Textiles and the Constitution of Indigenous Identity

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Abstract

Reflecting on the seminal theme of Biography as a provisional means of accessing artistic substance, this study dares a reading of the metamorphosis of the artistry of the contemporary West African artists: Yusuf Grillo, El Anatsui and Victor Ehikhamenor. Utilising an empirical analysis, principal art works of these masters are examined. However, a hermeneutic investigation is engaged to aid an unraveling of the tooling mechanisms and the art making traditions that these artists deployed in affecting the constitution of their identities. The works of Ehikhamenor are discussed with a hermeneutic detailing that draws attention to the peculiarities of his artistry as emblematic in the growth and development of the ethos of the reincarnation of the past in postmodernist creativity enabled by the break from the Negritude ethos of the 1960s. However, a similar investigation revealed (I) that the artist Anatsui in upholstering his artistry diligently sourced his devises on mimetic reinstatements and simulations of the canonic techniques and aesthetic determinants of African textiles traditions in the creations of his metal tapestries; while Grillo, however, engaged simulations of the mythical African grid schemes, iconographical imageries and the recreation of Adire-Eleko Indigo colours, while (II) Ehikhamenor toed the intellectually subtle repositioning of subject matter and picture-making devices, declaiming the prime Dakarois’ narratives but implanting a language of pictorial codes that deter the dearth of symbols. These are the groundings of the constitution of indigenous identity.

Keywords: Biography, Provisional, Metamorphosis, Hermeneutic; Upholster

Introduction

Art historians, critics and polemists: Olu (1995) and Ogbiechie (2012) decry the “condition and reality” of the historiography of contemporary African art. Ogbiechie underscores the misdirected Western artistic preferences, which give an undue pride of place to patriarchal figural sculpture and less visibility to the pre-eminently matriarchal arts in the formation of home-grown identity. Oguibe in his Third Text polemic directed at a critique of African modernity/ modernism draws attention to the problematic: the fictiveness of ‘Africanity’, the imperative of a plurality of ‘modernism’ in Africa (Oguibe, 1995:317-322). Steinberg (1972: 289-306) adumbrates the discourse by drawing attention to the Hegelian historicity of the artistic polemic on the displacement of sculpture and its replacement with painting in the discourse of the historiography of art and its histories in world art! However, in language reminiscent of Robert Hughes’ best seller The Shock of the New, Spring (2012: 236) claims
that through textiles past and present it is possible to read and reveal the diverse historical influences which have shaped cultures over many years. In fact, he echoes the contemporary West African sculptor El Anatsui’s claim that the innumerable textiles pictorial imageries of Africa, employing textiles and clothing metaphors, reveal how central cloth is to the lives of African people (2012:32). Spring points to the instrumentality of the Making and trading of numerous types of cloth as vital elements in African lives and culture for at least two millennia, linking the different parts of the African world with one another and tout le monde. The phenomenal inspiration of textile traditions as groundings for artistic creativity was successfully highlighted in two concurrent 2008-2009 exhibitions: the Metropolitan Museum of Art and at the Grey Art Gallery, both in New York. LaGamma (2008) explores the aesthetics of textiles in West Africa, their history, and how they pervade the continent’s creative expression. These Shows reveal that what constitutes the field of artistic practice on a global stage had been expanded because in both cases the artists used textiles traditions as a means towards discussing ideas, and concepts which had no natural or even continental boundaries (Spring, 2012).

This paper therefore, intend to (i) pursue the view that matriarchal arts are arguably the most manifest signifier’s of culture throughout Nigeria, albeit all Africa; and (ii) attempt a selective synopsis of the works of three contemporary artists from West Africa to draw attention to the reality that their works have been informed and inspired by the textile traditions of Africa. Fascinatingly it is on the avowed themes of the “miraculousness of the commonplace” (Danto, 1963) and subversion that the artists have delivered their messages with ease and the “playfulness of art” (Hans-Gadamer, 1986). Hence, in a hermeneutic and empirical analysis of prime works taken from the following artists: Y.C.A. Grillo, sculptor and painter; K. El. Anatsui, sculptor; and Victor Ehikhamenor, painter; I dare declaim the misdirection of Western aesthetic preferences for the patriarchal art of sculpture in African art. Instead, I assert the visibility of the pre-eminent matriarchal arts: textiles, decorative arts and performance arts, in the constitution of indigenous identity in the works of these artists.

