

TOWARDS THE DECONSTRUCTION OF EUROCENTRIC ASSUMPTION OF POSTMODERNIST ART AS WESTERN IN ITS PROVENANCE

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Abstract

Postmodernism is a shift from the rigours of modernism. The first usage of the term postmodernism was in the 1870s, when in a bid to move beyond French Impressionism; John Watkins Chapman suggested what he called a ‘postmodern style of painting.’ The basic features of postmodernism are conceptual art, installation art and performance art, among others. And for this fact, it can be argued that the origin of postmodernist art is traceable to the African installation arts and performance arts such as masquerading, Mbari art, water-pot reservoir installations, among many others that unarguably, predate ‘postmodern style of painting’ of 1870s. Advancing this line of argument, this paper surveys the African foundations of postmodernism art in, order to deconstruct the old narrative about the provenance of postmodernist art, relying on the qualitative method of data collection. The data were analyzed using historical and descriptive methods. Through the study it has been found that postmodernist art had been in practice in Africa since ages, beyond its emergence in the West. With examples drawn from different cultures, the study demonstrates that much of what we call postmodernism has existed as artistic practice in Africa, even though it was not called postmodernism.

Keywords: African Art, deconstruction, Eurocentric, Assumption, Postmodernist Art, Provenance

Introduction

Many art movements such as Mannerism, Baroque, Rococo, Neoclassicism, Realism, Expressionism, Dada, Impressionism, Post Impressionism, Cubism, Futurism and Bauhaus, among others, once flourished and later gave way for modernism. Of a truth, “Global art environment has witnessed numerous movements and cultural adjustment – one rising vibrantly and eventually giving way to another, after a significant flourish. Asogwa (2006) states;The emergence of any art movement stems from dissatisfaction point of view. Adoh (2006) corroborates this when he intoned that “art movements have always been an offshoot of artists being dissatisfied with the art order and the need to think out something new and different. Therefore, it is exploration by artists with this feeling of dissatisfaction that usually gives birth to new idea and ideals.

Again, the factors responsible for the emergence of any art movement derived from both political and ideological reasons, and other considerations. In this sense, artists tended to enthrone or bring about new idea(s) or style(s), all in a bid to become more relevant. In so doing, they would produce a type of art that would bring them into focus, thereby breaking the monopoly of influence on the artists. Ideologically, art movement is motivated by religion, racial or ethnic reasons, and many more. A movement could or can emerge as a result of creative restlessness which usually comes about naturally or deliberately, causing

each movement to usually pursue a common goal artistically. Generally, external factors were responsible for the emergence of art movements. Art movements, no doubt, affect very seriously the art standard of the day and are usually makers of new artists. An art movement energizes and forces new directions on the art of the day. They are generally very attractive to critics, both subjectively and objectively. Art movements are a dynamic and professionalizing experience of the art of any age. Many art movements have emerged all over the world and have already become historical. Therefore, a style becomes a movement when it attracts many proselytes and followers beyond its immediate environment and such a movement becomes permanent or historical when that style affects other artists or people from one nation or the other.

Could it be that postmodernism started based on the above factors? Several theories on the provenance of postmodernism have been put forward. These theories have delved into explaining the origin of postmodernism. What has been called postmodernism came into being as a result of the new climate of thought which was a manifestation of the creative spirit of the new age, crossing current ideas where all known boundaries in art have been dissolved and media boundaries also violated. Peter Ekeh in his study "In the Heart of a Rechristened old Child: Postmodernism and art in Africa" is of the view that postmodernism originated from the Occident and that postmodernism clearly is of foreign, not African origin (Ekeh, 1999). Kingsley Ene-Orji.K (2006), corroborates that "it is essentially a Western construct." The first usage of the term postmodernism was around the 1870s, when John Watkins Chapman, in a bid to move beyond French Impressionism, suggested what he called a 'Postmodern Style of Painting.' Art postmodernism emerged out of modernist art, and the suggested dates for the emergence were in 1914 in Europe and 1962 or 1968 in America. While commenting on issues concerning the actual date of the transition from modernism to postmodernism, James Elkins has likened it to what transpired in the 1960s, the period that mannerism spanned. In 1917, Rudolf Pannwitz used the term again, "described it as a philosophically-oriented culture. He drew the ideas from Friedrich Nietzsche's analysis of modernity and its end results, what he called decadence and nihilism." That is, the state of having low moral standards and being more concerned with pleasure than with serious matters. In his own view, Alton (2021) said that postmodernism claims to be the successor to the 17th century Enlightenment which has promoted and defended, to the core, what was termed a new age or a way of conceptualizing and rationalizing human life and progress.

