

The Challenges and the Development of Style in Nigerian Art

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Abstract

The development of artistic styles in the Nigerian art scene has developed almost along the same line as in other places worldwide, while the challenges facing the artist are almost the same everywhere. This may be so because these challenges are fundamental. The quest for identity, change, statement of purpose, sense of belonging, problem solving, and in some cases revolt, outright breaking of established art laws and most importantly personal experience are some of the influences and basis on which the creating or the development of styles in Nigeria rests upon. Some the styles and expression are new, while others are further developments, synthesis, or combinations from existing styles and techniques available in the different field of fine and applied arts. We are familiar with styles, which are trademarks of established and successful artists in our society; styles, which are a development of different art schools in Nigeria and in recent years the ones that are evolving among talented and creative young Nigerian artists. The later is what this paper seeks to examine. What are the challenges, Inspiration, and the motivation and most importantly influences behind these new innovations?

1.0 Introduction

Style in art has been defined or expressed as the characteristic manner and appearance of the works of an artist, school or period (Turner, 2003). It is also a distinctive manner in which an artist executes his works. It is therefore not too strange that there are hundreds of ways in which artists from different cultures, schools, and periods have expressed themselves over several centuries. The stylistic differences in the expression of art thus reveal that art is dynamic, and like all other trade and callings it has developed and survived through different periods. From such artistic development we have, Classical art, Expressionism, Roman art, Renaissance, Impressionism, Cubism, Surrealism, Fauvism, 'African art', and all other isms that have developed over several centuries. Thus Manet is to Impressionism as Picasso is to Cubism.

These brilliant and creative artists of different periods or cultures responded to the challenges posed to them from several angles within the confines of the world they live in. They have perfectly played the role that is expected of them as the mirror of the society, and by so doing gave the world order and beauty.

In the western art history, there is a continuous development of style modified by the experience of the artists, and the expectation of their public (Cornell, 1983). Such expectation is one of the numerous challenges facing the artist, but such expectation and other vectors are in themselves the catalysts of change and the development of style. It was on such basis for change that the stylistic development in western art rests. In order to seek and understand or appreciate these artistic styles, it was a necessity to know the training and techniques, of the artist, society in which they live in and materials available to the artist at a particular period. It is on such basis that in-depth studies were done on western artists; at the same time it would be highly beneficial if proper studies and documentation of styles in Nigerian art are given the same exposition.

In Africa, and with particular reference to Nigerian art, these situations mentioned were also very necessary for the artist to develop. A divergence from the western art history is the non-classification and lack of labelling in the identification of style. Despite the European writer's bias in their study of African art, it is no longer tenable to blame such on the doorstep of these scholars. Academic and practicing artist should put more efforts in documenting their works, that of others and also put the writings of the past in the right perspective and present proper classification of our arts.

The ancient art of Nigeria in itself has presented us with very distinct stylistic differences and development. According to Fagg, (1990), Nok corpus is remarkable for its reconciliation of great diversity of conceptual form with a pervading unity of style, which enables us to recognize two pieces instantly as belonging to the same style. He also mentions the unifying traits in the case of the Yoruba wood carving. These two he says illustrates well the richness of sculptural invention, which is found in the middle, range between naturalism and abstraction (Fagg 1990:23). Although there are great similarities, stylistic differences have been identified from the classical naturalism of the Ife art Corpus of the Yoruba to the stylized court art of Benin. Evidences abound of several art forms and styles within the circles of ancient Nigeria art. Furthermore, the development of modern art in Nigeria presents to us some great similarities in stylistic development as in the Western world. In actual fact, many artists have worked in the styles inherent in the history of Western art. We find good examples in Abayomi Barber and Josy Ajiboye, who work extensively as super realists (Surrealism) and Kolade Oshinowo and Lara Ige whose works exhibits the impressionistic style of the nineteenth century. In recent years there have been several stylistic development by young artists working in different media and materials. In addition to documenting the stylistic development of these young artists, this paper also seek to examine these developments viz the

development of style in Nigerian art. What are the challenges, the catalysts, and influences of such development? These are some of the questions this paper will try to examine, but before then it will be necessary to take a brief journey along the road of stylistic development art in Nigerian.

