

The Significance of the Use of Local Traditional Elements in Modern Paintings for Ethnic Identification

Swehra Kuranchie

Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Ladoke Akintola, University of Technology, Ogbomosho, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

It was established that there is a wide range of regional artistic forms that are indigenous to Nigerian culture. In traditional paintings in Nigeria, all these regional forms are reflected in our works which the materials are locally sourced. The materials ranging from raw materials from plants and earth colours are used to depict various cultural themes. The preponderance of traditional materials gave rise to stylization and modification of forms to create themes, which are essentially imbued with naturalistic characteristic. The indigenous painting looks flattened, exaggerated and elongated in a mannerist tendency. The designs are also cubistic and when his subjects are viewed critically, such naturalistic elements are evident. The pattern/motifs are now applied on textiles and used in all sort of visual art such as painting. There are group of artists known as the Ona and Nsukka groups and few artists from the North which are known for reviving the art of indigenous forms in modern times and using art mediums of today like gouche, watercolour, acrylic and so on.

KEYWORDS

Indigenous; Forms; Materials; Painting; Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Nigeria is a country that parades various architectural building with different forms and embellishment that are peculiar to our indigenous forms [1]. For example, architecture in the northern part of Nigeria is decorated with various symbols such as the northern knot. The Northern knot is another symbolic form found in the Northern part of Nigeria architecture which suggests an emotive symbol of Northern Nigerian power and political identity that was adopted by the region. The symbol was adopted in the 1950s when Nigerian elites were preparing for political independence from Britain. This symbol represents the unity in diversity which encapsulated in the One North philosophy that was used to fight for representation and privileges of Northern Nigeria. This symbol has become unique in arts and crafts objects as an entity for geographical identification of the region. Also, some of the wall paintings and etchings are Quranic verses with an artistic, calligraphic slant. The verses capture the imagination and to elicit aesthetic appreciation, but this is not an end in itself.

This symbolic design has been incorporated into various artistic formations in the northern part of Nigeria ranging from architecture, textile, crafts and modern painting.

Among other things, this paper focuses on the highlight of the indigenous forms in Nigeria painting with a view of bringing into bear what constitutes pattern of forms from different geographical sphere of Nigeria. This paper observes the traditional symbols and elements that are found in indigenous Nigeria art forms that are used for the purposes of ethnic identification in Modern Nigeria painting. Also, the paper established the content of inculcating and adaptation of cultural elements, of theme, motif, patterns and folklores in the various regional paintings. Most of the scholarly works on this subject are directly on ethnic traditions, contemporary Nigerian art and the issue of regional identification of traditional motifs and values, but not on the overview of indigenous forms of painting in Nigeria as a whole.

2. Results and Discussion

Generally, the forms of Nigeria indigenous painting are part of our history and have served specific purposes in the era of its creation. Such purposes may have been for either traditional or religious activities which defines the culture of such a tribe within Nigeria geography. For instance, the Igbos made bronze ceremonial vessels a part of their cultural heritage while the Yorubas have been known for their poetic and artistic history. They specialized in making sculptures which often represented a deity of some sort. The Hausa-Fulani art is somewhat associated with their daily way of living; such routines as farming and animal rearing. It is however mostly influenced by their religious beliefs and spirituality. In traditional paintings in Nigeria, all these regional forms are reflected in our works which the materials are locally sourced. The materials ranging from raw materials from plants and earth colours are used to depict various cultural themes of painting.

Indigenous forms are characterized with traditional subject, styles and techniques usable within Nigeria space. Nigeria is the populous African nation with several ethnic groups which all vary in their socio-cultural affinities. Nigeria art forms from the time immemorial also different in the use of subject, style and material techniques. Indigenous artists in this context are the traditional artists whose their practices have taken into concentration their locality without western interference.

Traditional subject matter in artistic presentation described the focus and the intention of an artist. The physical content that is visually represented in a painting is the subject. The subject in painting could be in form of landscape, still-life, portraits, mural decoration, figural and non-figural composition. The subjects of representation in traditional or indigenous painting are human figures which embodied the vivid image of the Nigerian way of life combined with the magnificent history of the past. One of the major aspects of the subject lies in the fact that they draw their inspiration from the traditional folk heritage of the region. It also includes pictorial symbols such as mysterious animals, deities, gods, goddesses, ancestral deities and spirits. The indigenous painters drew objects, rendering their units rich and multicoloured dominated basically with primary colour in their composition. The paintings produced during this period were derived from traditional Yoruba mythology, deities, as well as, individual fantasies [13].

