The Crisis Of Appropriating Identity For African Art And Artists: The Abayomi Barber School Responsorial Paradigm

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Abstract The paper examines the equivocation of western critical practice, considering the concepts of modernism, post-modernism and globalization as reflected in the views of the west concerning African art. Briefly, these concern strategies limiting African creativity by using western normative evaluation, specifically placing an identity/authenticity expectancy on African art works. Such attitudes and continued commodification has resulted in considerable damage to the development of modern African art as a whole, particularly since the formation of an international elite corps of African artists has occurred within Western parameters. Thus the reactions of African artists in Africa (not necessarily members of this international elite) deserve analysis. Emphasis is on Abayomi Barber, one of Nigeria's foremost modern artists and the mentor of the Abayomi Barber Art School.

Introduction

Way back in 1958, Nigeria's Ben Enwonwu had declared to those who accused him of being "an artist who cannot make up his mind whether to be an African or a European," that as an artist he had a right to switch from one style to the other just as an artist might switch from one medium such as stone to another such as bronze (Beier, 1960). As a result of this question of identity and its related issue of appropriation, many probing questions arise. What art is genuinely modern African? Does authentic African identity refer to the person of the artist, his origin or background, or his affiliation with Africa? Would authentic identity indicate the form of an art piece, its content, theme, or motive? What if a Western artist, non-African, produced works in an African style? Would such an artist or the work be branded African, European, American, fraudulent or modern? Can we say that the person of the artist and the work produced must show particular traits to be branded or have an "authentic" identity? These are the queries that this paper tries to answer.

The West still largely orchestrates the tempo and character of art in postcolonial Africa. Critics and historians apply western considerations of modernism, postmodernism and globalization to the analysis of modern African art. In spite of the ramifying experiences of globalization indicating connectivity between the local and the international in a seamless world, the western art establishment has continued to insist on an ethnic identification for African art. Crudity and juvenile form provide that African identity in terms of the normative expectations. Indeed, critics seem obsessed with the primitive and naïve as a display of the significant difference between the African as "other" and the West. However, many modern African artists contest this unfortunate situation. Nigerian artist Abayomi Barber and his school are among the modern artists who have defied and subverted an expectation that their art should conform to these normative expectations (Hassan, 1995).

Abayomi Barber is not an artist well-known outside of Nigeria, although he and the school he has established are now considered important in modern Nigerian art history [1] (Oloidi, personal communication, 1998. It is also something of an anomaly. His school is based on a workshop experience and his trainees have little more than a secondary school education. However, it is unlike the typical African workshop school, the best known in Nigeria being Osogbo, where students without much formal education were given materials to produce masterworks without technical instruction or interference. Barber, instead, used a master-apprentice training method. The Barber school does not produce "naïve" and "primitive" expressions characteristic of Osogbo and other workshop programs (Adepegba, 1996). Finally, the creative commune of modern artists who make up the Abayomi Barber School have been successful in attracting the patronage of educated Nigerians and the artists are quite visible in contemporary Nigerian artistic circles, again in contrast to members of the Osogbo school or Solomon Wangboje's Ori Olokun group [2].

Western writers, authors and the critical apparatus in general do not mention such non-stereotypical artistic developments as the Barber School because their ideological and aesthetic approach is often at variance with the West's mission. It is the same with African writers/scholars/critics residing in the west most of whom are writing from a global/international perspective. Abayomi Barber, the mentor of the School, and his followers are opposed to Western stereotypes that link African identity/authenticity with the grotesque, weird and crudely rendered. Despite the School's mandate to depict African subject matter, themes, portraits and landscapes —

particularly of the Yoruba peoples, it has not earned the benevolence of an "African authentic" seal of approval by Western authors and critics. Yet within Nigeria, the Abayomi Barber School has been more successful than Osogbo and comparable workshop experiences. Barber and his adherents command higher prices locally than other workshop schools, and, swimming against the tide of "primitivism," they have established a movement that features pictorial naturalism, magical symbolism and ethereal conceptualization.

