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ESCAPING
FROM OURSELVES
THE HUMAN
DILEMMA
IS AS IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN
AND WE SOLVE
NOTHING
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BY CREATING
OURSELVES
IN TECHNOLOGICAL
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Contextual Change in Nigerian Sculpture

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ABSTRACT

In the past fifty years Nigeria has witnessed an almost unparalleled upsurge in three-dimensional art production significantly, sculpture in the round. The emergence of the latter can be traced to pioneer African sculptures whose pieces have been adjudged contribution to world artistic heritage. This paper, therefore, examines the continuity and change in sculpture practice as a result of contact with Western cultures and the artistic influence in form, style, theme and material of contemporary sculpture in Nigeria. Significantly, this paper hopefully serves as reference point for future scholarship on sculpture in Africa, while at the same time assist in formulating critical theories on sculpture practice in contemporary Africa, and Nigeria in particular.

Key Words: Continuity, Change, African art, Contemporary Sculpture of Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Sculpture, the most important means through which the earliest African artists expressed themselves, in the human figure, evocative of real or symbolic key entities, facilitating contact with the supernatural, is almost exclusively the subject matter. African art and its arts, particularly sculpture, have been shrouded in speculations and spurious claims. The emergence of this could be traces to those who pioneered the field of African art history. These were mainly non-African ethnographers and anthropologists who did not believe anything culturally parallel to the Western culture could emerge from the African continent. They highlighted only those aspects of Africa's artistic heritage that corroborated their views (Akatakpo, 1997).

Generally, literature materials, often document disciplines, historical and developmental past as well as the present state of affairs and project into the future. Such literatures also abound in the Visual Arts. Existing studies on art examines the issue surrounding the history of contemporary African art since 1950s, such as patronage, formal and informal training and the development of new genres of sculptures. These publications are not specifically concerned about contextual change of sculptural form, theme and style. The publications, however, provide useful reference material for the general study on sculpture. Other publications are those that focus on traditional African art, and they extol the role of sculpture in traditional African culture (Oladugbagbe and Kalilu, 2013: 134). Many unpublished dissertation (Odiboh, 1987, Ikpakoronyi, 1997, Akintonde, 2008 and

Odewale, 2009) among others examines contemporary outdoor sculptures in public sphere, particularly in the southwest and eastern part of the country. None has worked on the new trend of forms, styles, themes and media in existing sculpture, since the last fifty years in Africa and Nigeria in particular.

In this contemporary time, however, there is a vast pool of diverse African sculptures that evolve as a result of tapping from the rich repository of African art and the diversity that derives from a migrations, wars and alliances (Akatakpo, 1997). Since the last century, Africa has experienced radical social, political, economic and religious transformations (Akatakpo, 1997). Inevitably, this has brought about an inescapable change in Africa's culturally expressive forms. As informative as most of these studies, they have not examined the forms and styles of sculptures and the injection of ideas, which have slipped into the streams of contemporary genres of sculpture in Africa; and as such, this paper examines the continuity and change in the new form, styles, themes and media of expression in contemporary sculptures; a phenomenon that is likened to artists' encounter with the Western artistic cultures, orientation and information technology.

MODERN AFRICAN SCULPTURES

The earliest sculptures in Sub-Saharan Africa are from the Nok culture (plate 1) of Nigeria dating back to 500 B.C. (Gillon, 1984: 55; Vansina, 1984: 177; Grieder, 1990: 340; Getlein, 2002: 345). It signifies the existence of a particular form and style synonymous to the people of Nok culture in Jemaa village, Nigeria. Other surviving examples of these traditional sculptures in Africa are essentially in bronze, stone and terracotta, and they also show a high degree of technical quality. Most of these sculptures have different styles and themes, depending on their tribal and geographical location. When European artists came in contact with the highly imaginative forms of African sculpture, they were stimulated and refreshed, and under the influence set upon a course of the experiment in an artistic form that completely revolutionized European art (Willet, 1967: 13).

