

A study of an 'African aesthetic' in
character designs for animation
through an analysis of the work by
Kenneth Shofela Coker.

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Research Report for Master of Arts in Digital Animation

Declaration

I hereby declare that the content of this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment for the *Masters of Arts in the field of Digital Animation by Coursework and Research Report (WSOA 7036)* in the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

Signed: _____

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On this the _____ day of _____ 2015.

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Introduction

Africa is the home of many diverse and rich cultures, which are often expressed in most of its creative media. Whether in music, dance, paintings, stories, poetry or theatre, artists have managed to capture an aesthetic that can be uniquely identified as African, hence coining the term “African aesthetic”. As an African digital artist one is often puzzled as to why this is not a common phenomenon that has been carried in to the digital realm, especially in character designs. This might be attributed to the fact that the industry is still in its infancy in Africa, evidenced by “the total lack of competition” (Mulligan) as Ventures Africa magazine puts it in an interview with Stuart Forrest, the CEO of Triggerfish Animation Studios in South Africa. Most digital art work in animated film or graphic novels has stories based in Africa but with characters whose design is mostly influenced by the European, Asian or Western style or one would say “aesthetic”. For a continent that has a rich traditional art culture, the progression to continue this “African” aesthetic into digital media should be natural.

With a lot of debate in the art scholarly community as to what constitutes toward an “African aesthetic,” this research is based on the idea that the definition and understanding of this will assist African character designers (both local and in the diaspora) to follow the well-established style that is uniquely African when telling African stories. This is the right time to create an identity that would set African animation apart in a global market that has been flooded by European, Asian and mostly American productions. It is possible that lack of funding and adequate education is breeding a lack of creative space to find this identity, so to speak. In the interview with Ventures Africa, Forrest says that: “Audiences around the world are becoming more receptive to creative content developed outside of Hollywood and we bring that fresh voice” (Mulligan). He adds: “There is a huge gap for a creative voice from outside the US in the international theatrical circuit. In particular, Africa has been silent when it comes to widely released family films. We fill that gap” (Mulligan). Although it is the opinion of one man, this plays to the notion that there is a demand for a difference in creative content and having our own style in character designs is a step towards fulfilling that need.

Understanding the ‘African aesthetic’ and how we can apply it to character design will also help market and promote our cultures and traditions to the world. It will help paint a picture of Africa in the way we Africans want it to be seen. Jaeho Choi, a Global Citizen Year fellow for Senegal, says that “We are trapped in a vicious cycle where films—either willingly or unknowingly—breed the masses’ perception of a certain region of the world inaccurately” (Choi). At the Luxor African Film Festival, in

his closing speech, Professor Haile Gerima, an Ethiopian film director said, “What is wrong with Africa is that we are people whose stories were stolen ... but now, through the cinema, we are reclaiming our history, the stories that were robbed, and presenting it to the world in our own way” (Henderson). From hearing this statement one cannot help but think of how Disney gave us *The Lion King* (1994), one could say one of the most famous stories of Africa, which was portrayed with western notions and is continuing to do so today. This research will further aid in the moulding of our own perceptions on Africa through our character designs in animation, giving the world a visual aesthetic of Africa in the way we want it to be seen.

For this research, published literature on what constitutes an ‘African aesthetic’ will be discussed. Some of the important references include a paper by Rowland Abiodun on *African Aesthetic* (2001) in which he talks about the importance of involving African scholars and looking at African art “from inside the culture that gave it birth rather than from outside” (Abiodun 16). This is relevant to this paper in that in order to attempt to understand the African aesthetic we cannot divorce it from the culture from which it originates. This also supports the opinion that it is Africans who are in a better position to interpret the African aesthetic and maintain its contemporary relevance, lest we “lose the “African” in African Art” (Abiodun 15). Another paper is by Wilfried Van Damme on *African Verbal Arts and the Study of African Visual Aesthetics* (2000) in which he discusses how “... analyses of African Verbal arts present for an understanding of “aesthetics” in African cultures” (8). The research will also consult a book called *The African Aesthetic: Keeper of the Traditions*, a published volume of papers by different scholars put together and edited by Kariamuwelsh-Asante. She tries to define the African aesthetic using three criteria which she believes are important to most if not all African cultures. These are “spirit, rhythm and creativity derived from epic memory” (Welsh-Asante 4). Doctor Babatunde Lawal’s talk entitled *A Big Calabash with Two Halves: The Yoruba Vision of the Cosmos* (2012) at the Stellar Connections Symposium in America will also serve as a reference in this research. In this talk, he highlights some of the Yoruba cultural beliefs and practices and how they affected their art and aesthetic values.

Su Haitao’s book *Alive Character Design: For Game, Animation and Film* provide a significant literary contribution in this research report and is discussed in chapter two on character design. He talks of how characters should have “distinctive uniqueness” and “rich features” (12), which resonate with the aim of this research which is to try and come up with ways in which designers can create an identity in character design that is uniquely African. He also talks about how great character designers need to draw inspiration from history, culture and everyday life. This goes along with the assumption that for there to be a distinctively African signature in digital character design, an

understanding of the African aesthetic is essential because the study would touch on the continent's art history and the culture of its people. A detailed break-down of the character design pipeline is important in this research because one has to understand at which stage is it relevant to adopt the principles of an African aesthetic. Haitao Su does detail this break-down, as does Bryan Tillman in his book *Creative Character Design* that will also be discussed in this research.

Interviews with industry professionals and animation enthusiasts provide personal insights on Coker's work. They serve as an added source since there is not much literature on Coker. They also help provide a more contemporary view on the idea of African character designers coming up with their own identity. Interview candidates include Professor Anitra Nettleton, who is the head of the Centre of the Creative Arts in Africa at the University of Witwatersrand and has a good knowledge on African art history, Jephumba who is an animation enthusiast and the founder of the African Digital website which is a platform that showcases Africa's digital art and talent to the world, Bobb Muchiri an animator at Studio Ang in Kenya, Kudzai Gumbo, a Zimbabwean character designer based in Malaysia, and Paula Callus, an animation professor at Bournemouth University in England who also writes a blog on African animation. These interviews were conducted in person where possible and via email. They are attached to this research in the appendix section.

The first chapter of the research will discuss what is believed to constitute an African aesthetic. It will draw from literature and discussions on culture, mainly that of the Yoruba, and how it influenced their art in its different forms. The chapter will also break down the common principles that are believed to be found in African art. The second chapter breaks down the character design pipeline and discusses the different principles that are considered when creating a character, such as colour, proportions and archetypes. This chapter will also discuss what constitutes a good character design and how an artist can create their own style based on Haitao Su's book. Chapter Three will present an in-depth case study on Kenneth Shofela Coker's work, mainly looking at his two short films called *Oni Ise Owo (2007)* and *Iwa (2009)*. It looks at how he approached his character designs for these projects and what message they carry, giving a comparison of their different aesthetics. This chapter will also look at some of his character designs for projects which he later hopes to translate into animation. Comments from industry professionals will also be mentioned in the conclusion of this chapter. The fourth and last chapter will conclude the research, and all the accumulated data and key points will be summarised to show how understanding the 'African aesthetic' can facilitate the existence of an African identity in animation. This chapter will also discuss points raised by the above-mentioned industry professionals regarding what they think about creating an African identity in character design for animation.

Chapter One – African Aesthetic

According to the Oxford Dictionary, “African” is a term given to someone or something that has originated from the continent of Africa and “aesthetic” is a term used to describe a concern with or the appreciation of beauty by a certain society (“African”; “Aesthetic”). So by this definition an African aesthetic can be viewed as the agreed-upon values of beauty by the people of African descent. This definition, however, assumes that there are common principles of beauty that are characteristic of all African cultures and that beauty is something that is easily defined – understandings that underpin the arguments of scholars such as Kariamu Welsh Asante and Susan M Vogel whose work is discussed in this chapter.

African art has long been deemed primitive and inferior due to a majority of art historians in the early twentieth century studying it using western and European views on aesthetics. According to Rowland Abiodun in his paper on the African aesthetic, it was not been seen as more than a ‘catalyst’ for European artists like Picasso (Abiodun 16). These were notions of people outside of the African culture trying to give their analysis from a position that did not afford them the full comprehension of what they were studying. In her volume, *The African Aesthetic: Keeper of traditions*, Asante mentions the importance of having an “epic memory” when one is trying to define African art, meaning one has to have experienced or appreciates the African culture to fully understand the aesthetic and speak from a position of authority (Welsh-Asante 4). Although it is not advisable to fully disregard the western or European methodologies of studying Africa’s art history, it does bring about the question whether it is the best source of information when defining an African aesthetic.

1.1 Culture and Religion

Culture plays a significant role in defining an African aesthetic because that is the source from which most African artists draw their inspiration. Culture defines people and it paints a path showing one what is acceptable and what is deemed offensive by a certain community. Gaining an appreciation of it gives an understanding of what certain shapes, symbols, colours, patterns and materials among others, mean to that society. Culture gives one a sense of pride and belonging. It is the basis on which a person moulds their life, making it a great tool for any African artist. According to Asante “an aesthetic draws upon the history, mythology, motif and creative ethos of a group of people...” which is something obtained by fully understanding the ways of a certain community (Welsh-Asante 6).

Abiodun also concurs when he speaks about defining African art from inside the culture that gave it birth rather than from the outside (Abiodun 15).

It is an African cultural trait that art almost always has a functional element to it, whether for a day-to-day or some sort of spiritual use. The notion of 'art for art's sake' is not a common phenomenon in Africa as it is in Europe and the Western world (Welsh-Asante 5). Most African art is created to serve a community purpose. It is used as a metaphor to convey messages, moral values and beliefs, and it can sometimes be seen as a communication with the spiritual realm. It also insures that a culture thrives for generations to come.

For most of African communities, one cannot separate religion from culture and one would find that most art has a religious purpose if not for some day-to-day function. A lot of the African aesthetic is influenced by religious beliefs, as most African art is used in rituals or as a symbol for some spiritual hope. Rituals often provide a space for artistic expression in many different forms, from the initiation masks of the Bamana, the tombs and pyramids of the Egyptians to the Mbakumba dance of the Shona (Azeez 29). Among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, art is seen as a physical manifestation of a spiritual power and is also used as an object for worship (Smithsonian NMAI). For example, a wooden carved fertility doll was traditionally carried around by Yoruba women because it was said that this would bring blessings for child bearing. So in a way, art is seen to bring comfort and to some extent healing.

Art helps in explaining religion by using symbols and metaphors that are recognised by a community. According to Babatunde Lawal, art among the Yoruba was traditionally used to personify intangible elements of humanity so as to allow for communication with them. For example, the god Sango is customarily associated with rain, thunder and sometimes justice. Sango is often portrayed with a double axe to show that he has two sides to him. He can have positive or negative aspects to him. For instance, with rain he can bring life to the crops but with thunder he can cause destruction. He is seen to be the one to reward or punish. During a Sango prayer ritual the priest or priestess wears the colour red to resemble fire, for when there is thunder he is believed to be riding fire. They also wear blue to resemble water and white for spirituality. Male priests braid their hair in a feminine way during this ceremony so as to try and embody the power of a woman's body that is believed to procreate through communication with the spiritual world. In so doing they believe that the spirit of Sango can pass through their bodies without harm (Smithsonian NMAI). During rituals, the masks used for the masquerades are often more stylised than naturalistic, to signify that the spirit of a person has left the body and is now eternal and therefore will not carry a specific face. All these beliefs, motifs and colours are elements that can be used in character design. This shows that it is

imperative to consider the influences of religion and to study its elements when defining an aesthetic of any African community.



Figure 1.1 A carved fertility doll (Left), Statue of Sango (Middle) and a divination priestess hold a statue of Sango during a ritual (Right.) Screenshots from Smithsonian NMAI.; “Stellar Connections: Explorations in Cultural Astronomy - Pt4, Babatunde Lawal.” Online Video Clip. *Youtube*. Youtube, 24 October 2012. Web. 3 November 2014.

Abiodun provides a case study of how some Yoruba cultural traditions and beliefs give an aesthetic to art. He starts off with the concept of ‘asa’ which means tradition or style that is “the result of a creative and intelligent combination of styles from a wide range of available options within the culture” (Abiodun 17). He talks about how famous Yoruba carvers were well travelled and exposed to other different styles which influenced their art but who still remained true to their identity. As much as Africa is a continent that is home to many cultures and traditions, an African aesthetic can be seen to embody the spirit of ‘asa’ in that artists have the luxury of adopting concepts from a wide pool of inspiration and still remain true to Africa. With particular relevance to character design, artists can even use styles adopted from different countries to portray the behaviours of different characters. Abiodun also makes mention of the concept of ‘ase’, “meaning ritual power or life force, which manifests itself in an aesthetics context as a forceful, exuberant, and expansive style” (20). This usually carries an association with religion, spirituality and leadership.

Abiodun goes on to talk about another Yoruba concept of ‘iwa’ which means character and which the people equate to beauty, *iwal’ewa* (character is beauty). The Yoruba believe that everything is created with its own ‘iwa’: hence, it is a prerequisite that an artist as well as his work should have their own ‘iwa’. They also believe that anything without ‘iwa’ would lose its ‘ewa’ (beauty) and hence seen as ugly, ‘oburewa’. In some cases an artist is expected to set aside his own personal ‘iwa’

giving priority to the creative *'iwa'*. For instance, if he is not a patient person, he would need to adopt the trait of patience that is needed to create beautiful art work. This plays well to the principles of character design, for an artist is required to understand the *'iwa'* of the character he is creating, otherwise his work would increasingly become irrelevant. By understanding the essence of an African aesthetic, designers will be equipped with the knowledge necessary to create characters that embody the *'iwa'* of Africa.

1.2 Myths and Oral Tradition

Mythology is another source of inspiration and is close to religion when it comes to defining an African aesthetic. Myths are a part of every African culture. Mircea Eliade defines them as “a narration of sacred history” and Asante adds to this by saying they are “an account of creation caused by some supernatural being” (Welsh-Asante 7). They are used to ensure that the values and principles of a certain culture are preserved and are continuously passed down from one generation to the next. This provides continuity, which is vital for the survival of any culture. When growing up in African cultures, myths become a part of one’s life from an early age. They help one in becoming a part of the community and in some cases help an individual strengthen themselves for future obstacles. It is only natural that most African artists draw inspiration from myths. Babatunde Lawal talks about how the Yoruba have a myth explaining the world’s existence: the world is said to be divided into two halves of a big calabash, the top half of which is said to represent the spirit world, where Oludumare, who is believed to be the source of life, resides, while the bottom half represents the physical world. Oludumare is believed not to affect life directly but to influence it through other spiritual deities like Oduduwa, to whom he gave a sacred bird and a bag of sand to create land on the waters that made the bottom half of the calabash. For this reason, in most ritual art of the Yoruba, the bird remains a sacred symbol due to its ability to communicate between heaven and earth. The chameleon is another symbol common in Yoruba art because it is believed that it was the chameleon that Oludumare sent to ensure that the land Oduduwa had created was now habitable. One finds that the Yoruba use the chameleon as a symbol of caution, immunity and clairvoyance, according to Lawal (Smithsonian NMAI).



Figure 1.2 The big calabash with two halves (left) showing how the Yoruba view human existence and a carving of Oduduwa with a bird motif (right). Screenshots from Smithsonian NMAI.: “Stellar Connections: Explorations in Cultural Astronomy- Pt4, Babatunde Lawal.” Online Video Clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 24 October 2012. Web. 3 November 2014

Myths were often spread through storytelling, a verbal art that is not new in Africa. There are often stories about some of the most important aspects of a culture like farming, hunting, courtship and child birth. Oral tradition is a very strong practice in African cultures and is expressed through poetry, song and stories, among others. These often provide a huge wealth of knowledge in terms of what a certain community deems to be beautiful and which ideas fall within their moral principles. Oral tradition provides a more entertaining way of passing on knowledge and for artists it is another rich source from which to draw an aesthetic. This is the reason why scholars like Wilfried Van Damme have been trying to draw attention to the Africa’s verbal arts, as he believes that by further studying them they will “...present for an understanding of “aesthetics” in African cultures” (Van Damme, 8). Van Damme cites different examples from different cultures of how oral tradition and verbal arts have influenced or share similar values reflected in other art forms. He begins by mentioning research done by Loretta Reinhardt, who in her findings discovered that “masks among the Mende of Sierra Leone emphasize features of ideal female beauty...” (Van Damme, 12). These are also characteristics stressed in a Mende praise song published by Sjoerd Hofstra. He also goes on to mention Kate Ezra, another scholar who also found a relationship between Nyeleni statues of the Bamana people and “the lyrics of the bard Seydou Camara...” (12). Van Damme states: “Together with the intensive study of the aesthetic and artistic vocabulary, a more thorough consideration of relevant forms of literature will therefore have to occupy a more prominent place in our attempts to comprehend African aesthetic views and philosophies of art” (17).

1.3 Common Elements of an African Aesthetic

Africa as a continent provides a huge resource for artistic inspiration. The fact that it houses a large number of different cultures makes room for a number of artistic styles to emerge. For a character designer it allows for the creation of unique characters by adopting different looks that best describe their personality and combining them into one character. One would believe that the results would stay true to an African aesthetic since the end product will contain at least a subset of all of its elements. Different scholars involved in the discussion on the African aesthetic agree that although diverse, there are some common elements in African art. In her volume of scholarly papers called *The African Aesthetic: Keeper of traditions*, Asante speaks of a specific and a communal aesthetic (Welsh-Asante 1). Susan M Vogel is often referenced in different articles when it comes to listing some of these common elements.

