ART AND NATIONALISM IN COLONIAL NIGERIA

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> In my brief and rather hurried discussion with you, I have been able to know that you (Onabolu) have proved a White man wrong to the contrary... I also know that your art will be an additional weapon needed to confront the mental and psychological imprisonment of our people back home...
> J.E. Casely Hayford, 1920[1]

> Lasekan's art can be too provoking to some... it can be very gratifying to others. His nationalistic inclinations are quite known to us...
> Aina Onabolu, 1949[2]

It is very painful to know that the richness and contributions of modern Nigerian art tradition are largely unknown to the contemporary Nigerian society. This art seems to be ignored or underrated by art scholars; for their main research interests are heavily on the traditional rather than modern art experience. The implications of this position are many; the most obvious being the total neglect of modern art traditions when considering the historical, socio-cultural or socio-political experiences of Nigeria. The recently celebrated Silver Jubilee of Nigerian Independence gives evidence to this assertion. Whether on the television, the newspapers, magazines and on the radio, visual art was not at all celebrated like the other arts. This situation could be reversed if the roles of art, particularly in the socio-political experience of Nigeria, are well known. But this cannot be realistically discussed here without some important background accounts. Before this, however, it is necessary to define some useful words: nationalism, modern art and traditional art.

Generally, nationalism can be taken to mean the growth of political awareness among a group or groups of people whose main objective is to secure political freedom.[3] But in the context of this paper, it is a sympathetic devotion to, or pre-occupation with, those meaningful experiences that promote national, racial rather than personal, group or ancestral interests. It is an instrumental ideologization of convictions or grievances that are of national interests. Modern art is presented here as the non-traditional but western, modernist or academic forms of visual representation that can be formally or informally learnt in the contemporary educational institutions. Traditional art explains the transmissibly acquired unadulterated visual imageries which, before colonization, were the guiding and controlling force on Africans' perception and philosophy of life. With these understanding, therefore, it is good to examine those factors that brought nationalism to modern Nigerian art.

The late 19th century and early 20th century Nigeria witnessed a most convulsive artistic agitation that almost suffocated the rich, flowery and age-old traditions of African traditional art. The riotous anti-art concepts and advocasies of this period were stimulated mainly by early European merchants, researchers or anthropologists, Christian missionaries and muslims, including Nigerian religious fanatics. It was a period of systematic cultural secularization brought about by these foreign incursions. As early as the late 15th century, and particularly 1485, the Portuguese traders were already engaged in commercial activities in Nigeria.[4]

The impressions of the early European traders as regards the art forms they saw, particularly in the mid-western area of Nigeria, were not different from those of their counterparts and others who came across similar traditional images about five centuries later. The abstract forms of

Nigerian traditional art, and those of other African peoples for that matter, made these Europeans generally conclude that an African had no slightest creative ability to draw a "true" picture.[5]

Traditional Nigerian art was seen as products of raw emotion, infertile mind whose technical processes were mainly based on mere accidental, intuitive, rather than methodical and calculable artistic, actions.[6] Since they had consciously or unconsciously started comparing African art forms with those of their own culture, these Europeans could not just understand the philosophical, religious and psychological essence of this art. Naturally, to many of the Europeans, this misunderstood concept of African traditional art, became an effective fertilizer used most dynamically and provocatively for the rapid growth of various racial dehumanising theories or pseudo-theories that had already been propounded in the West.

Though these Europeans saw the forms of Nigerian art as ugly, wretched and funny and though for this reason they believed that "the Africans have no feelings for beauty",[7] they could not resist the attractively mystifying aura which these objects educed. For this reason, among others, the acquisition of African art began.

Many just wanted these forms and collected them not necessarily as treasures but essentially as objects which could "make further ridiculous stories possible back home in Europe".[8] Very shortly, and with increasing regularity, traditional African artefacts were finding their ways to Europe. In fact by the 16th century, the Duke of Burgundy had had a collection of traditional African art, and by the end of the 17th century, many museums in Germany, Sweden, Austria among other European countries, had been filled with the art of Africa, though its systematic ridicule was also rife both in Africa and Europe. From the beginning of this contact therefore to the

second half of the 19th century, this category of Europeans saw the Nigerian traditional art as mere "curios";[9] research objects through which the minds of the Africans could be further analysed or studied for European audience.

But the attitude of Christianity to art was negative and devastating. The faith, more than anything else, was most effective to the colonization of the Nigerian mind and environment. Christianity, as a formal religion made its first appearance in Nigeria in the 16th century, though serious and sustained evangelical efforts did not begin until 1842.[10] By 1900, various christian denominations like the Anglican Church, Presbyterian Church, Roman Catholic, the Baptist Convention, the Qua Iboe Mission and the Primitive Methodist Church had been well established in Nigeria.[11]

These missions instituted various schools or colleges that eventually became propagandist formal grounds not only for the stabilization, acceleration and expansion of Christian faith but also for the "re-education and conversion of those minds that had, through ignorance, not been able to think beyond their haunting and fear-laden spiritualities".[12] Traditional art was made a target in the war of evangelization, and this war continued till the fifth decade of the 20th century. During this period, the Nigerian traditional artistic images were still considered "wretched, irritating and grotesque".[13] They were "graven images that can separate you from the church and therefore from God".[14] In fact, the use of these art works, regarded as idols, was strongly discouraged and all the activities associated with the images were banned by various churches.[15] In many parts of Southern Nigeria, and particularly in the present Ogun, Oyo and Ondo States of Nigeria, Nigerian traditional art forms were physically destroyed either through breaking or public burning. The Nigerian Christian converts were mainly responsible for this action. Many of them were either Catechists, teachers or leaders of christian organizations.

