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Paula Ben-Amos

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Pidgin Languages and Tourist Arts

PIDGIN LANGUAGES AND TOURIST ARTS

PAULA BEN-AMOS

As in all fields of inquiry, emotional climate and cultural preconceptions have affected scholarly research into the problem of artistic change. This has been most notable in the study of tourist art, that is, art forms which are created for sale to outsiders as souvenirs. Bascom (1976:305-307) has recently shown the extent to which scholars from the 1920s through the 1960s viewed West African tourist art as a degeneration from pure tribal forms, and thus, by implication, unworthy of investigation. Typically, it was characterized as a kind of "anti-art that emerges insidiously with the rapid fading of ways of life that generated the famous traditional African art" (Stout 1966:1). Hymes' characterization of attitudes toward pidgin languages can equally describe the approach to tourist arts:

Because of their origins, however, their association with poorer and darker members of a society, and through perpetuation of misleading stereotypes—such as that a pidgin is merely a broken or baby-talk version of another language—most interest, even where positive, has considered them merely curiosities. Much of the interest and information, scholarly as well as public, has been prejudicial. *These languages have been considered, not creative adaptations, but degenerations; not systems in their own right, but deviations from other systems.* Their origins have been explained, not by historical and social forces, but by inherent ignorance, indolence, and inferiority [1971:3; italics mine].

Recent research, however, has begun to point out the necessity of looking at the phenomenon of tourist arts as a "creative adaptation." Thus, Bascom (1976:317-319) discusses some of the "redeeming features" of African tourist art, particularly the stress on innovation, and Graburn (1969) points to the important acculturative value such art production can have for colonially dominated peoples. In this paper, I will suggest some of the ways in which tourist art productions can be considered systems of communication.¹ I am utilizing the concept of communication here in the sense proposed by Worth and Gross (1974:30) as "a social process, within a context, in which signs are produced and transmitted, perceived, and treated as messages from which meaning can be inferred."

The similarities between pidgin languages and tourist arts are not limited to the negative attitude toward them. Both

phenomena originate in the same types of circumstances and must meet similar functional requirements of communication. It seems logical, then, to follow Hymes' (1971) lead here and ask the same types of questions. That is, if we start from the premise that tourist art is not the visual equivalent of "simplified foreigner talk" but is a communicative system in its own right, then we are led to ask questions about how and why these forms arise, what are the patterns of development, how is communication accomplished and what are the rules governing the creation and acceptance of new forms within the system. In attempting to answer these questions, I will discuss some of the general processes of change and then analyze one specific body of sculpture—Benin ebony carvings—to show how a tourist art system operates.

SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Both tourist arts and pidgin languages arise in the primary stages of culture contact and develop hand in hand in response to the same economic and social forces: expanding commerce, colonialism, and, now, industrialization. While, as Bascom (1976) has shown, the impact of European cultures on African arts has been going on for centuries, clearly the major changes have occurred within the period of colonialism and its aftermath. These general trends have been discussed elsewhere² so that here I propose mainly to outline a few of the major developments.

As Trowell suggests:

Local art is affected by the foreigner in three ways: it may be affected by the introduction of fresh techniques and materials; its form of expression may be altered by the adoption of new idioms or the turning out of new types of applied art; or, most fundamental of all, its whole context of ideas may be changed [1954:33].

Trowell's suggestions for possible directions of change can in fact be viewed as a chronological summary of the development of tourist art forms, from the introduction of a few aspects of European technology through a gradual transformation into a full-fledged communicative system. The end result of this process is the creation of a "contact" art which is not (to paraphrase the linguist usage) the native artistic language of either participant.³ The linguistic concept of "interference" is particularly relevant here.⁴ The formal and symbolic structures of both art traditions (looked at in the broadest sense) are different enough to be mutually unintelligible. It has been pointed out by Trowell and others that Europeans may have had difficulty understanding African art:

the [European] patron will almost certainly have no understanding of the psychological approach to the art of a people other than his own, and will seldom have the artistic sensibility to appreciate formal values which are different from his own artistic tradition [1954:32-33].

