

# **Nigerian Culture and Modern Art: An Assessment of the Zaria Art Society**

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## **Abstract**

*Culture is dynamic, and is the way of life of a group of people. It is often passed from one generation to the other, which can be seen in their behaviour, thoughts, dressing, among others. Culture is not static, thus it is subject to change. Changes in culture are often associated to religion, politics, socialization, and other factors. In the case of the Zaria Art Society which this paper focuses on, the members of the society blended some aspect of Nigerian culture into the Western formal education that was thought in the Nigerian first institution of Higher learning to award Diploma in fine arts. This paper discourses the Zaria art society and their philosophy of natural synthesis and argues that a good art work should be embedded in the culture of its people, thus it cannot stand in isolation. The paper also exposes that Nigeria has a rich art and diverse culture which existed long before the colonial reign and thus encourages the efforts of the Zaria Art Society in recalling and using Nigerian traditional forms and motifs in their modern art by way of synthesis.*

## **Introduction**

Globalization and Western formal education in Nigeria which started with the introduction of Christianity and Islamic religion, has brought about cross-cultural influence on the Nigerian people. However, before the arrival of both religions, Nigeria had a diverse culture and ancient history which to a large extent represent its people and their lifestyle. From the Northern Nigeria, to the Southern Nigeria arts and culture, which represents each region, are highly deposited. However, the introduction of formal art education in Nigeria higher institution of learning in the year 1955 came with

an attempt to eradicate the rich cultural heritage of Nigeria through the art curriculum of the then colonial government. This action was highly opposed and resisted by the members of the Zaria art society, who accepted the Western formal education but insisted that some aspects of Nigerian culture must reflect in the school curriculum. Their effort brought about the philosophy of Natural Synthesis, (combining culture and formal education) which to a large extent has helped to shape and direct Nigerian art into its slowly but continuous growth, and thus has translated into the present day modern art.

### **Nigerian College Of Arts, Science And Technology (NCAST)**

The Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology (NCAST) Zaria can be said to be the bed rock of Nigerian modern art. The institution is a platform on which the Zaria art society, the first academic art society in Nigeria was born and developed. NCAST was established by the British colonial government out of a pressing need to produce middle-level manpower for a new nation. For an effective actualization of the above, the British government set up a Higher Education Committee in 1950 whose task was to study and advise the government on how to establish institutions of higher learning in the country. According to Chukwueggu (2010), “The committee completed its assignment, which brought about Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, with Dr. W.H. Thorpe as the pioneer head of the institution”.

The institution was established with three campuses located at Ibadan, Enugu and Zaria. The art programme which was later moved to Zaria took off at the Ibadan campus; this movement took place later in the year (1955) that the institution was established. The movement resulted from a directive of the colonial government, the art programme that was formally at the Ibadan campus should move to Zaria. On this Okeke-Agulu (2012) asserts that: “The art school in Zaria started with the relocation of the Department of Fine Arts of the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology from Ibadan to Zaria in 1955” Similarly, commenting on the origin of the Zaria Art Society, Chukueggu (2010) supports thus:

In 1955, the college introduced courses in Science and Intermediate Diploma in Fine Art at the Ibadan

branch...Architecture and Fine Arts Units that were formally operating in Ibadan were transferred to Zaria Branch. This was the genesis of Zaria Art School which produced the members of Zaria Art Society.

Three years after the establishment of NCAST, the Zaria art society was formed, and among the members were Yusuf Grillo, Simon Okeke, Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Oseloka Osadebe, Okechukwu Odita, F. N. Ekeada, Ogbonnaya Nwagbara, William Olasebikan and I. M. Omagie (the last two listed here were associate members). The main purpose of forming the society was to create a bridge between culture and western art that was taught in the school then by the European teachers. For effective synergy between culture and modern art, the philosophy of natural synthesis was propounded by a key member of the Zaria Art Society.

### **The Philosophy of Natural Synthesis**

The philosophy of Natural Synthesis was propounded by Uche Okeke, in 1958. According to Okeke (cited in Ogbechie 1999)

Natural Synthesis means an unconscious, unforced synthesis of old and new, of functional art and art for its own sake. The ‘old’ here implies Nigeria’s indigenous art and cultural heritage while the ‘new’ refers to the European art tradition, materials and methods through which the modern Nigerian artists creates his art.

