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Nationalism and the Rhetoric of Modernism in Nigeria: The Art of Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko, 1960-1968: [With Commentary]

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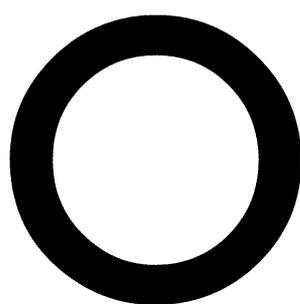
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# Nationalism and the Rhetoric of Modernism in Nigeria

## *The Art of Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko, 1960–1968*

CHIKA OKEKE-AGULU



On October 6, 1958, Uche Okeke, along with Simon Okeke and Demas Nwoko, had an informal discussion about forming what he then called the Nigerian Art Society (Okeke 1998:270). Uche Okeke and Nwoko were second-year students while Simon Okeke was their senior by one year. Three days later, an inaugural meeting was held, and in the next few days an executive committee of the Art Society was formed, with Uche Okeke as its founding secretary. The society, better known in the literature as the Zaria Art Society, has been accorded a key place in the art history of Nigeria.<sup>1</sup> Its championing of a national identity for the work of contemporary Nigerian artists under the banner of what Uche Okeke called Natural Synthesis remains the society's major contribution to Nigerian art. Yet the idea of Natural Synthesis and the attempt by the Art Society to consciously cultivate a nationalist art ideology based on the country's rich artistic heritage remains quite problematic, particularly in terms of what this Synthesis means, or

how it is expressed in the individual work of the Society's members. Incidentally, most commentators see in the works of these artists a unified production operating on the same conceptual logic and in the same political and context (jegede 1983; Kennedy 1992). The unfortunate consequence has been a kind of glossing over both the diverse stylistic and conceptual aspects of this work, and the implicit dissimilar political motivations of the artists.

By looking at the evidence of the work produced by Uche Okeke and Nwoko<sup>2</sup> in the 1960s, this essay argues that the specific paths each artist took in giving form to Natural Synthesis were divergent even though they could still be subsumed under what I want to call aesthetic nationalism.<sup>3</sup> As we shall see, Okeke's aesthetic program offered him a unique opportunity to explore, reclaim, and assert his Igbo artistic and cultural heritage. He did this through his work based on Igbo folklore and Uli art.<sup>4</sup> This is the classic scenario, perhaps the most developed form as well as the best articulated interpretation and expression of the Natural Synthesis paradigm: An artist studies an art form indigenous to his ethnicity and reformulates a modernist aesthetic and formal style on the basis of that art.

The same may not be said for Nwoko, himself also an Igbo, whose most important work at the time was informed by his research into Nok sculpture from the north-central region of Nigeria.<sup>5</sup> The question then is what to make of Nwoko's cross-cultural borrowing, especially given the importance of ethnic identity in both colonial and postcolonial Nigeria. Does it have any significance in terms of how the work operates within the context of Nigeria's political and cultural history? One way to look at the two aesthetic orientations, I argue, is to locate their work within the context of contemporary decolonization politics. Although this essay deals primarily with the work of two artists, it has important ramifications in the sense that it points to the variegated and divergent ideological and conceptual concerns among artists who at the dawn of political independence and in the early modernist period were often lumped together in unworkable, often useless groups such as "college-trained," "academic," "elitist." These labels only inhibit our readiness to engage deeply with the work at both formalistic/conceptual and contextual levels, which ought to be the task of the historian faced with these and similar work by



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modern artists in Nigeria and elsewhere on the continent.

The history of Nigerian nationalism shows two trends, a federalizing initiative that drew from the rhetoric of Pan-Africanism and another, which eventually triumphed, described by Coleman as the regionalization of nationalism (Coleman 1958:319–31). As Coleman notes, national-

ist politicians aspired to national office on the basis of their ethnic mandates and in the process reified Nigerian ethnic diversity and difference at the expense of a unified national spirit. I want to argue that within this context, Okeke's work reflects this regionalizing tendency while Nwoko's speaks to the less prominent, perhaps more idealistic, pan-Nigerian, creative intervention in Nigeria's cultural politics.

The type of analysis attempted here raises question about both its immediate and far-reaching implications about art, creative license, the historian's interpretive enterprise, and the construction of

(art) history. In other words, does an insertion of a specific series of works within a larger discourse of national cultural politics do justice to the works' place in the artist's evolving formal style? The second implication is epistemological. How, for instance, might a reading of an artist's work suggest a greater or lesser sensitivity to, and identification with, his social place? Or does this reading constitute in itself an independent act of knowledge production separate from that inherent in the artist's gesture?

## Art Society, Zaria, 1957–1961

The Art Society was formed at a critical time in the history of the Art Department of the Nigerian College of Art, Science, and Technology, Zaria (NCAST). Most art students came from southern Nigeria and therefore the Zaria experience was, from the beginning, an adventure of sorts. As Ola Oloidi (1998:35) has noted, the southern press, artists, and critics vehemently contested the transfer of the college in 1955 from Ibadan in the southwest to Zaria in the far north.<sup>6</sup> The move, to many, was an attempt by the colonial administration to discourage a burgeoning modern art trend in the south.<sup>7</sup> So for most students, the relocation of the art school presented a serious cultural challenge; in the eyes of many, producing art in a predominantly Islamic town and region could lead to cultural confrontation with their host communities. But as it turned out, the real contestation emerged not from an expected friction between artistic license and secular modernity on the one hand, and Islamic orthodoxy and cultural conservatism on the other. Instead, the national political landscape and the colonial question would become the focus of the students' ideological and intellectual energies. This in turn led to questions about the conditions of their tutelage and the nature of art in a decolonizing society.

The Art Society, therefore, was founded primarily to give its members a sense of direction as Africans, for it was apparent to its members that there was an unavoidable problem of culture conflict, as their teachers were mostly expatriates "who had their own culture, who had their own ideas."<sup>8</sup> Although its activities were largely informal, the Society was formally registered and recognized as a student group, and they made official representations to the authorities on such matters as the school's repeated attempts to get affiliated to the Slade and later Goldsmiths' College of the University of London. For most Zaria students the affiliation would not only guarantee their degree but also boost their professional viability and social status in the late colonial society. But, for the Art Society, it was an unacceptable circumvention of the much-desired full-fledged

1. Demas Nwoko  
*Nigeria, 1959, 1960*  
Oil on board, 136cm x 96.5cm (53" x 38")  
Collection of the artist/New Culture Studios,  
Ibadan

national art school, as well as a revalidation of the imperial project despite the imminence of political independence.

A significant part of the Society's activities included discussions on aspects of Nigerian indigenous cultural practices and traditions. It stressed the importance of preserving, through documentation, legends and folk tales of Nigerian peoples. In practice, according to Yusuf Grillo (Omoighe 1998:64), each member was encouraged to spend part of the holidays documenting art forms and traditions of his people, for it was important that each knew his roots as part of coming to terms with his identity. They would then present

their research findings to other members during their meeting sessions, and on several occasions they discussed works of European artists, as well as new Nigerian literature (Okeke 1998:276).<sup>9</sup> Uche Okeke, for instance, had been introduced to the novels of Amos Tutuola by one of the art teachers, as well as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Achebe's work especially had a clear resonance, for it deepened Okeke's understanding of Igbo culture, notwithstanding that it is a work of fiction (Okeke 1998:272). But it was also a major literary contribution to the quest by Nigerian intellectuals to counter, if not reject, colonial constructions of African

subjectivity.<sup>10</sup> In any case, the general tenor within the Art Society was one of clear, even programmatic striving for a nationalistic art, one that drew upon the work of contemporary African writers and politicians. This is emphasized in Okeke's presidential address at the meeting of the Society three weeks after political independence in October 1960 (Okeke 1982:2).<sup>11</sup> Thus, the Art Society period was marked by a sustained attempt on the part of the members to learn as much as they could about Nigerian cultural traditions, for without this awareness, their project of consolidating their self-esteem in the face of colonial snobbery could not succeed. As much as they learned about European art and artists, mostly from books and magazines, they equally absorbed as much information about the ancient art of Nok, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife, and Benin. They also researched contemporary Nigerian folklore and other cultural practices. And it is their conscious, critical deployment of the technical expertise learned from the art classes to sustained experimentation with indigenous art forms that Okeke would describe as Natural Synthesis.

The idea of Natural Synthesis in itself, that is, Okeke's description of their artistic program as "natural," is significant not least because the very process this program implied was anything but natural. Rather, the work called for entailed a very systematic approach to image-making that implied considerable intellection and conscious decision-making in terms of what artistic traditions to explore and what specific elements from these traditions to subject to formal experimentation. Clearly then, by describing their project as "natural" he aligned it with the tendency of political nationalism to insist on the naturalness or authenticity of the imagined nation and therefore rhetorically contrasted it with the forced artificiality of the Western art traditions associated with Zaria at the time. In any case, precisely because of the constructedness, rather than the naturalness, of this process of synthesis, the work of the Society members shows a wide range of interpretation of the very nature of the desired synthesis, although they all quite clearly showed similar ideological motivations grounded on ideas of artistic and political freedoms.



