Synergising pedagogies and styles: the collaborative works of Nike Okundaye and Tola Wewe

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Asọ funfun ni ńsunkán aró,
Ị̀jìnle ọrọ ni nsunkun èkèji tan-tan-tan-an.

The bare white cloth constantly yearns for embellishment,
Esoteric words loudly demand complements.

Introduction

The above Yorùbá proverb describes the compulsion of the traditional Yorùbá cloth-dyer or woodcarver to fill blank spaces with motifs, patterns and designs. The same expression explains the impromptu reaction of Nike Okundaye (formerly known as Nike Davies or Nike Davies-Okundaye) — who works as both an artist and art dealer — to add motifs and patterns to artworks brought to her for sale by fellow Nigerian artist, Tola Wewe. Okundaye felt that Wewe’s works needed more surface embellishments, as there were sizeable bare spaces in the paintings, so she went ahead to add details to these works. She recalls:

Nígbàtì mo rí àwon isé tí wón kó wá, morí wipe mo si lè fí isé ọná kun.
Láìro ñkankan àti láì bèèrè lọwọ Tólá Wewe mo mú irinsé wa mo sì fí àwon isé ọná kun.

Meaning:
When I saw the works that were brought by Tola Wèwe, I observed that there were too many empty spaces and I felt I could add some more decorative motifs, without thinking again or asking him, I picked up my brushes and added decorative motifs.¹

¹ Nike Okundaye, interviewed by Akande Abiodun and Akinwale Onipede, Lagos, Nigeria, May 22, 2019. Ọná in Yorùbá may be directly interpreted to mean art, but it is also used to mean design patterns, when it is used in this way it is called iṣẹ ọná (the work of art).
While the two artists had previously worked together on the same canvas, on this inspired occasion the collaboration was unplanned. Despite not being consulted, Wewe admitted that he was impressed when he saw the outcome. After this occurrence, the two agreed to collaborate, and since 2009 they have painted many canvasses together. According to Wewe, they have had three exhibitions where they displayed their collaborative works. Collaborations such as this, where two or more plastic artists work on the same picture plane, are not common in Nigeria. However, the collaboration and relationship that started spontaneously has blossomed and paintings done by the duo are among the best-selling artworks in the Nigerian art market. The two artists have built up a body of collaborative work that is worthy of interrogation.

By western standards, where art is most commonly associated with the ‘individualistic, singular genius,’ Okundaye’s act of painting on an already finished canvas by Wewe is unethical. However, Okundaye’s reaction has historical precedents in traditional arts of the Yoruba (a cultural group to which the two artists belong). Sydney Kasfir observes that much of what is today called African Art is the result of a series of bombardments of alien culture and influences on Africa. She points out that African art is a ‘bricolage’ of experiences from slavery, missionary activities, colonialism and the resulting urbanisation from European intrusions in Africa. It is the domination of African art by western art conventions that calls for the condemnation of Okundaye’s reaction. Ordinarily, in many African traditional arts, the principles of many artistic genres encourage collaborative production. Susan Vogel writes that what is seen as African art in the present time is ‘Africa Digesting the West.’ She specifically points out that:

> European military and political domination during the colonial period enforced countless changes... The lives of ordinary people everywhere on the continent have been affected by the advance of Islam and Christianity, urbanization, Western-style education...

Vogel conjectures that what we find in African art today is an ongoing adaptation of the exotic cultural imposition by the West on Africa. Okundaye’s reaction, as described above,

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3 Glenn Zorpette, “Dynamic Duos,” ARTnews 93, no.6 (Summer 1994), 165.
is a testimony to the fact that in the process of Africa’s adaptation and ‘digesting’ the West, the urge, feel and concept of traditional art are still latent in Africans and assert themselves when the need arises. The situation that presented itself to Okundaye was similar to what she had encountered before with àdùrì éléko — an extant traditional collaborative art practice for which Okundaye is popularly known — and she responded without hesitation.⁶

Àdùrì éléko is a traditional Yorùbá cloth that is produced by men and women.⁷ This collaborative art is done in stages by different sets of artists. The person that does the stencilling may not necessarily be the one that waxes, and the person waxing may not be the one that will dye. In fact, Yorùbá traditionalists believe that the èlú dye must be applied exclusively by women who have reached menopausal age. When stamp patterns are used for àdùrì éléko⁸ the cutting of the stamps and stamping with wax or corn-paste (èkọ) are done by men, while women thereafter dye the cloth.⁹ It was in this type of collective art environment that Okundaye was brought up by parents who were àdùrì éléko producers themselves.

