Education and Professional Associations in Contemporary Nigerian Art

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Abstract

Nigerian art, which has a long history of practice that dates back to the pre-colonial times, has been widely acclaimed as one of the best in the world. However, the subject's education, practice and patronage in contemporary time has lapses which have constrained the appreciation of the values of art to the individuals and society, and by implication, art professionalism. This article appraises the present state of art education, professional art associations/art groups and patronage in Nigeria. It highlights their problems and prospect, and suggests some factors that will create vibrant and virile art practice in the country. It concludes that immense benefits could be derived from harnessing the potentials of art educational system, art associations and patrons as stakeholders in Nigerian art practices, effectively.

Keywords: Artistic Dispensation, Contemporary Nigerian, Problems and Prospects, Art in Nigeria, Art Profession

Introduction

The Chambers Dictionary (1988) defines "profession" as a non-manual occupation requiring some degree of learning or training. It further states that a professional is someone who belongs to a profession and displays "the skill, artistry, demeanour or standard of conduct appropriate in a-member of a particular profession". Chambers' definition of a profession includes all those persons who practice an occupation for subsistence as opposed to those who do so as amateurs. The state of art practice in Nigeria and the issue of professionalism such as education, work modes, professional groups and patronage, which emanate from it have been the subject of academic discourse for quite some time (Beier 1960; Jegede 1981 and 1984; Okeke 1981; Emi 2003 as well as Ikwuemesi et al 2005 and Lawal 2006). This does not imply that its importance has been unknown in the past as the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA): the Apex association of the art profession in Nigeria has equal status with the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) and the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA). It was founded in 1964, shortly after independence (Adekoya, 2001).

This paper focuses on only three of the numerous issues associated with the art profession in Nigeria. These are the education of Nigerian artists, professional art groups and art patronage. The objective of the paper is to appraise the art profession in Nigeria by examining how the educational background of the artists, involvement of art associations; the degree of patronage from Nigerians and expatriates and roles of NGOs and government have impacted on art practice in Nigeria in contemporary terms.

The Art Profession in Pre-colonial Time

Contrary to the thinking that art in pre-colonial Nigeria as well as in other parts of Africa was primitive, several studies on the subject have shown that Nigerian traditional artworks were, indeed, superb and of high quality. That the appearance of African artworks in Europe and North America at the close of the nineteenth century stimulated the invention of art styles like cubism, and changed the paradigm of art practice and the axis of art scholarship globally, also buttress this point. It also underscores the expertise, artistry, ingenuity, training and patronage of the artist.

The pre-colonial Nigerian artist received this training on an apprenticeship basis. He worked for a master who was understudied for a specific period of time. Instruction was given practically and the apprentice was exposed to the materials, tools and techniques of the art. He also learned how the practice is conducted vis-a-vis customer/artist relationship and the ways of winning and executing works on commission. "The art guild, to which his branch of art belongs, like those of traditional Hausa architects and the Benin bronze workers" (Saad, 1985; Ebighgbo, 2000; Layiwola 2003), "acknowledges his competence at the end of his training by admitting him into its fold as a member".

Okeke and Crowder (1981) inform that "the patrons of pre-colonial era in Nigeria included traditional rulers, traditional religion priests and the general members of the community". Okeke and Crowder state further that "the works of traditional artists could be seen in palaces, market places and in the shrines of gods and goddess". They observe that "although the society has a clearly defined idea of the roles it expects the artist to play in its life, personal creativity still existed". Thus there were innovations in creations and cross cultural influences noticeable in the artworks of the period in question. "The latter", according to him, "is exemplified by the wide range of Yoruba Ibeji carvings".

Art Profession in Contemporary Nigeria

The art profession in Nigeria, today, is perhaps one of the few professions whose members' operation is unregulated. It is an open field where any person, who claims ability to create visually can render works of any sort and can work indiscriminately. This is in spite of the fact that SNA, which was mentioned earlier in this paper, has been in existence since the past sixty one years. The condition of the art profession in Nigeria differs in many respects to those of other professions like the medical, legal, banking and engineering professions in the country. They have strong associations, which enable them regulate the activities of their members and ensure that they maintain dignity, command the respect of the society, and protect their corporate image. One must attain a minimum qualification stipulated by the association, before he is considered fit to be registered as its member. He may also sit and pass a special examination that is administered by the association as an additional admission requirement. For examples, the Nigerian Bar Association, the Chartered Institute of Bankers of

Nigeria (CIBN), Nigeria Society of Engineers, Council of Registered Builders of Nigeria and the Nigeria Medical Association have such a membership admission policy. They also have code of conduct, which is an instrument that regulates the conducts of their members in the course of carrying out their day to day activities. Members who are deemed to be operating against the ethics of the profession are disciplined for their excesses.

