

**Beyond Single Stories:
Addressing Dynamism, Specificity, and
Agency in Arts of Africa**

Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi and Yaëlle Biro

In *Amalgam*, the spring 2019 exhibition Theaster Gates created for Paris's Palais de Tokyo, the artist focuses on the 1912 evacuation of interracial individuals from the island of Malaga, southeast of Brunswick, Maine. Casts of face masks—including ones in styles recognizable as Bamana, Baule, and Songye, as well as ones that merge features of different genres—appear throughout the exhibition as markers of the African ancestry of Malaga's early-twentieth-century residents. The installation *Island Modernity Institute and Department of Tourism* shows face masks displayed in cases as well as in and around a cabinet. A neon sign in the cabinet announces, "In the end nothing is pure" (Fig. 1). Gates's statement highlights the absurdity of wanting to assure racial purity on Malaga or anywhere. Placed in proximity to the casts of face masks, it also serves as a reminder that the use of cultural or ethnic group names to label arts of Africa has hinged

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on colonial concepts of race and purity.

Scholars have long been aware that their categories for so-called traditional, historical, or classical arts of Africa are imperfect, in part because these labels reflect erroneous colonial assumptions.¹ But we have not yet arrived at a consensus for how to address the imperfection of our categories.² For example, on the basis of form and outdated anthropological classifications rather than on specific information about a particular work, its original maker, patron, audience, or context of production, an encyclopedic or a university museum attributes a sculpture to the culture of the Senufo peoples, designates an object's maker as Senufo, or otherwise asserts the Senufo authorship of a work. Alternatively and seemingly interchangeably, a museum may identify an object with Senufo populations or locate it in a Senufo region. The term *Senufo* is used to designate different things following the purposes of different persons.

When art experts and enthusiasts attribute an object to a whole group of people or a geographic area ascribed to a population, they often buttress the attribution with a single, timeless story about the group and the types of objects the group makes. Repeated again and again in museums, classrooms, and publications, the stories suggest that art, culture, geography, language, religion, and social organization overlap neatly. They reinforce

1 Detail of Theaster Gates's *Island Modernity Institute and Department of Tourism* (2019) at Paris's Palais de Tokyo, March 20, 2019. Photo: Yaëlle Biro

the concept of tribe even if Africanist scholars have abandoned the term *tribe* from their vocabularies. The accounts also sideline historical specificity and individual agency.

The single stories experts and enthusiasts tell are not neutral. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie observes, "To create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become." Adichie warns listeners that the single story is dangerous because it is partial and incomplete. She also addresses power implicit in storytelling, observing that "power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person" (Adichie 2009).

Our concern with the perpetuation of single stories for historical arts of Africa in disparate spheres prompted us to organize sessions for the 2016 African Studies Association (ASA) annual meeting in Washington DC and the 2017 Arts Council of the African Studies

(ACASA) triennial conference in Accra, Ghana. We brought together anthropologists, art historians, and historians who work in museums or academia to investigate longstanding challenges in and fresh possibilities for the labeling and presentation of art in museums, universities, and publications.³

Following the two sessions and ongoing conversations, we have determined that African art scholars and other enthusiasts must more directly confront historical roots of the problem. We have also identified three core issues. The first lies in the limits of categories and language applied to African arts that European and Euro-American art enthusiasts have used to describe the arts and organize knowledge. The second pertains to the role of the market in the circulation and labeling of African arts. The third is tied to ways in which scholars can make historical arts of Africa relevant to their audiences.

