

# Preservation of Artistic Heritage: Effect of Modernization on Antiquities and Traditional Murals in Nigeria

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**Abstract**—Traditional art is one of Nigerian cultural heritage. It is an excellent instrument for documentation and identification. Antiquities are priceless and irreplaceable. They are basically preserved for future generations. Sadly, preserving these highly prized cultural heritage is becoming a serious challenge. This paper examines the extent modernization has affected the preservation of traditional art in Nigeria. Particularly hit is the antiquities and traditional murals of eastern part of Nigeria. Participatory visual methods were used for this study. Efforts were made to reach the few surviving and aged mural artists. Oral information was collected from them as well as first hand drawings and some photographs of their works. Findings indicate that modernization has seriously affected the preservation of Nigerian artistic heritage. Further findings show that traditional mural artists are gradually dwindling and dangerously going into extinct. Antiquities are indiscriminately destroyed due to sheer ignorance and the blind quest to fit into the so called modern world.

**Keyword**—Antiquities, artistic heritage, cultural preservation, drawings, modernization, murals.

## I. INTRODUCTION

AFRICA is home to “hundreds of cultures, each with its own distinctive art” [1]. Indeed, just like many African cultures, Nigeria has its own distinctive art. Nigeria has rich culture and diverse artistic heritage. Their antiquities remain ever priceless [1], [8]. This can be clearly seen in the earliest arts of Nigeria. Some of these were the delicately produced terra-cotta works of Nok art from northern Nigeria, the idealized naturalistic bronze and terra-cotta heads of the Ife art from the west and the intricately carved ivory and bronze heads of Benin kingdom. These antiquities are extremely important artistic legacy to Nigeria [1]. One of these Benin heads were used as symbol of Festival of Art and Culture (FESTAC) hosted by Nigeria in 1977 [9]. Some of these earliest arts can be found in museums both in Nigeria and Western countries [1]. These arts mentioned are not the only Nigerian artistic heritage. The eastern and southern groups team with beautiful arts. Among these arts are masks, shrine figures and beautiful wall decorations. Examples of these invaluable shrine figures are the well known Igbo-Ukwu bronze arts excavated in the 1940s by Bernard Fagg [4]. Ever since, these arts had been real important artistic heritage for the people of southern Nigeria. Shrine figures are used to honour and respect the spirits; maintain law and order; protect

individuals; groups or the entire community; and to execute judgment [1]. Masks and masquerades are very significant and are used in different forms of worship, rites and ceremonies. Wall arts are highly valued for their aesthetic values and sometimes used to pass information or communicate to individuals or the community [1]. Sadly, these arts are speedily dwindling into extinction. The merciless culprit of this swift delve into extinction is modernization. This culprit led to theft or looting of these figures, destruction and discarding of these highly priced arts and abandoning the production and practice. Old traditions have great value and it is a pity that modern times often neglect previous artistic and cultural achievements. In a way, it probably has to be so, but at the same time, the preservation of at least a number of examples of earlier traditions is priceless. It is thus necessary to preserve this priceless heritage even in the mist of modernization.



Fig. 1 Nok Terracotta Head



Fig. 2 Nok Terracotta Seated Figure

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Fig. 3 Ife Bronze Head



Fig. 4 Benin Bronze Plaque



Fig. 5 Igbo-Ukwu Art Object

## II. ART AND MODERNIZATION

Nigerian culture is greatly influenced by both Islamic and Western cultures. The influence is very strong that many of their artistic heritage have to struggle to survive. In the north,

the strong influence of Islamic tradition is clearly seen in their architecture and crafts. Emphasis are on calligraphy, decorative and utilitarian art as Islam traditionally strictly forbids the representation of people and animal. In the south, Western influences have challenged and threatened the rich artistic heritage that sustained the country for ages [1], [8], [11].

The British colonization has had a profound effect on many Nigeria art and culture. Since the early days of the nationalist movement, the question of cultural domination by western society through the forces of colonialism has been recognized as a serious practical and theoretical problem. Cultural emancipation was one of the stated objectives of nationalist movement [2].

One of the effects of modernization on Nigeria is the prowling of its traditional arts and antiquities. Interestingly, Western government are not exempted in these indiscriminate looting because these arts were taken to several museums in Europe and America [4], [7]. The museums in Nigeria which are supposed to protect and preserve these art and antiquities are no longer safe enough for them. In fact, the looting takes place at the museums where these art and antiquities run to for safety. In January, 1987, nine objects were stolen from National Museum, Jos in Plateau State. These objects include: four Igbo-Ukwu cultural items, three Benin works and two Ife heads [3]. Some other recorded incidents of thefts at Nigerian Museums listed below [4]:

1. Kaduna (6 times) – 1988 (twice), 1992, 1994 and 1999.
2. Jos (4 times) – 1987, 1990 (twice), and 1995.
3. Ife (3 times) – 1973 (thrice) and 1993.
4. Owo (2 times) – 1973 and 1993.
5. Esie (2 times) – 1986 and 1993.
6. Abeokuta – 1994.

