



## Between Gradualism and Aesthetic Dictatorship in Contemporary Nigerian Art: Awka School of Art as an Example

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James Hulton's hypothesis of Gradualism in 1795, tries to explain the origin of earth as a gradual evolutionary process, based on the fact that he believed that sedimentary rocks that encase fossils were formed by gradual accumulation of sediments in lakes, rivers and oceans.<sup>1</sup> Hulton's hypothesis did not only assist Charles Darwin in concretizing his theory of evolution in 1859 but has also provided clues to solving some problem in different disciplines, since the idea has a wide range of applications. Coming to the contemporary Africa art space, this idea of "gradual evolution" underlines the emergence of post-colonial art in Africa. Unfortunately, it has not been given serious thought by scholars hence scholars such as Willet (1978) dismissed African contemporary art as mere imitation of Western prototype.<sup>2</sup> Some of these misrepresentations of African art arise from lack of knowledge about the origin of contemporary African art and obvious western Racial determinism, which says that every good thing emanated from the west.

Odita (2010) appears to understand the problem inherent in the study of contemporary African art when he avers that contemporary Nigerian art is pluralistic in outlook, hear him:

Contemporary Nigerian art is fast becoming a topic of eager discussion in national and international art circles, as curators recognize the diversity and breadth within this generically named type of art. Still, a critical examination is rare in the art and is solely based on Euro-American principles of modern art which include no consideration of Nigerian ideas and ideals that explain the emergence of contemporary Nigerian art. A critical framework that would shed light on this art and engender deeper understanding among viewers is often ignored because reviewers and curators seem to lack the knowledge of a central force that caused changes over time in the production of the art.<sup>3</sup>

No matter the way Western critics view contemporary African art, the truth is that contemporary African artists rely heavily on traditional art, myth, history and relevant socio-political issues of their times. This idea was summarized by Uche Okeke with an Igbo proverb, *Nku di na mba na eghelufa ite* (a people's wood is their source for cooking).<sup>4</sup> The origin of neglect of African art and values by the west stems from the divisions of the world into "powerful and powerless", an idea that was rejected by the writer in his metal sculpture entitled, "African Chariot". The work is aimed at the promotion of an Afrocentric version of history. According to this highly popular dogma, the originating contributions of black Egyptians have been withheld from the narrative of western history by racist historians<sup>5</sup>

Generally, works from Awka art school are noteworthy, not so much for the quality of the art it presents, but for the way it mirrors certain disturbing trends within and outside the Art world. One of such trends is the tendency of Awka artists, curators and art educators to reduce contemporary art to the role of social work, in fact, much of the works here are numbingly didactic, easily summed up in a sentence or two.

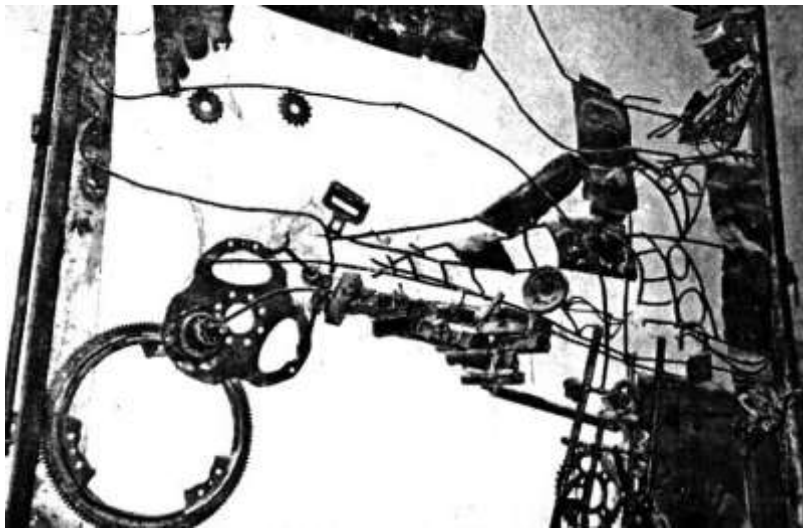


Plate 1: *African Chariot* by Cliff Nwanna, Scrap metal 2010

Curiously, this tendency to privilege social message over aesthetic consideration parallels the attitudes of religion's right to demand that art should be morally uplifting. Issues on class struggle pioneered by Karl Max were highlighted in Onyendi Chukwudi's "Anguish". The artists lament the

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inhuman treatment that workers proletariats undergo at the hands of taskmasters and ruthless bourgeois.