CHIKA OKEKE-AGULU/COURTESY: DEMAS NWOKO

*This page:*

2. Demas Nwoko  
*Ogboni Chief*, 1960  
Oil on board, 87.5cm x 54.5cm (34" x 21")  
Collection of the artist/New Culture Studios,  
Ibadan

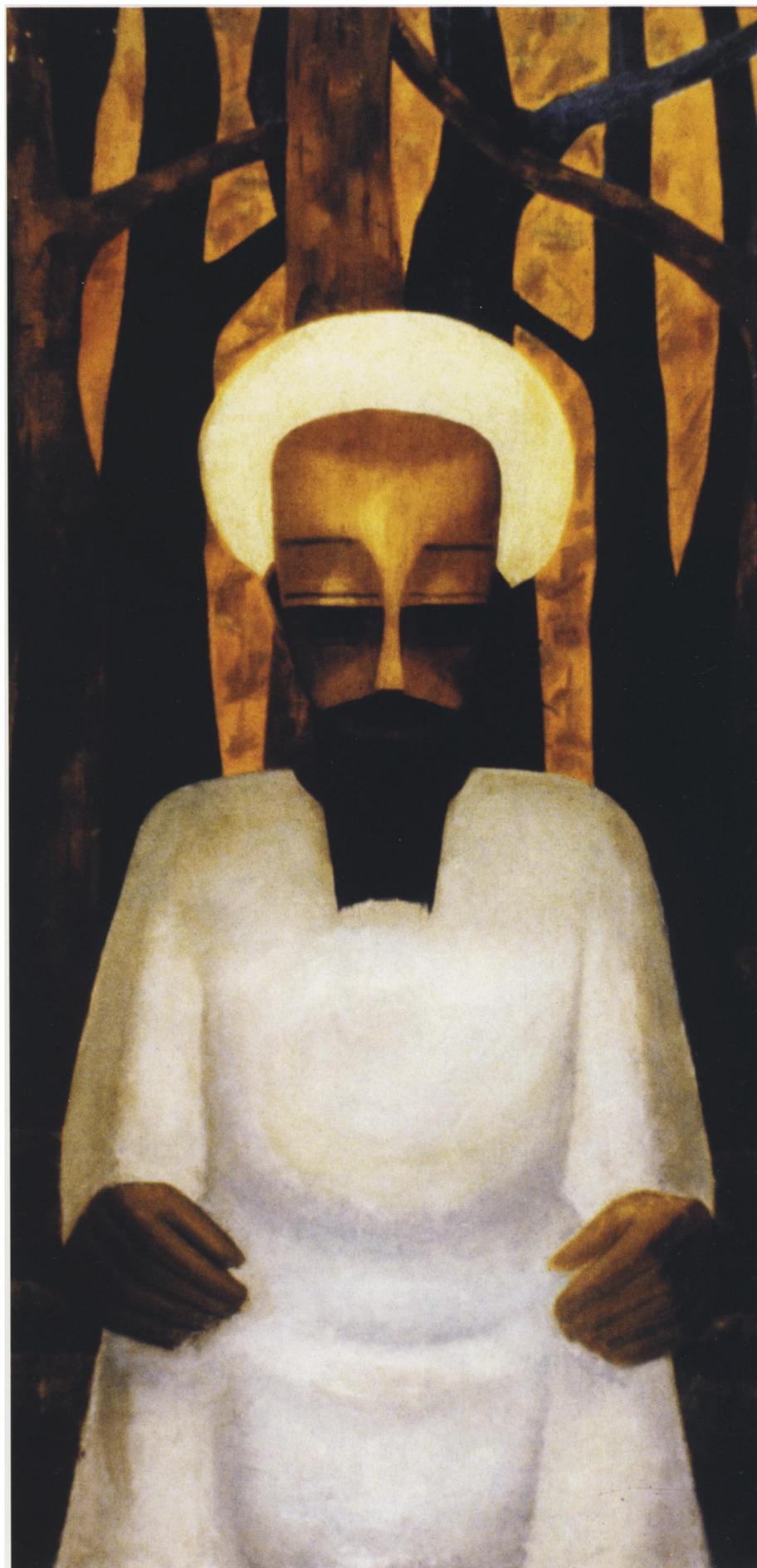
*Opposite page:*

3. Uche Okeke  
*Christ*, 1961  
Oil on board, 122cm x 61cm (48" x 24")  
Collection of Iwalewa-Haus, Bayreuth

Nevertheless, while in Zaria, the painting styles of Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko were clearly inspired not by any indigenous Nigerian painting tradition but by the work of European Symbolists and Post-Impressionists such as Henry Rousseau (1844–1910) and Paul Gauguin (1848–1903).<sup>12</sup> The similarity of palette among the members of the Art Society, which I would ascribe to the European Symbolist tradition, might have come to them through illustrations in books on modern European art. Thus, despite the fact that Society members researched art forms specific to their home areas, the impact of their findings affected not so much their formal style as their thematic preoccupation. Despite tentative gestures at adapting “African” sculptural form into their figural compositions, their Zaria paintings showed little if any unique quality directly or totally ascribable to particular Nigerian painting traditions, and this much is obvious from one of Nwoko’s best-known paintings, *Nigeria, 1959* (Fig. 1).

Although created in 1960, *Nigeria, 1959* retrospectively responded to the peaking political tension a year before the colonialists relinquished political power. An official portrait of sorts, the picture speaks to the Manichean world of colonialism even at its moment of expiration (Oyelola 1976:100). The white officers are all in different poses suggestive of systemic disarticulation, a loss of order and certitude, their long, drawn faces an index of disillusionment, but also fatigue. Even in their imperious seats, they seem suddenly vulnerable to unknown forces lurking in the dark. And this saturnine space is inhabited by barely visible black figures, their faces inscrutable; men who once protected the officers now seem like Death’s messengers, executioners waiting impatiently for the final hour. The style of execution of the figures is dissonant. While the white figures seem quite two-dimensional, like plywood cutouts ambiguously placed within the deep cadmium red space, the black figures are boldly modeled, like carved wooden figures inhabiting a dark blue shrine/space. Yet the similarity in the handling of the figures is remarkable: The bodies are sparsely modeled while the faces are glyphic, although the white faces are less so. Further, despite the obvious side-stepping of pictorial realism here, the smooth and resolved surface texture and brushwork, along with the rigidly drawn figures, recall the anti-Expressionist formal clarity characteristic of *Neue Sachlichkeit* painting in Germany in the interwar period.

Whereas the brushwork and form in *Nigeria, 1959* is considered, deliberate, and suppressed, in the other clearly expressionistic works of the same year, *Praying Woman* and *Churchgoers* for instance, there is an energetic vigor, an almost insouciant air that belies what must have been rapidly executed paintings. Nwoko displays in all these pictures sufficient mastery of



ULLI BEIER/COURTESY: IWALEWA-HAUS, BAYREUTH

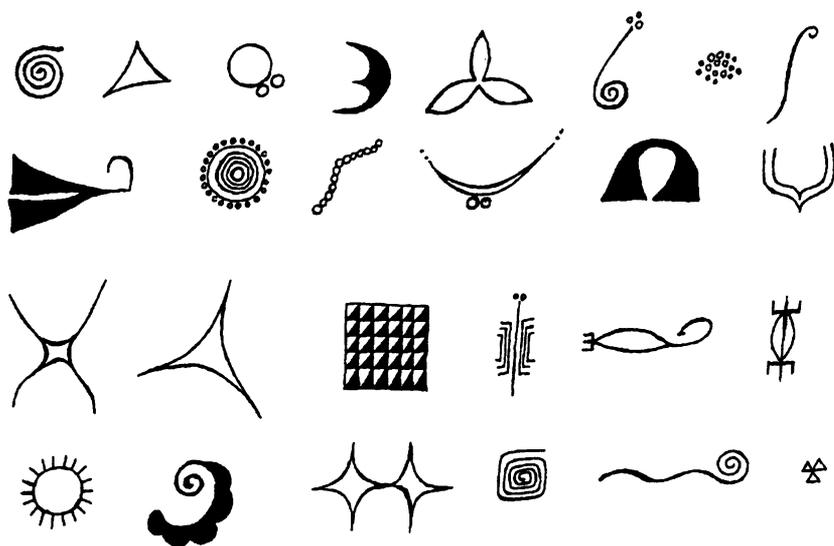


painting modes already established by European modernist painters. Thus, in form and composition, the 1960 pictures, taken here as the epitome of his Zaria painting experience, show the artist's assertion of his ability to manage, control, and appropriate techniques of delivery learned from an encounter with modern European painting.<sup>13</sup> It is clearly on account of Nwoko's expression of what I see as his internalization and reformulation of styles and principles of modern European painting that Beier would make a claim that was valid, if surprising, at the time. Referring to *Ogboni Chief* (1960; Fig. 2), he stated: "This picture is perhaps a clue to Nwoko's relation to African tradition. Unlike lesser artists he refuses to simply borrow the forms of traditional masks and carvings" (Beier 1960–1961:11, Beier's emphasis).<sup>14</sup> The question then is whatever happened to the research on and discussions about indigenous Nigerian art forms? How, if at all, did the artist exploit or explore the formal potentialities of local, "traditional" forms upon

which the idea of Natural Synthesis supposedly relied?

Actually, it would take a couple of years before the gains of the Art Society discussions and research projects resulted in work clearly inspired by, and mostly dependent on the Zaria activities. In the case of Nwoko this is manifested in the terracotta sculptures he started working on sometime in early 1965. For Uche Okeke, the development was more immediate, in the sense that his formal style more clearly reflected the formal implications of Natural Synthesis, reaching its watershed in 1962, a year after leaving Zaria. Although Okeke was exploring the formal possibilities of line in his drawings from 1957 to 1961 (his Zaria years), his stylistic uniqueness only emerged after he began in late 1961, but mostly in the following year, to experiment with designs and decorative principles from Igbo Uli painting and drawing.

A closer look at Okeke's last paintings in Zaria would clearly show, as stated earlier, a formal quality similar to Nwoko's



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Top: 4. Igbo Uli mural, from Uke, c. 1989. Photo: Ulli Beier. The major characteristic of Uli wall paintings from Uke in Anambra State is the black background on which the artists draw in white and yellow pigment simple, motifs abstracted from cosmic, botanic and zoomorphic forms. In some other Igbo areas, the motifs include recognizable though stylized human and animal representations.

Bottom: 5. Some Igbo Uli motifs drawn by the author. 2005. Modern artists, led by Uche Okeke employ adaptations of Uli motifs as major compositional elements, or as decorative forms in paintings, drawings characterized by lyrical, sensuous lines.

