

**FROM LAGOS ISLAND
TO THE NIGER-BENUE CONFLUENCE
(WHERE I ENCOUNTERED JOHN WAYNE)
OR HOW AFRICAN ART IS AS AFRICAN ARTISTS DO**

John Picton

School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

For Africa, unless we are archaeologists, most of the art that we actually study dates from the period since about 1850, a date that marks several factors or events that are crucial to the historiography of art, particularly in West Africa. These include the transition from Atlantic slave trading to colonial rule; resistance to that very same colonial rule, with the emergence of a local Black intellectual elite, trained at the best universities of Europe; the emergence of modern ethnicities and nation states; the persistence and development of traditions (ritual, material, aesthetic, social, etc.) received from the past; the developments of novel forms of social practice; the worldwide distribution of photography, an African practice for more-or-less the same time as in Europe; widespread conversion to Islam or Christianity; and all of this, and, doubtless, other factors also, comprising, variously, a diverse range of local modernities.

I know there are exceptions: in Nigeria, Benin City, for example, but they are the exceptions that prove the rule; and 1850 also marks the inception of a period in which the agents of colonial rule fetishise ethnic difference, making of it an instrument of both government and conflict; certain kinds of material artifacts are collected for the delectation of taxonomists and connoisseurs in Europe; and people are "collected" via European photography, anthropometry, etc; a period in which a view of Africa as "timeless" and "primitive" is invented, a view that feeds into the Ethnographic Present mode of writing that characterises the anthropology of the colonial period (this is, of course, not a criticism of the discipline as a whole), and which has allowed a view of African difference and authenticity that has proved difficult to shake out of the study of art—making by Black and African people (as if, for example, ethnicity were something more than the emergence of an identity contingent upon circumstances that forced upon people the need for a new kind of self-definition).

When I first arrived in Nigeria, in June 1961, a mere 22-year-old, it was supposed that I possessed some qualifications for the job I had been hired to do; which was to take over as Curator of the Nigerian Museum, Lagos (as it then was known) with its staff of some forty Nigerians. I possessed an undergraduate degree in an anthropology taught in the latter days of structural-functionalism, wherein I had learned about the socially interconnectedness of things and I had absorbed what we would now call the paradigm of ethnicity as the defining criterion of distinctive social environments. Then I had worked with William Fagg in the British Museum department of ethnography for a few months, and his view of the 'tribal'

nature of things in Africa had confirmed the paradigm of ethnicity.

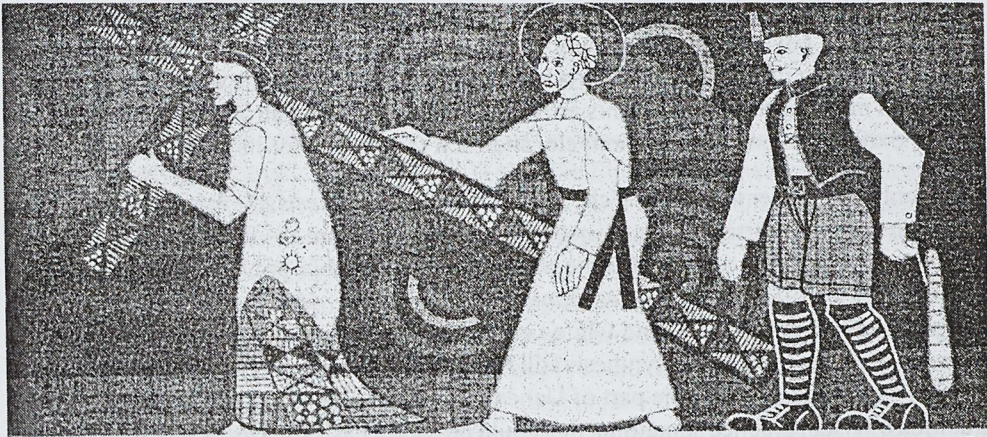
To arrive in Lagos in 1961 was about as fortunate an experience as one could ever have hoped for. There was the enthusiasm for an independent One Nigeria, the so-called 'Zaria Rebels' had begun to make their mark; Ben Enwonwu was 'on seat' as Federal Government Art Advisor (we were in the same ministry), Justus Akeredolu was in the same department as myself, Erhabor Emokpae was an active presence, supporting himself by a career in graphic design, Felix Idubor ran his own gallery, and Aina Onabolu was still active in many ways, as were people such as Kenneth Murray, Father Kevin Carroll, Ulli Beier and Paul Mount. Indeed, I inherited, so to speak, the running of the museum that Murray had set up in 1957 in advance of Independence, and a set of displays in which there was no mention of the ethnic categories that I had learned about. This was Murray's contribution to the critique of the pernicious effects of "tribalism" in

