

## REFLECTIONS ON THE TRANSFORMATION OF CONTEMPORARY ART AND ITS IMPACT ON NIGERIAN ARTISTS

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### Abstract

This paper is an additional effort in the documentation of the remarkable steps the creative visual arts have made since Aina Onabolu, the father of contemporary Nigerian Art. It seeks to locate the role played by the fathers of visual arts and that of the role workshop(s) play in Nigeria. It is an informed view, that progress in any field, must accommodate a thorough understanding and documentation of the currents which over time give rise to the growth and developments of today. Artistic developments whether directional or non-directional must be seen as portraying the continuities in experience, as well as the numerous changes that continue to take place. This paper also acknowledges and promotes the knowledge of past developments and the influence which pioneers of Contemporary Nigerian Art have exerted over the younger generation of artists. It is to the credit of men like Akinola Lasekan, Yusuf Grillo, Simon Okeke, Uche Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Demas Nwoko, Felix Idubor, Ben Enwonwu, Lamidi Fakeye and others that Nigerian art has continued to grow from strength to strength.

**Keywords:** Transformation, Reflections, Impartation Contemporary and African Art, Impact

### Introduction

In order to trace the “*Reflections on the Transformation of Contemporary African (Nigerian) Art and its Impact on Artists*”; it would be of great importance to highlight the origins of traditional Nigerian art. Before delving into the main thrust of this paper, some key words will be defined. According to Encarta Dictionary, transformation means a gradual directional change especially one leading to a more advanced or complex form. Other keywords are “contemporary African art” which Egonwa (1994) defined as the artistic expression that currently exists in Africa. Contemporary African Art in its actual sense means arts that are created by college trained artists as well as the non-college trained artists which involve self-trained artists, apprentices and the traditional artist. Nwosu (2006) explains that, there are three categories of artists: the traditional artists who trained themselves with traditional mode of practice and have maintained same traditional modes of practice. Secondly, the artists who are western-trained or oriented in their practice of art and benefitted adequately from the experience of formal training in art schools. It is in this category that the late Aina Onabolu is identified as a pioneer in the appropriation of western attitudes in art production and practice. The third category is the Zaria Art School (natural synthesis), where there is a merging of the cultural/traditional art with the western style/technique/media of art. In essence, it is a way of maintaining a link between the art and the people, in other words, the past and the present. Nwosu (2006) avers that the artist in the past is seen as a great being in the community because of his specific roles that were tied to religion, traditions, social ceremonies or socio-cultural activities and as well, cult activities. It was the artist who in those days provided all the functional materials of power

for the shrine, native doctors or chief priests, homes and other private and public spaces. Lawal in Akolo (1993) explains that contemporary African art is the outgrowth of the breakdown of a society through the disruptions of slave trade, colonization and exploitation, Islam and Christianity as well as economic and technological forces.

In the light of these, one would also ask: What truly is African art? African art according to Agada (2016) is a type of art that was practiced before the arrival of the Europeans. It means the art practiced by the Africans that is not diluted by the philosophies and ideologies of the west. It is the art practiced not for art sake rather for utilitarian purposes. With this as backdrop, the paper seeks to trace the historical transformation of contemporary African art and its impartation on artists, through the selected artists that will be mentioned in this paper.

### **Reflections on the transformation of the contemporary African (Nigerian) Art**

According to Muhammad (2005), the foundation of contemporary art started in the early 1920s which came about as a result of the vision and initiative of a Nigerian artist whose name is Aina Onabolu. Born in 1882 and died in 1963. Chief Aina Onabolu was the originator of a new direction in contemporary Nigerian art. He was the first African to be trained in the western concept of art education, hence referred to as contemporary artist. He studied art at the St. John Wood's Art, London and at the Julian Academy, Paris (1920). His aim of studying was to acquire more knowledge being that he was a self-taught artist at that time and also to prove the westerners wrong of their belief that African artists could never produce same art works as theirs. According to Ogumor (1992), Onabolu believed in the importance of the acquisition of technique through severe academic training and intellectual visual effort even though he was initially self-trained. He fought for the government's recognition of art, stressing the advantages of art as part of the school curriculum. Having won the battle and realizing that there were no indigenous art teachers to carry out this programme, he single-handedly persuaded the government to recruit expatriate art teachers. This led to the recruitment of Kenneth. C. Murray and Dennis Duerden who taught in Lagos and Umuahia secondary school to lay a foundation for Nigerian contemporary art and artists, which subsequently produced world rated artists like Ben Enwonwu, Yusuf Grillo, Lasekan Akinola, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Uche Okeke, Simon Okeke, Obiora Udechukwu, Demas Nwoko among others. It will be of importance to note here as stated by Ololide (2008), that what Chief Onabolu did in the art scene brought about what has become a movement. Ololide (2008) buttresses that for over two decades, or before the arrival of Murray in 1927, Onabolu had successfully planted his art and style of producing naturalistic works strictly in line with the instructional prescriptions of the Academy school in London. Onabolu was aware of certain modernistic experimental art, considering his first argument with Murray in 1930 about the danger of denaturing art naturalism. He rebelled very unbendingly against any philosophy that preached against the Academy tradition of art. In the same strength, he denounced the formal

