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Curatorship in Nigeria: Touring in Between Possibilities and Challenges

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Abstract

The Nigerian curatorial landscape is fraught with a myriad of possibilities and challenges, regardless of the rich cultural, sociopolitical, and ethnographic tapestry that runs through the length and breadth of Nigeria. Some of these includes the challenge of not enough awareness of curatorship as a profession, let alone understanding the ethics governing the profession. There is also the challenge of not enough training facilities and thus, not enough trained professionals in the field alongside the issues of grossly inadequate funding, and very poor infrastructures. This study renders hope in the face of these challenges by exploring possibilities for global collaborations and indigenous innovations for growth and development. This paper seeks to explore the contemporary role of Curators in Nigeria, with the focus of paying attention to the challenges faced by curators and their corresponding professional environments like the galleries and museums. This paper will also seek to explore possible prospects for growth and development in lieu with global partnerships and collaborations.

Keywords:
Curatorship, Collaborations, Indigenous innovations, Funding, Global partnership

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Background to the Study

Curatorship is the process of selecting, organizing, and presenting works of art in exhibitions, and by implication, a person in charge of these activities is referred to as a curator, one who acts like guardian of the art collection. The word 'curator'" originates from Old French '*curer*' and directly from Latin '*curare*' which means "take care of," a guardian; one who has care or superintendence of something"[1] . This also relates to the word 'curiosity' implying that the curator has a responsibility to a curious audience.[2]

One of the major responsibilities of a curator is to determine which artist or work of art is to be displayed, how these works are displayed, and under what theme an audience can relate best. The curator spends time researching these works of art and reinterpreting them like a storyteller to an audience. Sometimes, the responsibility of the curator may be just to take care of an existing collection, or at other times, they may have to create one from scratch by working with other artists using all available materials.

Interestingly for a curator, most of the thrilling and exciting opportunities lie in this path of creating from scratch, as well as the series of mountainous challenges to conquer, particularly when curating in a developing country like Nigeria.

Exploring the opportunities and obstacles affecting Nigerian art from the lenses of a curator comes with its mixed feelings. This is because, despite the numerous possibilities it holds, there is a series of overwhelming challenges bedeviling it from blooming. Nigeria is a rich canvas of varied ethnicities, traditions, and art forms, which offers a curator an enormous wealth of materials to work with. There are a vast wealth of traditional crafts and sculptures and innovative contemporary works, along with the potential to showcase and promote these aspects of Nigerian art both on a local and international scale. Beside these opportunities lies a series of weighty challenges, such as the issues of inadequate funding, limited infrastructure, restricted access, and others, all of which hinder the full realization of curatorship in Nigeria.

An Overview of the Nigerian Art Landscape

The Nigerian art landscape is made up of a wealth of both tapped and untapped potentials of diverse cultures and traditions. Some of these cultures and art traditions have been documented in the past; this includes:

1. **The Nok Art Tradition;** located in central Nigeria around the Kaduna area. Notable for its terracotta stylized figures, triangular eyes, and intricate hairstyles documenting the perceived culture of its time. [3]

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[1]Etymonline. (2018, June 7). *Etymology of Curator*. Retrieved from Etymonline.com: https://www.etymonline.com>word

[2]Austrialia-AGSA, A. G. (2022, October 20). *what is a curator*. Retrieved from Art Gallery of South Australia: https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.agsa.sa.gov.au/education/resources-educators/agsa-art-school-online/what-

[3]Fagg, B. (1977). *Nok Terracottas.* Ethnographic A.

