

# Contemporary Painting as Reflector of Yorùbá Cultural Values

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## Abstract

Every art form reflects the values of the cultural background that produces it, and visual culture in its present state is based on art and values from the past. This paper, therefore, examines the re-invention of culture and distinctive cultural ideals in contemporary Nigerian art. Specifically, it pinpoints contemporary Yorùbá paintings as visual markers of the Yorùbá value system. The study traces the origin of painting in Africa, from its earliest forms in African caves, shrines, and palaces, through the colonial and postcolonial eras to the present. Based on their contexts, eight (8) paintings that portray specific values of the Yorùbá and are ingrained with symbolic motifs, patterns and imageries are selected. Formal and contextual methods in art history are employed in the analysis of the data. The selected paintings serve as a visual document of the Yorùbá belief system; while contemporary Yorùbá artists are shown to consistently draw from their culture and design resources to establish a connection between the past and the present. The paper concludes that contemporary Nigerian art, generally, reveals new perspectives and meanings regarding art, culture, and identity in a fast-changing, multi-ethnic society like Nigeria.

**Key words:** Contemporary Paintings, Cultural Values, Symbolism, Iconography, Yorùbá.

## Introduction

Art<sup>1</sup>, in a generic term, is simply “an expression of the individual self” (Talabi 1979, 14). The word ‘expression’ as used by Talabi refers to the in-

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1 The word “art” as used in this paper refers to visual art, which is distinct from performing and literary arts.

dividual capacity for feeling, thinking and responding as a member of the larger social environment. Art, specifically, is a process and product in which skill, imagination, materials and experience are explored in innovative ways to communicate ideas and feelings which may be personal or shared (Fájuyìgbé 2018a). Painting, a branch of visual art<sup>2</sup>, is both a process and product. Conventionally, painting is a process of applying color or any other colored medium to varied surfaces such as canvas, board, paper, wall, ground, or exterior (outside) of a thing to create a representational or abstract picture or composition (Flemming 1980)<sup>3</sup>. As a product, painting is a representation of human intuition, thoughts, interactions and responses within a social setting. It is engaged for communication, educational, cultural, aesthetic, and philosophical purposes. In essence, painting generally describes both the act (process) and the outcome (product) of an idea, in addition to the ingenious ability of its maker.

As observed by Landau (n. d.), “a painting always describes something; it may describe an environment or the artist’s impression or feelings about a scene or person”. However, the subjects and contexts covered by painting vary depending on the artist, their cultural environment, and also the taste or preference of the art patron/collector. Painting not only records human history and emotions, it conveys a wide range of stories, emotions, intentions, ideas, and skills known to human civilization. As noted by Abodunrin and Oladiti (2015, 191), painting expresses messages, codifies them, and allows the spectator to decode and interpret meanings. It is not an overstatement, therefore, when Elkins’s (2005, 5) concludes, that: “Painting is an unspoken and largely unrecognized dialogue, where paint, either liquid or solid, speaks silent colossuses of colors and the artist responds in moods”. In this regard, painting is an effective tool for capturing the variety of human exploits and for constructing meanings.

Elkins’ submission that “the artist responds in moods” is an affirmation that artists (painters in particular) are socially responsible individuals. Their responsibility includes interpreting and documenting, visually, events and current debates in society. Villion (1952, 104) elegantly captures the social role of artists when he states that artists are “the chroniclers of the society in and by which they have lived.” This obligation, however, is subject to the artist’s ‘moods’ and ‘feelings’, which often frame their themes or subjects. Thus, as public commentators and social critics, artists have produced a large number

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2 Visual art comprises painting, sculpture, ceramics, textile, designs, photography, multimedia art, animation, and other creative works that require constant use of imagination, skill and innovation for communication, aesthetic and utilitarian purposes.

3 Now, new and unconventional materials such as threads, fabrics, plastics, copper wire and tree-backs among others have been introduced, which make painting more fascinating to viewers.

of ideas and images. They have provided humanity with some of the best records of the development of civilization, sometimes revealing more than the written word (Landau, n. d.). Painting, the focus of this study, has evolved through the ages and been explored, in various ways, to reflect and document the changing world and our ideas about it. It is expedient, therefore, to examine the pristine origin of painting in Africa.

### Origin of Painting in Africa

The evolutionary beginning of painting in Africa has been explicitly treated by scholars. According to Fosu (1986, 6) “the art of painting in Africa has its documented origins in the green Sahara Setuen 8000-6000 BC”. He expatiates further that the Neolithic engravings and paintings constituted the earliest body of art found in African caves. The antiquity of these art forms surpassed that of ancient Egypt and Nok, and are “found in varying density in different parts of Africa, but with a concentration in North Africa Mountains, the Sahara and the mountainous region of Southern Africa” (Adepegba 1995, 2). Paintings and engravings on rock surfaces are the earliest art forms in Africa, as pointed out in previous studies (Willett 1975, Fosu 1986). This notion is evidenced in most art traditions of the people, especially when compared to other visual art forms such as sculpture, pottery, and textile, among others (Ajiboye & Fájuyigbé 2019, 250).

Is painting the exclusive reserve of Western culture? Is it a cultural cum artistic legacy of colonialism bequeathed to Africa? As a two-dimensional art form, painting essentially took place independently in many areas of the ancient world, including Africa (Willett 1975, 4). The appearance of painting in Africa predates its discovery in Europe, based on archaeological dating of the earliest engravings and paintings on rock surfaces (Adepegba 1995, 2). In reference to ancient Egyptian painters and sculptors, Plato (cited in Forgotten Books 2016) declares that “painting had been practiced for ten thousand years” before the Christian era<sup>4</sup>. This assertion draws attention to the antiquity of painting as an art form; hence, its possibility of being the earliest art form in Africa cannot be overstated. In essence, painting is neither an exclusive reserve of any culture, nor is it a colonial legacy in African cultural history.

