

IJE ART MOVEMENT; CONFRONTING THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY CRISES IN NIGERIA AMIDST SWEEPING SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND GLOBALIZATION FORCES

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Abstract

The practice of art lends itself to not just the issues that concerns aesthetics, but also it is employed in social reconstruction and interrogation of identities, meanings and belief system of a people with the potency of initiating a shift in behavior. These are some of the things the Ije Art Movement group set out to do from its inception. How successful this mission will be is left to history. However, this article chronicles the formative years of the movement, its activities, and the philosophy behind it, its mission and place in the Nigerian contemporary art space. This paper sets out therefore to chronicle the activities of this group for the period that it was active, as well as the challenges that it faced and continue to face.

Introduction

The challenges confronting the present generation of Africans are quite enormous, ranging from politics to leadership crises, bad economy, social issues, and most importantly; identity crises. Addressing the challenge of identity crises is one of the chief driving forces that necessitated the establishment of the Ije art movement. This is in recognition of the fact that the present generation of Africans/Nigerians (especially the youth) lack a deep knowledge of their roots, which gives more credence to the Igbo proverb; “Onye amaghi ebe mmiri bidoro maba ya anaghi ama ebe ono gbachaa” meaning “He who does not know where the rains started to drench him can never tell where it stopped”

The disadvantages of acculturation in modern day Nigerian society has become not just worrisome but continues on an alarming rate. The preference for whatever that is foreign to local has led to great loss of cultural practices and heritage. A terrible culture of voracious consumerism has left its mark on the physical and ecological environment (Otikpa 2014). Local languages, which happens to be the most visible form of a people’s identity has come to be described by several scholars as being on the verge of total extinction (Chukwu 2014), (Egonu 2015).

Amidst all these maladies, there is no doubt that only a conscious realization and reawakening of the self, as Socrates puts it, will eventually arrest the denigration of our society into a state of abysmal ambivalences and facelessness, which prompts the question; what are we (Africans) bringing to the global negotiating table as the wind of globalization continues to sweep us like the harsh harmattan wind? The challenge of identity crises has therefore come to be one of the most daunting dilemmas of contemporary Africa; from the colonial era till the present times. Therefore, the forceful and uncanny approach of the colonial system that employed the techniques of shaming and psychological attack on the core components of the socio-cultural life of the Africans such as their religion and art, has come to be identified by scholars of African history as the root cause of identity crises and loss of faith in the self, (Cole and Aniakor 1984), (Nwoye 2011). Consequently, many

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Africans of the colonial era abandoned and, in extreme cases, set ablaze many of their art objects which were at the heart of their religious practices and taught by the colonialists to be idols. Many of the social beliefs, folklores, legends, taboos, social hierarchies and institutions, technology, knowledge of medicine and their cosmological beliefs were either desecrated or jettisoned in preference to the western system. A situation that Chinua Achebe (1984) succinctly described as “a collapse of a whole eschatology”

In such an era, one is tempted to ask; what was the response of art to these changes? Historically, we discover in the works of pre-colonial era art such as the Mbari Art tradition that continued well into the colonial and post-colonial era and adopted some foreign motifs and symbols; the carvings of Lamidi Fakeye; and so on; the evidence that proves that art evolved and adapted to the prevailing idiosyncrasies. Mount (1973), noted that this attitude to please the European patrons rather than the local economy started in Africa around the sixteen century, with the advent of the “so called Afro-Portuguese ivories”. The adaptation of Western motifs and storylines by these artists interestingly reveals the body language of the artists and their response to the changing social realities of their time. This phenomenon could be regarded as both economical, as well as circumstantial; as most of the artists of that era needed to adapt to the changing preference for western inspired art as a way to make ends meet and to manage their financial responsibilities to their families. However, it is important to note that other scholars like Achebe (1958) rightly captured in their works, in the most picturesque manner, the deterioration and decadence that was severing in quick pace, the ties that held the people together. These ties were in most cases summed up in their religion and made visible through such agencies like art, folklores, taboos, festivals, and other traditional ceremonies. Therefore, any form of attack on each, reflects and creates a ripple effect on the others. It took a while for the Africans to demystify the Western system and, armed with formal education and the full knowledge of Western art history, many artists of the pre-independence era in Nigeria discovered that Western art is not far from what the African heritage already embodies.

