



Analyzing Spirit Forms in Obi Ekwenchi's "From the Spirit World" and "Rhythm (From the Spirit World)" Paintings

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Abstract

Metaphysical auras, or spirit forms, have been a recurring theme in art and culture for centuries, with diverse interpretations across the African continent. Ekwenchi's paintings exemplify a profound understanding of this ancient discipline, reflecting either a deliberate revival or a continuum of knowledge that persists beyond the disruptions of Western influence. Rooted in antediluvian practice, the portrayal of spirit forms in African visual traditions encapsulates a cosmological worldview that predates and, in many respects, transcends the epistemological frameworks imposed by Western canons. This study presents a comprehensive survey of existing arguments on metaphysical auras, highlighting their enduring significance in art, culture, and spiritual expression. The discussion critically examines the extent to which Western aesthetic traditions have reshaped or paradoxically reinvigorated indigenous practices. The findings will be valuable for future studies and pedagogical learning, offering nuanced insights into the intersection of art, culture, and spirituality within the Nigerian and broader African context, ultimately affirming the resilience and continued relevance of metaphysical thought in African artistic practice.

Keywords: Spirit Forms, Interpretation, Western Canon, Antediluvian Practice



Introduction

The paintings by the artist, Obi Ekwenchi embody the complexities of human existence and culture, weaving together religious and metaphysical belief systems rooted in animist traditions. His exploration of Eastern Nigerian masquerade traditions serves as a powerful commentary on the tensions between indigenous identity and imposed colonial narratives. As Fanon (1952) noted, colonialism imposes a “cognitive dissonance” that disrupts an individual’s connection to their cultural heritage. Ekwenchi’s work confronts this dissonance, reclaiming and reaffirming the value of indigenous traditions. By honouring gods, ancestors, and nature, his paintings challenge the dominant narrative, inviting viewers to see beyond the surface level and recognize the nuanced complexities of cultural identity. The cinematic quality of his imagery serves as a potent tool for questioning norms and challenging dominant discourses. Ekwenchi’s work encourages viewers to engage with the subjective messages embedded in his compositions, sparking a deeper understanding of the ongoing struggle for self-definition in the face of colonialism’s legacy. Ekwenchi’s paintings highlight the tension between preserving cultural heritage and assimilating into dominant cultures, sparking conflicting ideas and beliefs. However, his work goes beyond this conflict, presenting a spiritual practice that seeks blessings, guidance, and protection for the community. By depicting these masquerade traditions, Ekwenchi emphasizes their significance in Eastern Nigerian culture, showcasing a deep understanding of their importance. His paintings are not just a representation of cultural identity, but a gesture of communal spirituality, seeking to connect with the divine and ensure the well-being of the community. The select paintings are examined in the studio-based practice, using diverse subjects, contexts, and ideas to critique Ekwenchi’s work. This examination of Ekwenchi’s paintings incorporates insights from philosophy and sociology, but centers on a nuanced analysis of the artwork itself, exploring the interplay between cultural context, visual language, and artistic expression. Previous discussions have explored Ekwenchi’s relevance to aesthetics, formal analysis, context, and subject matter, facilitating a nuanced understanding of his ideas. This contextualized study highlights the cultural significance and aesthetical claims of



his paintings, aiming to foster interdisciplinary connections by synthesizing artistic elements. By engaging with Ekwenchi's work in this manner, the goal is to promote a shared understanding of his paintings' value and significance, encouraging meaningful dialogue within the public sphere and pedagogical process. Ekwenchi's paintings reimagine his Eastern Nigerian heritage, specifically exploring the Igbo people's spiritual-material worldview. This worldview posits the existence of parallel realms inhabited by spirits, gods, deities, ancestors, and other entities, often represented as masquerades. Through his work, Ekwenchi invites viewers into this mystical realm, where the boundaries between reality and the spiritual are blurred. His paintings capture the dynamic interplay between the performer, the masquerade, and the mediumistic influences that shape the dance. By depicting these masquerade and medium dances, Ekwenchi's art reflects the cultural ethos of the Igbo people, where performance and spirituality are deeply intertwined. The artist's aesthetic vision is rooted in the understanding that such performances require active engagement and appraisal from the viewer, fostering a sense of communal participation and shared cultural experience.

Discussing the Paintings Contextually

Ekwenchi's paintings embody a defense of subjectivism, blending traditional Igbo aesthetics with contemporary art forms to explore the dynamic interplay between spirit forms, environment, and human experience. By depicting the intersections of birth, death, and the ancestral realm, his work highlights the symbiotic relationship between individuals and their cultural heritage.

