

ART EDUCATION FOR NIGERIANS IN THE 21ST
CENTURY: NEED FOR REVOLUTIONARY CHANGES

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In the last decade of the twentieth century, and thirty-two years after political independence, Nigeria is yet to attain an appreciable level of development; economic, social, political, technological. The universally accepted indices for the measurement of advancement in these areas suggest that Nigeria is still a far distance from the point of "technological take-off". Several reasons have been adduced for this state of affairs. Among the factors said to be responsible are:-

- (1) the depletion of our human resource through centuries of slave trading across the Sahara and the Atlantic;
- (2) deliberate exploitation of human and material resources by colonizing nations;
- (3) corruption of post-independence administration; and
- (4) lack of 'development-oriented' policies and programmes after independence.

The most tendentious factors often canvassed for our under-development are the slavery experience and colonization. Thompson¹ is convinced that slavery was a heinous, inhuman practise (which) did not help us to advance the history of the black people. It interrupted our historical and normal development. He advances his conviction by saying that slavery must be 'seen in the simple fact that the advancement of the (captors) was made directly at

the expense of African's blood, sweat and tears. Slavery was (the captors') instrument used to keep (Africans) back. (Africans) are poor because (the slaver owners) are rich. They are rich because we are poor'. Thompson further buttresses his argument by illustrating that 'the Japanese never became foreign slaves and consequently have been uninterrupted by history to become a world leader'.

David-West² however disagrees with Thompson's opinion. While David-West acknowledges that slave-trading is reproachable, he asserts that the direct victims of this experience have since the abolition of slave trade over-come their crippling set-back and made significant progress even in alien lands in which they found themselves. He recounts some of these achievements in as diverse areas as:

- (a) Medicine (earliest heart operation, Daniel Hale. July 9, 1893; Discovery of Blood Banking, Charles Drevv; Test for Syphilis, William Hinton; the Wasserman-Kahn - Hinton test, etc.).
- (b) Science (George Washington Carver etc.)
- (c) Sports (Jesse Owens, 4 gold medals 1936 Olympiad; Dahart Rubbard, Joe Louis, Mohammed Ali, Athea Gibson: Wimbledon champion 1957, etc.
- (d) Entertainment (Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Ray Charles, Ella Fitzgerald, etc.).

Consequently, David-West asks what we, whose 'historical and normal development' were not interrupted, have got to show today. He concedes with 'greatest respect the frequent reference to the

University of Timbuktu, the Sphinx and Pyramids of Egypt, the Queen of Sheba, the Benin Empire, or Africa as civilization's cradle' but concludes that all these are 'now essentially hollow. Faded sounds of a faded glorious past.'

Admitted, these factors of slave trading, colonization, etc. are debilitating enough to hold back, or at least, slow down the pace of development. However, colonialism and exploitation have been experienced in one form or another at different times in the past by virtually all societies. Yet, many of these societies have individually or collectively evaluated their situations and put together policies and programmes which today make them fore-runners in diverse areas of development of the human society.

Why, therefore, is it that some two hundred years after the abolition of slave trading, and some thirty years of political independence have not put Nigeria on the same platform with the likes of South Korea, India, Brazil, Argentina, Indonesia, et cetera? It is the view of this writer that inadequate or total lack of creativeness is responsible for this dilemma.

Studies have shown that creativeness is best nurtured in art; art being an instrument for growth and development. Art is also a 'means of putting men in a state of equilibrium with the surrounding world'.³

The older generations realized this necessity of art and appear to have used it optimally. This too may have accounted for the relative equilibrium that existed in most traditional societies.

But because a perpetual state of equilibrium between man and the surrounding world cannot be expected to exist even in the most highly developed society, the idea suggests that art was not merely necessary in the past but will always remain so. The Dionysian concept of art being a 'means of becoming one with the whole of reality' and being the expression of man's desire to identify with what he is not, as well as its Apollonian concept of entertainment and satisfaction suggest that the participant in art activity (producer or consumer) does not identify himself with what is represented. Rather he gains distance from it, overcoming the direct power of reality through a deliberate representation, and finds in art that happy freedom of which the burdens of everyday life deprive him. But are these the only roles assigned to art?

Bertolt Brecht's 'epic theatre' theory vividly illustrates the 'dialectics of art and of the way art can change the world ... by ensuring that the passion that consumes the dilettante serves the true artist; the artist not being mauled by the beast (rather) he tames it (through creativeness).'⁴

In many countries of the world today, the business of governance, finance and personnel management, politics, commerce, and even war have become 'arts'. These demand the highest level of creativeness. How do we define 'creativity'? It is difficult to find, much less to agree upon a definition of creativity hence, according to Sieber⁵ 'the term "inventiveness" can be considered

a fair compromise at least to the degree that invention is a part of the larger concept'. Creativity in summation, is the art of thinking and self-actualization; the ability to come up with new and novel ideas as (permanent) solutions to existing or anticipated problems. Norman Cousin describes creative people as people who are 'builders of their ideas', people who prefer to 'manipulate their ideas in various ways' or who 'prefer to re-arrange old ideas into new relationships'.

