

## Nigerian Art: The Problem of Identity

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### Abstract

The tag “Nigerian art” has continued to generate ripples in the academia most especially among the art historian. Several attempts were made to define “Nigerian art” by foreign and indigenous writers before and after Nigeria independence in 1960 without an agreeable or workable definition. With the controversies still going on, the question now is who is qualified to label or define Nigeria art considering the submissions of these authors. This paper advocates for an acceptable and workable definition through a synthesis of ideas that will anchor on the consideration of the art, the producer and the birthplace of the art-works. The paper defines “Nigerian art” as “works of art produced by Nigerians in its purest form devoid of any foreign influence.

**Keywords:** Nigerian, Art, Traditional, Contemporary, Representation, Visual, Aesthetics, Identity, Creativity.

### 1. Introduction:

Many scholars have written on the problems of identity in Nigerian Art. Carroll (1967) concentrates on the relevance of religion in Yoruba carving while Adepegba (1982) elaborates mostly on the traditional Nigerian Art, its past and relevance on the community where it is produced, and other attributes. Roy (1979) in his own case writes generally on African sculpture, while Sieber (1961) concentrates extensively on the sculpture-types of the Northern part of Nigeria. Beier (1959) discusses wood carving among the Yoruba of south-western part of Nigeria. He also in 1960 writes generally on Art in Nigeria. Thompson (1968) discusses the aesthetics in traditional African art, while Abiodun (1975) concentrates on ifa art objects in Yoruba Oral Tradition, and Drewal (1977) elaborates on the Traditional Art of the Nigerian Peoples as a whole. The focus of this paper is however, not far from their views but different in subject of definition of terms. What is Nigerian Art? Why the appellation “Nigerian Art” given to the art form of this area of West Africa? Could it be because the Art or the Art objects are produced from Nigeria or Nigerian? To attempt answers to these questions, one has to look into many aspects of the culture that produce such works of art. Nigerian art has many faces found deep in the socio-cultural setting of the people involved. These faces may include the choice of subject matter, use of colour, patterning techniques, use of symbols, and the general outlook of the art works.

From the western world point of view, the so called “Nigerian art” as other art forms in West Africa, was given this name out of their desire to probably arrogate the type of art produced by the people of this region; and perhaps to explore the possibility for illuminating the darkness in which the producers produced these art works and also to include the analysis of the “Primitive art” objects themselves. The submission at this level of discussion is that Nigerian art forms could be identified specifically not because they are made in Nigeria by Nigerians, but probably because they have basic discernible forms, styles, outlook, and other traditional values associated with their environment, and total well being. In the identification process, the socio-religious and cultural norms must be brought to bear relating them to the formative order of the traditional or contemporary idioms.

Nigeria is a large are occupied by many and varied ethnic groups suggesting and expressing their artistic values in two and three dimensional explanations. In Nigeria, different art traditions have thrived and are still striving in various parts of the country. Adepegba (1995) identifies the sculpture traditions to include Nok, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife, Tsoede, and Benin as well as the stone carving traditions in the Yoruba and Ekoi areas of the country. Apart from these, we still have ancient sculptures in stones in Yoruba area such as Sekunde in Ikire, Ikorun, Kuta, Igbajo, Ofaro among others. Most of these art works are figurative, fashioned out in granite and quartz.

In some areas of the country, sculptures in wood have been found simply because of the availability of material which is wood. Wood sculptures are mostly concentrated to the Southern part of Nigeria. In the Northern part of Nigeria, because of the influence of Islam, sculpture representing full human figure is very rare if not totally unacceptable. That notwithstanding, they also have their own type of art (Islamic Art) which is basically in pattern form (decorative arts). Whether figurative or in patterns the question still stands. What is a Nigeria Art? What makes these art works Nigerian? Can we identify Nigerian Art when series of art objects or works from different regions in West Africa are assembled? With what parameter could we do this? To determine the authenticity of what Nigerian art is, one must go into the cultural investigation within the traditional boundaries of the artistic norms and practices of the people in question. It could also be suggested that probably the art made in Nigeria also originated from rock art (paintings and engravings) found scattered in shelters and mountains of some ancient places in Nigeria. Stephens (1978) also wrote on the stone images of

Esie with emphasis placed mainly on the styles, anatomy, and the relevance regarding the tradition of the people. It could then be suggested that the so called Nigerian art originated from this source. For example, Adepegba (*ibid*) is equally of the opinion that the site of the painting in Igbedi represents a rock shelter which is associated with Iya Mapo, the goddess of women's occupations. Those at Igbara Oke are fish-like shapes, triangles and other geometric designs of which the local people seem to know nothing about (Morton-Williams, 1957). These art works really stand as pointers to what a Nigerian Art is because we can trace some similarities in the choice of themes between these past artistic glories and that of the present. At this point we may conveniently refer to Nigerian Art as Traditional art of Nigeria undiluted with foreign culture-types.

