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Art and the Canker-Worm Years in Nigeria, 1980-2006; the Implications for Modern Nigerian Art, Its History and Documentation (Pp. 510-523)

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Abstract

The imagery of the Cankerworm is used as metaphor and analogy to indicate a period of increasing authoritarianism in Nigerian government, official mismanagement, as well as sloppiness in government policies. This paper examines the consequences of the historical trend on modern Nigerian art as well as its history and documentation. Modern art in Nigeria and indeed the whole of Africa is not exactly along the lines of western experiences and this is because it is a derivative of specific historical background different in context, content and types from those of Europe and the United States In spite of the unfortunate postcolonial trend in Africa, modern Nigerian art has been an anomaly of the deplorable tendencies because of its transmutation through identifiable developmental stages, which is, the colonial and the postcolonial.

Key Words, Cankerworm, Marxist art historical approach, Kitsch, Art contracting, Hybridization, African Authenticity

... disease and political instability, African cultural production dance, drama, music and visual art all thrive

Kwame Anthony Appiah ¹

Introduction

The approach used in this paper is the critical Marxist art historical approach, showing how art interacts with power and economy in the society. During the mid-20th century in Europe, one critical approach that art historians used was Marxism. The goal is to show how art interacts with power structures in society. Marxist art history attempted to show how images contain information about economy, and how images can make the status quo seem natural. Perhaps the best-known Marxist was Clement Greenberg who came to prominence during the late 1930s with his essay “Avant-garde and Kitsch”; also prominent was Arnold Hauser who wrote the first Marxist survey of Western Art, titled *The Social History of Art*. In this book Hauser attempted to show how class consciousness reflected in major art periods. Another was T.J Clark, the first art historian of that period to abandon Vulgar Marxism. Most Marxists writings were focussed on the close relationship of the political and economic climates in which the art was created (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_history 3/12/2010). The Marxist art historical approach is what this paper has adopted to investigate the art historical development in Nigeria during the years under review

Nigerian Art and Polity, 1960 -2000s

In 1960, Nigeria became a sovereign nation from British rule and became a republic in 1963. Soon, ethnic rivalries, suspicion and official corruption committed by the political class manifested in crisis in all the regions of Nigeria; first in two military coups in 1966, and eventually the Nigerian civil war, 1967 to 1970. Before and during the civil war years, the Osogbo ‘primitivistic expressionists’ (Picton, 2001) founded by Ulli Beier in 1962 gained international fame after the successes of its exhibitions in Europe and America in the 1960s. It occupied the centre stage of Nigerian art from 1962 and gradually grew almost overshadowing other developments in modern Nigerian art. The ripples of their fame which started in 1962 reached such a wide range and did not fizzle out through the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. The period from 1969 to 1973 also featured other artistic experiences including the Ori-Olokun experimental school anchored by Michael Crowder and Solomon Wangboje, at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University).

With the end of the Nigerian civil war in 1970, the artists of the erstwhile opposing divides in the civil war were once again united and the Nigerian modern art space which though continued during the civil war, with the overbearing presence of the Osogbo School, came alive again with other

artistic features. By 1973, with the euphoria of the successful conclusion of the civil war, and with oil monies that seemed limitless, the federal military government headed by General Yakubu Gowon decreed an across-the-board *Udoji* wage increase for civil servants, which in most cases doubled existing salaries of workers in Nigeria (Vogel.1991, 246). The copious cash now in the purses of government workers, the largest workforce in Nigeria, also reflected in their buying powers. The new monetary status also made some of them to desire art works for their newly rearranged or refurbished apartments.

Although local clientele among Nigerian elites gradually grew for modern Nigerian art from the pre-1960s, but the artworks of the elite artists were often considered too expensive for majority of people outside the elite class (Ekweni, 1966, 41). It was the art works of the popular artists such as the souvenir or airport artists and 'road side artists', the referential nomenclature for the self-taught and other street or popular artists in Nigeria, which filled that need for quick and cheap art. This Kind of art yielded profit for some young Nigerians who found ready jobs painting, making or hawking and selling art, not just to Nigerian buyers, but most especially to foreigners (Kasfir, 1994,)(Vogel.1991, 246). The 'road side' or popular art type is usually cheap, with forms that are always vague and technically unprofessional, but usually attractive.