In fact, they discovered that the so-called quest for modernity in art as claimed by the West was a phenomenon triggered by the latter’s discovery of African art; an art form that was once labeled idolatry and with the least respectable synonym of tribal arts. Following these discoveries, the pre-independence era in Nigeria witnessed the birth of artists who responded in the most proactive manner to the identity crises already created as a consequence of colonization. This response reflected in the works of pioneer Nigerian contemporary Artist Aina Onabolu, who, in the early 1900s though self-taught, was able to prove to the colonial administrators that the African man was capable of producing realistic art. Another artist of this transition era was Ben Enwonwu who was reportedly the only black sculptor to have ever had her Majesty Queen Elizabeth 2nd sit for a portrait sculpture. This response could be most appropriately exemplified by the philosophy of ‘natural synthesis’ as championed by the Zaria art movement of the late 1950s. At this point in history, the response of art to the challenge of identity crises shifted from that of adaptation to rediscovery and assertion. Artists, especially the scholars among them, started looking inwards in order to celebrate and extol their cultural heritage with an array of abundant motifs made manifest in their immediate socio-cultural environment and using acquired

western techniques and materials. Interestingly, Okonkwo (2012) noted that the leader of the above movement Uche Okeke, was an ardent critic of Enwonwu's style of art, which he argued was detached from the period's prevailing search for a "theoretical basis for contemporary Nigerian art". However, Okonkwo (2012) was quick to suggest that the differences in time, periods and societal contexts clearly informed the disparity in style and aesthetics, as well as theoretical concerns of the two different generations. The process of adaptation and reconstruction of social identities have therefore; proven to be not without its own challenges as Baumeister and Muraven (1996) envisioned it; ... This argument is developed by considering how several historical changes in the sociocultural context (i.e. increasing freedom of choice, changed interpersonal patterns, loss of traditional value bases, and rising tension between desire for uniqueness and difficulty of achieving it) have led to changes in the nature of identity. Although identity adapts to changes in its sociocultural context, these changes sometimes create new problems, including the particularly problematic nature of modern selfhood. Our Vision Art being an ever present and dynamic area of human engagement has grown to become the galvanizing force that gathers artists together to present a common front that at any giving point in history culminates into the tangible elements that makes up what constitutes a people's culture and social identity, thereby being an instrument for the propagation and protection of a people's identity and world view.

This is a duty that this young movement (Ije) has borne upon herself; to look inwards, studying the sociocultural heritage that specifically identifies the Igbo people among the committee of nations and subsequently, through the agency of art, projecting these identities, taking care not to restrict ourselves to the traditional pedagogies that govern the making of art in both traditional and Western schools of thought. In doing this therefore, we humble ourselves as pupils under the wise and abundant tutelage of our rich sociocultural heritage, and not ignoring the social realities of our present environmental and social concerns. We believe that, as we act thus, we consciously approach in preparedness, the negotiating table of globalization as a people who not only have a past to be proud of, but also a future to look up to, knowing fully well that this idea is neither new nor impracticable having been proffered by scholars such as Barzilai (2007) quoting Santos's (1995) hypothesis; that globalization may be utilized in communal localities to redefine local cultures. He has also hypothesized alternatively, that local communities may globalize their cultures (Santos: 1995). The first process is localization of globalization, and the second process is globalization of locality. Accordingly, communities may localize contemporary international language of human rights, reshape communal practices, and thus raise claims aspiring to anchor their local identities in state law. Alternatively, communities may procreate practices that transcend a specific communal identity and thus aim to benefit through transnational language of universal rights (Barzilai 2003). Hence, globalization does not hinder politics of identities, rather enhances it, both at the communal and the international levels. Furthermore, globalization does not produce one universal identity but engenders variety of identities in various localities.

