

**Chika Okeke-Agulu.** *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2015. 376 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-5746-9.

**Reviewed by** Fred Smith

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Chika Okeke-Agulu's book on art and decolonization is an extensive and highly detailed investigation of the emergence of artistic modernism in Nigeria from the late 1950s to the civil war in 1967. However, it focuses primarily on artists who began their career as art students at the Nigeria College of Arts, Science, and Technology in Zaria. The book is especially concerned with the varied connections between local artistic developments and twentieth-century modernism. It also relates these connections to the cultural and political conditions of Nigeria as it transitioned from British colony to independence. The investigation begins with evaluating the colonial impact, especially that of indirect rule and its political implications on education, especially art education, during the early to mid-twentieth century.

Chapter 1 ("Colonialism and the Educated Africans") investigates the nature of the colonial experience and how it was affected by educated Africans. The discussion considers Anglophone Africa in general but primarily focuses on Nigeria. Various colonial administrators and their policies, including those impacting educational opportunities, are evaluated. It concludes with a consideration of the work and writings of Nnamdi Azikiwe, who is referred to by the author as "a foremost Nigerian nationalist" (p. 35). Basically this chapter is aimed at supporting Okeke-Agulu's belief that

"colonialism resisted rather than chaperoned the emergence of modern art in Nigeria" (p. 23).

The next chapter ("Indirect Rule And Colonial Modernism") begins by recognizing the historical and ideological significance of both Aina Onabolu, an important painter during the first half of the twentieth century, and Kenneth Murray, a British art educator. After studying art in London, Onabolu returned to Nigeria in 1922 and successfully convinced the Department of Education to hire an additional art teacher (Kenneth Murray) for Lagos and southern Nigeria. It is the conflicting visions about the nature of modern art for Nigeria on the part of Onabolu and Murray that is the focus of this chapter. According to the author previous writers have not adequately acknowledged the impact of this division. Onabolu is credited with emphasizing the critical importance of both formal art training and the need to break with the traditional arts of Nigeria. Murray on the other hand stressed the importance of maintaining ties with traditional art. This chapter is key to setting the stage for understanding the critical developments that will occur in the mid-twentieth century.

Chapter 3 ("The Academy And The Avant-Garde") focuses on the history of the Nigerian College of Arts, Sciences, and Technology, Zaria, as well as its impact on the modernist movement

during the late colonial period. It includes a thorough discussion of the establishment and subsequent impact of the Art Society, founded in 1958 by four students from the college (Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Bruce Onobrakpeya, and Jimo Akolo). The initial focus of these artists was on transforming the art program at the college from the training of art teachers to a school for professional artists. This undertaking led to considerable conflict within the college as well as in the broader art community. The author clearly states that his motivation in focusing on the developments at Zaria is “to offer a more compelling account of what really happened at Zaria and what that has to do with the modernist movement in Nigeria in the decade of independence” (p. 72). The reaction on the part of the colonial administration as well as other Nigerian artists to this development at Zaria is discussed extensively. The theory of natural synthesis that is developed more fully later in the book is briefly introduced at the end of this chapter.

Chapter 4 (“Transacting The Modern”) concludes the extensive analysis of the artistic developments in Nigeria during the colonial period. It begins with discussing the contributions and impact of the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists (1956) that was held in Paris and attended by Uli Beier, who according to the author was the single most influential figure in shaping the advent of Modernism in Nigeria. One of Beier’s important contributions was co-founding the journal *Black Orpheus*. The Nigerian Art Exhibition of 1960, which featured the works of numerous artists, is discussed especially in terms of the contributions of Uche Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya, and Demas Nwoko. This is followed by an extensive examination of the interdisciplinary club for artists and writers, Mbari, located in Ibadan, that exhibited the work of artists from other African countries, such as Ibrahim El Salahi of Sudan, Skunder Boghossian of Ethiopia, and

Vincent Kofi of Ghana. European and American artists were also exhibited.

Chapter 5 (“After Zaria”) examines the later works of artists discussed in chapter 3 who were members of the Zaria Art Society. In part, it focuses on their differing interpretations of the theory of natural synthesis. These artists include Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Simon Okeke, and Jimo Akolo. The presentation on Uche Okeke, the longest segment of this chapter, is particularly insightful.

Chapter 6 (“Contesting the Modern”) focuses on the major artistic developments and debates, occurring during the early 1960s, that would define the direction of contemporary art in Nigeria following independence. Early postindependence developments in Lagos, especially the impact of the Society of Nigerian Artists, are a major focus of this chapter. The works of various artists, notably Ben Enwonwu, Afi Ekong, Erhabor Emokpae, and Colette Omogbai, as well as the impact of *Nigeria* magazine are featured in this chapter.

Chapter 7 (“Crisis in the Postcolony”) ends the discussion of postcolonial artistic development by featuring the contributions of Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko, with a focus on the art they produced between 1965 and 1968. The work of Okeke is discussed both in terms of its early relationship to traditional Igbo painting, referred to as *uli*, as well as its increasing concern during this period with broader aspects of Igbo culture and history. Unlike Okeke, Demas Nwoko did not return to eastern Nigeria (Biafra) during the civil war of 1967-70, but he did “draw on the experience of the civil war to make a universal comment on the horrors of armed conflict” (p. 278).

*Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria* documents in great detail the origins of postcolonial art in Nigeria from the early twentieth century to the late 1960s, particularly in the first four chapters. Moreover, the pre-independence influence of artists from the Nigerian College of Arts, Science,

and Technology is clearly recognized. By chapter 5, the focus shifts to individual Art Society members, especially artists from the Igbo area of southeastern Nigeria. The final chapter focuses on the art of Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko, working within the context of a deteriorating political situation that would culminate in the Nigerian civil war. The book contains both historical photographs as well as numerous examples of the work of the artists being discussed. The book is without doubt a significant contribution to the study of mid- to late twentieth-century Nigerian art. However, it is important to recognize *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria* has the potential to appeal not only to scholars, but also to a broader audience.

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