The Nigerian Christian fanatics were so enmeshed in their puritanical devotion to their faith that they engaged in house to house search for christian members who might have traditional art images or "graven images that have been totally rejected by our church ... and have no relevance to our new thinking, practice and values".[16] The whole artistic atmosphere of Nigeria under Christianity was thus full of fear and victimization. And in the words of a former colonial Government Dental Surgeon, "Nigeria and Nigerians, no doubt, would have lost artistically and culturally but for the glorious entry of our dear Mr. Onabolu who has tried very admirably to replace the much hated and rejected art of his fathers with his much accepted form of European art".[17]

And of course by the time the above statement was made, Christianity had only succeeded in weakening but not killing African art in southern Nigeria. But Islam had succeeded in deterging all traces of preoccupation with traditional art images in the Northern areas of Nigeria. The faith, because of its syncretic nature, was able to easily and quickly dispossess the people of their age-old traditions of images which during the pre-Islamic period were in no way less dynamic than those in the southern parts of Nigeria. Again, this overpowering force of Islam can be understood if it is known that some areas of the North had been totally Islamized as early as the 14th century.[18]

The preceding accounts have been presented to show the racial, religious or colonial experiences of the colonial period. It is however important to point out that these racial and religious experiences were fully sanctioned by, and were in fact the official positions of, the colonial government in Nigeria. The same experiences were to bring nationalistic spirit to modern Nigerian art.

The first nationalistic art experience of Aina Onabolu, the pioneer of Western art in West Africa, however, was not motivated by the negative attitude of Christianity and Islam, for these religions, understandably, needed to perpetuate their faiths. Onabolu abhorred, and was very bitter about, the popularly accepted racialist notions of the non-missionaries that no African, not even the already culturally Europeanized ones, was endowed with the creativity to produce art or true picture like a white man. This was the statement of a foreign newspaper which Onabolu, a primary school pupil in Ijebu-Ode, his home town, read with Dr. J.K. Randle, one of the pioneer Yoruba medical practitioners of the late 19th century.

The friendship between Randle who was posted to the town on national service and Onabolu's father enabled Aina Onabolu, born in 1882, not only to have free association with Randle but also to see him as his father. Onabolu later learnt from Dr. Randle about the latter's bitterness towards the colonial government which gave him an appointment below those of his European counterparts; though he was professionally more qualified than many of them. By this time, around 1894, or before this, Onabolu had already been known for his creative activities such as the preparation of charts and other art works and visual aids for his school, St. Saviour's Primary School Ijebu-Ode.

Randle emboldened young Aina Onabolu in his desire to, one day, break the myth about African creativity and become like a white man, a well known professionally capable artist. Onabolu later joined Randle who had left Ijebu-Ode for Lagos some months earlier. Randle became the guardian and sponsor of Onabolu.[19] As a secondary school student in Lagos, Onabolu was a sensation, for he was still the only known African or Black man seen with this European medium - drawing and painting the western style. But as more negative accounts of alleged African creative

potential emerged, Onabolu intensified his interest in and practice of art, with the ideological backing of Randle. By 1900, Onabolu had finished his secondary education and had also proved to the dismay of both Africans and Europeans in Lagos that artistic creativity was not a monopoly of a particular culture. Meanwhile, he was working with the Marine Department in Lagos.

Even when and after Onabolu's effort in his new form was yielding laudable and unbelievable results, the disbelief in the creativity of the Blackman was still growing with stronger racial violence. It is good to examine some of these. As late as 1918, the essay of Sir Hugh Clifford, the Governor of Gold Coast (now Ghana), in the Blackwood Advertiser revealed how the "West African Negro" had often been condemned for not having any form of appreciable civilization; how he had never been engaged in any form of formal or Western-like artistic representations and literary activities and how he had not "even invented any mechanical contrivance worthy of the name".[20]

It was the general opinion of the colony that the teaching of Western form of art to the Nigerians was not only a waste of time but also a misplaced value; "for even if he has a moderate ability for this, he can only succeed in creating the tribal art form of his people".[21] This was because, to the colonial government, creativity among the Nigerians was known for its "raw crudeness, a lack of refinement and artistic perception".[22]

Onabolu saw these underrating feelings and others as a great reproach on the African. He "was therefore determined to refute the statement (negative feelings) and wipe off the reproach".[23] By 1901, he had, through advertisement in foreign newspapers and magazines, already contacted a London art shop that, for over four decades, was to become Onabolu's main supplier of art materials like sketch and instrumental books,

brushes, papers, canvases, pastel, oil and poster colours as well as various technical and historical art books.

