's reticence to address it, it is clear from the recollections of several of his artist colleagues that he was a huge fan of and collector of African art. He may be sensitive about this because Gertrude Stein reportedly accused him of relying on African art as a crutch. African influences may still be seen in his work long after the Cubist period: gigantic sculptures of women's heads from the early 1930s closely resemble Baga carvings. Picasso's paintings entered a surrealist phase in the late 1930s, typified by grotesquely twisted facial features. The deformation masks of the Ibibio tribe have similarly fragmented faces. In tribal rites, such masks portray either comical or menacing characters, probably inspired by the ravages of leprosy and other maladies. In a lighter vein, Picasso has created numerous faun figures in graphic media and ceramics; a similar theme also shows frequently in the work of Miro and Paul Klee. The Baule tribe's Guli masks, which are abstract representations of a buffalo head, are clearly related to this form of representation.

These are only a few examples that could go on indefinitely. Amadeo Modigliani, Henri Laurens, Paul Klee, Max Ernst, Barbara Hepworth, and Eduardo Paolozzi's works have also been photographed alongside primitive constructions. Such parallels strongly show that African iconography had a significant influence on modern artists. It is important to note that tracing primal influences on modern masters is not meant to diminish their achievements in any way. It is not created in a vacuum by artists. They are exposed to a range of external impressions, whether or not they are aware of them. The most innovative and adaptable among them have frequently used a variety of models as a starting point for their work.

The more formal models of Henry Moore's early work have given way to organic forms in later years, and Picasso's influences appear to include much of the world's art made before high time. If certain modern painters were the first to notice the aesthetic value of tribal sculpture and to use and modify tribal design to the point of incorporating it into one of the mainstreams of Western art, they were also responsible for the recent rise in popularity of primitive art objects. The general public has been regularly exposed to '*primitive*' forms created by famous modern artists for more than two generations. The observer will become accustomed to such images after seeing them repeatedly in museums, galleries, books, and magazines; he will no longer be horrified by them and will finally see them as respectable and even beautiful. Once the audience has arrived at this phase, they will be able to appreciate and be interested in the original rudimentary models for their own sake. As a result of this process, African and other tribal artifacts are now widely recognized as works of art and valued to levels that would have been unthinkable before the turn of the century. One might infer that there has been a mutually beneficial connection between cultures: modern artists' spectrum of expression has been expanded, while tribal art has benefited from a significant increase in eastern cultural regard.

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### **Debating the Discords of African Tribal Art: Loopholes in Projection and Outcomes**

With the huge and diverse art collections that have been gathered and sometimes neglected in museums and other institutions over more than a century, there is still a great deal of exciting research to be done. Thousands of artistically and ethnographically significant pieces have been scarcely identified and certainly not thoroughly examined in museums around the world, as well as many others that have only been documented at the most basic levels. There are various archival sites with extensive documentation of a general or specific character that include vast amounts of original and useful material. There are also untapped photographic documents and vital bits of information strewn around in "non-scientific" published works like articles from a wide range of vintage periodicals and travelogues.

Dark's Benin book is the result of extensive research on one specific region of art (Benin) and specific styles of art within it (mainly bronze heads and plaques). Dark's own short-term field investigations, as well as Bradbury's extended field expertise, add to this type of research. The research covers issues such as exterior and internal chronology, context, guild traditions, and so on. It includes a large collection of images, including field shots and "*comments on the plates.*" Despite several flaws (e.g., assumptions regarding the diachronic continuity of the functions of the bronze heads; omission of similar artifacts beyond the royal and primarily shrines), the work has a powerful effect due to its compact succinctness and accurate description of the subject matter. This is the type of analysis that is required as a first step toward a more comprehensive regional synthesis.

Stereotypes, *a priori*'s, and imprecision's abound in the study of African art. The flaws can take different shapes and affect various areas and levels of analysis. The precise nature of the art-producing unit; the linkages of African art with particular forms of religion (such as ancestral cult) or notions (such as vital force); and the numerous functions of single pieces of art or groups, to name a few, are all major sources of misunderstanding. The problem emerging from Islam's so-called iconoclastic tendencies among ethnic groups with abundant figurative representation in art has often been misrepresented in areas of Africa where Islam has firmly entered cultural systems have been introduced to other ethnic groups from their point of

origin. The destiny of the art forms and art usages defused in such settings necessitates a deeper inquiry into whether or not the receiving communities had their own original art traditions. Similarly, the influence of art on certain “new”, sometimes syncretistic cults, rituals, and prophetic or messianic organizations that sprang unexpectedly and later faded, obscured, or reoriented their ideology are of great interest. Forms, symbols, themes, motifs, locations, contexts, functions, and meanings must all be further explored and refined in comparative studies. The small-scale, meticulous, and well-documented comparative study that Mauss mentioned deserves our entire attention. This is especially crucial for a continent like Africa, where the arts are diverse and rich, yet information about them is either insufficient or non-existent. This is where we need to delve more to derive the essence and flavor of the culture, art, society and in whole, a study of mankind.

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## Notes

1. There are many cultures in Africa. It is, however, fair to say that there is an underlying theme or sameness in Africa’s response to the colonial encounter. This response has largely shaped modern African culture. Here restricting the discussion of culture to the imaginative expressions in philosophy and the arts and their manifestations in politics and society in general.
2. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989), 2.
3. Refer to, Kwame Anthony Appiah’s book *In My Father’s House*, Achille Mbembe’s seminal essay “*African Modes of Self-Writing*,” trans. Steven Rendall, *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 239–73 and Bruce Janz’s *Philosophy in an African Place* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).
4. The enduring legacies of the Western assault on Africa, such as the existence of artificial geopolitical boundaries, the policies of Western governments, and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank are to be referred here. In most cases, however, these have provided convenient excuses for some leaders to dodge the difficult task of consistently working for the development of their societies.
5. OgagaIfowodo, “They Won’t Even Build Toilets for Themselves! Thinking through the Corruption Complex with Frantz Fanon,”

<http://www.saharareporters.com/article/theywon%E2%80%99t-even-build-toilets-themselves-thinking-through-corruption-complex-frantzfanon?page=1> (accessed October 6, 2010).

6. Martin Asiegbu, “African Migrants in Spite of ‘Fortress’ Europe: An Essay in Philosophy of Popular Culture,” <http://www.ajol.info/index.php/og/article/viewFile/52332/40957> (accessed May 23, 2011).
7. “Rebranding Nigeria: Good People, Impossible Mission: The Government of a Great Nation Tries a Short Cut to Salvation,”

[http://www.economist.com/node/13579116?story\\_id=13579116](http://www.economist.com/node/13579116?story_id=13579116). See also “Rebranding Nigeria,”

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/documentaries/2009/10/091021\\_rebranding\\_nigeria.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/documentaries/2009/10/091021_rebranding_nigeria.shtml) (accessed May 21, 2011).

8. There are, of course, outstanding examples of African political leaders who paid with their lives because they sought to improve the lot of their countries—leaders such as Patrice Lumumba of Zaire, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso.
9. See, for instance, Hillary Clinton’s warning on Africa against new colonialism. “Clinton Warns against ‘New Colonialism’ in Africa,” <http://www.theafricareport.com/last-business-news/5141496-Clinton%20warns%20against%20%5C> (accessed June 11, 2011).

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5. Ross, H.W. (1978). African Tribal Arts, *African Arts*, UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Centre, 11(2), 84.