

The pathfinder paradox: historicizing African art within global modernity

Review of:

Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in 20th Century Nigeria*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015. 376 pp., 129 colour ill. \$29.95, paperback.

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‘...Our identity is not only constructed out of what we call ‘the real’ us, but of everything that we are not. That extraneous condition of Being makes all the difference. That is to say, even in advance of our choosing what to be, we are excluded from being all the things we are not, and our subsequent elections are relevant only to the extent that they are conformable to that preselection.’

Michael J. Echeruo, 2001: 11

I

The study of modern and contemporary African art is gaining global visibility in art history and there are now several publications that carry out sophisticated analysis of individuals, contexts and discursive practices. It is important to determine how these publications frame the emergent subject/context and evaluate the specific positioning of this scholarship in relation to the politics of academic writing. How do emergent theories and analyses of modern/contemporary African art position Africa within global debates about cultural production in general? How do we as scholars narrate a history of modern and contemporary art in Africa that unfolds from the viewpoint of the African subject / subjectivity rather than from the viewpoint of its negation by Western discourse? What approaches to historical data and interpretation are suitable for such analysis? I evaluate how these issues unfold in Chika Okeke-Agulu’s *Postcolonial Modernism*, whose narrative of African art’s emergence into global modernity bears close examination.¹ The book refers to various African contexts of modernist expression but it is primarily focused on the impact of a group of young art students at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science, and

¹ Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in 20th Century Nigeria*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

Technology Zaria (Zarianists) on postcolonial Nigerian art in the decade of independence (1958-1967). However, it constructs this on an expansive evaluation of discourses of modernity in Nigeria from the mid-19th Century. Since this historical background purports to engage with the primary actors in the discourse of modernism in Nigeria, its submissions and omissions are relevant to this essay.

In brief, *Postcolonial Modernism* is divided into seven chapters that evaluate connections between local artistic developments in Nigeria and global contexts of twentieth-century modernism. The first chapter reviews the British colonial impact on an established class of educated African intellectuals, indirect rule, and its political implications for art education. Okeke-Agulu contends that colonialism resisted rather than chaperoned the emergence of modern art in Nigeria. In the second chapter, he illustrates the contesting paradigms of art education by pairing Aina Onabolu and Kenneth C. Murray in their roles as art teachers, evaluating their conflicting visions about the nature of Nigerian art education and modern art. Aina Onabolu was initially self-trained as an artist but later studied in England. Back in Nigeria, where the colonial government stymied his effort to expand art teaching in Nigerian schools, Onabolu convinced the colonial Department of Education to hire additional art teachers. The British Colonial Government subsequently hired Murray to oversee art education in Southern Nigeria. As art teachers, Onabolu argued for formal art training strictly based on British traditions of history painting a la Joshua Reynolds, and a categorical break with African art traditions. Murray, meanwhile, argued that a thorough knowledge of indigenous African art was necessary for the development of modern African art of any kind, bearing in mind the impact of African art on Euromodernist practices of that era.

Onabolu and Murray both taught Nigerian high-school students who had only a cursory understanding of modern art. The colonial Department of Education ultimately decided to establish a formal art school at a higher level of education, which led to the establishment of the Nigeria College of Arts, Science, and Technology (NCAST) in Zaria. Chapter 3 of *Postcolonial Modernism* focuses on the history of this institution and the impact of members of the Zaria Art Society (1958-1962) on the school's transformation from an institution that trained art teachers to one that produced professional artists. The author argues that the Zarianists introduced the theory of Natural Synthesis, which played a significant role in postcolonial Nigerian art and resituates the work of the Art Society within the history of Nigerian art as an advancement of Onabolu's brand of colonial modernism, and a critique of Kenneth Murray's (p.17). For Okeke-Agulu, this inverts an established notion that Murray, not Onabolu, should be credited with initiating the set of ideas championed by the Art Society.

Chapter 4 examines the transition from colonial to postcolonial modernism in Nigeria through extensive analysis of the journal *Black Orpheus*, the magazine that gave voice to a new generation of Anglophone African and black diaspora writers and artists in the 1950s and 1960s—as well as of the exhibitions and workshops at the Mbari Artists and Writers Club, Ibadan. The Austrian critic Ulli Beier

championed both initiatives and, through his cultural brokerage, became the single most influential figure in shaping the international reception of post-independence Nigerian art. Mbari exhibited the works of modern artists from other African countries (Ibrahim El Salahi of Sudan, the Ethiopian Skunder Borghossian, and Vincent Kofi of Ghana) as well as European and American artists. Chapter 5 examines the post-independence works of principal Art Society members including Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Bruce Onobrakpeya, and Jimoh Akolo. It analyzes their divergent interpretations of Natural Synthesis and devotes its longest segment to an analysis of Okeke's art and career. Chapter 6 'shifts from the specificity of the Art Society and their work to the intellectual and cultural firmament and art world of Lagos, especially after 1963, when the city effectively replaced Ibadan as the centre of postcolonial artistic production and debate' (p.18). It also evaluates the schism that appeared between the Art Society members and an older generation of artists represented by Ben Enwonwu, Akinola Lasekan, and the novelist/critic Cyprian Ekwensi regarding the direction of postcolonial Nigerian art. Chapter 7 concludes the book by examining how deteriorating political circumstances led to the Nigeria/Biafra civil war (1967-1970), which affected the sense of cultural nationalism that had inspired artists in the independence period. The disillusionment of this era led to a rise in regionalism, as artists formerly associated with the Mbari Ibadan programs left to establish variants in Enugu and Oshogbo. Overall, *Postcolonial Modernism* achieves a significant interpretation of modernism in Africa (focused on Nigeria) by contextually relating its principal forms and debates to international modernist practices and discourse.

II

Scholarship, like life itself, is subject to the vagaries of fashion, which, in academia, refers to reigning paradigms of theoretical analysis, what we might define as the prevalent *isms* of knowledge work in general. The reigning theory of art historical analysis is globalism, which constructs narratives of history on the basis of transcultural analysis of mobility, circulation, networks, and connectivity; what Paul James described as analysis of various intersecting modes of practice that extend social relations around the world.² Globalism challenges earlier models of historical analysis that focused mainly on supposedly autonomous national or cultural developments rooted in defined and separate spaces. It enables an ecumenical reading of the global contemporary age as a network of postcolonial experiments in the formulation of region-specific modernisms. It allows us to sidestep questions of the validity of modern and contemporary African art (and other non-Western modernism) by linking it to similar developments in other parts of the world. It enables a historical framework that does not rely solely on the colonial apparatus as

² Paul James, *Globalism, Nationalism, Tribalism: Bringing Theory Back In*. London: Sage Publications, 2006: 21-22.

its foundation by challenging the claim that colonial schools instituted art training in Africa and through this produced the first modernists. Modernism, in this interpretation, was already emerging in cosmopolitan centres of Africa in the late 19th century, and colonialism actually set the cause of African modernization back by its efforts to redefine Africa as a locus of primitivism. Above all, globalism rescues modern African art from charges of belatedness, the persistent and wrongheaded assumption by Western critics that modern African art mimics styles of art that are already passé in Western art. Instead it argues for the specificity of African responses to modernity within a global network of similar responses outside of the canonical Euromodernist focus.

While all the above are positive developments, a larger issue lies within the goals and objectives of African art history in its global turn, where notions of interdisciplinarity often depend upon how well scholars apply Eurocentric theoretical foundations to African art/culture.³ Personally, I interpret this development as a neo-colonization of knowledge and consider its implications pernicious for African art history, however defined. For starters, much of this work evacuates Africans from the sites of their own creativity by locating contemporary African art in the works of expatriate Africans. Subsequently, African artists on the continent were overlooked by the 'global' art world and their artworks grossly undervalued.⁴ Furthermore, interdisciplinary research assumes the existence of disciplines in which the challenging work of taxonomic and stylistic analysis establishes the actual *forms* of knowledge in question. Also, in accounting for how Africans engaged Western ideas about modernity, globalism requires us to account for modes of indigenous knowledge through which Africans made sense of their place in the global world and challenged colonial 'epistemicide,' Mhoze Chikowero's apt description of British colonial efforts to suppress and undermine African indigenous knowledge.⁵ Analysis of how one might read indigenous African arts within the modernist project is woefully lacking and many publications that purport to locate modern African art in global space actually sideline artists and artworks that deploy African cultural registers. This analytical framework thus tends to validate African modernist practices only to the extent they conform to or comply with Euromodernist prescriptions.

³ For a critique of this tendency, see Rowland Abiodun, *Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

⁴ See Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, 'The curator as culture broker: a critique of the curatorial regime of Okwui Enwezor in the discourse of contemporary African Art'. *Achronym* <http://achronym.blogspot.com/2010/06/curator-as-culture-broker-critique-of.html?q=curator+as+culture+broker> (accessed December 2, 2019). See also *Art South Africa*, 9/1, 2010: 34-37.

