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Ara Aesthetic: Embodying Yoruba Philosophy in the Evolution of Nigerian Art

*¹Ozokeraha, Akpowowo Bensandy

About Article

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About Author

¹ Department of Fine Art and Industrial Design, Faculty of Environmental Sciences, Southern Delta University, Ozoro, Isoko North Local Government, Delta State, Nigeria

Contact @ Ozokeraha, Akpowowo Bensandy
ozokerahaab@dsust.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

The Ara aesthetic serves as a powerful cultural lens through which the depth of Yoruba philosophy is conveyed in visual art. Rooted in the Yoruba term Ara, signifying both “body” and “wonder,” this artistic expression positions the human figure as a central symbol for conveying divine essence, social values, and collective identity. Rather than emphasizing realism, Ara art embodies spiritual depth by incorporating metaphysical themes such as “Aṣẹ” (vital spiritual energy), “Orí” (individual destiny), and the inseparable relationship between the physical and the spiritual. It extends across diverse traditional art forms, fulfilling ceremonial, religious, and societal functions. Through its stylized portrayal of the human form, Ara art encodes moral teachings, ancestral heritage, and cosmological principles. This study presents Ara as a conceptual and aesthetic model deeply embedded in Yoruba cultural consciousness, demonstrating its persistent influence and reinvention in contemporary Nigerian artistic practices and identity formations. In the presentation, the paper deploys Art History method of Formal and Contextual Analysis to review four selected Arai paintings, noting that though the two methods appear distinct but they overlap like style and ideology in the discussion of a work of art. The objective is to reveal their relevance to the cultural voice of the Yoruba thought.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Studies have shown different civilizations with their aesthetics. Greek at the Classical period considered art as mimicry; the Romans, too, saw aesthetics as mimicry; that is the imitative representation of nature (mimesis). They had also assigned values to realistic delineation, harmony, and proportion (Gombrich, 2000). African civilizations had had theirs, too. Nigeria had hers. Nigerian art, even before independence, had considerably taken after naturalism. They lent credence to representational art where indigenous aesthetics were synthesized with the Western canon of art (Falola, 1998). However, the approach was shifty.

Nigeria's pre-independence witnessed a shift in the artistic tradition from Western academic naturalism to Nigerian indigenous aesthetics, a shift seemingly declared nationhood where local traditions took preeminence above others to project national identity. This feat summoned a new cultural style of artistic expression, which manifested in a profound artistic voice, the Nigerian visual voice/art.

In the new artistic experience, the very transformative, different art movements (some were critical art styles), all of which attempted to champion the different Nigerian culture, began to spring up. Among them is the Arai Art Style, which later became known as Araism or Ara Art Movement. It is heavily characterized by the Yoruba culture and it deploys natural synthesis in contemporary Nigerian art development. Since then, Ara Art has become a serious advocate of Nigerian culture in the modern art practices, using Western academic techniques. For some decades in Nigeria, many art forms, which are beyond the conventional style of painting and sculpting sprang up and are comparatively making waive in the art world.

This paper explores the concept, evolution, techniques, and impact of Africanized Nigerian visual art, particularly examining shifts from naturalistic portrayal to indigenous expression under globalization (Adeyemi, 2010; Honour, 1988).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Yoruba people are in the southwestern part of Nigeria with an art tradition that has become recognized and addressed as Yoruba traditional Art, a profound cultural expression in the Nigerian art development. These embrace themes of spirituality, cultural identity, symbolism, techniques and their impact. A major cultural area, the Yoruba people have a rich artistic heritage encapsulated in their traditional festivals and oral theatrics. The Yoruba hunters have a common patron, the Ogun deity whose hunting associates are versed in Ijala chanting, being a unique sonorous poetic language adopted by Ogun, the master hunter/chanter. Ifa, too, has its tonal poetry called Iyere, often laced with deep philosophy, folklores and remedies for spiritual problems.

The art of poetry intertwined in the Ijala, Iremoje and Iyere poetry form a strong philosophical strengthening that provide a solid background to Ara art style, which emerged in the development of the Nigerian art in 1998. Ara Art not only defines artworks but also honors the creator: artists become Oni-se-Arai (pattern-makers) or Gbena-gbena (design carvers), while in textiles and graphics, Dona-dona highlights nuanced artistry (Lawal, 2000; Harris, 1995).

2.1. Theoretical background

Abiodun (2014) posits that Yorubalanguage is a guide to understanding Yoruba artworks, concepts like oriki (praise poetry), and oral tradition, asserting that interpreting the works with a foreign-language often misses the cultural meanings. He supports his position with meta-analysis, noting that scholars who do not understand Yoruba risk the misrepresentation of the cultural meanings.

