

**LEAD PAPER**  
**The PhD in the Studio: The Zaria Experience**

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Date: 2-2-2017

**Introduction**

The PhD programmes were introduced for Painting and Sculpture in the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria in the 2009/2010 session. Their conception, however, dated back five years earlier. A committee was appointed by the Department of Fine Arts in 2005 to produce a proposal for their introduction and although the committee worked hard, it was not until the 2008/2009 session that the Senate of the University finally approved the programmes. The committee had to study and adapt existing models obtained from universities, which already offered them. Of great assistance was the 2007 Review Report of the Arts and Humanities Research Council of England as well as resource materials from the Goldsmiths College, Slade, Royal College of Art, all in London; University of Brighton, England; the California Institute of Integral Studies, California, United States of America; Edinburgh College of Art, Edinburgh, Scotland; University of New South Wales, Australia; University of Art and Design, Helsinki, Finland; and the University of Auckland, New Zealand. The committee also looked at the postgraduate programmes dated January, 2003 in Fine and Applied Arts of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Ladoko Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomoso. The procedure for approving new courses in the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria usually took a few years, contributing to the delay in the commencement of the programmes.

**Background**

Prior to the introduction of the PhD programmes in the studio, the Department of Fine Arts of the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria had since 1971, offered the master's degree in Painting, Sculpture, Art History and Art Education. By 1979, it had graduated its first PhD student in Art History. The master's degree, which bore the nomenclature, Master of Art (M.A.), was different from the Master of Fine Art (M.F.A.). The first M.F.A. graduate was recorded in 1982. When the M.F.A. was introduced in Painting and Sculpture, like in many universities, which offered the programme, it was considered to be a terminal degree. Gradually however, the argument to maintain it as a terminal degree was continuously eroded with the support of consultants hired by the National Universities Commission (NUC) and members of council of universities, which offered the programme. A few strategies were adopted to coax holders of the M.F.A. into desiring the PhD. One of such strategies was to enforce a policy, which maintained that only holders of the PhD would eventually teach in the universities. Another strategy was to deny lecturers with the M.F.A. promotion beyond the Senior Lecturer rank in the universities. Many lecturers with the M.F.A., in order not to stagnate, therefore, went to acquire the PhD in disciplines, which permitted them; after which they consciously or unconsciously propagated the new skills acquired in these areas to the detriment of art practice. The reason for introducing the PhD in the studio was therefore, partly intended to maintain practicing artists in the studio.

**Extraneous Challenges**

No sooner had the PhD programmes in the studio been introduced then there emerged a fierce antagonism against them from essentially the same people who were against the M.F.A. as a terminal degree! A graphic illustration of such antagonism was the inducement of an NUC panel on resource verification to visit the Department of Fine Arts, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria to, in the words of the Chairman, "shut down the PhD Painting and Sculpture programmes". The panel arrived the department on Monday 14<sup>th</sup> March, 2011 and immediately concluded that,

1. The staffing for the programmes was grossly inadequate, and
2. Their curricula were very shallow; the theoretical/academic contents of their curricula were inadequate.

Let us consider the points, one after the other:

*The staffing for the programmes was grossly inadequate*

At the time of introducing the PhD programmes in the studio in Zaria, no academic in the country had yet received the PhD either in Painting or Sculpture. It is common practice that in setting up a new programme, experts in related disciplines to it are drawn in as resource persons. In the parent university of the Chairman of the panel, where the programmes had been purportedly running since 2003, at the time of his visit to Zaria, five academics had PhD in related areas, none with PhD in the nine areas of specialization, which their PhD in the studio covered. Compare this figure to the 16

resource persons who had PhD in related areas listed in the documents the panel verified in Zaria for the PhD in Painting and Sculpture and imagine which staffing was grossly inadequate.