Artistic style is therefore the product of constant, recurring or coherent visual or conceptual traits. In painting, for example, a style might include characteristic of materials, brush strokes, colour combinations, subject matter, and technique of representation among several other reasons. Style may be associated with an entire culture within a particular time and place with a particular group of artists, with an individual artist and with a particular institution or school over a period of time [14]. Some artists develop a style and stick to it; while others have several styles, either simultaneously or sequentially. The style used by indigenous artists is between abstraction and naturalistic painting. The subjects are often decreasing of the size of objects proportionally with distance, muting of colour and decrease of the precision details. It often characterized by

a childlike simplicity in its subject matter and techniques. They explored the world of Yoruba folklore expressions on dreams, nightmares and weird pictorial elements which are difficult to understand because of their surrealistic tendencies. They made use of bright colours, stylized and disjointed figures, as well as unconventional materials. The forms are original, spontaneous and naively created with utter disregard for the depth, space or any expected relationship of motif themes are most times derived from folktales, myths and religious stories. Among the traditional artists among the Yoruba, who have made significant impacts are Twins Seven Seven, Muriana Oyelami, Adebisi Fabunmi, Nike Okundaye, Jimoh Buraimoh.

Uli is the name given to the traditional designs drawn by the Igbo people of Nigeria. It is an art tradition in which simplified linear rendering of form is balanced by an immense understanding of the qualities of both positive and negative space [15]. Uli is an Igbo female body and wall painting tradition from southeastern Nigeria that is based on sinuous abstract forms derived from nature (Figure 2). The Uli rich art tradition has become the signature tune for identifying the Nsukka School of art. The calligraphic nature of Uli art (body painting/ decoration) influenced the products work (Figure 3). The philosophy of application of Uli art form as espoused by Uche Okeke and later supported by Chuka Amefuna, Chike Aniakor and El-Anasui was to intensify the search for Igbo-identity, thereby using the Uli linear forms to depict radical sociopolitical and cultural subject matters.

In the traditional culture of the Igbo, Uli art according to Wills [16] was an art of the women folk. The motifs and symbols or patterns employed in Uli body and wall decoration were derived from different aspects of the people environment and world view. Some Uli were abstract with zigzag patterns and concentric circles, while others stood for house hold objects such as bowls, stools, pots, farm tools etc. Many represented animals and birds such as python, lizard, leopard, alligator, lion, monkey, eagle, owl, and kite, etc. or celestial bodies, the crescent moon and star [9]. It is pertinent to note that traditional Uli was employed in many social functions, such as title taking, marriages, memorial services for the dead, harvest rites and ritual performances. This perhaps is the reason why Ottenberg [9] says that Uli designs which commonly appeared on the faces, arms, legs and body of females, from girls to senior women and occasionally on the males, as well as the presence of Uli murals on houses and compound walls of Igbo living areas suggest human sociability.

On the other hand, Ona has also played a great role in the works of some of the Yoruba artists (Figure 4). Ona is a Yoruba word that has a wide application. Ona refers to decoration, pattern, ornament, embellishment, design composition, form, plan and motif. Okediji [17] explains the use of Ona for embellishment of traditional sculpture in wood. Such examples are found on decorations on Opon Ifa (Ifa Divination tray) Osa Sango (Sango Axe) Opo (House posts) doors and window carvings. Ona is also noticeable in traditional Yoruba pottery. The Yoruba, generally, like adornment for their body. The sources by which traditional Yoruba artists derived the Ona motifs or pattern are from nature, animals, birds, man-made objects, insects, plants and dreams (Figure 4). The ONA group of artists which crystallise in Ile-Ife in 1989 are united by their aim to incorporate traditional Yoruba decorative motifs in an art of social comment. Members of the ONA group have conducted research into digenous painting and experimented with materials ranging from clay and calabashes to plastic chippings and plastic sheets. The ONA artists are predominantly Yoruba and include Don Akatakpo, Bolaji Campbell, Kindle Filani, Tunde Nasiu, Moo Ogundipe, Tayo Ojomo, Mayo Okedij, Idowu Otun and Tola Wewe [18].

Artists like their counterparts in different parts of Africa have drawn some of their inspirations from indigenous forms and in so doing have contributed to the creation of an amalgamated national identity, but also continue to give art tradition a life line. The creative and visual talents noticed among many Nigerian artists no doubt is an indication that they have responded to the dynamics of change and continuity. However, indigenous artists are those that have identified themselves in terms of themes, materials, subject matter and techniques that are imbued in our tradition and culture. Most of them did not attend any form of formal

education; they learn the trade through apprenticeship. These categories of artists do not believe in Western ideology in the use of forms for artistic practice.

Indigenous paintings are those that drew reference from Nigeria indigenous traditions as those found on Fulani body art and gourd art, cloth decoration of the Jukun, body and wall painting, Ibibio body painting and scarification, Igbo, Uli and ichi marks; nsibidi script of Cross River culture area and Yoruba shrine wall paintings. There are different Schools and ideologies that have developed different experiments and innovations towards Nigerian identity. Members of Osogbo School, founded by Ulli Beier in the early 1960, have also explored Yoruba spirituality in several media. Leading Osogbo artists include the painter and musician Taiwo Olaniyi, popularly known as Twins Seven Seven, painter and writer Amos Tutuola; and sculptors such as Asiru Olatunde, Adebisi Akanji, Susanne Wenger [19].

