NATURAL SYNTHESIS: WHERE CULTURE MET ACADEMICS

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Abstract

This study attempts a detailed analysis of Natural Synthesis, the first meeting point of culture and academics in Nigeria. The study contextualized Natural Synthesis and the Nigerian traditional art and culture in relations to its transformation through the proponents of the philosophy. It discusses in details the genesis of the natural synthesis and it impact on Nigerian modern art. In the bid to enumerate its impact on Nigerian modern art, Uli Ona, Nsibidi, Ara, and the Society of Nigerian Artist were focused on as some of the legacies of the proponents of Natural Synthesis. The proponents of the Natural Synthesis were among the few Nigerian artists to be trained in the first Nigerian institution of Higher learning in Nigeria, the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology Zaria (NCAST). This study appraises the contributions of the Natural Synthesis to the development of Arts in Nigeria.

Keywords: Synthesis, culture, arts, academics

Introduction

Synthesis is combining separate elements to form a whole, it is a word often used in writing, when literature from variety of sources are combined to create a whole text. Synthesis is not limited to the arts, science study and research also encourages synthesis. Gulmezoglu (2005) defines research synthesis as “The process through which two or more research studies are assessed with the objective of summarizing the evidence relating to a particular question”. Whereas, in the Nigerian art scene, synthesis was made popular by a group of young Nigerian art Students in 1958 in the newly Nigerian College of Arts Science and Technology (NCAST) Zaria.

The synergy transformed to what is described by many as a visual academic cultural dialogue between Nigerian academic trained artists and their culture. The synthesis between Art and culture among the students of NCAST became stronger with the formation of society, named the Zaria Art Society. This society adopted Natural Synthesis as their philosophy, which marked the beginning of a new dawn on the contemporary Nigerian art scene. Natural Synthesis according to Uche Okeke: “was simply the unconscious effort to assimilate what is the cream of foreign influence and wedding them to our own culture” (Jari 2004). This was an avenue for young Nigerian artist to go back to their culture, and bring in some aspects of their culture into what was being taught in school by their European teachers.

Pre-Zaria art society

The first remarkable effort by Nigerian trained artists to synthesis between Nigerian culture and academic art before the Zaria Art Society was by Ben Enwonwu. Though it was not name Natural Synthesis, the concept of adopting traditional themes and motifs was already in existence between K.C Murray and his students in the Government College Umuahia in the present day Abia State of Nigeria. Nzegwu (1999) asserts: “Murray encouraged his students in Umuahia to attentively study and take design inspiration from uli forms, and the sculptural iconography around them”.

Unlike Aina Onabolu, who is the first Indigenous art teacher in Nigeria, Murray changed and took art training to a level Egonwa (2001) referred to as “The evolution of the concept of Natural Synthesis”. The training Enwonwu got from Murray, reflected synthesis between Nigerian culture and European art. Enwonwu absorbed into
his art Negritude, to further project Nigerian Culture. Negritude was a political and cultural movement of the French colonized countries, propounded by Senegalese poet and former president Leopold Senghor which preaches the same gospel as the Zaria Arts Society’s Natural Synthesis. According to Filani (2013) the academically trained artists, those who were formally trained, started to articulate art concepts, propelled by struggle for independence. They imbied the Negritude philosophy espoused by Leopold Senghor and similar ideas by other notable politicians such as: Kwame Nkrumah and Nnamdi Azikiwe to agitate for African identity. The artists of this period eventually came up with a novel admixture of both traditional and modern forms.

Negritude promoted the values of the black Africans with much emphasis on the beauty of culture. Negritude influenced Enwonwu’s art, most of which were elongated African images and festivals activities, such as: masking and masquerading. Enwonwu is of the opinion that: in demonstrating Negritude, we were painting with definite aims in mind and our visions were definite and characteristic of black expression. We were not imitating the white people, nor were we coping ancient African art. That is to say, we were not doing things for the white man to say that we were black. We were doing things which were ‘black’ because we were proud of being black (Nzegwu, 1999).