There are also other unreported incidents which take place on Nigerian Borders and airports. With these great numbers of thefts, it will be almost impossible for Nigeria to preserve its artistic heritage even in its museums.

The quest for modernization led to disregard of these traditional arts. Since the community did not regard this type of art as important, little or no effort is made to protect or preserve them. They eventually become easy prey to theft, damage and ruin.

Western religion also played a big role in the destruction of traditional decorated walls and antiquities that have been struggling to survive. Many who were converted to Christianity were taught to see such arts as fetish and forms of idolatry. The new converts were therefore discouraged from practicing or advancing their skills [12]. Few who continued in the work were seen as second hand members of the society. This seeming lack of recognition or even patronage contributed to the general lack of interest by the succeeding generations. Thus, forcing it to what appears to be an early extinction [11], [12].

Religion brainwashed the people and created intolerance. This led to fanaticism which dangerously eats deep into the hearts of the people. These fanatics destroy and discourage the productions of traditional arts. Consider the following

incidents: One wealthy man who values these antiquities kept them safely in his house, on his death, his children and grandchildren brought them out and burnt them up believing those arts to be ‘demonic’ objects and the cause of their misfortunes in life [2]. An old woman who newly converted to Christianity was treated as an outcaste in the church because she had *uli* traditional body decorations on her body [11]. One Mr. Madichie says that when he called some women to help him decorate his father’s wall (Fig. 7), he became a laughing stock. Some called him a wretched man who cannot afford money to erect modern walls. Others said he is bringing shame to his wealthy father’s name [12].

Beautiful mural works were seen as shrine or fetish items and are either destroyed and replaced or left without maintenance [11], [12]. Gradually, they were all washed away by the rain.

### III. TRADITIONAL MURALS ARTISTS AND WORKS

African women are the backbone of the continent. They are also like chains as “they link the past, present and future of their peoples” [5]. Nigeria women are not exempted. The women of eastern Nigeria are the traditional mural artists. Indeed, they are living treasures.

Igbo (eastern) women are among the more especially as regards their inexhaustible store of invention both in form and decoration and individual touch, which they give to the most ordinary article [5]. These women excel in body and mural drawings, paintings and decorations which are done with special substance called *Uli* and *Nkasiana*. These decorations are for aesthetics but may sometime have some symbolic meanings. Wall arts are usually bold with *uli* patterns but *nkasiana* patterns are only for the body.

Below are some mural drawings made by those traditional female muralists:



Fig. 6 Snail Movement (ire egune)



Fig. 7 Snail (egune)



Fig. 8 Palm Fronds (omu nkwu)



Fig. 9 Palm Fronds (omu nkwu)

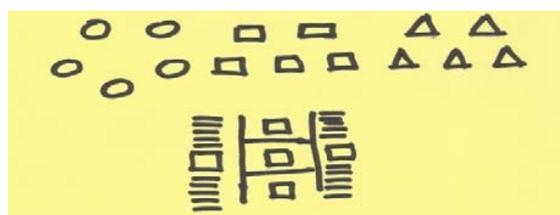


Fig. 10 Number Five (ise)

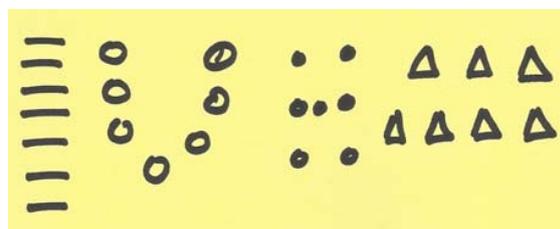


Fig. 11 Number Seven (asaa)

Motifs for murals are derived from animals like *egune* snail (Figs. 6 & 7), plants like *omu nkwu* palm frond (Figs. 8 & 9), numerical units *ise* and *asaa* five and seven (Figs. 10 & 11) and mural drawing tools. They can also be taken from cosmic elements like sun, stars and moon. They could be symbols that only the ‘learned’ understand. Many more are simple motifs with no meaning attached to them but are equally beautiful.

Figs. 12 & 13 are painting sketches of the traditional mural artists. Colours are usually obtained from natural sources. White is obtained from a type of calcium dug from the ground called *nzu* or white chalk. Since *nzu* is water based, it is often considered temporary adornment as it can be easily washed off with water. The *nzu* is ground and mixed with water. Colours like *edo* (yellow), *uhie* (red) could also be added. *Uli* drawings and paintings are generally for aesthetics but sometimes, they have some proverbial connotations as in Figs. 10 & 11 [11].



