



A psychoanalytic approach to contextual paradigms in style variation: The study of the woodcarvings of Olabisi Onawale Fakeye

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Abstract

Bisi Fakeye (b.1942) is an outstanding and prolific wood sculptor with a measure of local and international fame. A systematic study of his works since the late 1960s shows a wide spectrum of stylistic indulgences which some collectors and observers presume betrays professional weakness of inability to stick to a peculiar style. This observation stems from his decisive departure from typical traditional Yoruba woodcarving background from which he was trained, thereby causing seeming difficulty in locating him within either of the binary paradigms of traditional and modern groupings that define modern Nigerian art. This paper observes that his stylistic eclectics are responses to definite contexts which context-cum-style interrogation can define. Using the psychoanalytic method in critical art studies, the paper establishes three major contextual paradigms for which Bisi's works can be studied. They are traditional Yoruba art, western education and challenges of Nigerian contemporary art practice. These the paper opines have implicated Bisi's over five decades practice. Thus, they provide a basis for an appropriate stylistic classification for his later works herein identified as 'Modern Yoruba woodcarving style'.

Keywords: context; stylistic development; traditional; modern; paradigms

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1. Introduction

Olabisi Onawale Fakeye (b. 1942), popularly called Bisi Fakeye, is a woodcarver. The Universal Studios of Art where his studio is located within the premises of the National Gallery, Iganmu, Lagos, is a beehive of art patrons and enthusiasts. A random overview and assessment of his works over the last five decades reflect a measure of staggered stylistic tendencies which some perceive is not professional for an artist who started on a formidable traditional woodcarving foundation. This reaction has become quite topical as it affects identifying appropriate stylistic paradigm on which his art practice for over thirty years (1970s – 1990s) can be situated. Conservative critics are of the opinion that with his art training background traceable to Lamidi Fakeye (1928-2009), his works should indulge stylistic affinity within Lamidi's prototypes. Yemisi Shyllon(2008) in an oral interview expressed this school of thought. Even his uncle and master, Lamidi Fakeye(2007) in an oral interview did not mince words when he said Bisi had failed woefully for not following the family stylistic trait. Instead according to him, he was inculcating Benin stylistic traits. However, whatever opinions may exist about the variant stylistic issuances of this exuberant and didactic artist, this paper opines that Bisi's eclecticism can be traced to specific contexts that honed his development. These contexts combine both artistic and non-artistic inferences which are discernable through psychological interrogation.

The term 'context' quoting Drewal, Adesanya (1999:8)

"states that it is by knowing the specific context of a particular work that one can understand and appreciate the reasons for the choice of style, factors determining changes in style and choices in imagery."

The term can further be discussed under a theoretical framework that captures the essence of Martin Creed's (2000) neon text art piece titled "The Whole world + The Work = The Whole World" which occupies the blank pediment of Tate Britain's neo-classical façade. The piece provides a wide range of indicators for contextual analysis. Furthermore, a contextual appropriation for the arts can be gleaned from De Smedt and De Cruz (2011:63) article, which interrogates mental and external "implications of the epistemic use of material culture for our understanding of the causes of shifts in human behavior during the Upper Paleolithic". Though they applied their discourse to *Calendrical* systems related to time travel, the concept can be adapted for pure contextual studies in art since the external material world informs creative mental activity and vice versa.

A general overview of Bisi's works typifies a desperate psychological inclination to earning self-actualization through art. His practice possibly in search of such identity provides a spectacular array of works that typify Igbomina/ Ekiti traditional style, European academic traditions, and modern cum traditional formal symbiosis which highlights the concept of natural synthesis as propagated by the Zaria Art Society in the 1960s. Bisi (2005), basking in the euphoria of self-actualization said concerning his works,

"In my work, I diversify, elongate, stylize and texturize my surfaces to achieve modernity".

This assertion stems from a prolonged attempt to be relevant in the arts. A report on him after a group exhibition in Lagos, Olanipekun (1988a), reads thus

“I don’t want my work to be tied to that of Lamidi. I want to be independent and individualistic in approach.”

It is on this premise that the numerous accruing stylistic diversities that stagger his practice can be surveyed.

The objective of this paper therefore is to identify, analyze and discuss three contextual paradigms that implicate Bisi’s stylistic indulgences as they provide basis for a new classification for his recent works. The author believes such analytical discuss provides new insight into the general art historiography of Bisi within the scope of artist development, in a matrix of socio-political changes that define Nigeria’s society.

