



## Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria

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To cite this article: Sharlene Khan (2018): Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria, Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies, DOI: [10.1080/23277408.2018.1443622](https://doi.org/10.1080/23277408.2018.1443622)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23277408.2018.1443622>



Published online: 04 Apr 2018.



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## BOOK REVIEW

**Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria**, Chika Okeke-Agulu, Durham, Duke University Press, 2015, 376 pp., US\$109.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-5732-2; US\$29.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8223-5746-9

Histories are made of good stories told by good storytellers. Narrative is all important in conveying interpretable facts, defining contexts, time periods, key stakeholders, protagonists and antagonists. The sculpting of art histories is no different. Stories based on the visual productions of creative practitioners in a geo-specific context at specific times is given life through re-telling, and, when retold sufficiently, gets authorisation in official discourses and becomes canon forming. This is the case of the dominance of Western fine art, which spread through the conquest of Western colonialism. In postcolonial times, stories of suppressed histories, cultures and productions have sought to interfere with, add to, or displace the Western fine art canon officiated through Western art history discourses. Chika Okeke-Agulu's book *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria* (2015) does this in interesting complex ways. Okeke-Agulu's book takes, as its starting point, the formation of 'Modern' art in Nigeria, moving from contact with the Western fine art field into British colonialism of Nigeria, the short euphoria of the post-independence period punctured by the Biafran war.

The field of African arts is a difficult one to approach, not least because to speak of the arts of an entire continent with such diverse traditions over the ages with hybrid influences is daunting. African Arts is often accorded one of three categories of 'art': traditional art (the creative capacities that serviced religious, court and everyday life); modern art (the development of Western fine art practices for commercial sale and socio-political commentary); and contemporary art (the current state of global visual arts practice). These categories have been imported from a Western art historical discourse to find the equivalency of 'art' practices in other parts of the world, but they remain problematic because the terms 'fine art' and 'art history' have developed concurrently with European white supremacist colonial ideologies that sought to separate and categorize the cultural practices of the European population from the rest of the world. So, any decolonial writing project dealing with the development of visual arts histories in Africa has to take the complexities of language into account.

The term 'modern' here is meant in several ways: defining the kind of cultural contact and influences that flowed between Western Empires and their colonies that ushered in global technologies, industries and markets; 'modernity' as a cultural ideology used to spur notions of colonial dominance over 'Others'; and 'Modernism' as the encompassing term for a range of European fine art movements (latter half of 1800s to mid-nineteenth century, but also as a global phenomenon well into the twentieth century). There are times when the slippage is

problematic, and, yet, there is something admirable about Okeke-Agulu not spending too much space explaining that yes, Africans were 'modern', that modernity did exist in Nigeria and that the 'fine art' under discussion fits into global Modernist art practices. These kinds of explanations/defences can belabour writing. Going into the book it means that you do perhaps have to have some basic knowledge of art history/visual arts in order to understand the implications of his strategy and not take at face value that these terminologies are interchangeable. (A further note: often when 'art' is spoken about, it is not inclusive of the fields of literature, music and performance, but only 'fine art', which is also indicative of the hierarchy of this particular field.) What Okeke-Agulu does spend time on is defining his use of the literary field term 'postcolonial modernism', as he names a set of limited visual practices (fine art easel painting, drawing, sculpture, printmaking) that respond to the political contact between different (colonial-colonized) social entities that influenced each other through a visual break with mimetic pictorial realism — this, doesn't hold true for all global Modernist iterations. It also looks at Modernist art as a visual strategy for self-definition post-colonially.

*Postcolonial Modernism* traces the beginnings of 'fine art' in Nigeria. While such origination identifications can be problematic, they can always be contested thereafter. In Chapter 1, the context of British colonialism, from the mid-18th century, is set out against local and international anti-colonial and white supremacist perspectives, that influenced emerging African modernity. The author posits that 'fine art' was taken up by Nigerians wanting to graft their own identitarian questionings, and, therefore, was/is anything but simple Western art mimesis. This is a subtle and important shift for African art discourse, but does little to challenge the basis of 'art' as an import of Europe. Chapter 2 tackles various perspectives on the development of art curricula under British colonial rule in Nigeria, arguing that the colonial government favoured industrial education of natives rather than art and humanities subjects that created 'troublemakers' (so there is a fracture between the education Christian missionaries did and what the colonial administration proposed).