Ironically, the same lack of perception that dogged the early study of traditional art by members of Western culture appears to be reappearing in the study (or non-study) of modern and contemporary African art. Philips and Steiner (1999, 183) point out the peculiar blindness to individuality and creativity created under conditions of a prevailing aesthetic different from that of the West, despite the increasing interest in contemporary African art that has resulted in numerous exhibitions in the past decade in the United States and Europe: "Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa", an exhibition, mounted at the White chapel Art Gallery in London as part of Africa 95 the British based Festival of African Arts held during the autumn of 1995; the Johannesburg Biennial of International Contemporary Art; Ulli Beier's Iwalewa Haus exhibitions and publications which have provided the German and European audience some good view of the world of Contemporary African art; and the third "Images of Africa" Festival in Denmark (Hassan, 1999, 217)

Emphasis in these exhibits has remained the identification and promotion of artists whose work fits into Western critical paradigms, ignoring the values and tastes of their native peoples. In a recent visit to the Museum of African art, The Smithsonian Institution, United States, I found out that little interest is reserved for African artists who do not belong to this corps of elite artists-those who produce to specification to curry the west's curatorial sympathy. The intention is to concede the ability to enounce within those sites of western expectation or definition. Such regulatory strategies distort artistic production, presenting a problem for a coherent progressive and developmental study. (Oguibe, 2004)

The development of modern art in Africa differs from its development in the West. Modern art in Europe and America represent a departure from Western traditions of representation and the depiction of actual world experiences. In western modern art, the concern of the artist shifted from "physical embodiment" to the "idea". It is often assumed that the embodiment itself is no longer of great importance. A few statements on a piece of paper can serve just as well as a work produced in traditionally accepted materials by traditional methods, for the work of art can be seen as the map of a thought process. In Nigeria and in most parts of Africa (especially those areas with a history of artistic production), modern art involves a discontinuation of the forms and artistic perceptions of the traditional past in favour of the ethos and idioms of the Western academy. Such was the style of art taught in the formal institutions developed during the colonial period.

Africa's modern artists, and Nigerian artists are no exception, have attempted to distance themselves from their traditional or historical expressive forms - just as Western artists did and it continues to happen as art moves through postmodernism and globalisation. Distance from the past in the modern Western tradition meant breaking away from the representational, and one of the inspirations for the new art was non-Western art that conformed to a different set of criteria. Distance from the past in the African context meant moving away from the stylized and symbolic and towards the representational. Not surprisingly, differing perspectives and trends have emerged as African artists move to define this new art. First, there are those who advocate rejection of western influences and the return to traditional sources.

For example, Youssuf Bath from Cote D'Ivore puts aside Euro-American techniques and ideas in favour of a distinctive African approach to art with the aim to draw from African traditional myths, mysticism, spirituality and witchcraft to convey the strength and power of Africa in his works. To achieve this he uses "chalk and coffee as alternative pigments on paper and tree bark" (O'boyle 1991,8). There are also the group of artists whose works incorporate the latest styles, trends and techniques of contemporary western art .In Nigeria, it is only the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, trained artists who have been able to develop this modern global attitude to artistic renditions. Generally, modern/contemporary African art ranges from extreme naturalism to complete abstraction, tending towards internationalism (Adepegba, 1995). The only way to interpret or understand these works is in the light of the dual experience of colonialism and assimilation into western culture in Africa (Hassan, 1995).

Presently, many of the "popular" African artists paraded as modern in western critical idiom are not known even in their countries in Africa like the much celebrated Yinka Shonibare, Sokari Douglas and Late Rotimi Fani Kayode. Yet, their works are seen as visual vocalization of Africans thought. As contestable as this is, it is noteworthy that the majority of these artists live in the West and are highly conscious of and versed in Western art paradigms. Commendably however, there is a group of experienced and highly trained African artists who

have been accepted into the area of international art such as Ablade Glover, Wosene Kosof, Achamyeleh Debela, Bruce Onabrakpeya, Olu Oguibe, and El Anatsui. These artists work in styles that fall naturally or otherwise within the expected norms of African authenticity.