2. **The Ife Art Tradition**; located around the south-western part of Nigeria, bordering between Osun and Ibadan. It is renowned for its naturalistic bronze masks and figurative heads using the lost-wax (*cire perdue*) method of casting as well as terracotta pieces. These forms were highly detailed.[4]
3. **The Benin Art Tradition:** This art cuts across the old Bendel State, now Edo and Delta States. It is known for its sophisticated bronze plaques, sculptures, and ivory carvings, though most of which were looted during the 1897 British punitive expedition, as opined by Amos-Ben[5].
4. **The Igbo-ukwu art Tradition**: located in the southeastern parts of Nigeria and is famous for its sophisticated bronze objects and costume regalia.
5. **The Mbari Houses Tradition of the Igbo Culture:** These were sacred shrines artistically designed as offerings to the gods. It houses miniature sculptures and figurines representing deities and mythological creatures.[6]

Alongside these notable art traditions, there are also a series of outstanding traditional arts and crafts that are unique to the different regions in Nigeria. Among these are

1. **The famous leatherworks of northern Nigeria:** This craft is one of Nigeria's oldest crafts, especially around the Kano, Zaria, and Sokoto regions of northern Nigeria. They are known for their unique items like shoes, sandals, bags, mats, and other ceremonial items. Some of these items have even evolved into the class of luxury items by designers like Tunde Owolabi, who specializes in handbags, footwear, and dressing accessories with his label "Ethnik."[7]

2. **The Pottery Tradition of Nigeria:** Pottery is also one of Nigeria's famous art traditions with its links to the earliest Nok culture. This art tradition spreads across different regions of the country, each with its own unique style of execution. In the northern parts of Nigeria, the Hausas are famous for their pottery utilitarian wares like storage vessels, cooking pots, and others[8] (Sani, 1992). The Yoruba and Igbo traditional potteries in the southwest and eastern parts of Nigeria, respectively, are also famous for these crafts, which were majorly utilitarian as well as used for ceremonial purposes. They were usually hand-built and fired using the traditional open-firing technique. Also in central Nigeria, the Nupe people are well known for their highly decorative utilitarian pottery wares.

3. **Indigo-dyed Textile Tradition:** Two major regions are renowned for this craft; these are the Yoruba (*adire*) and the Hausa (*baba riga*). These are unique hand-

[4]Drewal, Henry J. and Roland, Abiodun. (1989). *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of Afrian Arts and Thought.* New York: Center for Afriacn Art.

[5]Amos-Ben, P. G. (1995). The Art of Benin. *British Museum Publications, London*, 85-90.

[6]Cole, Herbert M and Chike C. Aniakor. (1984). *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos.* Los Angeles: University of Califonia.

[7]Dunbar, R. (2012). *African Arts of Dressing: Nigeria's Leather Craft Tradition.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[8]Sani, M. A. (1992). *Traditional Pottery of Northern Nigeria.* Ibadan: Spectrum Books.

dyed textiles with intricate resist patterns produced using a local plant (*indigofera tinctoria),* which produces a deep blue dye.[9] The Nupe people are also known for their dyeing techniques, which share similarities with those of the Yoruba and Hausa.

Apart from these indigenous crafts, Nigeria is also blessed with a wealth of unique woven fabrics, which vary from one ethnicity to another and each with its own dexterous intricacy. Common amongst these are:

1. **The** *Akwete* **fabrics**

The *Akwete* fabric originates from the eastern parts of Nigeria amongst the *Akwete* people in the Ndoki region of Abia State. This fabric has features of intricate geometric patterns, which usually come in bright colors and bold patterns.[10]

2. **The** *Aso Oke* **fabrics**

The *Aso Oke* woven fabric is a traditional Yoruba fabric from southwestern Nigeria. The most common of these fabrics often come in dark indigo-dyed woven yarns locally referred to as '*etu*'. It also has other variants, the '*Sanyan*' woven from assorted beige silk and the '*Alaari*' which is made from vibrant red silk or cotton.[11]

3. **The** *Okene* **Fabrics**

This fabric originates from the Okene people in Kogi State, central Nigeria. It features complex patterns, which are often intricate geometric designs. [12]

4. **The** *Anger* **Fabric of Tiv:**

The Tiv people of Benue State in central Nigeria are famous for their black-and-white striped cloth, known as the *Anger* cloth. This fabric comes in distinct horizontal or vertical stripes, which are symbolic, and the cloth is worn during important cultural events, such as weddings and funerals[13]

5. **The** *Igbira* **Fabric:**

Known for its colorful and distinct patterns, this woven fabric is from the Igbira people in the northern part of Kogi State, often woven by women using cotton yarns[14].

