

**LIFE AND STYLES OF CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ARTISTS: A
BIOGRAPHY OF JAJI M. ADIO & SANI M. MUAZU**

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Abstract

It is a consensus among scholars that the greatest contributions of Africans to civilization are in the arts. Great European artists like Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and others had to copy African art styles to change the face of European art in the early 20th century. Today, contemporary African artists have the zeal and persistent carriage to compete with any artist on the globe. Thanks to the talented, hardworking and prolific traditional artists who laid the foundation for continuity. With a combination of traditional style and European approach to art, these artists have evolved new and peculiar styles worthy of analysis. Funke Efeta, an artist and a lecturer in University of Lagos rightly observed at the 50th anniversary of the Department of Fine Arts, ABU Zaria that these artists are hardly celebrated, the result of which a lot of contemporary African artists are still left undocumented. This paper therefore looks into the lives and styles of two contemporary African artists to give credence to those who are carrying African art to the next level. The artists are Jaji Muyideen Adio and Mohammed Sani Muazu.

Introduction

The changing trends in African arts and the artists privileged to have pioneered the change call for documentation. Fosu (1989) notes that traditional African art changed after the exposure of African artists to European training between 1955 and 1965 when most African countries attained independence. By this training the general outlook of African art transformed from figures infused with ancestral spirit to works produced through European aesthetic approach. Hardly can one find artists knowledgeable in African folklores today. They just imitate the forms using European skills to bring out their themes and often abandon African forms and methods to join the global trend in art. These artists are referred to in this paper as contemporary African artists.

Contemporary African Artists

Contemporary African art had its root in the artists who found solace in artistic expressions using European aesthetic principles in the early 20th century. These were self-trained or had the benefit of attending European higher institutions of learning. They jettisoned the traditional methods and copied magazines and books for the reproduction of realistic images. This started long after the Europeans had integrate

African artistic styles into their works. This trend suffered a retreat when African countries started craving for independence in the 1950s. The artists went back to their sources to dig out the artistic treasures of their predecessors and used them to elevate the images of their countries. After independence tribal art started emerging from different tribal artists. For example, in Nigeria Yoruba art, Igbo art were common expressions used for art form depending on which part of the country it originated from. The proficiency of different tribes in expressing their cultures through art forms culminated in the hosting of the World Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC '77).

After FESTAC, 1977 individual artists began to express themselves using a combination of European aesthetics and tribal idioms. Having received European training, the infusion of traditional forms in the works of African artists could not be sustained for long. Globalization of art became a contending issue also for the artists. The zeal to be world-class artists pushed them to look forward to Europe and the Americas for inspirations and sustainability. Art activities were encouraged in Europe and the Americas by their governments through the establishment of markets for the sales of African artworks. The existence of galleries, museum and exhibitions/workshops opportunities further increased the production of art for European markets. Since the person who pays the piper dictates the tune, there was no surprise that the trend of art in Africa was towards European aesthetic considerations. This trend remains until today. African artist now do conceptual and performance art to the detriment of African traditional art. They now appear to have forgotten about their source- Africa.

A lot of these contemporary African artists remain in oblivion. Oditia (1998) observes that, in Nigeria art is centred around heroes like Aina Onabolu, Akinola Lasekan, Justus Akeredolu, Ben Enwonwu and a few others for more than five decades leaving out subsequent artists to wallow in oblivion. In the same vein Egonwa (1994) believes the subsequent artists have access to multiplicity of ideas, styles executional capabilities that contribute to new definition of African aesthetic forms. They are undocumented and rarely known despite their enormous contributions in visual arts. Among these groups are Jaji Muyideen Adio and Mohammed Sani Muazu whose lives and works are discussed in this paper for posterity.

Jaji, Muyideen Adio

Muyideen is a grandfather, a father of three and a muslim from Kwara state of Nigeria. He was born in Lagos in the 1950s to Alhaja Habibat and Alhaji Wajab Jaji who resided in Accra Ghana. After having his primary education in Baboko School, Ilorin, he proceeded to Presbyterian Boys Middle School, Aburi in Ghana. His secondary education in Presbyterian Boys Secondary School, Legon Ghana exposed him to visual arts through the able hands of his art teachers namely Mr. Isaac Apreku and Mr. Asare Tetteh. Mr. Tetteh, a sculptor by training encouraged him to copy the works of great master sculptors like Michelangelo, Donatello, Bernini, among others. In the home front works of artist like Kofi Antuban and Ablade Glover were appreciated and imitated. His university education in Ghana was truncated by Jerry Rollins', (the Ghanaian military head of state then) closure of universities for a period of two years.

