

POSTCOLONIAL MODERNISM



Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria

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organize a retrospective exhibition of Uche Okeke to mark his sixtieth birthday in April 1993. I had not met Okeke, but I was fascinated by the opportunity to get to really know him and his work, given his reputation as the doyen of the Nsukka school and a mysterious national figure who at the time had retired in near seclusion to his historic cultural research center, the Asele Institute, Nimo. In the course of planning that exhibition I was led to an era, in many ways a distant one, a meaningful appreciation of whose scope and core motivations, politics and legacies, a reading of the major texts—Ulli Beier's *Contemporary Art in Africa* (1968), Marshall Ward Mount's *African Art: The Years since 1920* (1973), Jean Kennedy's *New Currents, Ancient Rivers* (1992)—had not prepared me. Nor did those texts help me understand the relationship between the formal, discursive, and ideological dimensions of the work of Okeke or other leading figures.⁶ Access to Okeke's personal archives, including his stunningly meticulous diary entries from the mid-1950s through the 1960s, spurred my two-decade-long study, not just of his work, but also of his surviving former Zaria colleagues and their contemporaries. In fact, it was this interest in the work of the Art Society artists and their contemporaries that set me to writing this book; it also helped me conceptualize the curatorial collaboration—with my friend and colleague Okwui Enwezor—that became the complex, traveling exhibition *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994*, organized by the Museum Villa Stuck, Munich, in 2001.⁷ Needless to say, *The Short Century*, because of its continental scope, made me particularly aware of the similarities between modern art and the politics of decolonization in Nigeria and Africa. It made me consider the broader, more challenging questions that have dogged the perception of modern African art, all of which are connected to its relationship with colonialism and Western art traditions, its apparent inauthenticity and derivativeness, its supposed lack of comparative sophistication, its troubling intimacy with cultural nationalism, and its dubious connection with African modernity. Let me address some of these matters to better frame the critical challenges this book confronts.

Europe and Modern African Art

It is impossible to fully appreciate the stakes of artistic modernism in twentieth-century Nigeria without close attention to the political and cultural implications of Africa's encounter with Europe during the imperial age. As this book argues, this modernism is a consequence of complex factors arising on the one hand from the political and discursive confrontation

between British indirect rule ideology and its attendant cultural practices and on the other from theories and ideas associated with African decolonization in the first half of the twentieth century. In tracing the genealogy and the political-discursive conditions that catalyzed this new work, as I do in the first two chapters, my task is to question routine assumptions about the origins of modern art in Nigeria (and Africa) by resituating and reframing its ideological relationship with colonialist thought. This is an important art-historical problem, no less because it had been normal for historians of modern African art to see a seamless, unproblematic link between the establishment of art teaching in colonial schools or in workshops established by European artist-teachers and the rise of modern art in Africa. The usual argument is that since formal art teaching began under the watch of colonial regimes and since easel painting and academic art was imported into colonial Africa through these encounters, it follows that the art made by Africans after this European type of art education is a product of colonialism and colonialist visions. Against these notions, this book sets out to disentangle artistic modernism from this supposed colonial imagination, returning it to the long history of anticolonial, self-affirmative theories, practices, and visions that began at the turn of the twentieth century. For it is all too clear, as I detail in the first chapter, that with the entrenchment of formal colonialism on the continent, African and black intellectuals in fields as diverse as religion, sociology, literature, art, and politics set for themselves the task of imagining an African modern subjectivity defined primarily by their own need for self-assertion and their visions of political and cultural autonomy. Even when this task was not vociferously anticolonial, it often staked a claim to an alternative position at odds with the schemes and propositions of colonial regimes and their apologists. This will to self-definition—which characterized the African anticolonial and decolonization movements—laid the grounds for the work of that generation of artists in Nigeria and elsewhere who participated, midcentury, in the making of what this book calls postcolonial modernism.

