

Enthroning Art as a Tool for Nation Building and Sustenance of Cultural Pride as Expressed by Some Nigerian Nationalist Artists Like J.D. Akeredolu, Ben Enwonwu, Sylvester Chukueggu Et Al.

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Abstract

Nigeria as a Nation since 1960, clocks 62years this 1st of October 2022. Several challenges via iconography had been surpassed as can be seen in some of the works of some of Nigeria's nationalist artists such as J. D. Akeredolu, Areogun and Bandele, Sylvester A. O. Chukueggu, Ben Enwonwu et Al. Tracing the Nigerian traditional sculpture, which was regarded by the early Church in Nigeria, becomes an interesting iconographic trend to note. The emergence of the European missionaries in Nigeria, provided a boost to the resuscitation of the Nigerian traditional arts, with special reference to sculpture. In the spirit of nationalism and conquests, the artists were not completely diverted from their original cultural background and traits typical of Nigeria. This paper takes a look at the historical perspective, and the trajectory of the early sculpture tradition and a glimpse at the contemporary sculpture in Nigeria. This will be done by taking a critical look at some sculptors of the early sculpture tradition vis-a-vis the themes they worked on, with special reference to the philosophy that brought about them. An interface with J. D. Akeredolu, Ben Enwonwu, Sylvester A. O. Chukueggu, et Al, will be brought to clear some tangled ends alongside some contemporary sculptors such as Charles Omuaru, Kenneth Njoku, and Frank Denedo. Some of their works and influence in enthroning art as a tool for nation building and sustenance of cultural pride.

Keywords: *Nation, Iconography, Nationalists*

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Background to the Study

Nigeria as a Nation since 1960, clocks 62years this 1st of October 2022. Several challenges via iconography had been surpassed as can be seen in some of the works of some of Nigeria's nationalist artists such as J. D. Akeredolu, Areogun and Bandele, Sylvester A. O. Chukueggu, Ben ENWONWU et Al. Tracing the Nigerian traditional sculpture, which was regarded by the early Church in Nigeria, becomes an interesting iconographic trend to note. The Church in Nigeria became the major patron of the traditional arts due to the emergence of the European Missionaries. The European Missionaries were at home with the traditional arts, which they saw as a tool to wining the hearts of their soon to be converts. Therefore, the Europeans made concerted efforts to resuscitate the traditional arts, with special reference to sculpture, as their bait. Chukueggu (1998), asserts that it was an interesting thing to note, that the Nigerian traditional sculpture, which was regarded by the Church then as primitive, fetish and superstitious suddenly became a beautiful bride cherished by the Church. He further alludes that the missionaries especially those of the Roman Catholic bias, relied on the creative ability of the Nigerian sculptors to propagate the religion. So many religious images were to be made as the missionary relied on the Nigerian sculptors for the propagation of their religion.

Nationalism as Projected

In the spirit of nationalism and conquests, the artists were not completely diverted from their original cultural background and traits typical of Nigeria.

A few of the sculptors then who were accommodated in line with the European missionaries vision were:

1. J.D. Akeredolu (1915-1984)
2. Areogun and Bandele
3. Sylvester A.O. Chukueggu (1909)
4. Ben Enwonwu (1921-1994)

Areogun and Bandele

In the words of Chukueggu, Areogun and Bandele were the pioneer traditional carvers at the Oye Ekiti Workshop Centre set up by Father Kelvin Caroll and Sean O' Mahoney. They were encouraged by the missionaries to carve Christian themes in Yoruba concepts as Yoruba people by birth. The promotion of Euro-Christian Concept of Nigerian Arts was highly embraced by the talented and creative Areogun, who employed his great potentials. He carved various Biblical themes based on the dictates of the Catholic priests who organized the workshop for them. In the same vein, Bandele, another proponent of Euro-Christian carving in Nigeria, confirmed the process by taking over from Areogun. Bandele equally, exhibited high artistic talent in his production of works like "Mary and the Child Christ", which replaced the African Concept of Mother and Child. The Commemorating ancestral statues were replaced by the images of the Biblical Saints carved on the doors of the Church. In the internal decorations of the Church, stories to represent Biblical stories were mounted there. In the spirit of nationalism and conquests, the artists not able to be diverted from their original cultural background and traits typical of the traditional 'Yoruba', by the missionaries.