African rock art, dated around 3000 B.C., was followed by the tomb paintings of ancient Egypt and Nubia. At that time, wall paintings were common within the interiors of tombs and *mastabas*, and were used for decorative, religious, and political purposes (Lazzari & Schlesier 2008). The Painting also

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4 Forgotten Books (2016). “Painting: Its Rise and Progress from the Earliest Ages to the Present Time.”, Boston: John P. Jewett & Co. (online). [www.forgottenbooks.com](http://www.forgottenbooks.com)

“manifested in the examples of the murals of Neolithic rock walls, ancient tombs, and medieval Coptic manuscripts” before Africa’s contact with the West. The murals are found on cave walls and rock surfaces in many parts of Africa, from the Sahara in North Africa to the hills and mountain regions in Southern Africa (Duiker & Spielvogel 1998). Apart from rock surfaces and caves interiors, Africans have also explored painting through elaborate body decoration and scarification<sup>5</sup>, architectural decoration, wall (fence) painting and calabash carving (Béwàjí 2003). Shrine paintings<sup>6</sup>, a later development on African rock art, are found among many ethnic groups in Nigeria like the Yorùbá, Igbo, Edo and Ibibio, among others (Aig-Imoukhuede 1991).

The forms of painting mentioned above are indigenous to Africa because they evolved from Africa’s cultural milieu. More so, the paintings, like other African art forms, are untainted and uninfluenced by any foreign material, style or ideology (Fájuyigbé 2018b, 28). Painting in Africa, therefore, has progressed from its indigenous origins in caves, tombs, temples and shrines to the modern creative expressions in contemporary African art (Flemming 1980, Fosu 1986). Thus, the art of painting in Africa can be said to evolve from the well-composed and artfully rendered African rock paintings and engravings. A vivid example of this transformation is noticeable in contemporary Nigerian paintings (Adepegba 1995, 2).

Contemporary painting is seen as a framework for projecting contemporary ideas, interpreting current debates, and ensuring a continuum of the past in the present. It is obvious that contemporary African painting reflects a deep cultural affinity to indigenous African art, despite the disruptive impact of western cultural invasion on Africa’s artistic heritage. In this regard, the selected contemporary paintings are examined as means of revisiting Yorùbá (African) cultural values through the visual arts.

## **Contemporary Painting in Nigeria**

In its modern and contemporary manifestations, painting in Nigeria is a conscious development of Western artistic tradition introduced into the cultural life of the people via western education. The cultural contact between Africa and Europe affected not only the religious and traditional African life but also affected the material and visual cultures of the people. Subsequently, the forms, themes, techniques, styles, materials, and even the philosophy guiding

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5 The human body has been explored as an alternative surface for aesthetic and communication display, across time and space.

6 The art of shrine painting is left in the hands of women to execute, due to what Campbell (2008, 63) describes as “gender occupational preference” among the Yorùbá . In most cases, the materials and patterns used are similar from place to place.

creative and cultural expressions in Africa are influenced significantly (Fájuyìgbé 2018b, 28).

In Africa's past, artists often produce wall and shrine paintings to communicate aesthetic and cultural values that express the African mindset. However, modern Nigerian artists who have been trained in the European mode of painting have so far tried "to retain the traditional forms by ensuring continuity through adaptations and synthesis" (Filani 1998, 42). This development is crucial, as contemporary Nigerian artists continue to focus their visual lens toward a reconstruction of a distinct visual identity that celebrates Nigerian cultures and the African value system, generally.

The approach to art in pre-colonial Nigeria described as communal, through which the indigenous artist projects the mind and values of their societies, rather than focusing on their personal views or interpretations. However, after the contact with the West, there has been a gradual but steady change from community-focused to personal-motivated expressions in Nigerian art. The present individualist tendency exhibited by many contemporary Nigerian artists can be traced to the development of paintings in Nigeria (Ajiboye & Fájuyìgbé 2015, 255).

The beginning of contemporary paintings in Nigeria is entrenched within the history of modern Nigerian art which is traceable to the European influence on Nigerian visual culture. The "new art" which was first expressed in painting cannot be separated from the singular efforts and contributions of late Chief Aina Onobolu (1888-1963)<sup>7</sup>, the acclaimed pioneer of modern Nigeria art.

Onobolu's efforts set the stage for the evolution of contemporary Nigerian painting which began as an imitation of western art forms and styles, to prove that naturalistic art is not exclusive to Europeans and that Africans are also capable of such expressions. Earlier paintings in modern Nigeria were produced by Aina Onobolu and Akinola Lasekan, and these were depictions of market scenes, portraits of dignitaries and ordinary people in the colonial era of the 1920s and 1930s (Fosu 1986, Okeke 1999). Other concerns included aesthetic and political considerations in which these works functioned as visual documentary of this era (Kasfir 1999).

Adaptation of indigenous African symbols, motifs, and imagery by contemporary artists, however, began as a parallel development to the nationalistic struggles in Africa in the 1940s and 1950s (Fájuyìgbé 2012, 43). Before this adaptation, there was a tradition of artistic creativity peculiar to and

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7 Aina Onobolu was a self-taught artist whose background training in art began by imitating visuals (particularly, drawings and paintings) in European magazines and illustrated bulletins (Fájuyìgbé, 2018b).

appreciated by the peoples of Africa. There was also the coming of European explorers, missionaries, and colonialists respectively to Africa. The landmark contact between Africa and the West, which spanned 250 years, brought about a change of outlook in the conception, execution, and purpose of art in contemporary Nigeria and Africa (Mount 1989).

Over the years, contemporary painting in Nigeria has evolved from the imitation of Western representational arts into the present multi-stylistic and multi-media expressions with diverse thematic thrusts and symbolisms. From Onobolu's era to the present, contemporary painters in Nigeria have continued to use works of art as tools of social commentary (Fájuyigbé 2018a). However, the themes and contexts of some of these works have been consistent with the need to promote and preserve cultural values of the Nigerian people. For instance, Fajuyigbe and Ademuleya (2011) observe that artists from the Yorùbá nation have been exceptionally committed to the rejuvenation of cultural ideals through art. Many contemporary Yorùbá artists, therefore, are inspired by signs and patterns lavishly painted on walls and facades of Yorùbá religious shrines, temples, palaces, royal houses and sacred buildings. Similar motifs and patterns found on traditional arts and crafts such as carvings, pottery and textiles (*àdìrẹ*) also provide a rich repertoire of design sources and resources for the artists<sup>8</sup>.

