

ART AND CULTURAL NATIONALISM IN COLONIAL NIGERIA (1900–1960)

Udejaja, Kenekwaku N.
Department of Fine and Industrial Arts
University of Nigeria, Nsukka
Kenekwaku.udejaja@unn.edu.ng
Tel: 07033473635

Abstract

This paper examines the emergence of modern Nigerian art during the colonial period between 1900 and 1960, tracing how it evolved from a communal and functional practice into a dynamic medium for individual expression and nationalist assertion. The study adopts a historical and theoretical framework grounded in three ideological pillars—nationalism, art, and cultural nationalism—demonstrating how visual production became a critical arena for contesting racial inequality and asserting cultural sovereignty. Central to this transformation was the psychological shift occasioned by the World Wars, particularly the Second World War, which dismantled colonial myths of European invincibility and strengthened African cultural confidence. The paper analyses the contributions of pioneering cultural nationalists, including Aina Onabolu, whose mastery of academic realism challenged assumptions of African inferiority; Kenneth Murray, who institutionalised indigenous aesthetics within colonial education; Akinola Lasekan, who used art as a form of political satire; and Ben Enwonwu, who synthesised African themes with modernist techniques to achieve global recognition. Particular attention is given to the Zaria Art Society and its philosophy of Natural Synthesis, which rejected binary distinctions between tradition and modernity. The contributions of expatriate intermediaries such as Ulli Beier and Father Kevin Carroll provided essential institutional support through initiatives such as *Black Orpheus*, the Mbari workshops, and liturgical commissions. By independence in 1960, Nigerian artists had forged a sovereign and self-possessed visual identity that paralleled the nation's political liberation.

Keywords: Cultural Nationalism, Colonial Nigerian Art, Natural Synthesis, Decolonisation, Nigerian Modernism, Visual Identity

Introduction

The emergence of modern Nigerian art during the colonial period between 1900 and 1960 represents a significant transformative epoch in the cultural and intellectual history of Nigeria. This period was marked by a shift from art as a functional, communal practice to a vehicle for individual expression and national identity. Prior to colonial rule, artistic production in Nigeria was largely embedded within traditional social, religious, and political institutions. Art forms such as sculpture, textiles, body adornment, pottery, and architecture served functional, ceremonial, and spiritual purposes within indigenous societies (Egonwa, 2001). However, the colonial encounter introduced new educational structures, artistic materials, and aesthetic philosophies that reshaped artistic practice. To understand this evolution, one must first define the ideological pillars that supported this movement: Nationalism, Art, and Cultural Nationalism.

In the colonial context, nationalism is the collective drive for self-determination and the rejection of foreign hegemony. It is the process by which a "tribal" subject is reconstructed into a citizen of a sovereign nation. Nationalism refers to the ideological movement promoting unified national identity, often through cultural symbols and self-grit efforts against colonial rule. Nationalism, as a political and ideological construct, denotes the aspiration of a people to achieve sovereignty, and collective identity, often in opposition to external domination or colonial rule. Gellner (1983) classically defined it as the principle that the political and national unit should be congruent, emphasizing how modernity and industrialization foster the alignment of state boundaries with cultural ones. In the African colonial context, nationalism transcended mere political agitation; it manifested as a multifaceted resistance that reclaimed agency through cultural and intellectual spheres. Anderson (1983) further conceptualized nations as "imagined communities," where shared narratives, symbols, and histories forge a sense of fraternity among disparate groups. In colonial Nigeria, this imagination was actively constructed against British imperial ideologies that portrayed Africans as primitive and incapable of self-governance or creative sophistication. This was achieved by using art as the major weapon of mental reconstruction and self awareness within colonial period.

Art, within this nationalist framework, emerges not merely as aesthetic expression but as a dynamic instrument of cultural assertion, identity formation, and decolonization. In art history, particularly in postcolonial studies, art functions as a site of negotiation between tradition and modernity, where visual languages challenge hegemonic narratives and encode resistance (Okeke-Agulu, 2015). Nationalism now manifests as artists leveraging on visual expressions to challenge imperial narratives and reclaim agency. Art during this era shifted from communal,

ritualistic functions like Yoruba sculptures for shrines or Igbo pottery to hybrid forms blending indigenous motifs with Western techniques, serving both aesthetic and political ends.

Cultural Nationalism is a form of nationalism where the "battle" for independence is fought in the realm of identity. It involves the conscious use of cultural heritage to challenge colonial stereotypes and establish a modern identity that is both contemporary and rooted in tradition. Cultural nationalism specifically emphasizes preserving and elevating indigenous heritage against cultural erasure, using art to foster pride and unity across ethnic lines. This involved reinterpreting traditional aesthetics, such as *uli* designs or Benin bronzes, within modern frameworks to counter European views of African creativity as "primitive". Cultural nationalism is a subset of broader nationalist ideologies which prioritizes the regeneration and promotion of indigenous cultural heritage such as language, traditions, rituals, and artistic practices as the foundation for national consciousness. John Hutchinson (1987) describes it as a movement of moral regeneration driven by intellectuals, artists, and educators who seek to revive cultural symbols to counter assimilation or erasure. Unlike political nationalism's focus on statehood, cultural nationalism operates through symbolic and discursive practices, fostering pride in pre-colonial achievements while adapting them to contemporary realities. In colonial Africa, it responded directly to European denigration of indigenous creativity, positioning art as a battleground for racial equality and cultural sovereignty (Ugiomoh, 2009).

