

Ori Olokun Art Experimental Workshop: An Epitome of Modernity in Nigerian Visual Art (1968 – 2009)

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Abstract

Nigeria is a single nation with the inability to establish and maintain a cultural identity. Hence, radical drive towards forging out cultural identity, led to the organization of series of experimental workshops shortly after Nigeria's independence Ori Olokun experimental workshop exposed artists to creative freedom with modern tendencies. Despite the negative criticism received by experimental workshops in the 60's, products from Ori Olokun experimental workshops excel at global level today with the cultural chorography of African art features. This paper therefore examines the concept of Ori Olokun experimental workshop since 1968 to 2009. Historical approach is being employed to source and elicit cultural data. The paper concludes the relevance of Ori Olokun experimental workshop in Modern Nigerian Art as it serves as a spring board for today's famous Ife Art School, Onaism and Araism.

Introduction

History recorded the Nigerian independence in 1960, as it equally recorded the most crucial in the political history of modern Africa. It was also a time of great ferment in the Art at the global level. Here in Nigeria, the independence paved way to strive for new cultural identity. Nigerian artistic scene witnessed cultural revolutions and radicalism in the early 60, so as to forge a new cultural identity void of alien or imperial tenets. Cultural artists were challenged to evolve a unique cultural identity for Nigeria. Cultural effervescence "afoot" as musicians,¹ writers and artists teamed up to explore the past to source for elements form rich heritage, so as to prepare for a future political, socio-cultural, economic and ideological independence.

This led to series of workshops being organized in Nigeria in the 60's. Notable among them are the Oshogbo Art Workshop and Mbari just to mention a few. The success of the earlier art workshops paved way for the Ori Olokun art experimental workshop. The workshop tends towards developing individual talents and breaking away from the rigid formalism.² Ori Olokun experimental art workshop can not be discussed in isolation without examining its relationship with Obafemi Awolowo University. The workshop actually metamorphosed to today's Fine Art Department of Obafemi Awolowo University.

Hence, this paper examines the concept of Art Experimental workshop in Nigeria. Ori Olokun paved way for the Ife Academic traditions with new cultural creative and artistic echo in the 1980s. The academic fixations processed by the pioneering staff transformed Ife art into a vibrant ideological culture.³ The paper also examines how modern artistic movements like Onaism and Araism emerged from Ife Art School.

Origin of Art Experimental Workshop

40 years ago, in 1960, various art workshops were established in Nigeria purposely to develop individual talents that would set them free from the boredom of formalism. Ideologically, art workshops could be viewed as a veritable tool for liberating captive creativity of Nigerian artists.

The origin of experimental workshop in Africa is traceable to Zimbabwe in 1957. Frank Mc Ewen was appraised for establishing the first art experimental workshop in Africa.

Art experimental workshop is described as an agent used for disseminating artistic and cultural knowledge to the young ones in order to develop them mentally in skill acquisition, in character reformation, cultural consciousness and enable them contribute freely to socio economic growth of the nation freely. The workshop was held in Salisbury. The art Gallery attendants were recorded to be the major participants of the workshop. Painting and sculpture were explored by the participants because sufficient colours and carved materials were made available for the participants. The participating artists expressed individualism in their art compositions. The co-ordinator of the workshop de-emphasized the use of formal element of draughtsmanship and rules of perspective, proportion and harmonizing colours as they might be detrimental to artistic creativity. Their main focus was to introduce the art of creative imagination expressed freely as inspired from the soul of the artist in his own cultural background. They assisted in taking “art away from the shackles of formalism”.⁴ The early art workshops participants were allowed to explore art with local expertise in an atmosphere conducive to artists and artistic creation. The first art workshop held in Zimbabwe, attracted several talented individuals within and outside the country.

Tracing the origin of art experimental workshops in Nigeria may be difficult without considering the days of the early missionaries and some prominent educational practitioners. It should be noted that some Christian missionaries like Roman Catholic have organized similar workshops as a tool of conversion. The first series of missionary workshops was organized by Father Kelly P.M of the African Missionary Society in 1947 at Oye Ekiti.⁵ The first art experimental workshop in Nigeria without religious affiliation was held by Uli Beier in Ibadan in 1961. The workshop was organized to provide art teachers the opportunity to adapt the practice and teaching of art to achieve national goals. The participants include carvers, weavers, embroiders, bead makers and leather works. Though the participants are non Christians yet they were kept from executing commissions for the chiefs and priests. The participants were given freedom to practice with less criticism.

