

## Cultural Hybridism: The New Expression of Nationalism in Contemporary Art

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### Abstract

Art creation throughout the ages has been a product of cross-cultural influences. This phenomenon still defines the conceptualism of contemporary art where cultural identities are merging into a creolized form of visual expression. This results in a creative synthesis that gives rise to the invention of new genres of art not restricted by a singular cultural affinity. Interculturalism inspired by globalization reworks the framing of national identities and artists tap into this cultural fluidity as the crux of their creativity. This paper explores cultural hybridism in artistic terms as a new kind of national identity by interrogating the cultural interaction between Tiv of Nigeria and Tamil of Sri Lanka in modern paintings as a reflection of dual identity intertwined into one in the works of Sukanthy Egharevba. Using Iconography as an analytical framework, selected paintings are subjected to in-depth analysis to examine how the hybridization of various cultural idioms as a leitmotif for contemporary artistic expression leads to the creation of a complex hybrid national identity. Findings show that her works are defined by a combined influence of Tiv and Tamil cultures and that the cultural creolization and artistic hybridization of such influences constitute a unique expression of nationalism in the contemporary art world.

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## Background to the Study

The making of art throughout the ages has been influenced by cross-cultural inspirations. Even today, cultural identities are merging into a new creolization resulting in creative synthesis that has led to the emergence of new genres of art not bound by a singular cultural identity. In the ever-evolving today's world, globalization has made the world more intertwined making contemporary art perhaps the most dynamic phase of human expressionism, as well as the most contested discourse in the humanities (Akpang,2020). As Anna Guasch (2018) opines, contemporary art production and its critical reception around the world can be readily identified with notions of 'the global' and 'globalization'. One cannot deal with the terms global and globalization without relating them to hybrid and hybridism. Cross-cultural influences, heightened communication and new technological advancements are all impacting our way of 2 living hence, the way we make or perceive art has in turn been predisposed one way or the other. What this points to is that the concepts of interculturalism and identity are taking a new theoretical and ideological shape in the form of a conceptual creolization; thus, cross cultural synthesis naturally results in hybridity in the making of art. According to Nederveen Pieterse,

*Hybridization is the making of global culture as a global melange. The very process of hybridization shows the difference to be relative and, with a slight shift of perspective, the relationship can also be described in terms of an affirmation of similarity. Hybridization as a perspective belongs to the fluid end of relations between cultures African, Asian, European and American: the mixing of cultures and not their separateness is emphasized (Nederveen 2013, 40).*

Globalization as hybridization, which Nederveen highlights, embraces the idea that globalization is not just moving towards cultural synchronization, but creating more diverse combinations. Ideas surrounding interculturalism are in this sense defining the new world order by creating new identities and nationalism that has never before happened in any phase of human civilization. While Nederveen's opinions pertain to sociological studies and discourse, it is obvious that all works of life have been greatly impacted by globalization, hybridism and interculturalism especially the arts. The artworld and its creative complexities informed by interculturalism has created many possibilities for cross-cultural influences at pan-regional, national and continental levels. Today the most celebrated artworks are acclaimed for their integration of elements from diverse cultural or discipline sources. This new global interconnectivity and interculturalism provide a great conceptual and ideological impetus to many contemporary artists and designers whose practices are now defined by the hybrid combination of their roots with other cultures, experimenting with the old and new, the conventional and unorthodox views in their creative process (Egharevba 2014). For example, Yinka Shonibare a British-based Nigerian-born artist uses his art to underscore his dual heritage with the use of wax fabrics which are Dutch-made but inspired by Africaness as a means of instigating creative dialogue, between his two selves, one as a British and the other, Nigerian. He, like his postmodern peers explores the themes of Masquerading, interconnectivity and socio-political critiques where boundaries are

merged or dissolved, new idioms and expressions created through hybridism of cultural ideas, materiality and nationalities. This visual dialogue is exemplified by his piece 'Scramble for Africa' (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Yinka Shonibare – Scramble for Africa 2009 (Source: National Museum of African Art Washington DC).

This piece creates a visual dialogue of a complex hybridism and neo-colonialism through its materiality and composition. African inspired Dutch pints are worn on European manikins as a form of interculturalism that questions globalism and nationalist identity politics.