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[9]Picton, John and Mack, John. (1979). *African Textiles: Looms, Weaving and Design.* Britain: British Musuem Press.

[10]Dike, P.C and Ajayi, P. (1997). *The Akwete Weaving Tradition of Southeastern Nigeria.* Nnsuka: University of Nigeria Press.

[11]Oyelola, P. (1981). *Nigerian Woven Textiles.* Ethnographica Ltd.

[12]Ogunwale, K. O. (1993). *Textile Traditions of Nigeria's Middle Belt Region.* Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press.

[13]Makar, T. (1975). *The History of the Tiv Textile Industry.* Jos: University of Jos Press.

[14]Sheba, M. E. (2003). *Woven Identity: The Igbira Textiles of Nigeria.* Kaduna: Kaduna State University Press.

The list of Nigeria's creative indigenous artistic expressions is inexhaustible, seeing that there are several aspects this paper may not be able to cover but are a gold mine of potential. A quick mention is the *Uli* art expression of the Igbo tradition, the *Nsibidi* writing systems of the Ekpe society, and the *Ibie-ebe* and *ibie-ka* ideograms of the Niger Delta region, to mention a few. All of these tell of the vast wealth of indigenous art forms, which could serve as a topic of interest to any art curator.

The Possibilities in Nigerian Curatorship

The diversity of the ethnic groups and traditions in Nigeria creates a window of opportunity to project the uniqueness of Nigeria's cultural heritage. From the spoken languages to the local cuisines, dressings, and hairstyles to the entire arts and culture of its people, all these are endless possibilities for curatorial explorations.

Explorations in the contemporary Nigerian arts and artists are another goldmine, especially since the upsurge of indigenous expressions from the 1950's Natural Synthesis. This natural synthesis was a national awareness originating from the Zaria Art School, which emphasized the need to synthesize Afrocentric concepts, media, and materials with the Eurocentric one, giving a bust of novel artistic expressions that were not only original but promoted the Nigerian heritage. This movement has since given rise to notable artists and their exceptional works. Some of these artists celebrated both nationally and internationally are Uche Okeke, Ben Enwowu, Bruce Onobrakpeya, El Anatsui, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Peju Alatise, and several others. The works of these artists project the culture and national heritage of Nigeria and could serve as a rich source for curatorial explorations.

The evolution of these indigenous art forms has created a huge hub for the contemporary arts, giving rise to events like Artx Abuja and Lagos, Lagos Biennial, Life in My City (LIMC) Port Harcourt, Life in My City Art Festival Enugu, Abuja Art Week, *iREP* International Documentary Film Festival, Benin City Art Expo, and others. In events like these, a number of artists, galleries, museums, and their curators come together to host huge art fairs with exhibitions showcasing contemporary works across different media. This event often includes organizing talks where curators, artists, critics, and art collectors share issues as they affect the African art landscape, especially from the angle of cultural identity and the global market. [15]

With the growth and development of these different hubs, there is an increase in visibility on both local and international platforms, especially in this age of digitalization and social media. Most of these events are hosted online, fostering cross-cultural exchanges and even generating international attention, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic of restricted movement. Such events create avenues for the curators and artists to gain the requisite exposure, fostering dialogue on issues affecting cultural identity and African art in general.

[15]The ArtNewspaper. (2021). *Art X Lagos; Shaping the Futer of African Contemporary Art.* Lagos.

In Nigeria today, there is a growing awareness of the integration of digital and technological tools in art and art curating. Online platforms, social media, and virtual exhibits are now common tools for sharing works and engaging audiences on a large scale.

These platforms allow visitors to explore exhibitions, view artworks, and even participate in live panel discussions reaching a global audience. Notable among these are SMO Contemporary Art, Ko Gallery, Art X Lagos Online, and others. Some of these platforms have embraced virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), where on the platform, it gives the audience the ability to examine artworks from different views, walk-through exhibitions, and even interact with the art pieces. Like, for example, Artfrica, The Art Exchange (TEX), and others.

