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Preface:

In 2019, the Department of Industrial Design, of the Federal University Akure, Nigeria convened an epoch-making conference on visual communication design, tagged “Design: in the Nigerian context”. The conference was received with great enthusiasm by scholars across the nation as it was aimed at catalysing general discourse on the fleeting technological developments in the field of graphic design. By so doing, it sought to understand the evolving indigenous design traits, trends and interfaces vis-a-vis praxis, theory and the education of the 21st century designer.

As a follow up to the conference, Graphic Design Practitioners in Nigeria activated a machinery to converge in Lafia in 2022 to dilate on issues raised in Akure in what was to be their maiden confab. The conference was suspended for certain logistic challenges. However, articles submitted for the conference were allowed to be published by the journal of visual communication design in a special edition. The respective manuscripts were subjected to rigorous peer review processes before they were published and will serve to highlight key issues in graphic design practise in Nigeria.

We enjoin you to always read and contribute to JOVICOD.

Prof. Etiido Effiongwilliam Inyang
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CONTENT PAGE

	Preface	ii
	Content Page	iii
1.	<i>OLUWAFEMI, J. O.</i> Design and Development of a Prototype Unified Directional Signage in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.	1 - 18
2.	<i>KAYODE, O. F.</i> Effect of Television Advertisement Stereotypes on Yoruba Culture in Lagos State, Nigeria.	19 - 29
3.	<i>OSAIGBOVO, F. O.</i> Advertising promotion mascots: revisiting the adventures of “Fido Dido” as 7up advertising brand ambassador in Nigeria.	30 - 41
4.	<i>AFOLABI, B. E.</i> Glocalisation or globalisation: visual communicators’ role amidst societal decadence.	42 - 56
5.	<i>ABAYOMI, I.</i> Perception of teachers on the use of instructional videos for teaching and learning in the basic science classroom.	57 - 67
6.	<i>KUNDE, T. M.</i> A critique on foreign cultural agencies and modern art practice in Nigeria.	68 - 75
7.	<i>OMOLOJA, A. I.</i> Redesigning FUTA bread brand; a case study of the ‘dinner roll’ package.	76 - 90
8.	<i>ADETUNJI, S. O.</i> Visual art education: a tool for national development in Nigeria.	91 - 99
9.	<i>DAKYES, S. U.</i> Review of contemporary issues in document protection and counterfeiting in the Nigerian print industry: a personal experience.	100 - 116
10.	<i>GILL, A.</i> An exploratory branding study using Yoruba design.	117 -121

A CRITIQUE ON FOREIGN CULTURAL AGENCIES AND MODERN ART PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper presents a critique on the activities of foreign cultural agencies on contemporary Nigerian art. It considers viewpoints of several authors by analyzing their individual opinion on the implication of the activities of foreign cultural agencies on Nigerian cultural space. During the discussion, it was observed that the activities of foreign cultural agencies have two sides which are positive and negative. The positive side is that, they offer contemporary Nigerian artists the opportunity to participate in global artistic events and grant them sponsorship which enable them to progress in their practicing career. On the other hand, the negative side is that, they are indirectly eroding the local visual culture and indigenous artistic values that make art practice relevant in contemporary African societies. The paper however recommends that, contemporary artists should endeavour to filter the artistic values been promoted by these foreign cultural agencies, as this will help propagate good artistic values for the development of contemporary art in Nigeria.