BEYOND DISCLAIMERS

Single stories for African arts become impossible to tell honestly once we recognize that the African continent never consisted of pure, isolated tribes and that people, objects, and ideas have always circulated. For decades, scholars have highlighted the colonial construction of cultural or ethnic groups (e.g., Bazin 1985, Amselle and M'bokolo 1985,

Appadurai 1988, Abu-Lughod 1991, Trouillot 2003). And for almost as long as they have used cultural or ethnic group names to categorize and study arts, art historians and other scholars have questioned the validity of the approach (e.g., Einstein 1991[1930], Vandenhouste 1948, Sieber and Rubin 1968, Bravmann 1973, Kasfir 1984, Vogel 1984, Visonà 1987, Oguibe 2004, Peffer 2005, Berns, Fardon, and Kasfir 2011, Gagliardi 2014, Formanoir 2018). Yet despite this long line of inquiry, without new models to replace old frameworks, art historians and other scholars have continued to rely on singular cultural or ethnic group classifications to assess art. Even if African art experts have long acknowledged fallacy in the "one tribe, one style" approach, it still plagues assessments of the arts.⁴ It also distances viewers from individual objects and specific histories about them while pretending to offer insight into the objects and their histories.

In their efforts to acknowledge dynamism of cultural production, African art experts have provided caveats or disclaimers to address the fluidity of identities or the reality of historical change on the African continent. But they have still also relied on a top-down vision of culture, one that imagines the form of an object correlates to the artist's cultural or ethnic identity as well as the artist's geography, language, religion, and social organization. The problem

is that the logic expressed in the caveats and disclaimers has not filtered into the vocabulary that experts use in their actual classifications and descriptions of art.

One significant challenge is that classifications based on cultural or ethnic group names as well as the arts labeled with the same names have become socially and politically important in the present. Sarah Van Beurden demonstrates how, within the postcolonial Zairian state, "ideology of tradition [served] as resistance against the legacy of colonialism" (2015: 168). Yet the notion of tradition that people who resisted the legacy of colonialism embraced was often one intimately bound to the colonial experience and colonial categories. Given the proliferation of studies that have demonstrated how colonial officials operating across the African continent transformed fluid and complex identity markers into names for discrete cultural or ethnic groups, Van Beurden's assessment may extend to the notion of tradition elsewhere on the continent.

THE MARKET AS SUBTEXT

Contributors to the ASA and ACASA sessions we organized as well as other scholars have recently examined how the market is integral to the circulation, categorization, and study of African arts (e.g., Forni and Steiner 2015, Biro 2018, Monroe 2019). Concepts

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2 “Artiste inconnu. Masque kodal. Style senoufo, Côte d’Ivoire. Seconde moitié du XIXe, début du XXe siècle. Bois. Museum Rietberg, Zurich, don d’Eduard von der Heydt” at the Musée de l’Orangerie’s installation of *Dada Africa*, December 22, 2017.

Photo: Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi

and categories that prevail today emerged in the early twentieth century, when European colonization of the continent was in full force. At the time, art enthusiasts beyond Africa began recognizing objects from the continent as art, and a variety of actors contributed to the development of a vibrant art market in Europe and North America.

Collectors and dealers who had little firsthand knowledge about the objects they admired adopted frameworks and terminologies grounded in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century anthropological theories and colonial power structures to label and sell African arts. The theories and power structures reflected the notion that the African continent was divided into discrete groups or “tribes,” each with its own culture, geography, language, religion, and social organization. Such ways of thinking tended to deny recognition of historical dynamism, local specificity, or

individual agency. Art connoisseurs extended the same logic to art, imagining that an object’s form corresponded with a style specific to a bounded group. They also assumed that the style corresponded with the identity of the object’s original maker, patron, and audience.

In a recent sociological model of categorization, Hannan et al. (2019) offer insights from diverse market settings that seem to apply also to African arts in European and American markets. The authors examine how market agents conceptualize “core” features of goods, how such features relate to notions of value and authenticity, and how certain features and values contribute to the ongoing production of goods. Significantly, the authors show that “core” features are not inherent to a set of goods but rather are determined through conceptual “spaces” shared by market actors. In the first decades of the twentieth century, people operating within European and

American markets for African arts similarly identified “core” features of each style. Objects that connoisseurs have since found appealing have tended not to deviate far from a “core” style. While European and American consumers have continued to refine their definitions of “core” styles and attempted to identify substyles based on different criteria, artists in Africa certainly also contributed to the articulation of styles, at times even quickly recognizing European and American preferences for objects that fit within particular categories.⁵ The makers may have then produced objects and stories about them to meet market demands (e.g., Schildkrout and Keim 1990, Fine 2016, Schildkraut 2018).