Challenges in Nigerian Curatorship

The challenge of not enough awareness of curatorship as a profession is one of the major issues bedeviling curatorship as a profession in Nigeria. Many Nigerians are unaware of the role or importance of the curator of a museum, gallery, or cultural center. This lack of awareness affects the curatorial practices in Nigeria because, without the public's understanding of these roles, there is minimal pressure for these institutions to improve.

There is the growing misunderstanding of curatorial roles in Nigeria, a situation where many assume that the role of the curator is merely about displaying objects without the expertise of managing, researching, and presenting these arts with their cultural significance. This also brings to the fore the naivety and unopened-mindedness of some who bring religious bias into engaging the art. This is because in many cultures in Nigeria, masks, sculptures, and other art forms are linked to religious or ritualistic purposes. So, there is the fear that these works of art are abodes for spirits. This often affects the way some of these works are treated or preserved. This has even led to the destruction of priceless pieces in the past, like in the case of the missing 'Mangrove Giant of Port Harcourt'. [16]

Curatorship in Nigeria is affected by issues of censorship and political sensitivity. Certain subjects in art, such as religious, political, and social themes, can be sensitive. This poses a challenge, as it limits the ability of curators to challenge existing norms or facilitate necessary dialogue. Curators are sometimes compelled to avoid politically charged or controversial subjects, such as critiques of government policies, discussions of human rights abuses, LGBTQ+ issues, and religious criticisms. These restrictions lead to self-censorship. Bakare-Yusuf (2006) attests to how censorship, particularly by governmental bodies, limits artistic expression in Nigeria[17].

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[16]Wikina, B. (2021, November 22). *The 'Missing' Mangrove Giant* . Retrieved from thesouthernexaminer: https://thesouthernexaminer.com

[17]Bakare-Yusuf, B. (2006). Fabricating Identities: Survival and the Imagination in Jamaican Dancehall Culture and the Politics of Censorship in Nigerian Popular Culture, pp. *African Identities, 4*(3), 321-334.

Curators themselves may limit the range of artworks they showcase to avoid penalties or for the exhibition to be shut down entirely. There is an inherent fear of backlash, not only from the government but also from non-state actors who may take offense at what they perceive as provocative or subversive content. This fear hampers the curators' ability to engage in critical dialogue on social or political issues, especially in a digital age where individuals or groups may take to social media to rally against exhibitions or artworks they find offensive, further pressuring scenarios that could lead to boycotts, protests, or worse, violence. There have been instances, particularly in the northern parts of Nigeria, where people have been lynched and killed for such provocations. This fear hampers the curators' ability to engage in critical dialogue on social or political issues.

Also, Eze (2014) discusses how economic pressures and funding structures influence cultural production in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa, constraining what curators can showcase. It is observed that curators working in publicly funded institutions may be pressured to align their exhibitions with government propaganda or refrain from addressing contentious issues like corruption, bad governance, or protests such as #EndSARS.[18]

In general, censorship leads to a homogenization of content, where only safe, non-controversial themes are explored. This limits the potential of art as a tool for social change, reducing its ability to challenge existing political, cultural, or religious norms.

The allocation of funding is a crucial aspect of curatorship and presents a significant challenge for curators in Nigeria. Typically, Nigerian curators heavily depend on government or corporate sponsorship due to limited public funding for the arts. Ikwuemesi (2006) highlights that the funding provided by the government is often insufficient or mismanaged, resulting in inadequate infrastructure and a lack of support for exhibitions or cultural programs. Cultural initiatives frequently take a back seat to sectors such as security, infrastructure, power, and health, leaving curatorial projects underfunded. Consequently, museums and galleries in Nigeria are understaffed and lack the necessary resources to support curatorial projects, in contrast to their counterparts in other parts of the world. [19]

Okeke-Agulu (2015) gives a comprehensive overview of the weak institutional infrastructure for the arts in Nigeria and the challenges faced by curators and artists in the absence of strong public support. He further posits that the Nigerian government does not have a coherent or strategic cultural policy that prioritizes investment in the arts. And without a clear cultural agenda, there is little public accountability for funding

[18]Eze, C. (2014). Rethinking African Culture and Identity: The Afropolitan Model. *Journal of African Cultural Studies, 26*(2), 234-247.