In another light, postmodernism emerged in architecture and art during the 1960s and 1970s, when it was found by critics Robert Venturi and Charles Jencks that modernist architecture was too homogeneous and neglectful of function and surroundings. Postmodern architects, like Michael Graves and Philip Johnson, stopped using the glass and geometric shapes of modernist architecture, and incorporated historical styles into their buildings and employed polychromy (Alton, 2021). They further distinguished themselves from modernists by using historical themes and styles in their work, as they believed that there were multiple ways of interpreting a work of art. They jettisoned the formalism of modernist art and preferred personal styles which were based on a multiplicity of traditions and cultures. In the academic circuit, postmodernism evolved or developed between the 1950s and 1960s and became the only mode of analyzing things. At the close of the decades of the twentieth century, it no doubt, influenced many disciplines like architecture, anthropology, religion, politics, literary criticism, ethics and morality, sociology, visual arts, music, international relations, among others. (Alton, 2021)

Relying on the qualitative method of data collection, analyzed through historical and descriptive methods, this study seeks putting the record straight by establishing that postmodernist art has an African foundation.

African Foundations of Postmodernist Art

Art has always been inseparable part of the African society and culture. Creating and interpreting the experience for centuries before the arrival of the Europeans, the art of Africa was able to sustain its continuity undisturbed because of its unique content and its intrinsic spirituality. Art had meaning and soul and it was life itself (Oloidi, 1988). The acceptance of and interest in traditional art set the stage for the emergence of new art, modern African art, evolving out of its ancient heritage. Deduction from the above shows clearly that what is today known as modern art took its root from African art and grew in the West. Example is Pablo Picasso's Cubism that was as a result of his contact with an African stylized mask. Having established this, it is proper to look at how African art again, might have given rise to postmodernism.

There is an assumption that African art is "postmodern" after Western postmodernism. For some writers who have engaged themselves in the ongoing debates on the origin of the term postmodernism, postmodernism is a Western concept, because super technology is the driver which at the moment is lacking in Africa. To refute this, the study looks into those installations that were and have been in place since the inception of African art; particularly those produced with high level of craftsmanship and creative fecundity, those creatively organized for one reason or the other in the African settings, even though they were not referred to as postmodernist art.

It is important to note that a leading African sculptor, El Anatsui has argued that the origin of postmodernism is African because of the fact that its paradigms are located within the ambits of conceptual and installation art which of course, are more African than European. He asserted that if an African artist installs, he is not in any way coping a new phenomenon or a new idea since the African artist certainly has more materials, inspirations and ideas at his/her disposal (Adeniyi, 1998). He emphasized that art postmodernism is not alien to Africa. Going down memory lane, he categorically stated what happened during the 13th century Mali Empire and illustrated the episode that involved Sundiata and the Emperor of Mali. In this remarkable episode, according to him, Sundiata in an attempt to depict warfare and despoliation, used a basket of guinea fowl feathers, potshards, dust and other ruffles to reveal how performance and installation art was a means of communication in Africa (Ene-orji and Eseyin, 2006). Based on the above, one deems it necessary to locate the Africa foundations of postmodernism and to also delve into these performance art, conceptual art and installation art that were created and are still being created in African today. That is, the prehistory of postmodernism which according to Ene-Orji, (2005) "can be traced to some traditions which do not however fall within the occidental time frame". Here, John Watkins's 1870s dating mentioned above comes to mind. These traditions range from masquerades and their performances, Mbari art, water-pot reservoir installations to yam-ban installations, among others.

Masquerades

Since ages, masquerade has been the most essential, as well as the central artistic and spiritual manifestations and representation of the ancestors whose main function is social control provision of therapy through performances, and so on. Masquerade is a very powerful medium of communication in the traditional theatre form, that is, the festival performance. In

Nigeria, tracing the genesis of masquerade poses a lot of difficulties and challenges, arising from the fact that there are no historical account documents of events to rely on. As a result, people depend only on oral traditions, that is, verbal narrations handed down from generation to generation which, obviously are full of errors in form of additions, subtractions and even exaggerations, to say the least.