One common attribute of an African aesthetic that a lot of scholars seem to agree on is that African art is rarely portraiture-oriented. The representation of a human figure is used as a major subject in most art forms as it relates to people's humanity and in some cases to supernatural beings. Most of African art, such as sculptures and masks, is mainly used in public rituals and by having them highly stylised, one would think that it allowed the pieces to remain sacred and mysterious. This could also mean that they could be used by or for different individuals that were being celebrated at a particular time, making it unnecessary for them to carve out a new piece for each ceremony. In Yoruba art, human and animal figures were used to personify things that were not tangible, thereby making it possible for them to communicate with these unseen forces. For example, as discussed earlier on, a bird was a common and sacred feature in their art as it represented a messenger that could communicate with both the heavens and the earth (Smithsonian NMAI). The idea of using the human figure also allows space for improved expression of ideas, with the use of facial expressions, body language, scarification and other decorative ornaments.



Figure 1.3 A highly stylised Gelede mask (left) shaped as a pregnant woman and a smooth polished fertility doll with an exaggerated head (right). Screenshots from Smithsonian NMAI.; “Stellar Connections: Explorations in Cultural Astronomy- Pt4, Babatunde Lawal.” Online Video Clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 24 October 2012. Web. 3 November 2014

African art rarely exhibits attributes that are undesirable. There is a strong desire to view and portray everything in a good light. The idea of luminosity is also another element which is portrayed in most of African art. In sculpture, the use of bright colours or a smooth polished finish is an attribute that is seen to depict beauty, a healthy skin or goodness, among other things. Most songs or poetry describe smooth and radiant skin as the features of an ideal woman or man. Luminosity also refers to a shiny surface which could also be used to represent spirituality and pureness. Deformation, irregularities and roughness are considered as evil, an illness or to instil discomfort. Although one must agree, this begs the question of why, in that case, some African cultures view scarification as a desirable feature. Putting that aside, the idea of luminosity does provide a great contrast that any character designer can use to distinguish between a hero and a villain.

Robert Farris Thompson states, “People in Africa, regardless of their actual age, return to strong, youthful patterning whenever they move within the streams of energy which flow from drums or other sources of percussion” (Willette). The young years are a period that resembles energy, activity, vigour, productivity and child bearing among other traits. Epehism is a word adopted from the Greek language to mean youth. This is another element that is agreed to be embedded within an African aesthetic. Here, Robert Farris Thompson talks about it in relation to the art of African ritual dancing but it can also be found in other art forms. Yoruba terracotta sculptures did not show age even though they were made to represent people that were elderly. An assumption can be made that youthfulness is a desirable element because it also symbolises the strength of that time of life, a period when an individual was most alive.

Another element discussed by Thompson, is the concept of “cool”. Among African cultures a person who is calm and composed is believed to be in control and dignified. Some go as far as saying that

they are spiritual because of their serene look. In his article on “An Aesthetic of the Cool,” Thompson highlights an African belief that the more pure a person is the more calm they are, allowing them to reach a state of spirituality (41). He gives an example to explain this phenomenon when he describes how dancers, during a traditional ritual dance, keep their facial expressions calm, in contrast to the rest of the body that would be full of energy. Sculptures among the Yoruba were often carved with a composed look that is upright, motionless and sometimes symmetrical to show this calm demeanour. This self-composure portrayed a figure to be wise and respected. The coolness also allowed clarity, in that a person’s intent was visible for all to see. A person with self-control was believed to not be prone to lashing out or acting foolishly.

Closely related to the non-portraiture attribute of an African aesthetic, human figures are often not naturalistic in terms of proportion. African artists tend to exaggerate a certain part of the body to emphasise a particular point of importance. This is a common feature in sculptures, wherein most figures’ heads are significantly larger than the rest of the body. According to Babatunde Lawal the head is where the Yoruba believed the housing of one’s destiny to be located, implying that one’s success was determined by how well they used their head (Smithsonian NMAI). This also seems to be a shared belief among many African cultures. Another case of exaggeration is that of the Nyeleni sculptures, that are carved with long necks, an attribute that is found to be desirable in women (Van Damme 12). The disproportionate nature of the figures also allows artists to have a larger surface area in a specific location, on which to add more decoration which equates to additional information that will further emphasise its importance. Like in the case of a head heavy sculpture, artists then add scarification, jewellery or facial expression among other things to drive an idea across.

Craftsmanship is an attribute that many scholars keep mentioning when talking about African art. Although it is not a physical attribute, it seems to be of great importance. The mastery of a particular art form is gained through years of practise and of becoming well versed in the techniques required. Rowland Abiodun talks about how this was usually passed down from generation to generation in a system of master and apprentice. This meant that a younger person who had a passion for a certain craft and was willing to learn could do so by watching and listening to the older generations, a practise which among the Yoruba was known as “walking with the elders” (Abiodun 20). Abiodun also speaks of how the craftsmen developed their skill by being well travelled and inspired by other styles that were not particularly found within their environment (18).

Another attribute worth mentioning is ‘the need to connect to the Earth’ by most of Africa’s art. Thompson mentions this as the reason why in most African traditional dances, the performers are usually bare footed. This is symbolic and it is believed that by doing this they are able to

communicate with “Mother Nature” and the forces within it directly and without any impairment. One can also wonder if this contributes to the reason why most African artists gain inspiration from nature in terms of colour, pattern and the materials used. Pattern is also a great feature that can be identified in African art. Repetition and sequencing of lines, shapes or other objects used to decorate a surface or even a piece of cloth give an insight into a person’s style. The meaning of the shapes and patterns do, however, differ from culture to culture. Closely related to patterning, Asante speaks of how “rhythm is integral to the life force of every African” (Welsh-Asante 12). This is an element that is not only found in African dancing but also in verbal and visual art. Africans are often encouraged to respond to different layers of any rhythmic piece and still remain in harmony. Robert Douglas in his paper ‘The Search for an Afrocentric Visual Aesthetic’ speaks of this and how this encourages Africans to deal with more than one problem in life at any given time (Douglas 162). This further proves how having rhythm is an element worth mentioning when one is talking about an African aesthetic.

1.4 African Masks and Sculpture

Since this research paper aims at looking at the African aesthetic in character design for animation, it can be seen as logical for one to look at some of the aesthetics of African masks and sculpture. This would help provide one with a source of inspiration when designing a character’s physical features.

Masks have been a great part of Africa’s art history and they serve different purposes, depending on the culture. They are mainly used in rituals such as initiation ceremonies and funerals, and, among other purposes, are a medium to communicate with the spirit world. Masks are made from different materials but are mainly carved from wood. This is due to the belief that the world spirits live in trees, and carvers pay their respects before cutting down a tree. Other materials like copper, brass and even jewellery are used to adorn a mask as a sign of social status. Patterns made out of simple geometric shapes are usually used to decorate masks and depending on the culture, they carry different messages in them. Patterns also give a visual rhythm to the mask which resonates with the believed spiritual power of the mask (MacTaggart). African masks are usually highly stylised and made to express the important features of the mask’s spirit. Simple shapes are used to resemble human and animal features. Symmetry is usually a strong feature because it provides visual stability to the mask, portraying the spirit’s humility and dignity. In some cases these decorations can be used to distinguish between male and female. An example of this is the Kota mask from Gabon and Congo which is oval shaped but with a convex shape for the men and concave for the women (MacTaggart).

The wearer of a mask is often believed to embody the spirit of the mask and sometimes to pass messages between the spirit and the natural world. The Egungun was one such mask among the Yoruba people. It was used in ceremonies where they appeased the spirits of their ancestors. The masquerade comprises of a wooden mask that resembles the face of a spirit and layers of brightly coloured cloth that symbolised the spirit's wealth and the layers between the two worlds (Olajubu 31). The cloth is often decorated with patchwork patterns, braids and even amulets that contain medicine to protect the wearer when they fall into a trance. This is one of the few instances where the wooden mask is carved to have a close resemblance to the spirit being celebrated and not highly stylised.

Maiden spirit masks are popular among the Igbo people of Nigeria and are used for young women's initiation ceremonies where they transition into womanhood. In some cases they are worn by men who then sing praises to these maidens, both alive and in spirit. They are painted in a white pigment that symbolises a young girl's purity and are carved to resemble the features that the Igbo find desirable in women, which are a long neck, small facial features and facial scarification ("Start with Art: Tribes of Africa."). In some cases these masks are carved with elaborate hairstyles as well to show social status.



Figure 1.4 Egungun mask (Left) and a Maiden mask (Right); "Start with Art: Tribes of Africa." *Mabee-Gerrer Museum of Art*; Mabee-Gerrer Museum of Art, n.d; PDF File.

African sculpture also adheres to aesthetic principles that are similar to those of masks but one element that stands out the most is the way it does not adhere to naturalistic proportions. This principle is listed as part of what is known as the Kobina Bucknor's six principles of African sculpture. Bucknor was a Ghanaian artist who studied African sculpture in order for it to influence his paint work. His findings are believed to resonate with those reached by a collective of artists based in the state of Chicago in America called the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists (Afri-Cobra) (Douglas, 169). As discussed in previous paragraphs, the exaggerated proportions were used to emphasise certain parts that were deemed important. The head was made larger: this is because it is believed that this is where someone's destiny is housed. The Yoruba went on to carve out the head as a cone shape pointing to the heavens as a way of linking to the spirit world (Smithsonian NMAI). Some had broad foreheads as a sign of intelligence. As with the masks, symmetry and an upright posture are used as tools to resemble stability and dignity.

By studying and fully understanding all the aesthetics of African art mentioned in this chapter and more, it is the aim of this research paper that any character designer will have a great resource of inspiration from which to come up with designs that are unique to the continent.

Chapter Two – Character Design

By definition, character means the mental and moral qualities distinctive to an individual (“character”). It is that which makes one person different from everyone else. To a certain extent it also determines how a person looks, acts, speaks and even interacts with others. Solomon Asch, an American psychologist whose work has been very influential, wrote an article in 1946 called ‘Forming Impressions of Personality’ where he spoke about how “we look at a person and immediately a certain impression of his character forms itself in us” (Asch 1). This brings about an idea that as humans we have a bias to certain visual markers that we associate with an individual’s personality. This is the concept upon which character designing is loosely based: the creation of virtual personalities so that an audience can relate to them because of their cognitive bias. Su Haitao, an experienced character designer and author of the book, *Alive Character Design: For Game, Animation and Film* (2011), defines it as the “design of human or humanlike characters of distinctive uniqueness and rich features for all kinds of visual media” (12). Key terms that one can pick up from all these definitions are distinctive, uniqueness and individuality, terms that resonate with the aim of this research, which is to try and come up with ways in which designers can create an identity in character design that is uniquely African.

In this chapter, the character design principles are going to be broken down and discussed individually in order to get more of an insight into the process of how artists come up with a visual style. Many professional character designers encourage artists to think of their creations as an actual person so as to determine how they act, what they wear, how they move and the like. The best way to achieve this is by defining the character’s history, which is known as a back-story and will therefore be the starting point for this chapter. Following this, the research shall investigate the role of the archetype in character design and these are the original fundamental traits or a group of traits which people try to copy. They are used in storytelling to try and explain the role of a character. After that the research will address how the physical features of a character can be used to give an impression of their personality. The features will be further broken down according to shape, colour and proportion, which are the main elements that make up a character’s visual aesthetic. The styles of character design can range from naturalistic/realistic to highly stylised characters. This chapter will also focus on how costume, hair, accessories and props can benefit a designer when creating characters. The chapter shall conclude with a look at the character design pipeline and how it fits within the overall animation production pipeline.

2.1 The Back-story of a character

Character design is common to all fields in the visual media industry, whether in film, advertising, games or print. Designers come up with personalities and visual solutions that convey a certain idea or message to which an audience can relate. The process of creating these characters does differ among studios but there are some initial requirements that are common. A designer is often given a brief on what the character is supposed to look like or a story in which the character is to be placed, then the designer will conduct some research and source inspiration based on the information they have been given. A character designer and author of the book *Creative Character Design* (2012), Bryan Tillman, speaks of how “the character is always in service to the story” (Tillman, 5). It is possible to create a visually pleasing character without a brief or a back-story but it only becomes problematic when one tries to apply that design to a project. The way it looks might not necessarily convey what that particular job needs. What Tillman is stressing in this statement is that a character’s back story should influence its visual traits.

A back story is essential because it is a character’s history. Haitao Su talks about how a designer should think of his character as an actual living being, with a real “personality, hobbies, friends, families and even pets...” (Haitao 39). Although it is fictional in most cases, it is essential because it gives an idea of who the character is and this contributes greatly in keeping an audience engaged. Tillman also adds by saying that a good character designer should be able to answer questions about his character such as: who the character is, what do they do in the story, when and where does the story take place, why is the character motivated to do what they do and how do they do it (Tillman 29)? All these questions shed light on the character’s back story therefore making it easier for the designer to come up with a design that suits the requirements and is unique to a certain project. A back-story helps explain a character’s behaviour to an audience since it usually determines what the character would wear, how they would talk and how they would act.

With relevance to this research, one then has to study and understand the stories and cultures of certain African people, for example the Yoruba, to know how to add that ‘*iwa*’ to their designs. A designer has to understand the aesthetics of African art so that they can be able to add unique symbolisms to their character, making them visually intriguing. This would draw in an audience and make them want to learn more about the character and further explore the culture. This is what Kenneth Shofela Coker has done by basing his two short animated films on Yoruba myths. The artist designed his characters based on back stories of Yoruba spirits, demons and deities that were already commonly known within the culture and there is visible evidence of this in his final work. As

discussed in the previous chapter, these are the same backstories that also influenced artists like the Yoruba carvers when creating masks and sculptures used in rituals to praise a certain deity.

2.2 Archetypes

An article in the *Imagine FX* magazine by the American character designer Francis Tsai discusses how a character designer should rely on 'visual cues' that people are already familiar with and have certain associations with (Tsai 80). This supports the idea that, consciously or sub-consciously, there are traits or a group of traits which people use to pass judgement as to what a certain person or fictional character is like. This idea formed the basis for the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, in grouping together people's character into groups known as "archetypes." Tillman defines archetypes as "the original mould or model of a person, trait, or behaviour that we as humans wish to copy or emulate" (11).

Solomon Asch explores how a general impression of a person is formed from a combination of different traits that this individual possesses. When it comes to archetypes in storytelling and character design, the general impression is the one that is used to determine the character's behaviour. Archetypes benefit from reoccurring images, symbols and patterns in human culture, thereby making them universal and easily identified by an audience.

Jung placed these archetypes into different categories and only a few are common in storytelling and in character design. Tillman lists them as the hero, the shadow, the fool, the anima/animus, the mentor and the trickster (12). He defines each one as follows: the hero, as someone who is brave and puts others before himself or herself; the shadow, as the opposite of hero, someone who is evil and selfish; the fool, as the confused, clumsy character that always gets others into predicaments; the anima/animus, as the visually appealing character that is placed in a story because of his or her good looks and whose role is mainly to be the protagonist's love interest; the mentor, as a guiding figure who gives advice, even when it is something that the hero does not want to hear; and, finally, the trickster, as the character who always wants to twist events in his or her favour (12-20). Each archetype has its own role to play in carrying a story forward. However, in terms of character design they also have a visual stereotype that is associated with them and that makes it easier for a designer to come up with concepts for each one of them. These traits also help the audience in identifying the characters of a story.



Figure 2.1 Archetypes from the movie *Epic* (2013) in order from left to right. The Hero, Anima, Shadow, Mentor, Trickster and the Fools.; "characters" *Epic the Movie*; Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment LLC, n.d; web; 10march 2015.

Hanna Ekstrom in her paper on *How Can a Character's Personality be Conveyed Visually, through Shape* (2013), talks about what is known as the *halo effect* in character design. This refers to a visual stereotype in which people assume that what is beautiful is necessarily always good (Ekstrom 5). Karen Dion, a psychology professor at the University of Toronto, talks about how in general people that are physically more attractive are considered superior than those who are not (Dion 285). This is a concept which scholars such as Welsh-Asante mention when trying to define an African aesthetic. He further goes on to highlight the fact that in most African languages the word for beauty is the same as the word for good (Xiii). A significant number of character designers have adopted this stereotype and a good example of this is can be found in the animated movie *Epic* (2013) where all the heroes and good characters were given more attractive features than the villains. Nevertheless, other films have challenged this stereotype and achieved intriguing results, such as Disney's *Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), which had a hero that was physically deformed but had a good heart.

2.3 Physical Features

Physical aesthetics are also used in character design to give an insight as to what the character's personality could be like. As previously discussed, Asch argued that humans get a certain perception of someone just by looking at them and this can be translated to fictional characters. In visual media this is achieved by using shapes, colour and proportions which will be discussed further in the sections to follow. Variations of these physical qualities convey different messages due to stereotypes subconsciously built by the human mind.

