



Contemporary Visual Arts in Africa in the Age of Regeneration and Transformation

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Abstract. This study aims at examining contemporary visual arts of Africa vis-à-vis the tendencies of renewal and hybridization of concepts, perspectives and creative energies on the continent. Contemporary visual arts of Africa have been making headway into global prominence through a number of avenues which include exhibitions, critical discourses, auctions and publications, so much unlike in the past when only the traditional arts enjoyed such visibility. Initially, modern/contemporary visual arts of Africa were derided, with aspersions cast on the authenticity of works produced after contact with the West. The notion that modern/contemporary African arts had dissolved into artistic practices and philosophy of the West and consequently, no longer authentic but an appendage, appears to have given way to the realization that artistic practices all over the world are not static or impermeably exclusive. That it is expected that contemporary visual arts anywhere is receptive and dynamic, capable of being reinvented and influenced by practices locally and elsewhere due to interconnectivity of cultures occasioned by globalization. The recent new expressions in contemporary African arts therefore attest to the rebirth and repackaging of the traditional models and viewpoints on the continent. Contemporary visual arts in Africa comprise of a vast range of practices and products out of which notable ones and their artists are studied. Data are obtained through library research, interview and observation and are presented through verbal and pictorial descriptions.

Keywords and Phrases: contemporary visual arts of Africa, renewal, hybridization, global prominence, globalization.

1. Introduction

Different insights have been given to the meaning of the term, “contemporary” in the visual arts of Africa.

A quick discussion of the term is essential to situate and delineate its application in this study. Aniakor, Kasfir, Ikwuemesi, Magnin and Soullillou, Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu’s perspectives are relevant and are discussed. Aniakor (1997-1998:15) hinges his definition of “contemporary” on time frame which, according to him includes, “every artist practicing now and those who died within the last forty years”. This, also by inference includes every art work produced in the present and in the past forty years. The type of work covered by the term is not specified, it is presumed to include the traditional, the modern, postmodern, the futuristic, etc., provided it was produced in the present or in the past forty years. Such is classified by Aniakor as qualifying as contemporary art.

Kasfir’s (1999:10) definition though made in respect of Western art, aligns with Aniakor’s. Contemporary art, she states “connotes the art of the present and the recent past”. Magnin and Soullillou (1996:10) differ and offer a two-pronged definitions which on the one hand refers to a privileged art, the type that:

... benefits from institutional support through the system of commissions and exhibitions of national or international talents, bolstered by a critical discourse whose panoply of references enable a cultivated public to recognize the figure of the modern artist: school, style, personality, placed in perspective by comparison with a famous figure in Western art...

The other arm of Magnin and Soullillou’s definitions describes the unprivileged but ubiquitous art:

... that cares little for the process of legitimation, deliberately side-stepping the official circuits, an art that prefers to ignore its possible claim as ‘contemporary,’ an art often practiced by artists without any formal schooling, many of whom have no ambition beyond satisfying a local community.

What Magnin and Soullou have done in their definitions is to highlight the two major artistic clusters in Africa; the celebrated and the neglected, stratified based on the mode of training of the artists, their products, exposure and institutional supports. Contemporary visual arts in Africa no doubt, are products of these two categories; the formally and, the informally trained, with the former being privileged and celebrated and the latter, largely neglected and lacking support. The bulk of the products of the informally trained artists, which by their indigenesness via apprenticeship training and affinity are expected to still retain high percentage of the traditional mode of expression have now become estranged from the traditional style and are more of a parody of the products of the formally trained artists. Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu (2009:12) latch on to Terry Smith and Arthur Danto's definitions of contemporary as "art pre-occupied with being within its time" and, "as a liberation from the succession of historical periods bound to styles". In essence, contemporary art to them is not just art, assertively descriptive and ensconced within the time frame of its production but also experimental and revolutionary, not desirous of stylistic allegiance to previous epochs. From the point of view of Ikwemesi (1999:20), contemporary art "is an acquired paradigm ... a by-product of colonization". Contemporary art, Ikwemesi expatiates:

is a problematic term in African scholarship. It can be misleading since it is a part of a binary, a dichotomy apparently created by Western imagination, in the effort to separate newer artistic practices in Africa from what obtained in pristine times.