Positioning migration and cultural diffusion as factors responsible for the advancement of painting in Nigeria, Filani (1998, 3) note that "painting took on a unique significance as it was used to represent the identity of certain groups, effectively excluding those who could not understand the symbols painted on the houses or bodies." These symbols are notable in Yorùbá indigenous murals and architectural decorations, in palaces and shrines where they serve aesthetic and socio-cultural purposes. With the advent of easel painting<sup>9</sup>, many of the traditional forms of painting are fading out. Nevertheless, the art of shrine painting among the Yorùbá continued well into the 20th and 21st centuries (Campbell 2008), even now.<sup>10</sup>

Contemporary Nigerian painting conveys a variety of ideas gleaned from the social, religious, political, moral, and physical life of the Nigerian people. Beyond this, contemporary Yorùbá painters reflect Yorùbá cultural values,

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8 Kunle Filani, (p.c. 2011). Dr. Kunle Filani is an Ona exponent and a former Provost, Federal College of Education, Osiele, Abeokuta.

9 Easel painting is a result of European cultural influences and the socio-cultural changes that came through western education.

10 Moyo Okediji, a Professor of Art and Art History, University of Texas at Austin, is presently re-enacting the art of shrine painting at Akodi-Ọrìṣà Cultural Centre in Ile-Ife, where he engages the creative abilities of young and middle-aged women. This is to ensure the continued relevance of Yorùbá shrine art in a contemporary African society.

history, and environment in their paintings (Fájuyìgbé 2012), to pinpoint culture as a crucible for social transformation. Contemporary Yorùbá artists such as Kunle Filani, Moyo Okediji, Tola Wewe, Kunle Adeyemi, Mufu Onifade, Segun Ajiboye, Stephen Folaranmi, and Stephen Adeyemi, among others adapt indigenous Yorùbá symbols, patterns, and motifs in their works. Unfortunately, Fájuyìgbé (2012) notes that many of the adaptations in contemporary paintings are not understood by many contemporary Yorùbá people due to a disconnect between the people and their art, or cum cultural heritage. Therefore, this study aims at investigating and analyze some invaluable cultural practices and values neglected or forgotten.

### **Statement of Research Problem**

Studies abound on contemporary paintings/painters in Nigeria, with respect to the use, adaptation, and projection of cultural motifs and patterns (Akatakpo 1997, Oloidi 2001, Adepegba 2007, Fajuyigbe 2012). The studies, mostly art reviews, focused on contemporary Nigerian artists' experimentations with respect to materials, techniques, styles, and the analysis of contemporary works with passive reference to the Yorùbá value system. Fájuyìgbé (2012) is more emphatic. He avers that quite a number of contemporary Nigerian artists of Yorùbá extraction are influenced by their culture because their works reflect some essential Yorùbá values. Citing art as a carrier and transmitter of socio-cultural values, Filani (1989) asserts that a society's value finds a place in its culture, and the overall intellectual development of its arts, beliefs, and social institutions.

In African society, the artist is concerned with integrating art into the daily activities of their people. Indigenous African artists often enjoy what Okeke (1979) describes as the "availability and commitment of a critical and discerning public versed in traditional iconography". In essence, the indigenous African society appreciates works of art embedded with iconographic symbols because it understands perfectly the artist's idea and intention through the visual cultural elements employed.

Today, changes in Nigeria's cultural environment and the changing values of the average 21st century Nigerian have made these core values very negligible. Indeed, we live in an age where values are perverted, and ideas that were once cherished are no longer appealing to contemporary people. A large number of the ideas and values embedded in African visual culture have lost their social appeal. This is due to changes that accompanied modernity and urbanization, including a lack of visual literacy, an unhealthy fashion craze, and a taste for foreign values among the people (Fájuyìgbé 2012). This paper, therefore, creates awareness regarding the waning cultural values between the

Yorùbá, and the need for their continuing rejuvenation and adaptation through contemporary art.

### Yorùbá Art and Values

Projection of communal values, order, and mutual coexistence among people is a central theme in African art generally, and Yorùbá art in particular. Indeed, the greatest task of the African artist, according to Akinola Lasekan<sup>11</sup> is to “do their best to reflect African ways of life in the best possible way” (Lasekan 1989, 36). That is, the artists are to re-enact the values of the past with the eyes of the present. In this regard, contemporary Nigerian artists, painters, in particular, have consistently produced a large number of works that interrogate, interpret, and rethink indigenous cultural practices and traditions. This is to mitigate what Okediji (2002) describes as the sweeping influx of foreign values and conducts, and avoid the waning impacts of African (Yorùbá) cultural ideals in the contemporary world.

Yorùbá values are condensed in the concept of *Ọmọ̀lúàbí*, a cultural framework for appreciating ethics and ethical behaviors in society and human interactions. The term encompasses pleasing human qualities, which the Yorùbá value so highly. As observed by Olanipekun (2017), *ọmọ̀lúàbí* concept is demonstrable in every aspect of human life, particularly in spoken word, truthfulness, hard work, diligence, self-control, social responsibility, and good character. These virtues contrast heavily with unethical behaviors such as bad character, covetousness, lawlessness, laziness, stealing, and all forms of moral decadence. In essence, the *ọmọ̀lúàbí* concept is an essential instrument for measuring and regulating human attitudes and thoughts in Yorùbá nation.