Chapter 3 traces the beginnings of the Zarian Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology's (NCAST) first arts curriculum and differing teaching models (which were tied into racial and nationalist ideologies). It highlights the Zarian Art Society's student members Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Jimo Akolo and Bruce Onobrakpeya (as well as Yusuf Grillo, Okechukwu Odita and Oseloka Osadebe), demonstrating the beginnings of their ideas of African Modern art. This group was invested simultaneously in international art ideas and local traditional creative practices, with each of the artists developing their own version of 'natural synthesis', which is the 'purposeful blending of distinctive, disparate, yet mutually entangled heritages in order to live meaningfully or authentically in a contemporary postcolonial and unapologetically modern society' (Okeke-Agulu 2015, 91). Such critically poetic phrasings can be found throughout the book and makes Okeke-Agulu's tome a pleasure to read. In Chapter 4, the influences of Europeans stakeholders are discussed, including the German scholar Ulli Beier and his founding of the journal *Black Orpheus* and the Mbari Artists and Writers Club (all differently working with notions of negritude and Pan-

Africanisms). This chapter demonstrates how art writing (criticism, review and portfolios) — key to Modernism's validation in the West — also supported particular styles of emerging Modernism art in Nigeria.

Chapter 5 looks at how the artworks of the class of 1961 Zarian student artists (above) further evolved post art school. One of the challenges of engaging and writing on Modernist artwork, particularly as it emerged as cubist abstraction, abstract-expressionist or supremacist, is that beyond the play with technique, the everyday subject matter can seem so banal as to not warrant much discussion. Okeke-Agulu demonstrates a beautiful sustained engagement with the artists' works that conveys a deep respect for their work. As a South African artist, I felt both envy and hopeful that one day the many South African artists working in similar styles can be treated with such historicity and critical reflection. Okeke-Agulu looks at how post-independence, the Zarian Art society's works became a locus of contestation over a national identity linked to Pan-Africanism that either strove to be universal or to pay attention to the local. Chapter 6 examines the cultural shift that occurs with Lagos as the new centre of visual arts and various stop-start ventures, as well as how organisations and individuals wanted to use the arts for their own political positionings in a continued effort to define the identity of Nigeria. The final brief chapter discusses the Biafran war as a major disruption to these processes of self-identification and the national decolonial project, and how various artists responded to this turbulent period in their individual artworks.

The book is consistent in showing the tensions between notions of the 'traditional' and the 'modern', not just as political ideologies but visual arts field practices. Okeke-Agulu moves between the centres of Zaria, Ibadan, Lagos and Enugu, demonstrating how the politics of space and regionalism is imperative to an understanding of Nigerian art being forged at that time. The absolute strength of the book is the dialogue Okeke-Agulu weaves across Africa, the US, UK, Europe, Asia, Latin America, and various disciplines showing the plethora of influences on Nigerian artists and society, evidencing what he says is Africans' 'multiple consciousness' and cosmopolitanism. There are times when 'Nigeria' seems to stand in for Africa, which is unnecessary, particularly as in the field of visual arts and art history, centres like Nigeria, South Africa, Egypt and Algeria dominate discourses and become emblematic tropes of 'Africa', even within the continent. The author maintains throughout his narrative the link between politics, evolving modernist identities, decolonial perspectives and technical experimentation, showing the fallacy of Western Modernist's statement of 'arts-for-art's-sake', even as it was used as colonial, nationalist and Cold War metaphors and tools.

Any book that attempts to chronologically historicise a period/field will render gaps. With Okeke-Agulu's text that looks at the real challenges taken up by various Nigerian artists, intellectuals and organisations in the pre- and post-independence era of Nigeria, the limitation of scope (which might be viewed as a practical choice) of 'art' to Western 'fine art' practices of painting, sculpture, printmaking and drawing does not, in my view, sufficiently contest the immanence of these categories, but rather transplants European models seamlessly into the Nigerian context. While many of the visual artists discussed studied in the UK and,

therefore, would have accepted these categorisations ('fine art' versus 'craft'), a book whose title includes the term 'decolonization' shouldn't. While Okeke-Agulu looks at the influence of local traditions and practices in various artists' works (the discussion he has on Uche Okeke being influenced by Igbo Uli practices, even as they emerged in metal gate-making is wonderful), he does not see them on a continuum of creative practices from the informal to the formal, as, for instance, Walter D. Mignolo (Mignolo and Vázquez 2013) does with his concept of 'decolonial AestheSis' (i.e., the decolonisation of the term and strategies of 'Western aestheTics', as well as the workings of the political fields that are fine art/art history/visual arts that seek to expose continued coloniality past colonialism).

