Cultural Articulations of Contemporary Art as Developmental Incentives for Nigeria and Her Diaspora

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ABSTRACT

The prospect of the culturally oriented Nigerian contemporary art as an incentive for not only fostering national development, but also propagating art and cultural collaboration with the Diaspora has not been given the due consideration it requires. Nigerian art as it relates to culture is sometimes examined from a perspective that delineates it as a form of craft bereft of prospective insights capable of instigating transformation in the country and her relationship with the diaspora. The contrary is the case for Western art. They have for many years acknowledged the priceless possibilities this indigenous inclination of art offers, and adapted its potential for effecting and promoting profound transformations in diverse spheres of their national development. This paper discusses the various ways through which a culture-centric contemporary art can spur such impact in Nigeria and the diaspora. It also examines the artistic experiences of selected world renowned Nigerian artists whose related works have achieved remarkable success in propelling development within and outside the continent or resolutely addressed issues that impede it. From the findings of this study, it is expected that Nigerians and those in the Diaspora, will discover the significant possibilities in sustainable development that a creative collaboration deeply rooted in a shared cultural history can instigate.

Keywords: Arts**,** culture, development, diaspora

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a country that is richly blessed with exceptional and diverse cultural practices, knowledge systems and expressions that induce in her citizens, an innate feeling of strength, resilience and pride. However, the existence of a strong cultural identity and affinity is significant if an indigenous health as well as a social and emotional wellbeing is to be to achieved and sustained for citizens in the country and those in the Diaspora. Culture refers to the customs, practices, languages, values and world views that define social groups such as those based on nationality, ethnicity, region or common interests (Social Report, 2010). In effect, cultural identity is important for people's sense of self and how they relate to others. A strong cultural identity can contribute to people's overall wellbeing (Ibid.).

It is not uncommon to see many scholars resort to national stereotypes when it comes to defining national culture or cultural identity. Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, and Perraton (1999:369) addressed this issue when they reflected on Swedish and German culture in the book "Global transformations: Politics, economics and culture", stating thus:

What is Swedish or German culture, how can we chart its changes...Can we meaningfully gauge how Swedish the Swedes feel or how French the French? Even if we were able to do any of these things, could we track changes in the intensity of identification and relate it to shifts in cultural enmeshment? All of this line of argument rests on the assumption that there is in any case a definable, lived national culture. Yet we know that such an idea is, at least in part, an active ideological creation that masks profound cultural divisions of gender, race, class and region within a nation-state.

Cultural identity in itself is a concept that is fast becoming a challenge especially for Nigerians in Diaspora, not ignoring the fact that issues such as globalization, acculturisation and trans-culturalism are stimulating a

gradual socio-cultural anesthesia that slowly dissipates any likelihood of cultural affiliation whatsoever and dissuades their inclination towards their historical or ancestral roots. It is very challenging for any society to exist without a culture, since it defines the values, norms and patterns of living of a people *(Barcon, 2014)*. Cultural identity that is entirely based on ethnicity, as far as the Nigerian diaspora is concerned, is not particularly exclusive. Nigerians abroad usually identify themselves as Nigerians in some circumstances, while regarding themselves as a part of a particular culture (like Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba or Ijaw among others) in others.

It is quite challenging to appropriately define the Nigerian national identity. This is not excluding the fact that Nigeria is a multiethnic nation, consisting of diverse cultural groups, with so many different customs and traditions. For instance, the way Nigerians perceive themselves may vary from person to person and may be contextual. While some relate to the Nigerian identity with reference to a shared history or her achievements in sports, arts and so on, others might acknowledge it through the lens of national characteristics or traits, or national symbols and icons. Hence, the fact that the government recognizes the relevance of promoting or establishing initiatives that strengthen indigenous culture cannot be overemphasized since they immensely contribute to economic, technological and socio-cultural development of any nature. The contributions of art towards this effect so far has been remarkable and commendable. The demonstration of Myerscough (1988), through the use of a multiplier, implies that direct spending on the arts led to spending in other sectors of the economy, which in turn enhanced wealth and job creation, and made cities appear more attractive to citizens and companies. The findings of the study, despite the fact that it was actually addressing a British environment, has a widespread bearing on the erstwhile perception of cultural sector and remonstrated for the economic impact of the arts as a feasible validation for continued public funding. The Centre for Economics and Business Research also provides a concise detail of the impact of arts and culture in the United Kingdom, stating thus:
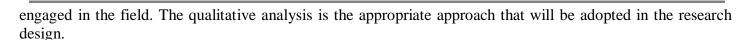
The arts and culture industry pays nearly five per cent more than the UK median salary of £26,095, thereby making a positive contribution to average household earnings. Furthermore, for every £1 of salary paid by the arts and culture industry, an additional £2.01 is generated in the wider economy through indirect and induced multiplier impacts. The industry has a high salary income multiplier relative to other broad sectors of the economy, which we suspect relates to the relatively high levels of pay in the sectors and industries from which the arts and culture sources intermediate inputs, including not least the creative industries, which account for 26 per cent of the arts and culture industry's supply chain. (Centre for Economics and Business Research, 2013)