2.3.1 Shapes

Shapes evoke different perceptions in people and according to Chris SolarSKI in his book *Drawing Basics and Video Game Art (2012)*, this is based on nature and how certain things feel when touched (179). The most commonly used shapes in character design are squares, circles and triangles. The square is mostly associated with stability, confidence, security, order and many other traits that make a character dependable. That is why most male hero character designs have square jaws and shoulders (Tillman 68-69). A good example of this is the character Ronin, Queen Tara's bodyguard and friend in Blue Sky Studio's feature film, *Epic (2013)*. A square can also be used to portray stubborn rigidity like the old-man Carl in Pixar Animation Studio's feature film, *UP (2009)* (Ekström 11). Circles evoke senses of playfulness, harmless, childlike, completeness, and comfort (Tillman 72). Also in nature, objects with rounded corners tend to be non-threatening and at times soft (Ekström 6). An example would be Russell, the little boy-scout character in *UP (2009)*. Shapes that have pointy corners often portray aggression, conflict, tension, energy, danger and harmful traits. This is why triangles are used in the portrayal of evil and sneaky characters; the use of these shapes engenders a sense of intimidation (Tillman 70). An example of this would be Mandrake, who has a diamond-shaped nose, pointy fingers and wears a rat's skin with pointy ears as a cloak.



Figure 2.2 Ronin from *Epic (2013)* (right), Carl and Russell from *UP (2009)* (middle) and Mandrake from *Epic (2013)* (left). "Characters" *Epic the Movie*; Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment LLC, n.d; web; 10 March 2015.

Comic Vine; "Elsa (Frozen) vs Carl Fredricksen and Russell (Up)"; *Comic Vine*; CBS Interactive Inc, January 2015; Web; 10 March 2015.

In many African cultures, shapes are used to create patterns and textures for decorative purposes and they also hold meaning. Like the Ndebele house paintings of South Africa, geometric shapes are used to create symbols that carry messages about personal prayers,

identification, emotions, marriage and many others (“Ndebele house painting”). These symbols can also be used to differentiate between males and females. Another example is the Adinkra symbols which originate from the Akan people of West Africa. These shapes convey messages of traditional wisdom, aspects of life or the environment and are often linked to common proverbs (Koutonin). Although these may be hard to use as physical shapes in a character’s design, they can be used as patterns on the costumes, body markings, as logos or as the shapes of a character’s props.

Closely related to shapes is a silhouette, which is a character’s outline shape. They are mainly used for clear readability and allow the audience to understand more clearly a character’s actions. A character design is considered good when it can be recognisable in its silhouette (Tillman 75). In cases where the characters belong to a team, a similar silhouette shape shows consistency and also helps a viewer to easily recognise members of the same group (Tsai 80).

2.3.2 Colour

Colour theory is a set of guiding principles that can be used to create harmonious colour combinations and is believed to be an idea that began in ancient times with artists like Leonardo Da Vinci (Morioka 18). It states that there are three primary colours from which all other colours come. These colours are red, yellow and blue. Colour in design has developed a language of its own since the human eye and brain are believed to experience colour emotionally and mentally (Morioka 24). Although the meanings of colour symbolism may tend to differ in different cultures there are some universal perceptions that are common. Tillman also discusses these in his book. He mentions the primary colours, their secondary results which are purple, orange and green and then also adds on black and white. Red is a colour that portrays danger, passion, desire, energy, anger, power and love (Tillman 112). In other cultures like the Yoruba, red is used to represent fire and lightning when they are performing the ritual to praise the deity Sango (Smithsonian NMAI). Blue gives a sense of coldness, sadness, wisdom, faith, healing, honour, understanding, truth and intelligence among others. Yellow is used to convey feelings of joy, happiness, liveliness, decay, sickness and jealousy. He then goes on to talk about the other colours and what they portray (Tillman 112-115). These examples do, however, show the importance of carefully considering the colours when designing characters, whether used in combination or as different shades. As evidenced by the different feelings these colours and even shapes provoke, each individual element does not only portray good or bad qualities but also takes

from both extremes. So it is important to also consider the context in which these characters are created.

2.3.3 Proportions

As already discussed in the previous chapter, proportions are used to add interest to a character's design and to emphasise a certain trait about them. Shem Cohen talks about how cartoon characters are measured by head ratios, in his book called *Character Design: Learning the art of cartooning step by step* (2006). He mentions that characters that are three heads tall are considered cute or young and that most superheroes and fashion models are designed with a ratio of eight heads tall (Cohen 16). Evidence of this can be found by looking at the Japanese manga character design called Chibi¹. These are created with head-heavy proportions and are traditionally three heads tall. This is done to portray a sense of cuteness and comic relief as they are mainly used in children and the teenage genre of comics and animated shows (Chibi Jennifer). Yoruba carvers also used head heavy proportions, this is because the head is where they believed a person's destiny resides (Smithsonian NMAI). Another example of the use of un-naturalistic proportions can be found in Pixar's *Wreck it Ralph* (2012), in which the main character was designed with proportionally larger arms and hands. This was because his main character-trait was that he destroyed things, whether intentionally or un-intentionally. His proportions added to his character in that they made him look strong but clumsy. Un-naturalistic proportions are a common element between character design and African sculpture, hence it would not be a far-fetched idea for a designer to implement African art aesthetics in their design.

2.4 Stylised versus Naturalistic character design

In character design there are two distinguishing categories in terms of style: a design can either be stylised or naturalistic. Naturalistic designs tend to stick mainly to real human or animal likeness in terms of shape, colour and proportion. They are based in realism and try as much as possible to match every detail from the reference given. This is common in visual effects projects where they try to place three-dimensional computer-generated characters in live footage as well as in some video games where they would want to give a player a more realistic experience. A good example is in the characters found in Naughty Dog's video game called *The Last of Us* (2013). Highly realistic characters have been criticised due to the theory of the uncanny valley, which states that as

¹ Chibi is a Japanese word that means a smaller or more cute version of something, mostly used for drawn comic or cartoon characters.

characters become more human-like they cause a sense of revulsion among some of the audience because of their inability to fully mimic human expression and actions (Mangan). An example of this can be found in Robert Zemeckis's *The Polar Express* (2004). This was a theory that was initially described by Japanese robotics expert Masahiro Mori, and although he spoke in terms of robots, it applies to computer generated characters as well. African art rarely portrays the subject realistically so one would argue that a character design with an African aesthetic would not fall victim to this phenomenon due to the fact that it would rarely strive to match reality.

In between the two extremes is a style that is a hybrid of naturalistic and stylised characters. Haitao Su refers to this as the "complicated style" of character design in which the proportions and expressions are close to reality but at the same time have exaggerated elements (Haitao 19). These are mainly found in live action fantasy films. An example is the design of the dwarfs or the hobbits in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003).

Stylised characters are mainly found in cartoon-based projects. These "will generally allow for more creativity, exaggerated shapes and proportions when it comes to defining a character through a distinguished silhouette" (Ekström 8). Stylisation plays on the previously discussed elements, creating combinations that are customised to a particular message. Here a designer has more freedom to be expressive, although he has to do so within the bounds of the character's back-story. Stylisation also helps in coming up with a large variety of characters to use or choose from, as well as to add comic relief (8). An example of a stylised character design is that of Bugs Bunny from Walt Disney's Looney Tunes series. He is a rabbit character made with human likeness and exaggerated proportions of his feet, hands, eyes and ears. In some cases the characters become highly stylised and even more simplified for a younger audience's consumption: this also has the benefit of being a way to cut down on cost. This is usually the case in daily television shows like Cartoon Network's *Dexter's Laboratory* and *The Power Puff Girls* (Haitao 19).

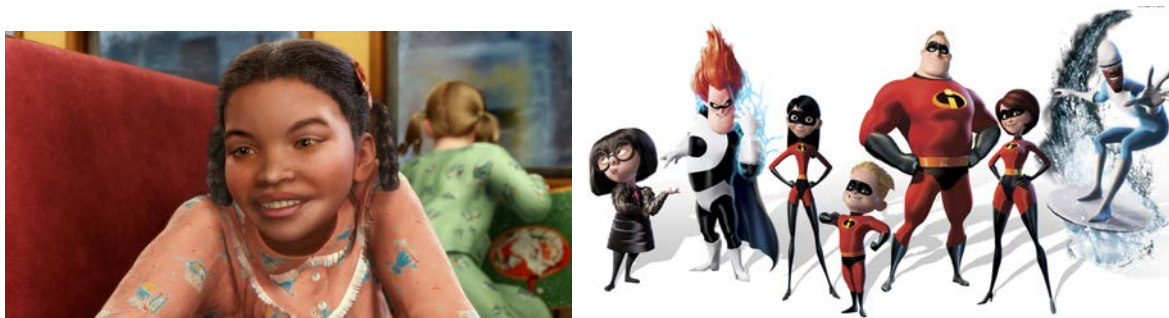


Figure 2.3. Naturalistic/Realistic character render of The Hero Girl in *The Polar Express* (2004) (Left); "The Polar Express"; *Slant Magazine*; *Slant Magazine*, 06 November 2004; Web; 09 March 2015.

Stylised characters from the Cast of *The Incredibles* (2004) (right); ""The Incredibles 2" News"; *Aggressive Comix*; *Aggressive Comix*, 18 March 2014; Web; 09 March 2015.

2.5 Costumes, hair and accessories

Costumes, hair and accessories aid in the visualisation of what a character's personality is like. Although they may feed off shape, colour and proportions, they are worth discussing in this research paper, because they provide space for a designer to add an African aesthetic to their design. Charlie Chaplin, an English comic actor from the silent film era, was quoted saying that "... the clothes and make up made me feel like the person he was (the character). I began to know him, and by the time I walked on stage he was fully born" (Thomas, Johnston 415). This shows how live actors react to costumes, as well as their audience. Clothes can help portray a person's identity as well as the time period and the location from which they originate. This also adds to a character's back-story. This means that they can be used as a distinguishing feature (Tillman 33). Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston, who were part of the Disney's nine old men of animation, write that "...the specific articles that the character wears make them a specific individual" and "... everyone is stimulated by the personality traits and cartoon business now that the character is becoming definite" (415). This means that the costume adds on to a character's identity and acting and sometimes they become a character themselves. A good example of this is Rapunzel's hair in Pixar's feature film *Tangled* (2010), where, in the singing sequence when she is locked up in the tower, she uses her hair as an extension of herself when opening windows or prepping herself up to paint the ceiling. In Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), the character Dopey was given a costume that looked like someone else's hand me downs which played well into his childlike character and the fact that he was the youngest (Thomas, Johnston 394). Costumes help make a character's role easily readable (Cohen 20). An audience can identify their professional occupation, social status, rank and even sex through the use of costumes.



Figure 2.4. Rapunzel and Flynn Rider from *Tangled* (2010) (Left); "Movies Tangled background for iPhone"; *Cartoon Images*; cartoonimages.com, n.d.; web 09 March 2015

Dopey from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) (right); "Dopey" Disney Wikia; Wikia Inc, n.d; web; 09 March 2015

Hair gives an artist more space for expression. In African cultures like the Mende and the Yoruba, hair has social and spiritual significance. The blogger on African culture Kweku Darko Ankrah, who is also a journalist in Ghana, talks about the different cases in which hair was used to send a message that "communicated age, marital status, ethnic identity, religion, wealth, and rank in the community." Those who had a high social standing had more elaborate hairstyles while the royalty would add a head piece to their hair. He talks about how the young women from the Wolof people in Senegal would shave the side of their hair to signify that they were not courting. He also talks about how widows would not attend to their hair so as not to attract suitors during their time of mourning. The Mende people believed that a woman with long hair symbolised prosperity and healthy children. Spiritually, he talks about how Africans believe that hair can be used to communicate with a supreme being since it is the most elevated part of the body (Kwekudee). With all this knowledge on the significance of hair, a character designer can use this as inspiration to effectively present their character.

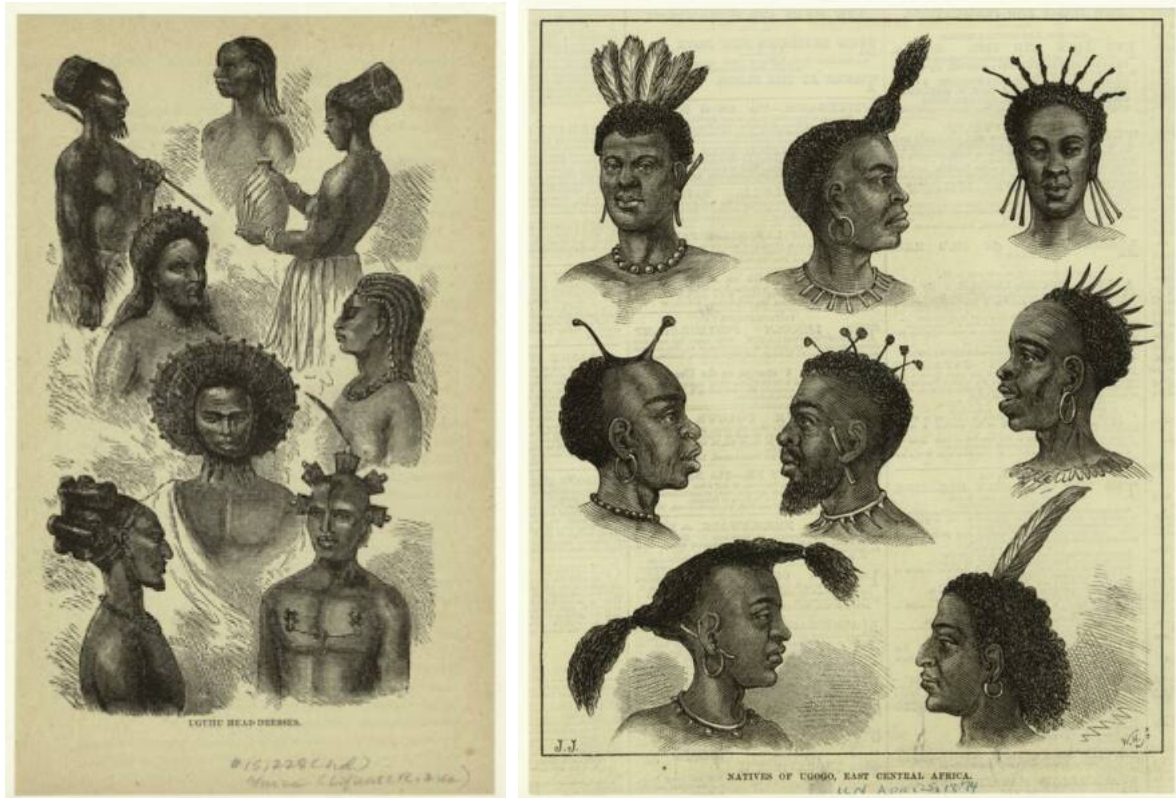


Figure 2.5 Traditional hairstyles of the Ugogo people of East Central Africa from Kwekudee's blog.; "Hairstyles in African Culture." *Trip Down Memory Lane*. Trip Down Memory Lane, 6 September 2012. Web. 18 February 2015

2.6 Props

Props differ from costumes and accessories in that they are not necessarily worn but held or carried. They are also not always on the character but they do help define their personality and state of thought at that moment (Cohen 21). For example in Blue Sky Studio's feature film *Epic* (2013), Mandrake (the main villain) would use his staff to strike the ground when he bursts out in anger; the staff also becomes an outlet for his magical powers. Props can furthermore become an extension of the character, as in the case of the Marvel Comics character Thor, who cannot be imagined without his hammer which is used as a symbol of his might and willpower. Although he may lose it from time to time, it can be said that this helps to portray to the reader his current state of emotion. A workshop article in *ImagineFX* magazine written by Francis Tsai talks about how props like weapons end up forming a "significant aspect of the character's silhouette" (Tsai 82). This article helps to support the perspective that the props are an extension of the character. A good example is that in most depictions of Shaka Zulu, a well-known Zulu King in South Africa or any of the Zulu warriors in African art, they are shown with a cattle hide shield and an assegai which are shapes that are an important feature to their silhouettes. In a similar way to the case of Thor, the use of props also adds

to the character's strength: when they are not in possession of their props their characters will be more vulnerable.



Figure 5 Marvel Comics' character Thor (Left) from Comic Vine; "Thor vs Anime Team (Inc avatar)"; *Comic Vine*; CBS Interactive Inc, January 2015; Web; 10 March 2015.

Artistic impression of a Zulu warrior (right) from plamoya.com.; "Andrea Miniatures S8-F12 Zulu Warrior (Isandlwana 1879)"; *Plamoya Japan*; Plamoya, n.d; web; 10 March 2015

2.7 The Character Design Pipeline

The term pipeline is commonly used in the animation production industry when talking about the process the project goes through from concept to delivery/finished product. There is a main production pipeline which is then broken down into small sections that deal with different departments: in this case, character design, which is found in the initial planning processes. A character design pipeline is usually broken into three parts, namely, pre-production, production and post-production. Pre-production is the research and conceptualising stage of the project. This is a vital part of the process because it is where a design style is decided upon and references that would influence the project's aesthetic are collected. In relation to this research, an artist's knowledge on an African aesthetic will then prove relevant at this stage. The production stage is the actual designing of the character and post-production is the stage where a finished character is made ready for animation or final posing. This section of the research paper will explain further the different stages of a character design pipeline which then falls within the broader pipeline. It is important to note that this process does differ depending on the artist, studio, project as well as budget.

2.7.1 Pre-production

This is the first stage of character design, where a designer familiarises himself or herself with the character they are meant to translate visually. They ask important questions that give them a better insight into what they are required to come up with and this proves beneficial in later processes (Haitao 28). As discussed previously, a back story is given and Tillman discusses a character development sheet in his book which comes as part of the brief. A development sheet gives a more detailed description of the character and he breaks it down into different sections which are basic statistics, distinguishing features, social characteristics, attributes and attitudes, emotional characteristics, spiritual characteristics and the character's involvement in the story (32-36).

