

# NATURAL SYNTHESIS AND DECOLONIZATION: A STUDY OF INDIGENOUS AESTHETICS IN THE WORKS OF THE ZARIA REBELS EXHIBITED IN *THE NUCLEUS* CATALOGUE

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the concept of "natural synthesis" within the works of the Zaria Rebels, a group of pioneering Nigerian artists who sought to blend indigenous aesthetics with modernist art practices. Focusing on the artworks featured in *The Nucleus* catalogue, the study explores how the Zaria Rebels utilized this synthesis to challenge colonial narratives and assert a decolonized African identity. The exhibition is analyzed as a critical moment in the decolonization of African art, where traditional African motifs and techniques were intentionally merged with contemporary forms to create a unique visual language that resonated with the post-colonial zeitgeist. By examining the thematic and stylistic choices presented in the catalogue, this paper highlights the Rebels' contributions to the broader discourse on cultural reclamation and the redefinition of African art. The study ultimately underscores the importance of *The Nucleus* catalogue as a historical document that encapsulates the intersection of artistic innovation and the decolonization movement in mid-20th century Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics, Decolonization, Indigenous, Synthesis, Zaria Rebels

## Introduction

The Zaria Art Society, popularly known as the Zaria Rebels, emerged in the late 1950s as a transformative force in Nigerian modern art. Comprised of students and artists from the Nigerian College of Arts, Science, and Technology in Zaria, this group sought to challenge the prevailing colonial art traditions by advocating for an approach they termed "natural synthesis." This concept involved the integration of indigenous African aesthetics with modernist techniques to create a unique visual language that was both rooted in tradition and reflective of contemporary realities (Okeke-Agulu, 2015; Kalilu, & Odeniyi, 2024). The Zaria Rebels' commitment to this synthesis was not merely an artistic endeavor but also a political one, as it represented a broader effort to decolonize African art and assert a distinct cultural identity in the post-colonial era (Nzegwu, 1999; Okoro, 2024).

One of the most significant showcases of the Zaria Rebels' work was *The Nucleus* catalogue, which featured key pieces that exemplified their artistic philosophy. This exhibition provided a platform for the Rebels to demonstrate how traditional African motifs, symbols, and techniques could be effectively merged with modernist forms to produce works that were both innovative and deeply connected to African heritage (Okeke-Agulu, 2015; Adedokun, & Osiboye, 2024). Through an analysis of the artworks featured in *The Nucleus* catalogue, such as Bruce Onobrakpeya's *The Threshold of the Church of Resurrection* and Yusuf Grillo's *Mother and Child*, this study explores how the Zaria Rebels employed natural synthesis to challenge colonial narratives and promote a decolonized African identity (Kasfir, 2007).

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the ways in which the Zaria Rebels utilized natural synthesis as a tool for decolonization, as seen in their works exhibited in *The Nucleus* catalogue. The study explores the thematic and stylistic choices made by the artists, assesses the significance of their contributions to post-colonial Nigerian art, and considers the lasting impact of their work on contemporary African art.

### **Historical Context**

The Zaria Art Society, more commonly known as the Zaria Rebels, was founded in 1958 by a group of students from the Nigerian College of Arts, Science, and Technology in Zaria. This group included prominent figures such as Uche Okeke (1933-2016), Demas Nwoko (b. 1935), Bruce Onobrakpeya (b. 1932), Yusuf Grillo (1934-2021), and Simon Okeke (b. 1936), who would later become central figures in the development of modern Nigerian art (Okeke-Agulu, 2015; Kalilu, & Odeniyi, 2024). The Zaria Rebels were united by their dissatisfaction with the colonial art education system, which emphasized Western art forms and neglected African traditions. In response, they sought to create an art movement that embraced indigenous African aesthetics while incorporating modernist techniques, a philosophy they termed "natural synthesis" (Kasfir, 2007; Duniya, & Adewumi, 2023).