The transformation of Nigerian art during the colonial period was driven not only by colonial educational institutions but also by a group of artists and educators who consciously used art as a means of cultural self-definition. These individuals challenged colonial stereotypes about African creativity and sought to establish a modern artistic identity rooted in indigenous cultural heritage. Among the most important pioneers were Aina Onabolu, Kenneth C. Murray, and Ben Enwonwu. Their contributions laid the foundation for modern Nigerian art education and artistic practice. Before we proceed, it is important to look at some key factors, such as what the colonial terrain in Africa was like within this period and the role of World war in the pre-independence era.

The Psychological Transformation of the African Mindset: The Role of the World Wars and the Road to 1960 Independence

A critical re-examination of the term "World War" is necessary to unpack the ideological and historical assumptions embedded in it. While the conflicts of 1914–1918 and 1939–1945 are conventionally described as global wars, this nomenclature can obscure the unequal power relations that structured participation in them. Rather than representing a truly "worldwide" conflict in terms of agency and origin, the wars were fundamentally rooted in European political rivalries, imperial ambitions, and competing nationalisms. Large numbers of people from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean were conscripted or recruited into these wars, not as autonomous actors pursuing their own national interests, but as colonial subjects compelled to serve imperial powers. In this sense, the so-called "World Wars" may be more accurately understood as European conflicts that were globalized through empire. Ikwuemesi (2003) further argues that all wars are tribal wars, from the World Wars down to recent clanging of guns and bombs in the Balkans, Afghanistan and the Gulf war, all are aimed at race and ethnic differences that has been so durable in our world today.

A critical interrogation of the nomenclature "World War" is essential when examining its impact on the African psyche. Far from being a truly global conflict in which all participants fought for universal ideals, the Second World War (1939–1945) was fundamentally a European war driven by competing nationalisms and extreme racial ideologies. Africans, including tens of thousands of Nigerians, were conscripted or coerced into a conflict that originated in European power struggles and Adolf Hitler's belief in Aryan racial superiority, a doctrine that sought to subjugate or eradicate groups deemed "inferior," including Black people (Myrice, 2015; Khapoya, 2013). From an African standpoint, the war represented yet another episode in humanity's long history of tribal or inter-ethnic conflicts, akin to the Balkan Wars, the Gulf Wars, or even the Nigerian Civil War (Biafra, 1967–1970), which some have described as the first major conflict in "jungle Africa" fought with sophisticated modern weapons. The label "World War" thus masks the Eurocentric nature of the conflict and the peripheral yet burdensome role imposed on colonized peoples.

The Collapse of the "Invincibility and Immortality" Myth

The two World Wars, especially the Second World War (1939–1945), constituted a profound psychological watershed that dismantled the deeply internalized colonial myth of white/European racial and civilization superiority. For generations, colonial ideology reinforced through education, missionary teachings, and administrative practice had cultivated among Africans a sense of inherent inferiority. Europeans were portrayed as invincible, intellectually superior, and divinely ordained to rule "primitive" subjects (Khapoya, 2013). This "colonial mentality" manifested as what Frantz Fanon described as a psychology of oppression, whereby the colonized internalized their subjugation and accepted the colonizer's superiority as natural (Fanon, 1961/2004).

World War I (1914–1918) planted initial seeds of doubt. Over two million Africans were recruited or conscripted into Allied forces, serving as soldiers, carriers, and laborers in Europe, the Middle East, and East Africa. Many witnessed European troops suffering the same fears, wounds, and deaths as Africans. However, the psychological impact remained limited because the war's scale in Africa was smaller, and post-war promises of reform were largely unfulfilled (UNESCO Courier, 2023).

It was World War II that delivered the decisive psychological rupture. Approximately one to two million Africans from British and French colonies, including tens of thousands from Nigeria, served in various theatres North Africa, Burma, Europe, and the Middle East. Returning soldiers reported a transformative realization: They observed white officers and soldiers bleeding, crying, fearing, and dying “just like anyone else” (Khapoya, 2013, p. 150, as cited in Myrice, 2015). This instinctive equality in extremis destroyed the illusion of white invincibility or immortality. Veterans returned radicalized, questioning why they had risked their lives for a freedom denied to their own homelands and to their own people (Money, 2018; Crawford, n.d.).

The psychological shift was reinforced by Allied propaganda. The Atlantic Charter (1941), issued by U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, which promised “the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live.” African nationalists, including Nnamdi Azikiwe in Nigeria, eagerly invoked the Charter as a moral weapon, only to encounter Churchill's explicit exclusion of colonies. This hypocrisy fighting fascism abroad while practicing racial domination at home intensified resentment and political consciousness (Ibhawoh, 2014). As Myrice (2015) argues, WWII “imposed psychological changes that aided in the decolonization of Africa,” replacing fatalistic acceptance of white superiority with “genuine hope that freedom was not a fantasy.”

In Nigeria, this transformed consciousness found concrete expression through returning ex-servicemen who joined nationalist organizations such as Azikiwe's National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC). They participated actively in the 1945 Lagos general strike and pressed for constitutional reforms. The wars also weakened Britain economically and militarily, making sustained colonial control increasingly untenable amid rising global anti-colonial sentiment and Cold War pressures. This psychological revolution directly fuelled the surge in cultural nationalism that shaped modern Nigerian art in the late colonial period. The newfound confidence that “whites are not superior” encouraged artists and intellectuals to reject Eurocentric hierarchies in both politics and aesthetics. Aina Onabolu's earlier assertion of African mastery of academic realism gained wider resonance, while later figures like Ben Enwonwu and the Zaria Rebels could more boldly pursue hybrid forms and “Natural Synthesis.” Art became a visual arena for asserting the very equality that soldiers had experienced on the battlefield reclaiming dignity, identity, and creative agency against colonial denigration of indigenous traditions as “primitive” (Okeke-Agulu, 2015).