After gaining an understanding of the character, a designer then does further research to look for inspiration and reference. These can be acquired in many different ways like going through books, magazines, movies, television, a trip to the museum and the internet among many others (Haitao 26). Haitao talks about how a designer should have "curiosity coupled with acute observation" to generate some inspiration (26). Inspiration helps an artist decide which style or direction they want to take and it also helps in the flow of ideas for their design. Tillman defines reference as "the ability to observe from life or from a photograph to ensure that what is being portrayed is visually correct" (85). As much as character designs have to be unique and distinctive, they have to be based on reality, for an audience to relate to what is being portrayed. Apart from the appearance, reference can also help when it comes making sure that a character's movements and gestures look appropriate (90).

After gaining a better understanding of the character from the director, or in some cases the client, a designer then goes through a process of what is called thumbnail sketching. This is where they draw a number of small drawings on a piece of paper to explore possible ideas. These can be done in line art or as silhouette shapes. Haitao discusses the benefits of doing these small drawings; he talks about how small drawings make it easy to show if there is clarity in the character's silhouette. This also helps a designer to gather a great many more ideas that are able to flow without being held back by details (29). After an artist has exhausted all their possible ideas they then pick a few of their best options and develop them further. At this stage, reference is important because this is when some rough detail is added in. This process also allows a designer to gauge how feasible their ideas are (29). When they are done an option is picked that they like and that will best suit the requirements.



Figure 2.7. Thumbnail sketches by Laura La Vito.; "silhouettes" *Laura La Vito: Creative design and illustration*; Fourthreestudios.com; 06 October 2012; web; 09 March 2015

2.7.2 Production

The character design is further developed in the production stage although at this point an artist will now have a more solid direction that they plan on taking. They can either continue sketching on paper or they can use a digital sketching program which provides more flexibility when one needs to make corrections, duplications, or to pursue a different angle. At this stage the fine details are added on to the design and the concept is pushed further. Certain important features are exaggerated to enhance the character's traits (Ekström 14). Accessories, costume and hair can also be further refined at this stage. Any added-on details will now be done from a more conscious decision-making process. After a rough concept sketch is done, an artist then goes through a process called 'clean up' where they retrace the lines of the sketch using a more bold and distinct line and they erase the underlying rough sketch to clearly show the final line work. If an artist was still working on paper, this is when they scan it in so that it can be digitised. Colouring can then proceed at this stage. The designer is able to try out different colours and their values to see what best suits their vision. They start off by applying the base colours and then move to highlights, shadows and finally add on the little details like texture and cloth patterns (Haitao34-37). This can all be done in a drawing and photo manipulation software like Adobe Photoshop.

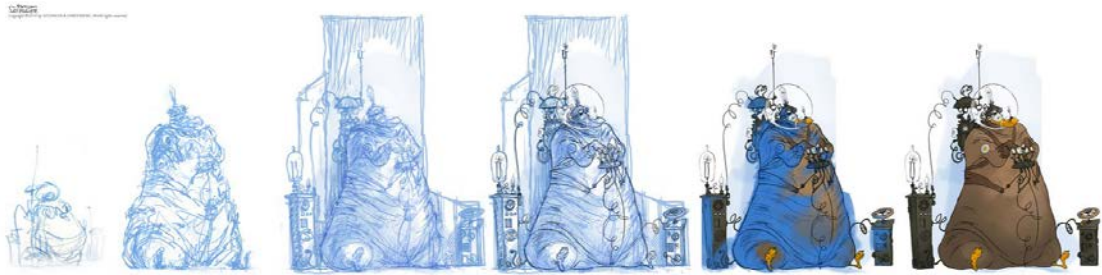


Figure 6. Character design process from sketch to clean-up and painting by Florian Satzinger.; "Paper Duck Toy Kit" *The Paperwalker Journal*; *The Paperwalker Journal*, 09 December 2010; Web; 10 March 2015

2.7.3 Post-Production

When satisfied with the final result, the character is then taken through a post-production process in which it is made ready for whatever application it is meant for, in this case animation. The designer creates what are known as character sheets. These include a turnaround, expression and pose sheets. Character sheets help maintain consistency when a character has to be reproduced or when there is going to be a number of artists working on the same project (Tillman 148). A turnaround sheet ensures that an artist knows what their character looks like from all angles. It is usually composed of drawings of a character standing in a neutral pose facing forward, sideways, backward and at a three quarter angle. If the character is meant to be sculpted in a three-dimensional programme then it is posed with its arms stretched out in what is known as a 'T-pose' (134-138). Expression sheets help an artist understand their character's facial expression, as well as how their character's face is supposed to look like when in a certain mood. They are usually comprised of a number of drawings of the character's head from the neck up showing different expressions and at different angles (141-143). Action pose sheets are made up of different drawings of the character captured in expected poses according to the story requirements (139-140). These not only help in consistency when being reproduced but in cases where they will be sculpted, it gives the modellers and rigging artists an idea of how extreme the character's poses should be allowed to become. There are also sheets where all the above-mentioned sheets are amalgamated into one. These are accompanied by some description notes and these are called model sheets. Style sheets then break down a character's composition to its simplest form to show ratio and measurements. All these ensure consistency when working in a team (144-148).



Figure 2.9 Character in a t-pose from Brian Lemay; “Character Designs”; *Hansel and Gretel: Brian’s Demo Drawings*; brianlemay.com, 3 February 2012; Web; 4 March 2015

If an artist is working with a client or a supervisor it is important to communicate with them and seek approval at each step (stage) of the pipeline: in this way, their visions are able to stay in sync with each other.

Since this research paper is concerned with sourcing ways in which designers can infuse an African aesthetic into character design, each step of the character design pipeline can benefit from being inspired by African art, motifs and culture especially in the pre-production phase which sets a tone for the whole process. For example, if the artist is working on a character that possesses a super power, they can then reference Yoruba deities in their research and look at how the Yoruba people portray these deities. They can also collect photos of sculptures and paintings created in honour of those gods to have a feel of the shapes, colour and detail that embody their characteristics.

A great design according to Haitao is one that can “demonstrate the character’s attributes and spirits” (22), one that is visually distinctive and to which the audience can relate. Haitao reiterates that “uniqueness is a character’s life,” (39) and by taking the unique attributes of a people like the Yoruba, a designer is capable of bringing to life characters that carry the aura of Africa and that can be memorable in the audience’s mind.

He also discusses how great character designers need to draw inspiration from history, culture and everyday life. This goes along with the assumption that, for there to be a distinctively African signature in digital character design, an understanding of the African aesthetic is essential because the study would touch on the continent’s art history and the culture of its people. Like the Yoruba carvers as mentioned by Abiodun, Haitao believes a character designer should be very curious, open minded, observant and well travelled, drawing inspiration from things around him and even from

things that seem “ordinary and prosaic” (13). He also shares common ground with the Yoruba in that he believes an artist or designer should embrace the virtue of being passionate, as passion shows through one’s work.

Chapter 3 – Kenneth Shofela Coker

This chapter focuses on the study of Kenneth Shofela Coker's work. Coker is a character designer, animator and illustrator originally from Lagos in Nigeria but who is now based in San Diego, California, in the United States of America. He graduated top of his class at the Memphis College of Art in 2009 where he majored in illustration. He is currently a character designer for Sony Online Entertainment which is the video game division of Sony, one of the largest international entertainment companies. Most of his personal work is inspired by African mythology and particularly that of the Yoruba. He has also produced two animated short films called *Oni Ise Owo* (2007) and *Iwa* (2009) as part of his degree fulfilment at the Memphis College of Art which are based on traditional stories of the Yoruba. In an interview with African Digital website, Coker is quoted to have said that "I knew I'd be telling African stories, which I felt and still feel need to visually stand out from the animated fair that flood the screens across the globe" (Jepchumba). This makes him a good candidate for a case study for he shares a similar view as this research which is that Africa needs its own unique identity in the digital realm.

Coker is a Yoruba descendant through his father and this may explain his keen interest in the culture. He talks about how his father is a great resource whenever he is researching. He mentions other sources of information like books from African authors such as Wole Soyinka and Amos Tutuola, although he goes on to talk about the drawbacks he faces in trying to find specific visual reference on Yoruba myths and traditional stories which are not well archived or readily available. Despite this he alternatively ends up basing his designs on traditional costumes, architecture and motifs (Callus). On his blog Coker does admit to drawing inspiration from Yoruba sculpture. He says that "...a lot of character can be derived from those iconic looking sculptures" (Coker). In a way this allows him more freedom to interpret and customise the designs in whichever way he wants to do so, but it would also translate to more work and thought being required to come up with an original result that is within the bounds of the Yoruba aesthetic. Coker also talks about using Nigerian ethnological magazines to inspire him when creating a visual form for some of his characters.

As suggested by Abiodun, Coker has an acute understanding of the culture of the Yoruba. He is quoted saying that "The food, music, humour, and sensibilities of African people are undeniably unique, as well as its mythology, of which I am an enthusiastic student of, particularly Yoruba cosmogony" (Jepchumba). His drawing of inspiration from myths and tales resonates with Wilfried Van Damme's paper in which he encourages the study of African art through verbal and literary art.

One can conclude that Coker has some understanding of the idea of an African aesthetic and he has applied it to the characters in his films resulting in designs that are unique and have features of Africa. According to Su Haitao, this is a good approach towards coming up with successful character designs.

Coker's pipeline does not diverge much from the one highlighted in the second chapter of this research. His pre-production stage begins with him conducting research on backstories because that is where he gets ideas to define his characters. He talks about how he enjoys this stage and spends more time at it. More planning and pre-production does help in making the actual work easier. His production stage is spent sketching in charcoal and scanning into Adobe Photoshop for clean-up and colouring. Then he does the basic modelling in Autodesk 3D Studio Max and then adds detail in Pixology's Zbrush. He then exports the model back to 3D Studio Max to prepare the character for animation (Jepchumba).

3.1 *Oni Ise Owo* (2007)



Figure 3.1 Screenshots from *Oni Ise Owo* (2007); “Oni Ise Owo (The Artisan)”; Online Video Clip; *YouTube*; Youtube, 20 August 2007; Web; 13 December 2014

This is an animated short film about an Artisan god that is exiled from heaven after tension between him and the other gods broke out. He is cursed with horns and is cast down to earth where he finds another purpose in life. The story is about the seeking of one's own identity which can be seen when

the artisan in question removes his mask and breaks out of his shell. One can take this as a metaphorical expression of wanting to break free. In an interview with Paula Callus, an animation professor at Bournemouth University in England, Coker talks about how this film was inspired by a Yoruba folklore about “stone protectors cursed to guard a sacred grove”, about being exiled and about the search for redemption (Callus).

In this film, Coker uses a stylised approach in his character design. It is a human-based character with added on props that include a mask and shell that covers their shoulders, chest and most of their back. The character does not wear much in terms of costume except for a loincloth that covers the waist and groin area. Coker gave them youthful bodies that show some muscle definition, touching on the concept of ephebism which is one of the common elements of an African aesthetic discussed in chapter one.

The following paragraphs analyse Coker’s character designs for this film using the principles discussed in the first two chapters of this research. This is to assess his implementation of these in his work. The research will initially look at his use of colour and extract possible meaning from it. Thereafter it will also analyse his use of proportions and props to further bring out his character’s personalities. At the end the paper will then discuss Coker’s use of visual metaphors and symbolism in this film.

3.1.1 Colour

He uses a black design for the body and adds in white lines for the detail. This explains what led the *Blacklooks* website to believe that this style was based of the prehistoric rock art found in the Sahara desert. The colour black can mean evil or death but in this instance it adds a sense of elegance, power and mystery to the design of the characters which speaks to the sophisticated nature of the artisan deities as supreme beings. Coker adds contrast to the design by using white detail lines to show the definition of the different body parts.

White is also used on the character’s shell and mask. This can be taken to signify that the work of these artisan gods is pure and innocent. He further adds to the mystery and awe of the deities by giving them white eyes that feel illuminated in contrast to the black of their skin. This shows that they are more than just ordinary beings and that they have some sort of spirituality to them.

3.1.2 Proportions

The proportions that Coker uses for the characters are exaggerated. As discussed before in both of the previous chapters, this is a common element in African art and in stylised character design. He made the artisans very tall with small heads and limbs that are

proportionally big, especially the hands. This emphasises the fact that the characters do their work mostly by hand and that they have a stable base. The small head gives the impression that they are just the work force that is given orders from a higher power and that they are not required to have their own creative thoughts. This can then explain why the one artisan was then exiled when he decided to give expression to his own individuality.

3.1.3 Props

The mask and the shell serve as some form of a uniform and they do not differ from character to character. This in a way shows that all of them have the same ranking because for the most part of the film they are doing the same action and there is no distinguishing feature to imply who is the leader. Only when the artisan is exiled do we see one character taking an authoritative role by expelling him. Coker talks about how the “energy shell” contains “Ase, a life force that controls their abilities” (Callus). This means that the shell serves as a metaphor representing their work, the responsibility they carry as artisans. When one character then strips off his “uniform” and breaks his shell, he is seen to have rebelled against their cause and this in turn infuriates the others. The breaking of the shell gives backing to Tsai’s point that was discussed in Chapter Two on the subject of how props can be used to show the state of a character. The shell adds to the character’s silhouette and makes it unique but at the same time makes the positioning of the head from the frontal view a bit ambiguous. If the shape of the character was filled with black an audience would not be able to tell the positioning or the shape of the head as it is small in size and is covered up by the shell’s shape. Only when the character turns to the side will one start to see the definition of the head in a silhouette. The shell has a spherical shape and rounded edges, making the character non-threatening but imposing due to its size. The white colour, as discussed before, can signify in this case the goodness or spirituality of the work that they do.

Coker adopted the idea of wearing masks to his character implying that their work was some form of ritual. This is a practice carried out by most African cultures like the Yoruba as discussed in Chapter One. The Yoruba believe that one embodies the spirit of the mask when wearing it and this can explain how the cast-out artisan seems to have lost his power when he takes his off. The design of the mask looks as though it was inspired by the Ife masks (Blacklooks) although Coker denies having based the design on any specific masks “but rather the idea of them as they exist in Yoruba culture” (Callus). The mask’s face has a calm demeanour and does not show any expression, which is another common element of African art discussed in Chapter One as the concept of “cool.” This adds mystery to the

character of the artisans and shows that they have a dignified personality. One can also argue that this shows that they are lifeless and submissive, as they do not react or show any expression when one of their own is exiled. The only time there is a show of expression is when the rebel artisan is marked by the horns and expelled, showing that he was now thinking on his own. The shape of the mask has a conical structure at the top which according to Babatunde Lawal signifies a communication between the wearer and a supreme being (Smithsonian NMAI). This adds to the idea that these characters report to some higher power. Coker also added some facial scarification to the mask, an aesthetic that is accepted in many African cultures.

3.1.4 Symbolism

African artists rarely depict unwanted features or deformities in their work. They in most cases show only desirable elements (Ray). Coker takes this opportunity to show that a character has been cursed by marking him with horns, a feature that is not usually desirable on a human being. As discussed by Rowland Abiodun in Chapter One, this signifies that the artisan had lost his godly beauty, his 'ewa', and was now ugly. This is referred to by the Yoruba people as 'oburewa' (Abiodun 22). Coker demonstrates how an artist can take a commonly practised tradition and manipulate it to fit the message they want to put across. He also challenges the idea of luminosity. African artists often portray smooth and shiny skin in most of their work. Here Coker added some white detail lines on the character's skin that makes it appear as though they have rough, scarred skin. One can explain this as an attempt to show that the artisans are veterans at what they do and have acquired the scars throughout the ages while working.

The characters in the film work with bare feet. This is a practise mainly done in African dance and according to Robert Farris Thompson, this allows a participant to have a connection with the earth without an impairment. It allows for a person to get energy from the ground which gives them life. The artisans in this film create structures by the spiritual powers within them, so one can say that the bare feet allow for that energy to flow through them and into the ground allowing them to build.