Consequently, the traditional Yoruba traits still manifested in the works of art generated by the workshop centers. This amounts to retaining artistic impressions rooted in African Iconography and symbols.

Great awareness was created for African sculpture, given that the Oye Ekiti experience was a great success, list wonder why Chukueggu mentioned someone like Lamdi Fakaye. He was a product of Oye Ekiti experiment and a famous Yoruba traditional wood carver. The emergence of this rebirth or re-interpretation of iconography of the traditional African Cultural artifacts and history, introduced by the Catholic Priests in Oye Ekiti, affected other recipient's institution. The Church of Missionary Society (C.M.S) was influenced by the experiment and they followed likewise, the footsteps of the Oye Ekiti. They came in a different dimension representing themes of Biblical figures, crucifix mainly for the decoration of the Alters. The C.M.S did not just engage the traditional wood carvers without a further effort at making sure that they engaged only people of the same faith. Therefore, those of the Anglican faithful converted gifted artists among others to the Anglican faith and employed the carvers from among the converts.

J. D. Akeredolu, (1915 – 1984)

One of the artists who is referred as self-taught in the Nigerian artists fold was J.D. Akeredolu. History has it that; Akeredolu was self-taught but developed himself more by attending courses abroad. He attended a course at the Hammersmith School of Arts and Crafts, London and later studied museum technology at the institute of Archeology, University of London, according to Chukueggu. He studied about the restoration of plaster of casting at the Museum London, where he was well involved in workshops and seminars.

Chief Akerodu taught arts in a secondary school in Owo and he later took up commercial artist job in Lagos where he then opened an art studio with Akinola Lasekan. He was very good in creating miniature sculpture in Nigerian Contemporary Art Circle. Naturalism is a major phenomenon in his rendition of the miniatures which are so descriptive in outlook, showing the daily life activities of the period. Miniatures became attractive to artists with lesser skills in producing such that cause the creative craft men to delve into the production of such, because they found patronage in the souvenir makes Akerolu and Lasekan's collectors were mainly Europeans and some Nigerian Elites who mostly were interested in portraits.

Jean Kennedy (1992) observed that these artists were confronted with the pre-conceptions of their audience... and were faced with the problems of continuing to work and survive economically in an atmosphere not particularly conducive. He made it clear that such atmosphere was not sympathetic equally towards modern artistic expressions. Kennedy maintains the opinion that often times, their dichotomous position between tradition and modernity and between Africa and West is evident in the works they produced. Some of the works of Justus Akeredolu include, Mallam, flutest and the Bust of Nigerian Girl. He also has works with Little A Hausa Man, Mother and Child which are some of his sculptures in wood.

Sylvester A. O. Chukueggu, (b 1909)

Another contemporary of Akeredolu and Lasekar was a talented self-taught artist, Sylvester A. O. Chukueggu. He participated in the 1948 National Contemporary Art excerpts held in Lagos according to Chukueggu (1998). Kenneth Murray School in Umuahia about the early 1940s, accommodated Sylvester A.O. Chukueggu whose sculptures as at then had varied stylistically, given the Igbo cultural background where he belongs. He was later on transferred to St. Charles Teachers Training College, Onitsha. Sylvester A. O. Chukueggu's career as a teacher led him to Stella Maris College, Port Harcourt where he spent about nine years as a teacher, from 1946 – 1955.

Danford (1950) declared that apart from Sylvester Chukueggu's participation in the First Nigerian exhibition in 1948 alongside Lasekan, E. Okagbule M.I. Osagie, H.I. Erhabor etc he also held solo exhibition in Freetown, Sierra Leone, 1943, Umuahia and Enugu 1950. Then more exhibition at the Vatican, Rome 1950, Shell B.P. Lagos, Kano and Jos in 1957. During FESTAC'77, that is the World Black and African Festival of Arts Lagos in 1977, he equally participated. Some of the works of Sylvester A.O. Chukueggu are Amadioha (plate) measuring about two feet high and fashioned in a neo-traditional concept made of wood.

Chukueggu C. C. alludes that Uche Okeke (1981), declared that one of the art works that attracted much attention at the first Nigerian Art exhibition, organized by the British Council in Lagos, was Chukueggu's Amadioha.



