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Onaism: An Artistic Model of Yoruba Civilization in Nigeria (Pp. 234-246)

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Ona stylistic tendency as an artistic model of Yoruba civilization in Nigeria. The quest to carve an identity led to series of experiments with diverse motifs and idioms in order to create art works reflecting our traditional setting. The Ona artistic movement is one of the many fruits or harvest emanating from the natural synthesis theory of the late nineteen fifties. It is the intention of the writer to examine its development from the modest beginning to its robust formalistic model of artistic expression. Through interviews with exponents and review of a number of literatures, it was found out that the Ona movement has to a large extent facilitated the crystallization of Nigerian visual art. The younger generation of Yoruba artists is inclined to revive Yoruba artforms, motifs and philosophy through constant experimentation with local materials, patterns and images rooted in modern styles. Through the use of this idiom, the Yoruba artists have carved an image for themselves by projecting Ona art as a formalistic model of artistic expression in Nigeria and the world at large.

Keywords: Ona, Ornament, Pattern Motif, Design

Introduction

In classical Greek and Roman view, all art was an imitation of nature and the artist's skill was measured by his ability to create life-like images. Prior to the period of independence in Nigeria, the formalist mode of artistic expression is that of naturalism whereby a facsimile of the subject matter is represented. At the twilight of independence, while the politicians were fighting for political independence, the Nigerian artists were equally fashioning out what could be referred to as the Nigerian traditional mode of artistic expression or an indigenous mode of our creative culture thus serving as springboard to carve an identity for Nigerian art.

In this scenario, various genre of artistic idioms became visible in the Nigerian visual landscape. This, thus, gave birth to Onaism as an artistic model of Yoruba civilization in Nigeria. The Ona artistic movement is one of the many fruits or harvest emanating from the natural synthesis theory of the late 1950s in Nigerian contemporary art. During this phase, novel art styles evolved such as the installation and performance art – A well sponsored form of globalization in the creative enterprise. It is on this backdrop that the writer seeks to redefine the concept, evolution, exponents and possible contributions to the visual art practices in Nigeria.

The Concept of Ona

The Yoruba people of South – Western Nigeria constitute one of the strongest and largest cultural groups in Africa South of the Sahara. They are descendants of a great ancestry and progeny of noble tradition. Yoruba art is among the earliest known by the West and consists of some of the best studied African works in the field. The Yoruba word for art is generic. The Yoruba word for art *Ona* means not only art but also design and even the profession of the artist/designer. Henry J. Drewel, Baba Tunde Lawal and Roland Abiodun have written on issues relating to Yoruba art and aesthetics. Others such as John Picton, Frank Willet, John Pemberton III and Micheal Harris reflected on the question of identity, style, significance and modernity of Yoruba art respectively.

These scholars have laid good foundation. Thus, Ona is a Yoruba word that has a wide application. It refers to decoration, pattern, ornament, embellishment, design, composition, form, plant and motif which are the basic elements in art making. Ona itself, as a philosophical concept and as a word especially with Yoruba language being dynamic, could mean actually

something or a derivative to another. According to Filani (1996) deep rooted virtuoso words such as Ona manifest in nouns such as:

Gbena – gbena (carrier of designs)

Dona – dona (designer)

Oju – Ona (critical eyes)

Ara (decoration, wonder, skill)

Dara (Perform wonders or design with great skill)

Ewa (Beauty)

Suuru (Patience).

These dynamic words are charged to give verbal luminosity. The textures we have in languages can be equated with the charging of the texture of the surface of canvas used in painting. These motifs derived from Yoruba tradition enrich the work.

In describing a piece of art work, the process of artistry and even names given to artists, the word *Ona* is linked with others to capture the underlying meanings. Thus, the design work is called *Ona* while the designer is regarded as *Oni-se-Ona* (He who makes pattern) or *Gbena – gbena* (He who carves design) which could be seen in the area of sculpture. If one says *Dona – dona* (it means somebody who decorates) as in textiles, graphics indicative of the fact that *Ona* embodies both the Fine and Applied Arts. It transcends beyond the level of art. *Ona* is also relevant to aesthetic appreciation. The Yoruba word, *Oju-ona* (eyes for design) describes position of “design consciousness” and critical appraisal. If *Ona* could be so dynamic in use, then there is something in patterning as seen in carving, clothing in *adire* and weaving which give a lot of details in their works. By and large, *Ona* when used in the creative context, it means Arts and aesthetics.