In the Northern part of the country, Nigeria, specifically in Birnin Kudu, and Geji near Bauchi, engravings depicting animals and human figures have been found. With these evidences of art works scattered all about in Nigeria, it could then be inferred that these paintings and engravings are the bed rocks and the foundation on which the Nigerian art, or to be more exact, Nigerian traditional Art, is solidly built both in execution and in visual representations. There is another crucial question that needs to be answered at this juncture; the question is whether there is any relationship between these ancient art works (Nigerian Art) and those that are being produced presently, that can mostly be referred to as the Contemporary Nigerian Art.

Works on Nigerian Contemporary Art are numerous and mostly based on ethnographical studies. The works under this include the studies of Shaw (1977), Jegede (1983), Ademuleya (2003), Filani (2006), Ojo (2006) and Aremu (2007) among others. An account of archaeological discoveries of Igbo-Ukwu by Shaw lends credence to this fact because these works are entirely traditional both in execution and in outlook. The working tradition of what Nigerian art is started many centuries ago and continues till present, although with some changes in both materials and methods of production, which has turned the products into contemporary Nigerian Art objects and they no longer have the real attributes of what a Nigerian Art should look like. Adepegba (1982) in Nigerian Art: Its tradition and Modern Tendencies, declares that the changing attitude observe in Nigerian art, which has diluted the traditional essence, started with the advent of colonialism, the efforts of Aina Onabolu, who trained earlier in the United Kingdom and France formed the foundation of modern Art better referred to as contemporary Nigerian Art. This was in 1923. This effort earned him the father of Modern Nigerian Art. This same effort also made the colonial masters invite Kenneth Murray to assist, train and promote the study of Art in Nigeria, thus the starting point of what we like to refer to as the illicit Traditional Nigerian Art forms.

Among those who pioneered the new form of Art were Enwonwu, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Erhabor Emokpae, Solomon Wangboje and Uche Okeke to mention a few. Generally, the activities of these people and others marked another epoch in the development of Modern Nigerian Art Education. Their escapades gave birth to the concept of synthesis in art whereby the integration of our culture to create a more refined art form took place; the concept that eventually formed the solid bedrock on which the Nigerian Art Education was built. Simeon Okeke was excitedly in love with the well-painted character of Benin bronze; Demas Nwoko began to exhume those classical stylistic and methodical art traditions of antiques of Nigeria for modern Artistic consumption (Ola Oloidi, 1998). The establishment of Agbarha-Otor workshop and other experimental Art centres inspired by Ulli Beier, the Mbari club at Oshogbo organised by Dennis William and Susanne Wenger with the help of Duro Ladipo, the Ori Olokun cultural centre at the University of Ife now the Obafemi Awolowo University at Ile Ife focused on the various workshop experiments in the adaptation of traditional Nigerian Arts to Modern Art forms, the Nigerian Contemporary art forms. These experimental ventures initiated by Agbarha-Otor and many other workshops, are gradually eroding the status of the Nigerian cultural heritage; thus in some years to come the roots of what can be referred to as The Traditional Nigerian Art, which used to be pride of the nation, should have been uprooted entirely from the Art scene. Happily, there is still some hope along the tunnel of destruction because there are still a handful of adherents of tradition and culture who still cling to the past glories of the Nigerian artistic rendition.

It is pertinent to stress that there is always a link in the choice of form, style, and theme by the producers of the Traditional art objects better referred to as Nigerian Art objects and the Contemporary Nigerian Art objects produced by the formal trained artists. The art works (engravings and paintings), which are mostly found in scattered environment, are very rich in their themes with artistic richness.