Okeke-Agulu's decision has a twofold impact: it refuses to reclassify traditional objects, even as it admires their aesthetic qualities; and it doesn't speak to a range of everyday modern art practices. In the first instance, Okeke-Agulu raises interesting debates in which European Modernist practices exoticised indigenous arts to their own fetishistic ends without caring for the original contexts of these functional objects. He also tries to demonstrate how Nigerian artists wilfully and purposefully decided on or against the use of traditional arts and practices, but saw their works as a continuum with the kinds of movements going on in the field of 'fine art'. But, in not regarding African non-fine art objects *as modern* — remember they were still being produced at the time of European Modernism and so are not just some ancient technique — then we fail to see that African creativities were already harkening to the evolution of styles, techniques and genres that were modernising *both Africans and Europeans*. To limit 'modernity' to European fine art innovations (and their encounter with African-Asian-Oceania-Meso-American objects and perspectives), is to limit the concept of the modern, which was a global evolutionary phenomenon, to the violent clash of cultures in which Euro-white ascendancy has won. The paradigmatic shift of viewing African traditional art as modern would have given more weight to this book as a decolonial project in its own (methodological) right, rather than just a historicising of the decolonial underpinnings of Modernist art formations in Nigeria. *Postcolonial Modernism*, thus, engages the decolonial option at the moment of pre- and post-independence as visibility responding to the political act of decolonisation, a medium among many that can evidence the struggles of modern Nigerians dealing with colonial administration and ideologies, but does not, in a sustained manner, treat visual media as decolonising tools, themselves, in the doing and the representing, and in decolonising visual media. However, again, Okeke-Agulu's text will allow for more comprehensive engagements about both the history and possibilities of visual arts as processes of decolonisation/decoloniality.

The second impact is that even within local settings, there are arts that are 'othered', particularly women's creative practices (Okeke-Agulu briefly, and interestingly, mentions metal gates, murals, body art and journal/book covers but with no real emphasis). Unforgivably, for a book written in 2015, Okeke-Agulu pays scant attention to the impact of gender in the 'fine art' field (even in his lack of critique of the term 'avant-garde' and its white, male, individual genius associations). Three Nigerian women are mentioned as important on the art scene in

the period discussed: Clara Ugbodaga, Afi Ekong and Collette Omogbai. Even though they seem to play multiple pivotal roles (artists, teachers, curator-gallerists, patrons), Okeke-Agulu's dealings with them are cursory. They are active not as agents to be given serious engagement (as he does so well with his men stakeholders), but as 'aids' to various men artists. In the case of Ugbodaga, this is particularly glaring as he mentions her as the only Nigerian staff at the Zarian art school in 1958 but does not discuss her as an artist, while going on to discuss and reproduce the artworks of other Nigerian and European male teachers. No doubt, there will be future women scholars who will take on this task of re-writing the equally important histories of these Nigerian women, but they will then be alternative histories to the canon that Okeke-Agulu has created.

As a young scholar, I was against canonisation, hoping for more democratic structures of information dissemination, but educators in classrooms and writers, who are not researchers, need coherent narratives that they can regurgitate and reference, or at the very least use as starting points. Decolonial, gender and sexuality paradigms are still too reliant on a person taking the initiative rather than this being par course, and, thus, such focuses remain precarious and contingent. Canons exist to be interrogated, but their initial formulations are rarely thereafter destroyed. Okeke-Agulu's canon will be deservedly important for years to come, and it is a sincere pity that more Nigerian women creatives were not given serious engagement in this foundational endeavour. This short review simply cannot do justice to the many critical issues presented in this book that needs unpacking because it is a rich resource through its contoured, nuanced, well-crafted narration.

## Reference

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## Notes on contributor

*Sharlene Khan* is a South African visual artist who works in multi-media installations and performances which focus on the socio-political realities of a post-apartheid society and the intersectionality of race-gender-class. She uses masquerading as a postcolonial strategy to interrogate her South African heritage, as well as the constructedness of identity via rote education, art discourses, historical narratives and popular culture. She holds a PhD (Arts) from Goldsmiths, University of London and is currently a Senior Lecturer in Art History and Visual Culture at Rhodes University.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/23277408.2018.1443622>