Like other aspects of visual arts, themes and concepts which oftentimes associated with the origin and cultural heritage of respective artists have also developed gradually and significantly in modern Nigerian painting. They have become varied, rich and interesting. For instance, Ben Enwonwu painted dancers from various ethnic groups in Nigeria based on their mystic theme. In his paintings, he depicted Yoruba, Hausa, Fulani and Igbo themes, which were mostly geared towards a call for unity and peace in Nigeria [20]. Also, Uche Okeke and his contemporaries took painting to new horizons and experimented with new visual imageries that were derived from traditional African aesthetics from which they created paintings that adequately represented Nigeria, and of course, Africa at large through the use of indigenous elements and forms [21]. Artists from traditional periods until the present time have engaged themselves with beautiful landscapes and seascapes spiced with rich vegetation, alluring and exotic flowers, and cattle rearer, Fulani maids with their milk calabashes decorated and often balanced on their heads, market scenes and so on. Others are in the area of architecture (palaces of traditional rulers: Obas, Obis, Emirs, and Chiefs), festivals (like the Durbar, Eyo, Egungun and Arugungu) mother and child, fishermen as well as other interesting events within Nigeria cultural society [22]. In the early 60s in the North, some radical students changed their art styles from the ancient traditions and even ignored the realistic approach being taught by expatriates to what could be termed the 'New African' concept. This concept was an admixture of traditions and modernism.

During this period till today, artists created new sensations in their bid to speak in authentic African Odom's in the modern era. Many of these progenitors carried their ideologies to other formal schools or workshops to greater vibrant artistic revolutions. Other artists of the 70s such as Shina Yusef, Joshua Akande, Dele Jegede, David Dale, Nelson-Cole, Kolade Oshinowo and Gani Odutokun also followed the efforts of the latter, who essentially, being followed by the majority of the recent 'Zaria School' graduates are characterized by elongated forms, with elegant Northern architecture and human figures. Their themes are usually humane and rendered in discernible images [23]. However the ULI, ONA and the NORTHERN SYMBOLS are charged with significant styles that if continued, could lead to an authentic, modern artistic culture from Nigeria. The adaptations of the indigenous forms in Nigeria could generate remarkable recognition worldwide. The forms are ingeniously employed to serve modern and universal artistic development.

3. Conclusion

It was established that there is a wide range of regional artistic forms that are indigenous to Nigerian culture. In traditional paintings in Nigeria, all these regional forms are reflected in our works which the materials are locally sourced. The materials ranging from raw materials from plants and earth colours are used to depict various cultural themes. The preponderance of traditional materials gave rise to stylization and modification of forms to create themes, which are essentially imbued with naturalistic characteristic. The indigenous painting looks flattened, exaggerated and elongated in a mannerist tendency. The designs are also cubistic and when his subjects are viewed critically, such naturalistic elements are evident. The pattern/motifs are now

applied on textiles and used in all sort of visual art such as painting. There are group of artists known as the Ona and Nsukka groups and few artists from the North which are known for reviving the art of indigenous forms in modern times and using art mediums of today like gouche, watercolour, acrylic and so on.