But it is equally plausible, I would suggest, that Africans might have had little comprehension of that art tradition being presented to them as superior. Unintelligibility works both ways. If we look closely at the types of situations in which European artistic values might have been transmitted to African artists, we find that they were probably quite limited in terms of numbers affected and extent of influence. The schools and missions were undoubtedly important transmitters of Victorian aesthetics, but the total number of Afri-

Paula Ben-Amos is a Research Associate of the University of Pennsylvania Museum and is currently teaching in the Art History Department. She is the Editor of Working Papers in the Traditional Arts. Her recent publications include "Men and Animals in Benin Art," and "Owina n'Ido: Royal Weavers of Benin."

cans who came under their influence was not uniformly large (in Benin, in fact, it was quite small; see Ben-Amos 1971:28-31), and, among those so educated, the number who went on to become artists was further limited. In the actual face-to-face contact situations between artist and customer, I would suspect (based on my experience in Benin) that the communication of artistic ideas was based on verbal critiques of existing pieces and equally verbal explanations of what is desired. Occasionally photographs and books may have been utilized. But in either case, both of these communications devices (printed as well as verbal) were totally removed from the established pattern of learning aesthetic values in Africa—watching a skilled senior at work. In short, the probability that tourist art is a straight visual copy of European artistic tastes is highly unlikely. What seems to be happening on a visual level is not the taking over *in toto* of another aesthetic but the gradual evolution of a system which can meet the minimum requirements of both producer and purchaser.

The major characteristic of tourist art is that it is critically restricted in its communicative function. As Samarin describes for linguistic phenomena:

The fundamental characteristic of pidginization is reduction or simplification. . . . With reference to the various uses to which language is put, this characterization means that a language is used to talk about less topics, or in fewer contexts, to indicate fewer social relations, etc. [1971:126].

Indeed, tourist art, as a system, has both a reduced semantic level and a limited range of possible subject matters—both of which will be discussed in the following section—as well as a reduced range of uses in comparison with the wide religious, social, political, and decorative uses of traditional arts. Tourist arts do not replace these multiple uses (although they indeed may replace a few limited ones), but remain marginal to the “parent” traditional system. The parent system, however, may cease through loss of patronage. These new forms may have no function at all within the culture of their producers (that is, they are made totally for export), or may have a limited use, copying that of the purchasers (for example, Bini give ebony carvings to European friends returning home). However—and this is a crucial area for investigation—the functions of tourist art may expand. In Benin, for example, tourist art has begun to replace one minor aspect of traditional art—prestige display. Chiefs now purchase modern carvings in place of traditional ones to exhibit in their parlors as signs of their sophistication and wealth. More important, just as pidgin languages can come to provide a sense of prestige and unity for colonized peoples (Kay and Sankoff (1972:4) give the example of New Guinea Tok Pisin), so can tourist arts perform important identity functions, as Graburn (1969) has well described.

Although tourist arts are capable of rapid development, they are contact-dependent and can, like pidgin languages, die as easily as they can expand. Thus, there were no more ivory salt cellars produced by Bini or Sierra Leonean carvers after the Portuguese trade died down. Undoubtedly it would be possible to document other instances of tourist arts that have died out because of the withdrawal of the dominant culture (due to war or cessation of trade) or because they never fully established themselves as effective communicative systems.

SOME PARAMETERS OF CHANGE

The processes of change occur along several parameters. Not all systems change at the same rate and in the same manner and it would be most fruitful to look at the process as a kind of continuum, varying from what Graburn (1969:3) has termed “functional arts” (“that is, those contemporary arts which perform traditional functions within the society where they are created, although changes may have taken place at the level of medium or techniques”) and “commercial fine arts” (“these are produced to satisfy their creators. . . but must also appeal to the buyers of primitive arts around the world”) through various intermediary stages to the creation of a totally new system (new materials, techniques, forms, and meanings) such as can be found among the Makonde of Tanzania, the Kamba of Kenya, and the Bini of Nigeria. The introduction of new media and techniques and/or the making of art forms available to outsiders are the prerequisites for transformation into a tourist art, since they constitute the initial sanctioned violations of the traditional system.⁵

As we have seen, both tourist arts and pidgin languages originate and function in situations of contact between mutually unintelligible communicative systems. The changes which result are not arbitrary but reflect the needs of the new situation. As Hymes points out regarding pidgin languages, the specific changes that occur

all have in common that they minimize the knowledge a hearer need have, and the speed with which he must decide, to know what in fact has grammatically happened. They minimize the knowledge a speaker need have, and his task in encoding, to say something within the rules of the code being used. . . . *Given the circumstances of use, the purpose is to make what means of communication are shared or sharable as accessible as possible* [Hymes 1971:73; italics mine].