In consequence, the freedom the African artist appeared to enjoy in expressing his personal concepts of the world around him was considered to be the most characteristic of African sculpture. African art, like other earlier civilizations of the world, thrived in the pre-twentieth century. Sculpture played an essential role in the lives of the Africans. The beauty of an African sculpture is simply in its meaning. Sculpture, as a means of expression, is held in high esteem by the people, and it is of great significance to the traditions that produced it in Africa (Wikipedia, 2008).

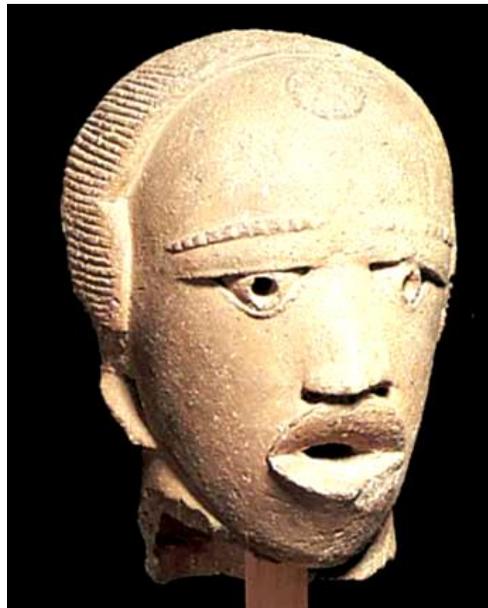


Plate 1
Nok Head, 500 B. C. – A. D. 200, Terracotta, Jemaa, Nigeria.

Modern art forms, styles, themes, media and techniques in African sculpture indisputably developed through contact with European missionaries, trader and diplomats (Oladugbagbe, 2012: 23). Initially, Christian missionaries paid deaf ears to the values and uses of indigenous African religious sculptural images tagging it primitive and consequently, antagonised its usage and used (Wangboje, 1977: 101). The ecumenism, a movement promoting unity among different Christian churches and groups, however, this initial narrow-minded attitude Euro-centrism, changed by through a group known as Catholic Society of African Mission (SMA). According to Willett (1976: 33), Oye-Ekiti experiment was established by SMA in the southwest of Nigeria to train craftsmen to employ traditional forms of sculpture in the Christian worship (Paden, 1970: 125). The visual representation corresponds to the sculptures in the European churches of the medieval period, which served to inspire Christian emotions in veneration and to instruct the non-literate members of the congregation. Gradually, this orientation has translated to an interesting development in contemporary African sculptures. Generally, this is noticed on the ongoing evolution of forms and styles; and connoisseurs within and outside of African continent now accepted art as reflective of a changing society. The technological advancement and communication network that compressed the whole world into a global village increases cultural exchange and cultural values and ideas noticed in the visual arts of Africa.

The state of artistic dissension and fervent adaptation of traditional forms and other socio-cultural issues in the visual arts started around the late 1950s when African countries started gaining political independence. The changes were substantiated by a "return to the root" motive. In conformity with this new socio-cultural stance, visual artists fell back on their different cultural backgrounds for inspiration, which they used to portray the dynamic nature of African cultures. African contemporary sculptors, therefore, experiment with variety of artistic media and metaphor; synthesised ideas that reflect the multifarious vestiges of traditional past with their sculptural works, coming up with new creative dimensions. The new generation artists who initiated these creative processes were trained in formal art institutions in Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, and Ethiopia among others (Mount, 1973: 62). There were some who learned without formal education, while others acquired their skills from workshop centres to actualise their artistic talent.