For this study however, contemporary art is seen in the light of Aniakor and Kasfir's definitions, to embrace all art produced in the present or the immediate past. Such art may include the traditional, the spiritual, the modern, the experimental, the revolutionary, the formally and informally learnt, etc., as long as they are produced in the present or in the immediate past.

2. The Road to the Contemporary

The road to the contemporary for visual arts of Africa is long and tortuous, coursing through broad markers such as the traditional, the modern and the contemporary under which is also the predictive futuristic and the experimental, predicated on the urge to break new grounds. The traditional arts are those of our forebears, surviving mostly as sculptures in wood, stone, metal, ivory, terracotta, bones, etc., and which according to Willett (2000:27), are "the greatest contribution Africa has made so far to the cultural heritage of mankind ..." Others, done in perishable

materials have been lost to agents of degradation. The traditional arts, on discovery by the West, were coveted for their uniqueness of presenting different philosophical and creative viewpoints from the West's and consequently, they have inspired a new mode of seeing and expression which led to cubism and modernism, and was responsible at a time for their being celebrated above the modern and contemporary expressions in Africa.

So much has been written about traditional arts of Africa; the motives for their production, the materials, the forms, their composite nature, the functionality, the patrons and the society for which they were produced, among others. The idea that modernism came upon African art as a result of the contact with the West and Western-styled education has been countered by Okeke (2013:28) who argues that modernism came:

because of a few individuals to whom art as an autonomous practice became a medium for expressing their subjectivity and coming to terms with their sociopolitical circumstances – with their own emergent modernities.

Kasfir (1999:10) and Nicodemus (2013:17) agree on the description of modern art as representing a break with the past, with modernism being a multifaceted phenomenon, meaning different things to the different cultures coming under its influence. For Africa and the West, modernism on the face value appears to have been the exchange of the representational formats of the two divides. While modernism in African art entails breaking away from the traditional style predicated on mystical attribution and taking on of art for art's sake, or, naturalism, as typified by Aina Onabolu, Pablo Picasso with his *Les Femmes d'Alger*, in 1907, also broke away from Euro-naturalism for the African mode of representation, both of which were significant departures from their respective pasts. However, to reduce or restrict the beginning of modernism in Africa art to the taking up of naturalism by African artists and attributing the influence wholly to the West is to have overlooked or be unmindful of the naturalism inherent in Ife art which sufficed as inspiration to any African artist desirous of the style at the time. Contemporary art is an offshoot of modernism although it goes beyond its scope as departure from artistic practices of the past to encompass all artistic practices done in the present or in the immediate past.

2.1 Components of the Contemporary

The contemporary art scene in Africa is a hive of activities which, as already defined, comprises all

shades of artistic practices and products in the present as well as in the recent past. The fact that contemporary African art and artists are presently enjoying global promotion and visibility is an attestation to the acceptance of artistic products and personalities on the continent. Art genres on the continent include paintings, sculpture, textile/fashion design, ceramics, installation, performance art, graphics, print making, digital/new media art, mixed media, etc. Besides, there are crafts and, souvenir art, which Mount (1973:39), describes as “perhaps the best-known category of present-day African art ...” These are the type made to please tourists, based on their preferences and therefore considered flattering and inauthentic.

There are also works made by the formally trained artists, produced by the various higher institutions where art is offered as a course of study on the continent. Institutions such as Makerere School of Fine Arts, Kumasi College of Science and Technology, Yaba Technical Institute, Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria, and many more. This category is influenced by both the Western and African viewpoints. The materials and techniques are mostly Western while the themes are drawn from local and global issues. The works produced by this category are seen as elitist because of the predominance of abstract mode of presentation which are far different from the familiar traditional methods. The works are believed to mostly glorify foreign artistic tastes and conventions.

