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Feminine Beauty and the Philosophy of Decolonization in the Nigerian Art Space

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Abstract

Feminine beauty is defined as the integration of physical and aesthetic attributes that are pleasing or desirable for females in a particular society, given the influence of culture, history, and society. This paper explores the intersection of feminine beauty, decolonial philosophy, and the Nigerian art world, exploring how feminine aesthetic images in Nigeria have developed from colonial legacies and how contemporary artists are reversing these impositions. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory and decolonial thought, the study examines how Eurocentric beauty standards promoting light skin, Euro-textured hair, and slender bodies—were institutionalized through colonial media, schooling, and Christian missionary exertions, and how these continue to be deeply rooted in Nigeria's beauty culture. With specific focus on the Nigerian art sphere, the article highlights how visual artists, photographers, and performance artists are doing acts of cultural resistance by reclaiming indigenous concepts of beauty based on Yoruba, Igbo, and other ethnic practices of aestheticism. Employing case studies of artists like Peju Alatise, and Lakin Ogunbanwo, the paper shows how Nigerian art deconstructs and refigures femininity beyond colonial epistemes, offering counter-narratives that celebrate dark skin, natural hair, bodily diversity, and ancestry symbolism. These visual responses are framed as acts of epistemic disobedience and cultural reawakening that are consistent with broader Nigerian decolonization processes. Lastly, the study argues that decolonizing feminine beauty within the context of Nigerian art is paramount to Nigeria's continuous search for cultural self-definition and decolonial emancipation.

Keywords:
Decolonization,
Feminine beauty,
Nigerian art,
Epistemic disobedience,
Indigenous aesthetics

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Background to the Study

The concept of beauty, both as a cultural phenomenon and one under philosophical examination, has forever been a place of struggle and negotiation. In Nigeria, ideas of female beauty have been dominated by colonial legacy that implemented Eurocentric standards, which tended to override indigenous aesthetics. Such dominant ideals not only shaped society but also permeated most facets of Nigerian life, including its thriving arts scene. The colonial experience imposed a hierarchy of beauty in terms of lighter skin, straighter hair, and slimmer body types, traits that were unfamiliar to the various ethnic groups in Nigeria. This imposition overshadowed the indigenous conceptions of beauty that previously existed, which celebrated traits such as fuller figures, more elaborate hair, and body markings, all of which carried very significant cultural and religious meanings (Ibanga, 2017). In addition, colonial occupation imposed new modes of seeing and being seen, as theorized by Fanon (1967), in how the colonized subject internalizes the white gaze and becomes alienated from their own body, resulting in profound psychological alienation. Bodily estrangement is especially pronounced for women, whose bodies became terrain for colonial ideals and nationalist reactions. However, before the onset of colonial contact, gender and body concepts in various Nigerian societies varied from Western binary oppositions. Oyěwùmí (1997) points out that Yoruba society, for example, did not categorically separate social life based on anatomical gender distinctions. Rather, roles in society were relationally and contextually determined, and considerations of seniority, lineage, and responsibility were more paramount than inflexible sex-based hierarchies. The destabilization of such indigenous forms by colonial powers not only instituted new gender conventions but also altered indigenous aesthetic principles, specifically those related to femininity and visual representation of the body.

Against these epistemic and aesthetic disruptions, Nigerian artists have come to concentrate more on decolonization themes, using their art forms to subvert and deconstruct the long-lasting colonial beauty standards. Through various art forms such as painting, sculpture, photography, and performance, these artists are actively reappropriating and reinterpreting native aesthetics, thereby offering counter-narratives that celebrate the richness and diversity of beauty standards in Nigeria. They align their work with broader decolonial attempts to question and transform the epistemological structures built by colonialism (Gordon, 2019). Decolonization in the Nigerian art space necessitates not only a critique of colonial aesthetics but also a restructuring of the frameworks through which African art is curated, viewed, and theorized. As Shabout (2014) argues, contemporary African art must be liberated from the persistent marginalization imposed by Western institutional narratives that often decontextualize African expressions or homogenize them under a universalizing aesthetic perspective. This concern is particularly acute when considering how African femininity has been historically represented often through Eurocentric ideals of beauty, modesty, and gender roles. Female artists like Peju Alatise and photographers like Lakin Ogunbanwo directly challenge these curatorial legacies by producing works that dwell on indigenous knowledge systems, ritual practices, and embodied mythologies. By foregrounding local materials, cosmological references, and non-Western aesthetic codes, these artists reject

the invisibility or hypervisibility that once defined the postcolonial female subject, offering instead a grounded and self-defined vision of feminine beauty. Through this lens, decolonization becomes not merely a theoretical exercise but a praxis of visibility, voice, and visual sovereignty in the Nigerian contemporary art space.

Colonial Heritages and the Making of Aesthetics

The Nigerian idea of beauty has been significantly influenced by colonial encounters that placed Eurocentric ideals above indigenous aesthetic ideals. During the colonial era, the spread of Western beliefs through religion, education, and the media works to not only bring civilization but also reshape African attitudes towards the values placed on the body. Specifically, the building of femininity as beauty became a significant site where colonial power imposed its will in both symbolic and material terms, substituting external constructions of beauty with local values.

Eurocentric notions of beauty, favouring fair skin, straight hair, and narrow bodies, were sold as indicators of civilisation and self-advancement. They were disseminated through missionary schooling and Christianisation, which tended to label darker skin and African cultural norms with religious and moral insufficiency. The colonial education system was largely responsible for this change, rewarding individuals who adhered to Western standards of dress and grooming and stigmatizing local modes of self-presentation (Nzegwu, 2006). Meanwhile, a flood of foreign printed and visual media saturated local markets with representations of white women as the ideal of elegance and sophistication, thereby perpetuating the beauty of European facial features and body types.

