

Development And Growth Of Fibre Art In Nigeria

G. O. Diogu

Abstract

The turn of the 21st century witnessed the emergence of fibre art as a major source of inspiration in the modern Nigerian art scene. This has been attributed to the convergence of a number of factors which have been identified by a few researchers. Although many Nigerian artists have explored with fibre and have produced different kinds of artistic works, there is scanty information about the artists who produce this kind of products due to lack of focus on fibre art phenomenon by researchers and art critics. This paper, therefore, tries to examine some of the popular fibre artists, particularly, those of the Nsukka Art School, and identify the roles they have played to the growth and development of fibre art in Nigeria. The paper argues that Nigeria has great potentials in fibre resource and its exploitation would lead to economic and technological growth of the nation.

Introduction

Way back in 1977, Irene Waller published his widely circulated book titled textile sculptures. The book introduced the most exciting aspect of fiber art movement with analysis of works of over twenty fiber artists across the globe. The book treated mostly, conceptual issues related to fiber art: Mixed-media, Interpretation of Conflicting Media, Motivations and Artists' modes of handling media.

The artists who were given critical focus in this book were European and American artists. Other issues which Waller, (1977) examined are the techniques used by the artists as major means of artistic expression including discussions about the quality of the creative products. Between 1950 and 1980, there were records of a multiplicity of art movements in Europe and America. Among these are Mixed-media assemblages, Indirect Sculpture, Hard edge, Colour field and Minimal art (Lewis, 1990). Also, Preble and Preble, (2004) recorded Early Feminism, Installation, Performance and Super-Realism as modern art movements of the late twentieth century which had the impact of fiber. Also, the artists who were presented and discussed by art critics were mainly European.

The author is curious to find out that the artists discussed in these literatures were foreign artists and none of them is an African by origin. Although many Nigerian artists have explored fibres as a means of artistic expression, and have created different kinds of products, people have little or no knowledge of them because they have not been focused by researchers. Therefore, there is need to study fibre art as a phenomenon; examine some of the most popular fibre artists and identify the roles they have played to the growth and development of the Nigerian society.

What Is Fibre Art?

Fiber arts, made its appearance in literature towards the end of the twentieth century. It describes works of art that are rendered in two or three dimensions, predominated by fibers or fibrous materials. Fiber art is a unique kind of art that is not meant to be functional or necessarily wearable. It encompasses works produced on treadle looms or constructed through any alternative devices including additive process. Tapestry, quilting, appliqué, cutting and joining, knotting, mixed media constructions and Fibre installation fall under this kind of art form.

However, this description has recently been used to discuss and theorize on issues concerning different kinds of explorative tendencies that give both specific and general information to Fine and Applied artists and readers who might be interested in development and growth of contemporary African art.

Fiber Art and Issue of Appropriation

Africa has indeed made good contributions to the development and growth of fiber art, but the records of visual artistic practices in fibres that led to product development have not been fully documented and publicized to give Africa the prime position it deserves. One of the problems according to Visona et al, (2001) is that the contributions made by the African artists have been seen to be insignificant and little understood and appreciated by non Africans. This has been the case with other forms of African arts. The above view is one of the frequently held misconceptions about African arts caused by the fact that foreign writers on African art due to linguistic problem have not been able to un-earth some of the important hidden histories of many different African cultures, particularly the culture in fibres.

Apparently, when issue of appropriation comes up, Europe and America have become the dominant factor. This is because of rapid research and technological culture and high level achievements in development of materials and human resources which these regions have been identified with. According to Ezelumba (2008), these regions have “largely dominated and orchestrated the tempo, and character of art and crafts in post-colonial Africa”. It is obvious that Western Critics and Art Historians apply Western values to the analysis of traditional and modern African arts without understanding some of the hidden histories of most African religions and traditional social system.

