

LIFE, WORK AND TIMES OF THREE NIGERIAN ARTISTS- Susanne Wenger(1915-2009); Bruce Onobrakpeya(b-1932); Nike Davies Okundaye(b-1951)

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Abstract

This paper examines the lives, works and times of three Nigerian artists, their artistic developments, influences and contributions to the growth of contemporary Nigerian artforms. It discusses how their presence has influenced the new generation of Nigerian artists and artforms particularly in the stimulation of rapid artistic production that led to an increase in art appreciation, production and criticism and assesses the legacy which these artists have conferred on the structure of modern Nigerian art. Mention is made of their involvement in both formal and informal training.

Introduction

Formal academic training of artists in Nigeria did not start until 1952 at the Yaba Technical Institute now Yaba College of Technology, Lagos. This programme was mounted by Paul Mount, a British art teacher at the instigation of the information department of the colonial government and the West African Publicity Company. A company involved in outdoor advertising, commercial arts, printing, graphic planning and information brokerage.

The second art training institution in Nigeria though at a higher level (Higher National Diploma Status) did not take off at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria now Ahmadu Bello University until 1956. Prior to this, some few Nigerians have been travelling abroad particularly Britain for their art training. Some of these artists are Aina Onabolu, Akinola Lashekan, Ben Enwonwu to mention just a few. However alternative training emerged on the Nigerian art landscape at workshops in 1961 through the efforts of Ulli Beier, Susan Wenger and Georgina Beier. In 1961 Ulli Beier began a series of summer schools for artists, non artists and some art teachers at the "Mbari mbayo" club in Ibadan. Similar workshops were organised by Ulli and Georgina Beier from 1962 to 1965 in Ibadan and Osogbo respectively for all who cared to attend and those that participated were "encouraged and fossilised" (Adepegba, 1995:96) While stating the reason for opening the workshop to all and sundry, Beier(1968) declares that "the experiment was not aesthetic in purpose; rather, it was to provide a means of existence for the participating artists"(Elebute 2010:11).

Workshop connection

The interplay and interwoven connectivity of the Mbari mbayo Osogbo and Ibadan workshops to these three artists is very significant to this paper. While Susan Wenger was almost a co-initiator of the workshop project by virtue of her marriage/friendship affinity with Ulli Beier, Bruce Onobrakpeya was a willing and eager participant at every of the workshop sessions. He actively participated at the Ibadan and Osogbo workshops. Nike Davies Okundaye on her part grew up to be a local textile *Adire* (tye and dye) worker in Oshogbo axis because of her apprenticeship with her greatgrandmother and her first marriage to Taiwo Olaniyi(Twin seven seven) who equally participated in all the workshops organised by Ulli Beier. Besides, she is one of the adopted daughters of Susanne Wenger. With this background, stucturally this paper believes the trio developed a philosophy of hardwork a principle of conscious influence on others at the back of their mind despite their education, gender, race and other differences.

Contributions

It is important to note that one of the contributions of these three artists is the stylistic development of their various genre in modern Nigerian art. Susan Wenger carved a niche for herself in the area of elongated forms in cement sculptures particularly those executed at the Oshun Osogbo groove/shrine where she was a priestess. Her batik tye and dye textiles and paintings were equally unique in elongationism, use of lines, shapes and colour. Bruce Onobrakpeya`s contributions was in the area of innovating some other methods in intaglio printing process in printmaking by developing the epoxy or plastic base etching which is a non acid base method of etching nicknamed plastograph. Some other innovations by him in this genre are additive plastography, plastocast, ivorex, metal foil etc. All except plastograph and additive plastograh tend towards relief sculptures in different forms and media. Nike Okundaye on her own part created waves in the *Adire* tie and dye textiles and her *Adire* batik patterned motif influenced paintings amongst her disciples.

