

## Modern Artistic Tendency in Nigeria: Its Influence on the Creative Development

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**ABSTRACT** The paper discusses the development of European Art tradition in Nigeria. It points out the pioneers of the artistic tendency and their creative inputs. It also investigates the point of marriage of the Nigerian and European art traditions, and finally concludes with the positive steps taken by some pioneer indigenous modern artists, without whom the story would have been different.

### INTRODUCTION

The ancient Benin Kingdom had a rich sculpture tradition, which was however, the last of the major rich artistic traditions of the ancient Nigeria. Initial suggestions by some European scholars, had attributed the origin of the rich naturalistic sculpture tradition to early interaction of the Benin artists with the European explorers particularly the Portuguese. This was from the early 13th centuries AD. However, the indigenous origin of the artistic excellence and skilled craftsmanship is very clear. It is readily traceable to the Ife art tradition (Lawal 1977: 4). While the indigenous origin of the rich naturalistic art tradition may no longer be questionable or subject of debate, the influence of the European art tradition on the artists may not be totally ruled out. This could be argued from the point of their early interaction with the Europeans, who were their major patrons even close to the first half of the twentieth century.

### MODERN ART IN NIGERIA

Modern Nigerian art tradition had two artistic expressions at the beginning of the twentieth century, which almost ran parallel to each other in terms of dating (Fosu 1986: 1-8). The first is the neo-traditional or transitional expression, which evolved soon after the Benin massacre of 1897. This tendency ran through the restoration of the puppet Obaship in 1926.

The second artistic tradition was the neo-colonial or the European style of artistic expression. This variant pioneered the introduction of European academic realism in the Nigerian art tradition.

### Neo-traditional Artistic Expression

The pioneering of the transitional period in art in Nigeria originated from the Benin Kingdom. Their early contact with the European travelers and explorers brought about what later became the merger of two divergent cultural interests and orientation. The Benin local artists and craftsmen adopted European cultural elements in their creativity. Consequently, it became very obvious that their interaction with the early travelers, particularly the Portuguese, had unconsciously started to influence the designs and patterns of their bronze plaques and sculptures, even in the Oba's palace. The urban and court nature of the Benin Art kingdom encouraged this new beginning in the artistic tradition of the country. In affirming the above assertion, Okeke (1999: 1) rightly noted that:

...the urban and court setting of the Benin kingdom was therefore conducive for the beginning of a new era in Nigerian art, a period marked by change occasioned by newly introduced ideas, materials, and techniques from the west. Although there have been no systematic documentation of the changing pattern of art and life in Benin Kingdom over the centuries, it is to be noted that the Portuguese influence is obvious. Benin artists were therefore pioneers and indeed the earliest transitional Artists in Nigeria..

Okeke further explained that the British military expedition in 1897 brought to a close, the early transitional period. This traditional art however, was to re-emerge later. This was as a result of the restoration of the puppet obaship in the Benin kingdom by the colonial authority in Nigeria. Therefore, by 1926, the traditional art of the Benin kingdom had begun to flourish once

more. They include: wood carvers and metal casters. The patronage of their art by foreigners was greatly on the increase. This no doubt, was as a result of the influx of more Europeans which followed the forceful removal of the Benin Monarch and the subsequent installation of a pro-government rulership in the kingdom in 1897.

Also, the second stage of the transitional art from pure traditional to neo-traditional conceptualization was beginning to emerge in Benin. Consequently, the Igbensawan, which was the popular lineage of traditional carvers in the Benin kingdom, established workshop centers for woodcarving and metal casting. Interested young apprentices were admitted and trained on how to carve wood and cast metals, this is because most of the earlier artists were either dead or too old, and others had fled the Benin kingdom as a result of the 1897 Benin massacre. The palace boys-in-waiting, generally referred to as Amanda, were therefore drafted to learn woodcarving.