Tourist art also operates as a minimal system which must make meanings as accessible as possible across visual boundary lines. The potential for unshared interpretations clearly exists. While the creators of the objects may have certain ideas about their meaning, the purchasers may hold entirely different notions. In the terminology of Worth and Gross (1974), the purchasers’ interpretations may be “attributional” rather than “inferential.” The formal and semantic changes that occur in tourist art are aimed precisely at bridging that gap and creating shared meanings. These changes are: standardization, changes in scale, reduction in semantic level of traditional forms, expansion of neo-traditional and secular motifs, and utilization of adjunct communicative systems.

Standardization

Next to shoddy workmanship, the standardization of forms is the most bitterly criticized characteristic of tourist art production, for it violates Western canons of individual creativity. Standardization, of course, simplifies production for the artist, leading to obvious results, as in the case of the Indian painters:

The demands of the market for efficiency, haste, and a product saleable to tourists have put an end to individuality and creativity in the painting of all but a few courageous painters devoted to working within the old Mewari styles. Artistic sterility, conventionalism, and frozen styles characterize the new wave of folk paintings from Rajasthan [Maduro 1976:241].

In the traditional art context the limits of the system were known; however, in the case of arts undergoing transformation, the situation is in flux and the limits and rules of the system are continually being formulated through trial and error. In these cases, standardization operates as a codification device for both the producer and the purchaser. For the artist, it establishes guidelines for production; in other words it tells him how to go about carving specific forms in a situation in which he is attempting to establish a repertoire of meaningful items. For the purchaser it performs a similar service. In a well stocked showroom, such as is common in large workshops, creative individuality would be chaotic for the person entering the new situation (faced with an unfamiliar code) and standardization minimizes his choice by giving him a set of formal and easily observable guidelines (size, subject matter) to operate with.

Changes in Scale

The demands of the new situation bring about changes in size: objects get larger to generate higher prices (Bascom's "gigantism" in 1976:314) or become smaller for increased portability (such as the Laguna pots described by Gill 1976:

Figure 1 —Detail from an ivory tusk on the king's ancestral shrine, Benin City, Nigeria. The figure, representing a king, illustrates the traditional Benin canon of proportions. Carved by members of the wood and ivory carvers' guild.

Figure 2 —A contemporary plaque representing a Benin chief and his wife illustrating the modern naturalistic canon of proportions. Carver: P. Igiehon.

108). Traditional forms also had to meet spatial requirements of altar placement or portability and these current transformations can best be viewed as accommodations to new kinds of uses.

But changes also occur in the formal relationships characterizing traditional art styles and, as a result, a new set of structural rules begins to emerge. What Bascom (1976:314) has characterized as "grotesqueness" in regard to Makonde *shetani* carvings constitutes in part a rearrangement of forms in violation of traditional African norms of rigid symmetry and frontality. Similarly, Abramson (1976:257) found in Sepik art that rigid bilateral symmetry was being abandoned in favor of "striking visual effects." One of the main developments in African tourist art is the gradual replacement of the African canon of proportions (Fagg 1963:24), whereby the head constitutes one-third to one-quarter of the total height of the body, by the natural proportion of one-sixth to one-seventh (see Figures 1 and 2). In Benin, this formal change is accompanied by a rationalized and verbalized norm of proportions used as a guideline in creating and judging sculptures. Thus, when carving human figures Bini attempt to make the length from the underarm to the elbow equal that from the waist to the neck, and from the thigh to the knee equal that from the knee to the ankle. Whether or not these proportions actually exist in nature, they do constitute a set of rules, a cognitive system of what the Bini carvers think is a code of naturalistic proportions.

Reduction in Semantic Level of Traditional Forms

According to Lévi-Strauss (Charbonnier 1969:60) the transition from primitive to modern art (and I include tourist art as well) is characterized by the "diminution of the function of art as a sign system." Thus we find for shields from the Sepik area:

where once utilization of design elements was conditioned by facts of kinship-group affiliation and, probably, by the ritual or mythological connotations of the design elements, now aesthetic considerations (always present to some degree) oriented around the desire to sell the object seem to be paramount [Abramson 1976: 257].

The subordination of meaning to "direct visual effect" in design systems is paralleled by the reliance on naturalistic detail in representative art systems. In the latter case, as Lévi-Strauss (Charbonnier 1969:61) explains, "the semantic function of the work tends to disappear to be replaced by an increasingly closer approximation to the model which the artist tries to imitate instead of merely signifying it." The contrast between a highly symbolic traditional code and a modern semantically restricted one is brought out in this comparison by Samson Okungbowa of an ancestral commemorative head and a modern ebony bust (Figures 3 and 4):

To make a proper commemorative head it is necessary to get all the patterns right. Someone who doesn't know how to make it

Figure 3 —Ancestral commemorative head made by the carvers' guild. Shrine of Chief Ihaza.

