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# A comparative analysis between a traditional Nigerian art form and an ancient Nubian icon

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to study the iconographic and stylistic similarities between an Owo pectoral mask and a Nubian jewelry work attributed to Queen Amanishakheto. That, both works share noticeable relationships re-echoes the question of origin. The likely origins of one from the other becomes questionable. However, to ascertain its possible origin, two art-historical methodologies have been employed. They are the iconographic and stylistic analysis technique. That some Nigerian pieces such as the Owo pectoral mask share both stylistic and iconographic similarities with a Nubian art form shows that the actual prototype may derive from a common source.

**Keywords:** Four to eight keywords come here. Divide the keywords by semicolon.

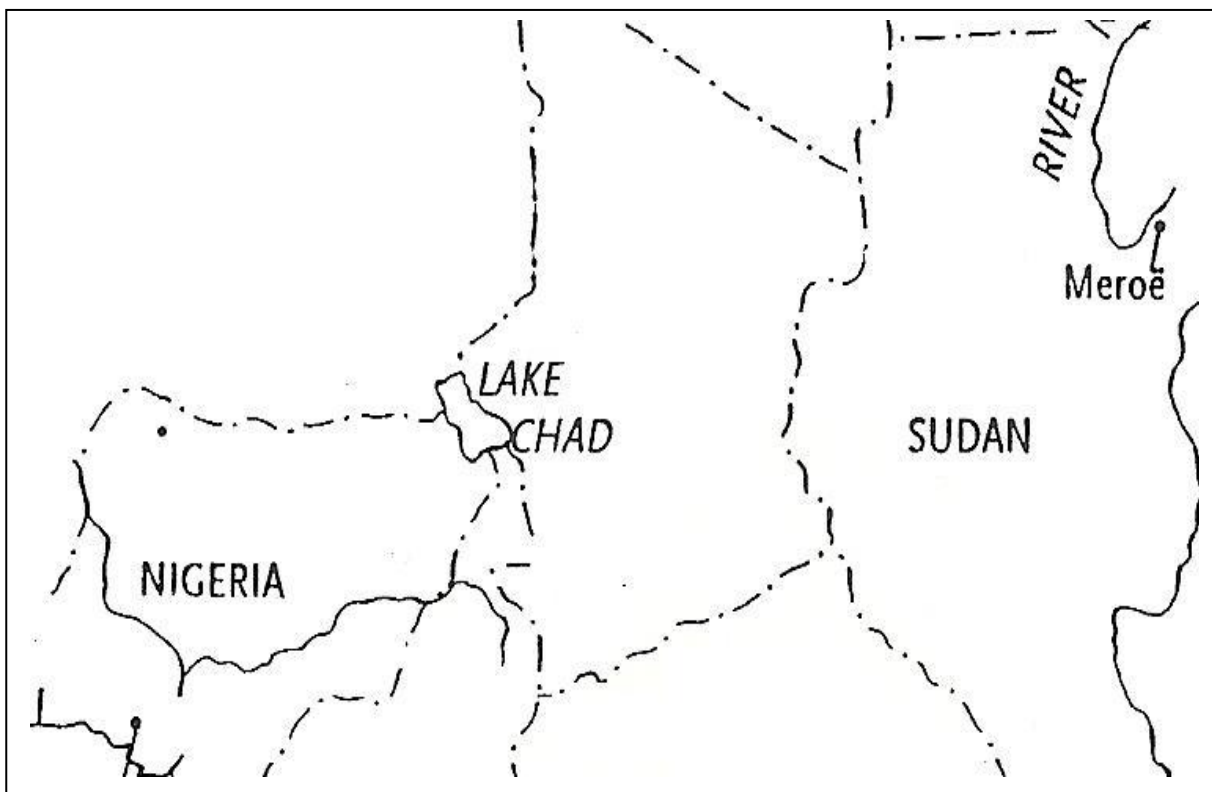
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## 1. Introduction

A metal piece discovered accidentally in 1907 during the digging of a well and ascribed to the 16<sup>th</sup>.century in Nigeria, seems to share similar iconographic and stylistic relationship with some ancient Nubian art forms. The said Nigerian piece, a pectoral mask with bells is linked with the Yoruba Kingdom of Owo (Figure 2). This mask in question, is characterized by a ram head with small bell- like structures attached to it. Ram heads in the words of Barley (99) are well documented in the arts of southern Nigeria and are often associated with chieftaincy and ancestral powers. However, Barley does not see the connection between this Owo piece and those of Nubian origin (99). He believes that commentators have attempted linking this piece with Egyptian origins which is nowadays out of favour. Looking critically at one of Queen Amanishakheto's jewelry collection from one of the Nubian pyramids and the Nigerian piece, one is forced to see the iconographic and stylistic similarities between both works (Figure 3).