In 1903, the artist's oil painting, the "Director of Public Works Quarters", one of his early commissioned works, was so good that it was unfortunately believed to have "some dubious creative and technical sources".[24] It was not until 1906 when his commissioned "Mrs. Spencer Savage" was finished that Onabolu first clearly proved, in his later words, that "God was impartial in his endowments of various talents to mankind".[25]

The work, which was painted that time in the presence of many friends and some uninvited but visiting curious Europeans, particularly from the Railway and Marine departments, was one of the artist's masterpieces. This marked the beginning of the acceptance of his artistic creativity. By 1910, he had made himself a celebrated portraitist and a well known African modern artist not only in Nigeria but also in West Africa. His official recognition by the white populace in Lagos also came this same year when he won "a special prize" during the Agricultural show organized by the white administrators in Lagos.[26] He was the only black artist who featured his works among those of other European artists. The very day he received the prize, Onabolu remarked:

I believe that a woodpecker in England is the same as the woodpecker in Lagos (Nigeria). Unless it is not a woodpecker, the Lagos woodpecker can knock its peck on a tree (wood) with the same maximum efficiency and determination which is also expected of an English woodpecker. Both can create holes that God has given them as their natural habitats. All woodpeckers of the same biological endowment, whether in

Nigeria or England, are the same. One woodpecker is not inferior to the other.[27]

By 1920, however, Onabolu's acceptance as a great artist, comparable to his counterparts in England, was no more in doubt. He had painted several portraits of the Lagos elite, missionaries and numerous Yoruba kings. He had already achieved his objectives, but without forgetting that, according to him, "I up to this time studied under no Art master, except under that great teacher - experience, whom Cicero called the great tax-gatherer".[28]

Though this pioneer and self-made artist had, at that time, conquered various technical intricacies of pictorial representations, he was not yet satisfied with his provincial popularity in the Lagos colony. He, therefore, left, in 1920, for an art college, St. John's Wood School of Art, in London. The departure was heralded by many Nigerian and even London newspapers.

But Onabolu made sure he achieved a professional standard and completed all possible artistic rituals in Nigeria before travelling "so that a white man in London may know that my study there is merely decorative".[29] For example, he had his first art exhibition, in Nigeria, the first in the history of West Africa. Very interestingly, the foreward to Onabolu's small book, A Short Discourse on Art, sold during the exhibition, was written by a European, F.H. Harward, the Deputy Director of Education for Nigeria. It reads among other things:

But it has been generally accepted that there is one barrier he (an African) cannot surmount, one door he is unable to open; that in the sphere of art (Western art) he is not capable of reaching even a moderate degree of proficiency. Mr. Aina Onabolu has once and for all broken down that barrier and opened the door.[30]

Onabolu, as a student in London, surprised his teachers and fellow students with his standard which was well comparable to that of his instructors. He won prizes and was written about by some London newspapers like "The Star", "The Studio" and "The Evening Standard".[31]

But what really crowned the nationalistic ideology of this pioneer artist were the comments of members of the West African Congress who visited Onabolu in his school in London. These included Hon. J.E. Casely Hayford, Herbert Macaulay, Chief Lijani Oluwa and Bankole Bright. According to Bright, "our man, the first African to study art in London, has made Africa proud on a white soil".[32] Macaulay saw Onabolu's works as a "clear, marvellous vindication of our struggle - a manifestation of our much repeated feelings that Africans are capable politically, intellectually and creatively".[33]

Onabolu returned to Nigeria, in 1922, a proud man "respected by his countrymen and Europeans alike".[34] He officially introduced formal art teaching to Lagos schools and became more instrumental in his pan-Africanist or nationalistic feelings. He saw his portraiture as a means of immortalizing all those people (European or African) who have helped African cause. In fact, the portraits of some of such people were painted by Onabolu.

1924 experienced Onabolu's artistic internationalization. This was the year he won a prize for a poster design he made for the colonial government to advertise and symbolize the Nigerian section at the 1924 British Empire Exhibition in Wembley. The poster titled "The Nigerian Weaver", showing a traditionally dressed Yoruba woman at her loom, was eventually chosen as the emblem for the entire British Empire Exhibition. Thousands of copies were produced by the Exhibition organizers and sold

as souvenirs. Onabolu was extensively written about by the press and covered by radio. A news bulletin in London saw the work as "a beautiful piece from the land of the unknown".[35]

When the news of the poster came to Onabolu, he thought of Casely Hayford's earlier remark at the St. John's Wood School that he should "make this light shine to all corners of Africa".[36] Thereafter Onabolu stressed his ideology that art, particularly his own, was and should be a visual history which generations in Africa should read and reflect upon. In fact, this philosophy led to his Lagos exhibition of "Nigerian Kings and Heroes" which took place in 1951. It gave him the opportunity to further propound his nationalistic feelings. He told the congregation at the opening of the exhibition that Nigerians should be bold to have great ambitions and face bold adventures. He echoed that an African can do what white people can do if only the African is determined. However, he did not hesitate to point out the weaknesses of his people:

There are, I say emphatically a good number of young men among us with fine brains, but for want of self application and perseverance, they cannot bring themselves forward, and therefore they remain unknown... Young men let us wake up to duty, on us depends the future of Nigeria.[37]

The nationalistic and artistic achievements of Onabolu who died in 1963 at 81 are reflected in the sermon read by the Bishop of Lagos in 1948 during the Silver Jubilee of Onabolu's official introduction of art to West Africa:

Mr. Onabolu does well to thank God for the gift of drawing and painting vouchsafed to him, for what have we got that we have not received ... Onabolu - the first West African art student to be trained in England - has painted portraits of great many notable people, African and European ...