Figure 4 —Modern ebony bust of a chief. Carver: D. Omoregie.

will lose parts of the pattern. Or he may say: "A real mouth is not like this" and he will try and make it in another way. He may try to make it more beautiful. The Igbesamwan [traditional guild] are not interested in realism; they are making a commemorative head for a shrine. The modern carving is exactly like a person and so is not made for a shrine. The commemorative head represents the head of a spirit not a human being. Its purpose is to instill fear and it is made for a shrine. No one was ever afraid of an ebony head!

Such a reduction in semantic level is necessary, as Maquet (1971:32-33) points out, because

senders of messages cannot rely upon signifiers whose meanings are traditionally known by the members of a society. Their representations thus have to reproduce appearances as the eye sees them when looking at the signified. Representations are imitative so as to diminish misunderstandings.

Although the Sepik and Benin systems constitute different types of visual codes, the basis of their accessibility to the outsider lies in their low semantic level. In either case the referent is not to mythological or other shared symbolic systems but to immediately perceivable qualities—formal arrangements in the one case and photographic likenesses in the other.⁶ The art object must now stand on its own so that, in modern parlance, “what you see is what you get.”

Expansion of Motifs

Within this new framework, the motif vocabularies are capable of great expansion (the limitations of which will be the subject of the next section). This expansion can occur in a number of ways; for example, items can be introduced directly from the dominant culture, such as salad bowls or paper knives. These are the visual equivalents of loan words. Another possibility is the introduction into the visual arena of imagery from other spheres of traditional or contemporary life previously not given visual embodiment. Makonde *shetani* carvings may be an example of the utilization of a demonology, previously in the realms of folklore and religion, for modern artistic representation (Stout 1966). Scenes from everyday life (a woman carrying a baby on her back, an antelope or other typical safari fauna) are obvious choices for subject matter because of their ease of identification for the purchaser, who, indeed is looking for something typical, from everyday life, as a souvenir (see Figure 5). Innovations like these are also easily incorporated because they carry a light semantic load. The animals used in traditional Benin ebony carving, for example, are generally not those used in traditional Benin art for symbolic purposes. I never saw an ebony leopard or chameleon, instead, there are crown birds and lions (representing the lion of Nigeria).

Expansion is most operable—and even considered desirable—in those sectors of the “vocabulary” considered “secular” or “commercial” as opposed to “ritual” and “traditional.” Perhaps as a kind of middle stage in the process of semantic reduction it is common for the producers to distinguish between the “sacred” or “traditional” objects which maintain meaning value for them, and the “commercial” forms, which are produced strictly for sale.⁷ The former (see Figure 6) are carved despite their potential inaccessibility to the customer, although in some cases the gaps in communication are bridged by recourse to external explanations (as, for example, the printed crib sheets provided by Dahomean tapestry appliquers). In effect, this development represents a kind of stratification within the visual communication system which expresses social as well as cultural differences between the participants. This situation may parallel the usage of proverbs by African pidgin speakers with European or other tribal groups. The listener may or may not recognize the utterance as a proverb, but, if he is European, he surely will not realize its social value, indicating that the speaker is a man of status, education, and intelligence. Similarly, the maintenance of traditional motifs and forms provides the artists with a strong sense of self-esteem. As one ebony carver

boasted to me: “I can carve every detail of an Oba’s dress and I know the name of every single piece. If there is a contest in all Benin I couldn’t get less than third for knowledge of traditional carving.”⁸ In this case the prestige derived from the creation of “traditional” art (as opposed to “commercial” forms) operates both vis-a-vis the other carvers (proving he is better than they) and the Europeans (providing a more positive self-image as Graburn (1969) has described). However, in order to accomplish this latter objective, it may be necessary to go outside the visual system.

Figure 5 —Ebony bust of a bare-breasted Bini woman made as a “commercial” object. Carver: R. Amu.

Figure 6 —A “neo-traditional” ebony carving representing the messenger of the god of death. This figure also appears in traditional art in wood, mud, and brass. Carver: R. Amu.

Utilization of Adjunct Communicative Systems

Due to the limited vocabulary, communication can break down between pidgin users, in which case they must resort to hand gestures, pictures, and other nonverbal means of expression. A similar situation obtains with tourist art where the producer is often required to go outside the system, that is, to verbally explain what the object represents. This is particularly true in the previously described cases of forms termed “traditional” since their higher semantic load makes them partially inaccessible to the purchaser. Under these circumstances, narration becomes a key element in the communication process, as exemplified in the following comment by James Abudu, an ebony carver:

When I make my plaques [considered “traditional”] I am trying to educate the public; for instance, they can learn the traditional ways of hunting in the olden days. When I start to make something I remember that what I make will get questions. I must be prepared to convince people. . . . Someone who has never seen traditional hunting will believe that this is the way they used to hunt.