The idea of *ọmọ̀lúàbí* as a moral agency and container of indigenous values is at the core of Yorùbá social life. These values are found in Yorùbá language and philosophy and shape the people’s visual, performance, and literary arts. Sterling examples of Yorùbá literary works with a large amount of cultural and moral lessons include D. O. Fagunwa’s *Àdiitu Olodumare* (1954), J. F. Odunjo’s *Kuye* (1978), Oladipo Yemitan’s *Gbobaniyi* (1979), and Adebayo Faleti’s *Wón Rò Pé Wèrè Ni* (1982), among others. These classics contain ideals, stories, symbolisms, cultural icons, and legendary figures, proverbs, and lexicon structures of the Yorùbá. These are cultural indicators of the Yorùbá value system, through which the people’s visual culture such as songs, music, art, and crafts are fully appreciated.

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11 Akinola Lasekan was a pioneer of modern Nigerian art, and the first renowned graphic artist and cartoonist in Nigeria. He worked with Nnamdi Azikiwe’s African Pilot as cartoonist in the 1950s.



The aforementioned values can be imbibed through a healthy reading culture. As pointed out by Felicia Oamen,<sup>12</sup> “reading culture” is the level of independence which an individual or a people has attained when it comes to the act of reading”. Reading culture is at an abysmally low level among many Nigerian youths and has shifted towards an overt appreciation and assimilation of Western values obtained in western books, magazines, comics, lyrics, and movies. In retrospect, Fájuyìgbé (2012) observes that the African sense of community life is no longer valued; rather, individual taste emphasized at the expense of community values. Respect for the elders and interest in cultural education, including language and proverbs and the embedded values are rarely embraced in social discourses. It is not surprising therefore that contemporary Africans, especially the youths, are steadily losing touch with their heritage. In the absence of effective reading culture and disregard for the African value system among the youths, contemporary paintings and other visual art forms provide an alternative method of impressing Yorùbá (and African) values in viewers’ consciousness; hence, this study.

### **Analysis of Values in Selected Works**

In view of the above exposé, this study examines eight contemporary paintings based on their contexts and as indicators of Yorùbá cultural values. The selected paintings focus on Yorùbá values for motherhood and maternal care, gynecology and female reproductive health, divine guidance, beautiful character, communal happiness, and diligence, among others. The re-invention of these cultural ideals in painting aimed toward a better appreciation of Yorùbá culture and worldviews.

### **I. Value for Motherhood & Maternal Care**

“*Affinity*” (plate 1), a painting by Mufu Onifade<sup>13</sup> (2010), depicts a nursing mother breastfeeding her baby. The Influence of the Yorùbá carving style seen in the formal configuration of the painting. The figures are relatively stylized<sup>14</sup> which reflects what Adepegba (1989:9) describes as “revisitation and adaptations of traditional art forms”. The painting’s point of emphasis swivels around the hand, breast, and the baby’s face. The painting is an interesting contrast of

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12 Personal communication (August 10, 2015), Felicia Oamen (PhD) is senior lecturer, Department of English and Literature, National Open University (NOUN), Abuja.

13 Mufu Onifade is a multitalented contemporary Nigerian artist and founder of Aramism - a combined imitation of batik crack patterns in which figures and forms transformed into traditional woodcarvings of the Yorùbá. He explores and interprets his cultural environment; with the intent to reflect the diverse human creative abilities represented by the Yorùbá art.

14 Stylization is one of the modern tendencies in Nigerian art.

warm and cool colors. The warm colors signify a mother's affection and kindness, and the energizing nutrients contained in her breast milk. Breast milk is important for the steady growth of a baby and its health. The cool colors, however, symbolize a mother's care, tenderness, and commitment toward her baby.

The painting reflects the artist's capacity to capture the time when mothers often breastfeed their babies. Shades of complementary and harmonious colors that enclose the painting's pictorial layout background and foreground suggest a strong indication of early morning or late-night hours. "*Affinity*" illustrates and celebrates the intimacy and natural bond between mother and child. The woman's affectionate and intensive gaze affirms a mother's love, care, and commitment to the baby as the baby sucks with full concentration.



**Plate 1:** *Affinity*

Mufu Onifade (2010). Oil on canvas,

Photo: Michael Olusegun Fajuyigbe

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"*Affinity*" sounds the truism of the Yorùbá axiom: "*abiyamọ t'òótọ*" ("mother indeed"); "*iyá dùn*" ("sweet mother"); and "*iyá ni wúra*" ("mother is gold"). The figure's elongated ear affirms a mother's compassion and care for the baby and its needs. She hardly sleeps. Even if she does, she sleeps lightly and promptly attends to her baby as the need arises; particularly when the

baby craves the precious breast milk or cries to express any discomforts. The enlarged breast to justify the inherent iconography illustrates the importance of breastfeeding here. The Yorùbá expect a child to be breastfed, exclusively, at least for one year, though many mothers breastfeed their child for two years or more<sup>15</sup>. The painting is a symbolic representation of the mother-child relationship; particularly, the significance of breastfeeding to the total welfare of a child. The half-covered breast represents the life force that strengthens the bond (connection) between mother and child.

The contemporary Nigerian nursing mother would prefer alternatives, like baby food, milk, and other nutritional supplements, rather than investing quality time in to breastfeeding her child. The neglect of breastfeeding as a better, safer, and healthier way of infant nutrition is trendy among young mothers. This, according to Bola Irinoye, might be due to some erroneous idea that “breastfeeding over a long period could make the breast sag”.<sup>16</sup> The artist’s focus is pointedly affirmed in the painting. It is to encourage breastfeeding as a healthy norm for nursing mothers, and reject the myth that breastfeeding makes breast sag. Ultimately, the painting conceived to restore the art of breastfeeding as a value-adding practice among the Yorùbá for adequate awareness and education of young nursing mother.

## II. Value for Reproductive and Maternity Health

The idea of reproductive and maternity health is focused on in this painting titled: *Ìyá Abiye* (Safe motherhood) by Segun Ajiboye<sup>17</sup> (2009; plate 2). The artwork is a succinct representation and reminder of the values the Yorùbá attach to antenatal care and the welfare of the pregnant woman, from conception to delivery. Conventionally, among the Yorùbá, herbal (or pharmaceutical) solutions are concocted and dispensed to pregnant women as gynecological indications occur (Agbaje, 1989). Gynecology is the branch of medicine that deals with women’s health, especially with the health of women’s reproductive organs, while pharmacognosy is the study of natural drugs and the active substances found in plants (2004). The artist, therefore, represents Yorùbá method(s) to curtail natural or unusual complications that may arise during

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15 Esther Akinpelu (Personal communication, September 12, 2020). She is a retired midwife at the Obafemi Awolowo University Teaching Hospital (OAUTHC), Ile-Ife.

