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**Uche Okeke as A Precursor of Contemporary
Nigerian Art Education**

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Abstract

It is forty-five years since the Zaria Art Society was founded at Nigeria College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria. One of its founding members, Uche Okeke, is in his eight decade of life. The artistic revolution he engineered as a student in Zaria was not the

kind that devours its children. If anything, it turned him into a pathfinder and today he is canonized as one of the heroes of modernism in Nigeria. Without prejudice to the contribution of Onabolu and the historic activities of Enwonwu, the location of the "Zarianist", as the art society was popularly called, remains most historically significant, not so much for their activities in Zaria but for their influence in different corners of the art arena over several years. In this regard, one must remember the roles played by Uche Okeke through his studio projects and writings in the post-war period, and perhaps until now. Above all, the significant roles of Uche Okeke as a pioneer of art education in Nigeria are elucidated in this paper.

Introduction

The history of art Education in Nigeria is still rather inadequately and inefficiently documented. One can say that writers and researchers have been rather slow in documenting the trends of this experience; its main protagonists; the causes and influences of the diverse manifestations of art education experience in Nigeria. The consequence of this attitude is that most materials on art education were written by foreign authors whose interests as it concerns this experience is at best doubtful and whose knowledge of the individual involved in the making of this history is superficial and at times outright non-existent. Thus, while individual modern Nigerian artists find acclaim both at the national and international level, very little or nothing done to thoroughly document their achievements for the posterity that will not have the opportunity of relating to these individual artists on a personal basis. The consequence of the above is that presently most of these historic individuals are misunderstood or held in unfounded awe with the attendant risk that in the future, they, together with their image and achievement will be relegated to denigratory positions mainly because future generation may not know much about them. One of such individuals, who is important in the historical account of art education is Uchechukwu Okeke.

At the university level however, the writer became more aware of Okeke, and also of the fact that there is insufficient information on his

professional experience which was grossly out of keeping with his international image and status. The writer also discovered that several misconceived notions of the artist abound: some people see Uche Okeke the Zaria rebel, as the founder of Asele Institute Nimo, others see him mainly as a drawing and painting artist, some regard him as a poet, and some other people know him as the man who introduced the Uli philosophy in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. While others see him as an ordinary artist who uses Uli motifs in his art works.

This situation reflects a view earlier stated that unavailability of information on Nigerian artists is more of a nuisance, since it makes it impossible for anyone to truly give an answer to such a question as “who is this or that particular artist”.

The writer believes that art education has existed long enough in its hundred years of existence for it to have a thorough documentation of the individual artists and group of people who played key roles in its creation as a discipline. Furthermore, the writer feels that the artist of Okeke’s calibre should not continue to exist in such an art historical vacuum and as such, deems it necessary to devote this research to the roles of Okeke as pioneer of art education in Nigeria. This paper is a focused on Uche Okeke and his activities within the framework of an art historical situation which is defined by the art educational experience in Nigeria. Through this focus, the paper attempts to document Okeke’s art career with emphasis on his contribution to the development of art education in Nigeria.

Biography of Uche Okeke

Uche Okeke was born on April 30, 1933 in Nimo, Njikoka Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria. Uche is the third in the row of seven children. His father, Isaac Okonkwo Chukwuka Okeke was a teacher and a craftsman and his mother, Mgboye Okeke, a petty trader. Uche Okeke, no doubt, inherited art of craftsmanship from his father who unarguably was a notable craftsman, who made woodcarvings and furniture in his time, (Nwanna, 2004).

Uche Okeke had his primary school education at St. Peter Claver's Catholic School, Kafachan, Nasarawa State, between 1940 and 1947 where he began to exhibit his artistic talent. He always assisted his teachers in drawings, and was also noted for making paper crafts, mat weavings and toys. Of significance is the year 1945, when his school's supervisor invited him to draw and paint visual aids on the walls of the school (Nwanna, 2004).

Apart from exhibiting his artistic talent, he also had his theatrical exposition in his secondary school days. Uche's affective religious upbringing in the Roman Catholic faith had influence on his works and interest in life. For example, biblical themes and characters such as the "Three Wise Men", "Head of Christ" often feature in his repertoire. Simon Ottenberg's article, "The Christian element in Uche Okeke's Art" succeeds in locating Uche's interest in Christian (Biblical) themes early in his career as an artist (Ottenberg, 2003).

