

REMEMBERING PRESIDENT EBELE JONATHAN'S PROMISE FOR THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

BY

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My article in the Guardian Newspaper of 26th March, 2012 titled: Conspiracy and trials in NGA...visual art, artists are greatest losers talked about the current happenings in the National gallery of Art (NGA).Thjs article have generated stirs, discussions among professional artists, art academics, players in the industry, and even the rank and file of members in the Society of Nigerian Artists. As a professional practising artist, an academic and more importantly the Vice President, Society of Nigerian Artists (West) I feel a heavy burden in my heart and downcast to see the current slide and downward trend in the Visual art administration of this great country of ours which I envisaged may continue with its present mediocrity unless President Ebele Jonathan's promise for the parastatal is remembered and put into action. I consider it very expedient again to make more contributions to this debate to salvage the visual art sub sector from the rot it found itself and in the hope that the current slide which has become the lot of the National Gallery of Art would receive the attention of the authorities.

THE EARLY DAYS

For some of us who knew how the NGA started, one would have liked to say in all fairness that the parastatal had a fairly good beginning taking off from the almost moribund National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) then under the auspice of the National Council for Art and Culture (NCAC). The NGA which was established under decree 86 of 1993(now Act of Parliament), took up the gaunt let and went straight into action. The first major assignment was the resuscitation of the gallery where works of art of renowned Nigerian artists were on display, where it is housed in a section of the National Art Theatre complex under a conducive environment. To its credit the Dr. P C Dike led management conceived and executed such programmes as:

- The Independence Exhibition – An annual event organised to mark the independence anniversary of Nigeria. The programme took place between 1994 and 1999. The annual independence Exhibition was in the main , a photographic

exhibition which chronicled the achievements and giant strides being made by Nigeria and Nigerians in areas such as politics, economy, commerce, agriculture, sports to mention just a few, while the programme lasted it gave good publicity for the government of the day and was worth spending the tax payers money.

- The Annual Lecture – This is also an annual event designed for educational purposes. It was a programme meant to highlight the trend in modern Nigerian art and its related subjects. This programme also made some impact to some extent.
- Saturday Art Club - This is a programme organised for the purpose of discovering the latent talent in young Nigerian children in both primary and secondary schools.

Other programmes – Other notable programmes are Children’s Day, Art Residency, and K12 International Art exchange programme. In a nutshell, these were programmes of the NGA at inception.

THE DECLINE

The years 1994- 1999 marked the golden era in the life of the National Gallery of Art during which according to impeccable sources it ranked among the best three parastatals in the Tourism and Culture Ministry in terms of performance. This was however short-lived as complacency soon set in. The management could not manage the success achieved and probably enunciate more programmes because of lack of basic visual art knowledge by the leadership of the parastatal. It was no surprise therefore that the Independence Exhibition died a natural death before year 2000. The Annual lecture lost its glamour and became a programme of rent - a – crowd in order to fill the lecture hall. This programme also witnessed its demise around 2003. These programmes became unfashionable for the visual art audience. The K12 International train the trainers programme for art teachers came on board during this period. The k12 was designed to be a programme where experts and scholars in the visual arts meet to train the art teachers in the primary and post-primary institutions to go and impact the new knowledge on their pupils / students. It is one of the pre2006 programme which was meant to be a joint collaboration between Ohio State University and the National Gallery of Art. It was equally designed according to the memorandum of Understanding to be a joint counterpart funding agreement between both institutions. Professor Okechukwu Odita, the only facilitator was responsible for the Ohio State University end of the understanding / agreement. Unfortunately, in the city of the blind, a one eyed man is king. A study

shows that the National Gallery of Art out of foolishness or lack of knowledge bore all the financial responsibilities throughout the existence of the programme under the Dr. Dike led administration. It was later clear that the only facilitator was using the opportunity of NGA (government) sponsorship to embark on his annual leave to Nigeria. So it was used all through by the then Director General's kinsman as a mere tool for cross-border visitation and holidaying. So it was that no programme was given any serious attention at the National Gallery of Art again. Perhaps the only programme left and worthy of any mention was the Saturday Art Club which was being done in bits and hiccups. I should also mention here that only very few of the programmes being executed had any hard-core professional content that could endanger the promotion of contemporary Visual arts let alone benefit its practitioners and other lovers of art both locally and on the international scene and by extension generating the much needed revenue for artists and government alike.