Concurring to the fact that a cultural heritage refers to the various artifacts, dresses, oral traditions, norms, beliefs, music and dance of the various ethnic groups of Nigeria, culturally orientated art has and still relegates itself as one of the best ways of ensuring an effective preservation of the nation's diverse cultural heritage. This in turn will induce a ripple effect that will prospectively impact on her national development.

Historically, contemporary art in Nigeria assumed a unique trend in its development that is somewhat different from that of the West. Not ignoring the controversial debate on whether terminologies such as contemporary or modern best applies to the current drift of art trends within the country, its development in that regard however was initiated from an escape from abstraction towards realism and surrealism and then eventually to conceptualism (as defined by contemporary art trends). Some of the significant works of artists like Uche Okeke, Bruce Onaprakpeya, Yinka Shonibare, Sokare Douglas-Camp among others have themes that allude to the historical, societal implications of cultural dynamics and its evolutionary trends in contemporary contexts.

This study has as its primary objective to inform and possible influence prospective agenda for subsequent research related to the impact of culture-centric contemporary art on national development, as well as the livelihood of those in Diaspora. In the course of achieving this, existing research and literature related to the subject matter will be collated and reviewed. Furthermore, methodologies and measures adopted for assessing the possible ways through which art projects, programmes, as well as creative industries impact on the economy will be discussed. Finally, it is intended to suggest a practical resource aimed at assisting those

engaged in the field. The qualitative analysis is the appropriate approach that will be adopted in the research design.

Reviewing Selected literature

Reviewing selected literature that are related and relevant to this discuss will be approached strategically. As such, whilst drawing on this selected body of works, this would imply addressing the concept and definitions of sub topics that include definitions of 'culture' and 'contemporary art'; as well as cultural articulations as it relates to contemporary art. Another term that will be visited is 'national development' and the implications of national development for those in the Diaspora.

It will also discuss the quality of existing body of works based on the quality and appropriateness of the existing research design and methods that were adopted. Finally, the key issues which these selected literature embody will be examined and discussed in the light of their implications for prospective research and policy development.

There have been many controversies among scholars regarding the appropriate definition of culture. Part of the problems, according to Apte (1994: 2001) in the ten-volume Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics, is that "Despite a century of efforts to define culture adequately, there was in the early 1990s no agreement among anthropologists regarding its nature." Another reason is that while some definitions focus on the material perspective of culture others emphasize on its idealistic aspects. However, anthropologists find some common ground when it comes to the issue of the characteristics of culture. These could be ascertained in the three fundamental levels through which it is predominantly manifested, and they include; observable artifacts, values and basic underlying assumptions. Due to the fact that discussing al three is in exhaustive and might not be ideal for this study, only the first will be addressed. According to Schein (1990: 111), "When one enters an organization one observes and feels its artifacts. This category includes everything from the physical layout, the dress code, the manner in which people address each other, the smell and feel of the place, its emotional intensity, and other phenomena, to the more permanent archival manifestations such as company records, products, statements of philosophy, and annual reports."

According to Kroeber & Kluckhohn (1952:181), 'Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other, as conditional elements of future action.'(as cited by Adler, 1997, p.14)

Matthew Arnolds (1997) in the book Culture *and Anarchy*, referred to it as a special intellectual or artistic endeavors or products, what is termed in recent times as call "high culture" as opposed to "popular culture" (or "folkways" in an earlier usage). This definition implies that it is only miniscule portions of any group possess culture. Arnolds definition suggests that culture is more closely inclined to aesthetics rather than to social science.

Edward Tylor provided another definition of culture in the book, Primitive Culture, where he referred to it as: "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor, 2012). From this perspective he was referring to a unique quality that people from all social groups possess, and are because of this arrayed on a development evolutionary) continuum (in Lewis Henry Morgan's scheme) from "savagery" through "barbarism" to "civilization (Spencer-Oatey, 2012).