⁵ Mhoze Chikowero, *African Music, Power and Being in Colonial Zimbabwe*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015: 4. Chikowero defined epistemicide as the destruction of a people's spiritual and cultural foundations and sense of self-worth, a sure way to disarm and dominate them.

Sonia Khullar notes 'over the past decade, art historians have enriched and expanded what we understand as modernism, analysing discourses and practices [outside of the established narrative of developments in Paris and New York] in Great Britain and the Soviet Union, as well as Mexico, Brazil, Senegal, Nigeria, Vietnam, China, Japan, Iran and Pakistan.'⁶ All these are useful developments in a discourse often bogged down in questions of definition and what Kobena Mercer derided as 'the traditional art historical concern with primordially—who did or said what first'.⁷ It is also important to note that art history's 'avoidance of close attention to modernist practices on the part of non-western artists throughout the 20th Century as a whole is reinforced by a predominant critique of Eurocentrism that endlessly returns the discussion to Western artists and institutions.'⁸ This particular point highlights the great failing of recent work on the subject, namely the Western negation of longstanding efforts by African artists and scholars to intervene in the discourse of modernity.

Exhibitions that try to globalize the modernist narrative tend to reframe analysis through the lens of Euromodernist practices, as in the Centre Georges Pompidou's 2013 exhibition, *Multiple Modernities From 1905 – 1970*, which showed 'how key modernist ideas spread throughout the world, and focuses on the artistic expression of regions hitherto considered marginal.'⁹ In a section devoted to developments in abstraction after 1950, a post-war period marked by decolonization, the museum characterized the [modernist] artistic expression that developed in Africa as 'an area still awaiting *a documented history* to be written about it' (italics mine). By 'Africa', the museum refers specifically to sub-Saharan or black Africa, since it already separately identified architectural developments in North Africa and Egypt. The exhibition thus restates the idea that modernism in art developed in Europe and then spread out into the world. The 'regional' developments it reviews are thus slotted into a hierarchy that again places Europe on top, reaffirming its role as 'the brain of the earth's body.'¹⁰ It takes this position despite Dipesh Chakrabarty's vigorous denunciation of art history's ideal of 'first in Europe, then

⁶ For an impressive list of publications that champion this new globalist focus, see Sonal Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity, and Modernism in India, 1930-1990*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015: 16.

⁷ Kobena Mercer, *Cosmopolitan Modernisms (Annotating Art's Histories: Cross-Cultural Perspectives in the Visual Arts)*. Boston: The MIT Press, 2005: 11.

⁸ Mercer 2005: 19.

⁹ 'Multiple Modernities 1905-1970.' Musée National d'Art Moderne, Center George Pompidou. Paris, October 2013 - January 2015.
<https://www.centrepompidou.fr/media/imp/M5050/CPV/a0/6e/M5050-CPV-d67db45a-b766-4abd-a06e-3ba4c425f99b.pdf> (accessed November 22, 2017)

¹⁰ Donald Preziosi, *Brain of the Earth's Body: Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

elsewhere,' which frames non-Western modernities as always trying to catch up to established practices of Euromodernism.¹¹

III

Postcolonial Modernism can be seen as an effort to document how the multiple modernities narrated by the Pompidou exhibition manifested in Nigeria. Its examination of the Zarianists' influence on postcolonial Nigerian art in the decade of independence (1958-1967) is constructed on an expansive evaluation of discourses of modernity in Nigeria from the mid-19th Century. This allows the author to examine 'the longer historical ideological and intellectual context of the work that emerged in the late 1950s' (p.15). The book also evaluates the conjunction of art and nationalism in Zarianist art and locates these within international modernist discourses.

Postcolonial Modernism uses as a theoretical framework for its analysis the concept of Natural Synthesis, which can be defined as the selective use of artistic resources and forms from Nigerian/African and European artistic traditions to construct a modern African art. Its theoretical formulations have since become an obsolete framework of analysis because of its Hegelian ideal of a thesis opposed by an antithesis resulting in a synthesis. Natural Synthesis opposes indigenous or traditional African art to Western modernity as two binaries that come together to produce a postcolonial synthesis. It assumes a static traditional culture and dynamic European modernity, rather than seeing that *both* African and European cultures were transformed within the global context of modernity.

Okeke-Agulu argues that true engagement with modernism in African art emerged only in the postcolonial period because the colonial era forestalled the emergence of modernity by trying to lock Africans into a discourse of primitivism. By delegitimizing colonialism as a significant factor in the emergence of modernism in Africa, the globalist approach evades the primary problem of analysis of non-Western modernisms, which is how its readings of region-specific and postcolonial art relate to or differ from the canonical narratives of Western art. Two approaches compete for space here. As the Centre Georges Pompidou exhibition reveals, the first sees modernism as originating from Western modernist practices and spreading to non-Western locales. The second insists on modernism as a global context, arguing that there are various forms and iterations of modernism that are not simply reducible to variations on the Western model. *Postcolonial Modernism* attempts to straddle both positions and this problematizes its interpretation of modernism in postcolonial Nigeria.

Okeke-Agulu describes his approach to historical analysis as 'research-based critical story telling' (p. 15) and provides a captivating narrative of the international

¹¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.

and interactive nature of postcolonial Nigerian art using a globalist framework. This approach is critically engaging but presents some obvious interpretive problems, especially in its framing of the colonial period and specific actors such as Onobolu and Murray, but most especially in its gross marginalization of the impact of Enwonwu, a key player in the colonial and postcolonial discourse of Nigerian art. Since the author does not explain how 'research-based critical story-telling' enables historical analysis, it seems this methodological approach permits overly broad and problematic interpretations of available historical evidence. It is true that historical evidence can be open to multiple interpretations, but such interpretations must at least acknowledge archival evidence of what historical actors did or said.

Okeke-Agulu is thus invested in a notion of radical newness, the conceit that his work as an art historian, and the work of the Zarianists as modernists, can be seen as autonomous inventions without precedent or peer. Accordingly, he claims his book 'maps the unprecedented, ill-understood, yet fundamental artistic, intellectual, and critical networks' in modern Nigerian art. In reality, however, it builds on existing scholarship that engages the principal issues it raises. The first chapter of *Postcolonial Modernism* (Colonialism and the Educated Africans) recalls a previous mapping of this context by Nkiru Nzegwu (2001), whose sophisticated analysis of the concept of modernity in contemporary African art critiques the tendency of scholarship to conflate 'modern' with Euromodernist aesthetics and discourses.¹² The second chapter's analysis of 'indirect rule and colonial modernism' is the subject of prodigious analysis in the study of African history.¹³ Other publications have previously evaluated the implications of colonial policies on the emergence of modernist practices in Nigerian art and evaluated principal Zarianists.¹⁴ For example, Simon Ottenberg produced two books containing detailed analyses of Okeke's art within a study of Uli Revivalist aesthetics in modern and contemporary Nigerian art (see Ottenberg, *The Nsukka Artists and Nigerian Contemporary Art*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002; Ottenberg, *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institutions Press, 1997). There is an existing anthology on Uche Okeke that discusses all facets of his work and includes articles that critically evaluate his impact on modern and contemporary Nigerian art (Krydz Ikwuemesi, ed. *The Triumph of a Vision: An Anthology on Uche Okeke and Modern Art in Nigeria*. Lagos: Pendulum, 2003).

¹² Nkiru Nzegwu, 'The Concept of Modernity in Contemporary African Art,' in *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities*. Isidore Okpewho, Carole Boyce Davis and Ali A. Mazrui, eds. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001: 391-424.

¹³ See for example Toyin Falola, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2001.

¹⁴ See Chapters 2 and 3 of Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2008.

Postcolonial Modernism really comes into its own in its analysis of Zarianist postcolonial engagements and its international character (from Chapter 3 onwards). but even here, the book carries out a selective reading of historical data and glosses over issues that might otherwise prove problematic. Positions criticized in earlier chapters as evidence of regressive indigenism, such as Murray's focus on indigenous art as a framework for contemporary practice, are praised as avant-garde attitudes when applied to the postcolonial art of the Zarianists. More importantly, *Postcolonial Modernism* avoids comparing the discursive and artistic positions of Enwonwu and the Zarianists or evaluating the continuities and ruptures in their works.¹⁵ Okeke-Agulu excuses this omission by claiming he sidesteps deep engagements with biographies of the individual artists. However, this doesn't explain why he chose to disregard important art historical analysis that contests the actual meaning and impact of Zarianist aesthetics in postcolonial Nigeria.

