

The Rhetorical Function of Portraits from Benin (Nigeria)

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ABSTRACT

A scrutiny of African portraiture art reveals that it is atypical in style, diverse in function and inherent in complex connotations. Consequently, this genre amongst the creative outputs of Africans is generally not properly comprehended outside their culture of origin, hence little has been written about them. It is therefore unsurprising that some arguments in literature actually assert that African art is devoid of portraits. On the contrary and as countless examples show, Africans, for example, the people of Benin (Nigeria) produce veritable portraits. The most intriguing aspects of these artforms, from an art historical perspective, are their unusual formal configuration, profound aesthetic and iconographic significance, multifarious style and diverse functions. These singular characteristics differentiate them from non-African portraits and are their own unique property. They are also the features that make them interesting and edifying. Thus the aim of this article is principally to present a contextual analysis of Benin portraits in an attempt to explicate the aesthetic and iconographic concerns

that make them significant. This appraisal is aimed also at promoting further knowledge and appreciation of these artforms outside their culture of origin.

Keywords and Phrases: *emblematic portraits, iconography, Benin, style, artforms*

INTRODUCTION

The people of Benin (Nigeria) produce genuine portraits which, in their distinct form, are distinguished by characteristic features that are their own unique property. These singular features differentiate them from non-African portraits and make them absorbing and engaging from an art historical perspective.¹ Their most riveting qualities which this article sets out to explicate are their particular formal configuration, profound stylistic and iconographic significance, complex style and diverse functions. A number of these artforms are examined in this article and they include: commemorative heads, free-standing sculptures, altar centre-pieces and ancestral staffs that feature in royal ancestral worship in Benin, and the altar used in the worship of the hand (*ikegobo*). These artforms have been singled out for attention because the general assumption, especially in the West, is that there is a dearth of portraiture art amongst the genres of African art. As Borgatti (1990: 37) puts it succinctly, "because Euramericans found it difficult to recognise the relative naturalism of African sculpture, they dismissed works described as portraits by Africans. Because of the equation between likeness and image that stands at the forefront of Western attitudes about portraiture," they did not probe the nature of portraiture in sub-Saharan African art and culture. These lapses are to be expected given the extant insufficient exposure outside their cultures of origin of this genre that is dominant amongst the creative outputs of Africans. Besides, since little is known about them, there is often a misreading of the nature and meaning of the artforms by some scholars of sub-Saharan African art. Gladly, more insightful studies have shown recently that the necessity to depict and memorialise humans is as crucial an impulse for

the creation of portraiture art in Africa as it is worldwide. Borgatti (1990), for example has proven this to be true in her seminal study entitled *African Portraits* in which she classified African portraits into three types, namely: generic, anthropomorphic and emblematic portraits. She demonstrated amply in her study that while some kind of physical resemblance is a constituent and perhaps a central one in many portraits, its portrayal is absolutely not the only means by which the individual traits of a person can be efficiently depicted. Similar studies have discussed some portraits from Benin (Nigeria) but only briefly since they were not predominantly on Benin art.

Benin culture has a rich tradition of portraiture art and there are several unique portraits of Benin origin which remain to be appraised in all their visual details. The artforms are characterised by a relatively uncharacteristic nature, thus an in-depth study of their nature and significance would definitely yield valuable information concerning beliefs and artistic propensities of the culture that create and use them. Thus this article presents a contextual analysis of Benin royal portraits in an attempt to explicate the aesthetic and iconographic concerns that make them significant. This appraisal is aimed at promoting further knowledge and appreciation of these artforms to the world.

Prior to doing this, it is relevant to take a brief look at the nature of African portraits in general in order for the reader to understand the vital elements that were considered in our interpretation of the artforms under consideration as genuine portraits.

THE NATURE OF AFRICAN PORTRAITS

It is relevant to state from the outset that a characteristic feature of African art generally, is its depiction of reality in a way that does not correspond to conventional ideas of it; consequently, African portraits naturally are in accord with this established artistic convention. As Vogel (1990: 7) notes, African portraits include three types of portrayals: (1) a generalised image that utilises conventional features to depict a person who can be identified by the image's

context, (2) the depiction of resemblance with focus on the reproduction of the perceptible features of the subject and (3) an emblematic portrait that "represents the whole schematically or allusively by only a few characteristic features."

