

## **Nationalism and African Conquest: Artistic Expressions with Reference to the Igbo Traditional Society, Post Colonial Developments and Heightened Complexities**

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Article DOI: 10.48028/iiprds/ijiraet.v2.i1.10

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### **Abstract**

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**N**ationalism and conquests correlate, causing the progenitors to always assert their allegiance to national interests, being propagated within or without same Nations. Conquests occur if ideologies propagated in other frontiers are welcomed and accepted. Artists in Africa moved towards Western art materials and practice, retaining artistic impressions rooted in African iconographs and symbols. The Igbo traditional society, pre-colonial era witnessed the use of signs and symbols, which communicated effectively with and to the people then. Post colonialism invariably infused in the artists like Ben Chuka Enwonwu, Bruce Onobrakpeya, et al, the tool of photographic realism in art. Western specific art materials started making waves within the concept of a rebirth and Conquest. The height of complexities identified due to the fusion of the western ideological concepts and styles affect the progress so far within the context of African arts with reference to the Igbo Traditional Society. This paper seeks to evaluate the shifting trends as introduced by Western ideologies in the conception and creation of arts post-colonial era, the confusions and redirections, vis-à-vis creative conquests. Conclusively, the issue of originality and colossal colonial influence on African Art, materials and practice would be critically analyzed.

**Keywords:** *Nationalism, Conquest, Expressions, Heightened, Complexities*

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### **Background to the Study**

Nationalism is a political ideology that emphasizes the importance of the nation-state and the promotion of its interests above all else. The rise of nationalism in Europe during the late 19th and early 20th centuries had a profound impact on the continent's colonial ambitions in Africa. African conquest was driven by a range of factors, including economic, political, and social factors. The late 19th century saw a scramble for Africa, as European powers competed for control of the continent's resources and territories. Nationalism played a significant role in shaping European colonial policies in Africa, as states sought to expand their territories and assert their dominance over rival powers. Nationalism was closely linked to ideas of racial superiority, with European powers viewing themselves as superior to the African peoples they sought to conquer. One example of the influence of nationalism on European colonial policies was the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, where European powers partitioned Africa among themselves. The conference was driven by a desire to avoid conflict between European powers in Africa and to establish clear borders between colonial territories. Nationalism played a key role in the conference, with European powers asserting their right to control African territories on the basis of their supposed superiority over Africans.

This paper will explore the relationship between nationalism and African conquest, examining how African arts nationalism influenced European colonial policies in Africa and how African art resistance to colonialism was shaped by nationalist artists' movements. Recent conversations surrounding nationalist consciousness and artistic incursion in Nigeria reveal the development of Art in Nigeria has been greatly influenced by the contributions of early modernist artists who championed artistic practice that favored African nationalism and nationalist consciousness. Many scholars have explored different notions of nationalism and the politics of identity. Africans (in Africa and the diaspora), have a robust character of cultural integrity especially in dress, music, food and language. This culture character and especially the way it is received is perhaps what strengthens their resolve for nationalist consciousness. Africans were/are traditional and had no sense of democracy pre independence. This is also perhaps why Sithole, (2013) has described African nationalism as “a feeling subjective of kinship or affinity”, p.150. This cultural affinity is perhaps why it was possible for many artists of the pre independence period to successfully engage and propagate natural synthesis ideologies (in Nigeria) and the negritude movement (in Senegal).

African nationalism in arts refers to the cultural and artistic expressions of African people that were used to promote a sense of national identity and pride during the struggle for independence from European colonialism. African nationalism was a political and cultural movement that emerged in the early 20th century, with the aim of promoting African cultures and traditions and rejecting the imposition of European values and norms. African nationalism in arts was characterized by the use of traditional African art forms and motifs, such as masks, sculptures, and textiles, as well as the incorporation of African languages and musical styles into literature and music. African artists sought to create a distinct African aesthetic that reflected the unique experiences and perspectives of African people, challenging the Eurocentric norms that had dominated artistic expression in Africa during the colonial period.