However, some historians have suggested that masquerades originated from West Africa from where it later spread to the rest of Africa and beyond. The materials used for masquerade costumes are a determining factor of its origin and its development. These materials include among other things, wood and some other plants products like fiber, which are used for masquerade costumes. These materials mentioned are very plenty in the southern part of West Africa, and the presence of these materials, including the creative ability of the African people may also account for the origin of masquerade in West Africa.

As Aniakor (2002), asserts, “masquerades are exquisite works of art, hence the easy correlation between beauty and function and their basic conceptualization. This is why it is fitting that masquerades constitute sculptural metaphor. In the same vain, they are installations that are functionally dynamics in performance. In like manner, Achebe (2012) posits, “the Igbo believe that art, religion, and everything in the whole of life are embodied in the art of the masquerade. It is dynamic. It is not allowed to remain stationary. One argues that since installation and performance art are among the paradigms of postmodernism, masquerades fit perfectly into it and because masquerades has its origin in Africa, then it means that postmodernism can be seen as taking its root in Africa, just as Africa traditional sculpture influenced the Western art (Pablo Picasso and Cubism come to mind here).

Having said so, it is good at this point to use some of the masquerades in Nigeria as reference points in this discussion. This is to show how they constitute African foundations of art postmodernism, even before art modernism. There are gigantic Igbo Ijele and Adada masquerades, the powerful Egungun masquerade of the Yoruba people and the towering Ejienu Masquerade of Urhobo people.



Plate 1: A local artist and his Adada Masquerade. © Odoja Asogwa.

The Adada masquerade (Plate. 1) is mostly found within the Nsukka Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria axis. It has similarity with the Ijele mask (Plate. 2) both in their conceptual and artistic configurations, and so will be used as an example in this study because the Ijele masquerade at different times has been extensively studied by Aniakor (1978), Cole & Aniakor (1984) and Okonkwo (1981), among other researchers, and also because that the researcher is more familiar with Adada masquerade, having come from the same axis.



Plate 2: Ijele masquerade. © Igbo History.

In the Nsukka Igbo area in southeastern Nigeria, there exists a river called Adada that is in the hydrographic class H and a tributary of the famous River Niger. It has a rivulet across almost all the Nsukka Igbo communities. It is a highly venerated river which people believe is central to their thoughts and religious beliefs to the extent that they deify and/or personify it in a masquerade called Adada masquerade (Asogwa, 2021). As Emmanuel Obiechina (1979) put it, “Adada masquerade is the most integrated artistic experience in the traditional life of the people”. For the simple reason that it possesses all the attributes of feminine gender, it is regarded as a female masquerade. Analysis shows the headgear of Adada masquerade as being super structural and contains very elaborately the historical and mythological images. The costumes are made of free flowing with some decorative appliqué designs of red, white and blue colours. Its cylindrical shape lends it an aesthetic and magnificence appearance.

The design motifs that feature in Adada masquerade are mostly derived from both organic and inorganic elements that cut across a broad spectrum of concepts, reflecting both animal, vegetal environments, human and spirit motifs. Of captivating effects are the colours and the motifs of the masquerade. The headgear forms a disc and it is adorned with pieces of sculpture, serving as visual records of historical events, ritual customs and certain legends in the social life of the people (Asogwa, 1991). The qualities that make it a monumental mobile installation consists of two parts: a cylindrical base and a conical headdress. Like Ijele, Adada

masquerade is essentially a sculptural and textiles work of art, judging from its materials as well as the techniques of production. It effectively simulates mural painting in its colourful appliquéd panels, and incorporates the rhythms of music, the theatricals of drama and the enclosure of architecture. In its dimensional qualities, this textile masterpiece is a composite sculpture, bearing numerous other symbols and figures in the round. (Dike, 2011)

An Igbo adage says: *Anya fūru ugo, yoru ugo n' ada afu ugo gbadaa*, meaning, the eyes that behold an eagle; should hail it, because the eagle is not seen often. The outing of Adada masquerade is rare because it happens only on special occasions. After its assemblage by the people whose jobs it is to do so in a secluded place, it comes out being accompanied by a group of professional local men singers into the dance arena, where it performs and draws a high level of ovation from the audience. Women play the role of singing for it in order to intensify the dance movements that unsettle the audience at emotional level. These songs make it dance with more gaits. The performance becomes an art event and provides entertainment at the level of theatre. Asogwa & Odoh (2021) observe that “as the masquerade performs, the base for the dynamic movement of the voluminous layer of expensive and elaborately decorated hang-down appliquéd cloth creates a breathtaking picture that imbues Adada with aura of majestic power and royalty.” They further note, “Adada is also a conundrum of paranormal technology and a meeting point of several Igbo artistic enterprises such as architecture, theatre, drama, music and dance, and minstrelsy, among others. The masquerade creates the imagery of a mobile museum replete with historical sculptures and social-cultural symbols that communicate the Igbo experience in a changing field of society as well as links the living to their dead ancestors.”²⁶ The above, undoubtedly, substantiates the African foundation of postmodernist art.

