

The Impact of Pan-Africanism and Nationalism on the Evolution of Modern Art in Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper examines the political and philosophical ideologies of the Pan-Africanism and Nationalism movements and their impact on the 20th century art of Africa with a particular reference to Nigeria. It opines that, while the foundation of modern arts in African could largely be attributed to Africans' embrace of Western education and life style, the African and Black descents' concept of Pan-Africanism and Nationalism (home and abroad) which fuelled the young African elites' renewed appreciation of interest in African culture and quest for African identity, also stimulated and fed the pre/post independent visual arts. The paper argues that the African nationalists' agitation for political freedom from colonial powers within the continent and that of Africans in Diaspora's struggle for liberation in the West and Europe which provoked the political vibes of the 1950s and 60s was indeed instrumental to the radical invigoration of the evolving modern visual arts of the continent in general and that of Nigeria in particular. It submits that the Pan-Africanism and Nationalism movements' ideals actually midwife the 'Zarianist' revolution and the reinvention of the concept of synthesis as evident in the Zaria Society of Art's natural synthesis theory as well as the post independent's emergence of art movements and stylistic art schools.

Keywords: Africa, Nationalism, Modern Nigerian art, Pan-Africanism, Visual Arts

1. Introduction

Scholars at different times and in variant situations have dialogued the terms Pan Africanism and Nationalism with many coming up with views that are divergent and a-times contradicting. Both seem wider in scope, broader in concept and deeper in meaning than can be imagined and there seem to be no agreement by scholars on the meaning and history of the terms. It is generally agreed that it is difficult, if not impossible to provide a clear and precise definition for any of the two, Immanuel Geiss (1974), Simala (2003), Zeleza (2006) and Baugura (2012). Attempt made here therefore is not intended to add to the contradiction nor come up with foolproof and acceptable definitions. Rather than go into analyses of scholars' contradicting views; of who started what, who was the first to use a term or the other; when was such first mentioned and in what context, or going into typologies and methodologies, our discussion and the use of the terms Pan-Africanism and nationalism (within African context) shall here be viewed in consonance with certain issues that have ever remain constant irrespective of scholars divergent views and opinions. Such issues are built on the premise that

- all the Pan Africanist and African Nationalist movements evolve around Africa, Africans, and Black descents.
- Their ideologies centre on Africanity and Africans be it within the continent or as found in other continents.
- It deals with the questions of African dignity, African identity, and African renaissance, and cannot be divulged from its (racial) equality content, and in colonialism, independence and power structure.
- The propagation drive cannot be discussed without the mention of certain personalities such as Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Cheikh Anta Diop, Kwame Nkruma, Leopold Senghor, Nnamdi Azikwe, Walther Rodney and other Africanists.

Based on the aforementioned, what is most certain and important to note here is the fact, that each of the movements in one way or the other is a response to servitude, racial discrimination and exploitation of Africans and the African descents. Irele (1965) expressed this when he noted that the racial discrimination which gravely hunted the Negroes' opportunity for social advancement, and the various humiliations to which he was exposed created a discontent which gives rise to various political movements. It is suffice to add that, the activities of these movements brought into the Africanists' revolution, what Simala (2003) describes as the "urge for a concurrent reaffirmation of Africa's own values as expressed in its arts, its literature, its philosophy and its history". The focus in this paper is to examine how the movements' ideologies and activities have fuelled the young African elites' renewed appreciation of interest in African culture and quest for African identity, also stimulated and fed the pre/post independent visual arts.

2. Pan Africanism, African Nationalism and the New art in Nigeria

Art in Africa generally, before contact with the west and colonization was known to be an essential part of the

people's life. So essential was art in ancient Africa that it could be seen as being central to everyday living. Africans from all known records have expressed themselves in different forms using varieties of media and materials. From the Stone Age to the earliest contact and the era of the explorers, evidences abound of the artistic potentials of Africa. The rock paintings across northern and southern Africa, the various sub-Saharan sculptural forms, pottery, jewellery and textiles of varied dimensions, architecture, wall decorations and body arts, Africans have expressed themselves using all available means. Contrary to Europeans attitudes to African art and their perception of the works as objects to be looked on with contempt, described as funny, evil or works brought from the dark places of the earth and not to be proud of (Kimble,1965), art in African before contact was not produced solely for aesthetic ends. It was and is not art for art's sake but deeply reflects certain accepted thoughts and shared values, at the same time reinforcing and symbolizing them. Before the contact and emergence of Christianity and colonisation, art in Africa was interwoven; Drama, Poetry, Visual arts, Music, Dance and even history are all closely linked with two to three or more being dependent on the other, and at-times all rolling into one in communal festivals. It was the basis for indigenous technologies, reinforces the socio-political systems and served as strong support to the peoples' religious beliefs and worldview.

