

# Aina Onabolu's Dr. Sapara and Reverse Appropriation

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## Abstract

The discourse on the development of modern painting in Nigeria, though robust has hardly considered the ideological alternative in the attempt to locate style within its frame as a visual language. The predilection to focus only on the empirical values of form to the exclusion of a governing text or an undercurrent that shapes thoughts and actions in the production of culture from time to time therefore, inspired this paper. The focus here is to understand what is it that lies behind the visual forms of Onabolu's age and by extrapolation every age within time/space concerned. Ideology as a latent but effective tool in the shaping of cultural action is non palpable parameter of reference. It is detectable in the way a noticed consistency in the thoughts and actions of an age have always been defined by some stylistic consistency and contextual coordinates. Ideology permits for the rearticulation of ideas from previous ages to suit those of another age hence it is usually open-ended in its ambiances of reference. This paper attempts a history of Aina Onabolu and the theory of Reverse Appropriation, from an ideological point of view, which implicated a discourse on the nature of ideas and Onabolu's desire to resituate, some racial prejudice and anti-African stereotypes re-inscribing the demystification of racist notions, that no African was endowed with the mental capacities to produce an art of true picture in verisimilitude, using SAPARA a portrait considered by scholars as a master piece of the early modern Africa's realism. The empirical values derived from Onabolu's work point to an inclination to appropriate alien tendencies. This is what Olu Oguibe termed "reverse appropriation. The term reverse appropriation carries with it inchoate connotations that undermine the reality of intercultural ideals and negotiations. Continued appropriation is the ground in which cultural progress is won: A few rhetorics that feature in the Onabolu history have provided positions that appear to validate the homophilia theory whereby Onabolu appropriated the western aesthetic canons in his paintings. "His intention was not to achieve validation in the eyes of the whiteman, but through reverse appropriation invalidate European assumptions upon which the civilizing missions in the colonies was founded" (Oguibe 2003:40).

**Keywords:** Modern Painting, Reverse Appropriation, Contemporary, colonial

## 1. Introduction

The beginning of the twentieth century signaled a nationalist struggle that was to change the face of Art in Nigeria through the appropriation of forms of western culture. The agent of this change was Aina Onabolu (1882-1963) who identified European academism as the visual signifier of colonial identity. Reverse appropriation to Onabolu as observed by Oguibe was to "hack, to use a most appropriate colloquialism, into the exclusive space of the antipode, in other words to possess the contested territory by mastering the forms and techniques of western artistic expression in order to cross out the ideological principles resident in its exclusivity. By the end of the century Onabolu "had acquired a signified civility beyond disputation. And the possibility of this acquisition outside the regulatory powers of colonial authority represented a Crack in the Scheme of the Empire"

Contemporary Nigerian painting started with the traditional artists and as their works seemed to be in decline, a crop of transnational painters who were not like the traditional, but European oriented grew up. This new group was directly or indirectly influenced by Euro/American traditions especially with the wild contact initiated by the colonial agenda. The colonial agenda is rooted in the enlightenment tradition from where Academic art developed in France, this trend brought about great changes.' The commendable, forays of Aina Onabolu (1882-1963) in the first quarter of this century remains a major landmark of this influence. Adepegba (1995:79) states that

The earliest effort to evolve new art was by few individuals who realizing their own talents in the course of their elementary western education, resolved to teach themselves the western kind of art. Such individuals such as Aina Onabolu and Akinola Lasekan even obtained their professional training in Britain.

## 2. Aina Onabolu

Aina Onabolu was born in Ijebu-Ode in the present Ogun state of Nigeria in 1882. Aina moved to Lagos after his primary school education, where he attended Caxton House School finishing in 1900 and by 1902 he had

started painting portrait pictures to earn a living. He held his first art exhibition in 1910. Onobolu's influence in his art arguably can be traced to Western academic traditions, holding his first solo exhibition in 1920 after which he left for Britain. There he enrolled at the St. John's Wood Art School and obtained a Diploma in Oil painting. In 1932 he produced the syllabus for art teaching and officially introduced art to some secondary schools in Lagos, this elevated art to a new prominence and so set the stage for change. Onobolu's career as an artist was an active one. He is credited with many paintings most of which are portraits. All his portraits were characterized by standardized European academic formalism - balanced, proportioned and distinctively accurate in anatomical details.

Oloidi (1996-126) asserts that his action had a political undertone, where his paintings attempt to make the colonial masters recognize Africa's competence in an area arrogantly thought to be the preserve of the European artists. In other words, Onobolu's achievement was a brand of nationalism: a desire to dehydrate some racial prejudice and anti-African stereotypes? His efforts included the demystification of such racist notions that no African not even the already Europeanized one was endowed with creativity to produce art or true picture in verisimilitude. Or could this be an ideology aimed at Reverse Appropriation?