The ideology of natural synthesis was rooted in the belief that African artists should draw inspiration from their own cultural heritage rather than merely imitating Western styles. This approach allowed the Zaria Rebels to explore themes and motifs that were deeply connected to Nigerian history, culture, and identity. Their works often featured traditional African symbols, such as the uli and nsibidi motifs, combined with contemporary artistic practices, thereby creating a unique visual language that resonated with the cultural and political aspirations of post-colonial Nigeria (Nzegwu, 1999).

### **Decolonization and Post-Colonial Nigerian Art**

The emergence of the Zaria Rebels coincided with Nigeria's transition to independence from British colonial rule in 1960. This period was marked by a broader movement of decolonization across Africa, where newly independent nations sought to reclaim and redefine their cultural identities. In the context of Nigerian art, decolonization involved challenging the dominance of European artistic traditions and asserting the value of indigenous art forms (Okeke-Agulu, 2015; Onibere, 2023). The Zaria Rebels were at the forefront of this movement, using their works to express a distinctly African identity that was free from colonial influence.

Their emphasis on natural synthesis was not just an artistic choice but also a political statement. By integrating traditional African aesthetics with modernist techniques, the Zaria Rebels sought to decolonize Nigerian art and create a visual language that was both contemporary and deeply rooted in African culture. This approach resonated with the broader post-colonial discourse, where art became a powerful tool for asserting cultural sovereignty and challenging the legacies of colonialism (Kasfir, 2007; Ayodele, 2023).

### **Natural Synthesis: Concept and Application**

The concept of "natural synthesis," as developed by the Zaria Rebels, represents a deliberate and strategic integration of indigenous African aesthetics with modernist artistic practices. This philosophy was articulated as a response to the colonial art education system, which prioritized European art forms and largely ignored African traditions. Uche Okeke, one of the leading figures of the Zaria Rebels, played a central role in theorizing

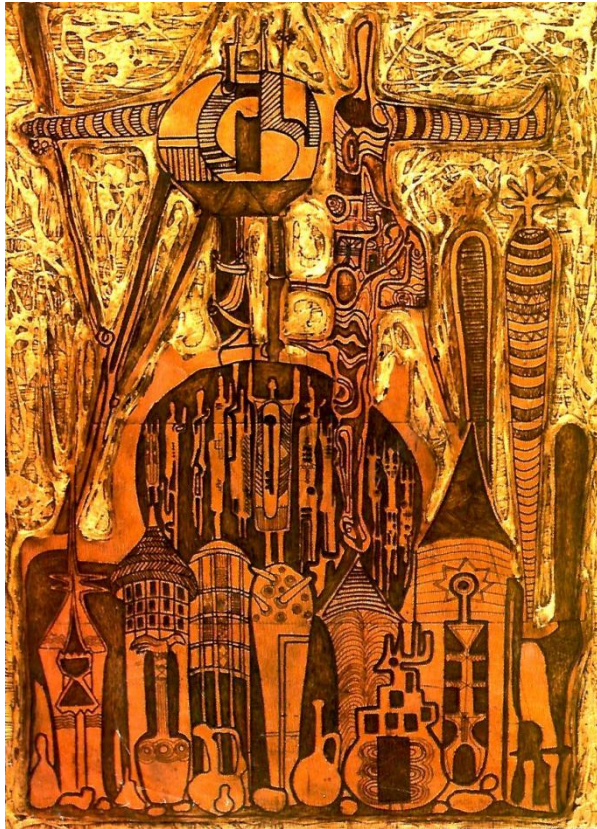
natural synthesis. He argued that African artists needed to engage deeply with their cultural heritage while also embracing contemporary techniques to create an art form that was uniquely African and modern (Okeke-Agulu, 2015).

Natural synthesis was not merely an aesthetic choice but also a political and cultural stance. By advocating for a return to African traditions, the Zaria Rebels sought to resist the cultural imperialism of colonialism and assert their identity in a post-colonial context. This approach involved the incorporation of traditional motifs, such as uli and nsibidi symbols from Igbo and Efik cultures, into modern compositions. The Zaria Rebels believed that by blending these elements with modernist forms, they could create a new visual language that reflected the complexities of contemporary African life (Kasfir, 2007; Ufuoma, 2023).

