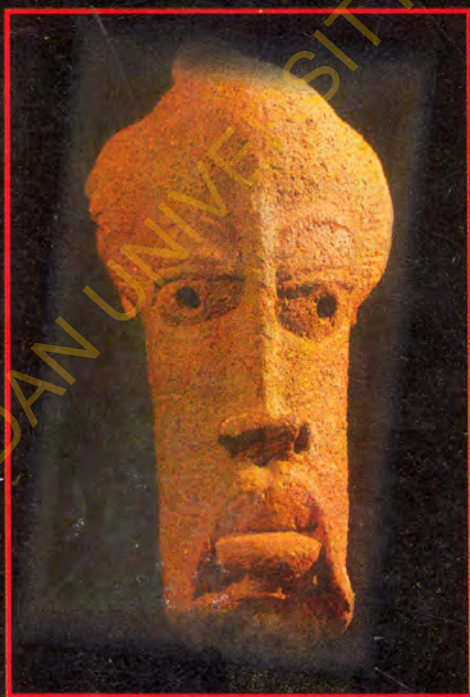


A Handbook of
Methodology

in

African
Studies



Edited by

Dele Layiwola

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A VISUAL ARTS METHODOLOGY

OHIOMA IFOUNU POGOSON

2

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to acquaint scholars and students with the basic tools required for investigating and probing the visual arts of Africa. By the term “visual arts of Africa” in the broadest sense, is meant the concrete material traditional and contemporary artistic productions of Africans in Africa and by Africans. Of course, they must be capable of being perceptible by the visual senses. Such works, which have now come to include the ethnographic objects, may be utilitarian, secular or religious. The peculiarity of traditional African visual arts lies in the fact that they are integral parts of African life, bearing heavily not only upon religion and ritual but also on the mundane. It is for this reason that African arts are said to be an “art for life” rather than the case of western art, which is believed to exist for its own sake to satisfy the basic desire for pleasure and entertainment. Indeed, Vogel has aptly noted that an essential quality of western art is that it exists for its own sake and that it has a higher ambition than to be useful in any pedestrian sense (Vogel, 1988:14). This situation has conditioned the marked difference between western and traditional African art methodology.

African art is even more complex when we consider that Africa lacked writing in the modern sense of it and as such it has been difficult to look far back into its past. This handicap has undoubtedly hindered the growth and development of the academic study of traditional African art, especially in the early period. Indeed, it is this peculiarity of Africa (and other non-literate peoples) that caused the study of their culture to require an especial approach in conducting research, gathering information and reporting on its material culture. It is also true that it is this very nature of traditional Africa that has worked to shape and condition the methodology for studying African culture. Since Africa did not belong to the civilised worlds of Europe and America, its study naturally fell within the realm of anthropology, and this was at a time when studying exotic cultures and their productions was a vogue for the more "advanced" and "civilised" world. They have more or less fashioned the methodology that this paper will discuss.

The issue of a method for the study of African arts began to gain serious attention when African art objects started to arrive in Europe in large numbers at the turn of the nineteenth century. The Europeans, finding it difficult to understand the works quickly concluded that such art works must in one form or the other be tied to their producer – culture and, therefore, could only be best comprehended from within the culture that has produced the art. Of course considering what and how western art experience is viewed, this was a safe position to begin with. Following from this is the importance of fieldwork that is now more or less a *sine qua non* for conducting studies in African visual arts. "Fieldwork" simply means going into a particular *foreign* culture to study. Consequent upon this development, scholars and enthusiasts have had to visit, live with and study African art producing cultures to be able to interpret the artistic productions of the people, especially in the western academic tradition of understanding art. Because the initiators of this idea were basically anthropologists, they referred to the procedure as "participant observation." And from the mid-nineteenth century onwards several European and American scholars, among them Leo Frobenius, William Fagg and the McIntoshes, visited various parts of Africa in order to carry out fieldwork. At this point, it is instructive to note that although many of these people were mostly anthropologists, they nonetheless studied the arts of the various places they visited as the material productions of man. Their published works and data are now important source materials in African visual art studies.

Participant observation as a method of gathering data requires for the researcher to go into the society which he wishes to study to become, as much as possible, a part and parcel of that society. Although there have been varying experiences with this approach to anthropological studies of Africa, participant observation remains a valid fieldwork tool that has withstood the test of time. Participant observation is now widely accepted as the tool for investigating the earlier so-called exotic cultures. It has been found to be an all-encompassing and appropriate method if used with caution, discretion and ingenuity. This is more so since it has been established that there is a close proximity between African arts and its producer-culture; to the extent that the knowledge of a particular culture is essential for a thorough understanding of its material productions. Therefore investigations about African visual arts require a well-grounded knowledge of the culture that has produced it. From an understanding of the culture, information about provenance, the impetus for its creation and, indeed, the reason why it is created as is, can be sought and got using the right procedure. In some cases, the materials and methods of production have been found to be culture conditioned. Consider always that many African cultures had no writing and have had to depend on oral traditions for information about the past.