Nevertheless, a few extent literatures in fibre art studies and practices have captured some American and European fibre artists such as Jindrich Vohanka who hails and work in Czechoslovakia, Barbara Chase Riboud, an American-Canadian artist based in the United States of America, Walter Nottingham, Josep Garriga from Spain, and Claire Zeisler an American, among many other foreign artists. These artists, used as examples, have made very useful contributions to the development of art which will help to inform and motivate art students to experiment indigenous materials.

For example, Jindrich experimental focus was on recycling of yarns, recyclable fabrics and renewable resource fibres such as cotton, jute and sisal. Jindrich in his fibre work in plate 1 shows his artistic skill in manipulating

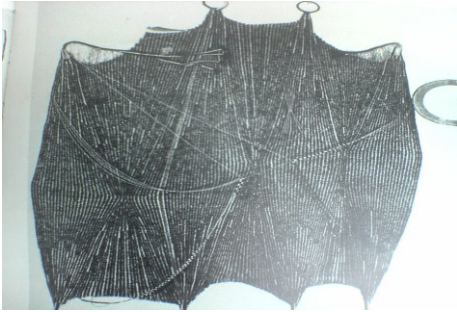


Plate 1. La Visite d'Aldebaran

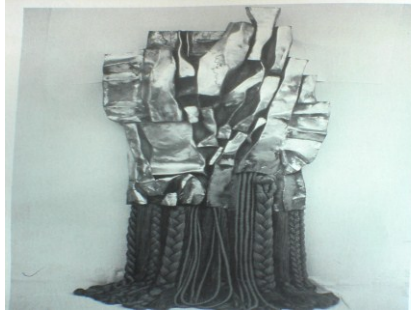


Plate 2. Monument to Malcolm

different types of fibres and his ability to weave with alternative device other than the treadle loom.

Barbara Chase Riboud on her own part explored the efficacy and compatibility of opposing elements. Her theme was always the combination of opposites; time and eternity, mathematics and poetry, the personal and the cosmic, force and tenderness, male and female, shadow and light. Commenting on her creative direction, she remarked that “the use of cord and ropes released me from the tyranny of the base and the armature, and was an absolute revolution for me...the silk and wool are worked not as a weaving material but as one would work clay in mass and volume, rather than weave and texture” (Waller, 1977).

Barbara’s textile sculpture, plate 2, like most works of the post-modern artists shows the artists influence from all artistic periods and styles, and willingness to combine elements of all styles and periods. Revealing her creative motivation, Barbara notes as follows “My objective in the wall hangings is to re-interpret the aesthetic function of African and Oceanic masks in abstract language, using non-anthropological materials: Bronze and silk, bronze and wool, steel and synthetic, aluminum and synthetic” (Patton, 1998). Walter Nottingham, another popular artist moved towards the use of crochet techniques as a major means of expression.

Walter Nottingham, another famous American artist, describes his idea and work process as follows: “...each work is my attempt to articulate through fibres spiritual, emotional and aesthetic impulses. Fibre construction and manipulation, both on and off loom, is the major form (medium) into and through which I attempt to translate, discover, intensify and respond to the mystical aspects of my life. The atmosphere and mystic aura is the main concern of my work...The form and techniques I feel must be one developed from the foundation of a search for content, a grouping of expressive, symbolic images within the live cycle of a work...the search for the form of things unknown-not trying to make the visible seen but the unseen visible, a probing of the mystical content within my life and medium of fibres is my involvement as a weaver” (Waller, 1977).

Nottingham’s statement above has contributions to art development. First, it shows that a work of art proclaims the creative authority of an individual artist. Secondly, a wide range of media provides the necessary anchor for artistic themes and these fell into these categories: Narratives, individual introspections, hero and valour, social and political satire, suffering and oppression. Thirdly, the power of art belongs to the creative artist and the

pictorial concern of themes and process are influenced by the artist thought or ideas and perceptions of his environment.