characteristics of the Yoruba or African traditional images, which he considered crude, conventionally disorganized and visually illogical. All these spanned from the fact that Onabolu had an exposure socially and his colonial predicament at that time when the colonial masters in Lagos believed that no African was capable of producing naturalistic work.

In spite of all these, the ideology and stylistic approach of Onabolu spread through the students he had taught such as Lasekan Akinola who happened to follow after him with others such as Ben Enwonwu, Geoffrey Okolo, Israel Ala, Albert Odunsi, Komolafe and Jubilee Oweii all of the 1940s. They all embraced naturalism and spread it to others (Oloidi, 2008). It is worthy to note that throughout the colonial period between 1900 and 1960, it was the stylistic school of Onabolu that dominated the Nigerian art scene. Up until 1955, the naturalism of Onabolu was also the centre of the type of art that was practiced both in the Eastern and Western parts of Nigeria. By 1960, according to Oloidi (2008), it was clear that Onabolu's mono-stylistic school with its western ideologies as well as philosophies, naturalism, had reproduced schools, which were stylistically homologous. This was evident in the official acceptance and introduction of the Academy's style of art instruction in all the Nigerian secondary schools and art department of the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria which is now known as Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. It was a glorious triumph for Onabolu before the revolt.

Yohanna in Muhammad (2006) asserts that the contemporary art, as it is presently being defined, evolved shortly after European contact with Africa, as early as 15th century A.D. This type of art which came with European influence appeared first at the mouth of Congo River. Since this contact, diverse art activities began to spring up which were also influenced by the western code of art practice. Egonwa in Muhammad (2006) narrates that the foreign motifs used as part of the European code of art practice were barely understood by artists' creative tendencies, styles and media of expression. Such artists were used to expressing their creative tendencies with conventional techniques known to the traditional folks. Akolo (1993) places the aforementioned artists in Nigerian scene as those trained under the apprenticeship background, experimental ones and the self-taught ones. All these artists that are mentioned practiced art with the new techniques, materials and styles produced by the Europeans. Muhammad (2006) reveals that the beginning of contemporary art on the African scene was facilitated by key individuals in addition to established Art Schools and workshop centers. Mamza (2002) confirms Muhammad's (2006) assertion and said:

“In Nigeria for instance, the first school known to have included art in its curriculum was Hope Waddell Training Institute, Calabar which was founded in 1895 by United Free Church Mission for the purpose of training Teachers and Pastors. Like all missionary bodies, Hope Waddell's first consideration was to make art serve religion; hence practical arts such as Carpentry, Tailoring and Metal work were taught”.

Indeed, the missionaries' arrival brought about a new kind of socio-economic and cultural activity, which sought to supplant the prevailing traditional religious practices. The implication of this new introduction as Muhammad (2006) submits, was that this kind of art was purely aimed at ignoring the subject matter of traditional African art. Essentially, the subject matter was changed to a new concept. Works of these contemporary African artists, particularly those in Nigeria, marked a transition from traditional to contemporary artistic expression. The works were influenced directly by traditional models or conventions and possessed the appearance of the traditional art styles. However, they deviated from the classical interpretative languages, motifs and function as well (Saliu, 2016).

Their styles were influenced by European code of interpreting art works, which are the European pictures in European magazines and calendar. Since the advent of colonialism and their missionary activities, their subsequent attacks on the traditional practices including art, artists in Africa have continued to re-sharpen and re-sharpen their ideas and mode of practice. The major essence of this action by the westerners was on the other hand to make a positive impact but on the other hand annihilating the traditional African art practices in different places. Thus, making the African artists to contend with new art trends and by so doing, it led to a more complex direction whereby there was a merger of the traditional and contemporary art practices which resulted into a fusion later known as 'synthesis'. The essence of this transformation perhaps was to suit the economic realities on the scene in Nigeria and Africa at large. At this point, the efforts of Kenneth, C. Murray will not be understated in the sense that there was a confrontation between him and Onabolu. According to Oloidi (2008), when Murray discovered what Onabolu was doing, he challenged him to stop because he was planting the mode of the European style of painting and other aspects of art practice into the students. Murray had a different view about what Onabolu was doing because he discovered that the students or the people that he (Onabolu) taught to abandon their cultural/traditional mode of art practice. It was in the midst of these that people like Ben Enwonwu and Ibeto discovered what Murray, one of the expatriates was up to. There were others like him but few. It was during this controversy that some of the students of the then Nigerian College of Aviation, Science and Technology that is known now as Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria revolted against the art practice mode of Onabolu and the activities of the westerners whom they believed came to Africa to nullify their traditional art. Murray was of the opinion that instead of the people to lose their cultural background or history, it would be better to allow them to improve on their practice using their raw methods or techniques.