Another useful example towards proving that masquerades are of African foundation of postmodernism is the Echaricha Omabe (Plate 3) of the Nsukka Igbo area. Regarded a pageant from the other world its face is a woven white threads with two tiny openings as the eyes. On its head are four long white flat sticks decorated with many white and black feathers. Shimmering round metallic buttons attached with treads on black fabric form its body. From the knees down to the ankles are tied with leathers which have been covered with small-sizes of white feathers. From the shoulders down to the elbows are covered with *nza-ebule* – mane. And white stockings cover elbows down to the wrists. It holds on the two hands long knives decorated with free flowing strips of coloured fabrics. Long leathers that are attached to their buttocks, serve as the tails of the *Echaricha Omabe* masquerade.

Aniakor (2011) observes, “When they electrifyingly perform, the success of theatrical performance is based on consensual aesthetics, that is, the level of ovation raised for each Echaricha Omabe dancer, the use of space, and the kinetic of body dance displays”. There are accompanying songs rendered by men when making entry into the village square, where natives are gathered. The style of their performance/display is quite unique, as any Echaricha Omabe wheels round and limp very swiftly to both left and right sides before leaping into the air with utmost alacrity and maintaining its position. This is followed by loud ovation from audience. Through, these unsettling dance movements, the Echaricha Omabe player is able to cover the overall performance stage with its bodily agility combined with unsettling dance movements. Its dance performance is nurtured on several strategies of theatrical presentation, namely the use of dances, songs, music, chants including grioting and the alluring cat-like figuration of the Omabe masked spirit to total theatrical action. This is total theatre in all – inclusive sense and parallels Batins’s theory of the canivalesque in which carnival player transform their bodies into a template of textual and imagistic inscription. Traditional theatre thrives in its multi – nodal references to the various departments of the cosmos and beyond.

Mask theatre is a multi-media event (Aniakor, 2011). Masquerades certainly, are dressed up theatrically for an audience²⁹ and as such postmodernist art.

Because Adada and Echaricha Omabe masquerades have been perceived as both installation and performance art (which are basic features of postmodernist art) and have been in existence in Africa from time immemorial, say 1900 AD, then postmodernism has serious African foundation if not origin.

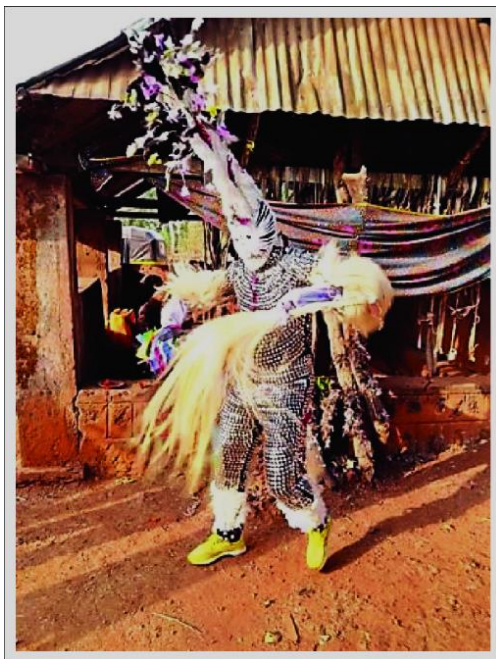


Plate 3: Echaricha Omabe masquerade of Nsukka Igbo area. © Martins Okoro.