In view of the foregoing, this paper approaches the subject “Indigenous identity” by interrogating specific prime works. The paper’s focus, is, therefore, concerned with how these distinctive contemporary works draw attention to (I) the historicity of the matriarchal arts in the affirmation of African indigenous identity in terms that firstly it confirms virtuality; but emphatically draws attention to the singularity of each artist’s work as unique. Hence, this paper investigates the intimate affects of matriarchal materiality employed by each artist, utilising endogenous artistry; even emphasise the simulation of structures, techniques of the making and productions of crafts such as textiles; and the engagements of aesthetic determinants of traditions, for example textiles, decorative arts and performance arts in their work without circumventing their indexicality. These undergird new methods with which to discuss individual experience; and (II) in the artists particular negotiations of plural locales and temporalities their specific creations constitute a vehicles for the smuggling in of a convergence point of Euro-Africa postmodernism.

Before the details of this essay, it is important to situate biographies of the artists emphasising their parochialism of background and liberal artistic exposure to the canon. It is, however, instructive to note George Kubler’s remarks that artists’ lives are the magnets that bridge traditional and progressive art practices, in spite of reflecting contemporaneity. The
biographies of these artists, offer a provisional gleaning of their artistic substance (Kubler, 1962:6-7). These masters are qualified individuals bestriding the new tracks of development emanating from renovations of the Negritude canon inspired by *Revue Noir* and Principal Western sponsored exhibitions of the time, for example, *the Seven Stories about Africa Exhibition*. In this essay, therefore, I take the view that if the biography of artists is sufficient provisional means of gleaning the groundings of artistic substance; then the artists’ works reflect conscious masterpieces that inflect symbolic codes in particular patterns of narratives, metaphors, storytelling mechanisms and choices of artistic content. In spite of being inheritors of the modernist tendencies dye-stamped on the art world in the 1960s; these works reflect departures that signal the collapse of the modernist ideology and point to a post-modern ethos.

**Yusuf Cameron Adebayo Grillo**

Born in Lagos in 1934 to returnee Brazilian settlers, Grillo was raised in the middle-class Brazilian Quarters, *Igboere*, Lagos, in a creolised intelligentsia family steep in *Egba* and Brazilian ancestry. Yusuf attended regular parochial Christian primary schools in Lagos, while Aina Onabolu was a visiting Art teacher. Through the tabloids of the day, he discovered the works of the cartoonist and political satirist Akinola Lasekan, who infused the ploys of exaggeration and the techniques of the redefinition of the peculiarities of the caricature.

Grillo graduated from the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria with a Diploma in Fine Art in 1961, specialising in Painting. Yusuf’s style is entirely African in spirit with a recognisable expressionist angular geometric flair evocative of African traditional sculpture. In creative glass montages with *Egba* cum Brazilian creolized images and imageries Cameron radically redirected the shape and content of paintings for the epistemology of the post Vatican II 1960s Church in Nigeria.

**El Anatsui**

Born in Anyako, Ghana, in 1944, Emmanuel Kofi Anatsui popularly hailed “EL”; spent his formative years as a student in Kumasi, the historical capital of the Asante kingdom. An acclaimed sculptor in the international scene, Anatsui trained at the College of Art, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana (1965-68). He studied sculpture and art education, receiving an academic training that emphasised Western art practice. In counterbalance Kofi expanded his artistic forms by observing the creative processes of traditional weavers and *Adinkra* cloth printers. However, when he appeared on the Nigerian arts-cape in the 70s, he simply took a tour of Nigeria’s vernacular art world looking at the extant traditions of the great *Igbo-Ukwu* and *Nok terra cotta* (personal communication, 2013). He has been a professor of sculpture at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka where he became a leading member of the Nsukka School.