This later metamorphosed into the wood carvers co-operative in Benin. Some of the carvers, who trained in the workshop centers, later left for Lagos, Ibadan, and other urban centers in Nigeria, where better European patronage was guaranteed. In such cities, they established many workshop centers, where they practiced their creativity and also trained young talented apprentices. Fosu (1986: VI) explained that the members of the artists' co-operative society understood very well, the intellectual framework within which they operated. Therefore, they provided the right platform for the right ideas, because they were well-equipped with both inspiration and knowledge of variety of traditional folklores, legends and mythologies. They married these experiences and ideas to their exposure to foreign culture and tradition acquired through expatriate patronage and interaction.

Prominent among these early neo-traditional artists were Idah Ovia, H.I. Erhabor, and Osula (Osula 1950: 162-173). According to Fosu (1986: 2), traditional art usually "expressed definite time-honoured ethnic beliefs" as well as ideal. The patterns and designs applied in such artworks were usually rooted in classical conventions, which were not easily amended. However, such conventions were cautiously repeated with occasional modifications in order to inject new experiences and forms where necessary. Majority of the Nigerian artists who responded to the twentieth century challenge worked outside the

limits of their traditional orbits. This was in their bid to satisfy their European patrons.

Nevertheless, most of the patrons were ignorant of the ethnic content of the artworks. Consequently, the neo-traditional artists employed strange traditional motifs that were at variance with the symbolic meanings of the original artworks. They rejected the standard themes of the traditions, folklore, and myths. Therefore, they explored new initiatives, which attracted their new patrons. This tendency spread like wild fire through the major cities among the Nigerian ethnic groups where European patronage thrived. Not even the norms of the traditional art were spared. The 1956 plaque to commemorate the visit of Queen Elizabeth of England to Benin City is a typical example. The plaque was produced by Omoregbe Inneh. Mount (1973: 10) summarises his observations thus:

.. The informality of the pose, an oba shaking hands, and the crude casting are further departures from the original Benin relief style. As a work of art, the relief is crude, naive and relatively without merit.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that the Benin art tradition pioneered the neo-traditional tendency at the turn of the 20th century. It is also clear that the popularity of the art was motivated by early European interaction. However, there were other neo-colonial artists across the River Niger, who were of equal artistic merit with the Benin artists. Most of them acquired their skills through self-training or they may have undergone traditional apprenticeship. While their art works had the usual traditional form, the artists however deviated from the original traditional interpretative language and function.

The artists could not be identified because their works did not bear identification marks. They carved masks for traditional masquerades, which appeared at festival, such as the *Ekpe*, *New year*, *Age-grade* and *Passage Rites*. A few of them however, were more creative in their approach. They carved very complex and intricate sculptural configurations that personified the traditional gods and the spirits which they believed control the activities of their various environments. In most of these artworks, traces of intimate interaction of the artists with their European clients were very vivid.

The early neo-traditional artists were mostly sculptors. Apart from the ancient rock-wall paintings of Birin Kudu in Kano and Geji in

Bauchi, which dated 15th century BC, (Nzewunwa 1983: 20), painting also reappeared with less prominence in the transitional period. Prominent among the painters were, Odunsi, Ugorji, Braimah and Mohamed Alkali (Danford 1950: 153-161). They also exhibited in the first colonial contemporary art exhibition in Lagos, in 1948 (Fig.1). However, the introduction of pure European academic realism in Lagos by Chief Aina Onabolu at the beginning of the century, signaled the gradual but systematic annihilation of what remained as neo-traditional art in Nigeria.

### **European Artistic Style in Nigerian Art Tradition**

The introduction of European artistic style or academic realism in Nigeria at the turn of the twentieth century, created a serious gulf between its protagonists and the early neo-traditional artists. This was so because the neo-traditional artists were mainly sculptors. Those that pioneered the modern art based on European aesthetic principles were mostly painters resident in Lagos who were led by Aina Onabolu. Some of the artists acquired their skills through self training. However, few of them later attended European art schools either through correspondence or by residency.

