

Art, the Artist and Nation Building

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Abstract:

The artist and his art are constantly battered. His luminous relevance to the society is beleaguered by the lopsidedness of the public mentality—a mentality, which denies an active involvement of art in technological or economic advancement. Art is however a vital force, a living magical force available as an instrument of tool for the development of man. The extent to which it goes in fulfilling this vital function depends largely on its application and on the motive for which it is applied. It is therefore the intention of this paper to examine, with some reference to its financial input, the role of art in economic development. The paper will also x-ray some biting problems inimical to meaningful and sustainable art professionalism.

Introduction:

Art has been under severe attack by certain individuals who myopically view it as –just an object of aesthetics. Such attitude portrays them as people who are unfortunately uninformed, not only about the meaning or nature of art, but also about its prospects and efficacy in the development of any economy. Often times, artists are left out in any meaningful deliberations geared towards national development. Their roles, in the eyes of many, begin and end with the production of art objects for souvenirs to senior government officials, or drama for amusement and cultural competitions, or still music for entertainment as interludes within cocktails. To them, art is just an amusement, an object for aesthetic satisfaction. However, even as this may be the traditional role of art, it actually goes far beyond it.

It is this effacement that perhaps compelled Naum Gabo to keep reiterating that civilizations are the result of a collective endeavour in which the artist actively played a part and shall continue to play (Gabo, 1948). The artist is not just an entertainer; he is also a builder. Gabo's observation could not be contended unless we want to blink the fact

that art complements sciences in all spheres. True, sometimes some people could not help arguing it even when all indications unanimously point to the importance of art in both human and material development. But do we relegate art to limbo and first determine its relevance before we can sanction its functions?

It is along this line that Sealy (1963) reasoned when he attempted to outline the place of art in the society. According to him, art is a potent means of communication which could be used not only to represent, but also to imitate, to inform, to arouse, to persuade and to move. In other words, he views art not merely as an instrument of representation, but also as a motivational force capable of directing man's action. On the other hand, however, Albert Camus identifies it as something running between two gulfs, namely: frivolity and propaganda; that is, he situates art on a ridge between the two chasms where the artist makes his adventure (Laird, 1963).

In Laird (1963), however, Plato rejected artists because he felt that when Arts are not guided by rational law and a sense of responsibility to the society as a whole, they brew negative results. Although Plato holds this view, he also notes that arts could be –the most useful instruments of education. He is of course in order. After all fire can be a faithful servant, as the old saying goes, or a cruel master. It all depends on the function it is allowed to perform. The artist is trained to generate and creatively develop ideas that will further the development of the society.

The Potency and Potentials of Art in a Developing Society:

It is a fact that human development paves way for material development. One cannot find enough ground to discuss any form of development – political, economic, religious, social, and so on in isolation. All are interwoven: for advancement in one necessitates a corresponding and simultaneous improvement in some others. In the same manner also, different disciplines combine to enhance any of the human endeavours. It is in this light that one should attempt to see beyond the contributions art makes to religio-cultural development of any given society. All along it seems art was tethered to a stake, which revolved within the ambit of religio-cultural circle.

But it is no longer so; art plays vital roles in the economy of any given society. Most often, these roles are beclouded by the few self-appointed economic arbiters who pedantically romanticise figures. Their enterprise rather weaves dangerous spells. The crass economic theorisation and analysis that constantly pervades our society are

normally silent about art and its contributions to economic growth. And because science (social) could not function as art or fill the vacuum created by the exclusion of art in economic planning and execution, there is always an egregious chasm begging for attention.

It is in response to the above demand that the former Irish Finance Minister, Charles Haughey, while announcing some economic measures to encourage the artists by the state, emphatically underlined –the importance of the artist to the community in which he lives and the values of the contributions he makes... (Abercrombie, 1975). The Republic of Ireland used to dismiss with a wave of hand the importance of art in nation-building until the effect was adversely felt on her economy. It was then that it dawned on her that she should take a positive step in checking the country's –long history of exporting her most creative people, and also in devising measures –to halting the intellectual drain.