The trio engaged in the establishment of informal art training for young school leavers, artists, industrial trainees, school drop outs, and anyone that cares to enrol in their workshop programmes. At their different studios and workshop sites, several craftsmen were trained through the apprenticeship system. Some formally trained artists who have passed through vocational schools, polytechnics and universities equally go for retraining or learning of new skills. Those that were trained through these methods now produce contemporary art. They have helped to produce artists who speak the language, understand

the vocabulary and create new things in the art genre. These attributes help to enlarge the visual arts in Nigeria beyond the edge. In some instances works shown at exhibitions breaks barriers and limitations.

Besides, they have independently created art viewing centres, display centres and galleries for both their works and other artists. This gives a lot of opportunities for art patrons, tourists, students, curators, critics, press, resarchers etc. to view works displayed at the galleries appreciate and comment appropriately.

Similarities exists in the inspiration of the works of these three artists. While Susanne Wenger`s works reveal esoteric spiritism, Oshun Osogbo mythology, *Yoruba* pattern, symbols, motifs and decorative arts and so on; Nike`s works talks equally on *Yoruba* mythology, folklore, commemorative events etc. using *Yoruba* symbols, patterns and motifs for visual content, and Bruce`s works deals on *Urhobo* mythology, folklore, commemorative events, sociol political commentaries etc.

The trio of Susan, Bruce and Nike individually in their own little way have created awarness for the visual arts practice and promotion locally in the areas of education particularly informal skill aquisition workshop practice; exposure of the younger generation of Nigerian artists by showing their works at exhibitions, gallery displays etc. They consciously helped to put value in the arts locally because of the accolades they have received from both local and various international shows. This is brought about by the visibility they have received from the press. They established foundations which are non-governmental organisation that are helping to engender the growth of art and culture through the provisions of opportunities for artists to improve themselves through skills acquisition and empowerment. They promote public interest in the visual art by creating awareness for the intrinstic values of African art and its benefits to the society. These trio have been enduring players in the visual arts scene in Nigeria. They are well respected artists and the Nigerian government, organisations, traditional, educational and foreign institutions had one time or the other conferred honours on them in appreciation of their contributions to the society. They have through their practice, teachings and lives changed the course of art in Nigeria from a Eurocentric concepts and practice towards a distict African aesthetic.

In the light of these, i hereby present a brief profile on Nike Davies Okundaye, Bruce Onobrakpeya and Susan Wenger(*Adunni Olorisa*).

NIKE DAVIES OKUNDAYE

Nike was born on the 23rd may, 1951 in Ogidi-Ijumu, Kogi state, Nigeria. A professional textile artist and painter. Holds many traditional chieftaincy titles.

Yeye Oba of Ogidi-Ijumaland, Yeye Tayese of Osogboland, Yeye Gbasaga of Ijumu kingdom among others. Nike was trained in the art of *Adire* (tye and dye) by her great grandmother whom she lived with after the death of her mother and grandmother. Her great grandmother was a weaver and an *Adire* textile maker. Nike lost her mother and grandmother at the age of 6 and 7 respectively. It is therefore interesting to know that she had no serious formal western education except primary six because of lack of fund. Her father was very poor and could not fund her education. However, she later developed herself in english language.

Also, Nike had no formal art training, yet textile art has brought her global spotlight. *Adire* (tye and dye) vocation was passed to her by her great grandmother, late madam Ibikunle. After her training and several years of practice she walked up the line to become an expert in *Adire* textile art, dyeing, weaving, painting and embroidery. She developed her own unique style and technique in the art of *Adire* textiles. Nike is a multi-talented lady who uses her natural ability to assist the less priviledge in the society. She has been able to give hope to the hopeless by being able to economically and socially empower many rural women by setting up cottage weaving workshop/centres for women at Abuja, Osogbo and Ogidi-Ijumu. This empowerment activities made some men in the communities challenged her ingenuity for her stance.

