

African Art as Philosophy: A Technical Analysis of Senghorian Vitalism and Bergsonian Intuition

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The discourse surrounding African aesthetics has undergone a radical transformation over the last century, moving from a colonial lens of 'primitive' craft toward a sophisticated recognition of **African Art as Philosophy**. This paradigm shift, spearheaded by thinkers like **Souleymane Bachir Diagne** and **Léopold Sédar Senghor**, posits that African artistic production is not merely a collection of decorative objects but a rigorous manifestation of ontological and metaphysical inquiries. This article provides a comprehensive technical analysis of the philosophical frameworks—specifically **Vitalism** and **Bergsonian Intuition**—that underpin African art, examining how form, rhythm, and material serve as a vehicle for complex knowledge systems.

The Ontological Foundation: Art as a Means of Knowledge

In his seminal work, *African Art as Philosophy*, Souleymane Bachir Diagne reconstructs Léopold Sédar Senghor's argument that art in the African context is a 'means of knowledge.' Unlike the Western post-Enlightenment tradition that often separates the aesthetic from the epistemic, Senghorian thought integrates them. The object is not a 'representation' of reality; it is a **re-creation** of the vital forces that constitute reality. To understand this, one must move beyond the visual surface to the **metaphysics of force**.

The Concept of Vital Force

At the core of this philosophical framework is the concept of **Vitalism**. In this view, the universe is not composed of static matter but of dynamic forces. An African mask or statue is designed to capture, channel, or amplify these forces. The artist (or 'technician of the sacred') does not seek to imitate the physical appearance of an ancestor or a spirit but to manifest their **ontological essence**. This aligns with the African philosophical axiom that 'being' is 'force.' Therefore, to create art is to engage in an act of **ontological engineering**.

Theoretical Framework: Senghor, Bergson, and the Mechanics of Intuition

The bridge between African aesthetics and modern European philosophy was famously constructed through Senghor's engagement with **Henri Bergson**. Specifically, Bergson's 1907 work, *Creative Evolution*, provided Senghor with the vocabulary to articulate the 'Negro-African' mode of knowing. This mode is defined by **Intuition** rather than the analytical 'dissecting' reason of Western Cartesianism.

The Bergsonian Influence: L'élan Vital

Bergson's concept of *l'élan vital* (the vital impulse) suggests that life cannot be understood through purely mechanistic or materialistic means. Life is a continuous flow, a **duration (durée)**. Senghor adapted this to argue that the African subject perceives the world through a 'sympathetic' vibration with this vital impulse. In the context of art, this means:

- **Subject-Object Fluidity:** The artist does not stand apart from the object but merges with it through a sensory and spiritual engagement.
- **Knowledge as Participation:** To know a thing is to 'dance' with it, to feel its rhythm, rather than to measure its dimensions.
- **The Primacy of the Image:** The image is not a symbol of something else; it is the presence of the thing itself in

its rhythmic form.

Table 1: Comparison of Epistemological Frameworks

Feature	Western Rationalism (Cartesian)	African Vitalism (Senghorian/Bergsonian)
Primary Mode of Inquiry	Analytical Reason (Dissection)	Intuition (Participation)
View of Matter	Inert, extended substance	Dynamic field of vital forces
Role of the Artist	Mimesis (Imitation of nature)	Poiesis (Re-creation of force)
Goal of Art	Aesthetic contemplation	Ontological intervention/Knowledge
Temporal Orientation	Linear/Mechanical time	Duration (Durée)/Rhythmic time

Technical Analysis of Artistic Components: Rhythm and Plasticity

If African art is philosophy, then its 'logic' is found in its **rhythm** and **plasticity**. These are not merely stylistic choices but technical requirements for the manifestation of vital force. Diagne emphasizes that rhythm is the 'architecture of being.' In African sculpture, rhythm is achieved through the repetition of geometric volumes and the calculated use of symmetry and asymmetry.

The Mathematical Logic of Rhythm

Rhythm in a three-dimensional object functions as a formal constraint that organizes the vital force. It can be broken down into three technical elements:

1. Symmetry: Represents the stability and permanence of the life force.
2. Asymmetry/Variation: Represents the movement and 'becoming' of life.
3. Proportion: Often non-naturalistic (e.g., enlarged heads in Yoruba sculpture) to emphasize the Ori (inner head/destiny), a philosophical statement on the seat of the soul.

Plasticity and the Negation of the 'Copy'

Technical data from Diagne's study indicates that African art has never aimed for **verisimilitude**. In Western art, the 'copy' of reality is often the benchmark of skill. In African art, the 'copy' is seen as a failure of philosophy. If one simply copies a human face, one has only captured the 'husk' or the 'accidental' features. The philosopher-artist must instead create a **plastic equivalent** of the spirit. This is why the 'distortion' of limbs or features is not a lack of skill but a technical necessity to express a specific metaphysical attribute (e.g., strength, fertility, or wisdom).

Core Mechanics: The Process of Ontological Creation

The creation of an African philosophical object (e.g., a mask) follows a rigorous procedural workflow that ensures the object transition from 'matter' to 'force-medium.'