Plate 1

Artist: *S. A. O. Chukwueggu*

Title: Amadioha

Media: Wood

Amadioha, here is represented as a sober figure on the back of a double-faced beast which in turn mounts on top of a tortoise. The figure appears, the double headed beast, appears to be out for action or say destruction.

The monolithic figure whose four sides appears to have been joined in anyway with glue or even wooden plug in any way. It was intricately and uniquely carved to its uniquely fashioned identity. One interesting thing to note is the composition of these destructive figures and the monitoring of same on a platform, which is typical of his creative style as it appeared in so many of his composition in wood carving. The legacy of Chukueggu's subject matter being repeated, is evidenced in the work of one of the prominent pioneer African Artist, a journalist print master and plastocaste exponents, Bruce Onobrakpaya, (Onobrakpaya 1985). Some artists then believe that the traditional African art forms should be retained in order to guarantee the continuity of the African cultural heritage. (Fasuji, 1985:7) I think Chukueggu A.O. belongs to the group of African traditional Artists that which this trait of repeating titles and themes for emphasis's sake. There works which are repeated in different forms and concepts in his approach in symbolism and mythology to his neo-traditional approach to Igbo art.

Ben Chuka Enwonwu (1921 -1994).

Ben Chuka Enwonwu was a son of a Sculpture, gifted from his early childhood. He was a former student of Kenneth Murray at Ibadan. Chukueggu (1985), says Ben was trained at Goldsmith College London in 1944; Ruskin College, Oxford between 1944 and 1946; Shade School of Arts, London (1946-1948), and graduated with first class honours.

Krydz Ikwuemesi (2003), says that Enweonu's tutelage under K.C. Murray had imbued him with an unusual tenacity for enthroning art as a tool for nation building and sustenance of cultural pride with over hearing colonial presence which encompassed Enweonwu then seemed to place him in a state of confusion even as he attempted some kind of synthesis in the 1950's, even though he had no group of academic artists to share ideas with. Ikwuemesi, referring to Filani Kunle (2003), asserts that the members of the Zaria Art Society were not at such disadvantage since they had worked as a group even outside the Art Society. They further shared in the singular advantage of being the earliest set of Art graduates who schooled in Nigeria and witnessed struggle against colonialism at the very dawn of independence.

The Zarianists were propelled by the Africanist consciousness into articulating the theory of "National synthesis". This they did by harmonizing what, according to them, was considered useful from indigenous traditions as well as from the new western art forms. Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbedie, in Ikwuewesi (2003), spoke on post-colonial criticisms of Enwonwu's art which being derived from Ulli Bier's characterization, led to a denigration of his importance in Nigerian Art history by critics like Uche Okeke (1982), Simon Ottenberg (1997), and Jean Kennedy (1993). He further asserts that these critics inscribed Enwonwu's art as an ambiguous phase of expression between the certainties of traditional modes of symbolic communication and an emergent contemporary sensibility in relation to pioneers of modern Nigeria art (Onabolu, Lasekan), and post-colonial Avant – garde artists represented

by members of the Zaria Art Society (1958-1962). One of Enwonwu's works in Anyanwu, a bronze symbolic sculpture of the rising sun.

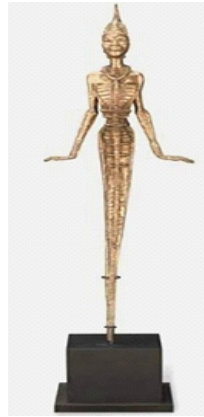


Plate 2

Artist: Ben Enwonwu

Title: Anyanwu

Medium: Bronze

The Igbo mythological figure
Anyanwu, representing.

It is a statue of a young woman dressed in the regalia of the Benin ancient kingdom, which is now a part of Nigeria, and symbolizing a rising nation, an awakening a new dawn, new hope, rebirth, which are the sun's various aspects. 'Anyanwu' is located at United Nation's Building New York on the second-floor corridor of the Conference Building between the Security Council and Trusteeship Council.

The spare of the influx prominent Nationalistic artists like Ben Enwonwu was high at a time, giving birth to proficient sculpture and artist in the specialization. The manner of Ben Enwonwu's professional practice which unfolded, revealing the consistence on his unique location as a modern African Artist.