2. Brief resume of Olabisi Onawale Fakeye

Bisi Fakeye belongs to the sixth generation of Olawonyi (c.1735-1850) woodcarving dynasty (Edewor Nelson, 2009). Emigrational contingencies of Olawonyi and his descendants now locate the family within the Inirun compound of Illa-Orangun of the present day Osun state. He had his primary and secondary education in Illa-Orangun (1949-1956 and 1957- 1959). Furthermore he attended Ife Divisional Teachers Training College from 1963-1964. He had intermittent apprenticeship training in woodcarving under Lamidi Fakeye from 1960-63 and 1965-1968). Bisi settled in Lagos as a full time practicing studio artist in 1968 with his studio situated at Mapo Street in Surulere. By providence, Bisi relocated to the premises of the National Theatre in Iganmu in 1978. Here his creative capability honed over the years. His first son Sola (b.1970), is also a woodcarver and practices in his father’s studio.

Bisi’s works transverse different stylistic indulgences which this paper identifies and discusses. He has participated in numerous exhibitions and executed different public and private commissions both in Nigeria and abroad. Notable exhibitions are;

- Group exhibitions of the young Fakeyes, American Society for African Culture, Lagos, 1963
- Olabisi Fakeye Solo Exhibition, German Cultural center, Lagos, 1969
- Nigerian National Art Exhibition on the Formal Opening of the National Theatre, Lagos, 2nd-9th October, 1976.
- Nigerian National Exhibition, Exhibition held in connection with the FESTAC ’77 at the Lagos State Cultural Centre, January –February 1977.
- Schild, Ulla. Graphik aus Nigeria; Goethe Institute Munich, 1978.
- Exhibition of Nigerian Contemporary Art, Dakar Senegal, 25th November -7th December, 1980.
- Ette Mercy. “Through the Eye of the Artist” Lagos, October 15th 1990.
- Exhibition of Nigerian Contemporary Art, Islamabad, Pakistan. 1983
- Black Fire, Skylight Gallery, Brooklyn, New York, USA, June 1 – July 12, 1987.

- Towards a Greater Nation; exhibitions of Drawings, Paintings and Sculptures by Society of Nigerian Artists, Lagos Chapter. December 5-19 1987.
- Elegance, Gothe Institute, Lagos, August, 1988
- Third Biennial Exhibition, Centro Wilfredo Lam, Havana, Cuba, 1989
- Zeitgenossiche Nigeriaische Kunst; Zwanzig Zeitgenossiche Nigeriaische Maler, Bildhauer und Batikkunstler Stellen Aus. Exhibition held in Bonn, Bocholt and Monchengladbach, Germany July to October, 1989.
- Creative Dialogue: SNA at 25, National Theatre, Lagos, November 27th –December 10, 1989
- Images of the Nigerian Nation, Lagos, September 29- October 13, 1990.
- Ausstellung Nigeriaische Kunst der Gegenwart; Exhibition held in Bonn, August 9-28 1992.
- Art for the Commonwealth, Abuja, 2003
- Rejuvenation, SNA National exhibition Lagos, 2003
- Living Masters, Lagos 2007.

Some commissions include;

- The door for the Nigerian embassy in Rome, 1982
- “Ireti” a sculptural piece which became logo for Africa house in Havana, Cuba in 1984
- A door and two pillars for the Federal guest house, Victoria Island, Lagos, 1985
- Two Sculptural pieces for the National Museum, Onikan, Lagos, 1988.
- Two works for the African house in Havana, Cuba, 1990.
- Plaques for the window openings of the civic hall within the premises of the Aina Onabolu complex, 2003

Commenting on Bisi, in the Living Masters exhibition catalogue, Oloidi (2007:12) succinctly puts it,

Olabisi “...is another phenomenon in modern Nigerian art...he has become an institution”.

In discussing the contextual implications for Bisi’s formal maneuvers since 1968, as observed earlier elicits a tripartite context; traditional cum neo-traditional Yoruba art, western art education and the challenges of contemporary art practice are significant.