By the 1950s, this empowered mindset had translated into mass nationalist movements, labour strikes, and constitutional negotiations. Nigeria's independence on 1 October 1960 was not granted as a benevolent gift but earned through a psychological and political assertion of equality forged in the crucible of the World Wars. As one veteran reflected, the experience taught Africans that shared purpose and sacrifice could overcome even seemingly invincible powers (Myrice, 2015). The same spirit animated the cultural nationalists who ensured that Nigeria's visual soul achieved sovereignty alongside its political independence. At this junction let's look at some core art nationalists and their roles.

Major Art Cultural Nationalists in Colonial Nigerian Art Aina Onabolu and the Emergence of Artistic Self-Assertion

Aina Onabolu occupies a central place in the history of modern Nigerian art. Born in 1882 in Lagos, Onabolu developed an early interest in drawing and painting at a time when art education was virtually nonexistent in Nigerian schools. Through personal study and correspondence courses, he developed strong skills in academic drawing and portraiture. Onabolu later travelled to Europe where he studied art formally in London and Paris. Upon his return to Nigeria, he became a strong advocate for the introduction of art education in colonial schools. He taught drawing at institutions such as CMS Grammar School and King's College in Lagos, where he encouraged students to develop artistic skills and appreciation.

Onabolu's contributions went beyond teaching. By mastering European academic realism, he challenged colonial assumptions that Africans lacked the intellectual capacity for fine art. His work served as a form of cultural nationalism, demonstrating that African artists could achieve excellence in artistic disciplines that had been dominated by Europeans (Okeke-Agulu, 2015). Onabolu's role as a nationalist was diplomatic. His portraits of the Lagosian elite lawyers, doctors, and clergy served as a visual archive of the “New African.” This professional class challenged the British stereotype of the “tribal” subject. Furthermore, he successfully lobbied the colonial

government to introduce art into the secondary school curriculum in the 1920s, providing the institutional foundation for all subsequent developments (Oloidi, 1989).

Nicodemus (2003) argues that Onabolu's mastery of academic realism was not a sign of "submission" to Western culture, but a radical act of subjective reconstruction. Nicodemus highlights that by adopting the colonizer's techniques, Onabolu was engaging in a battle for the "African Ego," proving that the African mind could inhabit and master any intellectual space (Nicodemus, 2003). Nicodemus (2012) further highlights that following the British punitive expedition of Ijebu-Ode in 1892, which led to the fall of Ijebu-Ode and conversion of her citizens to both Christianity and Islam. Aina Onabolu appropriated and challenged the victors' art instead of their religion by making portraits of the Lagosian elite (as seen in Fig. 1 and 2). Portraits that were more than art; they were diplomatic tools of nationalism that demanded racial parity and led to the formalization of art education in Nigerian schools.

The works of Aina Onabolu and Akinola Lasekon from the early 1900s to the dawn of independence in 1960 was characterized by the need to redress some of apparent misconceptions that Africans were incapable of creating realistic images in spite of the discovery of the Ife bronze heads by Leo Frobenius in 1910. The portraits and genre subjects executed by these artists displayed a superior mastery and understanding of European mimesis as the bases of pictorial composition. It is equally of note that Onabolu's career peaked at a period when European artists of his time developed cubism from their encounters with African art. Yet Onabolu consistently demonstrated that departure from naturalism by his forebears was not indicative of inept abilities, rather the expressive nature of their art was the hallmark and product of the triumph of man over superficial appearances of material objects (Campbell, 2012: 57). In other words, his forebears had explored and perfected the possibilities of abstraction long before a 20th century "discovery" by modern European artists of his era. It is for this reason that Onabolu can be regarded as a revolutionary in his time.



Fig. 1: Portrait of a Lawyer
Artist: Aina Onabolu
Year: Unknown
Source:
<https://dunopedia.data.blog/2020/12/02/ainaonabolu/>



Fig. 2: *Mrs. Spencer Savage*
Artist: Aina Onabolu
Year: 1906
Source:
<https://www.tumblr.com/thisisnotasuit/644248256307757056/portrait-of-mrs-spencer-savage-1906-of-descendant>

Kenneth Murray and the Rediscovery of Indigenous Aesthetics

Another significant figure in the development of Nigerian art during the colonial period was Kenneth C. Murray, who arrived in Nigeria in 1927 as a colonial art teacher. Unlike many colonial educators who emphasized European artistic models, **Murray encouraged Nigerian students to study and preserve indigenous artistic**

traditions. Kenneth C. Murray, appointed in 1927 following Onabolu's lobbying, emphasized indigenous integration. Teaching at Government Colleges, he encouraged local traditions over pure Western imitation, preserving heritage amid threats (Hellman, 2023). His work trained artists like Enwonwu and supported antiquities policies, providing institutional infrastructure through colonial expatriate employment (Hellman, 2023).