Opposite page:

Top: 6. Uche Okeke  
*From the Forest*, 1962  
Pen and ink on paper, 19cm x 14cm (7" x 5")  
Collection of the artist/Asele Institute, Nimo

Bottom: 7. Uche Okeke  
*Head of a Girl*, 1962  
Pen and ink on paper, 19cm x 14cm (7" x 5")  
Collection of the artist/Asele Institute, Nimo

and those of their other Art Society colleague Onobrakpeya. Thus, in Iwalewa-Haus Bayreuth's *Fabled Brute* (1960)—a character that comes from one of the several Igbo folk tales he documented before, but also during, his Zaria years—the color work is similar to that of Nwoko's *Nigeria*, 1959. The composite animal combines features of the toad and the crocodile but comes closer to representations of the dragon, this latter association emphasized by the fiery color of the beast's eyes and fanged mouth. Although the transmogrified figure of the beast is typical of the fantastic representations in his Igbo Folk Tale drawings,<sup>15</sup> the gesture toward the snarling horse-beasts in Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) is unmistakable.<sup>16</sup> As in Nwoko's *Nigeria*, 1959, the surface texture of *Fabled Brute* and *Christ* (1961; Fig. 3) is smooth, the brushwork almost imperceptible. Even more, the figural style of *Fabled Brute* and *Christ* echoes that of *Nigeria*, 1959, where faces are masklike and fairly well defined, unlike the rest of the body painted in slightly modulated but flat colors.

However, in scope and conception, one work that seemed different from Okeke's paintings of the period is the enigmatic *Ana Mmuo* (1961)—in the collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art—clearly one of his most accomplished pictures. It is, formally, a radical departure from his previous/other work from that year, and consists of flat, organic, intensely cadmium red, cadmium yellow, and white shapes, against which are abstract linear forms that suggest figures from the supernal world indicated by the title. I want to suggest that *Ana Mmuo* stands at the juncture between Okeke's Zaria work and the Uli-inspired work that would follow, for its organic flat shapes of color and distinct linear forms anticipate the lyrical qualities of the work that

emerged from the Uli experiments and inquiries later in 1961, but especially in the following year.

## After Zaria: Uli and Nok Art

While in Zaria Okeke collected Igbo folklore and conducted research in Uli mural and body art, with the initial guidance of his mother, an accomplished painter. Concerning Uli art there is a fair amount of literature, and this is not the place to review it (Fig. 4).<sup>17</sup> However, it would suffice to outline the main aesthetic principles and forms of *uli* that are important in Okeke's own work. Two different perspectives would be helpful for our present inquiry:

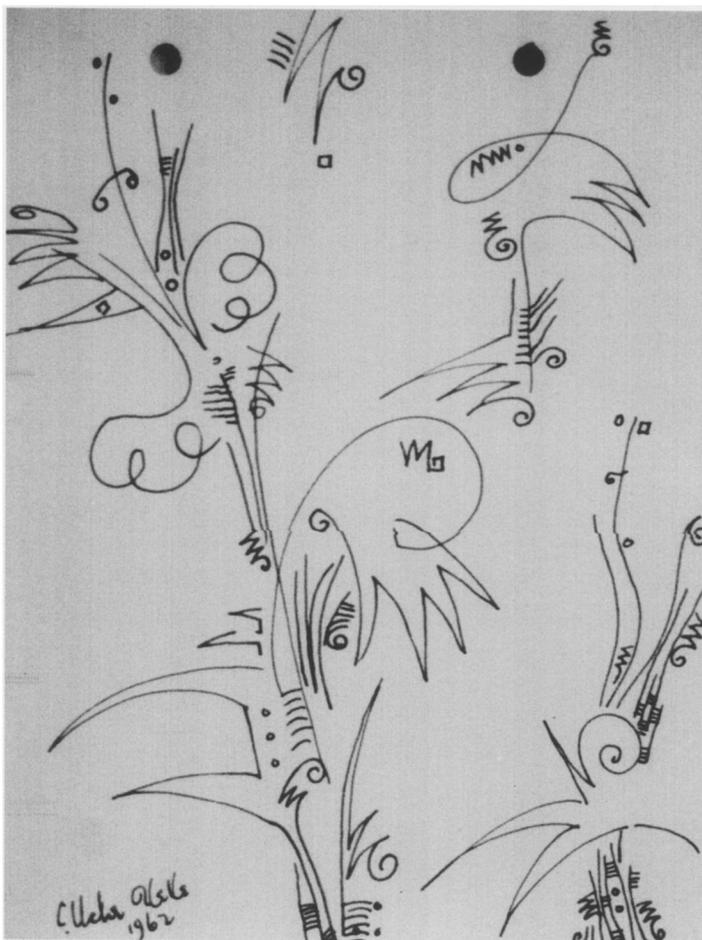
[A] quality of *uli* that strikes one immediately is the linearity, the primacy of line. *Akpala uli* or *akala uli*, the *uli* line, is very recurrent in *uli* repertoire. Also the "abstract" outlook cannot be missed. We use abstract not only because of the patent nonfigurative or nonobjective aspect but also because the motifs are abstracted from known objects, phenomena, or ideas (Udechukwu 1990:9).

The Igbo artist and art historian Chike Aniakor also stresses the characteristic linearity and simplification of form associated with aspects of the traditional art practice:

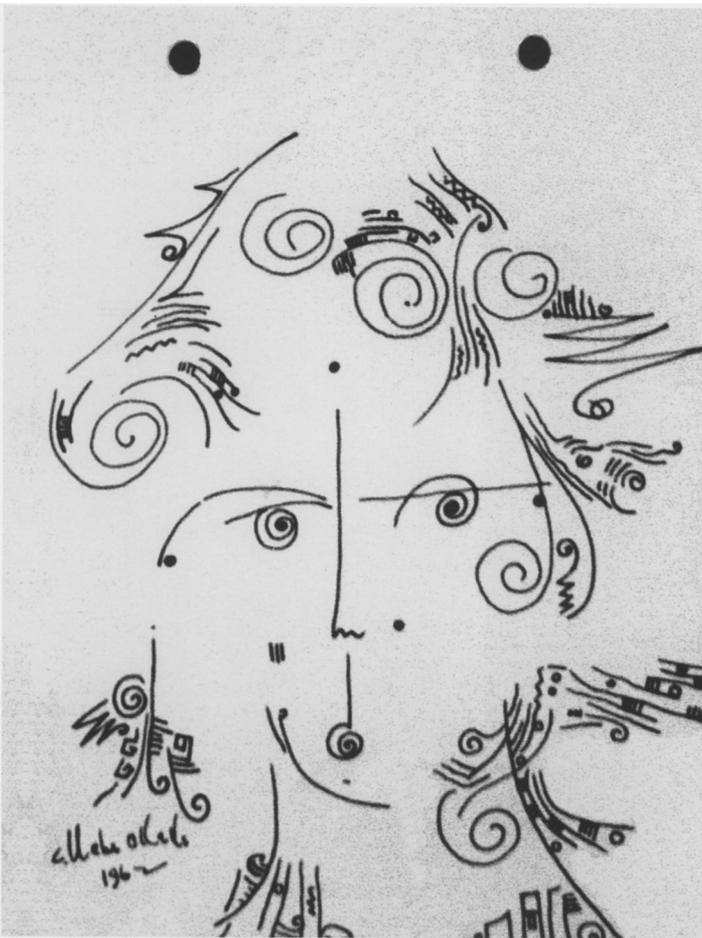
In fact, the quality of *uli* is directness of execution, simplification, and then the linear rendering of form in such a way that, less is said, and more is yet said. In other words: condensation is very important (quoted in Udechukwu 1990:60).<sup>18</sup>

*Uli* artists draw from a "corpus of motifs [that] is extensive and varies from region to region though there are units that are widely distributed throughout Igbo-land" (Udechukwu 1990:9).<sup>19</sup> As Udechukwu has suggested, very many *uli* motifs are abstractions based on natural forms—local flora and fauna, celestial bodies—and man-made objects. However, there are what one might call stock motifs that constituted Uche Okeke's own basic design elements (Fig. 5):

In *uli* body painting we have the basic shapes which appeared in several variations in the different decorative art. These range from the archetypal shapes—dot, line, curvilinear triangles and rectangles (*isinwaoji*), circles (*oloma*, *onwa*), and crescents—to their extensions in concentric coil (*agwolagwo*) derived from the snake, double triangle (*mbo agu*)—leopard's claw and so on (Udechukwu 1972:94).<sup>20</sup>



CHIKA OKEKE-AGULU/COURTESY: UCHE OKEKE



CHIKA OKEKE-AGULU/COURTESY: UCHE OKEKE



COURTESY: ASELE INSTITUTE/UCHE OKEKE



COURTESY: ASELE INSTITUTE/UCHE OKEKE

Soon after Zaria, while he was preparing for his trip to Germany in late 1962, Okeke produced a prodigious number of drawings, including the well-documented Oja Suite, in which he evidently demonstrated the formal lessons learned from experiment with Igbo Uli art and design.<sup>21</sup>

Typical of the Oja Suite drawings are *From the Forest* and *Head of a Girl* (Figs. 6–7). In the latter, the main structural element is a straight vertical line running from high up the forehead down to the nostrils, which are merely indicated by a corrugated m- or w-shaped line. This vertical line, broken after the nostrils, continues and ends in *agwolagwo* spiral mark, which is the mouth. Crossing this vertical line are two horizontal ones marking either the upper eyelids on the left or the eyebrow on the right. As with the mouth, the same *agwolagwo* motif representing her bundled or curly hair suggests the eyes, along with the pupils in one single gesture, while a short curving jaw line and a cascade of hair on the right outline her rotund face.