The absence of such regulatory measures in the art profession in Nigeria, which ironically exist among professions like: road transport workers and the automobile mechanics with presumably less lettered members, has militated against the progress of Nigerian artists in several ways. For instance, one cannot state the exact number of artists in the country and one cannot formulate policies and implement programmes with positive impact on the artists. The importance of registered members becomes evident if the artists as a body, approach government for support in their quest to evolve strategies to curtail the dwindling number of students enrolled into the country's tertiary institutions to study art annually. What would SNA say if government asks: "How many artists do you have in the country?" It would at best produce a tentative figure whereas the Nigerian Bar Association and the Medical Association will answer similar question promptly and with ease. Non-regulation of the profession has facilitated the membership of quacks, mediocre and amateurs. The consequence of this is the execution of sub-standard artworks, some of which have been reported by the media in recent times (Nnabuife, 2006). Rod Adoh Emi (2003) decries the practice whereby youth corpers who are obviously fresh graduates with little or no working experience are commissioned to execute urban/public outdoor sculptures. His example of the bad works done by such neophytes is the sculpture of Bashorun Ogunmola (Figure 1), which was executed by a National Youth Corper, and mounted at Orita-Mefa roundabout in Ibadan, the Oyo State capital. This work featured a badly sculpted horse that looks like a goat.



Figure 1: Statue of Bashorun Ogunmola
Location: Orita Mefa (Total Garden Roundabout), Ibadan
© Sam. K. Adekoya, 1999

One of the functions of a professional association that is yet to be carried out effectively by Nigerian professional art groups is the creation and sustenance of public awareness of their contributions of art and artists to individuals, corporate organizations, governments and the society at large. Such a public enlightenment measure, if implemented by the association's corporate affairs department/unit, could be in the form of periodic public lectures, symposia or by means of published articles in the print media. It could also arrange for its key officers to be interviewed or be allowed to speak in the electronic media. This approach to educating the public about the worth of art profession is necessary for the arts, which are yet to recover fully from the public prejudice, since colonialism. It is in realizing that art is organic and has to be nurtured to the point of appreciation and acceptance by the society that Okeke and Crowder (1981:63) commend the efforts of Ulli Beier in helping to foster Nigerian art through his public enlightenment efforts at the Mbari workshops in the early 1960s.

Educational Qualification as Criterion for Membership of Art Profession

One of the factors that have implication for the membership of any professional organization is the level of educational training vis-a-vis the qualification of its potential members. In other words intending members are expected to have attended certain educational art institutions where they will acquire the knowledge and skills that constitute the components of the institutions' curricula. The structured curriculum of contemporary Nigerian art schools, which is broad and patterned after that of the Western world, exposed the undergraduate students to many aspects of the art. These include drawing, photography, painting, ceramics, sculpture, textile and graphic designs. The system is such that the Nigerian art graduate specializes in an aspect of the art while he has some appreciable knowledge of the others. This is quite unlike the traditional apprenticeship system that allows for the study of only an aspect of the art and specialisation in it.

Adopting educational qualification as a criterion for enrolment into the membership of .the NBA and NMA will pose no problem as the educational requirements of these professional associations are straightforward. One has to study law at the tertiary level and thereafter attend the law school to qualify for NBA membership. The qualifications for both programmes are B.L., L.L. B, respectively. For the NMA one must obtain a university degree in medicine and surgery (MBBS), and then undergo a period of one-year house-man-ship in a recognized public hospital. But the use of educational qualifications, attained from specific types of academic institutions, as a criterion for enrolling artists into professional art associations like the SNA will cause confusion in the body. This is because the practitioners of art in Nigeria today have different educational backgrounds and qualifications. Consequently, they can be categorized into three groups. These are graduates of art programmes of tertiary institutions within and outside Nigeria; the artists from post-primary institutions, and the products of experimental art school: workshops and art training centres.

