

**Book Review: POSTCOLONIAL MODERNISM:  
Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century  
Nigeria. Durham and London: Duke  
University Press.X, 357 pp. by Chika Okeke  
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**Agwu Enekwachi – Reviewer**

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The book *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth Century Nigeria*, is authored by Chika Okeke-Agulu. The book details the active literary and artistic engagements of some Nigerian artists beginning from the early 1950s pre-independence period to the mid-sixties post-independence years. The book navigates the labyrinths of what is believed to be the fiery years that saw the evolution of Nigerian art into its form of modernity. It also spotlights concatenating cultural and political developments in Nigeria, and other parts of Africa and the diaspora. Okeke-Agulu maps these tense political and transcultural events through attentive investigation and analysis of leading artists and key events of that historical epoch.

The author's attention to this time frame is pertinent because it marked the birth of Nigeria's modernism encapsulated in the myriads of interconnected events leading to a rediscovery and subsequent demand for new identity and quest that would lead to independence in Nigeria and other African states. Okeke-Agulu thinks these vortexes of events as one "propelled by political developments and transactions," where the literature, media and political activism of the time evinced internal resonance.

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Agwu Enekwachi  
Department of Fine and Applied Arts  
University of Nigeria, Nsukka

In chapter 1, Okeke-Agulu draws attention to the colonial structures that sought to inhibit new ideologies and modernity by highlighting the antagonisms between imperial apologists and anti-colonial nationalists. With this, he sets the tone for the spinal ideological and philosophical origins of the cultural architecture of nationalism and Pan-Africanism as well as the influences of W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey and Nnamdi Azikiwe by putting in proper perspective the new post-colonial modernism championed by the Zaria Art Society.

In chapter two, Okeke-Agulu negotiates the contrasting yet complimentary stylistic and formal aspects of Aina Onabolu and Kenneth Murray. Onabolu had a preference for western naturalism as a route to dispelling European racist notion at the time that Africans are incapable of serious realism. While Murray, the British expatriate (hired in 1927 to teach art in Nigeria), on the other hand, encouraged his Nigerian art students to return to the glories of their traditional art against the onslaught of modernity. Murray's pedagogical thrust and Onabolu's stylistic paradigm constitute the two essences that the colonial scholar, Homi K. Bhabha called the "third space" - a liminal in-between where cultures converge and conflate. This fusion, Okeke-Agulu skillfully presented as the composite drive and inspiration of the art and theory of Zaria Art Society and the critical interventions of Ulli Beier and his circle of friends.

The author discusses in chapter 3, the formation of the Art Society at the National College of Arts, Science and Technology (1954-1961), to underscore the catalyzing role of the academy. Okeke-Agulu explains that the formation of Zaria Art Society is a major push in the process of decolonization. He presents the argument among scholars over who is the real precursor of the natural synthesis concept, between Kenneth Murray and Aina Onabolu. Okeke-Agulu resituates the work of the Art Society within the historical architecture of Nigerian art by balancing the argument for or against either Onabolu's brand of postcolonial modernism or Kenneth Murray's ideology. Okeke-Agulu by this goes against what many scholarships accept that Natural Synthesis was built on Murray's thinking, that he and not Onabolu, must be credited with initiating the sets of ideas championed by the Art Society. Onabolu's

drive to disprove racist idiosyncrasy led to a significant part to his abandonment of traditional art forms. Murray's artistic predilection despite accusations of furthering empire's position provided a counterbalancing influence on the evolution of postcolonial modernism. If Murray's works are to be judged outside of empire's shadows, perhaps, his contributions as a precursor to the natural synthesis concept would be less ambiguous. Okeke-Agulu argues that succeed in letting us know that whichever way you look at it, the inputs made by these two personages are vital to the discourse of Nigeria's post modernism.