It is necessary to add that when discussing culture as it relates to contemporary art, the concept of a cultural identity must first be appropriately defined. The words in the term 'cultural identity' do not mean the same thing. While the first implies a response to the questions of individuals regarding their origin and are based on, and are based on mutual images and stereotypes and on emotions linked to the outer layers of the onion, but not to values (Ibid). This explains why populations who often share a peculiar set of values are involved in

conflicts or disputes on the basis of their different "felt" cultures. (Hofstede, 2001, p.10). Nonetheless, culture as it relates to contemporary art, establishes itself as contemporary art concepts that allude to specific aesthetic features that could be identified with a particular culture.

The second term, 'national development', according to Adekoya, H.O & Afilore (2012), is defined as "the socio-cultural, political, economic and the spiritual wellbeing of a society. In a truly developed state there is assurance of good quality of life, exercise of all human rights, and freedom to participate in the democratic process. From the foregoing, development implies enhanced quality of life, equity and justice, as it takes into consideration the wellbeing, growth and advancement of individuals within the society". Diso cited in Harande (2010), notes that "the structural and infrastructural problems, official corruption, unstable political and economic policies, growing insecurity, and unstable power supply are the major factors negating the course of development in third world countries". The aspects of national development that is most primarily impacted by contemporary art are in the area of fostering the economy, and encouraging attitudes that would cause the citizens to embrace their cultural identity and hence inspire them to imbibe a sense of patriotism and national pride and their daily endeavors. For Nigerian diasporas, development would imply first of all a healthy awareness that they could be identified with an existing cultural heritage that they have the responsibility to nurture and sustain for not only the purpose of socio-cultural affinity but also for posterity. This in turn will enable them have an improved standard of living since every other aspect of social life as residents and citizens of these respective countries will be affected as a result of this consciousness.

To effectively achieve this, there must be a reliable way with which the impact of art can be assessed or measured. Nevertheless, there is several existing literatures that address this. The issue, however, is that these frameworks have yet to be adjusted and tested in the Nigerian context. For instance, in their essay on the valuation and assessment of the arts, Kelly and Kelly (2000) submit that measurements used to evaluate arts activity must be comprehensible and meaningful to stakeholders like artists, arts organisations and funders. On the other hand, Hill and Moriarty (2001) are of the view that a clear, comprehensive and comprehensible monitoring system for all arts cultural work with an evaluation review structure in place will result in higher quality, more accurately targeted work and greater development momentum. Still, it was the multi-level approach articulated by Lingayah et al (1996), that describes four levels at which approaches to measuring the social impact of the arts might usefully highlight on, and they include; national, organisational, local and project or programme levels. They also assert that for these levels to be effectively employed, it is necessary that the approaches required for measuring inputs and outputs must transcend the conventional ones, as well as emphasis on primarily on outcomes.

The Contemporary arts as a viable medium for Advocating cultural Identity and Affinity

Existing scholarly perceptions of contemporary art suggests a deviation from tradition, rather than embracing or appraising it. It also implies conformity to unconventional and unpredictable conceptual approaches to art. As such it could be well accepted that contemporary art indeed had its roots from the period in Nigerian art history when artists began experimenting with medium and exploring new radical ways of revisiting art that not only challenged the existing traditional approaches but introduced a sort of hybridity with cultural allusions. Shanken (n.d.) elaborates on this notion explicitly:

The extraordinary pluralism that characterizes contemporary art does not conform to conventional historical narratives that suggest a linear development, if not progression, of art. The multifaceted nature of avant garde practices emerging in the 1960s, from minimalism and conceptual art to happenings, Fluxes, and performance to earth art, pop art, video, and art and technology, constitute a remarkable diversity of artistic exploration that was co synchronous with a dramatic growth of the market for contemporary art.

However, the fact is that art in the true African worldview is wholly integrated into her religious and cultural fabric. Leaning on the generic definition of culture that describes it as a way of life, one can infer that art to the African is a perception and expression of his worldview and how he interacts with society. It is no wonder that abstraction was at its peak in African art long before the West ventured into it, although it was perceived from a more spiritual angle than a conceptual one. Interestingly, the historical trend of contemporary art in Nigeria, followed a peculiar path. While the trajectory of Western contemporary art was initiated with a departure from

realism to abstraction then to conceptualism, that of Nigeria took shape from abstraction to realism to conceptualism. The Natural synthesis ideology, among other similar art schools that preceded it paved the way for contemporary art to evolve to what it is today in Nigeria, and to how it is lauded in the art world. Still, the ideology foreshadowed the inclination of contemporary art practices evolving its unique form of hybridity. The works of renowned artists like El Anatsui, Yinka Shonibare and Sokare Douglas-Camp, among others while acknowledging the conceptual tenets of this genre, still expressed their themes from a rich aesthetic cultural platform. The impact of this approach jolted and fascinated a shocked western and indeed global audience. All of a sudden, the world was given a new orientation of the history of Africa from an aesthetic standpoint. The prospect of this information was fraught with possibilities, that art practice in the continent indeed has the potential to address and even provide priceless insights into relevant global issues and personal, national and international controversial themes.