Can it be said that creativity, as a human attribute, is non-existent in Nigerians? No. Like most humans the creative impulse is present in every Nigerian. The range of artistic stylistic expression among the various ancient art traditions in Nigeria does not suggest ultraconservative conformity. In spite of the fact that the societies in which these art traditions flourished focused heavily on corporate solidarity and collective action, the expression of individual taste, skill, and temperament in artistic productivity, according to Biebuyck⁶, makes it 'possible to speak about creative originality and conscious innovation' in such societies.

Furthermore, Sieber draws three illustrations from northern Nigeria to advance the view that there exists in the African artist 'inventiveness' and that this is recognised in the respective societies. According to Sieber, the appearance of a young carver named Namni among the Montol in about 1930 who worked in a highly distinctive 'style' and at variance with seemingly established stylistic consistency of the Montol in the production of their human

figure, is an example of an instance where 'a fairly large degree of flexibility' was allowed.

Sieber's second example is that of an acrobat whose abilities and performances had no prototype and which had been adapted to the choreography of the community masked dance. The third instance given by Sieber is that of Azume, a female potter among the Goemai who, 'according to available evidence ... invented a clay figure type that met with local success'.⁷

The examples, according to Sieber, 'put an end to the unfortunate myth that the African ... was totally constrained by the demands of his society, that he was no more than the passive prisoner of a totality repetitive convention'.

Wingert⁸, while supporting the view canvassed above, claims that the (African) artist was not so completely restrained by his society and his patrons as to be a mere copyrist; he "could endow the traditional forms with his own interpretation and insight" and "In this controlled material he created, following traditional patterns, his own rendering of the requisite forms".

Biebuyck reports O'Neale as saying that even 'within 'a compact body of traditions' choices are possible and alternates sought for certain portions of the basketry work more than for others. The rules for learning the craft, for selecting and using materials, for form, proportion, and design were rigid, but choice-making was permitted, for example, in the tone and arrangement of colour or in the selection of material for a design element".⁹

The fore-going not-with-standing, can creativity be gauged by slight modifications of forms that one has become accustomed to view as standards, or by the addition of some new motifs or themes to conventional groups of figures? The nature of codes of behaviour and the relative rigidity or flexibility with which rules and conventions are enhanced or sanctioned vary greatly from society to society. Therefore, we find that not all societies stimulate and validate individual effort and free initiative to the same extent. In the Nigerian context, creative impulses appear to have been doused or stultified by socialization processes and methodologies of traditional art education.

In discussing one aspect of our socialization process, Kawonise posits (and I beg to quote him extensively here) that the general conception of parents is that:

the more person grows, the more his individuality becomes manifest and all the more the tendency to want to assert that individuality. (parents also have the) misconception that their older age necessarily confers on them infinite wisdom, and the reality that they have an edge materially, parents feel no qualms stifling those initiatives of the child that run contrary to their own.

Rarely, for instance, do (parents) entertain the fact that they do not possess all wisdom in the relationship with their children. Yes, they must always be right.¹⁰

Kawonise concludes that the 'overall effect is usually that the child's initiatives are repressed, his individuality suppressed and his person oppressed'. The inherent tendency in the individual to dissent may attempt to find expression, but as Kawonise further

says:

a child who attempts to rebel against this negative trend stands the risk of family ostracism and the loss of the material support that comes from the family. The other child who is not given to rebellion or who just cannot rebel in spite of his internal urgings, grows to be patently obsequious, passively conformist and pitably uncritical. Quite frequently, that child, irrespective of his age and status later in life, finds it difficult to have a mind of his own.¹¹

Caught, therefore, between the Scylla of rebellion and Charybdis of conformism, very many children choose the latter. Kawonise finally concludes by asking that 'on the fact of it, is it not easier to conform than to rebel?'

This is the bottom-line of our developmental problems: conformism, stereotypism, Experimentation and exploration are least encouraged in the socialization up-bringing of Nigerian children. Genuine quests for knowledge through questioning and enquiries are often regarded as over-bearing inquisitiveness. Exploratory deviations are met with aggressive reproaches. Expert psychologists and art educationists (June King Mcfee, Robert Burkhart, Carl Rogers, Manuel Barkan et cetera) however tell us that 'creative growth starts from early childhood'.

Art, in its non-traditional conception, is a recent practise in Nigeria, dating back only to the 1920s. Because of its very recent history, its complete ramification has not been fully brought to bear on the Nigerian public. At its inception (and even possibly till now) the methodologies adopted further alienated the perceiving

public. Such alienation has led to the charge of obscurantism.¹²

Art education, however, is not a preserve of European mode of artistic production and consumption; art education being the learning and development of sensitivity to art elements and principles. Sensitivity is usually more fully achieved through participation in the creative process of production and that of concretization. This has origin in mental constructs.