Kunle Filani corroborates the fact that traditional Yorùbá works of art are usually profusely decorated with motifs and patterns.¹⁰ Yorùbá sculptors and àdùrì makers are fond of ornamenting bare surfaces. After carving the general forms of an object, the Yorùbá traditional woodcarver embellishes blank spaces on the object. For example, the friezes of opόn Ifá, the bodies and pedestals of most traditional sculptures are profusely decorated with geometric, abstract, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic motifs. Likewise, the àdùrì éléko producer and calabash carvers fill empty spaces with motifs and patterns. Okundaye claims that her work and that of Wewe are not too far apart in the use of ọnà (traditional Yorùbá decorative motifs). She points out that although Wewe works with oil and acrylic paints on canvas and was trained in the western academic art style, he continues to employ ọnà motifs in his works and that she, as a traditional tie-dye batik artist, also uses similar motifs.


⁷ Àdùrì éléko is a traditional Yorùbá pattern dyed cloth. Resist substance such as yam or cassava paste is used to block out areas where the dyer does not want the dyestuff to penetrate the cloth. The blocking out is done with various motifs and patterns chosen from a gamut but limited repertoire of meaningful motifs. Other areas are left to absorb the dye. After dying, the paste is removed to reveal the contrasting areas without dye.

⁸ Stamp patterns and the use of wax for resist are modern innovations in the dying of àdùrì éléko. Àdùrì means tie-dye, while the word éléko means ‘with corn-paste’. Therefore, the meaning of the entire nomenclature is ‘tie-dye with corn-paste’.


Although such collaborations are rare among contemporary Nigerian artists, there have been instances where artists have worked jointly with works co-signed by the parties concerned. Examples include those of Sam Ovraiti and Peter Ohiwerei’s collaborative watercolour paintings that were well known in Lagos in the mid-1990s. This collaboration did not last long. Ovraiti reveals that Ohiwerei was his student and mentee at Auchi Polytechnic, Nigeria.\(^1\) After Ohiwerei’s graduation, they jointly produced paintings. Another collaboration was that of Jelili Atiku and members of the Movement for Creative Drawing (MCD). The group jointly produced a drawing that condemned the September 11 terrorist attack on the United States. This work was presented to the United States Consulate in Lagos. Members of the Black Heritage group, numbering about thirty, also jointly produced a painting that they presented to Globacom Telecommunications Company in appreciation of its sponsorship of the Lagos Black Heritage Festival in 2010; the work was signed by all involved in its production.

There are also examples — especially concerning the production of monumental artworks — that were executed by several artists working alongside the main artist who was commissioned for the work. In such cases, it is usually the main artist who takes sole credit for the work. The other participants are considered as support assistants and they are assumed to have only rendered physical manpower.

The present study showcases an extraordinary Nigerian example of ongoing collaborations between two art personages. Both artists reside in the western part of Nigeria. Okundaye oscillates between Lagos and Osogbo where she owns art galleries, while Wewe lives and has his studio in Ondo, a town located north of Lagos; but mostly exhibits and sells his work in Lagos.

