

MURAL PAINTINGS IN ILE-IFE: FROM SHRINE WALLS TO MODERN WALLS

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Introduction

Until about two decades ago, mural decoration as a course was not taught at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife. It only featured as a topic in other painting courses. Even though it was included as a course in the curriculum of the department since the 1979/1980 session, mural painting was not taught. When mural decoration eventually entered the curriculum, the development was applauded. Since then, the school has become an academic cauldron of studies on Yoruba trado-religious murals. Different scholars have initiated studies and experiments into local sources of pigment, as well as Yoruba colour cognition. All these have taken place against the backdrop of the Ori Olokun murals, and the campus architectural environment that gave importance and space to mural and mosaic decorations. This paper examines the period before the introduction of the course, the intellectual research into Yoruba traditional murals by Ifè scholars, the effects of this on their practice as well as that of their students and the results of their experiments in mural painting.

Various studies on Yoruba traditional murals are quite informative; and many Yoruba traditional murals and shrine paintings have been documented. This give us a sufficient database for further analysis and investigation. The genesis of research into Yoruba wall paintings is traceable to Beier (1960), who carried out a brief study and documentation of about ten shrine paintings and murals in Yorubaland and other places. Murals such as that for Orisa Popo in Ogbomoso, *Obatala* in Ila, *Irele* in Ikirun, *Oya* in Jebba, *Sango* in Pobe-Dahomey and a private house in Gbongan and Ilara were all executed using locally procured materials. Equally remarkable is the documentation of the whole corpus of shrines within the ancient city of Ilé-Ifè by Fabunmi (1969). Okediji (1986) and Campbell (1989) have also provided a better understanding of the art of shrine

painting. Since then, a good amount of research¹ has been done on shrine paintings in Yorubaland and beyond. Studies by Adebisi (1986), Folaranmi (2002a&b) and others have provided information about the characteristics and form of Yoruba wall paintings. The paintings are executed specifically for the veneration of the *òrisà* and very few for decorative and historical purposes. Okediji (1986) and Adebisi (1986) postulate that the art of shrine painting is traditionally the exclusive preserve of women in Yorubaland, while the materials used are similar in most situations.

These conclusions were reached by carefully examining Yoruba cultural values, religion, myths, tales, folklore and oral tradition. These have eventually helped to broaden our knowledge about these murals and their significance.

The traditional materials for these paintings were sourced locally from earth and vegetable matter from the same Yoruba geographical environment. All shades of brown and ochre, are derived from clay and soil materials, while red (*pupa*) are derived from vegetable materials such as *Ibuje* leaves (*Randia maculata*) and *osun* camwood; *elu* leaves provide indigo, while pure black (*dudu*) is sourced from *ijokun* leaves (*Mucuna solenei*), and charcoal. According to Okediji (1986) white (*funfun*) is obtained by heating eggshell to a certain temperature and grinding it into fine powder; it can also be derived from kaolin and chalk. To bind these materials together so that they adhere to the wall surface, congealed pap (*eko tutu*) is made into paste and added to the prepared pigments. The procurement and preparation of these pigments are laborious and tedious.

By the late 1970s some changes had been witnessed in the execution of these murals. Modern paints such as enamel and emulsion have been introduced to the art of mural painting in Yorubaland. In some places, there is frequent use of contemporary pigments in the painting of shrine houses. The Ogboni painting (plate 1a and b) in Ilesa is one of such paintings where factory produced enamel paints were used. Although almost on the verge of decline, the art of shrine painting is still practiced in Ogbomoso, Ile-Ife, Osogbo, Ilesa, Ofa, Ibadan, Oyo and various parts of Lagos. This tradition is still maintained by the Orisakire painting school in Ile-Ife and Ogbomoso. In Ogbomoso as in other parts of Yorubaland the repainting (*re-clothing the orisa*) of the shrine walls accompanied with drumming and dancing is an annual event. This also includes the