In its valorization of the Zarianist emergence, *Postcolonial Modernism* validates an existing narrative of modern Nigerian art by Uche Okeke in which he (wrongly) identifies himself (and by extension the Zaria Art Society) as the originator and true representation of modernism in Nigerian art. In his book, *Art in Development: A Nigerian Perspective*, Okeke dismisses the earlier examples of Onabolu and Enwonwu, contending that '[t]he colonial situation resulted in a retrogressive anti-intellectual approach to creativity.... *Onabolu willingly suppressed his past, while Murray's pupils were grossly handicapped by their little knowledge of both the African culture and the Western way of life*' (my emphasis).¹⁶ Okeke's analysis of postcolonial art is faulted by his investment in a history of modern Nigerian art centred solely on his own interventions. Okeke-Agulu's obsession with providing validation of Uche Okeke's suppositions results in a rigid, programmatic narrative. It also overlooks the fact that Zarianist art, rather than engendering a real nationalist response, actually produced an insular interpretation of postcolonial modernity that was responsible for the blossoming of provincial agendas, sectional ideologies, and militant ethnicity in modern and contemporary Nigerian art.¹⁷

IV

Modern Nigerian art of the postcolonial period began with an important conceptual cleanse that reflected tensions between different generations of artists. A similar attitude is evident in Okeke-Agulu's book. The effort to centre the Zaria Art Society as the key driver of postcolonial modernism marginalizes previous generations of

¹⁵ See for example Ogbechie 2003.

¹⁶ Uche Okeke, *Art in Development: A Nigerian Perspective*. Minneapolis, USA: African American Cultural Center, 1982.

¹⁷ Sylvester Ogbechie, "More on Nationalism and Nigerian Art". *African Arts* Vol. 42, No. 3 (Autumn 2009): 9.

artists such as Enwonwu to highlight the newness ascribed to postcolonial Nigerian artists. In this regard, it is important to note that Ben Enwonwu was *the* significant modern Nigerian artist against whom Zarianists were trying to define themselves. Given that the Zarianists emerged after Enwonwu had already established a celebrated international career as an African modernist, any serious effort to historicize or globalize postcolonial Nigerian art needs to explain and contrast how the Zarianists' postcolonial modernism differs from Enwonwu's modernist and critical positions. Instead, Okeke-Agulu sidesteps the careers of Enwonwu and other artists to narrate the Zarianist emergence as a unique formalistic and discursive event.

Lack of basic documentation of modern African artists has contributed to problematic interpretations of their practice and their effacement from the history of art writ large. Art history sees artists' monographs invested in biographical and stylistic analyses as basic research, a rather pedestrian reckoning of dates and times built on the premise of causal links between an artist's life and art.¹⁸ However, such analysis is necessary to determine what kinds of claims one can make about artists, especially if it reveals that aspects of their work contradict their theoretical and critical positions. Also, the idea that monographic analysis is outmoded merely means that the narrative of practice it legitimizes for European artists has passed beyond consciousness into ideology. Western art history's focus on classifications of style and morphology came under attack in the 1970s, but this was after five hundred years of taxonomic narratives dating back to Vasari's *The Lives of the Artists*.¹⁹ Can art history, however defined, exist without such a taxonomic foundation?

Postcolonial Modernism posits the concept of Natural Synthesis as a defining principle of Zarianist art, which negates the fact that the Synthesis concept itself was central to the artistic orientation of many African modernists and that its origins predate the Zarianists. The conflict between Enwonwu and the Zarianists was largely about what aspects of synthesis to use in weighting the visual language of their modern art. Enwonwu argued that the road to postcolonial emancipation lay in adopting the best practices of indigenous culture and wedding these to Western technologies of representation. This process had the advantage of interpreting indigenous culture as a dynamic context of practice and provides a means of theorizing the modernity/modernization of indigenous African art. The Zarianists adopted Enwonwu's notion of synthesis but argued for constructing postcolonial modernity on Euromodernist aesthetics, which presumably afforded them entrée into a global art world that marginalizes African cultural registers. The 'will to self-

¹⁸ This viewpoint is thoroughly dismantled by Gabriele Guercio, *Art as Existence: The Artist Monograph and Its Project*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.

¹⁹ Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*. Tuscan: Torrentino 1550 (Oxford Classics Edition: Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. Julia Conway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991)

definition' (p. 7) that laid the groundwork for postcolonial Nigerian artists speaks to the immense importance of his career for the Zarianists.

Okeke-Agulu's marginalization of Enwonwu's precedent-setting career therefore exemplifies what I define as the *pathfinder paradox*, in which the achievements of pioneering figures are ascribed to their successors. Instead of evaluating how various generations of Nigerian artists experimented with divergent notions of modernist practice within the global context of their international education and careers, *Postcolonial Modernism* constructs postcolonialism in terms of efforts by African artists to engage the experiments and discourses of Euromodernist art, which is assumed to confer universality on their postcolonial practice. It thus directs attention away from how Nigerian art transformed from indigenous to modernist practices, and instead emphasizes how global discourses and Western culture brokers framed modern Nigerian art in the postcolonial period. Through this, it negates the Pan-African and anticolonial struggle to define an African-centred mode of being in the world. It further undermines the essential focus of the nationalist and anti-colonial struggle, which was intended to provide Africans and peoples of African descent a location from which to engage global questions of identity and subjectivity, one that categorically rejects Eurocentric narratives. This point was the basis of Enwonwu's critique of Zarianist art in the period of independence.

V

Scholarship on African art faces a conundrum, as it is mainly located outside the African contexts of its principal forms and subjects. Most books on the topic are published in the USA and Europe, and the small percentage published in Africa are only visible in the discourse if they narrate the continent's art in relation to Western antecedents. According to Nkiru Nzegwu, 'in the pursuit of international scholarly recognition and prestige, scholars are pressured through prepublication reviews to ignore African agency and uphold conventional Eurocentric narratives.'²⁰ Efforts to write against established paradigms or to foreground African interpretation of culturally oriented imagery are often derided as parochial and non-universal. In addition, Western reception of African modern art foregrounds the first artist(s), object(s), or narratives that come to the attention of the West, which marginalizes the historical processes that produced African artists and institutions. Important aspects of indigenous African art and creativity, such as its haptic and sonic qualities, were completely written out of the resulting narrative. The result is a truncated understanding of African art at variance with indigenous interpretations

²⁰ Nzegwu 2001: 406.

and a foregrounding of the European encounter as the primal moment of these objects' emergence and self-determination.²¹

Postcolonial Modernism is premised on the idea that colonialism pre-empted the emergence of modernity in African art and that modern African art only emerged in the postcolonial period. The author notes (p.12), that '...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.' He argues, however, for postcolonial modernism as being the proper framework to evaluate these 'before and after' developments. Since the author argues that colonialism precluded the emergence of modernism in Africa, how can we understand important initiatives such as Murray's pedagogy and Enwonwu's modernist practice, and the immense efforts of Nigerian artists overall to develop visual languages of modern art undertaken during the colonial period? How do we account for the fact that many key artists of the colonial period lived well into the postcolonial era?

Postcolonial Modernism faulted colonialism for primitivizing African art and attempts to sidestep its impact in the emergence of Nigerian postcolonial modern art. I contend it is misguided to posit a notion of modernity in Africa that disregards colonization as a significant context of analysis. The discourse of African modernity is carried out in European languages (mainly English and French) whose apparatus of linguistic power shapes horizons of meaning in significant ways. The transformation of African cultures within a wider world shaped by colonial culture and imperialism remains an irrevocable aspect of modern African history. Any analysis that sidesteps the complex social, cultural, and political transformations encoded in colonial history is ultimately anachronistic.

In her analysis of Lagos from 1880-1930, Nkiru Nzegwu suggests 'the problem with taking colonialism as the defining historical moment for the genesis of contemporary art is that a sharp divide is introduced that fails to recognize the historic links and cultural exchanges between various ethnic groups in Africa.'²² Careful evaluation of these cultural exchanges suggests that important cultural transformations based on a transnational conception of subjectivity were already taking place among Africans *before* the imposition of colonial rule. 'The centering of Europe through colonialism compels a near-obsessive attention on Europeans' artistic policies, intuitions, and interventions rather than on the resistance /

²¹ This position is extensively argued against in Nkiru Nzegwu, 'When the Paradigm Shifts, Africa Appears': reconceptualizing Yoruba art in space and time.' *Journal of Art Historiography* 18, June 2018 <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2018/08/nzegwu-review1.pdf> (accessed 4 December, 2019).

²² Nzegwu 2001: 404.

interactional / appropriational forces at play in Nigeria and West Africa between 1880 and 1920.²³

Postcolonial Modernism does not acknowledge Nzegwu's landmark analysis of the multi-ethnic, multicultural, politically active, intellectual community of Lagos, but it uses a similar argument to discuss contestations between the British colonial government and the anti-colonial agitations of the educated Lagos elite. It also conflates modern art with Euromodernist aesthetics, which thereby subverts its analysis. In her examination of the concept of modernism in contemporary African art, Nzegwu critiques it as 'a cartographic lens through which global visual creative expression is framed.'²⁴ She argues that, in the same manner that the Mercator map distorts the true reality of the sizes of continents and landmasses, 'the historical meaning of 'modern art' is clearly being replaced by the ideological meaning of the term and is being made equivalent in meaning to works in the Euromodernist style.'²⁵ *Postcolonial Modernism* is affected by this tendency, and it fails to question the ideological underpinnings of the Western culture brokers who sought to reorient postcolonial African art by foregrounding the Euromodernist ideal of art for art's sake. Against a Pan-Africanist discourse that emphasized the importance of using art to support the struggle for global African emancipation, the book adopts an ahistorical approach to the development of visual languages of modern art in Africa.