In 1976, Major General Olusegun Obasanjo became Nigeria's military Head of state (1976-1989) following the assassination of Brigadier Murtala Mohammed; (1975-1976).Murtala Mohammed had ousted General Yakubu Gowon (1966-1975) in a bloodless Military coup in 1975, to become head of state. In 1977, the Second World Festival of Black and African Culture FESTAC, held in Nigeria and the experience awakened more artistic consciousness in Nigerians. Numerous exhibitions were held and new artistic talents, styles and art forms also evolved.

Prior to this period, painting and sculpture had their pre-eminence in art practice and exhibitions particularly among elite Nigerian artists. But, by the 1980s, Ceramic and Glass designs ,Graphics design, Textile design, Metal design and Fashion design as well as other genres of art began to show along painting and sculpture on the Nigerian art space. Suddenly, an aesthetic revolution or transformation took place in Nigeria. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, a new generation of educated and wealthy Nigerian art patrons began to emerge, most of them, business people and owners of

large commercial concerns, as well as others in paid employments. This group of Nigerian art connoisseurs lived in the urban centres, cities and towns; and some in the rural suburbs mostly educated people or wealthy chiefs and title holders. To these newly emerged group of art patrons, possession of Nigerian art works became a status symbol (Author, 2002, 18). Outdoor sculptures became features at significant public spaces and road junctions of Nigerian cities. In the northern parts of Nigeria like Kaduna, Kano, Maiduguri, Jos and many other places where Islamic injunctions forbids representational artworks, abstracted outdoor sculptures suddenly emerged on the public squares. The works of this period were usually done by very professional artists who most often displayed their knowledge of the interrelationship of the elements of design and its applicable principles in the execution of the art works. The materials of execution of the works were also often carefully chosen to ensure their longevity.

In October 1979, an elected democratic government was sworn-in in Nigeria, with Alhaji Shehu Shagari (1979 to 1983) as the president. It was a period when the National Council for Arts and Culture organised many exhibitions on Contemporary Nigerian art within Nigeria and abroad in places like India, Germany and Dakar (Senegal). On 31st December 1983, General Muhammadu Buhari sacked the government of Shagari in a military coup and General Buhari became Nigeria's fourth military head of state (1983-1985). The regime at the time was considered a corrective regime that attempted to inculcate in Nigerians, a sense of commitment to national development and abhorrence of corruption. But the tasks before the regime was enormous and before it could settle down to address the numerous national problems before it, in less than two years, on the 27th August 1985 General Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993) staged a military coup which ousted the Buhari regime.

By 1985, corruption in government was so profound and the economy of the nation had begun to force majority of the art Departments in the country to lack materials for learning activities, and the experience was in all disciplines in Nigerian schools and at all levels. The education sector began to be under-funded and by 1986 the federal government subscribed to IMF Education loan as well as its structural adjustment programme (SAP), against the Nigerian public virulent protests. Consequently, Nigerian Universities soon began to sacrifice excellence for quantity in student enrolment to avoid closure.

From that time onwards the World Bank agenda informed all the Nigerian government education policies. But the main hindrance to the successful implementation of these policies was often official corruption. Nigeria began to turnout large number of graduates but with less professional competence in all disciplines including art. However, the experience became a paradoxical advantage to artists in Nigeria .It bred diversity of approaches and evolved creative adaptations of new materials for art in the nation. According to Babatunde Adeleke, a professor of chemistry and the Vice Chancellor of Ladoke Akintola University Ogbomoso, Oyo State, Nigeria

Our universities today are a reflection of what happened... when funds were not adequately provided for the universities to buy equipment, chemicals and other things. So, it is not surprising to people like me that Nigerian universities are where they are today. (Dike, 2006, <http://www.sunewsonline.com>)

Despite the negative factors prevalent as a result of corruption and mismanagement in the nation during the period, sale of art works was favoured by an astronomical growth in local clientele. 'Art contracting' became a feature of Nigerian art practice as some artists turned contractors, sourcing for art commissions and subcontracting them to other artists. There were clients, some of whom suddenly became wealthy through corruption and knew little about art; there were others too who were 'quite knowledgeable about the art they collected' (Ottenburg, 1996a, 8).