**Theoretical typology of the collaboration between Wewe and Okundaye**

Collaboration itself is a concept that lends itself to various activities and debates. Sociologist Howard Becker postulates that the artist ‘works in the centre of a network of cooperating people, all of whose work is essential to the final outcome.’ Becker does not necessarily point at object-based artworks; his postulation encompasses plastic and performative art. However, from his perspective, all art, one way or the other, becomes collaborative.\(^2\) Sculptor Nancy Holt defines ‘correlative’ collaboration as when artists

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‘inform’ the works of each other. Unfortunately, Holt does not clarify the degree of influence or how much an artist can ‘inform’ the work of another to qualify him to also sign the work, as opposed to merely rendering technical support. Joan Marter who, interviewed Holt, discusses ‘object-centred’ collaborations, which she defines as a situation where artists work together on a single piece of artwork. Such a collaboration requires the two artists to jointly contribute to the concept and the execution. The collaboration between Wewe and Okundaye combines elements of Marter’s ‘object-centred’ classification with Holt’s notion of correlative collaboration. The artists work independently on painting an object of art with their individual approaches informing each other’s contributions.

**Training backgrounds of Tola Wewe and Nike Okundaye**

The crux of the present research is that the two artists discussed here are products of the two major art training backgrounds available in the contemporary Nigerian art scene. In Nigeria, some artists are considered academic artists while others are seen as workshop artists. The academic artists are artists who have formal education in art. Such artists studied art in universities and polytechnics, where western academic art educational training methods are employed in the inculcation of the canonical understanding of art. Academic art was introduced into the Nigerian education system as a result of the incursion of the West into Africa and the resulting colonisation of Nigeria. Tertiary level academic art schools in Nigeria started in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. Wewe is a product of academic training. He trained at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife) and the University of Ibadan, both in Nigeria. After graduation, he and other University of Ife art graduates such as Kunle Filani, Moyo Okediji, Bolaji Campbell and Babatunde Nasiru launched the *Ọnà* art group, comprising painters, graphic artists and ceramicists. *Ọnà* is an art movement that promotes the use of traditional Yoruba art motifs as sources of inspiration or embellishments in art.

Coupled with Wewe’s academic training, his other formative experiences include his experience as the resident artist at the Rasha Frames Gallery — a sister company to

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Signature Art Gallery, Lagos — in 1993. There he worked with Rasha, a Lebanese art dealer based in Nigeria. At that time, Rasha was one of the most successful art dealers in Lagos. Many artists visited Signature Art Gallery to frame or market their works. Wewe was a juror in deciding what the gallery accepted or rejected. This experience expanded his understanding of art and art marketing beyond what he was taught in school. At that point, he learnt how he could package his creativity in a way that would be acceptable in the market. The Signature Art Gallery experience exposed Wewe to a broad range of African art styles and helped him in creating a unique style in his works.

Due to his academic art training, Wewe’s drawings reflect the skill of one who is knowledgeable in human anatomy, proportion, perspective and other fundamental skills of a draughtsman as exemplified in *Iye Boabo* and *Waiting for Mr. Governor* (figs 1 and 2). However, on occasions, he does deliberate distortions to express or communicate a specific theme or subject, as found in *Power of Women* and *Marriage* (figs 3 and 4).

In contrast to the academic artists, workshop artists are mostly non-formally educated persons who have benefitted from any of a series of training attempts organised by individuals, religious and government bodies between the 1940s and 1970s as attempts to resuscitate traditional art in Nigeria. Well known examples include the workshop established at Oye-Ekiti (1947), the Mbari Mbayo workshop at Osogbo (1962), the workshop initiated by Michael Cardew at Abuja (1953), and the Ori-Olokun workshop established at Ile-Ife (1970).

The intention of the founders of these workshops was to resuscitate traditional art in Nigeria. Technicians, young school leavers and others, or what Ulli Beier (the founder of the Osogbo workshop), refers to as ‘curious passers-by’, were recruited to produce works of art that were free of the encumbrances and regulations of the western canon, and which appealed to the organisers and the participants. One of the major aims of these workshops was to produce artists without previous western training in the genres of arts, whose perception of the arts was unrestrained by academic rules which were considered as hindrances to creativity. The Osogbo style drew on traditional Yoruba art forms, folklore and philosophy, but is intuitive, unrestricted and individualistic as artists were free to express themselves and did not follow guidelines and traditions. ‘Osogbo artists’, such as

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Taiwo Olaniyi (better known as Twin Seven-Seven), Jimoh Buraimoh, Rufus Ogundele, Muraina Oyelami and Susanne Wenger created an indelible landmark in the history of Nigerian art and have influenced others who also work in what has come to be an identifiably Osogbo art style.