VI

Okeke-Agulu's narrative of modern art in Nigeria identifies two opposing forces at work in colonial Nigeria. The first represented the official position of Frederick Lugard, who instituted a policy of indirect rule, and distrusted the emergent class of African intellectuals who challenged colonialism using the tools of British jurisprudence (rule of law, citizen rights, and moral arguments for the equality of man). He briefly sketches the history of Lagos cosmopolitanism and the rise of its intellectual elite from the mid-19th century into the period of colonial rule. He locates, in the art of pioneer modern artist Onobolu, efforts by the Nigerian intellectual elite to narrate themselves into being by deploying the visual arts as a counter-narrative to colonial effacement of the African subject. Onobolu published *A Short Discourse on Art* to define his interpretation of modern art and served as an unofficial art teacher in Lagos schools until the colonial government hired Murray in 1937 to formally establish art teaching in Nigerian schools. Okeke-Agulu uses Murray's ideas about art teaching as a foil to show the regressive character of colonial art education, which he charges undermined the advent of modernism in Nigerian art. He subsequently claims that debates about the 'character and direction of modern art in Nigeria reflected the fraught relationship of the increasingly

²³ Nzegwu 2001: 404.

²⁴ Nzegwu 2001: 391.

²⁵ Nzegwu 2001: 394.

dominant, even if unofficial, ideas of Onabolu and the institutionalized naïve traditionalism of Murray' (p. 40).

Colonialism indeed worked to forestall any form of African political and intellectual independence. Colonial schools provided mainly vocational education with the idea of locating Africans in a permanently subordinate role in the colonial order. Colonial and Mission schools alike used education as a new controlling mechanism and a class-making machine that led people away from ways that were deemed barbarous or hostile to the colonial administration. *Postcolonial Modernism* therefore argues that the introduction of formal art education in Nigerian schools could not be a basis for the emergence of modern art in Nigeria. That prestige had to wait until the establishment of the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology (NCAST), where a younger generation of Nigerian artists constituted postcolonial modern subjectivities.

Okeke-Agulu's misreads Onabolu's treatise and mischaracterizes Murray's attitude towards colonial education. By framing Murray's work as an extension of Lugard's regressive policies of colonial governance, Okeke-Agulu misinterprets the historical record (the Murray archives) to support his claim of radical subjectivity of avant-garde postcolonial Nigerian artists. The details of Murray's pedagogy are a matter of record (Ogbechie 2008: 36 – 46) and clearly do not suggest Murray thought Africans were unable to master European fine art traditions and practices. Murray expended significant effort towards teaching his students the finer technical points of how to draw and paint, held classes in art criticism, and worked to broaden their idea of modern art by exposing them to art from other countries. He also insisted that his students be familiar with indigenous arts as a basis for constructing their modernist expressions.

Postcolonial Modernism similarly carries out a selective reading of the role of educated Africans in the nationalist project. Evidence shows that many of the people named in the book were very much interested in assimilationist (or as the book terms it, adaptationist) politics, including Herbert McCaulay (who was known as the Black Englishman) and Nnamdi Azikiwe, whose original political positions sought accommodation with the colonial government. Like these other Afro-Victorians, Onabolu's artworks and writings suggest he was interested in assimilation rather than contestation. Interpretation of his art as an anti-colonial subversive practice rests on his challenge to colonial ideas of African inferiority, but he was a staunch Christian who believed in the implicit superiority of the British colonizer. Okeke-Agulu does not explain where or how Onabolu enunciated the 'conceptual and political basis' of a radical art that allows us to disregard his intense desire to be seen as the Nigerian Joshua Reynolds. It is certainly not in Onabolu's *Short Discourse on Art*, in which he stated that art was most perfected in Greece. In the context of a cosmopolitan Lagos where traditional arts and transnational architecture were prominent, Onabolu concluded that Yoruba traditional masks and sculpture were 'still crude forms destitute of Art and Science' (*Short Discourse*, p.14). Okeke-Agulu explains Onabolu's negation of the validity and vitality of traditional

art by arguing that Onabolu was aware that ‘once the genie of modernity was set free by the *longue durée* historical processes and by the sudden impact of the colonial encounter, artistic practice based on preserving what to him were irrevocably moribund traditional arts and crafts—a refusal to appreciate culture as process rather than product— could not be the basis for a modern artistic subjectivity’ (p. 44). The argument that Yoruba art (and indigenous African art in general) refused to appreciate culture as process rather than product contradicts Yoruba reliance on conceptual forms that saw art as process.²⁶ Yoruba art was also undergoing rapid changes during the colonial period and contained its own sites of engagements with modernity, evident in the work of famed artist Olowe of Ise, whose high relief sculptures and use of commercial paints pointed to experiments with modern ideas.²⁷

Postcolonial Modernism suggests Onabolu’s opinions about African art probably resulted from his self-education as an artist before his two-year stint at St. John’s Woods School of Art in London. It also points out that Onabolu’s art lacked technical sophistication, even though this does not invalidate its radical orientation. Murray saw indigenous Nigerian arts as indispensable to its emergent modernism and as such opposed Onabolu’s reliance on European antecedents. Okeke-Agulu characterized the works produced by Murray’s students as both illustrative and narrative, with ‘the singular exception of Enwonwu’s sophisticated ‘African style, which emerged only after he trained in London at the Slade School of Fine Art in the late 1940s’ (p.59). Enwonwu was indeed the only one of Murray’s students to become a professional artist and his oeuvre shows the natural development and increasing sophistication one might expect from an artist in the development of technical and conceptual skills. Moreover, he was less influenced by Murray’s pedagogy because his sculptor father already trained him in Igbo techniques of sculpture. While his Murray era paintings were indeed rudimentary, his sculptures were sophisticated and quite modernist in orientation. This accounts for Enwonwu’s success at the 1937 Zwemmer Gallery exhibition, where visitors lauded him as an accomplished modern artist. One must also not forget that Murray’s Zwemmer exhibition was composed of artworks by Nigerian high school students who were learning how to make pictures. Enwonwu transcended this phase and would later criticize effort by European critics to conflate the professional practice of modern Nigerian artists with the work of high-school or university students.

The principal issue at stake here is ‘when was Nigerian modernism?’ It is proper to frame *modernity* in Africa as changes wrought by global transformations and colonization and *modernism* as the visual language of art compatible with the global changes brought about by this process. Although colonization undoubtedly

²⁶ See Henry Drewal, John Pemberton, and Rowland Abiodun, *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*. New York: Centre for African Art, 1989.

²⁷ See Roslyn A. Walker, *Olowe of Ise: A Yoruba Sculptor to Kings*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998.

transformed African artistic practices, significant transformations in African visual culture date at least to the 15th century.²⁸ Okeke-Agulu is right that colonialism tried to truncate the development of modernity in Nigeria, but he errs in identifying such modernist transformation in a postcolonial context framed by an engagement with Euromodernist aesthetics, which leaves no room to incorporate equally complex transformations in indigenous art in the colonial and postcolonial periods. The simple reality is that no Nigerian was working in Western styles of painting before the colonial period. If we leave out analysis of photography, Onabolu's art can be considered the primal scene of 'modern' art in Nigeria, whose iteration in the postcolonial context was a struggle over the orientation of its visual languages that devolved into contention between Enwonwu and the Zarianists. Enwonwu firmly believed that art for the new nation (and postcolonial Africa in the global context) cannot be expected to parrot established ethnic and cultural forms –African or European—but must develop in tandem with historical, social, and political changes bearing in mind Africa's need for political and cultural emancipation. *Postcolonial Modernism's* efforts to locate the Zarianists at the centre of such changes overlooks the fact that they were primarily being swept along by powerful forces largely outside their control—by Ulli Beier and other culture brokers, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and Cold War politics that forcefully reshaped the discourse of modern African art.

Contrary to Okeke-Agulu's narrative, Murray rejected Onabolu's reliance on European classical notions of painting as counterproductive to the need for a new African art that deployed indigenous cultural forms as a vital aspect of its modernist practices. However, he concedes that Murray's work as a teacher was closely linked to his work as 'a visionary ethnographer and museologist noted for his dogged campaign to establish a Nigerian national ethnographic museum.'²⁹ This was meant to provide his students and future generations of Nigerian artists a location from which they might secure a proper understanding of the scope and complexity of their indigenous heritage of the arts, which he believed was central to developing their own new and unique forms of modern art. Because of this, Murray's first act, after his appointment in 1937, was to carry out a survey of existing indigenous Nigerian art. (Okeke-Agulu notes the Zarianists, under the tutelage of one of their British tutors, would carry out a similar survey three decades later as part of their education). Murray's documentation of Nigeria's indigenous arts and the museums he established ultimately provided Okeke, the key interlocutor of the Zarianists, with his Picasso-like encounter with African art in a museum setting. It also framed

²⁸ For example, 17th Century Benin bronze plaques with their representations of Portuguese merchants and soldiers, evaluated in John Picton, "Fetishising Modernity: Bricollage Revisited" in Gabriele Genge and Angela Sterken, *Art History and Fetishism Abroad: Global Shiftings in Media and Methods*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2014: 205-234.