public life; and while this strategy confused European and American visitors, it was no problem at all for Nigerians who knew well enough where the towns and provinces were that were mentioned in the labels. So all in all, it was patently obvious not only that I now had to learn new ways of conceptualizing the material for which I was responsible, but also, and far more significantly, that art in Nigeria had not stopped with the material in the Nigerian Museum Lagos or the British Museum London.

By 1961 things had moved on even from Ulli Beier's *Art in Nigeria 1960*, not least because "the greatest surprise of the exhibition [of contemporary art organised by the Nigerian Council for the Advancement of Art and Culture at the celebrations of Independence in 1960] was a group of young painters who are still students at Zaria... Jimo Akolo, Grillo, Onobrakpeya, Uche Okeke, Simon Okeke, Demas Nwoko... the finest monument to Nigerian Independence we could have wished for" (Beier 1961, pp. 31, 51). There was also the developing patronage of a broad range of artists by the Catholic Church, Onobrakpeya, for example, and not just the neo-traditionalists Bandele and Fakeye; and during the 1960s Yusuf Grillo became head of the art department at the Yaba College of Technology and



Ben Enwonwu's "Resurrection"



Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus to carry the cross, oil painting, 122cm x 305cm, (Ebute-Metta Stations), 1967.

From Bruce Onobrakpeya's "14 Stations of the Cross"

Bruce Onobrakpeya the art master at St Gregory's College, both in Lagos.

Added to all the variety of the new developments, masquerade was, as it has continued to be, an active and resilient set of traditions. On Lagos Island within a few years I had seen *Gelede*, *Egungun* and *Adamu-Orisha*; and it was manifestly clear that all these several traditions of visual and performance practice were current and contemporary, though some were, admittedly, of more recent inception than others. Moreover, Ulli Beier was active in bringing Black and African artists to Lagos, Ibadan and elsewhere in Nigeria, artists such as Ibrahim El Salahi, Malangatana and Jacob Lawrence, exhibiting in the same places as Uche Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Erhabor Emokpae and others. Lagos seemed then to have been transformed into an exciting centre of international Black and African visual culture. Masquerade, hand-made textiles, royal and chiefly ceremonial, easel painting, printmaking and a developing tradition of public sculpture were all modern. They were not merely extant, but were forms of active practice 'just now', the root meaning of 'modern' (see Williams 1976), and each flourished in terms of that essential social process of 'handing-on', which is all that the word 'tradition' really means. It did not make any sense at all to divide this complex up into the broad temporal categories of "traditional" and "contemporary" (let alone "tribal" and "post-tribal"). For one thing, the older traditions were subject to and carried the traces of current adaptation: the material in the Nigerian and British Museums were but an earlier stage in the process; a type of textile as "traditional" as the resist-dyed *adire*, brought into Lagos from Abeokuta and Ibadan, was manifestly a colonial-period development (Picton 1992a, 1995a); while the newer traditions included such practices as masquerade, chiefly ceremonial in their subject matter. In any case, there was only one Lagos, with its diverse inhabitants sometimes sharing in a common identity, sometimes manifesting a range of different identities. Whatever ethnicity was, sometimes

it mattered and sometimes it did not; and sometimes it led to the tribalism that was the enemy of good government. Anyway it was by no means the fixed and essential property I had been led to imagine; and the process of categorisation, if such were needed, had to begin at a more particular level: this artist, that technique, this patron, that masked event, this kind of education, that tradition, etc, and each recognised for its own history.