3.2 *Iwa* (2009)

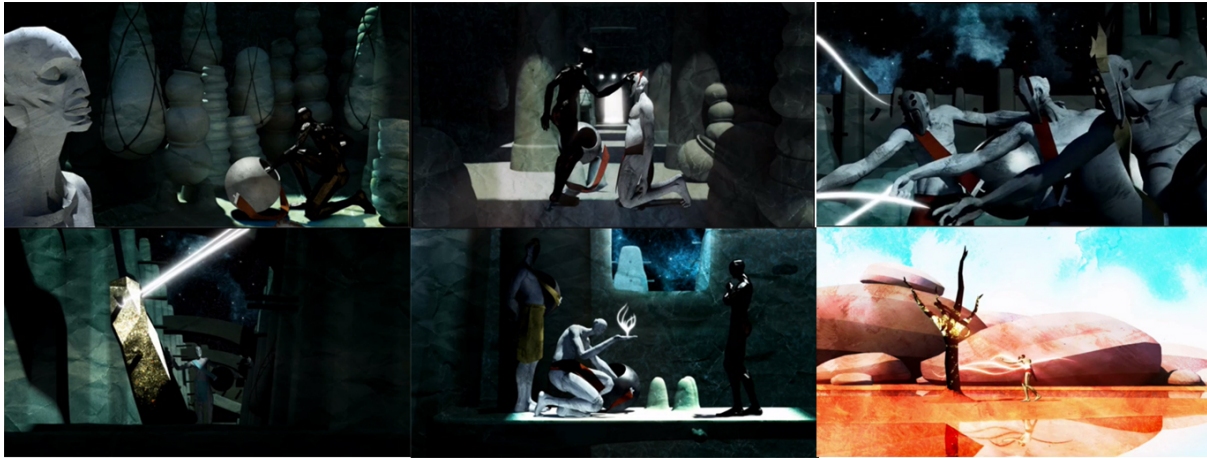


Figure 7 Screenshots from *Iwa* (2009); “Iwa.”; Online Video Clip; *Youtube*; YouTube, 20 August 2007; Web; 13 December 2014

Iwa in Yoruba language means character or behaviour and in this film Coker tells the same story as he did in *Oni Ise Owo*, only that he adds on to the story line and adds in a new character. The story begins with the Artisan falling from the heavens down to earth and then we cut to a scene that begins to explain the events that led to him being cast out. We then see a character that is a higher power, an Orisha giving life to the sculpture of the artisan and then setting him off to care for his duties. Orisha in the Yoruba culture are deity spirits that reflect the manifestations of Oludumare, the Supreme Being (“Orisha”). Coker talks about how this character represents Ogun, a Yoruba deity of war, invention and metallurgy (Callus). The film then moves to a scene where the protagonist is welcomed by his colleagues and then put to work. While working he becomes distracted and causes an accident that kills his fellow artisans. He is then taken back to the Ogun who casts him out. On earth he then finds a new purpose and gives his life to a tree. Coker bases this film on a Yoruba myth about a creator god and his rebellious servant (Callus).

As in *Oni Ise Owo*, the character designs in this film are stylised. Coker remains with minimal to no costume articles and gives the artisans some props to help explain their character. However, instead of a shell on their back as in the previous film, this time he gives them a calabash resembling a gourd that they sling over the shoulder so that it hangs on the side. He gives the characters a chiselled stone finish making them appear like live stone sculptures.

The next few paragraphs will break down Coker’s character designs in the same manner as the previous film analysis. The only difference is that in the first film, Coker had characters which looked

the same and in this current film he made use of two distinct character designs which have their own aesthetic properties. He also added some slight variations in the designs that look similar. At the end of this film analysis one will also have a comparison of the two distinct characters and how they work together.

3.2.1 The Orisha



Figure 8 The Orisha in the casting out sequence.; "Iwa."; Online Video Clip; *Youtube*; YouTube, 20 August 2007; Web; 13 December 2014

The Orisha character that he introduces in this film has a design that is different from the artisan characters. This helps to portray the fact that he is the higher power from which the rest of the characters are getting their orders. One can also establish this when he gives life to the main character of the story. His archetype would be the shadow because later in the story he becomes the antagonist to the main character. His body looks young, well-built and is given proportions that are almost naturalistic. Compared to the other characters, this makes him more agile and fit to be the leader. He is also given a dark colour that is close to black. This gives him a sense of mystery, power and elegance, which helps in conveying the message that he is a supreme being. However, it also plays well further into the story when he casts out the Artisan, showing that he has a cruel, impatient and unforgiving side to his character since he is Ogun, the god of war.

Coker gives this character a shiny surface that reflects light and at certain angles gives the impression that there is a galaxy of stars showing through him. This further conveys the idea of him as a supreme power who is highly spiritual. As discussed in Chapter One, this is a

common practise in African sculpture based of the idea of luminosity, where the artist gives a smooth shiny surface to his piece to give a sense of health and spirituality. Here, however, Coker does the opposite and instead of the smooth shiny surface, he gave the character a jagged but shiny surface, giving the sense that although the character is supreme, he is not entirely pure. The jagged surface also makes him intimidating and threatening, giving a hint of his cruel side.

For the most part of the film the audience rarely sees this character's face. Coker does not give him eyes or distinct facial features. This can be related to the idea that most of African art is rarely portraiture but a representation of a human being or animal. This allows the audience to relate to the character as a human-like being but then the idea of the character not having a face adds to his mysterious and supreme nature. Often, eyes are referred to as the windows to the soul and the character's lack of eyes further conveys his inhuman and cruel side.

In terms of the character's shape and silhouette, Coker left a lot more to be desired. There is no feature on the character's design that is very distinct, with the result that it is not memorable. If one was looking only at the overall shape of the character, one could not tell into which archetype this character falls, as it is a little ambiguous. He has no props and his naturalistic proportions do not make the character unique. Nevertheless, his lack of props in this story conveys the idea that he is not bound to any responsibility, as the others are, Coker could have added to the character by giving him props or a costume such as a staff or head gear to show his superiority. In most African cultures like the Maasai of Kenya, a staff or a fly whisk is carried as a symbol of authority (Werness 295) and the Zulu royalty used to wear leopard skin head bands (Bourquin). Coker could have used this opportunity to add in that African aesthetic. He could have also made the character's overall shape look more triangular to convey the cruel nature of the shadow archetype.

3.2.2 The Artisan

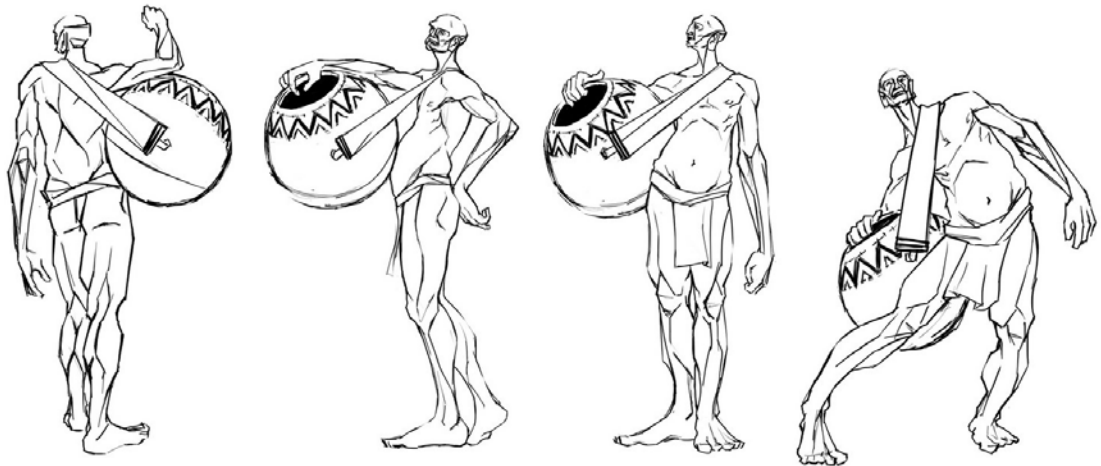


Figure 3.4 Sketches of The Artisan's character design from Kenneth Shofela Coker.; "We begin again" *Shof's Blog*, Shof's Blog, 25 June 2008. Web. 24 February 2015

Coker refined the artisan character design slightly more in this film as compared to how he portrayed it in *Oni Ise Owo*. He still kept it stylised with bottom-heavy proportions. This made the character look a bit more clumsy and slower by comparison to the Orisha character. This gave the sense that he was inferior. The arms were kept proportionally big to emphasise the idea that artisans worked more with their hands. He kept the young and able bodies with well-defined muscles, borrowing from the concept of ephedism. Although a little larger in this film, the head was still small in ratio to the body, as in the previous film. According to Babatunde Lawal, Yoruba sculptures were often made with head-heavy proportion since they believed that this is where a person's destiny was housed (Smithsonian NMAI). As discussed before, Coker could have intentionally made the heads for these characters smaller to show that they were more like subordinates. This is in contrast to the design of the superior character in which he kept the proportion of the head naturalistic.

The skin for the artisans was given a matte stone finish, which looks smooth but not shiny, showing that they were not as divine as the superior character. They were spiritual and possessed powers but only because they were given to them by the higher power. This also made them look more like chiselled stone sculptures that had come to life. The smooth look of their skin also made them look less intimidating as compared to the jagged skin texture of their leader.

To show their innocence and purity, the bodies were given an overall white colour unlike in the previous film where they were mostly black with hints of white detail. This also added to the contrast between them and the superior character. It made them less threatening and more naïve compared to the dark and powerful black colour of the antagonistic character. In this film, unlike in the previous one, Coker used colour as well to distinguish the artisans from each other. He gave them ranking by colouring their props and costumes. The brown coloured artisans came across as the foreman characters that came below the rank of the leader. This is evidenced in the scene when the main character is welcomed by his colleagues and the one in brown is the one to explain to him what he was supposed to do. Further, when he is brought back in front of the leader before he is cast out, the artisan in brown is the one who takes him there. The protagonist and one of the artisans he works with are given red colouring, showing that they are of the same rank and they are the ones who do the heavy lifting work. Finally, the artisans in blue seem to be the low ranking characters who do other jobs like sounding the bell and assisting the other higher ranking artisans in their work. An article on *“Colour Utilization among the Yorubas of Southwest Nigeria”* states that the Yoruba had three chromatic categories, namely, “fun”, “pupa” and “du.” “Fun” means white but also included colours like blue, silver and other icy colours. Psychologically the Yoruba associated these with kind, cool and homely personalities. “Pupa” translates to red and other fiery colours. It is used to represent danger or people that are very passionate. Finally “du” translates to black and other earthly tones like brown and green, which are used to represent a down-to-earth, practical, earthy sort of personality (Oluwole). This shows how Coker’s choice of colour for the artisans’ costumes is relevant and fitting.



Figure 3.5 The design of the Artisan in 3D (left) and the Artisans in the boulder sequence (right); “Iwa.”; Online Video Clip; *Youtube*; YouTube, 20 August 2007; Web; 13 December 2014

Coker kept the masks as part of the artisan's costume and as in the previous film, they look like they were inspired by the Ife masks of the Yoruba. They are white and have hints of the costume colour. Here Coker tried to give the artisans their individuality by making the designs of the masks slightly different. Apart from that difference, it does not seem to serve any other purpose. He could have used this opportunity to distinguish their ranks by using the mask designs. African masks are sometimes used to show a difference in social ranking (MacTaggart). As in *Oni Ise Owo* the masks are used to represent the artisan's work responsibility, they are a part of their uniform. Masks also drive the story, such as on the occasion when the protagonist takes his mask off and drops it to the ground to show that he had been distracted from his job and was no longer paying attention. As discussed before, the Yoruba believe that a wearer of a mask embodies the spirit of the mask and by taking it off, the artisan then lets go of that spirit. Coker mentions also that the mask serves as a visual metaphor of a forced identity. In African culture, masks are used to conceal the identity of the wearer and as discussed before, by removing the mask, the artisan shows his yearning for individuality - his need to express himself creatively (Callus).

In *Iwa*, Coker replaces the shell that was a part of the artisan's design in *Oni Ise Owo* with a calabash resembling a gourd which is attached to a band that is slung over the shoulders. This prop is used as the source of their power and becomes a prominent feature to the artisan's silhouette. Like the mask it is also used to represent the responsibility they carry. The calabash is a very important tool that is a part of the Yoruba everyday life. They are used to carry food, store medicine and at times turned in to musical instruments (Mullen 18). Babatunde Lawal even gives an explanation as to how the Yoruba metaphorically use the calabash as a way to define their cosmology (Smithsonian NMAI). This shows how Coker uses tools from a culture to add an African aesthetic to his design. The calabash is also used here as a storytelling device: when the character takes it off after causing the accident and lays it down, it is as if to say that he was ashamed and not worthy of the responsibility that was given to him. In another scene, the calabash is taken away from him before he is cast out to symbolise his powers being taken away.

Coker uses the same visual metaphor in *Iwa* as in *Oni Ise Owo* when the Artisan is marked with ram horns to show that he had been cursed, he was now 'oburewa'. He talks about how the ram is a symbol associated with the Yoruba god, Sango, who is the god of thunder. Sango has a rebellious spirit and was also exiled (Callus). Coker's use of visual metaphors is

awe-inspiring as this type of metaphor use can only be made possible if a character designer has an in-depth understanding of a certain culture, just as he does. Another example is the use of the white eyes, which are a part of the artisan's design. Initially he uses them to show that life had been breathed into the character when they illuminate. In the Yoruba culture as discussed before, white represents purity and the white eyes can be seen as a representation of the artisan's innocence and spiritual clarity.



Figure 3.69 The Artisan being marked with ram horns (Left). The two character in one scene for comparison (Right); "Iwa.": Online Video Clip; Youtube; YouTube, 20 August 2007; Web; 13 December 2014

3.2.3 Comparison of the two characters

Haitao Su talks about how a character designer should be able to compare the different characters in a story to see how unique each one is. In *Iwa*, the design of the artisan is more memorable as compared to that of the Orisha due to the fact that he has more distinguishing features. As discussed before his silhouette looks more interesting in the first part of the film due to the props he has to work with, added to his disproportionate features. The Orisha on the other hand has naturalistic human proportions and no highly distinguishable features. Nevertheless, one can argue that since the artisan was the main character, it is only natural that he is the most memorable. Looking at the weight and height of the characters, the artisan has an advantage over the Orisha which makes for an interesting driving point for the story, in that the smaller figure has power over one that is obviously larger. Coker did well in using colour to contrast the two characters by picking two colours that are opposite to each other metaphorically and in colour theory. However, he could have employed more ways of differentiating the characters such as, for example, using shapes for the overall body structure. This would have made it easier for the audience to identify immediately the different archetypes for each character. Among the artisans themselves as well there is not that separates one from the other when compared side by side. Coker could have considered given the hero of the story an additional unique feature that spoke to his individual character or changed the body structure of the others to show to

why certain artisans were ranked higher than others. As discussed previously he could have taken this moment to use different African cultural motifs and practices to distinguish the characters. The contrast and variety would have brought visual interest to the picture.

The characters in *Iwa* were designed for three-dimensional media which meant that Coker had to consider how the weight and volume of his characters worked in relation to the whole body as opposed to the flat two-dimensional characters in *Oni Ise Owo*. It is imperative for a designer to decide the medium they are going to use as it would affect what their result would look like. Two-dimensional characters can result in a different persona if translated to three-dimensional characters and vice versa.

3.3 Oro Iwin (2008)

In 2008, Coker created a series of characters for his blog and called the collection *Oro Iwin*. He explained that these are spirits that were forced to dwell in the forests of Yoruba land and they were neither deity nor demon. They were spirits which Oludumare (The Supreme Being) felt did not deserve the afterlife nor to become Orisha. Coker also adds that each one of them had their own unique story, traits and abilities (Coker). Although not designed for animation specifically, he used character design principles and African inspired aesthetics which makes them relevant to this research.



Figure 3.7 Madam Koin from Kenneth Shofela Coker.; "Oro Iwin: Madame Koin Koin" *Shof's Blog*. Shof's Blog, 07 July 2008. Web. 24 February 2015

One interesting character he showcases is that of 'Madam Koin' also known as *Ina Kere*, meaning small fire. Her character is based on a Yoruba myth about a strict headmistress at a school in Nigeria and the story is about how some of her students played a trick on her. It is said that they convinced her son to steal one of her shoes on a hot day when the earth was scorching. Fearing punishment, the son is believed to have run into the forest where he was followed by his mother, after which they both never returned (Coker). Coker created her as a short lady with a mean expression on her face playing well to the name *Ina Kere*. He gave her a pointy chin and long thorn-like finger nails which show her mean and dangerous side. Her costume is inspired by the everyday dress of women in Nigeria, with a long sleeved dress called a *Kaba*, that is wrapped around in a wrap-over called an *Iro* and a *Gele* head wrap ("Traditional Nigerian Fashion"). Apart from these being at simple level aesthetic elements of African costume, they also hold some symbolic meaning. The *Kaba* makes her very formal and it covers most of her body leaving the feet and hands. This gives a sense of her strict and unwavering nature while also showing that she is not trying to be flattering to herself, which makes her unapproachable. The *Iro* is normally worn around the waist but she wraps it very firmly from her chest, giving the sense that she is up-tight. The wrap-over looks like it is made from *Aso-Oke*, a hand woven material used by the Yoruba for formal events and hers is black which is called *Etu*, normally used for funerals (Olutayo 10). Coker gives her a fly whisk which, as discussed before, shows authority, adding to her character as a headmistress. The contours of her face look sharp and chiselled, making it feel like it is an African mask on a body.



Figure 3.8 Baba Itaniro from Kenneth Shofel Coker.; "Oro Iwin: Baba Itaniro" *Shof's Blog*. Shof's Blog, 01 July 2008. Web. 24 February 2015

A character for whom he actually used the idea of mask as a face is called Baba Itaniro. Coker used simple geometric shapes to hint at the idea of the facial features. For the eyes he used two semi-circle shapes as eye lids and placed them in well defined, carved out eye sockets, a common motif in African masks. The overall shape of the head looks like a wide octagon for the skull combined with a rectangular shape for the jaw and chin. He then added two facial scars on each cheek, an aesthetic that is also commonly used to decorate African masks and sculptures. Baba Itaniro is said to be a story teller, which is what his name actually translates as, Father of Stories (Coker). In African cultures, stories are often told by the elderly in the community which explains why he gave the character a beard and smoking pipe to show his age. Coker gives the character a stick which one can take as a symbol of a 'talking stick' also known as the 'speaker's staff.' This culture is practised by the Akan chiefs in Ghana and Ivory Coast giving the holder the authority to speak, mainly when settling disputes ("talking stick"). Although he is elderly, Baba Itaniro has a well-built and healthy-looking body, going back to the concept of ephebism in which most African art portrays youthfulness even in the old. Coker employs again the character design tool of making the subject disproportionate. He gives him short legs and normal human proportions on the upper body to draw more focus to it since it is more active in storytelling. However, if this character had been animated, the long arms would have proven to be a problem because they would be hard to be balanced when he is placed in different poses.