²⁹ *Postcolonial Modernism*: 295, footnote 26.

Okeke's awareness of Uli aesthetics, which he appropriated to construct the Zarianist interpretation of Natural Synthesis.³⁰

VII

Postcolonial Modernism introduced some key contentions in its first chapter. The first was that formal art education through the colonial schools is not the appropriate frame to investigate the emergence of modern art in Nigeria since colonial education forestalled the intellectual and cultural independence of the colonized. The second contention was about Onabolu's model of the self-aware speaking colonial subject who was convinced of his connection to world historical affairs. There is no doubt the advent of white people and their technologies of oppression were understood as a historical event of great import even among Nigerians who resided outside of cosmopolitan Lagos. Igbo peoples, for example, described the colonial period as 'Enu Oyibo', which literally translates into the 'age of the white people,' and carried overtones of political, cultural and cosmological transformations in Igbo culture.

Postcolonial Modernism celebrated Lagos's uniqueness as a site of cosmopolitan urbanism. We should note in this regard that urbanism (and its attendant cosmopolitanisms) in Nigeria predated both colonialism and the emergence of Lagos, and that there were many other sites of significant cosmopolitan interactions such as Kano, Benin City, Zaria, Onitsha, Calabar, Sokoto, and Bornu. Many of these cities were centuries old by the rise of colonial rule. Lagos cosmopolitanism was not unique and was late to join in such interactions. Okeke-Agulu's third contention is that anyone associated with the colonial government was automatically stained by its racist and Darwinist perception of Africans. Thus, despite Murray's advocacy for the rights of colonized Africans to define their own creative horizons and his dogged efforts to preserve Nigeria's art heritage, Okeke-Agulu could, contrary to historical evidence, class Murray with Lugard as racist proponents of indirect rule devoted to hindering the progress of Nigerian intellectuals. Finally, Okeke-Agulu posits Natural Synthesis as the principal mechanism of postcolonial modernism in Nigeria and locates its importance as the site of a globalism framed on appropriation of Euromodernist styles (in other words, against Pan-African notions of black subjectivity).

Okeke-Agulu suggested that Onabolu saw the 'radical potential of formal education' as a bulwark against the colonial government's efforts to stymie African progress (p.69). The author's insistence on the 'radical potential of formal education' in his evaluation of Onabolu's practice is problematic, because formal education was precisely what colonialism wrought. It is easy to see how the colonial view of formal education was wrong today, but during the colonial period, the realization that formal education was the only way to modernization (and hence to 'progress') was

³⁰ Uche Okeke's encounter with Igbo art was mediated by his own needs for cultural identity, as an Igbo person born and raised in Northern Nigeria among Hausa and Fulani peoples.

a principle upheld in every colonial context of global black life. In fact, Okeke-Agulu notes (p. 88; with regard to the Zarianists) 'It was obvious to the Art Society that the first stage in the development of modern Nigerian art depended on art instruction by Western artists and art teachers schooled in the canons of European art.' This statement directly contradicts the author's argument that the colonial art schools had nothing to do with the emergence of modern art in Nigeria. Moreover, NCAST was founded by the British colonial government, and the narrative of curricular debates at NCAST up till 1963 shows the extent to which the institution reflected ongoing British colonial power, even in the supposedly radical postcolonial era. All the principal instructors in the school and interlocutors in the debate about modern Nigerian art (with the exception of the Zarianists) were still British and operated in disregard of Enwonwu's strident and persistent calls for Africanization of the institution and its curriculum. Enwonwu had pushed for the marginalization of expatriate critics and the emergence of Nigerian critical voices since the 1956 Black Writers and Artists Congress at the Sorbonne. The emergence of the Zaria Art Society surely responded to Enwonwu's requests in this regard.

Okeke-Agulu's analysis of NCAST, the formation of the Zaria Art Society, and its role in the Nigerian independence celebrations in 1960 (Chapter 3) is a triumphalist accounting of the complex process that brought the school into being. The principal argument for the Zarianists is that they were trained as artists, unlike Murray's students who were trained as art teachers, but, as the NCAST curriculum shows, from the author's analysis, preparing students for careers as art-educators was a major part of NCAST's training. The formation of the Zaria Art Society in 1958 resulted from students' dissatisfaction with NCAST's lack of focus on African art. Regarding instructors Donald Hope and Eric Taylor's argument against the teaching of African art to Nigerian students at NCAST (p.84), Okeke-Agulu's contention that African artworks were 'objects of systematic art appreciation, criticism, and history, especially in a new nation in need of meaningful perspectives on the history of the arts and material cultures of its constituent peoples,' contradicts his earlier criticism of colonial efforts to preserve traditional artworks and Murray's efforts to encourage modern Nigerian artists to reference them. The criticism damns colonial interventions as salvage ethnography but then praises Zarianist recourse to traditional Nigerian artworks, in museums founded by Murray, a colonial art teacher, as a radical position.

Postcolonial Modernism's use of Natural Synthesis as a theoretical framework also bears closer examination. The idea of combining the best of African and Western elements to produce a modern African art emerged from Pan-African ideology as the 'Synthesis' concept of which Natural Synthesis is an iteration. We can locate its initial formulation in DuBois' notion of double consciousness, in relation to the Negro (sic) artist's need to merge his divergent identities into a self-conscious subject without losing any of these identities.³¹ Okeke-Agulu defines

³¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Dover Publications, 1903: 2-3.

natural synthesis (p. 1) as 'the selective use of artistic resources and forms from Nigerian/African and European traditions.' The 'Synthesis' concept provided a powerful framework for major experiments in postcolonial African art, but its return as an analytical platform is problematic because it proposes a clear demarcation between Africa and modernity and reiterates the idea of an Africa outside of history. Africa was involved in the global world order from its emergence in the 15th century, and we can read Africa's cultural developments in a cumulative manner that recognizes how global conditions change local contexts. If art from the Edo Kingdom of Benin has been working out the implications of contact with Europe since the 15th century, we cannot posit it as an autonomous context of traditional art practice. In contrast, the concept of Natural Synthesis overlooks Africa's location in global space and interprets African traditions as autonomous unchanging contexts of cultural production.

Ideally, Natural Synthesis requires an active amalgamation of African and European forms in modern African art. Seen through the ideology of Pan-Africanism, it built upon Negritude's call for recovering Africa's cultural heritage undermined by colonialism. Negritude describes various movements for rehabilitating black African culture in the wake of colonialism. If we define Pan-Africanism as the global dimension of black consciousness ideology, then we can interpret Negritude and Natural Synthesis as specific movements within this larger ideology. However, *Postcolonial Modernism* interpreted Negritude as a racial ideology and uses Kwame Nkrumah's African Personality movement as a counterweight to its racial aesthetics and prescriptions. It posits that, contrary to Negritude's 'proposal for an atavistic return to an imagined precolonial, pristine condition, African personality implied an active process of subject formation based on appropriated elements from traditional / indigenous and modern / Western cultures, politics and practices' (p 95). Given that the idea of synthesis was dominant in this era (between 1946 and 1960), Natural Synthesis cannot be seen as a new development.

Okeke-Agulu's argument that there were no visual artists in the Negritude movement overlooks Enwonwu's involvement with this group, which he joined in 1946 at the invitation of Leopold Senghor, one of the group's founders. From 1950 onwards (at the height of his global fame), his art highlighted Negritude within the larger context of Pan-Africanism and his practice provided young African artists with a visual framework for engaging these issues. However, Okeke-Agulu dismissed interpretations of Negritude by visual artists such as Enwonwu and artists of the Ecole de Dakar, specifically Papa Ibra Tall, as racial aesthetics (p. 98) by reading Enwonwu through his black female nudes and African dancers. In contrast, we should always read Enwonwu's critical position through his sculpture and paintings of masquerades (and through his copious writing on African art) since the metaphysical basis of his modernist expression is most legible therein. Enwonwu argued for a form of modern art based on African cultural registers that accommodated iterations in Africa and its global diaspora. That he chose to

approach this process through representation of masquerades is meaningful considering the immense importance of masking and masquerade performances in shaping Nigerian societies in the colonial and early postcolonial period. Enwonwu's reliance on Igbo aesthetics thus precluded his devolution into a purely racist practice of art. Defining his art in this manner does injury to the historical record and invalidates efforts by modern African artists to focus on culturally relevant representation.