What these descriptions bring to the fore is that African portraits discount emphasis on the realistic depictions of the physical qualities with scrupulous consideration of the facial features of the people depicted. This is not surprising because the idea of representing nature in its verisimilitude does not exist for the African craftsman. The African idea of art making, as Egonwa (2005: 15) observes, "is not synonymous with the simulation of nature, rather, art is differentiated from nature as an act that enriches nature rather than an imitative recreation of it." Another key point worthy of mention is that in creating their anthropomorphic figures, African craftsmen are guided by an invariable set of parameters that emphasise the depiction of an idealised beauty. Thus in creating their portraits, African craftsmen also decisively preclude emphasis on capturing the physiognomic resemblances of their subjects. As an alternative measure, they achieve resemblance between subject and portrait through other means such as the use of emblems, symbols, names, costumes, pose and surroundings in defining the individual. A careful scrutiny of the formal configuration of Benin royal portraits shows this to be true. They present no conceptual distinction or actual physical characteristics of the people they depict, instead, the emphasis is on the use of diverse iconographic devices associated with the people represented. For these reasons, Benin portraiture art presents a wide variety of styles, a complex formal configuration, a multiplicity of meanings and they serve diverse functions.

As noted earlier, these artforms are sacred objects that feature in religious contexts in Benin, thus, we must not lose sight of their primary function in appraising them as portraits. All the same, it must be noted also that their interpretation as portraits does not in any way undermine their religious function; rather it enhances their iconographic opulence and import. It is relevant to point out also that in our interpretation of the artforms under consideration as portraits, certain criteria would be taken into account. Firstly, the dominant features in the art-

forms that make identification of their subjects recognisable would be identified and discussed and secondly, the contextual details that permits accurate interpretation, which personalise the artform would also be evaluated. The artforms selected for this appraisal are: commemorative heads, statuettes, altar tableaux, ancestral staffs and altar to the hand.

BENIN COMMEMORATIVE HEADS AND FIGURES

At the behest of a new Oba (King) of Benin, members of the Benin royal bronze-casters guild (*Igun-Eromwon*) produce brass heads of Benin Kings and Queen Mothers, and free-standing figural sculptures of Obas, chiefs, priests and palace courtiers. These artforms are commemorative in function and are the sacred artforms that furnish altars used in royal ancestral worship of Benin Obas and Queen Mothers.

One of the unique features of Benin royal portraits is their metaphoric style which is in accord with the dictates of the established artistic convention in Benin art and the people's perception of the personages they depict. Therefore, typically, they present standardised depictions of the individuals in agreement with the customary notion of idealised beauty favoured in Benin anthropomorphic figures. Thus the sculptures are depicted with facial features that are stylised, generic and non-idiosyncratic (Photo 1). In addition, they are customarily depicted only in their prime of life without visual references to physical disability or the ravages of age.

This emphasis on representing royal portraits in this conventional style goes beyond aesthetic considerations since it also embodies the Benin belief that the Oba of Benin, being is a true representative of God (*Osanobua*), is an epitome of physical and spiritual perfection. Also, his subjects believe that he is timeless, immortal and invincible. These are the attributes that the formal configurations of these royal portraits illustrate literally.

It is interesting to note that the preoccupation with depictions of bodily perfection is also evident in other African royal portraits. As described by Blier (1998: 32), they show

the king as the epitome of bodily perfection and beauty, neither too old or too young, too heavy nor too thin. They convey an image of someone who never ages, gets ill, or succumbs to the strain of office. This concern with continuing youth makes such portraits somewhat different from royal representations elsewhere in the world.

Although Benin royal portraits exhibit a relatively naturalistic style and do not replicate the real physical traits of the Kings depicted, but they represent correctly and explicitly the characteristics appropriate to their rank and status in Benin society. For instance, they portray the specific royal emblems which identify each Oba as typified in the brass heads that are portrayed with beaded crowns (*ede*) and high neck collar beads (*odigba*). These are emblems of statecraft that are used exclusively by Benin Kings. Moreover, to identify the particular Oba that each head represents, a wide variety of crowns are depicted to record and identify the Oba who introduced their use into Benin royal court. Illustrative of this point are the portrait heads representing Oba Osemwende (1816 AD) which have crowns that have wing-like projections at their sides that he introduced as part of the royal regalia of Benin Kings. The projections signify the barbells of the mudfish. The aquatic species is one of the principal symbols of Benin divine kingship and it signifies the numinous power of the Oba which enables him to mediate between the land of the living and the spiritual realm. To further ensure easy identification of these brass heads as portraits of Benin Kings, the flanges around the bases of most heads have relief motifs that allude to the physical and mystical powers of Benin Kings such as the leopard, crocodile, etc. Additionally,



Photo 1 Brass head portrait of a Benin Oba
Source: Dark (1973)

the guilloche patterns referred to as *oba* that are emblems of status and the royal seal of Benin kings are represented on the flanges to indicate that the commemorative heads are art forms that feature in regal contexts.