Nike Okundaye, who is one of the most celebrated contemporary Nigerian artists, did not directly participate in any of the Mbari-Mbayo workshops at Osogbo. However, she tends to be considered a workshop or informally trained artist due to the fact that she was mentored by Twin Seven-Seven, her husband at the time. On the Nigerian art scene, artists trained by workshop artists are commonly considered workshop artists themselves. Her stylistic tendencies, which resemble those of other Osogbo artists, have further informed her association with workshop artists. From the examination of her typical works (figs 5, 6 and 7), it is undeniable that the features of Osogbo art are strong in Okundaye’s art style, an impact that continues to dominate the trajectory of her works.

However, while Okundaye can be viewed as a product of the Osogbo art school, or as a second-generation Osogbo artist, scholars such as Kim Marie Vaz and Onyinyechi Nkata, have traced her artistic history back to her mother who was an àdìre clothmaker.

Analysis of Tola Wewe and Nike Okundaye’s independent works

The individual styles of the two artists reflect their background and training. The Obafemi Awolowo University, where Wewe trained, had a subtle inclination towards Yorùbá art, probably as a result of its starting from the ashes of the Ori-Olokun workshop of the late 1960s. Traits of Ori-Olokun/Yorùbá art are noticeable in the works of Wewe and many other graduates of the University of Ife, such as Moyo Ogundipe, Moyo Okediji, Kunle Filani, Bolaji Campbell, Tunde Nasiru, Segun Ajiboye, Steve Folaranmi, Abiodun Akande and others. Wewe started like many Obafemi Awolowo University-trained painters doing stylised academic works as can be found in figs 1 and 2.

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20 Vaz, *The Woman with the Artistic Brush*.
Fig. 1: Tola Wewe, *Iye Boabo*. Oil on canvas, 90 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 2: Tola Wewe, *Waiting for Mr. Governor*. Oil on canvas, 90 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.
Due to other influences, such as his postgraduate training in African studies at the University of Ibadan and his stint as artist in residence at the Rasha Frames Gallery, Wewe heightened the infusion of African motifs into his paintings (figs 3 and 4), although not as profusely as Okundaye (figs 5 and 6). Wewe, perhaps as a result of his academic training leaves negative spaces in his works so that there will be breathing space for his forms. These are the spaces that attracted Okundaye.
Okundaye’s batik painting, produced as a wall hanging (fig. 5), follows the styles of other Osogbo artists. It shows multiple faces in frontal and profile composition, fused together. These human faces are more emblematic than biographical, they do not refer to any particular person or persons, and, the picture space is patterned rather than modelled. The tonal variation suggests that painterly values are intended more for aesthetic effect than to denote three-dimensionality of forms.
Adire eleko wrapper I and Adire eleko wrapper II (figs 6 and 7) are designs made for the production of wearable fabrics, a genre which may be described as Okundaye’s forte. These designs are derived from organic, geometric and cultural sources, freely patterned in no particular order but beautiful and organised. They reveal a noticeable penchant for decoration with every section filled with designs.

Mask and the Women of Old and The Tree of Life (figs 8 and 9) show Okundaye depicting life-like images instead of her famed designs and patterns. In Mask and the Women of Old, masks of different shapes and forms are painted and are suffused with designs. As with the other examples discussed, the entire picture space is filled with designs that complement

Fig. 8: Nike Okundaye, Mask and the Women of Old. Mixed media on board, 47 x 71 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 9: Nike Okundaye, The Tree of Life. Installation, 178.5 x 120.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

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the theme and aesthetics of the painting. The use of beads in this work references its innovative application as a painting medium by Osogbo artist Jimoh Buraimoh, *The Tree of Life* in the thickness and lushness of its vegetation alludes to the sacred Osun Osogbo, a major landmark in the city of Osogbo. In this example, she fills the pictorial space with intertwining tree stems and branches rather than patterns.