### **African Resistance and Nationalist Movements:**

African resistance to European colonialism was shaped by nationalist movements that sought to assert African identity and oppose European domination. Nationalist movements emerged across Africa in the early 20th century, fueled by a desire for self-determination and a rejection of European colonialism. Nationalist leaders sought to unite African peoples under a common identity, rejecting the divisions imposed by European colonialism. One example of a nationalist movement in Africa was the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa. The ANC was founded in 1912, with the aim of promoting the interests of black South Africans and opposing the racist policies of the white minority government. The ANC played a key role in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, with its leaders becoming symbols of the anti-apartheid movement. Another example of a nationalist movement in Africa was the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya. The Mau Mau rebellion was a violent anti-colonial movement that emerged in the 1950s, with the aim of driving out British colonial forces and establishing an independent Kenya. The Mau Mau rebellion was fueled by a sense of African nationalism, with its leaders emphasizing the need for Kenyans to assert their identity and resist British domination. One example of African nationalism in arts is the Negritude movement, which emerged in the 1930s and sought to promote a sense of pride in African culture and identity. The Negritude movement was founded by African intellectuals, writers, and artists, including Leopold Sedar Senghor, Aime Cesaire, and Leon Damas. The movement emphasized the importance of African languages, traditions, and values, and sought to challenge the notion that African culture was inferior to European culture.

The Negritude movement had a significant impact on African literature and poetry, with writers and poets using African languages and motifs to express their ideas and experiences. The movement also influenced the development of African music, with musicians incorporating African rhythms and melodies into their compositions. Another example of African nationalism in arts is the use of traditional African art forms in the visual arts. African artists began to incorporate traditional African motifs and techniques into their paintings, sculptures, and other artworks, challenging the dominance of European styles and aesthetics in the art world. African nationalism in arts played a significant role in promoting a sense of national identity and pride during the struggle for independence from European colonialism. By emphasizing the importance of African cultures and traditions, African artists and intellectuals helped to create a sense of solidarity among African people, inspiring them to fight for their independence and assert their identity and autonomy. Today, the legacy of African nationalism in arts continues to shape the artistic and cultural landscape of Africa, highlighting the enduring impact of this movement on the continent's cultural identity.

Kofi (2020) describes nationalism as beliefs intended to promote the interest of a group of people in this case, a nation) who share common characteristics, language, ethnicity, religion and customs (p.3). Other scholars have described nationalism as the attitude of members of a nation towards their national identity Ubaku, Emeh and Anyikwa (2014), as a patriotic feeling that brings an oppressed but related people together to demand independence (Chukwu, 2000), the strong devotion to one's own country (Nwabughuoju, 2004), a sentiment and activity directed at the creation of a nation (Chikwendu 2004) and the love and pride in a

country shown by its people( Omolewa 1986). Shittu (2013) opines that nationalism is a consciousness of African people to struggle against foreign powers and assert their rights to self-government among other things. Sithole (2013) notes also that the Ashanti (Ghana), Hehe (Tanzania) and Zulus ((South Africa) also had a strong sense of national identity owing to their empathy to culture and at different times, exhibited different levels of resistance to colonialist culture and oppression. This oppression came in cloaks of missionaries, schools, fashion, nomenclature among other things. This resistance by Africans across different locations heralded era of pan Africanism. This supports the idea that African nationalism was therefore birthed by different elements which united all parties involved in the quest for national identity. Like many other scholars, Joseph, Barbara and Vaclav (2014) have noted that Nigerian artists have successfully carried on the tradition of national consciousness which is evident in their paintings, sculptures, Igbo Ukwu carvings and bronze castings. Citing the example of the Benin bronzes, they describe the Benin bronzes as being “wholly, exclusively and solely African” (pp. 80), This infers that they represent a purely African identity, an identity that existed before the incursion of the British colonialists. Kofi (2020) notes that at the beginning of the twentieth century, almost all African countries, except Ethiopia and Liberia were under colonial rule. However, this period was also marked by intense struggle against colonization and spurred riots across several African countries which accelerated post World War II (pp.1).

While nationalist actors were spread across various locations in Africa, including Nigeria, key sectors of the economy expressed their views and objections in different ways. All these activities culminated in what is now known as nationalist consciousness. While this is so, Olusanya (1980) opines that the idea of Nigerian nationalism predates the establishment of effective British rule in Nigeria. This is because of the vast cultural divergencies that constitute the Nigerian space were colonized at different times and resistance took many forms. For example, the “Aro-Anglo war of 1901-1902, following the resistance of the Arochukwu people against their allies mounted against the increasing penetration of the British that challenged their normal life existence, also, the British expedition of 1897, following the refusal of King Ovonranmen to sign a British treaty that puts the Benin kingdom under the British colony, the Aniocha war of 1883 and the Ijebu war of 1892 and others.

