

**HYBRIDITY, MULTI-DISCIPLINARITY AND BOUNDARY CROSSING IN
AESTHETIC CULTURE: AN ANALYSIS OF MULTIMEDIA STRATEGIES AND
PRACTICES IN AFRICAN VISUAL ARTS**

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ABSTRACT

Hybridity, multi-disciplinarity and boundary crossing in aesthetic culture in African visual art has been caterpaulted by a number of factors during the past thirty years. Among these factors are; globalization, postcolonial, cultural theories and what Appandurai (1998) calls mediascapes, that is the flow of images, histories and information. Ideoscapes are the flow of cultural and political ideologies in his studies of globalization culture and the arts. The research found out that hybridity, multi-disciplinarity and boundary crossing are recent developments in African visual art. However, multimedia strategies and practices are closely linked to pre-colonial practices, post-colonial, postmodern theories and technology. Post-colonial theory is about the colonised announcing their presence and identity as well as reclaiming their past that was lost or distorted because of being ‘othered’ by the Western aesthetic theories. Today as Kwame Appiah of Ghana and Chika Okeke of Nigeria assert “Though driven by technology and multimedia practices , we cannot refer to contemporary African art exclusively as post colonial or post modern rather African art has deep historical connections to the precolonial .” This connection is called by some artists the ‘usable past’. Today, African artist use traditional media in combination with unusual materials, these include industrial recycled material, digital and new technologies.

INTRODUCTION

This article analyses hybridity and boundary crossing in visual art, juxtaposing globalization. Hybridity and boundary crossing has been necessitated by globalization over the past three decades (1980’s to the present day). Globalization theories have shaped, reshaped discourse and practices in visual art across the globe. It gave birth to hybridity, boundary crossing and multiplicity. This article also notes that hybridity and boundary crossing are not recent developments that came at the end of colonialism modernism in visual art. It is something that came hand and glove with consumerism and mass culture in the West.

It is imperative to have an exposition of each of the terms: hybridity, boundary crossing. The article also shows how these terms are intertwined with globalization theories.

Background to the Study

Globalization is an idea of our time highly contested and widely accepted at the same time. Globalization refers to a variety of events that are rapidly changing the world. It relates to economics, politics, culture, society and everything we deal with in our everyday lives. Cochrane and Pain (2000:226) define it as “a process of deepening and acceleration of boundary crossing transactions...” It is a set of processes that make parts of the world interdependently integrated, it is great movement of people, goods, capital, and ideas to increase economical integration, which in turn is propelled by increased trade and investment. Globalization refers to a variety of events that are rapidly changing the world. It relates to economics, politics, culture

Cultural globalization encompasses temporal and spatial aspects, which conceive globalizations as a process of accelerated boundary crossing transactions. Robertson (1992:8) sees globalization as “... both compression of the world and intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole”. Lecher (2005:330). perceives it “as the wide diffusion of practices, expansion of social relationships across continents , organization of social life on a global scale and growth of a shared global consciousness”. Interaction is made possible by electronic flows and communication networks. There is also availability of commodities from distant cultures, rise in migration, and strengthening of global network. Therefore there is emphasis for commonly shared consciousness where one’s actions have consequences others.

The arts and globalization culture

Appadurai (1999) in his studies of globalization culture and the arts distinguishes his studies between flows of image; histories and information which he calls (media capes). Flows of cultural and political ideologies (ideoscapes). Financial flows (finscapes). Flows of migrants, tourists and refugees (ethnos capes). All these according to Appadurai’s disjunctive flows proceeding according to their “ restrictions and incentives”. Appadurai’s differentiation does not go far enough. Considering the flow images for example, it is no way irrelevant whether one deals in flows in ‘high art’ or fine arts, popular arts, film television, and popular music.

Cultural globalization therefore corresponds to a network with no clearly defined centers or peripheries. Cultural influences move in many directions. Appadurai (2003) identifies cultural flows consisting of

- (i) Media
- (ii) Technology
- (iii) Ideology
- (iv) Ethnicities.

As such these cultural flows on recipient nations become hybridized rather than homogenized. Richard Armstrong and Hans Ulrich Obrist on 27 May 2010 had this to say about homogenisation “We do suffer from overly homogenised view of contemporary art our job is make sure this does happen... intellectuals of museums need not to be monocultural”. This statement simply means visual art should have a global appeal and it should be culturally synthetic. In African cities like Nairobi, Harare, Abidjan, Lagos linkages to global patronage through galleries, museums and electronic means are clearly visible.

Hybridity in most African countries is determined by the artists’ point of reference on the compass of postcolonial world. Kasfir (1999:12) argues, “ The output of an African artist working in London or California is filtered very different everyday from that of a counterpart in Lagos”. That is to say the focus of critical attention has come to rest on transnational artists who are Africans. Curator Okwai Enwezor a Nigerian living in the USA speaks of the tension between ‘here and there’ the seeing eye and the ‘remembering mind’.