After finishing his secondary school career in 1956 he joined the Department of Labour and Employment Exchange, Jos (Plateau State) as a clerk. He was still on this work when he enlisted as a member of the Nigerian Field Society. He was later transferred to Labour Department Headquarters, in Lagos and there he met Kenneth Murray, the curator of Nigerian Museum, Lagos and Eke Okaybulu, an artist working in the Graphic Art section of Federal Ministry of Information, Lagos. In the same year he entered the former Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria, (now Ahmadu Bello University), which was a big landmark in his artistic apprenticeship (Ikwuemesi, 2003).

At Zaria, Uche Okeke along with ten other students namely; Simon Obiekezie Okeke, Yusuf C. Grillo, William Olasebikan, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Demas Nwoko, F. N. Ekeada, E. C. Odita, O. O. Osadebe and E. O Nwagbara, of the National College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria formed a group known as the Zaria Art Society and people gave them the appellation "Zaria Rebels". Uche Okeke could rightly be called the pioneer of the Zaria Art Society.

The year 1960, when Nigeria got her independence from Britain was significant in the life of Uche Okeke. Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya and Demas Nwoko, designed the Art/Craft pavilion, painted murals for the Independence celebration on October 1, 1960. Besides, they organized the Nigerian Independence Art Exhibition at Victoria Island in Lagos. It was to be the beginning of Uche Okeke's artistic prominence. In the year 1964, Uche acquired a permanent location for Asele Institute at Agu Araba Nimo, with the help of Elias Ezigbalike, counselor for Uruezebaluchi village, Ifite Enu quarter, Nimo. In the same year, he did cover designs for Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and John Munoye's "The only Son" for Heinemann publishers' African Writers Series in 1964. He also painted murals on the walls of the children's section of the former Eastern Nigeria Library, Enugu. Okeke designed a stage and sets for Eastern Nigeria theatre group. Later he published a poem titled *Mamiwata* verse (1964) in a review of English Literature by Longmans Green and Co. LTD (Steve, 1970).

In 1970, when he was invited by Professor Modilim Achufusi, Dean Faculty of Arts, University of Nigeria Nsukka (Enugu State). At Nsukka he was appointed lecturer and acting Head, Department of Fine Arts (now Fine and Applied Arts). In 1976, he was appointed the head of the Department. In 1977, he was promoted to professor in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria Nsukka for a term of two years (1979-1981) (Ikwemesi, 2003).

In 1986 Uche Okeke was retired compulsorily from the University of Nigeria Nsukka as a result of the government's white paper on the report of the University visitation panel. He thereafter, devoted his time and energy to his pet project, the Nimo Historical Research project at the Asele Institute, Nimo.

Uche Okeke's Contributions to Art Education in Nigeria

After the war, there was the need to rebuild The Fine and Applied Arts Department at University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Professor Achufusi, then Dean of Faculty (Arts) at the university saw it fit to invite Uche Okeke for the task. That decision has proven most

portentous and significant in hindsight. Prior to acceptance of the headship of the department, Okeke had indicated in no obscured terms that the department would run an African art curriculum. It was at Nsukka that the artist brought to bear his experiences – the expertise in art borne of years of practice and his German study tour, and the radical departure from orthodox nurtured at Zaria.

Uche Okeke, at Nsukka, together with Chike Aniako, Chuka Amaefune, Obiora Udechukwu, and others set about restructuring the art department's training program. What was put in place is a tenacious art tradition and practice that has remained largely so up until this date. What was put in place grew out of Okeke's Zaria experience. What was put in place drew on the motifs, symbols, styles and design of Igbo Uli body and mural painting. The emphasis which is being placed on uli (in the department) has given rise to a new growth which, in a few years time, will fructify and attract attention, "Uche Okeke had written (1976, 9) an apt prediction". It has led to what is now globally known as the Nsukka school or Uliism, leading to the exhibition: "The poetics of line: seven artists of the Nsukka Group" at Sylvia H. Williams Gallery of Modern Art, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, and the publications: *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group and The Nsukka Artists and Nigerian Contemporary Art*, the former written by, and the later edited by, Simon Ottenberg, both constituting a major exploration and documentation of uli art practice and its exponents.