The paintings serve as a conduit to the ancestral systems, consolidating the connection between man and spirit. Embedded in the artwork are elements of identity and belief systems, inviting diverse reactions and viewpoints. Ekwenchi's oeuvre suggests that identity is fluid, shaped by the intersections of culture, history, and aesthetic experience. Ultimately, his paintings spark a philosophical inquiry into the nature of identity, culture, and the human experience, underscoring the importance of subjective interpretation and personal connection to



art. By voicing concerns about the ambivalence of spirit forms and traditional surroundings, Ekwenchi's work embodies a universal quest for meaning and connection to cultural ethos. Ekwenchi's paintings can be seen as a way of reconnecting with traditional Igbo spirituality, highlighting the layered complexities of "ways of seeing" and interpreting cultural symbols. By depicting the Pantheon of Igbo spirits as sentient and esoteric deities, Ekwenchi's art challenges the notion that these ancient beliefs are fossilized or obsolete. Instead, his work suggests that these spirit forms remain alive, urging viewers to reexamine their relationship with the divine and the natural world. However, this perspective is not without its challenges, as it confronts preconceptions and biases rooted in colonial and Christian influences. The historical segregation of African traditional practices as "devilish" or lacking salvation reflects a broader cultural narrative that has marginalized and erased indigenous spiritualities. Ekwenchi's work subtly subverts this narrative, inviting viewers to reconsider the value and significance of these ancient traditions. By doing so, he promotes a more nuanced understanding of Igbo culture and spirituality, one that is grounded in the complexities of history, identity, and human experience. This reclamation of traditional practices is not a nostalgic return to the past, but rather a way of rethinking the present and future. By centering Igbo spirituality and cultural heritage, Ekwenchi's work offers a powerful critique of the dominant narratives of modernity and colonialism, highlighting the global impact of colonialism and imperialism. In this context, Ekwenchi's paintings can be seen as a form of decolonial aesthetics, one that disrupts the dominant visual languages and epistemologies of the West. By reimagining the Pantheon of Igbo spirits, he is, in effect, reimagining the very foundations of knowledge and being, and offering a new way of seeing and being in the world. This decolonial turn is not just about reclaiming cultural heritage, but also about challenging the power structures that have historically marginalized and erased indigenous cultures. It is a call to recognize the value and validity of alternative epistemologies and ontologies, and to create a more just and equitable world. "Despite recent negative connotations associated with the term "modern", it is more suitable for such new African artistic expressions, because it symbolizes the experience and practices the art forms embody," (Ottenberg 2002, p. 5). This is notably evident in an African



environment, particularly when considering Ekwenchi's work as examples of pre-postmodern creative circumstances perceived as esoteric rituals. This displays an understanding that the art world is flexible and rich, with its own vocabulary and contextual evaluations of subject matter, regardless of cultural diversity. Some difficulties do exist. Though comparable to Ekwenchi's innovative approach to reinventing a once-thriving masquerade dance tradition created for their spirit-gods, it shows the masquerade costume wearer as conduits for the spirits for whom the act is performed. Ifedioramma Dike's fiber-based sculptural forms remind us of this once widely revered practice, but it, too, has been tarnished: "Once believed in indigenous societies to be emissaries from the gods, [yet] masquerades have been recast in contemporary cultures as an emblem of pagan ignorance," (Offoedu-Okeke 2012, p. 300). This is analogous to the dark ages, a period of assumed enlightenment, and both scholars, Dike and Offoedu-Okeke saw this type of conventional image as a misrepresentation, producing intentional dissonance in indigenous societies. However, the profundity of this nostalgic criticism necessitates a sideways view, from the more established canons of Western academia that are at odds with indigenous art forms, tying ceremonial themes and the hybridization of their gods to a more appropriate practice: the Western way. To summarize, this type of prejudice dwarfs African life and customary conditions, and according to (Monti 1969, p. 151), "The true art that may be found by chance amongst isolated communities, who are hesitant to relinquish certain habits, is [will] thus [be] the last trace of a departed era." This preliterate tradition can only be seen through the art of Ekwenchi as an indigenous replication of a bygone era, and it is linked to a pantheon that is sufficiently similar to the historical magnificence of Mayan cultural practices and other vanishing cultural civilizations that are almost lost to the world in these times. All of this is quite disturbing. Cultural displacement serves as the yardstick for this discussion. No other non-artistic effort, with any degree of certainty, rethinks brilliantly to obtain a coherent impression of former civilizations as they relate to the respective indigenes. The minutiae from which artistic history is fashioned is not intended for nonprofessional inquiries to diminish its birth pains, particularly the pleasure that art provides as a subjective experiencing of certain cultural forms. To rethink traditional displacement in the other direction is to recreate; to transform a



perception of something into an actionable vivid experience; this is how ideas emerge literally, from the dynamics of cultural separation, which is particularly strange to some of us. Preferably, the visuals that result from our active mind processes are mental assessments of both subjective and collective thought simulation patterns. And these are typically archetypal by nature, often borrowing from original patterns as ‘copies to reconsider pre-cultural-cum-post-cultural symbolisms’, but not wholly confined by them. Jungian psychology defines this as the prevalent notion or pictures from the collective unconscious, such as:

Forms or images of collective nature which occur practically as constituents of myths and at the same time as autochthonous individual products of unconscious origin. A mystical participation stripped off our world of things. But it is exactly this halo of unconscious associations that gives a colorful and fantastic aspect to the primitive world. We have lost it to such degree that we do not recognize it when we meet it again. With us such things are kept below the threshold; when they occasionally reappear, we even insist that something is wrong, (Jung 1968, p. 31).

The analysis of Ekwenchi’s work is an iterative process, prone to loops of inquiry and interpretation. It’s acknowledged that neither the viewer nor the artist can fully grasp the true essence of the artwork, as meaning is inherently subjective and context-dependent. This limitation sparks a natural inclination to explore parallel realities and dichotomies, echoing Carl Jung’s concept of the unconscious association of archetypal models. Ekwenchi’s paintings, in this context, can be seen as a manifestation of this dichotomy, inviting viewers to confront the interplay between opposing forces and the mysteries of the human psyche. The use of Jung’s theory here serves as a framework for understanding the symbolic language of Ekwenchi’s work, rather than a definitive interpretation. This approach acknowledges the complexity of the artwork and the viewer’s role in co-creating meaning. The paper leveraged the concept of polarity to explore the interplay between opposing forces, such as material and insubstantial, or positive and negative, highlighting how these dichotomies shape our perceptions and understanding of Ekwenchi’s work. Given the limitations of language in capturing subjective

tive experiences, the paper turned to color psychology as a means to access and convey the deeper, psycho-cultural meanings embedded in the artwork. By examining the connotations of color, the discussion aimed to transcend verbal descriptions and tap into the affective, intuitive aspects of human experience. This approach allowed for a more nuanced exploration of Ekwenchi's use of color, revealing the ways in which it reinforces or challenges the polarities present in his work, and inviting viewers to engage with the artwork on a more visceral level. Considering Plato's Theory of Forms, it proposes that abstract, eternal concepts (Forms) underlie the imperfect, changing world. Jungian psychology echoes this idea, suggesting that universal archetypes (collective unconscious) shape human experience. Ekwenchi's work taps into these archetypes, recontextualizing Igbo cultural history to access transcendent meanings. In essence, Ekwenchi's meta-imageries evoke Plato's Forms, inviting viewers to contemplate eternal, universal truths. Through a Jungian lens, his work reveals the collective unconscious, bridging cultural and historical contexts to reveal shared human experiences. By combining these perspectives, Ekwenchi's paintings become a nexus for exploring the intersections of culture, psyche, and the transcendent.



Figure 1: Obi Ekwenchi, *From the Spirit World*, 2003. Oil on canvas, 152.5 x 213.5 cm. Private collection.



Hannah Höch's "Cut with the Kitchen Knife" (1919) is a pioneering photomontage that dissects and reassembles images from popular culture, critiquing societal norms and the role of women. The work's fragmented forms and juxtapositions create a sense of chaos and disorder. Similarly, Ekwenchi's painting "From the Spirit World" (2003) employs fragmentation and layering to evoke the complexities of cultural identity and the spiritual realm. While Höch's work critiques the external world, Ekwenchi's painting explores the internal, mystical landscape of Igbo heritage. Both artists use disjointed imagery to convey the tensions between tradition and modernity, inviting viewers to navigate the dissonance and find meaning. Both works share a sense of disrupting the status quo, Höch through Dadaist critique and Ekwenchi through spiritual introspection, highlighting the power of art to challenge and transcend boundaries. Ekwenchi's work merges visual and dance elements, tapping into cultural preferences and engaging the mind on multiple levels. The color intensities and juxtapositions evoke a sense of corporeal intensity, transporting viewers to a realm that's both modern and otherworldly. The anthropomorphic forms, with their gigantic horns and irregular shapes, seem to dance off the canvas, blurring boundaries between art and life. The tension and disorientation they create are balanced by their flat, two-dimensional quality, making them feel like apparitions or spirits. This visual language speaks to a deeper cultural experience, one that transcends everyday reality and speaks to the mystical and the unknown. Ekwenchi's work invites viewers to engage with this realm, to participate in the dance of spirits and forms that seem to pulse with life. The result is an immersive experience that challenges perceptions and redefines the relationship between art, culture, and the self. Ekwenchi's "From the Spirit World" presents a satirical take on syncretic culture, embracing the mystical and unknown. The warlike characters, symbolic adornments, and Uli and Nsibidi symbols evoke Igbo cultural heritage, creating a unique aesthetic. This work explores opposing realities, dividing the tangible and intangible, secular and spiritual. It is an invitation to engage with the mystical, but acknowledges this realm may not be for everyone. For those who connect, it is a profound experience, transcending the material world and speaking to the spirit. The painting's ghostly quality, backed by Ekwenchi's background, demands attention from those who revere its customary details. Ekwenchi's "Rhythm