¹ See M. Òkédíjí, "Òrisà Ikire Painting School," in *Kurio Africana*, (1989) vol.1, No.2. p. 122; M. Òkédíjí, "Yoruba Paint Making Tradition," in *Nigerian Magazine*. (1986) 54, No 2, pp.19-26; V. B. Campbell, "Comparative study of Selected Shrine Paintings in Ilé-Ifè and Ilesa," (Unpublished M.F.A. Thesis Obáfèmi Awolowo University, Ilé-Ifè: (1992); V. B. Campbell, "Continuity and Change in Yoruba Shrine Painting Tradition," in *Kurio Africana*, (1995)1, No. 2. p.110; 38; S. Folaranmi, "Òrisà Popo Shrine Painting in Ogbomoso" (Unpublished B. A. Thesis Ilé-Ifè: Obáfèmi Awolowo University, 1995) S. Folàrànmí, "Òyó Palace Mural" (Unpublished M.F.A. Thesis 2000).

recitation of the deities' *oriki* – praise poetry. It is therefore not strange to find local artists who are well versed in the *oriki* chants of the deities especially when the bata drummers are performing (the *bata* drum is imperative for Ogun and Sango worshipers). At such times the painter is in a highly charged state of creative consciousness enabling him or her to create images that befit the *orisa* (Folaranmi, 2002a). Research into traditional Yoruba murals has influenced contemporary painting in Nigeria, especially the works of the *Ona* group of artists from the 'Ife Art School', and has also led to the study and teaching of mural painting in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts of Obafemi Awolowo University.



Plate 1a. Ogboni shrine painting in Ilesa. Photograph by Bolaji Cambell, 1989.

Murals in Ile-Ife

Ile-Ife, according to Yoruba mythology “is the first creation here below; the original home of all things; the place from which the day dawns; the enchanted holy city; the home of divinities and mysterious spirits” (Idowu, 1975:1). Oluorogbo is one of such divinities, whose shrine walls are bedecked with one of the most beautiful paintings in Ile-Ife, still retaining the use of locally procured pigments (plate 2). Painted in the

Yoruba colour range of red and white on a near black background. The priest described the forms as symbolic messages from the god by whom the painters have to be inspired before painting.



Plate 1b. Ogboni shrine painting in Ilesa. Photograph by Bolaji Cambell, 1989.



Plate 2. Oluorogbo shrine painting in Ile-Ife. Photograph by Stephen Folaranmi, 2009.

An addition to the traditional shrine painters are new crop of shrine painters who came on the scene in the late 1970s and 1980s. These painters often employ imported pigments for their work, mostly enamel and emulsion which provide a wide range of hues different from (the polychromal concept of) the Yoruba spectrum. Nearly all the



Plate 3. Mural at the forecourt of the Ori-Olokun Centre, 1968. Photograph courtesy of *African Arts*, vol.2, no. 3 (spring 1969).



Plate 4. Detail of mural at Ori-Olokun Centre, 1968. Photograph courtesy of *African Arts*, vol.2, no. 3 (spring 1969).

colours of the rainbow are expended in such murals. This makes it difficult to ascribe the symbolic connotations of the colours to the images on the painting. Campbell (1989:110) opined that some of these new paintings suggest an almost a surrealist trend. Surrealism is a 20th century art movement creating pictures derived from the world of dreams.

As the imported paints are much more durable than the traditional pigments, the market for traditionally produced pigments has seriously declined. Serious efforts have been made to find a better binding agent to add to the traditionally procured pigments so as to ensure fastness on walls.

Most of the paintings done with gloss or emulsion were executed by male artists who took part in the workshops organized by Ulli Beier, which later became known as the 'Osogbo School'. Many of these Osogbo artists have contributed immensely to the development of visual art in modern Nigeria, notable among whom are Twins-Seven-

Seven, Jacob Afolabi, Muraina Oyelami, Jimoh Buraimoh, Rufus Ogundele and many others. The Ori Olokun² workshop in Ile-Ife also provided local artists with an opportunity to showcase their new found skills in visual art, especially in the execution of murals.

For example, when the Ori Olokun started, Jimoh Buraimoh, Rufus Ogundele (now late) and Muraina Oyelami were commissioned to decorate the lower walls of the Ori-Olokun³ centre with murals (plates 3 and 4). These murals were perhaps the beginning of public murals in Ile-Ife. According to Agbo Folarin⁴ (pers. Com. November, 2006), Muraina Oyelami was also commissioned by Arch. David Geoffrey in 1975 to execute mosaic murals on two opposing walls of the link bridge at the newly constructed College of Health Sciences Building, while Jimoh Buraimoh created a mosaic mural at the bar of the Staff Club also on the university campus.

