

Nigeria Magazine in The Critical Discourse of Modern and Contemporary Art in Nigeria,
1946 – 1976

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Abstract

This article examines the role of the influential government periodical *Nigeria Magazine* in the development of modern and contemporary art in Nigeria through the agency of art criticism. Employing historical analysis, the scope chosen covers the developmental periods of early art modernism in Nigeria as a crucial period during which art writers and commentators shaped the direction of artistic development through critical discourses. Findings show that the writings of British colonial officials dominated the period from the mid-1940s up to the post-independence era and focused essentially on the manner by which the new artists were negotiating their ‘traditional’ creative sources with ‘foreign’ or ‘contemporary’ ones. In the early 1960s, contemporary artists themselves joined in the discourse, becoming much more sensitive to the modes of artistic production and presentation by their peers, as well as to their peers’ professional orientation and development. This critical engagement with the works of fellow artists by the Nigerian modern and contemporary artists of the 1960s and early 1970s gave rise to the phenomenon of artist-critics in contemporary Nigerian art.

Introduction

Nigeria Magazine played an outstanding role in the historical and critical discourse of early modern art in Nigeria, especially beginning from 1946. This date is very significant because it was the year in which what appears to be the first article on Nigeria’s proto-modern art practice appeared in the magazine. The magazine continued to function as a platform for the historical and critical engagement with modern and contemporary art in Nigeria from the 1940s through the 1960s (when critical reviews of art exhibitions reached its peak) to the mid-1970s when such writings almost disappeared.

The *Nigeria Magazine* has been described as “a household name among artists and scholars”¹ in Nigeria. According to Krydz Ikwuemesi, “it predated Ulli Beier’s *Black Orpheus*, and Rajat Neogy’s *Transition* as well as other well-known African publications like *The Classic* and *Drum* of South Africa, Ghana’s *Okyeama*, or even Alioune Diop’s Parisian cultural review, *Presence Africaine*.”² Edited at first by Mr. E.R. Swanston, *Nigeria Magazine* was initially published as the *Bulletin of Educational Matters* in February, 1927. It was at that time conceived as a journal intended for those in the teaching world and was therefore “designed to give teachers practical assistance in their work and notes on various subjects in their curriculum.”³ It became known as *The Nigerian Teacher* in 1933 (see Fig.1) when it was conceived as a journal intended for “those in the teaching world”. By its 7th issue in 1936, however, an editorial announced

that “for some time past we have felt that the title does not fully describe the scope of the journal; we endeavour to print articles that are of interest and value to teachers, but also to all educated men and women”⁴. Contributors included department officials, missionaries, chiefs, village heads, farmers, teachers and others. The magazine was at that time sold by bookshops and stores without taking commission, and “all writers, artists and photographers (gave) their services free”⁵. By its 9th issue in 1937, *The Nigerian Teacher* had changed its name to *Nigeria* and was sub-titled “a magazine for everyone interested in the progress of the country”⁶ and later “a quarterly magazine of general interest” (see Fig.2). It was compiled quarterly in January, April, July and October by the Education Department in collaboration with private individuals and all departments of Government⁷. By 1955, its name was again modified to *Nigeria Magazine*. It’s initial sub-title: “a quarterly publication for everyone interested in the country and its people” later disappeared (see Fig.3).

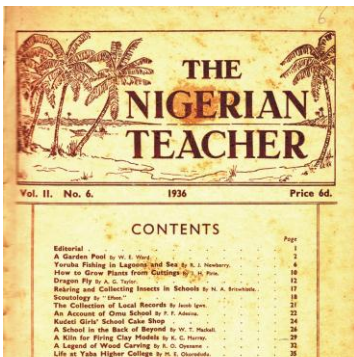


Fig1: Cover of *The Nigerian Teacher*, 1936

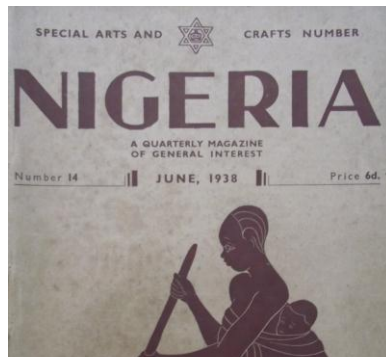
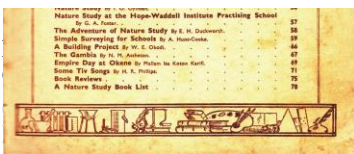