Keywords: Foreign Cultural Agencies; Contemporary Nigerian Art; Gothe Institut; Alliance Française

A CRITIQUE ON FOREIGN CULTURAL AGENCIES AND MODERN ART PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

Introduction

Modern art in Nigerian from the beginning has always had something to do with foreign cultures both in training and practice. For example, both Ikpakronyi (2001) and Fosu (1986) aver that the influences that led to the development of contemporary art in Nigeria were largely foreign. Also, from the early stages of its practice, up to 1950s through 1960s, modern Nigerian artists have been receiving their training (either directly or indirectly) from foreign art institutions/teachers. For example, contemporary art icons like Aina Onabolu, Akinola Lasekan, Ben Enwonwu, and even most members of the defunct Zaria Art Society all had a foreign artistic encounter in their training or practice. Hence, it is not out of point to state that, the current styles/trends in art as being practised by most modern Nigerian artists are congruent of foreign art cultures, including most of the materials which are often used in the execution of their art works. Hence, the presence of foreign cultural agencies in Nigeria and their influence on artists cannot be over emphasized. However, to what extent have these bodies impacted on Nigerian artistic landscape? And what is the implication of their activities on current contemporary art practice? It is based on these, among other factors, this paper presents a critique on foreign cultural agencies and modern art practice in Nigeria.

Literary Gaps on Foreign Cultural Agencies

There is little literature on foreign cultural centres in Nigeria, however, the nature of documentation of these literature does not properly fill the gaps that this paper has set out to fill, which is to examine the activities of foreign cultural centres to the development or otherwise of modern art in Nigeria. One of such studies is by Okome (2001) which presents "An Overview of The Management of Artistic and Cultural Organizations in Nigeria". The author lists and discusses the different roles of cultural bodies/agencies as well as independent cultural organizations especially in

promoting, preserving and propagating the arts and culture of Nigeria. Okome's discussion is more inclined to indigenous cultural centres, as he makes little or no effort to comment on the issue of foreign cultural centers and their activities in Nigeria.

This omission by Okome cast a shadow of non-existence of foreign cultural centres in Nigeria, an image which is contrary to the operational influence of such foreign cultural bodies on the Nigerian cultural terrain. Okome seems not to be the only one whose work has been noticed with such a gap. Oloidi (1995) also writes extensively about "Three Decades of Modern Nigerian Art (1960-1990)". In this publication, Oloidi presents a number of contemporary art issues, as well as comments on art events that have contributed to influencing different modes of art practice within the three decades. However, he only mentions foreigners (expatriates) like Giordina Beier, Ulli Beier and Suzanne Wenger who, in the early sixties, influenced the emergence of the Oshogbo experimental art school. During the period which Oloidi reviews, the activities of foreign cultural bodies were moving concurrently with some of the issues/events mentioned in his account. For example, three art workshops were organized by Goethe Institut at Nsukka (1985, 1986-1987). There was another art workshop / exhibition of Nigerian and German artists, influenced by the same German cultural centre, held at Yaba College of Technology, Yaba, Lagos in early 1989. Yet, Oloidi does not consider these events significant enough to mention in his critique of thirty years of modern art practice in Nigeria. The non-inclusion of certain artistic events by foreign cultural bodies in Nigeria in the Oloidi's account, such as the workshops held at Nsukka and Yaba-Lagos among others, creates a historical vacuum in terms of coverage of artistic events of that period. The above expression indicates a few examples among many literary gaps existing on contemporary art documents which unconsciously undermine the role of

these foreign cultural agencies in Nigeria. As such, these have directly or indirectly limited people's knowledge of their seeming implications on artists in Nigeria.

Implications of Foreign Cultural Agencies on Contemporary Nigerian Artists

The contemporary Nigerian art and foreign cultural agencies has enjoyed a complementary relationship for over the years. The implication of this relationship could be viewed in two opposite perspectives. In the first perspective, activities of these foreign agencies are plausible as they are adjudged to contribute positively to the development of art in Nigeria. For example, in discussing the state-of-the-art market and patronage in Nigeria, Ottenberg (1997) states that, "among foreign cultural centres, the Goethe Institut and the Italian cultural centre (though closed in 1994), have been most active in displaying contemporary Nigerian art increasingly to African audience". The author further posits that, "Other foreign cultural centres such as the Alliance Francaise, have held important exhibitions, while the British Council remains active in contemporary art in upcountry cities". Furthermore, the foreign cultural agencies have also contributed in organizing creative platforms for the Nigerian artists to showcase their talents. One among such platforms is through Art Workshops. For example, three art workshops were organized by Goethe Institut at Nsukka (1985, 1986-1987). Apart from that, there was an art workshop/exhibition of Nigerian and German artists, influenced by the same German cultural centre, held at Yaba College of Technology, Lagos in early 1989.