It was only much later that I read Uche Okeke's *Natural Synthesis*, his manifesto for a local modernism: 'young artists in a new nation, that is what we are... our new society calls for a synthesis of old and new...' (for the most recently available published account see C. Deliss *et al.*, 1995: *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*, pp. 208-209); but I experienced that enthusiasm, and while neither the artists nor the nation are quite as new as they were then, that call for synthesis still rings clear. Moreover, I continue to reckon that it was a stroke of genius on the part of Uche Okeke to be able to see within an indigenous tradition of visual practice something that could provide a basis for a local visual modernity. When, on a visit to Nigeria in 1995, I asked Uche Okeke how something as deeply Igbo as *uli* could take on a wider significance, he replied: 'drawing is drawing' (Picton 1995b, also Ottenberg 1997). For modernity was never something introduced as if ready made from Europe or the USA. It was and could only be the condition of things as they are at any given time and place, dependent upon that creative synthesis in which elements from further away become domesticated within a local framework of reference and practice, a process that is nothing new (even when it is subsumed within the cliché of globalization).

The experience of Lagos thus provided for the effective deconstruction of the dominant paradigms in the study of African art; or, at least, it began the process; but how would this stand up to the experience of field research beyond the big city? When I moved to the Ebirá-speaking region to the south-west of the Niger-Benue confluence, as I wrote elsewhere (Picton 1991), it seemed that the material culture of this area was comprised of several distinct elements of diverse origins, and that Ebirá people were relative newcomers. Ebirá women had inserted themselves into a weaving tradition that was or had once been common to the Yoruba- and Edo-speaking peoples, and some adjacent Igbo communities. Iron-smithing and wood carving had been mediated by a caste of Edo-speaking smiths, as Ebirá people began to settle in their present region. Ebirá men, on the other hand, had introduced very distinctive forms of masquerade that provided entertainment and promoted both gendered order (Picton 1988, 1997) and healing (1989) through performances that, at their core, were concerned with the re-embodiment of deceased male elders (1992, and see also Picton & Mack 1989, pp. 14, 68-73, 75); and these institutions had proved so attractive to surrounding peoples that they had all copied them, a fact that both reinforced and denied ethnic difference. In my research I began by trying to gather the kind of data that would enable me to reconstruct that ideal of what it must once have been like. The facts of change were obvious, but they were not the same from one community to another. Moreover they were not restricted to the period of my research in the late 1960s but could in some cases perhaps be traced back through the previous fifty years or more. Some masked forms were

proliferating, with an eclectic gathering in of diverse elements (Picton 1990a), while other practices were falling into disuse, especially at the ancestral core (Picton 1990b), but this was not necessarily always due to the impact of education, Islam and Christianity as there were also reasons within the tradition for the abandonment of particular practices.