The Zaria Art Society was found at a period when many African countries including Nigeria were clamouring for independence in order to take charge of their political, social, and economic affairs. Jari (2004) writes: “It should be recalled that the period within which the Zaria Art Society was founded coincided with the emergence of nationalist movements in many African countries including Nigeria. There was general discontent with the colonialists and their ideology”. Eventually, most African countries got their independence through the efforts of pressure groups formed by some African leaders like Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria, Kwame Nkrumah

of Ghana, Leopold Senghor of Senegal, and Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Patrice Lumumba of Congo Democratic Republic, among others. The quest for independence made each group to devise various means of actualizing their purpose; thus the philosophy of natural synthesis by the Zaria Art Society, which was a pressure group by Nigerian art students of that era.

The pressure by this students to ensure that some aspects of Nigerian traditional art is included in their school curriculum made a renowned art critic, Kojo Fosu, to christened them 'Zaria Rebels' in his book: *Twentieth- Century Art of Africa* which was published in 1993. Fosu (1993), acknowledge that, "the Zaria Rebels were providing what Uche Okeke refers to as 'artistic value that accord with native artistic sense' by experimenting with new visual images that are derived from traditional African aesthetics sources".

Uche Okeke, the proponent of the synthesis theory says in Omezi (2008), "The key word is synthesis and I am tempted to describe it as natural synthesis because it should be unconscious not forced". The hope and expectation of an independent Nigeria came with so much enthusiasm to everyone not excluding the members of the Zaria Art Society. This made them to use their philosophy to inspire youths of that time particularly their fellow students to strongly identify with their culture. The group used their natural synthesis philosophy to bring a revolution into formal art training in Nigeria's new institution of higher learning, claiming a great pride in Nigerian cultural legacy.

### **Natural Synthesis In Perspective**

Natural Synthesis contributed a great deal in the sustainability of the history of modern Nigerian culture through visual art. The concept started with the Zaria art society members in 1958 and has greatly influenced the Zaria Art School and the entire Nigerian art scene till date. The philosophy was born out of the passion and desire to sustain Nigerian rich cultural heritage which existed long before the advent of the Europeans. This rich culture was however not included in the curriculum of the first Nigerian institution of higher learning to award diploma in fine art. Thus the philosophy became necessary

in order to encourage the adherent and preservation of Nigerian rich culture. On this Ekpo Eyo (1990) asserts,

In spite of the tremendous achievement by Nigerians in the arts and culture before the arrival of the Europeans and the establishment of institutions of higher learning in Nigeria, the Europeans administrators did not consider it necessary to include some aspects of Nigerian culture into the new school curriculum. During this period, the members of the Zaria Art Society projected the concept of 'Natural Synthesis' so as to take on the shape of a distinct and tangible philosophy that helped the group to adopt the Nigerian traditional art into the European art practice that was taught in schools. This indeed became a major concern for the society.

The members were concerned about how the curriculum of the Department of Fine Arts was designed after two European art schools The Slade and Goldsmith Art Schools, both in London. Jari (2004) asserts that: "One of the major concerns of the society was therefore the formulation of an art curriculum in the country that reflected essentially these cultural peculiarities". However, this concern was not shown openly. As observed by Ikpakronyi (2009) "The reaction was only seen in their works, which they produced privately, attempting to make them different from the Western ones that were being taught. It was obvious that they wanted to come out as Nigerian artists, not European artists".

The group sees Natural synthesis simply an unconscious and uncommon relationship between the old and the new. It is a synthesis of things that are natural and come in agreement with the new thing that a person has learnt or acquired. The ideology of Natural Synthesis went through multiple stages, such as members using traditional art forms to restructure their own art, adaptation of Nigerian traditional motifs and indigenous concepts such as Uli traditional motifs of the South Eastern Nigeria and traditional Nigerian folklore, which dominates Bruce Onobrakpeya's works as

well as understanding and translating Nigerian traditional buildings as evident in Demas Nwoko's architecture.

### **The Desire for Sustainability of Nigerian Culture**

The Philosophy of Natural Synthesis is highly dynamic as it shows a relationship between Nigerian culture which is natural to the Nigerian people, and the European academic art in then Nigerian newly established institution of higher learning. The philosophy was driven by the need to correct what the art students felt were wrongly done to their country by the Europeans through arts.