Similarly, the free-standing figure sculptures of Obas are portrayed with appropriate emblems that allude to their rank and importance such as beaded gowns, multiple strands of neck and hand beads and ivory and brass bracelets (Photo 2). Furthermore, the figures usually carry one form of hand-held instruments or the other which are indicators of the prerogatives and roles attached to the office of the Oba. Illustrative examples are: the militarily significant weapons (*umozo*) that symbolise their invincibility and their role as the defenders of their kingdom and people, ritual objects such as royal staffs (*ukhure*) and talisman (*isevberigho*) that indicate their spiritual powers and their position as the spiritual leader of the Benins, and insignias of statecraft as exemplified in the ceremonial swords (*eben*), which symbolise their authority and their status as the temporal heads of their realm.

The extent to which Benin portrait sculptures are invested with individually referential emblems to ensure their identity is remarkable, hence Dark (1973: 16) remarked that the symbols that decorate Benin artforms were all "executed in a manner, which though expressing the idiom of Benin artist, bore the stamp of recognisable types of persons and things." This assertion is obvious in the images of chiefs that are depicted reminiscent of the Kings' portraits wearing suitable chiefly regalia and holding ceremonial swords, *eben*. Similarly, royal priests and court officials adorn the costume of their guilds and associations and they wield objects of their profession. For example, royal priests carry blacksmith's hammers (*avakala*) that are linked with *Ogun*, the power inherent in metals and the patron god of all persons who work with iron. Others hold spiritually potent objects such as celt stones and small horn trumpets (*oko*) as typified in the royal priests of *Osun*, the power inherent in herbs. There are also court priests who wear crosses, which are insignias of their office. They are identified as priests of *Ewua* guild. These priests perform with the Oba vital morning rituals, which recapture the origin of the Benin dynasty (Photo 3). Crosses feature in their

rituals because as Benin oral history indicates, Oba Esigie (1504), after his conversion to the Catholic faith through the Portuguese missionaries, introduced the tradition of having Roman Catholic priests (with Benin Chiefs in attendance) perform daily evening mass in the palace. As further reported, he later enlarged the existing royal morning ritual performed by the *Ewua* guild to incorporate the Catholic mass.

Also worthy of mention are the diverse costumes, headgears and hairstyles that are in accord in all details with the types used by the different ranks in Benin court that equally distinguish Benin portrait figures. For example, the heads of images of non-title holders have only overlapping rows of ringlets of hair while the depictions of chiefs and priests have specific chiefly headgears. The images of Osa and Osuan, for instance, are portrayed wearing basket-like garments and conical hats referred to as *oro* which form part of the costume used exclusively by them in their role as the priests of the royal deities called *Ora* and *Uwen*.

The point that is being emphasised with the artforms described so far is the precision and details of these elements and how the various imperative emblems that are depicted on each figure, evoke explicitly the personality and status of the people portrayed. The aim is to demonstrate that these artforms are veritable emblematic portraits. Another reason to appreciate these sculptures as true portraits is indicated in the function that they serve. The commemorative heads (*uhumwun elao*), for example, as noted



Photo 2 Brass figure of an Oba
Source: Photograph by Sweet U. Ebeighe



Photo 3 A royal priest
Source: Eguaokun (2009)

earlier, are part of the furnishing for royal ancestral altars and are integral in the worship of departed Benin Kings. In the context in which they are used, the heads help to validate the position of the Oba, reassert their ancestral heritage and affirm the legitimacy of their reign. As Blier (1998: 44) rightly notes, they function, as "potent visual references to each ruler's destiny (*ehi*), authority, wisdom, success, and happiness, reflecting Benin associations of the head with knowledge, intelligence, character, judgment and family leadership." For these reasons, it is compulsory for every new Oba of Benin to commission a variety of these memorial heads which he uses to establish an altar in honour of his departed father where he worships his late father's spirit annually. The altar and its objects serve as a "locus for ancestral contact with the new King becoming the principal priest and intercessor for his late father." The importance of

these artforms is obvious in the custom which makes it mandatory for the Oba to personally pour the first crucible of molten brass for the casting of the objects (Blier 1998: 71).