The racialized and gendered hierarchy of beauty has survived long after the colonial period, as seen in today's large market for skin-lightening products and hair-straightening treatments. According to Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2008), the global spread of skin-whitening products reflects a transnational system in which whiteness is continually upheld as identical with beauty, success, and modernity. In Nigeria, this is expressed in the popularity of cosmetics and plastic surgery that aim to "enhance" African features by approximating them to Eurocentric standards. Such practices are more than skin-deep, resonating with the profound psychological wounds of colonialism that equated blackness with inferiority and non-being.

Moreover, the cult of thinness which is yet another Western intrusion is in stark contrast to precolonial Nigeria's standards of beauty that upheld full, curvier bodies as the symbols of fertility, health, and status. These changes have generated mass anxiety about beauty, especially among Nigerian women who are being confronted with competing ideals: the traditional admiration of fullness and Western demands for thinness. Nzegwu (2006) further states that the disintegration of African kinship systems and communal values by colonial intrusion has caused identity to be fragmented, and women are forced to continually negotiate between various and often conflicting norms. The enactment of these ideals did not only transform the ideal of beauty; it fundamentally re-created the symbolic order in which female bodies became known and valued. The colonial legacy of

beauty, therefore, extends beyond aesthetics to entail epistemological dimensions, impacting the ground structures through which individuals come to know beauty, self-esteem, and cultural validity. Thus, decolonizing beauty necessitates not just the eschewal of Eurocentric norms but the recuperation and reinterpretation of native aesthetic systems that prioritize African narratives, corporeal experiences, and visions.

Indigenous Aesthetic Principles and Pre-colonial Concepts of Beauty

Before colonial contact, Nigerian ideas of female beauty were deeply embedded within spiritual, social, and cosmological structures. While aesthetic principles differed among groups, they mainly focused on symbolic adornments, body marks, and physical features like plumpness of the body - things that went beyond mere decoration and powerfully conveyed a woman's status within her group as well as her connection to superior metaphysical powers. The pre-colonial Nigerian understanding of beauty was holistic, including the physical, religious, and social dimensions of life, and often acted as a visual channel for cultural identity and moral guidelines. Within the Yoruba culture, aesthetics was central to both religious and philosophical aspects. Drewal and Pemberton (1989) depict how the aesthetic forms and ceremonies of adornment among the Yoruba, like scarification, elaborate hairstyles, and beaded clothing, went beyond mere visual attractions; they were indicators of social status, lineage, maturity, and religious authority. Scarification was imbued with profound cultural significance, being practiced as a rite of passage that turned the body into a signifier of identity and belonging. Such bodily markings were invested with symbolic as well as cosmological significance, situating the subject within a cosmos of ancestral and divine kinship. The idea of fullness of the body especially for women was once celebrated as a sign of health, fertility, and social prosperity. Such an appreciation of voluptuousness is in dramatic contrast with later Western ideals that prized thinness and self-control. Sculptural images and performance art that included full-figured female forms often incarnated fertility goddesses, mother figures, or symbols of plenty, thereby representing the generative power of femininity in both biological and cosmological terms.

Beauty was not separated from function or from spirituality within this system but was instead a manifestation of harmony with the universe and harmony with one's position in society. Oyěwùmí (1997) is a critical analysis of the notion of gender and body in pre-colonial Yoruba society. Oyewumi asserts that Yoruba social structure did not have most of it founded upon anatomical sex, but that it was centred on seniority and relational position which are frameworks in which the body did not alone dictate one's social status. Thus, the notion of female beauty went beyond straightforward gendered objectification, it was part of wider cultural roles, religious significance, and social adoration. The human body was viewed as a centre of *asé* (life force), and beauty was one of its expressions, specifically in women whose roles included caring, spiritual intermediary, and preservation of lineage. This indigenous aesthetic paradigm questions the colonial binary that splits beauty into either purely decorative or commercialized. It advocates for a new paradigm of beauty that encompasses both cultural and spiritual dimensions - a paradigm that resists simplistic Eurocentric interpretation of the African female body.

The reclamation of such traditions is thus not merely an exercise in cultural recovery but a necessary step in decolonizing beauty ideals in present-day Nigeria.

This study is anchored in a decolonial feminist framework, drawing particularly on the works of Frantz Fanon (1967), Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí (1997), and bell hooks (1992) to examine how visual representations of African femininity contest inherited colonial ideologies of beauty. Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* provides a foundational psychological pathway for understanding the internalization of white beauty ideals and the alienation of the Black subject. His discussion on the inferiority complex experienced by colonized subjects - particularly as it relates to the body, skin, and desire - underscores the need to interrogate beauty not merely as aesthetic but as a site of political and psychological struggle.

Fanon's insights are crucial for unpacking how the legacy of colonization has shaped representations of the Black female body as "the other," often exoticized or erased entirely. Within the Nigerian art space, this manifests through visual codes that either replicate or resist colonial beauty archetypes. By reclaiming local mythologies, material cultures, and gendered symbology, contemporary artists engage in what Fanon terms psychic decolonization which simply means a disalienation of the self through cultural re-rooting.

Furthermore, Oyěwùmí's critique of the Western gender binary in African epistemologies enhances this Fanonian base by foregrounding the indigenous ontologies that predate colonial frameworks. This convergence of Fanon's psych political analysis with African feminist theory offers a robust platform for interpreting works by artists like Peju Alatise and Lakin Ogunbanwo, whose practices reframe African womanhood through mythic, symbolic, and material interventions.

