

# The Artist and His responsibility to His Society: Mufu Onifade and the Emergence of Araism

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## Abstract

**A** lot of Artists in this modern time loose sight of the fact that the artist owes a social responsibility to his society. This attitude has led some members of the society to view art as mere entertainment without much social commitment, in view of this problem, the study examines the life and works of Mufu Onifade as an example of a contemporary Nigerian artist who has lived up to this societal expectation. This paper establishes that the artist is a product of a society to which he is responsible to. Using Araism Art Movement. The work captures the moral role of artists, first, to themselves and secondly to their society.

## Introduction

The decision to take up art as a profession by an individual is immediately followed by the desire to become a great artist. Little would one know, at the stage of decision-making, that the great artist has both moral and professional role to the society, especially in a society where decadence seems to define the culture of the people. In a society where the moral fiber is weak, where foreign usage have plunged indigenous systems into the abyss of inferiority "Art still has truth", society must "take refuge there". Works of art reflect and shape the world around them and that the end is everywhere but art still has the truth and urges everyone to take refuge there (Arnold in Achebe 2012)

The degree of knowing the truth in art and the ability to take refuge therein varies in terms of maturity where experience finds expression in the depth of understanding which transforms into responsibilities. The nature of responsibilities therefore, requires earnest demand on commitment. This nature in a great artist makes demand on him to be committed and to be responsible to both himself and his society. To some artists, the profession is just one of the labels, or ways to becoming an elitist. However, to others, especially as the experience deepens, the profession is not just one of the labels, but one that makes earnest demand on them to begin to see themselves as oracles, at this level, the artist is well informed that 'arts must be in the service of the society. (Eluemunor, 2013).

In the oracularity, the artist may become a very committed art writer/critic, studio practitioner, an art teacher or one who combines some areas of the arts with an attitude and themes of works that make certain serious demand on society, then the artist begins to think about how best to use his talent. At this stage, he also starts to realize that "art is man's constant effort for himself. A different order of reality from that which is given to him; an aspiration to provide himself with a second handle on existence through his imagination" (Achebe, 1988).

At a time, a young painter's egg of oracularity began to incubate, it began to crack with the age of his sense of responsibilities and commitments and in 1989, after seven years, Mufu Onifade emerged from the shell as a versatile artist. He became an acknowledged committed art writer/critic, studio practitioner, an art teacher and one who combines some areas of the art with an attitude and themes of works that make certain serious demands on society. The foregoing gave vent to Ara art and later Araism movement as a "platform", a philosophical dialogue among Africans, which prepares a generation of young painters for variety of sensibilities. The vent is wider and clearer in the exponent's art discourses that are yet to come under focus, knowing that not many can read and understand the details of a painting as they do with words.

### Moral Obligation

The “establishment” of Araism movement as a “platform on which ... styles of Araism could be projected” (Onifade, 2010), is critically the last in the chain of importance in the moral creative axis of Araism movement. In the formative years of Ara art, the exponent would be preoccupied with critical demands such as, “What is African art?” “What is Yoruba art?” The answers to the questions first appeared very simple: art of African culture, art of Yoruba culture. However, a deeper sense of the questions would generate some mental debate on the exponent, which gave vent to two sets of questions. The first set challenged the weight of the expression, “African art”, especially when viewed from the weight of “European art” with many art forms. The second set attempted to deal with the nature of African art or Yoruba art, what they include or exclude. Is African art the art that captures African experience? Alternatively, is it art done by an African? On the other hand, is it any art done in the continent of Africa by anyone? Alternatively, is it any art that did not follow academic rule in Africa? The questions bearing “Yoruba” also followed the same structure. The debate would continue until the exponent had a part, not the total, of the answer: African /Yoruba art is a language by itself, on its own that is, but contextual and committed.

To create works of art, to be a great artist and to be responsible to himself, the exponent had to deploy the language of his African art altered heavily with Yoruba dialect, thought, meaning and context of utterance. Mufu Onifade was latter by others and they, began to deploy the imageries of *layewu* and *Ijala*, Yoruba masquerade and tonal chants respectively, to unfold the structure of Ara art which is further complemented by the motifs of the dialectics of human history. Still on language, the linguistic apparatus has to be chosen. First, only one linguistic apparatus was opened to Ara artists to use - painting, using lines, shapes and colour to attain unity of structure and themes on canvas. Though Ara art is largely painting, it is now practiced in sculpture. Nevertheless, the language of painting is largely foreign; traditional African paintings did not survive as much as sculpture to establish a language/style, therefore, the Araists/artists had to redefine and alter it to give it African/Yoruba taste that is heavily individualized with Ara weight.