Progressively, similar art experimental workshop was organized at Oshogbo in 1963. The centre was co-ordinated by Williams and Bienart. While Williams teaching was theoretical and abstract, Bienart imparted a minimum technical knowledge needed by the participants. Bienart succeeded in stimulating the participants to evoke from the depths of the consciousness individual images. Furthermore, he assisted the participants to select relevant images and rejected those images he considered to be irrelevant. Early participants include Jacob Afolabi, Rufus Ogunde. When Beier got married to Georgina Betts a painter, Oshogbo School was enriched by a talented artist in residence through their marriage. Other talented artists discovered at Oshogbo centre include Twins Seven Seven, Muriana Oyelami, Adebisi Fabumi and Jimoh Buraimoh. Ideological, Oshogbo workshop stressed a creative stream that is rooted to neither tradition nor modernity. Nevertheless, the Oshogbo school has thus succeeded in giving the Nigerian art scene new pictorial aesthetic. Despite the initial “harsh criticism” received by the school, it enhanced modern Nigeria art experiences and international exposure.⁶

Emergence of Ori Olokun Experimental Workshop

Having discussed the earlier workshops held in Nigeria, it becomes pertinent to examine the emergence of Ori Olokun Art. The earlier art workshops held in Nigeria, most especially Mbari led to the foundation in 1968 of another cultural centre at the then University of Ife, called Ori Olokun. The movement of the university to the permanent site from Ibadan in 1967 paved way for the full actualization of the founding fathers dream search for cultural rebirth. This became possible through the input of the Institute of African Studies which was in existence alongside with the birth of the University to fulfil the “culture” aspect of the university’s philosophy. The movement to Ife led to the formation of a committee to foster a sound and lasting relationship with the community tagged “Town and Gown” policy. This gave birth to the establishment of Ori Olokun cultural centre under the leadership of Michael Crowder. Solomon Wangboje was the director of the Art programme which formed the nucleus of Fine Arts department of the University. Late Professor Ola Rotimi suggested the name Ori Olokun, which he derived from Olokun, the wife of Oduduwa.

The workshop started as a weekly experimental workshop in a restaurant located at the ancient city of Ile-Ife. It enjoyed financial aids from Ford Foundations, U.S.A.

The cultural centre was located at Aribidi in Ife which provided sufficient accessibility for the indigenes to relate with the academic community members an actualization of “town and gown policy”. The centre was co-ordinated by Solomon Wangboje while P. R. O. Ojo, Agbo Folarin and Akinola Lasekan were the instructors. The participants include James Adebayo, Rufus Orishayomi, Peter Badejo, Gbade Akintunde, Michael Agun, Wale Olajide, Adeniyi Adeyemi and Ademola Williams. The participants worked on themes that reflected African styles, settings and concepts. Specifically, Yoruba drama, painting, pottery, sculpture, textile, design, photography, music were intensively explored.

The Ori Olokun experimental art workshop was intended for people of different works of life who felt they had art talents and wanted to explore them. This workshop provided the necessary environment for artistic production. People who for one reason or the other could not go to institutions of higher learning converged in the workshop to work. The participants are well grounded in different disciplines like textiles, ceramics, sculpture and performing arts. Their works were exhibited all over Nigeria as well as some major cities in the United State of America. Currently, most of the students who started their art career in this workshop are now practicing on their own and they are good cultural ambassadors outside Nigeria.

The works of Wale Olajide and Adeniyi Adeyemi who participated in the workshop are presented in the collection of contemporary Nigerian art in the museum of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan. The individual artistic freedom inculcated in the participants definitely enriched the variety of their outputs and enabled them to make contributions to contemporary Nigerian Art. Rufus Orisayomi is into cinematography with Yorkshire Television. Ademola Williams who worked closely with Solomon Wangboje in different universities emerged as a specialist in textile and printmaking. He is currently a lecturer in the Fine and Applied Art department, University of Benin, Benin City. Segun Adeku who was described as a newspaper vendor before joining the workshop now based in Ile Ife.⁷ He is well known for his narrative pictures and exploration of Yoruba folklores, culture and religion with modernity. The art experimental workshop continued till 1975 when it eventually metamorphosed into the Fine Art Department of the University.

New Consciousness and Modernity

Ori Olokun experimental workshop came to a close when the Fine Art department of the University emerged in 1975. No strong ideological position was incited by the movement due to lack of intellectual and academic fixation. The styles of the participants remain fresh and quite original. Though their instructors had western training they did not impose any artistic concept on the participants. Their approach towards drawing is contrary to what is obtainable in formal schools which gave the individual maximum freedom of practice.

Participants were encouraged to explore their indigenous background and to generate pictorial symbols such as mysterious animals, deities, gods, goddesses, ancestral deities and spirits. They drew objects, rendering their units rich and multicoloured. They sufficiently explored primary colours in their compositions. Their production techniques and use of colour formed the basis for acquiring the much needed technical proficiency. Erudite scholars appointed as lecturers in the newly created Fine Art department in 1975 lifted up the standard and polished the existing traditions. Babatunde Lawal, Rowland Abiodun, J. R. O. Ojo and Agbo Folarin, Ibigbami just to mention few came to mind in this regard. Their contributions metamorphosed life into a vibrant ideological school with modern intellectual creative tendencies.