Fig1: Cover of a special Arts and Crafts Issue of *Nigeria*, 1936



Fig.3: Cover of *Nigeria Magazine*, 1963



field reports and discourses on the traditional art of Nigeria. During this period, there was hardly any discourse on the early modern artists and their practice, but the magazine often used plates of their works to spice up its pages. By its 7th issue of June 1939, the editor, in a column titled “Nigerian Artists”⁸, compiled a first list of Nigerian artists whose works had previously been used to illustrate the magazine. They include H.I. Erhabor, Uthman Ibrahim and J.D. Akeredolu (then Carving Master at Owo Government School, Owo). In 1946, the first article on the practice of proto-modern art in Nigeria appeared⁹. By early 1960s, review columns had been introduced in the magazine and served as a vigorous platform for the intellectualization of the modern era of Nigerian art through critical reviews and essays. This paper relies on a general overview of key essays from 1946 to 1976, as well as a critical survey of important reviews during this period, to attempt an appreciation of *Nigeria Magazine’s* role in the intellectualization of early modern and contemporary art in Nigeria.

Art Discourses in the *Nigeria Magazine*: A Review

For almost two decades, from Leon Underwood's article "Nigerian Art"¹⁰ (1946), to Vincent F. Butler's "Cement Funeral Sculpture in Eastern Nigeria"¹¹ (1963), expatriates exclusively wrote on the emerging proto-modern and modern visual arts of Nigeria. It was only later in 1963 that the tradition was broken by Dapo Onabolu's biographical study on Aina Onabolu¹² and Cyprian Ekwensi's review of Okpu Eze's exhibition in an article titled "One Step Beyond."¹³ Nigerian artists soon joined the band of art critics and commentators on the magazine's platform, beginning with Okpu Eze's review of three exhibitions held at *Nigeria Magazine's* Exhibition Centre in Marina Lagos. These exhibitions were those by Eve de Negri (March 1965), Riccardo Micheletti (April 1965)¹⁴ and Yusuf Grillo (April 28 to May 8, 1965).¹⁵ After Okpu Eze, other artists who contributed voices to the *Nigeria Magazine's* platform included Dele Jegede, Shina Yussuff, Uche Okeke, P.S.C. Igboanugo and Babatunde Lawal.

Before the series of exhibition reviews of the 1960s, Leon Underwood wrote¹⁶ on an exhibition of drawings by pupils of various schools held at the British Council Reading Room in Lagos in 1946. He observed the lack of local content in the works and commented on "the value that young West African artists can derive from a study of the works of their forefathers."¹⁷ Four years later, under the same title "Nigerian Art,"¹⁸ J.A. Danford (Regional Director, W.P., The British Council) employed ample illustrations drawn from the works shown at the Nigerian Art Exhibition of 1948 (under the auspices of the British Council) to examine the works of J.O. Ugoji, G. Okolo, Adeyemi Adenuga, Mohammed Alkali, Sampson Joseph, E. Okaybulu, M.I. Osagie, Akinola Lasekan, and a host of others. Danford observed the search for a new identity by the artists, pointing out two major categories of artists - those interested in appropriating traditional art forms without setting "about it in the best way" and those who "turn their back to tradition and respect European art for its photographic qualities".¹⁹ Danford considered this development a problem and offered the following advice:

There should be a gradual blending of the African and European schools, the artist taking the best both have to offer and build out of it a new school of Nigerian Art. This cannot be achieved overnight or even in the matter of a few years as the history of world art shows plainly. It is achieved only by the combined efforts of generations of artists working for an ideal²⁰

Danford's recommendation as early as 1948 appears to have contributed an important thought to the "Natural Synthesis" theory of members of the famous Zaria Art Society which was formed much later in 1958. The Society was composed of art students of the then Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology (now Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria) who rejected the Europeanised content of their curriculum and opted for a blend of the best of indigenous art practices with the best from 'outside'. The creative orientation of the members of the Society (Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Simon Okeke, and others) eventually created what can be regarded as a truly modern era in Nigerian art some years after the members had graduated from Zaria in the early 1960s.