**Victor Ehikhamenor**

Child of artists and artisans: grandmother, a cloth weaver; mother a local artist, a goldsmith maternal grandfather and a photographer uncle; Victor Ehikhamenor grew up in a large extended family. Oral storytelling, the chronicle, rhythm and beat of Esan life; with *Esanland* art and architecture, especially wall paintings; installation and performance arts of Udomi-Uwessan, were a commonplace spectacle. A graduate of English, a keen enthusiasm and study of Western Art books formatted his visual education (Bolshaw, 2016). In *The Prayer Room*, suffused with religious symbolisms; Ehikhamenor demonstrates how memory and its
associated themes of magic and realism are central to his works. In spite of folkloric themes, village traditional rituals, Christian Catholic world views are inflected in his visual thinking.

**ARTWORKS**

*Between Earth and Heaven*

![Fig. 1: Between Earth and Heaven, El Anatsui, Medium: Aluminum, copper wire, H. 86 3/4 x W. 128 in. (220.3 x 325.1 cm), 2006. ©El Anatsui. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.](image)

The phenomenal inspiration of textile traditions as groundings for the creations of the contemporary artist El Anatsui was successfully highlighted in two concurrent 1978 exhibitions: the Metropolitan Museum of Art and at the Grey Art Gallery, both in New York (Spring, 2012). These shows revealed that what constitutes the field of artistic practice on a global stage had been expanded because in both cases the artist used textiles traditions as a means towards discussing ideas, and concepts which had no natural or even continental boundaries (Spring, 2012).

Anatsui’s employment of cloth as theme taps into the worldwide awareness of its cultural power and worth as a commonplace material and symbolic item of African culture. EL’s vast metal installations attained international recognition through the exhibition (*Gawu*, Oriel Mostyn Gallery, Llandudno, Wales, 2002). In unique metal foil creations, Anatsui pursues a theme of transformation, subverting the label of metal as a stiff and rigid medium; but rather showing it as a soft, pliable, almost sensuous material (Anatsui, 2012). Created with “many hands”, these metal sculptures, for example, *Men’s Cloth* and *Between Earth and Heaven* constantly change in shape and luster according to the different curators who install them because the simulacra variations of metallic folds virtually metamorphose into spools of new shapes and forms depending on the handling. The *Kente* narrow-strip cloth is an all-encompassing presence. Anatsui’s cloth makes metal a unique fluid medium. El simulates the string of wrappers as allusions to the narrow-strip bands of the *Kente* yarns. He positions the narrow strips of metal foil (simply wrappers) in elaborate alternate formations then “sews”
them up “selvage to selvage” with metal strings creating reinterpretations of typical Kente yardage. The finished piece is either in alternate-pattern format or in random idiosyncratic layout. The use of varied colourful metal wrapper allows Between Earth and Heaven palette to be dramatically intensified. This metal tapestry, created by Anatsui in the 1990’s defies a facile classification.

From thousands of liquor bottle tops flattened then positioned in an anatsuistique colour scheme, and stretched together with copper wire; this spectacular overarching composition emerged. The completed luminous free-standing installation has a manipulability that the artist subsequently exploits. Impressing seemed “creases and folds” into the surface endows it with an animate billowing quality, writes. This I call the classic Toga effect! Anatsui subverts the notion of metal as stiff and unyielding; thusly offering endless possibilities for reshaping and reconfiguration. Christine Guittini at the Met installation overseen by El himself in January 6, 2008 describes between as resplendent and animated tapestry expanding outside from the gallery wall on which it hangs. This spectacle in reflective radiance suggests the sumptuousness of Kente, in gold tones attributive of high royalty, warmth and aglow with long life and prosperity. In Between Earth, the predominant gold foil represents a phenomenal elevation of the commonplace accumulation by its artistic conversion. At the same time, it alludes to the precious mineral resource exported from the Gold coast to the world. In hindsight, it is fascinating to recall that the same networks that evolved to exploit West African gold eventually shifted focus to trade in slaves. In exchange for the human cargo, merchandise and commodities like liquor and textiles were imported into the region. All these associations converge in Between Earth with otherworldly resplendence tempered by allusions of human short comings. The sheen of the expensive silk threads obtained by unraveling imported fabrics and incorporated in the Kente at the beginning of the 18th century is here formally evoked by the artworks’ shine and its passages of multicoloured weave. The alcoholic spirits poured as libations honouring ancestors and also consumed in large quantities are concretely manifest in this work, which is composed of bottle caps discarded by a single population. Anatsui uses the leit motif of Kente cloth as a means of engaging a conversation with his audience. Simulating different textures, different forms, that complexification seemed highly pixilated image offers innumerable possibilities in emergent envelopes and pages of wonder for the aesthetic pleasures and enjoyment of the viewers at any exhibition.
Old Man’s Cloth