## 2. Why Nigerian Art?

When considering what Nigerian art is, it is pertinent to also care about maintaining knowledge of artists' original intentions, his cultural environment, and his world-view; this would mean the re-appraisal of what has been, for so long time before the arrival of foreign influence, that which can be referred to as Nigerian art. Price (1989) rightly puts it that, Western Art gained its status as part of a documented history of civilization (with names, dates, political revolutions, cultural and religious rebirths etc.) because of the aforementioned canons of assessment. The Nigerian Art equally has these pointers to the history of civilization and should be given the same status as European art. Nigerian Art can also be sustained artistically, politically, cultural and religiously the same way as the Western Art. It equally possesses credible aesthetic qualities worthy of transmission, with

the information about the technical, social and religious functions. In most cases, the art works from this area of Africa, as in other parts, can also speak for themselves because the functions are mostly related to their meaning, which is in most cases, embedded in the function. Among the black race the world over, function and meaning are mostly tied together in the analysis of the art works, which also form the bases for identity.

Nigerian art exists so as to put an end to the discriminative attitude of the Western world, and also to demonstrate the existence and legitimacy of the creative frameworks within which these works are produced. The works that are being produced in Nigeria higher institutions by the budding and professional artists nowadays are mostly meant to exhibit what may be referred to as Nigerian creative and aesthetic sophistication in the context of a legitimate, radical, intellectual and artistic argument. The collective message of these artists is best appreciated on the basis of uninterrupted visual experience placed within a socio-cultural context and creativity. These artists, art historian and other visual art critics represent a pioneering effort in the determination of what Nigerian art is and probably the philosophy behind what could be referred to as Nigerian art. Why Nigerian art, one may probably ask. There should be a Nigerian art in other to be able to distinguish art of this region of West Africa from other art forms in the region. In most of the works produced in this area, form, style, theme and meaning could probably be taken as the valid assessment criteria for the identification of where a particular art belongs to or represents.

The identification of the Nigerian art should be placed on the platform for scholarly attention and analysis; attention such as the formal characteristics, the kind of reality, that is, the visible, conceptual or symbolic character these artists intend to capture, to include their respective roles within the societies that have produced such works of art. In other words, it is imperative to recognize the importance of cultural background and the aesthetic component when determining the identity of Nigerian art. To do this successfully, a special help is desired not only with its social, economic, religious and symbolic environment but also with its aesthetics surroundings which may embrace the concept of form, line, balance, colour, symmetry etc. that have contributed to its creation. In most cases, Nigerian art, as other art in black Africa, can be identified with the aforementioned canons. African art generally has many things in common, things such as the physical representations in terms of proportions, themes and other vital cultural norms such as patterning techniques, symbols, colour usage, and other creative attributes.

In all, there is need to have what can refer to as Nigerian art, not Nigerian Contemporary Art, probably because of prestige acquisition, exhibition of culture and tradition as well as for identification purposes. Contemporary Nigerian art is different from Nigerian art in that the term contemporary means the introduction of those concepts that are foreign, destructive to the basic tribal concepts. It means the demonstration and interpretation of the new concept in visual representation. Jegede (1983) gives real definition to contemporary Nigerian Art and equally elaborates on what contemporary art is all about. The term Nigerian art is used to identify with a particular type of creativity worthy of emulation because of its firm and uncompromising standard of aesthetic worth, traditional to the makers. Jegede (1984), Adepegba (1982), Willett (1967) and Beier (1954) and other art critics and art historians have variously written on Nigerian Art as it were, its outlook, and trend. Adepegba (1984) mentions the essence of the Yoruba sanctuary Pottery, as an aspect of Nigerian art form that embraces religion and culture of the people. The conservation of such art work is directly a conservation and preservation of culture and civilization, which Nigerians need for prosperity. From this point of view, it seems only proper that the artists should control the fate of their art, enriching it in their cultural conservatories for the benefit of "the world" including those unborn. This seems to have answered the question Why Nigerian Art. Therefore, it could be said that Nigerian Art is one of the most promising blue chip investments in art, as such; there should be what we can refer to as the Nigerian art.