All Ministers of Finance are not Charles Haughey. Haughey realized a crucial lapse in his country's administration resulting from the outstanding neglect of the artist and decided to address it. But the ruling class, particularly in developing countries, would rather resign their mandate than tolerate the artist because his art exposes and criticises their recklessness. They are only prepared to find art palatable if it should be in the past and not in the present, that is, a historical record of the past like the Paleolithic age. Or, if it should be in the present, it should be for amusement. Art as a live wire that can be used to electrify the public is abhorred.

But I must hasten to add that art stripped of this vital role is like a body with the limbs amputated. Or how else could art be potently functional? Art is such an effective tool which could be used to mobilize the people for veritable purpose and against any vanity of life. It is through this means, I think, that art is best applied to the service of mankind. It even lends an understandable meaning to that very essence of aestheticism.

Most battered economies spring from mismanagement of available resources and corruption by those who hold power. And as the duty of reflecting it falls on all and sundry, the artist plays his own role via his art. He creatively turns his art into a mouth-piece with which he condemns all agents of economic and social retrogression. Moreover, his masterpieces sometimes go further to constitute tourist attractions which generate income for the society while they recreate people. And where any of these works is leased or sold, the financial gain involved becomes much more. These support Firth's view that art

has a –thoroughly pragmatic function aimed entirely at direct economic objectives (Sealy, 1963). Nations that understand the role of art in economic development give art its rightful place in their economic planning by making policies and creating enabling opportunities that encourage artists to practice their profession effectively. A West African state, Senegal, is an outstanding example; she invests immensely on art and artists so much so that her economy depends largely on the proceeds generated from art through biennales, exhibitions, conferences and tourism.

Art as an instrument of a practical approach is perhaps best perceived in the light of its practical value where results are turned out in concrete terms. In this way, it demonstrates its efficacy. Vagueness is often minimal when it is used either as an instrument of self-expression or communication because it is not just a creation but an independent live creation, a vibration of reality. So, in effectuating an economic objective, art often diversifies its approach to issues for an effective result. In other words, it becomes a vehicle for propaganda – a means to persuade, to arouse, and then a call to action.

When Okay Ikenegbu, a sculptor, decided to publicly frown at the widespread corruption and the unflagging retrogression in Nigeria, he organized an art exhibition – *Now We Cry*. He identified and portrayed in his works, as much as possible, the problems with the system. He equally vivified the throes of the economic hardship on the citizens as can be seen on the faces of the charred figures on the panels, *Now We Cry*. In reacting to the work Ikwuemesi observes that –... Ikenegbu captures the present situation where we seem to be shipwrecked in our national affairs, Everything seems to have gone wrong... so much so that *Now We Cry* – cry for the past, the present, and the future (Ikwuemesi, 1995).

Ikenegbu neither used any verbal language nor gesticulated. Yet this message was communicated in a most precise and effective way to such extent that people of different languages and of all class understood him. He successfully articulated his views with the most suitable material and flung them in the face of the public.

Even at group art shows where different artists with different ideologies and ideals come under one umbrella to celebrate art in its ritualistic way, the artists, though in diversity, seem to be compelled to form a common front against the forces of retrogression. Take for instance the 1987 Aka Exhibition (Aka is an artistic association – a group of exhibiting artists). Almost all the artists portrayed the realities of the year in their individual ways. A look at Nsikkak Essien's

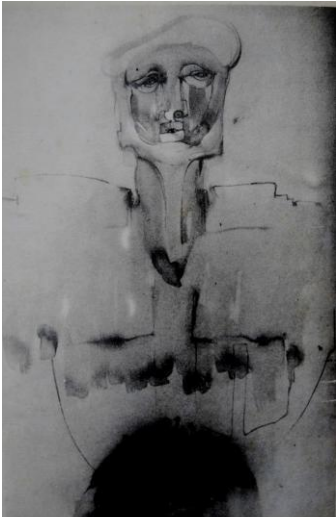
Armageddon or *Oppressor*, Obiora Udechukwu's *The Driver Has Changed* or *The General is Up*, Samson Uchendu's *The Struggle*, and Obiora Anidi's *The Problem is Internal*, -- will confront the viewer with an effectual formalized visual reality. The titles, even though they are from different independent studios, portray a kind of mixed grill turned out from one creative pot.