Among contemporary artists in Africa are those who are self-trained or trained in workshops facilitated by expatriates or by indigenous artists. The earliest of these workshops, observes Fosu (1986:47), started in the 1940s and were established, according to Beier, as a “short cut” to achieving a fusion of African and modern art (qtd. in Fosu 1986:47). Prominent among the workshops were the Lubumbashie Centre, Democratic Republic of the Congo (1943), Oye Ekiti Workshop, Nigeria (1947), The Cyrene Mission Centre, Zimbabwe (1948), Polly Street Art Centre, Johannesburg (1949), The Abuja Workshop, Nigeria (1951), The Salisbury Workshop, Rhodesia (1957), The Potopoto Centre, Congo Brazaville, (1958), The Osogbo Workshop, Nigeria (1962), The Ori Olokun Workshop, Nigeria (1968), The Abayomi Barber School, Nigeria (1972), The Harmattan Workshop, Nigeria (1998), (Fosu 1986:47-60, Mount 1973:124).

The method of the workshops, with the exception of the Abayomi Barber School, was to encourage participants, many of whom may not have had any previous training in the arts to freely express

themselves based on their natural talents and rich cultural backgrounds. The Cyrene Mission Centre, Zimbabwe only admitted physically challenged individuals (Fosu 1986:48), while the Abayomi Barber School regulated its practice as participants were not permitted to turn out works without first attaining technical capability to do so. On the whole, a tag of naivety of expression has always been attached to artistic products of these workshops. Artists produced by the workshops include, Bamidele Areogun, Lamidi Fakeye, Sydney Kumalo, Lucas Sithole, Zigoma, Thango, Pili Pili, Benson Dube, Ladi Kwali, Adebisi Akanji, Asiru Olatunde, Taiwo Olaniyi, Jimoh Buraimoh, Muraina Oyelami, Rufus Ogundele, Muri Adejimi, Wale Olajide, Toyin Alade, etc. (Fosu 1986:47-62). There is presently in Africa, artistic traditions built after these pioneer workshop-trained artists. These traditions are among the artistic currents defining the contemporary visual arts scene in Africa.

Closely related to the workshop trained artists are the carvers and sculptors who Wangboje (1984:3) refers to as “contemporary traditionalists.” This category he observes, “acquired their training through the long-established tradition of apprenticeship and ... have contributed immensely to the corpus of contemporary Nigerian art”. Their work, states Wangboje, “has been developed and adapted to meet the needs of a rapidly expanding urban society and modern architecture”. Some notable art movements, groupings and philosophies have contributed to the fame that contemporary African art is enjoying globally. Movements/philosophies such as Negritude, Natural Synthesis, *Ulism*, *Sankofa* and *Onaism* have continued to influence generations of African artists who have built their practice on concepts such as the “African personality”, the fusion of the best from the indigenous and Western artistic practices, and, as Ikwuemesi (1999) elucidates about Sankofa, looking backward into African rich artistic background to get ingredients for contemporary practice.

2.2 Agencies and mediums

Contemporary visual arts in Africa have benefitted from promotional and developmental programmes of some cultural institutions and individuals internationally. There have been lots of high-powered projects such as exhibitions, media publicity, discourses, auctions, workshops and residencies specifically organized to boost contemporary visual arts in Africa. Auction houses such as Sotheby, Bonhams, Arthouse, Terra Kulture Mydrim Gallery Auction House have organized auctions where groundbreaking sales and representations have been made for artists such as El Anatsui, Ben Enwonwu,

Bruce Onobrakpeya, Ablade Glover, Cheri Samba, Uzo Egonu, Godfried Donkor, Onwusu-Ankomah, Njideka Akunyili, etc (info@omenkaonline.com).

