

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Diaspora and Africa's Educational Transformation: Moyo Okediji's Visual Arts Exploits

AJAYI Adewale Olusegun, PhD¹, ONYEAGORO Chima Johnson¹, AKPRARA Amos Osakor, PhD²

¹Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo, Nigeria.

²Department of Fine Arts and Industrial Design, Delta State University of Science and Technology, Ozoro, Delta State, Nigeria.

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Corresponding Author: AJAYI Adewale Olusegun, Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo, Nigeria.

Abstract

As far back as in the late 19th Century, African Art became popular in Europe and America due to the fact that they were gifted out or stolen as historical fact has it, with the well-known examples of the looted Benin Artifacts. There are however, new waves of globalization of African Art going on through the exploits of many African artists in the Diaspora for more than two decades. Notable among them are artists of Nigerian origin such as Dele Jegede, Obiora Udechukwu, Moyo Okediji, Ray Soko and Yisa Akinbolaji to mention but a few. While each of these artists is renowned for certain peculiarities of their works. This paper focuses on the artistic exploits of Moyo Okediji for a number of reasons, especially because he is known to have derived his artistic ideas from Yoruba cultural idioms. In pursuance of his art practices, he co-founded the "Ona Group" (an art movement known for adaptation of Yoruba traditional motifs and icons in their artworks) at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. It later gained wider acceptance by the students and lecturers in the department who apply them in their works. This paper elucidates how Moyo Okediji carried the Yoruba "Onaism" cultural concept into the global art space through his art practices and teachings at the University of Texas, Austin, USA, as well as his continued influences on the art department of the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.

Keywords: Diaspora, Yoruba Culture, Traditional Motifs, Artistic Exploits, Visual Adaptation.

1. Introduction

As simply stated by Houghton (2003), Harper (2006), Encyclopedia (2007) and many others, the word "Diaspora" is commonly taken to mean the dispersion of an originally homogenous people originally belonging to or associated by some common tie or occupation living outside their traditional homelands. The word "Diaspora" is derived from a Greek verb "speiro" (to show) together with the Greek preposition "dia" (over). Diaspora can be seen as a cultural connection that is maintained by a set of people who have been dispersed or who have migrated around the world. Nworah (2005) observes that Rena Singer of

the American Christian Science Monitor estimates that 15 million Nigerians live abroad and in neighboring countries across the African Continent, Britain, United States of America, other European Countries and Asian countries. Amongst them are the Diaspora Nigerian visual artists that are professionals who in their various host countries have had tremendous influences on the social, political, educational and economic development of Nigeria. This view seems to confirm what Safran (1991) wrote in a paper titled "Diaspora in Modern Society" that; "they believe they should collectively be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity"

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Clifford (1994) quoting Khachis Totolian states that Diaspora are the exemplary communities of the transnational movement which is used to describe Jewish and Greek diaspora which now shares meanings with words like immigrants, refugee, expatriate, ethnic community and exile community. However, in as much as Totolian tried to situate "Diaspora" as a concept in its context, he did not actually describe what Diaspora is in its totality. Clifford went to opine that Diaspora is different from just travelling but and that it involves dwelling, maintaining communities, having collective homes away from homes. In this sense, it is different from exile as there is frequent individual focus. He concludes that the use of the word "diaspora" is just a signifier of a political struggle to explain the local as distinctive community and not as Totolian sees it as simply trans-nationality and movement. In this sense, it can be said that artists such as Moyo Okediji, Dele Jegede, and Victor Ehikamenor among others all have individual focus and live in Europe and USA for more than two decades having direct influence on Nigeria educational system and art practice through their works.

Since Moyo Okediji has had much of his art practices gleaned from his experiences in the teaching profession, it is worth to state that education is an organized and sustained instruction designed to communicate a combination of knowledge, skills and understanding valuable(s) for all activities of life. Daniel et al (2009) posits that every education teaches a philosophy of life, if not explicitly, then by suggestion or implication. by atmosphere, A transformative education is one in which the student is incrementally invited to engage life, to reflect upon it and then, to be of service to our world. Moyo Okediji's influence on his Nigerian students and staff of the academic institutions communicate a combination of knowledge, skills and natural synthesis where culture meets with academics.