Dennis Duerden's "Is There a Nigerian Style of Painting?"²¹ is a survey of "school-boy paintings in the middle Belt"²² of Nigeria, including the early works of Jimoh Akolo and Ajai Jegede. He observed the gradual emergence of contemporary works with local content, arguing strongly that:

There is to be found in the paintings ... a distinctive Nigerian style which should be strongly encouraged and protected from the influence of European illustration. This is particularly the responsibility of festival judges and art teachers²³.

By 1953 also, D.W.M. (probably a pen name) examined the sculptures of Felix Idubor in an article titled "A New Carver."²⁴ He traced Idubor's sources of inspiration, techniques, style and subject matter. Using five images of Idubor's works, printed in black-and-white, the writer set a new standard for critical discourses on Nigerian proto-modern art and its artists in the fashion of Dennis Duerden's article on "Nigeria's Art"²⁵ published in *Nigeria Magazine's* Special Issue of 1960. It would appear, however, that the Independence Exhibition of 1960 remains an important marker of art modernism in Nigeria.

The Independence Exhibition spot-lighted a crop of young Nigerian artists who appeared to have fully resolved the search for an identity rooted in a synthesis of local and foreign creative legacies and cultural resources. In his review of the exhibition, Ulli Beier referred to the young Nigerian artists from Zaria as "truly modern"²⁶. After Beier's article of 1961, there followed series of reviews of art exhibitions in the *Nigeria Magazine*, especially those held in the magazine's Exhibition Centre in Marina, Lagos. These include those on Michael Crowder's photographs, Festus Idehen's sculptures, Bruce Onobrakpeya's prints and paintings, as well as Demas Nwoko and Uche Okeke's paintings.²⁷ In 1962, Michael Crowder reviewed the exhibition by Jimoh Akolo,²⁸ followed by reviews on the exhibitions by Clifford Frith and Ben Enwonwu.²⁹ Others include Cyprian Ekwensi's writing on the works of Okpu Eze³⁰, Tunde Lawal on Colette Omogbai³¹ and a review of an exhibition marking the inauguration of the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA) in 1964³².

In 1965, key essays include Okpu Eze's review of the art of Eve de Negri, Riccardo Michelletti³³ and Yusuf Grillo³⁴, as well as Ulli Beier's report on "Experimental Art School" in Oshogbo in which he continued his argument in favour of what he called "short cut" to art³⁵ engendered by informal creative training of some youths in Oshogbo. The same year also, Ajala reported on "Museum of Popular Art in Osogbo"³⁶ in which he briefly discussed the works of popular artists from Kano, Benin, Ikot-Ekpene, Oshogbo, Owerri and Onitsha in the museum belonging to the Mbari Mbayo Club which was at the time housed in the palace of the Ataoja of Oshogbo. Following this was a review of Nigeria's entries for the Commonwealth Festival in 1965 held at the Royal Festival Hall in London³⁷.

By 1966 other discourses revolved around Demas Nwoko's experiment in terracotta³⁸, Nupe wood carving³⁹ and on the "High Price of Nigerian Art"⁴⁰. In 1968 Jean Kennedy reviewed, in terms of style and technique, the exhibition of, according to him, two "well-known Oshogbo artists" (Asiru Olatunde and Jimoh Buraimoh) at the German Cultural Institut⁴¹. But before then in 1967, Lawrence Allagoa reported on the relocation of the old Exhibition Centre from Marina, Lagos to the Ground Floor, Independence Building, "above which is the famous twenty-five-storey historic building facing the Tafawa Balewa (Race Course), Lagos."⁴² He also reviewed six exhibitions, sponsored by *Nigeria Magazine* that took place in the new Exhibition Centre between January and March 1966. These include exhibitions by Germy George, Onayemi Onabolu, Eve de Negri, Etso Ngu (Clara Ugboadagu) and Godfrey Aduku Okiki with

Ayo Ajayi⁴³. The Magazine's provision of not only an exhibition space but also a respectable platform for critical discourses of the exhibits is an important contribution to the development of contemporary art in Nigeria.