Nigerian Art Practitioners

The graduates of tertiary institutions such as universities, polytechnics and colleges of education who constitute the first category of Nigerian artists are often considered as the avant-garde artists. While some of them, whom Aniakor (2003)

refers to as "professional academic artists", teach art in schools and practice art as a profession on part-time basis, majority of them work in advertising agencies, government cultural agencies and the print/electronic media. A minor percentage of them are engaged in full studio art practice and have staged exhibitions of their works in Nigeria and abroad. Their works are characterized by a synthesis of traditional motifs, rendering of traditional and contemporary themes and the application of indigenous and Western techniques. They also work with mixed media and apply the international art style in creating some of their works. "It is also significant that these are corps of artists that founded and belonged to art movements and groups like: the Zaria Society, that metamorphosed into the SNA in 1964" (Adekoya 2001) and the Aka Circle of Exhibiting Artists as well as Ona Art Group. "Their works are expensive as a result the patronage is limited to expatriates and few Nigerian elites" (Emi 2003; Worika 2006). There is the propensity for these artists to view themselves as the cream of Nigerian artists and hence "superior" to the other categories of the country's artists because of their high intellectual status.

The graduates of post-primary art programmes, like those of technical colleges who constitute a greater percentage of the popular artists of Nigeria, are also deemed to be inferior in status to the tertiary school trained graduates. Referred to derogatively, as "sign writers" or "road-side artists", they execute rubber stamps, signpost designs, banners, mural designs, and screen print vests, head ties, handkerchiefs and umbrella. They also execute calendar and almanac designs as well as sculpture pieces, which are purchased mainly as souvenirs by tourists. Aniakor (2003) aptly observes that "although these artists who operate in Nigerian towns and cities have little education, they are nevertheless highly committed to their art, which they practice on full-time basis in order to maximize their profit".

Some scholars such as Lawal (2006) do not think that all beneficiaries of the experimental art schools such as the Mbari Mbayo of Osogbo are competent. Some of the schools' products such as Jimoh Buraimoh, Muraina Oyelami, Twins Seven-Seven, and other Osogbo artists have indeed stood out as modern artists. "The works of several others in the heydays of the experimental school were", in Lawal's words "a visual anarchy". Although an attempt to discuss the rationale of Lawal's view is outside the scope of this paper, it is apposite to state that many

beneficiaries of similar art workshops and experimental schools are often considered to be mediocre or half-baked by their counterparts who had one way or the other belonged to this category. It is, however, noteworthy that discrimination among colleagues in a profession is not peculiar to Nigeria's art profession; it is a reflection of the general attitude of Nigerians to formal education and certificate. So many attentions are paid to certificated education that the artistic prowess and ingenuity of the likes of Lamidi Fakeye, Festus Idehen, Felix Idubor and Ladi Kwali, who received training at experimental art schools and art workshops and are internationally acclaimed as Nigerian neo-traditional artists, could be overlooked in the ranking of Nigerian artists.

Unity of Nigerian Artists and Professional Art Associations

The adverse effects of discrimination in professionalism of art in contemporary Nigeria are numerous. They could be stated briefly as follows:

a) "Nigerian artists are not fully united with, the result that some of the artists tend to do many things their own way without regards for the arts" (Ikwuemesi et al 2005). Majority of them will not attend meetings of art associations or contribute in cash and kind towards the implementation of projects that will develop the profession.
b) There is also the unethical practice whereby some artists hijack and execute commissions that fall outside their area of specialisation. Artists who specialise in them should ideally execute such commissions. The result of this is that bad works are produced with impunity, since there are no sanctions for violating professional ethics.
c) Lack of cohesion among Nigerian artists, which is manifest in SNA makes it exceedingly difficult for the artists to attract reasonable patronage from government, NGOs and other potential patrons in form of the public and organized private sector.
d) Lack of full support from artists has constrained the promotion of the profession by the SNA; consequently the status of art among other professions remains low in the eyes of the society.

This weak state of Nigeria's professional art associations mostly accounts for the arbitrary measures that the governments often take on issues that have grave consequences for artists and the art profession. The Lagos State Governor once

ordered the demolition of sub-standard artworks in the city centre (Nnabuife, 2006), and some years back too, "Governor Ada George of Rivers State also directed that the "Mangrove Giant": a sculptural piece depicting a brave giant in a desperate tango with a crocodile, be pulled down from its pedestal in front of the Civic Centre in Port Harcourt without notifying the SNA or seeking for its opinion (Ebimo 1992 cited in Emeji, 2000). The artists and other colleagues at the erstwhile Department of Fine and Applied Arts of the Ogun State College of Education (now Tai Solarin University of Education), Ijebu-Ode watched helplessly as the *Obanta* Statue, (Figure. 2) a ferro-concrete sculptural piece, which they had executed for the Ijebu-Ode Local Government Council was demolished in 2001. It was mounted in Itoro Roundabout, the nerve centre of Ijebu-Ode, where it had been for fifteen years.