The post colonial and the postmodern

Postcolonial theory

Postcolonial is an area of cultural and critical theory that has been used in the study of literary texts. Postcolonial theory deals with the reading and writing of literature written in colonizing countries (the metropolis/centres) dealing with colonisation or colonised people. Mapara (2009:141) argues that the theory also focuses largely on the way in which literature “by the colonizers distorts the experience and realities of the colonised, and inscribes the inferiority of the colonised while at the same time promoting the superiority of the colonizer”. The postcolonial theory is also about the colonised and formerly colonised announcing their presence and identity as well as reclaiming their past that was lost or distorted because of being othered by colonialism.

Post colonialism is not about a literal theory that deals with the literature produced in countries that were former colonies of countries like Britain, France Portugal and Spain. It is anchored on binary opposition where white is presented as superior where black and oriental are inferior . According to Fanon and Said post colonial theory deals with the cultural identities of the colonised people , focusing largely on their dilemmas at the same time attempting to develop a national identity after the demise of colonial rule .Franz Fanon and Edward Said are the two major proponents of the postcolonial theory .

Fanon asserts that colonialism because of its rigid promotion of white race superiority over non-whites, has created a sense of division and alienation. He further argues that in colonialism the history, language, culture, arts customs and belief system of the colonizers are considered universal, normative and superior. This has led to a strong sense of inferiority in most of the colonised people so much that they adopt all the colonizers' identity as their own. The colonised end up using the colonisers' language, culture and customs. As such “ the majority of African artists have been deeply affected by the colonial and postcolonial condition most obviously in their continual economic dependence on foreign or local European patronage” (Kasfir, 1999:13). This implies that most art produced in Africa whether commercial, pop, fine academic, folk or any other type has some “signs of modern consciousness tethered to the civilising missionary and disciplinary procedures of the European” Chika Okeke).

Postmodern theory

The postmodern theory emphasizes the major shifts in attitudes and styles ,away from modernism, especially on its formalist inclinations towards interests in semiotics and renewed concerns with history and tradition . Postmodernism in visual arts is “ part of global project of cultural decolonization.... an attempt in part of the Western people to get beyond strictly European idea of aesthetics...” (McEvelley,1994:266). Therefore postmodern stresses the shift from art with a capital “A”. The key to this shift is democratization of artistry the focus shifts from product to process from cultural others to cultural brothers and sisters.

Postcolonial and postmodern suggest an exploration of new sources that characterizes the trajectory of any inventive, initiative artist. It also suggests when focused upon concrete cultural references like African sculptures, fetishes, San rock art etc “ the African artist-intellectual's search for a 'usable past'. That usable past becomes an encyclopedic

referencing” (Kasfir,1999:210). This means the artist combines his own creation with certain cultural references and icons using any media of his/her choice to create hybridity and cross cultural phenomenon. This is well illustrated in the works of Ouattara an Ivorian painter who lives in New York Yinka Shonibare a Yoruba artist who creates installations and lives in London.

Similarities between the postcolonial and the postmodern theories

How ‘post modern’ is contemporary African art ? This question is well answered by the Ghanaian scholar Kwame Appiah who asks “is the ‘post’ in postcolonial the same as the ‘post’ in? postmodernism ?.His answer is both ‘yes’ and ‘no’. The reason being that many of the same philosophers and cultural studies theorists define modernity as the ‘spread of global capitalism also identify the postcolonial condition with the postmodern’(Kasfir,199:14).The striking similarities between the two are that of cultural decolonization, doing away with strictly European type of aesthetics in visual art and doing away with ‘otherness’ in arts and cultural issues. Therefore we cannot refer contemporary African art exclusively as ‘postcolonial’ or ‘post modern’. Rather it has deeper history and connections to what came before the colonial incursion art.

It can be said that the unique similarity between the ‘postcolonial and the postmodern has been this condition of hybridity’ (Kasfir,1999:14) . This article further discusses hybridity boundary crossing in visual art juxtaposing globalization.

Hybridity

In science a hybrid is created by mixing the characteristics of two different species in order to create one that is better or stronger. In visual art the artist chooses materials and media of his /her own choice. “For artists today, the choice of materials and media for creating art is wide open”.(Okeke,2010:17). This is supported by Duncuum (2004:252) who argues that “...there are no exclusive visual sites .All cultural sites that involve imagery include various ratios of other communicative modes and may employ more than vision”. That is to say material hybridity has helped in blurring the boundaries in visual art. Today artist are using both traditional media such as paint, clay, stone, bronze, etc. but others have selected new or unusual materials for their art. These include industrial recycled materials and new technologies such as photography, video, or digital media which offer artists more ways to express themselves .Hence a combination of these; multimedia, technology , and many

different techniques gives birth to hybridity, multidisciplinary and boundary crossing in aesthetic culture.

