

# Art History and Coloniality: Towards a Localized Theoretical Reconstruction as a Propitious Perspective for Defining Contemporary African Art

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Article DOI: 10.48028/iiprds/ijsrpaop.v3.i1.21

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## Abstract

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Long after colonialism and its western centered epistemologies that framed former colonies in static, primitive and backward frameworks, African art discourse in this alter-modern age is still suffering the legacies of colonial cultural imperialism and construction. The history of African art known to the world was framed by the West through a Eurocentric providential lens. As many scholars have pointed out, because of its western supremacist philosophy, art history as a field requires decentering to ensure a multifaceted understanding of global art from diverse contexts and iconologies. The problematic however, lies in the fact that the parameter for such decentering is being defined by European scholars and not African or indigenous scholars whose voices should rather be privileged for any effective decentering of the current art historical field. This paper reviews the current discourse around efforts to decenter African art studies attempting to define the framework for a new art historical approach to African art. Using critical theory as methodology, the paper argues for the application of practical reason based on localized context in the reframing of contemporary African art studies. The paper recommends that the interrogation of contemporary African art and the definition of African Philosophy as a whole will benefit from the rejection of universalism as a normative philosophy for art discourses and embrace a context/culture specific analysis.

**Keywords:** *Decentering, Africa, Contemporary, Reconstruction, Perspective, Art*

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### **Background to the Study**

Although deeper scholarly interest in the continent of Africa is long overdue, the current methodological approach to the continent needs an overhaul. By treating colonial-era borders as accurate representation of coherent societies and cultures, too many researchers are producing findings with little real-world relevance (Amaeshi 2019, p.1). This extract from Amaeshi's essay on decolonizing African scholarship summarizes the problematic and ambiguity in contemporary African scholarship across varying disciplines. Until the very recent past, the theorization of African history, culture, philosophies, cosmologies, ideologies and value systems was constructed through colonial and imperial lenses. This is because before the advent of colonialism, Africans had no systems of formal writing and documentations in western terms. Thus, the missionaries and the colonizers who introduced western education in Africa saddled themselves with the responsibility defining their new subjects alongside the documentation of their adventures among the colonized. As a result, libraries and archives in Africa are populated by documented representations of 2 Africans by Europeans as the ideal categorization of the black continent. In recent past, African and some western scholars began questioning colonial representation of Africa because they found such colonial and western writings about Africa fundamental bias, misrepresentations, overarching exaggeration and blatant stereotypical conditioning passed as philosophical truths. This attempt to question and revisit colonial histories and writings about Africa has opened up a new discourse of decolonizing African scholarship. One of the disciplines most affected by colonial misrepresentation is African art history and theory.

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Historiography**

Historiography is both a critical way of writing history and as a reflection on the writing of history involves a triangulation of a range of methods, often in combination, which includes the use of archived material and written historical accounts (including research, autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, and oral histories) to reconstruct a history of art or define a discourse around art. In this context, in conjunction with critical theory, historiography is used to examine written account about African arts to identify the gaps and propose the approaches to decenter western art history.

#### **African Art Scholarship and Colonial Construction**

Largely available literature sources that theorizes African art (premodern, modern and contemporary) are written by western scholars; however, some of these scholarships are coached in colonial thinking. While the efforts of the early writers on African arts are highly commendable and appreciated, there is no denying the fact that the frameworks on which modern African art was framed was misconstrued to dismiss the sophisticated artifactuality of art produced in the continent from the 1900s. This is because modern art in the continent starting from Nigeria was framed by Uli Beier in a discourse of 'Contemporary Art,' at a time when modernism was dominating artistic discourses in Europe and America. Rather than interrogating Twentieth Century African art in relation to Euro-American modernist high artistic ethos, Beier and some African/European scholars developed a discourse that centered on a construed ideological interpretation of artistic contemporaneity. Beier began the

theoretical framing of modern Nigerian art in relation to the colonial project as an involuntary aesthetic colonization - that is a product of colonial benevolence and western experiments. His narrative centered on the works of workshop trained artists, thus, defining Twentieth Century African art as a spontaneous indigenous movement, based on a carefully calculated planned culture change inspired by enculturation and imperial colonial impact, European anthropologists and expatriates. His thesis authenticated 20th century Nigerian and African art as contemporary based on the aesthetic framework of indigenous-primitivism and as a form of reactionary aesthetics. Kunle Filani's 'Of Assumptions and Realities: Critical Perspectives in Contemporary Nigerian Art', corroborate this theory; making reference to Frank Willet, Filani, categorizes Twentieth Century modern Nigerian art as “the continuing relevance and viability of particular traditions together with emergence of novel practices”, he proceeds to assert that "the story of contemporary Nigerian art should be told within the context of colonial history” (Filani 2008: 92). This theory of involuntary aesthetic colonization based on the enthusiasm of semi-civilized artists carried away by their contact with 3 Europeans, de-emphasizes the philosophical potency of modern Nigerian art from the 1900s by denying it any sound conceptual, intellectual or avant-garde underpinning. This resulted in writers such as Rasheed Araeen dismissing the works of Aina Onabolu and other Nigerian modernists as basic mimicry of Western realism, unable to interrogate imperialism or liberate the African image.