Exhibitions such as “*Changing Traditions* (1990), *Africa Explores* (1991), *Africa Now* (1992), *Africa 95, Seven Stories about Modern African Art* (1995), *Africa Remix* (2004), *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994* (2001), *Fiction of Authenticity: Contemporary Africa Abroad* (2003), *Looking Both Ways: Art of Contemporary African Diaspora* (2004)” (Silva 1996:30-35, Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu 2009:6), have helped to give prominence to contemporary African arts internationally. So also are Biennales such as the Venice Biennale, Sao Paulo Biennale, Documenta, Biennale of Sydney, Havana Biennale, Istanbul Biennale, Lyon Biennale, Dak’Art Biennale, etc. (<https://www.thebalancecareers.com>).

African artists such as El Anatsui (Ghana), Bruce Onobrakpeya (Nigeria), Cheri Samba (Democratic Republic of Congo), Aboudia Abdoulaye (Cote d’Ivoire), William Joseph Kendridge (South Africa), Nnenna Okore (Nigeria), Goncalo Mabunda (Mozambique), Victor Ekpuk (Nigeria), Jelili Atiku (Nigeria), among others have been promoted and given platforms to international limelight (<https://www.huffingtonpost.com>).

The press, art writers, scholars, researchers, curators and critics have also lent their weight to the vibrancy of contemporary visual arts in Africa up to the extent of internationalizing it through in-depth discourses and evaluations which have shown their merits and prospects. The fashion then was to lament the dearth of publications on contemporary African arts in contradistinction to the surplus on traditional arts. The situation has improved as there are now books and journals which have deepened knowledge on various aspects of contemporary arts in Africa. Closely related to the issue of books is the increase in the number of resource individuals and stakeholders such as, curators, gallery owners, art teachers, patrons, collectors and even artists themselves. This has also

bolstered activities within the sector and are contributory to the effervescence of contemporary African arts. The good news in all of these is that the progress made in acceptability of contemporary African arts were not brought about by foreign institutions and resource individuals alone, African institutions, platforms, scholars, researchers, curators, critics, media, etc., have also contributed to it.

2.3 Regeneration and Transformation

Contemporary visual arts in Africa have witnessed the repackaging and rebranding of some old practices in the traditional arts. *Uli, Ona, Nsibidi*, for example were derived from artistic practices in Nigeria and have been transformed, in the spirit of the ideology of Natural Synthesis, to contemporary styles and movements. Also, new genres in contemporary arts, such as Installation and Performance art are believed to have taken their roots from practices in traditional Africa, which may not have been considered art in the original context of use but are now repackaged and rebranded as art globally (Balogun 2007, Filani 2004).

Fig. 1 for example, captures a common practice which is used to ward off intruders or thieves from belongings in many parts of Africa. The magical construct which varies in material-component, depending on the purpose of use, and is usually fortified with incantations, is believed to be capable of imposing curse or ill luck on trespassers. This particular construct is made with stick, old serving spoon, a disused slipper, broom and other items. Every item in the construct is selected for a purpose. The symbolism of the slipper in the construct, for example, may be that trespasser’s life will experience the same fate as the slipper, which is daily worn, trampled and dragged on the floor. Contemporary artists in Africa and globally have adapted and regenerated this preventive African magical practice to produce art genres such as installation and mobile sculpture. Also, the natural arrangement of artefacts and items on ancestral altars in Benin for example (Fig. 2), has inspired contemporary artists such as Bruce Onobrakpeya in his sculptural installation, Fig. 3.