Figure 1. One North



Figure 2. Uli wall painting

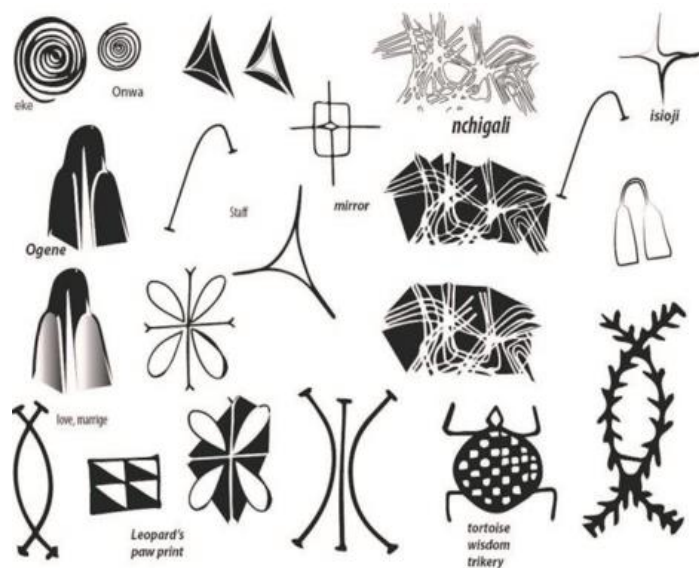


Figure 3. Uli symbol

References

- Paul S.C. Tacon (2018). From rock art to Contemporary art: Indigenous depictions of trains, planes and automobiles, *Australian Archaeology*, Vol. 84(3): 281-293 DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03122417.2018.1543095>
- Abodunrin J and Oladiti A (2015). Growth and Development of Styles of Painting in Contemporary Nigeria' *IISTE, Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, 5(5): 190-198. Google Scholar
- Campbell B (1995). Metaphor of Spiritual Power: The Example of Shrine Wall paintings' in R.O. Rom Kalilu (ed) *Powers of Expression and Expressions of Power in Yoruba Art*, Bidsol and Associates. Ikeja.
- Campbell B (2008). *Painting for the Gods: Art and Aesthetic of Yoruba Religious Murals*, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press. Google Scholar
- Udechukwu O (1990). Uli Traditional Wall Painting and Modern Art from Nigeria. An Exhibition held in Lagos and Bayreuth, Western Germany Cultural center. Google Scholar
- Oluwaseyi AD, Akande A and Oladiti OA (2018). Heritage Architecture in Ibadan, Nigeria: The House of Adebisi Giwa of Idikan. *Journal of Art and Architecture Studies*, 7(1): 11-20. Article link ; Google Scholar
- Okeke U (1979). History of Modern Nigerian Art. *Nigerian Magazine*, No. 128-129. Google Scholar
- Okediji M (1992). Orisakire Painting School Kurio. *Africana: Journal of Art and Criticism*, (ed) Okediji, M. Ile-Ife. 1(2): 14-19.
- Ottenberg S (1997). *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group* (Washington D.C, Smithsonian Institution Press). Google Scholar
- Abokede G (2009). Egungun shrine paintings in the Upper Ogun area of Oyo State, *ELA: Journal of African Studies*, 1(25&26): 1-25.
- Akinwumi T (2006). The state of Nigerian Traditional linear Art at the end of the Twentieth century: An overview, *Ela Journal of African Studies*, Nos: 19&20 pp 15-45.
- Smith S (2010). Uli Metamorphosis of a Tradition into Contemporary Aesthetic An Unpublished M.A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts of Kent State University. http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=kent1267478083 ; Google Scholar
- Ikwuemesi K (1996). Nigeria Art and the Politics of Identity, *USO: Nigeria Journal of Art*, 1(2): 16-18.
- Getlin M (2002). *Living with Art*, New York. McGraw-Hill Higher Education. Google Scholar
- Igboanugo P. (1980). Obiora Udechukwu: Towards Clarity and Essence in Nigeria Magazine; Federal Department of Culture; Lagos. No. 132-133: 6-10.
- Wills L (1986). Uli Painting and the Igbo World view *African Arts*, pp. 62-67. Google Scholar
- Okediji M (1989). *Contemporary Ife-Art. Ile-Ife: An Exhibition Catalogue*, Department of Fine Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.
- Adetola W (1990). ONA: a revolutionary art movement in commentary Nigeria? Paper presented at the 1990 Conference on Yoruba at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. April 24-28.
- Filani K (1998). Form and Content as a Basis for the Classification of Contemporary Nigerian Arts, *USO. Nigerian Journal of Arts*, 2(1&2): 38-42. Google Scholar
- Federal Department of Culture (1981). *NUCLEUS*, Lagos. Chukueggu C and Onwuakpa S (2016). Natural Synthesis and Contemporary Nigerian Visual Arts: An Exposition of Uche Okeke's works. *African Research Review: An International MultiDisciplinary Journal*, 10 (4): 257-269. Google Scholar; <https://doi.org/10.4314/afrrrev.v10i4.18>
- Ikwuemesi K (1996). Nigeria Art and the Politics of Identity, *USO: Nigeria Journal of Art*, 1(2): 16-18.
- Filani K (1998). Form and Content as a Basis for the Classification of Contemporary Nigerian Arts, *USO. Nigerian Journal of Arts*, 2 (1): 38-42.

- Shi Yuan Meng. The Initial Collision of Chinese and Western Civilizations – The Portuguese Settlement in Macao and the Countermeasures of the Ming Government. *Gansu Social Sciences*, pp. 142, 2003(1).
- Pe. Manuelt Eixeira, "The Church in Macao", Ni R. D. Cremer (Ed.), *Macacu: Ctiy of Com Merce and Cutlure*, Hong Kong, Unvierstiy of East Asia Press ltd., pp. 40-43, 1987.
- Zhang Tingmao. Several Issues on the Relationship between Macao and Portugal in the 16th and 17th Century. *Journal of Hangzhou Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, pp. 32, 2005(4).
- Liu Xiangxue. The reasons for the Portuguese colonists' occupation of Macao from the perspective of ethnic policy in the middle and late Ming Dynasty. *Research on Chinese Frontier History and Geography*, pp. 64, 2000(6).

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).