While waiting for the reopening of the universities, he sojourned to Nigeria where he was an apprentice under Abuede Marble and Concrete Sculptures Industry, Ladipo, Oshodi-Lagos. By the time he got back to Ghana, a probable application he made to Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (A.B.U.) had become a reality. He enrolled

in A.B.U. in 1980 where he bagged his first and second degrees in 1983 and 1986 respectively. He was specifically requested to do his National Service in the Department of Fine Arts, A.B.U. Zaria. He is also a proud holder of a Doctor of Philosophy in Arts Education from the same University.

Early Artistic Experience

Muyideen's artistic exploration began in primary school when he was the doyen of all of craft lovers. His talent in art and craft won him the admiration of both students and teachers. He took first positions in clay modeling, basketry, pottery, broom weaving, sewing with needles and a host of other crafts. Muyideen was encouraged by stipends coming from admirers and kept up the production of crafts until he left for Ghana after his primary education. His first year in Ghana was for academic work to get him into secondary school. Art was abandoned but rejuvenated in secondary school. His father a stunt muslim wanted him to be a medical doctor, so science subjects were forced on him but with the assistance of his art teachers a taboo was broken. A science student was made to offer fine art at leisure time for the first time. On completing his secondary education, his school engaged him in teaching art and geography while waiting for his results.

After his university education he took up an appointment as a lecturer in Fine and Applied Arts with the Kwara State College of Education, Ilorin. After about five years, he left for Ladoko Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomosho and later settled in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria as a lecturer in sculpture.

Style

His styles are in phases: Naturalism, Stylization and Stunted figures. As a student, he studied works of old master sculptors. No wonder his early works reveal realistic sculptures. Most of his early works reveal deep anatomical study and preoccupation with details. Following the lead of the great master sculptors he so admired, he studied the human body carefully and sculpted from models in the studio. He was constantly searching and experimenting to improve his sculptural techniques for expressing his philosophical beliefs. His compositions reveal harmony, balance, and beauty resulting from carefully calculated intellectual and technical means. All these are visible in his personal works, projects and commissioned jobs, for example, 'The Air Man' in Air force Military School, Jos. (See Plate I). He also produced few Islamic arts such as insignias on domes and Arabic calligraphy for mosques and buildings while in Ilorin.



(Plate I) 'Junior Air Man': 1984: Jos: Terracotta: Life Size: Muyideen A. Jaji
He abandoned naturalism for stylization and cubism. He dabbled into exaggerated elongated proportions and distortion of forms (See Plate II). Russel (1976) refers to this as mannerism.



(Plate II) 'Begger': 2003: Terracotta: 45cm x 21cm: Muyideen A. Jaji
Muyideen is presently experimenting with stunted figures. It is a combination of African traditional technique and European aesthetic principles. The marriage of the two are epitomized by the "Herbalist"(Plate III.)



(Plate III) 'The Herbalist': 2008: Terracotta: 45cm: Muyideen A. Jaji

Philosophy

His philosophy is better life for the people. He hates seeing people suffering, the reason for which his themes are based on destitute and downtrodden in the society. Babalola (2004) observes that he is of good reputation and calm composure and always around reasonable friends who will contribute positively to his vision of life. His cultural intensity led him to create sculptures reflecting the Yoruba and Ashanti cultures. His frustration is on the emphasis laid on paper publication on academic artists today that has led to the stagnation of his promotion since year 2003. His practice has also suffered from this seemingly lack of foresight on the part of those who are behind this regulation.

Materials of Expression

Muyideen employs the use of different materials for expressing himself. He however loves modeling which makes him favour modeling materials like cement, clay, wax, plaster of Paris that ensure transitory process for casting in bronze and fiber glass. Most of his monumental sculptures are in cement and produced through direct cement techniques. He believes that cement has good structural strength, provides good time for mixing and setting.