VIII

The ideological program of global art history, according to Kobena Mercer (2005: 8), foregrounds a matrix in which identities are constantly modifying one another in their moment of mutual encounter. For Sonia Khullar (*as per Said*), this act of being formally connected recasts modernism as a process of affiliation, which denotes a historical process by which a national art world became conjoined with an international art world. *Postcolonial Modernism* does an excellent job of tracking the international interactions that framed Zairianist art of the independence era. However, it also makes clear their artworks reproduced/appropriated Euromodernist styles while emphasizing subject matter focused on '...genre, traditional African, and the occasional Christian themes' (p. 99). Their reliance on Euromodernist forms proved conflicting to Enwonwu, who criticized Zairianist art for normalizing Euromodernist aesthetics rather than searching for uniquely African responses to modernism.³² This practice, he concluded, subverted the Pan-African ideal of cultural emancipation in favour of a recolonization of the African mind. Zairianist art thus re-affirms the Euromodernist style with its white supremacist ideologies and colonization of abstraction as *the* style of an international modern art.³³ *Postcolonial Modernism* concedes this position, noting that, in some pictures (p.100), '[Uche] Okeke combines the structural serendipity of Igbo-carved face masks with an expressive palette. *In so doing, he arrives at a pictorial language redolent... of early twentieth-century European modernist painting*' (my emphasis). He also notes that Okeke's approaches to colour, form, and composition, all in various ways allude to his interest in the visual rhetoric of the early European avant-garde. He therefore concludes that 'close analysis...reveals that the painting style of the Art Society group did not so much reflect a thorough grounding in Nigerian artistic traditions as show these artists grappling with the formal lessons of the work of European symbolists, postimpressionists, and later modernists. This raises crucial questions about the relationship between praxis and rhetoric, between

³² Ben Enwonwu, 'Into the Abstract Jungle.'

³³ Roger Denson, 'Colonizing Abstraction: MoMA's Inventing Abstraction show denies its ancient global origins'. *Huffington Post*, February 3, 2015
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/colonizing-abstraction-mo_b_2683159 (accessed September 5, 2019)

desire and reality' (p.99). Okeke-Agulu argues that Zarianists reliance on Euromodernist aesthetics is countered by their amalgamation of Western and African motifs and symbols.

The fact that Zarianist art re-centred Western modernism as the key signifier of their global engagement reiterates the question of whether there is any other way in which African subjects can emerge into modernity outside of framing their work in association or contestation with Euromodernist styles and discourses. Enwonwu posited a combination of Pan-Africanism with the numinous affect of indigenous arts – its reliance on African spirituality and cultural registers – as a viable alternative. This notion of Pan-Africanism does not reject Western ideas or protocols of art making; however, it insists that such synthesis occur through an analytic study of traditional African forms and symbolism followed by a synthetic adaptation to contemporary painting, sculpture and other art forms. This process pursues the thorough grounding in Nigerian traditions reflected in Enwonwu's art, and that of many African and African Diaspora artists whose modernism was based on figurative imagery rather than abstraction it also validates the use of African cultural registers.

The conceptual frameworks of Pan-Africanism and Euromodernism point to competing ideologies and narratives of modernism in African art. In Euromodernist ideology, modernism emerges in the West, and non-Western modernisms reflect the indigenization of its principal forms, styles, and discourse. *Postcolonial Modernism* posits a non-hierarchical interpretation of modernism that allows for divergent developments in different time periods based on notions of affiliation and plurality. This claim imposes contemporary notions of global relations on historical issues. To promote the idea of non-hierarchical cultural engagements in the colonial and postcolonial era is to deny the significant power of Western imperialism in the colonial period when the very framing of the concept of the 'modern world' equated with Western technologies and discourses as objects of desire. In contrast, the ideology of Pan-Africanism interrogates the unequal power relations of colonialism and its impact on the status of the African subject (i.e. African and African Diaspora peoples) in the metaphysics of modernity. It affirms Africa's location as a global agent of modernity and is concerned about salvaging black agency within a global culture of white supremacy. Artists in all parts of global Africa resisted their exclusion from global history by reaching back to the continent for symbolic imagery and conceptual frameworks. For these artists, indigenous Africa's deep historical roots challenged the Western dogma that Africans had no history or culture. In the visual arts, Pan-Africanism demanded the development of cultural narratives that recognized the modernity of indigenous forms of art and cultural production and acknowledge, though not fetishize, the impact of Western cultural norms.

Colonial culture (and the postcolonial imperium of Cold War *pax Americana*) actively worked against the Pan-African effort to produce a politically and culturally aware global African subject. Through culture brokers like Beier, the

effort promoted the abstract art of European modernists as *the* canonical style of modernism, and derided all other engagements with modernist aesthetics, discourse, and technologies as parochial. Colonial culture also worked to marginalize an emergent global black nationalism. Euromodernism framed postcolonial African art as belated emulations of established styles and models. The contemporary shift to globalism as a paradigm of analysis returns the field of modern African art to questions of definition that begin always by justifying the validity of African modernist practices. This in turn narrates how postcolonial artists encountered, hybridized, disrupted, and in other ways engaged Euromodernism as a principal scaffolding of global aesthetics. How 'global' is this turn if it effaces the struggle to define an African/Black protocol of artistic engagement through which one might challenge the hegemony of Euromodernist representation? The Natural Synthesis of the Zaria Art Society artists does not resolve this issue, which might explain why Okeke-Agulu took great pains to avoid any discussion of Enwonwu's Pan-Africanist model of modern art and its operations in a global context. Effacing the older artist from reckoning allows *Postcolonial Modernism* to posit Euromodernist abstraction as a model for modern Nigerian art that naturally developed from an earlier focus on anti-colonial practices by African intellectuals. In essence, it refuses to acknowledge the decades modern African artists like Enwonwu, Aferwek Tekle, Uzo Egonu (to some extent), Iba Ndiaye, and Gerald Sekoto spent championing Africa-centred conceptions of modern art and global black subjectivity.

IX

Postcolonial Modernism indicted the colonial order for standing in the way of African progress and posited the African intellectual's will to self-definition as a counter to colonial adaptationist policies. Similarly, it celebrates Zarianist agency in debates about modernism, and cultural identity in the years after the attainment of political independence. It emphasizes their will to self-definition, defined by their own need for self-assertion and their visions of political and cultural autonomy. The book fails to determine how an aesthetic of Pan-Africanism challenged the Euromodernist model. It is therefore problematic that the author appeals to Pan-Africanism and Negritude to rescue Zarianist aesthetics from their reliance on Euromodernist styles, syntax, and models of modern art. I want to suggest that Zarianist agency (their will to self-definition) was subverted by the power relations at play in this period, especially in how cold war ideologies and the critical agency of culture broker Beier in particular shaped mid-twentieth century Nigerian modernism. The impact of this subversion was as pernicious as the intransigence of the colonial order, since both essentially tried to lock modern African artists into parochial mannerist protocols of representation.

Beier was ubiquitous in African cultural politics in the immediate postcolonial period, from 1960 to 1966. While teaching English at Nigeria's

University of Ibadan, he worked as a writer, culture broker, entrepreneur, academic, editor, and energetic promoter of African arts and letters.³⁴ It was less known that Beier also channelled funds from the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), through which the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) intervened to redirect art in postcolonial countries away from Pan-Africanism and Soviet Communist support towards US prescriptions of neoliberalism. Beier's involvement with CCF funding necessitates a re-evaluation of his work in postcolonial Africa—even if only to question how the propaganda aspects of Cold War politics actively shaped the artistic and intellectual culture he championed in the period after independence.

Modern art was a weapon in the cold war struggle for global supremacy between the Western and Communist blocs.³⁵ The CIA was the most active and influential patron of African Anglophone cultural production during the 1960s, using funds channelled through the CCF.³⁶ Frances Saunders notes that the decision to include culture and art in the US Cold War arsenal was taken as soon as the CIA was founded in 1947. 'Dismayed at the appeal communism still had for many intellectuals and artists in the West, the new agency set up a division, the *Propaganda Assets Inventory*, which at its peak influenced more than 800 newspapers, magazines and public information organizations. They joked that it was like a Wurlitzer jukebox: when the CIA pushed a button it could hear whatever tune it wanted playing across the world.'³⁷ After CIA involvement with cultural propaganda became public in 1966, CCF was renamed the International Association for Cultural Freedom (IACF) and remained involved in the cultural affairs of postcolonial countries, especially in Africa.

CCF's propaganda created ideologically conflated notions of artistic freedom and forms. From its headquarters in Paris, it subsidized countless cultural programs from Latin America to Africa and Southeast Asia, developing a network of journals, conferences, and exhibitions that advanced a 'universal' language of modernism in literature, art, and music.³⁸ The program supported a generation of postcolonial African intellectuals – Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, Rajat Neogy and, through Beier, the Zarianists. These writers and artists were major players in the two most important postcolonial journals of African writing and art,

³⁴ Kaye Whiteman, 'Ulli Beier Obituary,' the *Guardian*, May 24, 2011 <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/may/24/ulli-beier-obituary> (accessed October 12, 2018).

