

ARTAS LIFE: THE BRISTOL SYMPOSIUM¹

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Although it had been a busy month for me trying to clear my desk before starting a year's study leave in London, the news from Professor James Gibbs that the Nigerian Field Society UK branch was holding a two day meeting at the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol was an invitation I could not resist, particularly when I learnt that Professor Simon Ottenberg, renowned scholar of Igbo studies would be present. So it was that on a Saturday morning, I found myself in a seminar room filled with about fifty other people. I was one of only three Nigerians in the room, the rest were all English and had worked or lived in Nigeria at some point or the other. I was also probably the youngest person in the room. Having arrived slightly late, I had missed the introductory coffee and so quickly took my place at the back of the room.

The theme of the symposium was Nigerian Arts and Crafts and the first speaker was Professor John Picton of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London and a former curator of the National Museum in Lagos. His advertised theme was "Unchanging Patterns in Nigerian Textiles," but he spoke on modern art in Nigeria, approaching the subject from the viewpoint that tradition is a continuum and that there has always been cross-fertilization of cultures, making the concept of a "pure, untouched tradition" untenable. He stressed that the term modernity is viewed in different contexts in different cultures stating that the first modern artists in West Africa were actually the photographers who were active in the area from the 1850s, some time before Aina Onabolu, widely regarded as a pioneer in modern visual art.

He stressed that the term "international" had a much wider meaning than Paris, London and New York, pointing out that internationalism was visible all over the world. He argued that the modern world of Lagos in the 1900s was international, embracing elements of the Brazilian, Victorian and Gothic in the architecture, for instance. He lamented the pulling down of the Old Central Mosque in Lagos, a fantastic example of Brazilian architecture. He traced the roots of the Zaria Art School and their conviction that one could be modern and Nigerian at the same time, showing slides of Uche Okeke's early Uli drawings to buttress his argument. He also showed slides of sketches by Bruce Onobrakpeya for his Stations of the Cross at St Paul's Church in Ebute Metta and suggested that the influence of Christianity on Nigerian and African art has not been studied deeply enough.

¹This appeared first on the site Nigeriansinamerica.com.

He then argued that Ulli Beier's greatest contribution (apart from his work in Oshogbo) was the role he played in the sixties in making Lagos and Ibadan a centre of artistic activity, drawing exhibitors of works by black artists from Sudan, South Africa, America and the Caribbean as well as his incisive articles in *Nigeria Magazine*.

Moving deeper into his theme, he referred to the fact that some of the fine examples of Okene cloth sold in the sixties were actually made from unravelled hospital blankets and recounted how he came across several examples of a masquerade called "Joway" in the Ebira area which had its origins in films of John Wayne shown in the area years before!

He was followed by Dr Pat Oyelola, who had come all the way from Ibadan. She spoke on Internationalism and Ethnicity in modern Nigerian Art. She began her talk by giving an overview of the current state of Nigerian art, welcoming the fact that more and more galleries were being opened and that more people were collecting art. Increasing numbers of statues were also being executed on roundabouts in the major cities. Referring to cultural influences, she said that a receiver culture digests new influences and incorporates those elements which are compatible. She pointed to the beaded staffs and crowns of Obas in Yorubaland, which are decorated with non-indigenous beads as an example. She also referred to the incorporation of new threads and colours into the *aso oke* and *adire* of the Yoruba as another example, paying tribute to the great sense of colour of the Nigerian woman.

Examining some of Bruce Onobrakpeya's work, she indicated that he had incorporated elements from his Urhobo ethnic background, his education in Benin and Zaria and from Yorubaland where he has lived for a long time. She also referred to the fact that he uses a print technique, which is not indigenous and that he exhibits internationally but draws his inspiration from his indigenous background.

She also made reference to Uche Okeke, an early member of the Nigerian Field Society, who had travelled widely across Nigeria, gaining inspiration in the process and becoming the father of the Uli art school, which drew on his childhood experiences with his mother who was a specialist in the Igbo art form of body painting called Uli. Similarly, the artists belonging to the ONA movement which crystalised at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, in 1989, incorporate Yoruba decorative motifs from textiles, wood-carving and metal-work into an art of social comment. Leading members of this group are Kunle Filani, Moyo Okediji and Tola Wewe.

The next speaker, Professor Simon Ottenberg spoke on "Christian Religious Influences in Two Nigerian Contemporary Artists, the late Boniface Okafor and Nsikak Essien". It was an enlightening talk, which drew heavily from the speaker's personal knowledge of the two artists. He began by highlighting the similarities between the two artists – both belonged to the same generation, attended the same tertiary institution, taught at the same institution (the Institute of Management Technology in Enugu) and both drew from new religions,

Pentecostal Christianity in the case of Essien and Universalism in the case of Okafor.