Beauty, Resistance, and Epistemic Disobedience

The modern Nigerian art movement typified by a decolonial turn, particularly its redefinition of beauty for women, is an example of what Walter Mignolo (2011) calls epistemic disobedience: deliberate challenge to colonial knowledge production, understanding, and representation structures. In reclaiming indigenous aesthetics and disrupting Eurocentric visual norms, artists like Peju Alatise and Lakin Ogunbanwo perform an interruption both of aesthetic conventions and of the colonial logics that underwrite them. Epistemic disobedience, for Mignolo (2011), is equivalent to delinking from the Western episteme which has continually disavowed non-European worldviews and ways of knowing. In the realm of beauty, this break is about transgressing coloniality of aesthetics - a system that traditionally aligned whiteness, thinness, and Western attitude with value and humanness and deigned African phenotypes and aesthetics as deviance. Through the creation of visual languages based on local cosmologies, embodied experience, and cultural memory, these Nigerian artists affirm alternative visions of perception and being that are embedded in African epistemological frameworks.

María Lugones (2007) extends this criticism to consider how coloniality not only racialized epistemic categories but also enforced a colonial/modern gender system - a hierarchy that forcibly reorganized indigenous gender relations and imposed Western binary hierarchies. For instance, in precolonial Yoruba society, social roles were not fixed by sex but by seniority and relational responsibilities (Oyěwùmí, 1997). The imposition of colonialism instituted a patriarchal structure in which African women were dually oppressed as racialized and gendered others. Lugones (2007) argues that resistance to such a system requires the embrace of a decolonial feminism attuned to both the racialized and gendered dimensions of colonial power.

Here, the Nigerian artists' redefinition of beauty is not merely an aesthetic act but a highly political and philosophical act. Their creative practices are an instance of what Lugones (2007) would refer to as a "world-traveling" praxis - one that decentres the colonial center and relocates the site of enunciation to the epistemic periphery. Alatise's summoning of Yoruba myth and Ogunbanwo's photographic homage to dark skin and traditional attire, all work against this reigning paradigm. Rather, they render visible what has been erased or invisible within colonial visual culture, forcing viewers to take on alternative visual and epistemological frameworks. These gestures of visual and epistemic disobedience are not merely concerned with the critique of the past, they build futures. They create conceptual and material space for African femininity to be imagined outside of the shadow of coloniality. For Mignolo (2011), decolonial aesthetics do not involve inclusion within Western canons, but rather the creation of an entirely different grammar of beauty, one that begins from the epistemic sovereignty of formerly colonized peoples. Beauty here is a space of resistance and regeneration, where African women can regain the agency to define themselves for themselves.

Case studies

Peju Alatise: Reclaiming African femininity through myth and materiality

Peju Alatise's mixed media is an expression of a feminist reinterpretation of African womanhood, founded on Yoruba cosmological concepts and contemporary socio-political commentary. Her installation, *Flying Girls*, in Plate 1 exhibited at the Nigerian Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale, addresses a cluster of young Black girls as winged sculptures, suspended between liberty and captivity (Venice Biennale, 2017). Based on Yoruba mythology and oral tradition, the piece counters the objectification of Black women's bodies by presenting instead an image of transcendence, resistance, and collective memory. Not only does the installation critique patriarchal violence and child labour, but it also suggests a spiritual reclamation of the African girl-child as sacred and powerful. Alatise's writing underscores the imperative need to portray Black girlhood beyond victimhood and within empowered mythological frameworks, deconstructing with great effect the colonial binaries of savagery and civilization as applied to African femininity. Peju Alatise's *Flying Girls* is a landmark installation that powerfully engages with the decolonization of African femininity by invoking Yoruba mythology and feminist consciousness through evocative material choices and symbolic visual storytelling. Composed of eight life-sized black girl sculptures with wings, arranged in a

circular formation, this work reclaims the representation of African girls from the confines of victimhood, objectification, and colonial narratives. Presented at the 57th Venice Biennale (2017), *Flying Girls* exemplifies the contemporary Nigerian art space's capacity to interrogate and reshape postcolonial aesthetics of beauty and womanhood.

Myth and the Female Body: A Yoruba-Centered Epistemology

Drawing on Yoruba cosmology, Alatise challenges Western frameworks of beauty and feminine identity. In Yoruba ontology, femininity is intrinsically powerful and sacred, embodied in deities such as Oshun, the goddess of beauty, love, and fertility, and Oya, the fierce guardian of change and rebirth. *Flying Girls* recalls these mythic associations through its visual metaphor: the girls, though young and vulnerable, are equipped with wings which are symbols of agency, transcendence, and divine potential. Alatise re-inscribes the African girl-child with spiritual and mythic significance, thus dislodging colonial and patriarchal readings of the female body as passive or merely ornamental. This re-mythologizing process is central to the decolonization of beauty as it positions African femininity not as a derivative of Western ideals, but as a self-defined, culturally grounded construct. As Oguibe (2004) notes, myth in African art often operates as a "reservoir of resistance," allowing artists to contest hegemonic narratives while rooting their work in indigenous worldviews.

Materiality as Politics and Poetics

Alatise's choice of materials - charcoal-black resin, cement, and mixed media - foregrounds the politics of representation and the aesthetic of reclamation. The dark complexion of the figures defies Eurocentric standards of beauty that have historically prized light skin as aspirational. The assertive blackness of the girls is not just a visual choice but a political act: it affirms African beauty in its natural, unfiltered form, engaging what hooks (1992) refers to as the "oppositional gaze" - a deliberate counter-visuality that interrogates dominant image regimes. Furthermore, the tactility of the materials alludes to traditional African sculptural practices while situating the work in a contemporary idiom. The industrial and textured nature of the materials also symbolizes the resilience and inner strength of the girl-child - beauty here is not fragile or polished but forged in struggle and endurance.