Art Movement, Meaning and Context

The world of art history is resplendent with numerous examples of movements occurring through the ages; from the Achaic era, Aegean, Greek, to Classical art, Renaissance, Romanticism, Gothic, Mannerism, Art nouveau, Modernism, Constructivism, Futurists, Realists, Expressionism, Dadaism, and Surrealism. Each of them flourished by following certain social movements or intervening in giving aesthetics colouring to the spirit of the milieu, while others become the driving ethos of its era, and catalysts for new consciousness and response to forces of civilization. Most times art movements emanate as the response of art to prevailing social happenings, this could also go the other way, where art ignites a certain type of social consciousness. This consciousness could be so pervading that it reflects in several aspects of the social life of a people. In African art, several motifs that appear in the arts reflects fauna and flora, folklore and cultural mimetic images. For instance, the Nsibidi ancient system of writing/language, came to the knowledge of historians through its resurgence in the arts of the people of South-Eastern Nigeria, once used as a secret means of communication among a select group, the motifs can be interpreted to be used both as an art form and a language of communication. The same could be said about the Uli art form, popular among the Igbo of Nigeria, used both as ornamentation on the body and for decoration on architecture, pottery and sculpture. Uli resurgence had the strongest influence on Uche Okeke, who championed the cultural revivalism that had a national outlook in the history of Nigerian modern art. By co-founding the Zaria Art Society, which could be regarded as the first formal art movement in Nigeria; the group's development of the concept 'natural synthesis' could be likened to the cultural revivalism of the renaissance era, where the eulogizing and celebration of classical heritage gave rise to an entirely new consciousness and social achievement.

Short Bio of Members of Ije Art Movement

Ikegwuonu Godlove Chimaechi was born in 1989 in Bamenda Cameroon and graduated from Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka with a Bachelor of Science in Architecture. He is an experimental artist and craftsman with a passion for surreal expressionism and elevating consciousness. Moses Njoku is a versatile artist who engages in exploratory art. He experiments with different mediums from sculpture. His style of art embraces the plurality of artistic media, which allows for sculptures created with a variety of materials. He has taken part in numerous art exhibitions in Nigeria and has his works in private and public collections. Moses is the current Chairman, Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA) Anambra State Chapter. He lectures in Fine and Applied Arts Department, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka.



Ugochukwu Ifedioramma Dike is a progeny of the dexterous Ifedioramma Ndubueze Dike, who was best known for his textile sculptures, and a founding member of the popular AKA Circle of Artists. With an epic fibre and textile art pedigree, Ugochukwu continues to evolve an experimental approach to his practice, incorporating and exploring different media with particular interest in textiles. Chineke Enemuoh is an urban design architect and an urban and regional planning lecturer at Federal University of Technology, Owerri (a position she held for a few months before moving back to the United Kingdom) She is the founder of Nelen

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studios and believes that creative arts is the most effective and sustainable tool for development.

Dumebi Okuagu hails from Idemmili North LGA, and studied Psychology at Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka. Through art, he wishes to guide youths through the unexamined identity stage to the achieved ‘ethnic’ identity stage. Uzochukwu Collins Asiegbu is from Neni, Anaocha LGA, Anambra State and studied Fine and Applied Arts in NnamdiAzikiwe University Awka, specialising in sculpture. He sees himself as “a versatile artist who likes to engage more in three- dimensional forms and experiment with a variety of media” All short bios are extracts from Ije exhibition catalogue of 2019 and Nelen Studios exhibition catalogue of 2021.

	
<p>Plate 1: Chima Ikegwonu Godlove. (Ije instagram page 2019)</p>	<p>Plate 2: Moses Njoku (Ije instagram page, 2019)</p>
	
<p>Plate 3: Dumebi Okuagu . (Ije instagram page, 2019)</p>	<p>Plate 4: Uzochukwu Collins Asiegbu (Ije Instagram page, 2019)</p>

 A portrait of Chinelu Enemuo, a woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a maroon floral patterned top and pearl earrings. She is smiling slightly against a blue background.	 A portrait of Ugochukwu Ifedioramma, a man with a short beard, wearing a black long-sleeved shirt under a patterned vest. He is looking slightly to the right against a light-colored wall with a framed picture.
<p>Plate 5: Chinelu Enemuo. (Ije instagram page, 2019)</p>	<p>Plate 6: Ugochukwu Ifedioramma (Ije instagram page, 2019)</p>