Murray, Duerden, Clarke, Duckworth, Swanston and Braunholtz with Hunt-Corke all united and advocated the return to tradition with special interest in the traditional crafts of the people. While their ideology and school of thoughts emphasized on civilization of art and its relevance to modernity, they also believed that the local crafts in their various communities will go a long way to help in their practice

of art (craft). Clarke on the other hand, was of the opinion that the traditional artists and craftsmen should be brought into the modern systems, to be part of these systems while not forgetting their own traditions. This was how a few of them were assimilated without any formal education and made part of the teaching staff in both primary and secondary schools. With these expatriates already on ground, it was an opportunity as well for the contemporary artist to learn the ideas of western art practice and the traditional African art. The exposure led to the reevaluation of the impact and the effect of their art practice in relation to their socio-cultural and political realities. It also resulted to the emergence of the art workshops and centers within Africa, where contemporary/modern and traditional art are practiced. Muhammad in Adepegba (1995) mentions that, among these centers are the one specifically in Nigeria such as the Oye Ekiti, set up in 1947, and run by fathers Kevin Carroll and O'Mahoney. He notes that where the centre made a lasting impression was in wood carving. Other centers include the Oshogbo art Centre and the Mbari art practices of Southeast Nigeria. These centers in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa, for example, served as avenues for the effects that contemporary African art has made.

The Oye-Ekiti art workshop or center created in 1947 according to Olodi (2008) did not become active till the early post-colonial period which brought about another synthesis creed to the Nigerian art experiences. The workshop brought the traditional Yoruba carvers who were fulfilling various aspects of the Yoruba socio-cultural, socio-political and religious functions. Notable carvers were enrolled into the art workshop such as Aerogun, George Bandele, and Lamidi Fakeye to create art for the Catholic Church. They were to use the traditional artistic and formalistic philosophy to demonstrate and visually represent various aspects of the Bible. Olodi (2008) highlighted the extent, to which their production of art works for the Catholic reached.

The Christian subjects therefore began to wear Yoruba traditional motifs and other cultural iconographic elements. The Oye experiment got global attention, particularly in Rome where the Pope specially approved the exhibition of Oye works in Rome and other areas. Lamidi Fakeye was the most notable and widely known in this experiment. The activities of the Oye School have brought new dimensions to modern Nigerian art. The school has not only made tradition relevant to modernity, it has also inspired modern artists in their quest for identity (Olodi, 2006).

It is clear that even though the works that were commissioned to be created by these artists were produced using their traditional style or method of approach, as Olodi rightly pointed out, they were at liberty to express themselves in their art. They were not forced rather they freely expressed themselves without changing their creed and distinguished them amongst the other art practitioners.

The Oshogbo School that is also referred to as the Oshogbo workshop or experiment was also a product of expatriates like Suzanne Wenger, and more particularly Georgina Beier and Ulli Beier. Olodi (2008) highlights here that the school grew out of Duro Ladipo Theatre Company and Mbari Mbayo Club, and