### **3. Probable Origin of the Nigerian Art**

A brief survey of art in different parts of Nigeria may probably solve the problem of the origin of art in Nigeria. The origin of the so called Nigerian art could probably be traced to the socio-religious relevance of the people. It would be discovered that most of what we now call Nigerian art today majorly has its root in the southern part of the country with little from the Northern part. This was due to the Islamic religion that was forced on the people. But in the North-eastern part of the country, several three dimensional art forms were discovered and then named after the town, NOK; thus the origin of an important tradition in art was named after the culture of the people. This brought about the name given to the oldest of the sculpture traditions which was discovered in an extensive area in the southern portion of the plateau of northern Nigeria. Even with the discovery, the date of origin could not be established as there are varieties of these assumptions. Sieber and Walker (1987) suggested that the date could be perhaps be dated back to about 2000 years. The date of the culture was deduced from geological associations which put it between 500 B.C. and A.D. 200. Can we then suggest that this was the beginning of Nigerian art? But if consideration is given to the various rock paintings and engravings found in most parts of Africa, then Nok art might be taken as a more recent art form. Jefferson (1974) also submits that at one time the Sahara desert was fertile land where people lived and farmed. Rock art of about ten thousand years ago was

found, which means the art of these areas predates that of Nok that was initially taken as the origin of Nigerian art. This could equally mean that the various rock art found in most African countries might have been the sources of the traditional art forms. To have an original Nigerian art form, is to have art without any external parasites that could interfere with the traditional norms and cultural identity. It should be from the pot of tradition both in the execution and outlook. As earlier stressed, Nigerian art that is to be original and unpolluted should answer the call of tradition and culture of the people. This is because these works of art are entwined in the existence of the people, more so when they also believe that Art is life and Life is art.

African art flourished extensively south of the Sahara region mostly in three dimensional forms, in wood, stone, metal, terra cotta etc. In the northern and eastern parts of the Sahara, in Mali, among the Dogon and in Senegal and Gambia where the influence of Islam did not have a great impact on their art, they have mostly three dimensional representations, unlike in Libya, Morocco, Tunisia etc where Islam has its root deeply planted in their well being, most of their art forms are in patterns (arabesque), thus two dimensional art is warmly favoured. Arts and Crafts are part of the African heritage used to express religious ideas. We find it in wood, stools, calabashes, stones, sticks etc. (Mbiti, 1978), with the addition that it is also expressed in the form of masks and carvings on wood and ivory. African generally, and Nigerians specifically have their own symbols whose meanings are really embedded in the culture and tradition of the people. Since culture has being with man right from his origin and religions equally started the same time, it then confirms our assertion that the origin of art could not be far away from the time when man began to be influenced by his culture and environment. The cave man began to be influenced by his environment, and some important legendary animals were mostly used as symbols representing certain facts of life, since symbols are a part of art of the people. Religious concepts have undoubtedly created many of these symbols and in turn the symbols themselves help to communicate and strengthen the religious ideas (*ibid*). Since traditional regions grew with many cultures in Africa, it then goes to suggest that art and religion became inseparable, they are in fact the important aspects of human needs for survival.

In the south-eastern part of the country we have other sculptural traditions amongst which, is Igbo-Ukwu an archaeological site in the present day Igbo village, this art form is next to Nok in age. The popular art objects found in this area were made of copper and smited, but most metal objects from Igbo-Ukwu were cast by lost-wax or cire perdue method (Adepegba, 1995). Now can we even refer to Igbo-Ukwu art form as entirely Traditional Nigerian art, since there was that new concept (foreign) in the making or in the production of the art works. Again, in some of the works there are common herringbones designs similar to the engraved patterns, common to metal smiting in Islamic cultures found among the Hausa and the Tuaregs. Now, with the borrowed concepts of lost wax and the production of new forms of designs into the art scene, could the product be given the name Nigerian art? Shaw (1970), is of the view that the use of latex (which is foreign), instead of local wax for modelling before casting is responsible for the fineness of details. This fineness is the direct opposite of the crude and uncouth, the terminology the Europeans used to describe African art as a whole. If this art form is with fine details and well polished with foreign matters, something illicit has entered the scene of traditional Nigerian art.

Further South-east is the stone sculpture of the Ekoi area of the present Cross River state of Nigeria. These sculptures are different from those found in the Yoruba area in that they are uniformly made in hard stones mainly in basalt, limestone and sand stone. These sculptural pieces are called The Akwansi figures. The sculptures are found standing in abandoned or existing village sites; especially at the centre known as "play ground". Some are even hung in individual houses and compounds to represent family ancestors, most especially the small ones. From known evidences, no one knows the origin of the carving tradition, even with the help of the archaeologists. Socio-religiously, so far, we have not discovered any exact date of origin of any of the art works in the country; this is why the rock paintings and engravings might be taken as the closest source of origin of African art.