Plate 2: *Anguish* by Chukwudi Onyendi, wood, 2011

Oil Politics which is threatening the unity of the country was x-rayed in Chukwuanugo Emebo's "Militants in the Niger Delta". The work laments the ugly side of oil exploration in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria, a situation that forced the indigenes to take up arms against the oil companies and the Federal government. Some of these works that address socio-political issues in Nigeria are genuinely shocking in the way they reveal power and honesty.



Plate 3: *Militants* by Emebo Chukwuanugo, fibre glass, 2011

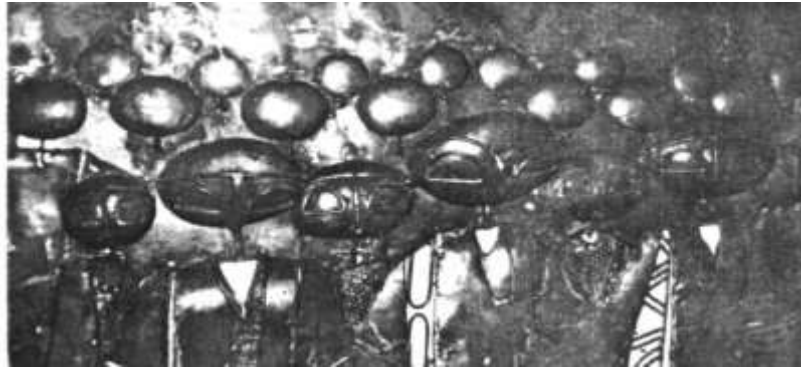


Plate 4: *Delegates* by Emeka Echendu, metal, 2010



Plate 5: "Virgin" by Chisom Otikpa, wood and metal, 2012

Among these are Emeka Echendu's "Delegates" and Nelson Igboamazu's "National Cake". The drive for social veracity was also reflected in the artists' choices of materials and media, much of the paintings in Awka School incorporated photographs, documentary materials, texts, objects and artefacts charged with explicit social and political messages. Other works include an installation by Mbadimma Chinemelum entitled "over exposed". Their Sculpture also offered reading on the nation's current preoccupation which is the re-branding of Nigeria.

Looking at these works, it would seem that the purpose is to take the pulse of Nigeria, its vision is of a nation with ethnic and gender balance. However, gender imbalance and women's unequal place in society is still a source of concern. Chisom Otikpa's "Virgin" addressed the issue of female marginalization in society by raging at the abuse visited upon women by their partners in heterosexual relationships.

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His raw, cartoonish sculpture is augmented here by many works which extol the positive side of women and the need for gender balance. Such works include Uche Okolo's "Couple", and Cliff Nwanna's "Ozo na Ojivi". Tochi Ajuorah addressed female abuse as oppressive in most of her works. Her "Cry for Help" is a departure from the critique of the skewed values of contemporary Nigerian society where some people see female abuse as "Female self-abuse", and as a natural reaction to oppressive social pressure. Children were also grouped alongside women as members of the marginalized population.

Another work which is proactive rather than polemical is Francis Okafor's "family". In this naturalistic composition, the father, mother and young son stand in a posture that suggests human development and hierarchy. In this exhibition, this piece suggests multiple readings ranging from meditation on parents' mastery over their children to a revelation of the suppressed sexuality of the family unit.

The presence of so many recently executed large-scale works gave the University a befitting aesthetic quality along with the rhetoric of experimentation and innovation. Afrocentric scholars have always argued that science and technology originated in Africa, in areas outside Egypt. Some of the works, especially in the area of applied arts, appear to have vindicated this claim.