Few of them who were creative, perfected their art by copying photographic portraits from calendar illustrations and magazines that were printed in Europe. Through this method, they were able to produce the European photographic forms and ideas based on realism. They represented their works, as they perceived the objects optically based on the European artistic rule on perspective and forms. Before the introduction of European photographic realism in painting, there was no such innovative art of realism in portraiture in Nigeria, which could match what obtained in Europe. Fosu (1986: 6) agrees with this claim when he states that:

The art of realism in Africa differed remarkably from that of Europe, as did the African sense of perspective. Perhaps only in the sculpture of the Nile valley regions of ancient Egypt and Nubia were full-size statues represented in accurate proportions. The Naturalistic sculptures of the rest of Africa completely disregarded anatomical accuracies of torsos. Instead, torsos were expressed in exaggerations, disproportions, or in stylized abstractions or stylized realism...

### **The Aina Onabolu Pioneering Influence**

Aina Onabolu held his first exhibition in 1910. Most of his exhibits were portraits of the colonial masters and prominent Nigerians who lived in Lagos. In 1920, he held another exhibition and used part of the money realized in it to travel by sea to Britain. There, he was admitted to study art at St. John Wood Art School, London. He graduated in 1922 with a Diploma in Art. Onabolu still wanted to know more about European aesthetic principles, he therefore crossed over to France and enrolled at Academic Julien in Paris. He obtained another Diploma in Art from the college.

Aina Onabolu started through self training and reproduction of portraits, textbooks illustrations, as well as photographs in foreign magazines and newspapers. He was so accurate in his perspectives based on European aesthetic principle, that by 1900 he had started to produce paintings in water colours. He successfully painted in 1903 the portrait of the colonial director of public works in Lagos. He also produced the first oil portrait painting in Nigeria in 1906. It was the portrait of one Mrs. Spencer Savage, rendered in formal European academic realism. Thus, Aina Onabolu today is synonymous with the introduction of modern painting in Nigeria. Okeke (1999: 2) pointed out that Onabolu's motivation to excel in his newly found style of art, at the expense of the traditional art, is readily traced to his quest to belong to the "superior western culture and civilization".

This was the point of departure from purely neo-traditional art to European academic realism in Nigeria. Lagos was the first place where it was practiced. This is understandably attributed to its early contact with the colonial masters and the missionaries. Onabolu returned to Nigeria and taught modern art in government schools in Lagos. He also developed the first art curriculum for secondary schools in the western part of the country. This of course, was based on European aesthetic principles. There was at the period, the obvious need for more art teachers in the newly established government secondary schools across the country. Onabolu therefore, succeeded in getting the colonial government to appoint more artists teachers. This led to the employment of Kenneth C. Murray in 1928.

The arrival of Murray signaled a new chapter in the study of modern art in Nigeria. Onabolu's

untiring campaign for the teaching of art in government secondary schools and the consequent adoption of European artistic concepts and principles in the schools, therefore triggered off all that was required for the massive awareness and acceptance of the new art tradition in Nigeria. Also, his early conversion to the Christian religion greatly aided his conviction. He openly prided himself as belonging to the newly introduced religion. He was one of the earliest West Africans to visually communicate his ideas in modern forms, Okeke (1999: 30). As a matter of fact, he was careful in his art and clearly distanced himself from the traditional concepts and ideas. He lived in Ikoyi, in Lagos, which was generally referred to as "European Quarters". There, he was fully separated from his culture and tradition, along with other "Europeanized Nigerians" who did not believe in our cultural heritage.

#### **The Fusion of European Art with Nigerian Art Tradition**

The marriage of European art to the Nigerian art tradition was a gradual process. Two factors were responsible for the sudden creative awareness and merger which began in 1928. They are: The Kenneth Crosswaite School and the Activities of the Zaria Art Society.

#### **The Kenneth Crosswaite Murray's Influence on Nigerian Art Tradition**

There appears to be a misconception on who actually invited Kenneth Crosswaite Murray in Nigeria. While it is believed by some artists that he came at the instance of Chief Aina Onabolu, others are of the view that one Eric Swanston, a Deputy Director of Education in the Colonial Administration in Lagos, convinced him to come to Nigeria and assist them in developing her art education programmes. However, on his arrival in the country in 1928, he was employed as an Education Officer to teach art in Government Secondary Schools in Nigeria. His first posting was Queens College, Lagos. He also doubled as the Art teacher of the nearby Kings College, Lagos. In this period, the colonial administration was beginning to take interest in secondary education in Nigeria. He was, therefore, mandated to further review the secondary school art curriculum earlier put in place by Aina Onabolu.