On her part, Borgatti (1990: 79) correctly notes that royal portraits can be read as "genealogical logical reference points (captured image) and as public statements (monuments)" and she observes that royal portraits, whether emblematic or representational, bring to mind not only particular monarchs and their accomplishments, but also ethics of governance. Also, she adds, "even in politically decentralised societies, portraits may be read simultaneously as individually referential and as iconic, helping people to remember significant family members and community leaders as well as providing models of ideal behaviour and comportment."

Given the obvious naturalism of these brass heads, a question that naturally arises is: Can these artforms be justifiably described as portraits? The answer to this question unequivocally is yes. A very important reason that elicits the designation of these artforms as veritable portraits apart from their formal configuration is further indicated in the people's attitude towards these memorial sculptures. Benin ancestral altars and their artforms are actually exclusively dedicated to and are named after specific Obas. Consequently, each altar and its artforms represent only one deceased individual and belong to that person exclusively. Therefore, the altar and artforms created for one ancestor are named after the person they are dedicated to and are never reallocated to the worship of another because they personify one person only and that person solely. Thus placement and usage not only make these memorial sculptures sacred objects, but they also acquire their identity as portraits by means of their function, context of use and their connotation. Other elements that identify these artforms as portraits, as mentioned already, are the emblems, symbols and costumes that their creators use in defining the individuals.

The points made above can be illustrated with the example of the memorial heads that represent Queen Idia (1504–1550) the mother of Oba Esigie (1504) who was the first mother of a Benin King to be invested with the title of *Iye-Oba* (Mother of the Oba). Benin oral tradition records that the title was introduced after her demise by her son Oba Esigie to honour her in recognition of her incessant spiritual help in averting serious threats to his rule and the integrity of his kingdom. It is said that she actually participated physically in some of the wars to expand and defend the territorial integrity of his kingdom fought by her son. Oba Esigie is also credited with the introduction of the still extant practice of placing brass heads of Benin Queen Mothers on their commemorative altars.

The brass heads depicting Queen Idia, similar to the portraits of Benin Kings, have generic facial features but they are equally furnished with elements that convey her personal identity without resorting to a literal physical description of Queen Idia (Photo 4). For instance, although her hairstyle is a version of the *ukpokhokho* (chicken's beak) hairdo with

royal association which Agheyisi (1986: 152) says is a unique variety of the *okuku* hairdo worn by the wives of Benin Kings, the portrait heads of Queen Idia are individualised with the distinctive high, forward-pointing peaked elongated coiffure of which she had an exclusive use in Benin. The beaded conical crown (*ede Iye-Oba*) which sheathes the hairstyle entirely that was also exclusive to her, similarly distinguishes the heads as representing Queen Idia. Queen Idia's crown is comparable to the spiritually potent projection on top of the Oba's crown (Blackmun 1984: 60). Other Benin Queens and high-ranking Benin women wear utterly different types of *okuku* and no other Queen till date is permitted to use Queen Idia's type of hairstyle.

Queen Idia portrait heads, like other royal portrait heads, also exhibit other features that distinguish African portraiture art such as body cicatrices. Depicted on these brass heads are the supra-orbital facial marks, *ikharo* that she wore in real life. They are part of the characteristic body cicatrices that are the cultural identifying marks known collectively as *Iwu* of the Benins (Aisien 2011: 34). The crossed strands of beads that extend from her shoulder to her waist that are represented on Queen Idia's figures are called *ivie ikpen egbe veva* and they are body accoutrements that are only worn by the *Iye-Oba*, the Oba and high-ranking chiefs in Benin.

Some of the Queen Mother heads are also furnished with angular pedestals that bear low-relief depictions of royal signifying motifs that allude to the spiritual power of this legendary Warrior-Queen. Other symbols that allude to her that are portrayed on the pedestals include: mudfish and mystical leaves (the symbols of her mystical powers), image of the hand (which signifies her military prowess), and other geometric shapes used decoratively. Benin royal portraits are not only culturally specific, they are also gender specific as typified

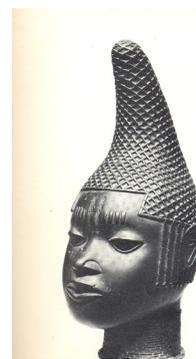


Photo 4 Queen Idia head
Source: Photograph by
Sweet U. Ebeigbe

in the aura of feminist that emanates from this head. These features make the brass heads easily recognisable as portraits of Queen Idia despite their idealised and generic features. What is important about these heads as portraits is that they refer to a specific person, they are individually referential and iconic and they immortalise Queen Idia's memory in her society. Remarkably, one fact stands out from an encounter with these portraits, that is, the awareness that Benin craftsmen are not remote from their culture; they in fact interrelate with it familiarly.