2.0 The Development of Style in Nigerian Contemporary Art.

The stylistic development of modern art in Nigeria could as well be traced to about eight years ago, with the pioneering brush strokes and drawings of the first academically trained artist, Chief Aina Onabolu (1882 – 1963). Although Onabolu had started painting as early as 1906, there was a turning around and development of style when he traveled to London and Paris where he obtained a diploma in Fine Arts. Such training gave him the academic knowledge of painting and formal European art education (Banjoko 2000:163). Furthermore, his naturalistic style of painting was as a result of the academic training he received which today makes him the father of Nigerian contemporary art. However, the naturalistic style of artistic representation adopted and mastered by Onabolu was not only influenced by his training, it was also catalyzed by the desire and urge to prove a vital point that Africans could also draw and paint in such manner. Interestingly, this was before Leo Frobenius excavated the famous classical naturalistic sculptures of Ile-Ife. When these artifacts were discovered, it had been erroneously affirmed that their origin was foreign. The task, which Onabolu set for himself was to prove that it was still possible as a Yoruba man to produce art works in such naturalistic style, the only difference being the use of new and foreign material. From the exploits and success of Onabolu followed other artist such as Akinola Lasekan, who also studied in England and explored classical realism as a style. To him, that was the style he could best represent and interpret the African culture and personality. Through these two pioneers of Nigerian modern art. We can say that the established style in the early or formative years was purely naturalistic.

The arrival of Kenneth C. Murray in Nigeria in 1927 as a colonial education officer also had very great impact on the development of style in Nigeria Art. Kenneth who later became an art teacher of contemporary art taught many students. And because he was an ardent believer in the preservation of Nigerian culture through art, he encouraged his students to learn from traditional artists, and in addition draw their inspiration from their culture (Egonwa 1995:6). Furthermore, Murray's philosophy that modern art should of necessity be based on traditional art puts him at the threshold of the modernist movement in Nigeria. The infusion of cultural forms and ideas in art thus began with many of the students trained by Murray. The most prolific of these artists was Professor Ben Enwonwu, (1921-1994). Enwonwu, experimented by transforming traditional Africa forms with the aid of western training. The result of such synthesis evolved into a personal style in which Enwonwu worked throughout his artistic career. If the introduction of art in Nigeria educational system had been influenced by both Onabolu and Murray such efforts was later to metamorphous into the establishment of art institution at the tertiary level of the Nigerian educational system. Such establishment was important for the development of stylistic patterns in the Nigerian art scene (Egonwa 1995:6).

It must be noted that the early teachers in such schools were all Europeans who taught mainly in the naturalistic style of expression. The advantages of such training, no matter how it must have been kicked against, were necessary for the upbringing of academic artists. Despite such training, these institutions served as a breeding ground for cultural theories, which supported the studio experiments of the stylistic exponents (Denice Osa Egonwa, 2017; Denis Osa Egonwa, 1995). It was therefore from these schools¹ that the eventual pioneers of nationalism and cultural identify evolved. Aside from the establishment of art schools, there are other powerful influences, which I have referred to as the catalysts of stylistic development. .

2.1 Catalysts of Stylistic Development

We have taken a cursory look at the development of style in the early contemporary Nigerian art, as examined there are several important reasons and forces behind each of the development we have witnessed up till the present moment. The ability to create or develop is an already an inbuilt characteristic of an artists, these forces were only instrumental to such development. Through these catalysts there has been a very rapid change and development of style in contemporary Nigerian art. Some of the very important catalyst of stylistic development and the challenges they pose to artists are 'background to which the works were created, historical or social conditions, patrons (taste and requests), philosophical views of the artists, training and practical experience, influences by the styles and conventions of art surrounding the artist, conscious modification of earlier styles, need for improvement and setting new problems and seeking solutions for them'. It is on this basis that the works of the selected artists are viewed in relationship to their identified stylistic traits.

Some of these influences have been found to be more instrumental to the stylistic development of the artists under study. Furthermore such effects are also reflected in the works of workshop trained artists and formal art institutions. The historical, social or economic condition in which an artwork is created is wrapped up into the background to which the work was executed; this influence is exhibited in the themes or materials in which the

¹ Yaba Technical Institute (now Yaba college of Technology) and College of Art Science and Technology, Zaria

artist explores. Such social or historical conditions may also affect colours in painting or mode of expression in other art media. Patrons also have very powerful influence in the stylistic development of the artist. The taste and request of the patron may determine in which style the artist may work. Thus his materials, themes and techniques will be primarily to satisfy his client, for example the Osogbo artists and other similar workshop have worked in a particular style because of the demand for works created in such styles most especially by European clients.