Then Araism took off obviously as Onifade’s basic commitment to integrity of his own painting as a means of discovering himself, the web of his relationship with the world. Araism has shown that art is a serious business and a moral obligation. The exponent’s commitment to art is evident in his art discourses such as in his comparison of two exhibitions in Wangboje Art Gallery and Quintessence Gallery with serious query to the former and doubt about the competence of Art Galleries Association of Nigeria (AGAN):

What happened at the Wangboje Art Gallery and how a show was better packaged and delivered at the Quintessence Gallery is a juxtaposition of tales bordering on sheer carelessness on one hand and seriousness on the other. Whether AGAN (Art Galleries Association of Nigeria) headed by Chief Frank Okonta ever tries to monitor the activities of its numerous members is a serious issue that will be addressed soon. AGAN should not harp its relevance on the National Gallery of Arts that supported Art Expos only, it must be seen as putting its house in order (Onifade, 2010).

A major obligation of Araism is effectively telling the African story straight from within, using the Oyo art tradition experiences, which are broadened by formal art education as an embellishment. This concern yielded a unique and authentic African art style, which, though employs foreign canon, has been altered to bear the weight of the dialectics of African creative history. Against this backdrop, art historians and commentators can no longer hold back their feelings on Araism. In her characterization, the art historian reveals, “Like a thunderbolt, the culturally communicative vibrancy of Mufu's works made an indelible impression on me... an artist and his works are a culmination of all

the socio-cultural experiences preceding the execution of the (his) works. An artist's work on the long run, is nothing, but a portrait of himself" (Areo, 2010).

Araism is a continuum of the African faith in which art and community are fused together; A fusion that fights hard to resist colonial defilement and academic doctrine in order to retain the spirituality, conceptuality and symbolism of a people's worldview. The Yoruba communal life, the full-moon experience, sacred marriage institution, the mask and masquerade tradition, the sense of right and wrong, punishment and reward, defense and aggression, the idea of character as beauty are central to the philosophy of forms in Araism. Therefore, Ara art, like the Bible, packages the whole life style of a people where everything plays a part and, like an ideological weapon, of course, "...Art still has truth", Africans and the whole of humanity must "take refuge there".

### **Responsibility to Society**

Born to survive in the crucible of debate of history marked by Nigerian "isms" and faithlessness in a country of dead and dying creative experiences, Araism movement proposes a premise that intersects in language and the creative pictorial muse. This robustly captures two phases of life, their comparison and the chart for the need for a new order, not only in thematic terms but also in practical terms that sum up the sub-styles in an overall painting style, Araism. Though Araism started as a voice of the Yoruba culture and tradition of the exponent, it has since evolved to cover a larger society to become the voice of a generation. With Araism, the Araists pursue the relevance of art to society thereby strongly adding their generational voices to the African creative essence.

Araism locates the relevance of art to the taproots of the society and uses the characters and situations from society. In this course, Araists present themselves through their art as sociological beings that are abreast with reality but not as insubstantiality of imagination of children. They attempt to entertain, delight and please with the determination to subvert the bad and ugly and replace them with the ideal. In this way, Ara art captures a society of greed and corruption and attempts to instill some consciousness that upholds contentment, articulating many works of art metaphorically to reveal this aspect of society.



**Plate. 1:** *Ona ofun, Ona Orun* (Measure of Life), Onifade, Tempera on jute sack, 60 cm x 200 cm, 1994. © Mufu Onifade.



**Plate 2:** *Aajo Laye* (The Return), Popoola, Acrylic on Canvas, 120 cm × 90 cm, 2008. © Oludotun Popoola.

*Ona ofun, Ona Orun, Measure of Life* (Plate 1) and *Aajo Laye, The Return* (Plate 2) capture symbolically the situation of life, “that wrench within the human psyche which we vaguely define as ‘tragedy’” (Soyinka, 2007) with the hope for a better society; the market is a stage, the human figures are players and the article is the script. Man must play his part and leave; therefore, he requires some modesty.