From Object to Subject: Narrating Liberation

Embedded within *Flying Girls* is the story of a ten-year-old domestic servant in Lagos who dreams of escape and flight. Alatise transforms this narrative of exploitation into one of empowerment and transcendence. The wings signal a metaphorical flight from servitude to self-determination, reclaiming the right to dream, to exist, and to be beautiful on one's own terms. By giving her subjects wings, Alatise reverses the logic of objectification. The girls are not to be looked at as passive muses but to be seen as active agents in a mythic transformation. This shift from object to subject resonates with decolonial feminist theory, particularly Nnaemeka's (2004) *nego-feminism*, which advocates for agency, negotiation, and contextual empowerment rather than Western-imported ideologies.

Philosophy of Decolonization and Feminine Beauty

In the broader discourse of feminine beauty and the philosophy of decolonization, *Flying Girls* is both a critique and a proposition. It critiques the historical violence of aesthetic colonialism that erased or commodified African women's bodies and narratives. Simultaneously, it proposes an alternative aesthetic rooted in African spirituality, resilience, and collective memory. Alatise's work becomes a philosophical gesture calling for a re-evaluation of what beauty means in a postcolonial African context. Her art aligns with Kwame Nkrumah's call for "the decolonization of the mind," extending it to the visual and material realm. Beauty, in this framework, is not merely appearance but an epistemology, a way of knowing and valuing the self and others through indigenous cultural lenses. Peju Alatise's *Flying Girls* powerfully embodies the reclamation of African femininity through myth and materiality. By invoking Yoruba spirituality, challenging Eurocentric aesthetics, and re-centring the African girl-child as a bearer of beauty and agency, the work contributes meaningfully to the decolonization of visual culture in Nigeria. It insists that beauty in African art is not a borrowed ideal but an ancestral inheritance, reimagined, reasserted, and radiant in its own right.

Plate 1: Peju Alatise. *Flying Girls*. Installation art. source: https://library.clarkart.edu

Purple Period (2011) another masterpiece from Peju Alatise pictured in Plate II is a profound and politically charged mixed-media sculpture. This work deconstructs colonial and patriarchal perceptions of the female body and reclaims its representation through an indigenous, feminist, and postcolonial view. The sculpture presents the fragmented, abstracted female torso woven from tangled cords and mixed materials, embedded against a textured surface. The figure emerges not as a smooth, idealized nude (as in Western academic traditions), but as a raw, complex entity. The knots and tangles form a corporeal narrative that resists linear beauty ideals. The chaotic, intertwined cords speak to the layers of identity, trauma, and resilience experienced by Nigerian women. Rather than conforming to Western canonical ideals of feminine beauty - symmetry, polish, eroticism, Alatise reclaims the female form as a site of struggle and agency. The emphasis is not on erotic appeal but on inner turbulence and strength, challenging centuries of the objectification of African women's bodies in colonial ethnography and art. Here, beauty is conceptualized as an assertion of autonomy. Alatise's materials - earth-toned, fibrous, and coarse, evoke traditional Nigerian craft techniques and bodily labour.

In this way, beauty becomes a tactile, lived experience rather than a visual or consumable spectacle. This is a deliberate rejection of Western modes of representation that often reduce the African female body to the exotic or the primitive.

In *Purple Period*, 2011 (Plate II), the nude is not passive; it is unruly and dense with meaning. The artwork visually critiques the way colonial aesthetics made the black female nude both invisible and hyper visible, devoid of context but oversexualized. Alatise's abstraction pushes in opposition to this. By avoiding explicitness and limitation, she subverts the colonial viewpoint, forcing audiences to engage with the body as a location of cumulative histories and cultural memory. The tangled cords and layers demonstrate the complex epistemological and aesthetic interrelationships presented by this colonialism, and the work of art becomes a philosophical exploration of what it means to reclaim selfhood and beauty on one's own terms. Drawing upon Yoruba metaphysical thought and feminist aesthetics, Alatise presents identity as nonlinear, embodied, and resistant.

The "purple" in the title may symbolically refer to both royalty and trauma, a chromatic tension that mirrors the complexity of black womanhood in postcolonial Nigeria. Purple is also a colour often associated with feminist struggle globally, suggesting a transnational solidarity. Peju Alatise's *Purple Period* is not merely a visual artwork but a decolonial feminist manifesto in sculptural form. Through its raw materiality and disruption of conventional form, it interrogates and reimagines what beauty means for Nigerian women in a postcolonial context. Alatise thus participates in a broader movement within contemporary Nigerian art that seeks to reclaim authorship, reframe identity, and dismantle the visual legacies of colonialism.

Plate 2: Peju Alatise, Purple period, 2011. Mixed media Sculpture. Size - 48 x 48 x 10 inches
Source: https://www.mutualart.com

Peju Alatise's *The Purple Period* is a visceral, multi-sensory installation that extends her long-standing interrogation of gender, spirituality, and power within the framework of decolonization. This work boldly addresses the silencing, suffering, and resilience of African women in a patriarchal and postcolonial context. Using a deeply symbolic color palette, richly layered textures, and Yoruba cosmological references, *The Purple Period* becomes a meditative space that critiques historical erasures and reclaims feminine beauty as a spiritual and political force.

