

VISUAL ART APPRECIATION IN NIGERIA: THE ZARIA ART SOCIETY EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

There is no doubt that one of the greatest creative impetuses injected into Nigerian art was made possible by, among other things, the activities of the first art institution in Nigeria to award a Diploma certificate in art, Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology (NCAST). NCAST started in 1953/54 at their Ibadan branch but they could not rationalize their art programme *ab initio* but organized art exhibition to raise the public awareness of the programme. In September 1955 the art programme became a full department and relocated to their permanent site at Zaria, in northern Nigeria, with 16 students. This paper focuses on NCAST impact on modern Nigerian art and the gradual, but steady, growth of other art activities in Nigeria since NCAST. The paper also discusses the emergence of an art society from NCAST, known as Zaria Art Society and the extension of the philosophy of the Art Society into the church by one of its member, Bruce Onobrakpeya, who represented most of his Christian images in traditional Urhobo style as against the popular western style. The paper argues that Nigeria has a rich art and diverse culture which existed long before the colonial reign and thus encouraged the efforts of the Zaria Art Society in re-appropriating local forms and motifs in their modern art by way of an ideology known as 'Natural synthesis.'

Introduction

The argument may be how one can define 'culture' in the context of the diverse ethnic groups that populate present-day Nigeria. Such a definition may fail because, considering the postcolonial milieu of art practice in Nigeria, art itself seems to have defied definition. However, it is important to mention here that before the advent of Europeans' capitalist incursion into Africa, there were local artists and craftsmen who had long practised their skills and craft and were in charge of the society's art cults. This is proven by the highly creative artistic works discovered in Nok (500.B.C.), Igbo-Ukwu (900. A.D.), Benin (1400. A.D.), Ile-Ife (1000-1500.A.D.), among others. However, the advent of European missionaries to Benin Kingdom brought international recognition to Nigerian traditional art. Layiwola (2010) observes: "The city of Benin had attracted several visitors since 1486 when Joao Alfonso d'Aveiro, a Portuguese, first visited Benin City". The Nigerian local art practice has slowly but continuously grown and translated into what one call modern or contemporary art. The 'modern' parlance of what is today known as Nigerian art may historically bear certain link to the activities of NCAST which was the first institution of higher learning in Nigeria to award a diploma certificate in art and on whose platform the Zaria Art Society was born. Okeke-Agulu (2015) presented the reformist students at NCAST, admitted in 1957, led by Uche Okeke (b.1933), Demas Nwoko (b.1935), Bruce Onobrakpeya (b. 1932), Jimo Akolo (b. 1934), who were already launching their impression as professional artists of the much

"expected, post-independent nation". Others who joined the group included: Yusuf Grillo (b.1934), Simon Obiekezie Okeke (1937-1969), William Olaosebikan (unknown life births). Then in 1958/59 Emmanuel Okechukwu Odita (b. 1936), Oseloka Osadebe (b. 1935), Ogbonnaya Nwagbara (1934-1985), Felix Nwoko Ekeada (b. 1934) completed the group. On October 9, 1959 a society known as the 'Art Society' was formed with Simon Okeke as President, Uche Okeke as Secretary and Onobrakpeya as Treasurer with Mrs Hart, the college principal's wife as Patron. The aim of the society was to "encourage the study of Fine Arts and hold weekly discussions on varied aspects of West African culture with specific reference to Nigerian cultures" (85).

Modern Nigerian Art

Different forms of art and craft such as Terra Cotta, wood carving and bronze casting, calabash carving, tusk and horn carving, shell, and weaving of textile products had existed in Nigeria long before what has now come to be known as 'modern Nigerian Art.' The art of every society plays a major role in the history of the society. Modern Nigerian Art is said to have started in the early 20th-Century with the contributions of Aina Onabolu (1881-1963) who is today regarded as 'The father of Modern Nigerian Art'. Ogbechie (1999) writes, "A tentative date of 1906 is assumed in this essay as the beginning of Modern Nigerian Art." Onabolu was the first Nigeria artist to receive a formal education in art, thus he single-handedly brought about change in the Nigerian school curriculum, by making sure that art as a subject was included in the school curriculum and taught during the era of colonial government in Nigeria. Onabolu's figurative drawings of landscape and portraiture meet the European mimetic realism standard. Iriwieri (2010) asserts: "Onabolu's drawings and paintings show great sensibility in the discipline, which he acquired in the art academies in London and Paris. Some of his works remained to this day the finest naturalistic portrait paintings of contemporary Nigerian art". When the task of spreading the teaching art across the nation became heavy for Onabolu alone to bear, he advised the colonial government to Kenneth Murray another art teacher from Europe for assistance. With the eventual arrival of Kenneth Murray (1902-1972) Modern Nigerian Art began to develop in Nigerian schools particularly in secondary schools, and Ben Enwonwu is recorded to be a major benefactor of Onabolu's effort.