Murray travelled extensively across Nigeria documenting traditional art forms such as sculpture, pottery, weaving, and mural painting. His research contributed to the preservation of Nigerian cultural heritage at a time when many traditional practices were declining due to the impact of colonial modernization (Chukueggu, 2010). The 1920s saw a pedagogical shift under Kenneth Murray, whose "traditionalist" approach introduced a complex paradox. Murray's intent was to shield Nigerian art from the "corrosive" effects of Westernization by emphasizing indigenous craft. While this served to preserve certain motifs, it also risked "ghettoizing" the African artist into a rural, non-modern category, a strategy that mirrored colonial policies of Indirect Rule.

The challenge of this period was the tension between Onabolu's "Modernism-as-Equality" and Murray's "Modernism-as-Difference." Yet, Murray acted as an essential broker by facilitating the first major international exhibitions of Nigerian art in London (1937), thereby inserting African artistic agency into the global discourse, albeit under a paternalistic framework. In his teaching philosophy, Murray encouraged creativity rooted in local cultural contexts. Rather than promoting imitation of European art, he urged his students to draw inspiration from indigenous designs, motifs, and symbols. This approach had a profound influence on the development of modern Nigerian art by encouraging artists to integrate traditional aesthetics into contemporary artistic practice. Ogbegie (2003:179), has it that Murray did not want modern Nigerian artists to copy traditional art (he called it "the old art of their ancestors") but at the same time, he did not want them to base their new art on European paradigms. He wanted them to invent a new contexts of practice based on valorization of indigenous rural culture. Murray was convinced that any ultimate significance of modern Nigerian art must derive from the "virtues of African life, and not from an ability to do things like the Europeans". He perceived the emergent modern Nigerian art as a form of intellectual production and regarded as a practice in which "educated Africans" (whom he assumed were largely cut off from "traditional animistic art") can express themselves. To this extent, he initiated a distinction between the practice of such educated Africans and the existing practice of indigenous Nigerian art. Murray was firmly convinced of the superiority of traditional art and he subsequently derided the tastes of "educated Africans" whom he accused of neglecting cultural heritage Ogbegie (2003:180). These can be seen in the quality of students he produced likes of Christopher C. Ibeto, Uthman Ibrahim, Jerome O. Ugoji, Umana A.J and the globally recognized Ben Enwonwu (collectively formed the Murray School) are testaments to Murray's mentorship and philosophy.

Ben Enwonwu and the Global Recognition of Nigerian Art

Among the most prominent artists of the colonial and early postcolonial period was Ben Enwonwu. Born in 1917, Enwonwu received his early art training in Nigeria before continuing his studies in Britain, where he attended the Slade School of Fine Art. One of Enwonwu's most significant contributions was his ability to synthesize African themes with modern artistic techniques. His work demonstrated that African artists could participate fully in global modernist movements while maintaining strong connections to their cultural traditions (Beier, 1968). Heavily influenced by the Negritude movement, Enwonwu's work utilized the elongated forms of traditional African sculpture combined with European bronze-casting techniques (Ogbegie, 2008) (see fig. 3). Enwonwu's activities and sympathies for the Negritude philosophy seem to have set him above other earlier artists and established the basis for the evolution of contemporary Nigerian art. The natural grace and elegance of his "African Dances" series synthesized the rhythmic forms of African dances with European traditions of figural painting (see fig.4). Ultimately, this became the genesis of a new aesthetics for succeeding generations of Nigerian painters (Campbell, 2012: 58).

Enwonwu served as a "Cultural Nationalist." By accepting prestigious commissions, such as the statue of Queen Elizabeth II, he proved that African themes could command the same respect as European classics. His work demonstrated that modernism did not require the abandonment of African heritage but rather its evolution. Nicodemus (2003) notes that artists like Enwonwu had to navigate the "double consciousness" of colonial education while attempting to express an authentic African soul. Enwonwu's work proved that African themes could be translated into modern mediums without losing their metaphysical power, effectively brokering the status of the African artist as a global contemporary.

Enwonwu also played an important role as a cultural ambassador for Nigeria. Through international exhibitions and public commissions, he helped introduce modern Nigerian art to global audiences and contributed to the cultural prestige of Nigeria during the period leading to independence.



Fig. 3: *Anyanwu*
 Artist: Ben Enwonwu
 Year: 1966
 Source:
<https://www.un.org/ungifts/replica-anyanwu>



Fig. 4: *The Dancer (Agbogho Mmuo-Maiden spirit Mask)*
 Artist: Ben Enwonwu
 Year: 1962
 Source:
<https://benuri.org/artworks/2260-ben-enwonwu-the-dancer-agbogho-mmuo-maiden-spirit-mask-1962/>

Akinola Lasekan: Art, Media, and Political Nationalism

It is important to note that while Onobolu focused on elite dignity, Akinola Lasekan (1916–1972) transformed art into a populist weapon of protest. Lasekan’s role was defined by his work as a political cartoonist for Nnamdi Azikiwe’s *West African Pilot*. His illustrations were powerful tools of anti-colonial critique, addressing issues such as oppression, inequality, and the struggle for independence. Through visual satire and symbolic imagery, Lasekan communicated complex political ideas to a broad audience, making art accessible beyond elite circles. His work demonstrated that art could function not only as aesthetic expression but also as a form of political resistance.

Lasekan transitioned the realist style into the realm of Political Nationalism. Through sharp satirical drawings, he attacked colonial policies and mocked British administrators, making the independence movement visually accessible to the masses (Oloidi, 1993) (see fig. 6 and 7). Furthermore, Lasekan’s instructional books, such as *Drawing and Painting*, served to "democratize" art education, breaking the colonial monopoly on technical knowledge.