Myth and Ritual in African Feminine Expression

In *the Purple Period*, Alatise once again engages Yoruba mythological motifs to challenge colonial and patriarchal constructions of femininity. The title itself alludes to menstruation - a biological and sacred rite of passage - yet often treated as taboo in African and global societies. By invoking purple, traditionally associated with royalty, spirituality, and transformation, Alatise situates the female body within a mythic and exalted framework.

Yoruba spirituality does not stigmatize menstruation; instead, it recognizes it as part of the cyclical power of life, aligned with Oshun's fertility and Yemoja's nurturing forces. Alatise uses this framework to dismantle colonial-christian moralities that associated female bodily functions with impurity and shame. In doing so, she reclaims the menstrual cycle as a source of *ase* - spiritual power and generative potential - in Yoruba epistemology. This re-mythologization is central to the decolonial reimagination of feminine beauty, as it shifts focus from aesthetic form to ontological essence.

Materiality, Colour, and Symbolism

Alatise's artistic vocabulary in *The Purple Period* is defined by her signature use of mixed media: fabric, pigment, resin, text, and sculptural forms that fuse the spiritual with the sensuous. The saturation of purple across the installation is not decorative, it is deliberate and symbolic. In West African colour symbolism, purple can represent healing, mysticism, and divine authority. With this chromatic vocabulary, Alatise creates a immersive environment that dignifies the inner worlds of African women. The material layering in The Purple Period mirrors the psychic and historical layering of trauma and resistance. Textured surfaces, woven fabrics, and embedded patterns evoke traditional feminine craft practices like textile weaving and body adornment, affirming simultaneously the place of women both as artists and as subjects in the history of art. This challenges the colonial archive in which African women were either invisible or hyper visible as exoticized subjects. Her use of inscriptions - sometimes actual texts embedded into the work - acts as a dialogical bridge between voice and visibility. In this way, Alatise's materials do not just "make" beauty; they *speak* beauty, reclaiming the right to narrate African femininity through indigenous and personal language.

Pain, Power, Transcendence

The Purple Period explores the tension between pain and transcendence - between what African women endure and what they become. It draws attention to themes like domestic

violence, societal stigma, and bodily autonomy while resisting narratives of victimization. The labour is not characterized by anguish; rather, it emphasizes fortitude, spiritual strength, and restoration. This duality is deeply rooted in the African philosophical idea of complementarity - where polarities, including existence and nonexistence, aesthetics and suffering, authority and susceptibility, exist simultaneously and provide significance to one another (Mbiti, 1990). Through the integration of this duality in both structure and substance, Alatise decentralizes Western binaries and reconceptualizes African beauty as a lived, fluid phenomenon shaped by history, struggle, and spirit. In *the Purple Period*, Peju Alatise evokes a multi-sensory world where fragments of the female experience are constructed through textured layers, found materials, and Yoruba cosmological symbolism. Her visual vocabulary turns into a conscious rewriting of colonial femininity - a reclaiming of Black womanhood beyond exoticism and objectification. This aligns with Frantz Fanon's (1967) idea that the Black woman under colonial rule tends to internalize foreign ideals of beauty and attractiveness, leading to psychological alienation. Alatise counters this by grounding her forms in native spiritual knowledge and communal memory.

The use of recycled materials and rough textures during The Purple Period questions the polished, Eurocentric surfaces conventionally associated with feminine ideals, substituting them with an aesthetic of rupture and healing. Fanon believed that freedom from colonial rule entails not just political or economic emancipation but also psychic decolonization of the self. Alatise's work imagines this analyzation that encompasses both myth and materiality, providing not only an assessment but also a novel ontological possibility of African femininity. The purple hues - long linked with royalty and spirituality within Yoruba culture - testify to the divinity of the female form, recontextualizing it as indigenous value systems instead of seeking external affirmation. Consequently, Alatise examines Fanon's philosophical appeal to disalienate the colonized self-using visual art as a tool for the epistemic integrity of African beauty.

Feminine Beauty and Decolonial Imagination

In the context of decolonizing beauty in the Nigerian art space, The Purple Period is a radical gesture. It critiques the colonial aesthetic regime that devalued African women's bodies and experiences, and rather suggests a beauty that is sacred, embodied, and in process. Alatise's vision coincides with Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "Third Space" - a hybrid location in which new identities are constructed outside of colonial imposition. Her artwork then becomes an epistemic act - a means of knowing and re-knowing the African female self. Here, feminine beauty is not superficial or performative but metaphysical, insurgent, and based on communal remembrance. The installation steadfastly maintains that African women are not objects of aesthetic appreciation but autonomous agents of cultural production.

Peju Alatise's The Purple Period reclaims African femininity through the sacredness of myth, the representational significance of colour, alongside the influence of material narratives. Within the context of the wider philosophy of decolonization in Nigerian art,

this work repositions feminine beauty as a site of cultural memory, religious authority, and political resistance are highlighted. It maintains that African womanhood is abundant in ritual, resourcefulness, and ingenuity and cannot be bound by colonial categories have to be seen, felt, and honoured on their own terms.

Lakin Ogunbanwo: ***Reimagining African beauty through visual sovereignty and cultural archetypes***

Lakin Ogunbanwo's photography is a powerful critique of racialized beauty standards and homogeneous beauty ideals. In his body of work, including *Are We Good Enough*? and *e wá wo mi* ("come look at me"), Ogunbanwo presents dark-skinned Nigerian women attired in traditional gele (headpieces), luxurious fabrics, and textured backgrounds that create an ambiance characterized by grandeur and cultural authenticity.