The problematic construction of modern African and Nigerian art as reactionary aesthetics and product of colonial benevolence covers art created from the 1900s to the early 1970s. The discourse unconsciously constructs art during this period as a form of reactionary aesthetic response to colonial cultural imperialism as opposed to looking at it from the dominant modernist lens of art historical discourses of that period (Akpang 2020). In other words, by not adopting a modernist compass in analyzing Nigerian art from the 1900s, it is unwittingly interpreted as a loose mimetic artistic form which occurred as an extension of European expressionism through indigenous reaction to western imposition and subjugation. This in turn impedes understanding of the underlying ideologies and philosophies that informed 1900s artistic expressionism in Nigeria/Africa and the role art/artists played in fostering anti-imperial battles as a form of indigenous avant-gardism. With this theory, Beier set the colonization of African art discourse in motion which lasted for many decades until African artists began to write about African art in order to decolonize African art scholarship.

Example of such African scholars include Syvester Ogbecbe who in his monograph on Ben Enwonwu instigated a theoretical paradigm shift away from colonial/imperial historiographies to focus on the analysis of art as a product of societal transformation and local/foreign cultural and aesthetic interaction, especially in Nigeria as a product of intense local politics and anti-imperial sentiments. This theory is corroborated by his contemporary Olu Ogiube's essay 'Appropriation as Nationalism in Modern African Art'. In this essay, Ogiube fosters the narrative of Nigerian art from the 1900s as an intellectual artistic reaction to colonialism and cultural imperialism. He argues that, the imperialist imposed colonial mimicry in order to keep Africans within primitive representation and this resulted in civilized Africans drawing inspiration from their colonial conditioning to invent a kind of modernist

art to defy colonial restrictions and debunk imperial text/stereotypes of the colonized 'Other' (Oguibe 2002). What Oguibe and Ogbeche achieve in their respective essays is a deeper contextual analysis of the contemporal in which the invention of modern arts in Twentieth Century Africa is analyzed to have existed within and independent of colonialism by assuming a bohemian positioning to oppose imperialism. Both scholars, thus, define a discourse within Contemporary Nigerian Art history that frames Twentieth Century Nigerian art as a unique juxtaposition of modern creative tendencies with societal concerns and political aspirations to foster a nationalist vision of freedom from colonial subjugation through a new emergent art formalism. These scholars constitute the vanguards of the theoretical battle for the decolonization of African art scholarship. But like every other discourse, the call for decolonizing African scholarship is not just novel but ambiguous and problematic.

### **Ambiguities in African Art Scholarship**

The challenges with decolonizing African art scholarship are more monumental in reality than imagine. Two thematic approaches have emerged each with their pros and cons. On the one hand are those scholars who argue for the outright rejection of colonial framing of African art 4 histories and theories. These writers advocate the complete rejection of what was written about African art by Europeans. The problem with such approach is that it will lead to the debasement of great works by seasoned scholars who spent years of field research and writing to put Africa on the map and devalue their contributions to African art scholarship. Erasing such history will set the continent a century back in terms of scholarship. A second school of thought advocates the re-writing of African art histories and theories eliminating colonial philosophies, language, ideologies and constructions. This group also argue for the framing of African modern art using African-informed and constructed language. While this has been central to contemporary scholarship yielding great results, this category of scholars also grapples with the problem of terminologies and lexicons. The problem lies in the fact that words used for formal language construction are still largely hegemonized by the west and since Africans are yet to break that hegemony, attempts at eliminating colonial historiographical languages in the re-writing of African art scholarship are futile.

The issues associated with the discourse of decolonizing African art scholarship informs the rationale for this paper which proposes a new framework based on the reconstruction of African art history using western frameworks of historiography and theorization to analyze African art in parallel time-frames as Europe and America. The idea is not to dismiss the established modern African art historical discourse but to build upon existing theoretical, thematic and conceptual frameworks in available literature to provide a new narrative that interprets such art in modernist, postmodernist, contemporary and alter-modern contexts mirroring the genealogy of global artistic development and discourse of the Twentieth Century.

### **Localized Reconstruction as Framework for rethinking Contemporary African Art Scholarship**

This paper suggests a new form of localized reconstruction of African art history in parallel artistic development with Europe and America as an alternative perspective to achieve such

scholarly decolonization. This approach will involve re-reading art in Africa from the 1900s beginning with Onobolu till date in same historiographical frameworks defined by the west such as modern, postmodern, contemporary, neo-contemporary to the new movement of alter-modernism proposed by Nicolas Bourriaud. This approach will eliminate the continues time-lag African art is fixated (as reactionary to the west) and will ensure African arts and artists are celebrated for their contributions to the global artworld. If African art is reconstructed in this framework, in a broader humanistic sense, it will enable a comprehensive understanding of the dynamism of the aforementioned art movements in different context and cultures, thus making art history more dependable.

### **Conclusion**

This paper looked at the ambiguity and challenges faced by African scholars as they grapple with the project and issue of decolonizing African art scholarship. This is an ongoing discourse that will become clearer as scholarship along this direction continues to expand. However, this paper has recommended a localized reading that privileges indigenous voices a propitious framework for decentering the current art history and rethinking the contemporary articulation of contemporary African art. This can be achieved by conducting collective research where Africans contribute to constructing African art history, by drawing impetus from the African scholars such as Ogbechie, Okeke-Agulu, Oguibe, Enwezor to bridge the gaps in literature and address the problems in the discourse of contemporary African Art.

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