There was also, in 1967, an essay on the sculptures of Ben Osawe by Paula Ben Amos in which he examined Osawe's grappling with the problem of identity, particularly "since he (had) just returned from England where he spent ten important years of his life"⁴⁴. Other important reviews of the same year include that by Roy Dean on the exhibition by Oshogbo artists in London⁴⁵, followed by a critical commentary on art and culture policy by Sabu Law, entitled "Contemporary Works of Art Need a Home in Nigeria"⁴⁶.

In the 1970s there were also series of exhibition reviews by mainly visual artists themselves. These include Dele Jegede's "Student Art"⁴⁷, Shina Yussuff's "The Debut of Dele Jegede"⁴⁸, Uche Okeke's "Panorama of Nigerian Art"⁴⁹, P.S.C. Igboanugo's "Homage to Christopher Okigbo"⁵⁰, Babatunde Lawal's "The Mythical Realism of Bruce Onobrakpeya"⁵¹ and others. The remaining part of this paper is dedicated to an appraisal of selected exhibition reviews and essays that adequately illustrate *Nigeria Magazine's* role as a remarkable platform for critical discourses on the early modern and contemporary art practice in Nigeria.

***Nigeria Magazine* as Platform for Critical Discourses: An Analysis of Selected Essays**

Ulli Beier remained the dominant voice in the critical discourse of early modern and contemporary art in Nigeria, especially in the 1960s and early 1970s. Beier appears to be the first writer and critic to use the label "contemporary" in discussing the emergent modernist art in Nigeria. His article, "Contemporary Nigerian Art"⁵², review of an exhibition marking Nigeria's independence, published in 1961, discusses the professional achievements of key artists and the styles of majority of them in terms of their level of borrowing from tradition and from 'outside', as well as their individual appropriation of foreign media. The artists under reference include Demas Nwoko, Uche Okeke, Simon Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Yusuf Grillo, Simon Okeke, Jimoh Akolo, Osagie Osifo, Festus Idehen, Ben Enwonwu, Felix Idubor and others. According to Beier:

The first two artists to attain something of an international reputation were Ben Enwonwu and Felix Idubor. Ben Enwonwu was for a long time the only Nigerian artist known outside Nigeria. In a sense he was the first Nigerian to be considered a "contemporary" artist by the European public⁵³

For Beier, however:

The greatest surprise of the exhibition was a group of young painters who are still students at Zaria Technical College. The interesting and encouraging fact about these young men – Jimoh Akolo, Grillo, Onobrakpeya, Uche Okeke, Simon Okeke, Demas Nwoko is that their entire attitude to art is essentially modern⁵⁴.

Ulli Beier's most controversial discourses however appear to be his opinion on academically trained artists. For Beier, the experimental school method (as represented by the Oshogbo experiment in 1962 and 1963 by Denis Williams and 1964 by Georgina Betts) was a lot more creatively pure and authentic than formal art schools because, according to him, the latter "almost always means uninhibited, fresh vision". He argues that the artist "discovered" through experimental workshops "is saved the long, painful process of 'liberating' himself from the dead weight of visual experience and early art training".⁵⁵ This explains why Beier often gave attention to such artists as Idah, a wood carver, whose practice, according to the writer, was "able to survive the corrupting influence of the tourist market", since Idah "an old illiterate (Bini) wood carver" was trained "strictly in the traditional styles of wood carving... and (there is) really no outside influences on his work".⁵⁶