In Nigeria, the foundation of the 20th century "new" arts, the nonessential art, "an art for its own sake", could largely be attributed to the people's embrace of western education and life styles. To a greater extent, the missionaries and not the colonial government in the British colonies in particular should have the credit for championing the cause of western education in the colonies. Although the moral force represented as duly observed by Du Bois (1943) would have met greater resistance had it not been working along line favourable to the imperialist investment and colonial profit. To the colonial powers, introduction of western education was only a major tool in the cultural conquest of Africa.

It must however be noted that the form of education introduced as Adepegba (1996) rightly observed was to produce preachers, interpreters, teachers and the clerks who were indispensable for effective link between the Europeans and their people for evangelisation purpose . It is therefore not surprising that art was not introduced. As a matter of fact, and according to Oloidi (1989) the missionaries and the people were discouraged from associating with their art forms described as "this formless carving of yours" for fear of losing the "new children of light" (the new converts).

While western education takes the credit for the emergence of the 'new' art in Nigeria, it also had a share along with Christianity and colonialism for dismantling the people's culture and lifting the art off the people's essential list. The incursion of the three displaced many local religions, social and political institutions such as cult groups, age grades and royal courts which provided artists with their main sources of inspiration, patronage and livelihood. Towards the mid 20th century, a vacuum seems to had been created with the displacement and modifications of traditional institutions with some of them being labelled 'uncivilised' or 'paganish' thus loosing due attention and making many local artists to be out of job for lack of patronage. Unfortunately too, the western oriented type of education which was dispensed even at the higher levels failed to give students meaningful insights into the indigenous cultures. Dingome (1986) writing on this and with particular reference to literature in Nigeria puts it this way:

.....there were little or no encouragement for budding fiction writers to draw their inspiration from the vigorous forms of traditional literatures in a way that could have aptly mirrored the startling changes through which Nigerian was passing in order to meet the demand of a new civilisation.

2.1 Nationalist ideals in modern Nigerian art

There is no doubt that the ideologies of Pan-Africanism and nationalism inspired the revolution in the Visual arts. The first set of the new African Visual artists to be trained abroad had their training in Europe, with most of them schooling in the home countries of their colonial governments. Although there were no records of their direct involvement in the wave of nationalists black movements abroad, it was however obvious that they must have experienced directly or indirectly some level of racial discrimination and absorbed some nationalists' ideals as evident in their personal philosophy and works.

Towards the mid of the 20th century, there had been increased participation of young Nigerians in the Pan -Africanist movements, there were pockets of some prominent movements in schools and some political Youth formations around. Ademuleya (2003) in a related discourse observed that it was:

... a period when such terms as Pan Africanism, and Nationalism were household words. The years between 1930s and 1958 witnessed, in Nigeria, the formation of pressure groups, political parties students and trade unions. Towards the close of 1950 the agitation for independence had reached the high point and hardly could there be any person(s) who schooled in Nigeria at this period who could not have been politically indoctrinated.

Between the end of the Second World War and late 1950s, agitation for self government became more

pronounced. There was more collaboration among Pan Africanist and nationalist movements within and outside the country. Of great importance was the emergence of ethnic and territorial student unions across Europe and the Fifth Pan-African Congress, held at Manchester in October 1945. The congress which was a collaboration of the West African Student Union (WASU), the League of Coloured Peoples, the Pan-African Federation, the Negro Welfare Centre and the International African Service Bureau, also attracted delegates from the Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone (Boahem, 1994). The Congress' main resolution reads "We shall complain, appeal and arraign. We will make the world listen to the fact of our condition. We will fight in every way we can for freedom, democracy and social betterment". The aftermaths of this were organised forms of resistance and sometimes protests in the colonies.