Onaism as an artistic concept has its interest in the revival of Yoruba art forms, motifs and philosophies through constant experimentation with local materials, patterns and images. It is characterized with the use of significant symbols charged with related motifs to give verbal luminosity in such a manner that there is scarcely any surface of the picture plane without action. It is pattern oriented with ornamentation, which is dominant in *Ona* art, given attention to details. Furthermore, it is built up with symbolic images that convey several meanings which are often masked away from the viewers at

first glance. Motifs from which patterns/designs are made could be derived from geometric, organic, technomorphs, animals and birds motifs. Others include motifs derived from nature, utilitarian objects, lettering and sculptural forms.

However, motifs are generally classified into two basic types: the geometric and organic. Geometric shapes are usually precise and based on mathematical forms such as circles, triangles, rectangles, squares and zig zag lines. Organic shapes are more flexible and dynamic. They are derived from nature such as animal and human forms, plant and floral designs and amoebic forms. Organic shapes are more naturalistic and often representational. Motifs also occur either incidentally or by design. Incidental motifs are produced as a result of the nature of the technique employed in the creation of an art piece. For example, weaving techniques as in matting, basketry, coiffure and clothing tend by their very nature to produce a series of motifs of essentially geometric shapes which Frank Willet called “technomorphs” since their forms arise from the technique. Such technomorphs may be adapted to suit other geometric or even organic designs. Incidental motifs by their nature are independent and universal in spread since any society that employs such techniques will produce such motifs. Designed motifs are based on symbolism or are merely decorative elements. They could be geometric or organic or a combination of both. Various motifs are usually combined to create interesting abstract or naturalistic patterns which are used for decorative or symbolic purposes.

These terms have earlier being explained but it should be noted further that geometric motifs generally deal with ovals, lines and surfaces with precise shapes. Geometry to the African artists does not necessarily mean a precise angle symmetry or balance. Geometric motifs could be symbolic or just decorative. Organic motifs are more fluid and irregular. The motifs are mainly derived from nature and they could be decorative or symbolic. Technomorph motifs are usually derived (or inspired) from the technique used in the making of certain crafts such as weaving, plaiting and matting. The motifs are generally decorative and found on crafts and sometimes on wood carving (Filani, 2002).

Technique

With good draughtsman-ship and a mastery of aerial and linear perspective, windows can be created in the works and a more interesting solidity of forms could be achieved without losing the presence of patterns all over the picture.

The patterns are not after – thought additions, but a systematic build up of symbols, motifs and signs integrated within the structure of the composition. In Ona art, traditional art forms are transmitted in artistic production and thus using it as a point of reference to create modern forms.

Evolution

The movement evolved in the later part of 1988 and earlier 1989 through the activities of a group of graduates of the “Art Department” of the “University of Ife” now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile – Ife, in furtherance of their creative ideas in modern Nigerian art practice. The group curiously noting the motto of their alma mater – “for learning and culture”, were thus poised to conduct research in indigenous African art in order to actualize the University motto especially as Ife is a cradle of an ancient civilization. Thus, building on their thorough grounding in the study of indigenous African art and Western tradition, they produced something entirely new and innovative by integrating the ancient and contemporary trends in art. In scholarly circles, this is a sort of trans–modernism– a harmonious combination of the past with the present to produce something new and forward–looking (Ojo, 1993).

According to Filani (1996) in an article titled “Unity of Verbal and Visual Aesthetics in Art”, deep rooted Virtuoso words are charged with related motifs to give verbal luminosity. The textures we have in languages can be equated with the charging of the textures on the surface canvas used in painting. Thus, motifs derived from Yoruba tradition enrich the word.

The founding members of this movement include Moyosore Okediji (b.1956), Olakunle Filani (b.1957-), Tola Wewe (b.1959-), Bolaji Campbell (b.1958-), and Tunde Nasiru (b.1964-). The Ona artists in the use of motifs and forms go back to tradition in their artistic expression and using it as a point of reference to create modern forms in the context of technique, materials and tradition. Moyosore Okediji presents works through the use of very sensitive, intricate lines and motifs which appear like musical notes. He is also fond of working on circular frame; a pioneer of soil painting in Nigeria. Soil pigment used for painting especially among the Oritsa shrine painters are explored and have been tested. Consequently, asking students to experiment with painting in natural earth colours using soil pigment will definitely generate reactions. Reactions are thus tilted to happenings in the environment using traditional images with content suited in modernity.