Thus, as we offer him our congratulations on his twenty five years of constructive art in this country ... we join with him in his thanksgiving to Almighty God for having been spared for so many years to carry on his work of usefulness and beauty.[38]

However if Onabolu's nationalism was motivated more by the desire to dehydrate some inhuman and objectionable racial prejudice and anti-African stereotypes, that of Kenneth C. Murray was stimulated by the urge to bring cultural rehabilitation, parity and pride to both the arts and the entire cultural heritage of Nigeria.

Murray, an artist who was born in 1902 in England, came to Nigeria in 1927 through an earlier invitation of Onabolu who needed a European artist as the second art teacher in Nigeria. Murray was a bit worried when the Education Department in London contacted him about his new assignment. This was because of the general impression of Africa in England: "an entirely different world of people without culture ... people with many strange features, mannerisms and unpredictable aggressions".[39] According to Murray, "you just had to read those literature sent home by the colonial officials and come to this colony (Lagos) to see how seriously misleading and dangerous these were".[40] The colonial governments in Africa painted an image of unreality which, for a very long time, made England ill-informed in their knowledge and conception of Africa. But Murray, like many other Europeans, and in spite of the initial worry, was very excited about his coming to Lagos. It was then a dream of many English professionals to have the opportunity to serve in any of the British colonies, particularly those in Africa.

Immediately Murray arrived Lagos, he started teaching art at the King's College, Lagos. The activities of Christianity strongly challenged his conscience. He became more convinced that the impressions created

particularly by christian literature on Africa were not at all captured but manufactured. He became inebriated with the Nigerian cultural traditions and rebelled against his people's cultural improbity and irreligious approach to the Nigerian cultural heritage. By the middle of 1928, Murray's art teaching and philosophy; his pronouncements, incredible knowledge of the Nigerian environment and choice and type of association, among other actions unexpected of a European of the period, had made it clear that his professional, administrative, cultural and humanistic qualities were in the best interest of Nigeria.

His students at the King's College were shocked when he started advocating traditionalism, rather than Europeanism or conventionalism of Onabolu, in art.[41] These students had expected him to continue the academic perfectionism of Onabolu; the achievement in European Academy standard which would make western aesthetic canon in art glaringly manifest. Rather, Murray urged these students to "be local (Nigerian or African) in your conception, interpretation, characterization and general attitude to art".[42]

This culturistic philosophy of Murray became more dynamic and provocative in 1933 when his teaching career shifted to the long-awaited newly opened Ibadan College. His art students were Ben Enwonwu, A. Umana, D. Nnachi, U. Ibrahim and C.C. Ibeto.[43] He told them to reconcile themselves with traditional subjects, to make their drawings, paintings and sculpture look like the traditional art forms of their parents. He discouraged them from taking subjects from modern or European experiences which he regarded as superficial to their heritage and a cultural sell-out. Perhaps his attitude to this art traditionalization is best captured in his 1940 note:

the real creative impulse is stimulated by close association with visible experiences in one's immediate environment and not by imagined ones one has not personally experienced or felt. I think it is more proper for pupils to be able to draw "themselves" first before drawing others. In fact, these Nigerian experiences are by far richer than the Western ones. Instead of you to make your local subjects Western, try as much as possible to make your Western subjects local.[44]

By 1940, however, Murray had succeeded to a very large extent in making Europe appreciate the forms of the Nigerian traditional art. The 1937 exhibition of his students at the Zwemmer Gallery in London was particularly instrumental to this.

But this admirable teaching ideology of Kenneth Murray was even less nationalistic if viewed along with his more vocal and dissenting attitude to the devalued Nigerian works of antiquities. Having arrived Nigeria at the time traditional art was being destroyed or rejected, Murray developed cold attitude to many of his fellow Europeans. According to him, "to be able to save these treasures from total destruction or exportation, I had no alternative than to be nice (to) but less familiar with many of my (European) friends".[45] No wonder, some of these friends saw him as socially ascetic.

Murray began to collect various discarded and aged traditional art objects and even bought a large number with his money so that these works might not go into the hands of the hungry collectors whose main interest was economic. He went deeper, with escorts and interpreters, into Western and Eastern provinces. His advocacy for museums, which began in 1928, was by 1945 well known to the "London office". By 1950, Murray had helped bring recognition and respect to the Nigerian antiquities. He had

persuaded the colonial government to enact the Antiquities Law which made the exportation of any Nigerian art treasure a crime. He had successfully prevailed over many Christian Missionaries whose myopic orthodoxy he earlier condemned. His 1949 London exhibition of "Masks and Headdresses of Nigeria" which he garnished with disarming philosophical content helped him to catch the favourable eye of the colonial government of Nigeria.