As in other similar drawings, there are short gesticulating lines in *Head of a Girl*, but here they all tend to end in spirals, as though several autonomous centripetal forces pull the lines as soon as they emerge. It is also as if—when one imagines the drawing process—the artist's pen was dancing on the paper leaving the drawing as an index of that activity. This reading is, apparently, not entirely far-fetched, for Okeke has himself made a connection between dance and *uli* painting and drawing (Okeke 1976).<sup>22</sup> It might seem like a small point, but the use of the spiral motif in this work, as well as in many others in Oja Suite, is in fact a key aspect of what I want to call Okeke's system.

This system is most evident in another, quite remarkable drawing from 1962 (Fig. 8). Initially we see vertical lines broken up into long and short linear marks. In between some of them are high-density zigzag marks, some of which end in spirals. These are mostly in the lower part of the picture and at the top corners. At the

*This page:*

Top: 8. Uche Okeke

*Owls*, 1962

Pen and ink on paper, 23cm x 15cm (9" x 6")

Collection of the artist/Asele Institute, Nimo

The spiral motif (*agwolagwo*), performs multiple signifying functions. It represents the moon at the upper right; the eyes of the owls; and floral forms mostly in the lower left corner.

Bottom: 9. Uche Okeke

*Munich Girl*, 1962

Brush and ink on paper, 40.5cm x 27.3cm

(16" x 10")

Collection of the artist/Asele Institute, Nimo

*Opposite page:*

10. Uche Okeke

*Girl with Flowing Hair*, 1962

Brush and ink on paper, 38cm x 14cm (15" x 5")

Collection of the artist/Asele Institute, Nimo

top right area, especially, we see the bolder marks suggestive of dense foliage. On top of these is a large spiral that is at the apex of a triangular formation of spirals, four of which are diagonally displaced on the picture plane. Between the two sets of spirals are marks reminiscent of *okala isinwaoji* motifs, and around all these are concave lines breaking up the vertical ones. The title of this drawing is *Owls*. It all begins to make sense that the two sets of lower spirals are pairs of eyes belonging to two owls, the *okala isinwaoji* being their vastly exaggerated beaks. Above them is what might be the moon, the birds being nocturnal.

Let us return then to *Head of a Girl*, to note that in this drawing the same mark—the spiral—signifies the hair, eyes, and mouth. In *Owls*, it signifies (bird) eyes and the moon. In other words, with just one graphic gesture, the artist represents human, animal, and cosmic forms. Thus there is a conscious decision on Okeke's part to invent new ways of seeing and representing not only the folk tales he collected but also genre subject matter. Indeed, this system of notation in its very extreme tends to become somewhat abstract, as is the case with some of the works he produced during his sojourn in Munich between 1962 and 1963.

The Munich Suite is a series of drawings, mostly in brush and ink but some in charcoal. As in his previous suites, he drew a few head portraits. One such is *Munich Girl* (Fig. 9), which presents another clear case of the polysemic power of the spiral form. The eye on the right is unambiguously present, or so it seems, for the spiral mark that asserts its presence is, really, a lock of hair hanging down her forehead and ending in a curly bang. Perhaps testifying to the precariousness of this signifying gesture, the left eye struggles to keep its independence, and therefore the specific identity of hair and eye—a long strand of hair seems to hang over the eye, ending shortly. Yet, having seen the other eye, we are not sure if this too is a full circle or a fudged up spiral connected somehow to the hair.

Most of the Munich Suite ink drawings continue the visual tropes already noted, only modified by the unique graphic qualities of brush and ink, compared to pen or charcoal. Thus, the structural similarities of *Munich Girl* and two 1962 ink-and-brush drawings, *Birds in Flight* and *Girl with Flowing Hair* (Fig. 10), are as obvious as their formal difference.<sup>23</sup> Whereas, in *Munich Girl*, lines effortlessly glide across the picture plane, defining, in linear detail, the subject's curly hair and frilly dress, in *Girl with Flowing Hair* there is a struggle to force the liquid lines into curvatures—that-refuse-to-be-spirals and to tame the ink-loaded brush well enough to negotiate without breaking subtle curvatures and spirals. It seems, nevertheless, that what the artist has done in these drawings is to confront us with the polysemic potential,



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actually the emptiness of the motifs/signs. They do not carry meaning in themselves; instead the context fulfills their signifying task. This is the ultimate lesson of the Munich Suite drawings.

The argument for the instability of the spiral form in Okeke's work draws from the work of both Rosalind Krauss (1985:23–40) and, more significantly, Yve-Alain Bois (1992:169–208), specifically their semiological reading of what she called "art history as a history of the proper name," Krauss argues against the tendency by art historians to read Picasso's works as biographies, that is, that particular works could be explained by the artist's relationship with mistresses, wives, friends, even his pets. For her, the post-Cubist collages, especially, were by their very nature allegorical and, more importantly, polysemic. She argues, based on Ferdinand de Saussure's semiology, that the artist's use of the musicological "clef" sign in his collages does not represent the guitar—which is an object—but an idea: perspectival depth, in a picture-making mode that clearly spurned the use of perspective.

Similarly, Bois not only applied Saussure but also incorporated Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics in his analysis of Picasso's Cubism. Significantly, Bois determined different semiological phases in the artist's Cubist period, but the one that interests us here is the second phase, defined as the search for a "unitary system of notation" (Bois 1992:180). Within this phase, says Bois, is the first of two periods during which, as in the artist's *Three Women* (1907–1908), "the same geometric sign, the triangle, is used over and over with a different semantic function, each time determined by its context" (Bois 1992:180).

This unitary system of notation to which Bois refers is evident, as already demonstrated, in Okeke's use of one icon, the *agwologwo*/spiral, which in *uli* represents the coiled python, but which ac-

quires a polysemic potency in his drawings. For while the spiral form serves a unifying purpose—after all, it would seem as though every line has the ultimate aim of ending up as a spiral or a segment of it—its referents are not static, its meaning depending entirely on the other lines, motifs, or spaces to which it relates.

Another important element in these drawings is that the intervening spaces between the brief notations of plant forms play an active rather than a passive role in our experience of the plants. They do not constitute a background per se, but are instead the "mute echoes by which silence is part of the sound" (Aniakor 1995:n.p.). In a way, the "empty space" seems willing and ready to lift or clear like a mist, revealing more of the forms it covers or holds back, and it is this deferred possibility that makes it an active yet negative space. This, in addition to the lyrical quality of line, guarantees the pictures' poetic quality.

Okeke's 1962 and 1963 drawings therefore are crucial not so much for their formal inventiveness as for their heralding what must be seen as the ultimate artistic implication of the idea of Natural Synthesis. For it is here that he successfully and rigorously examines and exploits the formal potentials of an indigenous art form, based on a sensibility that comes from his internalization of the experimental approach to image-making we have come to associate with twentieth century modern, Western art. Unlike in his previous painting, where he adapted figural qualities of Igbo sculpture in a rather illustrative, even if inventive, manner, here his image-making process relies squarely on a sustained inquiry into the principles of design in, as well as the conceptual parameters of, a specific traditional art form. He therefore attained, arguably for the first time in Nigeria, a very modernist art that did not rely on or quote from formal tactics of Western modernists, but instead consisted of a synthesis of Igbo *uli* form and idea and modernist formal experimentation.

The impact of *uli* on Okeke's painting from 1962 is equally significant, and this is clearly apparent in *Crucifixion*, *Edge of the Primeval Forest*, and *Ana*, among others. In all there is a definite change in his painting style, facilitated no doubt by the use of quick-drying gouache instead of oils. While his previous canvases are painted in a flat, smooth brushwork technique, resulting in clear forms with rigid boundaries, in the 1962 works the artist used paint as if it were ink. Thus, he drew with his brush, creating curvilinear strokes of color that often turned into spirals and floriforms, a tendency characteristic of *uli* drawing and painting. Nothing from his Zaria training or his knowledge of Western modern art and artists accounts for this new drawing and painting. And it is on this count that I am suggesting that only at this point did his painting respond to the Art Society's quest

for a new art and formal syntax largely informed by indigenous Nigerian art forms and traditions.<sup>24</sup> In other words, it was only in the post-Zaria *uli*-inspired work that the quest for a new style, attained by a process he described in a 1960 poem as "blending diverse culture types,/ the cream of the native kind/ adaptable alien types," becomes manifest (Okeke 1982:2).

The process is quite different for Demas Nwoko. Although his early post-Zaria work was mostly painting and some wood sculpture, he started experimenting with clays used by traditional potters in southern Nigeria in around 1964 (Williams 1966:5). He was particularly interested in attaining the variegated surface patina (produced by resinous matter) characteristic of ancient pottery and terracotta, but it became clear to him that the open-air firing normally used by local potters would be inadequate due to the low operational temperatures possible in that process. Thus, he devised a pottery kiln powered by logs of green teak and designed in a manner "reminiscent of the earliest of all iron-smelting furnaces—the bowl furnace" (*ibid.*, 13). The following year Nwoko conducted a ten-day workshop at the Mbari Club, Ibadan, as part of its ongoing studio workshop program. By the summer of that year he started producing terracotta sculptures inspired by Nok sculptures from northern Nigeria.

As Ekpo Eyo has shown, there are a number of stylistic variations in the Nok corpus, but he describes the ones found in Nok, Jemaa, and Wamba as "representing the classical examples of this complex" (Eyo 1977:62). In the classical mode, the eye is triangular or semicircular, with a prominent hole for the pupil (Fig. 11). Full figures are modeled with tubular torsos and rotund limbs ending in minimally defined hands and feet (Fig. 12). Nok terracotta is remarkable not only for its age and significance in the context of Nigerian archaeology and cultural history, but for its unique formal qualities, as well as the technical sophistication responsible for the sometimes-complex terracotta figures.