Prior mention has been made of the atypical nature of African portraits and it is being reiterated here that the idea that they are veritable portraits may be not be easy for those who are unfamiliar with the nature of African portraiture art to comprehend. This is particularly true of the carved effigy staffs that the Benins use in the worship of their departed forebears as we shall show presently.

ANCESTRAL EFFIGY STAFFS (*UKHURE*)

The worship of ancestors is prevalent in Benin thus as Bradbury (1973: 50) reports, anywhere Benin ancient customs are adhered to in Benin, "every family maintains an altar dedicated to the deceased male members of the lineage." The Benins venerate their ancestors because they believe that they transmute into deified entities after their demise and become endowed with heightened crucial superiority of wisdom and strength of mind which they exercise over their living descendants due to their acquisition of a deeper comprehension of the forces and nature. They believe that communion with their ancestors is not only possible but also obligatory for securing their protection and goodwill. The practice is also aimed at immortalising Benin departed forebears.

These beliefs are encapsulated in the symbolism of the effigy rattle staffs (*ukhure*) which the Benins create and use to establish altars for the veneration of the spirits of their ancestors. Additionally, *ukhure* staffs indicate lineage history and are the quintessential symbols of the idea of family and lineage which form the foundation of social order in Benin

traditional society. They help to validate and venerate the position of the oldest surviving male (*okaegbee*) as the head of the extended family system. Igbe (2005: 2–3) reports that the *okaegbee* is the custodian and priest of the family ancestral altar (*aro-erha*), he performs the propitiatory rites to secure ancestral aid and protection and purification rites when family taboos are contravened. As he puts it, the *okaegbee* is "the arrowhead in the family sponsorship of the superiority of the family over the individual" who is charged with the maintenance of peace and harmony within the family circle.

The *ukhure* staffs are wooden elongated and segmented pole-like objects with hollow chambers which encase pieces of wood that create rattling sounds when shaken. Both the staffs and the altars are transformed into spiritual icons through a ritual called *ukomwen* (meaning "to plant" or "establish") which involves the offering of sacrifices of animal blood, drinks and food items.

The implication of *ukhure* staffs as portraits is explicit in their function. The staffs help the adherents make concrete and real their religious beliefs, their users acknowledge them as the symbolic representations of their ancestors and they use them to evoke their spiritual reality. Furthermore, the staffs are the focal point for ritual worship and they are also communication objects that are sounded to invoke the divine presence of the ancestors. Through the use of the staffs, the Benins attempt to create a reality that gives meaning to the ritual acts. *Ukhure* staffs address themselves to the supernatural and not the human world, they serve as monuments to individual achievements of the ancestors that they signify and since they identify specific ancestors, collectively, they provide a visual genealogical documentation that preserves the time of deaths of departed forebears in each family.

The feature that most delineates the staffs as effigy portraits is the symbol of a generalised ancestor that is typically depicted on their topmost segments. The symbol is in the form of a generalised human head which signifies the power of the *okaegbee* as the head of the family lineage. Like all Benin anthropomorphic sculptures, the heads bear no resemblance to the physical appearance of the ancestors, but on a deeper level of interpretation and in line

with the context of this discussion, the staffs can be rightly classified as generic portraits of the ancestors. The reasons for this are obvious. Firstly, they represent specific persons whose identities are provided in explicit ways that make meaning for their users. Secondly, each *ukhure* is created exclusively for a specific ancestor and is not reassigned to another ancestor. Thirdly, the altars and their staffs actually bear the name of the ancestors they represent. Therefore, the fact that the staffs are acknowledged by their users as representing specific deceased forebears takes priority over the fact that the generalised heads bear no biographical references to their subjects. Once these facts are taken into consideration, the idea of the staffs as portraits would cease to be incongruous and their appreciation as portraits would be further enhanced.

ALTAR CENTRE-PIECES (*ASEBERIA*)

These are rectangular brass multi-figural centre-pieces which are positioned at the centre of the royal ancestral altars dedicated to departed Obas and Queen Mothers, *Iye-Oba* (*Iyoba*). Their themes depict scenes of court life around a dominant figure representing the person that each centre-piece is dedicated to. They consist of group compositions that are portrayed in a hierarchical mode with the Obas and Queens as the central focus of the artforms. They are depicted larger in size to reflect their superiority over their subjects and their iconic status.