The style that was adopted by Ben Enwonwu into his artistic expression was not due to factors of inferiority but rather a demonstration of idiomatic cultural expression, which was based on the Synthesis between Nigerian Culture and European art. in the Nigerian art ascene, Enwonwu was the only one among his contemporaries that practice Synthesis, though there were few educated artist in Nigeria then. Later the Nigerian visual art scene witnessed an articulated and sophisticated group: The ‘Zaria Art Society’. This was the society that propounded the philosophy of Natural Synthesis, which is similar in concept to Senghor’s Negritude that was adhered to by Ben Enwonwu. Both Bruce Onabrakpeya and Demas Nwoko members of the Zaria Art Society, affirmed in an interview (2003) that during the society’s four years of existence, members were encouraged to synthesize Nigerian culture and modern European art that they were taught in school. The society was closed down by its founding members in 1961, but the philosophy of Natural Synthesis continued to manifest in their works and even in the works of younger generations, some of whom were students of the founding members of the Zaria Art Society.

So much has happened in Nigerian art scene since the Zaria Art Society was closed down, particularly in the area of its philosophy, “Natural Synthesis”. Many genres of artistic idioms have been formed and most of them work in the line of synthesising Nigerian culture with Western art traditions. These groups are known with different names but their philosophies are not far from that of the Zaria Art Society’s Natural Synthesis. Among the genres are: Uli, Ona, Nsibidi and Ara.

**Uli motif**

In the year 1961, the Zaria Art Society members graduated from NCAST lead to the official closure of the society but opened up a more serious exploration of Nigerian forms and motifs by members individually. The exploration was seen in traditional art forms such as Uli, which was a traditional motif commonly used among the Igbo women of Eastern part of Nigeria for decorations. Traditionally, *Uli* was done on the body of women and wall of buildings. *Uli* body design was a necessary aspect of dressing among the Igbo women to show the rank of a woman in the community, and it was also used to decorate the body of medians during marriages. Apart from using *uli* as a mark of authorities and body decoration for medians, it was also used for seasonal celebrations and other important celebrations in the community, but most importantly, for beautification. Aniakor (2004) asserts: “Body painting is certainly one of the finest Igbo body arts”. *Uli* body art which was obsolescent was revived and transformed by Uche Okeke’s exploration of Natural Synthesis.
Uli body decoration is no longer popular among the Igbo women; this is associated to the fact that presently, most women wear clothes that covers most parts of their body. The wearing of clothes therefore covers the platform on which Uli design was traditionally displayed. However, Uche Okeke, the founder and proponent of Uli synthesis in Nsukka, transformed Uli and made it a twentieth century art movement, bringing the past to the present, which will most likely determine the future. Ottenberg (1997) sees such transformation as: “… the past is seen as an anchor of stable indigenous culture, in contrast to an ever-changing present and an uncertain future”. Uli Synthesis which started at Nsukka by Uche Okeke, later gained the support of other scholars such as: Obiora Udechukwu, Chuka Amefuna, El-Anasui, Marcia Kure, among others. Filani (1998) sees Uli drawing as:“the hallmark of Nsukka’s contribution to modern Nigerian art”.

**Ona**

Uli movement no doubt was not a direct off-spring of the proponents of Natural Synthesis. Like Uli, the Onamovement which is also known as Onaism was also formed by young graduates of the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife then (University of Ife). Going by one of the
Onamovement objectives which is to create art works with diverse motifs and idioms, to reflect Nigerian culture, it is therefore justifiable that Ona is one of the many fruits of the Natural Synthesis. Ona which is strongly rooted in Ile-Ife, an ancient Yoruba city in the south-western part of Nigeria is characterised by the use of Yoruba motifs, forms and symbols to create artistic concepts. The movement explores various Yoruba rich artistic visual culture such as: decorative motifs, patterns and symbols to adhere creative works. Some of the motifs and symbols have already gone into extinction but have presently been revived by the Ona artists. Below are some artistic expressions by the Ona artists.

Plate 4: Ona Painting by: Kunle Filani
Source: Africanartswithta.blogspot.com

Plate 5: Ona Painting by: Tola Wewe

Ogheneruemu (2010) asserts: Onaism as an artistic concept has its interest in the revival of Yoruba art forms, motifs and philosophies through constant experimentation with local materials, patterns and images...the movement evolved in the later part of 1988 and earlier 1989 through the activities of a group of graduate of Art Department of the University of Ife now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, in furtherance of their creative ideas in modern Nigerian art practice.