Figure 3.9 *Wood Spirits* from Kenneth Shofel Coker.; "Wood Spirits" *Shof's Blog*. Shof's Blog, 22 November 2009. Web. 24 February 2015

A final character design which is relevant to this study is the design Coker created for what he calls the Wood Spirits. These are believed to inhabit the forest of Eredo in Yoruba land (Coker). Unlike the previous Oro Iwin that were rendered in black and white shading, the Wood spirits have a brown colour for their skin and wear white costumes. The brown is adopted from the wood colour and is an earth tone. This borrows from the African aesthetic element in which art has to have some connection to the earth. Their skin has tattoo-like markings that look like tree rings and as discussed before scarification is a commonly practised culture among many African traditions like the Yoruba. Coker designs the hair with rigid dreadlocks that look like twigs, helping to convey their role as wood spirits. Here again Coker replaces normal faces with masks, adding to the character's mystery.

There are many other characters in this series that Coker elaborates, and each have their own unique attributes and back stories. He keeps borrowing from African cultural motifs and practices to put a symbolic idea across. The *Oro Iwin* series has character designs that seem more established than those in the short films. If all of them are put together there is contrast and variety that makes them more appealing, which would have been an advantage if translated to animation. Each one has a memorable trait that is conveyed in their design and each one would have had a unique personality that would affect the way they would have been animated.

3.4 Other work



Figure 3.10 Cast of *Ekologue* (Left) from Kenneth Shofela Coker.; "Ekologue" *Shof's Blog*. Shof's Blog, 17 August 2012. Web. 24 February 2015.

Cast of *Outcasts of Jupiter* (2014) which was initially called *The Adventure of Jupiter Jonah* (right) from Kenneth Shofela Coker.; "Happy 50th" *Shof's Blog*. Shof's Blog, 30 September 2010. Web. 24 February 2015.

Some of Coker's work that is worth mentioning in this research are the *Outcasts of Jupiter* (2014), a graphic novel which he intends to translate to animation in the future, and an animated series he pitched to a Nigerian TV station with his brother, called *Ekologue*. They are based in a more futuristic time, and modern Nigeria, respectively. These stories are not necessarily based on Yoruba mythology or traditional stories but he hints at the fact that they in some instances draw inspiration from them. Although *Ekologue* was later shelved he states that it "promised to cover a good breadth of the Nigerian human perspective and best of all, a look at how Lagosians would spin sci-fi tropes in their own way" (Coker). The characters in these stories are more close to a naturalistic design but at the same time carry an aesthetic that can be identified as part of a more modern Africa. In *Ekologue* he achieved this by using colours with an earth tone feel and by employing motifs that are common to present day Nigeria like the sandals and Nigerian cap worn by men called *Fila or Aso Oke*. In *The Outcasts of Jupiter*, Coker talks about how the main character's costume is based on post-colonial Nigerian attire. Although not very pronounced, one does feel the African aesthetic in his visuals for these projects and this shows the possibility of implementing it in stories that are not necessarily based on traditional or historic times.

3.5 Reviews from industry professionals and African animation enthusiasts.

To get a different perspective on Coker's work, his portfolio and films were sent to a select² number of character designers and other animation enthusiasts to see if they would agree on the aesthetic of his work.

Kudzai Gumbo, a Zimbabwean character designer based in Malaysia, talks about how Coker is a brilliant artist, who is inspiring and setting a trail for African digital artists. Being an African digital artist himself based in the diaspora, his opinion on Coker's character designs in the two short films was considered relevant for this research. Gumbo feels that Coker is still safe in his choice of colour and choice of features that are distinctly African. He recommends that Coker use more vibrant colours that reflect the tones and energy of Africa. He goes on to praise his flow of line although he says it is more reminiscent of American classic illustrations.

Paula Callus, a lecturer at Bournemouth University, who studies and writes about African animation, praises Coker's ability to draw inspiration from Yoruba mythology but also to be able to combine it with influences from other places other than just Nigeria. Professor Anitra Nettleton, who is the

² These professionals were selected based on their knowledge on African art, like in the case of Professor Anitra Nettleton, and their connection with African animation, as is the case with Paula Callus who writes a blog on it and Kudzai Gumbo who is an African animator in the diaspora.

head of the Centre of the Creative Arts in Africa at the University of Witwatersrand and has a good knowledge of African art history, says that his character design work does give a sense of an African sculpture aesthetic although not very overtly so. Jepchumba, the owner of the African Digital website expresses her intrigue in Coker's films and work. She also goes on to say that he is helping to build Africa's brand in the digital realm.

From all these views, one gets the sense that Coker's work is reminiscent of an African aesthetic but in a subtle manner, which could have been pushed further to distinctly show the identity clearly. He could have explored the use of more African motifs to make features of his characters stand out. As discussed before he could have taken the opportunity provided by the masks to show the diversity, meaning and different functionality of African masks.

Chapter Four – Conclusion

Defining an African aesthetic is an enormous task, although not impossible to achieve. Due to the fact that Africa is a continent that has a huge number of cultures, countries, languages and even customs, trying to come up with a single Pan-African formula proves to be problematic but there are similarities in this pool of options. This is the premise on which this research project is based: the study of common elements of an “African Aesthetic” and applying them to character design in order to come up with a style that can be identified as African.

In the first chapter of this research, scholars such as Rowland Abiodun, Wilfried Van Damme and Kariamuwelsh-Asante among others are discussed and all of them agree on a number of common elements that can be identified in most of African art. Some of these are ephemerism, the aesthetic of cool, luminosity and the need to connect to the earth, to cite a few examples. The research mainly studied the art work of the Yoruba people and other cultures which undoubtedly did showcase the above-mentioned elements, giving proof of scholar’s claims of some commonality in African art. These scholars do agree on the point that to truly understand what an African aesthetic is, one has to understand and define it from an African perspective. One needs to study it from within the culture from which it stems if one is to truly speak from a position of authority. Wilfried Van Damme explains this by showing how the term aesthetic differs between a Western and an African context. The term refers to the philosophy of art in the West and talks more about the ideas of beauty in the later context. The research shows more difference between these two worlds in that the notion of art for art’s sake is a practise in the west, one that is not common in Africa, where all creative work carries an aesthetic and a utilitarian use as well. These differences highlight the need for more African scholars and artists to study what an African aesthetic is and then share it with the world from their view. The main aim for this research is to help character designers in understanding the elements of African art in order to have a design style that has an African aesthetics.

The paper goes on to report that culture and religion are a central aspect of African creativity and can never be divorced from art. They give meaning to the lives of many African people and having an in-depth knowledge of them would provide one with a manual to understand the meaning of certain symbols, colours, shapes and messages. Rowland Abiodun talks about how creative work was not only for the gratification of the artist but for the consumption of the entire community so it was essential for one to understand what was acceptable and what was not. This can only be achieved by experiencing or by having a great appreciation of the cultures.

One concludes that religion provides a space and inspiration for artistic expression. The involvement of different art pieces in rituals has encouraged the artists to understand local beliefs and study the back-stories of the different deities they worshipped. A point stressed in the second chapter of this research, is that having a clear knowledge of your subject's background does prove beneficial. Most, if not all, African cultures have strong spiritual beliefs and systems that coincide or show some form of similarity, making the study of their different religions a good basis upon which to define an African aesthetic from.

Mythology is a tool which many African cultures utilise and this is also discussed in this research. It helps many people stay connected to their roots and contains blueprints for one to live by. Myths are passed down from generation to generation and allow a culture to live on. They are entertaining and yet educational since they explain why certain things are the way they are in a captivating manner. A huge wealth of history is contained in them and they are a result of deep thought and consideration therefore making them a good resource for artist inspiration. Again, myths provide a character designer with a back-story that would influence the visual appearance of their work such as seen by the case study in this research.

Wilfried Van Damme calls for the study of oral traditions and verbal arts when defining an African aesthetic. From this research, one concludes that verbal arts provide a more primary source of information as they mostly come from people who have experiences or have lived by their principles. Kenneth Shofela Coker, the artist reviewed in this research, talks in an interview about how at times he asks his father for information about Yoruba myths due to the fact that it is his ethnicity (Callus). Oral tradition provides an opportunity for one to further ask questions and get specific feedback first hand on things that are relevant to their project, unlike written records which also have some information edited out. Verbal arts call for an emotional response and are very interactive, providing an artist with more inspiration and the need to pass on the information. In the case of this research the artist would achieve this visually. In some cases a listener is moved to participate in the verbal art activity, making the experience more personal for them and leaving them in a space where it would be easy to translate that experience, using shapes, colour and other elements of character design.

Oral tradition has its flaws and the major one is that it is prone to bias. The people doing the telling can at times withhold or exaggerate information to best suit their need. This led Van Damme to the conclusion that sayings and proverbs are the best medium to use, since they are a result of a communal effort and do come from a place of deep thought and consideration (Van Damme, 10). The other problem is that it needs to be translated in its cultural context otherwise a person from

outside would not be able to understand. This poses a question that if this research is to find an African aesthetic in character design, would then an audience from other continents understand the different symbolic meanings of the elements within a design. One can consequently recommend that the designer would have to educate their audience in some way as to the implied context, or simplify their metaphors in order for people to easily understand their meanings. This can be achieved either by the character's actions or by combining another commonly known visual metaphor that can explain where the character is from or who they are in society. The other flaw in oral tradition and verbal arts is that as this art form is passed down through the generations, and later versions can begin to differ and become watered down. As the initial people to practise this tradition grow old and die, so do the original versions.

From this research one can conclude that African art in most cases would prefer to highlight the good qualities of a subject more than the bad. By looking at the discussed common elements they all have a sense of adoration and respect towards a certain being and rarely do they portray them in a bad light. One can say that since most subjects are deities or dead spirits, there is a fear of being cursed. As a character designer this is an opportunity that can be used to one's advantage, in that by using the direct opposite trait of a commonly used element, they can communicate different message. By doing this, an audience can quickly relate to a character because if familiar visual cues are used in reverse they would be just as effective and would incite an equally emotional response. For example, the concept of luminosity is brought to bear when a subject is portrayed with smooth skin that often reflects light, to give out a message of youthfulness and good health. If a designer were to give a character rough or diseased skin the message would be different. Artists could use this on the villainous characters.

African art tends to simplify the human and animal form by using shapes that represent certain parts of the body. This is common in sculptures and an iconic example is the use of two semi-circle like shapes for eyelids. It is reported that African art is rarely portraiture but stylised so as to differentiate the spirit from the human world. One can then conclude that if an African style of character design is to emerge, it would work best in the case of the more stylised character as opposed to the more realistic. Furthermore, most of the human or animal forms represented in African art do not follow naturalistic proportions. In an interview for this report with Jepchumba of the Digital Africa website and Bobb Muchiri, an animator at Studio Ang in Kenya, they seem to agree that this highly stylised form of an African aesthetic may prove to be hard to translate to animation because it would be a great technical challenge. This is a statement with which one is inclined to agree because the difference in proportions and placement of body parts on a character will call for

a change in the way they move. This results in extra work for the character designer to consider although it is not impossible.

There are major drawbacks in trying to define an African Aesthetic which this research highlights. The most significant of these is that Africa has a multitude of different cultures, with different styles of traditional art. Instead of coming up with a Pan-African aesthetic the designer can use this to their advantage and say that they have a huge resource from which to draw inspiration. Jepchumba concurs with this statement when she says that by adopting from the different cultures an artist is bound to have a result that says this work is from Africa. An artist will then have to be careful so as to make sure that their audience is well aware of the context within which these different aesthetic elements have been adopted. This can be achieved either by incorporating a narrative in the story or by including other elements in the character itself or in the scene.

Another drawback faced by artists in coming up with an African aesthetic in their designs is that there are not many readily available archives that offer explanation or visual inspiration to select from when it comes to the ancient African art forms. This is a problem that Kenneth Shofela Coker faces but then he has used it as an advantage to create his own interpretations from the stories on which he bases his films. As discussed previously, oral tradition is prone to bias and the original version of a story tends to become watered down as it is passed from generation to generation.

African art is very symbolic and metaphorical. There are many hidden meanings within a piece and these can only be understood if translated in context. This could also prove to be problematic for a designer who would consequently have to go to great lengths to explain the context to an audience so that they do not mistake the message they are trying to put across. On the other hand symbolism does make a character more intriguing and it would make one want to know more about them: this is where the back-story comes into play.

Even with all these drawbacks the pros outweigh the cons. In an interview with Professor Anitra Nettleton, the head of the Centre for the Creative Arts of Africa at the University of the Witwatersrand, she mentions how adopting from traditional art into a modern media like animation would help to keep African art contemporary and relevant. It would ensure that the aesthetic is not lost but would build on the archives for future generations. Jepchumba talks about building Africa as a brand and how this would also help to market African cultures to other continents. It would help in correcting all the “pre-packaged ideas” about what Africa should look like. Having an African aesthetic in character design would also establish the continent’s identity in the digital media platform and give the world a new perspective in storytelling and visual appeal.

In defining an African aesthetic, one would find out that creativity has been used to personify things that were intangible or mysterious to allow for some sort of communication between the people and that certain aspect in their life. For character design this opens a door to a lot of possibilities, because it allows an artist to base their work on more than just people and human personalities. They could now gain inspiration from other natural phenomena, allowing their imaginations to grow. Babatunde Lawal does talk about this and goes on to list a number Yoruba deities and what they represent, an example being the god of creativity called Obatala (Smithsonian NMAI).

At the end of the first chapter, the research goes on to look at the aesthetics of African masks and sculpture due to the fact that since the research is based on character design, these are the two closely related media to it. The study of African sculpture would give an artist an insight on how traditional artists use shape and proportions to convey messages and ideas and how best they can adapt this when designing their character's bodies. African mask history helps to inspire an artist as to how to lay out their character's face and facial expressions. It also shows which other elements were used to decorate the face, such as scarification.

In Chapter Two, the research discusses how character design is dependent on the story to come up with a result that is relevant to a particular project. A back-story on the character would make it easier for a designer to add on elements that would give the audience an insight into their behaviour, it explains why they do what they do and how they add to the story being told. Characters are the face of a story and their appeal keeps the audience engaged and intrigued by them. Therefore, their back story has to help in making sure the audience relates to what is on screen.

The industrial professionals and animation enthusiasts interviewed for this research, like Jepchumba and Muchiri, tend to lean towards this notion that if the story is African, whatever visual aesthetic that comes from it would resonate Africa. This, however, brings into question of whether an African style of character design would only apply to African stories alone. One would like to agree with this but only for an introductory stage of this style. Once the international scene has become familiar with it, it is possible that others will start to adopt it for stories other than African stories. This can be seen with the Japanese anime style of character design which in this day is applied to even American-based stories. A good example of this would be Aaron McGruder's *The Boondocks* (2005) series.

Shape, colour and ratio are essential to character design and as discussed in the second chapter they have different uses and meaning that are well known in the digital media industry. They also have their own other meaning and implication in the different African cultures. Mixing and balancing the

different translations would make for an interesting and unique result. Shapes in character design are normally used to differentiate the archetypes while in most African cultures they are used to create patterns, representations of body elements and metaphorical symbols. One can combine the two by using shape for the overall body structure of a character which can be complemented by pattern on the costume or semi-circle eye lids or lips. When it comes to colour, the meanings and translations are similar and only differ slightly. For example as discussed in Chapter Two, red can be taken to mean passion, danger and fire while among the Yoruba the colour red is also used to represent fire and lightning during the ceremony of *orisha, Sango*. Proportions work in the same fashion in character design as in African art. It is a tool best used when trying to highlight a character's skill or ability.

The research discusses how familiar visual clues are a great tool for an artist to utilise. Shapes and colour are basic visual elements that are familiar to an audience because most humans are taught to recognise these from an early age and so are cultural motifs. Francis Tsai in an article on character design in the *ImagineFX* magazine talks about this but also warns about adopting and mixing from different cultures so as to avoid being insulting (Tsai 81). Although it is in contrast to the views of this research one is inclined to partially agree with him in that when adopting features from these different cultures and religions they should be used in an appropriate manner unless the designer intentionally wants to cause controversy. He then goes on to add that if used correctly, the combination of the cultural and other influences would make for a unique and interesting result (81).

An analysis of Kenneth Shofela Coker's work does reveal the possibility of character design being influenced by culture. His two short films analysed here are based on Yoruba mythology and his in-depth understanding of the Yoruba people does make it easy for him to adopt motifs and elements from the culture and to implement them into his work. He talks about how he refers to Yoruba art for inspiration and how he uses his father who is of Yoruba descent, as a verbal resource.

The character designs in his two films indicate that he used most, if not all, of the previously discussed elements of African art. His characters are stylised and do not have natural human proportions. They are portrayed with young, healthy and well-built bodies, touching on the concept of ephibism. All characters have bare feet, showing the connection they have to the environment in which they are working and allowing their energy to emanate to the ground without hindrance. All these features, among others, do help his design to have an African aesthetic to them. Coker was intelligent enough further to use these elements in reverse to show the bad traits of one of his characters in *Iwa*.