(From the Spirit World)” solidifies the connection to “From the Spirit World”, showcasing the artist’s imaginative take on Igbo cultural influences. The central figures dancing in the foreground, with blue torsos and bronze-like hues, are set against shadowy ghostly forms beating drums, creating a mesmerizing rhythm.

This ambiguous representation of ‘rhythm’ invites viewers to participate in the paradoxical forms – spirit and man – mirroring a spatiotemporal meaning that’s both captivating and mysterious. The artist’s use of color and composition creates a sense of embedded mystery, drawing us into the world of the painting. The work’s power lies in its ability to evoke a sense of connection to the unknown, making us feel like we’re partaking in a hidden truth. Ekwenchi’s masterful blending of cultural influences and imaginative expression creates a unique, haunting experience. Yet, such experience can only be shared by a few who, by the same semblance of what Fanon critiques as cultural dissonance, will fully partake in the cultural space of their tradition without allowing the constraints of westernisation have its toll.



Figure 2: Obi Ekwenchi, *Rhythm (From the Spirit World)*, 2004. Oil on canvas, 91.5 x 122 cm. Private collection.

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Ekwenchi's works transport us to a mystical realm where Igbo spirits and masquerades coexist with humans, evoking a sense of sublime mystery. As Offoedu-Okeke (2012, p. 392) notes, "The otherworldly visages of the masquerades, here represented as a pantheon of Igbo spirits, are rendered even more mysterious by their closed eyes, yet they are elegantly poised in stylish dance movements, gesturing with broad fans and great swords." The spirits' poised dance movements create an eerie elegance, while Ekwenchi's restrained palette adds to the enigmatic atmosphere. This deliberate choice of color and composition invites us to engage with the spiritual realm, framing his surreal topics as a form of "creative prayer". Ekwenchi emphasizes the interconnectedness of spirit and human, implying a contractual bond between the two. The twilight atmosphere in his paintings serves as a threshold between worlds, blurring subjective and objective thinking. Ekwenchi challenges us to reconsider reality, suggesting the spirit world is a parallel realm deserving consideration and respect. By prioritizing this perspective, he creates a unique visual language that captivates and intrigues, making the unseen, seen. Ekwenchi's masterful manipulation of sub-representations creates a sense of creative tension, drawing viewers into the mystical realm of his paintings. The interplay between spirit and corporeal forms sparks analytical curiosity, inviting us to ponder the connections between the worlds of man and spirit. The drummer's rhythmic thumping serves as a bridge between these realms, echoing the pre-Christian belief systems that revered the spirit world. By tapping into this cultural heritage, Ekwenchi's work awakens a sense of nostalgia and curiosity, encouraging viewers to explore the spaces between the tangible and the unknown. While each of the paintings in this paper is about 'Ala', the earth goddess of fertility, the scholar, Offoedu-Okeke believes that the fundamental urge to create, perhaps to symbolize reverence and expectations from that which is served but not perceived with our conventional sense organs, is elusive in modern humanity. This is especially why Ekwenchi's paintings emanate the urge to trace back history and revere the spirit of the ground, just as: "our prehistoric ancestors crawled through dark cave passages. . . they created amazing images. . . part of a shamanist ritual to ensure a suc-