Fieldwork as a tool for investigating the visual arts of Africa involves going to the environment that has created the art to ask questions that will provide correct information about the work. To do this, you must sample, observe, conduct interviews or generate questionnaires and analyse the products of these initiatives. To go about doing this you are obligated to prepare adequately for fieldwork. Because the researcher is directly involved in the quest for information and knowledge that will throw light upon the topic he is working on, he is participating fully in the endeavour to which observation is of extreme importance, to reliably gather the information required. When he does this he is doing fieldwork as a participant observer. As I have indicated earlier on, due to the proximity of African visual arts to its culture, the desired exhaustive understanding of the culture is best approached using the participant observation method of fieldwork. This method ensures that the researcher is opportuned to interact within the environment and imbibe the salient aspects of the culture, well enough to undertake successful research. This is not to imply that the method is devoid of its own drawbacks and handicaps. Participant observation as a method involves a set of procedures, which have evolved basically from

the experiences of various early researchers. Many of these procedures derive simply from the early field experiences. They now ensure the sustainability, reliability and validity of the data that is gathered and translated into the final research output, the academic write-up.

The Pre-Fieldwork Stage

At this stage we shall review those things that require to be carried out before proceeding to the field to undertake any research. First and very important is the determination of the research interest. You may call this the conception stage where it is expected that you determine and define the problematic. Having become conversant with the basics of the discipline, the researcher seeks loopholes and gaps which he hopes to fill and enlighten upon in order to make a contribution to knowledge in his discipline. The researcher thus peruses his discipline, searching for areas where further light requires to be thrown. To do this the researcher must, of course, be sufficiently conversant with his discipline. When he has located such an area that he wishes to research, he must then endeavour to read deep and wide to acquaint himself with the state of knowledge in that area. This is often referred to as the library search stage. Here, the visual arts researcher is expected to probe the culture of the producer of the arts he wishes to study. In addition, he should look into nearby areas and cross-check relationships and connections that may exist. Based on his library work, the researcher builds up a bibliography of relevant materials on the subject. This will be a handy compilation for the future when he begins to write his research. It would also be wise for the researcher to spend some time seeking circumstantial materials. The experiences of various workers in the field have shown that it could be quite revealing and rewarding.

Consider the case of the researcher who while studying Benin, ventured into its relationship with Owo only to discover and conclude that most of the ivory carvings initially attributed to Benin possessed very strong Owo connections. Indeed, Gillon is now of the view that based on grounds of iconography, most of the Benin bronzes are the products of Owo artists (Gillon, 1984:212). This is in spite of the fact that Owo is a Yoruba town about 100 km northwest of Benin and is very closely related to Ife, the fountain-head of the Yoruba from where very important manifestations of Yoruba artistic adroitness have been discovered. All considered, the point in this section of this paper is the need for a thorough preparation; one that will neither

under-value nor take for granted any form of information gathered from various sources.

For better efficiency, the production of a check-list is often advised at this stage as well as at the other stages. Such a list, which must contain details of the hows, whats and whens of the project, is a good way to organise and prepare for fieldwork. This way, the researcher is less likely to forget or omit anything that had previously been planned. Indeed, there is no gainsaying the need for adequate preparation before fieldwork. This section is, therefore, not cast in any concrete structures. What this means is that preparations have to go beyond the points I have raised into really more personal things. For example, it will be foolhardy for a researcher in the Jos area of Nigeria in the later part of any year not to go there prepared with thick clothing. This is because at such periods the temperature drops to as low as between 18/22°, a temperature which is considered very cold for a researcher from the tropics. There are also the more basic preparation in terms of where to stay in the field, amounts of money to take along, the type of materials and equipment that you could need, etc. Finally and above all, the researcher must prepare for and strive to be as comfortable and independent as possible while in the field. Therefore, the researcher must, in addition to making adequate preparations, trouble-shoot for possible problems and ensure multiple back-ups to ensure a hitch-free fieldwork period. Finally, it is important to mention that the quality of research is highly dependent on the preparation for and the comfort of the researcher in the field.

Let me say that much of what is to be achieved in the field is dependent on the researchers ability to be innovative and creative. He must not assume a straitjacket or have preconceived ideas about how to go about his data gathering. What is most important is that he is willing to spend time to find creative solutions to hitches and blocks that he will definitely come across in the field. Above all, he must remain focussed on his goal. Indeed, the quality of the outcome of his work in the field depends greatly on how well and how adequately he has prepared for this stage. This is the point where there are no hard and fast rules and as such the researcher must be willing and ready to bend over backwards to ensure that once in the field, his objectives are achieved to the best of his ability.