History of Ije Art Movement

Ije Art Movement began in the year 2018, it initially began as a small gathering of creative individuals looking for some creative hub to go to and relieve themselves of the creative urge. The CEO of Nelen Studios (Chinelo Enemuo) facilitated this gathering by providing top notch state of the art facility for the arts, both visual and performance. The facility housed a recording studio, small theater, computer graphics studio, dance studio, library, wood workshop, and a design/drawing room. Nelen studio became to them what Tahiti was to Paul Gauguin. Activities within the group ranged from discussions on socio-political issues both local/African and global level. The way forward for the creative people and the creative economy, how to tell the African/Nigerian story, encouraging younger generations to take up the passions and making careers out of them, discourses on identity issues, and the crises faced by the youth in the county and so on. As the meetings became more regular, it became imperative to give the gathering a name. The options were between it being regarded as a club for creative people, or some other lexicon that could suffice. The pioneer members of the group include Chinelo Enemuo (convener), Ugochukwu Dike, Chima Ikegwuonu, Moses Njoku, Collins Asiegbu and Dumebi Okuagu. Asides from individual skill sets, all the founding members were gifted in the arts, with different levels of mastery and exposure. With education in different fields of human endeavours, these individuals were bound together with a triple cord of insight, hunger, and passion; these three attributes drove the group to establish a movement that will impact the society and tell stories of the resilient spirit of the Nigerian youth using the most creative of all agencies; art. Coming together, the group drafted a concise mission which reads; ‘Our mission as members of the Ije Art Movement is to come together as a people with a homogenous socio-cultural identity, and assert our position on a global scale as individual artists mapping and recording our social

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realities, anxieties, expectations, ideations and projections through the creative agency of art. We hope to exhibit the artworks to a global audience and gradually play a part in the molding a self-conscious society that will be proactive and responsible to our environment; approaching our collective future with the caution of a society that understands that our present actions (or inactions) will ultimately affect future generations’.

Two members of the group; Chinelo and Chima are professional architects with eyes for details and spatial organizations. Chinelo with an extreme talent for organization and management was the engine of the group with exceptional skills in illustration and storytelling, while Chima with a knack for fixing stuff with a sharp sense of craftsmanship and a dexterous painter. Ugochukwu trained as a Geologist with a genealogical strain of creativity and eagles eyes for details of the dexterous Textile Artist, Dike Ifedioramma. He is the ‘go to guy’ when matters of measurement, accuracy and introspection arises. Collins and the writer, Moses are the only formally trained artists in the group, products of the Awka School of Art (UNIZIK). While Dumebi, although, also product of Nnamdi Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, trained as a psychologist. All these talents came together to tell the story of the African reality through art, starting from (Awka) a city, less travelled by art enthusiasts in Nigeria.

In recent times, the group has metamorphosed into branches, with two members now operating from the Diaspora. However, the movement continues and would not let distance and space hinder her. In fact, efforts are being made to take advantage of this dispersal to take this African story to Africans in Diaspora who yearns even for the slightest ounce of the scent that reminds them of home, a whisper from across the savanna and rainforests, and a soothing gift to fill the gap between homestead and the yonder.

Manifesto of the Group

The group’s manifesto reads; ‘to drive social change through art by holding regular exhibitions, mentorship programs for schools, public art engagement programs and galvanizing local artists to work together for collective good’

Activities of the Group

Ije Art Movement, organizes workshops for Secondary School Students, particularly with students with potentials in the arts. After each session, students are given gifts such as art materials and tools. One of the beneficiaries of this project is Bishop crowther Seminary, Awka. The group also organizes public art events, at Kenneth Dike State Digital Library, Awka, tagged ‘Ije Open House’ during which art talks and discourses on the issues affecting artists in Nigeria, specifically Anambra State are engaged in. Art games also forms part of these open house activities. In 2018, Ije held her maiden art exhibition from the 5th to 11th of May, titled; ‘Akaraka’(destiny).

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Plate 7; Maiden Ije Exhibition Flyer 2018 (Ije archives)



Plate 8: five members of Ije during the maiden exhibition (Ije archives)



Plate 8: Ije community engagement series 'Open House' (2018) at Nelen Studios



Plate 9: some Ije members with the then President of Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA) Oliver Enwonwu (on white blazer) and his Secretary, Diseye Tantua (on black blazer). IJE's first outta state trip. at the actionaid art4dev expo in Abuja from the 28th - 30th of June, 2018 (Ije archives)



Plate 10: the writer explaining his work to guests during the ije exhibition of 2019 (ije archives)



Plates 11 and 12: Ije Open House art session at Kenneth Dike State Library, Awka. (Ije archives)