Ogbuchie believes that Enwonwu's public presentation operated along European nations of the Artist professional, but in his themes, images and use of traditional Igbo tools for sculpting. He also clung to a model of production that linked him to his Igbo heritage of the master artist or 'di nka'. Enwonwu, in the conceptual space between the European and the indigenous Igbo ideals, each with it's notion or idea of the personality of the artist. Ben Enwonwu and some other pioneers modern Nigeria artists were branded colonial relics by Ulli Beier according to Ogbuchie, which exemplified the negative aspects of European critical intervention in the disclosure of Modern Nigerian art. Their attempt furthermore to legislate a note of contemporary practice, based on the work, student artists.

Therefore, the negation of the fact that modern Nigerian art right from inception, the early 1900s, existed an indigenous discourse on the pedagogy and practice, through which Nigerian artists evaluated their emergence modernity in relation to the hegemonic discourses of European colonization as Ogbechie puts it.

Contemporary Artists and their Tools

In the light of modernism, Naturalism and colonial influence in the Nigerian art circle, some contemporary Nigerian sculptors, whose works speak in line with Ben Enwonwu's work were interacted with in the Course of this project.

The few to be looked at are:

- 1) Charles Omuaru
- 2) Kenneth Njoku
- 3) Frank Denedo

Charles G.T. Omuaru (b. 1962)

The magic of dust wood art as confectioned and manipulated to an affective style, cannot be over emphasized when related to the sculpture an experiment of Charles G.T. Omuaru.

Charles Omuaru as revealed by an oral interview graduated the researcher, was born in Bakana, Degema Local Government Area of Rivers state. He is of the Kalabari of Ijaw extraction in Rivers State, Nigeria. His early school days were such adventures as he loved to play by the sea sides which affected his perceptions about the beauty of nature. His childhood education as well as tertiary education were in Rivers State. This led to his studies of Ibadan, Oyo state Nigeria and Uyo, Akwa Ibom, Nigeria where he baffled a Ph.D. A devoted Christian who the fear of God and according to him by extension, the love for nature. Omuaru's love for driftwood, which he attaches a great passion to, enriched his quest to seek beauty among wastes especially, and as an exploratory beneficial art. Moreover, being born and breed in the Niger Delta Region, where the mangrove forest pay homage to his style of art. He works around themes of social, religious and mundane visual dialogue according to (Uwa Usen, 2016) who stated that Charles Omuaru's desire to cut a niche for himself, motivated him to the driftwood experimental journey.

Omuaru, according to clement Etim Ekom (2016) explores and exploit one of the many environmental treasures of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria to the advantage of the art ecosystem in the world. Speaking with the drift wood icon himself, Charles GT Omuaru (Ph.D), in an oral interview so many pockets of ideas and style of execution of same were revealed by him. Eyefoki, (2007) opined that art itself being a creative reaction to the challenges of life, carries along with its aesthetics, which is a response to beauty stimulus or sensual appeal in natural and man-made images. The basic thing he revealed here is that when he finds a piece of wood that is appealing to him, or a material that resembles an object he has in mind, he picks it. Identifying woods that look interesting which he can work with is a major task he undergoes at all times before delving into the use of such. Sometimes it might be at a wood sealers' shop that the identification is made, propelling him to ask it of the wood seller or buys it from him as the case maybe. This explains why in his work the materials are considered to have drifted from the parent's side or yanked off from the mother wood and drifted to any

other place. Sometimes the material could be gotten from a falling tree by any situation such as environmental factors like wind, rain or whose roots have been eating up by termites or just rotten away.

He finds roots of trees so interesting that sometimes he digs them out for use. Some of the roots would have been in the ground for a long time, deteriorating agents such as chemicals and another impediment of decays. These could cause what he calls grottos in his works as having been tampered with by ant, waters and decays. Omuaru sees beauty in the root, especially, when they would have been affected by termites and rest of the agents that aid where-out or decay. He sees something that is creative, something that can narrate ideas. He picks the woods, lives with it, not just starting to work with it when he freshly picks the wood. He allows the wood to be with him, turns it upside down and probably do a lot of things with the wood and then, start identifying one particular idea, which he relates to other parts of the whole wood where forms can be created. He does not just create the forms but with the narratives that follows them. Sometimes, the objects he perceives on the part of the woods may not collaborate with the narrative he may have developed with other forms, he will knock down that one and recreate another to conform with perceived object on the driftwood. His works do not just fit in for aesthetic purposes only, but are functional, creating stories that may have taken place over time.