Kenneth Murray encouraged his students to adapt traditional African forms and motifs into their art practices, his students, particularly Ben Enwonwu, is known for such practice. This was revealed by Nzegwu (1999), "Murray encouraged his students in Umuahia to attentively study and take design inspiration from *uli* forms, and the sculptural iconography around them". She further states: "Like Okeke did years after Enwonwu had transcended these kinds of concerns, Enwonwu differently valued both his Onitsha and European art experiences, constantly exploring the limits of the former with the techniques he learned from the latter". Moreover, Murray transformed and took the training in art to a level Egonwa (2001) described as "the evolution of the concept of Natural Synthesis," which involves a blend of the techniques of African arts with those of European experiences. Therefore, Enwonwu's awareness of the culture of his people, no doubt, influenced the nature of his art (paintings and sculptures), which are, for the most part, are a combination of Nigerian and European arts, what he learnt from his teacher Kenneth Murray. Though Murray and Enwonwu contributed in the synthesis of art and culture in Nigeria, but their efforts were not noticeable because they were few in number. Subsequently, a force came from the then newly established Nigerian College of Arts Science and Technology (NCAT) in 1958 by a group of students who formed a society known as the Zaria Art Society.

Thus what is today known as the Modern Nigerian Art can be ascribed to the contributions of artists like Aina Onabulu, Akinola Lasekan (both were advocate of naturalistic painting), Ben Enwonwu, among others. However, modern Nigerian art attained its height of significance when young and promising Nigerian artists from the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology formulated an ideology of 'Natural Synthesis'. The ideology preaches the adoption of experiences in modernity while maintaining the best of Nigerian culture. The synergy of academic art and Nigerian culture was enlarged by the members of the Zaria Art Society but it however did not end with them. Many years after the existence of the Zaria Art Society, modern Nigerian Art continues to grow even stronger. The growth of modern Nigerian art can also be attributed to the establishment of various workshops for art training such as: A the Ori-Olokun Movement in 1968 by the renowned Bishop Michael Ajayi Crowther at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University). Chukueggu (2012) identified Adeniyi Adeyemi and Wale Olajide as notable beneficiaries of the workshop organised to encourage interest in Yoruba Art.

The Zaria Art Society

A society is a group of people with a particular purpose and a common interest, members of a society often shares same culture within the same geographical region. Thus in a society, the members share a common identity or desire and a common purpose. Furthermore in a society, the members are expected to be an organized group of people that meets or associates for the same interest, such as: religion, culture, science, politics, arts, humanitarian, among other reasons or ideologies. The above definitions and explanations are necessary to be able to situate the Zaria Art Society in their right position. The Society's existence spanned between 1958 and 1961 and was founded with the sole purpose of synthesizing academics with culture by way of art practice. On this Grillo (2013) opines: "The Zaria Art Society was simply a group of young art students that began to recognize one another in Zaria. They were students with like aspirations who got together just as the saying 'Birds of the same feather flock together'".

The Zaria Art Society was a product of an informal discussion between Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko at Ibadan, during their interview into the school in 1957. Okeke and Nwoko were already practicing art practice before they came for the interview; this probably was there reason for understanding and thinking of a better way to reposition the Nigerian art at that time. The fact that the nation was still under colonial rule at that time was a more reason why they believed that individually and collectively Nigerians should uphold their cultural heritage. This led to informal meetings of few persons who believed in their vision. During their discussions on art and other issues, ideas were exchanged and developed and the Zaria Art Society was born. Ikpakronyi (2004) asserts, "On the 9th of October 1958, the Zaria Art Society was formally inaugurated. This was a great achievement and as earlier agreed by the members, it was immediately registered with the Students' Union of the College like other associations".