16 Personal communication (March 5, 2016). Bola Irinoye (PhD) is professor of nursing science, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.

17 Segun Ajiboye (PhD) teaches painting in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. He is a versatile artist and academic with focus on contemporary Nigerian arts and artists, with bias in landscape painting and cartoon. He specifically explores Yorùbá forms and colors to convey ideas that are relevant to the contemporary world.

pregnancy and to ensure the sound health of both the mother and baby before and after delivery.

The painting reflects the physiology of a pregnant woman, fully dressed in Yorùbá attire of *bùbá* and *ìró*, and adorned with the popular *sùkú* hairstyle. It also shows *ìyá àbíyè* (gynecologist) or *agbèbí* (midwife). Attired in white apparel in the background is *ìyá àbíyè*. The Yorùbá gynecologist uses a variety of herbs and plants with medicinal values to nurture the unborn baby and the expectant mother until her delivery. The painting is an iconic representation of an indigenous Yorùbá *onísègùn* (healer) or *ajáwé-wagbò* (pharmacognosist), who studies and adapts only the active substances found in plants and roots, for medication and therapeutic purposes (Agbaje 1989). The two pots in the background are earthenware containers used in preparing and storing special



**Plate 2:** *Ìyá Àbíyè*

Segun Ajiboye (2009). Oil on canvas,

Photo: Michael Fajuyigbe (2011)

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herbal solutions for health indications common to pregnancy. The variety of plants, fauna, flowers, tree backs, roots, and other mineral/vegetable materials projected in the painting are the materials explored by the *onìṣẹ̀gùn* in discharging her gynecological functions.

A Yorùbá adage “*ki àgbàdo tó d’aye, nkàn l’adiyẹ n jẹ*”, (hens feed on something before corn was discovered), captures the moral lesson in this painting. In pre-colonial and independent eras, the Yorùbá (and Africans generally) have peculiar ways of diagnosing illnesses and determining the appropriate treatments. As observed by Simpson (1980, 97) “the most common methods of treating patients consist of medical preparations made of mixtures of roots, leaves, barks, fruits, part of animals and rituals involving offerings to the *òrìṣà*. The medical preparations are administered orally, in ointments, by bathing, or through scarification.” Here, the artist tries to depict Yorùbá values for the curative power of nature as embedded in plants and roots, and the importance of maternity healthcare and all that pertains to human reproductive health. Despite the advances in the field of medicine, the indigenous Yorùbá approaches to gynecology and pharmacognosy are still relevant today, especially in the aspects of providing necessary medications to combat seen or unanticipated complications during pregnancy, child delivery and post-natal periods.

### III. Value for Divine Wisdom and Guidance

*Asòròdayò*, a batik painting by Stephen Adeyemi<sup>18</sup> (2012, plate 3), is a two-dimensional rendering of Ifa divination corpus, an iconic representation of ancient wisdom of Yorùbá life, philosophy, thoughts, and cosmos. *Ọ̀rúnmilà*<sup>19</sup> is the central figure in the Ifa corpus and custodian of ancient wisdom (Bamidele, 2004, Abimbola, 1977). The Yorùbá regard Olodumare as the ultimate source of wisdom and divine wisdom, whose quintessence and glory cannot be fathomed by mere mortals; hence, the myriads of names crafted to reflect his majestic personalities (Adeoye, 2005). One such name, codified in *Ọ̀rúnmilà* is “*asòròdayò*” (the harbinger of joy).

Ifa is an ageless, bottomless, and endless flow of wisdom that, over the ages, has sustained the Yorùbá people in understanding the mysteries of life as well as solving the constantly changing problems associated with living (Fájuyigbé 2012). He stresses that Ifá is appropriate in our contemporary age as a tool of regulating order in human affairs. This is succinctly captured by

18 Stephen Adeyemi is a painter and graduate of Fine Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. He presently explores various media to projecting Yorùbá cultural values, motifs, patterns, imagery and color symbolism.

19 *Ọ̀rúnmilà* is Yorùbá god of divination, wisdom, truth and revelation; and it serves as a guide to other gods.

Egberongbe (2005), when he describes Ifá as “the esoteric word or command of Olodumare, the Supreme Force, in control of the universe; it is embedded in all things of nature (dead or alive), the corollary of which is the compendium of spiritual cosmology that emanated from Oduduwa race (Yorùbá) of Nigeria”. In essence, Òrúnmìlà’s insightful ability is helpful in unravelling the secrets within the cosmos to man.

Adeyemi’s painting is a synergy of Yorùbá verbal and visual arts, rendered in the characteristics of colors and symbolic motifs that are indigenous to the people. The dominant colors are indigo and ultramarine contrasted with hues of red and yellow ochre. At the foreground is a circular *opón Ifá* (divination bowl)<sup>20</sup> with an embossed edge endowed with spiritual and cultural patterns/motifs. *Èrindinlógún* (sixteen divination cowries) and *èjiogbè* sign strategically placed in the center of the bowl to represent the classified corpus of mythical codes in Ifa divination system. *Opón Ifá*, *èrindinlógún*, and *iróké* (divination tapper) are used in divination. A central ritual within the Ifa tradition. *Opón Ifa* among the Yorùbá is a paraphernalia of Òrúnmìlà, the god of wisdom, truth, and revelation; and it serves as a guide to other gods. The emphasis in Ifa divination is the need to understand the nature of a person’s *orí* (head). When faced with life’s challenges or dilemmas in decision-making, one can consult his/her *orí* (head) or *elédàá* (creator) for divine guidance through the instrumentality of Ifa.