[19]Ikwuemesi, C. (2006). Art, the State and the Crisis of Funding in Nigeria. *African Studies Quarterly, 3*(3).

the arts, and this neglect translates into inadequate support for curatorship. [20] Additionally, the lack of funding hampers Nigerian curators' access to professional development opportunities, such as curatorial education and training programs like the Asiko Art School for Curators Lagos, the Omenka Gallery Curatorial Initiative, Art x Lagos, Terra Culture Art Programs, and others. Without access to these advanced curatorial programs or mentorship opportunities, curators struggle to develop the skills needed to secure funding, manage large exhibitions, and engage with global art networks.

Conclusion

To be able to strike a balance between possibilities and challenges in curatorship in Nigeria, the future lies in blending tradition with contemporary innovation while tackling these challenges head-on. Some of these innovations include;

Firstly, exploring avenues of local and international collaborations and partnerships. It is becoming more frequent, especially in city centers like Lagos and Abuja, for curators to partner together to embark on projects and even easily source for grants. From within Nigeria alone, avenues like Art X Lagos, cultural institutions like CCA Lagos (Centre for Contemporary Art), and the Nigerian National Museum Initiative offer the curator a platform to collaborate in organizing large-scale exhibitions, seminars, and workshops, and even residency in some cases. Some of these institutions also partner with educational institutions, the private sector, and artists to share resources and ideas. On an international scale, institutes like the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C., the British Museum, and the Goethe-Institute have been known to collaborate in joint research, exhibitions, and even offering grants and international residency. All of these are avenues that can help overcome issues of funding for the Nigerian curator.

Secondly is leveraging digital platforms. In this age of technology, it is imperative for the curators to explore digital options, leveraging on these tools to research, document, promote, and showcase our cultural heritage. With the aid of digital platforms, curators can now navigate challenges like limited physical gallery spaces or overcoming distance barriers by leveraging on virtual exhibitions, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. Platforms like Art X Lagos Virtual Art Fair, SMO Contemporary Art: "Art in Life: An Online Exhibition, "Tech Meets Art" by Samsung and Rele Gallery, and several others have successfully hosted exciting exhibitions and live talks for a number of years. The social media is another aspect of these digital platforms. With tools like Instagram, Twitter (X), WhatsApp, and Facebook. With these, today's curator can now promote exhibitions, criticize and discuss artworks, giving room for expansion, and engage with global audiences.

[20] Okeke-Agulu, C. (2015). *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria.* Duke University Press.

Thirdly is crowd funding and alternative funding sources. With the overwhelming attitude of poor funding and grants from government institutions, curators are exploring other avenues to raise funds. Crowd funding is a method of raising funds by soliciting small contributions from a large number of people, especially through online platforms like GoFundMe. It allows one to present their ideas to the public and seek financial support. In 2017, Zina Saro-Wiwa explored this option using the platform 'kickstarter' to solicit for funds for the exhibition "Mourning a Bygone Utopia." Records have it that she raised over $30,000.[21] Lagos Biennial 2017 also explored using 'gofundme' and generated over $10,000. All of these attest that through digital platforms, curators are able to connect with supporters across the globe, securing resources to advance their work and promote Nigerian art. Seeking cooperation sponsorship is also a means of raising funds, seeing that most private and co-operate organizations prefer to deal with another co-operate organization than with individuals.

Finally, the Nigerian curators need to continuously advocate for better policies, infrastructure, and funding for cultural institutions, urging government bodies, private organizations, and the public to support their initiatives.

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[21]Okeke-Agulu, C. (2015). *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria.* Duke University Press.

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