Nsikak Essien *Oppressor*



Nsikak Essien *Armageddon*



Obiora Udechukwu *The General is Up*



Obiora Anidi *The Problem is Internal*

Again, in *Artesmundi*³, nine artists reflected on the environment as it affects man and then created some thought provoking work that

call for action. They re-presented nature in another context that induces the audience to ask questions regarding their assumptions about the society. Abdoulaye Konate for example, through his textile art in the show, raised the disturbing issue of –environmental effects of deforestation and the devastation drought brings (Artesmundi³, 2008:3). In their own part, Mathew Dalziel and Louise Scullion collaboratively produced work that opens the viewers’ eyes to their environment from an alternative point of view where they can –establish a new relationship with it. A look at one of their exhibits, *More Than Us*, which is an enhanced expansive natural rock formation of sea coast, momentarily persuades the viewer to see aspects of natural world adorned with the beauty of plants and sea. It goes beyond presenting and concretizing the reality to exploring the complexities of nature like all other exhibits in the show, in order to provide an alternative.



Dalziel and Scullion *Source*



Dalziel and Scullion *More Than Us*



Abdoulaye Konate *Symphonie bleue*



Abdoulaye Konate *Homage aux Chasseurs du Mandé*

The artist's impact is felt not only through art exhibitions. Magazines and national dailies are other channels through which he fights the negative trends in the society. This organ proves so effective that sometimes one wonders if it were not the only potent means through which the artist's critical mind gets in touch with the majority of the people. Even those who deride or fear art come face to face with its explosive functionalism in cartoons. A vivid example, for instance, of the directness and clarity of cartoon in dealing with issues is portrayed in the Tell Magazine of 30th November, 1998. The Graffiti column of this Nigeria's independent weekly pointed out in a pictorial form that the ex-minister of finance in the expired military administration had chosen to cling stubbornly to power and money, and had refused to jump down from a cracked wall even when his position was terribly endangered, (Oyekusibe, 1998). And because cartoon stimulates, plenty of the readers of newspapers and magazines always flip quickly through the pages of the papers to the cartoon page first before relaxing to peruse the remaining pages.

So, the artist preaches against all types of social vices via his works in the same way he strives to amplify what he believes are the ideals of a better society. These he does when he wields his art as an instrument of propaganda, that is, an art which has become an attendant to religion, a handmaid of morality or social ideology, (Read, MCMLXVII). This goes to say that the artist often has a purpose far beyond mere entertainment. The pleasure he gives through his art helps to get people attuned to the message, the idea he passes across.

Hurdles against Meaningful Art Professionalism:

The level and nature of patronage the artist enjoys in any society somehow influences the style and nature of art flourishing there. It may also be contended, perhaps erroneously, that it determines the extent the artist is accepted in the community. For non-appreciation or collection of his works implies rejection. But then one may wonder if the non-appreciation goes in any way to affect the intrinsic or extrinsic values of his works as art objects. An art work does not lose its value because the viewer could not frankly understand or appreciate it. I think what is just needed to bring the viewer into agreement with the work is enlightenment or orientation.

And so, the artist depends on his works for a living. He relies on his patrons-individuals, corporate bodies and the government – who either sponsor or collect his works. But unfortunately patronage particularly in developing countries leaves much to be desired as the

trend spells doom for art professionalism. It has come very close to a point where quack art collectors or patrons have outrageously destroyed the status quo and assumed the role of the artist while the artist himself, in a bid for survival, takes solace in working as artisan and studio assistant.