The symbolic motifs in the background are suggestive of human desires and challenges. This work is an indicator of Yorùbá value for wisdom in decision-making, and the search for divine guidance in human endeavors. Rather than gamble through life, the Yorùbá encourages humans to consult Olodumare, the Supreme God, and has the power to avert evils in their life’s journey. Disrespect for divine guidance has brought untold hardships to humans, who, most times embrace humanistic concepts for living, and ignore the intervention of an omniscient and omnipotent God in their affairs.

#### IV. Value for Beautiful Character

This painting by Mufu Onifade (2008) is the portrait of a young lady. She is elaborately adorned with body and hair ornaments, intricate hairstyles, and a variety of beads. Rendered in cool colors of blue and brown with highlights of milk white and vermilion red, her appearance is that of a typical African princess and symbolizes a paragon of beauty with ennobled character, traceable to holistic grooming in indigenous cultural education. She exudes humility,

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20 *Opón Ifá*, with diverse imageries, is the most significant of the paraphernalia used in Ifa corpus.

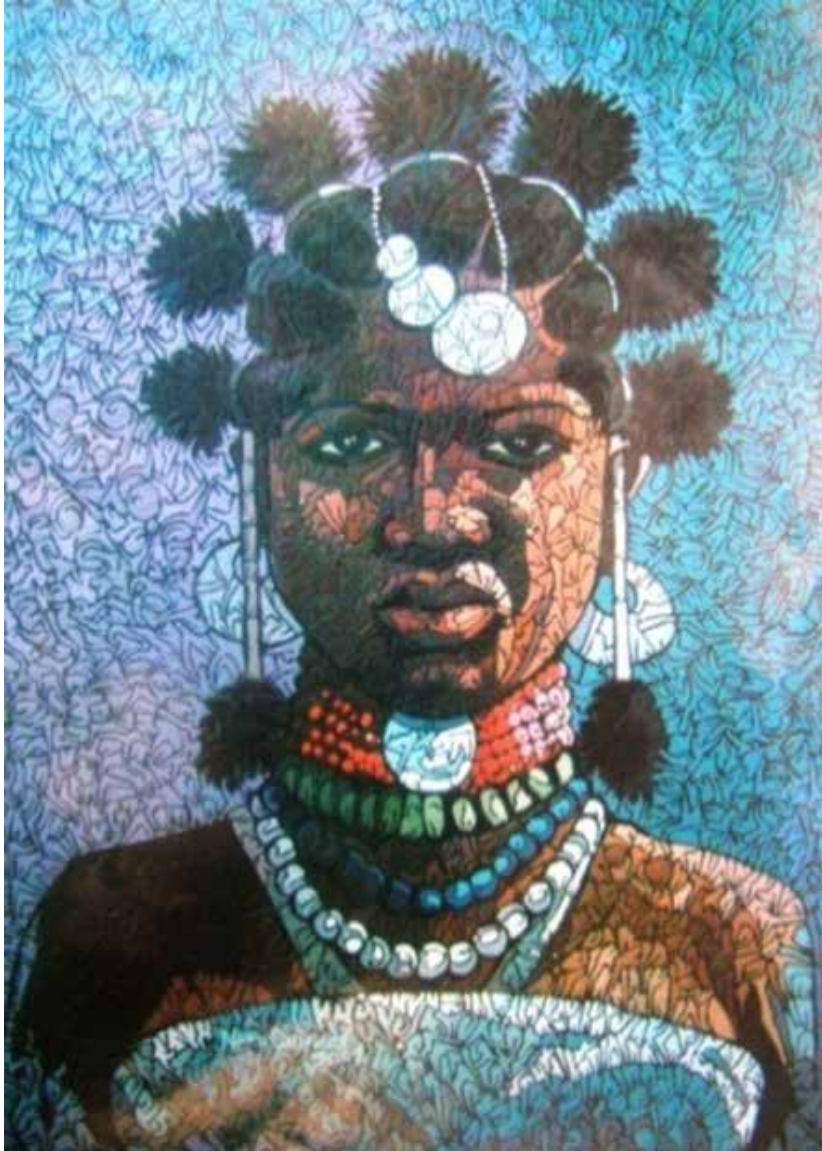


**Plate 3:** *Asòròdayò*

Stephen Adeyemi (2011). Batik painting,

Photo: Michael Fajuyigbe (2012)

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**Plate 4:** *Awéléwà*

Mufu Onifade (2008). Oil on canvas

Source: Ara Studios, Lagos

This artwork is reproduced with the permission of the artist.



calmness, self-control, comeliness, moderation, and a quiet glow; hence, this title: *Awéléwà* (impeccable beauty).

Positing a link between virtue and beauty Olanipekun (2017) states that *ìwà t'ó rewà* (beautiful character) is a key indicator of *iwa omólúàbí* (virtuous character). *Èwà* (beauty) is pleasurable sensation that stimulates the senses, and, as stated by Abiodun (2001), *ewà* is a significant aspect of Yorùbá aesthetics<sup>21</sup>. He explains further that *ewa ode* (physical beauty) without *ìwà rere* (good character) is a sham; hence, it is deceptive and vain<sup>22</sup>. The Yorùbá believe that anyone called beautifully (“*l'ewà*”) is physically, morally, spiritually and psychologically pleasing in attitudes and thoughts. Nwoko (1978) affirms this assertion when he states that, among Africans, the ideal beauty is a quality deeper than the surface.

The Yorùbá consider character a measure of ideal beauty and positive aesthetic experience. Hence, the phrase, “*ó wuyi*” (it’s appealing) or “*ó dára*” (it’s good) aptly describes a person of beautiful character. A truly beautiful personality should exhibit virtues that promote good human relations and social responsibility. In summation, this painting is a combination of impeccable beauty and virtuous character. This “ideal beauty” is rare among contemporary Yorùbá people, the youths in particular, who often over-emphasize physical beauty at the expense of beautiful character.