These royal altarpieces can be read rightly as emblematic portraits of the Kings and Queen Mothers because they incorporate the icons and emblems of the status, power and biographical references of the persons they represent which make their identities possible. The formal renditions of these altar centre-pieces were conceived to reflect symbolically, the royal courts of the *Iye-Oba* and the Obas and the people who animate them. For example, the *Iye-Oba's* centre-piece consists of her image flanked by smaller figures of her attendants. Her figure has the hairstyle, regalia and ornamental body accoutrements which are the privileges of her title, office and political role as the recipient of the fifth position amongst the *Eghaevbo*

N'Ore (Town Chiefs). Other key elements that individualise this artform are the figures of the courtiers depicted on the tableaux. There are the bearers of *asa* (*Omuasa*) who shield her in public with slab-shaped mystical protective shields (*asa*), arm-supporters (*Enobore*) and sword bearers (*Omuada*). She is the only female in Benin who is entitled to the services of these personages as privileges of her title. These features distinguish her and her altar centre-pieces.

These royal portraits are excellent examples of African emblematic portraits because they present in a particularly striking way specific details about Benin Obas and Queen Mothers. Their creator endeavoured to reveal their spiritual and political roles in Benin society which make it possible for the figures depicted to evoke the presence of their subjects and the known facts about their life and deeds.

IKEGOBO (ALTAR TO THE HAND)

The *ikegobo* is an altar, which Benins dedicate to the worship of the hand. The practice stems from the Benin belief in the hand as the symbol of a person's ability to attain great achievements in life. Consequently, only eminent personalities establish *ikegobo* for their personal devotion. Similar to the *ukhure* staffs, *ikegobo* are not reassigned to any other person. Instead, after the demise of their owners, smaller replicas of the altars are buried with them while the larger altars are passed on to lineage heirs who place them amongst the ancestral staffs on their family altars to commemorate the dead owner and during worship they invoke the spirit of the owners of the altar and offer sacrifices and supplications to them.

The *ikegobo* are being interpreted as portraits because of the motifs depicted on them which convey complex information. For example, the owner of the altar is represented as a central figure in three-dimensional form on the top of the drum-like altar and also in low relief around the sides and it is usually surrounded by smaller figures of his attendants. Also, emblems of occupation, social position, achievement, prestige and success are portrayed on

them to show that the owner is a great achiever. These simplified depictions do not capture the physical likeness of the personages but they encapsulate their attributes and call to mind vividly their presence. Thus a chief's *ikegobo* normally convey his image in full regalia carrying a ceremonial sword, *eben* and he is surrounded by objects such as coral beads and *ube* drum which are status symbols of Benin chiefs and chests and containers which symbolise wealth. Symbols that are linked with the worship of the hand are also explicitly portrayed on the altars. Some examples are: The motif of a hand with clenched fist and extended thumb, which signifies a person's ability to garner wealth with his or her own hands (prowess), the feather of a vulturine fish eagle which is the Benin symbol of longevity, the tools of Benin blacksmiths (hammer or anvil) which symbolise industry, and kolanut (*kola culmamata*), the symbol of life. These enigmatic symbols are effective substitutes for the lack of physical likeness of the owners of the altars and they are the specific elements that imbue identity and which justify our interpretation of the *ikegobo* as generic portrait.

CONCLUSION

This article embarked on a contextual appraisal of some Benin portraits and it posits that based on their form, content, function, and stylistic and iconographic significance, these artforms can be rightly read as emblematic portraits. The appraisal demonstrates that a major concern for their creators in creating these portraits is principally to convey the attributes, status and role of the personages represented and not necessarily their actual physiognomic resemblances. The appraisal also reveals that in order to secure identity between subjects and portraits, their creators incisively depicted several identifying elements such as emblems of office, rank and status, regalia, hairstyles and cultural marks on the anthropomorphic sculptures. These

characteristic elements sufficiently identify the artforms as veritable, even though, atypical portraits. It was reiterated throughout this appraisal that these essential features must be taken fully into cognizance in order for the artforms to be fully appreciated as veritable portraits.

NOTE

1. A portrait is an artistic representation (painting, photograph, sculpture) of a specific individual, in which the face and its expression is predominant and the purpose is to reveal the resemblance, personality, and even the disposition of the person depicted. While Western portraits favour individualised and realistic depictions of persons, African portraits emphasise an idealised symbol of what the person depicted looks like. African portraiture artists idealise form and symbolically formalise ideas.

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