At the same time, there are many artists working in Africa who are not known to the outside. And, these include such as Abayomi Barber and members of his school, Kolade Oshinowo among others from all over Africa In Nigeria, for instance, there are many modern artists actively involved in artistic production and who are successful and live professionally by their work. These artists are just as worthy and deserving of serious consideration as those Africans who form part of the international elite corps of artists. It is not possible for all African artists to relocate to Western countries and local publications with international distribution are rare. Thus, for a comprehensive analysis and proper dialogue about modern African art, there is a need for both publications and exhibitions in the West to feature some of these artists who are successful in Africa but not well known outside.

Scholars like Kim Levin (1995), Olu Oguibe (2004), have denounced the attitude of Western critical practice of articulating artistic norms for African creativity as well as referred to the whole question of constructing a primitive African identity as "pornographic". That structured identity implies that African artists and their works are placed at the lowest rungs of a "strictly multitiered contemporary art market from where upward mobility is almost impossible" (Oguibe 2004). And, this is why even at the international level, works of proven African artists are disdained for the Kitsch, crude and aesthetically jejune, products of the roadside painters who crowd the markets of African metropolis turned overnight into so-called self taught geniuses" (Hassan, 1999, 218).

Such factors prompted the elevation of the naïve and juvenile forms produced by artists like Twin Seven Seven and other artists of the Osogbo School, Cheri Samba or Felix Boubre's as works of African masters. They are among the large group of untrained individuals pushed into artistic production by collectors and rehearsed into performance. Such artists and their works would not be considered even on the fringes of serious African creativity but for the purpose of confirming a sense of Africa's inferiority as the "other" (Hassan, 1999).

Who is the modern or contemporary African artist? How does he make manifest his identity? Certainly many articles have been written on this issue. However, most authors in the manner of Ulli Beier (1960) have tended to separate the artist from the reality of his African personality, and to view his formal artistic production as something of a "phenomenon" or "unique occurrence". Others, notably African authors like Leopold Senghor (1967), Yusuf Grillo (Mount, 1973) justified the expression of ethnic identities in the works of modern African artists in the late Colonial and early post-Independence period. They considered it as a necessary development since artists who are African should be susceptible naturally to influences from their own backgrounds.

More recent authors like Sallah Hassan (1999), Everlyn Nicodemus (1999), and Olu Oguibe (2004) have advanced the opinion that it is the search for ethnic identity by the West in the works of African artists that is suspicious. They question the morality of western critical practice in its frame of reference for concepts like modernism, postmodernism and globalization. According to Hassan (1995) and Oguibe (2004), the notion of seeking for identity is a Western ploy to marginalize African art in terms of its creativity and keep it on the shelf of cheap commodity.

In Nigeria, Art Historian Pat Oyelola (1981) categorized those artists like the" road side artists" and the informally or formally trained who have adapted phoney African identities in their works as pseudo artists because their intentions are purely commercial and they have found this to be useful sales strategy. Adepegba (1995) describes the work of such artist as naïve abstraction, which results more from lack of representational skill than the artists' intentions. Such art was encouraged during colonial period in Africa, in order to produce an "authentic" African art untainted by western education and civilization. Colonial administrators use the works of these "instant" artists, who never had the least knowledge of what art was, to emphasize the savagery of the African (Oloidi, 1989). And, it has persisted as the definitional characteristic of modern African creativity.

Since the character of art and formal representation has never been monolithic, in Africa or elsewhere, there is a multiplicity of approaches ranging from the figurative and mimetic to the stylized and abstracted. Thus to generalize about African art is to radically oversimplify the situation. Certainly, the assumption during colonial and immediate post-colonial period that traditional Africa is devoid of mimetic and representational art is mistaken, although often promoted by negative academic discussion. Such discussion was often silent on the very naturalism of the ancient court art of Ile-Ife as well as the Tada sculptures of the lower Niger regions of Nigeria.