In the Yoruba speaking areas of the country, specifically, in the south west extending to the Yoruba speaking of people of Benin republic, we have sculptures in stones and wood and to a lesser degree, in metal and mud, representing one form of image or the other, which are used to answer the calls of the deities. In other words, they are meant to be worshipped or sometimes used as shrine furniture by the traditional worshippers. These works of art are not for sake but art for life sake. In most black African communities, it is believed that there is a force or power or energy in the universe which can be tapped and used for either good or bad towards other people. To be able to tap these powers effectively, images in stone, wood, mud or iron etc, were and still being used to serve as intermediaries between the physical and the spiritual world. Since man and his religion grew together, and what were and are still being used in religious worship, are still these art objects. This is why it could be deduced that the Traditional Nigerian art started with man's existence.

Generally, the study of African art is to some extent, the study of art of sub-Saharan Africa, which is dependent on two sources, the written reports of the explorer, missionaries, etc, and the oral traditions. But to use oral source to detect the origin of African art may be a bit difficult if not impossible because it may change with

time or even distorted over time because, according to Sieber and Walker (1987), memory is selective and open to a number of cautions and that most of what we now refer to as African art are made of perishable materials, and have lost touch with intensity of the cultural reality that particular works of art once possessed. To support this submission, Sieber and Walker (*ibid*) equally put in to add that nearly every African sculpture in a museum, collection, or exhibition has had its life cycle interrupted.

African art was ‘discovered’ by artists and critics early in the twentieth century and that no serious attempt was made to discern the role, meaning, or aesthetics from the point of view of the African producers; and problems emerged when the producers of the works rarely produced art works except on commission from patrons, these patrons could be foreigners who will dictate the pace, putting their own ideas in the making, thus tampering with the tradition of the maker and the work of art itself. We have famous wood carvers in Nigeria; some of which are Bisi Fakaye, brother to the famous Lamidi Fakaye, Joseph Adeyemi Fakaye, Bamidele Awoogun and many other traditional wood carvers all in Yoruba land. They started their career on a traditional platform, but later they yielded to external influences, thus their visual representations began to give way. Their arts, like other aspects of traditional culture, prove to be adaptable, adjusting to new ideas and new forms. The old forms disappear and Africanised types became the order of the day, although to some extent, some still adapt to traditional forms. According to Lamidi Fakaye, the Christian missionaries made his brother David Adeosun Fayeke to believe that his artistic work was evil and he had to drop it before he could be accepted into the Christian fold. His artistic ideas and initiatives were therefore handicapped. This type of activity was common in most areas in Africa. Even Lamidi Fayeke also went through this type of litigation in Oye Ekiti; whereby Father Kelvin Caroll always had a say in his initiatives during carving exercises. This was the effect of series of workshops initiated at that time. When Father Kelvin Caroll was posted to Western Nigeria, he encouraged Catholic Churches to use Yoruba styles of carving; he then started to commission local artists to carve such items as doors, veranda posts and even images of biblical stories. In like vein, the influence of Portuguese navigators in the lower Congo on the artists in the region also created negative tendencies. The local artists produced devotional objects, including crucifixes, rosaries, statues of St. Anthony and even medals. In Omdurman city, in Sudan the former animistic and magical elements of the religions gave way to text from the holy Koran, the sacred text of Islam. The writing board with the decorated text in geometric designs was introduced with the inclusion of land and sea creatures. This was then used by ritual practitioner to wade away disease or misfortune. The decorations on the wooden board are themselves art works resembling the rock art. This was as a result of the advent of Islam. To be able to withstand the tide of foreign influence, Africa must now search for new values, new identities and a new consciousness (Mbiti, 1969). In African art the value is got from its functions and how it relates to the way life of an individual in the society, to now shift grounds in order to satisfy a group of individuals in the name of modernisation will amount to derailing the more cherished artistic traditions of the people. Among the Bamana peoples of Segou region in Mali, great attention is paid to the use of masks during initiations. During initiation ceremonies, social and religious instruction is to free a man from his Wanzo, that is, an inner blindness of human mind in all that regards self-knowledge, but refers also to physical malformations, impurity and evil in general (Zahan 1974). In Guinea, among Nalu peoples, Banda masks are used as venerable emblem of the highest grade of simo, the men’s association that regulated fertility and initiation rituals of disparate villages among the Nalu, Landuman, and Baga peoples (Delange, 1974). In like vein is the face mask (Mbuya) commonly used by the Pende peoples of katungu region in Zaire. This is a sculptured wooden in form of human or animal faces, worn with a prescribed costume by graduates of the Mukanda in initiation ceremony. Some masks were symbols of power and authority (Delange in Biebuyck 1985). The origin of the usage is still unknown, what is definite about this exercise is that culture has been with people probably since the period when they started living as a community. It would be discovered that most of these various art forms are from the black areas of Africa where tradition is warmly embraced. As among the Yoruba people of the western part of the country, most of the art works are in either wood, stone, metal, and to some extent ivory, used variously for social religious and ritual purposes. These could be in the form of full standing figures or in masks worn to cover the face. They are used by both diviners and healers, whose professions include diagnosis and cure of ill health and other kinds of misfortune.