Arguably, Africa's greatest sculptor El-Anatsui the Ghanaian-born, Nigerian-based artist also interrogates ideas surrounding globalism, identities and Nationalism through his works. He draws inspirations from indigenous Ghanaian ideographs to recontextualize waste generated from the West that are now overtaking African land fields. He uses discarded cans and bottle tops from the West to comment on African economic reliance on the West, hyper-consumerism as well as the erosion of indigenous identity through the ongoing spread of interculturalism which he sees as both advancing and debasing Africa. His works are a hybrid of sculpture, painting and textile installation that has cut across borders and boundaries, bridging the gap between art disciplines, but most importantly hybridizing African concepts with European materiality to create installations that belie deep ideologies around globalization.



**Figure 2:** El-Anatsui – Logoligi Logarithm 2019 (Source: The New York Times).

The aforementioned African artists and many of their contemporaries use visual vocabularies of abstraction and representationalism, to create distinct works that convey the social and political concerns of contemporary societies especially the pros and cons of globalism and interculturalism. For this group of artists, contemporary art, serves a host of functions but most significantly as a catalyst for an on-going process of open discussion and intellectual inquiry about the world today, by providing an opportunity to reflect on contemporary society and the issues relevant to ourselves, and the world around us using art as a point of departure for referencing/interrogating complex societal issues. Through their works contemporary art is positioned as part of a cultural dialogue that concerns larger contextual frameworks such as personal and cultural identity, family, community, and nationality, politics, economy, and environment as well as hybridism and cultural revivalism (Akpang and Egharevba 2018). The 4 works of Sri-Lankan-born Nigerian-based artist Sukanthy Egharevba chimes with a broad category of artists today who explore issues of identity and hybridism in their individual practices.

### **Methodology**

This paper adopts Iconographic Analysis as an analytical framework. Iconography the seminal work of Erwin Panofsky focuses on analysing works of art as symptomatic of other events, ideologies or concepts. In this context, the formalism of a piece is viewed as the first layer of meaning and a window to decipher multiple layers of hidden meanings (Panofsky 1955, 18). The conception of art as visual reflection of something else is central to this paper's analysis of aesthetic/cultural hybridism as the expression and promotion of a new identity in contemporary art. It is applied here to subject the works of Sukanthy Egharevba to formalistic and contextual reading to unearth the creative intersection of Tiv and Tamil cultural idioms into a new alter modern contemporary artistic identity.

### **Cultural Hybridism as Creation of New Genre of Art through Tamil/Tiv Juxtaposition**

Sukanthy moved to Nigeria with her family in the 1980s, fleeing from the Sri-Lankan civil war, and then settled in Benue State as her new home. With her Tamil cultural heritage, Sukanthy found an affinity between Tamil cultural forms and those of the Tiv of Nigeria and began exploring their artistic potentialities as leitmotif for contemporary paintings. Today she has advanced her creative methodology to appropriate the philosophy of Natural Synthesis propounded by Uche Okeke and the Zarianists. Natural synthesis has become the trend in most societies, and this is predicated on the fact that we are living in a world of multi-culturalism, where cross-cultural influences, marriages, education and cross-breeds are prevalent. The concept of synthesis, as a creative tendency, holds the thought that modern artists should absorb and adapt any good art technique or style from any part of the world for the creation of art in Nigeria. Natural synthesis stimulated the consciousness of preference for indigenous motifs at the local level. At the global scene, it expanded Nigeria's avant-garde's earlier advocacy for freedom to explore new modes of expression that is unique and innovative, yet of global intelligibility. But beyond the idea of cultural re-invention and revivalism, Sukanthy's works incorporates a new nationalism as a symbol of contemporaneity for which her dual nationality now symbolizes.

In her works she incorporates the fluidity, dynamism and rhythm of Tamil Kolam designs and the pictorial elements found in Tiv cosmic and artistic expressions (see fig. 3). These qualities, the uniqueness of Tamil and Tiv ideographs that inform the visual dynamics of her paintings not only bring forth the two minority groups from two different continents and countries to the limelight but also project the universality between the two disparate cultures. In doing so she creates a hybrid art that is neither Sri-Lankan nor Nigerian but contemporary. The painting titled “Intertwined” accentuates the global citizens, their connections despite their differences in continents, countries, race and class. The choice of a vibrant palette of acrylics and the use fabrics often found in her works, thus, brings forth the idea of social fabric which means that it brings together a cohesive society. This mixed media painting with acrylics and fabrics explores a common theme of togetherness that underlines the essence of our existence as humans in the 5 planet Earth. We are bound by technology, basic needs, communication, transport and global trades and networking. The connectivity is not limited to certain countries or cultures or continents rather it involves us as humans. Tiv and Tamil motifs that are similar in connotations, for example the Sun, wholes, circles and triangles for example are deployed for a comprehensive and thought-provoking composition.