What African Identity? : The Abayomi Barber School Attitudes

Abayomi Barber *(see fig 1 for the portrait of the artist)* was very critical of this assumptions about the perceived non-naturalism of African art works development (Odiboh, 2003). As a native of Ile-Ife, a place with an ancient history of naturalistic art, he considers all twentieth century derived artistic developments regarding formal re-arrangements as fashion, fads or vogues, which will soon fade away (Words 1978, 34).

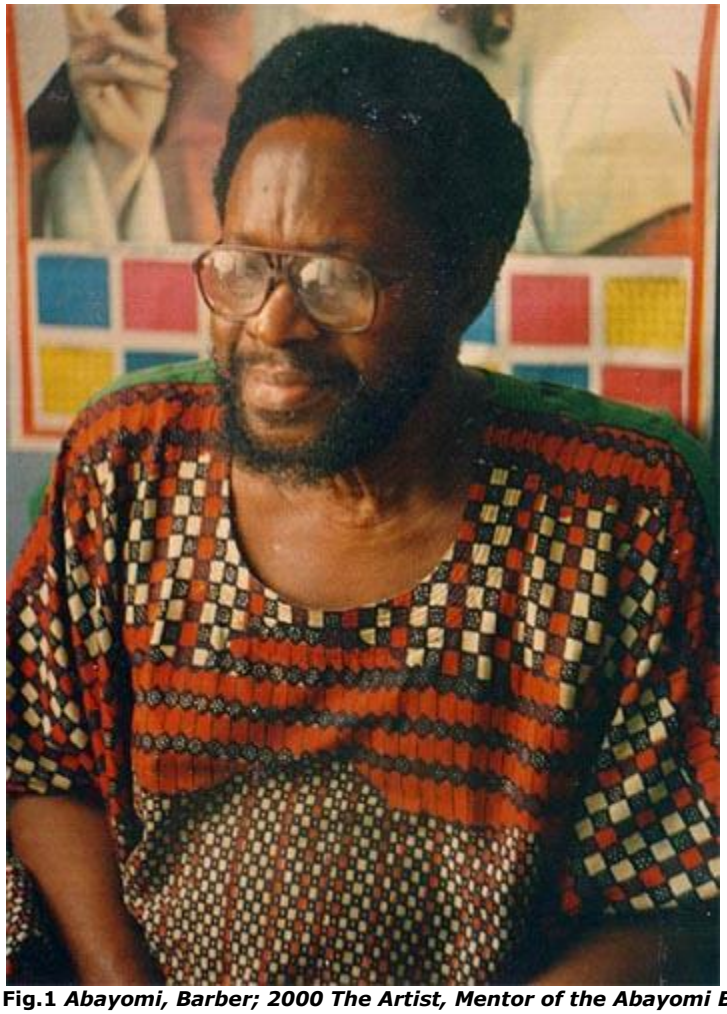

Fig.1 ***Abayomi, Barber; 2000 The Artist, Mentor of the Abayomi Barber School***

This underscores his reason for maintaining an approach that he has stamped indelibly upon the art of the Barber school, and that is painstaking realism with affinity for detailed super realistic finish. Attributes of Yoruba culture establish emphatically the character of the works as African, whether portrait or landscape. Themes are often centered on folklore, mythological personalities, events, and settings. Generally, the ideas center on common folks, without pretensions of being elitist.

In spite of the African identity of content and form, Abayomi hates the use of the label 'African art' to describe his works and those of his School. He argues that "art" is the universality of individual artists' experiences. Abayomi is an African/Nigerian artist to whom traditional cultural values are still relevant, despite his sojourn in London, where he lived for eleven years (1960-1971), and his home in cosmopolitan Lagos. Moreover his birth and early life within the very traditional and cultural environment of the palace of the Oni of Ife have become a feature that resonates through every aspect of his life including his art. Thus, a proper comprehension of his art and that of the Barber School must include Yoruba traditional culture as its context.