Man’s Cloth made of foil liquor bottle wrappers linked together in a technique that El describes as part of the “nomadic aesthetic”, expressive of the artist’s open offer to the curators participation in the creative process. EL breaks new ground in art making by dint of a germane fluidity of forms and share indeterminacy in the envelopes and shapes that characterise his works. This permits the curators and their handymen the authority to try their hands at forming what the artists has provided as a starting point (El Anatsui, 2011). The montage of brands of liquor labels and their inscriptions have names linked to events, people; hallowing allusions to Kente congruent traditions of same practice. History in Africa finds its “dialogue” in cloth! Despite the conversion of real bottle top wrappers, the grim realities of the Middle Passage, in which liquor was primary merchandise exchanged for the human cargo of slaves, is memorialised. For Anatsui the bottle tops were iconic to a history. “Bottles cappings” fashioned in Europe for the transfer of drinks from European merchants to African markets (transformed to flat wrapper frames) is symbolised as historical ground breaking technology. Anatsui draws attention to the important development of trade and merchandising in Africa from Europe beyond the slave trade. The bottle tops were borne out of this currency. “So I think drink has a lot to do with the link between the continents that is a historical fact!” (EL-Anatsui, 2011).

Anatsui is a contemporary master who has mined his landscape for locally available materials and idioms of expression and transposed them into personal creations with an entirely new syntax. Embracing a visual language culled from the colours and patterns of Ewe and Asante strip weaving; and Adinkra motifs, he appropriated the effervescent legacy of those regional millennial textile traditions echoing their cultural significance. Anatsui simulates the classic Ghanaian Toga, monumental in scale and highly sculptural in the way they drape the body as the apparel of leaders, resplendent in undulations that evoke tactility (Fig.2B). Its resplendent color scheme of gold, red, and black translates and transposes the artistry of finely woven silk into the medium of base metal. Heaven is a tribute to the indispensability of West African
aesthetics grounded in strip-woven textiles and reflects upon the sculptural nature of cloth. Anatsui’s transformation of base metal is fresh, and fascinatingly original!

**Grillo and his Works**

Yusuf Grillo is one artist who has nurtured a deliberate passion to re-engage an African renaissance in stained glass in a manner that is unique and incisive. He brings the story of the Word and Good news, originally imported to African shores by the first generation of European images implanted on African shores in the first evangelisation; transmuting the same stories in allegories that are quintessentially “other”. Bridging the gap with the first generation artists, Onabolu, Lasekan and Ben Enwonwu, Grillo deliberately breaks with the rooted canons of academe; instead, he simulates African story telling mechanisms, especially allegories. He, thusly, engages a transfiguration of commonplace iconographies large in the day to day lives of real people. His sensitivity is strengthened by unique mathematical formal organisation. These transcribe the visual canons of past artworks, revalidating them in the present, while giving them the language of the new evangelisation. These works explore canons of art drawn directly from the Egba cum Brazilian cultural space with colour schemes lifted almost painter-like from the Adire-Eleko ecology of resist dying traditions popular in the Egba heartland. Even principal imageries, for example, the drummer and kaftan clad figures are drawn from the allegories, folklore of the locales’ cultural foregrounds. For the purposes of this discourse, critical looks at the master’s prime creations in the Lagos metropolis now follow.

