

Building a Sustainable Future in Museums: Decolonized Perspectives of the University of Lagos Museum Collection

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Abstract:

This article explores the role of the University of Lagos Museum Collection in decolonizing the Nigerian mind and promoting a return to African roots and ideology. The collection was stored away in the University of Lagos Library archives from 1977 to 2012 when the Museum Section of the University of Lagos Library was inaugurated. At this point, the collection was organized for display to the public. It has largely been unstudied, except for an M.A. project by this author in 2009 and a few mentions of the collection in scholarly articles by a few other researchers. Using a case study approach, the article explores the potential of the University of Lagos Museum Collection in decolonising Nigerian minds and promoting a return to the roots and precolonial African ideals. It evaluates the impact of the museum's constructions on Nigeria's historical and cultural studies. The research data is gathered through the consultation of literature, the artworks in the collection, and interviews with actors in the field. The study scrutinizes the University of Lagos Museum collection as one of the surviving archives of the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC 77), by examining how the artworks in the University of Lagos Museum archives are being used as a means of reorientation of the postcolonial Nigerian mind. The study explores the historical significance of museum archives in shaping individual and collective memory, and how museum collections and displays can be used to challenge dominant narratives and ideologies. The findings suggest that museums can be powerful tools for decolonization, and the University of Lagos Museum Collection in particular holds great potential for this purpose. Overall, this article contributes to the ongoing discourse on decolonization and the role of museums in shaping national identity and memory.

Keywords: Decolonisation, Museum, Identity, Sustainability, globalisation

Introduction

Colonialism and its offerings were delivered with a lot of conflicts to the African self and identity. This left a lot of Africans with a mixture of confusion and illusion about the self. At the dawn of independence, the task at hand for most African nations was essentially to redefine

the African identity, which took place in many African nations in the form of conferences and festivals to assert African pride. One such festival was the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture otherwise known as FESTAC '77, where Africans from the motherland and the diaspora all came together to assert African pride and their contributions to the development of the world.

The inner desire of the organisers of the program to kick-start a gradual decolonisation and rebirth of the mind and values of black and African people across the world was adequately expressed in the opening speech delivered at the colloquium by General Olusegun Obasanjo, the Head of State of Nigeria at the time. General Obasanjo stated, “the standing tragedy of all blacks and Africans wherever they may be, is that their tongues have been pulled out and they must speak in strange tongues” (Nigerian National Commissions for UNESCO. [n.d.]). He cautioned that Africans and black folks across the world need to exercise painstaking dedication, humility, and patience to overcome this standing tragedy (UNESCO. [n.d.]).

FESTAC '77 held significant patriotic implications to the leaders who were part of its organisation. The individuals responsible for arranging the event had optimistic expectations of the contributions of the festival to the promotion of national harmony and the integration of various cultural elements, thereby creating a distinct Nigerian national culture that could be showcased in museums. The state's efforts to create a national culture were part of a broader strategy aimed at guiding development and revitalising the nation as a whole. This act in itself was an attempt at decolonising the Nigerian mind by the federal government of Nigeria at the time (Apter, [n.d.]). FESTAC '77 broadened the concept of blackness in Nigeria, as the country embraced and incorporated various black and African cultures into its diverse array of cultural expressions, effectively eliminating the lingering remnants of colonial influence from the collective consciousness (Apter, [n.d.]). It unified ethnic distinctions and transformed them into unique representations of equal worth and significance, both nationally and within the Pan-African context.

The primary objective of the festival was to foster stronger cooperation among all individuals, while also honouring and preserving their unique cultural identities. The National Museum played a crucial role by curating and showcasing an exhibition that spanned 2000 years of Nigerian Art. This exhibition featured various artworks, including Nok terracotta dating from 900 B.C. to 200 A.D., Ife terracotta from the 12th to 15th century, Tsoede bronzes from the 16th century, and Benin bronzes from the 15th to 19th century. Among these, the bronzes of Ife garnered significant acclaim. Additionally, Ethiopia contributed one of the festival's largest art exhibitions, with a particular focus on traditional Ethiopian art. This section of the exhibition was notably rich, showcasing Archbishop's regalia, manuscripts, and valuable icons (UNESCO. [n.d.]). This gathering allowed participants from various parts of the world, to interact and share their cultures and traditions, creating a vibrant atmosphere of celebration and unity. Undoubtedly, one of the remarkable achievements of the FESTAC celebration was its ability to bring together black people from across Africa and its diaspora, fostering a sense of togetherness (UNESCO. [n.d.]).