Step-by-Step Technical Workflow

- Selection of Material: The choice of wood or metal is dictated by the 'vital charge' of the material. Specific trees are chosen because their biological 'life' is compatible with the spirit being invoked.
- Ritual Purification: The artist must enter a state of 'ontological readiness'—often involving fasting or prayer—to align their own vital force with the creative act.
- The Act of Carving (Subtraction): Carving is seen as the removal of 'excess' to reveal the essential form. It is a reductive process that mirrors the philosophical search for the 'One' or the 'Essence.'

- Consecration: Once the physical form is complete, the object is 'activated.' Without this final step, it remains a mere piece of wood. The activation is the technical 'booting up' of the philosophical device.

Comparative Analysis: African Philosophy vs. Western Trends

To further contextualize the 'Art as Philosophy' model, it is useful to compare it with other trends in African philosophy as defined by scholars like **Henry Odera Orika**.

Table 2: Odera Orika’s Four Trends vs. Diagne’s Model

Trend	Definition	Relation to Art
Ethno-philosophy	Collective worldviews and myths.	Art as a collective cultural marker.
Sage Philosophy	Individual critical thinkers (Sages).	Art as the expression of an individual master-carver's wisdom.
Nationalist-Ideological	Philosophy for liberation/identity.	Art as a tool for Negritude and political unity.
Professional Philosophy	Western-style academic rigor.	Diagne's systematic analysis of art using Bergsonian logic.

Practical Implementation: Interpreting the 'Object-Text'

How does a researcher or student apply this framework to an actual artifact? This field guide provides a methodological approach to 'reading' African art philosophically.

A Methodological Field Guide

1. Identify the Ontological Intent: Ask, what force is this object meant to regulate? (e.g., Is it a fertility figure? A judicial mask? A funerary statue?)
2. Analyze the Rhythmic Structure: Map the repetition of shapes. Are there zig-zag patterns (representing water or lightning)? Are there spheres (representing completeness)?
3. Evaluate the Epistemological Mode: Does the object require 'distanced' observation (intellect) or 'participatory' engagement (intuition/dance)?
4. Deconstruct the Materiality: Why was bronze used instead of wood? In Benin art, bronze represents the permanence of the kingship (the Oba), reflecting a political philosophy of stability.

Case Study: The Dogon Mask and the Philosophy of the Word

The Dogon people of Mali offer a profound case study in *Art as Philosophy*. For the Dogon, the universe was created through 'The Word' (Nommo). Their masks, used in the *Dama* ceremony, are not just costumes; they are architectural diagrams of the universe. The **Kanaga mask**, with its cross-like structure, represents the hand of god and the four cardinal points of the cosmos. To see the mask in motion is to witness the 'unfolding of the world.' Technically, the mask functions as a **mnemotechnic device**—a physical object that stores and transmits complex cosmological data across generations.

Failure Modes in Modern Interpretation

When analyzing African art through a purely aesthetic or 'Western' art-history lens, several critical errors occur:

- The 'Museumification' Error: Treating a mask as a static object for display. This removes its 'vital force,' rendering it philosophically 'dead.'
- The Mimesis Trap: Criticizing African art for lacking 'correct' proportions. This fails to recognize that the proportions are mathematically calculated to represent metaphysical truths, not biological ones.
- Ignoring the Performative Context: Philosophy in Africa is often embodied. A mask without the dance, the music, and the community is like a book with half its pages missing.

Solution Matrix for Interpretive Challenges

Common Error	Philosophical Solution
Viewing art as 'primitive' or 'naive.'	Recognize the use of abstraction as a sophisticated intellectual choice.
Over-emphasizing the 'anonymous' carver.	Research the Sage Philosophy and individual mastery of specific lineages.
Decoupling art from politics.	Analyze how the object reinforces or critiques social hierarchies and rights.

The Broader Implications of African Vitalism

The recognition of African Art as Philosophy has profound implications beyond the walls of the gallery. It challenges the global hierarchy of knowledge. By demonstrating that African societies have always possessed rigorous systems of thought expressed through 'plastic logic,' Diagne and Senghor provide a foundation for **epistemic decolonization**.

Furthermore, this vitalist philosophy offers a unique perspective on contemporary issues such as **socio-economic rights** and environmental ethics. If we view the world as a network of vital forces rather than a collection of resources to be exploited, our approach to development and sustainability changes. The 'participation' inherent in African intuition suggests a more harmonious relationship between humans and the biosphere, grounded in the recognition of a shared life force.

Ultimately, the study of African art through the lens of philosophy reveals a world where beauty is inseparable from truth, and where the rhythmic carving of a mask is a profound act of metaphysical inquiry. It invites us to reconsider the nature of reason itself, suggesting that the 'emotion' Senghor spoke of is not a lack of logic, but a more direct, vibrant, and integrated way of understanding the universe. As Souleymane Bachir Diagne masterfully argues, African art does not need to be 'given' a philosophy; it *is* philosophy in its most tangible and rhythmic form.

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- [The Foundations of Aesthetics: A Comprehensive Analysis of Philosophy of the Arts](http://123caramba.com/comprehensive-guide-aesthetics-philosophy-of-arts.pdf)

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- [The Evolution of Aesthetic Theory: A Comprehensive Analysis from Classical Greece to the Present](http://123caramba.com/evolution-of-aesthetic-theory-classical-greece-to-present.pdf)

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Tags: #African Philosophy #Negritude #Souleymane Bachir Diagne #Vitalism #Henri Bergson #African Art