In 1957, however, he achieved one of his life objectives when the Nigerian (now National) Museum was officially opened in Lagos. His own collections which he acquired with his money mostly formed the nucleus of the Museum's collections. He did not ask for any compensation. He was earlier instrumental to the opening of other Nigerian museums. Unfortunately, Murray died in 1972 at the age of 69 while travelling to Benin to the new Benin Museum with some art treasures he wanted to exhibit. There was an accident when his driver was overtaking another vehicle.

Thus, Kenneth C. Murray, the first European art teacher in Nigeria, the first European to rebel against the use of anti-social language for African subjects, first Director of Antiquities, the first Preserver and protector of Nigerian antiquities, an education officer and a lover of Africa, ended his life on active service as a "Nigerian". He was buried in Lagos.

If Onabolu and Murray confronted the racial prejudices of the West and the cultural suppression and deformation by Christianity, Akinola Lasekan attacked the abrasive colonial experiences of the British rule. His nationalistic outpourings were mainly for political freedom, social justice and mental decolonization.

Lasekan, a painter and cartoonist, was born in 1916 in Owo in the present Ondo State of Nigeria. His artistic activities date back to his primary school days when, like Onabolu, he was the officially recognized artist of his school. Onabolu's activities had also made art a little popular in the West by 1930. When Lasekan completed his primary education, he was retained by his school to teach art.[46] By 1932, he was familiar with the activities of Onabolu and Murray.

Lasekan's name was first known nationally in 1933 when he was selected as one of the students to study art in Europe.[47] This was the result of his performance in a nationwide art competition sponsored by the colonial government. With this, his hopes were raised very high as regards the possibility of becoming, one day, another Onabolu or Murray. But very disappointingly, the government could no more fulfil this promise. Lasekan did not allow this development to frustrate his hopes. He therefore left for Lagos, and by 1936, he had become an artist with the Church Missionary Society (CMS) Bookshop in Lagos. And here, his nationalistic spirit developed for some reasons which will be discussed shortly. Like Onabolu, Lasekan was a self-made artist. He became a nature painter, book illustrator and cartoonist before travelling in 1945 to London where, unlike Onabolu, he returned home almost immediately without studying because the standard of the art schools that accepted to enrol him was too low for him. But as far back as 1940, through the influence of Onabolu and art correspondence which the CMS made possible for him, Lasekan had already distinguished himself as a painter. He was next only to Onabolu in standard, and had become an illustrator, a designer and a cartoonist of outstanding merit. With these professional standard and maturity, Lasekan became emboldened in his nationalistic expressions.

His work experience with the CMS Bookshop enlarged his world-view and made him familiar with many and various books. He was disappointed in his reading because African experiences were never mentioned in books that were expected to cover Africa. According to Akinola Lasekan, "can you believe that a book about World Civilization from the Beginning to the Present does not have any reference to Africa"?[48] Lasekan therefore decided "not to paint any white man on his own creative initiative unless it is a commissioned work which in this case and without being slavish, is a response to professional necessity".[49] One can, therefore, understand why in 1942 he refused the contract to illustrate a book about Africa unless the book carried African and not European illustrative pictorials. Lasekan won.

Apart from the CMS experience, the political career of Herbert Macaulay, particularly his nationalistic activities also influenced him. In addition, the general racial attitude in Lagos, where a church and some eating houses were exclusive only to Europeans, was too much for Lasekan to stomach.[50] He was bitter about the "condition which placed a more qualified African under a less qualified European". The activities of Nnamdi Azikiwe were most instrumental in crystallizing Lasekan's nationalistic interests as from 1948.

Before that time, however, his ideological grievances had been thoroughly reflected in his art career, particularly in the publication of not less than five political cartoon books including the Nigeria in Cartoons (1940), the Nigerian Joker, Nigeria in 1945, Nigeria in 1944 and "Paintings and Cartoons on the Life of Herbert Macaulay" (1947).[51]

These books generally centred on those things needed to bring freedom, progress, unity and comfort to Nigeria. For example, he attacked

some form of racial segregation "which in our own land makes me feel as if I am still in London, where even this situation is more relaxed".[52] Lasekan once asked a question as to whether colour prejudice could ever end in Nigeria. His cartoon to this effect shows a man putting a final nail on a coffin of "Colour Discrimination" with the prayer "Lord Grant that it may not rise again even on the resurrection day!"[53] He believed that "no amount of artistic, intellectual and physical energy is too much, as a sacrifice, to devote to these racial actions of our colonial lords".[54] Freedom to him was the only solution. He saw freedom as the "determination to think with one mind, speak with one voice, act with an objective and work with all hands".[55] For according to him, this was the same ideological strategy of the Europeans over their colonies.

Thus, without being sponsored or prodded to action, Lasekan made himself, on his own professional, social experiences and ideological initiative, a nationalist whose name was well known to West African nationalists and whose career greatly rewarded the nationalist spirit of his period.