**Celebration**

![Fig, 3, Old Man’s Cloth, 2003, El Anatsui, Harn Museum of Art, Gainesville, Florida, aluminum and copper wire, 487.7 x 520.7. ©El Anatsui. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York](image)
Distinctive in *Celebration* (Fig. 3) is the boldly outlined grids that define and conjure-up mathematical proportions as “fractals”, which they project. The artwork emphasises the artist’s preoccupations with mathematical geometric principles in his alignment of shapes within the picture space. Thus, “flatness” definitive of traditional mask configurations is emphasised as a defining characteristic; while the silhouette cartoon draws attention to the departure from canonic forms. Thus, skilfully avoiding any reminders of the popular themes and styles of European glass, Grillo imprints “the new” in Christendom’s glass. In that way the artwork inflects a critical insight along with reflecting on the particular needs of the post Vatican II Church. In spite of a partiality for glass, there is a dominance of the substrate Plexiglas in subsequent works of the late 1960s. His painting medium is usually traditional stained glass colours. Tin-led and steel bars are utilised as cames. Tin-led holds the glass pieces in place, while the steel bars aide the carriage that divide sectional weight.

*Celebration* is peculiar among the other artworks created for the Church. There are two giant lancet windows. Each window is made entirely of scavenged glass. Copper foil as a casing material is absent. All glass pieces are glued onto the substrate, uneven spaces between each section of glass is filled-in utilising a mixture of silicone adhesive and black Universal stain, all blended in white filler to create a permanent grout mix. The mosaics of grouted units in the compositions create the fantasies and abstractions in sections of the works. Adebayo simulates a glass appliqué technique, similar to fabric appliqué in that work. Picture sections are created from small snaps of materials and sewn to a larger piece. This creates colourful mosaic-like fancy imageries in the left and right sections of both corner panels in each lancet. Such imageries toast to the possibilities of “unconscious flows” of, otherwise, psychoanalytic mechanisms that operate independently of the art makers’ formal palette. The paintings in this church are good examples in which this creative turn by the artist is manifest. Grillo (2012) revealed that in spite of the dominant drummer motif and its attendant silhouettes in
serial repeats in this composition, large sections of this picture were a result of the grouting and appliqué techniques employed in their creation.

Displacing mimetic and photographic figuration commonplace in the first churches, for example, the Anglican Christ Church Cathedral, Marina, Lagos Island, the master employs the caricature silhouette of a cartoon-like drummer figure. This dominates the rectangular picture space. Other silhouette imageries play out in endless repeats across the rectilinearly divided rhomboid sections of the ensemble. However, two bishop crosier silhouettes positioned as opposite shapes together project a middle rhomboid that “announces” the central theme of this image: *Good News All Are God’s Works in God’s World.* These together in concert repeat aloud the chronicle of a slightly inclined figure, the silhouette drummer character. It is a metaphoric mainstay for the exposition of this picture. In both lancets giant silhouette cartoons are diagonally located at the center of the picture space. The left lancet is most fascinating. The giant drummer figure is surmounted on a screen almost water-mark like in the middle of a montage of *Adire-Eleko* derived blues. Thusly, this *grilloesque* substrate projects the drummer figure cajoling the viewers, usually local folks to celebrate; and all beholders to engage dialogue rather than a mimetic recount of the actions in the pictorial space. In the *Egba*-Brazilian community the drummer is a ready and familiar chronicler of important events!

There is, however, another prominent silhouette figure, a *Kaftan* clad personality. This is obviously a distinctive *Kaftan*, for its neckline is elaborately decorated. With the *Kaftan*, it is fascinating to witness how this artist has smuggled in an internationalising imagery (this dress is native to the Arab world; now made international by economic, trade and migrations to Africa and the rest of the world; but now a commonplace attire) to intuit the universality of the Christian message. That imagery brings the ecclesial truths of spreading the Word across the world to all mankind. Also included in the schema are a variety of crosses. However, the entire picture ensemble is skillfully tied together utilising the frame work of the peculiar *grilloesque* mathematically crafted triangles and rhomboid shapes as knitting mechanisms on an *Adire* resist dye ground.