The Ori-Olokun murals were much bolder than the traditional murals with wide panels of colour in contrast to the intricate abstract decorations of shrines. The subject matter of these new murals on the walls of the university and the Ori-Olokun centre were different from the shrine paintings in Ile-Ife, although they were sometimes similar in their modes of expression and form.

The new inroads made by these murals on the university walls are a result of the commendable efforts to correct the shortcomings noted by Beier (1960:39). He had mentioned that few attempts have been made to carry over the traditional form of painting into new conditions and ways of life. The proliferation of murals on the university walls which bear semblance to traditional Yoruba shrine paintings in form and motif, can be considered as successful attempts in reproducing the traditional ideas of the Yoruba murals into modern contemporary life. The murals on the walls of the university are evidence of Yoruba traditional ideas and culture clothed in new imagery.

² The Ori Olokun Experimental Art Workshop (named after one of the Great artefacts of Ife) was established in 1968, under the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ife now Obafemi Awolowo University.

³ See D. Brokensha, Ori Olokun: A new Art Center, *African Art*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Spring, 1969) UCLA James S. Coleman African studies Center.

⁴ Interview with Prof. Agbo Folarin, former lecturer at the Department of Fine Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, November, 2006

Mural art on the university walls

The making of the 'Ife Art School' was a calculated attempt by the new university established shortly after independence to forge a synthesis of modernity with tradition, at a time when the new nation was in serious search of self identity. The history of the ideology that eventually shaped the philosophy of the school, which can be traced to 1962, the foundation date of the then University of Ifè now Obafemi

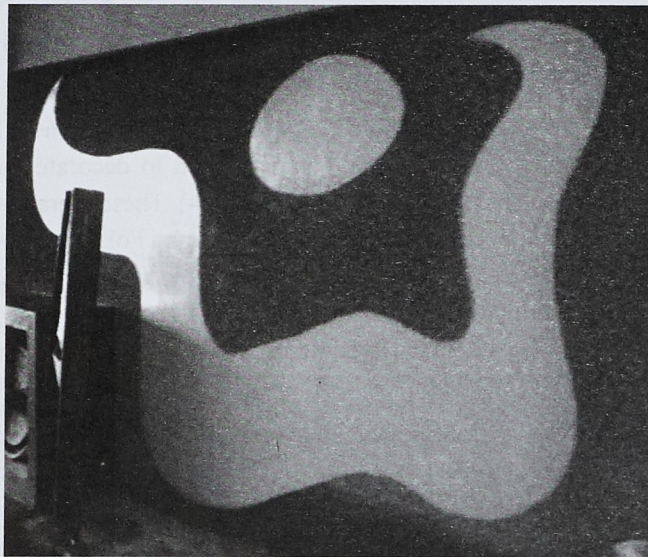


Plate 5. One of the murals at the Faculty of Education, Obafemi Awolowo University. Photograph by Stephen Folaranmi, 2006.

Awolowo University, Ile-Ife (Ademuleya and Folaranmi, 2006).

Mural decoration started immediately the campus of the University of Ife was being designed and constructed. One of the first murals are those of the Faculty of Education,

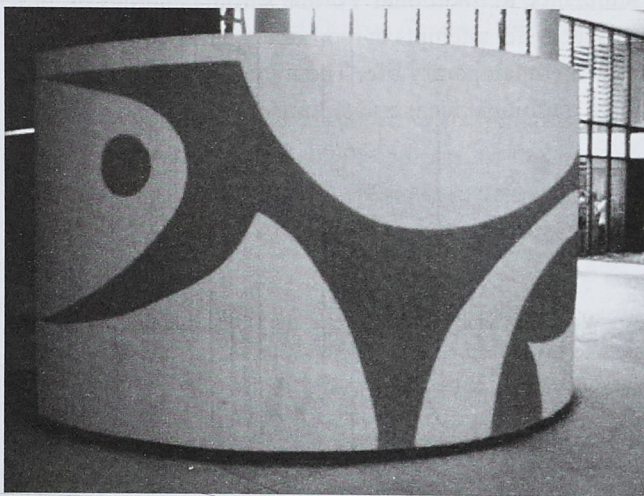


Plate 6. Floor 'O' mural, University Hall. Photograph by Stephen Folaranmi, 2006.