The subject of man in Araism continues with *Olokun Esien* (plate 3) and *Agbodorogun* (plate 4). These works explain the stupidity of man in taking to aggression and vainly hoping to defend and protect himself against his own creation. Man’s stupidity and his uncontrollable quest for power and its arbitrary use feature prominently to teach some morals.



**plate 3:** *Olokun Esien* (King’s Horsemen), Onifade, Acrylic on canvas, 92 cm × 41 cm, 2007. © Mufu Onifade.



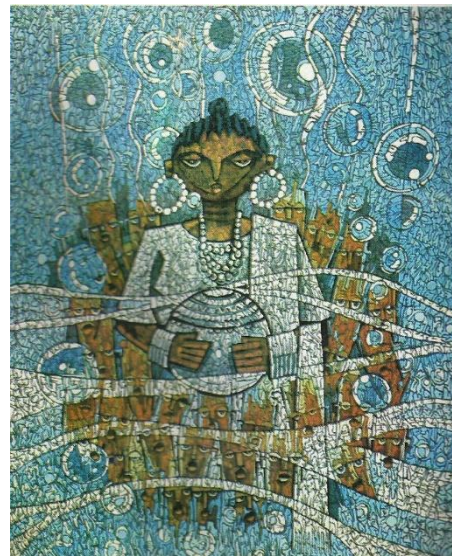
**plate 4:** *Agbodorogun*, Onifade, Acrylic on canvas, 106 cm × 38 cm, 2005. © Mufu Onifade.

*Sango's Harem* (plate 5) is a metaphorical motif of caution, discretion and wisdom rather than power. *Osun Olomoyoyo, Goddess of Fertility and Productivity* (plate 6) directly addresses man as one who is bereft of power, including that to bear children, and attributes power to the gods. When he bears children, only in marriage as Araisim advocates, he is happy, but, in his foolishness, scorns others who could not *Transition* (plate 7), *Nursing Mother* (plate 8), *Akanda, Special Breed* (plate 9) advocates modesty among humanity, using allegorically alcohol as a motif of disgrace, self-destruction and gangrene in the body of a society.

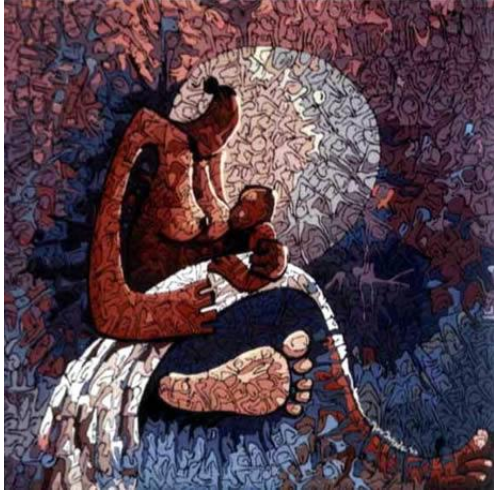
In a decaying society where moral is thrown overboard, Araisim employs two approaches to address the decay, sometimes very direct and at other times, subtle but very committed. The works in the group that directly attack the decay capture the stratified society where "the largest black nation on earth is also the largest disgrace to black people world-wide" (Sobowale, 2013). *Kokoro to Njefo, Systemic Destruction* (plate 10



**plate 5:** *Sango's Harem*, Onifade, Acrylic on canvas, 102 cm x 101 cm, 2008.  
© Mufu Onifade.



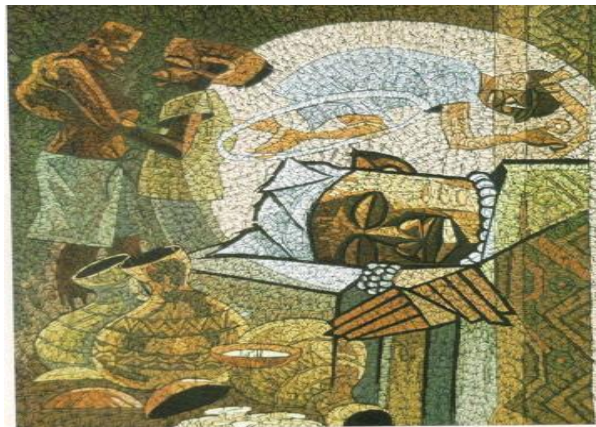
**plate 6:** *Osun Olomoyoyo*, Onifade, Acrylic on canvas, 102 cm x 101 cm, 2006.  
© Mufu Onifade.