In contemporary African art hybridity goes hand in hand with the postcolonial and postmodern. Appiah a Ghanaian scholar argues that postcolonial and postmodern "...both also share the central premise of commodification of art work and the dominance of international art market". Globalisation has necessitated hybridity, multidisciplinary and boundary crossing in African art. As a result "new art" has developed in most African countries due to ease flow of information through the internet, mass media, fast cross border transactions and cross- cultural interactions. Kasfir (1999:16) argues about the new art that is hybrid in nature that "...it must take place within a milieu of existing practices producing hybrid images and reflexive content which uses or comment upon them". New artists who embrace this approach include John Goba of Sierra Leone who was born in 1944. In his work masks "Odeh- E- Lay" (1992), Goba combines paint store pigment and porcupine quills to the reworking of 'adinkra (hand stamped Akan funeral cloth) and Kente (strip –woven-Akan royal cloth).Ode- Lay are a derivative of much older mask genres .Ode- Lay developed into a form of urban street theatre in Free Town .

In South Africa postcoloniality , hybridity ,technology and globalization have changed the visual art landscape. Hence in South Africa during the apartheid era white artists incorporated their activism into explicit content of their artwork. Sue Williamson screen-printed photographic collage honouring women involved in apartheid struggle. Most of these women were blacks. Williamson's finest piece is 'Jenny Curtis Schoon' who was a white anti-apartheid activist and was blown out by a parcel bomb in 1982 together with her daughter. Another artist of excellence is William Kentridge who began to combine drawing with animation during the apartheid era. He made a film in the studio on one sheet of paper the film was entitled 'Soho and Mrs Eckstein in the Landscape'(1991). Kentridge uses technology and multimedia approaches in his art .This resulted in six films, Johannesburg 2nd Greatest City after Paris', Obesity and Getting Old (1991).

Soon after independence South African art went steps further in the use of hybridity, technology and multimedia. Siopis Penny 1996 used technology in moulding figures of women and children in her installation 'Mostly Women and Children'. This is a room installation depicting the aftermath of violence it featured a body cast of an African woman lying amidst a scene of destruction, while a fire flickered and cast shadows over the room. Chive' van den Berg's 'Men Loving' (1996) dealt with political violence of the past and

homophobia of blacks and whites in South Africa. Two male figures lie one white one black lay together in a shared grave with grass growing over them, Ba reference to infamous history and events .

Boundary Crossing

Visual arts does cross cultural, civilisational, ethnic, religious, and geographic boundaries. There are artistic boundaries within the system that are constantly in move and cause the artistry as process to happen between the common and align contexts. There were/ are boundaries between high art and craft, folk art and “other”, commercial commodities. Today boundaries created by Western aesthetic standards are on the artistic wayside. This is due to the greatly expanded geography in which art circulate. The other factor is as Appadurai (1998) puts it in his globalisation culture mediasapes that the easy flow of images, histories and information. This flow has been enhanced by electronic network. Flow of cultural and political ideologies (ideoscapes) has enhanced hybridity and boundary crossing due to easy border crossing of commodities and people. These cultural flows involve media technology, always results in hybridity typing and boundary ceossing. Museums, patrons and art collectors maintained that in their discourse of high-art there is “..... a major distinction between the privileged sphere of Art” and other goods. The difference between aesthetic objects made in response to an urge to create and those made unabashedly to be sold. “Therefore High or fine art it is held, must be free of commercial motive....” There are historically two distinctions fine art (non-utilitarian) and craft (utilitarian) and another distinction between (presumed non-commercials) and (commodity) commercial. All of these Eurocentric aesthetics and artisanal traditions are not a true picture of contemporary art today. Valid Art today is influenced by globalization which in two gives birth to boundary crossing and hybridity due to media, technology, ideoscapes and ethnoscapas as said by Appadurai. Therefore today we celebrate technology in visual art which sees the crumbling of the art-craft –art commodity, commercial and fine art boundaries of artwork, “...it encompasses hybridity, cycreticism and multidimensional and needia.” Today artists use both traditional, media and unusual materials for their art, these include industrial recycled material, and new technologies and digital media.

Conclusion

It can be strongly asserted that African art today is in transit. Visual Art in Sub Saharan has a strong connection to pre-colonial art in terms of iconography, themes and style. However, globalization has influenced some of the works greatly. The influence has given birth to hybridity, and boundary crossing. Today we celebrate technology in visual art which already mentioned see the crumbling of the art-craft art commodity, commercial fine art boundaries. African artists have asserted the right to use traditional media, unusual materials for their art, these include new technologies and digital medias.

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