The assumption of a causal link between colonialist thought and modern African art has resulted in the long-standing underestimation of or outright disregard for the artistic accomplishments represented by this work, as well as doubts about the significance of its contribution to the expansion of the horizons of modernisms of the twentieth century. It is in fact necessary to return to this rather old problem, precisely because its damning effect on the reception of African modernist work remains with us today. Let me cite three examples of how a particular perspective on the colonial history of Africa has undermined the reception and appreciation of modern African art

of the type covered in this study. In their classic 1964 book on African sculpture, two eminent ethnologists, the Briton William Fagg and the American Margaret Plass, summarily dismissed the work of African modernists thus: “we are not concerned here with ‘contemporary’ African art, which for all its merits is an extension of European art by a kind of involuntary cultural colonialism.”⁸ More than three decades later, a European museum curator confidently justified the marginalization of contemporary African art in international art exhibitions by noting that “it seems like third-rate artwork to us because the art presented here emulates the Western tradition—this is a criterion for selection—and because it is always lagging behind, regardless of how commendable the effort might be basically.”⁹ And finally, only a few years ago the British scholar Rasheed Araeen declared the naturalistic, colonial-era portrait paintings of Aina Onabolu to be a form of “mimicry under the tutelage of colonial paternalism.”¹⁰ Central to these three assessments of modern African art are two important, unflattering assumptions about this work: first, the idea that it is a weak copy, a product of involuntary mimicry of European art; and second, its apparent belatedness, that is to say, its perpetual condition of being out of time, quintessentially anachronistic, and completely evacuated of any radical potential.¹¹

But these arguments about mimesis and modern African art miss a crucial aspect of mimicry, which, as Homi Bhabha has suggested, produces “the representation of difference that is itself a process of disavowal.”¹² In other words, they ignore the radical potential of self-consciously deployed mimesis. Moreover, they sidestep the rather complex strategies adopted by colonial subjects committed to asserting, even within the limited political-discursive space available to them, their right to determine and articulate their own visions of modernity. Indeed, early-twentieth-century radical nationalists saw native beliefs and cultural practices as important elements of a modern subjectivity that was quite comfortable with negotiating, against all odds, its relationship with Europe. Thus my argument in this book is that this model of colonial-nationalist subjectivity informed the work of the independence generation of Nigerian artists who invented a modernist artistic identity from a rigorous and confident synthesis of Western and indigenous techniques, design elements, and styles. In doing so, they asserted that modernist and progressive artists must be willing to acknowledge in their work the diverse contradictory local and foreign elements that constituted Nigerian and African modernity.

Nationalism, Modernity, and Compound Consciousness

In his influential study on nationalism, Benedict Anderson introduced a useful concept, what he calls “colonial pilgrimage,” which refers to the movement of colonial subjects, initially to European metropolises and later to regional bureaucratic centers, to attend school. Often, he writes, they met fellow bilingual sojourners from other colonies, with whom they shared notions of nationalism drawn largely from Western models.¹³ Anderson’s point here is to draw a direct, uncomplicated line between Western education during the colonial period and the colonial subject’s mental conversion to everything European. Yet it is clear that, although many of the African intelligentsia, with no viable options for higher education at home, embarked on the colonial pilgrimage to Europe (and later to the United States), their responses to the experience varied. For instance, in his autobiography Kwame Nkrumah describes his meetings in Europe with other African students and nationalists, including Jomo Kenyatta (1894–1978), Félix Houphouët-Boigny (1905–1993), and Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001)—who, respectively, became the first presidents and prime ministers of Kenya, Ivory Coast, and Senegal—before and after the Fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester (1945).¹⁴ However, while Senghor and Houphouët-Boigny demonstrated their infatuation with *la civilisation française* and political commitment to “Françafrique,” Kenyatta and Nkrumah’s view of and relationship with Western culture were very different. Senghor ruled Senegal with the support of French advisers, maintained strong ties with France, and after two decades as president, stunningly retired to a French village, where he died in 2001. In contrast, upon Nkrumah’s return from England, he revived the idea of African personality and his own concept of decolonization through consciencism as guiding principles for political pan-Africanism.¹⁵ He also colorfully placed Ghana’s cultural traditions at the fore of national politics, taking the honorific “Osagyefo,” in addition to adopting the kente cloth as an assertion of his new, independent personhood. Even so, Nkrumah also wore Mao suits to establish his socialist credentials, while his friend and colleague, the Kenyan nationalist Jomo Kenyatta, took the honorific “Mzee” and combined Savile Row suits with a leopard-skin hat, fly whisk, and Muslim sandals. In both instances, there is an unquestionably deft sartorial hybridization and manipulation of populist imagery for political capital. Yet it was in Nkrumah’s and Kenyatta’s recognition rather than rejection of the symbolic and tactical values of these unstable multicultural fusions that their sartorial sense parallels their nationalist political ideologies and their identity politics.

