

Uche Okeke's Legacy Challenges the Ongoing Decolonisation of Art & Art History

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Uche Okeke is widely regarded as a pivotal figure in modern Nigerian art. This accolade stems in large part from his leading role in the Zaria Art Society, an association of students formed in the years preceding political independence from Britain, who challenged the eurocentrism of the art curriculum taught at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science & Technology. In particular, Okeke's formulation of the notion of Natural Synthesis is frequently taken as a foundational moment in the orientation of modern Nigerian art, one that would find full fruition after his teaching appointment at the University of Nsukka in 1970.

The framing of Okeke as a Nigerian artist is in many ways inevitable. His emergence coincides with political independence, and his early works capture the diversity of a pan-Nigerian consciousness that accompanied the euphoria of independence. His mature work draws directly on uli, a Nigerian (more specifically Igbo) tradition of body and wall painting. He was directly caught up in the Nigerian civil war and its legacy can in part be read into the increasingly Igbo orientation of his art practice. He was also a key figure in the development of the Nsukka Group. These are all well documented episodes that do not require my elaboration, suffice to underline the obvious case for situating Okeke within Nigerian artistic, cultural and political history. However, the Biafran war was not just a Nigerian affair, and its significance is in part its emblematic status as a sign of the unravelling of the postcolonial project, more specifically the new bounded nationalisms that went hand in hand with the artificial constructions of sovereign territories.

The question of postcolonial identity is critical for Okeke, but what remains open is the extent to which decolonisation reflects compliance or dissent with the nationalism of the nation-state.

At one end decolonisation has been tied to the politics of the nation state. For example, Chike Okeke-Agulu (2006) positions Okeke as part of a political project that defines the nationalism of the nation state as built on regional identities. Okeke-Agulu uses the political scientist Coleman, writing in the build-up to independence, to argue this point, but Thomas Hodgkin (1957), a contemporary of Coleman's, took issue with Coleman's narrow definition of nationalism. Hodgkin argued that many nationalisms existed during the pre and post-independence period, from the local to the transnational. Writing decades later Frederick Cooper (2002) appears to concur with Hodgkin's analysis, arguing that a particular, restrictive form of decolonisation was allowed by the former colonising powers and the emerging African political elites

to take place, namely a decolonisation that accepted the territorial divisions of the former colonising powers.

Here one may find Moyo Okediji (1999) useful, in his argument that the ethnoaesthetics of Okeke (and others) presents a direct challenge to the supremacy of the nation-state. In other words, artists articulate and manifest a plurality of nationalisms, and it is the relationship and contestation between these notions of nationhood that generate an ambiguity in Okeke's work, one that ultimately calls the very notion of national identity into question, providing a much more layered and charged reading of his work than the unidimensional instrumentality that comes with a superficial reading of the Nigerian sources in his work.

To grasp this transnational as well as intranational dimension of Okeke's work one would do well to consider that, as pointed out by Ottenberg (1997) and Ogbechie (2002), Okeke's *Natural Synthesis* can be positioned as part of a much broader global movement, namely the response of formerly colonised people to the hegemonic position of western culture. In this sense Okeke's work has currency not only as a uniquely Nigerian response, but as part of a global project that dares to claim modernism as an inclusive, universal language, rooted as much in the local as the international.

The resonance of Okeke's practice as an artist exceeds its significance as a temporally bonded intervention, inextricably tied to the political independence of Nigeria. It resonates for late decolonisations, such as South Africa, where it seems that we have begun to exhaust the euphoria typically associated with independence, and are increasingly tasked to face the unresolved legacies of the proclamation of Union in 1910. However, whereas Okeke's generation challenged and developed alternatives to the eurocentrism of international art history, it is debatable to what extent a comparative shift has occurred in South African art. Similarly, Okeke's attempts to develop a global art curriculum at Nsukka beg questions not only of its content and success, but of its equivalence in South African and other national contexts.

Happy 80th birthday Professor Okeke, thank you not only for what you have done for modern Nigerian art, but also for the challenges you continue to present for artists and art historians committed to producing art/history that can claim a critical 'independence', beyond smug patriotisms, and as healthy alternatives to the diets imposed by the gatekeepers of contemporary art.

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