3. Traditional cum neo-traditional Yoruba art

Bisi Fakeye as stated earlier has a family trajectory of over two hundred years of woodcarving legacy. His father David Adeosun (c.1914-1996) is the elder brother of Lamidi both children of Fakeye Akobi-Ogun (c.1870-1946). Other parsonages in the family line include Dada (c. 1830-98), Bagunjooko (c.1800-70) and Olawoyin (c.1735-1850), (Edewor 2009). Bisi once proudly boasted to the author during an oral interview when he said,

“woodcarving runs like blood in my veins and do not need the certification of anybody to practice”.

This assertion was in response to the question posed to him if he duly completed his apprenticeship term under his uncle Lamidi and had proper release (freedom rites) associated with the discharge of an apprentice in traditional training system.

Also, Bisi also does not take lightly the meaning of his name in association with his vocation. His given name "Onawale" which literally means 'design has come home' according to him attests his paternity desire for his present career. Apart from the fact that he trained under his uncle, his biological father David and other uncles were woodcarvers. Therefore growing up amongst woodcarvers of his Inirun compound of Ila-Orangun, implicated instinctive reflexes that naturally tailored him towards woodcarving.

Stylistically, the impact of this traditional context on Bisi's early woodcarvings can further be assessed from a broader perspective and localized within the limits of his abilities. Fagg (1967:1) asserts that

"of all African cultures which have practiced sculptures, the Yoruba's are by far the most numerous".

A survey of media in Yoruba art shows a vast variety of art objects, of which wood is the most numerous medium of expression. Furthermore, Fagg (1982:35-49) classifies Yoruba sculpture of Western Nigeria into nine regions. These regional distinctions are predicated on the vast stylistic diversity that operates within the main Yoruba style. Of the wide range of carving types, three major classifications subsist. The first two are masks and figurine which could include equestrians made separately while the third is the merger of both masks and figurine into a superstructure composition. Popular traditional masks include Epa, Gelede and Egungun. Figurine related concepts include Shango, Eshu, Oshe Shango ('Shango staff), divination cup, Ifa bowl, Ere Ibeji, Eshu staff, Ogun ceremonial axe, Arugba (woman with bowl), Oya shrine sculpture, Odo Shango (Shango pedestal), Priest stool, divination clapper etcetera. The Epa mask and superstructure is an example of the third category. It is an intricately carved concept which may combine up to twenty figures as superstructures over a helmet mask. Epa mask is the hallmark of Ekiti stylistic group. The Igbomina group under which Ila-Orangun belongs is neighbours of Ekiti and share in the Epa concept though in a lesser carving dexterity. It is within this background that the Oye-Ekiti (1947-1953) workshop woodcarving experiments through the works of Bamgboye Areoogun (c.1910-1995) and Lamidi Fakeye (1928-2009) indulged a neo-traditional formalism of figurines for Christian evangelical needs (Carroll, 1963; Bridger, 2002). The Oye-Ekiti experiment was under the facilitation of Rev. Fr. Kevin Carroll and Fr. O'Mahoney.

These inherent (traditional Yoruba and the neo-traditional) inclinations from Bisi's pedigree and his uncle's studio presents the first context that informed Bisi's early development. The evidence is visible in his early works such as "Ifa Priest", Arugba and Shango (Figures 1-3). These works depicts a level of formal articulation that employs Yoruba traditional concepts, proportions and figural definitions. The works also mimic singularity of figure composition which was popular in the Oye-Ekiti workshop. This is substantiated in Adjere's (1969:5) critique on Bisi group exhibition in 1969 thus, "Olabisi's works can be mistaken for those of Lamidi Fakeye".



Figure 1. Arugba, Iroko Wood, 90cm, 1976



Figure 2. Shango Priest, Iroko Wood, 125cm, 1977



Figure 3. Ifa Priest, Iroko wood, 140cm, 1978

4. Western art training

Bisi's further art development and indulgences can be traced to the measure of western art education that Bisi has. He is a certified Grade II teacher with art as teaching subject. Art education according to Emeji (2000:58) presumes the import of an art curriculum which has basic ingredients for creative and intellectual development of a pupil. According to him, art training instills a sense of proportion, harmony, balance and aesthetic sensibility. Furthermore, Ezeoluomba Ndubisi (2006) attests to the fact that these aspects have impact in the forming of an individual's creative foundation. Espousing on the impact of western art training on his psychological make-up, Bisi (2005) asserts that, the courses he took in drawing exercises from nature and still life sharpened his creative sensibilities in design and composition, which have been helpful in his career.