The Department of Fine Art, Obafemi Awolowo has graduated numerous artists. The ideological creative foundation of the school could be attributed to the versatility of their pioneering teachers earlier mentioned.⁸ They inculcate the artistic skills and deep creative perception to the students produced. They set a high standard of creativity for art practices and theory in all creative faculties. While paying tribute to pioneering teachers of Ife Art School, Osinowo 2005 appraised them for their dedication in “ensuring that enduring legacy” which they put in place. They succeeded in establishing a creative tradition which embodies the strong concept of survival of modern trends.

Akatakpo (1997) rightly observes that though creative style of the school is seen to be individualistic, there are two discernible stylistic trends which Nigerians can trace to Ife Art Schools. These are “Onaism” and “Araism”. Other styles that metamorphosed from the school could be classified as the experimental, the indigenous and the modern.⁹ At the level of this discussion, it becomes pertinent to examine Onaism and Araism the two stylistic ideologies that emerged from Ife Art School.

Onaism

Onaism is an artistic movement that emerged from Ife Art School to explore the Yoruba understanding of Art through the use of Yoruba colours patterns, materials and philosophies. Kunle Filani, Moyo Okediji, Tola Wewe, Bolaji Campbel and Tunde Nasiru are the pioneering members of the movement. Assertively, Onaism could be described as a celebrated movement serving as a rallying point for art graduates from the University of Ife between 1970 and early 80s. Their artistic ideology reflects the Yoruba concept of design and aesthetics in modern Nigeria art. Their compositions are based on signs, symbols and motifs of the Yorubas derived from decoration of pottery, textiles, sculptures and shrine walls.¹⁰ Due to the handful contributions of pioneering teachers of Ife Art School, it has metamorphosed into a vibrant cultural ideology. The intellectual and artistic vibrations lifted Ife Art School to national and international creative limelight. The new creative movement coined Onaism paved way for Yoruba indigenous signs and motif in such a manner that it dominates the contemporary painting, ceramics, textiles and graphics today.

“Ona” pioneering members evolved in Ondo 20th February, 1989, they formed a professional alliance to incorporate the Yoruba decorative motifs in making social commentary. It is worth being noted that there was a strong connectivity between the disbanded Ori Olokun and the department. Most of the Art instructors and researchers at Ori Olokun dominated the core group of the pioneering staff of the department. This may probably have been the reason why they have a very strong influence on the formalism and philosophy of Ife Art School. Remarkably, Moyo Okediji one of the pioneering students attended Ori Olokun experimental workshop before being admitted to the department of Fine Arts. There was tendency for him to have transferred Ori Olokun creative ideology into the department when he eventually became an academic staff in the department.¹¹ These intellectuals served as the bridge between the old traditions and modernity in the history of Ife Art School.

The number of the group appreciates daily spreading their creative focus within Idowu Otun, Stephen Folaranmi, Tunde Ogunlaye, Segun Ajiboye, Rasheed Amoda and a host of others. Their works are made available for public visual appreciation through their series of public exhibition tagged “Best of Ife”. Modernism becomes apparent in their works, in the proportion of their figures and in their compositions. The head of a figure is emphasized physically reflecting its spiritually overwhelming importance. This new cultural ideology is expressed in the attempt made by the artists today to blend traditional and contemporary subject matter by forging out modernism as reflected in their works. Onaism is the true Nigerian Art being the product of a culture or synthesis of culture that made up holistic Nigeria. It is a movement that celebrates tradition and culture with ideology of modernism.¹² Hence, it was observed that members of the school have revitalized and improvised the motif, themes, styles and techniques to achieve visual modernity. Plates 1, 2 & 3 are specimens of Kunle Filani, Tola Wewe and Don Akatakpo confirming the above assertions.

Organic and geometric shapes were adapted to evolve cultural symbols applicable to cubist’s compositions. Their motifs depict African culture like lizard, fishes, reptiles, moon, stars, sun and many other signs. African styles were employed mostly in their works. Warm colours in acrylic and oil colours were explored as experiments. Adepegba commended John Amefoh a member of the Ona group for his unique style of “mixing his misty and dripping paint with painted peeping faces” quite contrary to other painters who at times expressed different motif and materials in their works as expressed in “Time to Say No” plate 4 (Adepegba, C. O. 1999).¹³

