

A Pandora Box: Issues of Artist Registration Council of Nigeria

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Article DOI:

10.48028/iiprds/ijsrhlir.v9.i1.01

Keywords:

Accessibility,
Inclusivity,
Credentialing,
Bureaucracy

Abstract

In recent years, prominent Nigerian Artists have been advocating for the establishment of an Artist Registrational Council in Nigeria. This registration council is expected to regulate and support the professional activities of visual artists, ensuring high standards and providing essential services. However, the establishment of this council will raise significant issues that would hinder its effectiveness. This paper examines the multifaceted challenges associated with establishing and maintaining an Artist Registration Council in Nigeria while comparing it with the proverbial Pandora box. Key challenges include ensuring accessibility and inclusivity for all the visual artists, establishing fair and high standards for credentialing and managing bureaucracy as well as conflicts of interests within the membership. By identifying these issues and exploring strategic solutions, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved in managing the Artist Registration Council and suggests pathways to enhance its success, sustenance and support for the artists if eventually established in Nigeria.

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Background to the Study

The concept of Artists Registration Council in Nigeria was first mooted in form of paper presentations in a conference of the Pan-African Circle of Artists (PACA) in 2001 and subsequent national art conferences and symposia. The conference was aimed at x-raying the essence of uniform curriculum development in art study as well as the regulation of its practice in Nigeria. At this conference, art practitioners especially those in the academics feared that there was a huge decline in the quality of art being produced by students in the institutions of higher learning in Nigeria and therefore called for the establishment of a regulatory system in art practice¹. Diakparomre (2010) explained that since after the Second World Black and African Festival of Art and Culture in 1977, visual art production was becoming more commercially driven than the natural love for creativity, which has led to sub-standardization of the visual art practice over the years.

Also, Egonwa (2001) emphasized the need for a code conduct in visual art practice in order to bring sanity to the profession². Since then, several other scholars have lent their voices to the call for a regulatory body to be created. Prominent amongst such is Shola Kukoyi's article titled "Case for Artist Registration Council"³. He raised concerns on the need for a regulatory body for the visual arts, which would be empowered to regulate the training and practice of visual art. This view was also supported by scholars like Nwosu (2002), who cited references of other professional bodies in Nigeria with regulatory systems. Such according to him include the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria (ICAN) for Accountants, the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) for lawyers, and the Council for Registered Engineers of Nigeria (COREN). These he opined should serve as templates for the visual artists⁴.

In 2008, Benjamin Njoku published an article titled 'SNA partners with NGA to Establish Artists Regulation Council'⁵. He applauded the moves made by the Society of Nigerian Artist (SNA) to liaise with the legal department of the National Gallery of Art (NGA) to kick-start the process of articulating a legislation concerning the establishment of the Artists Regulatory Council in Nigeria. Further stating that the council will be saddled with the responsibility of registration, regulating and enforcement of art practice laws in the country.

This became the first major move in the establishment of the Artists Registration Council in Nigeria and has since raised several concerns. Notable amongst such is that its

¹Diakparomre, Abel Mac. *Comments on Regulation issues in Modern Art Practice in Nigeria*. Ethiopia: African Research Review, 2010.

²Egonwa, O.D. "Art Mercantilisms: Antithesis to Nigerian Art Growth." *Paper presented at the 2001 Annual Conference of the Pan-African Circle of Artist (PACA) held at Enugu*, 2001.

³Kukoyi, S.A. *Case for Artists' Registration Council*. Lagos: The Guardian, April 2009.

⁴Nwosu, U. *Much Ado About Artists' Registration Council*. Lagos: The Guardian, May 21, 2002.

⁵Njoku, Benjamin. *Nigeria: SNA Partners NGA to Establish Artists Regulatory Council*. Lagos: The Vanguard, December 4, 2008.

establishment may rather imprison the spirit of art practice, hinder individualization and experimentation through envisaged imaginary restrictive mechanism which in turn will create monopoly, stereotype and stagflation⁶.

This paper, though comparing it to the proverbial Pandora box, examines the multifaceted challenges associated with establishing and maintaining an Artist Registration Council in Nigeria stressing on key challenges like establishing fair and high standards for credentialing and managing bureaucracy as well as conflicts of interest within the council membership. There is also the issues of accessibility and inclusivity for all artists and several others, especially in an age of digitalization and experimentations in the visual art. By identifying these issues, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved in managing an artists' registration council and suggests pathways to enhance efficacy and support for the Nigerian artists.