It was a period remarkable for the material elevation of the status of the Nigerian artist much more than the early periods, because artists began to own their cars and lived in upward social status like their counterpart in other professions. Nevertheless, not all Nigerian artists, including scholars and intellectuals could survive the very dangerously corrupt terrain of that period. Consequently, many of them were forced to immigrate to other parts of the world, especially Europe and America.

The brain drain which resulted, almost destroyed all the efforts that was made to propagate fertile intellectual activities in almost all fields that began towards the early independence period, some of which continued through the 1970s down to the beginning of the 21st century. Moreover, the turbulent situation over those years justified the virile presence of many Nigerian modern artists at the international scene like late Egonu, Taiwo Jegede,

Yinka Shonibare and Sokari Douglas Camp Obiora Udechukwu, Olu Oguibe, Moyo Okediji who found their abode in Britain worthwhile. Nevertheless, many artists who remained in Nigeria continued to raise the standard of modern Nigerian art

The Problem of Modern Art Documentation in Nigeria, 1960-2008: A Historical Perspective

The efforts of documenting modern Nigerian art began in the early period of the new art with Aina Onabolu --- Nigeria pioneer modern artist's published book, *A Short Discourse on Nigerian Art*, (1920). Oloidi (1986; 120) and Ottenburg (1996; 89) insists that by the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, the little known art of the period was made beautiful through the pages of newspapers and magazines by writings of Kenneth Murray, John Danford, Ulli Beier, Udo Ema, J.C Aniebo, Ayo Ajayi and others who were not even trained in visual Arts but were a credit to the growing critical art tradition of Nigeria. The '*Nigerian Field*' and '*The Nigerian Teacher*' (later entitled "*Nigeria*" and then "*Nigeria Magazine*" in 1960) started in 1943 and were the most popular and probably the most suitable journals of the period. In 1960 Ulli Beier among his other publications on Nigerian art and literature published, *Art in Nigeria* (1960), a book that was sympathetic to the emerging styles in the modern Nigerian art of the time. It contained articles on modern Nigerian art and artists, as well as other artistic fields.

Through the Mbari club publications, Ulli Beier also 'published four small art books' (Ulli Beier, 2001, 47). In the 1960s, though the Nigeria Magazine continued to carry articles on modern Nigerian art, two British publications, *West Africa and West African Review* also provided for reviews and commentaries on the art. These two publications provided information and photographs on contemporary Nigerian artists and their work was helpful for those who had little access to the art itself, often scattered in Nigeria or overseas. They were an aspect of the intellectualization of contemporary art, already started at the art training program at universities and colleges from the middle of the 1950s and beyond into the 1960s and the 1970s (Ottenberg, 1996; 90)

In the 1960s, Uche Okeke, who featured prominently in the Zaria University revolutionary struggles for the hybridization of pre-colonial and academy art styles in Nigerian art, developed keen interest in writing on Nigerian modern art in *Nigeria Magazine* and the pages of other Nigerian daily newspapers. From the 1970s to the beginning of the 1980s, Nigeria

witnessed an avalanche of intellectualization on modern Nigeria art. Another artist of the Zaria group, Demas Nwoko, wrote versatile essays on art covering nearly all the areas of visual arts, performing art, environmental studies, industrial design and humanities, (Oloidi, 1995).