Very good examples of such are the standing figure of the Mumuye peoples of Benue valley in Nigeria, the Guro peoples of Cote d’Ivoire, the Kwele peoples of Congo, and the Dan peoples of Liberia to mention but a few. Some of these works of art still retain their identity in forms and styles; while some could not resist the foreign influence with its introduced artistic misfortune. When one looks at these works, one could hardly identify them with their physical appearance unless one is an insider that has the knowledge of different culture that produced a particular work of art. Apart from ritual images, we have carved utilitarian items such as customary decorated drinking cups with elaborately geometric designs; an example is the art of the Kuba peoples found in the Sankuru region of Zaire. The cups were usually carved in the form of ram horns. In traditional Kuba society, the ram was a royal animal, and the horns symbolized supernatural powers of kings and princes (Vansina 1983; Mack 1981).

In Black African societies, function is regarded as an important factor in the assessment of their art. This function could be related to their day to day activities to include ceremonies and other paraphernalia of life. Again, what we need to focus our attention on is the art works themselves to discern what we can derive from the study in terms of visual representations. Art from Black African countries is undoubtedly, very rich and equally full of meaning. They are regarded as important factors of life, which are mostly cherished by all. Throughout the entire discussion, the matter of origin has not been given adequate attention, the only vital issues has always been centred on the usage, the form, and to a lesser extent the meaning of the works, which are very vital.

#### **4. Status of Nigerian Art**

Status in this regard refers to the professional position or rank in relation to other art forms in the region or even in the world at large. Before going deep into this, there is need to do a sort of lucid classification which could be under Traditional and Contemporary. Tradition could mean the passing of beliefs customs from one generation to the next undiluted. But to relate it to art, it could mean the passing of a long-established method or practice of art production from one generation to the other. While contemporary could mean present time or modern or even what we can refer to as worldwide accepted type of art. Which side should Nigeria take presently? Is it a totally condensed traditional art form or dance to the yearnings of Modernization in order to be reckoned with? To go along with this classification, we need to leave out the importance of economy in the determination of status regarding Nigerian Art. Economic factor must be reduced so as to bring out the importance and status of Nigerian Art? We need to create a compromise between them as Carpenter (1973) rightly pointed out in his book on Inuit Souvenirs. He reminds us that Michelangelo worked for money without loss of integrity, and he never mass-produced to debase the status of his art works.

We are now faced with a reality, and a question is now staring at us, and that is, how many Nigerian Artists can go along with this concept without losing out in the uplifting of the status because we can hardly find the real authentic Nigerian Art and Artists. This is to say that Nigerian artists can hardly take to one side (money and integrity), in their art productions. When Nigerian artists paint, sculpt, design, based on commission and for sale a sort of understanding occurs between the buyer and the producer, the buyer, if a foreigner, may lack the understanding of the meaning of the art work in its native context, the producer on the other hand may also lack understanding of its meaning in its new home. For this reason, there may be no agreed-upon ground in the evaluation of the price of such work of art. Jegede (1984) discusses the patronage of Nigerian Art, with the pros and cons of negotiation. What is most important to an anxious producer is the money involved. The Nigerian producer may be desperately in need of money to the extent of reducing the price to a ridiculous level, thus equally reducing the status of the artwork and the producer. Artists may even mass-produce to the extent of reducing the traditional value and status of such work of art.