³⁵ Frances Stornor Saunders, 'Modern Art was CIA Weapon.' *The Independent*, Saturday 21 October, 1995. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/modern-art-was-cia-weapon-1578808.html> (accessed November 29, 2017).

³⁶ Peter Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

³⁷ Saunders, 1995.

³⁸ Haus der Kulturen Welt, 'Parapolitics: Cultural Freedom and the Cold War, Nov, 3 2017-Jan. 8, 2018.' http://www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/2017/parapolitics/parapolitics_start.php (accessed Nov 25, 2017)

Black Orpheus and *Transition*, both funded by the CCF in its efforts to bolster America's image in countries the CIA itself destabilized with coups, assassinations, and other forms of illegal interventions. As an organization notorious for undermining democracy in the name of fighting communism, it was important that the CIA source of CCF's funding program was hidden from the recipients.

Nigeria was impacted by the CIA's interventions in postcolonial artistic and literary endeavours through Beier's role as a principal interlocutor who literally spoke for contemporary African artists in the independence decade. Okeke-Agulu correctly notes that Ulli Beier was the single most influential figure in articulating artistic modernism in postcolonial Nigeria, and the most reliable source of funding for artistic and cultural projects. He founded *Mbari*, a platform for postcolonial cultural discourse through which he invited many African American and foreign writers and artists to engage with their Nigerian counterparts. He organized major exhibitions and also founded highly influential journals such as *Odu*, a scholarly journal of Yoruba studies, and *Black Orpheus*, which brought African writers and artists of the postcolonial period to global attention. Above all, he published many articles that framed the new postcolonial art according to CCF propaganda prescriptions.

Can we read Beier in isolation from his role as a tool of CIA propaganda? How should this fact impact our understanding of his cultural brokerage? I suggest it at least explains some of the more curious aspects of Beier's role as interlocutor. These include his hasty dismissal of Nigerian artists invested in Pan-Africanism, such as Enwonwu and Lasekan, as anachronistic colonial relics, and his penchant for disguising some of his critical interventions by adopting Yoruba *noms de guerre* such as Obotunde Ijimere, Akanji, Omidiji Aragbabalu under which he published subversive criticisms of modern Nigerian art and culture. Beier's adoption of Yoruba names was a classic methodology of espionage. Okeke-Agulu (p.134) contends Beier did this to avoid being singled out as a Yoruba person, but perhaps it was because he realized that clear evidence of his intrusive presence in the discourse might cause greater challenge to his ideas, many of which –given his involvement with the CCF– were not in the best interest of Nigerian postcoloniality.

I have argued that Murray's location in colonial culture should not cause us to dismiss his prescriptions for Nigerian art as racist. In that regard I am not arguing that Beier's CCF's funding should cause us to dismiss his important interventions in postcolonial Nigerian art, or that it indicts the Zarianists he championed. I, however, insist that Beier channelled a notion of postcolonial modernism in Nigeria based on CIA propaganda prescriptions, especially regarding his celebration of Euromodernist prescriptions as the canonical visual form of global modernism. Beier's journal, *Black Orpheus*, was funded by the CCF program and from the onset, prescribed a new orientation for Nigerian art. His tenure as editor of the journal from (1957-1966) coincided with the heyday of US propaganda funding of postcolonial projects. Although these dates closely map *Postcolonial Modernism's*

decade long analysis of Zarianist art, Okeke-Agulu glosses over the implications of Beier's involvement with CCF's cultural propaganda.

Black Orpheus was established in 1957 as a journal of African and Afro-American literature, and was originally edited by the Nigerian novelist Wole Soyinka and the South African writer Es'kia Mphahlele.³⁹ The *Black Orpheus* inaugural editorial, written by Beier, declared its intention to encourage new African writing and study 'the great traditions of oral literature of African tribes (sic). For it is on the heritage of the past, that the literature of the future must be based.'⁴⁰ However, in his inaugural art-related *Black Orpheus* essay, Beier promoted neither traditional African oral literature nor art; he focused instead on the modernist experiments of his then-wife, Suzanne Wenger (1915-2009), in the ritual context of Oshogbo religious art. Soon after their arrival in Nigeria, Wenger had become a priestess of the Osun religion in Oshogbo. Beier narrated Wenger as primary exemplar of what he thought contemporary African art should be, rating her insertion into Oshogbo ritual protocols much higher than Enwonwu's ongoing advocacy for a new Nigerian art.

Okeke-Agulu argues the 'cultural and literary arguments of Negritude impacted and shaped mid-twentieth century Nigerian art artistic modernism through the critical agency of Ulli Beier in particular' (p. 132). Beier, however did not promote Zarianist artwork as a logical evolution of negritude ideals. Instead, writing as Akanji, he positioned Wenger as *the* true face and ultimate realization of negritude aesthetics and thereby subverts negritude's original demand to centre Africans at the sites of their own creativity. Okeke-Agulu claims that '[T]o Beier, Wenger's work exemplified a progressive and radical interpolation of negritude ethos into the artistic sensibilities of European modernism,'⁴¹ even though there is no evidence of Wenger's involvement with negritude prior to her arrival in Nigeria.

Okeke-Agulu identifies Wenger as one of the European artists disillusioned by the failure of technological progress who subsequently 'embarked on a journey to re-establish a connection with the irrational, mysterious life forces tragically lost by modern Europe.'⁴² Wenger was thus a primitivist and her performance of primitivism is reflected in how she reinterpreted the ritual imagery of the Osun grove to reflect primitivist aesthetics while using resources derived in part from Beier's CCF connections. This reconfiguration of Osogbo cultural heritage through

³⁹ For a comprehensive evaluation of the journal, see Peter Benson, *Black Orpheus, Transition, and Modern Cultural Awakening in Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

⁴⁰ *Black Orpheus*, no. 1: 4.

⁴¹ *Postcolonial Modernism*, 134.

⁴² *Postcolonial Modernism*, 134.

foreign models of symbolic imagery complicates Nigerian perception of her artistic legacy.⁴³

Beier had thus already established a Euromodernist template for his cultural activism by the time he began to promote the works of members of the Zaria Art Society. Nkiru Nzegwu notes that Beier drew heavily from a German expressionist framework animated by stereotypical views of African's primitive nature and foisted this aesthetic view on Nigeria's modern art.⁴⁴ He reconstructed the history of Nigerian art by subsuming it under a unitary hegemonic narrative of European-inflected modernism. In this manner, Beier tied his concept of postcolonial modernism to European modes of visual representation and Euromodernist formulations.

Postcolonial Modernism, like Beier, positions the Zarianists within a globalizing postcolonial discourse that frames their work not in relation to engagements with any Pan-African focus, or African ideas about art and cultural production, but through a Euromodernism championed by Beier's CIA-inflected cultural brokerage. Enwonwu concluded that Beier's advocacy and the machinations of cold-war politics subverted the anti-colonial aspirations of African countries in the decade of independence. He therefore contested expatriate control of the narrative and discourse of modern Nigerian art in the postcolonial period as an inversion of Negritude ideology. In this, he did not negate the importance of African artists working within global networks or accepting funding from foreign agents. Rather he saw Beier's advocacy as an attempt to impose on young Nigerian artists an ideology of form that merely rehashed established Western protocols of modernist expression.

The issue here is not only that the CIA funded cultural propaganda, but also that, through European culture brokers such as Beier, the agency subverted efforts by colonial and postcolonial African artists and intellectuals to develop Pan-African modes of cultural representation that foregrounded African cultural registers. Instead, Beier's culture brokerage directed postcolonial African artists to Euromodernist aesthetics that positioned them as secondary players on a global stage. *Postcolonial Modernism's* analysis of Zarianist art acknowledges the overwhelming impact of Western appropriation on their paintings but defends it as an initial step toward the realization of their ideal of Natural Synthesis. In the immediate postcolonial period in which Enwonwu accused Beier of leading the Zarianists 'into the abstract jungle', however, he was entirely correct that their works hewed too closely to canonical Euromodernist aesthetics, and therefore negated the search for new postcolonial forms of African cultural expression that was the primary objective of the 1956 Bandung conference's decolonization platform.

⁴³ Wenger is equally praised and criticized by Oshogbo peoples for her revisualization of the Osun grove. See Peter Probst, *Oshogbo and the Art of Heritage: Monuments, Deities, and Money*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011.

⁴⁴ Nzegwu 2001: 395.

Beier's dalliance with the Zarianists was ultimately superseded by his distrust of formal education for African artists, contrary to the genealogy of formal education that *Postcolonial Modernism* inked from Onobolu to the Zarianists. According to Okeke-Agulu, Beier believed that 'colonial (and any) formal education subjected African artists to a doctrinaire system that claimed their individuality and in so doing thwarted their access to progressive developments in contemporary art, specifically surrealism and expressionism' (p. 136). He subsequently promoted the works of mentally ill individuals, which he thought showed enough compelling artistic talent to demonstrate a link between mental illness and artistic originality. In this, he channelled the primitivist logic of modernism's perception of African art. The idea of sidelining formally educated African artists in favour of mentally ill patients validates the idea that African art is an innate creative expression devoid of any intellectual framework. In pursuit of this objective, Beier moved his Mbari program to Oshogbo, where it could focus on informally trained Nigerian artists and he could advance his vision of the African artists as a creature of nature rather than culture. Lack of analysis of the implications of Beier's obvious investment in regressive primitivism is thus a great failure of *Postcolonial Modernism*.