Plate 3: Lakin Ogunbanwo, *We are good enough series*, 2015 – 2017.
Source: https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/lakin-ogunbanwo-are-we-good-enough-series/

Plate 4: Lakin Ogunbanwo, *e wá wo mi* ("come look at me"), 2019
Source: https://thenativemag.com/featured/native-exclusive-lakin-ogunbanwo-challenges-monolithic-narratives-africa-photographs/

The images captured by Ogunbanwo proceed against the historical erasure of black beauty, rather, black beauty is presented unapologetically authentic, assertive, and confident regardless of the white gaze. For Okeke-Agulu (2021), Ogunbanwo's

photography is engaged in a "poetics of Black skin" wherein the camera neither fetishizes nor demeans but dignifies and uplifts African flesh. His obsession with blackness, sensuality, and cultural specificity topples conventional representations that conventionally relegated African aesthetics to the periphery of world visual culture.

Together, these artists generate several paradigms of vision that legitimize African beauty, memory, and self-definition. Through their works, they reveal colonial ideologies inherent within current standards of beauty and propose alternative visual narratives that emphasize cultural specificity, resilience, and change. By doing this, they contribute significantly to the continued decolonisation of image and politics of representation in Nigerian art.

Lakin Ogunbanwo's *Untitled II* (2019) in Plate V, is a striking photographic work that engages deeply with the title of the paper. Through its deliberate use of portraiture, symbolism, and aesthetic composition, the photograph critiques colonial beauty standards and affirms a culturally grounded, autonomous representation of Nigerian womanhood.

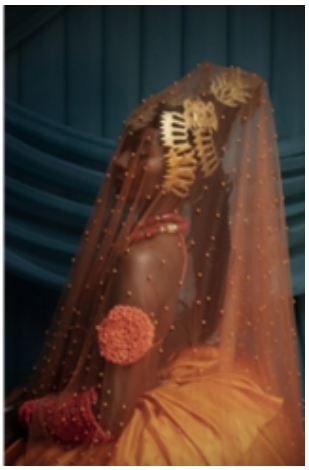

Plate 5: Lakin Ogunbanwo, *Untitled II*, 2019, Archival ink-jet print on Hahnemuhle Photorag. 59 1/10 x 39 2/5 inches.
Source: https//www.artsy.net

Her bearing, majestic and stately conveys both vulnerability and strength. The utilization of side profile, shadow, and concealment (through the veil) resists the full exposure typical of Western portraiture, especially of African women, that tended to objectify or exoticize them. Ogunbanwo reclaims the gaze by posing the figure marked by poise, serenity, and cultural specificity. The use of archival ink-jet printing on Hahnemuhle photorag also dignifies the medium, giving the image texture and permanence which are qualities denied to African subjects in colonial photography historically which tended to make them anonymous or ethnographic specimens. Beauty here is not a matter of visibility or seduction, but one of honour, elegance, and cultural identity. The woman

wears coral beads that have traditionally been worn by royalty and ritual passage in many Nigerian ethnic societies, especially among the Benin and Yoruba cultures peoples. These symbols recover beauty as an ancestral heritage instead of Western construct. Her complexion is not altered by digital bleaching or Eurocentric norms, symbolizing a decolonial move, claiming that African features and dark skin are powerful and beautiful. There is a veil that is added of meaning: it not only summons up bridal traditions but also metaphorically protects her from the colonizing gaze, implying that what is sacred cannot be consumed or comprehended completely by outsiders. Ogunbanwo's work functions as a visual critique of colonial and postcolonial structures of representation. Colonial portraiture routinely depicted African women via a voyeuristic perspective classifies individuals either as over-sexualized or as subservient beings devoid of agency. Contrary to this, the image affirms the autonomy of the Black female subject, offering a different depiction rooted in pride, tradition, and resistance. Philosophically, the picture represents a return to native epistemologies - beauty is not separated from context, history, and symbolism- and is used to illustrate a non-Western approach to existence and manifestation, one where the woman is not a spectacle but a subject, taking up space with purpose, memory, and cultural rootedness.

Lakin Ogunbanwo's *Untitled II* is a bold modern portrait that reshapes African femininity using a visual vocabulary rich in myth, beauty, and cultural iconography. Recognized for his evocative fashion photography and conceptual portraiture, Ogunbanwo here creates a subtle counter-narrative to the colonial gaze - one that affirms African womanhood as sacred, royal, and multilayered. This portrait is from his award-winning series that examines identity, tradition, and representation in postcolonial Nigeria, specifically concentrating on the ways in which indigenous material culture conveys feminine beauty symbolism.

Reclaiming the Female Body through Visual Mythmaking

The photograph presents a Black woman standing, adorned in vibrant orange and gold clothing, her body partially covered with a sheer material that is embroidered with golden designs and beads. Her posture is one of stately dignity and confidence, echoing the gravitas found in classical portraiture while re-envisioning the female body as a site of empowerment and not a mere object of display. The coral beads, gold headpieces, and fabric veil borrow from signifiers of the Ibibio ethnic nationality bridal and ceremonial wear that historically denoted status, prosperity, and spiritual energy. By bringing these symbols to the fore, Ogunbanwo positions the female subject in a genealogy of cultural sovereignty instead of colonial exoticism. Although Western visual traditions frequently use veils as symbols of concealment or oppression, here the veil becomes a performative layer of mystery and reality. The viewer's gaze is mediated, compelling acknowledgment of the woman's presence without allowing unregulated access to her body, thereby resisting the colonial and patriarchal convention of the overexposed "ethnographic" female nude. The composition of elements and the lighting readily transform the subject into an archetypal figure - a timeless being that transcends individual identity to embody collective cultural memory. This is in accordance with the arguments of scholars such as