In the area of promotion, she built galleries and art displays centres for herself and other artists products. In this wise Nike`s actions and initiatives have positively impacted the lives of so many who came her way. She has shown her art locally and internationally with over 102 solo and 36 group art exhibitions. Her works can be found in many private homes and public institutions all over the world. She has equally facilitated *Adire* textiles workshops locally and internationally. Nike has received many awards, merits and honourary mentions locally and internationally because of her contributions to arts culture and humanity. Students, researchers and scholars have studied and written about Nike. She is married to Ruben Okundaye and blessed with children.

SUSANNE WENGER (ADUNNI OLORISA) (1916-2009)

Susanne Wenger was born in 1916 at Graz, Austria. She studied art in Graz and later in Vienna, where she was a member of the city`s famous art club. The young Wenger was widely travelled, visiting Italy, and exhibiting in the Deux Vives Gallery in Zurich, Switzerland. She arrived in Nigeria with her husband Ulli Beier a German linguist with whom she shared a love of African culture in 1950. They arrived in Ibadan, Oyo state and later in Ede, a town near Osogbo where she met Ajagemo, a high priest of Obatala (the creator god) who

introduced her to Yoruba religion. She regarded Ajagemo as her mentor. It took Ajagemo 10 years to induct and initiate Susanne fully into the cult. She often say of her mentor, "He took me by the hand and led me into the spirit world. I did not speak Yoruba, and he did not speak english, our only intercourse was the language of the trees." Her marriage with Beier did not last, but Susanne Wenger found a greater love. Her lifelong sojourn in the world of the Yoruba had begun. For 57years, she lived among the indigenes of Osogbo; and married a local drummer by name Chief Alarape, in 1959. Among her many adoptive Yoruba children is the artist Nike Davies- Okundaye.

In Ede, she started the reconstruction of the Soponna cult and subsequently the renovations of the shrines of other gods in the Oshun groves at Osogbo. Her main work over the years was the constant reconstruction, renovation and conservation of the shrines in the Oshun Osogbo groves. The construction of the sculpture`s shrines in the Oshun groves started in 1963. Wenger got fasinated with the spiritual aspects of the Yoruba culture and so the fusion of art and religion is at the core of her art, and she says,"the singular purpose of her work is to protect the sacredness of nature. Her works present a mixture and flair of architecture, religion and art. It has both the esoteric and exoteric knowledge which are the inner and the outer elemental levels. The deeper meaning of her works most times are accessible only to her and few people including the cultic functionaries. Her elongated forms are quite expressive, aesthetic and decorative. Wenger enjoys the constant flow of the Oshun river and this has a part to play in the continous elongation and flow of her forms even towards the sky. Her free standing sculptures are uniquely hers influenced by some of the trees that bears little or no branches in the Osun groves. The influence of the Oshun river, forest and the natural habitat within the grove impacted her creations to the extent that the sculptures were made of small quantity of cement and much of the red earth found within the premises of the Oshun grove. This attribute made Wenger`s sculptures wholly organic with components used in proportions determined by religious injunctions or instructions. The grove where she had her cement sculptures is a blend of fauna and flora and is usually a quiet and serene place. Wenger`s works exhibit the influence of both the inner and outer elements of art in Yoruba religion.

To ensure the conservation of nature in the grove, Wenger was able to get the Oshun grove onto the list of the Nigerian Antiquity consevation areas. This act did not go down well with the farmers and hunters who perceive these areas as a means of livelihood. However, with adequate information on the usefulness of such stance, harmony was achieved. Susanne Wengers works like the Yoruba belief; art and ritual are indispensable to communication between