The significance of these events is that, the art workshops provided a creative opportunity for artists to artistically interact with their environment, using different medium to produce works that represent their viewpoints on issues and events that relate to their society. Furthermore, Kelly (1993) mentions the role that Goethe Institut- has played in some cultural events involving Nigeria and Germany. These include events such as "The Success of Nsukka's Print Making

Workshop, a collaboration between Germany and Nigeria" in 1985; and "A symposium on Nigeria and Foreign Patronage of Art", held at the Goethe Institut, Lagos in 1987. However, Kelly captures these events only as mere historical tips of dates and events, forming a chronological background of Nigerian art, 1920-1992. This kind of presentation, indeed, lacks the basic elements (substantial details) like the influence and implications of such events on practising artists as well as on modern Nigerian art.

Similarly, Agada (2004) discusses the functions of contemporary art galleries using Alliance Francaise (a French cultural centre in Kaduna) as a case study. Although Alliance Francaise is made the focus point in the study, it is based on the fact that the French Cultural Centre offers services to contemporary artists that are similar to Art galleries. This includes services like the provision of exhibition space for artists; sponsorship of indigenous artists to attend foreign art shows, organizing art events like exhibition and art workshops which serves as platforms for contemporary artists soar in their practicing career, and other similar ways. For example, the Annual Alliance Française de Lagos OPEN CALL show, presents "a variety of cultural non-commercial events such as exhibitions, screenings, talks, concerts, dance events, etc. featuring talents coming from both Nigerian artistic community and French speaking countries" (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: A Cultural Performance at the Annual Alliance Française de Lagos OPEN CALL show. **Source:** <https://www.afnigeria.org/lagos/events/cultural-programme/>

Amodu (2008) writes a commentary on the issue of globalization and its benefits to Nigerian artists and art community. He also points out that: "Foreign art interest or art friendly organizations (foreign cultural centres/agencies) in Nigeria and abroad can help improve the promotion of international visual art/fine arts related programmes and events taking place in different parts of the world". The writer believes that such bodies can do this successfully by informing and sensitizing the Nigerian art community (through seminars, talk-shops, mails, invitation to foreign art programmes, etcetera) of art related subjects that would be beneficial to artists like art/cultural exchange scheme in their country or continents. According to Amodu (2008):

"The activities of foreign cultural agencies in Nigerian have contributed in many different ways to the progress (and other wise) of the contemporary art practice. First, it offered many Nigerian artists the opportunity to interact with the outside world through visual art platforms."

Although the interests of Amodu is more on how Nigerian artists can fit into the globalised art world, his statement is suggestive of what should be the role that foreign cultural centres /agencies should play in the promotion of visual art in Nigeria. An instance of this is the corroborative cultural event that was staged by Korean Cultural Centre in Seoul titled "Seeds of Friendship" which featured both Nigerian and Korean artists (Fig. 2).

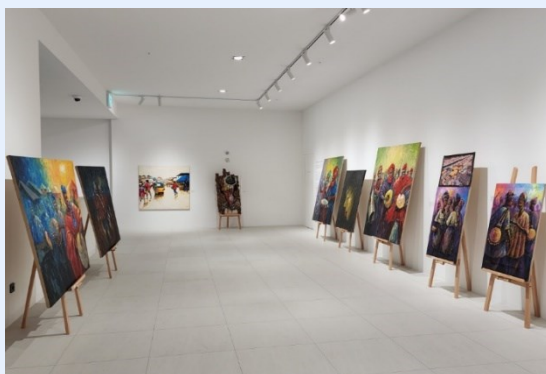


Fig. 2: "Seeds of Friendship" exhibition at Summit Gallery in Southern Seoul featuring works by Nigerian artists. Source: Hwang Dong-hee/The Korea Herald