It was no wonder that Nnamdi Azikiwe made him the cartoonist and art adviser to his nationalist paper, the West African Pilot, in 1948. Thus, Lasekan, known as "Lash" became the first newspaper cartoonist in Nigeria. With this new role, he became more provocative in his ideology which this time had become one with that of Zik. He was not only a cartoonist but also an intimate friend of Zik who had known him as far back as 1937.[56]

With Lasekan's art, Zik got more weapons with which he was able to fight not only the colonial masters but also their Nigerian agents. As Lasekan's paintings became more politically instrumental, his cartoons in the Pilot became more devastating. Other newspapers like the Nigerian

Outlook and the Sunday Times wanted to snatch him without success. Zik's ideology fascinated him most and he "gave him political art so as to help him complete his political acts".[57] Lasekan's nationalistic interest is well understood in his 1958 statement made prior to the opening of his art exhibitions in Lagos and Ibadan:

My works become very relevant and therefore satisfying only when they reflect the glorious moments of our fathers (culture) or the ancient inter-tribal wars; when they address the colonial conscience, when they show Macaulay as the Shepherd, Zik as Pied Piper and emancipator, Prof. Ita, O.E. Roberts and Ransome Kuti as fighters against educational backwardness. They become very relevant when they talk about the nationalists like Alakija, Ikoli, Maja and Oni of Ife; foreign capitalists and negrophobia...[58]

There is no doubt that the nationalist spirit and contribution of Akinola Lasekan was well known to the nationalists of his time. For example, according to Nnamdi Azikiwe, then the President of Nigeria: "I am relying on you (Lasekan) to use your good offices to help cement and preserve the unity of this new Republic".[59] Earlier, Azikiwe, as a Governor General, described him as "an artist of the first rank, respected as one of the leading painters in West Africa".[60] President Azikiwe once asked Lasekan whether "it will be possible this time to have you and Mrs. Lasekan to spend a quiet time with us and possibly join us in having a meal".[61]

By the early fifties, it was clear enough that the nationalist activities of Murray and Lasekan, particularly, had ideologically affected the Nigerian modern art tradition. It is not surprising that the tradition experienced the nationalistic agitations of the colonial period. The tradition

became prominent in the art department of the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria (now Ahmadu Bello University).

By 1957, Nigeria could boast of two colleges offering courses leading to the award of a diploma in art. These were the Art Department in Zaria already mentioned, and the Yaba College of Technology, formally known as Yaba Institute. Nigeria could, by this time, therefore, produce her art professionals at home in addition to those produced abroad. This was no doubt a credit to Onabolu's pioneership, particularly in terms of course content and programme structure which were all based on the British Academy tradition. All these reflected Onabolu's philosophy of art rather than that of Murray, though Onabolu was not at all directly instrumental to this. Murray was conscious of this entirely Europeanized system of the new Nigerian art education, but his pressing interest in Nigerian antiquities at this period, rendered him incapable of any reconstructive reactions.

The 17 pioneer art students of the Zaria Art Department which included Irein Wangboje, now a professor of art education, and Fasuyi, the former Federal Art Adviser, had as early as 1955 been very uncomfortable with some instructional methodologies of, and constraints on, their training. But it was not until 1957, that few art students of this institution felt very strongly the nationalistic urges which were, to a large extent, to change the course of Nigerian art education.

This period coincided with the verbally riotous nationalistic and political spirits of the day as directed by Azikiwe in the Eastern part of Nigeria, Awolowo in the West and Ahmadu Bello in the North. Various Nigerian social, political and educational experiences, most especially in the South, were vigorously charged with the desire to gain freedom. But unfortunately too, the experiences had marks of superficiality and

neo-colonialism which in fact stimulated some of these art students of Zaria to action.

The students began to wonder why their teaching staff should be predominantly, if not entirely, European. The only African on the teaching staff of the department was Etsu Clara Ugbodaga or Ugbodaga-Ngu. She was the first female artist to teach art in Nigeria and also the first African and female to teach in the art department in Zaria. However, her position was such that she had no influence on the department's administration. Furthermore, the students were not happy with their Academy-oriented art programme. According to them, the much talked about negritude or Pan-Africanism as well as the nationalistic preachings of Zikism and Nkrumaism seemed to have no effect on their department. They saw their training as culturally slavish and creatively unrelated to their artistic heritage. The students wanted a change.

In 1958, the "Zaria Art Society" was formed and fully registered. The society which initially had six students, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Uche Okeke, Simon Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Yusuf Grillo and William Olasebikan, later accommodated E.O. Odita, Felix Ekeada, O. Osadebe and O. Nwagbara to make the number ten. Uche Okeke became the President of the Society after a short tenure of Simon Okeke. The ideology of the Zaria Art Society was contained in their manifesto.

The students demanded a total radicalization of their programme to reflect meaningfully the African situations. They saw pre-occupation with the painting of still-life objects, landscape and other merely physical aspects of art alone as unrealistic. Subjects for art, to them, should be inspired by their own cultural background. That is, that stylistically and conceptually their training should be de-Europeanized and Africanized.