**plate 7:** *Nursing Mother*, Onifade, Tempera on Canvas, 100 cm × 61 cm, 2012. © Mufu Onifade.



**plate 8:** *Oju Meji (Impact)*, Amodu, Acrylic on Canvas, 92 cm × 92 cm, 2007. © Oluwanbe Amodu.



**Plate 9:** *Akanda (Special Breed)*, Onifade, Acrylic on canvas, 89 cm × 76 cm, 2007. © Mufu Onifade.



**Plate 10:** *Kokoro To Njefo (Systemic Destruction)*, Popoola, Mixed Media, 99 cm × 77 cm, 2012. © Oludotun Popoola.

Captures the moral fiber of government functionaries and intellectuals with their vanity and artificiality of glorified sharp practices. The range of these works implicitly carries the tone of a circle of destruction that must complete itself. It also points to the alternate: due process, integrity and dignity of labour. The subtlety approach deploys the relevance of culture and religion as a character mould. This, together with works on moral instruction, assumes a social force, an ideological machinery, to put in place a society with a strong moral character as a chaste virgin.



**Plate 11:** *Mallam* (The Cleric), Onifade,  
Acrylic on Canvas, 33 cm × 23 cm, 2009. © Mufu Onifade.

Religiously, *Mallam* (plate 11) addresses the ills of society, asking humanity to move from the mundane to the realm of spirituality where man is free and safe. This subtlety finds strong expression on *Ipe, Calling* (plate 12), *The Cross* (plate 13), *Adura Nii Gba, Power of Prayer* (plate 14), */Eja NbAka? Positive or Negative?* (plate 15) and *The Priest* (plate 16). These works are remarkably produced with a didactic contemporary moral function, serving as a turntable to character assessment with the hope for a better society.



**plate 14:** *Adura Nii Gba* (Power of Prayer), Egunjobi,  
Acrylic on Canvass, 84 cm x 84 cm, 2008. © George  
Egunjobi.



**plate 15:** *Eja NbAka?* (Positive or Negative?),  
Egunjobi, Acrylic on Canvass, 93 cm x 46 cm, 2008. © George  
Egunjobi.



**plate 16 :** *The Priest*, Taiwo, Acrylic on Canvas, 81 cm x 61 cm, 2008.  
© Adeyeye Taiwo.



**plate 17:** *Latoke Oya (Drummer from the North)*, Onifade, Acrylic on canvas, 70 cm x 52 cm, 2007. © Mufu Onifade.

Araism deploys the talking drum, which lies in the façade of entertainment, to serve a dual purpose to the society, the duality of moral and culture. Morally, the talking drum presents a society of two characters; the good, what makes him good and why he must be emulated and the bad, the things that make him bad; and why he must not be emulated. By this, Araism reads the blood pressure of the society, warning when it is obvious and advising before the danger looms too heavily. Culturally, the talking drum entertains in a theatric mode amid songs, dance, costume and audience of all sorts in a natural setting. In this mode, the talking drum captures the dialectics of communal history, emphasizing the prestige of the people.

*Latoke Oya, Drummer from the North* (plate 17), the imagery of the tonal poetry, which contextually embodies the worldview of a people. Though *Latoke Oya, Drummer from the North* is meant to show on the surface cross-culture yet the real intent is to serve as a channel for moral obligation. If the theater is character refinery and drumming, with all its paraphernalia, is part of that open theater, then the vehicle of these works must be moral-bound. The message in tonal poetry is unambiguously persuasive and explosive, charged with a kind of a masked atomic energy to play its role in the advancement of the society. Araism believes that man can change his society through art; and change is central in the philosophy of Araism movement.

The centrality of change in Araism is further complemented with direct moral instruction, using the mother and child as the character mould of the society. By this, Araism presents art beyond entertainment, which is obviously into utility for all humanity, and surprisingly teaching everyone that all forms of art are strongly rooted in the society and answerable to man. The artists present an image of a society with fragile moral texture, which needs the wisdom of the old to attain grandeur in the varieties of human experience.