## V. Value for Hardwork & Diligence

In Yorùbá culture, hard work and diligence are crucial to any successful endeavor, especially in business, finance, and home management. Having a stable and sustainable source of livelihood cherished as the value that dignifies an individual; hence, no real man should be ashamed of his job. The Yorùbá counsel everyone to work, even if it is a menial job. They regard begging as an occupation for vagabonds and the indolent who often give excuses for their unproductive lifestyle. Begging is shameless, an insult to human integrity and dignity. A working individual admired for his diligence, however, low income. To show the seriousness with which the Yorùbá abhor begging, they encourage the physically challenged to acquire creative skills that would bring stable income, instead of resorting to begging as a means of livelihood. In this context, Odunjo’s (1961) classic poems: “*Iṣé ni òdògùn iṣé*” (“work is the antidote for poverty”) and “*Iṣé ẹni ni iṣé ẹni*” (“your profession is your work”) are very

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21 Aesthetics is the positive essence of an experience of beauty and goodness (Nwoko, 1978).

22 In African aesthetics, particularly among the Yorùbá and Igbo, a great emphasis is laid on the “good”, and not on the “beautiful”. Goodness in this context refers to a quality that is acceptable to everyone (Nwoko, 1978).



**Plate 5:** *The Beggar*

Dotun Popoola (2014). Oil on canvas

Photo: Michael Fajuyigbe (2014)

This artwork is reproduced with the permission of the artist.

instructive<sup>23</sup>. The poems focus on the need to rekindle the values of diligence, resourcefulness and work among the youths, and encourage them to embrace a value system that focused on the dignity of labor and purposeful endeavors.

Dotun Pooola's<sup>24</sup> painting, *The Beggar*, 2014 (plate 5) depicts begging as a social menace and mockery of the socio-religious institutions that permit it to thrive. Strangely, the beggar's appearance and pictorial ambiance of the work imply that begging is a lucrative business. It is now common to see able-bodied persons engage in begging as a means of livelihood. Adeoye's (2005, 91) submission on Yorùbá's view of indolence is instructive. He asserts thus: "òlẹ̀ lápá lásán, kò lẹ̀ fi r'oko; òlẹ̀ lápá lásán, kò lẹ̀ fi yẹ ònà", meaning that 'the sluggard has hands, he cannot farm; the sluggard has hands, he cannot work.

"*The Beggar*" captures the art of begging while "*Ajé*" (plate 6) by Kunle Adeyemi<sup>25</sup> revolves around the idea of money as a legal tender and reward for hard work. The artist uses various vestigial forms of money to express the personality of the goddess. The hues of light brown surrounding the main object: hands spilling different forms of money such as cowries, manilla, and coins from a sack, create a cool ambiance that accentuates the thematic focus of the painting. In addition, the motifs, arranged in a crisscross format background, capture the symbolism and various forms of money among the Yorùbá.

"*Ajé*" is Yorùbá goddess of trade, commerce, and wealth; a living essence that symbolizes 'profit' or 'reward' (Fájuyìgbé 2012). The Yorùbá believe that money, "*owó*", is both a material and spiritual entity; hence, its deification as the existence and embodiment of "*Ajé*". The only way to curry the goddess' favor is to become an addict for hard work, financial intelligence, and prudence; and eschew ostentatious living and wastefulness. The importance of *Ajé* in Yorùbá life and philosophy, especially for traders, is summed up in a special praise song dedicated to the goddess. Market women sometimes recite the song to seek *Ajé*'s support to curry her favor for good sales and profits in their daily transactions. The song, according to Madam Alice Fiola<sup>26</sup> stated accordingly:

*Ajé, ògúgúlúsò, onísò ibòji*  
*Wá fi isò mi se ilé l'oni*

23 For further reading, see *Akojopo Ewi Aladun* by J. F. Odunjo (1961). Lagos: Longman Nigeria.

24 Dotun Pooola is a versatile contemporary Nigerian painter and sculptor. He has participated in several solo, joint and group exhibitions in Nigeria and abroad.

25 Kunle Adeyemi is a leading contemporary Nigerian artist, based in Lagos, Nigeria. His paintings are replete with profuse use of motifs, patterns and symbols.

26 Personal communication (June 5, 2014). Mrs. Alice Fiola is retired administrative secretary, Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.



**Plate 6:** *Ajé (Legal Tender)*

Kunle Adeyemi (2004), Oil on canvas

Source: Kunle Adeyemi Studios, Lagos.

*Kí n r'ówó je, r'ówó mu*

*Ajé, ògúgúlúsò, trader of the shades,  
Today, let my shop be your abode,  
That I may have money to eat and drink.*

*Ajé* is the basis for all human endeavors. Thus, in this painting, the artist directs viewers' attention to the importance of money as a means to an end, to both material and financial ends. Every individual, society, institution, and nation, needs money to survive, even to accomplish personal desires. Hard work, diligence and fair play in business interactions are values required not only in financial matters but also in all human engagements. Humans' search for financial comfort and material blessings is a never-ending struggle. Indeed, the paths to success are laced with thorns and challenges; it takes diligence to journey along. *Ajé* only favors the diligent; hence, the painting stresses the importance of hard work and diligence in human development. The Yorùbá would rather encourage the youths to embrace these values as the pathway to prosperous living than see them engage in antisocial behaviors like stealing, hooliganism, internet defrauds, and begging.

## VI. Value for Communal Happiness & Entertainment

The Yorùbá place a premium value on communal happiness and peace. This is evident in their festivals, celebrations, and entertainment, through which they gratitude to Olodumare for his diverse blessings towards them. It is an optimistic gesture for the Yorùbá to celebrate and ensure communal happiness, in spite of the unpleasant issues they face daily. It is an understatement that the Yorùbá love merrymaking; hence, the cliché “*ówàníbẹ̀*”<sup>27</sup> (“it’s happening there”). The painting: “*Ìyá Ìlù*” (plate 7) by Kunle Adeyemi and “*Àríyá*” (plate 8) by Gbolade Omidiran’s<sup>28</sup> are hereby examined as reflectors of these values.