Prevailing ideas about authenticity of historical arts of Africa are at odds with the recognition of the agency of African artists who may have favored particular styles in their practice and told certain stories about the objects they made to meet the expectations of European and American clients. When twentieth-century dealers and collectors linked a style to a particular cultural or ethnic group based on limited information, they commonly imagined as “authentic” works made by an artist for a patron and an audience within a single group and without influence from beyond that group.⁶ Such a notion of authenticity implies purity of art and people linked to art.

CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

The late Mary Nooter Roberts considered curatorial approaches to African arts in a First Word essay in a 2012 issue of this journal. Roberts explained, “Focusing on topics of relevance and urgency not only dissolves paralyzing categories dividing traditional from

contemporary, but characterizes a field that is always in the making, always at the end of some new *now*" (Roberts 2012: 7; emphasis in the original). During the 2016 ASA session we organized, Silvia Forni, Kathryn Wysocki Gunsch, and Amanda Maples discussed museum labeling strategies for historical arts of Africa that seem to address Roberts's call for relevance and the dissolution of boundaries between so-called traditional and contemporary arts. Their approaches ranged from including contemporary voices in their displays, to highlighting pressing social and political issues in relation to works in their collections, to considering the practice of studio-based artists who challenge common categories in African arts. The strategies aim to capture audiences' attention and insert a chronological arch in their presentations. However, are such valuable approaches the only possibilities for us to signal dynamism in the production of historical African arts or knowledge about the works?

Insisting on the inclusion of works by studio-based artists in presentations of historical African arts may shift the responsibility for recognizing complex histories from scholars in museums or universities onto living artists. As curator Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi has stated in a different context, the strategy risks transforming the contemporary artist into the spokesperson for an entire community or even the entire continent. It may also erase specificity in discussion of historical arts (Nzewi in Luke et al. 2018).⁷ While studio-based artists working for the international art market often reveal and investigate contemporary realities and historical concerns in provocative ways, they are not responsible for conducting thorough art-historical investigations or finding solutions to scholarly challenges. In addition, the approach may suggest that historical arts are only relevant in terms of their relationships to contemporary arts.

We can recover history and complexity if we look at individual works and their specific biographies, if we carefully acknowledge gaps in our knowledge about the works rather than try to fill the gaps with assumptions, and if we have in mind the colonial structures informing our knowledge about the works. Such an approach requires a change in our language that does not shy away from difficult histories and that Roberts encouraged scholars of African arts to adopt (2012: 7, citing Irit Rogoff 2010). The approach is also more relevant than ever, given calls for the decolonization of knowledge production and other examinations of longstanding power structures. For example, through the introductory African art history course that Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi has designed at Emory University, the two of us have observed that it is indeed possible to change our language and our methods for presenting and making relevant historical arts of Africa

to audiences with no prior knowledge of the subject.⁸

LET'S ACKNOWLEDGE STYLE

We cannot avoid the inconvenient truth that the "one tribe, one style" paradigm has provided a foundation for commercial as well as art-historical discourses on African arts since the early twentieth century. In a way reminiscent of how a headpiece from a mask has come to stand metonymically for the entire multi-sensory ensemble in a museum setting, terms including *Bamana*, *Baule*, and *Songye* have come to encompass sets of objects, meanings seemingly related to the forms, and knowledge about the arts. Thus, the terms today constitute a common vocabulary and organizing framework for African arts and their study. Abandoning the terms and replacing them with new ones would miss the point.