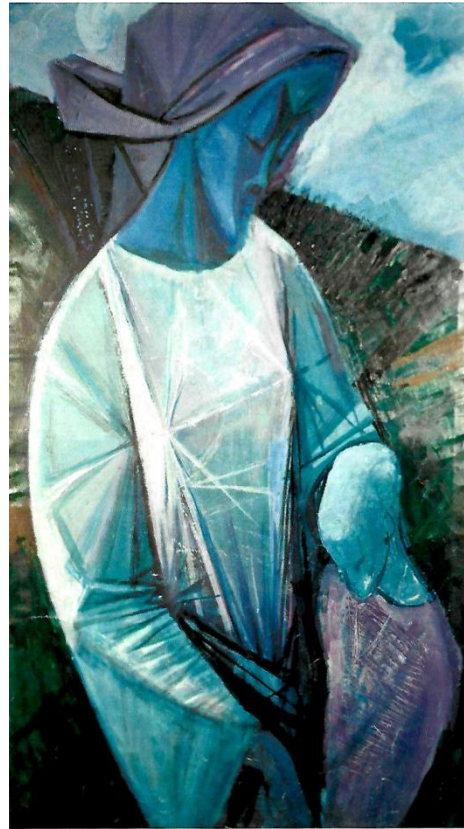
### **Artistic Techniques and Themes**

The application of natural synthesis in the works of the Zaria Rebels is evident in their use of both traditional and modern techniques. For example, Bruce Onobrakpeya's *The Threshold of the Church of Resurrection* (Figure 1) exemplifies how natural synthesis manifests in artistic practice. In this work, Onobrakpeya employs photocasting—a modern technique—while incorporating traditional African motifs, thereby creating a piece that is both innovative and rooted in African heritage (Oguibe, 2002). Similarly, Yusuf Grillo's *Mother and Child* (Figure 2) integrates traditional Yoruba themes with the use of modern oil painting techniques, symbolizing the fusion of past and present in African art (Grillo, 1960; Saleh, & Irokanulo, 2024).

The themes explored by the Zaria Rebels through natural synthesis often revolved around identity, tradition, and modernity. Their works frequently addressed the tensions between maintaining cultural heritage and embracing the new realities of post-colonial Nigeria. This thematic focus reflects the broader post-colonial discourse in which African nations were negotiating their identities in the aftermath of colonial rule (Oguibe, 2002). Through their art, the Zaria Rebels contributed to this dialogue by creating works that were both deeply personal and universally resonant, offering a vision of a decolonized and culturally rich Africa.



**Figure 1.** Onobrakpeya Bruce, 1974, *Threshold To The Church Of Resurrection*, Photocast, 122 x 91.5cm, National Gallery of Modern Art, Lagos



**Figure 2.** Grillo Yusuf, 1960, *Mother and Child*, Oil Painting, 1.5 x 1.0m, National Gallery of Modern Art, Lagos

#### Art Narrative

*The Nucleus* catalogue represents a seminal moment in the history of modern Nigerian art, capturing the essence of the Zaria Rebels' philosophy of natural synthesis. Published as part of an exhibition that brought together the works of these pioneering artists, the catalogue served as both a showcase of their artistic achievements and a manifesto for their decolonization efforts. The exhibition was not just a display of artistic talent; it was a bold statement against the lingering cultural imperialism of the colonial period and an assertion of a new, independent Nigerian identity (Kasfir, 2007).

The artworks featured in *The Nucleus* catalogue reflect the Zaria Rebels' commitment to integrating traditional African motifs with modernist techniques, thereby creating a visual language that was both innovative and deeply connected to their cultural roots. This synthesis was a deliberate strategy to challenge the dominance of Western art forms and to establish a uniquely African modernism that could stand on its own in the global art world (Okeke-Agulu, 2015).