Many African countries have felt similar need at the time of political independence to refashion their cultural identities, not only to distance themselves from the “British council's piano, but to move beyond perceptions of the tribal and traditional towards a more vaunted but tentative modernity in the form of a national state” (Kasfir 1999:167). For many Nigerian artists, their creative engagements as a medium to join voices with others in the quest for national consciousness. This movement also gave rise to different shades of modernism in development of art in Nigerian. Nigerian artists like Ben Enwonwu, Uche Okeke, Buce Onabrakpeya, Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo among others played key roles that drove and crystalized the nationalist consciousness in Nigeria. Onuzulike (2019) notes that African art modernism “emerged essentially out of the colonial encounter in which African artists and designers have demonstrated an awareness of a wider creative field” (p. 58). This is correct because the involvement of artists in the quest for national consciousness birthed the natural

synthesis movement. The natural synthesis movement encouraged artists to create art with themes and in some cases materials that resonate with their immediate environment. Kasfir (1999) while discussing national culture describes the intervention of African intellectuals during the beginning of the modernist era as a second decolonizing stage” (p. 166). This is true because many of these uprisings heralded the independence decade of the 1960s.

While artists in Nigeria championed natural synthesis, countries like Senegal moved with Negritude. While both of these movements essentially amplify conversations on national consciousness, their methods were different. For Senegal, negritude encouraged the Senegalese to favour the African cultural identity over the western culture of their French colonialists. It was easy and fast spread in Senegal for many reasons. Senegal has one cultural ideology. Negritude had its strongest voice in President Leopold Senghor. The fact that the one championing Negritude was also running the affairs of the state, was perhaps the reason why it was easier for Senegal to embrace Negritude and maintain it for an extended period. Nigeria, on the other hand did not have artists (or at least those championing the natural synthesis movement) running the affairs of the nation. Kasfir (1999) also notes that beyond anti colonial rhetoric, the very idea of national culture raised different issues for practicing artists across Nigeria, especially in terms of creating a national art. This is largely because of the distinctiveness between traditions and cultures within the Nigerian populace. For instance, the Oshogbo art practice of Yoruba, Nigeria is distinct from the Igbo Ukwu art practice of Eastern Nigeria. Using the Mbari movement, she demonstrates how Nigerian artists and intellectuals were instrumental to the development of an artistic identity for themselves despite the cultural complexities that were abounding.

Igbo traditional society has a rich history of artistic expression, encompassing a range of art forms, including music, dance, sculpture, and mask-making. Artistic expression in Igbo traditional society was closely tied to cultural and religious practices, with art forms used to communicate important cultural values and beliefs. Post-colonial developments in Igbo society brought about significant changes in artistic expression, as Igbo artists and intellectuals sought to assert their identity and autonomy in the face of European colonialism. Igbo artists began to incorporate new techniques and styles into their work, while also drawing on traditional Igbo art forms and motifs to create a distinct aesthetic that reflected their experiences and perspectives.

The heightened complexities of contemporary Igbo society have also had a significant impact on artistic expression, with artists grappling with issues related to globalization, urbanization, and cultural identity. Contemporary Igbo artists are exploring new forms of artistic expression, using a range of media, including photography, video, and digital art, to explore issues related to cultural identity, gender, and social justice. One example of artistic expression in Igbo traditional society is the use of masquerades, which are an important cultural practice in Igbo communities. Masquerades are elaborate performances that involve the use of masks, costumes, and music to communicate important cultural values and beliefs. Masquerades are performed during important cultural events, such as funerals, weddings, and festivals, and are seen as an important way of maintaining cultural traditions and promoting social cohesion.

Post-colonial developments in Igbo society brought about significant changes in the way masquerades were performed and interpreted. Igbo artists began to experiment with new techniques and styles, incorporating new materials and influences into their work, while also maintaining a strong connection to traditional Igbo art forms and motifs. The use of masquerades as a means of political expression also increased, with masquerades used to challenge colonial authority and promote nationalist ideals.