Araism

Onaism gives credence to the birth of Araism as an offshoot. It is worth being noted that Mufu Onifade the exponent of Araism graduated from Ife Art School and is a staunch member of Onaism. Mufu Onifade’s artistic experimentation began in 1987 when he confided in his friends that he wanted to perform “wonders” meaning “ARA” in Yoruba language. Having passed through gestation period until 1996 when the experiment became a real breakthrough in the Nigerian artistic scene. Araism conveys the creative ideology of Onifade a striking difference from the existing tradition. He stormed Nigerian artistic scene with modern creative ideology. He succeeded in projecting the wonders of Yoruba creativity with a unique touch of reference. There are well above twenty five disciples of ARA who have graduated when Araism was inaugurated as a movement. Some of his disciples include Oludotun Popoola Abiola, Mautun Akande, Jonathan Ikposa, Awojobi and Oluwanbe Amodu. The disciples are influenced by techniques of painting akin termed Araism. Araism is post Onaism, focused to promote Yoruba themes which are rich in colours and philosophies.

Araism ideologically explores Yoruba art forms and creativity as exemplified by the richness of their philosophies, proverbs, folklores, patterns, textures and other cultural values employed in his creation which has by virtue of consistency crystallized into a style.¹⁴ It is an embodiment of the philosophical ideology associated with the visual creation of Mufu Onifade. Araism involves a composition of strokes that interrelate to form patterns, textures and visual images. Creative technical proficiency, themes, colours and use of proportion of images are representation of Yoruba philosophies. Varieties of creative techniques are explored by Araism. The usage of raw colours that fuses with the overlapping effect of plate strokes are adopted by few of his disciples while the styles concerning large picture surface with crackled strokes was observed in the specimens of his works Plates 5, 6 and 7. It becomes pertinent to note that creative innovations of Araism could be attributed to the solid artistic tutelage which Mufu received initially from Ife Art School and his affiliation with Onaism. The influence of Onaism on the artistic development of Mufu Onifade cannot be underestimated. Furthermore, it is worth being mentioned that lecturers and instructors who migrated from Ori Olokun Art Experimental Workshop to the Fine Art Department laid the artistic foundation of these groups of artists.

Concluding Remarks

The above discussion has generally shown the clear metamorphosis of Ori Olokun Art experimental workshop to modern Nigerian art using Ife Art school's ideological styles as the hatching centre. Modern Nigerian art has attained reasonable measures of both national and global character. Through intensive experimentation with various materials and techniques, Ife Art School products have completely derailed from the alien artistic styles.

They unwittingly imbibed unique modern stylistic tendencies, creatively rich with socio cultural undertone. Products from Ori Olokun experimental workshop have matured over the years through constant practice and variety of experience. They are eloquent in the cultural idioms which enhanced their pictorial elements. They enjoyed sufficient level of ventilations of discipleship in form of apprentices to ensure the future propagation and continuity of the forms and compositions. They have influenced many modern Nigerian artists to revisit their traditions in both form and content. Conclusively, Ori Olokun Workshop goes beyond merely motivating the young ones towards creativity. It serves as the springboard for today's Ife Art School, Onaism and Araism through the above stylistic triumvirate.



Plate 1: More is Less

Oil on Canvas

1997



Plate 2: Ijapa and Agbamurere Oil on Canvas 2001



Plate 3: Iroko Oil on Canvas 1998



Plate 4: Time to Say No

Oil on Canvas

1997

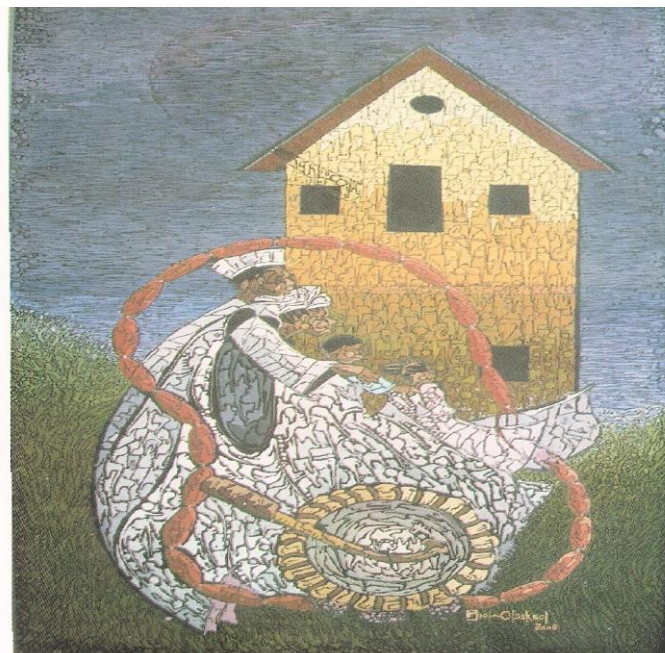


Plate 5: Prosperity

Acrylic on Canvas

1997



Plate 6: Lagos Yellow I Acrylic on Canvas 2006



Plate 7: Latoke Oya Oil on Canvas 2005

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