Fig.6: *Independence Pasture Zik*
 Artist: Akinola Lasekan
 Year: Unknown
 Source:
<https://africacartoons.com/akinola-lasekan-independence-pasture/>



Fig.7: *African Financier*
 Artist: Akinola Lasekan
 Year: Unknown
 Source:
<https://africacartoons.com/akinola-lasekan-african-financier/>

The Zaria Rebels and the Ideology of Natural Synthesis

By the late 1950s, a younger generation of Nigerian artists began to challenge the colonial art curriculum that dominated art education in Nigeria. In 1958, a group of students at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology formed the Zaria Art Society. Key members included: Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Bruce Onobrakpeya, and Yusuf Grillo, the “monumental four” as fondly called by scholars like Filani(2003) , These artists criticized the dominance of Western artistic models within colonial art education. They believed that Nigerian artists should develop a modern artistic language rooted in their own cultural traditions.

To achieve this goal, the Zaria Art Society introduced the concept of Natural Synthesis, which proposed a creative fusion between indigenous artistic traditions and modern artistic techniques. According to this philosophy, Nigerian artists should study traditional visual cultures such as *uli* body designs, mural painting, and sculptural forms while also engaging with global modernism (Okeke-Agulu, 2015). The ideas of the Zaria Rebels later became one of the most influential intellectual foundations of contemporary Nigerian art. The “monumental four” became the cornerstones in a quadrangle of creative expression and artistic expansion in Nigeria. They are visionaries whose creative principles are tested and regarded as timeless verities. Apart from being sagacious in creativity, the parameters of their successes can also be measured with the quality of exemplary leadership they offered the art community (Filani 2003).

It is important to add that the prevalent mood of the period was based on the patriotic support for independence. All the Zaria Art members grew up to find a nation moving from a somber state through a transitional period, a period when such terms as Pan-Africanism, and nationalism were household words. The colonial structures in almost all facets of national life were seen as too imperialistic, meriting nothing but destruction. The years between 1930s and 1958 witnessed in Nigeria the formation of pressure groups, political parties, students and trade unions. Towards the close of 1950 the agitation for independence had reached a high point and hardly could there be any person(s) who schooled in Nigeria at this period who could not have been politically indoctrinated (Ademuleya 2003: 149). As a matter of fact, what happened in Zaria could be seen as an extension of the Pan- Africanist and nationalist struggle. The few elite and students in tertiary institutions constituted a patriotic bloc that lead nationalistic ideas. Many art students lead by the “Rebells” became sensitive to the negative nuances of colonialism and consciously decided to embrace tradition. The obvious ways to vent their views was to visually translate their opinions into art forms (Filani 2003). There seemed to be a general “recourse to culture” with themes rooted in “cultural specificity” and forms adapted from traditional arts.

Historically, among the core influence and motivations that moved the Zarian rebels were the orientations and artistic extra moral background they received either prior to the Zaria art school or while as a student. Firstly, Uche Okeke`s interest in linear expression has its roots not only in the *uli* drawings he enjoyed as a child, but also in the graphic illustrations and cartoons of his mentor Akinola Lasekan (1916-1972). Uche Okeke was said to have received his first serious art training between 1954 and 1957 during his studentship under Lasekan who operated an art correspondence studio (Lash Studio) in Ipele near Owo town. This singular experience became instrumental to his life ambition (Dike et al, 1998:124 as cited in Filani 2003, Ademuleya 2003: 149). From Lasekan`s studio, Okeke had learnt an important element employed in Lash`s cartoon which is synonymous with the concept of synthesis- the idea that the actual drawing is not as important as the message it conveys. Also having learnt or seen that art could be used as a political weapon from his mentor Lasekan through his nationalist cartons for the *West African Pilot* newspaper, he then became a strong voice or what Ademuleya termed “activist” even before his admission into Zaria. Ademuleya (2003) further state that to highlight the level of the Zaria passion for political independence the Zaria revolution could be first seen as a pre-conceived political manifestation. And even the idea of synthesis came in either as an afterthought or a deliberate application of “preserve our culture” philosophy as a political weapon to disguise their primary and main motive.

Bringing the idea of synthesis, Aniakor when recalling the early Zaria days as students, would remember Ulli Beier on countless times visiting Uche Okeke and possibly Demas Nwoko and consistently engaging them on a discussion. This he belief must have shared some ideas and some archival materials with them, although none of them has openly acknowledged this fact. But if you consider Beier`s notion of African art, he did not belief that an African artist should be university trained and that art is innate in everything and in everybody. This prompted on his arrival to Ibadan in 1957, he started building his circle by assembling people, which includes his houseboy and people that hawk or sell on the streets and they started what we know today as Oshogbo School. He provided them with materials to just draw whatever they wanted. It is believed that the success of the Oshogbo school could not have been just that the participants developed a high passion that enabled them to continue, there must have been an economic angle to it all. It is possible that Ulli Beier and his friends must have been collecting the artworks and then paying them, which could be the ultimate encouragement. So with this background and convictions, you may not be surprised why he became friends with people like Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko and also Obiora

Udechukwu, which he linked with because of his interest in *uli* which was a kind of traditional creative idiom already practiced by olden women in Igbo land. *Uli* of course became the creative resource in most of Uche Okeke and Obiora Udechukwu's contemporary works.