cessful hunt of bison, or ensure fertility and the continuation of the tribe...” (Ocvirk et al. 2009, p. 4). Like the components of ‘shape’ and ‘composition’ in Ekwenchi’s paintings, both of these elements give contour to the images and unify the principles of organization to increase the viewer’s attention. Movement is also used through the shapes in the paintings to increase tensions to these focal points. One notable example of context shaping is Ekwenchi’s use of a wooden hat masquerade costume to highlight the notion of “land and people” in his paintings. This wood-cultural legacy may be interpreted as having profound spiritual importance, as another well recognized creative manifestation of local artisan life with “shrine art,” particularly in this current setting. Notably, Peek (2002) (citing Owode 1971; Peek 1976) discusses how “Western Igbo tradition may well be critical because according to Isoko traditions, many molded figures were in the past prepared by Western Igbo herbalists and artists.” This cultural context is palpable in Ekwenchi’s works, where dance movement, portable fans, swords, animal horns, and humanly transformed appearances in the form of masquerades converge to create a spectacle that honors clan deities, echoing the stylistic impressions of cubism and facial impressions that characterize his unique artistic vision. It is not surprising that each of the paintings’ expressive content is bizarre, and for some, complex. Each shape and/or form in the paintings depicts distinct reactions to something clearly beyond our understanding, as well as a microscopic world we are only vaguely familiar with. However, it is only natural that the shapes Ekwenchi investigated are a combination of shapes that have deeply resonant effects on us. So, while the underlying mentality that pervades Ekwenchi’s works to refocus on his historical background may appear archaic, it is only natural to imply a more creative revolutionary attitude inherent in the concept of the Modernist artistic period: Eliminate Eurocentric circumstances. Debates on this were founded on interpretive and creative conditions, which frequently leaned toward personal opinions. Perhaps, if it were on the negative, Kissick (1996, p. 446) would propose to finish this paper:

It is because the viewer now lacks the necessary faith that artists can indeed bring about change; that they can not only reflect their world but actively participate in its creation. If cynicism prevails, it is our loss, and will certainly remain their strength.



Conclusion

A comprehensive comparative analysis of Paul Gauguin's *The Day of the Gods* (1894) and Ekwenchi's works reveals intriguing parallels in their artistic preoccupations, despite operating in different cultural contexts. Both artists sought refuge in primitivism and the spiritual realm as a response to the disillusionments of modernity.

Criterion	Paul Gauguin	Obi Ekwenchi
Work	<i>The Day of the Gods</i> (1894)	Various works (selected paintings)
Themes	Harmony, innocence, critique of Western civilisation	Spirituality, cultural identity, critique of modern life
Cultural Context	Post-Impressionist response to Western industrialisation	Nigerian artist engaging with Igbo traditions and postcolonial realities

Gauguin's *The Day of the Gods* depicts a Tahitian paradise, evoking a sense of primordial harmony and spiritual connection. Similarly, Ekwenchi's paintings explore the mystical realm of Igbo spirits and masquerades, inviting viewers to engage with the spiritual dimensions of Nigerian cultural heritage. Both artists critique modern life, albeit from different perspectives. Gauguin rejects Western industrialization, while Ekwenchi's work subtly comments on the dislocations of postcolonial Nigeria. Their shared emphasis on primitivism and spirituality serves as a counterpoint to the rationalism and materialism of modernity. Ekwenchi's paintings, like Gauguin's, can be seen as an attempt to reclaim cultural identity and spiritual authenticity in the face of external influences. However, whereas Gauguin's primitivism is often characterized by an exoticized Otherness, Ekwenchi's work is rooted in a specific cultural context, offering a more nuanced exploration of Igbo spirituality and tradition. In conclusion, both Gauguin and Ekwenchi demonstrate a desire to transcend the limitations of modern life through art, seeking solace in the spiritual and the primitive. Their works serve as a reminder of the enduring power of art to critique and transcend the conditions of its time. Drawing on Fanon's critique



of colonialism and cultural alienation, Ekwenchi's paintings can be seen as a reclaiming of indigenous cultural identity, resisting the erasure of traditional ways of knowing. Similarly, Gauguin's primitivism reflects a critique of Western modernity, albeit one tinged with exoticism. Ekwenchi's visual dialect, however, leans on a deeper psychological and philosophical framework, echoing Carl Jung's concept of the collective unconscious (Jung 1968). The Igbo spirits and masquerades in his paintings tap into a shared reservoir of archetypes, inviting viewers to engage with the symbolic and the mystical. This resonates with Plato's notion of the world of Forms (Plato 380). Through this lens, Ekwenchi's paintings compose a visual language that transcends the particularities of time and space, speaking to a universal human experience. His works offer a way of seeing beyond the mundane, accessing the hidden patterns and connections that underlie our reality. In doing so, Ekwenchi's art not only critiques modernity but also offers a path towards individuation, wholeness, and integration, echoing Jung's concept of the process of becoming (Jung 1968). Ultimately, the convergence of these perspectives underscores the transformative power of art to reveal new ways of seeing and being in the world. By engaging with the mystical and the primitive, Gauguin and Ekwenchi invite us to reevaluate our relationship with the world and ourselves, pointing towards a more holistic understanding of human existence.

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