Josep, Crau Garriga, from Spain, whose career has been dominated by fibre exploration expressed his feelings through textural explorations of two and three dimensional forms



Plate 3. Naixemont d'un Rei



Plate 4. Parella

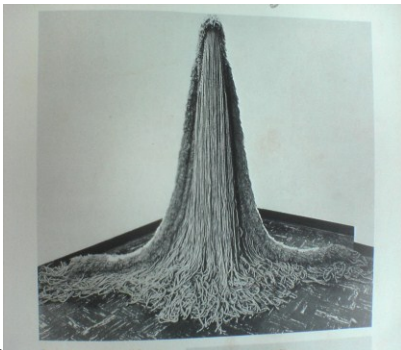


Plate 5. Cascade



Plate 6. Untitled

(Plate, 3 and 4), while Claire Zeisler, on his own part pursued interest in producing free standing textile sculptures with effective knotted and bound shapes that have little structural support in the forms of wrapped coils and looped stitches, see plates,5 and 6. Claire Zeisler's style has a great influence on modern fibre artists.

The discussion above shows, based on extant literatures that fibre art phenomenon evolved in Europe about a century ago under the influence of the Bauhaus. However, more exploration with the medium began in the 1970's. Many European artists who were involved

in this development were formally trained in art institutions and consequently, this affected positively their compositional skills, styles, themes and concepts. Also, the European artists generally, seem to have abandoned representational art in favour of conceptual art. This marks a new creative transformation being pursued by artists across the globe, today.

However, fibre art which is apparently modern in Europe has been a traditional means of formalistic and conceptual expression that had its origin in African masking tradition. Duerden (1974) observes that masking “is a particular kind of art which is unique to the continent and can be found no where else in the world”. Masking tradition according to Duerden had played significant role to the development and growth of African social system. Leuzinger (1976) had earlier noted that the high culture and luxurious requirements African royal courts gave impetus to art. In addition, the production of objects of everyday use and the place of honour occupied by figures, masks and ceremonial fibre objects gave rise to production of creative variety of art products.

Fibre Art In Nigeria: Media And Techniques

One would wonder why Nigerian fibre artists have not yet appealed to art critics as subject of study or research. Has Nigeria not evolved fiber art culture that can appeal to researchers? Can it be assumed that fibre artists from Nigeria lack inspiration, skill and ability to explore ideas and media like their foreign counterpart? Seeking out immediate answers to the above questions may lead ultimately to a discussion on why the Nigerian artist creates, for whom he creates and what social and historical conditions influence, shape and amplify his creative act. In the case of Nigeria, the fact remains that there is scanty information about mode, media and design processes of fibre art phenomenon, although fibre art is traditionally rooted in most Nigerian communities.

For over a century, studies of Nigerian masking traditions have been subjects of foreign photo-journalism. Wearable fibre costumes have appeared in many books such as Leuzinger, (1976), Willet, (1971), Robert, (1980) and Visona, et al (2001). Discussions in these books focus on functions of masking as theater or as agent of social control. Fiber art which makes this phenomenon apparently dynamic and aesthetically pleasing had no significant focus. Obviously, there are many Nigerian artists working in fibre medium who are not known in Africa, Europe and America and elsewhere in the world.

Majority of these had link with formal art institutions, but their contributions to the society is recognized and appreciated by their local communities. However, when their works are sold in markets far away from their places of origin, it is usually difficult to identify the artists that produce the works. This has indeed created problem of identity and authorship of many good Nigerian art works. Foreign art critics and historians identify these artists as “Anonymous artists” when they find it difficult to identify the producer of the work.

However, these so-called “anonymous Nigerian artists” should not be blamed for not signing or identifying themselves with their works. In traditional African societies, stamp of identity is not usually the interest or focus of the artist. The focus of the traditional artists is on service to the society and not service to self, and the artist from the beginning realizes that a work of art, particularly, religious objects, masking costumes and paraphernalia including secular objects are the properties of the society that dictates the forms, concepts, design and media of the art products.