At this point it is important to address the roles of Ulli Beier, and Father Kevin Carroll within the framework of Nigerian art history. One must examine them as "expatriate cultural nationalists." While they were not Nigerians by birth, their interventions during the late colonial period (1940s–1950s) provided the institutional and intellectual scaffolding for a modern Nigerian identity that challenged British colonial orthodoxy. Ulli Beier's *Black Orpheus*, and Father Kevin Carroll must be viewed as catalytic agents. They did not create Nigerian cultural nationalism, but they provided the media (journals), the markets (commissions), and the spaces (workshops) that allowed Nigerian artists to articulate a sovereign identity. Their work ensured that by the time of independence in 1960, Nigerian art was not merely an imitation of British styles, but a robust, "naturally synthesized" expression of a nation that knew its past and was confident in its modern future. The workshops and institutions associated with Ulli Beier, and Fr. Kevin Carroll created spaces where African sign systems for example Yoruba cosmology, orality, masquerade, craft idioms could be recombined with, rather than subordinated to European forms. Bracketing these spaces as "aesthetics laboratory" in the sense of Bruno Latour, one can see them as sites where perception, authorship, and value were experimentally reconfigured (Latour 2005; Okeke-Agulu 2015).

The Role of Expatriate Intermediaries in Nigerian Cultural Nationalism: Ulli Beier and *Black Orpheus*: The Intellectual Engine of Negritude

Ulli Beier, a German-born lecturer at the University of Ibadan, became perhaps the most influential non-African figure in the mid-century African Renaissance. In 1957, he co-founded the journal *Black Orpheus*, which served as a critical node for the "Negritude" movement and the budding nationalist consciousness in Nigeria. *Black Orpheus: A Journal of African and Afro American Literature* marked a watershed in West African cultural discourse as the first major English-language periodical edited by Africans for a global audience (Beier 1957–1975; Okeke-Agulu 2015). Its title, inspired by Jean-Paul Sartre's *Orphée Noir*, signaled an ambition to elevate African and diasporic creativity to the core of modernism, rather than relegating it to exotic footnotes (Okeke-Agulu 2015; OlongoAfrica 2025).

As Cultural Nationalist: Beier's nationalism was rooted in aesthetic validation. At a time when colonial education (represented by Kenneth Murray) focused on "traditional craft" and Aina Onabolu focused on "Western Realism," Beier sought a third way. Through *Black Orpheus*, he provided a platform for Nigerian artists and writers to see themselves as part of a global Black intellectual community. He argued that African art did not need to be "museumized" or "Westernized" to be modern; it simply needed to be authentic to the contemporary African experience. Furthermore, Benson (1986) developed this point by treating *Black Orpheus* and its sibling journal *Transition* as key "incubators" of Africa's postcolonial literary and artistic awakening. In *Black Orpheus, Transition, and Modern Cultural Awakening in Africa*, Benson shows how these journals turned Ibadan and later Nairobi into hubs of transnational African modernism, where young artists and writers could imagine themselves as part of global avant-garde rather than provincial imitators of Europe (Benson 2021; Okeke-Agulu 2015). In this light, *Black Orpheus* was not merely a periodical; it was a normative project that sought to decolonize the categories through which Nigerian art was thought and evaluated, reshaping the terms of aesthetic value in the late colonial moment.

The Mbari Club: Beier's role extended into the physical space with the establishment of the Mbari Writers and Artists Club in Ibadan (and later Oshogbo). This became the laboratory for "Natural Synthesis," where artists like Uche Okeke and Bruce Onobrakpeya could experiment with indigenous motifs (such as *Uli*) within a modern professional framework. These clubs combined theatre, visual art, and printmaking in a single experimental space, and they functioned as semi-autonomous institutions alongside colonial-run schools and universities. The Mbari Clubs drew their name from the Igbo *mbari* house, a ritual pavilion dedicated to aesthetic performance, but in the Nigerian context they became sites of modernist experimentation that cut across ethnic lines (Okeke-Agulu 2015; Okeke in Lagos 2019).

The Mbari and Oshogbo workshops produced a generation of major Nigerian modernists, whose work illustrated the practical implications of the art cultural nationalist project. Twins Seven Seven developed a distinctive mural and painting style in which densely packed Yoruba mythic figures, animals, and deities swirled across the picture plane in a seemingly chaotic yet internally ordered cosmos. His work visualized Yoruba cosmology as a living, contemporary reality, not a museum bound relic (Weise 2025; Okeke Agulu 2015). Jimoh Buraimoh and Jacob Afolabi worked extensively with beads and combs, transforming everyday Yoruba textiles and hairstyles into patterned, almost biomorphic compositions that hovered between abstraction and narrative. Their work reinterpreted Yoruba masking and textile idioms through modernist patterning, challenging any hard distinction

between “craft” and “high art” (Ko Art Space 2018; Okeke Agulu 2015). Muraina Oyelami and Rufus Ogundele combined training in traditional Yoruba drumming and performance with painting and printmaking, producing images that fused Ajayi Crowther era Christian themes with Yoruba satire and ritual. Their work exemplified a critical religiosity, where the sacred and the popular were not mutually exclusive but interpenetrated (Okeke Agulu 2015; Okeke in Lagos 2019). Adebisi Fabunmi specialized in monumental wood carving and relief works that bridged the aesthetics of Yoruba ritual objects and modernist monumentality. His sculptures often occupied public or semi public spaces, thereby inserting Yoruba cosmology into the visual order of the emerging Nigerian city. These artists did not merely reproduce “tradition”; they re semanticised it in response to urbanisation, Christianity, and nationalism, producing a visual epistemology in which the ancestral cosmos remained immanent in the modern everyday (Weise 2025; Okeke Agulu 2015).