The Zaria Art Society was an informal society that was opened to membership for all students from any department in the college. In Nwoko (2013) account, Shemu and Okin from the Department of Architecture were also members of the society. According to Nwoko, the two architecture students attended meetings with the art students and participated in outdoor drawing which was the medium used by the society to gain recognition.

Bruce Onobrakpeya who was also another active member of the society, revealed that the society was an intellectual one and most of its members were already engaged in various kinds of professional arts before they were admitted into school. In the account of Bruce Onobrakpeya, other members such as himself, that didn't know much about art before the

gained admission into the school decided to join the society, because they knew that there was much to gain from it. Most members of the society were interested in working as professional artists after completing their education and not just to acquire certificates. Onobrakpeya, however, agrees with Demas Nwoko that there were students from other departments who often joined in their informal discussions. These students, he referred to as ‘associate members’ because they were mostly their friends from other departments. The first president of the society was Simon Okeke, who was in 1956 set, same with Yusuf Grillo (while Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, and Bruce Onabrakpeya were in 1957 set). Uche Okeke (1975) attests to Demas Nwoko’s assertion of Simon Okeke as the first leader of the group thus: “Simon Okeke, (1937-1969) was the first leader of the group who espoused the concept of synthesis of old and new”. Much later in 1959, Simon Okeke resigned as the president of the society and the mantle of leadership fall on Uche Okeke. Ikpakronyi (2004) asserts:

Shortly after the election, Simon Okeke, for personal reasons, relinquished his post. A fresh election was then conducted and the mantle of leadership fell on Uche Okeke on the 9th of February 1959, Olaosebikan was then the secretary. When he left in 1959, Okechukwu Odita became the secretary of the society till it was dissolved in 1961.

The society flourished and encouraged all students of the College to join because of its philosophy of ‘Natural Synthesis’ or ‘cultural life’ which the founding members believed cuts across all disciplines. It was therefore an open society, as the case may be, outside of the academic programme. The society spanned three generations of students, from 1958 to 1961 when it was formally closed. Apart from the members of the Zaria Art Society, the Zaria art school has contributed greatly and still contributing to the development of art in Nigeria through its graduates in different sectors of the society, particularly the educational sector. They are: J.B. Akolo (Painting), Y.A.G. Lawal, (Painting), D.O. Babalola (Sculpture), C.C. Aniakor (Painting), C.O Adepegba (Sculpture), D. Jegede (Painting), K. Oshinowo (Painting) among others.



Plate I: Members of the Zaria Art Society.

Sitting from left to right: Bruce Onobrakpeya, Yusuf Grillo, Uche Okeke, and Demas Nwoko. Back Row: Oseloka Osadebe, Ogbonaya Nwagbara, and Okechukwu Odita. (Source: *Africanartwithtaj.blogspot.com*)



Plate II: Some of the members of the Zaria Art Society with their classmates: Prof. Jimoh Akolo in 2011. (Source: *Africanartwithtaj.blogspot.com*). Sitting from left to right: Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Jimoh Akolo, Bruce Onobrakpeya and Yusuf Grillo.

The Role of The Zaria Art Society in the synthesis of modern and traditional art in Nigeria

About ten years after Enwonwu's foresight and vision in the development of a true Nigerian contemporary art by recognition of his ancestral home through his art came a group of young men from the Zaria art school who were inspired and guided by Enwonwu's art and philosophy. These young Nigerian artists in 1950s in the then College of Arts, Science and Technology at Zaria, started a society with the sole aim of synthesising between modern and traditional art. Collectively, they commenced the search for an indigenous art tradition as against the Western representational art as was the case of the early educated Nigerian artists. The Zaria Art Society members were aware of the harm that the newly introduced Western art could cause to Nigerian culture. They sensed that there was something fundamentally wrong in the academic syllabus, and decided to use their association to correct it by trying to merge Nigerian art tradition with the newly introduced Western style. According to Oloidi (1989):

A reversal was needed if true, modern Nigerian art was to be established. In order to focus their thoughts, the Zaria Art Society advanced their theory of natural synthesis which, essentially, called for the merging of the best of the indigenous art traditions, forms and idea with the useful western ones.