Like the nucleus of the National Gallery of Art Nigeria, many of the initial works that form the University of Lagos Museum collection of Artworks were derived from this festival (Barber, 2022, & Ikpakronyi, 2002). Based on the connection of these works to the FESTAC celebration, one can immediately understand their position as cultural materials that were produced and exhibited for decolonisation and reorientation purposes. This collection is one of the repositories where memories, acts of nation-making and national orientation were deposited

after the program. A look at the artworks in the collection of the University of Lagos museum reveals them as art pieces with unambiguous attempts to produce narratives of nation-making, decolonisation, and reorientation of the Nigerian mind.

The University of Lagos Museum Collection

The initial corpus of artworks at the Museum Section, University of Lagos Library was given to the University of Lagos by the Federal Society for Arts and Humanities (FSAH). The FSAH was established in 1963 shortly after the inauguration of the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA). It holds the distinction of being the initial organisation in Nigeria to seek financial support from the federal government in order to procure Nigerian contemporary visual art, which would serve as the foundation for a National collection (Barber, 2022, & Ikpakronyi, 2002). When the negotiations between the Federal Government of Nigeria and the FSAH on the procurement of landed property for the construction of a national gallery did not produce positive results, the FSAH gave some of the works in its collection to the University of Lagos Library (Discussion with Simon Ikpakronyi & Olu Spencer).

Around 2008, a number of artworks and cultural materials within the collection began to show signs of deterioration. Consequently, Olatunde Barber presented a proposal to Dr. Okanlawon Adediji, the University Librarian at that time. In the proposal, he emphasised the significance of establishing a museum to properly preserve these items for posterity. Dr. Adediji brought forth the proposal to the University Council, and after extensive discussions, the collection was officially established as the Museum Section of the University of Lagos Library in 2012. Olatunde Barber assumed the role of the museum's inaugural curator. The collection at the Museum Section, University of Lagos Library is a repository of material culture that documents the history of Nigeria and West Africa. It contains a wide range of objects, including art, artefacts, and other cultural materials. The collection is accessible to researchers, scholars, and the public.

Connecting Narratives of Change and Decolonisation in Museums

There are three main areas that provided the context and direction for this research which I have classified under the following subheadings: Transition from Representing Colonial Narratives to Embracing Postcolonial Perspectives; Geography and Decolonisation; and Managing Change in University Museums.

The process of metamorphosis and transition from representing colonial narratives to embracing postcolonial perspectives by museums in London, Paris, Amsterdam, and Brussels was examined by Aldrich. He analyses how rapid changes in these museums reflect a sense of unease regarding the historical legacy of imperialism, while the subsequent transformations indicate a renewed recognition and exploration of the empire's heritage. Aldrich accentuates the actions of colonialists to leave lasting imprints of empire in cities through various means such as erecting monuments that celebrate both victorious and defeated battles, establishing ministries that extended imperial influence to the farthest reaches of the known world, constructing churches that house relics of religious martyrs, and preserving remnants of colonial exhibitions (Aldrich, 2009).

Similarly, Vawda debates that although they are commonly perceived as institutions of progress, enlightenment, and modernity, museums are deeply entwined with colonialism itself. He raises questions about how museums understand and acknowledge their colonial legacy and examines the process of decolonisation within these institutions. Vawda argues that addressing this issue goes beyond former colonisers grappling with their colonial pasts through museums

and heritage sites. It also entails recognising the significance of decolonising museums and the reasons why it is crucial to do so (Vawda, 2019).

Gunapala et.al. address the concept of driving change in museums and assert that effectively managing change is recognised as a crucial concern for all types of organisations. However, in the case of university libraries, they find that a comprehensive understanding of how to successfully address this challenge has not yet been fully developed (Gunapala et.al., 2020). While Goebel and Epprecht explore an exhibition at Queen's University in Ontario featuring the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection of African Art. This community-centered exhibition was designed to confront the problematic historical practices of colonial-era exhibition, collection, and appropriation of African art in Western museums (Goebel & Epprecht, 2020).

Frost employs audience research to examine the public's perceptions of the British Museum. Frost asserts that the museum's history is intricately intertwined with that of the British Empire since it was established in 1753. He highlights that the museum's collection comprises numerous objects whose acquisition was facilitated, either directly or indirectly, through colonialism. Given the museum's extensive history, vast collection, and global influence, it is described by Frost as a compelling lens to explore contemporary public attitudes towards the British Empire (Frost, 2019).