His Works



Some of his works are usually functional as well as attain aesthetic beauty as in his work; “*Throne of the Mystery Sea god*”. The Throne according to the Niger Delta background where he is coming from, are not what anyhow can sit anyhow. The thrones are usually embellished with all sorts of things like masquerade head, fish, tortoise, snails, etc. Charles Omuaru still practice sculpture and currently teaching Art in the Department of Fine and Applied Art, Faculty of Humanities, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

Kenneth I. Njoku (b. 1972)

Dr. Kenneth I. Njoku is one of the Contemporary Nigerian Sculptors, a prolific and well exhibited artist. Njoku became the first Nigerian to obtain a Ph.D in sculpture (Studio Art) of the Delta State University in 2015. He has a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) and a Bachelor of Arts (B.A. Hons) degrees in sculptor of the University of Benin City in 2003 and 1996 respectively. In 1997, Njoku won the Edo State Governments award of excellence. He lectured at the Federal College of Education Akoka, Lagos State until 2005 when he decided to engage himself in practice as a full-time studio artist. One very good thing or say unique about Njoku is that he has practiced extensively the art of making bronze sculptors.

Currently, Njoku is teaching Sculpture at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Benin. His scholarly articles have been published in reputable academic journals both locally and internationally. It will be nice to note that Njoku has in the course of working extensively as a bronze sculptor, greatly improved on the lost-way cost technique and have don a couple of collaborations with the writer. In the area of finishing (Patina) on bronze, he has introduced some measure of innovations act. The use of Styrofoam as an alternative to the use of wax in the “Spring process” of bronze casting has become a wonderful accompaniment even as he introduced it to his processes.

His latest exploration on 'kinetics', introducing movement as a complement is commendable. An improved complement to 'statistics' in contemporary Nigeria sculpture practice. Njoku's inspiration and references are majorly drawn from cultural elements, especially Nigeria – Igbo folklores 'Masquerade' traditions and festivals, songs, traditional lingos, proverbs and the Uri/Edeala body adornment. His works have enjoyed corporate and private collections within and outside Nigeria. Njoku is the founder and coordinator of the University of Benin trained Visual Artists, and a member of the Society of Nigerian Artists. He is equally a member of Sculptors Association of Nigeria (ScAN) and Visual Arts.

Francis Denedo (b.1971)

Francis Denedo, studied fine arts in Auchi PolytecAuchi, specializing in Sculpture in 1993. He is the first of five children. He born on March 24, 1971, and attended primary school in Benin and Agbor between 1976-82. He also attended Egba Grammar School between 1982 to 87 gaining his west African Schools Certificate, (WAEC). He has been a full-time studio artist until recently when he volunteered to teach art at the University of Lagos for about six semesters. Frank, as popularly called, has had numerous exhibitions where he showcased Sculptures and paintings. The artist enjoys working with all Sculptural media but believes that metal construction is very interesting to handle. This he has shown in his works such as, Beta Drummer, a metal construction of about two feet, produced in year 2018. Denedo has some of his works in private and public collections.

This research study, due to its need to employ geometric forms in the rendering of plywood dummies and subsequent casts, alludes to African sculptural forms for conceptual inclinations. African sculptures have been lauded for their multifaceted attributes and multidimensional forms. The three-dimensional art forms from Africa display embodiment

of significant oeuvre exhibiting not only the exceptional craftsmanship of the local sculptors but an array of styles cutting across various traditions and cultural backgrounds. Most of the works are naturalistic as much as some are abstract in form; some are stylized as much as some are realistic. These works served and still serve in various capacities occupying categories Trowell (1970) identifies as: Spirit-regarding art, Man-regarding art, and the art for ritual display. These art objects fit in within these categories and while exhibiting definite forms and styles which had over time defined the regions and localities they emerged from.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the emergence of the European arts influence on the nationalist artists, pre and post-Independence had a push towards a paradigm shift, for economic sustainability, with regards to the art practice, and art appreciation. In the spirit of nationalism and conquests, the nationalist artists were not completely diverted from their original cultural background and traits typical of Nigeria, as earlier asserted, rather their works wore new garments akin to developments in nation building via arts, and the economic entrants from patronage, placing same in the world map and narratives.

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