The above is in a foreword to Onobolu's pamphlet entitled "A Short Discourse in Art" written by F.H. Howard, a Deputy Director of Education in Colonial Nigeria. Stated inter alia that "In the field of art, an African is not capable of reaching even a moderate degree of proficiency" Onobolu with a "determination to refute and wipe off this reproach" left Nigeria for two years and returned in 1922 with a Diploma in Art" as Fosu (1986:7) opinion is expressed. If we agree with Fosu we then are bound to take Onobolu's achievement on a surface value. In other words, the growth of Onobolu's artistic ingenuity would be diminished. Although the period of 1920 through 1930 was marked as the most prolific years of his profession as a portrait painter, Onobolu continued to indulge in several studies of nude women and according to Oloidi (1986:108-126) "he died painting his unfinished portrait of Adebayo Doharty in 1963 at the age of eight-one.

So far Onobolu's artistry is couched in the politics of post-colonial discussed and identity politics. There is the need to move beyond such frontiers that have dominated critical appraisal of his work to broader concerns of art History. In the above light while exploring the rhetoric of post-colonialism a critical look specifically at Onobolu's work "Dr. Sapara" within hybrid contents of appropriation is conducted. The very obvious factors of intercultural dialogue where by cultures borrows from each other appears politicised so far in Onobolu's work. Therefore "Dr. Sapara" is presented as an instance of appropriation based on intercultural dialogue and negotiation necessary for expansion of form in art History.

Reverse Appropriation as Nationalism in Modern African Art" by Oguibe, (2003:35-47) is a historical documentation of major landmarks in the evaluation of modern art in Africa. It hints at its origin as a deliberate motive actor who initiated it especially Aina Onobolu. A brief historical overview of the oppositions and difficulties he encountered from the white missionaries is aptly documented in it. Along with this came the deliberate efforts of colonial authorities to discourage the development of the hybrid art, which was then in the offing. Oguibe (2003) argues that the motive that propelled action in Aina Onobolu should be appreciated within the context of a spirit of Nationalism. This according to him was akin to undermining the colonial project, which was an act in condescension in its ideological foundation. Thus by overwriting its colonial context, Oguibe provides an example of such overwriting with an in-depth commentary on what Aina Onobolu, John Mohl and Gerald Sekoto (both South Africans) achieved with reverse appropriation.

The significance of artists like Onobolu, Mohl and Sekoto in the construction of modernity in Africa should be understood in the context of what was produced by the several workshops and art centers that would later sprout up all over the continent under the direction of European art teachers. In every case the art was predictably naive and unaccomplished, which for the colonialists represented the limits of African ability to represent what they saw as African reality. Only those artists who understood the ideological underpinnings of such art actively contested these underpinnings and produced works of an accomplished quality as part of Africa's aspirations for change through modernity. (Oguibe 2003:43).

While the above explains a motive that is foregrounded in ideology, other ideological instances is called upon by Oguibe thus –

“Where Onobolu and his contemporaries pursued a discourse of humanistic universalism, the younger artists initiated what one might call a discourse of mapped differences, and set about defining and inscribing that difference (Oguibe 2003:46)

Onobolu is credited with many paintings most of which are portraits which include Mrs. Spencer Savage (1906) and Dr. Sapara (1920) which will be evaluated here in an attempt to determine an ideological framework based on the theory of “reverse appropriation”; originally conversed by Olu Oguibe.



**Title: Dr. Sapara.**  
**Artist: Aina Onobolu**  
Medium: Oil on canvas  
Size: 107 by 76cm  
Date: 1920.

### 2.1 Dr. Sapara (1920)

Dr. Sapara, a portrait painting was exhibited in 1920. It presents an ideal example of photographic realism within the genre of portrait making which epitomizes the high point of Onobolu’s skill in the genre. The panel is vertical and not divided into any noticeable subsections. Dr. Sapara is a portrait of a male, his mode of dressing is formal and African. His dressing and comportment projects the values of the famous flowing ‘Agbada’ popularly referred to as “one thousand five hundred” and reserved for the rich, and affluent. The material is very well embroidered with white and orange colours interjecting into the predominant colour of darkish blue/green.

The neck and burst area are highlighted with lines, a star on the left breast and a bigger star on the right shoulder. The portrait’s flamboyance and a half smiling robust face which, shows sharp and intelligent brown eyes, long nose and half bent mouth, is formed into a whistling shape as if the figure is whistling a song. The jaws and neck are thick representing a well fed aristocrat and is crowned with a dominantly gold embroidered cap that is intricately designed with circular shapes which show great movement. Both hands are tucked into the “Agbada” displaying only the arms and the picture shows the right hand holding the “Erukere” (Horse tail) which is reserved for only chiefs and people of honour. This Erukere is painted mostly in white and made into two parts, with one part made of horse tail hair and the other in leather with Dr. Sapara inscribed on it.