2. Globalization of African Art

Any African art and art practice that has found its way into another country can be described as being under cultural globalization as it deals with ideas, values and social relations. James (2006) posits that globalization is about the transmission of ideas, meanings and values around the world in such a way as to extend and intensify social relations. Steger et al (2010), observes that globalization involves the formation of shared norms and knowledge with which people associate their individual and collective cultural

identities. This brings increasing interconnectedness among different populations and cultures. It is in this sense that this paper holds the view that globalization is also about the many African art works that found their ways into Europe and America which can be found in their Museums and art Galleries. This has had a great deal of influence on the art practice in Europe and America as it changed the face of their art from strict formalism as exemplified in Cubism. At the moment, contemporary artists in Nigeria have keyed into globalizing their art practice with their works being displayed in both local and international exhibitions across the globe. Over the years, such efforts have given rise to the globalization of African artworks. The effects of the concept of globalization are being intensified through the artworks of many Nigerian born Diaspora. In view of this, Ademola (1996) posits, it is "not only in Africa that artists are conscious of their identity" Moyo Okediji is one of the Diaspora artists who have been sharing his cultural identity of the Yoruba people from his base in America to other parts of the world. By so doing he and other artists in Diaspora have remained conscious of their African root.

3. Moyo Okediji's Artistic Globalization Gaits

A focus on Moyo Okediji would present him to be one of the very notable artists in the Diaspora. It is worthy to know that Moyo Okediji was born in Lagos in 1956. His family hails from Oyo town, in Oyo State, Nigeria. His parents moved to Ile-Ife when Okediji was young, and he spent most of his adolescent years in the ancient town. Currently, Okediji is a renowned Professor of Visual Arts at the University of Colorado, Denver, U.S.A. where he teaches as an art historian, painter and curator. He studied Fine Arts at the University of Ife, specializing in painting and thereafter, he worked as a graduate assistant in the Faculty of Arts at the University before proceeding to the University of Benin, where he did an MFA in African Art Criticism, Poetry, and Painting. While in Benin, he was influenced by the techniques of Guyanese painter Doris Rodgers who included decorative elements of African origin in her works. He is also a scholar of art history from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where he received a PhD in African Arts and Diaspora Visual Cultures. He also experienced apprenticeship with several indigenous African artists working in both sacred and secular mediums including mat weaving, textile designs, terra cotta, shrine painting, and sculpture.

After teaching for several years at the Department of Fine Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University Ile Ife Nigeria, he sought for greener pastures in the United States where he has remained for more than two decades. While at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife, he taught and practiced art borrowing from Yoruba tradition. His art practices has contributed to the growth and development of modern art in Nigeria as also similar to that of the formal and informal ideological art movements such as Zaria art school, Nsukka art school, Yaba art school, Auchi art school, the Osogbo school and so on. It is worth knowing that these art schools find their roots in the stylistic triad of Onabolu School, the Expatriate School of K.C Murray and the Zaria art School. Oloidi (2006) observes that "these schools including *Ona*, as we have them today, grew out of the creative tree planted by the triumvirate mentioned above".

As an *Ona* artist, Okediji is known to be very experimental, well researched and an individual who is vibrant in aesthetics. He has succeeded in exporting *Ona* as an art movement and ideology beyond cultural boundaries of the Yoruba people. Okediji (2002) posit that *Ona* and *Uli* take similar political aesthetic positions based on the validation and exploration of indigenous African forms. Ngumah (2006) observes that *ona* as a group started with just five members namely; Moyo Okediji, Kunle Filani, Bolaji Campbell, Tola Wewe and Tunde Nasiru and the membership later increased to eleven in number. He pointed out that *Ona* artists are creatively vocal in both visual and verbal terms. Like the *Uli* artists, *Ona* artists also appear to conform to the post colonial artistic patterns that can be found in *Uli* as well as in several other similar artistic groups in Africa and in the Diaspora, such as *Africobras*. *Ona* as a movement sought to reference Yoruba adages, proverbs, and visual concepts in their art works adjusting to modern Nigerian realities of the twentieth century. Just as Ademols's posits, artistic works at any time or place is always influenced by the physical and socio-cultural factors in his immediate environment. "Onaism" is therefore a method of executing art works borrowed from Yoruba acronym "Ona" which in the Yoruba cosmos can be found in the intricate linear designs on wood, cloth, clay, body board, calabash and other materials.