Fig. 1: *Aale* (A magical construct), drawn by Lukman Karounwi after a photo by Paul Ben, in *A History of Art in Africa*, by Visona, Poynor and Cole



Fig. 2: Royal ancestral altar for Oba Ovoranmwen.
Photo: Paul Ben-Amos, in *Benin Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria*

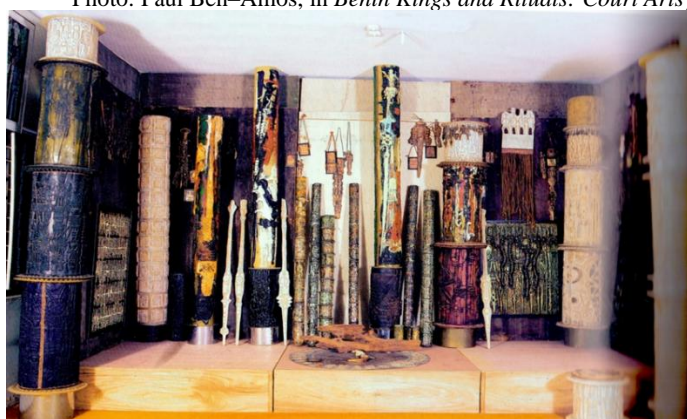


Fig. 3: Bruce Onobrakpeya, *Akporode*.
Source: *Benin Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria*



Fig. 4: Dil-Humphrey Umezulike. *Waiting for the Bus*, 2003. Mixed Media Installation
Source: Artists of Nigeria by Onyema Offoedu-Okeke

Added to the foregoing is the continuous experimentation with materials, forms and concepts which has led to new art forms such as Junk Art (Fig. 4) which also has found currency in contemporary times. As buttressed by Gombrich (1991:24), "... the whole story of art is not a story of progress in technical proficiency, but a story of changing ideas and requirements".

3. Regeneration and Transformation in Selected Works by Contemporary African Artists

Selected works of artists such as El Anatsui, Ablade Glover, Nnenna Okore, Jelili Atiku, Ibrahim El Salahi, Nandipha Mntambo are examined to show the verve of contemporary art in Africa and their regenerative and transformative bents. They are also selected because of their international visibility and spread. El Anatsui (b.1944) is a Ghanaian artist resident in Nigeria since 1975. He is an experimental sculptor whose colourful works are derived either through direct application of pigments onto them or by taking advantage of the hues on the various materials he uses which are mostly scavenged and repurposed. He works mostly with clay, wood and metal and have attained global renown through hard work, consistency and most especially, the unusualness of his massive creative adaptation of "wastes", emanating majorly from consumer goods. In many of his works, wastes of human consumerism, such as tins, cans and aluminum bottle tops which daily constitute environmental nuisance are repurposed and transformed to art, thereby achieving the dual benefits of having a clean environment and producing astonishingly creative works. Vogel (2012:89) attests that, "Anatsui's art had evolved to become a complex statement that was now globally relevant, conceptually original and visually magnificent".

Ablade Glover (b.1934) is also a Ghanaian artist and educator who trained in Ghana, Britain and the United States (<http://www.octobergallery.co.uk>). He has distinguished himself as a painter of note to the point of being featured in international exhibitions and Sotheby auctions alongside El Anatsui and other notable contemporary artists from Africa (info@omenkaonline.com). Glover's paintings are in many public and private collections globally and are remarkable for their portrayal of the elegance, beauty and strength of the African woman cast in various occupational and attitudinal roles. His paintings are usually thickly layered with colours which in most cases are feverishly applied to suggest human gestures and, vistas. Female figures are a favourite theme of African artists even in the traditional setting. Many of the traditional sculptures are of female figures, cast in different cultural roles. Glover in his paintings has reinvented the female forms from their traditional sculptural representation into a two-dimensional format which nevertheless captures the dignified essence of the African woman.