“*Ìyá Ìlù*” is a mixed media inspired by the tapestry design on Yorùbá *agbádá*,<sup>29</sup> Yorùbá music, and drum patterns/motifs. The emblematic forms in the painting include *iyá ilù* (master drum), *gògò* (drum stick), *agbádá onà* (embroidered garment), *agogo* (gongs), drum strap, and the northern star, among others. The drum represents melody and celebration, the drumstick regulates

27 This phrase is a satire used to describe the people’s over-indulgence in merriment and entertainment.

28 Gbolade Omidiran is a contemporary Nigerian painter and mixed-media artist. His works are in private and public collections in Nigeria and abroad.

29 *Agbádá* is an elaborately embroidered gown for men, especially on special occasions. It is called *babariga* among the Hausa/Fulani people of northern Nigeria.



**Plate 7:** *Ìyá Ìlù*

Kunle Adeyemi (2002), Mixed media  
Source: Kunle Adeyemi Studios, Lagos

the lyrics and acrobatic displays of *bàtá* dancers to the pleasure of listeners and viewers. As a significant part of *ìyá ilù*, the miniature gongs (*agogo*) adorning the drum rim are designed to accentuate the drumbeats and the message encoded by the drummer. The drum strap ensures the balance of the drum in the hands of the drummer, while the northern star depicts the cross-cultural influences on Yorùbá *agbádá* design.

As the lead instrument in Yorùbá musical ensemble, “*Ìyá Ilù*” signifies a device employed by the master drummer to regulate the melody, lyrics, and rhythms emanating from musical instruments, including dance and choreography. It requires a skillful master drummer, with a lead drum to produce good music, especially one that will relax the body, inspire the mind and fortifies the spirit. Thus, the Yorùbá adage “*kò sí ẹ̀ni tó mọ̀ èdè àyàn bí ẹ̀ ni tó mú ọ̀pá ẹ̀ lówó*” (“no one can decode the drummer’s language, like the person with the drum stick”) aptly underscores the importance of music as a tool of communication, education and social commentary among the people.

The painting, “*Àríyá*”, depicts two Yorùbá *bàtá* drummers and melody makers in flowing embroidered *agbádá*, adorned with popular Yorùbá caps (*fila*). Apparently, the drummers are on the stage where they churn out music and beats to the satisfaction of an imaginary audience. The moonlight illuminates the picture plane to reflect the drummers while displaying their skill with the drums. The cool, friendly, and joyful ambiance in the painting provides people the opportunity to relax after a long day’s work and sometimes on weekends. The artist to denote the excitement, peace, and joy of the tranquil environment skillfully explores the hues of brown, blue, and dark colors.

“*Àríyá*” emphasizes merry-making through songs, dance, music, and light refreshment, especially after profitable labor. It does not suggest, however, an invitation to unbridled hedonistic tendencies and impudent behaviors that are now rampant among contemporary Yorùbá people, the youths in particular. It is not an antisocial behavior to seek happiness or gratify the need for entertainment, but the gratification of such desire should be as and when due, and become a norm.

In summary, the two paintings, “*Ìyá Ilù*” and “*Àríyá*” express Yorùbá value for communal happiness and celebration; particularly, during special events like cultural festivals, coronations or naming ceremonies, housewarming, and in occasions of bounty harvests, among others. The Yorùbá proverb “*ìlù ló n mú ara ilù dun*” (“music makes people merry”) underscore the essence of joyful celebration both at the individual and communal levels. Communal happiness depends mainly on *ìró ayò*, or *nńkan idùnnú* (good news), and people often roll out drums in celebration and appreciation. However, bad news and unfavorable events, such as insecurity of life and property would make people sad and despair; hence, the need to constantly remind the public



**Plate 8:** *Àrìyá*

Gbolade Omidiran (2009), Oil on velvet.

Photo: Michael Fajuyigbe (2010)

This artwork is reproduced with the permission of the artist.



about the importance of these values. Communal happiness is a product of communal peace, security, and prosperity, and they are indicators for communal development.

### **Findings and Recommendations**

This study shows the visual imagery in the selected paintings are containers and reflectors of values indigenous to Yorùbá people and Africans generally. It reveals the design archives and sources of the Yorùbá artist, and the fact that many contemporary Yorùbá painters often adopt new forms and ideas from Yorùbá culture and traditional iconography to revitalize indigenous values cherished by the people.

Museums are reservoirs of our cultural heritage, values, and ideals. In this regard, the study recommends that contemporary Yorùbá (Nigerians) should visit art galleries and museums regularly for adequate appreciation of African cultural heritage and values. This exposure will stimulate viewers' intellect and guard them against unhealthy acculturation rampant among Nigerian youths. It is believed that such an experience will herald a new consciousness among the old and young regarding the philosophical values of art.

As a responsive public analyst, the contemporary artist can interrogate, examine, interpret and document social discourses through contemporary art. Therefore, contemporary African artists should be more creative and conscious regarding how they package and integrate African cultural symbols and values into the daily life of their people through regular art exhibitions and activities.

### **Conclusion**

The rejuvenation of culture through contemporary paintings is the essence of this study. It projects Yorùbá visual symbolism as a tool for expressing and recording the people's cultural values, which include good character, ideal beauty, healthy motherhood, intelligence, divine guidance, diligence, hard work, and communal happiness, among others. Iconographic symbols are carriers of human values and ideas and pinpoint the communicability of visual arts and their impacts on viewers' aesthetic sensibility, human attitudes, and belief systems. Induced by indigenous African value systems and behavioral mechanisms, contemporary art provides spontaneous alternatives for the average Nigerian in view of their overt borrowing from foreign cultures/values. Contemporary art, as explored by contemporary artists, generally reveals new perspectives and meanings regarding the relatedness of art, culture, and identity in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and fast-changing society like Nigeria. Painting, therefore, is one of the most effective means of educating the Nigerian (Yorùbá) youths regarding their artistic heritage and value

systems. In the context of this study, contemporary art (and humanities generally) remains the surest path to sustaining Africa's cultural renaissance in contemporary times.

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