The paintings in this group, therefore, highlight the parental metaphor as the mainstay of the structure of the society. *Aayon, Home Sick* (plate 18), needs the parents not necessarily to suck breasts, but to receive the blessing of moral lesson; *Baba Ni Digi, Sweet Father* (plate 19), teaches fathers to complement the role of mothers in raising the child and then presents fatherly love as a turntable on which moral lessons must rest. Directly, *Ilela Ti Nkeso Rode, Charity Begins at Home* (plate 20) takes the children through moral drilling, talks to parents not to spare the rod to save



the child and that “whether you are a man or a woman you must have basic home training” (Okpozo, 2013).



**plate 18:** *Aayon* (Home Sick), Onifade, Acrylic on Canvass, 62.5 cm x 42 cm, 2010. © Mufu Onifade.



**plate 20:** *Baba Ni Digi* (Sweet Father), Onifade, Mixed Media, 50 cm x 40 cm, 2010. © Mufu Onifade.

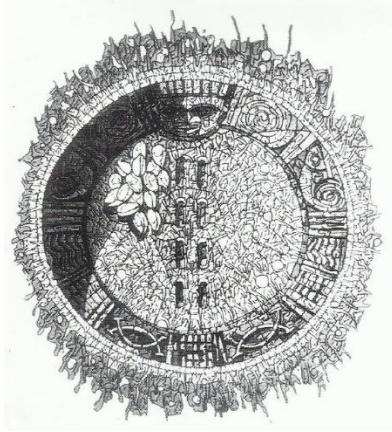


**Plate 20:** *Ilela Ti Nkeso Rode* (Charity Begins at Home), Ikpoza, Acrylic on Canvas, 90 cm x 75 cm, 2008. © Jonathan Ikpoza.

The work also encourages direct dealing between the parent and child, but discourages parents from abandoning their role for hired labour.

Araism advocates societal responsibility, using the motif of the dignity of labour. This is captured variously with situations and imageries of economy. *Asoro Dayo, The Bringer of Joy* (plate

21), portrays satisfaction derived from genuinely acquired wealth, which gives neither God nor man the concern to investigate its authenticity. *Ise lo see dase* (plate 22) advocates the flow of genuinely earned money among one's relations. *Awosifila*, Metropolitan Cape (plate 23), has a "didactic contemporary political function" (King and Ogungbesan, 1977), encourages government to pursue wealth-driven policies. *Gbedo-Gbedo* promotes acquisition of skill.