<https://www.google.com.ng/search?q=ablade+glover&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=>

Jelili Atiku (b.1968) is a Nigerian performance artist who has enjoyed a great deal of local and global support and promotion. Trained initially as a sculptor in Nigeria, his interest in performance art, he states, was kindled as a result of his team's visit to a prison yard as a youth corps member, where he saw the prisoners in the most inhuman and deplorable state imaginable, consequent upon which he resolved to use his art to correct the treatment, and performance art, he states, appeared to be the most suitable medium to fight and correct such societal anomalies (interview 2015). Performance art is one of the genres believed to have been inspired by practices in Africa. His

performances have continued to resonate and connect with masquerades and masking traditions in his native Yoruba land, thus supporting the claim of African origin of performance art. Atiku's themes are drawn widely, they are cultural as well as political and they have cast him the role of an activist. He has taken on such local and global issues as "prison congestion,

freedom of information, child marriage, political assassination, proliferation of nuclear weapons, and deification of global icons" (Onipede 2016:26-33). With his performance art, the masking traditions of the Yoruba culture has been repackaged as contemporary medium of artistic expression.



Figs. 5 and 6: Jelili Atiku, *Aragamago oo* and his performance at Venice Art Biennale
Source: <https://www.google.com.ng/search?q=jelili+atiku&source>



Ibrahim El Salahi (b.1930), the Sudanese artist, politician and diplomat holds a belief similar to natural synthesis' philosophy in his combination and transformation of Sudanese indigenous forms into modern mode of artistic expression. Salahi combines African and Islamic cultures to form a mode of expression which imbues human compositions with calligraphic attributes (Fosu 1986:84). This blend of the traditional and modern in Salahi's works, impressed and inspired Denis Williams, the Jamaican artist and scholar, who, according to Shibrain referred to this development as the Khartoum School (qtd. in Fosu 1986:84). Salahi's works display elegant linearity and simplicity.

Nnenna Okore (b.1975) trained under El Anatsui, in Nigeria before proceeding to the United States of America for her postgraduate studies. She is a Nigerian and an experimental sculptor inspired by surfaces, colours and forms in her surroundings. She, like Anatsui, also uses rejected objects which she repurposes and transforms as art works which have attracted great admiration for her resourcefulness, experimentation, depth and currency. Her materials vary and they include clay, twine, paper, stick, textile, etc. Her works have been exhibited widely, globally and have received appreciable acclaim.

Nandipha Mntanmbo (b.1982) is a Southern African artist who trained in Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town. Her sculptures, videos and photography are exploratory of the symbolism of identity and, the human body, usually modelled with materials such as the hide of cows, using her body as the mold. Her sculptures are thus to her, mediums to interrogate the animals in humans (<https://www.google.com.ng/search>). Her works reference those of another highly experimental African artist, Peju Alatise, a Nigerian who uses textile materials to mold sculptural forms of the human body. Hides are edibles in different parts of Africa. In Nigeria for example, it is believed that human consumption of hides poses a threat to tanners and industries relying on hides as raw materials for their goods. The transformation of hides from edibles to materials and medium for life size art is no doubt ingenious, notwithstanding that smaller crafts have also been made with hides. All these reinventions add to the creative effervescence which has come to be identified with contemporary visual arts in Africa.



Figs. 7 and 8: Nandipha Mntanmbo’s sculptures made with cow skin.

Source: <https://www.google.com.ng/search>



4. Conclusion

The study has examined the meanings of the term, “contemporary” as it relates to the visual arts of Africa and as proffered by different authors and also, as applied in the context of the study, to refer to all art

produced in the present or the immediate past. The evolution of art from the traditional, through the modern, to the contemporary is discussed, so also the component practices and products that constitute the contemporary, some of which have been proven to be carry-overs from the traditional past but which are

repackaged and rebranded to assume new functions and relevance. The agencies and mediums through which contemporary arts of Africa have been flourishing are also studied, their increase attesting to the vibrancy of artistic practices and, the acceptability of their products. Contemporary arts of Africa, going by the attention it is getting globally has no doubt blazed a trail in the tradition of its glorious forebears and is now seen, not as an appendage of Western art but an art that is original, assertive and self-determining.

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