#### Analysis of Selected Works

Several key pieces from *The Nucleus* catalogue exemplify the Zaria Rebels' approach to natural synthesis and their broader goals of decolonization. Bruce Onobrakpeya's *The Threshold of the Church of Resurrection* (Figure 1) is one such work, which uses the modern technique of photocasting to create a piece imbued with traditional African

symbolism. The work's title and imagery suggest a fusion of Christian themes with African spiritual traditions, reflecting the complex cultural landscape of post-colonial Nigeria (Oguibe, 2002; Odokuma-Aboderin, 2022). This blending of cultural elements is a hallmark of the Zaria Rebels' approach, illustrating their commitment to creating art that resonates with their dual heritage.

Another notable work in the catalogue is Yusuf Grillo's *Mother and Child* (Figure 2). This painting, which employs modern oil techniques, is rooted in traditional Yoruba culture, depicting themes of motherhood and family that are central to Yoruba society. Grillo's use of bold colors and stylized forms speaks to the influence of both indigenous and modernist aesthetics, making the work a prime example of natural synthesis (Grillo, 1960; Saleh, & Irokanulo, 2024). The piece not only showcases Grillo's technical skill but also his ability to communicate complex cultural narratives through his art. Jimoh Akolo's works, such as *Flutist* (Figure 3) and *Dyepit* (Figure 4), also featured in *The Nucleus* catalogue, further illustrate the Zaria Rebels' dedication to decolonizing art through natural synthesis. These paintings, with their rich use of colour and incorporation of traditional African themes, exemplify the Zaria Rebels' efforts to create a modern art form that is distinctly African (Kasfir, 2007).



**Figure 3.** Akolo Jimoh, 1972, *Flutist*, Oil Painting, 91.5 cm × 61 cm, National Gallery of Modern Art



**Figure 4.** Akolo Jimoh, 1972, *Dyepit*, Oil Painting, 92 cm × 122 cm, National Gallery of Modern Art

### **The Catalogue as a Historical Document**

*The Nucleus* catalogue is more than just a collection of artworks; it is a historical document that captures a critical moment in the evolution of Nigerian art. The catalogue reflects the Zaria Rebels' intellectual and artistic responses to the challenges of post-colonial identity and cultural sovereignty. By documenting their works and their commitment to natural synthesis, *The Nucleus* catalogue has become an essential reference for understanding the

development of modern African art and its role in the decolonization process (Okeke-Agulu, 2015).

The influence of *The Nucleus* catalogue extends beyond the immediate circle of the Zaria Rebels. It has served as an inspiration for subsequent generations of African artists who continue to explore the intersection of tradition and modernity in their work. The catalogue's legacy is a testament to the enduring power of art as a tool for cultural and political expression in post-colonial societies (Oguiibe, 2002; Effiboley, 2024).

### **Implications for Post-Colonial Art and Identity**

The Zaria Rebels' philosophy of natural synthesis and their works exhibited in *The Nucleus* catalogue have had profound implications for the discourse on post-colonial art and identity. By advocating for the integration of indigenous African aesthetics with modernist techniques, the Zaria Rebels not only challenged the cultural hegemony of colonialism but also laid the groundwork for a distinctly African modernism. This approach has been instrumental in shaping a post-colonial artistic identity that is both rooted in tradition and responsive to contemporary realities (Okeke-Agulu, 2015; Okoro, 2024).

The Zaria Rebels' emphasis on natural synthesis can be seen as part of a broader movement across the African continent where artists sought to reclaim and redefine their cultural identities in the wake of colonialism. This movement was characterized by a rejection of the Eurocentric standards imposed by colonial powers and a reassertion of the value of African traditions. In this context, the Zaria Rebels' work contributed to a growing sense of cultural sovereignty, where African artists began to see themselves as creators of meaning and value within their own cultural frameworks, rather than merely imitators of Western art (Nzegwu, 1999; Onibere, 2023).