There is a natural stylistic and ideological meeting point between Okundaye and Wewe’s works. Wewe is ‘Osogbo’ at heart and can be described as an academically trained Osogbo artist who derives his inspiration, forms and imagery from Yoruba culture and lore. Despite his formal training at the University of Ife, he began the process of self-training and unlearning academic restrictions of exactitude which resulted in a distortion of forms and imagery, culminating in naïve, childlike but masterly expressions.

**A brief history of the collaboration**

Okundaye recalls that the first time she worked on the same canvas with Wewe was in California in 2000. The two artists were invited to a workshop where they were to produce works for display in a museum. When they discovered that they could not finish their large canvases on time, they decided to work jointly to hasten their completion. Wewe dates this event to 2003 or 2004. Whichever of the dates is correct, the significant observation is that their initial collaboration was borne out of necessity and not planned. The ‘context-specificity’ of their collaboration simply required a practical solution at a particular time. However, this experience cannot be ruled out as having played a part in inspiring and shaping the long-term collaboration that eventually resulted. Another collaborative experience recalled by the two artists was when they were invited by a group of expatriates to the Belgian embassy in Nigeria in 2009. They were to demonstrate painting and batik techniques. Wewe was obliged to leave before completing his paintings. With Wewe’s consent, Okundaye added motifs and patterns to his paintings.

The two experiences narrated above preceded their long-term engagement which commenced in earnest when, as described earlier, Wewe sent small paintings to Okundaye’s gallery in Lagos to be sold, and when Okundaye, without consulting Wewe, embellished these works with patterns. From that point, Wewe would start a painting in Ondo, deciding the theme, sketching the forms and figures, laying the colours and

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inserting some details. He would sign the painting and take it to Lagos for Okundaye to decorate with surface embellishments after which she would also append her signature.

Analysis of paintings from the collaboration

It is important to state from the onset that Wewe and Okundaye still do independent paintings that they sign individually. They only come together on selected works in which they explore the creative dimension of their combined talents.

Fig. 10: Nike Okundaye and Tola Wewe, *Feminine Power*. Mixed media, 81.3 x 68.6 cm. Courtesy of the artists.
Feminine Power (fig. 10) is one of the early products of their collaboration. It is a painting of six female figures, five of which are intertwined in a style that is typical of Wewe, in which figures are made to overlap and share features of one another. The central nude is accentuated through with an elegant pose and display of features that reinforce the theme of feminine power and sexuality. The other figures are subsumed into the profusely patterned background and are only differentiated by the delineation of lines and varied patterns, as found in Okundaye’s monochrome batiks but rendered here in multicolours.

Enraptured Desire (fig. 11) is a painting in which the forms are subdued and are less emphasised than the patterns. Whereas in Feminine Power Wewe’s trademark forms are clearly outlined and balanced with Okundaye’s decorations, there is an overriding emphasis on decorative patterning in Enraptured Desire. Apart from a gestural human
form dissolved in a maze of patterns, the entire pictorial space is alternated with variegated designs by Okundaye and Wewe. There is no attempt at painterliness and spatial definition with an overall greenish colour complimented by reds of different values and intensity. The beauty of this work is in the fusion and highlighting of the two artists decorative proclivities.