Uche Okeke with his "natural synthesis" either directly taught and influenced or indirectly influenced the following artists of international repute: Obiora Udechukwu known for his masterfully deployed lines, El Anatsui, one of Africa's leading Sculptors, Tayo Adenaike, Africa's gift to the world of watercolors. Others are Gbubemi (Amas) Amanoritsewor, Barthosa Nkurueh, Chika Okeke, Olu Oguibe, Krydz Ikwemesi, Ndidi Dike, Chinwe Uwatse, Chali Nduanya, Chris Afuba, among others.

Although one of Okeke's students, Tayo Adenaike (in Ottenberg: 127) whose works are deeply dipped in the dye of uli motifs, laments: "We never saw him paint; he never mentioned uli art, nor advised us to incorporate it into our art", he also points out that: "Uche Okeke's method of always looking for areas of weakness, colour disharmony, poor composition, colour stains and unconvincing lines and shades, has been a lesson well learned" (128). Ola Oloidi (in Ottenberg, 239) affirms: "The bombardment of the creative, cerebral crusading of uli and the related intellectual and ideological forces cannot be realistically explained without Uche Okeke's highly prismatic artistic ventures, particularly between 1954 and 1961."

In addition, Uche Okeke established the art departments of the Institute of Management and Technology (IMT), Enugu and Alvan Ikoku College of Education, Owerri, (Ikwuemesi, 2003). Other technology institutions and colleges of education in southeastern Nigeria have had to follow the IMT and Alvan Ikoku model. The younger universities have had to follow as models the Nsukka, and Ife art departments in which Okeke left certain influences. Such indeed is the wide-ranging influence of the man, following his time to Asele Institute, Nimo.

While the civil war raged, Uche Okeke could not stay aloof pretending that everything was normal. This was a feeling shared by such kindred spirits as Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo and Chinua Achebe. Okeke worked on the side of the Biafrans – his ethnic home, as the Directorate for Art propaganda in Aba, where he headed the visual art section, Refugee Affairs Committee.

Experiment with Igbo Uli Art Forms

However, 1962 was another episodic year that signalled the beginning of another art revolution in Nigeria. This was when Okeke began his experiment with the Igbo Uli art forms. It must be stressed here that Uche Okeke never pre-occupied himself with uli as a stylistic stimulus when he was a student in Zaria. Rather, he fortified his creativity with folklorist inspirations which he actualized in his radical drawings,

painting and poems. Uche Okeke, between 1962 and 1965, made visits to human and material sources in and around Nimo, his town, for documentation of uli.

He sketched these body art from women and girls, particularly, interviewing them when necessary, for the art's fecund implied and applied iconography. His mother became the primary source for his uli documentation. He learnt from her the ability to unburden the rigidity of the wrist in order to make fast, smooth and long lines. With the mass documentation of the uli art medium, Uche Okeke was able to introduce into his already popular drawings, non-loquacious linear forms that were very uniquely graphic in form, composition and visualization.

For several weeks in 1964, this creatively curious artist refused to pictorialise his linear expressions or sketches. In a particular sketch book of his, pages or the entire book was filled with only linear exercise full of processional, military, well populated formations. For example, lines of different shapes, sizes or dimensions are given an untiring repetition in various directions with pencil or pen. Circles and semi-circles are also endlessly given similar repetitions; so also are profuse dots of well graded visual intensities. The whole Sketch Book is an alarming celebration of near-arabesque, greatly casual as well as liberated strokes and dots that submissively acknowledge visual spontaneity. It was very clear that Uche Okeke had already weaponised his intention for a new stylistic (uli) revolution. He immediately began to make the above- discussed repeated strokes and dots acquire compositional characters with highly romantic and poetic appeal.

Okeke's new Uli stylistic tradition was different from his earlier radical folklorist style because his new style was well nourished with light and delicate lines, spatially-economized, greatly tokenistic compositions and unusual formalistic and aesthetic brevity. Definitely, Uche Okeke had expanded the language of drawing with Uli art that he also fed with "rich emotional and intellectual iconograph." By

1967, Uche Okeke had already reached the golden age of Uli intellectual, artistic and professional pre-occupation in Nigeria.”