Nwoko's artistic response to the Nok classical form can best be described as formal extrapolation, in the sense that he worked with stock elements, extending their possibilities, adding new ones. The results are images that assert their stylistic-relationship with the ancient art form rather ambiguously. His *Adam and Eve*, *Titled Woman* (1965; Fig. 13) and the Asele Institute's *Philosopher* (1965; Fig. 14a–b) are exemplary. *Adam and Eve*, for instance, evinces Nok formal tropes such as large, outsized heads; tubular, as if nonvertebral, body parts; and perforated pupils. The perfunctory handling of the hands and feet is also reminiscent of Nok statuary, but the eye structure is quite different,

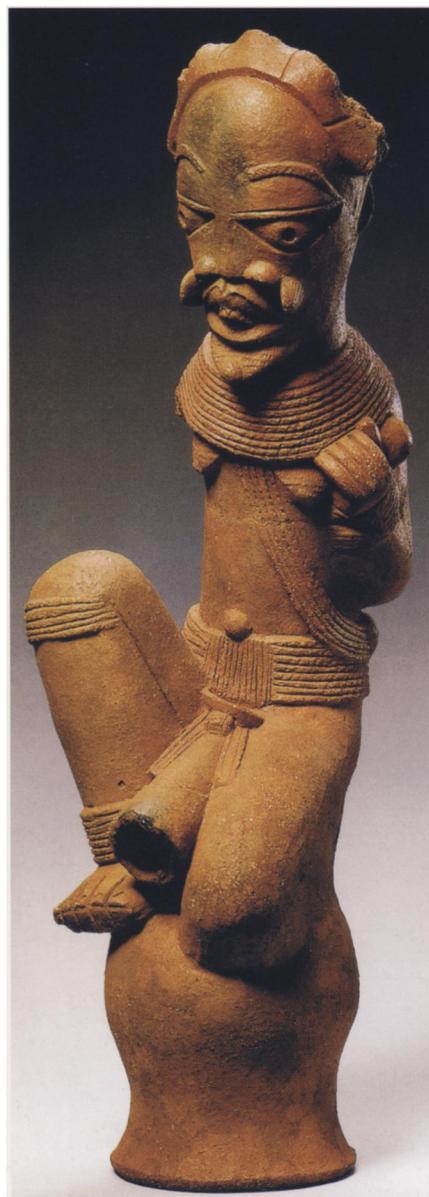
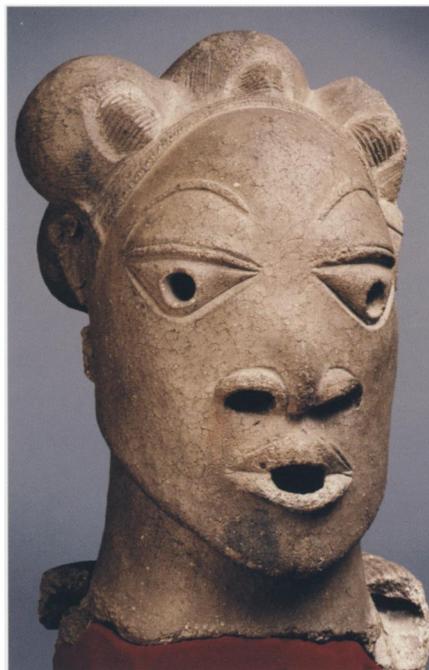


PHOTO: HEINI SCHNEEBELUCOURTESY: PRESTEL

This page:

Top: 11. Head from Rafin Kura  
Nok Valley, c. 500 BCE–200 CE  
Terracotta, 36cm (14")  
Collection of the National Museum, Lagos

Bottom: 12. *Kneeling Male Figure*  
Nok, Date unknown  
Terracotta, 65.5cm x 19cm x 23cm (25" x 7" x 9")  
Private collection

Opposite page, from left:

13. Demas Nwoko  
*Titled Woman*, 1965  
Terracotta, 47cm (18")  
Collection of the artist/New Culture Studios,  
Ibadan

14a. Demas Nwoko  
*Philosopher*, 1965  
Terracotta, 47cm (18")  
Collection of the Asele Institute, Nimo

14b. Demas Nwoko  
*Philosopher*, 1965, detail

for whereas, as noted earlier, they are triangular in classic Nok figures, those of *Adam and Eve* are not; their pupils are more prominent than what we find in the ancient images. Although the Nok faces could be described as expressive, with the dramatic pupils, flaring nostrils, and often perforated or even gaping mouths, they remain static as if the gestures are frozen in time. But in Nwoko's *Eve*, the pupils are slightly off-centered, thereby suggesting the act of looking and, with the closed lips and hand gesture, conveying a certain emotion more or less consistent with the biblical characters and story to which the work refers. Clearly Nwoko's faces are sensitively modeled, in spite of the obvious attempt to keep them minimally natural or mimetic. Thus, even as they tend to the impersonality of Nok, and indeed, ancient Ife or Benin figure sculpture, they also seem like portraits of individuals, that is, specific character types. Further, his clothed figures, *Senegalese Woman* (1965) and *Indian Girl* (1965) for instance, wear contemporary if indigenous attire. In these, surface design consists of deftly placed embossed lines suggesting the main cut and folds of the dress; he indeed achieves a formal archaism by this means. Thus, while the figures speak to a contemporary cultural experience, they allude to an ancient image-making style.

This conflation of temporalities is stretched furthest in *Soja Come, Soja Stay* (1968), a work speaking directly to the first Nigerian military coup d'état in 1966, and perhaps Nwoko's most ambitious work in the Nok mode.<sup>25</sup> It is as if, having mastered the Nok style, he proceeds to combine it with elements from other sources. This is most evident in the soldier's helmeted head: Nothing points to Nok; instead he draws from the facial form already seen in his earlier painting *Combatant II* (1967). In a sense, *Soja* is a

sculptural equivalent of *Combatant II*, considering the figure's pose and the head structure. Formally, *Soja* is brutally disarticulated and, with the deathlike face, evokes considerable unease in the viewer. Even the surface designs, representing his military paraphernalia, are archaized, as is the gun that only very remotely resembles a modern weapon. Here, as in other later terracottas (Fig. 15), Nwoko clearly was beginning to consciously step away from the Nok aesthetic. And this is facilitated by his own formal interventions, something similar to what Okeke did with *uli* painting and drawing from 1962 onwards.

## Natural Synthesis and National Politics

The unprecedented impulse to turn to local art traditions, to artistically respond to them in a rigorous manner, was in fact a key aspect of the rhetoric of the Art Society. The ideology of Natural Synthesis entailed a conscious attempt to create art that is both modern and Nigerian, that is, art that speaks to the condition of freedom inherent in political independence. By implication this meant an awareness but also a direct claiming of the artists' dual heritage as Nigerians who inherited rich African artistic traditions and as heirs

to colonial/European and postcolonial cultural practices. Thus, we see in both Nwoko and Okeke a clear, unambiguous turn to specific non-European art forms and techniques for inspiration. But if we re-examine the two artists' work vis-à-vis the Art Society's aspirations, and also situate their rhetoric and praxis within the context of contemporary Nigerian ethnopolitics, an interesting scenario emerges. It was obvious enough that by encouraging its members to research the art forms and traditions of their peoples, the Society acknowledged the multiethnic and polycultural nature of the Nigerian nation. Thus when Okeke turned to the mural and body arts of his Igbo people, he was actualizing the nationalist goals of the Art Society.<sup>26</sup> Yusuf Grillo makes this point clear:

The very first thing for an artist (Chinese, Japanese, Nigerian, European [sic] etc.) is to know who he or she is. You have to know where you are coming from. You have to know your roots. Not because you are an artist, but for the simple reason that you are a person. For example you have been born in Benin. You have to know Benin, its traditions and history. If you are born in Ife, you ought to know all about Ife, the origin, mythology, the names of past Obas,

the belief system and the culture of the people (Omoighe 1998:64).

One can argue that Grillo suggests here that the assertion of a Nigerian identity implies an open identification with one's ethnicity, which is the source—as anti-colonial, nationalist politicians demonstrated—of both political and existential authenticity.<sup>27</sup> It was same for Okeke.<sup>28</sup> Nwoko, however, made a radical move by going contrary to this ethnic reasoning.<sup>29</sup> His borrowing from Nok rather than from an Igbo sculptural tradition, say Igbo-Ukwu, suggests a different position on the question of art and nationalism.

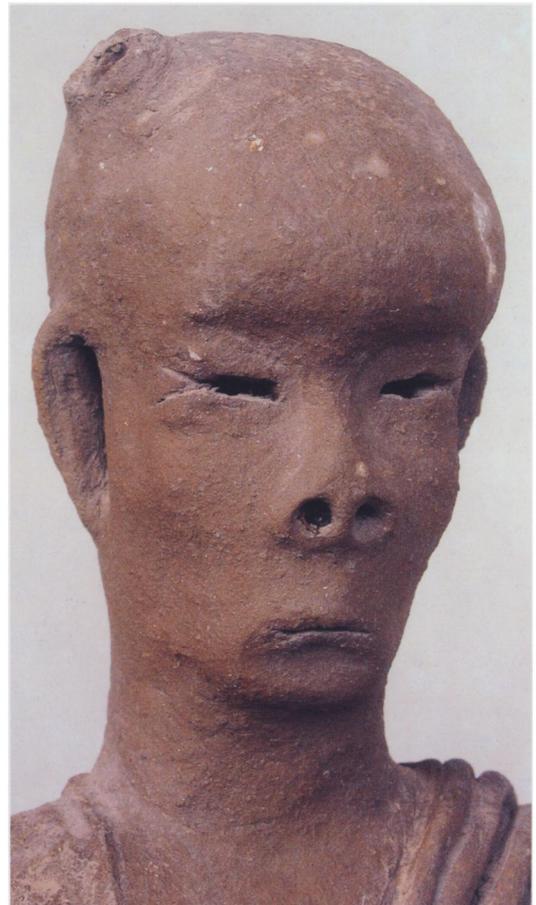
The controversy around the relocation of the Art Department to Zaria in 1955 reflected a tendency already inherent in post-World War II decolonization politics; it touched on the religious, ethnic, and cultural differences embedded in the discourse of national politics (Schwartz 1965:52). In other words, it was an indication of the political and cultural complexities of the Nigerian nation in the colonial era. Right from the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914, the British colonial administration acknowledged the ethnic and cultural differences between protectorates, but also among their constitutive groups. However, the beginning of colo-



CHIKA OKEKE-AGULU/COURTESY: DEMAS NWOKO



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nationalism also coincided with the rise of nationalist activity, especially in colonial Lagos, where a vibrant print media culture had been established since the 1880s (Omu 1978). Apart from native Lagosians, many of whom had trained in England as lawyers and medical practitioners, a majority of the early politicians were "native foreigners," a term for freed slaves immigrating from Sierra Leone, Liberia, Brazil, and the United States (Kopytoff 1965). Thus, at the very beginning, Lagos-based nationalists had a wider, Pan-African perspective, in part due to the influence of the politics of W.E.B. Dubois and Marcus Garvey. Simultaneous with this incipient race-based nationalism was an emergent ethnic nationalism inspired mostly by a feeling of ethnic pride among the rising literati. These two tendencies would become the nodal points of Nigerian nationalism once the movement toward political independence speeded up after World War II (Schwartz 1965:58).