Sylvia Tamale (2020), who theorize the framework of decolonial aesthetics, in which the imaging of the Black female body is not offered as a spectacle to be gazed at externally but as a vessel for ancestral narratives. The deliberate vividness of the hues, the almost tangible texture of the fabrics, and the subject's upright, dignified posture counteract historical representations of African women as either over-sexualized or primitive. Ogunbanwo's work, therefore, goes beyond photography; it actively rebuilds a visual narrative where the African woman takes a central, empowering position, defined on her own cultural terms. This photo, as others with his series greatly enriches the current artistic and intellectual conversation surrounding the reclamation of African femininity through materiality and myth, within the wider paradigm of postcolonial criticism and feminist aesthetics in Nigerian contemporary art. The veiled figure is thus not hidden but enshrined, honoured within her own cultural semiotics, echoing what Nnaemeka (2004) describes in nego-feminism as a strategy of negotiation and self-definition.

By using these materials within a high-fashion, studio-lit environment, Ogunbanwo collapses the boundaries between tradition and contemporaneity. This juxtaposition allows African femininity to emerge not as static or "tribal," but as evolving, cosmopolitan, and self-styled. As theorist Olu Oguibe (2004) argues, this kind of practice is key to resisting the colonial impulse to freeze African identities in the past.

Femininity as Power and Sovereignty

The sitter's posture - elegant, poised, yet unyielding - communicates a quiet sovereignty. There is no smile or performative gesture for the viewer. Her presence is self-contained, commanding respect rather than soliciting desire. This refusal to perform for the camera resists both colonial exoticism and Western beauty ideals, echoing bell hooks' (1992) concept of the “Oppositional gaze” - a gaze that resists consumption and asserts subjecthood. Here, beauty is not passive decoration but a political articulation of being. It is inscribed through posture, adornment, and ancestral codes rather than Euro-American aesthetic standards. Ogunbanwo thus redefines African beauty not as a deviation from the Western norm, but as a sovereign, original language of selfhood and community.

Decolonizing the Aesthetic Field

This photograph contributes significantly to the philosophy of decolonization in the Nigerian

art space by repositioning photography as a site of cultural reclamation. In contrast to colonial era ethnographic photography, which sought to categorize and objectify African bodies, Ogunbanwo's work empowers the subject through composition, symbolism, and myth. His camera does not extract meaning from the body; it collaborates with it - drawing on Yoruba cultural epistemes to challenge colonial legacies of erasure and objectification. The result is a decolonized visual language where myth meets materiality, and where African femininity is framed within its own aesthetic and philosophical terms.

Mythic Elegance and Cultural Archetypes

The subject in *Untitled VI* is dressed in vibrant traditional attire - marked by a dramatic *gele*. (head wrap), pink lace, white coral beads, and a sheer veil. This iconography is

instantly resonant with Yoruba bridal and chieftaincy regalia, invoking archetypes of the *Olori* (royal spouse), the *Iyalode* (the woman chief), or even the mythological Oshun, the goddess of love and beauty.

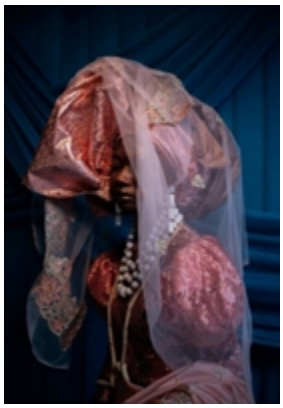

Plate 6: Lakin Ogunbanwo, *Untitled V*, Archival ink-jet print on Hahnemuhle Photorag. 59 1/10 x 39 2/5 inches.
Source: https//www.artsy.net

Styling and visual framing by Ogunbanwo build a visual myth - a self-conscious performance of sacred femininity that is outside Western aesthetic conventions. Rather than a passive sitter, the woman is presented as a custodian of tradition, memory, and aesthetic power. This mythological call counters the erasure of African female archetypes by reincorporating them in high art contexts with dignity and gravitas.

Materiality, Texture, and the Politics of Adornment

The sumptuousness of materials - metallic fabric, coral beads, lace, and diaphanous veils - emphasizes the material quality of African cultural expression. In African visual traditions, clothing and adornment are not merely decorative; they are communicative. The complicated *gele* formation in this image serves as a metaphor for social standing, creative autonomy, and even spiritual presence. By showing these materials in a very stylized, studio-lit environment, Ogunbanwo is celebrating their aesthetic and symbolic power. The pink colors, commonly linked with femininity in both African and global cultures, are given complexity through layering, shadow, and contrast with the deep blue background suggesting both tenderness and power. The veil, rather than conceal, mediates presence and absence, visibility and mystery, echoing sacred rites of initiation and transition. Materiality is used here as a feminist tool - taking control of self-representation. As Nnaemeka (2004) posits in her nego-feminist theory, African women's agency is frequently spoken not in explicit opposition, but in contextual, layered negotiation. Ogunbanwo's subject negotiates space, gaze, and symbolism through her layered presentation—neither overexposed nor hidden but suspended in mythic self-possession.