Okpe (1995) comments on "the participation of foreign cultural agencies like Goethe Institut in Nigeria in the support, promotion and patronage of the development of contemporary Nigerian art through exhibitions, symposiums (symposia), lectures, workshops and publications is immense". To Okpe, the German cultural centre is playing a complementary role to indigenous cultural institutions like museums and galleries which cannot appropriately cope with the growing demand of visual artists/art practice in Nigeria. He states that:

"It has become obvious that the various government organs of culture together with private and seemingly purely business-oriented galleries and museums in Nigeria are proving to be unable to cope with the desires and demands of the new reasoning to invest in perpetuating the development of experimental aspects of our art (visual art)."

The interest of Okpe, however, is more on the number of activities/programmes like exhibitions and workshops organized by Goethe Institut which involved the participation of artists in the Zaria Art School. Hence, he does not take cognizance of what could be the implications of such activities on participating artists and the Nigerian cultural environment.

In a farewell note written by Okeke (1995) on one of the former directors of Goethe Institut, Lagos, Mrs. Renate Albertsen Marton, the author states that:

"Renate's humanity has affected everyone who has had occasion to meet her- through the various workshops she had organized for Goethe Institut in virtually every part of the country; or through exhibitions at Goethe and elsewhere; or in her house. ...Here, certain post-exhibitions or performers dinners are well known not because of her sumptuous buffets but for the unique environment where they take place, and the people you meet there:

*Comedians, artists, journalists,
writers, poets, dramatists..."*

Okeke's statement does not only point to the fact that, the activities of foreign cultural agencies have been felt in most parts of the country, it also indicates that the such agencies have a large audience in Nigeria which cuts across different cultural professionals including visual artists. However, the writer does not state whether or not the influence of such activities may have direct bearing on the kind of art styles, trends, and even ideas that were behind the creation of such art works.

However, there is another perspective in which activities of foreign cultural agencies are seen to negatively affect the contemporary art in a long run. This is by indirect introduction and support for the flourishing of new global trends of art practice, which sometimes excessively affect indigenous art practice. This is done by indirect spread of foreign artistic values or Western visual ethics which are generally promoted through art events sometimes organized by the foreign cultural agencies. For example, most contemporary Nigerian artists who have participated in art projects or contests organized by foreign cultural agencies, note their profound interest in the promotion of art forms that seem to differ in representational approach to the visual culture that is generally acceptable (in terms of patronage) to the current Nigerian society. In this way, the excessive adherence to art forms/trends like conceptual or abstract art has technically affected the younger artists from focusing on creative rudiments in design (such as the application principles of design). This is probably the reason while Jegede in Kunde (2010), having observed the prevailing influence of foreign activities on artists from the emerging art schools in Nigeria, noted that:

"From the foregoing, a safe assumption could be made that Nigeria is capable of giving succour to as many schools of art as care to emerge, although it would be safest if utmost care is exercised in defining the extent to

which such schools should allow themselves to be goaded, persuaded or forced to swallow foreign dogmas of little beneficial import to our cultural aspirations."

Jegede's comment is not specific, whether he is referring to the attitude of individual foreigners who were sponsoring art workshops such as Oshogbo and Mbari, or he was referring to foreign cultural centres like British Council, Italian Cultural Centre, Alliance Francaise and others, whose activities were gaining ground over time. Jegede's comment could be seen as an earlier warning over the same issue raised by Jari (2002) when he warns against "the Darwinian motivated propaganda for the emergence of a new primitivism in Nigeria (and indeed Africa) by the West". In the paper titled "Nigerian Art and Endangerment", Jari discusses among other issues, Western activities in Africa

which have contributed to the misrepresentation of African art. He explains that:

"This is achieved through the careful sponsorship of special workshops organized all over the continent involving Africans that had no prior artistic training. Works from these workshops are considered pure self-expression as opposed to the tainted or third-rated ones produced by trained African artists."