The concept of natural synthesis has also influenced the way in which post-colonial African identity is articulated in art. By merging traditional African elements with modernist forms, the Zaria Rebels created a visual language that speaks to the complexity and hybridity of African identities in the post-colonial era. This approach has allowed African artists to navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity, offering a way to engage with their heritage while also participating in global artistic discourses (Oguiibe, 2002). The Zaria Rebels' work, therefore, represents a crucial intervention in the construction of a post-colonial artistic identity that is dynamic, multifaceted, and deeply connected to the African experience.

### **Influence on Contemporary Nigerian Art**

The legacy of the Zaria Rebels and their commitment to natural synthesis continues to resonate in contemporary Nigerian art. Their pioneering efforts to blend indigenous and modernist aesthetics have inspired subsequent generations of artists, who have built upon this foundation to explore new forms of expression. In the years since the Zaria Rebels first articulated their vision, Nigerian art has continued to evolve, with artists increasingly experimenting with materials, techniques, and themes that reflect the diverse and changing realities of Nigerian society (Okeke-Agulu, 2015; Duniya, & Adewumi, 2023).

Contemporary Nigerian artists have drawn from the Zaria Rebels' example in various ways, whether through the direct incorporation of traditional motifs into modern works or through the exploration of themes related to identity, culture, and history. The emphasis on cultural authenticity and innovation that the Zaria Rebels championed has become a hallmark of Nigerian art, contributing to its growing prominence on the global stage (Kasfir, 2007; Enwonwu, 2024). Moreover, the Zaria Rebels' legacy can be seen in the continued

engagement with the concept of decolonization in African art, as artists and scholars alike continue to grapple with the legacies of colonialism and the ongoing process of cultural reclamation.

In this way, the Zaria Rebels' work has had a lasting impact not only on Nigerian art but also on the broader field of post-colonial art. Their approach to natural synthesis has provided a model for how artists can engage with their cultural heritage in a way that is both respectful of tradition and innovative in its execution. As a result, the Zaria Rebels have left an indelible mark on the trajectory of African art, shaping the ways in which post-colonial identity is expressed and understood in the visual arts (Oguibe, 2002; Ayodele, 2023).

### **Conclusion**

The Zaria Rebels, through their innovative philosophy of natural synthesis, made a significant impact on the trajectory of modern Nigerian art and the broader post-colonial artistic discourse. By consciously integrating indigenous African aesthetics with modernist techniques, they forged a new visual language that was deeply rooted in African cultural heritage while being responsive to the contemporary realities of post-colonial Nigeria. Their works, as exhibited in *The Nucleus* catalogue, represent a powerful statement against the cultural imperialism of colonialism and an assertion of a decolonized African identity.

The Zaria Rebels' commitment to natural synthesis was not only an artistic endeavor but also a political and cultural movement. Their work contributed to the broader efforts of decolonization in Africa, where art became a critical tool for reclaiming and redefining cultural identity. Through their innovative blending of traditional and modern elements, the Zaria Rebels challenged the dominance of Western art forms and demonstrated that African art could be both authentic and modern, deeply connected to its roots yet forward-looking.

The influence of the Zaria Rebels extends beyond their immediate historical context, continuing to inspire contemporary Nigerian artists and the global art community. Their legacy is evident in the ongoing exploration of identity, tradition, and modernity in African art, as artists and scholars continue to build upon the foundation they established. The Zaria Rebels' work serves as a testament to the power of art in the post-colonial context, highlighting its role in the ongoing process of cultural reclamation and the construction of a dynamic, multifaceted African identity.

In summary, the Zaria Rebels' philosophy of natural synthesis and their contributions to the decolonization of African art remain vital to understanding the evolution of modern African art. Their pioneering efforts have left an indelible mark on the cultural landscape, providing a model for how artists can engage with their heritage in ways that are both innovative and respectful of tradition. As we continue to explore the complexities of post-colonial identity in art, the Zaria Rebels' work stands as a powerful reminder of the enduring relevance of natural synthesis and the ongoing quest for cultural sovereignty in the global art world.

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