The Issues

Viewing the establishment of an Artist Registration Council in Nigeria as a form of the proverbial Pandora's Box implies that its establishment and operation might lead to a series of unintended and potentially problematic consequences for the Nigerian art community. While the establishment of the council is intended to provide structure, support, and recognition, its implementation would definitely result in negative outcomes that may not have been initially anticipated. One of these major concerns is the question of professionalizing visual art practice.

To determine who qualifies as a professional artist, amateur or hobbyists is a sensitive task because of the diverse nature of the visual art. These complexities really make it difficult to define art as a profession and also control its practice.

On the first instance, if one wants to define art as a profession from the lenses of specified special training and education, a huge number of practicing Nigerian artists would not qualify because there are a lot of successful artists who are self-taught. Some even have formal education in other fields but are now focused on the arts and its production. As argued by Towes (2006), in the arts, individual talent trumps formal education.⁷ It is a process of learning by doing and finding one's own style, hence it is not a significant criterion to determine art as a profession or a career path.

Secondly, when you take the definition of the term “professional”, it refers to a person engaged in a specified activity, as a main paid occupation rather than as a pastime⁸. This brings to question the number of Nigerian practicing artists who engage in art and

⁶Diakparomre, Abel Mac. *Comments on Regulation issues in Modern Art Practice in Nigeria*. Ethiopia: African Research Review, 2010.

⁷Towse, R. "Human Capital and Artists' Labour Markets ." In *Handbook of the Economics of the Arts and Culture*, by V.A and Throsby, D. Ginsburgh, 865-894. North-Holland: Elsevier Science, 2006.

⁸*Australian Council of Professions*. 2024. <http://www.professions.org.au> (accessed October 8, 2024).

depend solely on it as the main source of livelihood. The Nigerian art market is highly unpredictable and bedeviled with its challenges that hinders its full blossom⁹. This makes most artists seek other jobs to make ends meet and this criterion would disqualify a significant number of artists as professionals in Nigeria. Recently, Baldin, Andrea et-al (2021) tried to make distinctions between professional artist and amateurs using the population of Denmark as case study.¹⁰ Their findings reveal that only about 46% of the entire Danish artist population qualifies to be classified as professional artist having met the criteria of working full time as visual artists and are able to live solely from their art. According to the report, 26% are made up of retired individuals, who had made a good pension in another career path and are now focused in the art. They further attest that going by the term professional artist (i.e. one whose income is from art, working hours spent in art production daily and is self-employed) a huge number of Denmark's artists will be disqualified as professionals.

All of these makes it difficult to establish and enforce standards for who qualifies as a professional artist and this affects the core objective that the Artists Registration Council of Nigeria proposes, which is "to set criteria for membership and registration; differentiating professional artists from amateurs or hobbyists".¹¹ Insisting on professionalizing art as it is currently, will create bureaucratic bottlenecks and inefficient complex processes as is experienced in most other government agencies. This will deter many artists from proposed registration

One other aspect the professionalization of art could bring is the issue of inclusivity or exclusion of certain art forms from the art profession. Art forms, which do not fit into the conventional definitions of art especially the current digital and AI art explorations, may be overlooked or marginalized. This exclusion would stifle diversity within the arts profession. Towse (2010) discusses how outdated legal frameworks prevents the adaptation of art councils to the evolving needs of contemporary artists, especially in the digital era¹². The imposition of standardized criteria and regulations would constrain artistic expression and creativity. Artists may feel pressured to conform to certain norms or expectations to gain official recognition, potentially stifling innovation and experimentation. This would lead to a homogenization of art and a reduction in the diversity of artistic voices¹³.

⁹Oni, O. G. "The Challenges of Nigerian Art Market and Artist in a Globalizing World." *African Research Review*, 2015: 193-202.

¹⁰Badin,Andrea; Bille, Trine. "Who is an Artist? Heterogeneity and Professionalism among Visual Artist." *Journal of Cultural Economics*, 2021: 527-556.

¹¹Njoku, Benjamin. *Nigeria: SNA Partners NGA to EStablish Artists Regulatory Council*. Lagos: The Vanguard, December 4, 2008.

¹²Towse, R. "Human Capital and Artists' Labour Markets ." In *Handbook of the Economics of the Arts and Culture*, by V.A and Throsby, D. Ginsburgh, 865-894. North-Holland: Elsevier Science, 2006.

¹³Diakparomre, Abel Mac. *Comments on Regulation issues in Modern Art Practice in Nigeria*. Ethiopia: African Research Review, 2010.