It is important to add that some criticisms followed the Oshogbo Experimental workshop, Fulani (2003) has it that Ulli Beier started the Mbari Workshop in Ibadan with academic interest, but later transferred it to Oshogbo with experimental instinct. He promoted and propagated what Nicodemus (1995) described as “the weird notion of an African artist as the very opposite of an intellectual”. The educated artists of the 1960s fought against the propaganda mounted for the workshop artists and saw it as “offsprings of the ideological surplus of Europe, mainly in form of loose, anti-academic ideas” (Nicodemus 1995). They therefore must replace such outrage with ideological art that carried the authentic stamp “Africanness”. Going a bit further, Ikwuemesi (2003) quoting Christopher Okigbo described the Oshogbo artists as “unschooled artists” and whose works he called a “disgrace”. Irrespective of the criticisms, the role Ulli Beier played generally is a strong landmark which is very symbolical in the art development of Nigeria especially in the colonial times. Another important expatriate and activist that played a significant role which helped shape the minds of Yoruba sculptors and carvers by Africanizing the biblical scenes is Fr. Kevin Carroll.

Father Kevin Carroll and the Oye-Ekiti Workshop: Liturgical Nationalism

While Beier worked in the secular and literary realms, Father Kevin Carroll, an Irish Catholic priest, addressed the crisis of “religious colonialism.” Historically, the Church had been an agent of iconoclasm, destroying “pagan” carvings. Carroll, alongside Father Sean O’Mahoney, sought to reverse this trend through the Oye-Ekiti Christmas Workshop (established in 1947).

As Cultural Nationalist: Carroll’s intervention was a form of liturgical cultural nationalism. He recognized that for Christianity to be truly Nigerian, it had to speak through Nigerian visual forms. He employed traditional Yoruba master carvers most notably Areogun of Osi-Ilorin and Lamidi Fakeye to produce Christian liturgical objects (doors, crucifixes, and statues) using traditional Yoruba styles (Bridger, 2012).

Lamidi Olonade Fakeye, a fifth generation wood carver, used the workshop as a space to experiment with Christian subjects without abandoning Yoruba motifs. His later work, including cathedral carvings and public reliefs, fused biblical narratives with Yoruba iconography, producing a visual language that was both religious and culturally continuous (Okeke Agulu 2015; Okeke Agulu 2024). George Bandele, son of the renowned carver Areogun of Osi Ilorin, combined inherited workshop techniques with new Christian commissions. His work became a key conduit through which Yoruba carving idioms were transmitted into the modern art market and museum collections (Okeke Agulu 2024; Okeke Agulu 2015).

By commissioning these artists, Carroll saved the traditional Yoruba carving technique from extinction under the weight of colonial modernization. He proved that “traditional” art was not a static relic of the past but a living, evolving language capable of expressing new, global concepts. Then on the part of these artists, they treated the workshop as a site of technical preservation and aesthetic innovation, where Yoruba carving was not fossilized into “tradition” but re-engineered for new contexts and audiences. Carroll’s project expressed a set of overlapping ideas that were deeply philosophical as well as aesthetic: That Christianity need not be visually European, and that the Gospel could be “Africanised” in biblical scenes and saints’ figures carved in Yoruba style. That indigenous art forms could carry high theological meaning thereby contesting colonial era dismissals of African art as “pagan” or “superstitious”. In philosophical terms, this corresponds to a form of confessional decolonization: the Church, which had often been a vehicle of cultural imperialism, became a site where African aesthetic autonomy was negotiated and affirmed (Carroll 2012; Fanon 1961).

The Synthesis of Influence: Bridging the "Old" and "New"

The roles of Beier and Carroll were complementary in the psychological transformation of the Nigerian artist. If Aina Onabolu provided the “technical ego” to compete with the West, Beier and Carroll provided the “cultural permission” to return to indigenous roots without being labeled “primitive.”

They (Beier and Carroll) helped shift the definition of the Nigerian artist from a "colonial subject imitating Europe" to a "sovereign creator synthesizing two worlds." They embraced European techniques and Christian forms, but treated them as materials to be selectively combined with African idioms, rather than as normative templates. Beier and Carroll Challenged colonial pedagogy and acted as a foil to the official British colonial art education system. While the British government often sought to control African art as a "controlled commodity" or "folk craft," Beier and Carroll treated it as high art and intellectual philosophy. They challenged the colonial episteme that consigned African art to ethnography and folklore, instead treating it as a source of modernist innovation and philosophical reflection.

The workshops and institutions associated with, Ulli Beier, and Fr. Kevin Carroll in late colonial Nigeria functioned as philosophical aesthetic laboratories in which Nigerian modernism was forged. Through the Mbari/Osogbo network and the Oye-Ekiti carvers' studio, artists such as Twins Seven-Seven, Jimoh Buraimoh, Muraina Oyelami, Lamidi O. Fakeye, and George Bandele learned to read their own traditions both critically and lovingly, producing a visual language that was modern, self reflexive, and indigenously grounded. Philosophically, these actors can be read as art-cultural nationalists because they re-centred African aesthetics within modernity, challenged colonial epistemic hierarchies, and used hybrid forms to assert a self-possessed African Nigerian subjectivity before political independence. Their work does not merely "illustrate" nationalism; it stages it as a visual and existential project, showing that the decolonization of art was a necessary condition for the decolonization of the self.

