

A Review of Nigerian Modernism 1900-1965: Anti-Europeanisation, Nationalism and Avant-Garde Art by Clement Akpang

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Abstract

This paper is a review of the book entitled 'Nigerian Modernism 1900-1965: Anti-Europeanisation, Nationalism and Avant-garde Art' by Clement E. Akpang. The paper explores the conceptual and theoretical approaches and philosophies presented in the book, particularly its postcolonial critique of European modernism history in order to decenter it. The scholarly implications of such theoretical endeavour on African and global art histories are examined. The methodological approach used for this review revolves around critical theory. It is concluded after in-depth analysis of the book, that the author presents an all-encompassing reconstruction of modern Nigerian art history that addresses the ambiguities in earlier literature and commentaries. The book, thus, constitute a rich resource for the study of modern Nigerian/ African art globally. It is recommended for all art schools in Nigeria and global institutes with focus on African art studies.

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Background to the Study

A Review of Nigerian Modernism 1900-1965: Anti-Europeanisation, Nationalism and Avant-Garde Art by Clement Akpang

The author here reconstructs the narrative of modern Nigeria art, a parallel to Euro-Centric Modernism, thus creating a contradiction by dismissing the misrepresentation of what constitutes Nigerian Modernism in contrast to European historiographers who classify modern Nigeria art as contemporary art. His position is well articulated. The book title: "Nigerian Modernism 1900-1965: Anti Europeanization, Nationalism and Avant-garde Art" is quite apt. The book written as a counter to the falsehood propagated by Euro-American modernists debunks most of the narratives by the Western accounts often full of bias. Hence the book is an authentic African /Nigerian perspective which is a true reflection of the purpose and function of what constitutes Nigerian Modernism. The author, by this has been able to situate the plethora of art genres that can be classified as contemporary art, as well as establish the conceptualization, appropriation, and definition of avant-garde art in Nigeria.

The book in essence is an art historical account written by a participant observer, who presents the true narrative of a burning issue about what constitutes African art other than the account of Euro-American eccentricities. It is intended to correct the erroneous account for the benefit of art historians and artists in general. The author's apothegmatic use of language makes for easy understanding and comprehension. The language use is cohesive with a clear message as to the purpose for which the book has been written.

My first encounter with the book reveals that Akpang appears to be goaded by his exposure to foreign authors' account of Nigeria's modern art. As a direct response to their accounts, set out to document a near accurate historical heritage that can be approximated to altruism for the benefit of Nigerian artists and the global audience. Surely the book is designed as a formal response to Western narratives on African art and modernity. Akpang's book on Nigerian Modernism succeeds in its goals based on classifications, his historiography and use of analytical tools to distinguish post colonialism from modernism. The discourse is quite comprehensive and it ensured the exposition of a movement that gave verve to a phenomenal deconstruction of the philosophies that define the plethora of artistic genres that constitute contemporary Nigerian art. Definitely this is a must read to an art audience that yearn to discern the historical account enshrined in this book, while reflecting on earlier accounts by Eurocentric thinking whereby African art is interpreted in terms of European and Anglo-American values and experiences. The author succinctly captures African artistic values, aspirations and modernization in the words of Enwonwu (1989) thus:

When I use the pure art form of my father's images and I use my experience, academic knowledge ...I arrive at a point where realism and symbolism can meet... what will result and survive is the continuation of the aspirations of African people, their dignified way of life, their beliefs, their dreams, and their yearnings for intrinsic lasting values that are encapsulated in the new form.

Enwonwu's postulation birth the appropriation and revolutionization of Western and African aesthetics conventions. This gave rise to a modern art philosophy that resulted in a hybrid stylized unique aesthetic formalism that is distinctly Nigerian from the late 1930s to the period under review. The author, Akpang leaves no one in doubt as to his mastery of the subject of Modernism in art. He began by x-raying modernism, and followed up with European Modernism discourse and Africa; gave a good account of Twentieth Century Nigerian Art and factors that prompted 3 Avant-gardism in structuring Modern Nigerian Art. All of this was done to give a background to the main menu in the book. The book is made up of eight (8) chapters. The technique which the author has used is quite helpful in a treatise such as this. The development of the book is laid out from a tripartite perspective of its text, context and subject. Based on the text, the context offers some rich insight as it gives vivid verbal and pictorial account of the subject. The main purpose of the text is to convey information, and to narrate the author's perspective on Modern Nigerian art by its diverse approach, its freedom from conventionalities, thus provides us with the unique opportunity of unveiling Modern Nigerian art.

The contents are expressed philosophically, and historically to reveal the brand of Nigerian Modernism in order to determine its genre. The book is presented as a weave of intricate intrepid deconstruction that outranks Euro-vision of African Modernity. This, the author in his book alludes to a "subtle expression of resistance to imperial authority through the reverse-imposition of modern African art..." the concern of this treatise is to make the reader understand the dual relationship between text and context of deconstruction theory. The implicit message of this book helps us to be abreast with what the author intended to achieve, this is encapsulated in the subtext, thus we are grilled through a chronological flow of the issues discussed. Akpang employed both explanatory and persuasive voice to get the reader understand his stand -point as it affects the intersection of genres and disciplines that define contemporary art. Akpang is of the view that artists today respond to a new global society, hence their works are a direct response to a new eclectically visual idiom that defines classification. The book quite suits its intended audience based on the dislocation of the historical picture as presented by foreign authors. These works have had a debilitating effect on the world view of African art nay Nigerian Modernism. A stitch in time saves nine. It is a welcome development as this add to existing voices to heal the wounds of the devastation caused by earlier historiographers.

Conclusion

This book in all its ramifications is an interrogation of the concepts, style, philosophy and ideology of Nigerian Modernism from the perspective of a Nigerian artist. The author investigates, postulates, interrogates, classifies and appropriates the constituent of what is most appropriately Nigerian Modernism. The emergence of new realities is the ethos that defines the direction of this treatise that is well researched and documented for today and tomorrow, however, the work of Kojo Fosu's "Twentieth century Art of Africa" is hereby suggested to add verve to Akpang's rich historiography of modern Nigerian art. Sukanthy (Visagapperumal) Egharevba.

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