TOURIST ART AS A SYSTEM

By using the example of Benin ebony carving I hope to demonstrate that tourist art does indeed constitute a system, that is, that there exist clear markers distinguishing ebony carving from other carving productions in Benin as well as rules of operation governing what constitutes an acceptable artistic form.

A series of contextual markers differentiate between modern and traditional (guild-produced) carving in Benin (see Table 1).⁹ The guild carvers utilized wood from the iroko tree (which was believed to contain a powerful and dangerous spirit) as well as other restricted woods which they obtained by permission of the Oba. Members of the carpenter’s guild (*Owina*) went to the forests to cut down and bring in the wood, which was then purified (“to erase the unclean handprints of the *Owina*”) and carved by *Igbesamwan* members. Ebony, the distinguishing mark of modern carvings, was not used traditionally. In fact, its use was initiated only in the 1920s and 30s when Bini carvers sojourned in Lagos, far from the impact of traditional sanctions. Modern carvers obtain their ebony, walnut, and mahogany from special contractors who actually work principally to supply this new industry.

Modern carvers work almost exclusively in ebony, with an occasional usage of mahogany and walnut, while traditional carvers continue to make commemorative heads, rattle staffs, and so on, with iroko. There is minimal overlap. In an attempt to “modernize,” four guild members actually went to learn tourist art production in the 1940s and 50s. Now, when called upon to carve for the Oba (which rarely occurs) they expect him to provide the materials, but when producing tourist art, they obtain wood from the Forestry Department or occasionally from contractors.

All artistic production related to the Oba—not just carving—took place in ward guilds near the palace. *Igbesamwan* members did their actual carving in the yards behind their houses or in a special room within the palace. Modern carvers have created the institution of the workshop (*isiwinna*) as a place separate from one’s residence where it is possible to store tools and display objects. These workshops are located

along commercial arteries far from traditional areas. Only a minority of modern craftsmen choose to work at home. Modern carvers, in fact, often change location in search of better possibilities, in sharp contrast to traditional values of permanence and stability. Ebony carvers, no matter where they might move, would hardly consider renting a shed anywhere near Igbesanmwan ward (for more than commercial reasons) and members of Igbesanmwan have steadfastly refused to rent workshops outside their area, even though their street is far from the commercial center. In addition, it is common for the Igbesanmwan to carve their traditional work in the yard behind their house and their modern carvings in a special showroom they have opened up on the street.

Members of the guild received a sense of worth from being "servants of the Oba." Although he reimbursed their work according to an established system of equivalences, these were euphemistically viewed as "gifts" from the king to his faithful servants. Today they continue to receive goats, yams, and other traditional payments, although it is now necessary for the head of the guild to admonish the younger members about to start a commission for some villagers not to "shame themselves before the Oba" by accepting money. Modern carvings are obviously for financial gain and the offering of a goat as reimbursement would not be acceptable. But even more, one carver complained to me that he used to pay calls of respect to the Oba but stopped when to his astonishment the Oba actually expected him to offer some of his carvings as gifts. While the "violation" was on the part of the Oba, nevertheless, the carver could not see any legitimacy in his expectation.

The guild was by definition a closed system and theoretically anyone caught carving outside it would be punished by

death. Learning was informal, from father to son, with the possibilities of assistance from other guild members. Igbesanmwan carvers believed that carving was "in the blood" of those born into the guild and actual training only brought out the inborn potential. Ebony carving can be learned only through an apprenticeship, which is highly modern in its own organization. Apprentices sign written contracts which specify the length of the learning period and the various mutual obligations of teacher and pupil. At the end of the training there is a formal party where the apprentice is endorsed as a skilled practitioner. In fact, when ebony carving was first brought to Benin from Lagos, Aifesehi, the local carver who initially wished to learn it, paid the returning carver, Ihaza, for his instructions, thus acknowledging that he was entering a new system. Indeed, when the members of the guild wished to "modernize," they went to this same Aifesehi for training.