Figure 2: Obanta Statue
Location: Formerly at Itooro roundabout, Ijebu-Ode
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No official explanation was given to the artists who created it or to the SNA; and no art group or association spoke about this anti-art act. Government and the Civil Society know that they will draw the ire and criticisms of other professions such as the NBA or NMA that they hold in high esteem, if they attempt to handle matters that concern these professions with such levity and impunity.

Art Association and the Promotion of Art Profession

Apart from the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA), which is the umbrella body of Nigerian artists, there should also exit other art groups with aims and objectives that are geared towards catering for the interests and needs of the Nigerian artists. The existence of such groups, which must have a link with the SNA, will create discrimination-free environment in which artists of similar training and peculiar art practices could work together without inhibition. Good enough, such groups like the Association of Nigerian Sign-Writers and Graphic Production Practitioners, Ijebu-Ode Chapter, was launched with a public lecture delivered on December 6, 2000. Although we know of the existence of the Nigerian Society for Education through Art (NSEA), the Cartoonists Association of Nigeria (CARTAN), Craft Potters Association of Nigeria and the Textile Society of Nigeria (TEXSON), Sculptors Association of Nigeria (ScAN), we look forward to seeing the mobilization and formation of more art groups like the Association of Nigerian Architectural Sculptors, the Guild of Tie-dye and Batik Designers; by the SNA. The SNA should make concerted efforts to encourage the founding of more of this type of groups; ensure linkage of one to the other through effective networking. They should be affiliated to the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA).

The leadership of the SNA has passed through several hands over the years, since its inception in 1964. While we acknowledge the onerous tasks associated with managing such a broad-base national organization, we could not but note Aniakor's allegation of double standard against some executive members of SNA who organized separate exhibitions for themselves during the Second World Black festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) that took place in Nigeria in 1977. Complaining further about the insincerity and selfishness of SNA leadership at a time in past, Aniakor says in an interview with Ikwemesi (2005): "SNA for three or four people...Most often they would hijack an exhibition (meant for all the members of the association), then travel and come back... And they did it over the

years". The lesson from this indictment is that professional associations must be run with every sense of sincerity, accountability and equity. It is only in this way that the co-operation and support of the members of the association can be gotten and progress will be made in the art profession. Fortunately, the attitude of the executives of SNA in leading the organization has changed for the better in recent times.

It is noteworthy that one seldom sees or hears of art workshops and related training programmes that are organized by the SNA and other art agencies or organizations as a means of providing more knowledge for Nigerian artists and to improve their skills. In order to do this effectively, professional art groups must monitor the developmental trend of the nation's socio-economic activities and recommend, if and where necessary, what the art profession could do to ameliorate the prevalent ailing economic system or help to create innovations in them. The overall result of such a monitoring strategy could impact positively on the nation's art education system by way of modifying, updating or broadening the curricular of the art schools. Activities like this, coupled with the sourcing for grants from potential donor agencies and groups like government, NGOs and foreign embassies (in order to assist artists to conduct researches and experiments or travel abroad to mount exhibitions of their works) will justify the trust and faith which members have in SNA and other professional art organization. It will also underscore the relevance of these organizations to the members, the society and the nation.

Individual Members of Art Association

The roles of individual members of the Nigerian art associations towards the progress of the art profession cannot be overemphasized. This is because the leadership of an association cannot function without the input of its members. To this extent, academic artists in the position of authority in government, most especially the ones at the helms of the education sector, such as vice-chancellors, rectors and provosts of universities, polytechnics and colleges of education respectively should strive to introduce positive changes in the curriculum of art programmes of their institutions. For example, Professor Irein Wangboje did this by using his position as Deputy Vice-Chancellor to create a Faculty of Creative Arts in the University of Benin (UNIBEN) in the 1980s. It was the first of its kind

in Nigeria. Wangboje, who was once a regional president of the International Society for Education through Art (INSEA), is also credited for the introduction of changes that had profound effects on fine arts programmes of the university when he was appointed the head of fine arts department in 1978. Layiwola (2003) acknowledges that "he broadened Benin art school's art curriculum by introducing jewelry and silver smiting".

Similarly, Professor Rasaq Rom Kalilu the incumbent Vice Chancellor of Ladoke Akintola University used his position when he was the Deputy Vice Chancellor in the late 2000s to influence infrastructural development in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts of the institution. It is also on record that it was during the tenure of Dr. Kunle Filani as the Provost of the Federal College of Education, Osiele-Abeokuta that the Department of Fine and Applied Arts of the institution acquired a giant electric kiln, which is used in firing the students' ceramic/sculpture wares.