was later embodied by Ulli Beier, who eventually adopted both artists and the works of this unique community. The experimental school gained ground in 1963 such that it acquired a professional and artistically serious image. This informal art experience or experiment included the following artists: Jacob Afolabi, Taiwo Olaniyi popularly known as Twin Seven Seven, Buraimoh Jimoh, Muraima Oyelami, Rufus Ogundele and Asira Olatunde, among others. It had an ideology that purely stressed a creative stream that had its source neither from tradition nor modernity. In Ulli's perspective, the Oshogbo Art School succeeded in giving the Nigerian art scene new pictorial aesthetics; the supremacy of the creative, intuitive self over external inspirations. It is also worthy to note that the Oshogbo School according to Oloidi (2008), in spite of its earlier criticisms, has given the Modern Nigerian art scenes an international exposure specifically between 1963 to 1970. The other aspect of the metamorphosis of the contemporary art will be looked into finally. This development and metamorphosis has to do with the Zaria Art School. Transformation in contemporary art would not be complete without the contributions of Zaria Art School currently known as Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Pioneering members of this school comprise of Uche Okeke, who was the motivator and driving force of the revolt then and also a founder. Others include Yusuf Grillo, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Demas Nwoko, Simon Okeke, Emmanuel Odita, Ekeada Felix, Nwagbara. O, Oseloka Osadebe among many others. They collectively challenged the colonial ideology that was extrinsically parasitic in nature according to their curriculum and instruction at Nigerian College of Aviation, Science and Technology, Zaria (Oloidi, 2008). In 1958, the Zaria Art Society was formed and it developed the 'natural synthesis' ideology, and challenged the authoritative force of the Academy's Art Curriculum that they considered unrealistic to their Nigerian situation. It was at this period that there was political struggle for the independence of Nigeria and the students particularly Okeke, Onobrakpeya and Nwoko, as Oloidi narrates, became aggressive and sensitive to events that still tied them to colonial influences. Oloidi (2008) further reveals that, these students addressed this issue in 1958 as contained in the following excerpt:

“This is our age of enquiry and reassessment of our cultural values. This is our renaissance era. In our quest for truth, we must be firm, confident and joyful because of our newly won freedom. We must not allow others to think for us in our artistic life because art is life itself and life is our experience, physical and spiritual, of the world. It is our work as artists to select and render in pictorial and plastic media our reactions to things and events”.

The revolt of the students was mainly against the form of teaching that does not support and as well respect their cultural situations or variations. Oloidi (2008) posits that these students were not actually rebels rather, revolutionaries who believed and insisted that they should go back to their cultural roots to extract all possible oral and visual arts energies that could enliven and effectuate their revolutionary ideologies. A typical example of this can be seen in Uche Okeke's quest to collect folktales and various

mythological stories of his people. In addition, he has also made over 2000 drawings of Igbo cultural motifs, symbols and pattern. Another figure on the scene is Bruce Onobrakpeya who also went to his Urhobo people to collect creative inspirations from their culture through adequate visual documentation of rich folktales and other oral traditions. Grillo on the other hand, received his unique creative force from many Yoruba wood sculptures, particularly located in museums.

From the ongoing events, it became obvious that it was time for radical action in these students' lives thereby, challenging their departments and surprising their fellow students, who did not belong to the same society with their art creations that were abstract, riotous in nature, academically unconventional and mercilessly tortured (Oloidi, 2008). In all this seeming art crisis, where many did not understand the revolution and where it was heading to, this was what Ulli Beier had to say in her view about these revolutionaries; "that their art features a very highly and exuberantly force or strength." However, it was not the activities of these students that made them notable in the institution then rather, their activities after graduation. The Zaria Art School, as a department had succeeded in producing a radical society of diverse artists that eventually paved the way for ideological changes in schools across Nigeria. In other words, it was after some of these creative students had graduated and had the privilege of getting into leadership positions that they had the opportunity to advocate and perpetuate these art ideologies that they had envisioned while in school. Prominent in this category were Uche Okeke, Yusuf Grillo and Demas Nwoko. With Uche Okeke in mind, the Nsukka School shows up with the Ulism concept or ideology while Bruce Onobrakpeya's deep etching style shows up at Agbarha-Otor in Delta state. According to Dike and Oyelola (2006), Yusuf Grillo's labour in Yaba College of Technology was appreciated even though not many knew about it. Grillo worked with Mount for six months after which Mr. Mount handed over the headship of the art school to Grillo. Grillo then formulated a curriculum based on which the college's art programme was formalized and upgraded to a certificate and diploma-awarding programme. He also fought for the institution of single-subject certificate programmes for skilled artists who may not meet academic requirements but need training to enhance the practical application of craft as Dike and Oyelola (2006) narrate, just like the art centers or workshops that helped the artists. At this, one is astonished by Grillo's vital role in the transformation of an informal congregation of enthusiasts to an important centre of learning where highly renowned skilled artists emerged.

From this, we look further at the impartation that this transformation brought on the artists in a concise manner. It is worthy to note here that, these changes that occurred did not only take place in Nigeria but in most of the African countries such as South Africa, Ghana, Cameroon and others. All these, came as a result of the influx of the western ideologies as well as dealing with their socio-cultural, socio-economic, political and religious experiences. For some of these artists, they merged both the traditional and

contemporary/modern conventional and unconventional method in producing art works, while some in the process of doing so created a niche for themselves.