Through Uche Okeke, the concept of "natural synthesis" was developed: the marriage of the relevant past with those things that are productive in the present to realize a culturally realistic non-enslaving future. The students had a duty "to promote, through art, Nigerian cultural values with utmost dedication, love and will-power". To make the College know the seriousness of their intention, the students communicated their actions to Nnamdi Azikiwe, the Ministry of Home Affairs, Information Services in the three regions and many high-ranking government officials. Some foreign missions were also contacted.

According to the Zaria Art Society, the culture of a people is the life of a people. If the culture perishes, the people also die. The Society therefore was determined to research into and revive all the dynamic and realistically relevant aspects of Nigerian cultures. According to its President:

This is our age of enquiry and reassessment of our cultural values. This is our renaissance era. In our quest for truth, we must be firm, confident and joyful because of our newly won freedom. We must not allow others to think for us in our artistic life because art is life itself and life is our experience, physical and spiritual, of the world.[63]

These few students were, to a large extent, also influenced by the ideology of the Mexican artists whose art forms, between 1915 and 1945 particularly, were provocatively and radically reactionary to their environment. It was not surprising therefore that these students advocated that art should be a socio-political weapon capable of liberating Nigerian cultural values from the gripping tentacles of colonialism. According to the society:

It is our work as artists to select and render in pictorial or plastic media our reactions to things and events. The art of creation is not merely physical, it is also a solemn act.[64]

Meanwhile and by the end of 1958, the members of the Zaria Art Society had started ignoring many of their expatriate lecturers' instructions that were stylistically, thematically and conceptually based on European modes. Instead, they fell back on their people's heritage for creative and philosophical inspirations.

For instance, the students had an educative or propagandist tour of all the important areas of antiquities, that were of cultural significance, in Nigeria. Not only that, they refused to see Western sources or books as a yardstick for measuring their own Nigerian cultural dimensions. Rather, each member was mandated to return to his roots and research for the much-needed artistic stimuli. For this reason, Onobrakpeya saw his Ibibio folk-lore as a major force that would direct his artistic expressions. Simon Okeke began using his Igbo Ukwu ancient art traditions for creative inspiration while Uche Okeke's research into Igbo uli art made him an exponent of uli symbols and motifs in Nigerian art.

This is not all. Nwoko generally and emotionally saw the formalistic and humanistic aura of Nigerian traditional art as an indispensable creative echo. Grillo also fell back on various Yoruba traditional experiences which his cosmopolitan Lagos environment had not devalued. To the Zaria art department, there was a rebellious situation over which it found itself incapable of controlling. The students finally succeeded in de-Europeanizing and Africanizing their programme. But they were not yet satisfied.

To make their new and revolutionary artistic and ideological advocacies national, many of the students held group art exhibitions between 1958 and 1959 in Kano, Jos, Lagos, Ibadan and Ughelli. The effects on fellow and younger artists were significant. But what really crowned the efforts of this Zaria art revolution was the Independence "Exhibition of Arts and Crafts" of 1960 in Lagos which featured the works of some of them along with more professionally, nationally and internationally known Nigerian artists like Onabolu, Lasekan, Enwonwu and Idubor.

Ulli Beier, one of the few art critics of the colonial period, reacted to the exhibition:

> The great surprise of the exhibition was a group of young painters who are still students at Zaria College. Their entire attitude to art is essentially modern (African); their work is very individual. They are mostly meditative pictures. The Artists are grappling with ideas, with psychological and cultural problems. Their pictures are heavy with content and charged with emotion.[65]

It was the conceptual and artistic ideology of these students in the Zaria Art Society that gave the newly independent Nigeria non-colonial art tradition which was to serve as new foundation for modern Nigerian art; namely, a creative, cultural and aesthetic freedom.

Without doubt, considering all the nationalistic experiences of art in the colonial period, it is clear that art was instrumental not only to the winning of the Nigerian Independence but also to the de-colonization of the Nigerian environment and cultural heritage. It also shows how richly endowed and historically fertile modern Nigerian art experience has been.

Notes

1. Statement contained in Onabolu's Visitor's Book to the art exhibition at St. John's Wood Art School, London, 1920.
2. Foreword to Lasekan's art exhibition leaflet, November, 1949.
3. O. Adeoye, "Nationalism in Kenya, 1920-63", Tarikh, Vol.4, No. 1, 1971, p. 28.
4. Nnochi I. Okongwu, "History of Education in Nigeria, 1842-1942", an unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, New York University 1946, pp. 1-2.
5. Ola Oloidi, "Onabolu, Pioneer of Modern Art in West Africa: An Introduction", unpublished manuscript, U.N.N., p. 18.
6. See Ola Oloidi, "Abstraction in Modern African Art", New Culture: A Review of Contemporary African Arts, Vol. 1, No. 9, 1979.
7. Janheinz Jahn, Muntu: the New African Culture (New York: Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 174.
8. Jeff Donaldson, "African Influence on Black-American Art", an unpublished lecture on Fine Arts Criticism, Howard University, Washington, D.C., 1972.
9. S.A.J. Pratt, "West African Art at Oxford", Africana: The Magazine of the West African Society, Vol. 1, No. 2, April 1949, p. 26.
10. Ola Oloidi, "Growth and Development of Formal Art Education in Nigeria, 1900-1960", under publication in Transafrican Journal of History, Nairobi, Kenya.
11. E.A. Udo, "The Methodist Contribution to Education in Eastern Nigeria, 1893-1960" an unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1965) p. 63.
    Ogbu Kalu (ed.), Christianity in West Africa: The Nigerian Story (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1978), p. 289.
12. Record of Sunday Service (RSS), Catholic Mission, Agba, 29/9/35.