Traditional carvings were made for the Oba and, with his explicit permission, for members of the nobility and some commoners. The modern carver sells to visiting Europeans, Nigerian civil servants, and a few chiefs, as well as utilizing the Hausa traders and other middlemen. In terms of purchases within the context of Benin culture, the two systems are minimally co-extensive. A traditionalist would scorn an ebony carving ("No one was ever afraid of an ebony head!") while a modern civil servant would disdain traditional art as "primitive, if you will excuse the expression." Yet, an individual might, under very limited circumstances, utilize both systems: (1) A traditionalist might give an ebony carving to European or local dignitaries who are temporary residents or are in the process of departing (i.e., gifts to those higher in status who are not permanent sharers of the same culture) in consideration of the receiver's possible aesthetic tastes. (2)

TABLE 1
TRADITIONAL AND MODERN CARVING IN BENIN

	Igbesanmwan Guild Carving	Modern Tourist Carving
Materials	<i>Iroko</i> (<i>Chlorophora excelsa</i>) <i>Obobo</i> (<i>Guarea Kennedyi</i>) <i>Evbee</i> (<i>Cola acuminata</i>)	Ebony, mahogany, and walnut
	Obtained from Oba via Carpenters' Guild	Obtained from contractors or Forestry Department
Types of objects made	Wooden commemorative heads, ancestral rattle staffs, shrines of the hand, kola nut boxes, stools, doors and beams, and ivory pectoral masks, staffs, armlets and tusks	Busts of kings, chiefs, warriors, and young ladies, lamp stands, ash trays, salad bowls, paper knives, and book ends, figures of lions, elephants, antelopes, and snails
Location of production	Igbesanmwan ward or palace	Workshops in commercial zones, often separate from residence
Goal of production	Service to Oba	Financial remuneration
Training of carvers	Father to son inside guild	Contractual apprenticeship
Function of carvings	Commemoration Contact with supernatural Enhancement of status, etc.	"Decoration"
Distribution of carvings	Regulated by Oba along status lines. For nobility and restricted use by commoners	Directly to Europeans, and Nigerian civil servants and via Hausa middlemen and Nigerian government

Although their numbers are dwindling there still are a few chiefs in Benin who maintain their ancestral shrines. At the same time, they are modifying the prestige uses of art and it is conceivable for them to purchase expensive modern carvings to decorate their residences. Even then, the ancestral objects are kept in a special shrine room (*ikun*) while the modern art is on display in their parlor for the admiration of guests.¹⁰

Ebony carving, then, is set apart socially from other carving productions within Benin culture. But it also constitutes a distinct system of artistic communication with its own criteria of correctness and acceptability and its own rules for generation of innovations. The organizing principle of this new system is naturalism. According to Osborne, naturalism is

the habit of mind which deflects attention from the artwork as such and looks through it, as if through a mirror or transparent window, toward the slice of reality which it "imitates" or reproduces, assessing the artwork either by the natural standards applied to its subject or by the standards of accuracy, skill, and vividness with which it reflects its subject [Osborne 1970:79].

Traditional visual codes, such as in Benin, operate with a system of conventional representations:

Thus, for example, in the representation of animals the primitive limits himself to the enumeration of such creatures as limbs and organs and uses geometrically clear-cut shape and pattern to identify their kind, function, importance, and mutual relationships as precisely as possible. He may use pictorial means also to express "physiognomic" qualities, such as the ferocity or friendliness of the animal. Realistic detail would obscure rather than clarify these relevant characteristics [Arnheim 1969:103].

Traditionally, the major criterion for Benin carvers was "getting the patterns right," that is, knowing the explicit conventions needed for each type of representation. As Lévi-Strauss (Charbonnier 1969:84) points out, the lack of interest in realism in systems like these is at least in part related to the type of subject matter: "Being supernatural, it is by definition non-representable, since no 'facsimile' or model of it can be provided." When I asked guild members if they had ever seen a spirit in order to know how to represent it correctly their response was laughter.

In modern representational tourist art systems schematization gives way to stress on naturalistic detail. Thus, Graburn (1976:52) found Eskimo carvers hesitant about whether to portray a polar bear with the conventional four canines or to accurately reproduce the actual number of teeth. This is precisely the dilemma of the system in transition. The "patterns" that modern Bini carvers now attempt to "get right" are no longer conventional representations but exact replications of the natural world.¹¹ Thus, Albert Osayimwen queried me:

Do you know how to tell the best carver in Benin? Has any carver ever given you a description of every detail and how he arrived at it? (Pointing to a "greedy hunter," a statue referring to the parable of a successful hunter returning with an elephant on his head, an antelope over his shoulder, and game birds under his arm, who is so greedy that he cannot resist trying to kill a cricket with his toe [see Figure 7]). When you see someone carrying a heavy load, he'll be bent. You should note whether the hand is placed loosely on the load or not. . . . Note how firmly he grips the gun. Someone who uses his toe to dig the ground won't have both legs the same; one must be lifted. . . . I don't allow the neck to be long when carving olden days people because their necks used to be short because they carried loads; I know because I have seen necks of old men.