The impact of these was felt in all aspects of art, be it music, theatre, literature or visual arts, and it became more and more obvious that Africa must reassert its vitality through the development of African culture (Simala 2003). Among most African intellectuals, artists, and politician, it became obvious that 'cultural liberation is an essential condition for political liberation'. Those young intellectuals discovered early enough the power of the arts in revolution. They were indeed creative fellows whose concerted creative works towards the mid 20th century set the pace for others after them. Dingome (1986) captured this prevailing circumstance and significant moment in Africa history in what was described as the new assertiveness conceding with the growing momentum of nationalist movements of the time, according to him:

.....the people in academia and particularly those with latent artistic talents were infected with a general ferment of creativeness, which in turn acted as a catalyst in liberating their genius.

The resultant of this was a huge harvest of literary works which made the distinctiveness of African culture their focus. The period saw African intellectuals devoting their energies to the renaissance and promotion of the classical African culture. The general euphoria also crystallized into the creation of pressure groups and art clubs as well as publication of journals dedicated to give shape, direction and purpose to a new way of looking at Africa. It was this reawakening that gave birth to the theory of synthesis in the arts of the time.

2.2 Pre Independent Nationalism and Evolution of Natural Synthesis in Nigerian art

The first exposition of nationalist ideals in modern Nigerian art dated to Aina Onabolu (1882-1963), the foremost Nigerian artist and the acclaimed pioneer of modern Nigerian arts. He was the earliest African artists of the colonial period to be trained in Europe. Onabolu's youthful age witnessed a Nigeria of highly pronounced colonial discrimination. His decision to study 'European science of Painting' between 1920 and 1923 abroad (London and Paris) at the age of 40 was motivated by the western misconception and prejudices about Africans and Africa, hence the need for him to prove through his art and teaching that "what the Whiteman can do, the Blackman can do even better" (Ademuleya 2003). The period of colonialism was marked with whites' show of supremacy and domination.

The European imperialists' perception that all Africans are inferior in status and in kind informed their policies and actions, Africans were thought of as being incapable beings. Even Africans who went to study in England were not spared of such arrogance. They were not only considered inferior beings by nature and by race (Boahen; 1994), they were often humiliated. Boahen reported a Wembley Exhibition in 1929 in which some Africans were put on show "as curios" a scene that infuriated the students and informed one of the objectives of West African Student Union (WASU) "to fight racial prejudice and discrimination then prevalent in the united kingdom and change the attitude of the white man towards educated African".

However, to the continental Africans' young elites whom Curtin (1966) described as "those with the training and ability to be-come leaders of a modern state"; colonial rule was both a stigma of inferiority and a bar to independence that must be pulled down. To this group Curtin noted:

Because they admired some things about the West, the new elites resented Western insults. Because they had lost some of their moorings in traditional culture, they resented the Western accusation that their culture was barbarous. Because they were well enough educated to work at European levels of the colonial administration, they resented their fellow workers' belief that they were racial inferiors. (253)

Even when and where it was obvious that an African could run an office better, he would be placed under a white who may not be as experienced and probably younger. This perhaps explains Onabolu's preference for naturalism which was indeed revolutionary.

It is good to note that the prevailing circumstances that led him to school at old age also inspired his pioneering art teaching in schools. After his return from training abroad, Onabolu mounted pressure on the then colonial government for the inclusion of Art in the school curriculum. With the approval granted and knowing fully-well that there were no teachers to implement the programme, the onus fell on him to go abroad and recruit teachers. His effort yielded the coming of Kenneth Murray in 1927 and the likes of H.E. Duckworth and Dennis

Duerden who joined later. Through his paintings and classroom efforts he was able to make the colonial masters recognize Africans competence in an area arrogantly taught to be the preserve of the 'white'. His approach may be subtle, that neither makes it a betrayer of inheritance nor removes its revolutionary tendencies. His works reflect synthesis of newly acquired techniques and style with typical everyday life of his people.

Onabolu's paintings proved a practical way of protesting the European's arrogance, debunking white supremacy and denouncing the stigma of being inferior. This is evident in his naturalistic paintings. He saw nationalism as spelt out in the dictionaries "a devotion to one's nation" and "a strong feeling of love and pride in one's own country". Nationalism; whether cultural, political or economic, came about in reaction against domination or outright annihilation.

Of all the recruited expatriate teachers, young Kenneth Murray seemed more of an "African in white skin". His coming coincided with the development of a new concept in art education in Europe. By middle 1920s, the child centred movement in general education, expressionism in painting and a number of social forces began to focus attention on self-expression and originality. It was against this background that Murray's "guided discovery" a method which allowed students' self-expression was based. Besides allowing students to develop their talents without much imposition, Murray also encouraged his students to be apprenticed to local craftsmen and establish a school based on "preserve our culture" philosophy which actually laid the foundation for an artistic revolution that could not but naturally evolve synthesis through time (Ademuleya 2003).