Through continuous research in Yoruba rich artistic heritage, the Ona group have contributed immensely to the contemporary Nigerian art tradition. Ogheneruemu noted the following artists as the founders of the Ona art movement: Moyosore Okediji, Olakunle Filani, Tola Wewe, Bolaji Campbell, and Tunde Nasiru.

Nsibidi
The synergy between Nigerian traditional art and Western art, which were the major concern of the Natural Synthesis and the creation of art works with diverse motifs and idioms to reflect Nigerian culture by the Ona movement continued with creation of Nsibidi by Victor Ekpuk a Nigerian trained artist based in America. Ekpuk started research into Nsibidi(traditional graphic and writing system) after graduating from the Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife. Thus, Ekpuk’s art style can be linked to his training at Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, the base of the Ona group.
Nsibidi writing is indigenous to the Ejagham, Efik, Igbo and Ibibio people of South-eastern part of Nigeria. The Nsibidi which is an aesthetic philosophy where sign system are used to convey ideas was traditionally engraved or imprinted on calabashes, textiles, brass, wood sculpture, masks among other objects by the ancient people of South Eastern Nigeria. Traditionally, it was a sign mostly used by the secret societies. Macgregor (1909) asserts: “The system of writing is really the property of a secret society, the Nsibidi society, into which men are regularly initiated after undergoing a period of preparation”. Ekpe and Bassey (2012) support Macgregor thus: Nsibidi is a system used among the initiates of the Ekpe Society in Efik land to communicate with one another and with the Ekpe…. The Ukara cloth, which is the official apparel of the Ekpe society, members of the Society ties the cloth during the cult’s activities.

Some of the signs are known by people outside the society but the vast majority are known and used by only the initiated members. However, for Ekpuk, Nsibidi is used to reflect his experience as an international artist. The subject matters of his
works deals with human lifes and conditions, ranging from: family, gender, politics, culture and identity.

**Araism**

Araism is derived from a Yoruba word *Ara*, which means wonder. Like *Uli* and *Ona*, Araism is another culture based artistic technique that began in Nigeria in 1989, by its founder, Mufu Onifade but was formally launched on Saturday July 22, 2006 with an exhibition of paintings of Araism by the proponents of the technique. Among the proponents are: Mufu Onifade, Olaniyi Omojuwa, Tope Oguntuase, Dotun Popoola, Abiola Mautin-Akande and Jonathan Ikpoza. Ara which is a Yoruba word translated to mean ‘wonder’ in English is also said to be an acronym A.R.A which is philosophically translated as: Aesthetically Rich Art.

![Plate 9](image1.png)
![Plate 10](image2.png)

Ara Paintings by: Mufu Onifade, (Source: araismmovement.org)

The above discussed movements or techniques are some of the notable groups that have emerged many years after the Natural Synthesis philosophy. All of the above have one thing in common, which is the cultural based philosophy with the aim of preserving Nigerian culture. The cultural based ideology of these groups could have emanated from the philosophy of Zaria Art Society, which was the first major artistic pressure group in Nigeria that worked and are still working hard to promote and preserve dying Nigerian culture.

**Conclusion**

The Natural Synthesis philosophy was necessary at the time it was propounded because there was an obvious elision of Nigerian tradition and culture in the art curriculum of the newly established Institution of higher learning in Nigeria (NCAST). The Art Society members saw this as been fundamentally wrong, thus the revolution. This was done through the Natural Synthesis which called for a merger of the best of Nigerian traditional art forms and idea with the Western ones.

With Ben Enwonwu having laid a positive foundation in the projection and inclusion of Nigerian indigenous forms and motifs in his modern art practises, it was easy for the Zaria Art Society members to take up the challenge, using the Natural Synthesis as a tool. The awareness created by the Natural Synthesis proponents, created a soft landing for other art movements that
was established later, such as the *Ona, Nsibidi* and *Araism*. These movements or techniques are some of the notable groups that have emerged many years after the Natural Synthesis philosophy was propounded. All of the above have one thing in common, which is the cultural based philosophy with the aim of promoting and preserving Nigerian rich culture.

**References**