Jimoh Buraimoh and Muraina Oyelami are very good representatives of the Òsogbo School, their works to a large extent are still produced for foreign art patrons and enthusiasts. The philosophical views of the artist are mostly influenced by the type of training (formal or informal) the artist is exposed to, this in turn influences the works of art he will produce. Formal art schools like Ife and Nsukka have developed very strong philosophical perspective in the training of students and by and large the style of works being produced by these artists. Despite their formal training in the rudiments of art and principles in the Western styled education, they have derived forms, images, motifs and symbols from their traditional background. We had mentioned of Murray's philosophy for the derivation of modern Nigerian art, in the same perspective, Onabolu worked in naturalism because of the point he wanted to make. In this present study, the style and convention surrounding the artist in addition to the conscious modification and variation of such styles are the pivot on which the new development to be examined rests upon. In essence, there is a creative adaptation¹ of existing styles, combination or modification so as to evolve a personal identification, a distinct manner in which these artists express themselves.

3. Individual Artists and New Frontiers in Stylistic Development

According to (Cornell 1983:11), the development of style is always influenced by artists' awareness of past solutions. It was further stated that artists' responses to the particular synthesis of philosophy, the social and economic climate and the modes of expression of their age affect the development of style. The stylistic variations and development from four artists to be examined reveal so much of the various influences and catalysts of stylistic development. Though belonging to the same school of art, they have over a short period of time developed styles that are peculiar to them in the Nigerian art circle. The common factor, being their deep knowledge of the Yoruba Culture, and the use of motifs, and symbols which is synonymous with Ife.

The robust Yorùbá culture and traditions is highly exhibited in the works of Demola Ogunajo. A graduate of Ife Art School, Ile-Ife, he developed an interest in carving and also took elective courses in carving where Lamidi Fakeye (1928-2009) was the Lecturer. As a very good draughtsman, he has creatively utilized his interest and knowledge acquired in the carving classes to develop a new form of expression in his *paintings* (Fig.1. 'àpéjò àwòn àgbà). The themes and subject matters in painting assignments given by Bolaji Campbell also served as a catalytic effect and influence in the adaptation and development of this new style. Such themes for pictorial representation were very rich in Yorùbá folklore, stories, myths and social activities. (Foláránmí 2002:49). Never satisfied with one source of inspiration, his art though largely Yoruba in content has gradually taken the garb of globalization with the introduction of figures and myths from other cultures. The catalytic effects of Yoruba carvings are highly evident in Ogunajo's works, which has shown to be very dynamic, and constantly changing as his recent works displays (Fig.2. 'Òrìṣà pantheon).

For Mufu Onifade, also a graduate of Ife, the exploration into a unique mode of artistic style began while still at Ife. His love for the effect of cracks created by wax on batik gave him an insight to the style in which he now christened 'araism' (Fig. 3. 'A Measure of Life'). His was a conscious effort to be different nevertheless it is also an adaptation. His experiment passed through some trial stages especially in the use of materials before he settled for the use of tempera on canvas. His representations are essentially expressionistic revolving around organic and dramatic rein of forms and colours. (Adebayo 2000:23-25) There he delves into the use of ocre, the colour of mother earth, an influence from the study of Yoruba shrine paintings, which have been brought to lime light by the pioneers and founders of 'Ona' group and 'Best of Ife'². It is then glaring that from the throes of *Ona*, Mufu has only adapted the 'Ona' within him for himself. His themes rendered mostly with anatomical reality are Yoruba in content. The philosophy of *Ona*, with deep knowledge of Yoruba culture gives his innovation a right footing. A painting titled 'bàrà-àgbonmirègún' best illustrate such philosophy (Fig. 4).

If exploration of batik into painting was a means to an end for Mufu, it is in fact the end in Segun Ajiboye's exploration. Though trained as a painter also in Ife, his involvement in textile was a result of his mothers' influence. That influence only ends in the rudimental aspects of dying. His batik paintings are naturalistic.