Fig.2

Abayomi Barber, Late Oni of Ife - Oba Aderemi Adesoji, Sculpture, Life Size
National Gallery of Modern Art, Lagos

Beside the peculiarity of a representational approach for an "informally" trained artist is his insistence on the mastery of technique, which has resulted in an almost photographic super realism as seen in *(fig .2.)* the life-sized sculpture of the late Oni of Ife-Oba Aderemi Adesoji by Abayomi Barber. A look at his production and that of his school makes it very clear that Abayomi Barber is averse to the neo-traditional expressive form much sought for by the West in works of African artists. This, no doubt resulted in the school's artistic character featuring the zeal for pictorial naturalism as in Barber's own landscapes (below), magical symbolism, and ethereal conceptualisation. Abayomi's Landscape (fig 3) is a sample of the artist's recent paintings possessing characteristic hues with esoteric forms of wild animal heads like lions, leopards and birds among others.

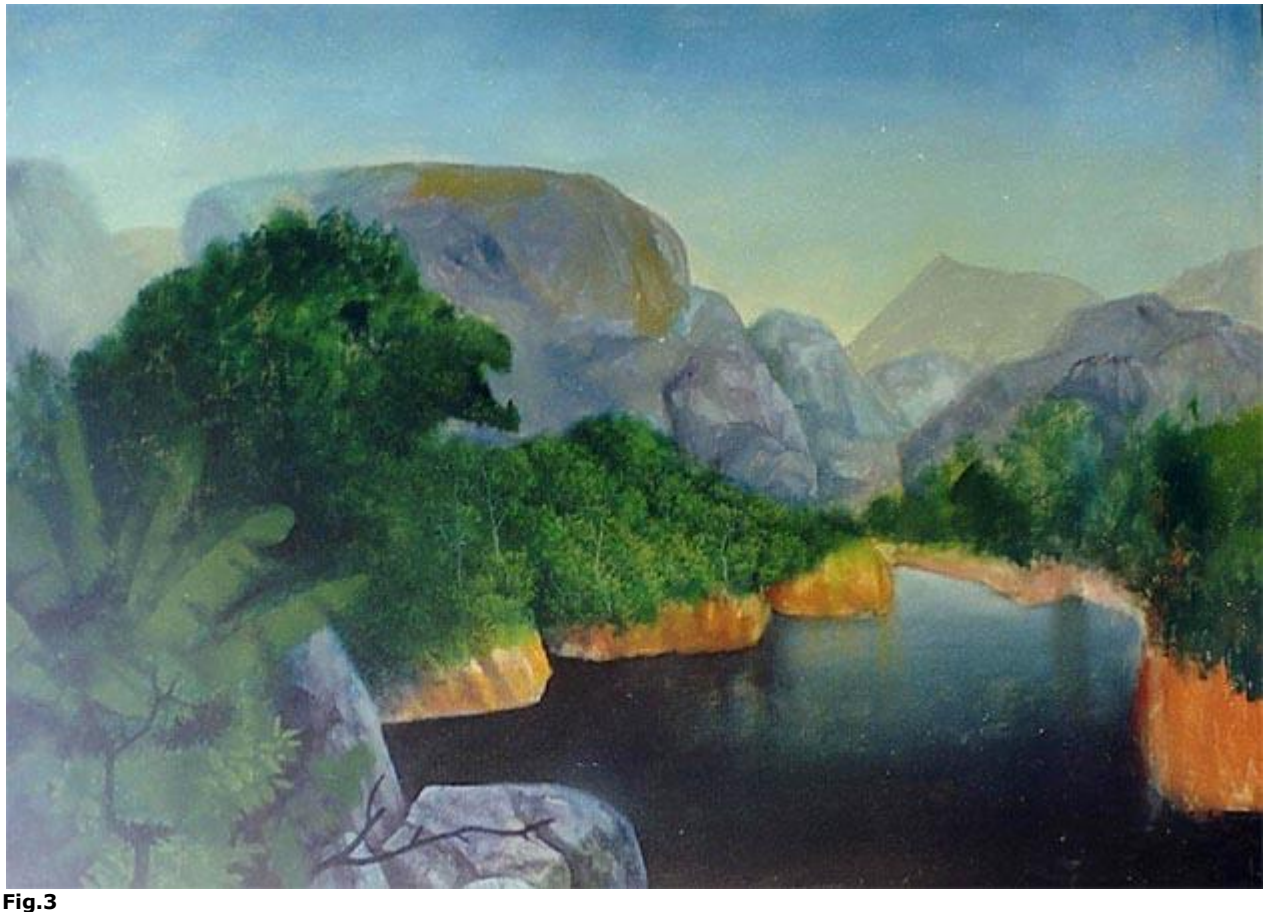

Fig.3

Abayomi Barber, African Landscape, Oil on Board, 1994

The style is unique in the post-colonial artistic panorama of Nigeria because of its serene supernaturalism and metaphysical effects .The essence of the school's art as mentioned before is the representational depiction of African subjects (people, landscape and environment) and themes (notably, Yoruba myths and spirituality). Consider also Toyin Alade's [3] work "*Igba Irubo" (fig.4.)*(below) done in 2000. His subject refers to Yoruba ritual practice. He communicates spirituality in visual terms through his atmospheric treatment of form and colour .The work features the head of an Osun priestess and the sacrificial calabash (Igba Irubo), an apparition emerging from a distance and rendered obscure by his use of a translucent film of light and colour.

Fig.4

Toyin Alade, Igba Irubo