In Ibadan, Murray was able to identify a few

talented young boys whom he gave special training and guidance. Some of the students include Ben Enwonwu and Uthman Ibrahim. Although, most of the students were ignorant of the techniques applied in drawing and painting, sooner than expected, they started producing very good creative drawings and paintings. A few years later, Murray was posted to Government College, Umuahia. At Umuahia, he discovered another set of talented students. They include: Christopher Chukwunenye Ibeto, who as an orphan. He was brought up by the missionaries. Others were Ugorji and Nnachi, who hailed from Ohafia. They were sponsored by the Presbyterian Church Missionaries in Umuahia. Also in this group was Umana, who attended Elementary Training Centre, Uyo, but was associated with the Kenneth Murray School. Umana was very creative and distinguished himself as a carver.

Kenneth Murray was therefore, ultimately concerned with a guiding the young artists to develop their talents in line with their cultural leanings with a visible touch of European artistic tendency. Thus, gradually moving away from the Aina Onabolu's concept of photographic realism, which was the popular form of art in Lagos. This, signaled the sudden re-emergence of the discarded neo-traditional style of creativity. He was untiring in his resolve to give the country a realistic art education programme, which according to him should be based on Nigerian culture and tradition. Therefore, he studied the art culture and tradition of the major ethnic groups in the country and thereafter designed a new art syllabus for Nigerian schools. This was just before the commencement of the Second World War. The traditional art and craft formed the core of his programme. From then on, it became the springboard of the development of contemporary art in Nigeria. His ideas in the colonial period were very necessary in determining the form and direction the country's art education programme should follow.

Kenneth Murray insisted that the students must draw and paint what they saw. He also applied the same method in teaching modeling and carving. The result was that he produced what is today regarded as the first generation of contemporary artists in the country. They include Ben Enweonwu and Christopher Ibeto among others. In his painting class, such traditional concepts as masquerades, dancers, village forest, palm tree climbing scenes, canoe paddling, fishermen and market scenes became very popular

among the growing number of artists. They also taught them how to illustrate simple textbooks. Christopher Ibeto and Uthman Ibrahim became very creative textbook illustrators for local publishers. Murray further ensured that some of his former students were employed as teachers in mission and government schools across the country. By so doing, his creative ideals and concepts on traditionally oriented art education continued to spread among young Nigerian artists.

Other young artists who were associated with the Kenneth Murray School at Umuahia and Ibadan include, Eke Okaybulu, Akinola Lasekan and Sylvester Chukueggu. Their interaction with Murray enabled them to sharpen their concepts and consequently formed their own ideas and stylistic approaches independently, which were based on Nigerian culture and tradition. This group became very creative and popular in their styles, forms and media of expression. It was not surprising therefore, that in the first contemporary art exhibition organized in Lagos, in 1948, by the colonial masters, most of the artists who were associated with the Murray school were very outstanding in their presentations. Their artworks in sculpture and painting showcased major attractions of the exhibition (Danford 1950: 153, 166-167).

While supporting the above claims by Danford, Okeke (1999: 7) states that Chukueggu's presentation in the 1948 art exhibition was the grotesque thunder spirit image *Amadioha* (Fig. 2). According to him, the intricately carved wood sculpture was unique and a clear departure from the traditional sculpture of the Igbo. It was the star exhibit of the first contemporary art exhibition (Osula 1950: 165). Other artists who had earlier been associated with Murray school also participated in the exhibition. They are Ugorji, an art teacher in Port Harcourt. He drew inspiration from the traditional life style of the Igbo. Therefore, his paintings, which were based on the life of the local people, drew tremendous comments and attention. He also experimented so much with traditional dyes. His sense of colour application was very appealing. Alele presented a three quarter figure of a *Praying Boy* and a *Female Bust* in wood sculpture, while Mohammed Alkali, Ebanda, Braimah, Odunsi and Ahmadu Tanko had traditional painting compositions (Fig. 3).