Demas also founded the *New Culture: A Review of Contemporary African Culture*, a magazine published monthly by his New Culture Studios located in Ibadan: The magazine published such topics as Obiora Udechukwu's 'Nigeria's Political Cartoonists in the late 1970s' or Ola Oloidi's 'Nigerian Art and The Cultural Division', a critical essay that was an assessment of the performance of Nigeria Government's Cultural sector (*New Culture*, 1979; 12-24). Several workshops and conferences were held and papers presented on the problem of modern Nigerian art; the first was in 1976 at Nsukka, and a second one in 1978, a conference on the interrelationships of the Arts, held at the University of Lagos. Both events brought together Artists, Critics, Art Historians, educationists and other scholars in Nigeria and a few from elsewhere.

Instructively, before 1977, artists in Nigeria exhibited without catalogues of their exhibits and the situation prodded, Ola Oloidi's critical coverage of the Festival of Art and Culture (FESTAC) 1977 national exhibition and his indictment of the exhibition for being a mere formalistic adventure because of the sloppy manner the exhibits were displayed without information or educated guide about them (Oloidi 1995; 68). This seem to have challenged Nigerian artists to see the intellectual importance of such exercise and must have led to the making of catalogues/ brochures for exhibitions which today, has become a common feature of exhibitions in Nigeria. Noteworthy, a lot of information on Nigerian modern art is located in the numerous catalogues/ brochures of many exhibitions held frequently all over the country, but they are in scattered form, and there is presently no specific collection or pool to locate such documents or information for future reference purposes.

At the on-set of the 1980s, some Nigerians began to produce books and Journals of interest to modern art, though many of them were either text for schools such as the book by renowned Art Educationist, Professor Irein Wangboje, *A Textbook for Junior Secondary Schools Art*, 1982 and other professional essays published in journals. During this period, *Abinibi: a Quarterly Journal of the Arts and Culture of Lagos State* (Abinibi, 1987) began to publish and some of the topics in the journal were of significance to modern Nigerian art history and it was so, because of the spate of modern

Nigerian art activities in Lagos, due to the centrality of Lagos. Lagos was then the capital of Nigeria and still is the major seaport and airport of Nigeria.

In the mid-1980s, military coups worsened the already pitiful social-economic and political contrivance in the nation. The economic hardship precipitated the demise of the scholarly journals that were published in the 1970s and early 1980s that carried articles on modern Nigerian art, and they began to publish irregularly due to high costs and decreasing morale. The Nigerian Magazine also, which was government owned since its inception and a major source of information on Nigerian modern art began to publish occasionally until it eventually stopped production. The period in the 1990s was beneficial to Nigerian art because of the wealth that came into Nigeria's economy, resulting from the 'windfall' revenue from excess sales of Nigerian crude oil.

In 1992, *The Eye Journal* began to publish at the Ahmadu Bello University, and it was associated with the Eye Society artists based in the Zaria Art Department, but it was a journal that focused on studio practice rather than theoretical or art philosophising. In 1994, *Art Facts*, a less scholarly, but quite informative journal, which featured daily occurrence of art, was circulated within Lagos. It contained such as birthdays of artists, exhibitions, conferences and the whereabouts of people in art. In 1995, *Usò: Nigeria Journal of Art* was launched, by the National Gallery of Art with its new Director Paul Dike as the Editor. It contained articles on modern art though not necessarily historical and has since published four editions, 1995, 1998, 2002 and 2005(combined). The National Council for Arts and Culture also has made efforts publishing books and providing information on modern Nigerian art. One of such is *A Handbook on Nigerian Culture*, published in 1991.

Since 1999 and the restoration of democratic governance in Nigeria, there has been a review of the salary of government workers, leading to an improvement in the living conditions of University teachers as well as increased funding for institutions of learning. It has led to an increase in the number of Journals published by the Art Departments of Nigerian Universities. One of such is the *Journal of Creative Arts* by the Department of Creative Arts, University of Port Harcourt. Again, in 1999, within the same period in the Art Department of the University of Port Harcourt, another Journal *the Studio* began to publish, though infrequently. In 2001,

University of Benin Art Department, published the first issue of its maiden Departmental journal, *Emotan: a Journal of the Arts* and has already published its second volume and third volumes, but the articles are also not necessarily focused on modern Nigerian art or its history.