It became clear that the proposition that there was an ideal to reconstruct was mere wishful thinking of an Ethnographic Present kind. Within the Ebira region there was a calendar of events that integrated all the districts into a common annual cycle although the details of ritual and masked performances were not identical from one place to another, this allowing for different patterns of change. There was, moreover, internal evidence that suggested that the night masquerades that provided the most popular entertainment of the year in the Ebira calendar was a relatively new element that had developed during the 20th century. Masquerade could thus be seen instead as a series of related developmental sequences, with some elements in common (such as the use of a red cloth woven from unravalled hospital blankets) but with many idiosyncratic representations of the facts of change, including Islam (the mask that went to Mecca, i.e. the performance of a mask that in its costuming and the songs that accompanied its appearance celebrated the successful return of a member of its household from Pilgrimage) modern technology (the road-building bulldozer) and the movies (masked individuals called John Wayne: at the time of my research, Ebira was still without electricity but they had once had a film show...). Masked performances provided a means of not only reiterating a sense of identity with a received tradition, but also, through documentation and critique, of appropriating change to that tradition. Thereby, the material and poetic cultures of masquerade were active in promoting a sense of local modernity defined by an identity with a mythic past, but which also included, variously, fluency in the Qur'an, an excellent modern educational system and the possibilities of achievement in the nation state and beyond as represented by the head of the Nigerian government service, Abdul Azeez Atta, and the local Catholic bishop, Alexius Makozi (now the Bishop of Port Harcourt). This local modernity was clearly not a seamless garment, so to speak, but hybrid and multiple engagements between the local and the longer-distance. Ebira language, a sense of belonging to a particular place and lineage, the enjoyment of masked performances, the Igbo shopkeeper who could get you whatever you needed from Onitsha market within a few days, 'John Wayne' the popular masked character, and one's school and mosque or church were all part of it.

In due course masked performances became so dangerously violent that, in 1988, they were prohibited by the police, to the great delight of the local Muslim fundamentalists. It is not difficult, of course, to understand Islamic moral antipathy to anything associated with ancestral re-embodiment, but it was those more ritualised elements that were falling into disuse in any case. The masked forms ritually of lesser status permitted a more individualised dramatic presentation, and these were flourishing and proliferating. In time masked performance would have probably become so far removed from the inheritance of ritual practice, with ancestral re-embodiment very much a thing of the past, that they could



Fakeye: "Annunciation" at Seat of Wisdom Catholic Church, University of Ibadan



Fakeye: "Visitation" at Seat of Wisdom Catholic Church, University of Ibadan

have been incorporated into Muslim and Christian celebrations as has sometimes happened elsewhere in West Africa.

For better or for worse, the transformations wrought by the Saharan, Indian Ocean and Atlantic slave trades, by colonial government and resistance thereto, and all the developments in technology, education and communications through the past 150 years have been profound; but recent engagements between the local and the long-distant are also

manifestations of processes of very considerable antiquity. The painted or engraved illustrations of north African horse-drawn chariots found across the Sahara in the second and first millennia BC, mark the western and central trade routes also, subsequently, known to Islamic traders and travellers, suggesting that for as long as there has been a Sahara people have been going back and forth across it. In that sense (I am not here concerned with economics but with the facts of people moving from one place to another for whatever reason), what is now called globalisation is nothing new. Moreover, as the Afro-Portuguese ivories of circa 1500 (Bassani & Fagg 1988) suggest, artists making things for foreign consumption, or perhaps moving to work in foreign parts, is nothing new either. Even the brutalities of transatlantic slavery would produce, in due course, an enrichment of art in the Americas and in Europe; and it is also worth remembering that the experiences of another diaspora was the basis from which resistance to colonial rule was initiated. The West African intellectuals who were responsible were often the children of those who had been enslaved and liberated in Freetown. Many had travelled to Europe for high-level educational purposes, and on their return to they had the support of diasporic Africans from the Americas. This was also the context for the inception of photography, the earliest form of modern African visual practice (*Revue Noire* 1999), and of Africa-print fabric (Picton 2001, and 1995a); which is sort of where I came in!