**Figure 3:** Sukanthy Egharevba - Intertwined 2020, (Source: The Artist).

This cultural hybridism and re-invention are also seen in the painting titled 'The Living and the Dead 2011'. The piece is the outcome of an abysmal void following the demise of her father. The painting is vertically oriented and divided into two parts. Characterized by dynamic curvilinearity, sweeping, swirling and intersecting lines, all converging and diverging from a dissecting line at the centre. The composition is divided into parts that symbolizes – the earth and the great beyond. The colour scheme consists of green, yellow, ochre and their tints and shades. The dark area of the work depicts the earth with its pains



and pangs, and the brutal reality of death. The flower motif on the right part of the picture plane shows the beautiful part of the earth, notwithstanding the cold hands of death which one has to endure. The left side of the painting portrays the glamour of the beautiful great beyond. The serenity about this side is captured with the brilliance of light greens, lemon yellows, oranges and their nuances. Contextually, this painting addresses a global and vital issue of death that is inevitable and the uncertainties that it surrounds it. Incorporating and combining Tiv, Tamil, Uli motifs Egharevba advocates a shared humanity that all races experience and feel (see fig. 4).



**Figure 4:** Sukanthy Egharevba -The living and the dead 2011 (Source: The Artist).

#### **Aesthetic Hybridism as Expression of Nationalism in a Personalized Creative Vision**

Beyond the display of aesthetic hybridity and cultural juxtaposition in creating a new variant of art, Sukanthy's works speak volume in fostering hybrid art as an identity for many contemporary artists and designers today. Her works very often explore shared ethnic themes and concepts such as joys, sorrows, happiness and victories etc., that are not nation or culture specific. In doing this Sukanthy places herself at the centre of her practices and her artworks become visual interpretations of her dual identity, shared cultural experiences and responsibility in a biracial home. With her successful juxtaposition of Tiv and Tamil cultural idioms and ideographs Sukanthy's works provide a new lens or perspective of looking at the world from a multiracial and intercultural viewpoint as the part which a critical mass should follow as our world continues to evolve into a contemporary interconnected global village. Her recent work 'Female Exuberance 2020' most succinctly adduces this viewpoint (fig. 5).



**Figure 5:** Sukanthy Egharevba - Female Exuberance 2020 (Source: The Artist)

This work celebrates womanhood, femininity and the glamour of humanity. She draws inspirations from deep within her, her emotions and feelings to ideate her compositions, celebrating women in a unified society. Like most of her works, this painting exhibits hybridization of aesthetic and cultural idioms; the elegant female figure in perspex sheets is draped in Nigerian attire with a majestic head gear. The African-inspired background celebrates women in the face of the ambiguity of our times, which is juxtaposed with the intricate dotted designs and rhythmic motifs that reference Tamil fabric patterns of Sri-Lankan culture. In this synthesis, the painting does two things, celebrate womanhood as a universal phenomenon and promote cultural hybridism as a quintessential reflection of globalism and universalism through appropriation and re-contextualization.

### **Conclusion**

As an artist Sukanthy's main mission has been to synthesize Tamil and Tiv pictorial elements that are visible and applicable to the creative art of the two cultures to promote the knowledge of 8 synthesis in art production. But beyond aesthetic and creative concerns this paper demonstrates that Sukanthy's works hold in them a deep lying philosophical standpoint namely to promote creative synthesis as a mechanism to blur cultural boundaries and genre specificities as well as promote interculturalism as the new nationality in the contemporary art-space. By juxtaposing Tamil and Tiv visual idioms into leitmotif for contemporary paintings, Sukanthy successfully blends two cultures into one to define her new identity as an artist of dual citizenry and cultural affinity. The success of her practice and stylistic ethos, therefore, demonstrates that aesthetic hybridism and genre intersection propounded in the contemporary artworld is central to understanding and promoting globalism and interculturalism.

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