Nnamdi Azikiwe, the foremost nationalist and leader of the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) from the late 1930s, adopted the pan-Nigerian nationalism of "native foreigners" (Schwartz 1965:60).<sup>30</sup>

The NYM consisted of young Nigerians from various, mostly southern, ethnic groups. Many had just returned from studies in England, where they also belonged to the West African Students Association, a major anticolonial political force in Britain before World War II. In 1944, a conflict between Azikiwe and his rival Ernest Ikoli, an Ijaw, led to the breakup of the NYM. Azikiwe pulled out of the NYM, leaving the party in largely Yoruba hands, subsequently led by Obafemi Awolowo. In 1944, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), which retained the pan-Nigerian outlook of the original NYM, was formed with Azikiwe and Herbert Macaulay as its leaders. In 1946, during the Azikiwe assassination plot saga, three of his younger followers, all from three different ethnic groups, formed the Zikist Movement, ostensibly to promote the multiethnic politics of Azikiwe.<sup>31</sup> Until late 1948, the Zikist Movement served as the youth branch of the NCNC, but it also promoted an unprecedented brand of militant nationalism championed by Nwafor Orizu and Mbonu Ojike, Ogedengbe Macaulay, and H.R. Abdallah

(Coleman 1958:297). Following the imprisonment of some of the Zikist leaders for sedition in 1950, the colonial government banned the movement and, although its political influence soon diminished, its ideals were retained by such individual Zikists as Mbonu Ojike, popularly known, by the mid-1950s, as the Boycott King for his then-fashionable ideology of "Boycott All Boycottables."

Thus in the discourse of Nigerian nationalism during the period before political independence, the major nodes of subject formation and identity politics were either ethnic or pan-Nigerian. However, it was clear that the ethnic impulse, the process described by Coleman (1958:319–31) as "regionalization of nationalism," was ascendant and would indeed become the dominant political perspective adopted by late colonial and postcolonial nationalists for whom ethnic identity preceded, without necessarily invalidating, their quest for national sovereignty. It is within this discursive field of Nigerian politics that I situate the works of Okeke and Nwoko.<sup>32</sup> The argument here is that by his rigorous experimentation and total identification with Igbo Uli art Okeke echoes the brand of nationalism anchored around one's ethnic identity. On the other hand, Nwoko, like the early NYM or the Zikist Movement, seemed to have substituted the ethnic with the national: One is first a Nigerian, and Igbo or Yoruba or Hausa after. It is clear that the act of seeking inspiration from Nok culture signifies a claim to an imagined community, that is a Nigerian nation in which the citizens share a common, even if fictive, or at least ideologically constructed, national heritage (Anderson 1991). It is on this basis that that which belongs to one ethnic nationality or group could be claimed by any citizen of Nigeria.<sup>33</sup> Ethnicity thus becomes nationalized as the focus of identity politics shifts to the larger, more viable, politically and culturally rich and diverse space, Nigeria. Nevertheless, this does not amount to a denial of one's ethnicity; instead it is the recognition of one's orientation and allegiance to a wider social and political space, the nation-state, which in the Nigerian situation is always fraught with difficulties arising from fractious inter-ethnic relations.

## Epistemological Doubts or Conclusion?

At the beginning of this article I had wondered about the implication of the

15. Demas Nwoko  
*Enuani Dancers*, 1968  
Terracotta, 49cm x 32cm (19" x 12")  
Collection of the artist/New Culture Studios,  
Ibadan



CHIKA OKEKE-AGULU/COURTESY, DEMAS NWOKO

kind of reading and argument made here vis-à-vis our knowledge and understanding of the two artists' work. In connection with Nwoko, for instance, what does it mean to claim, as I have done, that his major artistic output of the mid-1960s had a national rather than ethnic perspective, and to what extent then might he be said to be more nationalistic than Okeke, whose work is more ethnically inflected? Second, does this kind of inquiry do violence to the artist's overall project if, in fact, a more panoptic view reveals an oeuvre that includes works that draw from, say, Igbo and non-Igbo sources, as indeed is the case with Nwoko?

As an artist, designer, and architect, Nwoko has focused more on western Igbo art, design, and architectural form as sources for his art, but this does not in any way imply that the singular focus of his 1960s terracotta on Nok sculpture, as well as the argument for its participation—by virtue of the non-Igbo sources that inspired it—in the discourse of national politics proposed here, undermines the totality of his artistic vision. Rather, I want to suggest that no one single critical perspective or theoretical model could sufficiently account for the often rhizomorphic trajectories evident in the formal styles and conceptual preoccupations of an artist at any given moment in time or over a long period. Thus, attention to a specific body of work necessarily provides the opportunity for deeper reflection on the nature and scope of the artistic imagination as well the discursive contexts of the artist's critical practice; such micro-study, rather than being motivated by an obsession for total vision or for a fixed, sure-fire hermeneutic model, supposes an organic but rigorous analysis that can in turn constitute a part of other series of analyses depending on the paths taken by the artist/subject. One thing is clear, however: Within the context of the independence decade, and against the background of Okeke's and Nwoko's artistic biography beginning from Zaria, their first critically important body not only culminated their earlier search for an "authentic" formal style but also participated in the discourse of nationalism and ethnicity already well established in the field of politics proper.

There is no doubt that the intersection of ethnicity and nationalism is fraught with ambiguity. Yet we are reminded of the fictiveness and constructedness of ethnic or national identity, the very fact that the relationship between the one and the other is contingent upon the given sociopolitical reality. For many nationalists, the argument for national sovereignty often rests on demonstration of the viability of the country's constituent ethnicities.

## Commentary

by John Picton

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I commend Chika Okeke's presentation of detailed documentation in regard to the sources drawn upon by Uche Okeke (no relation) and Demas Nwoko, two of the leading figures among a group of students in the later 1950s who were keen that a modern art education should not simply ignore the existing heritage of forms. They insisted that this inheritance was as much a useful resource for a Nigerian artist as a command of the latest art-making technologies. Such was the basis of Uche Okeke's *Natural Synthesis*. Another member of their group, Bruce Onobrakpeya, made use of forms derived from Nigerian textiles. These artists demonstrated in their art that one could be Igbo and Nigerian, Yoruba and Nigerian, Urhobo and Nigerian, and so forth; and it is important to remember that both ethnic and national identities evolved as part of the modern world that comes into existence from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, that the former are not somehow historically prior to the latter, and should not be given precedence. This is how post-1850 developments in visual practice were associated with opposition to colonial rule.

If anyone objects that these artists were merely recycling someone else's stuff, surely, that is what artists have always done anyway. (Picasso is a prime example!) African sculptors working within the corpus of traditions inherited from a more-or-less distant past almost never show the naked human form. Rather, it is a human form

In other words, emphasizing one's ethnicity, as Okeke and several politicians before him did, reflects a dual gesture at securing one's cultural base and asserting one's claim to the sovereign nation-state. On the other hand, Nwoko's cross-ethnic borrowing, in a country where ethnic identification played a major role in colonial and postcolonial nationalist politics, presupposes that national citizenship endows him the freedom to claim as his own any cultures and heritages within the borders of the nation-state. In this sense he, like several nationalists and cultural historians, insinuates through his sculptures the modernist tendency to imagine peoples of different cultural and historical backgrounds as belonging to the same national community.<sup>34</sup> These con-

siderations indeed displace the question of which of the two artists, on the basis of their work, is more nationalistic, in the sense that both reflect two different attitudes to the expressionism of nationalism.

More than this, the work of Okeke and Nwoko, in the way it reflected different political scenarios that played out during the immediate independence period, testifies to the profound impact of decolonization politics on cultural production and modernist artistic practices and to the fact that fashioning a modernism in Nigeria at the time was in itself a political gesture variously interpreted by two artists committed to the same idea of artistic innovation at the heart of all modernisms. ■

already socialized by the use of other, prior art practices: I refer, of course, to dress, scarification, hair dressing, and so forth. When U. Okeke drew upon the forms of *uli* body painting he was doing something new to him, new within the art department of which he was a student; but within the wider frame of African art history, it was commonplace. That these artists began as students, wiser than their (European) teachers, to look at other visual practices within what had become Nigeria was not in itself a matter of surprise, therefore. The entire corpus of brass castings from Benin City is predicated for its imagery upon, among other things, the arts of royal and chiefly ceremonial: it creates its own unique virtual reality.