In the background one can identify a tower fading into the sky a sky that is calm in shades of blue and gray with dark areas to balance the main picture. The sky shows dignity and peace and focuses our attention on the principal character of the scene. Visibly his weight is supported suggesting that the sky is a barrier which presses down upon him and not a source of release. There is rigidity at naturalistic representation. The unit shows an idea of weight and support, it is therefore evident that the art work deals with responsibility, which becomes more noticeable when we consider the Nigerian extended family system where people rely on others for help and trust. The portrait portrays a man that can be trusted and privileged. Onobolu maintains smooth smulding texture brush strokes with a high degree of different tints and shades of colours which emphasizes advanced use of chiaroscuro.

The portrait evidently represents a wealthy sociolite. His title (a doctor) locates him within such a bracket. The overall format of the painting reminds one of the pyramidal compositions where the background to a painting serves only a supportive role as the figures are made to dominate the foreground space of compositions. A good

example of such a work resides in the portrait of *Mona Lisa* (1503-5) oil on panel 105cm x 60cm now in the Louvre, Paris, France, by Leonardo da Vinci.



Title: Monalisa  
Artist: Leonardo da Vinci  
Date: 1503-5  
Medium: Oil on panel  
Size: 30/21cm

Beyond the pyramidal structure of this composition, is the three quarters posture that is typical of Mona Lisa. The artists of the renaissance period in their study to improve representation of nature through the art of perspective rendition and the geometry of Euclid. Related to Euclid's geometry is the  $\frac{3}{4}$  known as the "golden section" or the golden mean or Fibonacci series. Fibonacci series "are sequences in which the sum of two consecutive numbers gives the third subsequent number; 1:2; 3:15; 8:16; etc (Imah, 2007:129) which Dr. Sapara and Mona Lisa share. In ideal, Euclid geometry as employed by the renaissance artist as the postures of Dr. Sapara and Monalisa exhibit, a ratio 2:3 is implicated. Euclid's geometry as it relates to the golden section since the renaissance has had an enduring influence in the art academy.

Another lingering influence of this ratio in the academy is the ideal sizes of drawing towards and cartridge papers used in the academy. In a given sense, in the portrait of Dr. Sapara and other portraits of Onabolu most of which are typical of the exploration of the golden section, one can associate with them as consummate influence of Western academic culture. It is therefore not surprising to have Okeke (1979:10) commenting on the art of Onabolu that with C.C. Ibeto (1912-1995) they abandoned a "ritual sense, the proportion, the concern for the decorative and not the least the mastery of ethnic symbolism". With Okeke's position it would be pertinent to further define the ideological grounds in which Onabolu's works can be located along with other acts of cultural productions when he (Onabolu) was an active cultural producer. The painting "SAPARA" is Onabolu's new artistic idiom akin to that of Europe, not wanting to mimic Europe but meant to define his idiom as a vehicle for translating and reinstating his own heritage (having come from Ife, known for naturalist art forms) into new forms in the context of the change that was enveloping African art. Sapara though produced in the same idiom of verisimilitude as the most revered European Painting "Monalisa" was unacceptable to the colonial masters because it was an effort outside the regulatory powers of colonial authority, this could signal independence. Onabolu Sapara was not to achieve validation in the eyes of the white man, but as Olu Oguibe observes "to invalidate European assumptions upon which the civilizing mission in the colonies was founded". Furthermore Olu Oguibe asserts that "if the African could perform equally well in what Europe claims as its exclusive domain, then the former cancels out the tropes of ascendancy and puts Europe in its proper place". SAPARA was a portrait considered by scholars to be a masterpiece of early modern Africa's realism. The portrait was seen as an attempt to unravel the mystique of colonialization. The appropriation of the European realist tradition in the painting SAPARA was a significant part of a process of crossing out Europe's text of exclusivity, rather than merely imbibing forms and surfaces.

### 3. Reverse Appropriation

African art before colonization was conceptual or idealistic. It was dominantly not mimetic or realistic or realistic. With colonization we adopted the academic tradition which is mimetic. In the same token western art

with abstraction embraced conceptual art which dominated practice in Africa. The re-adoption of what the west took from Africa by practicing modern artists is like Aina Onabolu is an instance of reverse appropriation. The nationalist struggles in Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century was characterized by visible change in the visual arts, the struggle was not directed at confronting the structures of colonialism but was done through an appropriation of the forms of imperial culture.