Aboruboye is work done with soil pigment showcasing the use of traditional motifs with symbolic content reflecting on the rich culture of the Yoruba.

This experiment with the use of this medium is a further attempt at improvisation and the use of unconventional material which were not initially contemplated in art production. The entire canvas is surfeited with traditional motifs which are not only decorative but symbolic. This uniqueness and customizing of art production can also be seen in *circlescope* which is a deviation from the formalized pattern of producing most two-dimensional art. In spite of the crowded textures which are of course symbolic, one can readily decipher the subject matter of the art work. These works are produced from paints derived from clay (soil) with colour schemes that are totally dependent on Yoruba colour chromatics.

In consequence, the works are heuristically restricted to shades of brown, grey, light blue, black, white and ochre with a lot of tonal gradation. This approach to creativity is to further promote African values hence the use of African imagery and materials in the works, in which one encounters an endless flow of lines that criss-cross at random, although in a rhythmic manner so as to sensitize the eyes of any viewer to the essence of his experiments. Okediji's themes are largely drawn from Yoruba myths.

Moyo Ogundipe presents us with a very lucid interpretation of muses on his mind through the use of very sensitive, intricate lines and motifs which appear like musical notes.

Ogundipe enjoys the use of colours for enriching his works. In "Royal Procession", several daubs of paints overlap one another to such an extent that they appear monochromatic. You almost feel the total absence of other colours at first glance.

The high point of Ona is the decorative linearity and symbolic representation with images.

In Eniyan N'woju, Bolaji Campbell weaves a story about the impossibility of discerning the minds construction on the face. He informed us that - Only God knows what goes on behind the facades of seemingly kind and genial outlook. The moral in Campbell's work is that we do not know what another is thinking simply by staring at their faces. In the same way, we do not understand the artistic significance of a work merely by staring at the painting on a wall. The mix-media nature gives the work a tapestry effect. Raffia has been carefully and neatly stitched, layer upon layer, to achieve a cross weave pattern. The geometric designs, the colour and the tactile feel of the raffia gives the work a most unusual quality.

Tola Wewe's work in a similar vein depicts stylized naturalism with moderate expressiveness. He explored Ifa motifs and poetry in both the form and content of his painting indicative of the long time honoured Yoruba canon of style thereby reinventing tradition in modern times. With a critical look at these works, one can observe that the canvas is surfeited with patterns using intelligent variations of tones and linear emphasis to separate the foreground from the background. Calculated and articulate mastery of structure and tones are required by the artists in order to make his image discernable and his themes understandable.

In tracing the development of Ona stylistic tendency, attempt is made with the postulated chronological period thus.

The early style (1988 – 1993) – This is the conceptual stage of this mode of artistic expression where the picture plane and surface of the art work is filled with textures that are not only decorative but symbolic. The early style involves the use of abstract motifs in a composition that there is hardly any space left in the entire picture plane. The motifs are also symbolic with a bearing on the theme of the work. Icons and unconventional art materials are sources for the recreation of indigenous art forms to create modern art. The work is highly texturized. Windows are created in order to give spatial depth and distance on a two-dimensional surface and also to make for the solidity of form. This can be seen in Bolaji Campbell's work "Gele Odun" as characterized by the works of other pioneering artists earlier mentioned. Gele Odun is surfeited with abstracted textures that are not only decorative but symbolic. The middle period (1994 – 1999) is a continuation of the traditional format with considerable shift in producing works that are less compacted with space evenly distributed. Forms are well pronounced and quite realistic.

The middle style embraced the use of human and animal figures in diverse proportions in composition. All the compositional elements are not as compacted when compared to the work of previous style. Then the later style (2000 – 2008) is characterized with works perhaps due to their use for social commentaries to resolve some ills in society, the works reflect an eclecticism of the adaptation of motifs from diverse stylistic groupings to create art works with motifs that are quite representational and conventional. The recent compositions have reduced textures and highly interfaced. Along with the traditional consciousness, the artist of this period tries to project individual concept to reconstruct their visual grammar. There are younger

generation of Yoruba artists especially trained at the art department at Ife such as Wole Lagunji, Adeniyi Dada, Demola Ogunajo, Mufu Onifade and Rasheed Amodu, who all graduated from Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile – Ife and were taught by some Ona artists.