Uche Okeke was the first to elaborately and formally publish “anti-conventional creative drawings and hold an exhibition of the drawings in Nigeria”. Also by 1967, he had already been known internationally for his Uli stylistic achievements through his exhibitions in Nigeria, Uganda, former Rhodesia, Senegal, Brazil and France. Other countries were the USA, India, Pakistan, Western Germany and Mexico. One must not forget that Okeke devoted his full time to art professionalization which was well rewarded with various successes.

Between 1962 and 1967, he also featured prominently in the art of print-making theatre or stage designs and drama productions. He wrote novels and published a book of Igbo folk tales. He illustrated books for individuals and companies in addition to various art commissions. His presence at Nsukka ushered in another phase of serious art activities among the artists there. It was not only the visual artists that were creating an impact, but also others in the literary and performing arts.

Uche and the making of Nsukka Art School

1970 was when the visual art centre of Nsukka became the centre of the Nsukka artists group under the effective leadership of Uche Okeke. He changed the name of the department to Fine and Applied Arts, the name it bears till today. Before this time from 1960 the department was known as the Ben Enwonwu College of Fine Arts. It was Uche Okeke who introduced the exploration of Uli design to the students of Nsukka.

In 1971, Uche Okeke carried out an important assignment in the school when he conducted the then head of state, General Yakubu Gowon, round the exhibition of art works and photographs of staff and students at the continuing education centre (CEC) UNN. The exhibition was put together and co-ordinated by him as part of the programme in respect of Gen. Gowon’s visit (Nwanna 2004).

During the early 1970s Uche was trying to sort out a lot of challenges before him in the department, putting efforts together to re-programme the school of art of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Uche Okeke effected important changes in the academic programme of the department and introduced courses in applied design as well as greatly emphasizes visual art theory. He did not only effect changes that benefited students, he also designed and distributed schedules of teaching staff. Uche Okeke encouraged his staff to constantly exhibit their artworks and to produce standard exhibition brochure to accompany such exhibitions, and consequently enhance their promotion chances. To achieve this objective for them, as already stated in this essay, Uche Okeke organized a number of exhibitions for Asele art gallery at his 917W street residence, later named Murtala Mohammed way, University of Nigeria, Nsukka campus later, the Asele Institute started organizing art exhibitions in collaboration with the Fine and Applied Arts Department and the Institute of African studies of the University. Based on his initial efforts, Uche was promoted reader in Fine Art and became Head of Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1974.

When he was appointed Head of the Department of Fine Arts University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in 1970, it was a good opportunity for him to continue with what he had initiated, so he introduced and organized art history courses in Nigerian art in addition to studio work, final year students of the Department were encouraged to know the theoretical aspects of art, hence they had to produce theses with an historical approach. Master of Fine Arts (MFA) students had to write comprehensive reports on their final year projects. They were encouraged to study the various aspects of culture in their communities, especially during their holidays. This was aimed at providing materials on which the history of modern Nigerian art could be built. This yielded good results in the school. Uche encouraged and supervised the first Art History Doctoral Dissertation “Modern Nigerian Art: The Implantation, Development, Direction and Analysis from 1900 to 1960. This work if well edited and published, would

serve as good reference materials for the history of modern Nigerian art.

In 1976, through the efforts of Uche Okeke, an International Symposium on contemporary Nigerian art was held at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Also through his efforts, in 1978, at the same venue, the 14th annual conference of the society of Nigerian artists (S.N.A) under the leadership of Professor Yusuf Grillo was held. It was in recognition of his efforts in this direction that the Art and Artists Conference Forum, Association of University of Nigeria Art Graduates, Committee for Relevant Art, and Society of Nigerian Artists organized the 2nd international symposium on contemporary Nigerian art commemorating his 60th birthday anniversary in 1993 at the University of Lagos.

He initiated undergraduate and graduate courses that exposed students not only to the classical Art of Nok, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife and Benin, but also to the history, myths, folklore and artistic traditions of the different cultures in the country.