**Plate 21:** *Asoro Dayo* (The Bringer of Joy), Onifade, Acrylic on Canvas, 102 cm x 101 cm, 2005. © Mufu Onifade.



**Plate 22:** *Ise lo see dase*, Onifade, Acrylic on Canvas, 100 cm x 90 cm, 2011. © Mufu Onifade.

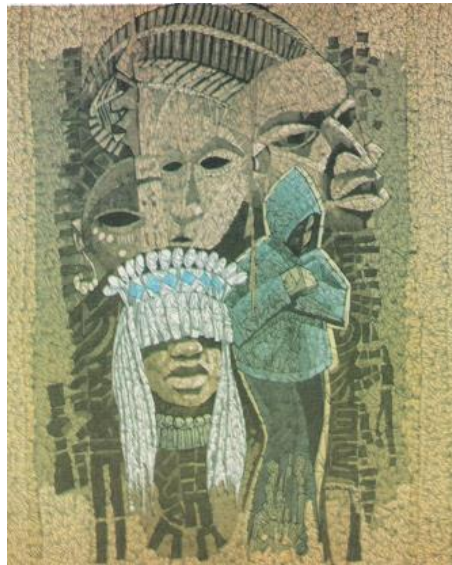


**Plate 23:** *Awosifila* (Metropolitan Cape), Onifade, Acrylic on Canvas, 90 cm x 60 cm, 2010. © Mufu Onifade.

Araism approaches culture with the major concerns of today to reaffirm "traditional African culture is not obsolete but relevant for the articulation of contemporary needs and goals" (Okpewho, 1992). In this respect, Araism is taking cue from the past in which traditional African writing, criticism and visual art have been greatly enriched with ideologies of negritude (East Africa, Senghor; writer), apartheid (South Africa, Mandela; critic) and colonialism (West Africa, Jegede; cartoonist). (The characters chosen may not be the most appropriate but they appeal most to the author in their areas). One word that summarizes the struggle in Africa against colonialism, which in turn enriched African creative experience, is change. Araism is change-driven through traditional African culture with emphasis on the Yoruba culture. *Agba Alejo, Utmost Hospitality* (plate 24); characterizes traditional African culture, makes comparison of African and Western cultures and chooses the former. *Ajoji, Stranger among Masks* (plate 25); indicates the point of acculturation when horror crept in and took over the serene environment.

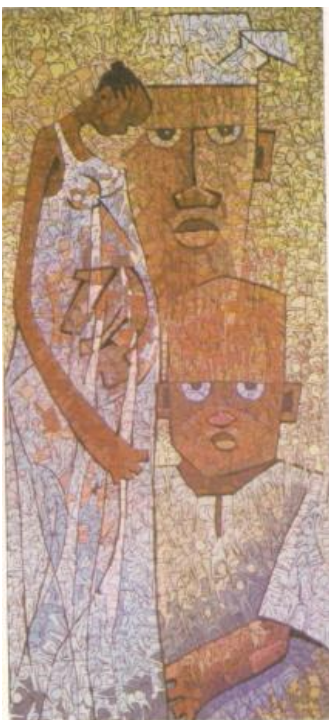


**Plate 24:** *Agba Alejo*  
(Utmost Hospitality), Onifade,  
Acrylic on Canvas,  
134 cm x 76 cm, 2009.  
© Mufu Onifade.

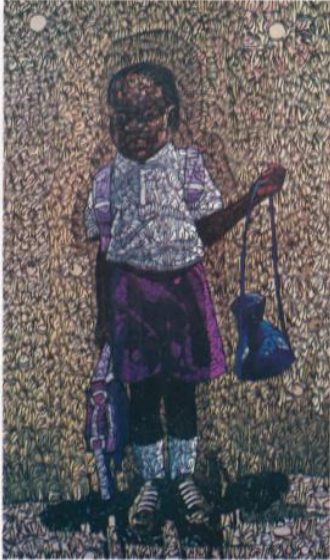


**Plate 25:** *Ajoji* (Stranger among Masks),  
Onifade, Acrylic on Canvas,  
90 cm x 90 cm, 2010.  
© Mufu Onifade.

Araism is change-driven and uses social relation and education as drivers to create awareness among the people; “a boy of about one year, who was crying when the invaders attacked the family, was shot at close range and his remains littered the room when we got there” (Obateru, 2013). Obateru’s report captures the true situation in Nigeria where *Obi O Ju’ Bi Eju Ewuro, Morning Due* (plate 26), and articulates affection; the subject critically examined, errors revealed and the way forward shown. *Jelesinmi, Kindergarten* (plate 27), among others,



**Plate 26:** *Obi O Ju' Bi'*, Eju Ewuro  
Tempera on Canvas,  
107 cm × 38 cm, 2003.  
© Mufu Onifade.



**Plate 27:** *Jeleosinmi* (Kindergarten),  
Onifade, Acrylic on Canvas,  
78 cm × 45 cm, 2009.  
© Mufu Onifade.

capture education, examining its relevance, urging society to embrace it by talking parents and guardians into sending their children and wards to school early. It urges society to start to mould the child early through school for a good society and seems to affirm the position that “the quality of a country’s educational system should be an effective indicator of the country’s progress” (Animasaun, 2013).

That is not all. The entire story about Araism finds expression in both economy and prestige of the country. At a certain point in a man’s life, the safety and upkeep of his family are a major concern. The Araists are not complaining financially. In the same manner, Araism is contributing its quota to foreign exchange. With respect to prestige or identity, Ghana’s *Kente* and Nigeria’s *Anyanwu* in United Nations are no longer sufficient. Araism is on its way to give Nigeria a creative identity.

### Conclusion

Every discipline is creatively profitable to the society. It is to the extent of its value that visual art has survived these years. In the modern world the artist has continued to tighten the knot of the moral fiber of his society.

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