Unapologetic about his naturalistic art style, Abayomi maintains that the Primitivistic identity often sought for by members of Western society exerts a limitation and barrier against the progress of creativity. Olu Spencer [4], one of the trainees and artist of the Barber School, reinforces Abayomi's argument, asserting that the use of Yoruba motifs and symbols by the Barber School "goes a long way to reveal that African art works can have elements of study, treatment and rule comparable with those that are naturalistically rendered by artists of the West." Spencer asserts that Westerners have labeled some art works from Africa as not being African because of their naturalism. However, he affirms that the style of the Barber School makes a statement that to be African art does not necessarily mean to be a celebration of crudity in formal rendition. (Odiboh, 2003)

In the works of the School, although the subject may be simply rendered, meaning is at times esoteric. Flowing rivers and other natural objects often transmogrify to attain human attributes. Landscapes are repeatedly a medley of trees, foliages, shells, hills, feathers, birds, rocks, cowries, fruits, men and women juxtaposed into compositions to mystifying effects .The works are mostly philosophical, ritualistic or magical (mysteriously charming) but seldomly, concerned with the political complexities of contemporary Nigerian society. Ponder for example Busari Agbolade's [5]*" Money and Women* ", (fig.5.) (below) a painting, although highly coded, is undoubtedly decipherable as African. The work displays a subtle gradation of colours and the local mat dominates the background. This mat is the magical veil from where the conjuring into existence is made, of the different types of money, such as the Manila, Cowries, Dollars and Naira notes as well as the two female breasts, that appear from the background .The bluish curtain introduced by the painting makes the whole theme look like a magician's act.