In the visual arts, there is a great need for photographs and this is one area where many researchers have problems, because in this culture people are averse to being photographed, with or without their permission. In order to scale this usual hurdle several creative solutions

have been taken in the past. In a particular occasion while doing fieldwork among the Hausa-Fulani nomads, Adepegba (Personal communication, 14) found it expedient to carry along with him a Polaroid instant camera in addition to his 35mm camera. With the Polaroid, he was able to photograph his subjects, which he gave to them in order to ameliorate their aversion. However, to attain his objective, he used the 35mm camera first and then used the Polaroid last and thereby making it seem as though the picture he had presented them was the product of both cameras! Some other researchers have preferred to seek by subtle means the permission of the subject before attempting to take a photograph of him. Yet, another researcher went to the length of explaining the purpose and need for the photograph to the townsfolk or community head who in turn explained these to the subjects. Truly, there is no limit to handling such issues; each must respond to the peculiarity of the situation he finds himself. When the visual arts researcher also needs to take video pictures of festivals or masquerades, he must device ways and means of surmounting these obstacles that have a great potential to disrupt the research. Several other thorny situations could arise when you are talking to people, observing a situation or, indeed, just living among the people.

While carrying out fieldwork in Esie, Kwara State, in 1983/84, I was confronted with a situation where I had to deal with two factions of the townsfolk. This anomalous situation required me to gain the confidence of both sides in order to get the right history and information I was seeking. At the end of the day, my discussions with the local school-teacher and church priest provided useful insights to how to use the data that I had obtained from both factions in the town. Understanding the local politics especially from the point of views of the teacher and the church priest saved me the embarrassment of using skewed data. This is not to say that advice from them could not have distorted things for me, but passing all information gathered through a plausibility sieve aided in the handling of data collected. I was able to evolve a basis for sieving and selecting what to use.

The Fieldwork Stage

This is at the stage when the researcher is in the field proper, to gather the information for his work. It is the stage to implement all the planning that have been made at the first stage. Armed with his work-plan, the researcher is advised to proceed with clinical efficiency and creativity. Apart from following with the plan and adapting to

situations that can yield the best results for your research, some emphasis is required by way of advice on comportment and relationships with informants. While in the field, it is advisable that the researcher is humble while expressing his opinions and interacting with members of the community. He should place himself in the position of a learner and be willing to absorb all that he gets. He should also be ready to sieve and cross-check his material when he gets to the next stage of the work. It is advisable to check your work, and plan regularly when in the field so as to be able to adjust to changing situations. Finally, the researcher must strive to remain very organised in the face of the vagaries of the field conditions. More often than not, the researcher will be faced with emergency situations and so he must act and make quick decisions that will aid him in re-focusing on his objective and the plan of work. It is even possible that what you get in the field could advance and recondition your focus. At all times during this stage, therefore, the researcher must remain flexible, and willing to adjust the dictates of the field.

While carrying out fieldwork in Esie as earlier mentioned. I had been, so to say, living and interacting with the stone sculptures for about two weeks, trying to find a focus on how to attempt a stylistic study of such a large collection of sculptures. But it was not until my supervisor visited me in the field and pointed out what later constituted the bases of my stylistic study of the images, that I was able to handle the large number of works involved in handy packages. Indeed, the packaging of that study and the bases used now encompasses the over 800 stone sculptures of Esie Nigeria. It used to be the practice of the postgraduate school for the supervisor to visit the researcher while in the field. The student, in what was then known as Bench fees, paid for this practice. It enabled the supervisor to visit the student researcher in the field. This was meant to ensure not only that the researcher is in the field, but more importantly, that the researcher is going about his data collection in the best manner to obtain maximum results. In addition, as I have already showed above, the presence of the supervisor in the field enables both supervisor and researcher to agree on new directions that the field conditions may re-direct. Perhaps reintroducing "fieldwork supervision", as the former situation could be called, will go a long way to enabling better fieldwork and ensuring better research and results. The student researcher could also gain a lot of confidence that he will require in future research endeavours.

The Post-Fieldwork Stage

By the time the researcher comes out of the field, he should be armed with all he requires to begin the write-up or documentation part. This is the desired end of all academic research. Therefore, the question of how, who and where he will write becomes very important. For example, if he is writing a thesis or a dissertation, he has to follow the tradition of the institution for which he is writing. He could just as well be writing for a journal or, indeed, a book, but the most important thing is to realise that there are specified styles of presenting your work. It is advisable, therefore, for the researcher to consult with his supervisor or an editor to review the options that could be available. But since the aim here is to acquaint the student with the tools and techniques to cope with data gathering and thesis writing, he should be talking with his supervisor. There could be other situations that arose while in the field that will tend to condition the structure of the write-up. With the help of his supervisor, the researcher should work out a plan to approach this stage. Some library work is also necessary and advisable to cross-check materials brought in from the field. Since the main aim of this stage is the write-up, the researcher should be diligent in doing so. He must make frequent references to his field notes and ensure that his photographs are sharp and clear.