An article by the Nigerian novelist Cyprian Ekwensi, entitled "High Price of Nigerian Art", opened another chapter in the critical discourses of contemporary Nigerian art in the mid-1960s. Prompted by questions raised by readers of the two previous issues of *Nigeria Magazine* "about the high price of Nigerian art" after Erbabor Omokpae tagged his 8'x4' painting, entitled *Tears of God*, for 300 guineas. Ekwensi set out to elicit answers by interviewing Omokpae himself (who worked as a designer with an advertising agency), Okpu Eze (a Works Superintendent in the Ministry of Works) and, according to him, "the great Ben Enwonwu, father of modern Nigerian Art" (Art Adviser to the Federal Government)⁵⁷. The responses by these artists go beyond the issue of art prices to touch upon important issues relating to art training and professionalism. According to Ekwensi,

All the artists are agreed on the need to recognise Nigerian art on a National basis, on the importance of artistic appreciation among the ordinary people based on a re-education of the people and a new functional approach to art⁵⁸

By its 74th issue in 1962, *Nigeria Magazine* had introduced an "Art Gallery" section towards the back cover in which series of exhibitions, held at her Exhibition Centre, were reviewed, including exhibitions by Clifford Frith (one time Head of the Department of Fine Art, Nigerian Colleges of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria) and Ben Enwonwu. Frith's work is said to have "demonstrated a technical excellence that should serve as a model to some younger artists who tend to be impatient of technique in their painting", although "some of (Frith's) painting had "a tendency to cliché"⁵⁹. Enwonwu's large exhibition of paintings and sculptures were reported to have "dwarfed latter exhibitions by Erhabour Ernokpae, Lamidi Fakeye and Simon Okeke" at the Exhibition Centre".⁶⁰ Yet the reviewer noted that "in some of (Enwonwu's) paintings one feels his technical virtuosity has carried him away, and some of his more recent paintings lack the depth of feeling of his early pieces".⁶¹

On the work of the Zaria-trained painter, Jimoh Akolo, Michael Crowder notes him, as at 1962, as "the only northern Nigerian artist so far to have gained national recognition"⁶². He reviewed the life and work of Akolo, highlighting his achievements, including his honorary mention at the 6th Biennale at Sao Paolo, Cuba. On Akolo's solo exhibition of April 1962 at the Exhibition Centre, Crowder made the following critical comment:

The main criticism of his work is a rather slapdash attitude toward the materials he is using, notably patched up canvasses, badly applied paint, irregular shaped boards. Also everything is painted on a scale that makes it almost impossible for the private collector to buy for lack of space to accommodate it in the ordinary house⁶³.

Earlier in 1962, the *Nigeria Magazine* had established “Art Reviews” section which preceded the “Art Gallery”. But both sections were essentially cites for reviews of exhibitions held at the magazine’s Exhibition Centre in Marina, Lagos. The reviews under “Art Reviews” were sometimes anonymous. In issue 27 of 1962, one finds a review of series of exhibitions held in the previous six months at the Exhibition Centre. Among them is the exhibition of Bruce Onobrakpeya’s prints and paintings. Onobrakpeya’s paintings were criticised as having “a certain dowdiness and lack of distinction which (was) not the case with his well cut prints”. Onobrakpeya was therefore advised to “concentrate more in graphic art if he (was) really to make a name for himself”⁶⁴. It appears that Onobrakpeya’s concentration in printmaking thereafter is an evidence of the power of constructive criticism usually offered on the review pages of *Nigeria Magazine*. Shina Yussuff’s review of Dele Jegede’s exhibition in 1974 follows a similar critical path. Yussuff noted Jegede as “a budding genius in the field of contemporary art in Nigeria” who possessed “skilled craftsmanship, purity of colour and vibrant vision” but who was yet “to choose his specialty or style”⁶⁵.

Michael Lancaster also reviewed Demas Nwoko’s murals in the Tedder Hall at the University College Ibadan. He discussed the work as follows:

This is on a dark wall, and when I saw it half completed the simple shapes in greens and ochres glowed brilliantly from the shadows. Unfortunately the picture has been rather overworked with fussy detail and that boldness has been lost⁶⁶.