A prominent artist after Onabolu who propagated nationalism through his works was Akinola Lasekan (1916 - 1972), a political cartoonist, a self-taught painter, book illustrator and academic. He started his career as a textile designer before veering into book illustrations for publishing companies. While working with CMS Bookshop between 1936 and 1940, he took corresponding courses in fine art from Normal College of Art in London and commercial art and cartooning from Washington School of Art in the United States of America. As a cartoonist he worked for the West African Pilot newspaper established in 1937 by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe one of the country's foremost nationalist figures and established his career as Nigeria's pioneer political cartoonist. His cartoons came to depict colonialism as being unjust, and that nationalism was self evident. His aesthetic appeal was tuned to realism and his cartoons sometimes delved into polemical realistic portrayals of the bloated white colonizer, the masculine nationalist and the exploited worker.

It is to be noted that these modern art pioneer's preference for realism was indeed revolutionary, a fight against European imperialists' perception that all Africans are inferior in status and in kind informed their policies and actions, Africans were thought of as being incapable beings. However, to the continental African young elites, whom Curtin (1966) describes as "those with the training and ability to be-come leaders of a modern state", the colonial rule was both a stigma of inferiority and a bar to independence, that must be pull down. To this group Curtin noted:

Because they admired some things about the West, the new elites resented Western insults. Because they had lost some of their moorings in traditional culture, they resented the Western accusation that their culture was barbarous. Because they were well enough educated to work at European levels of the colonial administration, they resented their fellow workers' belief that they were racial inferiors. (253)

Ben Enwonwu (1921 - 1993), a son of a carver and student of Kenneth Murray was another prominent artist of nationalist influence. The nationalists' struggle for political independence and self rule which became more pronounced and popular among the young elites across Africa and in the Diaspora by the mid 20th century, championed by the West African Student Union, League of Coloured Peoples, the Pan-African Federation, the Negro Welfare Centre, the International African Service Bureau, Negritude movement and many other similar Pan Africanist ideals inspired Enwonwu and his likes, to espouse Negritude ideals in their artworks from the 1940s onward.

While Onabolu and Lasekan worked hard with their art to prove equality with their European counterpart, Enwonwu and some other artists moved a step further by embracing the 'back to the root' philosophy, looking towards his culture for artistic inspiration and expression reflecting what he termed is 'African Style'. Kenneth's reference to his insistence that the work of African artists be judged by a set of canons appropriate to their own culture should be seen in this direction (Kennedy, 1992). These notable Nigerian academically trained, or partially trained or self trained artists started what was to later be christened Natural Synthesis by the "Zarianist".

The establishment of institutions of higher learning and that of the department of arts in some of the schools between 1930s and 1950s coincided with the period of heightened agitation and protest for self-government within the colonies and intensified protest of racial segregation of the pan-Africanist movement in America and Europe. Although the schools in Africa were fashioned after different European models they were European in focus of training, with emphasis on skill and originality. Also almost all of their instructors were Europeans with only a few Africans trained in the same tradition. The training was like the training in Europe.

Towards the late 1950's some of the students of these schools who had caught the bug of the politically charged polity started chatting new ways for a renewed appreciation for African culture in their works. They started asking national questions and challenging the curriculum which does not allow them to be exposed to their culture. They were calling for a reflection of African identity in their training and works. Okeke (1993) in the manifestos of the Zaria Arts Society inaugurated at the Nigerian College of Art, Science and Technology, Zaria (now Ahmadu Bello University) 1958, put it thus:

Whether our African writers now call the new realization Negritude or our politicians talk about the African personality, they both stand for the awareness and yearn for freedom of black people all over the world. Contemporary Nigerian artists could and should champion the cause of this movement.

In his review of the growth of the artistic development of the post-colonial period, Odutokun (1989) acknowledged the impact of Pan-Africanism movement in the arts by praising the nationalistic struggles of the early period of the century, through which he noted that great awareness was made possible of the need to maintain the national identity and on a continental scale, the African personality.