The crisis between Enwonwu, Beier, and the Zarianists came to a head in the Nigerian Art Exhibition of 1960. In his official role as Art Adviser to the Nigerian government, Enwonwu was central to debates about the future of postcolonial Africa and was strident in his concern that foreign interlocutors were taking control of postcolonial Nigerian art and its discourses. Okeke-Agulu notes that such concern led Enwonwu to resign his position as curator of the Nigerian pavilion in a letter to the Federal Ministry of Education dated July 29, 1960, stating that the Ministry of Commerce and Industry 'had decided to dispense with his services in connection with the exhibition of Arts and Crafts...and [they] have preferred a European who is not an artist to undertake the Exhibition Organization' (p. 141). Footnoting this important detail allows the author to avoid analysis of the important criticism Enwonwu mounted against Beier's culture brokerage, which he saw as undermining both the very grounds of cultural autonomy and, more importantly, the ability of postcolonial Africans to determine their own fates. In this context, Enwonwu represented the radical position (what the author called 'Enwonwu's high-profile onslaught') that Africans should take control of their creative destiny and that the Zarianists were merely being used as pawns in power games mounted by the white colonialist power structure. Onobolu's absence from the Nigerian Pavilion of the 1960 exhibition shows he agreed in principle with Enwonwu's criticism.

X

In the later chapters of the book, Okeke-Agulu evaluates the role of various organizations and art societies in Nigerian art and acknowledges Enwonwu's centrality to ongoing postcolonial debates over the role of expatriate culture brokers,

especially in the conflict over the white-dominated Nigerian Council for the Advancement of Art and Culture (NCAAC). In this, he accepts the fact that Enwonwu was equally involved in charting the post-independence enunciation of modern art and discourse, and that his involvement is necessary for a nuanced reading of the postcolonial moment. Okeke-Agulu initially relegates Enwonwu to the periphery as an artist of the colonial period but later recovers him into his analysis of Nigerian modernity (*sans* validation of Enwonwu's modernist experiments) when it became clear that Enwonwu's important critical interventions from 1956 to 1964 could not be ignored.

The latter sections of *Postcolonial Modernism* also alternate between analysis of visual arts and literary discourses. In its pursuit of a postcolonial framework for interpreting Zarianist art, *Postcolonial Modernism* emphasizes how modern African intellectuals engaged in literary discourses and provides a very narrow and selective interpretation of how discursive positions taken by Zarianist artists translated into actual artistic practice. It used their artworks to confirm discursive positions rather than investigate how artists explored such positions through specific forms of visual representation. The problem here is that 'reading' visual culture not only tends to conflate the history of art with the treatment of history by contemporary artists, but also that the formalistic, aesthetic and historical dimensions of the work of art as a mode of modernist visibility is made secondary to the variety of 'meanings' that the interpreter can find in it. The focus on form in modernism was paramount and therefore not reducible to narratives about theories of artistic practice even if these abounded in the self-representation of modern artists.

Postcolonial Modernism's appeal to literary discourses as a framework for analysing Zarianist art falters since many of the critical treatises the author cites to bolster the discursive sophistication of the Zarianists are belied by the evidence of artworks that reflected a less radical orientation. The author repeatedly states that the Zarianists were unaware of such critical texts, which suggests their art is being miscategorized into an existing theoretical framework instead of deriving from evidence of the work itself. For example, the author notes Okeke was not familiar with Freudian psychoanalysis, Hegelian logic, and Marxian dialectics, and that he is 'not aware of any direct knowledge on the part of Okeke and the Art Society of Fanon's work' (p. 91). Repeatedly, the author notes that Okeke (the principal theorist of the Zarianists) was not familiar with larger scale discursive interventions in the colonial and postcolonial discourses of African subjectivities and identities yet persists in ascribing these positions to the artist. It thus seems the issue here is how to make the actual historical facts fit with a globalist narrative that papers over such facts in favour of anachronistic interpretations of the past. This is a common failing of postcolonial scholarship, that it narrates subaltern populations often outside of the facts of their existence.

The latter chapters of *Postcolonial Modernism* presented granular analysis of the works of specific members of the Zaria Art Society and other postcolonial artists

and writers. As with previous sections, the author makes constant reference to specific Euromodernist artists in his analysis of the work of postcolonial African artists, but does not spare an equal focus on indigenous African art, to show how and in what form postcolonial artists referred to it (see p. 175 for example on comparison of Ahmed Shibrain's work with that of Hans Hartung). In this, the book encourages an interpretation of African art that marginalizes African values and aesthetics. For example, Okeke-Agulu theorizes *gesture* as a primary focus of Zarianist postcolonial modernism, which echoes a similar reliance on gesture as a defining element of abstract expressionism. However, the abstract expressionist idea of gesture differs considerably from Igbo/African interpretations of gesture as a form of embodiment through which the artist or ritual expert tunes into metaphysical/spiritual frequencies. Similarly, Okeke-Agulu's interpretation of Nwoko's *Adam and Eve* along the lines of Igbo dualistic imagery is faulty since the former foregrounds the hierarchy and gender inequity that frames the biblical model of male-female relationships while such gender inequity is absent in African models.

Okeke-Agulu shifted from analysis of artworks to analysis of literary discourse through references to literary debates of the independence era, which sought to resolve prevailing political and social issues through an examination of language and narrative. Soyinka and Achebe are novelists and poets, and one must assume they chose this path against other possibilities such as painting or sculpture. This is not an appeal to the old-fashioned idea that the various arts are hermetic but rather recognition of modern art's investment in particular forms/visualities of representation. Achebe was not a sculptor or painter; Enwonwu was, and though Enwonwu wrote trenchant criticism at various points of his career, he did not once assume that his expertise as a sculptor/painter allowed him liberties with literary criticism. Okeke-Agulu's reliance on literary discourses for his analysis can be defended by noting that Uche Okeke was a published poet and Bruce Onobrakpeya also wrote and continues to write poetry. In line with my earlier argument, though, to highlight their literary output against their visual art would require analysis of an African modernist literature in a lineage extending from Amos Tutuola, whose phantasmagoric English properly channels Yoruba panegyrics and thus is a good example of Natural Synthesis. This is, however, not the case.

XI

The beauty of the present moment in the discourse of African modern and contemporary art is that the extant literature is now adequately rich to allow authors to generate broader analytical overviews and narratives. This is a beneficial development for a field that is still bogged down in definitions and documentation of various practices. *Postcolonial Modernism* builds upon the accumulated knowledge of the field to produce an intelligent but flawed reading of Nigerian modern art. It is a brilliant social history of the independence decade of postcolonial Nigeria but it

doesn't quite work as a history of modern and contemporary art in Nigeria. Modernism in art already had a history in Nigeria. Most of the Nigerian artists who preceded the Zarianists were already global in their education and their careers largely unfolded within transnational contexts. The Zarianists were thus not unique in this process. *Postcolonial Modernism's* globalist focus is thus commendable but not unique. Its claim to uniqueness merely highlights an ongoing Western control of technologies of discourse, which disregard existing analysis to promote specific texts as the primary locale of discourse. *Postcolonial Modernism* is a book of its time, and could only have been published when it was. The first book on a modern Nigerian artist was written by Olu Oguibe and published by INIVA in London in 1995. It represented a significant advance in the discourse of African art history through its biographical focus on the modern art of the Nigerian artist Uzo Egonu, who moved to England permanently at the age of 15. It also established a contested premise that expatriate African artists who live and work in the West represent the truest expression of African modernism and contemporaneity. The esteemed curator Okwui Enwezor (1963 – 2019) pushed this premise to problematic conclusions by interpreting contemporary African art mainly in terms of expatriate artists in the first decade of his career (this position changed in his later work as a curator). My book on Ben Enwonwu was the first to evaluate a Nigerian artist's engagements with modernist practices and discourses on a transnational stage. It combined Oguibe's biographical focus with a critical analysis of Enwonwu art and career within a discourse of modernism, from Enwonwu's Igbo/colonial cultural origins to his eventual global success and postcolonial practice. *Postcolonial Modernism* is the third book in this vein, and it positions the Zarianists within a similar globalizing postcolonial discourse but not in relation to extant evaluations of the development of specific languages of visual expression in African modern art. Prompted by its author's assertions, the publisher lauded its publication as a defining moment for the discourse of African art history. It is indeed, but only to the extent that we recognize its achievements and shortcomings. It is also notable that none of these books are in wide circulation in Nigeria or any other part of Africa.

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