(plate 5), and those behind the security post of the 'floor O' in the University Hall (plate 6). The walls of the imposing Oduduwa Hall are also embellished with several bold murals one of which is titled *The Spirit of Man* (plates 7 and plate 8). It was designed and executed by an unidentified Israeli female artist. These monochromatic murals are a combination of lines

and abstract shapes. They were intended to harmonise with the building as well as enhance it.

In addition to the Oduduwa architectural mural is another colourful mural at the basement café of the Oduduwa hall, executed in the Osogbo style. This mural may also have been influenced by the Yoruba shrine paintings and the Ori Olokun experience. The forms on the work are similar to the ones found in many works done by products of the Ori Olokun experiment. It is also very possible that the artist who did the work was local, and not oblivious of the Ori Olokun developments. It is perhaps the first

mural executed in enamel pigment on the University campus. The work is however unsigned. Investigation into the originator of the mural has hitherto not been discovered (plate 9).

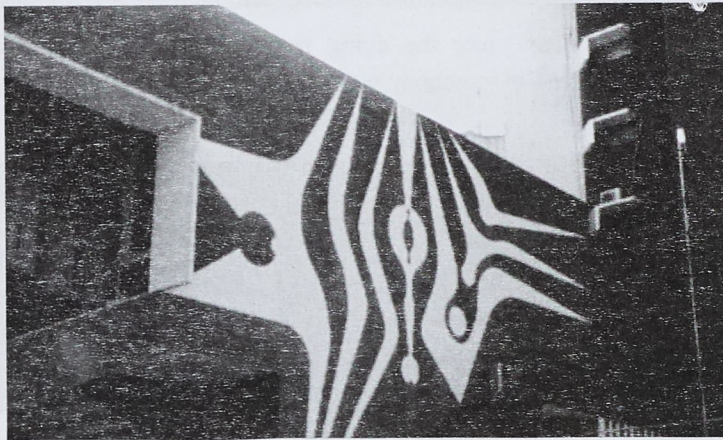


Plate 7. *Spirit of Man* on the exterior wall of Oduduwa Hall. Photograph by Stephen Folaranmi, 2006.

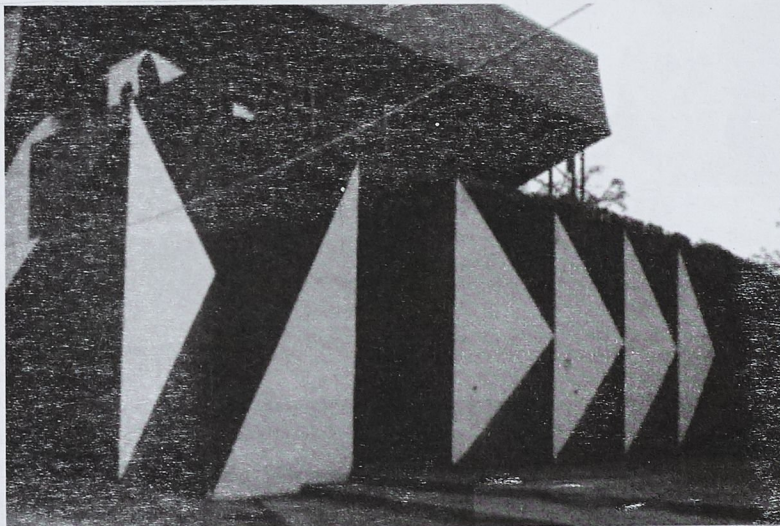


Plate 8. *Spirit of Man* on Oduduwa Hall. Photograph by Stephen Folaranmi, 2006.

Murals on African Studies Building

It is not only in the area of murals alone that the African Studies Building is indebted to traditional Yoruba art: It also borrows features from Yoruba palace architectural design which is reflected in the living spaces around the courtyards. In this case, the main courtyard happens to be the amphitheatre around which the all the offices and the pit theatre are designed. Folaranmi (2000:28) describes the building in this way, "Built in the Yoruba traditional palace design, it houses exhibition galleries, art studios, an indoor theatre, an amphitheatre and courtyards, filled with works of art. It also houses the visual and performing arts and a collection of traditional art.