The radical change spread from the academic circle to other cultural centres around the country, where several other young, talented artists were trained. This new art style which started in the mid-1950s was highly embraced particularly by the youths who saw it as a quest in the spirit of Nigerian independence. This radical art tradition change continued after the Zaria Art Society was closed down, gradually the spread from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, to University of Nigeria Nsukka, with the development of the *Uli* art style. Also at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ife, a similar style called *Ona* was developed all in search of a true Nigerian identity through visual arts.

Western and traditional art synthesis in the church by one of the member of the Zaria Art Society

The spread synthesis of Modern and traditional art in Nigeria also extended to Churches with Bruce Onobrakpeya championing it. Bruce Onobrakpeya was recorded to have worked extensively in the area of Nigerian indigenous Christian art using Urhobo motifs and art styles to interpret Bible stories. Bruce Onobrakpeya was formally trained as a painter in Western European technique and material, but through a series of experimentation and exploration, he evolved a synthesis in print making that depicts authentic African culture in foreign and local techniques and materials. His unique art style seems to have solved the problem of identity in his struggle to retain Nigerian identity in the world of art. Quel in Onobrakpeya (1992) says, "Nigeria is in the throes of change. It requires a type of art (call it modern) that will reflect its on-going effort to achieve meaningful development and cultural identity". Onobrakpeya is one Nigerian artist that has worked tirelessly in trying to inculcate the biblical theme, and make it Nigerian by interweaving Christianity with Nigerian culture. Quel in Onobrakpeya (1992) further writes, "Notwithstanding his traditional background and the nostalgia expressed in a good majority of his works, Onobrakpeya is a devout Christian. He has drawn considerable inspiration from the Bible for many of his Christian themes". He has handled several church commissions. Among his church commissions, as observed by Quel in Onobrakpeya (1992), were the "complete set of the Catholic Stations of the Cross" for St. Paul's Catholic Church, Ebute-Metta Lagos, Nigeria, in which he represented the Disciples of Christ as Urhobo indigenes. He produced 60 illustrations for the Catholic National Catechism in Nigeria. In 1977, his prints entitled, 'Life of St. Paul' in traditional Urhobo style was presented by Bishop Fitzgibbon to Pope Paul VI on the occasion of his 80th birthday. Apart from the Catholic Church, he also recorded that in 1979, one of his works entitled 'Ota Gbinowe' was presented to the Archbishop of Canterbury during his visit to Nigeria. In Onobrakpeya's works one can hardly find any stylistic difference between the treatment of Christian and Nigerian themes, thereby making it possible for him to synthesize his Christian images in order to bring the message nearer home.

Conclusion

Nigeria as a nation is known for its diverse culture, which is responsible for its rich art. the arts and culture of Nigeria cuts across all its geographical region and dates back to 500 B.C. However, the beginnings of what can be described as a visual academic cultural dialogue between academic trained artists and their culture in Nigeria started with Ben Enwonwu who was recorded by most authors as the first trained Nigerian Artist to make a remarkable effort in the promotion of Nigerian culture through his art works. In 1958, a pressure group from the newly established institution (Nigerian College of Arts Science and Technology Zaria) formed the Zaria Art Society. The society introduced and adopted a philosophy they called 'Natural Synthesis' and this marked the beginning of a new dawn on the contemporary art scene in Nigerian. This was an avenue for young Nigerian artist to go back to their culture, and bring in some aspects of their culture into what was being taught in school by their European teachers. Though the society existed for only three years, but it left a remarkable impact on the Nigerian art scene. So much has happened and is still happening in Nigerian art since the closure of the Zaria Art Society, their philosophy of "Natural Synthesis" has been a driving force among many Nigerian artists, and this has also lead to the formation of many art groups. Some of the notable groups are as follows: Uli, Ona, Nsibidi and Ara. Though the above mentioned groups are in different names, their philosophies are not far from that of the Zaria Art Society's Natural Synthesis.

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