Exhibitions and Commissions

With a few solo exhibitions and a good number of group exhibitions across the nation and the United States of America, Muyideen stands the chance of being counted among the contemporary African artists. He has tremendous contributions to art in terms of commissioned works. A few of such works include the ‘Junior Air Man’ (cement) in Air Force Military School, Jos (1984); ‘Weight lifter and Footballer’ (cement) in the Sports Stadium, Ilorin (1985); ‘Untitled Relief Sculpture’ (cement) in Emir of Ilorin’s Palace (1985); ‘Atilogu Drummer’ (cement) in University of Ilorin Old Campus (1991); ‘Untitled Relief Sculpture’ (cement) Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomoso (1992); ‘Avid Readers’ (cement) in Osun State College of Education, Ilesha (1993); ‘Combatant and Ceremonial Guard’ (cement) in Nigerian Military Academy, Kaduna (2013). All the sculptures mentioned above are heroic in size and are still standing in public ambience to educate passers-by.

Muazu Mohammed Sani

Muazu is a Hausa accomplished painter born in 1959 to the family of Mallam Mohammed Sani. Born into a polygamous home, drawing was handy for sustenance of life as a boy. Also as an extraction from Hausa tribe, art reduced the number of years he could have spent in Koranic school as ‘Almajiri’. At about seven years of age he commenced his primary school education. Danjuma (2007) observes that it was here he began copying illustrations from Michael West Dictionary of English Language. After his primary education, he was admitted into Government Secondary School, Zaria now referred to as Alhuda-huda Secondary School, Zaria. It was here he met “Mallam Shehu Artist”, one of his art teachers who inspired him to the level of painting portraits of several individuals. His offer to study art in the university came in 1978. He graduated with a first class honours degree in painting in 1983. On completion of his National Service in 1984, he registered for the Master of Fine Arts Degree in painting. He recently completed his Doctor of Philosophy in painting in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Mu’azu was at a time the president of Nogh-Nogh Art Group in Zaria and a member of Society of Nigerian Artists He was happily married to Lara of blessed memory with two children. His present wife is an artist and a lecturer in Industrial Design Department, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria.

Early Artistic Experience

As earlier observed, Mu’azu had his early exploration with art in primary school, where he copied illustrations from dictionaries. His friends admired the drawings and this encouraged him to produce more drawings. Under the mentorship of his teacher in secondary school, he produced several drawings, culminating into paintings of the portraits of friends and relations. By the time he got to the university his love for painting grew to the level of springing surprises with colours in his final year.

Work Experience

Muazu did his National Service in Kano State after his first degree. By the time he finished doing his National Service in 1984, he secured appointment with the Fine Arts Department, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria where he is till today. He has risen to the position of a professor in Painting.

Style

Muazu's innovative use of colours and strong simplified forms are startling and enough to cover his weak draftsmanship that leads to frustration when asked to produce naturalistic paintings. Thanks to his lecturers in the university whose encouragement further fueled his desire to excel in painting, he managed this weakness well by evolving his own style of painting. Danjuma (2007) lists these lecturers in the following order: Barbara House, a Briton; Professor Lucas Bentu, a Nigerian; Gani Odutokun, a Nigerian; Domingo Alconaba, a Filipino; Tony Sharp, a Briton; Tyron Getter; an American and Chidum Onuchwuku, a Nigerian.

With guidance from these lecturers, he experimented with different techniques such as splashing, pouring, smudging and dribbling on ceiling boards, canvases and other surfaces. His paintings are naturalistic stylizations of humans, horses and traditional northern houses. (See Plate IV)



(Plate IV) *'Warriors of Bornu II'*: 1998: Enamel on Board: 50 x 70cm: Mu'azu M. Sani

Deeply concerned with compositions, he carefully works out his paintings first in sketches and studies. He captures these impressions on boards by painting with small strokes and dabs of hazy colours. After which colours are taken directly from the tubes like the impressionist painters. Instead of mixing blue and yellow on their palettes to make green, or yellow and red to make orange, he places these small brush strokes of colours next to each other for the eyes to blend. This impressionistic approach to painting was used by Jackson Pollock, an American painter of repute whose drips, splashes and spills appear to have been painted in an intense and undisciplined fury of action (Russell, 1976). In the case of Muazu, the colour combinations are subtle and the structure of his paintings develops through the rhythm of his movements. By spreading his canvases on the floor, he drips his colours from milk cans, tubes and big brushes. In a conversation with the painter he started

experimenting with the possibilities of liquidized splashing and sprinkling techniques in the early 1980s.