Photography and the Visual Arts

Photographs are most essential in any visual arts study. The photographs are meant to present in a more graphic and visible form the works that the researcher had studied. Unlike other disciplines where a good description could suffice, it is expected that good quality black and white or colour prints be used to illustrate the arts being studied. Free-hand drawings are also acceptable in cases where photographs are strictly not allowed. Although many researchers are unable to take good photographs, the expectation is that the researcher himself takes care of his photography. He is required to be able to take good, sharp and appropriate pictures to illustrate aspects of the arts that he is studying. It is for this reason that basic techniques of photography are taught. I must emphasise here that the ability to take a good photograph is not something that can be achieved as quickly as it will take to teach the basic photography lecture. Good photographs come out of consistent practice. You must handle your camera and take photographs under varying conditions to be able to imbibe the simple roles each of the settings of the camera play.

Let me point out here that the whole idea of taking a good picture depends on exposing the right amount of light on the subject in the lens and for the right amount of time. But choosing the right equipment (see a short discussion on equipment later on) is equally important. So, it is a function of balancing the right quantity of light for the right amount of time on the image that the right lens sees.

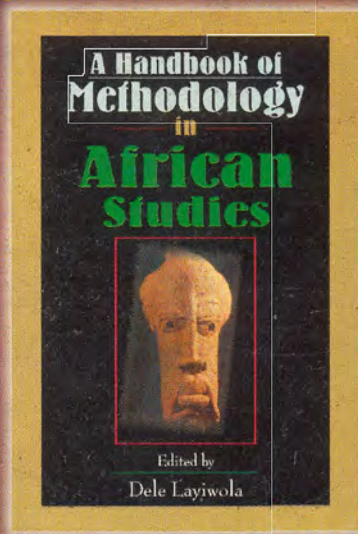
The three basic parts of the camera that you can use to perform the operation described above are the lens and the aperture. The lens is like the eye while the aperture is like the mouth. With the lens you position your subject in the frame and ensure that it is in good focus. These can be achieved by positioning the subject properly within the square frame which is meant to guide you and turning the focusing ring until you are satisfied with the sharpness of the subject. Having done these, the weather conditions will now guide you on what amount of light you will require and for how long. If, for example, you are working on a very bright day, you can imagine that there will be sufficient natural light so, first of all, you do not require any artificial light such as a flash. Next you will also realise that you do not need to expose your film for too long so that you do not get an over-exposed picture. Measured in f-stops, the higher the aperture numbers, the smaller the aperture opening. Therefore, on a bright day such as we are using here, an f-22 aperture will be more desirable than an f-3.5. It is all a function of getting the basic working principles of the camera and constant practice. In terms of the printing, ensure that you use printers that are reputable in printing research photographs.

Regarding the camera to take to the field, I would advice on a 35mm single lens reflex (SLR) camera because of its portability, versatility and ruggedness. This came to replace the very bulky and highly professional twin lens cameras. Since the entry of the SLR's into the photography market, they have become very successful. They can now be bought with numerous optional items to enhance the quality of photographs that can be taken. Some of these include a wide variety of lenses from wide-angle lenses to telephoto lenses and combination zooms. There are also flash units with amazing intensity and ranges as well as other power attachments meant to make the camera user-friendly.

Apart from the still camera, there are now very portable camcorders for recording action scenes such as festivals and observing action procedures. Also, more recently, digital cameras and computer scanners have emerged to further simplify good picture making. Although the hardware to use a digital camera and scanner, the

The fifteen works of twelve researchers from the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan here anthologised are meant to disseminate directions of thought in field methods in African studies. Rather than cataloguing facts, however, the collection anticipates a conceptual framework of practice. It is, therefore, a theory and practice of field investigation in Africa, south of the Sahara. It also seeks to carry forward the vision of *African Notes*, as a forum for scholars and students with more than a passing interest in African culture and its continuing relevance to contemporary life.

Dele Layiwola is a senior research fellow at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan where he has been the editor of *African Notes* for more than a decade. Some of his other works include: *African Theatre in Performance* (Routledge, 1999/2000); *Rethinking African Arts and Culture* (CASAS, Cape Town, 2000) and *Understanding Post-Colonial Identities: Ireland, Africa and The Pacific* (Sefer, Ibadan, 2001).



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