A recent journal article on ori (head) in Grafiati Journal (2024), surveys the Yoruba attempt to adorn and symbolically decorate ori on spiritual and moral values, using visual imagery to examine the symbolic role of the head in the Yoruba aesthetics and social order.

Olaiya (2022) examines the stronghold of Yoruba religious traditions such as iṣeṣe in their carvings, ritual sculptures, textiles, and color representation that these art forms mirror deep spiritual beliefs and daily life.

Akinmolayan (2023) captures the influence of traditional Yoruba art on vernacular and modern architecture in Ile-Ife that the royal architecture incorporates carvings, murals, and spiritual symbols that function as artistry and rituals and that these artistic elements still preserve their cultural identity in spite of modernization.

Beginning experimentation of Ara Art Style in the 1989, the exponent became versed in the experiment after seven years and launched Ara art with thirty-two painting exhibits on May 5, 1998. He started to teach young artists the technique with individualized identity and slight varying styles with an overall Yoruba cultural ideology. The exponent, together with five trainees who accepted and practised Ara art style, launched it on July 22, 2006 into an art movement and Ara art became known as Araism. Since then sculptors and painters have accepted and have been practicing Araism cultural philosophy and style with verve that has always disseminated the Yoruba culture. Very importantly, Arai Art ever since embodies a unified creative grandeur in Yoruba motifs, patterns, composition, and formal blistering effect in the advancement of the Yoruba aesthetics.

In addition to numerous commissions, the growing movement began to exhibit within and outside the country. Araism began to gain a wide acceptance within and outside the country among young painters.

2.2. Empirical framework

The empirical framework attempts to establish contemporary continuities and the resolve to reinterpret traditional art in modern art, an attempt to embrace synthesis/integration. Twentieth-century iconoclastic movements, driven by colonial Christian influence, suppressed Yoruba traditional arts. However, modern heritage efforts, such as the Osogbo Art Revival, have emerged to restore spiritual and cultural expressions. These movements reclaim Yoruba art as living heritage.

Adire, a traditional indigo resist-dyed cloth, encodes spiritual and social stories in its patterns. Contemporary artists like Sangodare Gbadeges in Ajala have modernized these traditions, incorporating vibrant colors and spiritual iconography. Their works have gained international recognition, including exhibitions at global art events. Characterized by intricate ornamentation—geometric and organic motifs - Arai Art



integrates symbolic meaning into visual design, anchoring pieces to Yoruba heritage (Filani, 2002; Willet, 1982).

The technique begins with sourcing for materials and tools required for the canvas and for the actual painting, which include stretcher, canvas, tempera or powder pigment mixed with glue to get primer to prime the canvas. Others are sketchpad, knife, pencil, and acrylic. Others are palette knife, water container, plastic spoon, and a painting table. The painter lays the canvas on the table where he uses the pencil to transfer his motifs to the canvas. He mixes the acrylic pigment to the desired hue, tone, and value and then applies in crackled strokes on canvas with the palette knife. Every painter chooses his colour and the angle to place his palette knife to achieve individual style. Tiny strokes in irregular shapes are laid while avoiding merging them, thus leaving tiny linear space in between strokes until the entire space is covered and the overall effect is crackles. Figure 1 and 2; Materials and Application of Pigments, capture materials and the exponent laying the strokes on a canvas.

The ideology of Ara art is to attempt to reconstruct Yoruba aesthetics, using poetic lines, vibrant colours and dramatic poses to reconcile academic and traditional art Africa thought and motifs. Though the works of Ara art painters vary in artistic wavelength, the overall style and themes are cultured in graphical painting sometimes called Ara or Araism – having two connotations: style and art movement.

3. METHODOLOGY

The paper uses Art History method of Formal and Contextual Analysis to evaluate some selected Arai paintings. The two methods appear distinct but overlap like style and ideology of a work of art in discussion. The selection of the four works was randomly based on their relevance to the subject under discussion – their cultural nature as the voice of the Yoruba thought. To adequately deal with the study, the method uses historical and contemporary texts on visual art, and engages the viewer in interactive participation for a comprehensive feel, an attempt to understand the creative process.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Contributions of ara art

Some artists/writers have reacted to Ara's aesthetic and their reactions form a profound background to the discussion. Their reactions merge the different views of critics on Ara art style as the following indicates.

Modern artistic expressions rooted in Ara Art continue to reflect core ancestral, spiritual, and communal symbols of the Yoruba tradition, thereby playing a vital role in resisting the dilution of cultural values (Filani, 1996).

Through Arai Art Yoruba cultural principles are preserved and projected within the context of globalization. The style also serves as a valuable educational tool, embedding indigenous knowledge within formal learning systems (Babatunde, 2019; Wewe, 2008).