In the late 1980s, Mr. Okechwuku Orjinta and the then Head of Department of Fine Arts, Tai Solarin College of Education (now Tai Solarin University of Education), Ijebu-Ode introduced Display and Exhibition Techniques as a separate course into the curriculum of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts programme. Fortunately, the course was later accepted for inclusion into the minimum standard of the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) when it was presented for consideration during a subsequent Curriculum Review Workshop organized by the Commission in the early 1990s. Spurred by its acceptance by the NCCE, they later included the course in the draft of the curriculum, which the then Department of Fine and Applied Arts of the Tai-Solarin College of Education forwarded to the University of Ibadan as its input in TASCE's proposal for a B. Ed (Fine and Applied Arts) programme it intended to run in affiliation with the University of Ibadan. Today, the course remains as a component of the University of Ibadan harmonized syllabus for its affiliated colleges of education that run its Bachelor in Education degree programme in fine and applied arts.

The point that is being underscored here is that some individual Nigerian artists have and could still contribute innovatively to the progress of the art profession in various ways. The formation of art movements like the Aka Circle of Exhibiting

Artists and the Ona Art Group, which were concerned primarily with the creation of art in peculiar ways (that herald progress in art practice), are commendable. So also is the founding of NGOs like the Cultural and Creative Arts Forum (CCAF) in Lagos by Kunle Filani, Ademola Azeez, Mike Omoighe, Seinde Ademuleya and Austine Emifoniye, which extends the frontier of art professionalism through sustained public enlightenment of artists, art educators and scholars.

Peju Layiwola's founding of the Women and Youth (Wy) Art Fondation in 2004 is also praise-worthy. The Foundation was set up to equip women and youth with necessary skills as a means of empowering them economically. Through the annual hands-on workshops, the foundation pull a large number of people particularly youths from far and near to Lagos for training in goldsmithing, millinery, bead-work, gemstone faceting, wirework, and other professional areas of jewellery production. It also teaches tie-dye, ceramics, crafts, baking and sugar craft as well as a broad range of other art activities thereby creating a future for the Nigerian youths. Besides these workshops, the Wy Art Foundation introduced the first educational DVD on art in Nigeria.

Implication of this Study in Contemporary Art Education

A fallout of the discrimination against artists with low formal educational background is the improper implementation of the part of the curricular that includes traditional artists such as carvers, weavers, potters, bead workers and the likes in the staff of art department of contemporary tertiary art institutions. Thus, the system is unwittingly denied of the services of these categories of artists who act as a link between the past and present art traditions in Nigeria.

Government's arbitrary intervention into matters of art that the body's associations should normally handle, portends chaos in a system which is already bedeviled by societal prejudice against art. As for contemporary education system, government should concern itself with providing more funds for the acquisition of basic art equipment and infrastructure as well as research grants which enhance art education.

Not all form of education can be acquired in a conventional Western type formal classroom settings. Moreover, experience in adult education has shown that

certain factors such as age, parental socio-economic background and occupation could, indeed, prevent one from attending formal school, thereby compelling affected students to seek for alternative sources of education typified by the apprenticeship system and occasional art workshops. Therefore, different types of art education should be given their due recognition and encouraged to develop in the Nigeria's current educational system.

It is doubtless, that the cost of infrastructure and equipment for the applied arts (industrial art) aspect of visual arts namely: textitle, graphic, and ceramic designs which require heavy equipment in form of machine/plants is exorbitant. Consequently, proprietors of institutions with art departments find it hard to provide them with these components as necessary input to facilitate the study of the subject. This factor may account for the exclusion of visual art programmes in the country's private universities

Recommendations and Conclusion

It could be deduced from the foregoing that art education, professional art groups as well as associations have played decisive roles in creating the present status of art profession in Nigeria. However, much can still be done to enable the profession derive optimal benefits from these actors of change and progress. Greater attention should be paid to the task of enlightening the public about the values of art to individuals and the society. The curriculum of art programmes of Nigerian tertiary educational institutions should be monitored (with changes made in them when necessary) in order to update them.

Discrimination among artists should be eschewed and steps taken to strengthen existing art groups. New art groups with objectives that will foster unity among their members and enhance the bodies must be created. In doing this the input of individual artists and art groups will be harnessed and channeled towards protecting and projecting the image of the Nigerian artists as professionals within and beyond the shore of Nigeria.

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