Another issue that is likely to arise from insisting on professionalizing the Arts in Nigeria is that without clear standards, it would create room for corruption and favoritism where some persons would be getting fast-tracked support and others ignored or entirely rejected. In the same vain, many persons are just skeptical to the idea of an Artist registration council. Artists are naturally resistant to regulations, fearing that government involvement could stifle their creative freedom or impose unnecessary restrictions. Some view the registration process as an attempt by the government to control or unduly tax artists or indirectly censor artistic expressions.

Another notable issue arising from this proposal is the fear of inaccessibility. As experienced in many parts of Nigeria, access to government offices or the council's services is limited even in other professions, especially in rural areas. Many artists outside city-areas will be unable to access these services due to the current poor infrastructure being experienced especially in the Association levels like Society of Nigerian Artist (SNA), Female Artists Association of Nigeria (FAAN) and others. The artist may have to travel long distance to be able to register or participate in such activity. Adeyemi (2024) notes that most of these agencies suffer same fate as a result poor funding rooted in the lack of supportive and functional legislative framework¹⁴. There is also the lack of internet services and inadequate information.

In General, it is perceived that the legal framework surrounding the establishment of this artist registration Council in Nigeria may still be vague, leaving room for misinterpretation and inconsistent application of rules. This will lead to confusion among artists about what is required of them or the expected roles the council will play if accepted. There is also the issue of conflicting roles. It is perceived that because of the vagueness surrounding the framework of this proposed council, its' functions may overlap with other cultural bodies, leading to jurisdictional conflicts and confusion for artists about which organization they should be affiliated with.

Learning from other Art Councils in Africa

There have been several art councils and its affiliations that have served similar functions for the artists with various levels of successes and failures over time. A quick view of some of these would give better perception on the role (if need be) the Artists Registration Council of Nigeria should play when established.

- 1. The National Gallery of Art (NGA):** Many countries have an organization called the National Gallery of Art including Nigeria. Some country refers to theirs as National Art Gallery, National Gallery of Modern Art or National Gallery of the country e.g. National Gallery of Indonesia. Its general function is to serves as the primary institution for art registration and promotion of Art in those countries.

¹⁴ Adeyemi, Jonathan. "The Imperative of a Fuctional Policy for the Nigerian Creative and Cultural Economy." *Creative Economy*. April 9, 2024. <http://www.linkedin.com/pluse/imperative-functional-policu-nigerian-creative-jonathan-adeyemi-phd-mkfe> (accessed October 10, 2024).

They also aim to support and regulate the visual arts sector, preserve the country's art heritage, and promote its indigenous art nationally and internationally. It also offers a platform for exhibition, recognition and potential access to funding.

2. The National Arts Council (NAC)

Some countries have a National Art Council like that of Ghana, South Africa, Nigeria, and others even outside Africa. In Nigeria it oversees arts registration and potential funding. Its role includes supporting artists through grants, promoting arts education, and facilitating access to national and international markets. It offers a range of support mechanisms including financial grants and developmental programs.

3. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)/National Art Foundation (NAF)

As seen in countries like Brazil, UK, Canada and others, the NEA and NAF is primarily a federal agency established to supporting the arts. It does not directly register artists but provides grants, fellowships, and support through various programs¹⁵. Artists apply for grants, fellowships, or awards from various institutions, including state arts agencies and private foundations. McGuigan (1996) notes that the competitive nature for grants can be challenging for emerging artists, and access to funding can be uneven across different states and art forms.¹⁶

While each country has developed its approach to supporting artists through registration and related mechanisms they have not emphasized the professionalization of art as proposed by the Artist Registration Council of Nigeria. They also have their common challenges which includes bureaucracy, inclusivity, and resource allocation. Gibson and Kong (2005) notes that the U.S. system is notable for its decentralization and extensive funding opportunities, whereas African countries like Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya are still far behind struggling to balance a formal structure with practical support for artists within their unique contexts.¹⁷

Conclusion

Pursuing the establishment of the registration council without proper ground structures may be opening the door to larger problems. Increasing the tension between artists and regulatory authorities as well as the marginalization of certain art forms and artists shall definitely deepen the problems we want to resolve. This proposal would have been applauded if structures like that of the NEA and the NFA were adopted with the focus of creating and adapting policies that reflect the evolving nature of art, especially in this digital age and work more closely with local artistic communities beyond the known SNA

¹⁵McGuigan, J. *Culture and the Public Sphere*. Routledge, 1996.

¹⁶Ibid

¹⁷Gibson, C. and Kong, L. "Cultural Economy: A critical Review." *Progress in Human Geography* 29, no. 5 (2005): 541-561.

or NGA to ensure it serves their interests and promote inclusivity. It should rather seek avenues to providing tangible benefits for the artists generally, especially those emerging ones. This will greatly encourage its acceptance and unity whenever the need for registration arises.

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