Swarmed in *Adire Eleko* dye pit brilliance, Grillo engages the colours adroitly. He invests them with a richness that explores analogous harmony and linear intersections. With colour, line and his peculiar notions of harmony, Grillo enacts entire symphonies. Using the instrumentality of glass and metal, he conjures the emotions, spiritual consciousness and physical energies into play with rhythmic flair animating the compositions. As he cajoles the persons doing commerce in the church space with the play of melodies and harmonies, Grillo reenacts that “feeling that words alone cannot describe", the feel of transcendental presence (*Isaiah* 1: ). With these, he develops a grid system of linear supports. The keynote of this artist’s work is harmony with the keynote of the archetype, God whose purpose the church space serves. Thus, he creates volumes and recessions, the music of the spheres!
Grillo expresses Nigerian iconographical elements in a mimetic almost photographic representation *vivre* (Fig.2). In these Plexiglas lancet windows the silhouette is adapted to a water-colour like rendering but with sharp graphic definition of the images of principal personas of Church history. Within a formal grid system, each unit of the picture is located, all seamlessly invested in analogous colours. Made up of two giant shapes, first a rhomboid dominated by twelve giant petals, these sunflower-like flutter around a central circle in which a white dove silhouette floats perpetually in eternal bliss. In each of these petals giant iconographical Christian motifs: varied cross shapes, the anchor, the sacred heart; and even an imperial cross in a crown of thorns; all sit on cutout fabric print roulette patterns. These patterns are themselves silhouettes in petal *simulacrum* of the sunflower; the dove motif stays in eternal flight in the middle circle.

In spite of the print decorative impression that his colouration impacts in this picture, Grillo deliberately implants the colour green as background element to create the illusion of stability and balance. Green, a product of the collaboration between yellow and blue, has a positive valence as an emblem of life. Both colours and red constitute the triad of primary colours. Green stands for vegetation and a symbol of calmness and cool disposition. With these qualities, Yusuf aligns green with red as complimentary chords. Exploiting Yoruba textile and clothing, important cultural artifacts; to define concepts of beauty, humanity, culture and proper social relations; the artist enhances the biblical and Christos story. Cloth draws its strength as a metaphor from its use as a powerful expressive medium in Yoruba life. Cameron’s simulation of imagery from the *Egba* cum Brazilian world is subtle, reticent in its
assemblage, but significant at achieving culturalisation of imagery for the Christian church.

The other giant shape is a rectangular stained glass unit. It is made up of four smaller rectangular units, horizontally aligned. Each unit contains mimetic images that choreograph the Dominican Orders vows: obedience, service, humility and continence. A crucifix is located in the center panel. The St. Dominic’s artwork is, in fact, a giant rhomboid unit that fits snugly atop a horizontally aligned rectangular unit. Evocative of the Mathematical sciences and palpably conveyed in all his glass, that principle shapes the planar relationships that characterise his work. This concurs with what Simms (2004) referred to as “Math Art”. It is the dynamism that undergirds both structure and beauty in his work. That grid of structures usually support his art work, constituting their foundation along with a colour scheme that appear as coordinates in complementary and analogous relationships. Mathematical symbolism conjoins the physical and spiritual essences inherent in African artworks. It is fascinating to note how deeply rooted Grillo’s design metaphors are drawn from Adire fabric designs and interwoven mathematically in glass. It is impressive to note the quantitative and the elegant way the artist has manipulated the “grid” in the format of the entire composite picture space. As a result his approach to form is one where objective contexts emerge from personal dispositions. This is informed by the master’s interests in simple but incisive use of design metaphors, all drawn from the African art world.

A preoccupation with culture and the numerical principle remains the pillar of strength in all his works. Hence, the elegant and beautiful emerge concretely through the voice of the physics of nature. It is the dynamic that frames structure and beauty; the spiritual, the quantitative and the elegant. Mythically structure is the grounding upon which the beautiful and the spiritual are encountered. From Grillo’s preoccupation with the feminine theme in paintings like Yoruba Bride, Mother and Child and a host of sculptural works; and within the corpus of images, in Wood-cuts and other print media, a characteristic primary focus on the human figure in dramatic projection from a deliberate investiture in open space is a distinctive master style.