As this quote illustrates, observation is the source of formal arrangements and, in fact, Albert and others claimed to spend time observing people in order not to make mistakes. In contrast, in traditional systems, "in order to communicate messages effectively, apprentices look at effigies carved by their masters and not at the human beings the statues are supposed to represent" (Maquet 1971:32). As discussed earlier, the utilization of natural models is essential for minimizing the knowledge necessary for decoding.

The major aesthetic criterion utilized by Bini carvers in evaluating their work is realism; as exemplified in this statement by Albert Osayimwen:

If something is smooth it doesn't mean it is good. You must examine it carefully to see if what the person has said he has carved is the real thing. The aim of the Oba, whose name I don't remember [!], who started carving was to carve what you have in mind, the real object. Past carvings were like photographs; they were for remembrance. People nowadays buy carvings for decoration and because of the history behind it. When I make a carving, I want people to feel pity for the slave, to believe that the hunter is really greedy; that is, I want them to feel that what I have depicted is really true.

The importance of carving the real thing, of maintaining the details which prove authenticity, are all part of the naturalistic aesthetic which stresses, as Osborne (1970:21) points out, "correctness, completeness, and vividness (or convincingness) of representation."

As a system, Benin tourist art operates with a set of boundaries which determine acceptability and provide the limits for innovation. To demonstrate this, I will present three anecdotal scenes from my fieldwork which illustrate violations of the code in the direction of (1) improbability; (2) idealization; (3) system interference.

(1) The carving of the "greedy hunter" described previously has been modified by Albert. Whereas he used to carve it in the conventional manner, by depicting a hunter returning with an elephant on his head, he began to come under criticism from his friends, who claimed that in real life no one could do such a feat. He changed the elephant to a bundle of firewood, thus bringing the carving outside of the range of the very traditional meanings he wished to impart (Figure 8). Events and scenes which could not really happen are now violations of the system.

(2) In criticizing another workshop, Osula, one of the senior craftsmen, explained their major fault:

In the [competing workshop] they don't know how to make a real lion; for example, the mane of a real lion is uneven, the belly smooth. . . . They want to make the lion more beautiful than it really is.¹² I myself cannot get it exactly as in nature but I can come close.

Osborne (1970:82-83) points out that naturalism can be both realistic, as in the Bini system being described, or idealistic, as in the example of the Ife heads. In ebony carving, idealism is a violation of the canon of realism and the major goal is, as Osula claims, "to copy from real life exactly—not better and not worse."

(3) Benson Osawe, a carver who had studied art in England for ten years, returned to Benin, and when rumors began to circulate that he was receiving £700 commissions for his modernistic sculpture, ebony carvers became envious and curious. The head of one of the large workshops began to

Figure 7 —The greedy hunter carrying an elephant. Carver: A. Osague.

Figure 8 —The greedy hunter carrying a load of firewood. Carved A. Osayimwen.

pay social calls on Benson (using the social visit as a pretext for copying ideas is quite common in Benin because of the premium on innovation) and finally attempted to copy one of Benson's sculptures (Figure 9). Since Benson had been influenced abroad by European artists like Brancusi and Lipchitz (who themselves, of course, had been influenced by African art), he was producing semi-abstract forms (at that point mainly masks that looked Congolese via Modigliani; see Figure 10) which the workshop leader could hardly comprehend. When I asked him about his newest production, he explained that Benson was a "real artist" and that by copying him the first time he would learn how to do it so he could do it on his own the next. I asked his good friend, sitting alongside, what he thought of the new carving and, after first protesting that he really liked it, he finally admitted that in fact he did not care for it at all, but "if Europeans value it, it must be alright."¹³ The problem with the piece was that he could not figure out "what the thing is supposed to represent." His own work, he claimed, is just like a photograph. But if anyone asks him what the leader's work is he cannot answer them. When I asked him if he is an artist, he responded that "I don't know; I am just doing the work I know." He then proceeded to tease the head of the workshop, claiming that his innovation looked like a gorilla (quite an insult since the gorilla is the ultimate in grotesqueness). Finally, the head admitted that it was indeed "a funny thing" but insisted rather sheepishly that he still liked it and that he would sell it for £12 (a considerable sum since most ebony carvings of that size sold for £4-6). Apparently he never did, since he presented it to me as a going away present, thus killing two birds with one stone.