REFERENCES

- Bassani E & W Fagg, 1988: *African and the Renaissance*, The Center for African Art, New York.
- Beier U, 1960: *Art in Nigeria 1960*, Cambridge University Press
- Beier U, 1961: Contemporary Nigerian Art, *Nigeria Magazine*, no 68, pp. 27-51.
- Carroll K, 1967: *Yoruba Religious Carving*, Geoffrey Chapman, London.
- Commission for Racial Equality, 1996: *Roots of the Future*, London.
- Deliss C, et al, 1995: *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*, Whitechapel Gallery London.
- Fardon R [ed] 1995: *Counterworks: managing the diversity of knowledge*, Routledge, London
- Fosu K, 1993: *20th Century Art of Africa*, revised edition Artists Alliance, Accra; 1st published 1986, Gaskiya Press, Zaria.
- Hassan S M & O Oguibe [eds], 2001: Authentic Ex-Centric: conceptualism in contemporary African art, *Forum for African Arts*, Ithaca, New York.
- Herreman F [ed], 1999: *Liberated Voices: Contemporary Art from South Africa*, Museum for African Art, New York.
- Hynes N, 2001: Yinka Shonibare: Re-Dressing History, *African Arts*, XXXIV, 3, pp 60-65, 93.
- Kunsthalle Basel, 2001: *Atta Kwami*.
- Kunsthalle Bern, 2000: *South Meets West*.
- Laotan A B, 1961: Brazilian influence on Lagos, *Nigeria Magazine*, 69, pp156-165.
- Njami S, 2001: El Anatsui, the thread of history, in P. Subiros *et al.*, *Africas, the artist and the city*, Centre de Cultura Contemporania de Barcelona, pp 94-95.
- Oguibe O, 1996: Photography and the substance of the image, in Clare Bell *et al.*, *In/sight: African photographers, 1940 to the present*, pp. 231-249, Guggenheim Museum.

- Oguibe O, 2001: The photographic experience: towards an understanding of photography in Africa, in Kunsthalle, Wien, *Flash Afrique: Photography from West Africa*, pp 9-15.
- Onabolu D, 1963: Aina Onabolu, *Nigeria Magazine*, 79, pp 295-298.
- Onobrakpeya B, 1985: *Symbols of Ancestral Groves*, Lagos.
- Onobrakpeya B, 1988: *Sahelian Masquerades*, Lagos.
- Onobrakpeya B, 1992: *The Spirit in Ascent*, Lagos.
- Ottenberg S, 1997, *New Traditions from Nigeria: seven artists of the Nsukka group*, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC.
- Phillips T [ed], 1995: *African, the art of a continent*, The Royal Academy, London.
- Picton J, 2001: Yinka Shonibare: Undressing Ethnicity, *African Arts*, XXXIV, 3, pp 66-73, 93-95.
- Picton J et al, 1998: *El Anatsui: a sculpted history of Africa*, October Gallery London.
- Picton J [ed] 1997: *Image and Form: prints drawings and sculpture from southern Africa and Nigeria*, Brunei Gallery SOAS.
- Picton J, 1995a [reprinted 1999]: Technology, tradition and lurex, in J Picton et al, Barbican Art Gallery and Lund Humphries, London; catalogue to 1995 exhibition selected by John Picton and Carol Brown, pp 8-31.
- Picton J, 1995b: Observers are Worried, a BBC Radio 3 broadcast 10.9.95, produced by Judith Bumpus.
- Picton J, 1992a: Technology, tradition and lurex: some comments on textile history and design in west Africa, in National Museum of African Art, *History, Design and Craft in West African Strip-woven Cloth*, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, pp 13-52.
- Picton J, 1992b: Desperately Seeking Africa New York 1991, *Oxford Art Journal*, 15, 2, pp 104-112.
- Picton J, 1991: On artifact and identity at the Niger-Benue confluence, *African Arts*, XXIV, 3, pp 34-49, 93-94.
- Picton J, 1990a: Transformations of the artifact: John Wayne, plastic bags, and the Eye-That-Surpasses-All-Other-Eyes, in C Deliss [ed], *Lotte or the Transformation of the Object*, published as *Durch 8/9*, Kunstverein, Graz, pp 36-65.
- Picton J, 1990b: What's in a mask, *African Language and Culture*, 3, 2, pp 181-202.
- Picton J & J Mack, 1989 [2nd ed]: *African Textiles*, British Museum, London.
- Williams R, 1976: *Keywords*, Fontana.