Nigeria has various kinds of traditional customs and these customs have required patterns, which lead to development of its material objects. These material objects include

secular art objects used in homes such as cloth, mat, pot, carved doors, carved wooden post, hat and cap, bangles, roofing and fencing materials, and wearable costumes used for different purposes. These objects are designed and produced by craftsmen, who explore indigenous ideas, forms and materials.

With regard to production of fibre products, the following materials sourced from local environment have been explored: fibres from local plants, pliable materials, feather, hides, and skin, reed and ropes. Different kinds of functional and decorative objects have been developed by traditional fibre artists, who have explored the following techniques: weaving, quilting, macramé, looping, bonding, tying and knotting. “The need to explore materials for production of objects led to the discovery of indigenous methods of fibre processing” (Diogu, 2004). Also, trading on fibre-crafts such as baskets, mat, cloth, costumes, bags, among others, forms major economic activity that encourages societal growth and development.

Furthermore, the society evolved and sustained different kinds of ceremonies, feasts and festivals which encourage production and utilization of arts and crafts, thus enhancing innovation in indigenous art and technology.

Modern Nigerian Fibre Artists and the Roles of the Nsukka Art School

Education has brought changes and challenges in the ways people think and what they do. Christian and Muslim religions have also made serious impact on the traditional values of Nigerian society. Indeed, Africans, particularly, the elites have been identified by Ottenberg, (1959) for their quick receptivity to modern changes. These changes obviously, seem to have been inspired by the Bauhaus, particularly, the Bauhaus Weaving Workshops, which has since the formation of the Bauhaus in 1919, in Germany continues to inspire contemporary textile appreciation, design and production. When architect Walter Gropius founded the Bauhaus, he assembled multi-talented teachers who sought to reverse the split between art and production by returning to crafts as the foundation of all artistic activities and was intent on developing designs for objects and space that would advance a more humane society.

In 1977, Uche Okeke, who had links with Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and the University of Nigeria Fine Art Departments, and had a postgraduate training in Munich, Germany, introduced fibre exploration in the Nsukka Art School (Diogu 2010). This has resulted to the training of Modern Fibre artists in Nigeria. The Nsukka Art School has international and avant-garde dimensions when the issues of fibre art study and practices are raised and discussed in Nigeria. Artists such as Uche Okeke, Chianugo. S .Okeke, Ifedioranma Dike, Godson Diogu, Bright Eke, Asogwa Odoja and Nkem Udeani from the Nsukka Art School have sought a new visual idiom appropriate for a modern artistically conscious nation, Nigeria. In the area of Fashion Design and fibre, Okpara Tochukwu and Rita Ubah, (females) from the Nsukka School come to mind. The works of these artists cited above are comparable with those of famous American and European fibre artists earlier mentioned in this paper. Based on refinement of creative works and media, and aesthetic appeal, the works of some of these artists were presented in this paper to show evidence of creativity and innovation.



Plate 7. Owuelo, Tapestry by Uche Okeke. Cotton, jute, rayon.



Plate 8. Resonance by I. Dike
Mixed –media: cloth, fibre and pigment.

This tapestry by Uche Okeke, Plate 7, reveals a deliberately use of forms, negative and positive space in the overall composition of the design. The major imagery in this tapestry is the mythical spirit figure centrally placed in the picture. The spirit figure represents the ancestor advising Owuelo to depart and go home because the aboard of humans is in the home and not in the bush where the ancestral spirits dwell. The theme was conceived from the Igbo folk-tale and belief that the ancestors visit their earthly home at night to commune with the living members of their family and retire to the spirit world in the bush after the visit. Uche Okeke's composition has strange forms that might have their origin from spiritual realm.