This carver's violation of the system is not on the same order as the one committed by Albert. When Albert replaced the elephant, he was still working within a system of realism and simply conformed to its rules of probability. The workshop leader, however, in creating this new object (without

Figure 9 —An ebony mask made as an attempt to copy B. Osawe's abstract carving.

Figure 10 —Abstract carving made by B. Osawe.

eyes or other features with some reference point in the observable world) had gone beyond the boundaries of the system. He had tried to describe the impossible, the totally absurd, and the only response could be incredulity and laughter.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has attempted to show that tourist arts are not corruptions or deviations but visual communicative systems. While it is true that they represent the extremes to which an art can go in responding to economic forces, they nevertheless are not *arbitrary* responses. Tourist arts constitute visual codes and the essential question underlying their analysis is how in fact do they perform their communicative function given their restricted nature.

NOTES

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¹ Along similar lines, Briggs (1976) has discussed the symbolism of a traditional art undergoing transformation into a tourist art, while Szombati-Fabian and Fabian (1976) have analyzed a contemporary popular (but not tourist) art production as a communicative system.

² For general world trends see Graburn (1969;1971), for trends in Africa see Bascom (1976) and Ben-Amos (1971), and for specific case studies from various areas see articles in Graburn (1976). Sociolinguistic discussion of the nature of the contact situation and the types of variables affecting the development of a pidgin language can be found in Hall (1962) and Grimshaw (1971).

³ Here I am in complete disagreement with the common view that tourist art is a total abdication to Western tastes, as is exemplified in Leuzinger's (1960:209) claim that "*the negro artist has found new patrons, to whose taste he is bound to conform*." Where formerly it was the secret societies, priests and kings who assured his existence, today his customers are largely to be found amongst town-dwellers and missionaries, white settlers and tourists. In the hope of rapid and easy gain, *the negro complies with their wishes*" (italics mine).

⁴ The role of interference in the development of pidgin languages is discussed in Whinnom (1971:66).

⁵ Traditional arts were not completely closed systems. Limited external sale to other tribes was possible (such as occurred between Ibo and Ibibio in Nigeria) and new ideas were constantly being incorporated. The key variables here are political domination and economic transformation, particularly the withdrawal of traditional patronage.

⁶ Paul Kay (1973, personal communication) suggests a parallelism between "naturalism in tourist art as a lowest common denominator between alien cultures and the matching of surface structures phenomenon hypothesized to operate in language contact situations." In his article with Sankoff (1972:10), the authors suggest that "in contact situations, those surface structures which are held in common amongst two or more languages will be the first and perhaps the only structures that speaker-hearers learn to produce and interpret correctly in the other's language. These constructions then form the natural grammatical basis for a pidgin."

⁷ Examples of this dichotomization can be found among the Benin carvers (Ben-Amos 1976:326), Brahmin painters (Maduro 1976:242) and Ainu carvers (Low 1976:222), etc. The term in Benin

is not applied to objects actually used in pre-contact days, such as commemorative heads or rattle staffs, but to carvings utilizing motifs drawn from tradition such as busts of kings and chiefs dressed in complete ceremonial regalia. In this case, one might term them "neotraditional."

⁸ His claim of third prize is not a display of modesty but recognition that the first and second places belong by right of seniority to two other carvers within the Benin community.

⁹ Due to considerations of space, the discussion will be limited to a comparison with guild carving and will not deal with other carving systems (the palace-trained pages or the village age-grade carvers).

¹⁰ This paper was written in 1973. On a more recent visit to Benin I found ebony busts in a few chiefly ancestral shrines, indicating, perhaps, a kind of "creolization."

¹¹ That the carvers are clearly aware of these differences can be seen in the following statements: "I started carving in the native way, where a hand is not like a real hand but is made in a traditional way. It is not neat. It is primitive, if you pardon the use of the word" (J. Abudu). "In the olden days, the work did not look so nice because now they carve a face that is exactly like a human being" (D. Iyamu). "I myself cannot get it exactly as in nature, but I can come close. In the olden days they did what came to their minds (not copied from nature)" (S. Osula).

¹² The notion of beauty referred to here is cosmetic, that is, the carvers are attempting to enhance the appeal of the lion for sales purposes.

¹³ The system operates according to several criteria, among them naturalism but also what Europeans value. In a situation of conflict, the carver opted for the latter criterion.

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