Cyprian Ekwensi’s review of Okpu Eze’s exhibition extended in some ways the debate over the usefulness or otherwise of formal training in art, noting that “it is a controversial point whether or not schools of art are helping or inhibiting the natural talents of Nigerian artists”⁶⁷. As for the practice of Okpu Eze, the writer observed that “Eze is a completely ‘free’ artist, not tied to any particular chains, free to make his own decisions”⁶⁸. It is, however, in Dele Jegede’s article titled “Student Art”⁶⁹ that Ulli Beier’s position on the subject came under direct critical scrutiny using the 1974 exhibition held in Lagos by art students of the Department of Fine Arts, Ahmadu Bello University. Jegede noted that:

The school of painting presented some subtle and accomplished painting, abstract and realistic, that would completely destroy the erroneous belief held in some quarters that art schools kill the genius in man⁷⁰.

The writer continued as follows:

Some may argue that art schools at best turn out stereotypes and at worst effect a demise of the creative mind, circumscribing the budding

artist's talent and perverting his artistic ebullience, some may even lead us by the nose to show us the series of success achieved by a particular group of artists who have never seen the inside of a University. It is noteworthy, however, that such misconceptions like these are destroyed by the sort of exposure art students are given⁷¹.

Jegede also criticised the method of teaching Graphics at that time in ABU, calling for an up-dated "teaching methods if graphic graduates are not to find themselves in embarrassing situations in Advertising Agencies keeping abreast of modern advertising gimmicks"⁷². Ceramics at ABU also attracted criticism in the fashion of the magazine's review pages. Jegede wrote:

I am disappointed with ceramics. This is a section where standard has refused to excel that of last year. They achieved a feat with their glazing. No more. We were shown the hum-drum conventional mugs, bowls and sets.⁷³

Jegede's critical gaze on ceramics was pioneering. For the first time, a writer gave attention to the emergent modern ceramic art of Nigeria. John King in 1962 had raised the issue of lack of historical and critical attention to the modern ceramic art of Nigeria. According to him:

probably because of a far too rigid, even precious differentiation between art and craft, there has been an enormous amount of scholarship devoted to the metal works and wood carvings of Nigeria while little, indeed almost none, has been turned towards contemporary pottery.⁷⁴

There are a number of other reviews and essays that provide critical perspectives on the works of Nigerian contemporary artists, issues of art dissemination⁷⁵ and policy matters on art and creativity.⁷⁶ However, the above narrative adequately sheds light on the nature of art discourses during the formative professional period of majority of Nigeria's current art masters, providing us an insight into the form and content of *Nigeria Magazine* as a platform for the promotion of critical culture in Nigeria between 1949 and 1976.

Conclusion

The foregoing discourse shows that for 30 years (1946 to 1976) the *Nigeria Magazine* provided a vital platform for a vigorous critical examination of the early modern, modern and contemporary art in Nigeria. Through the Magazine, which was well distributed nationally and internationally, the public was kept abreast of developments in the new Nigerian art that resulted from the colonial encounter.

There was perhaps no professional art historians and critics on the Nigerian scene up until the late 1970s. In the history of the criticism of modern art in Nigeria, Ulli Beier, the German literary scholar, appears outstanding. He functioned as an influential, even domineering, voice (especially from the late 1950s up until the early 1970s). Beier's forward-looking approach to art criticism and his authoritative style of writing were perhaps a major influence on many emergent artist-writers especially from the early

1960s. This may have also led to the remarkable trend in the 1960s and 70s when profile studies and reviews on artists and their works were not only about projecting their professional achievements but also of drawing attention to their weak points. Prominent artists who received sharp criticism included Ben Enwonwu, Bruce Onobrakpeya and Demas Nwoko. This critical orientation helped to constructively shape the professional growth and development of Nigerian contemporary art and artists.

Similarly, the *Nigeria Magazine's* provision of not only an exhibition space in Lagos but also a respectable platform for critical discourses of the works shown there is an important contribution to the development of contemporary art in Nigeria. Its legacies remain a reference point in the criticism of modern art in Nigeria and a model to be deeply appreciated. This is especially because the critical orientation it engendered in Nigerian contemporary artists of the late 1960s and the 1970s gave rise to the phenomenon of artist-critics in the Nigerian visual art circle. The trend of artist-critics has outlived the *Nigeria Magazine* and endured into the twenty-first century.

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