Apart from Kenneth Murray and Aina Onabolu, there was a lady who made commendable

efforts at giving 20th century Nigerian art a direction. She is Mrs. Kurian Williams, an Irish and wife of the first principal of Methodist College, Uzuakoli near Umuahia. She established a workshop center where she taught art to young school leavers in the early 1930s. She emphasized on illustrations and drawings. Udo Ema was the most outstanding pupil of the Uzuakoli experiment. He produced many textbook illustrations for publishers. He also produced materials for the teaching of art and crafts in primary schools in Uzuakoli and Umuahia. Majority of the illustrations were based on European academic realism.

Apart from the above artists, who had direct interaction with European artistic influence, there were other numerous artists who were trained in the workshop centers established by the pioneers. Consequently, this influence gave rise to total introduction of European art curricular in our pioneer higher institutions – Yaba College of Technology and the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria.

#### Pioneer Indigenous Modern Artists

The Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria which was later transformed to Ahmadu Bello University in 1962, was the centre of agitation for the study of art based on Nigerian culture and tradition. This began in 1958 by a group of first year students of the Department of Fine Arts of the college against their European Lecturers. This was because no aspect of the rich Nigerian art tradition was included in their art curriculum. The students therefore wanted their



A. ODUNSI: Fig. 1. Going to the market, 1948.  
(Courtesy Nigerian Art, No. 33, pp172, 1950)



**S.A.O CHUKUEGGU: Fig. 2. Amadioha, 1948.**  
(Courtesy Nigeria Art, No. 33, pp. 165, 1950)

art curriculum to include the Nigerian art tradition. This led to the formation of an art movement called the Zaria Art Society. The group leader was Uche Okeke, with Okechukwu Odita, Yusaf Grillo, Demas Nwoko, Felix Ekeada and Bruce Onobrakpeya as active members.

The inauguration of the radical movement coincided with the period of agitation for political independence in Nigeria. Motivated by the political tempo, the Zarianists held on to their demand which was eventually granted. Consequently, the art curriculum of the pioneer art institution was changed to integrate the Nigerian art tradition with the essence of the European art tradition. This is referred to as the Natural Synthesis Ideology in the study and practice of art in Nigeria (Iriwieri 2007: 27).

The Zarianists on graduation dissolved the art movement in the school but continued with their art programme throughout the country. Since they were the first set of indigenously trained artists, they also pioneered the teaching of modern art in many colleges and institutions of higher



**ALELE: Fig. 3. Female Bust, 1948**  
(Courtesy Nigeria Art, No. 33, pp. 159, 1950)

learning in Nigeria. Their new art curriculum was, therefore, very handy to implement. Felix Ekeada pioneered the teaching of art at Saint Augustine's Teacher Training College, Baza in the old Gongola State in 1963, Bishop Shanahan College, Imo State 1965, Queens College Enugu 1988 and Alvan Ikoku College of Education Owerri in 1971, from where he retired in 1998. Uche Okeke, Okechukwu Odita, Bruce Onobrakpeya and Yusuf Grillo also pioneered new art curricular in many secondary schools and higher institutions in Nigeria.

## CONCLUSION

The foregoing, shows that the transformation and the refocusing of the art tradition in Nigeria is a product of generations of patriotic, visionary and highly talented artists. The efforts of the Neo-traditional artists, who were technically limited by their environment and patronage, cannot

however be neglected. The Zarianists sharpened and refocused the art tradition based on the initial creative efforts of the Neo-traditional artists, Aina Onabolu and the Murray School. It is very obvious that the art forms and indeed the art tradition as we have in Nigeria today is a synthesis of both the indigenous and western art traditions. This has obviously repositioned the Nigerian art tradition as a major focus in the discuss of art traditions in Africa.

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