**Figure 1.** Map showing the countries mentioned in this study (Courtesy of Africa Arts and Cultures Ed. By John Mack, 2000)

This study however, attempts to use the art-historical method of iconology and stylistic analysis to ascertain the iconic and stylistic realities of these two works in question.

The objective is to prove that inter-continental interactions existed between cultures of Africa. Particularly, as some of the cultures which had earlier claimed Egyptian origins may well have originated from Nubia. More so, to show that a common source may have been drawn from in the execution of construction of these works.

## 2. Iconic interpretation

First, the study attempts a detailed interpretation of the Nigerian pectoral mask. This mask depicts authority and leadership. The ram is a forward moving animal with agility. At the same time, it is also graceful and frequently used in spiritual sacrifices. In most southern Nigerian communities the head or the horn of the ram is often depicted. It sometimes represents a mark of power and kingship. In ancient Nubian culture, jewelry showing the ram god *Amun* was of common place. *Amun* was regarded as the supreme state god of the Nubians (77).

In some Nigerian cultures like Owo, Benin, Esan and the Igbo, the image of the ram features recurrently, as it is used as a sign of leadership. In Owo, rams were used to represent the head of a dead king when they were under Benin suzerainty and authority. Fagg posits that in Owo, such ram heads were placed on the altars of the ancestors of chiefs of the royal lineage of Owo and that sacrifices were made before them at the cutting of the first yams every year (103). The same concept was shared in Esan culture, even amongst the Igbo, rams are still been used to depict power and spirituality.

Iconographically, the Nigerian use of the ram as a mark of leadership tallies favourably with that of ancient Nubia. Hence, a similar source is evident here.

## 3. Stylistic analysis

In the words of Barley (99), this work was discovered accidentally in 1907 at a depth of about 3m while a well was dug. Yet, he did not say specifically if the well was dug at Apapa or Owo, but suggested that it features resembled some of the so-called lower Niger bronzes and claimed that it most likely originated from Owo.

This piece in question, portrays a ram's head with some bell-like structures attached to it. The horns of the ram are positioned at the sides of the head. While the eyes are large and also located at the edge of the head. The treatment given to the entire work is intricate, stylistic and shows a high level of details.

Comparing it with one of the Nubian jewelry pieces, a similar style seems to emerge although with slight differences. The Nubian specimen has a big ring on its head with projections said to be crowns of tall feathers. Cobras also form part of the design depicted on the work and are located in the middle of feathers near the sun disk. The ram's head is right under the sun disk placed in a semi-circular gold sheet. The sheet is decorated with diverse geometric shapes of circles, diamonds and bead forms. At the bottom edge of the semi-circular shaped sheet, are six beads attached with wire together.



**Figure 2.** Brass pectoral Mask with bells. Apapa, Nigeria. (Courtesy of Africa Arts and Cultures (ed) By John Mack, 2000)



**Figure 3.** A Nubian Shield ring of Amanishkheto, showing the Ram headed god Amun. Courtesy of Eyewitness Anthologies Ancient Egyptians (A Dorling Kindersley Book, 1996)

Although, the Nubian piece is more intricate than of the Nigerian, the Nigerian piece is calm and seems original. It has a style of its own with less ornamentation.

#### **4. Discussion**

The question of spontaneity in the execution and creation of forms in such works as these, has been highly debatable. That, the concept may be spontaneous, re-echoes the fact that art is universal and can be tapped from any angle of the world. Consider the pyramids of Egypt and those of the Meyer cultures, did the latter originate from the former or vice versa? What of the forms and the contents of the pyramids are there similar? However, ideas could be shared within the physical and spiritual frame work of societies. Yet, art is a universal language spoken by all and understood by a little. Perhaps, the similarities noticeable between the Nubian and Nigerian piece may suggest a spontaneous creation or a diffusion of ideas from the Nubian empire since it is older than the fragment found in the Nigeria. Or possibly a once shared cultural connection in the distant past.

#### **5. Conclusion**

From these analyses, it is obvious that there may have been some sort of interaction between the ancient Nubians and certain Yoruba, Igbo and Niger Delta cultures in the past. Or perhaps, the concept is an African thing which is shared by all parts mentioned here spontaneously. However, scholars in the past have always seen Africans to have lived a match-box kind of life in the past. Some of these ancient contacts are evident in the content of paintings in some pharaoh's pyramids, where darker versions of Africans are seen offering gifts from distant African lands.

Other explanations could be that the objects were stolen from the pyramids of the Nubians and copied by some African artist, using their own styles. There is also the fact that the Nigerian version of the work is the recent type while that of the Nubian, is the prototype.

There is a possibility that the Nubian kingdom may have spread its authority down to the sub-Saharan. This speculation cannot be ignored or that migrants moved from Nubian towards Nigeria area cannot be ignored, since migration itself is as old as man.

Finally, whatever the conclusions, the spontaneity of art should not be taken for granted certain styles and forms are in most cases, accidentally depicted even without physical contact. As such, styles which appear similar may be depicted even when prototypes are not seen by both cultures.

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