By the wake of the 20th century, the sculpture was already characterised by different sculptural and material expressions. Therefore, emphasis was placed on formal stylisation rather than the naturalistic or classical mode of presentation of the traditional eras. With the advancement in material and information technology, coupled with academic or scholastic explorations by artists generally, expression became unhindered, fluid and unbounded. Many sculptors envisage new modes of expression, placed emphasis on the simplified and possibilities of distortion of forms in sculpture images. Sculpture works happen to be opened, closed, plane and some other qualities as exemplified in the sculptural works of Pablo Picasso, Jacob Epstein, Henry Moore, Alberto Giacometti, Julio Gonzalez, Jacques Lipschitz, Marino Marini, together with those of Isamu Noguchi, Alexander Calder, George Rickey, among many others (Oladugbagbe, 2012: 5). This gradually influenced the new repertoire of contemporary sculptural forms, themes and styles of African contemporary sculptures.

NIGERIAN SCULPTURE

Nigeria as a homeland of three prominent tribes -Northern and Southern became a protectorate along with the colony of Lagos by the British government in 1900. Efforts to unify and integrate these conglomerates were made in 1906. Lagos and which had existed separately, were amalgamated to become the Colony of Southern Nigeria (Atofarati, 1992: 2). Lagos, "the city of aquatic splendour," became an administrative nerve-centre, a heartland for trade and a

setting for social revolution that resulted from inevitable cultural intercourse among white administrators, missionaries, entrepreneurs and the indigenes. This cultural contact produced a new Nigeria whose values were dominated by a preference for models in European culture, which invariably set a new pace of artistic and cultural tradition (Oladugbagbe, 2012:186). With this Western influence, Nigerians way of living, to a major extent, gave way to modern tendencies: a propensity that even evolved from physical arrangement of city structures, guided architectural forms to engineering and land-development. According to Adepegba (1995: 78), these changes began between the nineteenth and the 20th centuries when traditional sculptures eventually ceased and new art forms, ideas and philosophies in sculpture were cultivated. These expositions heralded the emergence of modern art in Nigeria.

In this respect, a crucial and thoughtful development happened: modern sculpture as opposed to African traditional courtyard, shrines was introduced into the Nigerian public places as a result of contact with these European standard of living and religious conviction. During the colonial period, *circa* 1900, the British established a Public Works Department (PWD) in the Southern Protectorate, and later in Nigeria when the Northern and Southern Protectorates become one unified country. This Department saw to the maintenance of roads and public places. It was also empowered to beautify the environment most of which were created between 1906 and 1914 (Agiri, 2000: 334), and the Department commenced this function much later in other parts of Nigeria. Among the notable outdoor sculptures commissioned at that period were *Soja Idumota* (plate 2) and *Emotan* (plate 3).



Plate 2

Cenotaph of *Unknown Soldier (Soja Idumota)*, c.1948, Bronze
Courtesy of Ajayi Oladele, 2007



Plate 3

John Danford, *Emotan*,
1954, Bronze Photograph by Allan
Oladugbagbe, 2010

Soja Idumota, commissioned *circa* 1948 (Odiboh, 1987: 3), was formerly erected in Lagos and later relocated to Abuja, the Federal Capital of Nigeria. The work was a memorial sculpture to immortalise Nigerian soldiers that died during the Second World War.

Emotan, a female bronze statue, was erected in Oba market in Benin and was sculpted by John Danford of the British Council (Beier, 1960: 220). The *Emotan* statue replaced a sacred tree *Uruche* planted on the spot where she usually sat during her life time at the Oba's Market (Ikpakronyi, 2005: 26). Historically, the image of *Emotan* is of great importance to the Edo nation because of her sacrificial role in keeping the entire Edo kingdom intact. The sovereignty of the Edo people could have been erased from existence albeit her pacifying role in counselling a banished Edo King, Oba Ewuare, to return to his throne. King Ewuare later regained his crown on the very day *Emotan* died. This statue was produced in her memory (Ikpakronyi, 2005: 26). Among other art works in the category of early colonial outdoor sculptures is that which portrays Mary Slessor, located in Calabar.