¹ See Foláránmí (2002)

² The pioneers of Ona and Best of Ife Exhibition are Kunle Filani, Moyo Okediji, Bolaji Campbell, Adetola Wewe and Babátúndé Nasiru

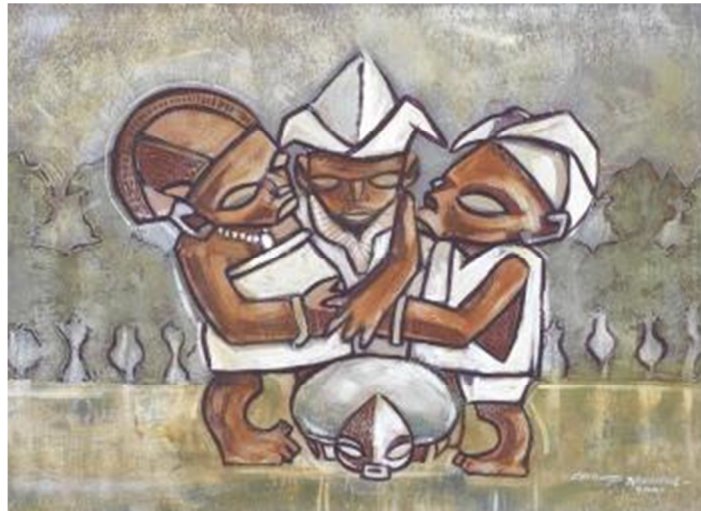


Figure 1. *Ademola Ogunajo*, àpéjọ àwọn àgbà 1999, 31x48cm
Acrylic on canvas.



Figure 2. *Ademola Ogunajo* Òrìṣà pantheon 1999,
31x48cm .Acrylic on canvas.



Figure 3. Mufu Onifádé. *Measure of life*. 1998, Acrylic on dyed Canvas. Photograph by the artist.



Figure 4. Mufu Onifádé. '*bàrà-àgbonmirègún*' painting in araism style. Acrylic on Canvas. Photograph by the artist.

Though his technique and method are not particularly strange and new, he has however succeeded in using

his draughtsmanship skill to render in realistic manner his batik painting, (*Fig. 5*). At first glance his batiks present itself to you as an easel painting on canvas. The batiks exhibit a colour approach that explores the tonal values of the hues. Good attention is paid to drawing and motifs are used characteristically as embellishment and symbolism. In some cases the crackles so elevated in Mufu's paintings are completely lost but the beauty to which much labour has been expended is not lost.

Gbolade Omidiran trained as a graphic artist also at Ife and a contemporary of Ademola Ogunajo. After graduation he worked briefly as a resident artist at Aragon Gallery in Lagos. It was there that he developed on some of the traits that have been visible in his graphical works came into play. A very astute experimentalist, he stops at nothing when it comes to meddling with materials. Hence his graphical paintings are mixed media embellished with wood, calabash, mat, paper, straw, plastic, and several organic or inorganic materials (*Fig. 6 and 7*). Instrumental to Gbolade's constant experimentation is the sales he makes occasioned by his clients (patrons), and according to Grosser (1964:142), sales give visible style to his picture, which has been highly influenced by the tastes of his numerous patrons. Over the years he has successfully improved on his forms and material experimentation. These he has also extended to other artists and students who have done some form of informal training in his studio either after school or as students on industrial training. These traits are therefore found in many of these student/artists who are somehow dubbed as Gbolades disciples.



Figure 4. *Segun Ajibóyè*. All We Need, 2001, Batik. 54 x 76 cm



Figure 5. *Gbolade Omidiran* Titled life on water 2015, Plastic collage, 41x92 cm. Photograph by the artist



Figure 6. *Gbolade Omidiran Cultural Presentation 2013*, Wood collage, straw, rope and acrylic on board, 41x92 cm. Photograph by the artist

3. Analysis

Nigerian artists, even before independence, have always concerned themselves with the quest for identity, that which would imbue their art with proper Nigerianess (Ikwuemesi 1996: 54). The point has to be made that it is not only the infusion of cultural experiences into the work of art that gives it any identity. Style which is the individual's peculiar way of handling technique, and tradition, with the dynamics of the collection or amalgamation of related styles, also contributes to the making of identity. Hence it is not only the artist's creative thoughts that constitute his identity, but also his articulation of those thoughts in concrete terms as well as the relation of his own mode to those in a given environment (Ikwuemesi 1996:56).

My argument therefore is not about whether these artists have done or created something entirely new but rather that they have been able to modify the styles in which they have developed from the Ife art school and by extension '*onaism*'. Being able to modify within the existing style and philosophy shows that *ona* as a style of art in Nigeria is very dynamic; inherent in it are possible variations that still need to be tapped. They have taken a queue from their senior colleagues and pioneer students of the Ife school and founders of the *ona* group. The variations and modifications, which have resulted in individual stylistic differences is also noted in the works of these masters.