This claim corroborates Eleti-Ofe's (1963) report on Bisi's first group exhibition alongside his cousins. In the report he quoted Bisi as saying that

"I am training to be a teacher with one end in view; that of learning how to teach one subject [art] to younger ones".

He further reports that Bisi believed that with his art educational background he would not only be able to learn from other artist from other parts of the world, but be able to appreciate and intelligently understand other works of art. This assertion in advertently results in the much formal eclecticism evident in Bisi's practice between the mid-1980s till the 1990s. Within this period, Bisi explored almost every known style available to him. These included realism, abstraction and formal stylization. In an interview session with Bisi

in 2008, he avowed that his training in western art education broadened his horizon. His Christian theme commission (Figure 4) in the 1980s elucidates the rudiments of life drawing, perspective and composition. Figures 5-7 show other formal experiments within the ambits of realism and abstraction as interpreted within his understanding of western stereotypes.



Figure 4. Ascension of Christ, Omo wood, 300 x 330, 1986-87

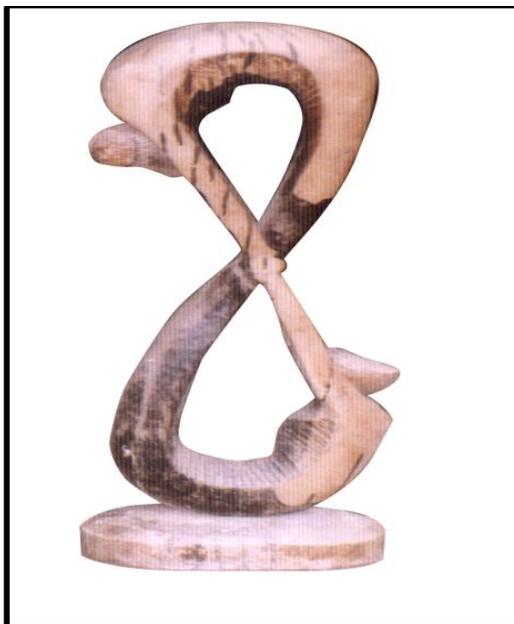


Figure 5. Acrobats, Ebony wood, 105cm, 1994



Figure 6. Confidentiality, Cam wood, 90cm, 1994

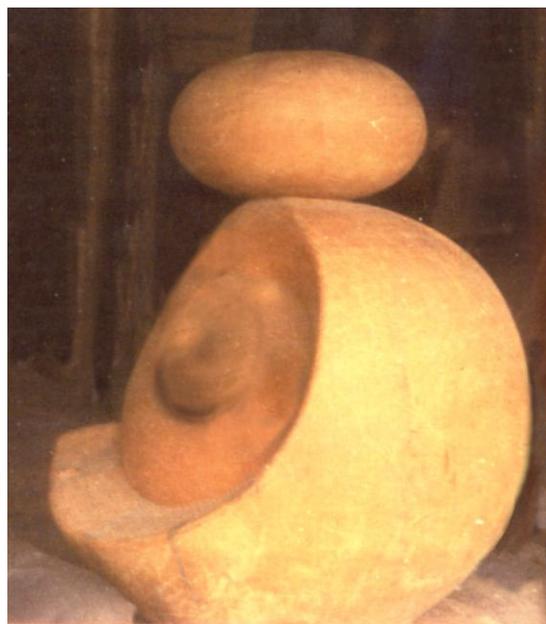


Figure 7. Evolution, Opepe wood, 75cm, 1996

5. Challenges of modern Nigerian art practice

Bisi's stylistic development is also implicated on the challenges of contemporary Nigerian art practice. These challenges include concerns on originality, artist visibility, patronage and caliber of clientele, exhibitions as well as innate craving for personal identity. Since 1960, many challenges have trailed the development of the arts. Ezeluomba (2006), associates factors such as proliferation of art departments at the tertiary level, didactic art practice, effects of post colonialism, identity and individualism as precarious to contemporary art development. These according to him have directly or indirectly impacted Nigerian art practice. Within this spectrum, Bisi's interface with new art trends in Nigerian contemporary art practice since the late 1970s has further influenced his style repertoire.