This tendency to embrace native cultures and to publicly express one's attachment to them *after* a pilgrimage to the West—all this while appropriating usable ciphers of Western economic and political modernity—suggests a more complex, even paradoxical, response to the metropolitan encounter. Put differently, the pilgrimage might have produced what Anderson calls Anglicized colonial subjects, but the pilgrim cultural nationalists returned home with the confidence to regard Western and African cultures and resources as permutable and fungible elements for the construction of a new, hybrid postcolonial subjectivity. These West Africans thus remind us of Chatterjee's Indian nationalists, for whom the road to modernity had to begin with an assertion of cultural difference without which any claim to independence from Europe might not be completely justifiable or meaningful.¹⁶

But how to make sense of this will to synthesis, this idea of modernity in which combinatory nativisms and Westernisms yielded what could easily be mistaken for a crisis-prone, unstable, and inauthentic postcolonial subjectivity? One thing is certain: theories of mimicry, W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness," or Ali Mazrui's idea of triple heritage do not sufficiently explain how self-aware Africans synthesized autonomous and competing pressures of ethnic, religious, national, and racial identities as part of what I want to call strategies of becoming. I suggest that this attitude to modernity is especially unproblematic among African peoples, given that their cosmologies tend to run counter to the very metaphysical and ontological absolutes at the basis of Western worldviews. This kind of subjectivity is refashioned through and constituted by constant negotiation with others—humans, deities, spirits. Also, it is the essence of "*Ife kwulu ife akwuso ya*," a common Igbo adage, which affirms the belief that the self and the other are not necessarily opposed but instead are signposts in a cyclical network of social, ritual, and cosmic relations.¹⁷ The ideas encapsulated in this Igbo proverb also occur in a Xhosa proverb, "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" (a person is a person through persons), which, according to the South African philosopher Augustine Shutte, means that the "self and world are united and intermingle in a web of reciprocal relations."¹⁸ One might call this the principle of complementarity at the basis of Igbo and African philosophies of being.

This, it seems to me, helps explain the disposition on the part of African peoples to open up to and incorporate new religions, cultures, and ideas, whether before, during, or after the colonial encounter. This sensibility is further instantiated in an episode in Chinua Achebe's novel *Arrow of God*, in which the priest Ezeulu, an appointed protector of his community's traditions against the onslaught of alien Christian-colonial culture, admonished

his school-bound son to thoroughly *master* the white man's system of writing upon which colonial governance is based, such that he could write with his left hand—in other words, so he could do what he wished with this acquired knowledge.¹⁹ Despite his antagonism for the colonial regime, Ezeulu saw in the written word not just a gateway to the new world order but also a tool for self-enunciation and navigation through the maze of confounding modernity. He was, like many an African cultural nationalist, fiercely protective of his ancestral heritage and cognizant of the inexorable value of aspects of Western modernity to the constitution of his son's subjectivity in the new, colonial world. This same incorporative, compound consciousness of African subjectivity was what the proponents of negritude, African personality, and similar anticolonial ideologies sought to recoup when they argued for the inclusion of Africa and African traditions in the making of postcolonial modernity. In proposing this idea of compound consciousness, my intention is to place emphasis on the agency or choice-making facility of the individuals involved; in other words, they are simultaneously products and agents of history. In this sense I agree with the art historian Henry J. Drewal, who has argued that what he calls "multiple consciousness" of Afro-Brazilians is not to be mistaken for "syncretism," which implies a "blending and homogenizing process." As he notes: "I would suggest we recognize the distinctiveness of each faith, the simultaneous interplay and juxtaposition of multiple beliefs and practices for persons whose histories demanded a refined, subtle, and effective facility for *multiple consciousness*."²⁰

The work of artists presented in this book, I reiterate, was motivated by the need to imagine the postcolonial self as a compound consciousness that constantly reconstituted itself by selective incorporation of diverse, oppositional, or complementary elements. This might help us come to terms, for instance, with what can seem an intriguing incidence of Christian themes in the work of many of these artists. The Christians among them—say, Uche Okeke and Bruce Onobrakpeya, who are practicing Catholics—depicted themes from the Old and New Testaments as well as from Igbo and Urhobo religions and folklore, as if to assert their equal sympathies for the doctrine and legacies of both religions traditions. Similarly Yusuf Grillo, a devout Muslim, executed many major commissions for Lagos churches, to the extent that we must imagine his having a considerable understanding of and familiarity with Christian iconography and ritual aesthetics. What we take from this is that the modernism of these artists—to cite Biodun Jeyifo's argument about parallel developments in modern African literature—is a product of "a replete African world which derives its deepest truths and resources

endogenously, not in exclusivist, racial-chauvinist terms but all the same as a distinctive presence in the world on its own terms.”²¹