Plate 6: "Couple" by Uche Okolo, metal, 2009

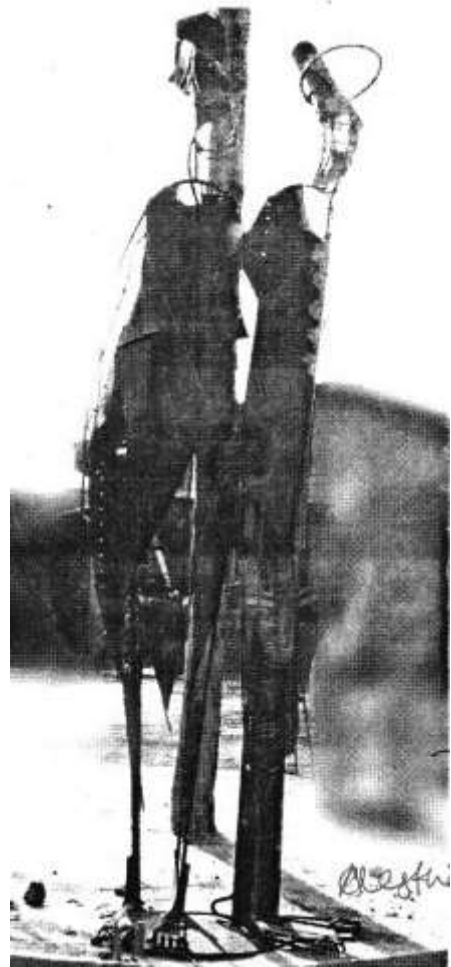




Plate 6: “Family” by Francis Okafor, scrap metal, 2009

Among these technological inventions that form part of Awka School’s integrity include an underground furnace by Cliff Nwanna, a textile loom by Emea Ogboso, and a ceramic Kiln by Ivan Okonkwo. Other scientific and technological productions in the Fine and Applied Arts Department include a hand-driven pug mill by Uju Uyanwune, glazed ceramic wares by Emman Okunna, textile sculptures by Ifedioramma Dike, woven fabrics by Calista Nwosu and Emea Ogboso, printmaking and creative photography by Benjamin Njelita. John Amifor is championing the video and multimedia art in the university.

It is fact that even while Europe was wallowing in the medieval period, the ancient Ghana Empire got to its peak of civilization. The Dogon people of Mali have been exploring the heavenly bodies for over seven hundred years. Back home, the Awka blacksmiths had constructed traditional iron furnaces and produced iron wares long before the colonial era. The writer believes that scientific and technological development must be closely linked with social responsibility. Also, modern industries must not only depend on basic science for its supply of innovations it should also look into the domain of humanities. I dare say that there cannot be any genuine sustainable development in any nation without art and having such development rooted in the people’s culture. If not, to use the words of late Congolese poet, Ténicaya Utam’si, it will be “a false growth upon the roots of any tree”. The Awka School of Art rejects aesthetic dictatorship in all its ramifications while advancing the idea of art as a collectivity of cultures and ideas.

The exhibition also attempts to erase the boundaries separating art and life, to knock art off its autonomous pedestal. Art belongs to the people and not museums and galleries.

## Notes

1. Mare, R.W.D, Clark, K., Stern, R. and Vodopich, D. *Botany*. Winsconsin: Brown Publishers Dubique. 1995.
2. Frank Willet's position on African art still persists in some quarters today and is an obstacle to the appreciation of modern African Art on its terms. See Willet, F. *African Art*, London: Thames and Hudson. 1971.
3. Oditia, O. "Understanding Contemporary Nigerian Art," Ohio: *A Celebration of Modern Nigerian Art, 101 Nigerian Artists*, Bosah and Edozie (Eds), Ben Bosah Books. 2010
4. The adage runs along with Uche Okeke's theory of Natural Synthesis. See Okeke, U. *Art in development – A Nigerian Perspective*. Mineapolis: Onion Printers
5. Onyewuenyi and a host of other African Scholars are of the opinion that the West owe their Civilization to Africa. See Onyewuenyi, I. C. *The African origin of Greek Philosophy – An exercise in Afro-centricism*, Nsukka: UNN Press, 1993.