human and divine and therefore the sacredness can be felt. Her works are subjective rather than objective. They are more of exploration and imaginative re-creation of perceived ideas and forms usually from the divine. One of the main features of her life and over life size works are the bulging eyes of her images which are signs of spiritual power in Yoruba mythology and religious experiences, depicting a higher consciousness. Her over life size works depicts a representations of deities and records of mythology. Some of the sculptures produced by Wenger and her assistants who are most times her adopted children in the Oshun grove include; Ontotoo (a senior deity in the heavenly abode), Obatala (the deity of purity and the creator god), Iya moopo (protector of all womens crafts and trade) etc. These figures are characterized by a blend of fauna and flora. Natural vegetation can be seen clinging to the shrines while monkeys, birds and other animals visit at their pleasure. Wenger`s sculptures enhance the vividness of the deities to observers and worshipers alike. All through her lifetime, her legend and belief did not diminish because she lived to see Oshun grove made a UNESCO World heritage site in 2005.

BRUCE ONOBRAKPEYA

Bruce Onobrakpeya is admittedly one of Africas best known and most highly respected artist. A Nigerian, and an Urhobo by birth. A master printmaker and a painter. He was born in Agbarha-Otor, Ughelli local government area of Delta state, Nigeria in 1932. He studied Fine art at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria (now Ahmadu Bello University) and graduated in 1961. He taught art briely at his alma mater, the old Western Boys`High School, Benin City; Ondo Boys` High School, Ondo; and later at St. Gregory`s College, Lagos. These happened at various time between 1953 and 1980 where he nurtured successive generations of art students, some of whom have today grown to become famous names in the field. He has one time or the other worked as guest teacher and artist in residence in Europe, U.S.A., Nigeria and has participated in over 125 art exhibitions in Nigeria and around the world. His works are in many international collections, including the Vatican Museum in Rome, the National Museum for African and African American Art and Antiques, New York. His works are in the collection of her majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Head of the Commonwealth, and in various public and private collections all over the world. He has equally executed many public commissions in Nigeria.

Bruce Onobrakpeya is presently developing an international art centre in Agbarha-Otor, Delta state, Nigeria his birth place that will include folk museum of art, as well as a gallery of contemporary African art. The centre presently at its infant stage has hosted the Annual Harmattan workshop series for visual

artists since 1998. This centre according to Bruce is created to provide opportunities for artists to come together to experiment, share ideas and carry out research on art and its allies. The Harmattan workshop has since gained international recognition at least within Africa. Artists of various backgrounds come together for up to 6 weeks in a year to engage in artistic and academic projects. Bruce has received very many national and international prizes and awards. The recent one being a merit award from UNESCO in 2006 as the Living Human Treasure.

Bruce as an illustrator, painter and printmaker draws inspirations from the Urhobo mythology, folklore, religion, events in daily life, socio, political-environmental concern and the Nigerian landscape for his images. He wants to share with others his delight with the world around him, his observations and comments on the human condition. He yet draws inspiration from the everyday activities of the farmer, herdsman, fishermen, and craftsman, and employing motifs from the repertoire of the metal caster, calabash-carver, textile designer and embroiderer. With this he creates an artistic universe redolent of Nigerian culture and stamped with his personal style. Myths also find visual expression in the hands of Bruce who harvest them from the fleeting word, proverbs, adage, etc., and makes them accessible to a wider audience, opening the viewers' minds to the world beyond their own.

However, his work is not always a calm reflection of the activities of a rural Utopian world. 'Nudes and Protest' for instance pays tribute to the courage of women who took mass action to combat injustice as at the time of the *Aba TAX Riots*. His prints in the 'Broken Pipe Series' employ vivid images evoking the hangman's noose which recall a painful episode in Nigeria's history.

According to Oyelola P.(2003:V), Bruce's concern for justice and freedom of expression extends beyond the boundaries of his own country, as can be seen in the work dedicated to Ngugi Wa Thiong'o of Kenya which shows a head with clamped lips and a minstrel behind bars. Innovation to Bruce is the spice of life and art. Though, he has attained the status of 'grey eminence' in the Nigerian art world, he is still experimenting with form, technique and medium. To cap it all, Bruce is both an artist and a poet.