Aina Onabolu (1882–1963) had documented through his portraiture the great Nigerian figures of his time, but for U. Okeke and his companions it was time to move on, by demonstrating that a uniquely Nigerian modernism was possible by drawing upon the wider fields and forms of its artistic inheritance. In doing so, they created a demand for their work as teachers and artists, taking commissions from government and the churches, called upon in the design of public monuments, and enjoying the patronage of Nigerian art collectors. If we are to continue making progress in the writing of an African art history, we need the kind of close attention to detail—the more particular histories, of this artist, that technique, this institution, that masquerade, and so forth—that Chika Okeke gives us so that we can get away from categories that have long since outlived whatever usefulness we might have thought they once had. ■

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that Ashanti is not a tribe but a NATION must ... be the biggest fool this ancient Nation has ever produced ... The Akan-speaking people of Ashanti Nation are not a tribe but a Nation with a long, bloodstained history of unity and power, a well-organized system of Government with the Ashanti at the apex" (*Liberator*, August 10, 1953:3).

7. Significantly, a photograph of Ghanaian workers denouncing Nkrumah at a demonstration after his overthrow shows a sign which reads, "No More Animal Farm" (*Evening News*, March 4, 1966:6).

8. The cartoonist Ghanatta is reported to have published a comic book on the fall of Kwame Nkrumah. See De Graft-Johnson 1977.

9. One source (Woode 1983:53) states that an artist favored by the Nkrumah administration, Ado Safo, destroyed his work and fled to Nigeria.

10. At least five political parties in Ghana have traced their roots to Nkrumah's philosophy, including the People's Heritage Party, the National Conventional Party, the People's National Convention Party, the National Independence Party, and the People's Party for Development and Democracy.

11. As the Centre's brochure states, it was hoped that the house "will become a rallying point where Black people from all over the world, and all those who have truly dedicated themselves to the cause of justice and the triumph of the human spirit[,] will come to seek inspiration and guidance." (W.E.B. DuBois Centre 1980:n.p.)

12. The park was designed by a Ghanaian architect, Dr. Don Arthur; the bronze statue was imported from Italy (Anon. 1995).

13. Nkrumah's stance, with right arm outstretched, alludes to the motto of the CPP, "forward ever, backward never" (*ibid.*).

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#### OKEKE: Notes, from page 37

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- In contemporary literature, it was simply called the Art Society.
- I focus on these two artists for two reasons. The first, and more obvious one, is that it makes for a manageable, concise study. The second is that Okeke and Nwoko were clearly the prime motivators of the Art Society. Yusuf Grillo (Omoighe 1998:63), for instance, states that it was Okeke, Nwoko, and Onobrakpeya that led the group. But Nwoko did not include Onobrakpeya among the arch "rebels." One thing is clear, and that is the fact that although Nwoko and Onobrakpeya knew each other well before they went to Zaria, once there, Okeke and Nwoko seemed to have had a closer friendship; their art careers fed off of each other while in Zaria. They would go on to have a joint show in Ibadan and later, after meeting Ulli Beier, join the Mbari Club, Ibadan. Because their work developed along a similar path, the difference I argue for becomes starker, more dramatic.
- I am interested here only in Demas Nwoko's painting and sculpture, not in his theater design and architecture, although he produced equally significant work in these genres. To take on these would require more space than is necessary for a short essay, and would entail a more complex argument.
- In a previous study I have detailed the development of Okeke's personal style, which drew significantly from his Uli experiments. At the very beginning of this process he apprenticed with his mother, who was, in her youth, an accomplished Uli muralist and body artist.
- dele jegede mentions Nwoko's borrowing from Nok sculpture and Okeke's work with Igbo Uli painting and drawing as a manifestation of the "synthesis dictum embraced by the early Zaria students" (1983:47). Of course, the "synthesis dictum" he refers to was specific to the Art Society. Also, he does not question the time lag between the espousal of the dictum and its actualization. Nor is he interested in the complex matter of ethnicity, art, and nationalism this present inquiry tries to untangle, or at least broach.
- For a discussion of the genesis and early history of the NCAST, see jegede 1983:31-49, and for a more recent account of both the school's institutional and pedagogical history see Okeke-Agulu 2004. jegede calls Ulli Beier's later critique of the relocation of the art department "flippant and unsupportable" (1983:42). But Oloidi's research (1998), which documents statements of some influential Nigerian artists on the subject, suggests that jegede is completely wrong since Beier, writing in 1968, echoes the pre-relocation criticisms from the Southern critics and press with which he must have been familiar.
- The reality, though, was more complicated, according to Ben Enwonwu's interview with Oloidi (1998:34-5). Enwonwu, himself from the South, was the Federal Art Adviser, yet despite his personal reservations about the relocation could not influence the policy. As a result, *The West African Pilot*, the influential newspaper owned by the foremost nationalist Nnamdi Azikiwe, apparently withdrew an editorial critical of the relocation in order not to embarrass Enwonwu Azikiwe's townsman.
- See an interview with Jimo Akolo published in *The Eye* 3, 1 (June 1994):14-22. Akolo was the only one of the four members of the 1957 painting class who did not join the Art Society. But he remained their close associate and friend. In this interview he provides justification for the Society, but also points out that he did not join because "the Society was trying to decide what people should do and how far you could go." In other words, he was at odds with its prescriptive program, even though he sympathized with its basic *raison d'être*.
- On March 14, 1960, for instance, an exhibition of contemporary British painting, organized by the British Council, opened in Zaria. Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, and other students had an informal critical session on the show. As Okeke indicated, he learned a lot from the techniques of delivery used by the British artists. Yet he would state that "the more I looked at the

- works the more I was emboldened in my belief that in the field of painting something new and fresh will come out of modern Africa" (Okeke 1998:276).
10. *Things Fall Apart*, as Achebe has stated, was his response to Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939), "a novel describing the absurd aspiration to European manners and identity of an African clerk in a small British colonial outpost in Northern Nigeria" (Thelwell 1996:10-11). The main character, Mister Johnson, is presented as a pathetic mimic of European manners, a caricature figure who, having lost touch with his own culture, lacks the capacity to step up to the European lifestyle. See Thelwell 1996:11-12.
11. A section of the address reads: "Nigeria needs a virile school of art with new philosophy of the new age—our renaissance period. Whether our African writers call the new realization Negritude, or our politicians talk about the African Personality, they both stand for the awareness and yearning for freedom of black people all over the world. *Contemporary Nigerian artists, could, and should champion the cause of this movement* [my emphasis]."
12. I have asked Uche Okeke about the possible influence of Gauguin on his painting at this point. His response was that it was a possibility because they were looking at many artists then. Personal interview with Uche Okeke, Nimo, January 8, 1993.
13. Indeed, Beier (1960-1961:10-11) rightly insinuates its connection to twentieth century European Modernism. He laments the fact that "enlightenment" of Modernism, precisely the encounter of African art by European artists, and the consequent development of Cubism and its aftermath, came too late to Nigerian artists. These latter, he states, were still being taught to despise their traditions, while the only European art they were brought into contact with was nineteenth century. He however suggests that Nwoko is outstanding among young art students who now use modernist tactics to create "a highly original and distinctive style."
14. I am suggesting that Beier's claim must have come as a surprise to anyone conversant with the activities of the Art Society, because their aspiration was to create art that borrowed from African forms, as well as non-African ones.
15. The painted version of *Fabled Brute* is a copy of the pen and ink drawing *Fabled Brute* (1959), which belongs to the Folk Tales Drawing suite. Mbari Publications published some drawings from the Igbo Folk Tales suite in 1961 as *Drawings by Uche Okeke*.
16. I am not as certain if Okeke was familiar with *Guernica* when he painted this work or created the earlier drawing. The similarity I am suggesting here might well be coincidental.
17. For further information on Igbo Uli art, see Udechukwu 1972, 1984, and 1990; Okeke 1976; Cole and Aniakor 1984; Willis 1987, 1989, and 1997; Aniakor 1995; Ottenberg 1997; Okeke-Agulu 1999; Adams 2002, among others.
18. Udechukwu and Chike Aniakor have contributed some of the major texts on *uli* and have spearheaded research on the subject. With Uche Okeke, they were leading figures in the modern *uli* art movement associated with artists at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in the 1970s and '80s. Uche Okeke headed the art department at Nsukka between 1971 and 1983, and retired from the university in 1985.
19. Liz Willis (1987), as far as I know, has provided the most comprehensive documentation of *uli* motifs. Her annotated illustrations give their respective names, meaning, and regional distribution within the Igbo area. It is a most useful, if incomplete, compendium.
20. To clarify, *Isinwaaji* is a motif adapted from the space between the three or four lobes of the kola nut (*cola acuminata*). *Isinwaaji* usually has four points (indicating a four-lobed kola-nut), but when it is only three points (three-lobed), the motif is called *okala isinwaaji*—that is, half *isinwaaji*; *oloma* is orange and *onwa* is moon; *agwolaqwo* is an onomatopoeic term for spiral. The *agwolaqwo* motif refers not only to the snake (*agwo*) as Udechukwu suggests, but to a particular variety, *eke*, the sacred royal python revered in many parts of the north-central Igbo area. A variant of this motif, *odu eke* (python's tail), shows a short line ending in a spiral. For a comprehensive list of *uli* motifs, see Willis 1987.
21. See for instance, Dike and Oyelola 1998:135, 162; Ottenberg 1997:44; Okeke-Agulu 1993:20.
22. See Okeke 1976. He narrates the anecdotal story of an old woman, an Nne Ijele—that is, the mother of Ijele—who leads with song and measured dance steps the majestic Ijele masquerade. She, it was said, for long unsuccessfully tried her hand at song making, but after committing herself to creating *uli*, she received the gift of song. This story, Okeke suggests, was a clear indication of the formal connection between *uli* and song/dance. It would seem that the key element here is the fact that both the artist's hand and the dancer's movement are lyrical gestures. Similarly where the one is visually poetic the other shows oral poetry at its finest.
23. The title of this drawing is reminiscent of Constantin Brancusi's *Bird in Space* (1911), and Okeke might have been thinking of the work, which he must have seen in reproduction. Nevertheless, except for the abstractness of the two images and the suggestion of dynamic movement in both, there is hardly any formal relationship between them.
24. It should be clear by now that I do not consider the content (what Clement Greenberg and formal critics would call "literary" elements) of the work produced by the artists as crucial to my argument here. The reason is simple: Any artist could have produced work speaking to Nigerian cultural experiences even though the artist worked within, say, the canonical Western Modernist aesthetic. There would be, I argue, nothing about

such work, qua work of art, that locates it within or in relation to (a) specific Nigerian art tradition(s). I concede that this is a tough argument to make. Yet I want to insist that our interest must be in seeing how the formal questions presented by Western painting, for instance, are mediated by, or synthesized with, those from one or many local painting traditions. In other words, an argument for a synthesis of form in one tradition and content in order is at best illogical. Ogbecchie (2000) exemplifies this latter attitude in his recent study of Ben Enwonwu's work.