Before then, art works were created in local tradition and materials, but with the advent of Western influences, Nigerian art soon gave way to modern tendencies. Many of these artists no longer subscribed absolutely to traditional beliefs that gave meaning to the art of their ancestors, and so they see external forms of sculptures as the way Derain, Vlaminck, or Picasso saw African art: simply as a new interpretation of natural forms (Muhlberger, 1995: 23). Since then, formal art institutions were established to complement the original traditional system, where art was taught informally by families reputed for such artistry.

Ben Enwonwu, the first formally-trained Nigerian sculptor who was trained abroad, set the pace for the modern sculpture practice in Nigeria (Kalilu and Oladugbagbe, 2013: 187). He produced many remarkable sculptures which include *Anyanwu* (plate 4), hoisted at the National Museum premises in Lagos and *Sango* (plate 5), the Yoruba god of thunder, presently in front of the former Nigeria Electric Power Authority (NEPA) now Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN) in Lagos. Enwonwu an Igbo, has chosen subtle and elongated form to express a traditional theme *Ayanwu* (Arise) to illustrate contemporary socio-political issue- awakening to civic responsibility patriotically in the building of the young independent Nigeria. Iconically, the form can be well interpreted by the more elitist Lagos society who accepted the art and even recognised the maker of the work. However, the *Sango* bronze sculpture (Plate 5) by the same artist is more realistic and shown concurrent aesthetic forces of forms.



Plate 4

Ben Enwonwu, *Anyanwu*, Bronze,
National Museum, Lagos



Plate 5

Ben Enwonwu, *Sango*, Bronze, NEPA (now
PHCN) Headquarter, Lagos.
Photograph by Emmanuel Uweh, 2011

Enwonwu also produced the corporate icon of the Nigerian Telecommunications (NITEL) (Mount, 1973: 176) and *The Risen Christ* at Protestant Chapel, University of Ibadan (plate 6). Although, the *Risen Christ* of Enwonwu was in realistic style, the probable storm or breeze that preside the “rise” of Christ from death appeared conceived in rhythmic geometric forms. If the major figure in the composition was removed, the adjoining form appears more akin to Alexander Archipenko’s quasi-representational sculpture (Gardner, 1976:840). These sculptures led the way in modern outdoor sculptures executed by a Nigerian artist. From the late 1960s, especially after the Nigerian civil war, memorial and architectural sculptures have become increasingly popular. Sculptural pieces are noticeable on the landscapes of Nigerian towns and cities. The establishment of formal art institutions for training artists in the country created a new awareness in the art, and interest in sculpture. Sculptural expressions are expressed in various styles, themes, and media such as in cement, metals, marble-stone, fibre-glass, plastics, mixed-media and found-object. Distinctive styles: naturalism, realism, biomorphic, abstract and several others emanated from different Nigeria sculptors.



Plate 6

Ben Enwonwu. *Risen Christ*, wood,
Protestant Chapel, University of Ibadan,
Nigeria Photograph by Busayo, 2014

CHANGES IN NIGERIAN SCULPTURE

The Postmodern period was the artistic era that brought expansion, projection and the exploration of the self ego the artists, particularly, sculptors. At this period, extreme expressionistic, impressionistic and neo-Dadaistic exhibitionism in thought, visual, literary and physical actions started gaining grounds. There was also a change of focus in most of our art intellectuals in Nigeria to produce sculptures and other art forms that were in favour of political and economic situations. Consequently, varied artistic activities sprang gradually among some Nigerian artists. Thus, many art practitioners got involved in various acquisition sculptural forms. This antecedent also led to latter and many recent ones. Now, in Nigeria's higher institution, various works of sculpture both good and bad naturally go on in the sphere of art. From the 1970s to the present time, works show different degrees of expression and material techniques such as cement cast from clay models, cement cast from synthetic material, direct cement modelling, among others. Styles have been generally chosen, ranging from naturalism to abstraction. Most of the recent works done precisely from the 90s convey new art forms like found objects. Some of the works in this series are detailed (Plates 7, 8, 9 and 10), which expressly involved the deconstruction of representational sculptures. These new developments in style and theme are observable signs of change in attitude and value. The latter became more glaring in the works produced in the new millennium; the era that promote both technology and information networking at its premium. The epoch also brought to light the development and encouragement of developed and encouraged aesthetic lore for abstraction, indigenous iconography and symbolism. From that period onward, form in and on sculpture continue to undergo a distillation process. This is seen in, the use of the mixed-media approach to sculpture (plates 7 and 8). This development has even gone weird in recent times, particularly, in the Western environment where there is absolute social interpretation and reaction to what can be referred to as art. Science and technology is also artistically and socially congruent to recent artistic development in many Nigerian art institutions, and the ever evolving Nigerian art market and art communities. In order, therefore, to fully understand the development of this recent artistic verbosity in Nigeria, a socio-artistic transition that actually evolved in Nigerian art institutions, and most especially in sculpture, as seen in (plates 7 and 8) must be thought-out.