Looking at the representation and positioning of African art and the politics involved in representing African art in museums, Abungu expresses the view that the examination of geopolitics, decolonisation, globalisation, and migration is more relevant than ever in relation to museums worldwide. He explores the complex and sometimes conflicting roles of museums within the current contexts while considering the historical factors and events that have influenced and continue to shape human connections across different regions of the globe (Abungu, 2019). While

These divergent views represent the revolving discourses around the concept of 'Change and Decolonisation in Museums. These authors have more directly addressed this issue as it pertains to Europe and North America. This reveals the gap to be filled by a historicised cultural study of this phenomenon as it pertains to museums in Nigeria. However, the ideas laid down by these authors provide the basis for the analysis of the decolonisation process of museums in Nigeria, as this line of research has scarcely been done in Nigeria. Utilising particular instances of carefully selected and skilfully analysed modern artwork in dedicated exhibitions has frequently demonstrated its efficacy in intellectually and emotionally captivating visitors with subjects that might otherwise seem distant from their individual encounters (McIntyre, 2015).

Art and Reorientation

The connection between museums worldwide and colonisation is inherent. Consequently, the process of decolonisation goes beyond physically separating from the coloniser or the dominant power. It involves actively engaging in a critical process of contemplation and action that does not uncritically endorse Eurocentric ideas. Decolonisation calls for deep reflection on the accumulation of ideas and knowledge systems that form the basis of "Western civilization," both those that existed before and persisted during and after colonisation. It involves questioning and revealing the underlying foundations of these ideas, which contribute to rendering the societies and people of Africa, Asia, and Latin America "invisible" to the colonisers. Decolonisation seeks to comprehend the mental, political, and economic

mechanisms that subjugate the minds of the colonised and neutralize the historical, intellectual, and cultural heritage, ideas, and practices of the colonised peoples (Vawda, 2019).

The wounds in need of healing extend beyond the impact of colonialism on the African psyche. Preceding colonisation was the presence of slavery and the slave trade. While slavery was a widespread human phenomenon spanning many centuries, including in Europe during the Roman and Medieval periods, its most profound and enduring effects were experienced through the African continent. The Arab-led slave trade along the East African coast and in the trans-Saharan region, along with the European-led trade across the Atlantic Ocean, have left indelible marks that continue to shape Africa's development across various dimensions. These historical events have not only influenced Africa's socioeconomic landscape, but they have also deeply affected the geopolitical relations between the African continent and the rest of the world. Furthermore, they have significantly influenced the self-perception of individuals of African descent (Abungu, 2019). It is this feeling of despondency and inability to shake off the frame of mind of being shackled that has left the black man in a state of inertia.

Using the collection of the Museum Section, University of Lagos Library, I, therefore, make efforts to identify the ways in which these artworks convey and engage with social issues, encompassing political, religious, and to some extent, economic aspects. Art possesses immense potential as historical documents and means of communication. When positioned as documents, these artworks hold the power to serve as tools for comprehending the past and shaping future negotiations. It is widely acknowledged that museums are not impartial spaces. The act of choosing and exhibiting objects is inherently subjective (Aronsson, 2011; Giblin, et. Al., 2019; Knell, 2011; & Knell, 2016). Archives embody the fundamental core of our cultural legacy, representing the unfiltered and genuine voice of the past. They are indispensable in creating a genuine understanding of history, whether it pertains to recent decades or centuries gone by. They serve as the bedrock upon which all our historical narratives are constructed (Flinn, 2007).

The narratives accompanying exhibitions of cultural materials from Nigeria and other African nations should reflect the specific local content and context in which these objects exist. It is essential that those who live and actively participate in the culture being examined play a central role in expressing these narratives. A people's art and creative energies can be deployed as empowering narratives for their society to anchor their aim of asserting their identity. Perhaps the most important archaeological finding in sub-Saharan Africa which has helped to redeem the Black race from the civilisational nonentity where Europe had it dumped since Hegel are the terracotta and bronze sculptures from the Ife art civilisation (11th and 15th century CE). The discoveries made through archaeology in the ancient Ife civilisation provide undeniable evidence of a long-standing sub-Saharan tradition. This tradition emphasised achieving excellence in their artistic creations well before Africa had any contact with Europe. Thereby debunking the civilising mission of European colonialists in Africa.