One way to avoid reinforcing outdated ideas about bounded cultural or ethnic groups is to focus on an art-historical approach based on style and to remove altogether the "tribe" part of the "one tribe, one style" equation. Today, *Bamana*, *Baule*, or *Songye* designate a set of formal traits recognized by African art connoisseurs separate from a single object's original contexts of creation or use. As Constantine Petridis reminds us, given a paucity of firsthand information about African arts, "most labels are assigned based on stylistic comparison" (2018: 14). Faced with this reality, we conclude we should clearly recognize that the terms we use reflect connoisseurs' evaluations of form and complex market negotiations. Such assessments do not always align with other information we have about an object.

By talking and writing about a *Bamana* style, a *Baule* style, a *Songye* style, or some other style, we make clear that the terminology reflects visual evaluation of objects (Fig. 2).⁹ We recognize that this approach presents challenges. One objection we have encountered is that description of an object in a particular style suggests that it is "in the style of" and implies a questioning of the object's authenticity. But a strict definition of *authenticity*, one tied to the notion of *cultural purity*, is itself already flawed. Another objection reflects concern about a style-based label as another "single story." Yet a single story based on form situates the object in a specific art-historical context, one that allows us to reckon with the constructed nature of the story and its ties to colonial history. Further art-historical investigations focused on specific objects or their biographies would allow us to recover additional nuances and multiple stories.

Once we recognize that our determinations of style reflect our evaluations of form, then we must also revise our language to signal to our audiences that the style of a particular object may or may not reflect anything about who

made it, for whom, or why.¹⁰ Doing so without losing sight of powerful narratives embedded within each work or its formal appeal is another challenge. We must nevertheless highlight the unevenness of our knowledge about the object. Indeed, extant documentation often allows us to recuperate more information about contexts in which a particular work was acquired, sold, and subsequently displayed and described in Europe and North America than information about the object's original maker, patron, audience, or context of production. We must realize that efforts to fill such gaps with assumptions about precolonial cultures does not translate into the actual recovery of African experiences in the past. We must also acknowledge that present-day articulations of identity intersect with but also diverge from historical ones (see also Appiah 2018). Scholars have long lived alongside the unequal and uncomfortable power structures embedded in the circulation of African arts. Our audiences are eager to see us address them more directly.

A danger in the single, timeless stories we as scholars continue to tell is that they reinforce ideas about Africa that we have known for decades to be out of date. Rather than overhaul our language, specialists in museums and universities have shifted much of the responsibility for recognizing the historical dynamism, individual agency, and local specificity from themselves to their audiences. They have also tacitly reinforced notions of purity (see Latour's [1991] reflections on purity). But as Theaster Gates reminds us, "In the end nothing is pure." Recognizing the impact of formal analysis and the historical definition of discrete styles allows us to move away from outdated anthropological concepts and inscribe the works firmly into an art history that is self-reflective and that acknowledges its problematic roots.

Notes

The ideas we outline here reflect more than a decade of conversation with each other as well as numerous conversations with colleagues, family, and friends around the world. Their names are too many to list here. However, we thank each person for the thoughtful exchanges.

1 We recognize a longstanding discomfort with the terms *traditional*, *historical*, or *classical* to identify a corpus of African arts (for example, see Lamp 1999, Vogel 2005, Doris 2011). The works in this corpus are historical or have historical precedents. In some cases, artists still produce similar works. Rather than focus on this terminological challenge here, we address other foundational terminological concerns.

2 The April 17, 2019 Atelier Style / ethnic workshop at the Institut national d'histoire de l'art in Paris, France, reflects a recent effort to analyze this challenge for the study and presentation of African arts. Claire Bosc-Tiessé and Peter Mark organized the workshop. Invited participants included Richard Fardon, Jonathan Fine, Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi, Hélène Joubert, Dominique Malaquais, and Eric Michaud.