The focus of this paper is lodged in various histories on; Onabolu's works as discussed by various critics and these reviews have shown in their discourse that various analyses are lodged in histories that have not been fully defined with regards to Onabolu's ideological framework, stylistic successions it can be argued, presuppose recognition that there is an ideological motive behind change. From another perspective they also appear with their focus on biographical annotation and stylistic progression to ponder to formalism. Thus what one encounters in the study of Onabolu's works is a kind of serial progression of form without the history that propelled them into life as form. Okeke (1979:10) commenting on the art of Onabolu, states "it would be pertinent to further define the ideological grounds in which Onabolu's works can be located along with other acts of culture productions when he (Onabolu) was an active culture producer? He concludes that Onabolu's ideological foregrounding be probed further. Questions that arise as a result of this are, was Onabolu driven by the quest to prove that what the European artists can do the African artists can do even better as Oloidi asserts or did he have a political undertone in his paintings where he was able to make the colonial masters recognize Africa's competence in an area arrogantly thought to be the preserve of the Euro American Artists and as such agree with Olu Oguibe who argues that the motive that propelled action in Aina Onabolu should be appreciated within the context of a spirit of Nationalism.

Oguibe in his views clearly articulates two ideological frames of reference as far as modern African art in so far as its development is the focus. This has demonstrated however that the artwork as form is a product of history and that factual articulation of Onabolu's work should be rooted in understanding the theory of "Reserve Appropriation" which repositions the nature of ideology in Onabolu's time and the underlying ideological grounds that successive areas of development grew from. What is implied by the above is that there is always a discernable frame of knowledge that accommodates social or cultural actions where art belongs. Oguibe calls attention to two dominant ideologies that may have propelled Onabolu, viz-reverse appropriation and that of overwriting of the colonial space. embracing, the above has become an urgent test lest the history of modern Nigerian Art may continue to harbour hazy historical progressions and definitions of its form, where form alone is not history.

#### 4. Conclusion

The narrative so far is prudent as a testimony of prevalent opinion on the development of modern Nigerian painting. Among the first of the moderns in Nigeria, that is Onabolu, a dominant opinion, it appears favours the claim that he set to prove a point. The Onabolu agenda from this position is that he demonstrated that he could achieve what the west had already developed. Looked at from the ideological lens the argument and position appear attractive. This is because it pleads relevance from an anti-colonial sentiment that attempts to reconstitute the image of the colonized. The above claim when situated against Onabolu's enthusiasm to learn and acquire a form of new knowledge becomes problematic. From another point of view, what Onabolu achieved as an artist in his portraits can be taken as valid grounds to evaluate what contributions he made to painting in Nigeria. The empirical values derived from Onabolu's "Dr. Sapara" point more to an inclination to appropriate alien tendencies, it is in the characters of humans to adapt,

adopt and co-opt as Ugiomoh (2001) notes. This is what Olu Oguibe termed 'reverse appropriation'. Onabolu's work located in time from a synchronic level relates to Tutuola's Palm Wine Drinkard'. The way the genre objects and figures become subject of paintings can be likened to the way lived experiences that became fables came to be given form in the story line of the novel. In other words it may not be wholly accurate to brand the emergence of modern painting in Nigeria as a product of cultural claim to ward off inferiority complex. This is precisely what Oguibe's argument amounts to and it merits consideration as another view. In our circumstances it stands to appeal to a cogent reasoning beyond other considerations that propelled Onabolu to action.

A few rhetorics that feature in the Onabolu history have provided positions that appear to validate the homophilia theory whereby Onabolu appropriated the western aesthetic canons in his paintings. Frank Ugiomoh (2002: 77-92) variously have asked the question inversely in relation to Uche Okeke if he operated during Onabolu's time if he were going to propagate the 'Natural Synthesis' Ideology? It could be pertinent to ask if Onabolu operated at a latter time would western realism have held value for him? The contexts of homophilia therefore stands to be positively considered in evaluating Onabolu's works as metaphors. From the point of view

of their ideological language therefore they stand as a watershed of a new consciousness in the modernization of Nigeria's culture. From an ideological standpoint their position defines an appropriation of external ideals. That appropriation is synonymous to the expansion, of cultures that arises from contacts. Onabolu's pioneering initiative can be seen today as providing an alternative to conceptual or idealistic art which traditions of visual arts in Nigeria were defined by.

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### Biography

Dr. Onyema Emeni is a renowned Painter, Art Historian and Art Critic. He is also a Senior Lecturer in Fine and Applied Arts Department Delta State University, Abraka Nigeria. He is a Fellow of Society of Nigerian Artists. Emeni hails from Obiaruku Delta State Nigeria, Born in December 1951. He attended Government College Ughelli, Auchi Polytechnic Auchi, University of Benin, Benin City and Delta State University Abraka, Nigeria. He obtained O.N.D; H.N.D in Fine Art in 1976 and 1979. Postgraduate Diploma in Technical Education 1999, M.F.A in Painting 2002 and MA/Ph.D in 2005 – married with children.

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