*Fig. 12: Nike Okundaye and Tola Wewe, Pillars of Love. Acrylic on canvas, 70 x 74 cm. Courtesy of the artists.*

*Pillars of Love* (fig. 12) follows a familiar romantic theme that is notable in Okundaye and Wewe’s collaborations. Six figures are set in a predominantly light blue scheme that is offset against a chequered patterned background of harmonious and contrasting colours. The two figures at the extreme right of the painting are entangled in passionate embrace while a headless female with elaborate waist beads and patterned body appears as if dropping from above, thereby culminating in an asymmetrical balancing of the picture space. The patterns on the human forms are thinned out, making the forms contrast with the heavy and kaleidoscopic background. There is a noticeable thinning down of Wewe’s thick outlines to a delicate and elegant consistency that adds a feminine touch, attributable to Okundaye.
In *Between Husband and Wife* (fig. 13), the hitherto subtle merging of Okundaye and Wewe’s collaborative efforts give way to easily identifiable individual traits. While Wewe’s heavy lines and strong colours demand attention, Okundaye’s subtle touch caresses the canvas, producing complementary patterns that add grace and substance. The two figures in the painting, representing husband and wife, are closely composed, overlapping each other, alluding to the Yorùbá proverb that if there is no gap or crack in a wall, lizards, as seen represented in the painting, cannot intrude. Okundaye and Wewe seem to be cautioning couples to be closely joined in their relationship to prevent intruders from destabilising it.
Conclusions

At the outset, the collaboration between Wewe and Okundaye was inspired by necessity and later by Okundaye's impromptu embellishment of Wewe's paintings. Glenn Zorpette observes that many artists who are in collaborations do not usually have strong individual identities outside of the collaboration. However, the collaboration between Wewe and Okundaye is an exception to this postulation, because the artists, before and after the collaboration, have their individual identities. Even in the process of collaboration, they have continued to paint as individual artists. They only come together on selected works in which they put to use their complementary creative inventiveness.

The present study carried out a thematic and stylistic analysis of Wewe and Okundaye's independent paintings and paintings they did collaboratively. In the process, three unique characteristic styles were identified; these are the two different styles of the artists as individuals and that of the combined one that comes into play when the two artists collaborate. However, interestingly, the researchers also observed some paintings by Okundaye, for example, *The Power of One Woman* and *Love Dance* (figs 14 and 15) that do not fall into any of the observed three categories except in their decorative aspects. These paintings possess evidence of extremely skilful draughtsmanship that are characteristic of an academically-trained artist, which Okundaye, evidently, as observed from her training/background and early works, does not possess. Seemingly, workshop assistants or another artist has contributed to these paintings. This led the researchers to ask Okundaye if she has had, other collaborations apart from that of Wewe. The question elicited a strong ‘No’ answer. At that point, the researchers were forced to consider the possibilities of the postulation of Roberts Atkins that there could be a mix-up between participation and collaboration. He attempts to differentiate between the two by considering situations where studio assistants or a community of artists take part in the seemingly routine aspect of creating art. His theory suggests that this kind of assistance may be considered participatory rather than collaborative. However, there is a very thin line between where participation ends and collaboration begins because the so-called participants cannot but introduce their personal artistic inventiveness into the making of art.

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The collaboration between Wewe and Okundaye has been inspired by stylistic and cultural affinities between them. Okundaye herself attests that her individual works and those of Wewe already have things in common in that they share the use of traditional Yorùbá ṣọna motifs and patterns; which made it easy for them to blend into each other's style during collaboration.25

Another reason that has enhanced their collaboration has been their different training backgrounds and complementary skills. Wewe is academically-trained and has mastery of human anatomy and general drawing, whereas, Okundaye is informally trained, with little or no training in naturalistic drawing, but is skilful in the rendition of traditional Yorùbá motifs. As it can be observed in the arrangements of their collaboration, Wewe does the drawing, while Nike adds the traditional Yorùbá àdùrè éléko decorative motifs to the works. Okundaye and Wewe’s collaboration can indeed be best appreciated in paintings where both artists infuse their strong areas of expertise on canvases.

The present study observes that the collaboration goes beyond the persons of Wewe and Okundaye to the fusion of the two major art training pedagogies that have operated independently in the Nigerian art scene for about seventy years. The collaboration of the artists introduces the possibilities of integrating these major art training forms that have defined Nigerian art for years into the existing predominantly westernised education system. The collaboration can be seen as a romance between pedagogies that have hitherto been independent.