Fig. 12 Uli Wall Motif (numbers, heavenly bodies and man-made motifs)

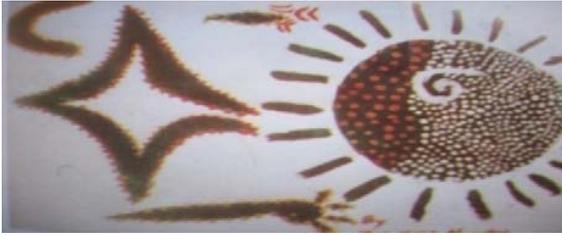


Fig. 13 Uli Wall Motif (Heavenly bodies: star, moon and sun)

Wall engraving is considered too strong for women (some strong women do the engravings themselves). Men sometimes do the engraving while the wall is still wet and the women continue with the drawings after the wall is dried. The dyes for wall art are collected from wide variety of sources, ranging from vegetables and plants to earth and stones. Any dye can be used for wall art provided it is vivid and brilliant. Colours for the wall are black, white, red, brown, yellow, ochre and purple or dark blue (Figs. 12 & 13) [11].

Black colour is obtained from black soil (*Aja ojii*). Although rare, some of these sands could be found deep in the forest. Charcoal or *unyi* is another source of black colour. Soot from back of pots produces very rich and shiny black hue. White is obtained from white chalk or *nzu*. White ash (*ntuocha*) is obtained from burning special woods like *nku ukwa* (breadfruit wood) [11], [12].

Red sand *upa* and anthill are collected for extraction of red pigment. Unlike body decoration, wall designs are bold with brighter colours. The drawings are adapted from natural objects and also from manmade objects as well. More freedom and choice of theme and design are involved in wall decoration and painting than in body decoration [13].



Fig. 14 Iyi Azi Wall



Fig. 15 Chief Gabriel Madichie's Wall (Complete Mural)

In preparing the wall for drawing, cracks on the walls must be filled and completely covered with red sand. Next step is the coating or priming of the wall with one colour, preferably red soil or charcoal. After about four days, the wall is dry and coconut shell is used as sand paper to achieve a smooth and glossy surface. Bold patterns are put in first, followed by smaller ones. Dark or black colour may be used to outline the designs. One of the traditional muralists, Mama Ekema says that she personally preferred using black as the background colour for it brings out any colour of design made on it [11], [12], [13].

Most artists are now too old and can no longer do the work. An eighty-seven year old Mama Nnama of Umunze in Anambra state could not make small body drawing patterns on a paper with pencil when asked to do so. Not until she was given a bold marker pen and paper before she could draw *eselese* patterns (Fig. 16) [11].



Fig. 16 Eselese

The artists are unable to pass on the skills to the younger generations because majority of eastern Nigerian inhabitants have embraced Christianity. Most are church goers and they see such drawings and paintings as fetish. According to 85year old Mama Nnama, when the heathen women were being converted to Christianity, the body decoration was one of their biggest challenges. If the newly converted women attend the church with their bodies fully decorated, no one sits beside them, they would be treated as outcasts until the decorations fade away [11]. That definitely would become their last body decoration until today.

Modernization brought a change and rejection of cultural values. Usually, mural artists pass the skills to their daughters

or younger generations [2], [6], this transition is not always taking place in Nigerian modern traditions. Many old traditional women artists have stopped working and when these last generations of artists die, mural paintings of many Igbo traditions die with them.

#### IV.CONCLUSION

Old traditions have great value and it is a pity that modern times often neglect previous artistic and cultural achievements. In a way, it probably has to be so, but at the same time, the preservation of at least a number of examples of earlier traditions is priceless. Most of these traditional decorated murals in Nigeria are now either destroyed or unattended to. Quite a few now exist and are located in the interior places in the communities. Mbari house located beside Owerri in Imo state would have gone into extinction if the Nigerian government had not intervened. It was reconstructed and modernized with durable materials, decorated and now stands as a monument [7]. In this way, these murals of the past have been preserved to educate future generations. A lot should be learnt from the looting of Nigerian antiquities. This is a strong evidence that these antiquities are priceless and should be preserved at any cost.

#### V.RECOMMENDATION

This paper wishes to recommend that for the Nigerian murals to remain, it should be well guarded and maintained. The skills should also be passed to the younger generations. Younger generations should be educated by the community to see the need to keep their cultural heritage. Modernization should have a positive influence to Nigerian culture. Nigerians should be aware that it is possible to borrow the techniques of the Western tradition without actually copying them; or at worst abandoning Nigerian artistic heritage. Many successful and celebrated Nigerian artists did just so. They used Western techniques in art and yet maintained the heritage of Nigeria. These artists include; Bruce Onobrakpeya, Ben Enweonwu, Uche Okeke, Obiora Udechukwu, and many others.

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