The vertical format of the pictures in St. Dominic’s reflects Grillo’s transposition of imageries and colour palette from regular painting canvass ground. The overall intensity of the now familiar signature Blue, lights up the background with impressionistic freshness. This fills up the, otherwise, somber clerestory void. The rest of the picture is a sketch pad geometric exercise in the alignment, balance and counter alignment of varied sizes of rectangular picture planes. In fact, the art historian and critic, Adepegba (1995) draws attention to this characteristic master signature: distinctive simple figure compositions typified by elongated and geometrised forms with long necks and narrow heads. Grillo’s compositional imageries and contents reflect the logical tendency of the college trained painter, now turned glass artist, to transpose experience and ideas from one familiar ground to a new one. The artist’s peculiar recreation of Adire-Eleko blue flows freely water colour-like in an admixture of rich red and a splinter of various analogous colours. This is the master’s knitting mechanism for the myriad of planes in the composition. In spite of the Lead came that boldly define the rhomboid planes, the palette colours simply flow like many streams flowing to make one river, the picture!
Victor Ehikhamenor: The Prayer Room

Fig. 5: Stained glass paintings, St. Dominic’s Catholic Church, Lagos. Yusuf Grillo, Plexiglass & Pigment, 1360 x 680, 1963. © Nelson Graves.

Fig. 6: The Prayer Room, 2016, Mixed media Installation, Victor Ehikhamenor Dak’Art 2016 international exhibition, Installation view, Palais de Justice © C&
Ehikhamenor’s psychedelic work forces the attention of both visitors and social media audiences. An All Over pattern rendition of iconographic motifs, adapted from regular commonplace Esan-land parlor design, enshrouds all four walls and ceiling of this rectangular space; but a loop shaped Mirror is fixed on one wall. This space is reminiscent of the “Okougheleh”, elders’ communal Meeting Room. Victor takes his architectural idiom from the upland Edo tradition derived from Benin royal architecture. An elders’ Room is a place of solace, prayer, meditation and self reflection spiced with relaxation and entertainment after a grinding day’s work.

Prayer Room is characterised by endless line work, shapes and hidden faces shrouded in a cover of motifs. With a giant loop shaped mirror dominating one wall of a rectangular space, inflecting trompe l’oeil affects relief sculpture on two walls, creating the illusion of a repeat sculptural motif on all walls. Otherwise, the entire surfaces with vibrant white wash paint are simply enveloped in a montage of abstract motifs and symbols. That illusionary ornate ground, evocative of traditional Benin shrine walls, permits the roll-off of blue Orishaic symbols and patched motifs enveloping the entire surface. These symbols and motifs are alluded to as visual alphabets and codes by the artist (Mann, 2016). Distinctive in this florescent Light lit room is the enforced gaze effect created by the All Over pattern repeats on entire interior surfaces. Capturing humanity, evanescence and transience within Prayer, Ehikhamenor enacts his story incorporating traditional African religious cosmological iconography into a contemporary artistic medium.

This velvety shroud in its deep blue cool speechlessness and mute eloquence, declaims all mimesis, instead a garland of iconographical imageries invoke absolute music to the eyes of initiates. Only the relation of flat shapes and colour, without reference to specific objects, remain as a kind of visual music which addresses the mystique of this tableau. In spite of his canonic art education, Victor dadiastically takes inspiration from the ontology of his Esan roots. Adaptations from its Traditional architecture and decorative tableau, specifically the “Okougheleh”, elders’ communal meeting room is central to all his works (Ehikhamenor, 2016). It is apt to look at that ground for the poetic ontology of Prayer Room. He dares a synchronisation, crossing borders via confluences of two traditions (the Esan for shapes and forms, and the western by way of pigments). Through critical negotiations, this is the vernacular base, to borrow a word from Hall (2008) that inspires his forms and shapes. Claiming that Esan poetic literature is the religion of his art; Victor engages inveterate repeats of imageries drawn from that cosmology. In adaptive human play, therefore, his work is expressive of that heartfelt polemic and its rhetoric’s.