Postcolonial Modernism

Why do I insist on calling the work of these Nigerian and African artists “postcolonial modernism”? This question is especially pertinent since, for nearly two decades now, art history and visual culture scholarship has seriously engaged the question of how this work by African (and Third World) artists fits into the narrative template of modernism, which is traditionally understood to be the aesthetic manifestation of Western modernity. What we can see clearly is that, years after the final waves of decolonization blew over the world in the mid-twentieth century, the scholarship began, slowly at first, to consider the cultural implications of the sovereignties won by what would be known as Third World countries in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and elsewhere. Important work on the African diaspora and Latin America—exemplified by that of Paul Gilroy, Nestor Garcia Canclini, and David Craven—sought to name, describe, and analyze the art, literature, and other forms of expression produced within a context of colonial and postcolonial modernity. Quite pertinently, there is a general consensus that in these parts of the world, the tapestry of modernity and modernism was not just woven from diverse multicultural threads but was forged during the colonial encounter, as well as from the intermixture of histories, cultures, and subjectivities before and after colonialism.

The question that confronts us, then, is how to describe the foundational concerns of artists whose work was catalyzed by ideas of cultural and social modernity and informed by visions of progress within the context of a sovereign nation. I am convinced of the appropriateness of calling this work “postcolonial modernism” for two reasons. For one, it reflects my belief that, given what we know today about the specific political, cultural, intellectual, and discursive contexts of the work of twentieth-century avant-gardes everywhere, all manifestations of artistic modernism ought to be qualified in some way to reflect their origins, particularities, and horizons. Moreover, it makes sense to name *all* modernisms, so long as—this is important—such acts do not tempt us to view them in hierarchical order. This is so simply because nothing I have seen in the histories of modernisms around the world makes any particular one, whether it manifested earlier or later in the century, any more or less profound.

In proposing postcolonial modernism as an analytical concept for this

study of the conjunction of art and the politics of decolonization in twentieth-century Nigeria, I am inspired by Kobena Mercer's idea of "cosmopolitan modernisms." For him, this term describes two related experiences: first, the two-way traffic of bodies and ideas between colonial peripheries and Western metropolises and the relocation of modernism from European cities to New York; second, the threefold interaction among non-Western artists, minority artists in the West, and Western art movements that have engaged different cultures. However, if Mercer's cosmopolitan modernisms—drawing on postcolonial theory's onslaught against the hegemonic and universal ambitions of what now looks like an insular strain of Western modernism—serves as a conceptual tool for articulating a broad-based, global theory of modernism, then postcolonial modernism as used in this book describes an aspect of "the cosmopolitan" specific to Nigeria and other (African) locales with similar cultural histories and modernist work that is deeply inflected by the experience and rhetoric of decolonization.

But what is the status of the "postcolonial"? What do I mean by this term? In thinking about the postcolonial, I recall Kwame Anthony Appiah's description of postcoloniality as the condition of the elite, college-trained writers and intellectuals who, because of their dual access to Western and African knowledge systems, act as mediators between the two supposedly distinct worlds.²² Unlike their less-educated compatriots, who in fact constitute the majority and who are more or less unconcerned with transcending the colonial condition, Appiah argues, the elites embrace postcoloniality as a means of clearing the space previously occupied by colonial, cultural modernity. While I agree with Appiah's association of postcoloniality with the African intellectual elite, I also see the postcolonial as describing sets of critical practices—by elite writers, artists, political theorists, philosophers—simultaneously directed at dismantling the ideological foundations of colonialism and anticipating the consequences of its end. In this sense, the postcolonial does not necessarily depend on the hard temporal markers of colonialism's end; in other words, it is not restricted, in Nigeria for instance, to literary and artistic discourses and practices that came *after* 1960. Rather, I use it as Robert J. C. Young has described it: "a dialectical concept that marks the broad historical facts of *decolonization* and the determined achievement of sovereignty—but also the realities of nations and peoples emerging into a new imperialistic context of economic and sometimes political domination."²³