Plate 4: Odo Masquerade. © Nairaland

Odo masquerades are of the Igbo Etiti in South-eastern Nigeria. Notable among the Odo masquerades are those of the Aku town. Johnson Arua noted that Odo masquerade festival of Aku Diewa Mgboko Odobo in Igbo-Etiti Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria, is celebrated biennially in honour of the ancestors and that Odo is generally believed and referred to as ancestral masquerade embodying the soul of the community. The unique initiation Rites includes in-depth artistic engagements with drawing and painting, textile design, sculpture (carving, installations and metal work) weaving, and body adornments (Arua, 2021). As a performing masquerade imbued with high level of craftsmanship, as can be seen in its headgear made of weaved materials from palm sticks and painted over with green and pink colours and the body made of fresh plume of palm fronds, Odo masquerade (Plate. 4) is a postmodernist art.



Plate 5: Egungun Masquerades. © Ene-Orji

Among the Yoruba people, Egungun masquerade “honours ancestors by serving as evidence of a descendant’s commitment to continuing the traditions of his predecessors and maintaining the reputation of his lineage (Drewal, 1978). There are typologies of Egungun masquerades (Plate. 5). And what are the characteristics that make Egungun postmodernists creation? They are because of an elaborate assemblage of cloths and other media. They are characterized by switching panels of cloth attached to a covered stick, which is balanced horizontally across the head of the masquerader (Shitz, 1978). They are also made up of horizontal superstructures from which appliqué cloth panels are suspended enabling them to perform unpredictable dance movement (Harmmersly, 1978). The masquerades have body costumes made from strips of *Asa-oke* cloth which have been sewn together and which are sometimes voluminous with a trailing train of fabric which may be fitted to the body. They sometimes have a ruff of white hair attached to the top of the head. There are, of course, other characteristics of postmodernism which the Egungun masquerades possess. The ones raised in this study are symbolic of other examples.



Plate 6: *Edjienu* Masks. © Abel Diakparomre.

Edjienu masquerade (Plate. 6) of Urhobo in South-south of Nigeria is another good example of performance masquerade that can be regarded as performance sculpture. Edjienu is associated with the Urhobo beliefs in superintending spirits that inhabit the atmosphere. To solicit for their assistance, periodic mask performances are enacted in the process of which three dimensional constructs are brought into being to express the essence of performance ideation (Diakparomre, 2007). Edjienu masquerade configuration is in three distinct volumes, namely the three lower-volume that formed the base, and a shaft at the mid-volume and upper-volume that is the crucible. The base may either be pyramidal or conical. The construction of this mask requires the tying of pieces of wood of different dimensions together. The upper volume of the masquerade is conceived as a modified inverted cone. The entire form of Edjienu is usually about 12 metres in height. This is why Edjienu masquerade is a very tall ancient masquerade. Its assemblage and the performance associated with it are typical of postmodernist art, and so, a good example of African foundation of postmodern art.



Plate 7: Mbari Art. © Herbert Cole.

Mbari Art

Mbari art (Plate. 7) is performed by the Owerri people of the present Imo state in the South-eastern Nigeria. It is a celebration of life through the powerful tool, art. Achebe (2012) notes, “The *Ala* combined two formidable roles in the Igbo pantheon as fountain of creativity in the world and custodian of the moral order in human society. In honour of *Ala*, images are created through a communal effort. A diviner would go round the villages to select people who would perform the sacred duty. These chosen persons must work in a secluded space, fenced with palm leaves, under the supervision of senior craftsmen for duration of say, nine months or one full year. Even though the Mbari art usually collapses in a short period because it is made of mud, its construction is a rigorous process, as multiple images are created with molded earth. Right in the centre of these images, is the Earth goddess who doubles as a mother and a judge, carrying a child on her knees and holding on her right hand a sword. The walls of the Mbari house are designed with painting rendered in white, yellow, black and green colours. And of course, some of the sculpture pieces are coated with paint (Ene-Orji, 2007). In fact; a better understanding of Mbari is capture very succinctly in the following lines of Achebe (2012):

The Owerri Igbo ... saw Mbari as art engaged in process and celebration of life. A mud house was often built with decorated walls and crowned with either corrugated metal or a thatched roof made of intricately woven palm leaves and spines. Inside, center stage on an elevated mud platform, an observer would find life-size sculptures of the constituent parts of the Owerri Igbo world: Alusi – deity – such as Otamiri and Ani, the goddess; and men, women, children, soldiers, animals, crops, and foreigners (mainly Europeans), all seated. The incultion of the Europeans, a great tribute to the virtues of African tolerance and accommodation, was an example of the positive acknowledgment of strangers who had ventured into their midst. There would also be depictions from ancient mythology, as well as scourges, diseases, and other unpleasant things. The purpose of this art form was to invoke protection from the gods for the people through the celebration of

the world these villagers lived in – in other words, through art as celebration.