Resplendent in endless line work, but shrouded in a cover of motifs, with the canvass molded figures as the only tangible imagery; Ehikhamenor’s (henceforth, VE/ VE’s) poetically couched narrative recreates Okougheleh, as the essence of this spectacle. In resplendent blue and white (reminiscent of white chalkiness of Benin shrines and rituals) Ehikhamenor expresses fundamental realities of cool aesthetics. The “cool” is fundamental to his native Edo and the Black Atlantic. It is expressive of the ideals of balance and control; the cool of creative manners, full of motion and brilliance” and the cool of social responsibility. That cool resonates in “shared traits” in West African ritual dress code. In fact, it is evident in the Americas with slaves who wove it into a rich and dynamic Creole civilization (Thompson, 1973). Engaging “line” as the fundamental essence of art making, the manual and the poetic is clearly determined by the kind of knowledge involved. One hermeneutic view draws attention to the use of poetry as a point of departure in a quest to read this art work. Eluding
to the words poesis and poites, Gadamer (1988) emphasises the specific sense in which both words reflect the process of creation and the creator. That double meaning makes a semantic connection between a specific kind of making and producing and other forms of the same activity. VE’s work alludes to poetry as the fundamental grounding on which creation and creativity belong. In fact, knowledge and faculty direct the productive activity of both craftsman and poet; whose activity is directed towards the work and its consequent use. This artwork’s public functionality is embedded in the context of life, where it occupies a position of its own in the processes of religious worship, theatrical performance; and even decoration and embellishment.

In traditional oral discourse, words enjoy unlimited power and ideal perfection in poetic evocation that depend on reproduction via dramatic play, recitation and reading. Hence, there is no other respect in which a linguistic work of art has to be for anything else. The oral traditions that enact the narratives that ground VE’s works are properly speaking “made”. In his dadaistic resort to lines and the iconographical decorative tableau in Prayer Room, the pleasure of persons who recognise what is represented, show the real significance of imitative representation. There is no question of judging the degree of accuracy with which the representations approach original Esan iconography. This creation like every representation, finds its genuine fulfillment in the reality that what it represents is recognised as categorically there. This is the essential purpose of esoteric character of cults. Knowledge means recognition. Mimesis, says Gadamer (1998) is a representation in which we know and have in view the essential content of what is represented.

VE recalibrates memory of the tangible past in ephemera, engaging colonial materiality but applying an “aesthetic of the cool” taken from his roots, while circumventing western aesthetics. He found, instead, a new way of reinterpretation and discourse of individual experience in Okougheleh. With esoteric cultic suggestiveness, the art represents a transformation of the old Elder’s Room in nouvelle concepts, shapes and volumes. This work is an absorbing spectacle, resplendently engaging mimesis, poetic lyricisms and share coolness to affect a gaze. In an eternal return to same, Victor restores the essences and values of the past, while validating their timelessness.

Conclusion
In nouvelle shapes and volumes reminiscent of the playfulness of art (Gadamer, 1986:123-6) these artists seemed “got rid of everything that smacks of journalism, worms, everything nice and right, blinkered, moralistic, Europeanized, enervated by saying dada like the Zurich artists 100 years ago.” (Kedmey, 2016). In concert with the kin-folk consciousness of the most visible signifiers of their art worlds, the artists’ utilised endogenous cosmological imageries, all drawn directly from matriarchal artistry. These creations, distinguished in iconography play out the texts of this essay, epitomising “indigenous identity”. These artworks are directed to the literati, the Élan vital; people with a certain level of intellection and education, ready to read the images that are cast in front of them. With convergence of “conscious evolution”, among the artists, nuanced in the regimen of the mainstay textile arts, these creations emphasise the pre-eminence of matriarchal artistry in the constitution of indigenous identity.

The works reflect the reality that in Africa textiles are ubiquitous artworks whose artistry draws upon both reservoirs of past practice and a thirst for innovation. At the core of these
artworks is the reality that design is an endlessly expansive continuum of possibilities. That approach continues to resonate in El Anatsui’s and Ehikhamenor’s creative works. The visual aesthetics of textiles is central to the collective sensivity of contemporary artists. They take their experiences from locales and cosmopolitan spaces. The personalised departures of individual imaginations reflect the synergy between the classical traditions and the art of the present. Their art deal in terms of scale shifts from locale to global, individual to empire, and from the intimate to the immense! Reflecting the grand metaphor *City in the Blue Day Light*; a hermeneutic analysis of the creations reflect a rekindling of individual visions in the drive for the calibration of new strategies and aesthetics reflecting the sole purpose of re-enchanting the world and the continent (Njami, 2016). Exhibitions in the West highlight the unique role of textiles as fundamental stimulation. While recognising the transavant-garde as the groundings for the vivacity of contemporary expression in Africa and the connection that exists with the traditional forms for African artistic post-modernism; the reading and writing of the stories that these images recite remain the daunting tasks for the future.

References


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