Most of these journals are avenues for publication on Nigerian art but not necessarily solely for historical, updates or comparative works on modern artistic events locally or internationally.

Modern Nigerian Art and Some Problems of Its History

Before now, the lack of research materials on the history of modern Nigerian art resulted in the unsavoury inclination of a large number of Nigerian Art Historians, to pre-colonial Nigerian Art, because of the abundance of materials for the researcher in that aspect of art history. Consequently, efforts made so far in researching on modern Nigerian art history have been quite negligible. Up-till now, many books on modern Nigerian/African art, produced in Europe and America are not easily accessible to scholars and students of art history in Nigeria. Some of these books have been written by Nigerians, while others written by Euro-American scholars are supposed to be read through Western eyes. In fact, some art historians in history find it difficult to have their works published abroad.

Invariably, due to economic constraints in the nation, a large number of modern Nigerian art collectors had been foreigners, particularly European and Americans. Now, there is a growing local clientele. Westerners also form the largest reading audience of the literary materials on African art. Unfortunately, to this audience, what is often considered 'African authenticity' is a virtue which a modern African artwork must possess before it could be accepted as an authentic African art work. It continues to have a negative affect on the production of African artists in the international art market (Sanyal 2002; 136). More over it is a development that adversely affects proper analysis, interpretation and stylistic appropriation for art historical purposes.

Invariably, majority of the published articles in Journals based in the Art departments shy away from classifying them, either as history, anthropology or aesthetics. Consequently, this poses a problem for Nigerian art history because the inability to classify the numerous writings on modern Nigerian Art makes the business of historicising on Nigerian art an all comers affair. Almost anyone who could write anything on Nigerian art claims to be an art historian and art history discipline is weakened by these developments. These

are the worrisome issues that have prompted the founding of the Art Historical Association of Nigeria (AHAN) in May 2001 at the National Museum Enugu, when the convener of the group, Art Historian and Professor, Ola Oloidi addressed a forum of the Press and the Academia. Some of the aims of AHAN according to him are to provide the right research methods, usually historical, for Nigerian art institutions, to replace the perceived erroneous perversion of research methodology: It also intends to produce literature that will realistically be a living history and not anthropology of modern Nigerian art. According to him,

Nigeria, probably more than any country in Black Africa, is rich in modern art historical events, art professionals, professionalization (sic) and psycho-cultural ideology. We art historians have reversed and sabotaged art history in our art, whether traditional or modern, we have failed in our academic and intellectual function by creating a misty climate for art history through our canonization and celebration of anthropology a very undynamic-sic- manifestation of what the Western scholars, or anthropologists, imposed on us in their own interest (Oloidi, 2004; 3)

Oloidi insists that an examination of the various topics written by African and non Africans say so much about the subject of modern African art history being heavily woven around anthropology. He (2002;39) outlines some of the titles of some researches in modern Nigerian art history such as the following; “Motifs on the traditional Carved Doors of the Yorubas”, “Adaptations of Uli Designs to Modern Textile Art” Traditional Spoons and Carved Doors of the Fulani, “Art Associated with Masquerades among Igala”. “Form and Function of Shango Staff”, “Divination Implements of the Ijaws”; and concludes that “these are engrossingly anthropological”.

It must be noted that daily, the knowledge of art is constantly being updated, revised and reconsidered and the latest attribution is not necessarily the correct one and it would need consistent reading through specialist local and international Art history journals, books and the *internet* to be current. And, it is safe to argue that the low ebb art historical information in circulation in Nigeria is blameable on the constraints of the availability of avenues of these information avenues. Apparently, as mentioned earlier, the West still controls large volumes of the information even on local Nigerian artists than is available to the local art historian in Nigeria.