The affirmation of such believe is also seen and mentioned in the stylistic features which differentiates Ekiti Yoruba carvings from that of Oyo Yoruba and by extension can be compared to this present study. "When Yoruba carving is viewed or discussed, it is seen as one but closer studies reveal stylistic variations in the mode in which eyes, nose, mouth as well as in strength, delicacy and liveliness is concerned" (Ajayi 1995:45). Ajayi also stated that it is always difficult to identify individual styles in these carvings upon the presentation of works but that individual style do occur when the artist drift from certain conventions. This he says may be determined through the use of materials, tools and techniques. This can be seen and are expressed in their woks of these artists under study, especially in that of Onifade, the use of tempera paint as a medium of expression in what he has termed *araism* might be the point on which his work is different. It is yet to be determined if he could achieved the same texture and effects in oil paints. Same can also be said of Ajiboye and Omidiran. However, in Ajiboye's works, he has not used any new technique or style, his variations stems from a naturalistic representation of figures and objects in batik. It is not very common to see such naturalistic painterly representation of batik in Nigeria tradition. Simply put, he has adapted his painting technique to execute his batiks.

The peculiar or distinctive ways in which these artists express themselves should therefore be viewed from the definition of style we have initially given. Style here therefore simply falls within the circles of modification or stylistic variation from an existing style, which in this case is *Onà*. If only for academic exercise and documentation, variation and modifications as it occurs from the different spheres of Nigerian art needs to be studied and put in the right perspective. It must be mentioned that in the history of modern Euro-American art there were many artists or styles that only occurred in fleeting moment of history. Such artist and their momentous styles were documented and elevated more than the rigorous exercises of our own indigenous artists, which are mostly referred to as unknown or anonymous. At certain levels of our academic studies, we are even compelled to study such artists and styles. It therefore would not be a futile exercise if documentation of various artists in Nigeria are studied.

4.0 Conclusion

The development of style has been linked or tied to the catalysts we have mentioned in the body of this paper, variations and modification of existing styles in mostly responsible for the stylistic development of our present studies. The mentioned artists have also shown the creative tendencies inherent in the Ife art school, which Egonwa (1995) describe as a “presentation of a clearly distinctive character which marks a school, whose stylistic quiver is full of many tendencies,” these tendencies is exhibited in the works of these artists and many other artists within the Nigerian space.

However, arising from these discussions are begging questions, which may still be the subject of another discuss. One of such is, how long would an artist work in a particular distinctive manner before it can be recognised as a style; should an artist unilaterally label his own style? To answer partly we find some kind of response in the writing of Lassalle (1993:210) who was of the opinion that labelling is a frequent phenomenon in the history of *avant-garde*, more so when it is viewed as a device of advertising people. Though not particularly harmful, Mufu’s christening of ‘*araism*’ could be viewed from this perspective. Be that as it may, he has used it to identify himself in relationship to the expressive medium he swims in, and for over a decade, he and his disciples and others who work in that style have shown that it takes dexterity and consistency in what you do to establish yourself. On the other hand, the dynamism orchestrated around the word (Labelling or nomenclature) provided a promotional instrument in the art market. The other important question in the context of this paper would be how long can the artist under discuss sustain the stylistic variation in which they have started? Only time will tell.

In conclusion, the strong artistic tradition that pervades Ife as an ancient town still exists in the Ife Art School, that these young artists, like their forbears have shown promising beginning needs encouragement, documentation. More so when the tremendous creative deposits embedded in an artist cannot be limited or bound by many of the man made rules or convention, it is these creative abilities which have continually lead the artist to look for various means by which he can best represent or express himself weather as an escapist means or truthfully being creative. These artists¹ though young and still in the formative years of their careers have shown brilliant tendencies towards establishing a style in which they can be identified. It is hoped that through studies such as this, a constant repertoire/literature of Nigerian art and artist will be available, revealing their stylistic development over a period of time.

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¹ All these artists have continued along the line of the discussion. They have not waned and are well established artists in Nigeria today practicing and creating art works in the same style. This is to acknowledge that this paper in its original form was first published with the same title in 2005 as part of a conference proceeding titled *Issues and Challenges of Creativity in Contemporary Nigerian Art*. I therefore want to thank Culture and Creative Art Forum, the publishers, for the permission to republish this paper in its modified version.