Plate 1

Artist: Abayomi Barber

Title: *Ori Olokun*

Year: 1973

Medium: P.O.P

Height: 46cm

Abayomi Barber (1928- 2021), a Nigerian contemporary artist, was the mentor of the Abayomi Barber School of Thought in Lagos, Nigeria. He is a significant figure in Nigerian modern art, renowned for his utilisation of naturalism and surrealism techniques in his artistic creations. Leaning on this Ife tradition Abayomi Barber drew on his ancestry and connection to the Ile-Ife palace to reproduce the historical Ori Olokun to keep the achievements of Nigeria's past in the memory of future generations of Nigeria. His creative recreation has been deployed as direct stimuli for the resuscitation of the realistic artistic tradition of the Ife art civilisation as a response to the synergy propagated in the négritude philosophy. The négritude philosophy is a Pan-African movement assigned for the affirmation of Blackness through literary and artistic expression (Banoum, 2011). Aimé Césaire, a poet from Martinique, along with Léon Damas, a poet from French Guiana, and Léopold Sédar Senghor, who later became the President of Senegal and was also a poet, spearheaded the Négritude movement. This movement drew inspiration from various artistic styles and movements such as surrealism and the Harlem Renaissance.

Barber's depiction of the Ori Olokun (see plate 1) establishes a connection between the artistic form and the expression of the nation's essence and spirit. This sculpture, with its intricate

spiritual powers and intricate layers, embodies the fertility deity Olokun, known as Yemoja in the Yoruba region. As explained by Odibo, the sculpture exemplifies the abundant symbolism of a divine entity capable of bestowing children and bringing about prosperous earthly achievements. The reverence for children and wealth held by many Africans further underscores the significance of Yemoja, the mother deity of rivers and seas, whose worship extends across the cultural boundaries of the Yoruba people, Africans, and the African diaspora. This spiritual being, representative of fertility, also mirrors the bountiful nature of the country (Barber, 2022 & Odibo, 2018).

Constance Afiong Ekong (1930-2009) holds the distinction of being the pioneering female artist from Nigeria to receive formal academic training. Her area of expertise lay in the realm of painting. In her painting titled *Uphill* (see plate 2), Ekong skilfully captures the depiction of a donkey embarking on an arduous uphill journey. The painting portrays the donkey as visibly fatigued from the demanding and precarious climb, yet exhibiting unwavering determination. The museum aims to emphasise this resolute character to its visitors. The painting employs a range of blue hues, creating a cool and sombre atmosphere. The darker shades in the lower portion of the painting convey a sense of melancholy associated with the toil and struggle. Conversely, the introduction of light in the upper region symbolises hope—perhaps hope for a brighter future or hope for a better Nigeria.



Plate 2

Artist: Afi Ekong

Title: Uphill

Year: N/A

Medium: Oil on board

Size: 60cm x 60cm

Benedict Enwonwu (1917-1994) was a renowned Nigerian painter and sculptor, and his position as an art adviser to the federal government allowed him to shape the standards of

Nigerian art. One of his most noteworthy contributions was his unwavering belief that the works of African artists should be evaluated based on criteria relevant to their own cultural contexts (Kennedy, 1992 & Barber, 2022). This principle is evident in his painting originally titled *Négritude*, later renamed *Going* (see plate 3) within the Museum Section of the University of Lagos Library collection.

The painting symbolically represents African through the depiction of female figures, metaphorically portraying her receptive nature. The central figure in the artwork is depicted as a youthful female, symbolising fertility, strength, and the potential to achieve any desired purpose. This painting was created by Ben Enwonwu as a response to the Pan-African *négritude* movement. The painting reflects a festive atmosphere, with masks representing various African cultures scattered throughout the painting. In the top right corner, there are Bambara masks, and a mask resembling the Akuaba doll from Ghana as the incorporates the designs of several African cultures into the overall composition. The painting also features images of young girls dressed in bikinis and bathing suits, some relaxing on the beach while others are engaged in joyous dancing. This demonstrates that by 1961, Africans had assimilated certain aspects of Western culture into their own.

Consequently, this painting juxtaposes traditional African values with the newly adopted values influenced by colonialism. The human figures depicted in the artwork display the characteristic elongation often seen in Enwonwu's paintings and sculptures. On closer examination, pencil marks can be discerned in areas where the artist had not yet applied paint. However, the painting bears the artist's signature and is dated 1961, indicating its completion at that time. The unpainted portions of the artwork symbolise an ongoing process, representing Africa's transitional phase from traditional values to a fusion with Western influences. It suggests that the journey has just commenced as Africa incorporates new ideas and values while forging its path. The unfinished nature of the painting signifies the potential for further growth and unforeseen future outcomes.