The Fine and Applied Arts Department of the University of Nigeria under Uche Okeke rejected or discouraged all art forms that were not modern. Experiments were encouraged, particularly in painting, drawing and sculpture. And by 1980, art experiment, or in a sense, intellectualization, had become an integral part of art experience in Nsukka. Very radically, too, Uli art had been given different formal interpretations by Udechukwu and Aniakor. They all helped in giving permanence and ideological continuity to Uli tradition. But Uche Okeke continued with his contributions to Art Education in Nigeria. For example, apart from preparing an art programme, that eventually influenced many art institutions, he was the first to compile a list of Nigerian art institutions.

Okeke made the Department of Fine and Applied Arts champion various development experiences that promoted art and the image of the artists. The first conference on modern Nigerian art, which he organized in 1976 in Nsukka, further presented the department as a

formidable centre of ideas and progressive change. Before Uche Okeke left the University of Nigeria in 1985, he had already actualized his dream. He had completed his own part of the revolution he incited, and manufactured weapons for more revolutions. He had already created his ideological dynasty and had become an embodiment of “Nsukka School”.

Uche Okeke’s “natural synthesis” advocacy has now created for art and scholarship a beautiful narrative of tedious but bold adventure from the formalism of Onaboluism to the ideology of Zarianism.

Uche Okeke (b.1933), for many of us represents the beginning of theoretical and historical discourse on art in Nigeria. There is no doubt as well that his contemporaries in the profession share this same view. He has been described, and rightly so, as the philosopher-king of the avant-garde group dubbed the “Zaria Rebels”. In fact, his prominence, in early modernist art history in Nigeria forced some people to view some of his contributions in mono-casual proportions. Perhaps it is no longer necessary to tow that line. Okeke provided light in many dark areas of art theory, whereas his colleagues felt there was nothing of importance from Africa. Perhaps, if not for Uche Okeke, the tendency to regard art as “a doing thing”, as widely believed by generations of Nigerian artists, and for which reason the profession has been stunted in growth and political influence, would have become a centralizing norm.

I recall his humble undergraduate premier art theory classes tagged “Art and Artists” in the mid 1970s at Nsukka. It was then for the first time that I knew that the African had an art form; that the artists is a versatile member of the society. I learnt all that before I knew of the celebration of versatility among the European artists of the Renaissance. He taught his students to recognize art in their culture as elsewhere. This was against the background of the essentially alienated approach to modernization in all facets and fields of learning in Africa since the contact with the

Western paradigm. This model of mind was pervasively so during Okeke's active years on the art scene until very recently (Udosen, 1993).

I recall how in Chinua Achebe's *A man of the people* (1966), the African cook got infuriated at Chief Nanga's question whether he could prepare pounded yam and egusi soup. Being a cook, to the modernizing African, is a foreign thing which has nothing to do with African type of food, or do Africans have cooks! That was the high level of the African's alienation. But for the efforts of Uche Okeke, we would have thought that art is a foreign thing with no roots in our history (Udosen, 1993).

Uche Okeke's classification of the evolution of art in Nigeria recognizes, and rightly too, the efforts of the pre-19th century Nigerian proto-modern artists, which would have all been consigned to the recycling bin of history. Suffice is to state for now that modern art predated 20th century in the West Coast of Africa. The origins of pidgin, the concert play, the missionary catafalque among others were its contemporaries. These and many other events will provide synchronic evidence for the reconstruction of the history of modernist tendencies in the art tradition.

Conclusion

The story of art in Nigeria, by which is meant the origin and evolutionary development of art and cultural events in the geo-polity called Nigeria, cannot be fully understood in its right context until the roles played by human agents such as Uche Okeke and the ideas which they stand for are properly understood. Okeke tilled the soil on which the seed of modern Nigerian art education was to be planted. Okeke's early attempt to document postcolonial art tradition in Nigeria is remarkable for someone who did not engage in formal studies in art education or history. Okeke wrote from a participant-

observer's perspective, beginning from 1956 when he began to see art exhibitions.

It is as if he is divinely ordained to ever be a partaker in the story of art in Nigeria. He saw and participated in the October 1960 Independence Exhibition. Uche Okeke's service in the Visual Arts Sub-Committee of *Festac 77* was an opportunity to set up the embers which ignited the flame of artistic advancement in Nigeria. Invariably, that, in significant ways, not only impacted on the emergent art history, but also gave Okeke the confidence of a precursor. His periodisation of the story of art in Nigeria is thoughtful and represents a classification based on forms.

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