Some artists who work within the Arai framework rely heavily on locally sourced elements such as earth, wood, raffia, and traditional fabrics. Notably, Okediji's soil-based paintings showcase innovative use of these materials (Ogundipe, 2002; Okediji, 2000).

Some artists have blended Yoruba visual culture with contemporary techniques and this has elevated Arai artists onto global platforms, thereby earning them recognition through international exhibitions and artistic partnerships (Adeeko, 2015).

Influence of Arai Art extends beyond Yoruba communities, as artists from other Nigerian ethnic groups adapt its stylistic and philosophical elements to articulate their own cultural narratives, contributing to a cohesive Nigerian artistic identity (Babatunde, 2019).

4.2. Analysis of figures formal

Figure 1, Materials and Application of Pigments captures the exponent of Ara art demonstrating Ara technique. He displays the materials and he seems to emphasize how the canvas should lie on the table instead of on the easel in conventional painting. The inset is the picture of some materials. He applies acrylic with palette knife on the canvas. Figure 2, Layewu (Hunter Masquerade) is tempera on jute. Here the artist retains the dominant characteristics of frontal and profile axial movement in the study of Layewu. He graduates the hues of brown in clearly delineated straps. The human figures are in the festive mood, some engage in verbal and theatrical experiences, typical of Layewu masquerades and Ijala chanters. Their theatric movement is characterized by open mouth, growing horns and ecstatic mood, all placed in a dept created with aerial perspective in visual components of a hunter at the background of Yoruba aesthetics. Expressed in four sections with hues of yellowish green as dominant colour (and hues of red and black less dominant), section 1 captures Olode (The Hunters), and section 2, Olokiti (The Acrobat). Others are section 3, Layewu (Masquerade) and section 4, Alubata (The Drummer).

Figure 3, Jengbetiele (Fortified) captures the Yoruba woodcarving stylistics, drawing inspiration from African formal elements, symbols and motifs, which speak unambiguously straight from the Yoruba tradition. The male figure in profile, which is on lines and straps of hues, relies heavily on colour hues. It also relies on the intensity at the background of a staccato and abrupt transition, which is clearly delineated with minor forms and headgear. The figure and background reveal a symphony of colour hues and value yet the image is distinct. The artist assigns qualities to the lines to become convex, concave, straight, circular and angular on a warp surface and a smooth texture to achieve rhythm, harmony, emphasis and unity between image and canvas.

Figure 4, Osun Olomoyoyo, the Goddess of Fertility and Productivity is craft on a background of head masks, all of which stand as models of fertility. On a varying length of cubic and painterly/vanishing/burring outlines, the figure stands frontally, carrying a calabash with the firmness of a goddess. Her eyes search the void from an oval face that terminates into braids of hair with a loop that penetrates into space.

4.3. Analysis of figures contextual

The four figures are in the crusade for the Yoruba worldview, using festivals, rituals, chants, Ifa literature, folklore, proverbs and idioms as means of interpretation and preservation.

The figures agree with the position of (Filani, 1996) that they



reflect the core ancestral, spiritual, and communal symbols of the Yoruba tradition and so they play important role in resisting foreign usages in favour of the cultural values. The figures preserve and disseminate the Yoruba thought in the realm of globalization, embedding indigenous knowledge in formal education; same as the position of Babatunde (2019) and Wewe, (2008).

The blending of Yoruba visual culture with contemporary techniques has elevated Arai artists onto global platforms, earning them recognition through international exhibitions and artistic partnerships (Adeeko, 2015).



Figure 1. Materials and pigments application.
Source: Onifade (2010)



Figure 2. Layewu (Hunter Masquerade),
Source: Onifade (1995)



Figure 3. Jengbetiele (Fortified).
Source: Onifade (2009)



Figure 4. Osun Olomoyoyo.
Source: Onifade (2006)

5. CONCLUSIONS

Ara Art exemplifies a vital contemporary interpretation of Yoruba philosophical and aesthetic traditions within Nigerian visual culture. By merging ancestral motifs with modern artistic methods, Ara Art articulates Yoruba identity in a manner that resonates with both indigenous and international audiences. This stylistic movement not only safeguards Yoruba heritage but also energizes new forms of artistic expression, reflecting a continuous dialogue between the past and the present. Through its evolving practice, Ara Art fosters cultural sustainability while contributing meaningfully to the global narrative of African art. For their local content nature in scholarship experiences, the administrative functionaries of institutions of higher learn should incorporate the art in their curriculum. Further research on the identity implications of Ara Art with respect to Yoruba as a people is also advocated.

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