Coker's use of visual cues and props to add to his character's design is well thought out. He uses these to drive his story in a way that is clear and relatable. He borrows from the Yoruba concept of 'oburewa' when he uses the horns of a Ram to show that the hero of his story had been cursed. Another well-used visual cue was when the artisan in *Oni Ise Owo* takes off his mask and breaks his spirit shell to symbolise his breaking free from their routine and his yearning for individuality. Visual cues as discussed before do help a designer in creating characters that an audience can easily relate to and they can also be used in explaining a context in which certain motifs can be translated.

One does feel that Coker's designs for animation are a bit weaker than those of his print and non-animated media. Kudzai Gumbo, a Zimbabwean character designer also based in the diaspora, does agree with this statement. In an interview for this research, Gumbo does praise Coker's work but then goes on to say that he could have pushed his character designs further in terms of colour and proportions. Coker's series of characters based on Yoruba myths about condemned spirits called *Oro Iwin* shows that they had more thought and work put in them as compared to those in the films. If put together, these characters would show more variety and visual interest than those seen in *Iwa* and *Oni Ise Owo*. To his defence one can conclude that since the two films were school projects, he had to work with limiting deadlines as opposed to the *Oro Iwin* project which was personal and for which he could afford to take his time on each design. This shows how time and sometimes money are a factor that will influence the way a design would end up looking.

Interviews of different industrial professionals and animation enthusiasts were conducted for this research. The general view from these was that although it may prove difficult an African identity is needed in the digital media realm and finding an African aesthetic in character design would benefit that cause.

Kudzai Gumbo talks about how it is possible to use African stereotypes in a positive manner to create work that is "visually astounding and commercially acceptable." One does agree with him in that the resulting style should show an African aesthetic but it should still have an international quality standard and appeal so that some revenue can be generated from projects that implement it. It is good to create an identity in character design but it should also serve the purpose of selling the story to a wide audience. If implemented properly Gumbo believes that this would be an opportunity to further expose the African cultures and motifs to the world.

Jepchumba is the founder of the African Digital website which is a platform that showcases Africa's digital art and talent to the world and is an animation enthusiast. On her website she has interviewed and featured a number African character designers and animators. In her interview for this research she mainly talks about the need to strengthen and build Africa's brand in the digital

industry the world over and believes that the aim for this research would help in doing that. She talks about how the story is vital in coming up with a visual aesthetic in character design that can be identified as African and calls for creative artists to study the history and cultures of the continent. Her views on the subject do resonate with some of the principles discussed in this research especially when it comes to understanding the back-story of a character. She recommends that artists should not only look at traditional art history alone but also at the more contemporary commercial crafts, created mainly for tourist consumption that have become a common feature throughout the continent. This touches on a previously discussed point on how mixing the traditional and the contemporary would make for an interesting and unique result.

Another interview was with Bobb Muchiri who is a Kenyan animator and works for Studio Ang in Nairobi. Apart from also emphasising the need for an African identity in character design, his main point was that designers should also be aware of the technical aspect involved in creating characters for animation. He gives a recollection on a project he worked on that involved animating work produced by contemporary African painters and how it was difficult having to rig³ the character for animation. This was due to the fact that the characters were highly stylised and when they were designed they did not take into consideration how they would move since they were initially meant to be viewed as still images. One does agree with his warning because due to the fact that African art tends to use disproportionate figures and irregular shapes, it is easy to create something that is appealing visually but which would then cause a problem when trying to get them to move. Designers should therefore be aware of that.

Eugene Mapondera, an animation blogger and character designer once wrote an article in which he questioned whether African character design simply meant bare-chested/breasted characters with animal print costumes (Mapondera). He asked what the modern African character would look like. One does understand his frustration because it seems as though that the old traditional aesthetic is the full scope of what an African should look like. It does not take into account the fact that today, there is a more modern African who dresses and looks contemporary but still stays true to their identity. So one does caution that although this research is looking at old traditional African art, it is based on the belief that the old should inspire the new and that the new should complement the old. A good character designer should be able to combine aesthetics from both generations and come up with a solution that has a modern appeal and at the same time not feel foreign to the traditional demographic.

³ To rig a character in animation is the process of creating a skeleton that will be bound and used to move the model.

This research mainly focused on the traditional cultures and art history of the West African countries but the same principles do apply across the continent. African art has a distinct aesthetic which is not common to other continents no matter which culture one decides to reference. There is a great wealth of creative inspiration from which a character designer can draw. The findings in this research would help one to begin to understand the African aesthetic and come up with a visual aesthetic in character design that is unique to Africa.

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Appendix A



Batsirai Freddy <freddybatsirai@gmail.com>

Masters research paper

Kudzai Gumbo <scribblemo@gmail.com>
To: batsirai freddy <freddybatsirai@gmail.com>

Mon, Feb 23, 2015 at 2:18 PM

hi Batsi

the response to your questions

1. What are your general comments on Kenneth Shofela Coker's work?

brilliant artist, and inspiring, setting the trail for african digital artist

2. Do you think Coker's character design represent an African style and why? Discuss in terms of colour, shape, proportions, props etc.

i particular love his flow of line, reminiscent of american classic illustrations, I do feel his work is still very safe and perhaps has not fully explored translating the distinct african features onto digital canvas. His choice of colors is excellent, in the future i believe he will explore the full vibrant range of african colors that reflect the tones and vibrant energy of africa.

3. If Africa is to come up with its own distinct style of character design, what do you think is the way forward?

I believe that african artists would have to become comfortable with ourselves, a lot of the african features have been compared to animals, described as being brutish, large bulging, i feel the successful artist will be able to depict these features in a manner that is visually astounding and commercially acceptable. I feel the style will have to include or at least address african stereotypes in a positive manner.

4. Do you think this style could be applied to any other story that is not necessarily linked to Africa and what would be the benefit?

I think the style could be applied to any style other than african, and the benefit would be that those intrigued by the story would become interested in the artist and explore his various other works, including african stories which would give them the exposure they need.

[Quoted text hidden]

Appendix B



Batsirai Freddy <freddybatsirai@gmail.com>

The African aesthetic in African animation

Paula Callus <PCallus@bournemouth.ac.uk>

Mon, May 26, 2014 at 4:14 PM

To: "freddybatsirai@gmail.com" <freddybatsirai@gmail.com>

Hi Batsi -

I would be happy to help, but I suppose my first impression would be to advise you to be weary of using the term 'African'. The term is used in reference to a continent (as opposed to anime that was developed in Japan). As you are aware Africa consists of different countries with a range of artistic traditions with particular aesthetics, and their own narratives and mythologies, music etc. Therefore perhaps you consider the differentiation between 'African' and Kenyan, Zimbabwean, Congolese, Nigerian, Moroccan, etc. and the political implications of this in design.

People like Kenneth are interesting as they are able to refer to Yoruba mythologies whilst accommodating a range of aesthetic devices that stem from places beyond specifically Nigeria. Also I suppose that you could consider references to exotic imagery (as perceived from a Western audience) and consider this in light of Edward Said's discussions on Orientalism or Homi Bhaba's discussions on the 'Other'. How do certain designs and images resonate with audiences as being distinctly 'African' as opposed to any other place?

The question is a very interesting one and raises a host of wider concerns -regarding the Disney-fication of animation and other forms...

I attaching two articles I published on the animation journal about anthropology and animation -there is mention of Kibushi's animation and Congolese popular painting - this gives you an example of the specific motifs that read to particular people - in this case Congolese (as opposed to African). It may help you frame your discussion,

Get back to me if you have more questions

Paula

From: batsirai freddy [freddybatsirai@gmail.com]

Sent: 26 May 2014 14:44

To: Paula Callus

Subject: The African aesthetic in African animation

[Quoted text hidden]

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3 attachments



Callus_Output01.pdf
705K



Callus_Output03.pdf
1481K



Callus_Output02.pdf
2499K

Appendix C

Kenneth Coker Interview
2012-11-04

ABOUT YOU:

First of all – could you give me some background information about your position/situation in Nigeria before your move to the US?

I was born in 1987. I grew up in Lagos; never once leaving the country till I was 18 to pursue a degree in Illustration in the Memphis College of Art. My brother had already traveled to the US for his education in art. I was initially going to study animation at another college, but he convinced me that illustration would be better in the long run for my career, and I still thank him for it today.

You mention in interviews, that you have a keen interest in comics and animation that results from a childhood exposure to these forms. Could you talk about what types of comic books and animations you would typically come across as a child in Lagos? What aspects of these comics did you relate to? And were you reading any locally made/published cartoons, comics?

Growing up in Lagos, foreign comics/ animation were always considered 'cool.' The quality level at the time was always incomparably higher than anything produced locally. I struggle to remember locally produced animated tv shows and comics books. In fact, there were no local shows on television that had full animation. The closest that came to it was Tales by Moonlight on NTA (Nigerian Broadcast Network), which I still possess fond memories of. A presenter, 'Aunty' would recount folktales to kids gathered around her under the moonlight. As she narrated the story, the show would often present still image paintings or puppets, dramatizing sequences of mami water (mermaids) and monsters. There were a handful of similar shows, like Storyline and Puppet World, but they haven't really left a very strong impression on me. NTA, however, aired more foreign produced shows than local ones. So I watched animation from Germany, Canada, the US, England and Japan. Shows like Gatchaman force, Astro boy, Ovide and the Gang, Transformers, Danger Mouse, Postman Pat, Gummy Bears, etc. Nigerian TV networks bought syndicated TV shows, so quite a few of the shows I watched spanned multiple decades. They were often shown out of sequence, more often than not, never completing a show's entire run. There was also the odd art house animation that would be shown such as a Lotte Reiniger silhouette animation which was interesting then, but have come to deeply appreciate in recent years.

As for comics or kid's books, I only remember The Bobo series (eg Bobo Learns to Fly) They were educational books that revolved around a boy named Bobo on some fantastic journey that would teach him a moral or skill. I grew up reading mostly Marvel and DC comics that my grandfather would buy for us at a local supermarket called UTC in Surulere. Comics such as the Avengers, Spiderman, Superman, etc. They were fantastic, but I had an even greater affinity for books like Tintin and Asterix and Obelix. My family had an extensive collection of them. The print quality in these books were amazing (better than the Marvel and DC books, till this day) and I really fell in love with them as objects. Of course as stories I related to Tintin and his brave adventurous spirit as well as the humor within. Asterix and Obelix just seemed to live in the most wonderfully vibrant universe. The referenced real world history ingrained in the stories was also quite fascinating

In retrospect, I think above all what I related to most in all these early influences was the strong sense of family conveyed in these stories. My family is quite close so identifying similar relationship threads within

the narratives of all the examples above was endearing to me.

What were you doing/ where were you living before the US and what motivated your move?

I was living in Lagos, Nigeria. As mentioned above, during the two years after Secondary school at Greensprings School, I worked at Midicorp Nigeria Ltd briefly working on tv commercials and then on a canceled project titled The Passport of Mallam Ilia for Aqkumen Animation. I also mentored with my father and his mural painting and design company, Coreak designs. My main motivation for moving was college and a desire to further my career as an animator/storyteller. I studied at the Memphis College of Art from 2005-2009, majoring in Illustration with a minor in Art History.

You mention that your father is a professor in fine art in Lagos– what role did he play in your artistic development?

My father is a painting professor at the Yaba College of Technology in Lagos. He is also a muralist and gallery painter. He has always been a wonderful influence on me. He never pushed me to become an artist though. He encouraged me with whatever pursuit I was occupied with at the time- encouraging me to be an architect for instance, after a long obsession with Lego. Of course watching him work and the success he achieved probably allowed me to believe that making art for a living was a viable way of life. My father's futurist tendencies and positive outlook on the manner in which art can affect a society rubbed off on me too. I would say however, that in my early years, my older brother had always been my biggest artistic influence. He always challenged me to improve my skills and introduced me to artwork, media and ways of thinking about art that I'd otherwise be ignorant of.

Do you feel that his profession positioned you to be more critically aware of your practice as an artist and where this sits in the history of post-colonial Nigerian art?

My father's circle of friends and art ecosystem gave me a broad view of the lifestyle and the challenges they faced. Nigerian society is very much practical and utilitarian at the moment. Most people don't have disposable incomes that are applied toward purchasing art, so watching these men and women try to forge new methods to redefine Nigerian artistic identity in the modern era was enlightening. Numerous artists in Nigeria, dismiss the idea of art for art's sake in favor of a more pragmatic ideology. Hopefully I can help build and evolve their ideas, and the manner in which I've chosen to do so is through storytelling in new media.

The pressure to raise your country's artistic perception in the world is quite motivating, but at the same time stifling and detrimental. I believe at times, that sense of duty tethers one to a single mindedness that doesn't allow for much creative, personal freedom in expression.

How do you see the linkages between your artistic practice as an illustrator, independent animator, and CG modeler for Sony?

A lot of the professional practices are similar- the tools and skill set, time management, discipline, etc. The creative process couldn't be more different. Creative problem solving varies in each discipline. Working in production as a CG modeler can be quite 'blue collar.' You are in essence a very specialized cog in a large machine. Influencing the entirety and scope of a project as a CG modeler or in my case, as a character artist is quite difficult. Smaller studios with smaller team sizes offer more flexibility in this regard, but at Sony there are often tiers of management that filter communication and solutions before they reach me.

Freelance illustration provides a little more creative wiggle room especially if you are able to develop a strong relationship of trust with your clients. Of course independent animation/storytelling requires the most initiative and self direction and offers great freedom, but also requires a high degree of fiscal responsibility, if you intend to do it for a decent amount of time.

Your current profession is firmly set within the commercial sector and CGI industry/ do you intend to continue your projects as an independent animator/filmmaker/illustrator?

I wouldn't say it is firmly set at all actually. I view my time in the industry almost as an extension of my education. Currently I'm working in the commercial sector to develop as much professional experience, build a strong network of professionals, and to further improve my skill set. It also affords me the ability to live in the US, gaining exposure to an industry that has influenced my entire life. Doing so has also provided a platform for me to gain perspective and momentum with personal projects. I'm a storyteller at heart first, not a digital artist and whether I'm working on comics or animation, I'm at my happiest.

Before your move to the US, it appears that you had some work experience in Lagos, could you describe how you found the studio work environment there?

My experience working at Midicorp Nigeria Ltd. in Lagos was not what I hoped it would be. It was a studio that was doing relatively well financially with quality infrastructure and a studio head that appeared to be invested in new media. I soon found the advertising and animation department I worked in was understaffed, unmotivated, disorganized and lacked good leadership. I was hired along with a friend of mine to create an animated pitch for potential investors. We had a senior supervisor that had less production knowledge than we did (a 17 and 18 year old) and project management was nonexistent. Looking back it's easy to see they exploited us. Midicorp never paid us for the assets and services delivered to them, instead choosing to consider our time there an unpaid internship despite earlier agreements. In truth I was too naive and should have signed a contract or some sort of pre-agreement.

Working on the Passport of Mallam Iliya was exciting. Although I worked as a freelancer in conjunction with Aqkumen studios, I was working with like minded colleagues that had the same aspirations, drive, and belief that I did. I felt like I was working on a project that could be considered a significant part of Nigerian history. It was quite a collaborative process despite suffering from a lack of experience in production.

The funding was in retrospect was too meager to undertake the proposed scale of the project. I look back on this project fondly though and still hold Aqkumen in high regard for good business ethics. They actually paid me for delivered services despite the cancellation of the project, which is unbelievably rare in the entertainment industry in Lagos, now and then.

Your CV mentions work on a television animated series for "The Passport of Mallam Iliya" - when and where did this series air? And you have access to any images of this animation that you could provide me with or more information about the project?

The Passport of Mallam Iliya was meant to be a 13 episode adaptation of a popular Nigerian book of the same name by Cyprian Ekwensi. It was meant to air at Christmas of 2009. It never did. I originally signed on the project as a character designer, modeler and animator. In hindsight I wore too many hats for a production of that scale. It was also the last 4 months leading up to my departure for college. I delivered as many assets and pre-production work as I could before I left the project, modeling most of the cast, props and set pieces for the first episode. Eventually production shut down, due to funding issues and the fact the book's author did not grant the rights for it.

There are moments in your CV where it appears that you were working on projects in Lagos and Memphis – were you travelling between countries at that time/ or were you working remotely * ie via the internet? (See 2007 – Coreak/ and Memphis)

I was working for my father's design studio, Coreak Designs. Yes, I was working remotely via the internet while I was in college. From time to time I still help out with some projects he works on. The work mostly entails CG visualisations of architectural space.

Would you like to return to Lagos with a view to contribute to the local art scene or film sector?

Very much so and not just Lagos, but hopefully several cities in Africa. I do not have any definitive plans. I am not certain that I will actually live and work in Lagos on a consistent basis in the future either.

However, making sure the work I produce is experienced back home and in other parts of Africa is imperative, because that is where I hope it makes the biggest societal contribution and hopefully provide avenues that allow other creators more fluency when attempting the same.

How did your practice change or develop throughout your education in Memphis? Could you talk briefly about your experience of the American educational system in the arts and how this compares to that in Lagos?