Through the philosophy of natural synthesis, the students made effort to sustain their traditions and cultures that were not recognised by their European teachers. Their passion and love for their culture and tradition spurred them to make conscious effort to bring other students together so as to consider the possibility of extending their culture into academics. Uche Okeke, the proponents of the concept passionately made the following speech at the inauguration of the society:

Young artists in a new nation that is what we are! We must grow with the new Nigeria and work to satisfy her traditional love for art or perish with our colonial past. Our new nation places huge responsibilities upon men and women in all walks of life and places, much heavier burden on the shoulders of contemporary artists. I have strong belief that with dedication of our very beings to the cause of art and with hard work, we shall finally triumph. But the time of triumph is not near, for it demands great change of mind and attitude toward cultural and social problems that beset our entire continent today. The very fabric of our social life is deeply affected by this inevitable change. Therefore the great work of building up new art culture for a new society in the second half of this century must be tackled by us in a very realistic manner. (Okeke,1995).

The action of these students affirmed Marcus Garvey's words (Cited in Amy Jacque-Garvey, 2009), that: "blacks are descendants of the greatest and proudest race who ever peopled the earth." The African pride in these young undergraduate students ignited a strong passion for change in the school curriculum and the adaptation of African traditional motifs and styles into their art practice.

The philosophy helped to provide the needed environment for the growth of cultural art practice within a formal school. At the end of the academic program of the Zaria art society group, the members spread to other parts of the country. Most of them got employed in other institutions of higher learning that were established years after the Nigerian College of Arts Science and Technology, and through their art practice, the philosophy was also introduced to schools..

### **The Synthesis of Modern And Traditional Art In Nigeria**

The members of the Zaria art society upon graduation continued to be guided by their philosophy. Thus collectively, they began to search for indigenous art tradition as against the Western representational art that was the case of the early educated Nigerian artists. This is because the young men foresee the harm that the newly introduced Western art could cause to Nigerian culture. They believed that something was fundamentally wrong with the academic syllabus, and began a gradual transformation of the syllabus by subtly merging Nigerian traditional art with the newly introduced Western style. According to Oloidi (1989):

A reversal was needed if true, modern Nigerian art was to be established. In order to focus their thoughts, the Zaria Art Society advanced their theory of natural synthesis which, essentially, called for the merging of the best of the indigenous art traditions, forms and idea with the useful western ones.

The radical change spread from the academic circle to other cultural centres around the country, where several other young, talented artists were trained. This new art style which started in the mid-1950s was highly embraced particularly by the youths who saw it as a quest and good direction towards Nigerian independence. This new

art tradition continued among the members after the Zaria Art Society was closed down in 1961. Gradually it spread from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, to University of Nigeria Nsukka, with the development of the *Uli* art style. Also at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ife, a similar style called *Ona* was developed all in search of a true Nigerian identity through visual arts.

### **Conclusion**

Although Nigeria as a nation is known for its diverse culture, the beginnings of what can be described as a visual academic cultural dialogue between academic trained artists and their culture was made popular through the philosophy of Natural Synthesis that was propounded by Uche Okeke and adhered by all the members of the Zaria art society. This was a pressure group that came to lime light 1958, from the newly established institution (Nigerian College of Arts Science and Technology Zaria). The society introduced and adopted the philosophy of ‘Natural Synthesis’ and this marked the beginning of a new dawn on the contemporary art scene in Nigerian. The philosophy later created an avenue for young Nigerian artist to revisit their culture, and bring in some aspects of it into what was being taught in school by their European teachers.

The society left a remarkable impact on the Nigerian art scene, in spite of the fact that it had a short lifespan. Since the closure of the society by its members in 1961, so much has happened and is still happening in Nigerian art scene. The society’s philosophy of “Natural Synthesis” has been a driving force among many Nigerian artists, and this has also inspired the formation of many art groups. Some of the notable groups that towed the line of the society are as follows: Uli, which emanates from University of Nigeria Nsukka. Another notable group is the Ona from the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. Nsibidi and Ara art formed victor Ekpuk and Mufu Onifade, respectively. Though the above mentioned groups existed in different institutions and regions and were also of different eras, their philosophies are not far from the Zaria Art Society’s Natural Synthesis, which is an evident that the philosophy of Zaria art society is well accepted by the Nigerian artists because of its cultural content.

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