Culture evolves. But one of the most significant ways of preserving it is through arts. This is evident that many of the civilization where able to live the most surviving information about their ways of life through excavated works of artifacts and architecture. In the same vein, contemporary art has the same capability of preserving information about the present for posterity.

A Review of Selected Nigerian Contemporary Art

As stated earlier, the contributions of art in enhancing development in Nigeria, as well as for her diaspora has been commendable in recent times and attracted a lot of global appraisal in the art field. This is evident in the exploits of prominent Nigerians and Artists influenced by Nigerian art ideology in the international scene. As such works of artists like EL Enatsui, Yinka Shonibare, Sokari Douglas Camp, Ndidi Dike among others have commanded a profound global interest and attention on the prospects of contemporary art in Nigeria. For further emphasis, the works of these artists will be discussed as they relate to their respective manipulations of cultural allusions and how they integrate this in contemporary art. The intent of this is to establish the possibilities of creatively articulating concepts and addressing themes inspired by the diverse cultures in Nigeria. It also implies that these diverse cultural aesthetics within the country have the propensity of evolving and adapting to location, time and space. As such the selected contemporary art works to be reviewed include those of Yinka Shonibari, Sokari Douglas Camp, Ndidi Dike and El Anatsui.

Yinka Shonibari

Born in 1962 in London, Yinka Shonibari, grew up in both the United Kingdom and Nigeria. His educational background was also His concepts basically address cultural hybridity and construction of identity. He has a unique approach of creatively Synthesizing cultural and historical signifiers in his videos, photographs and installations (see fig.1), to blur boundaries between class and ethnicity, high and low art and coloniser-colonised relationships (White, 2010).

Fig.1 Shonibari Yinka. Scramble for Africa. Invariable dimension.© Ruth White art and Research Design Sketch Book

Sokari Douglas-Camp

Sokari draws the inspiration of her works, which mostly consist mostly of scupture from kalabari culture of the Ijaw ethnic group. Aspects of the culture most of her works allude to include traditions and aesthetics of masquerades, textiles, dances, and other ceremonies that she witnessed while growing up in her native homeland. She often depicts these in her kinetic steel sculptures with her unique style of cladding the figures, which are also the main subjects, with sculpted costumes, textiles and sometimes with sourced organic materials. Sokari is mostly concerned with the fact that the western portrayal of African masks is usually and erroneously static which contradicts their lively context in their original culture, and attempts to address this misrepresentation by ensuring that are sculptures are relatively kinetic (fig.2).

Fig.2. Sokari Douglas-Camp. Asoebi. Steel and Chicken wire, 240 x 40cm, 2005© British Museum

Towards Fostering National Development and the Diaspora: Reflections on the prospects of culture-centric Nigerian contemporary art

The findings of researches in recent times have revealed that proximity to art and culture can eventually translate into higher wages and productivity. This is evident in the fact that many commercial creative industries draw upon the art and culture as a source of inspiration. In other words they diffuse innovative content and ideas from arts and culture in their productions (CEBR, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Governments worldwide recognise that creative industries are a significant force in the modern economy and as a result many governments have issued national strategies targeting their creative businesses and workforce.

Nigeria's creative industries, talent and culture have a proud and distinctive international profile.

Nigeria's rich cultural, historical and natural heritage offers great potential for economic growth, increase in employment and greater social cohesion. In order to utilize this potential, investments are needed to halt the further deterioration of its cultural heritage and to revitalise part of this heritage for the use of current and future generations. Support is needed to spur on developments in the area of contemporary art and culture and to gear- up intercultural dialogue and a greater public awareness about the importance of cultural diversity.

Besides investments in the safeguarding of Nigerian cultural heritage, there is a pressing need to raise level of peoples' involvement in art and culture; there is a need to direct support towards measures which will provide people with greater access to Nigerian art, culture and heritage both physically and digitally.

There is also a need to develop cultural professionals' capacity to adapt to current challenges related to the digital shift and to the need to reach 'new' audiences and deepen bonds with current audiences. This could be

achieved through encouraging art organisations and the initiating Federal art and cultural ministries to provide avenues for grants and partnerships

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