Every art class I attended in Lagos secondary schools, including a few of my father's at Yaba Technology focused primarily on technical skill and the study of art theory and practice, i.e mixing paint, color theory, understanding form, etc. The majority of classes in college revolved around conceptual thinking and methods of creative problem solving in art. The lack of emphasis on skill was a little jarring and frustrating at first, but I feel like that was exactly the kind of education I needed at that time. I needed to realize and develop what I wanted my art to convey and methods of successfully going about doing so- Raising my awareness of artists and art that had dealt with similar ideology, subject matter, etc. I was also exposed to a great variety of art history and resources in college that influenced my decision making skills and outlook on art.

ABOUT YOUR FILMS:

I assumed that due to your being from the South of Nigeria, and from your interest in Yoruba mythology that you may be of Yoruba descent/ if this is not correct would you be able to talk about your ethnic lineage/s?

That is correct. My father is of Yoruba descent and therefore, I am, according to Yoruba patrilineal custom. Specifically my paternal family comes from Abeokuta, in Ogun state. Abeokuta is a town about 45 minutes north of Lagos. My mother, however is half Yoruba (Lagosian from Ijora) and half German.

You have been cited in various articles as having a keen interest in Yoruba myth and narrative and undertaking research in this field (AfricanDigitalArt) – could you describe how you go about researching this material and what sources you look towards before producing your own work/ (adaptations)?

First of all my father is a great source. Yoruba tradition is based on oral history so I've found it quite natural to rely on him as a source. There might be consistency issues, but I find the organic evolution of narrative and history through ancestral descent quite essential. It's a theme that I plan to tackle in some of my future work actually. Most of my narrative and conceptual research is derived from books and authors such as Wole Soyinka, Ulli Beier, Geoffrey Parrinder, Harold Courlander, Amos Tutuola, and D.O.

Fagunwa.

Finding specific representations for visual research for Yoruba myth is more of a challenge. So I tend to reference a lot of traditional Yoruba costume, architecture, and motifs and derive my visual language loosely on this. It's a blessing and a curse because it's more arduous process to develop aesthetics without an already established visual history, but allows more creative freedom with your choices. I also don't have to deal with preconceived notions of what things are supposed to look like. I have at times been told that some of my work doesn't look 'African' enough though, which I find quite hilarious. I also research old ethnological Nigerian magazines. Unfortunately, there isn't a great deal of visual information online about Yoruba myth and folklore...yet.

Could you translate what "Oni Ise Owo" means in Yoruba, and why you chose this as the title of your animated film?

Oni Ise Owo roughly translates to 'The Artisan' in Yoruba. The film revolves around a pivotal moment in the life of an artisan from the heavens.

I came across a brief description of this film as:

"It tells the story of an exiled artisan from the heavens that manages to find a new purpose guarding a grove of trees on earth."

Could you describe the narrative context of your film? What inspired you to tackle this story?

Thematically Oni Ise Owo deals with exile and the solace of redemption. I have always been drawn to exiled characters that journey to seek atonement and I thought I could explore that sentiment in this student film. I remembered a folklore about a stone protectors cursed to stand guard over a sacred grove and the idea evolved from that point. Visually, I had been doing a lot of research on Lotte Reiniger's films at the time and wanted to pose a character and story of my own in a world of silhouette animation.

Why is the central character banished/ exiled – who are the other figures that exile him?

Perhaps the biggest failing of the short film for me is the clarity in this regard. He is banished for cracking his shell. The energy shells on the torsos of the artisans contain Ase, a life force that drives their abilities. Breaking it renders one invalid. He is branded with ram horns and banished by his peers as he can no longer carry out his duties among them.

You split the narrative into two sections – one is monochromatic, the other has colour – is this device use with a particular intention in mind?

The color separation served as a motif to describe two disparate universes. The realm of earth and that of the gods. The film's narrative is non linear so I felt employing distinct color treatments to the settings would also help ease the fluency of the narrative.

Diaspora films tend to have a thematic interest in exile, migration and movement between different locations. Do you think that this film references these motifs/ and is it a metaphor for a larger narrative?

I think you could certainly draw that conclusion with Oni Ise Owo. However, it was never a conscious effort to highlight a topical issue or point at a larger narrative relating to society.

I've never liked the term diaspora though, even though I technically fall under the category. The term 'diaspora' always conjures negative connotations for me, as if one eschews his/her country of origin with careless abandon. As if migrating or living in a country other than your birth is a betrayal. I was born and

raised in Nigeria and I will be Nigerian no matter where I live. Perhaps tackling this subject matter is a manner of constantly trying to reconnect or reaffirm a dialogue with the land of one's heritage.

Who is the central horned/ ram character in "Oni Ise Owo"? What inspired this design? Did you have any particular Nigerian aesthetic references that you were interested in for this project?

The central character is one of many artisans tasked to build the city of the gods. In Yoruba cosmogony the ram is the symbol of Sango, a god of thunder that has a fiery, rebellious spirit. Sango was also an exiled king before his deification. I enjoyed the symmetry so I thought the horns as a brand would be an interesting visual motif. I looked at Dahomey art, North African architecture, Lotte Reiniger's films, and even Thai shadow puppetry for research. An important visual element in the film was implementing Yoruba textile patterns.

At moments in this animation you employ masked characters – could you explain what the unmasking of the character signifies/ and if you are referencing any particular masks from Yoruba masquerade?

I did not reference any specific Yoruba mask, but rather the idea of them as they exist in Yoruba culture. Masks in most cultures conceal identity; Yoruba masks and masquerade empower the wearer with its attributes or channel ancestral spirits. In Oni Ise Owo the artisan's unmasking heralds the character's chance to discover his own identity as opposed to one forced on him.

In your film 'Iwa' – the ram-like character makes reappearance, and again there seem to be some recurring motifs that appear in your first animation with the exile to another place. – Was this film intended to be seen in light of your earlier film and as a development of it?

Absolutely, the stories vary slightly but the themes and essence were similar, but expanded upon. I had read a Yoruba creation myth recounted by Wole Soyinka about a creator god and his rebellious servant and I became interested in incorporating destiny and choice into the story. 'Iwa' is the Yoruba word for character/behavior. With more time, better tools, and resources I felt I could more closely execute my mind's eye. Oni Ise Owo was produced in a month. Iwa took 5 months.

Is there a particular reason why you chose to assign the horns of the ram to this character/ and what particular meaning these carry?

See earlier description of the use of the ram horns in Oni Ise Owo.

Could you give a brief narrative overview of this animation, and again reference any influences that may have played upon the development of this film?

Iwa is the story of an artisan in the city of the gods that finds new purpose after his exile to earth. It is a journey that takes him from the awe inspiring Orun (heavenly city), to liminal space and to a vibrant grove in Ife (Earth). The artisan's journey is one of introspection, ignominy, and redemption. With both Oni Ise Owo and Iwa, it was not my intention to directly adapt a specific Yoruba folk tale or myth, only to derive ideas and visual stepping stones. Earlier I mentioned the Wole Soyinka folktale of Olorun and the first servant. For theatrical and tonal reference I looked at films such as The Fountain, The Fall, and Madame Tutli Putli. Artists such as Eyvind Earle and Luis Baragan influenced the visual design.

Who is the figure at the start of the film – that gives life to the man with the mask?

The figure is meant to be a representation of Ogun, the Yoruba god of war, invention and metallurgy. In Iwa's universe, using Ase (life force) he brings life to the army or artisans building the city of the gods.

What is this space that these characters inhabit – and what references did you use when you thought of the environment design?

My intention was to keep the style as close to my 2D illustrations as possible. The environments were broken into three distinct spaces, the realm of the gods, a liminal void, and life on Earth. The non-linear narrative made it necessary for me to retain a distinct color palette for each realm. Each segment's color theory also had to reflect the emotional weight of the narrative – Iwa's languid, poetic sensibility.

Because of the heavy use of overlaid textures and ornamentation, it was necessary to keep a simplified shape design in the environments. The work of Mexican architect Luis Barragán was a great influence. Studying his work and understanding his ideology led to a lot of educated direction in Iwa. The similarities between Mesoamerican and West African architectural motifs have always been obvious to me, but it is the manner in which Barragán translated his homeland's cultural aesthetic into a contemporary sense that interested me the most. His modernist education is apparent, but does not reflect his deep-rooted traditional belief in the evocation of emotion, a prevailing sense of serenity in architecture.

There seem to be architectural references to the Hausa minarets and the Great Mosque of Djenné in Mali – was this an intentional device and if so could you elaborate on this.

You are correct, although, initially it was my brother that originally proposed the idea of a city of the gods built referencing North African architecture in one of his comics. I expanded this visual vocabulary to the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, Ethiopia, Dogon rock dwellings, and Dahomey/Benin architecture and sculpture. Clay/earthen buildings are typical of African architecture and this motif served the narrative of Iwa for some of the above-mentioned reasons. There is a sense of iconism and monumentality in this architecture that evokes a sense of serenity and meditation.

What is the significance of the bell ringing sequence?

At that point in the story it signifies a call to work. The Agogo bells in the film herald a turning point in the story. A thematic reckoning.

In this animation you present 3 characters with distinctly different masks? Could you talk about the significance of these masks and their intended meaning within the narrative? Also could you give an account of the role of these characters?

Although the story never explicitly stated it, the other masked characters were the artisan's brothers. The visual symbolism of their masks was not metaphorically important. Their masks imply rank and skill in their rote work – lifting a block of obsidian to a higher level for construction. They build and do not create, so the growing light tree during this sequence is a spiritual manifestation of his burgeoning desire to express his creativity. This distraction leads to negligence in his duty. The deaths of his brothers follow. The sequence provides the reason for the artisan's desire for atonement.

There is a similar masking/unmasking of the character that appears (as in your previous film). How do you see the image of the mask and its use in this narrative? And does this represent a larger metaphor?

In the story the masks and the clay pots the artisans carry imbue them with abilities. Stripping the mask of the artisan renders him invalid, without purpose. He must in essence forge a new identity, a destiny for himself through some sort of redemption, which he does by healing the destroyed tree on Earth.

The story of the artisan is one I hope to one day return to again. Iwa was my senior show, developed in my last semester at college. As a student film I felt the story was told as best as I could considering the amount of work I juggled, the timeframe, and resources. Developing the story further is an ongoing project.

FUTURE PROJECTS?

I am particularly interested in your proposed project in development for Jupiter Jonah and the animation pitch for Ekologue – would you be able to talk about these projects in more detail.

My brother and I intend to make Jupiter Jonah our lives' work. The same way Herge developed Tintin and Uderzo and Goscinny developed Asterix and Obelix. Jupiter Jonah is the story of a time-displaced man searching for a way home, travelling around the galaxy to find a manner in which to do so. Shobo and I are developing it as a comic first, with intentions for other media, especially animation. At the moment we are only working on pre-production material for the project preparing viable methods of funding actual production.

Ekologue is a story that takes place in the not too distant future of Lagos and the new Eko city. The story revolves around the socio-economic rift that develops between the more affluent inhabitants of Eko city and the debilitated, writhing stratified mess of old Lagos. The story brings together a core group of characters, a patchwork family that introduce us to their world and struggles.

You mention in your blog that you pitched Ekologue as a Nigerian television animation series – Who did you pitch to and how was this received – and what type of audience were you targeting for the series?

We pitched the show to a network with African interests. At this moment, my brother and I cannot discuss the details of the pitch itself, but it was favorably received. Family was a major theme developed for the show. We were not given a target audience stipulation, but we were interested in a show for all ages.

In the preproduction treatment for both of these two projects you use imagery that draws from colonial motifs (such as the costume design and props and some characters such as Stein) – Are you interested in these references and if so how are you proposing to tackle these political ideas within your work?

Jonah's story is influenced by his outlook and sensibilities as a Nigerian from a freshly post colonial era of the 70s. Inevitably, post colonial issues partially govern his identity and we thought it would be necessary to have some literal and visually familiar touchstones in the new world he encounters. I believe this adds to the story's richness and depth, as well as a specificity of perspective. In some instances, it's a method we use to undermine the power of a particular negative historical or political weight. The story also references Nigerian history and myth quite a bit, but in a manner you might not expect. These overarching themes are never meant to be contentious or didactic for the sake of being so, and is only one aspect of Jupiter Jonah's story so as not to be obtuse to the reader.

Jonah's visual style also references adventure novels and stories my brother and I enjoyed when we were children, which inherently possess some of this imagery. Such as Rider Haggard's Alan Quatermain, Indiana Jones, Edgar Rice Burrough's Barsoom series, Flash Gordon, etc. The same principles applied to the Ekologue project barring the pulp adventure influence.

It may appear that your aesthetic treatments of these two projects bring a sense of the 'Marvel-comic' and in places something of the Miyazaki and Peter Chung's Aeon Flux. (Whilst I realise all uniquely different – for example your lady on the scooter image on your blog for Ekologue reminds me of Miyazaki, and your Funlola character has something of the Aeon Flux)...

Are you influenced at all by any of these artists? Which artists do you feel have made an impact on you as an artist?

As I mentioned earlier I read Marvel comics when I was younger. I still read Spider-man comics now and then, but rarely. Both Peter Chung and Hayao Miyazaki are fantastic artists and storytellers in their own right. Their work is indeed a strong influence on me. I love Miyazaki's tendencies to incorporate themes of flight and family and human optimism in his stories. I'm an avid student of the craft of his manga and anime. His economy of line, shape language and color theory present a beautiful simplicity. Chung's style is influential because it showed me early on in my life that expressionism in animation is technically attainable and impactful in storytelling. Ludwig Holwein, Heinrich Kley (German expressionist illustrator), Herge (Georges Remi), Albert Uderezo, Luis Barragan. Contemporaries like Tomer Hanuka, Marjane Satrapi, Craig Thompson, Uderezo, and Mike Mignola. There are too many to list. Technically they are all visually unique and skilful artists and I do learn a lot from their craft, but my sources tend to influence me more with their unique approach to storytelling ability, creative problem solving and artistic philosophy.

Having said the above – the design incorporates qualities that also resonate with a Nigerian audience. If you had to identify why you think this is so – and what makes this narrative and aesthetic treatment an example of Nigerian comics, could you discuss this?

First of all, I'd hope the art resonates with any audience, regardless of nationality. Of course there are visual elements in Jupiter Jonah and Ekologue that ostensibly reference Nigerian/ African aesthetics, but more so, for instance the character of Jupiter Jonah is essentially a Nigerian and narratively all is told from his unique perspective. Jonah is Nigerian because of the archetypes he's based on. His identity and even some of the characters he comes across are based on men and women in my family and personalities I grew up with. It used to worry me that people would see Jonah set in a sci-fi universe amongst a visual vocabulary that is quite eclectic and miss the Nigerian perspective in the story. Ekologue is a little simpler because the setting is in Lagos, so a direct reference is readily available to stay true to. Because visual verisimilitude is inherent in the setting and background design, capturing the energy of the city is the challenge.

In my mind at the moment, I perceive no overriding Nigerian contemporary aesthetic precedent in comics or animation to draw comparisons to, so there is no point in competing with one or creating one. I certainly don't possess the hubris for that. I just draw images and hope they are interesting enough to evoke a response or dialogue from people.

Some writers like to use the term hybridity to describe films or artworks that draw from different practises and that perhaps can be situated in different geographical spaces. Would you describe your more recent work as an example of 'hybrid' animation/ graphic novel?

I've come across this concept a lot and it's hard to look at any artists work today and not attribute this concept to their craft or manner of thinking. I believe all my work has always been drawn from a number of influences and practices so I feel 'hybridity' is not a recent development in my work. Because of the proliferation of practice and communication on the internet, it's hard to determine physical geography as a determining factor in my practice as an artist. If I lived in Nigeria, Jupiter Jonah would still be the same script influenced by the same interests and sources. In fact the script for Jupiter Jonah was written by my brother who was living in Nigeria and is now continuing to write it in the Philippines, where he currently resides. Of course my immediate surroundings always influence me greatly, but I don't see hybridity as new vocabulary in my work.

How does this later work differ from your first two animated films mentioned above?

Visually they may appear markedly different, but I have always drawn the way I do. The animated films Iwa and Oni Ise Owo were explorations in style, but my belief is that the art I create should always follow the tone of its story or subject matter. In other words, concept drives form. There will always be elements of my personal visual language in my work though, like the use of texture or a propensity toward the look of watercolor techniques. Iwa and Oni Ise Owo were both tonally impressionistic and metaphorical and so the style leaned in that direction. My more recent work is more figurative and descriptive, perhaps more accessible.

Your blog also mentions other personal projects that you are working on. Would you like to talk about them?

I am illustrating Light Sweet Crude. A graphic novel written by Christopher Arnold, a writer in Arizona. The story is derived from the conflict surrounding the Niger Delta. There are other long term projects, some you can see hints of on my blog. Project Eredo, for instance. I also work on little video game projects here and there with my brother.

What your intentions are for each of these in the future?

At the moment the scale of working in comics is much more realistic than animation. Hopefully with a strong enough technical foundation in comics I can return to animation in the future. Many animators take this route, including Miyazaki.

Project Eredo and a lot of these projects require the need of a studio to execute. Creating a small 15- 20 person animation studio is a long term aspiration of mine.

Have you considered financing these projects through crowd funding?

When proper plans are developed for these projects, crowd funding is an option, yes. My brother and I follow sites like Kickstarter and GoFundMe and have even pledged funds to some interesting projects. We are also aware of some projects that never come to fruition through crowd funding because of the lack of understanding major artistic and entertainment endeavors require. Planning and timing however, are the biggest issues regarding developing any future project. Because of Jupiter Jonah's initial small scale production format crowd funding will almost be a certainty when we begin production.