Beier (2001), notes Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, Demas Nwoko, UcheOkeke, Bruce Onabrakpeya, Obiora Udechukwu and Tayo Adenaike as one of the foremost modernists of the post-colonial era (p.47). Aside from Chinua Achebe and Christopher Okigbo who were literary artists, the creative engagements of others were influenced by the natural synthesis movement that as championed by students of the National College for Arts, Science and Technology (NCAST), Zaria.. Jean (2005) notes that Uche Okeke's natural synthesis movement was birthed as a result of the dissatisfaction of himself and a few of his colleagues to the western curriculum they were subjected to. They abandoned the western curriculum and developed their own style and new artistic directions. These new styles favored indigenous themes and approach. Picton (1991) notes that if Zaria achieved anything at all, it was that “its early methods of approach to problems of contemporary art in Nigeria, gave rise to the formation of a students' art society that dedicated itself to the growth of a truly Nigerian school of art.” (p.30). This author notes also that their final exhibition impressed their western teachers from whose control, they were trying to escape.

Upon graduation, many of these students dispersed to different locations in Nigeria but continued to chart new directions in their various locations. For example, Bruce Onabrakpeya went on Delta state and began to adopt folklores to his print making expressions and Uche Okeke went on to head the Art school at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka where he explored the Uli traditional motifs and adopted it to his paintings. Before long, artists all over Nigeria had begun to explore various expressions of natural synthesis. Adepegba (1998) suggested that the title rebel” which is often ascribed to the students of NCAST was untrue of their real actions and intentions, rather, it birthed new directions for modern art and practice in Nigeria. These experiments have engineered trajectories that have steered the developments of Art in Nigeria and diaspora.

The heightened complexities of contemporary Igbo society have also brought about new forms of artistic expression. Contemporary Igbo artists are exploring new media and techniques, using art as a means of exploring issues related to cultural identity, gender, and social justice. For example, some contemporary Igbo artists are using digital media to create works that challenge traditional gender roles and promote social equality.

Artistic expression has been an integral part of Igbo traditional society for centuries. In Igbo culture, art is not only a form of entertainment, but it is also a means of communication, education, and cultural preservation. Igbo art encompasses a wide range of forms, including music, dance, sculpture, painting, and storytelling. Before the arrival of Europeans and the subsequent colonization of Nigeria, artistic expression in Igbo society was deeply rooted in

tradition and spirituality. Artistic expressions were used to convey important cultural values, beliefs, and histories. For example, the Igbo masquerade is a form of artistic expression that is used to communicate with the spirits and ancestors, and to celebrate important events. However, with the advent of colonialism and the introduction of Christianity in Nigeria, traditional Igbo art forms were suppressed and deemed pagan and uncivilized. The colonial government also imposed European educational systems that discouraged the teaching of traditional art forms. As a result, many Igbo artists were forced to abandon their traditional art forms and adopt Western styles.

Today, Igbo artistic expression is experiencing a resurgence, as artists seek to reclaim their cultural heritage and express themselves through a variety of mediums. However, the post-colonial era has brought about many complexities in the artistic expression in Igbo society. On the one hand, artists are seeking to preserve traditional forms of art, while on the other hand, they are also seeking to create new forms of expression that reflect the changing realities of contemporary Nigerian society. Furthermore, the heightened complexities of modern Nigerian society, such as political and social unrest, economic struggles, and religious tensions, have also influenced Igbo artistic expression. Many artists are using their work to comment on these issues and engage in social and political activism.

### **Conclusion**

Nationalism played a significant role in shaping European colonial policies in Africa, with European powers seeking to expand their territories and assert their dominance over rival powers. African resistance to colonialism was shaped by nationalist movements that sought to assert African identity and oppose European domination. The struggle for African independence was a complex and multifaceted process, with nationalist movements playing a key role in shaping the course of African history. Today, the legacy of nationalism and colonialism in Africa continues to shape the continent's political, economic, and social landscape, highlighting the enduring impact of these historical forces on the modern world. Furthermore, artistic expression in Igbo traditional society has a rich history and continues to evolve in response to post-colonial developments and heightened complexities in Nigerian society. Through their work, Igbo artists are preserving their cultural heritage while also engaging with contemporary issues and creating new forms of expression.

Artistic expression in Igbo traditional society has a rich history that has been shaped by post-colonial developments and contemporary complexities. Igbo artists and intellectuals have sought to assert their identity and autonomy through artistic expression, drawing on traditional art forms and motifs while also incorporating new techniques and styles. Today, contemporary Igbo artists are using art to explore a range of issues related to cultural identity, gender, and social justice, highlighting the enduring importance of artistic expression in Igbo society.

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