2.3 Nationalist ideals in Post Independent Nigerian art

The attainment of Independence in Africa brought with it the aura of great freedoms which spurred creative intellectuals into emphasizing the element of Africanity in their works. It is suffice to note that this had been also interpreted to mean two opposites, a subject which Adepegba attended to in his article titled "Split Identity". While African artists' call for a synthesis of old and new, of functional art and arts for its own sake (Okeke 1960), Western art critics thought otherwise, they interpreted such synthesis as aping western artists and not being original. Perhaps they still expected the young African artist to keep working in line with what the same critics have described as stereotypes and static. Iba N Diaye (b: 1922) of Senegal captures the western critics' expectation by saying "certain European seeking exotic thrills expect me to serve them folklore. I refuse to do it-otherwise I would exist as only a function of their segregationist ideas of the African artist". Okeke in the manifestoes (ibid) warned that while it is expedient to synthesize,

"it is equally futile copying our old art heritages, for they stand for our old order. Culture lives by change. Today's social problems are different from yesterdays and we shall be doing great disservice to Africa and mankind by living on our fathers achievements for this is like living an entirely alien cultural background (1993).

A great number of prominent Nigerian artists whose works have projected nationalism and are good examples of the reflection of the ideals of Pan-Africanism while at the same time catching up with modernity include Aina Onabolu, Akinola Lasekan, Ben Enwonwu, Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Yussuf Grillo, Bruce Onobrakpeya of Nigeria and others too numerous to list.

Soyinka rose in defence of these modern African artists against the Western critics on the issue of "Africanity" in his "Forward" in the 1990 Harlem exhibition of contemporary African artists: Changing tradition" thus

Yes indeed there is an entity called "Africa", but the creative entities within the dark humus-fecund, restive, and protean-burst through the surface of a presumed monolithic reality and invade the stratosphere with unsuspected shapes and tints of the individual vision.

To the modern African artists and Soyinka, art must also reflect the time.

The reflection of the "time" – an era of ascertaining "African personality", "African identity" - the era of the "back to the root call" which got to its peak at the post independence era also mirrored the Pan-African and negritude ideals generally in the average Africans' life style and more pronounced among the elites of the 1960s and 1970s. This call which made some Nigerian nationalists' leaders and their other African counterparts to start discarding their European names since the 40s and 50s hit its peak with a conscious search for cultural emblem before and after independence (Odutokun 1989) and the consequent elevation of some local textiles such as kente, Akuete, Adire (tye-dye) and aso-oke as symbols of national identify in Ghana and among the Yoruba and Igbo of Nigeria. In Nigeria, the educated elites from the main ethnic groups began to identify themselves with cloths and mode of dresses peculiar to their areas as official dress codes. The result of this, among the Yoruba, was the adoption and recognition of complete set of agbada, buba, sokoto and fila attire for men and bubà, iró, gèlè with iborùn for female even as office wears. This also informed the wide patronage and use of traditional attires such as Aso-òkè, by the Yoruba between the 1960s and 1980s as wedding out-fits in place of the English wedding dresses at "white weddings".

3. Conclusion

It is indeed certain and as here noted, that the home grown nationalism and the African Diaspora's struggle for black emancipation across Europe and the Americas, more than any other factors, fuelled the burning flame of the evolving new art and nurtured it to maturity. There is no doubt that the foundation of modern arts in African could largely be said to have been laid by the dovetailing effects of the 18th and 19th centuries' trans-Atlantic slavery, trade, colonialism and proselytizing crusades of religious missionaries as well as the Africans' embrace of Western education and life style. It is however to be noted that the African nationalists' agitation for political freedom from colonial powers within the continent and that of Africans in Diaspora's struggle for liberation in the West and Europe as enshrined in the Pan-Africanism and Nationalism movements' ideals indeed provoked the political ambience of the 1950s and 60s was indeed instrumental to the drastic invigoration of the already evolving modern visual arts. It is here concluded that the African and Black descents' concept of Pan-Africanism and Nationalism (home and abroad) which fuelled the young African elites' renewed appreciation of interest in African culture and quest for African identity; the "urge for a concurrent reaffirmation of Africa's own values as expressed in its arts, its literature, its philosophy and its history", also stimulated and fed the pre/post independent visual arts actually midwife the 'Zarianist' revolution and the reinvention of the concept of synthesis as evident in the Zaria Society of Art's natural synthesis theory as well as the post independent's emergence of art movements and stylistic art schools in Nigeria.

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