The two works (plates 7 and 8) revealed the fusion of art, science and technology and changed the range of sculptural forms by using metals and other obvious materials like jute reinforced through welding with iron rods and other found objects to titivate the surroundings. This incessant used of materials adapted from industrial technology became prominent in Nigerian art institutions. The introduction of new media and techniques has come into play in the work of Bassy Orok in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria's sculpture garden. In eclectic contrast, the deconstruction of human figure sculptures becomes glaring in *Structural Adjustment Programme* (plate 7). The work shows a Volkswagen abandoned car and two men pushing it, invariably, also, to indicate that suffering abounds the crannies of the country around 1990 (Oladugbagbe and Kalilu, 2013: 135)



Plate 7

Bassey Orok, *Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP)*, (1990), Found Objects.
<http://www.iiste.org/journals/2013>

The Assemblage Tyres (plate 8) in blue, black and red executed by a former male student of the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (ABU), specialising in sculpture. The work is located at the middle of the institution's sculpture garden; he explored a nonfigurative approach to the work which at the time was in vogue in the country. The artist intermingling the used of media and materials technically embraced a solution to visual art and also expands our outlooks regarding what we consider acceptable ways and means of creating art.

Plate 8

Unknown Artist, *Assemblage Tyres*. (2006),
 Photograph by Allan
 Oladugbagbe, 2010



Other significant sculptures are in (plates 9 and 10) titled *The Bird* and *Global Warming* respectfully. *Global Warming* (plate 10) was created by Austine Ojo, a graduate of the Auchi Polytechnic; his work entangles the reality of the African experience with the emerging development in the continent.



Plate 9

Unknown Artist, *Bird*,
mixed-media, 2006.

Photograph by Allan Oladugbagbe, 2010



Plate 10

Austine Ojo, *Global Warming*,
mixed-media, 2010.

Photograph by Allan Oladugbagbe, 2010

CONCLUSION

In the recent past no doubt, has had a huge impact on the growth of consumerism and instant gratification in the visual arts particularly sculptures. The latter is as a result of consumers' desire for novelty and entertainment in contemporary work of art. In response, many artists, curators and other professionals seized the privileged to turn out artistic products, such as, installation art, which allowed consumers to experience art in a much more pro-active way. The public's desire to be shocked and stimulated by new inventive subject-matter that become the order of the day.

This conceptual approach to forms may likely hamper the growth of figurative representation in the art in no distance time, because from the 1990s to date, sculpture expressions has changed greatly in favour of the exploration of new materials and techniques towards the production of life-size works. The "spirit of adventure" is the strongest point of this era. Space, material, size and permanency have been explored so far in Nigerian artistic domain. But there is room for extensive explorative chances, the result of which is often novel for Nigeria's creative field. John Russell has observed this new role of art as a "machinery of promotion and speculation," which he said took its rise in the 1970s. "In part," he said, "it was an authentic and justifiable tribute to the new role of art in the imaginative life". There is no benefit in being static in this new age of expansion; it is the age of possibilities and boundless thoughts.

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