Contributions

The Ona School has contributed immensely to the propagation of our rich artistic heritage through continuous research in forms and creativity, the product of which are found in schools, universities and mass media. They may be helping to stem the tide of cultural alienation, which now besets black Africa in particular and the third world in general. The Ona School has ensured that the Nigerian identity is neither lost nor being recolonised mentally hence while adapting, the practicing artists still try to modernize the images and imagery in their art practices. Using motifs from tradition, the style has helped in the transmission via translation in visuals, of what our forefathers have passed down to us. In this way, they may become germane in our own consciousness.

The exponents of Ona stylistic tendencies theorize along the pattern of practice. This has given room for the publication of journals and the organization of conferences and workshops to promote Nigerian art. For instance, *Kurio Africana* - a journal produced by the pioneers of the Ona group has helped to a large extent in the propagation of the ideals of art and aesthetics. This journal enjoys patronage and publicity widely in Europe and America. This has elevated art to a point of dignity in the academic world. The past students and propagators of this stylistic tendency have ensured continuity in their art through art promotions via periodic art exhibitions.

Notable Exponents of Ona Stylistic Tendency

Olakunle, Filani (b.1957-)

Olakunle Filani is an articulate printmaker and painter whose success lies in the intricacies of his decorative linear drawings. He is not only an exponent of Yoruba contemporary art but a leading member of the Ona group of artists who are committed to the uplifting of African art and aesthetics. He is a master draughtsman, experimentalist, visionary and a futurist. The forms, content and compositional structure of his works is constantly evolving. This is due to his knowledge of contemporary and post modern artistic development within the continent and the ongoing globalization process. Filani was born on September, 8 1957 and hails from Ikole – Ekiti, Ondo State, Nigeria. He holds a B.A. Hons Degree in Fine Arts specializing in

Graphics from the University of Ife, Ile-Ife; MFA degree in printmaking from the University of Benin, Benin City and a Ph.D degree in visual arts from the University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.

Nature and Technique of His Work

His paintings fall under four main groups, namely semi – dissected works, completely dissected compositions, figurative expression and landscapes. The lyrical lines and forms of Olakunle Filani provide an excellent break between two painting techniques – the oil medium and mixed media techniques. Apart from being a painter and printmaker, Filani is also a fine draughtsman.

Pen and Ink is Filani’s most effective medium of expression influenced by the printmaking styles of Munio Makuchi, the Japanese – American. Filani’s drawings are intricate and visually rich. His lines are carefully thought out and sensitively placed, in such a way that each line seems to tell a story of its own. His proficiency and attention to details is remarkable. There is no doubt that these virtues are what imbue his work with so much richness.

Tola Wewe (b.1959-)

Tola Wewe is an apostle of the Ona creative movement. He is an intellectual and social commentator, who seems to have successfully appropriated basic compositional principles of the formal and informal modes of training in Nigeria in his works. He is a committed painter whose research into African masks yielded a new African rhythm and rich textural and tactile qualities. Tola Wewe was born in 1959, in Shabomi, Okitipupa area of Ondo State of Nigeria. He attended the University of Ife, Ile-Ife graduating with a B. A. (Hons) degree in Fine Arts in 1983. He also obtained the M. A. degree in visual Arts in 1986 from the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.

Nature and Techniques of His Work

The art of Ife and works of so many other artists within and outside this country, are sources of inspiration in his artistic creation. He is a good illustrator. His illustrations are considered one of the best in Nigerian news media. Wewe is primarily concerned with the social conditions of every day reality from which he derives theme for compositions. He according to Akatakpo (1993) in an article titled “Creativity and Diversity in Contemporary Ife Art”, is sensitive to colour. Besides the consistency shown in his use of colour, he is known to move from one style to another, which

again is proof of versatility. Wewe has been experimenting with cubism and pointilism in the African way. He is a good draughtsman, especially with his experience as an illustrator in some news magazines. Tola brings to bear on his works that power of drawing which he now combines with colour experiments to arrive at interesting compositions.

Wewe's paintings are rendered in brilliant colours of yellow, orange and white but checkmated with earthy African colours of brown, indigo and red. He employs the African proportion, with the head dominating the body. His use of motifs cut across elemental shapes such as the sun, stars and zoomorphic images of lizards, birds, tortoise, hen, horses as well as stylized human figures. Wewe adopts motifs from geometric and organic shapes derived from Yoruba art and craft practices. He sometimes extends his search for design elements to other African decorative symbols by adapting motifs from Adinkra cloth of Ghana and the hieroglyphs of Egypt.