Moreover, the turbulent socio-economic and political situation on the continent, which hinders progress and economic development, has made the thrust of the arts in Africa preponderantly western. It has not been favourable to the emergence of a quantum and quality local patronage as well as critical art historical practice that can properly correct the art historical records initiated by the west. The deluge of many Nigerian scholars, artists and intellectuals to other parts of the world particularly Europe and America resulting in a number of renowned Nigerian Art historians now residing in the west has not helped situation. They include Roland Abiodun, Babatunde Lawal, Moyosore Benjamin Okediji, Olu Oguibe and Sylvester Ogbechie; others include Stanley Okoye, Chika Okeke; in spite of this, the state of art history practice and education in the nation needs to improve.

Yet, there is a need to nurture more home-grown and home resident professionals to literarily implement the right Nigerian /African artistic and intellectual attitudes, concepts, perception, trends and even art historical terms on a one-sided western dominated critical practice. The works of Nigeria resident art history scholars ,like professors C.O Adepegba, Ola Oloidi, Ola Babalola, among others needs to be complemented by a breed of younger generation art historians

These problems are nagging and need to be resolved for a proper focus and definition of art history practice and education in Nigeria. There is therefore the need to engender a critical art historical tradition in the art departments of Nigerian Universities. Further, the definition and demands of art history as well as its relevance to literary history needs to be emphasized to art history students and they need to be taught the differences between the various disciplines which art history can borrow from to authenticate their facts.

Students should also be taught that the goals of art history are different from mere literary narrative, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, aesthetics, and psychology: Students should learn how to communicate effectively; how to be good citizens, how to think critically and analytically; to appreciate and understand their environment, to develop their self-esteem, and to understand others in this country and the world. Like any other disciplines the technique of art history is methodical. It is necessary that, art history students be taught to equip themselves with art historical techniques of inquiry. Art historians often root their studies in the close scrutiny of individual objects. They thus attempt to answer in historically specific ways, questions such as: What are

key features of this style?, What meaning did this object convey?, How does it function visually?, Did the artist meet their goals well?, What symbols are involved?, and Does it function discursively?(Stephen Addiss and Mary Erickson,1993; 149)

Moreover, there had been an urgent need for an umbrella association for Nigerian art historians like the Association of Art Historians (AAH), London; CIHA (Comite Internationale d'Histoire de l'art) based in Switzerland or the College Association of America (CAA).

Conclusion

Although Nigerian art has grown to evolve many styles and approaches, the undulating political and economic situation has often caused hindrances to growth particularly in art patronage and intellectualization. Otherwise, profuse artistic experimentation has often impacted milestones of discoveries in many societies of the world .The social history of art in the West and even pre-colonial Africa have proved that great ideas in technology were sometimes long conceived through the sketches and drawings of artists.

Above all, if the current neo-colonial attitudes of western curators, writers and art historians must be addressed, it is needful that a well educated and articulate art historical practice and education must develop all over Africa including Nigeria. Ironically, the same lack of perception that dogged the early study of traditional art by members of western culture appears to have reappeared in the study (or non-study) of modern African art. Nevertheless, with the present attempt at an intellectual umbrella body like the Art Historical Association of Nigeria (AHAN), a body of art historians in Nigeria, a momentum for professional improvement in art history education and standardization in Nigeria is probably about to begin.

AHAN should transform to a statutory professional body of art historians in the nation like the CAA in the United States, having powers to accredit professionals as well as art history courses in the institutions. Besides, its senior members should assess candidates for professorial positions in the nation's art history departments. Art Historical publications including Journals that are well researched, and comparable with those of the West, should be produced in Nigeria and the rest parts of Africa as Africa's voice in the one sided western critical enterprise.

Importantly, academic staff teaching art history must be scholars knowledgeable about the discipline and ready to avail themselves of current

development on the field. In the Universities, Qualified and certified persons with the knowledge of art history epistemology only should be allowed and employed to teach art history in the departments.

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