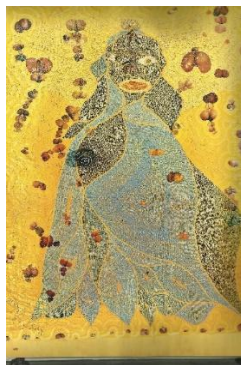
*Their curriculum were very shallow; the theoretical/academic contents of their curricula were inadequate*

In making such an observation, it should be taken for granted that the panel was rating the programmes it was verifying against existing universal standards. The panel however, did not mention such models. The programmes it looked at listed at least 10 verifiable models, which were adapted. The programmes were rooted in local needs and the courses contextualized to fulfill demands of inquiry into a domesticated cultural framework while maintaining the universal flavour of the visual arts discipline. In any case, practice-led PhD programmes, which the Zaria programmes were, in majority if not all universities, are offered purely by research. The Zaria programmes, which had a coursework component of ten courses comprising theoretical and practical subjects totaling 48 credits spread within the duration of the programmes could not be assessed as inadequate when compared to the existing practice of zero coursework. The NUC benchmark is 24 credits.

### **Internal Challenges**

Clearly, the panel was mischievous but the programmes have so far survived, graduating by the end of 2016, 12 candidates. There have however, been other challenges emanating from academics conversant with research procedures in the humanities and sciences. Their discussions about research are usually premised on an assumption that all research procedures are the same. The practice-based research, which advocates that the artworks are the theses, is too revolutionary for them to accept as a tenable procedure. This has led to its corruption by studio art researchers in an attempt to win acceptability through introducing a huge dosage of a theoretical component fashioned in some manner, after the humanities' procedure. In some instances, there is the complete abandonment of anything close to visual arts research, advocating instead, for the humanities' approach. Egonwa (2012), a book on visual arts research, illustrates this point, where the only allusion to practice-based research is the acknowledgment of Graeme Sullivan's book, *Art Practice as Research*, as an inspiration.

This present writer maintains that conducting research in the studio is not the same as conducting one in Sociology or Physics for the reason that Fine Art is a purely subjective discipline. Space may not permit an elaborate demonstration of this point but one example may suffice. This example is taken from the formulation of a research topic. Researchers in the humanities and sciences would advise that a topic should contain a dependent variable known as *Y* and an independent variable known as *X*. *Y* is the element in the topic, which can be affected when a form of treatment is administered. The administered treatment is the *X*. In other words, *causes* are the independent variables while *effects* are the dependent variables. To them a topic such as, *The Performance of Students in Painting is Independent of the Use of Models*, is simply perfect. Researchers familiar with Quantitative methodology, however, know that in a descriptive research, topics may not necessarily contain any variable working on another. A topic such as, *Between Myth and Reality: the aesthetics of traditional architecture in Hausaland*, would just be brilliant. Before we examine the challenges in formulating a research topic in Painting and Sculpture, let us look at Chris Ofili's painting entitled, *Holy Virgin Mary*.



Chris Ofili, *Holy Virgin Mary*, 1996, Mixed Media, 244 x 83cm

The painting is composed of elephant dung, pornographic materials, a primitive expression and other mixed media. These are deliberately selected by Ofili to represent an important Catholic icon. As a

Catholic, the present writer does not see the appropriateness of the title, *Holy Virgin Mary*. If he was to suggest a title for this painting, it would be, *The Line Between Freedom of Expression and Provocation is 0.0mm Wide*. This illustrates that two artists cannot paint the same subject matter in exactly the same manner. In other words, two studio art researchers cannot arrive at the same answer even if they engage the same procedures while researching on the same topic because their reaction to each issue is subjective. While objectivity is rewarded in other disciplines, creativity feeds on the uniqueness of an idea.

### **Conclusion**

Is the PhD in the studio desirable or should 1<sup>st</sup> class graduates of Painting and Sculpture take the PhD in other disciplines? If the PhD in the studio is desirable, what research methodology should be employed: the humanities approach or Practice-based research? Who should determine the research methodology: academics in the humanities and sciences or those in Fine Arts?

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