3 Silvia Forni, Kathryn Wysocki Gunsch, Amanda Maples, and Matthew Rarey presented papers during the Shattering Single Stories session we co-organized for the 2016 African Studies Association (ASA) annual meeting. Kevin Dumouchelle and Karen Milbourne responded to the papers. Paul Davis, John Monroe, Elizabeth Perrill, and Matthew Rarey presented papers during the session bearing the same name that we co-organized for the 2017 Arts Council of the African

Studies Association triennial conference. Constantine Petridis served as a discussant.

4 Here we refer to the title of Sidney Littlefield Kasfir's oft-cited essay, "One Tribe, One Style? Paradigms in the Historiography of African Art" (Kasfir 1984).

5 Jean-Loup Amselle (1998) argues that efforts to discern subgroup styles reproduce the same problematic logic informing efforts to discern the styles of broader cultural or ethnic groups, even if the attempts to discern subgroup styles seem grounded in greater specificity (see Gagliardi 2014: 46–48).

6 African art scholars and other enthusiasts have long debated what *authenticity* means. For example, see the issue of *African Arts* devoted to "fakes and fakery" (vol. 9, no. 3, 1976). See also Kasfir 1992, Monroe 2012, Van Beurden 2015. Despite ongoing debates about different possibilities for the term's meaning, strict notions of authenticity still prevail in many discourses. On uncertainty within the discipline of art history, see Didi-Huberman 2009.

7 Nzewi's statement starts around 47:40 in the podcast.

8 For the spring semester of 2016, Gagliardi used a single object in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA) as the starting point for each class meeting. She presented to students specific information about each object that she gathered in the museum's archives in consultation with Constantine Petridis, then the CMA curator of African art. She asked students to identify when publications focused on a particular object or on unspecific comparative examples. Rather than present information to students with disclaimers about the construction of identities or the insistence on object types, Gagliardi showed students what we do and do not know about specific objects and publications related to them. Students in the course then considered the nature of our evidence for certain claims as well as uncomfortable gaps in our knowledge. They engaged successfully with the material. The case studies Gagliardi selected also introduced students to major themes and concepts in the field. Gagliardi worked with Yaëlle Biro to develop a version of the course around the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection and with Petridis to create another version around the Art Institute of Chicago's collection in the spring of 2018 and fall of 2019, respectively. Other scholars have experimented with how to teach introductory African art history courses and gathered to discuss pedagogy. For example, Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi and Matthew Rarey worked with the CMA to organize a March 2018 workshop to consider different approaches.

9 Petridis and Gagliardi experimented with this formulation when they collaborated on the Cleveland Museum of Art's 2015 exhibition *Senufo: Art and Identity in West Africa* (see also Gagliardi 2014). Petridis has not adopted the approach in subsequent installations. However, Gaëlle Beaujean and Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch referred to object styles in the labels they prepared for Paris's Musée du quai Branly's 2017 exhibition *L'Afrique des routes* (see also Coquery-Vidrovitch 2017). Labels for Paris's Musée de l'Orangerie's 2017 installation of *Dada Africa*, an exhibition organized at Zurich's Museum Rietberg, also referred to object styles (Burmeister, Oberhofer, and Francini 2016).

10 We use the term *style* here to refer to an ensemble of visual characteristics that art connoisseurs and other experts rely on to categorize an object with other objects on the basis of form. Our goal is to focus attention on the constructed nature of style categories. We also aim to acknowledge how actors in the art market or other arenas have defined style categories and imposed style labels on objects. Discussion of the extensive twentieth-century debates on the concept of *style* is beyond the scope of our essay. However, as Jan Elsner (2003: 108) explains, "Style remains a crucial reminder of our discipline's depths—the follies, the idealisms aspired to and unachieved, the rigor of an unsurpassed formal analysis supported by a compendious firsthand visual knowledge. This is the lineage of the discipline we practice." He concludes, "If we abandon it entirely, we do so at our peril."

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