Plate 3

Artist: Ben Enwonwu

Title: Going/Beauty and the Beast

Year: 1961

Medium: Oil on board

Size: 258cm x 92cm

Erabor Emokpae (1934-1984) was a renowned Nigerian artist, who was considered one of the pioneers of modern art in Nigeria. In his painting titled *The Journey* (see plate 4), executed with perfect symmetry in 1965, Emokpae portrays two distinct figures. While symbolic in nature, it is evident that these figures represent a black man and a white woman, symbolising the symbiotic relationship between Africa and the West, as well as the harmony between black and white cultures. Emokpae's intention is to accentuate the negritude philosophy, which advocates for the integration of the positive aspects of African and Western values. The painting illustrates a merging of African and Western values, with the central area representing a perfect balance and harmony of the two cultures. The outer edges of the painting are depicted in darker shades, stressing that the point of convergence, where the two cultures unite, represents greater enlightenment and progress. The painting can also be interpreted as a metaphor for the duality of life, highlighting the coexistence of opposites such as good and bad, dark and light, night and day, and so on.



Plate 4

Artist: Erabor Emokpae

Title: The Journey

Year: 1965

Medium: Oil on board

Size: 152cm x 91cm

Appropriation of ideas from the West by Nigerian artists

Throughout history, religion has played a significant role in supporting and promoting art in various nations. In Nigeria, religion has served as a driving force behind the development of a rich repertoire of traditional art. Paradoxically, the arrival of Christianity in Nigeria had a somewhat detrimental impact on the production of art. The early Christian missionaries, unaware of the cultural value of Nigerian art, prohibited the continued creation of traditional Nigerian artworks. They publicly destroyed what they perceived as “fetishes,” associating African woodcarvings with what they labelled as “idol worship” (Beier, 1960). However, there were instances where the Nigerian identity was encouraged to be expressed through Christian

themes. This occurred in a workshop organised by Catholic Priests Father Kevin Carroll and Sean O'Mahoney in the Yoruba town of Oye-Ekiti in 1948. The workshop aimed to employ traditional methods to fulfil the artistic requirements of the church (Filani, 2004). As a result, artists such as Bamidele Areogun and Lamidi Fakeye emerged from this workshop, negotiating the Nigerian identity through their artistry.

Lamidi Fakeye (1925-2009) sought to incorporate Western ideology into Nigerian iconography by adapting Christian themes using Yoruba iconography. His aim was to facilitate the understanding of Christianity for Yoruba converts. In his untitled relief wood carving (see plate 5), Fakeye skilfully presents the nativity scene, exercising his artistic freedom to represent the Holy family in classical traditional Yoruba sculpture proportions. He emphasises the significance of the head as the part of the body that is capable of communicating with God by giving it prominence. Furthermore, he dresses his subjects in traditional Yoruba attire, blending the Yoruba mode of dressing with Christian symbolism.



Plate 5

Artist: Lamidi O. Fakeye

Title: N/A

Year: 1965

Medium: Sculpture Wood relief

Size: 61cm x 37cm

Mary is depicted carrying the baby Jesus and Joseph is depicted as a shepherd and the protector of the family. Standing before them is the illustration of the Three Wise Men and the star that has led them to the manger where the saviour was born. Mary is represented in Yoruba attire, with her hairstyle in the suku hairstyle. She is wearing an iborun (a scarf that women use for covering the head or the shoulders), she is also wearing a buba and iro (blouse and wrapper) and she has an ornamentally designed hallow depicted over her head. The adornment on the hallow shows the light that radiates from her and her position as a pious person.

Joseph and the baby Jesus are also depicted wearing halos, and the artist focuses on the ornamental design of Joseph's fila (cap), buba (shirt), and sokoto (trousers), showcasing the prestigious aso oke attire prominent in Yoruba culture. Interestingly, the artist has portrayed baby Jesus with the face of an adult, wearing a flowing dress. This deliberate choice emphasises

Jesus as a figure of infinite wisdom. The representation of the Three Wise Men in the nativity scene is an illustration that showcases men from Nigeria's three major tribes: the Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba ethnic groups.

Through his artistic license, Fakeye appropriates the context of a religion introduced to Africa by Europeans and transforms it into a metaphorical expression for Nigerians. By intentionally incorporating various tribes, he aims to foster a sense of unity and common purpose within the nation.

Conclusion

This research has revealed how the University of Lagos Museum Collection has been deployed for decolonising the Nigerian mind and promoting a return to African roots and ideology by its deployment as a means of reorientation of the postcolonial Nigerian mind. The artistic expressions in this collection have been used as a window to gain insight into the mind of the artist of late colonial and early postcolonial Nigeria. The artists involved have successfully married the ideologies of traditional Africa and that of the West that was introduced to them through colonialism, even though their works are expressed in different styles and mediums. The study has also revealed the process of decolonisation of collections by localising the context and narratives of the collection.

Acknowledgments

My gratitude goes to God, for the grace and strength to carry out this research.

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