Refusal and Reclamation of the Colonial Gaze

In *Untitled V,* the face of the sitter, partially hidden by the veil and the shadows of the *gele* is a subtle but potent mode of resistance - a resistance to being consumed by the spectator's gaze, specifically the historical gaze of colonial and ethnographic photography. This resonates bell hooks' (1992) oppositional gaze theory, in which Black women take back their image from objectification by controlling the conditions of their visibility. This refusal is not silence; it is sovereignty. The figure's adornment, posture, and partial concealment are not signing of passivity but visual strategies of control and narrative authorship. Ogunbanwo thus deconstructs the colonial aesthetic framework that veiled African femininity either hyper visible (as exotic) or invisible (as irrelevant), and instead presents an image of womanhood characterized by cultural grounding and visual power.

Feminine Beauty and the Decolonization of Beauty Standards

By building beauty through cultural specificity through Yoruba bridal aesthetics, regalia, and mythic resonance, Ogunbanwo challenges the universality of Eurocentric beauty standards. His work demonstrates that feminine beauty is multiple, context-dependent, and culturally coded. The elegance of the figure in Untitled V is not a matter of adhering to international fashion standards; it occurs from her embeddedness in Yoruba aesthetic and spiritual systems. This is a decolonial gesture - aesthetic resistance to the West as the gatekeeper of beauty. It confirms the idea that scholar Sylvia Tamale (2020) defines as "epistemic disobedience" - a strategic viewpoint to reclaim Indigenous knowledge systems and aesthetics as valid, holistic, and sovereign. Lakin Ogunbanwo's *Untitled V* is a powerful gesture of feminist and cultural reclamation. By means of the interaction of myth, ornament, and visual austerity, the photograph introduces African femininity not as a Western construct, but as a spiritually and culturally based expression of identity. It invokes myth and materiality to claim beauty as both an ancestral inheritance and decolonial philosophy. In the Nigerian art sphere, this piece is representative a deep transformation in the way African women's bodies and identities are being reclaimed, curated, and celebrated by artists from within.

In Lakin Ogunbanwo's Untitled II and Untitled V, the photographic portraiture of the veiled women becomes a critical intervention into colonial and patriarchal visuality. His lush, stylized imagery frequently situating Black women in dramatic drapery and silhouetted tableaux - refuses both the documentary flatness of ethnographic photography and the eroticised framing of the African female body found in colonial archives. Rather, Ogunbanwo produces a visual language in which hiding turns into empowerment, matching Frantz Fanon's (1967) insight that the colonized subject has to "make himself visible" by first appropriating the gaze and rejecting imposed visibility.

Fanon speaks of the “epidermalization” of inferiority - the way Black skin is perceived as lack within a white-dominated symbolic order. Ogunbanwo challenges this by rendering skin, fabric, and form as compositional focal points of beauty and mystery. His veiled figures destabilize the viewer's gaze, shifting power back to the subject who now controls how, or whether, she is seen. In this way, Ogunbanwo's work stages a decolonial refusal: a

turning away from both hypervisibility and invisibility, creating a third space where the African woman becomes a subject of myth, not merely representation.

The materiality of the fabric in his photography evokes indigenous aesthetics of adornment and spiritual symbolism, echoing Fanon's call for a return to native culture as a mode of psychological liberation. The interplay between fabric and skin gestures toward a symbolic re-inscription of identity where African femininity is no longer tethered to colonial constructions of the exotic or the erotic but grounded in cultural self-assertion. Ogunbanwo, through visual minimalism and mythic abstraction, embodies Fanon's idea of reclaiming Black identity beyond the white gaze.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed how the decolonization of beauty in the Nigerian context calls for an epistemological as well as an aesthetic intervention, an approach that challenges the colonial hierarchies of race, gender, and bodily presence. Through a discussion of the imposition of Eurocentric standards of beauty during the era of colonial rule and their enduring consequences in postcolonial Nigeria, it has emerged that coloniality not only altered conceptions of physical beauty but also degraded traditional conceptions of the body, femininity, and value. Precolonial Nigerian aesthetics, particularly those of the Yoruba, valorised fullness of the body, scarification, and symbolic ornamentation as expressions of spiritual energy and cultural affiliation, which offered a different paradigm from Western visual standards (Drewal & Pemberton, 1989; Oyěwùmí, 1997).

Contemporary Nigerian artists such as Peju Alatise and Lakin Ogunbanwo are actively reclaiming their cultural terrain. Their works engage in what Mignolo (2011) calls "epistemic disobedience," resisting the replication of colonial aesthetics and, on the contrary, inventing new visual vocabularies that foreground African femininity, memory, and agency. Via sculpture, photography, and installation, these artists decry the commodification of the Black female body and advocate a return to indigenous notions of beauty embedded in cultural specificity and cosmological balance. As Lugones (2007) reminds us, decolonization demands more than critique; it demands the building of new, liberatory worlds outside the logics of colonial/modern systems of gender and representation. The artistic practices explored in this paper are testimony to that imperative. They do not aim for inclusion into dominant aesthetic formations but envision beauty as a space for cultural affirmation and political reimagination. Therefore, decolonizing beauty comes to be a necessary process of resistance—an acknowledgment of African existence, honour, and future possibilities.

Recommendations for Further Research

Future research should explore how feminine beauty and decolonial aesthetics are expressed across different African regions to allow for comparative insights. There is a need to examine the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and class, and how they shape representations in Nigerian art. Scholars should also study how male artists engage with feminine subjects and how digital platforms are being used to challenge colonial beauty

norms. Investigating the influence of indigenous aesthetic systems like Yoruba, Igbo, or Hausa traditions on contemporary art can enrich the discourse. Audience reception, the role of Nigerian art institutions, and the recovery of marginalized women artists' contributions also deserve attention. Ultimately, the development of an African feminist and philosophical framework for beauty, grounded in indigenous knowledge, is essential to advancing the decolonization of aesthetics in Nigeria.

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