Beier (1960:39) expressed his fears over the dying tradition of mural painting in Yorubaland in 1959 and wondered if somebody would ever make a thorough study



Plate 9. Oduduwa Hall basement café mural, enamel on wall.

of it. A number of scholars and artists have contributed to the development and adaptation of the images, forms and colours of Yoruba mural art into architectural,

aesthetic, religious and contemporary Nigerian painting, which brings us to the development of mural decoration by scholars and artists of the Ife Art School.

The first major mural decoration was the beautiful geometric mural on the Institute of African Studies Building commissioned for the university campus and designed by a professional artist of international repute, Professor Yussuf Grillo, one of Nigeria's foremost artists and an educationist. Although the mural was not executed by Grillo himself, the design was done by him and handed over to Architect Robin Atkinson who was then handling the construction of the building. Thus began the influence of the Zaria Art School on the new and "most beautiful university in Africa". Grillo's mural

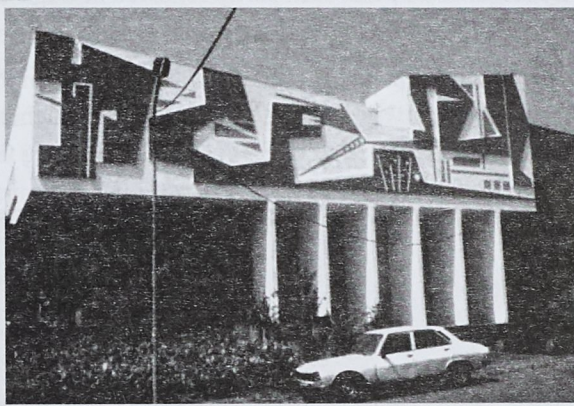


Plate 10. Grillo's mural on African Studies Building.
Photograph by Stephen Folaranmi, 2006.

complements the building both in colour and design, combining bas relief and pigment (plate 10).

When the Department of Fine Arts was officially established in 1975, it had on the staff former students of the Zaria Art School namely Rowland Abiodun, J.R.O. Ojo, R.I. Ibigbami and Irien

Wangboje. Others who were not from Zaria were Agbo Folarin, Babatunde Lawal, Akinola Lasekan and Ben Enwowu. Their involvement in the Ori Olokun project of Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Akin Euba, Michael Crowder and many others, developed a high sense of Yoruba aesthetics in the students of the new department. This result in the foundation of the Ona movement by Moyo Okediji, Kunle Filani, Bolaji Campbell, Tola Wewe and Tunde Nasiru. The Ona movement also included Audu Osi, John Amifor and Idowu Otun and Victor Ekpuk, among others.

Okediji was particularly instrumental to the study on Yoruba mural art. The combination of these artists and scholars, with the support and free hand given to them by the older colleagues in the 'school' led to the gradual development of a mural art tradition on modern walls which largely derived inspiration from the traditional Yoruba murals. Since then many others have joined in the crusade for the decoration of the walls, turning the African Studies Building into an exhibiting gallery. While Agbo

Folarin held sway in architectural sculpture which included relief and other related forms, Okediji and Campbell taught mural decoration with support from J.R.O. Ojo and Rowland Abiodun.

Even though the building is occupied by four departments, namely Dramatic Arts, Music, African Languages and Literature (now Linguistics and African Languages), the presence of the Department of Fine Arts is predominant. From which ever side you approach this imposing and one of the most beautiful structures on the university campus, the department's presence is manifest in mural paintings, giant pots, as well as numerous sculptures in metal, concrete, wood and other media. All these have made it the most admired and creative building on the university campus. The synthesis of modernity and tradition aimed at by the university has been partly achieved through the murals of the 'Ife Art School'.

The murals visible today were not the first to be painted on the walls in Ifè; many of the initial murals were executed on boards which were then mounted on walls. Others, previously created directly on walls, have been painted over several times during the



Plate 11. Section of Sunday Adebisi's mural, Soil on wall. 1995. African Studies Building. Photograph by Stephen Folaranmi, 2006.

last twenty years. It is most unfortunate that no proper documentation of the murals was carried out in those early years. It would then have been possible to trace the development of these murals from their beginning as an offshoot from shrine walls to the more modern and contemporary paintings of today. Aside from the mural done by Grillo, the oldest surviving mural executed in locally sourced materials is the one by Sunday Adebisi (plate 11).