Okediji (2002) describes the *Ona* movement artists that are making conscious efforts through their works to develop the Yoruba concept of art and aesthetics in contemporary Nigeria by adapting the signs, symbols

and motifs as seen on pottery, textiles, wood sculpture and, wall of shrines. Adepegba (2008) claims that *Onaism* became a formal art movement on the 20th of February 1989 at the Ife art school. It thrives and is still thriving on the Yoruba cultural idiom. The founders, Moyo Okediji, Kunle Filani, Tola Wewe, Bolaji Campbell and Tunde Nasiru made serious efforts to project the Yoruba concept of art called *Onaism* in contemporary Nigerian art. According to Okediji (1999), linking the practice of visual art on any ethnic tradition is very important as it is a link to the past, the ladder to the future and the stem from which all the beautiful petals of Nigerian art flourish today. Nigeria art exist because it shows first in the ethnic culture of the people. This view aligns with Egonwa (1991) assertion that, in order to understand Africa's idea of art, one has to "search and grasp the intellectual construct created by the Africans for assessing the effective response to visual forms that arenative to the Africans" Nigeria art exist because it shows first in the ethnic culture of the people. These points of views are important because the students of Ife school have opportunity of translating their visual realities in and through the *Ona* style which is the lens of the Yoruba culture. Individualism of the artist is still being encouraged as revealed in the successive "Best of Ife" art exhibitions. In these exhibitions one could see the influence of Moyo Okediji's impact in the artists' works signifying the Yoruba culture as an underlining principle.

Okediji relocated to the United States in 1992. He served as the curator of African and Oceanic arts at the Denver Art Museum. He also taught at various colleges in the United States, including Wellesley College, University of Wisconsin, Madison, and the University of Colorado at Denver, among others. He has also exhibited at various places including the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, and the Corcoran Center, London. Back home in Nigeria, he also exhibited at the National Museum, Onikan, Lagos. He is the author of many books and exhibition catalogues such as the African Renaissance, Old Forms, New Images in Nigerian Art, The Shattered Gourd and, Yoruba Forms in Twentieth Century American Art. (Moyo Okediji, 2024)

4. Moyo Okediji's Artworks

Moyo Okediji as a prolific painter has produced several works which represents his unique creative Yoruba artistic style of creation both in materiality and concept. His works are broadly discussed in terms of

the use of colours, signs, motifs and symbols. Iriwieri (2010) posits that Moyo Okediji creates his works through the use of very sensitive, intricate lines and motifs that appears like musical notes. He further states that Okediji has always love making circular frames and as a pioneer of the *oritsa* shrine painters, he has been well tested. For instance, "Aboruboye" is a work produced using soil pigment. It depicts the delicate adaptation of the traditional motifs that symbolizes the rich cultural heritage of the Yoruba tribe. This experimentation with the use of the medium is a further attempt at improvisation with unconventional materials that were never had been imagined while contemplation the processes of creating the artwork. Although the entire canvas is surfeited with traditional motifs that are both decorative and symbolic, the work is unique in its own right. *Circlescope* that is a deviation from the formalized patterns of producing most of the two-dimensional art is also a case of unique and customization of art work production. Despite the crowded textures that appear symbolic, one can easily observe the subject matter of the art work. These works with experimentation of soil colours schemes are heuristically restricted to shades of brown, grey,

light blue, black, white and ocher having many tonal graduations. This approach in creativity was aimed at promoting the Yoruba cultural values. This is why the use of traditional Yoruba imagery and material in the works resulted into an endless flow of linearity that ran at random and in a rhythmic manner. Perhaps, Okediji applied these visual elements in such manners so as to help sensitize the eyes of the spectator or viewers of to perceive some of the reasons behind his experiments. (Iriwieri, 2010)

5. Moyo Okediji's Early Works in Diaspora

"The Dutchman" (fig 1) was painted after Okediji has spent time and gained greater insight into the daily realities of African American life in the United States. He encountered first-hand, how artists confronted that reality in their work. It was inspired, in part, by African American poet Robert Hayden's poem about the Atlantic slave trade titled; "Middle Passage." This painting may signify Okediji's own psychic reconnection to his long lost ancestors strewn across the Atlantic and to those who survived in the "NewWorld".