From my personal and majority of SNA members assessment as a professional body the NGA lost complete focus from year 2002 and became a shadow of its old self living only in name by virtue of the goodwill it earlier enjoyed. The pioneer Director General, Dr. P C Dike engaged in intensive lobbying and buying time to perpetrate himself in office. The only thing that could be recorded for the Gallery was the massive employment of unqualified personnel in almost every facet of its departments. The NGA was therefore in dire straits and needed a change. Unfortunately, the change did not come until August 2006, when Joe Musa, an artist with the right pedigree and vision came into the saddle.

THE PERIOD AUGUST 2006 – AUGUST 2009

Joe Musa's appointment marked a new dawn and a new beginning in the life of the NGA. As it is often said that one crowded hour of a glorious life is worth an age without a name. Joe Musa's three years at the helm of affairs of the NGA before the forces of retrogression who are averse to progress and change struck was a period loaded with unassailable and incontrovertible monumental achievements. A cursory look at the list of programmes enunciated by him just in three years speaks volume. For the avoidance of doubt, some of these programmes are:

- The Annual Lagos Art Expo
- ARESUVA(African Regional Summit and Exhibition on Visual Art)
- Nigerian Visual Art World Tour (NIVATOUR)
- National Visual Arts competition
- Art Endowment in tertiary institution

- Exhibition partnership with foreign missions
- NGA Educational sponsorship
- Release of grants to Art bodies
- Sponsorship of individual artists to international events
- International museums and Galleries visit by NGA staffs
- SNA upgrade as a member of the NGA board
- Annual Stakeholders' conference
- Other art promotion of artists and group exhibitions
- Emergence of dedicated publications and academic materials

For us concerned watchers and stakeholders of the goings-on at the NGA, Joe Musa's programme and their mode of execution became too loud and made some people uncomfortable. It was felt in some quarters that the few legacies (if any) that Dr P.C. Dike left behind have been eroded and the only thing left for detractors who are negative in their thinking and wants power at all cost was to rock the boat .

THE RETURN TO PRE AUGUST 2006

It was no longer news that the NGA has been returned to pre August 2006 days with a management that is made up of officers without any professional background in Visual Art. The only thing the present management under Abdulahi Muku engaged in is to launder its image left right and centre and hire more consultants and special assistants who are possibly not put into the professional use they are being employed for. As a result it appears nothing tangible is actually going on in the gallery by way of programmes. I have it on good authority that the new management has moved the office to the Federal Secretariat where it would only be pulsing files as against planning for and carrying out professional work. This macabre dance the drum beat of which started in September 2009 has brought the gallery back to another all time low after the good works of Joe Musa. The truth is that while this ugly trend continues, the visual arts sub-sector and its teeming admirers both here in Nigeria and elsewhere will be the losers for it. It is quite unfortunate that some of our members in the SNA who are supposed to stand up and be counted in the struggle to prevent merit being sacrificed on the altar of mediocrity have been recruited for pecuniary gains. Is this how our present visual arts generation would be professionally wasted under directionless administrative trials and errors?

ANY SOLUTION?

Perhaps one would like to recall that not too long ago, the President, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan had a meeting with stakeholders and practitioners in the culture sector. This meeting took place in Lagos. The interface was ostensibly organised in order to fashion a way forward for the sector. It would be recalled that at the meeting, a renowned artist and a patriarch in the visual arts sub-sector, Dr. Bruce Onabrakpeya had raised a poser on why non-professionals were being appointed to head a parastatal like the NGA. The President responded and made a promise that it would soon be looked into. That was a little over one year ago and one is at a loss what has become of the promise. Is it still being looked into, despite the present stagnancy in the sub-sector? May be it is pertinent to place the blame at the doorsteps of the parent ministry which for reasons best known to it has become lethargic on necessary advice to the Presidency on issues such as this. This ministry looks satisfied with the current situation in which mediocrity and non-performance hold sway at the NGA. Could there have been any act behind the scene between the NGA and the ministry that is holding sway

One thing is certain that even without looking into any crystal ball, the current slide and downward trend is likely to continue unless urgent steps are taken to address the situation. How soon that will be is a matter for conjecture. The question one would want to ask: Is there any solution in sight and Is Mr President still in tab of his diary on the critical issue of putting the round pegs in the round holes at the National Gallery of Art?

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