Okeke-Agulu x-rays the crystallization of Nigerian modernist and postcolonial art practice in the fourth chapter. He narrates the importance of Ulli Beier's influence in the development and internationalization of modern Nigerian art. With improved practice, there was attendant literature primarily from Ulli Beier's *Black Orpheus* magazine. The art reviews and criticisms from this magazine helped to provide more insight into the active and influential workshops and exhibitions of Mbari Club in Nigeria. According to Okeke-Agulu, it also lent its voice to a new generation of Anglophone African and Diaspora artists and writers of the 1950s and 1960s. The author awakens in us the sensibilities and awareness of an emerging community of contemporary artists and writers by explaining how Beier's literary devotion contributed to the artistic sophistication of a new generation of Nigerian artists and writers.

In chapter 5, Okeke-Agulu examines the post-NCST years of the individuals that constituted the Art Society and their roles as co-travelers in the Nigeria's postmodernism journey. The early 1960 years saw the flowering of postcolonial modernism not necessarily as a single motivating force rather Okeke suggests "that individual artist had the freedom to negotiate their relationship with inherited and appropriated artistic sources." The Art Society members' provocative inclination to personal artistic identity became apparent, exclusive of the natural synthesis of a national style. He wrote that the artists infused doses of their culture in divergent interpretations of their own creative goals still within the framework of the principles of Natural Synthesis.



Examining the debate in Nigeria and beyond, about the incongruent similarity between the young Zaria artists and their contemporaries in Lagos Okeke-Agulu in chapter 6, gives valuable attention to artists such as Erhabor Emokpae and Okpu Eze who were active on the Lagos scene. This younger generation of Nigerian artists and the older generation represented by Ben Enwonwu, Akinola Lasekan and Cyprian Ekwensi, formed the Lagos crucible that would determine the form and direction of post-independence Nigerian art. As Okeke-Agulu narrated, more artists relocated to Lagos from Zaria, abroad (those returning from art training) in addition to nearby artists from Yaba College of Technology because Lagos offered many exhibition opportunities, patronage from both government and foreign agencies and expatriates. He examined the role played by these factors in making Lagos an authentic and preeminent cultural capital. In 1965, Colette Omogbai's historic manifesto in *Nigeria Magazine* described the Lagos factor as "the high noon of contemporary art world increasingly dominated by young artists who were both critically and historically self-aware." In the concluding chapter 7, the post-independence political crisis, the military intervention in 1966 and the civil war, cast shadows on the social gains of nationalism that earlier inspired the Art Society and other art movements in Lagos. This unfortunate reversal of national dynamism fueled the resurgence of regionalism due to fractal relationships among contending constituencies. Okeke-Agulu notes that the formation of Mbari house in Enugu is one of such fallouts of the post-independence crisis. Many of the artists who had associated with Ibadan and Lagos had to return to Enugu where a vibrant art centre was soon established. Most of the works featured in this chapter are mainly Okeke and Nwoko's works. Both experienced the Nigerian civil war at the Biafran divide. It is notable that works from the Nigerian side of the conflict if any were not reflected or among the works discussed. The above, where available, would have provided alternative and wider visual experience of the conflict.

Postcolonial Modernism: Art and decolonization in the Twentieth-Century Nigeria, is a valuable addition to resources available to scholars in African art. The in-depth analysis and

gorgeous illustrations of over 225 images will prove useful to art scholarship especially those interested in Nigerian Contemporary Art and postcolonial studies. In summarizing the 357-page book, Okeke-Agulu reminds us that “the mid-twentieth century, nationalism and decolonization as ideas and practices in Nigeria and other parts of Africa and beyond, were primal catalysts of a short-lived yet historically significant, complex, tangled, multilayered, and fraught artistic modernism.

Chika Okeke-Agulu has taught art history at some institutions in United States of America including Princeton University, Emory University, Pennsylvania State University. Before migrating to the USA, he taught art at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and Yaba College of Technology, Lagos- Nigeria. Okeke-Agulu has published widely in many journals and has edited several works on African arts. He is a recipient of many awards for his contributions to art scholarship including the CAA Frank Jewett Mather Award for Art Criticism.