But can one talk about art education in a traditional environment where art is more functional than aesthetic; where sensitivity is essentially not attributed to the elements and principles of art but to the potency and functionality of the object?

Limitations are often imposed by the local style tradition which is itself determined by the audience reaction to the work of art. Boas¹³ attached a lot of significance to this factor: "the style has the power of limiting the inventiveness of the productive artist ... The controlling power of a strong, traditional style is surprising", and "although the artisan works without copying, his imagination never rises beyond the level of the copyist, for he merely uses familiar motives composed in customary ways".

Even though these styles have "developed through the creative efforts of numerous individual artists in the past, they impose certain limitations on the creative expression of the individual artists who are producing at any given period of time. Artists work within these recognised limits, creating pieces that their customers or teachers find acceptable and they themselves find aesthetically

satisfying. These limitations derive from accepted standards of a given style, and in trying to produce something appropriate, correct, or beautiful, an artist is trying to achieve these standards in his own work. Whether he knows it or not, and even when he may be consciously striving for originality, he is, in fact, trying to conform to the stylistic and aesthetic standards that he accepts.

Creative thinking, Hoffa tells us, is promoted only through intensive experience in the arts. In the last decade of the 20th century, Nigeria is gradually moving away from being a traditional society to a modern state. Has the past adequately prepared our society for the future.

The most acknowledged contribution of the black race to global human society is her arts. The influences of African arts on the visual and performing arts of Europe and North America abound in the 20th century's sculptures, paintings, and music. But what is the nature of art education in most Nigerian societies?

In our traditional past, the production of works of art was the exclusive preserve of either guilds or specific family lineages. Membership of the guilds was also sometimes geneological. In these guilds and family lineages artistic experience is based almost wholly on the application of technical instruction to design. The forms are set, and the process established. Deviation from these set forms and processes are often perceived as rebellion against the order and status quo. In these systems, mental and physical conformity is the norm. Mental conformity, we know, is opposed to,

and antithetical to creativity. In interaction of individual creativity and tribal norms, the former implies freedom for the artist while the latter, the concept of tribal norm, is, in Gulart's words, antithesis of freedom.

Creativity, according to Andrews¹⁴ demands experimentation and exploration (which must of necessity be a derivative of freedom). The imagination must be stimulated, and there must be freedom of individual expression. All these are denied in traditional art education. The problem of periodization of most of African art derives from this stereotypical and conformist ethos.

What, therefore, can a society held captive by its self-imposed stereotypism hold forth as panacea for its problems? Does it mean that the traditional apprenticeship system and traditional art education process truly inhibits creativity? I dare say, yes. They do. Because of rules. Also because technical knowledge and manual dexterity (which most of our traditional works of art exhibit) without perception and insight will not result in creativity.

In seeking understanding and appreciation, one finds that majority of Nigeria's traditional art forms transcend European notion of art. Many of these works perform functions, and are utilized in manners that make them less public than most of European art. The forms are set in forests and groves into which only a limited number of people are allowed access. The art works may also be located in the recesses of rooms and shrines where visibility is poor and access also restricted.

Conclusion:

It is apparent from the fore-going that from either viewpoints of creative production and consumption, a majority of Nigerians are handicapped. They are also alienated from the best and most culturally significant of their arts. One agrees that some of these traditional art forms are secular and to which the people have access. This accessibility is, even then, transient and inadequate for visual and aesthetic impact sufficient to alter already established attitudes.

Art, it has been suggested, should be a basic tool in education, to promote creative thinking (Lowenfeld/Brittain).¹⁵ Creativity acquired through experiences in art does not relate only to the activities of sculpting, painting, or designing but encompasses all endeavours of man to harness his environment and intellect in making the world a better place for himself. In our artistic misapprehension and deprivation we are unable to conceive our own ideas in solving our problems. This is largely because our traditional art education, through centuries of traditional art practices, did not encourage us to go beyond that which has just been witnessed.

For national growth and development, the 21st century must revolutionize the training programme in traditional art practices. Traditional practices must create a place for interpretative and instinctive thinking. These 'are more important than technical achievement.' Individualization can no longer be ignored.

The development of creative abilities is essential in our society, especially now, as our nation turns towards the unknown and unpredictable. Because a large majority of us are still deprived of the opportunities to develop our creative abilities, the fear is expressed in certain quarters if Nigeria will be able to keep pace with other nations of the world in the race for modernity and power.

What is the fate of traditional art in this scheme? Would liberalization of the traditional apprenticeship system mean a disappearance of traditional art? Synthesists and conservatists hold opposed views. The pressures and pace of modernization however behoves us to take seriously 'the importance of the development of creative thinking for us, both as individuals and as a nation. It offers a change from what is and has been, to what might be or what is yet to be discovered'.

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