Although Jari does not define "the West" in the light of the activities of foreign cultural agencies, neither is Jegede specific in the usage of "foreigners", one thing that both authors stress is the need to be conscious of the excessiveness of Western activities which, very often, go a long way in defining what should be regarded as a true representation of modern art in Nigeria.

Amoda (1995) also notes that "the Nigerian art in the last ten years witnessed the coming of important personalities in various foreign cultural centres." He mentions a number of art collaborative

ventures that have over time, built as well as enhanced a working relationship between Yaba College of Technology, Yaba, Lagos and other foreign agencies like the German Cultural Centre, British Council, Alliance Francaise especially in the area of art. His observation is, however, similar to those of Jegede and Jari above. In expressing his feeling on one of the programmes organized by Gothe Institut (German Cultural Centre), Amoda states that:

"Apart from the exhibition, workshop and donations, the Goethe Institut also influenced some Art scholars and Gallery owners from Germany and other parts of Europe to visit the college and give lectures or document works for posterity. Danny Keller, a gallery owner in Germany that deals in contemporary African art visited the college to give a slide lecture on contemporary Africa. The lecture did not go down well with most of us that attended it because we all felt that was not a true reflection of what was on ground."

Amoda's statement above, points to the fact that, there are some issues ingrained in some of the programmes being carried out by foreign cultural centres in Nigeria. It stands to reason; therefore, that there is need to critically be examined and analysed the activities of foreign cultural agencies for the benefit of modern Nigerian art practice. This will contribute to solving issues that relate to the misrepresentation of modern Nigerian art (and indeed African art) in international art fora. The author has been involved in series of foreign cultural activities in Nigeria. One among such activities is the workshop organized by Gothe Institut, Lagos in 2005 which led to the production street-lights (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Title: Street Light (Installation), **Artist:** Olu Amoda, **Year:** 2005, **Medium:** Wood stand, lantern, paint. **Location:** Lagos. **Source:** *Footprints- a Bridge of Culture and Friendship*; Lagos, Nigeria: Publication of Goethe Institut, P. 32-33

Conclusion

The discussion above indicates that modern art in Nigeria, at different stages of its development, has had foreign cultural activities interlinked with other events, shaping the history of art in Nigeria. It also reveals that foreign cultural agencies have a long-time working relationship with Nigerian artists, as well as departments of arts in some Nigerian institutions (especially Universities and Polytechnics), through programmes such as art workshops, art exhibitions, seminars, conferences and other art related gatherings which they usually organise.

Furthermore, it was observed that the activities of foreign cultural agencies have two sides which are positive and negative. The positive side is that, they offer contemporary Nigerian artists the opportunity to participate in global artistic events and grant them sponsorship which enable them to progress in their practicing career. This is indeed a welcome development. However, the negative side is that, they are indirectly eroding the local visual culture and indigenous artistic values that make art practice relevant in contemporary African societies. Nwakunor and Ajeluoruo (2019) observed that, "...while these foreign agencies are aggressively promoting their various cultures and languages, and getting Nigeria's young ones immersed in them, the country is tragically indifferent to the promotion of its own languages". His comment, however, was based on the

overwhelming influence that foreign cultural agencies have on African artists, as against the knowledge of their indigenous culture.

Recommendation

The paper however recommends that, contemporary artists should be aware of the need to filter the artistic values been promoted by these foreign cultural

agencies, as this will help propagate good artistic values for the development of contemporary art. Also, Nigerian Government, as well as other African states, should formulate as well as channel her cultural policies towards enhancing a good relationship as well as checking some of their activities that will negatively affect its cultural terrain.

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