Let us take the work of Lamidi Fakeye, the world's renowned Yoruba wood carver for our discussion. He started his career on a humble background which equally shows in his works. He was mostly under the direct dictatorship of the patron, the catholic father, Father Kelvin Carol. Under him, he carved many religious pieces such as "Christ on the cross", "Madonna" and many other religious pieces in the Roman Catholic Churches. Lamidi Fakeye was not the only one enclosed in this type of dictated artistic expressions. Economic factor can reduce freedom of expression. The external influence was mainly on the choice of subject matter and not on the techniques to use. When his old works of about fifty years ago are compared with the present productions, there is that lamentation on the disappearance of what should be referred to as the Original Art tradition. This could be found in his handling of tools and materials.

The same ideology embraces fabric productions of which Adire-eleko is primary. The old traditional Adire-eleko fabric used to be of one colour scheme, fashioned out from indigo dyestuffs embellished with traditional motifs in "crude" representations. Other aspects of traditional art equally passed through this change, whereby new tools, materials, influences and expertise helped to modernize and determine the nature of artistic production in virtually every corner of the country. Carpenter (1973) decries the development of such artwork as being imposed from outside and it has deprived it of something that gave traditional value and status. When such work is assessed alongside tradition, then one is surely going to view it as impure type perpetrated by economic factor. The importance of economy and the zeal to move with the current trend in creativity are usually considered as new currents of traditional destruction of the art works. This statement is highly contestable. As globalisation encourages technology in artistic production, and there is a rebirth in creativity, artists must always link up with their past glories, and equally care about the traditional efficacy of their creative tendencies. They should likewise recognise the aesthetic options and consequences of the choice they make in the assemblage of materials they use. It is noted that, the former traditional value no longer exists fully as it used to be in the past as indicated above, probably because of the materials and their new exposure to artistic civilization.

What gives status to most of these art works could be traced to many things out of which are the new exposure, subject matter, style, form and the general treatment of such works of art. Nigerian artists are mostly

sensitive to their choice of motifs, guided by the cultural imprint, a pretext for decorative embellishment. A question can now be asked, and that is, should artists reduce the relevance of the aforementioned creative canons and still uphold the traditional status to support the contemporary nature? Contemporary in this regard could mean the admixture of local and foreign, or better still, borrowed concept in art production. With this admixture, there would be what could be referred to as the creative stimulants, which will eventually enable us to document fully the history of artistic civilization of Nigerians in terms of status building. The evidence of these stimulants, such as the symbols, colour schemes, proportion, themes etc. clearly confirm certain historic, religious, traditional and socio-cultural events of the original Nigerian art. Aiming at internationalizing Nigerian art may be culturally inappropriate and unacceptable; artists should always call on their native aesthetics conceptualization to maintain their traditional art, which seems to have credibility and a higher status.

In Nigeria today, there exist, prolific painters, sculptors, designers, ceramists and graphic artists, all, demonstrating their artistic know-how in order to put Nigeria in a golden crucible of culture-bound and culture-encompassing eminence. It is equally very interesting to add that most of these artists are not fully in the portrayal of Nigerian true aesthetic experience, but rather, they are still within the boundary, because we can still acknowledge the existence and legitimacy of the thematic frameworks within the culture in their creativity.

The difference between tradition and contemporary nature of their products can rather be seen in their execution and not fully in their themes. The execution and the material contents of their works are mostly towards a tedious elaboration of new techniques that embrace new concepts that are intended to capture new roles within and outside Nigeria. Some of their techniques are the excellence of skilful innovations of concepts and styles; some are even of perfect respectability of high quality creation, all in the promotion of what Nigerian art stands to represent. Many artists that are operating different media are also involved in this creative exercise, improving and initiating cultural expressions in the promotion of the Nigerian visual art within a cultural environment. This creative exercise could be referred to as an intellectual tension that is characterized by the relationship between the traditional and contemporary art of Nigeria. But to assess the status of the Nigerian art in the real sense of it, it seems important to recognize that the cultural and traditional backgrounds drawn when these works are viewed must include aesthetic components. Therefore, a special help is envisaged not only with their symbolic environment but also with their aesthetic surroundings, that is, with their concept of form, line, balance, colour etc. As they relate to the various works, most especially in traditional art forms. These are some of the important rudiments that give status and creditability to the Nigerian art and artists.

## **5. The Nigerian Artists**

Dealing with the Nigerian artists requires consideration of the notion raised in our earlier discussions regarding the products of the artists themselves. It is important to note that the artistic response of the artists rests on the innate feeling. If we accept this as our working hypothesis, and equally agree that all cultures allow for individual aesthetic response (which individual artists develop to vary), then artists in this area of West Africa are fundamentally in control of their creative works. They experiment, assimilate, digest and participate in supra/cultural aesthetic experiences and creativity.