Conclusion

The transformative epoch between 1900 and 1960 represents a critical period in the visual articulation of Nigerian sovereignty. This era witnessed the gradual dismantling of colonial hegemony, during which art evolved from a communal and functional practice into a dynamic medium for individual expression and nationalist assertion. The development of modern Nigerian art was not linear but constituted a multifaceted form of resistance shaped by pioneering artists who drew on diverse ideological frameworks to reclaim African agency.

From the work of Aina Onabolu, whose mastery of academic realism enabled a subjective reconstruction of African identity, to that of Akinola Lasekan, who employed political satire as a tool of social critique, art functioned as an instrument of intellectual and cultural reawakening. While Kenneth Murray established a protective—though somewhat conservative—framework for the preservation of indigenous aesthetics, it was the synthesis achieved by Ben Enwonwu and the Zaria Art Society that ultimately bridged the divide between tradition and modernity. Through the philosophy of Natural Synthesis, these artists rejected the binary opposition of imitation and preservation, instead forging a hybrid visual language that reflected the aspirations of an emerging nation.

Furthermore, the contributions of expatriate intermediaries such as Ulli Beier and Father Kevin Carroll provided important institutional support through platforms such as *Black Orpheus* and the Mbari workshops. These initiatives created spaces for experimentation, dialogue, and artistic growth. Ultimately, the decolonisation of Nigerian art paralleled—and reinforced—the broader process of cultural self-definition. By the dawn of independence on October 1, 1960, Nigerian artists had established a visual identity that was not a derivative imitation of Europe, but a confident and self-determined expression of modern African subjectivity.

References

- Ademuleya, B. (2003). *Synthesis: Between Onabolu, Enwonwu and The Zarianists. The Triumph of a Vision: An Anthology on Uche Okeke and Modern Art in Nigeria.*
- Beier, U. (1968). *Contemporary Art in Africa.* London: Pall Mall Press.
- Benson, P. (2021). *Black Orpheus, Transition, and Modern Cultural Awakening in Africa.* Berkeley. University of California Press.
- Bridger, N. (2012). *Africanizing Christian Art: Kevin Carroll and Yoruba Christian Art in Nigeria.* Society of African Missions / Irish Missionary Press.
- Carroll, K. (1992). *Africanizing Christian Art: Kevin Carroll and Yoruba Christian Art in Nigeria.* Irish Missionary Press.
- Campbell, B.(2012). *New Perspectives On Contemporary Nigerian Painting.* Ezumezu: Essays On Nigerian Art & Architecture A Festschrift In Honour Of Demas Nwoko.Goldline &Jacobs Publishing.
- Chukueggu, C. C. (2010). Kenneth Murray and the development of Nigerian art tradition. *The Anthropologist*, 12(3), 167–172.
- Césaire, A.(1955). *Discourse on Colonialism.* New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Egonwa, O. D. (2001). *Nigerian Art: Introductory Notes.* Ibadan: Ababa Press.
- Fanon, F. (1952). *Black Skin, White Masks.* Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove.

- Fanon, F.(1961). *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington. New York: Grove.
- Filani, k. (2003). *Zaria Art Society and the Imperative of Historical Articulation*. The Triumph of a Vision: An Anthology on Uche Okeke and Modern Art in Nigeria.
- Hellman, A. H. (2023). *The making of museums in Nigeria: Kenneth C. Murray and heritage preservation in colonial West Africa*. Lexington Books.
- Ko Art Space (2018). *Oshogbo Exhibition Catalogue*.
- Ikwuemesi. C. k. (2003). *Nigerian Modernism(s?), Uche Okeke and Nsukka Artists*. The Triumph of a Vision: An Anthology on Uche Okeke and Modern Art in Nigeria.
- Ikwuemesi. C. k. (2003). *A Critical Travelogue*. The Citadel Publishing Company,
- Ikwuemesi. C. k. (2012). *From The Nigerian Teacher to the Eye: Journals and Magazines in the Development of Contemporary Nigerian Art*. Ezumezu: Essays On Nigerian Art & Architecture A Festschrift In Honour Of Demas Nwoko. Goldline & Jacobs Publishing.
- Khapoya, V. B. (2013). *The African experience: An introduction* (4th ed.). Pearson.
- Latour, B. (2005). *The Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences Into Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Lasekan, A. (1944). *Drawing and Painting*. (Self-published instructional series).
- Mbembe, A (1955). *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
- Myrice, E. (2015). The impact of the Second World War on the decolonization of Africa [Conference session]. Africana Studies Student Research Conference, Bowling Green, OH, United States.
- Nicodemus, E. (2003). Aina Onabolu: The African Modernism. In *The Art of African Contemporaries: The Post-Colonial Era* (pp. 45–62). Prince Claus Fund.
- Nicodemus, E. (2012). *From Local To Global Perspectives An Art History African Badly Needs*. The 2nd Peter Areh Lecture on Art and Cultural Enterprise.
- Ogbechie, S O,(2003). *Ben Enwonwu, Zarianist Aesthetics, and The Postcolonial Criticism of Modern Nigerian Art*. The Triumph of a Vision: An Anthology on Uche Okeke and Modern Art in Nigeria.
- Okeke-Agulu, C. (2015). *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Oloidi, O. (1989). Constraints on the growth of African visual arts in the colonial period. *World Art*, 1(1), 32–45.
- Oloidi, O. (1993). *Akinola Lasekan: Cartooning, Art and Nationalism at the Dawn of a New Nigeria*. SNA Publications.
- Ottenberg, S. (1997). *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Vogel, S. (1991). *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art*. New York: Center for African Art.