Adebisi was one of the initial research scholars who carried out an in-depth study of the Oluorogbo shrine painting in Ile-Ife. Fifteen years after his mural was executed with soil materials, it remains beautiful and vibrant despite years of being exposed to unfavourable outdoor weather conditions. After almost 18 years, the mural was recently

retouched with modern pigments by Dotun Popoola between December 2012 and January, 2013.

Telling stories with the murals

Folktales, myths and legends were all used as inspiration for compositions rendered in soil and vegetable pigments. However, the new murals are done to fulfil the demands of the course curriculum of both the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes as well as to chronicle in visual form the events and activities of the four departments occupying the building. The paintings provide illustrations of the activities of these departments which can be apprehended at a glance. Adebisi's mural painted on the balcony linking the department of Music to the Pit Theatre is central to this visual experience.

Life on Stage (plates 12a, b and c) by Segun Ajíboye and Stephen Folaranmi is executed on the lower walls of the Pit Theatre. The three murals making up this composition represent the most common activities of the Dramatic Arts Department: drama and dance. Another visible mural was executed by the late Godwin Asuquo Jackson in 2002, it is one of the longest murals done on any of the walls on the university campus. The stylized human figures are engaged in activities related to the African Studies Building and the university as a whole (plate 13).

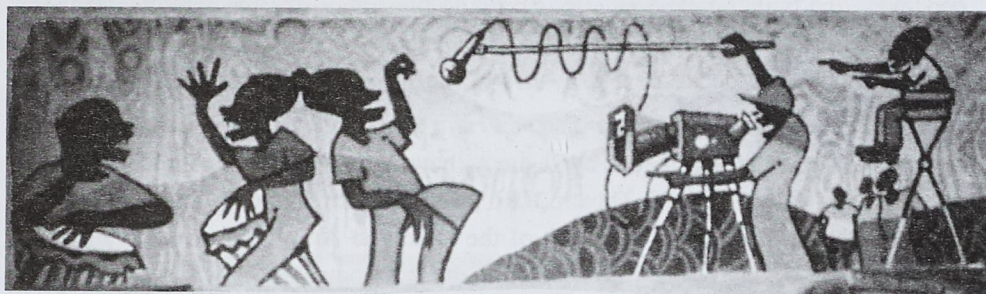
Other murals within the building have been painted on various walls of the Department of Fine Arts. They are chronicles of the different sections and areas of specializations in the department.



Plate 12 a.



Plate 12b



Plates 12a, b and c. *Life on stage*. soil and local pigments 1998. 2ft 10" x 10ft 11" each. Stephen Folaranmi & Segun Ajiboye. Photograph by Stephen Folárànmí, 2006.



Plate 13. *The university at a glance* by Godwin Jackson, 2002. Acrylic emulsion on wall. Photograph by Stephen Folaranmi, 2006.

There has been a great divergence and difference in the form, content and style of the present murals from those executed in the early 1980s when the research into shrine painting began.

In the last few sessions, attention has now been focused on specific studios, or areas of specialization in the School of Art (see plates 14 and 15a and b). Twenty years ago, murals by students and staff of the department were restricted to the African Studies Building. However, in the last few years, new murals are surfacing in other parts of the university where they were previously not allowed. The first examples of these are murals on the walls overlooking the staircase landings of blocks 1 and 2 of the Faculty of Environmental Design and Management buildings. These murals were executed by

Ayoola Ijisakin, Tosin Igwe, Rotimi Aderogba, Kunle Osundina and Ronke Ajiboye, all MFA students in between 2010 and 2011.

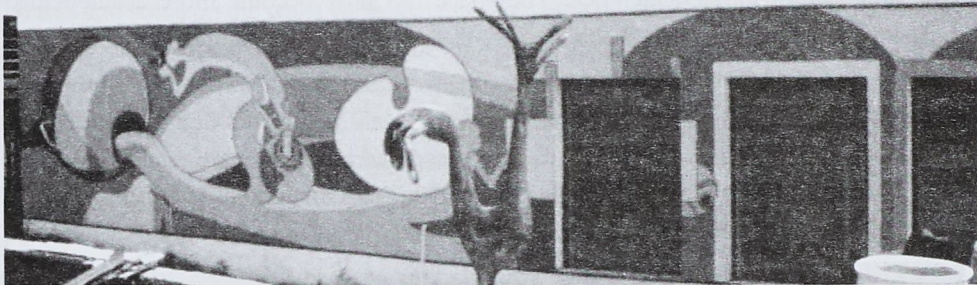


Plate 14. Mural by Bolu Adeyemi, Gbemi Oyinsan, Abiola Akande, Rhoda Mabadeje, Gbolahan Adams and Moji Odunlami., 2005, 17ft 5" x 5ft 7". Photograph by Stephen Folaranmi, 2006.