13. Roman Cath. Mission, Esa Oke, Sept. 8, 1935.
14. RSS, Agba, 29/9/35.
15. For more general information on Christianity and African culture see: (i) S. Ezeanya, The Church Speaks to African - (Enugu: The Diocesan Catholic Secretariat, 1976). (ii) C.B. Okolo, Toward Decolonizing the Church - (Onitsha: Tabansi Press Ltd., 1976).
16. RSS, Agba, 29/9/35.
17. N.W. Roland Steel, Dental Surgeon, of 26 Lugard Ave. Ikoyi, Lagos, his comments in Onabolu's Visitor's Book, Sept. 16, 1942.
18. Olivia Vlahos, African Beginnings (New York: The Viking Press, 1967), pp. 231-260.

    For more information on Islam and African traditional art and culture, see Rene A. Brauvmann, Islam and Tribal Art in West Africa. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), John E. Means, "A Study of the Influence of Islam in Northern Nigeria", an unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. 1965.
19. D. Agoro, "Aina Onabolu: Pioneer of Modern Art tradition", an unpublished B.A. Thesis, University of Nigeria, Nsukka 1980, pp. 5-7.
20. Dapo Onabolu, "Aina Onabolu", Nigeria Magazine, No. 79, 1963, p. 295.
21. George Fowler, his comments in Onabolu's Visitor's Book, August 13, 1938.
22. Foreword to Onabolu's A Short Discourse on Art (Lagos: Onabolu, 1920).
23. Onabolu's note dated 1924 (no day, month indicated).
24. Akinola Lasekan, "Foundation of Nigerian Art", an unpublished note, 1965.
25. Onabolu, 1920.

26. Oloidi, "Onabolu, Pioneer ...", p. 3.
27. Aina Onabolu, "About my Life and Works", essay prepared for the Harmon Foundation in New York as requested by its Assistant Director, Evelyn S. Brown; April 1961.
28. Onabolu, 1920, p. 2.
29. "Dear Mr. Femi Wright", copy of a letter written to one Wright of the Public Works Dept. in Lagos, May 2, 1921.
30. Onabolu, 1920, p. 2.
31. Aina Onabolu, "The First Challenge", a documentary note, November 4, 1921.
32. Onabolu's Visitor's Book, London, 1920 (OVBL, 1920).
33. Ibid.
34. Lasekan, 1965.
35. Onabolu, "About my Life ...", 1961.
36. OVBL., 1920.
37. Onabolu, 1920, p. 15.
38. Copy of Sermon read by the Anglican Bishop of Lagos in 1948.
39. K.C. Murray, Draft of Brochure of Zwemmer Gallery London, Art Exhibition of his Nigerian students, 1937. Copy sent to Ugoji.
40. Ibid.
41. Lasekan, 1965.
42. K.C. Murray, "Art Teaching in Nigeria: Important Suggestions", unpublished notes, 1940.
43. Murray, 1937.
44. Murray, 1940.
45. K.C. Murray, his notes to the 1949 London exhibition of "Masks and Headdresses of Nigeria", Ugoji's private document.
46. D. Ajidahun, his interview with Lasekan's wife, in Owo, Ondo State, January 1980.

47. The materials for this discussion of Lasekan are largely from his own private documents which have not been published.
48. A Lasekan, "Dean J.", his letter dated 3/6/46 to J. Akeredolu, a professional colleague and most intimate friend (Lasekan, 3/6/46).
49. Ibid.
50. Esther Eze's interview with J. Akeredolu in Owo, December 1981, February and March, 1982.
51. Lasekan's revised Curriculum Vitae, July 1958.
52. Lasekan, 3/6/46.
53. A Lasekan, Nigeria in 1944 (Lagos: Lasekan, 1944) p. 45.
54. Lasekan, 3/6/46.
55. Ibid.
56. Nnamdi Azikiwe, then the Governor General of Nigeria in his letter of recommendation dated 6th March 1962, to the Registrar of Royal Society of Arts, London (Zik, 6/3/62).
57. A Lasekan, his draft lecture on painting, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, March 1963.
58. A Lasekan, his letter dated September 2, 1958, to E. Evans, the Director of Programmes, the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, Lagos.
59. Nnamdi Azikiwe, his letter to Lasekan dated 18/10/63.
60. Zik, 6/3/62.
61. Nnamdi Azikiwe, his letter to Lasekan dated 18/12/61.
62. Ola Oloidi, Modern Nigerian Art: Implantation, Growth and Development from 1900 to 1960, an unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 1984, p. 315.
63. Uche Okeke, part of address delivered to the Zaria Art Society in October 1959.
64. Ibid.
65. Nigeria Magazine, No. 68, March 1961, pp. 31, 50-51.