He described Okafor as eclectic, drawn to the symbols of life and energy – the Pyramids, the oriental symbols of yin and yang and Christ on the Cross. He traced Okafor's personal history as a not particularly religious Catholic who survived an accident during the Civil War in which his friends died and who was then led to examine why he had been saved. He subsequently started training as a Catholic priest but left before ordination and began to read religious and philosophical books of all kinds, which began to influence his art from about 1982. Ottenberg noted that Okafor, in spite of his eclecticism, did not show any Islamic influences and wondered if this was attributable to his wartime experiences. He lamented Okafor's death in an armed robbery attack in Enugu.

By contrast, Essien, who had just taken part in a Barclays' Bank sponsored exhibition of Nigerian Art in London, was born to devout Methodists. At the age of eighteen, he rejected his upbringing and decided to be a "rational man". During his days at IMT, he was known as an eccentric figure, "a Nigerian hippy". Like Okafor, he was a member of the Aqua Circle of exhibiting artists. His early work drew heavily on social and political themes as exemplified in his 1982 work "Armageddon" which was inspired by the line: "In those days in Nigeria, people were walking around with tombstones in their eyes." In 1992 he married and became born again. He gave up political and social themes and began to paint works with religion and family life themes. Many of his pictures now used his young son as a model. Explaining his motivation to Ottenberg, he said that his art was now happy art, asking what good his political art ever did. He emphasizes the positive, uplifting nature of his recent art, saying that it fulfils an important role. Ottenberg suggested that these two artists' work also reflected their temperaments-Okafor, sober, cool and logical and Essien, refreshing, vibrant and exuberant. The talk was accompanied by slides of both artists' work.

During the break for lunch, I was able to chat with some of the other guests who included David Roberts of the British Council, Miss Everard, founding principal of Federal Government College Owerri, Mr Kimmitt, founding principal of Federal Government College Ikot Ekpene and many former lecturers and teachers from the University of Ibadan and the International School Ibadan. Others had worked in Umuahia, Uyo, Kano and many other places and it was fascinating to chat with them and enjoy their perspectives of life in Nigeria in the forties, fifties and sixties.

After lunch, Elizabeth Moloney, a former director of the VSO in Nigeria spoke on "Michael Cardew's Pottery in Abuja". In an enlightening talk, she explained why she is currently working on a biography of Michael Cardew, an Oxford educated Englishman who became one of the first Pottery Officers in the Colonial Service in Nigeria. Her motivation was largely to counter the perception of Cardew as a silly colonial do-gooder and to show through his writing that he was perceptive and intelligent and was interested in exploring how Western techniques of pottery could be married with indigenous styles while retaining

the beauty and strength of the local work. She referred to the inspiration he drew from Ladi Kwali's work and highlighted the cooperation he received from the Emir of Abuja, Suleiman Barau.

The final speaker was Folake Shoga from the Watershed Art and Media Centre in Bristol who explored the influences growing up in Nigeria may have had on her current work as an artist in the UK. She explored questions of identity, pointing out that having been born to a Nigerian father and English mother, she had been brought up in Ibadan, coming to England to attend art school and subsequently settling in England. Her work has drawn from Mbari art and she examined this as a model for community art in the United Kingdom. She highlighted the beauty of the concept of Mbari, art as life, art as beauty and the impermanence of the Mbari houses. She showed slides of her recent work, particularly her series of feasts echoing themes from Yoruba traditional religion and the diasporan versions of the same. Her poignant talk, which was dedicated to her mother for her courage in accepting to be part of a different culture under very difficult circumstances, was very moving.

Drawing to a close, she asked if she should refer to herself as a Yoruba artist or an English artist. This drew lively responses from the audience who pointed out that it was her right to choose, giving examples of various Nigerian artists and writers abroad who have chosen different answers to the same question.

Her final slide of her installation, "A Voyage with Yemoja," set up at Bristol Harbour on Mother's Day 1999, bore the inscription "In order to remember what was brought to us by the sea and what was taken away" and brought some to tears. It was particularly moving because Bristol was a major port in the Triangular Trade between Africa, Britain and the West Indies.

It was a fitting end to a most interesting day. As I left to catch my train back to London, I was burdened by the thought that the memories and documents of many members of the Society were a valuable resource for Nigerian scholars and may soon be lost to us. I was sad to miss the second day of the Symposium but look forward to building links between the Society and younger Nigerians.

Editors note: The papers presented at the Symposium will appear as an Occasional Publication of the U.K. Branch in the not too distant future.