To be sure, the concept of postcolonial modernism made its first appearance in literary criticism, specifically to address, as Bart Moore-Gilbert has put it, both the critical conjunction of postcolonialism and modernism and

the “wide-ranging reassessment of the cultural politics of [modernism] inaugurated in the late 1980s.”²⁴ In this book, I recuperate and reanimate the critical ambitions of literary postcolonial modernism as a way to give analytical rigor to the work of artistic modernisms in Nigeria and the African continent. As I detail in this book, the literatures that have been subjected to analyses as exemplary of postcolonial modernism were produced in the same discursive spaces and contexts as the works of art with which I am concerned here. Whether in the pages of the literary journal *Black Orpheus*, founded at Ibadan, Nigeria, in 1957, or within the Mbari Club in the 1960s, African writers (Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Es’kia Mphahlele, Christopher Okigbo, for instance) shared the same concerns with their artist-colleagues (Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Ibrahim El Salahi, among others) about the implications and impact of political decolonization on the thematic and stylistic directions of their work. Despite the fact that debates on these questions were undoubtedly more developed and vociferous in the field of literature, closer examination of contemporary art criticism, which I offer in this book, convinces us that conversations of similar motivation and substance occurred on the subject of art during the same period.

Given the above considerations, it is clear as day that the work of the Art Society and their colleagues elsewhere on the continent in the independence decade was decidedly postcolonial, in the sense that they initially imagined their art as constituting a critical space in which the exhilarating drama of cultural decolonization was enacted, and subsequently thought of it as a platform for articulating the contradictions of political sovereignty and crises of postindependence nationalism and subjectivity. These two sequences of the postcolonial, as I describe them in chapters 5 and 7, respectively, are evident first in Uche Okeke’s *Oja Series*, a suite of drawings inspired by Igbo Uli traditional drawing (and in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*);²⁵ and second, in Okeke and Demas Nwoko’s “crisis” paintings (as well as in Christopher Okigbo’s poems *Path of Thunder*), from the late 1960s. In conjunction with its postcolonial status, the work of these artists manifests the formal and discursive sensibilities that have come to define artistic modernisms. First among these is their belief in the significance of the artist’s role in fashioning a new art and culture for the new nation and society, as a harbinger of the new. It is in this sense that I describe Okeke, Nwoko, and their cohorts as constituting an avant-garde. Second is their attempt to articulate and reframe their relationship with “tradition” and the past. Third is their focus on the invention of formal styles unlike any developed before them. Fourth is the artists’ turn to critical analyses and commentary on the postcolonial state as it was eclipsed by political crises from the late 1960s onward.

Let me return to Appiah's description of the postcolonial as a space-clearing gesture simply to retrieve an earlier point about my view of the relationship of the Nigerian modernists of the independence decade and coloniality. It is quite evident that once inspired by the thrilling, powerful wave of decolonization that set off at full speed soon after the end of the World War II, young, progressive artists and writers set about reimagining and recalibrating their relations with imperial Europe, its ideologies, cultures, and knowledge bases. It is not so much that they rejected Europe or replaced it with "native" cultures; rather, in marking both the locus and the horizons of their artistic imagination, they outlined a new, multidimensional space in which the complex drama of their postcolonial subjectivities played out. It was no longer about whether they spoke the artistic language of Europe or that of their ancestors or whether they aligned themselves with the monovalent pulls of blackness, Africa, the nation, or the ethnos. What the artists presented in this book demonstrate through their work is the constitution, during the years around political independence in Nigeria, of compound—messy, fraught, and inevitably distinctive—postcolonial modern subjectivities.

BEFORE I SUMMARIZE this book's chapters, let me explain the logic of its architecture. From the onset I had to confront the option of compressing the scope by zooming closely into the independence decade, paying only passing attention to the context of modern art of the previous decades. There is no doubt some sense in this approach. But the alternative route, taken here, allows me to examine the longer historical, ideological, and intellectual context of the work that emerged in the late 1950s; otherwise we might miss or fail to fully appreciate, as has been the case in the literature, the stakes of the latter. Besides keeping the modern art of the independence decade in dynamic alignment with the preceding six decades of Nigerian art and political history, the narrative arc of this book frequently swings between sweeping intellectual and social-historical accounts to meticulous formalist and critical readings of particular artworks and texts. This is my way of insisting on an approach to writing modern and contemporary African art history that depends on the scholarly virtues of research-based critical storytelling and close reading of works of art in order to reveal not just their visual intelligence but also how they relate to the world of the artist and his society.

This study is divided into seven chapters, the first of which sets the colonial context from which the postcolonial modernism of the midcentury emerged. It argues, following the work of the historian Taiwo Olufemi, that