The best way to untangle this point is to return to the basis of European art. The early modernists reinvented European painting at the beginning of the twentieth century by combining the formal principles of African (as well as Oceanic and medieval) sculpture and those of European painting. Thus, any argument for the kind of synthesis Okeke and the Art Society sought for must be focused on how they tried to champion a new Nigerian Modern art by joining European painting or sculpture to their own experiments with the formal principles from one or more indigenous painting or sculptural traditions. Instead, what has happened thus far is that critics consider *subject matter*, rather than *form*, as the indigenous element. And I want to claim that, in the work of Nigerian or African Modern artists, content associated with indigenous cultures without a matching rigorous experimentation with indigenous form and technique invariably will leave the work still in the European (pre)modernist tradition.

25. Soja is Pidgin English for "soldier." In 1979, when the military regime gave way to the Second Republic, he turned the 1968 *Soja* with its back to the spectator, calling this turned figure *Soja Go*. He thus conceptually completed the sequential advent, rule, and exit of the military dictatorship. The 1966 military coup was a culmination of the growing turmoil and widespread dissatisfaction with the democracy that came with political independence in 1960. It brought an end to any lingering euphoria that may have come with attainment of political sovereignty.

26. This tendency to draw from art forms specific to one's own ethnic or cultural background was adopted by most of the active members, including Bruce Onobrakpeya, Simon Okeke, and Yusuf Grillo. Onobrakpeya, an Urhobo, studied Urhobo and Edo shrine sculptures and installations; S. Okeke was interested in Igbo-Ukwu sculpture, although I would argue that the impact of this art was very marginal if at all present in his formal style. The same is the case with Grillo, who was born in Lagos and may have looked to its masking traditions or textile arts for inspiration. S. Okeke and Grillo, in other words, did not rigorously interrogate the media or formal principles of the indigenous arts they associated with their work.

27. In order to disprove the arguments of European colonialists about the alienation of Western-educated Africans, early nationalists such as Azikiwe, Awolowo, and Udo Udoma helped establish ethnic/cultural unions that eventually served as platforms for their political ambitions.

28. Uche Okeke, Grillo states, "often claims his Igbo culture over and above his Nigerian identity" (Omoighe 1998:64). Okeke's career and work as an artist, poet, teacher, and scholar bear this out. Other members of the Art Society, including Bruce Onobrakpeya, who studied Urhobo and Edo art and culture, worked in accordance with this prescription during this period.

29. Lawal (1990:15) recognizes the importance of this development. Although he also includes Ben Enwonwu in the list of artists who have done this cross-ethnic borrowing, he does not at least indicate the difference between the nature of the borrowing occurring in Enwonwu and Nwoko. While Enwonwu may have drawn inspiration from Ife sculpture as Lawal suggests, the artist does not follow this up with a rigorous examination and analysis of the Ife form or "style" in a series of paintings or sculptures, which is what both Nwoko and Okeke have done in their own work.

30. Earlier in his political writings, Azikiwe, like the "native foreigners," fostered a Pan-African or Pan-West African perspective. His focus later narrowed to Nigeria. Although the breakup of the NYM is blamed on his playing an ethnic card when his candidate lost in the Lagos municipality elections, his own politics clearly retained a Nigerian rather than ethnic focus, while those of his rival contemporaries Awolowo, a Yoruba, and Sardauna of Sokoto, a northern Fulani, were more blatantly ethnocentric.

31. Schwartz (1965:65) however states that the "Zikist Movement was born in 1946 as a response by Azikiwe's militant supporters to ridicule by the NYM's newspaper of his charges that the British plotted his assassination." The group's multiethnic composition and later politics confirm its nationalist aspirations.

32. Although Okeke seemed to have identified with the NCNC, in which case the claim I make here appears to be on shaky ground, his particular admiration of Azikiwe might in fact be because he saw the latter first as a successful Igbo politician on the national stage. On the other hand, Nwoko's politics was clearly nationalistic. For instance, when the civil war broke out 1967 he refused to flee from Ibadan in the Western Region, as had most other Igbo, insisting, at great personal risk (as he did when he named a daughter born during this period Anyibuofa, Igbo for "We are one"), on the unity of Nigeria.

33. Obafemi Awolowo, a foremost nationalist and champion of ethnic nationalism, had put it more crudely: "So long as every person in Nigeria is made to feel that he is a Nigerian first and a Yoruba or Ibo or Hausa next, each will be justified to poke his nose into the domestic issues of the other"

(Schwartz 1965:254).

34. The idea of Nigeria as an imagined cultural community is very much at play in Ekpo Eyo's *2000 Years of Nigerian Art* (1977). Clearly the concept of Nigeria as a single political entity did not exist prior to 1914. Thus, the claim for a 2,000-year-old artistic tradition is at best a conundrum. Still, in the Nigeria of the imagination, such idea makes perfect sense, since the sovereign state exercises ownership of the heritages of its constituent, even if historically unrelated, cultures and ethnic nationalities.

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#### GRABSKI: Notes, from page 49

- Omar Katta Diallo, interview with author, tape recording, Dakar, February 19, 1999.
- Pape Mballo Kebe, interview with author, tape recording, Dakar, October 12, 1998.
- Ibou Diouf, interview by author, tape recording, Dakar, September 14, 1998.
- Histories of modern art in African centers have discussed the role of several expatriates in founding art schools. This analysis does not intend merely to shed light on Lods's role in the school or replace Senghor's role with Lods as the primary force in shaping post-independence visual production. It seeks to position the national art school as an essential site in Dakar's art world, both today and in its earliest years. Dakar's national art school is currently in a state of serious crisis as funding has been dramatically cut back. Critics in Dakar have raised the question of whether funds going towards the Dakar biennial should be directed to the art school instead.
- Senghor met Lods in Paris in 1956 at an exhibition of work from the Poto-Poto School.
- In discussing these themes, the artists emphasized that they were "originally African" or "purely African."
- Several artists also mentioned that they knew of other African artists working contemporaneously, such as Nigerian Twins Seven-Seven and Ivorian sculptor Christian Lattier. The Senegalese artists met many of their international colleagues, including a group of Congolese artists from the Poto-Poto School of Painting, at the Premier Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres.
- I conducted research in Brazzaville, Congo, in 1996.
- Amadou Seck, interview with author, tape recording, Dakar, August 27, 1998.
- Modou Niang, interview with author, Dakar, November 13, 1998.
- Countless artists used the terms "external influence," "imposition," and "constraint" in discussing the philosophical foundation of their training.
- Lods's students consistently claim that he did not show them his work. One former student remembered that, while visiting Lods's home studio, he saw Lods at work on a collage made with seashells. In Brazzaville, Lods painted a fresco of St. Anne crossing the Congo River in a pirogue in St. Anne's cathedral.
- Cherif Thiam, interview with author, tape recording, Dakar, September 18, 1998.
- As discussed above, Iba Ndiaye is an exception to this assertion.
- Niang, interview with author, 1998.
- Alpha Wallid Diallo, interview with author, tape recording, Dakar, August 28, 1998.
- Cheikh Amadou Bamba is considered a Senegalese hero for his resistance of French forces. Blaise Diagne was the first Senegalese to be appointed as a deputy to the French National Assembly.
- Diallo, interview, 1998.
- Ibid.
- Diouf, interview, 1998.
- Since returning from Switzerland in the late 1980s, Diouf has changed his artistic style. His more recent works are subtle and impressionistic. They no longer deal with distinctively African themes.
- Oumar Katta Diallo, interview with author, tape recording, Dakar, February 19, 1999.
- Diatta Seck, interview with author, tape recording, Dakar, September 15, 1998.
- Thiam, interview, 1999.
- Wallid Diallo, interview, 1998.
- The works which comprised the exhibition were selected by a jury from France appointed by Iba Ndiaye, head of the Section Arts Plastiques.
- The term "universal civilization" is used by Senghor in many writings of this period. See especially Senghor 1963:8-13.
- Katta Diallo, interview, 1999. See also interviews with Diouf, Seck, and Thiam.
- For more on the commission's objectives and accomplishments, see Axt and Sy 1989:83.
- See Axt and Sy 1989:75. One of the primary mechanisms for building the state collection was the annual Salon des artistes sénégalais.
- Diouf, interview, 1998.
- Ibid.
- Individuals who were considered artisans, such as glass painters Babacar Lo and Mor Gueye, did not enjoy the same privileges as the elitely fashioned Beaux-Arts artists. For more on the establishment of an artistic elite, see Camara 1967:35.
- Exceptions to this assertion are Ibou Diouf, Amadou Sow, and Souleymane Keita.
- Niang, interview, 1998.
- Thiam, interview, 1998.
- El Hadji Sy, interview with author, tape recording, Dakar, July 2, 1998.

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