

Development of Art in Postcolonial Africa: Impediments and Culpability

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The traditional African society thrived on sustainable artistic professionalism. Art played significant role in all facet of the society. Household objects were not merely utilitarian in nature but also aesthetically decorated, traditional architectures were absolutely works of art – the design, doors, windows and walls, objects - and articles of worship were works of creativity. To the traditional African society, art was life and life was art. Art appreciation wasn't a problem as the people placed premium on aesthetic of objects. Pottery, basket weaving, caving, painting, fabric weaving and design, mural and poetry were trades that occupied daily activities of the people. By 15th Century when the time Europeans began to explore Africa, art appreciation took a new turn for two reasons, one was that the Europeans misunderstood some of the art forms of Africa and second, Western values began to infiltrate African culture.

In the 1960s when the wind of change began to blow, there were agitations for political freedom and in the arts there were reactions to western artistic ideologies. In Nigeria for example, Zaria Art Society, group of students of Nigerian College of Arts and Science and Technology, Zaria which is now Ahmadu Bello University brought about a revolution, at the same time a few expatriate, including Kenneth Murray, John Digby Clarke and Mrs Kurian Williams got to appreciate the

ingenuity in African Art. At independence, the political structure entrenched by the by the Europeans was meant to suit their economic interest.

With this background the development of art in postcolonial Africa, was hindered by several impediments. The impediments were confronted, at various stages with the hope of finding enduring solutions. These problems can be summarized as follows:

1) **Problem of Proper Recognition**

Before the 70s government did not gives proper recognition to art in terms of provision of infrastructure and propagation. Emphasis was on science and social sciences rather than art. The certificate of art graduates was not quantified for proper placement with their counterpart in other disciplines. The certificate of art graduate of Yaba Technology was not recognized before 1970 as an example.

Recognition problem started change in the 80s, certificates were quantified and artists were placed appropriately. However the problem of recognition is yet to be completely dealt with. Government is yet to fully understand the role art can play in social, political and economic development. Head of art institutions such as the National Galley of Art (NGA), Ministry of Culture and Tourism, thus National Museum and so an are usually appointed without considering if such persons had any art background. We have seen in Nigeria for example where people with science background were appointed as head of art related institutions.

2. **Problem of Definition**

Art is becoming quite difficult to defined because of various stylistic tendencies, evolution of art forms and movements. The problem of definition is also compounded because of the versatility of art and inter-penetrating power of art. Thus it becomes difficult to come to a general agreement on, What is art? What is western Art? What is African art, what is craft just to mention but a few. It must be noted, however that the problem of definition is not limited to Africa alone, it has a universal dimension to it. The problem is further compounded by modernism in art.

The good side of the problem of definition is, it engendered critical dialogue and contributes to the growth of art criticism. The problem has generated topical issues such as modernity as tradition, problem of identify - who is an African artist And so one. As long as the problem of definition continues to generate healthy discourse, the problem will continue to polarize, but, howbeit, positively, for the good of the art profession.

3) **Problem of Art Appreciation**

The postcolonial society is yet to come to terms with the values that art offers. The society is basically uninformed about art. The attitude of lack of art appreciation is to the disadvantage of the society because art cannot be separated from life. Unknowingly people get involved in art and make their choices based on artistic influence, this notwithstanding, the society has refused to encourage or support art, all to the detriment of development

4) **Problem of sound professionalism**

Although many artists are being produced though formal and informal training, there are few artists who may be called professionals. A professional artist is one who engages in continuous studio practice, who showcases his work in exhibition and who is capable of producing quality art. He is one who has attained professionalism. Only few artists among the so many meet this criteria.

5) **Problem of Identify**

The problem of identity can be viewed in two ways. The first, has to do with nomenclature; who is an African artist for example. What qualifies one to be an African artist? Is it by geo-location or by stylistic ideology? The debate has been ongoing. The second view point which has not generated much debate is about the lack of identity for traditional African artworks, many carted away by the Europeans. They are without signage which may identify the artists which produced them..

6) **Problem of Ph.D**

The "Ph.D Syndrome" becomes a disease that began to plague sound professionalism from the late 90s. This problems has to do with mandatory demand for Doctor of Philosophy as a pre-requisite for academic promotion for art

lecturers. This demand is taking its toll on the appraisal of studio practice. Many professional are abandoning studio practice for Ph.D in Art History or in non relevant disciplines which advertently affect studio training of students.

7) **Problem of Moralization**

The problem of moralization evolves around problem of plagiarism, problem of copying (copyright) and problem of art theft, problem of oppression all of which borders on insincerity and corruption. Some artists lack ethisc morals; while some engage in plagiarism and copying for selfish gains others engage in outright theft. Example is a work of Yusuf Grillo stolen many years ago and sold to a collector in Lagos but was eventually discovered few year ago. The collector had to pay all over again to avoid embarrassment. Similarly, fake copy of Kolade Oshinowo was discovered and exposed this year in Lagos.

The other aspect which is very sad is the fact that same artists deliberately use their position to oppress others either by creating obstacles on the part of other artists, trying to obstruct their way to success.

8) **Problem of Research Methodology**

Many academic institution are adopting a scientific method of research which in suitable for sciences, humanities and socio sciences but inimical to historic documentation researches. According to Ola Oloidi, "this type of research methodology is academically constraining and intellectually infantile to realistic documentation of modern African Art" whereas a few artists like Prof. Ola Oloidi; has openly criticized the method, many other are indifferent about it.

9) **Problem of Art Criticism**

The development of art criticism started rather on a slow pace and did not gain momentum until the 70s when few artists have graduated and began to teach and exhibit their works, coupled with art journalism in the few magazines and newspaper of the time. Today, art criticism is on a rapid increase, thanks to major art events in the continent, academic training and researches. The major problem of art criticism is the problem of interpretation. This problem is prevalent due to diverse stylistic and ideological background of critics.

10) Problem of Sustained Exhibition platform

Africa is yet to catch up with the world as far as opportunity for artistic exposure for emerging artists is concerned. Beside Dak'art Biennale, Bamako Photo Biennale, many major art platforms simply lose steam after the first and second editions. There are a few indigenous efforts by some art cooperatives, such as the Pan African Circle of Artists (PACA), their efforts don't usually enjoy the funding that can uplift the events to world standard.

Conclusion

Culpability for the impediments to art development in postcolonial Africa is shared between the government, the society and the artists. Various African governments have failed to put in place policies that will encourage artistic development, they do not also adequately fund art. The society has lost its value for African art appreciation and continues to follow Western trends. And the African artist, lacking confidence in his heritage has failed to properly confront his challenges and his dependence on the West as a well spring of ideals and sponsorships.

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