Figure 1. Title: *The Dutchman*, Artist: Moyo Okediji, Medium: Acrylic on canvas, Size: 48 x 72 inches, Year: 2002, Photo: David Paul Morris for the Chronicle.

6. The Universe of Moyo Okediji: Rand Africa series

The period reflects mainly cyclic orientation (fig.2 and 3) which was influenced by Okediji's conceptual thoughts of creation of the universe. He abandoned the rectangular orientation of painting support which he felt restricted one to believing that the world is rectangular in shape. Nzegwu, (2000) opines that

His selection of a circle as the appropriate shape of creation is intimately connected to the pre-figurement of the moon and sun in his psychic imagination, and in Yorùbá folkloric tradition. Under awakened consciousness, the circle becomes a relevant medium

for presenting planetary events since the Yorùbá conceptual scheme takes the spherical rotund form of the calabash as the shape of the world. Opting for circular canvases of cloth, jute or raffia to create this optical effect, he confronted class biases with his unconventional style of painting. This bias was further amplified when he irreverently tacked his paintings onto the ubiquitous round flat basket trays used by tomato and pepper sellers for hawking their wares.

Moyo Okediji got the idea of his earth colour palettes of dark indigos, hues of burnt umber and sienna with light shades of ocher from the stylistic and shrine iconography of the traditional women muralists.



Figure 2. Artist: Moyo Okediji, Yoruba Genesis I, Source: Artist



Figure 3. Artist: Moyo Okediji, Yoruba Genesis II, Source: Artist

7. Moyo Okediji's Drawings

“Spiritual Purge” (2023) (fig 4) is a linear eloquence by Moyo Okediji; rendered in acrylic and ink on wood in the year. This is a small-scale composition of a young woman, shown in full figure against a coloured backdrop. Moyo explored elemental strokes to create forms, shapes and textures in the work. Every line he used convey a unique emotion and concepts to enrich the visual language of the composition. His linear exploration evoke a sense of calmness and creation of fine details. These lines evoke sense of sensuality,

grace and fluidity in the drawing. Moyo also explored these to create boundaries and distinguish elements from their surroundings, giving the subject clarity and a sense of form. He also made use of positive and negative space to create emphasis in the drawing. Much more, the artist introduced geometric and organic shapes in the artwork to add substance and interest to the work. The work “Spiritual Purge” is hinged on traditional religion of spiritual cleansing in the community.



Figure 4. Artist: Moyo Okediji, Title: *Spiritual Purge*, Medium: Acrylic and ink on wood, Year: 2023, Source: Artist

“See Who’s Getting Her Hair Done” (2023) (fig. 5) is another linear diction by Moyo Okediji executed in acrylic and ink on canvas in the year 2023. The subject of the artwork is depicted strapping an infant on her back with a fabric securely tied against her body as she stood in front of a standing mirror. Besides, she clasp in her hands an object as her image is partially reflected in the mirror before her. The fundamental

elements he explored in this artwork that enrich its visual language are the multiplicity of lines. He also employed curve lines to show grace, softness and fluidity. Like he did in “Spiritual Purge”, he employed positive and negative space including shape and emphasis. This composition attempts to reveal how women sees their hair as a reflection of their identity as it is both personal and public.



Figure 5. Artist: Moyo Okediji, Title: See Who's Getting Her Hair Dons, Medium: Acrylic and ink on wood, Year: 2023, Source: Artist

8. Moyo Okediji's Tera Cota Pieces

One of his works finished in tera cota, “Untitled” (fig 6) was produced in fired clay in fragments and later assembled in-situ, shows two figures of a Yoruba couple. Exploring terracotta charts on wood panels in

addition to more conventional media were adopted to produce powerful social and political critique. The art piece “untitled” presents a couple lost in thought with their pet trying to get the attention of the man.