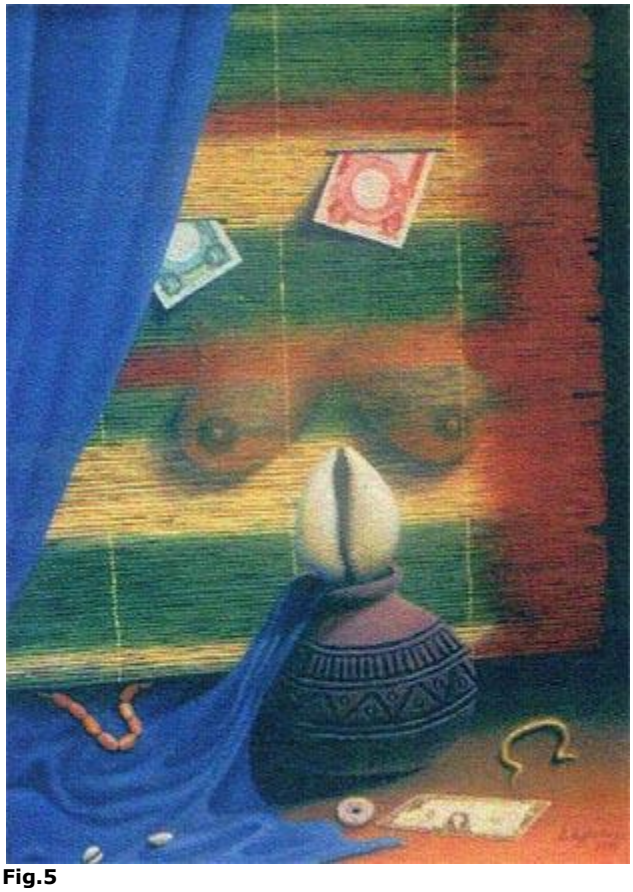

Fig.5

Busari Agbolade, Money and Women, Oil on Barber Board,96.5x75cm 1999

The Barber School artists have adopted Yoruba cultural prototypes and they justify their use of these symbols because of their knowledge of the cultural contents. Interestingly, the interpretations of the cultural and magical iconography used in the works of the school vary with the individual artist. Busari Agbolade maintains that painting is a foreign artistic medium and for foreigners (that is, westerners) to actually appreciate "what we are doing, we have to do those things that are African and traditional to us'.

Fig.6

Toyin Alade, Flight of the Ogbanje, Oil on Barber Board, 122x81cm, 1992

For instance, with Kola nuts, Busari explains," not many people know what we do with kola nuts". He insists, "if in painting the lobes of the partitions of kola nuts are presented with two pieces lying face-down and the remaining two facing up, it has its meaning " He maintains that it connotes some mystical representation and interpretation. It means that the pieces of kola nuts are to be used to appease the spirits or supplicate for power According to him, in the Ifa corpus and system of divination, it also means that the sacrifice has been accepted or sublimated. In the same manner, Artist Toyin Alade believes that feather images introduced in his paintings as in the "Flight of the Ogbanje"(fig.6.) assures him of patronage and sale of such works . Barber and his artists assert through their work that African subject matter and symbols are intrinsic to an expression of African identity.

N'Diaye of the Ecole d'Daker, like artists of the Barber school, had asserted that authentic identity only came in the work of a genuine artist through attention to skill and materials along with sincerity of practice. He warned his students to be on guard against "those who in the name of authenticity...continue to want to preserve you in an exotic garden" (Harney, 2003). He reiterated that they had a very great responsibility to make our profession legitimate in the eyes of our fellow countrymen, and those of men from all the continents (Ibid). Likewise, Abayomi submits that many of the so-called Africanists recognized in the west as producing African art give wrong impressions to the Europeans about the African intelligence and artistic capabilities; thus reducing the art from Africa to the lowly status of tourist souvenir. He therefore expressed his apprehensions concerning the extent of damage this artistic misrepresentation may have done to Africa. He notes, "when these things (that is, the art works) are bought, I cannot help thinking that our progress and consciences are bought along with them" (Barber, 1984).

Abayomi Barber walks on the same artistic terrain as Mohamed Khalil and Amir Nour, both Sudanese artists, who echo the assertion of many modern African artists that they have the right to use all the sources and media available to them and have no need to conform to an expectation about the character of their art (Hassan 1989). Mohammed O Khalil, a sculptor who has lived in New York since 1967, considers his works an embodiment of all his individual experiences as a human being and as an African living in New York. He asserts that his roots are as close to him as his limbs. Yet, he prefers to follow his own private creative intuition, rather than deliberately portray elements of his African heritage. He perceives his art as coming from the past, if not a continuation of it, but also acknowledges other influences. Nour says "Moore, Picasso, Modigliani are never labeled African as I am labeled Western" (1995)

It is significant to emphasize that a lot of caution is to be exercised in the attempt to demarcate boundaries of African creativity. Unfortunately, the thrust of the art training in Africa has been preponderantly Western. At the same time, a quantum and quality of local patronage and critical practice to challenge the west has not emerged, a situation exacerbated by the socio-economic and political situation on the continent that has hindered progress and economic development, resulted in the atrophy that has been the bane of our educational system, including the nonchalant attitude of Nigeria's government, at least, to scholarship and research. This situation has led to the flight of many African scholars, artists and intellectuals to other parts of the world particularly Europe and America; and, has turned back the hands of the clock on the evolving fertile intellectual activities of the early independence period into the 1980s.