Plate 15a Mural by Ayoola Ijisakin, Kehinde Fagbule and David Adepegba, 2006. Emulsion on wall. Photograph by Stephen Folaranmi, 2006.

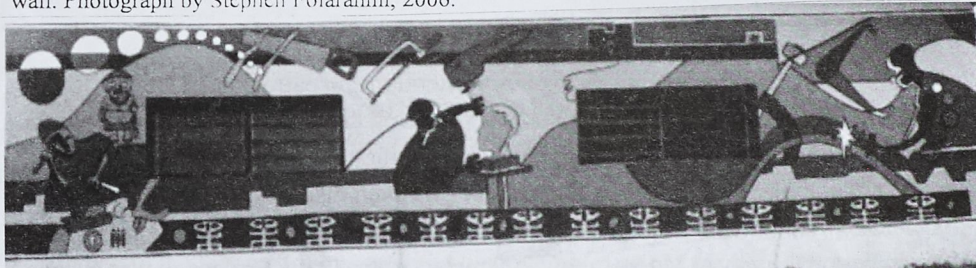


Plate 15b. Mural by Gbemi Momoh, Tosin Igwe, Kemi Ogungbemi and Tolu Akingbile. Emulsion on wall. Photograph by Stephen Folaranmi, 2006.

The second of such new murals (plate 16) is a group mural by the 2011⁵ graduating set of the department. Unlike the first set of murals which are hidden within the Environmental Design and Management building, this mural is one of the very first in

⁵ Fagorusi, Mesonrale, Oluwatosin Toromade, Oladiipo Abimbola, Abiodun Oladokun, and Stephen Gbenro.

open air on the walkway linking the Faculty of Education to Humanities Block One. It also attempts to give a visual representation of university life and the different disciplines from thirteen faculties. The space has now become more aesthetically pleasing due to the presence of the mural.

The last set of murals was added in 2013 by the graduating set of 2013. The four murals are all on the two entrance walls of the Environmental Design and Management Block Two, welcoming visitors into the new space occupied by the Department of Fine and Applied Arts. The tradition that started originally in the African Studies building is now gradually moving to the Environmental Design and Management building.

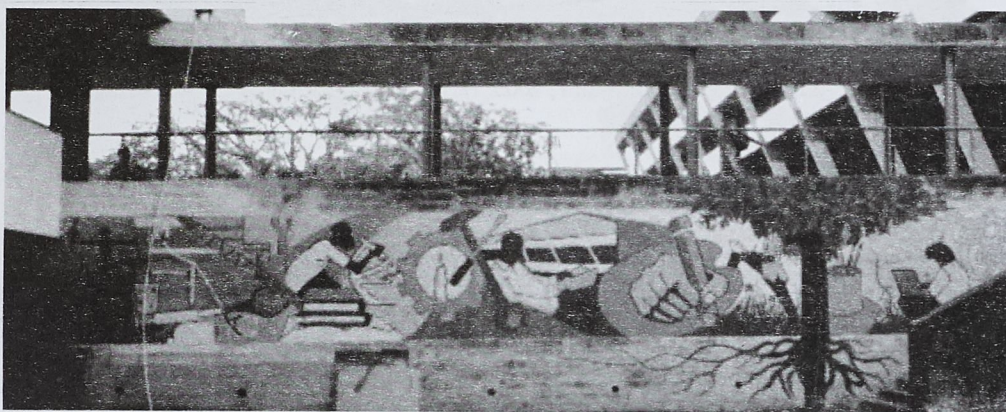


Plate 16. Mural by Class of 2011, acrylic emulsion, Fagorusi, Mesonrale, Oladokun, Toromade, Abimbola Oladiipo and Stephen.