One thing that strikes the mind of this researcher about Uche Okeke's tapestry is his attached value on traditional folklores. Uche Okeke artistically reminds us that history of art has always depended on the inheritance of the past, which has been a narrative of loss and gain. This inheritance should not be rejected by that generation of artists in the light of modern development. Rather, artistic inheritance should be re-worked, re-presented, re-directed and transformed and this process should form part of the process of change through innovation. Aniagala, (2007) in his discussion on "folkism" as the contemporary African exploration of drama as social intervention, notes that "Folkism explores the African folktale narrative techniques in an attempt to re--mould both the individual and the society. It focuses on the socio-political problems which bring about behavioural decay, insecurity, and the unnecessary wastage of human lives and material resources. It is also used to address the societal problems through the use of creative resources that are relevant experiences of the African". Apparently, these are also the issues that Uche Okeke and Godson Diogu seem to have addressed using tapestry as their expressive medium.



plate 9 "Expection" by G.O.Diogu
Media: Jute and rayon fibre.



Plate10. "The Seer" by G.O. Diogu. *The artist composed the work with recycled materials: yarn and pieces of cloth sourced from tailor's workshop*

Beyond the folkloristic characteristic of Uche Okeke's tapestry, his work could be seen as a very powerful visual document to align him with his Western counterparts in exploration of this medium. In contrast, other artists like Ifedioramma Dike and Godson Diogu borrowed from Uche Okeke's creative experience. However, the concepts of their works were informed by the social/secular culture of the Igbo. For example, Dike's works titled "Resonance", Plate 8, is a Mixed-media production. In this work, Dike explored the

dynamics of forms and design, adapting Igbo masking tradition. Commenting on his motivations and influence, Dike, (2003) notes that: "I am conversant with masking traditions of my people, and resolved to bring innovation into the tradition through adaptation of the tradition, formal and conceptual quality, to make new artistic statement in textile art". On the other hand, Godson Diogu directed his attention to exploring with recyclable media. "Expectation" and "The Seer", plates 9 and 10 respectively showed the artist's skill in pictorial composition using materials picked from the junk.

Evidently, all through the ages, the Nigerian artist has been concerned with the fate of man in the world that threatens his existence. It is the artist in the traditional and modern societies that seeks to create a positive consciousness that will enable man to strive for worthy goals and ideals in life that will improve his habitat and his degree of social interactions. These are the ideals and values which Nigerian Fibre artists have tried to achieve.

There are also different kinds of fibre products for aesthetic and functional purposes produced by local fibre artists. These products today have direct influence on art schools, particularly, in Nigeria. The works produced by some contemporary Nigerian fibre artists were used in this paper to exemplify the level of exploration and research in this area of study. It is hoped that through these examples, the society generally, will be more artistically informed, the artists more creatively inspired and people that are interested in this profession, particularly in Nigeria would be more energetically motivated.

Conclusion

From what has been discussed so far, it would be seen that Nigerian craftsmen are knowledgeable and very conversant with the use of multi-media in art production, and fibre art is one of the Nigerian common mode of artistic expression with regard to masking tradition. It was noted that the functions of fibre art works in Nigeria are strictly to meet the demands of masking traditions, traditional burial ceremonies and other religious feasts, unlike in Europe, America and other developed countries that have brought academic content into fibre art and thus, conceptualized the creative process, the Nigerian artists still find themselves tied to the string of traditions that do not make provision for exploration with media, ideas and forms. This lack of experimental and exploring spirits developed through academic practice has been the cog that militates against the development, growth and sustainability of fibre art in Nigeria.

Although Nigeria has made major contributions to the development of Fibre Art, it seems that Nigeria, based on lack of historical records of her traditional economic, social and technological activities of the past has lost important records of the development and growth of fibre art. This gap is gradually being filled today, because some Universities such as the University of Nigeria, Nsukka had included fibre art in its academic curriculum. Much progress is expected in this direction because Nigeria has abundant fibre resources. Exploring with these resources under the influence of the Art Schools is currently producing good results. The challenge now lies with Nigerian art historians and theorists who are vested with the responsibility of research and dissimulation of information about fibre art phenomenon.

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