CONCLUSION

Colonialism and independence among other experiences have been identified as responsible for the character of modern African art. It bred two groups of artists: One advocates rejection of Western influences and return to traditional sources. The other incorporates the latest styles, trends and techniques of contemporary Western art. The third group works in a naturalistic style influenced by African traditional classical art such as that of Ile-Ife and Tada sculptures of the lower Niger regions of Nigeria; this proves the inappropriateness of typifying modern African art as the West, often for and mercantilist motives, often does it. That western craving for "primitivism" in African art and desiring at the same time a linkage of the works to African ethnicity is mere equivocation, froth and mischief. Simply, modernism in the West renders anonymous the artist and his/her ethnic affiliations altogether rather than anonymising the artist and accentuating his ethnic affiliations.

By this, the western artist is often positioned in a limitless, borderless and infinite centre; but the non European and African artists are constrained by a "criticality bound by an interceptive demand for the identity of the other by the query, "where were you born?" to attest the identity and authenticity (Oguibe, 2004). It is already apparent with recent ethnic politics in places such as the former Yugoslavia or Rwanda, Ogoni-Land in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria among others, the potential of modernism and post-modernism pitfalls in the ideas of identity/authenticity politics. It is obvious that it is not possible to celebrate the diversity of group identities in art without fragmenting into divisive warring camps (Levin, 1995) It is certainly not possible to dwell on these for long without splintering the peoples of the world into neo-tribal entities. This may open a very scary scenario of infinite regression for mankind. The idea of universalism by the West according to Kim Levin (1995) is nothing more than a modern code word for a Euro-centric myth rather than issues.

It is becoming apparent, however, that art can no longer afford to be autonomous, that it must address its social responsibilities in a modern world where there is an abundance of anarchy including the collapse of aesthetic notions, collapse of concepts of authenticity and critical language. Levin (1995) posits that no utopian modernist could have predicted that the last decade of the modern century would witness fundamentalist fanaticism, ethnic cleansing, mass migrations, environmental deterioration, species extinctions and a global pandemic. This is where the instruction of Abayomi Barber and the artists of the Barber School in Nigeria become relevant and didactive; that African art should be allowed to be free of western constraints and be at liberty to address Africa's situations and that it should be an authoritative expression of the African peoples according to their historical, socio-cultural, political and environmental experiences; and be accepted as such.

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NOTES

1. The Abayomi Barber Art School developed in the art workshop of the Center for Cultural Studies, University of Lagos. The Center founded in 1971, had its workshop built in 1972. The center as a unit of the University, functioned and with Barber in residence, became the arena for the birth of a new aesthetics artistic concept It became recognized as an artistic School in the annals of modern Nigeria art because of the consistency of style. Abayomi Barber, who initiated the School, is a versatile Painter, Sculptor, illustrator and a musician. The style of the school that he initiated is known for its combination of serenity, ultra naturalistic style and mystical

effects as shown in the works of the artists of the School including Olu Spencer, Busari Agbolade among others. This consistency in stylistic approach has made the Abayomi Barber School an important event in modern Nigerian art history.

2. Solomon Wangboje's Ori-Olokun is an artistic development in Nigeria that has yet to be properly assessed in art historical terms .The late Solomon Wangboje and Michael Crowder nurtured the Ori-Olokun Workshop from 1968 at the then University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University .The Workshop may be considered as an outgrowth of the Osogbo experiment since many of the pioneer artists of the Ori-Olokun were younger artists of the Osogbo movement. (Cited from Ademola Williams (1994); *Workshop Practices in the Education of the Artist in Print- Making ;Ori-Olokun Experimental Art Workshop of Institute of African Studies, University of Ife as a Case Study* (Unpublished) M F A degree report, Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Benin, Benin City

3. Toyin Agbolade, Barber School artist

4. Olu Spencer, Barber School artist

5. Busari Agbolade, Barber School artist