The execution of murals is gradually gaining attention and patronage in the Ile-Ife town. A few schools and public places now have murals on their wall executed by artists and students from the university. It goes to show that the town-gown concept is still very much alive, long after the Ori-Olokun centre had been disbanded. One of such murals is the Oke-moogun mural (plate 17) painted in the Ogun shrine beside the Ife City Hall which lies on the way to Moore, about 200 meters to the Ooni's Palace. It was executed in 2012 and commissioned by the Commissioner for Culture in Osun State.

Colour usage and materials

One unifying factor in all the murals recently executed is the use of earth colours and neutrals, brown, ochre, greys and black and white. This is done purposely to blend the murals visually with the environment. The OAU campus has a lot of greens and neutrals in its natural environment, greys and ochre in the architecture. To create harmony, the murals are painted in these hues.

The pigments used in the execution of the majority of the murals were locally derived, procured principally from earth and vegetable matter. The initial murals were done on boards and some on the walls were also executed with these local pigments but with the addition of factory manufactured glue to ensure better adhesion. After 1997, some changes have been witnessed, first, with the combination of both factory produced emulsion paint and the locally procured pigments, and in recent time the sole use of emulsion paint. Some of the artists have also used textured surfaces created with a mixture of soil and emulsion (applied initially to the surface before sketching and painting) to execute their murals.



Plate 17. Oke-Mogun Mural (south view) Stephen Foláránmi, Peter Kiladejo, and Jonathan Imafidor, October, 2012.

The Artists

Yoruba mural tradition as well as those other traditional societies in Nigeria have been documented in the form of long essays and theses by students of the Ifè Art School over a period of 30 years. Apart from conducting theoretical studies, others have contributed in no small measure to the transfer of this form of painting to the walls in Ifè and beyond. Many others have utilized the motifs, images, symbols and pigments of Yoruba mural painting in the execution of contemporary paintings.

It is important to mention some of these artists whose murals have graced the walls of the University and Ile-Ife at one time or the other, foremost among whom is

Moyo Okediji who brazed the trail. Others are Bolaji Campbell, Sunday Adebisi, Bridget Nwanze, Kunle Filani, Tola Wewe, Idowu Otun, ROM Kalilu, Mashigo Abimbola, Abiodun Akande, Opeyemi Ajayi Idowu, Olusanya Ojikutu, Sadiq Olujide,

Olukayode Babalola, Ladipo Adeniyi, Victor Ekpuk, Deji Dan, Mudasiru, Segun Ajiboye Gbenga Ajiboye, Yemi Odusote, Dejo Akande, Stephen Folaranmi, Ademola Ogunajo, Akinyele Odofin-Bello, Victor Onibere, Azeem Bello, Adeniyi Olona, Ayanfela Adefi, Oyelayo Oyewusi, Jumoke Olusanya, Mufu Onifade, Godwin Jackson, Akeem Balogun, Joolade Adebayo, Akinlami Daniel, Gbenro Olusegun, Akinpelu Bodunrin, Rotimi Ajiboye, Yemisi Ajiboye, Gbemi Oyinsan, Bolu Adeyemi, Rhoda Mabadeje, Mautin Akande, Moji Odunlami, Adams Gbolahan, Gbemi Momoh, Kehinde Fagbule, David Adepegba, Tosin Igwe, Tolu Akingbile, Akeem Balogun, Fagorusi, Mesonrale, Oladokun, Oluwatosin Toromade, Oladiipo Abimbola and Stephen Gbenro, Adeyemi Abiola, Peter Kiladejo, Stephen Olalekan, Femi Olatunde, Adediwura, Ademola Adeniyi, Olamide Ayo, Akeem Dada, Moses Makinde, Tope Okunlola, Olojede, Kazeem Oyebowale, Olufemi Oyewole, Shedrach Oyewumi....

Conclusion

Traditional Yoruba mural art has been relevant to the development of the mural art tradition of the Ife Art School. This article aims to chronicle of all such paintings done by students, teachers and other artists who have passed through the school in the last 30 years. Many of the artists and scholars from Ife have benefitted immensely from the imagery and materials derived from the studies of this Yoruba mural tradition. It has also opened their eyes to the possibilities of using locally sourced pigments as an alternative or additive to expensive imported colours. Above all, in the world of global change and technological evolution which are fast turning the world into a global village where cultural and artistic identities are easily eroded and sometimes completely lost, the use of earth colours and Yoruba motifs by some modern Nigerian artists links their works to the locus of Yoruba artistic genius.

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