### **Transformational Impartation on Artists**

The established art centers or workshops and schools, helped a lot of students and artists. Such as the one headed by Rev. Father Carroll in Oye-Ekiti, Zaria Art School, Nsukka Art School, Yaba Technology Art School, and other art training universities from the Federal Government such as the Ile-Ife, Benin, Maiduguri, Akure, Uyo, Delta and Port-Harcourt and others. There are Colleges of Education and Polytechnics which are also involved in art training. These include Institute of Management Technology (IMT) Enugu, Auchi, Kano and others. These Art Schools and Art Departments have produced artists who have made diverse giant strides in their chosen fields of specialization. For the purpose of this paper, selected artists will be mentioned and the impartation of contemporary art in their diverse specializations. The essence of mentioning the institutions above are because of the vital role that they have and still playing in the art scene of Nigeria in transforming the artists.

Akinola Lasekan (painter and cartoonist) was also trained like the father of the Modern art in Nigeria, Chief Aina Onabolu. He travelled to London to study art and came back and followed in the footsteps of Onabolu. His works also focused on naturalism with paintings and cartoons using it to depict the state of the nation politically. He also trained other artists that followed after the naturalism style. Ben Enwonwu is another artist that specialized in painting and sculpture as well. After his trip to London and subsequent return to Nigeria, he merged his artistic abilities of both the western and the African style in the production of his art works. Ogunmor (1992) reveals that Enwonwu strongly believed that Nigerian artists should express their cultural identity through the use of western techniques without copying western art. This is seen in his works that he rendered in naturalism and abstract styles. The ‘*Anyanwu*’ sculptural piece as seen in figure 1 depicts the merging of both naturalistic and abstraction.



**Fig.1. ‘Anyanwu’, Ben Enwonwu, Bronze, 6ft, 10inches, 1955. Source: Independent.com**

Bruce Onobrakpeya is yet another ‘Zarianists’ that has also brought change in the art scene in Nigeria till date with his etching style. Uche Okeke, who is considered to be the driving force of the revolt and



advocate of ulism perfected it between 1962 and 1967. It became a tool which he employed to create fresh radical aesthetics among staff and students of University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN). In the same vein, it aided the students to research into revered aspects of their traditions. Yusuf Grillo also in his niche, works on stained glass paintings in different places such as the church in Lagos but mostly known as the “master of blue hues”. Lamidi Fakeye, the carver also was influenced and several others like Solomon Wangboje, Isaiah Uzoagba, Felix Idubor, Jimoh Buraimoh, Kolade Oshinowo, and Erhabor Emokpae among others. These artists both the pioneers and the imparted younger ones are working in such a manner that it has a crusading influences and contributions to art, national developments as well as the international art scenes.

### **Conclusion**

Art is a thought process, deriving its essence from introspection, inspiration, reflection and experience, and above all, knowledge and the will and determination to excel. The various labours of the fathers in visual art platform will continue, particularly the pioneers, for the light they cast on the artistic development and activities must continue with greater intensity. The reflections on the transformation of contemporary art and its impartation on the artists depict the departure from the traditional approach to the utilization of the modern techniques and materials in making or producing art. Even though there was a shift, a handful of some of these artists still held on to the traditional philosophy or ideology of practicing art. There are those artists who merged the two philosophies (traditional and contemporary) to express themselves in their practice. From the discourse above, it has been established that Aina Onabolu that brought about the radical change of art in the African scene contemporarily. Since the western code of art was adopted by Onabolu and passed to the upcoming artists, it is clear that at each progressive stage, there is a challenge seemingly appearing as if the modernity of art does not have a focus or direction. But on the other hand, there have been progressive changes with styles and usage of both conventional and unconventional methods. The place and role of the established art workshops or centers have also been noted.

It is of importance to note that government and art patrons have made efforts in assisting artists in patronizing their art works and the artists themselves. There is also a need to sustain these efforts. We should not be in a haste to forget the rise of art schools, workshop centers and artistic movements in Nigerian art is an outcome of the need to give contemporary Nigerian art an intellectual platform. Indeed the youthful products of the art schools and others with different artistic traditions, workshops, schools, movements and orientations are in no doubt about the philosophical and ideological paths or routes of their artistic discourse.

We must not fail to promote and acknowledge the knowledge of the past developments with its impacts or influence which the pioneers have exerted over the younger generations of artists. It is also to the credit of

men like Akinola Lasekan, Yusuf Grillo, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Uche Okeke, Felix Idubor, Lamidi Fakeye, Ben Enwonwu, Clara Ngu, Agboola Folarin, Simon Okeke, Irein Wangboje, Demas Nwoko, Erhabor Emokpae and several others that Nigerian art has continued to grow from strength to strength.

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