These Nigerian artists are able to deal conceptually with aesthetics beyond the passive and unthinking acceptance of forms and techniques that originated in the mythical past of the people. Lamidi Fakeye's wood carvings, most especially those that represent human figures, stand out undiluted with any misdirect intellectual theory of proportion. The head of "The Horse Rider", for example, still maintains the much cherished African proportion's principle, knowing full well that this expression is a sort of catalyst for the understanding between the Western world and the so called "Primitive Artists". Segy (1975) declares that his own art historical goal was

To show parallel between what the African projects freely in his Art and what is buried in our own psychological roots. These Parallels make possible our emotional identification with the Content of African art By learning to understand the African sculptor's motivation and his relationship to his art, we can increase our understanding of ourselves and our relationship to art.

It is pertinent to stress that there is need to have a personal rediscovery with deeper instinct to be able to increase the understanding of Nigerian artists. Where do we group Nigerian Artists? Do we refer to them as artists that have the caption "Nigeria is ours" at the back of their minds when working their types of art? This assumption is arrived at because of the freedom and self confidence that they have. They don't even care again what people say about type of art works anymore. They combine, initiate, and experiment to arrive at what they deem fit to express their mind in two and three dimensional art forms. This does not intend to include discussion that will embrace an individual artist and his activities, but it prefers to put their creative tendencies and activities in an envelope for a general consideration. The connection between the creative activities of the artists and the affinity between the creative activities and aggression in the society must be considered alongside the general assessment of the artists and their works of art, aggression against the society at large, and total emancipation of the Nigerian art by the Western world.

The Nigerian artists would like to be themselves, but it is not totally possible; because most of them receive their influences by looking at the so-called Western old Master's works (European art) bordering on foreign artistic civilization for inspirations. With this, as Price (*ibid*), adequately puts it that an integrated package of creative characteristics like these result into conceptualized phenomena. Can these conceptualized phenomena sustain what could adequately be referred to as pure and undiluted Nigerian art? This extension of creative attitudes of the Nigerian artists are particularly revealing, since their products are the combination of traditional and contemporary characteristics isolated from their usual realities on which the traditional art is solidly based. The revealing nature of the creative attitudes borders on the general visual representation.

At this junction, a question bordering on the artists self appraisal may arise. The question is, how confident are these artists when referring to themselves as Nigerian artists and their products Nigerian art; because these works are the products of the admixture of styles, and influences created with two different processes-maturation and civilization. Do we group such works under another name to be more comfortable? Probably we may use them Semi-Nigerian art or even Contemporary Nigerian Art form, simply because they do not represent or confirm the ideology regarding what Traditional Nigerian art stands to represent visually and culturally. This is when we keep in mind the whole range of elements that make up for what a Nigerian art should be or look like.

It is worrisome to suspect what the Western world would be thinking about the Nigerian art and the artists producing these works of art, what about the Nigerian themselves? It becomes a matter of artists' power of achieving enough solidarity, so that they are not always at the mercy of the society or the foreigners who do not understand what they are doing, that is the latent traditional burning artistic urge in them. Nigerian artists feel misunderstood and sometimes manipulated by the forces beyond their control when it comes to creativity, but they have access to modes of artistic communication that allows their visual voices to be heard and translated into two and three dimensional forms. If globalization is anything to go by, then, Nigerians should be happy to see their artists as representative samples of Nigerian vision of art and society, several aspects of which deserve congratulations.

## 6. Conclusion

Have we actually solved the problem of identity regarding Nigerian art? Which type of visual representation do we consider as an authentic Traditional Nigerian Art? With the introduction of foreign innovations and influence into the Nigerian visual art, could we still refer to the products as of Nigerian origin? Could we even say that only traditional art forms of these people should be referred to as Nigerian art because they are from the source, representing the essence? This paper raises series of questions that border on how the Traditional Nigerian Art could be identified.

To have what could be called the Traditional Nigerian art, it is presumed that all the traits of globalization should be removed and the focus should be on tradition and cultural environment embracing style, tools, techniques and the total outlook of the art in question. Let us hope that in another century we would still have our art tradition sustained, and the artists themselves would have something to lean on for aspirations. With all these assumption, credible Nigerian visual representations devoid of major foreign influence, is still attainable.

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