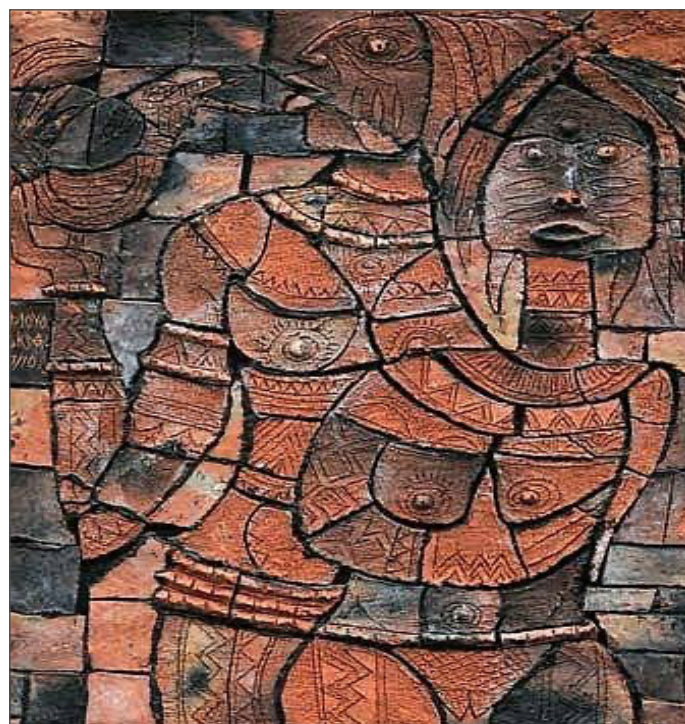


Figure 6. Untitled, Artist: Moyo Okediji, Medium: Terra Cotta, Year: 2010, Source: Artist



Figure 7. Moyo Okediji - Creative process of soil on canvas painting

9. Collaboration Series

The photographs in fig.8 and 9 shows Moyo creating his massive works using earthen-multi coloured sand

on canvas. His students are seen serving as studio assistants and as well collaborates with him to produce the artworks.



Figure 8. Moyo Okediji's creative process with students



Figure 9. Moyo Okediji's creative process with students

10. Moyo Okediji's Influence on Two *Ona* Artists

Moyo Okediji started his career in Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife and has taught many students, some of who have also become lecturers in the department

while others are practicing as full time studio artists. His influences on many artists that apply the *Onaism* concept in creating artworks are deeply revealing. Works of two outstanding and resourceful *Onaism* artists; Agbolade Omidiran and Stephen Folaranmi are selected for review.



Figure 10. Title: *Market scene*, Artist: *Gbolade Omidiran*, Medium: *Mixed Media*, Source: *Artist*



Figure 11. Title: *African Painting*, Artist: *Gbolade Omidiran*, Medium: *Mixed Media*, Source: *Artist*

Agbolade Omidiran is one of the *Ona* artists who drew inspirations from Moyo Okediji's works. One of his artworks titled "The Market Scene" shown in fig.10 is a figurative expressionist painting. The theme focuses mainly on women who are involved in buying and selling activities. In this artwork, bold lines in parallel formations as are seen in nature were freely used in a manner that is illustrative and relates with that of body decorations.

Another work by Agbolade titled "African Painting" (fig 11) is an illustration of masks of different shapes and sizes overlapping one another in a crowded form. The artist uses different sizes of triangles, disks, oval, rectangles, squares and cylinders in the cubists' expressionism. It is also lained with ornamental lines which are known as *Ona* in Yoruba. This form of rendition is typical of Okediji styles of artistic portrayal of some Yoruba cultural cosmology.



Figure 12. Title: *We-All-I-Gathered*, Artist: Stephen Folaranmi, Medium: Oil/Tempera on Canvas, Year: 1998, Source: Artist



Figure 13. Title: *Women and Pots*, Artist: Stephen Folaranmi, Medium: Oil on Canvas, Year: Unknown, Source: Artist

Another versatile and resourceful artist who seems to have also heavily appropriated Okediji's style of artistic rendition using the *Onaism* concept is Stephen Folaranmi. A look at two of his paintings in fig.12 and 13 titled, "We-All-I-Gathered" and "Women and Pots" shows how he skillfully appropriated Okediji's materiality and techniques. The paintings reveals a point where culture meets academics in the use of lines and symbols. The creative concepts of *Onaism* seems to reflect those of *Uli* and *Nsibidi* which are some of Nigeria's rich cultural identity. Stephen Folaranmi painting, "Women and Pots" was executed in Oil/Tempera on Canvas. Its visual content portrays the rich colourful images of women activities full of African cultural symbols and identity in geometric forms supporting the activities of women folks.

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