Plate 12

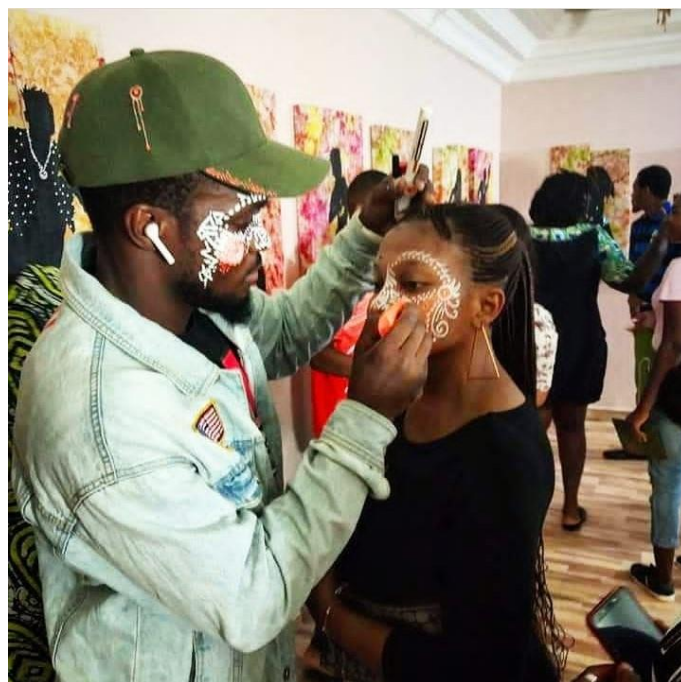


Plate 13: face painting a guest at Ije art exhibition 2019 (Ije archives)



Plate 14: Chima Ikegwonu explaining his painting to school children during Ije exhibition 2019 (Ije archives)

The exhibition featured works from the 5 founding members of Ije, and 4 other artists which include; Prof. Cliff. Nwanna, Chukwu Nkemakolam, and Edore Miracle. The exhibition included, drama, music, dance performance, and interactive session with the guests. In opening the show, the group posited that all the works represent over 6 months of planning, analysis, and reflections. Also, friendship, sacrifices, hard work, determination, perseverance, commitment, and late nights. Overcoming challenges to get to this point throwing a themed interactive art exhibition in Awka that is purely about telling African stories, exploring our cultural heritage, sharing ideas on how to remain progressive & attain a higher level of consciousness, and most importantly, inspiring other dreamers to leap into action all to be demonstrated through the creative agency of visual art'

In 2019, the inspiring dreamers (Ije) turned up again and the exhibition turned out to be a festival of some sort. This year's exhibition titled 'Culture' showcased socio-cultural values and norms of the people. Culture being a people's way of life inspired the theme and artistic expressions taking place in 2 or 3-dimensional works in myriad of mediums were showcased to further portray the artists' views on how culture has helped the growth or stagnated the society. This time around, the show attracted up to twenty seven exhibiting artists who turned up from other states like Lagos, Benin, Enugu, Port-Harcourt and Cross-River. Besides the works on display, other activities included live art sessions such as portrait drawing and face painting. Local delicacies were also sampled and sold out in no time. The exhibition attracted notable art enthusiasts in the State, including the then Commissioner for Environment; Arch. Michael Okonkwo and then Commissioner for Youth Empowerment and Creative Economy; Hon. Bonaventure Enemali.

Conclusion

It may be argued that Ije Art movement is not widespread nor long-lasting enough to earn the title of ‘movement’, considering the depth of literature and spread of typical historical art movements. It is however a known fact that some of the movements in history, never envisaged that they would eventually become popular. Nevertheless, the Ije art movement from the onset in 2018 published a manifesto and mission statement, part of which appears in this article. This was backed up with exhibitions and community engagement, both locally in Awka and on National level. Therefore, it could be argued that the true impact of the movement could only be ascertained by the passage of time and the activities of the individual members of the group who share common ideology, not minding the limitations of resources and geography; are spreading the seeds of the message of telling African stories and reawakening consciousness in the material culture of African communal identity and uniqueness of experience and most importantly, upholding the rich eclectic creative paradigms of African/Nigerian cultural heritage, notwithstanding the influences of globalization.

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