Wewe sometimes discards the law of perspective by allowing images to float in space without regards for proportion. In some other series, he geometricalizes his form in cubist style. His compositions focus on masked – like portraits of a single face or more faces with the head significantly bigger than the body. The heads are shaped like rectangles, squares and sometimes ovals and the facial features such as eyes, noses and lips often serve as both form and decorative motifs. Commenting on his works, Akatakpo (1998) in an article titled “Modern Nigerian Art in a State of Metamorphosis” observed that Wewe's use of the circle lends itself to several conceptual and visual interpretations such as his depiction of the eyes, human heads, faces, the sun and the moon. A more recent direction in Tola Wewe's work is reminiscent of rock art of the Tessili and Fezzan in North Africa.

Wewe as a protest painter uses the image of women as symbols for social justice. In a series of equestrian figures rendered in the manner of traditional Yoruba carving, he uses art as weapon of propaganda for social reforms and as documents of faith for democratic ideal. In a work such as *Realities of the Moment*, Wewe employs typical Yoruba art forms and motifs to enhance his visual imagery. The painting is suffused with signs, symbols, motifs and clichés from culture and folklore such as images of Ghost, gods and goddesses, all living in harmony with mankind. The rich repertoire of Yoruba images and the use of geometric and organic motifs in his works attest to his affinity for indigenous forms and motifs. Wewe also adopts the representation of human figures in a state of nudity, a characteristic of

Yoruba wood carving tradition, where he depicts the female figures with exaggerated feminist even when rendered in naturalistic format. In his paintings such as *Sensual Vibes*, the breasts of the figures are firm, robust and pointed. The buttocks and bosom are broad and protruded. The beauty and fertility symbol of the African women are well rendered by the artist.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, Nigerian artists continue to stress the humanistic approach in their art while others try to invent new style and idioms. Our different ways of conceptualizing i.e. thinking out and perceiving works of art have brought about different modes or kinds of arts commonly referred to as schools such as Realism, Impressionism, and our individual way of making art we call style. Since the first decade of the twentieth century witnessed the radicalization of art in Europe brought about by the assimilation of African philosophy of art, it has changed European perception of African art. To a number of Europeans, nothing has been so rebellious against their age – old creative culture, a culture that highly appreciates the naturalistic excellence of the art of classical Greece, the life – like representations of the Roman Emperors, whose feat at capturing nature produced the high renaissance. This reactionary attitude to art rather than being regarded as burial creativity was in fact the birth of creativity (Oloidi, 1988).

Furthermore, art is a necessity for every culture and every generation. We have the obligation therefore as members of this generation to raise the quality of our artworks to world standard, especially as we have just come out from a crossroad of culture and westernization at the beginning of the twentieth century in our art experiences. Since art is based on our experiences, there is the need to evolve a technique that is unique to our culture. Although globalization has its own problem, the question of identity is most significant. In order to ensure that our identity is not lost, recolonised mentally, therefore, when adapting and adopting motifs, we should still try to modernize the forms, images and imagery in our art practice – one of the goals of the Ona movement.

Art, as it were, acts as a facilitator of the crystallization of Nigerian art, because patterns are now being elevated into the fine arts. Ornaments, motifs associated to culture are used to create art. It is therefore necessary to state that the activities of the Zaria students Art society of the 1950s which promulgated the concept of Natural synthesis in artistic production gave rise

to the Uli Artistic movement among the Igbo ethnic groups which also gave birth to other emergent art movements in Nigeria, such as the Ona stylistic tendency from the Yoruba ethnic group. Uli perse is a popular, graphic imagery traceable to the Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria. It is characterized by broad lines, calligraphic in form, a very linear, curvilinear, visually precise, space emanating and greatly elemental art with highly romantic appeal and culturally implied symbolism. In the words of Moyosore Okediji (1990) according to Filiani(1990),the Ona experimental artists have not only expanded but also have colleased to a movement virile enough to recon with in contemporary Nigerian art. Another leading exponent Moyosore Okediji equated Onaism with the Eastern Nigeria based Uli movement. He argued that if Uli could be regarded as the most important movement in contemporary Igbo art today, Onaism could equally be considered as the most significant movement in contemporary Yoruba art. The trend now is that diverse motifs are now being taken as sign post for creating a national art (identity) for Nigeria. Thus, with *Ona* as an essential philosophical and artistic word in Yoruba design consciousness, it is clear that a solid and well informed artistic culture had since been established in western Nigeria.

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