(Plate V) The Painter at Work (Curled from Celebrate! Nigerian Art For the Commonwealth 2003 Abuja)

He is currently oscillating between painting and performance art. His Doctor of Philosophy degree in painting was more of performance than painting. He did not stop there, his performance art on 'Chibok Girls' and other performance art works show that he is gradually shedding the toga of a painter and donning the hat of a performance artist craving way for a setback on painting. No wonder, Danjuma (2007) notes the frustration on his face by observing that his unhappiness came from the clamour for paper publications and pursuance of doctoral degrees.

Philosophy

The cultural content in his works gives him out as an advocate of Hausa culture. His love for painting durbar sceneries and festivals in the north is so enormous that one tends to forget his other themes. He once confessed that he is greatly inspired by Hausa/Fulani tradition to the level of using it as themes and motifs for his artistic expressions. Once in a while he delves into social commentary. His painting of a 'Chuwa-chuwa' boy whose face appears absorbed by sickly-coloured gases is his reaction to fuel scarcity in the country in 1997. (See Plate VI).



Chuwa-chuwa Boy: 1997: Enamel on Canvas: 50X70cm: Mu'azu M. Sani

Danjuma (2007) buttresses this statement by noting that his paintings are a celebration of Hausa and Fulani cultures but has also addressed some socio-religious-political issues in his paintings that had steered up rancour among the people that had come in contact with them. He gave an example of 'In the Grave' that led to the closure of the Ahmadu Bello University library in March 1994. Owning an explosive personal frustration as an artist living in a hostile environment, Muazu reflects not only his responses to the outer world but his personal emotions in his works. He is dejected by the lack of understanding of his paintings by his people

Materials of Expression

Mu'azu uses different types of paints but he appears to favour industrial enamel and car paints. He started his works on ceiling boards and advanced to the use of canvases of different textures and thickness. He now uses human feet as brushes for the purpose of registering his thought in performance art. This is epitomized by one of his recent works called '*Chibok Girl.*'

Exhibitions and Commissioned Works

With more than eight solo exhibitions and several awards and commissions, Mu'azu stands tall among his contemporaries. He is such a dedicated and hardworking painter who has exhibited far and wide – London, Kassel, Las Vegas to mention but a few. He is a well-exhibited painter whose works are found in the collections of both national and international collectors and galleries. Mu'azu won the best final year award in drawing and the Merit Award for outstanding work in the Guinness Arts Exhibition in Lagos in 1994. His commissioned works include the 'Fulani Milk Maiden', mosaic at Kano (1983); 'Golden Jubilee Impression' for

Friends of the Zaria Leprosy Center (1986); the 'Northern Knot' mural in Zaria among others.

Conclusion

From the above discussions it is obvious that the two artists mentioned have contributed tremendously to visual art and are capable of moving African art to the next level. A lot of artists still remain unsung in Africa despite their enormous contributions to art. Rather than being documented by African writers or historians, their works exist in the books of the Europeans. Thanks to Kodjo Fosu, an American trained but Ghanaian born art historian who opened the eyes of the few art historians we have in this direction, the few celebrated artists we have would have continued to remain in oblivion. Gushem (2007) in his writing on Professor Lukas Bentu solicits for the assistance of National Gallery of Arts, Council of Arts and universities to encourage African writers on art. He went further to suggest residency on writing about contemporary African artists, especially Nigerian artists. There is need to reduce the emphasis laid on academic artists by ensuring that their exhibitions and commissioned works continue to count according to the ratio 60:40 rather than the total condemnation given to the works of art. That is sixty percent (60%) for paper publication and forty percent (40%) for art activities. This is rather reducing the rank and files of African artists who would have carried African art to the next level. They are gradually dropping their brushes and mallets for the pen. This makes one wonder why academic artists are being made to go through these while art historians and educators may not produce any work of art yet they are rated with the same number of publications. It is obvious that Muyideen and Mu'azu have made enormous contributions to art yet they are barely known. With this attitude to art, they may also find themselves on the other side like those before them.

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