In other words, some artists, for the fear of losing their patrons, or for the frightful prospect of turning out works without selling them, allow their minds to be enslaved by the -money bag collectors who dictate the course of art. Some time ago, for instance, one artist returned from an art show in Lagos and dejectedly set to work on five of the paintings he had exhibited but could not sell. When asked why he was reworking the paintings, he lamented that as many as six people wanted to collect the works but complained that they had military friends who may not like to encounter paintings preaching against military rule. Upon that the painter went ahead and transformed the works — one, a bishop with a scepter; another, a traditional ruler; and the rest, Muslims. Sure, the works have now conformed to the taste of the so-called collectors, collectors who are only interested in forms and not in meaning or content of art works.

Such attitudes according to Ikwuemesi (1997) induce lots of people to believing that art practice is nothing else but a survivalist enterprise where an artist sacrifices anything in an attempt to making himself financially comfortable. He begs for commissions, dances to the dictates of his prospective patrons, and hawks his works from house to house. In his view, these travesty the very essence of art, positioning it as creativity motivated by hunger and want which in turn can ruin an entire tradition.

It is not however surprising that the artist, particularly in developing countries, only enjoys very little encouragement from the government. He receives no grants from the government. Besides, the government seldom spends any portion of its resources in collecting contemporary works of art. It even imposes some stiff tariff on art materials so much so that it now costs the artist a fortune to produce a work. Almost all the few enabling factors for the propagation and development of art are the sole handwork of the artist himself.

The low level of patronage as the artist enjoys from the government is not necessarily as a result of any prevailing economic retrogression. To my mind, it is rather because it feels, as observed earlier, the contemporary artist has no other preoccupation than toiling all day creating art forms that criticise or expose its lapses. Or how could it be convincingly explained that the government strives to

finance and develop all the human endeavours including sports and then, on the other hand, abandon art and its sustenance at the mercy of the artist and a few voluntary charitable individuals and organizations?

Equally regrettable is the fact that many artists fall short in their professional commitment. They tread the course of frivolity in art which points to neither functional nor understandable concept. They seem to be insensitive to the social realities of their immediate surroundings as they more or less preach nothing but aestheticism. Hence, their explorations in art become geared towards formalistic excellence only. The relevance of their works is not seen as a whole because the artists dissevered the concept of art and dwell just on a fragment.

It is therefore in the light of the problems of art patronage and functionalism generally identified above that one could understand why art professionalism is dwindling. The more the artist is inundated with those constraints the less meaningful and relevant his art becomes.

Conclusion:

As already discussed, art in its very essence, as amusement, does not convey a complete meaning until it communicates to, and influences, man. The entertainment that derives from art is principally an impulsive trait, which, in a way, influences man psychologically. The artist is quite conscious of this. He is aware that his function does not end at thrilling people but at making an understandable and intelligible assertion. In other words, his art transcends entertainment and becomes an instrument with which he can persuade or spur on his spectators: that is, an instrument for propaganda. It is also his only weapon – a weapon with which he fights against deprivation, cheating, corruption, and other forces of economic depression.

But the situation of the contemporary artist especially in the developing society is quite pathetic. He is only accepted as long as he faithfully follows the dictates of the counterfeit art collectors and patrons at whose mercy he subsists. Any attempt he makes to find himself productively functional and professional relevant is often frustrated by the same collectors and patrons who subject him to starvation. He even suffers unthinkable neglect from the government which does very little to encourage him. Faced with these constraints, the modern artist, in a bid to survive, sometimes strays from the corridors of art professionalism to vain art practice devoid of creative discipline.

However, the society could benefit more from the special endowment of the artist if his rightful place in the society is restored and accorded some respect. And for this to be, the public should be made conscious of the values of art; there should be public enlightenment programmes directed towards art appreciation. Moreover, like his counterparts in other professions, the artist should be encouraged morally and financially. It is only when he works under a favourable condition that he could produce works richly charged with meanings – works that will survive posterity.

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