Cole (1988), regards Mbari house “as installations that were also showplaces display of artistry capturing graphically the activities and values of the day. Indeed, Mbari house is an installation and as such, a postmodernist art.

There are other postmodernist installation art forms produced in Africa societies from time immemorial. One form of these is the yam-barn installations (Plate. 8). In this installation, yams are tied to poles by farmers for preservation sake. As a site specific installation, it lasts for one year, before the following year’s harvest. The yam-barn installation has inspired a postmodern artist, Ozioma Onuzulike, who uses clay to create a body of work entitled, “Seed Yam of our Land”. In this work, yam-like forms are fired in an electric kiln and afterwards tied them in a manner that depicts yams-barn (Plate 9).



Plate 8: Yam-barn installation. © Martins Okoro



Plate 9: Seed yam of our Land. © CCA, Lagos



Figure 10: Water-Pot Reservoir Installation. © Chike Aniakor

Water-pot Installation

Chike Aniakor observes that in the Nsukka area, a woman's pottery especially where there is no nearby stream is accumulated to a staggering number of about one hundred for water storage (Aniakor, 2005) (Plate. 10). The earthen water-pots reservoirs for storing water are found all over the African societies. This practice is as old as the African society itself. The accumulation, arrangement, assemblage, as well as the installation of numerous earthen pots for storing water, in most cases, where there are no nearby streams, is simply fascinating, showing that the role of art is extended as a tool of domestic engagement. It is postmodern in artistic tradition. There are shrines in African villages. And in these shrines are installations of all kinds of paraphernalia such as cloths of red, white, blue and yellow stripes, earthen pots, carved wood and animal bones. From an artistic view point, they are art installations, functioning and serving the purpose of shrines, which without creativity; they would not have come into existence. Shrines are in the domain of postmodernist art.



Plate 11: Uli wall painting. © C.K. Ikwuemesi

Uli Paintings

A cultural heritage of the Igbo people of the South-eastern Nigeria, *Uli* is the art of body and wall paintings practiced in the South-eastern Nigeria by women. In this art, they decorated their bodies with indigo dye obtained from several species of plants identified with the following botanical names: *Rothmania Whitfieldi*, *Rothmania hispirole*, *Rothmania cuspica*, and *Rothmania urcelli*⁴² Using four colours namely, white, yellow, red and black derived from charcoal, talcum powder, white chalk and camwood, they also decorated walls of shrines and homes with symbols and motifs. While the body variant lasts for about two week, the site-specific mural painting, like the Mbari mud structure, does not last long, as it collapses and dilapidates over time. *Uli* body and wall painting are postmodernist art because of its ephemeral nature and site specificity. The art tradition subsists within the postmodernist ethos because its qualities characterize this mood: appropriation, site specific, impermanence, and so on (Ene-orji, 2009).

Conclusion

The issue pertaining to the provenance of art postmodernism has sparked a lot of contentions. Based on this, therefore, frantic efforts have been made in this study towards deconstructing the Eurocentric assumption that postmodernism is Western in its provenance and that postmodernist art began in the West when John Watkins Chapman, in a bid to move beyond French Impressionism, suggested what he called a ‘postmodern style of painting.’ This paper argues that for the fact that the basic features of postmodernist art are conceptual art, installation art and performance art, the origin of postmodernist art is traceable to the African installation art and performance art carried out by Sudianta of Mali in the 13th century that predated ‘postmodern style of painting’ of 1870’s. And pushing the argument further, this paper surveyed the African foundations of postmodernist art, using masquerades and their performances; Mbari art and its conceptualization, as well as the process of execution; water-pot reservoir installation, assemblage and grouping; among other such installations as the painstaking yam-barn site-specific installation as useful examples, given the well-known fact that their existence and practices in Africa are as old as man. Whether some of the creations are art, calls for other debates. What is key here, are the process, installation and performance involved in their creations, enactment as well as the purpose for which they serve. Finally this study contributes in “decolonizing African history which involves efforts towards ending European intellectual hegemony over African political, economic, historical and cultural ways, the reverse of its effects, and the pursuit of absolute liberation and self-determination for African. Decolonizing history emphasizes the study of African history from an African perspective...”(Falola, 2024)

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