The stylistic assimilation that espouses this context is traceable to circumstances that surround the preparations for the African Regional Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC 77). During the preparations, Mr. Gbenga Shonuga, then Director of Lagos State Council for Arts and Culture noticed and took special interest in Bisi's works at his roadside Mapo street, Surulere, Lagos shop. With closer fraternity, patronage, and knowledge that Bisi is related to the famed Lamidi Fakeye, Bisi was allotted a studio space within the premises of the National Theater, Lagos in 1978. This space is now the hub of art practice in Lagos, and called the Universal Studio of Arts, Iganmu, Lagos. Prominent artists as Abiodun Olaku, Bunmi Babatunde, Ejo Wanate, Odogwu Fidelis, Lekan Olatunde and a host of others practice within this complex. For Bisi, this space translated into a stable productive environment for him in terms of exposure to formidable patrons and patronage, art administrators and artists' community of national and international repute. His desire to be original and possibly digress off Lamidi's formal tethers was informed by the new perspective to art which this new space provided.

Within his new creative environment, it would seem that Bisi's agitation to be original was in its offing, though with the inevitably price of leaning towards other stylistic climes. Reporting again on Bisi's 1988 exhibition Olanipekun (1988b) in the Guardian Newspaper attests to a stylistic similitude between Bisi's pieces with Ben Enwounwu's "Anyanwu". Bisi (2005) during an interview accepted that he had diverse influences. Of major note according to him was Emokpae Erhabor (1934-1984), a Benin born sculptor and painter who was a major commissioned artist to the National Gallery at that time. This influence is even observable in Bisi's choice of Ebony wood for carving which hitherto was only popular amongst Benin carvers. This authenticates Lamidi's fears that his nephew instead of following after and maintaining Yoruba forms was indulging Benin styles.

Within the challenges on modern art practice, another personality that Bisi identified as being instrumental to guiding him in focusing his career was Miss Renatte who was an Assistant Director at the Goethe Institute, Lagos. Apart from being the main contact for his 1988 Goethe Institute solo exhibition, she also organized his German trip in the 1980s. Her contribution to his style development according to Bisi can be deduced in her advice to him to retract from eclectic style indulgencies and concentrate his energies in developing a formal style that conforms to his Yoruba roots. This advice seemed to have matured and became practicable in the 1998 'TokoTaya' piece (Figure 8).

From this point, a definite style which Edewor, (2009) refers to as modern Yoruba style began to evolve in Bisi's practice. Figures 9 and 10 further espouses the new stylistic trend. The assessment that Bisi diversifies, elongates, stylizes and texturizes his surfaces, weaves within the matrix of intricacies that surrounds the contextual realities discussed above.



Figure 8. Toko Taya, Cam wood, 180cm, 1998

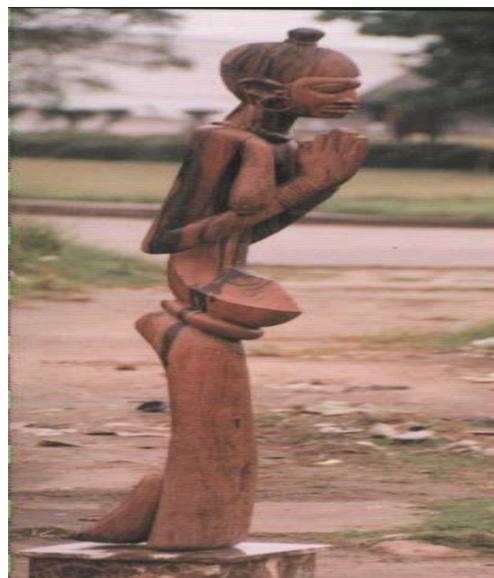


Figure 9. Supplication for world peace, Ebony wood, 185cm, 2003



Figure 10. Adura lo n gba, agbara ki gba, Oro wood, 95.5cm, 2003

6. Conclusion

Artists are custodians of their society and environment. Martin Creed's "The World + Work = The whole World" typifies that art practice is a product of contextual issuances. Bisi Fakeye's trajectory symbolizes this trait while asserting that stylistic dynamism is not necessarily a trait of weakness or confusion but ones response to his environment. The departure from the inherent family and cultural background style also has given him the opportunity to carve a niche for himself. This achievement has further defined his innate creative sensibilities and adopts him within essential ingredients that pivot in contemporary Nigerian art. This is noteworthy and novel in the study of Bisi's practice as it situates his artistry with the main stream of modern art without undermining the Yoruba traditional forms which is his springboard. This formal realization provides a classificatory identity for Bisi as a 'Modern Yoruba woodcarver'.

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