



Gani Odutokun's Dialogue with Mona Lisa as Paradigm for Interface Between Africa and Europe

Edewor U. Nelson O. PhD

Fine and Applied Arts Department,
Delta State University, Abraka.
nelsonedewor@delsu.edu.ng
nelsonedewor@gmail.com
+234 803 676 1368

ABSTRACT

Abstract

Gani Odutokun (1946-1995) studied at Ahmadu Bello University where he taught painting for three decades. Having died in a ghastly motor accident on his way from Lagos where he participated actively in a group exhibition, his works continue to draw attention in Nigerian visual art practice. Amongst his numerous paintings, "Dialogue with Mona Lisa" is one of the pieces which focus on Euro-African interface. Though the painting has found a permanent place for itself on page 489 of Lois Fichner-Rathus' (2007) *Understanding Art*, there is no in-depth analysis and interpretation of the painting thus far. This paper therefore interrogates the painting by analyzing the multi-cultural iconic elements employed as instruments for addressing aesthetic relationships between different cultural spaces. The formalistic and iconographic methods of art critical writing were therefore employed to reveal the artist's expressive ingenuity in conceptualizing socio-cultural and political interface between Europe and Africa. Arising from the study of the painting, the paper concludes that African society can reinvent itself in the face of debilitating factors that its encounter with Europe could have caused.

Keywords- Euro-African Interface, Negritude, Tigritude, Pan-Africanism

iSTEAMS Cross-Border Conference Proceedings Paper Citation Format

Edewor U. Nelson O. (2017): Gani Odutokun's Dialogue with Mona Lisa as Paradigm for Interface Between Africa and Europe. Proceedings of the 9th iSTEAMS Multidisciplinary Conference, University of Ghana, Legon, Accra Ghana. Pp 203-210

1. INTRODUCTION

Gani Odutokun's (1946-1995) will be remembered in the creative annals of Nigerian art development as a great mentor and art teacher. Twenty-two years ago, precisely in the month of February 1995 he died in an auto crash while returning from an exhibition in Lagos to his base in Zaria. Zaria in contemporary Nigerian art history is symbolic as it signals the entrenchment of indigenous tertiary art institution. It also signposts an artistic renaissance which defined the nation's social consciousness at independence in the 1960s. This assertion does not in any way undermine Ben Enwounwu's (1921-1994) cultural inspired experimental beginnings in the 1950s based on Kenneth Murray's cultural advocacy ideology.

Gani Odutokun's art practice is mostly remembered for his unique technique in painting which he stylistically referred to as *color liquidization*. Notable amongst his numerous paintings, is "Dialogue with Mona Lisa" which currently only exists in photographs and books; the most prominent being a compare and contrast item in relation to Leonardo da Vinci's, Michael Duchamp's and Sadie Lees versions of the iconic Mona Lisa (Lois Fichner-Rathus', 2007:488-489). The original piece is said to have been lost during an art exhibition in the United States. This claim of loss was put to test when a pirated copy appeared at Arthouse auction in Lagos in 2012. The pirated piece as identified by Mallie (Odutokun's wife) was destroyed under the supervision of executive members of the Society of Nigerian Artists.



The painting "Dialogue with Mona Lisa" (fig. 1) is iconic for discussing implications of Euro-African interface since the colonial period. The work highlights, based on the chosen subjects expressed in the work, iconographic issuances that stimulate metaphoric interpretations based on deeper understandings of social imbalance directly linked to the relationship shared between the West and Africa. The iconic subjects in the painting are "Nimba fertility sculpture" of Baga in Guinea (fig. 2), Leonardo Da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" (fig. 3) and Piet Mondrian's painting (Fig. 4). The objective of the paper therefore is to identify, interpret and analyze these icons within their different social contexts as instruments for understanding their new assigned roles in Gani's visual reconstruction. Their new assigned role therefore provides metaphoric elucidation of Euro-African interface since the 19th century. Thus, it highlights artistic denotations and connotations as visible implications for providing answers to the questions of art relevance and standards of beauty.

2. BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE ON GANI ODUTOKUN

Citing Kojo Fosu, Ikpakronyi (2007:2), writes that Gani Odutokun was born in Ghana in 1946. At the age of 19, he relocated to Kaduna (Nigeria) where he obtained a degree in Fine Arts with specialization in painting at Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria. A cursory survey of his life according to Ise Azeez (2007:46) shows that he graduated with Bachelors and Masters Degrees at ABU, Zaria in 1975 and 1979 respectively. In an interview with Gani, Ise reveals that Gani first intended to study Graphics based on his experience in sign writing and illustrations on mammy wagons while living in Ashanti, Ghana. However this was not to be due to lecturer's compelling influence on student's specialization choice. Gani joined the Lecturer cadre as a graduate assistant in 1976. While in the system, his stylistic oeuvre impacted positively on the art community and beyond overwhelmingly. His creative ideology "Accident and Design" added another dimension to the premier developments of Uche Okeke and his colleagues' "Natural Synthesis" ideology. Concerning his philosophy of accident and design, Jacob Jari 2007:52 quotes Gani thus,

The guiding light behind most of my work is the concept of 'accident and design'. I see art as life and I perceive life as an endless circle of oscillation between accident and design. Man attempts to order the world around him through design. Forces intervene to aid or disrupt. In the end, what gets realized is hardly the precise thing the mind conceived. Man is never in control. I like my art to reflect the essence, for that is my perception of reality. As if giving biological definition to his ideology, Gani died in an automobile accident while returning from an art exhibition in Lagos alongside other colleagues on Thursday 16th February, 1995. At death, "accident" claimed a "design" mantra.

Formal and Iconographic Analyses of the Different Subjects in Odutokun's Dialogue with Mona Lisa.

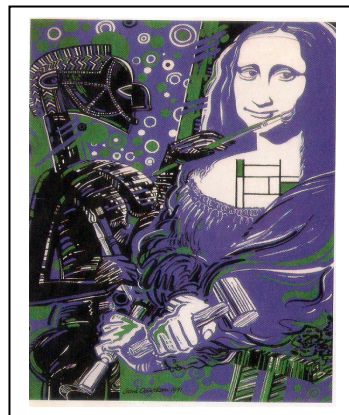


Fig. 1, Gani Odutokun, Dialogue with Mona Lisa, Guash on Paper, 30"x22"cm, 1991



Fig. 2, *Nimba* Mask, Wood and fibre, Baga, Guinea, 48", (Date unknown)

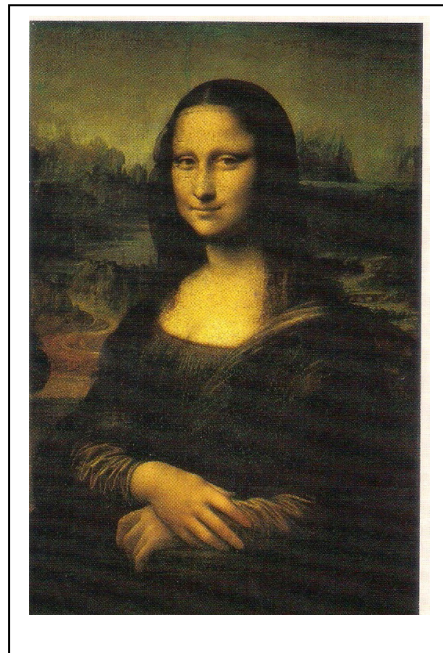


Fig. 3, Leonardo Da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, Oil on Panel, 30.4" x 21" (c. 1503)

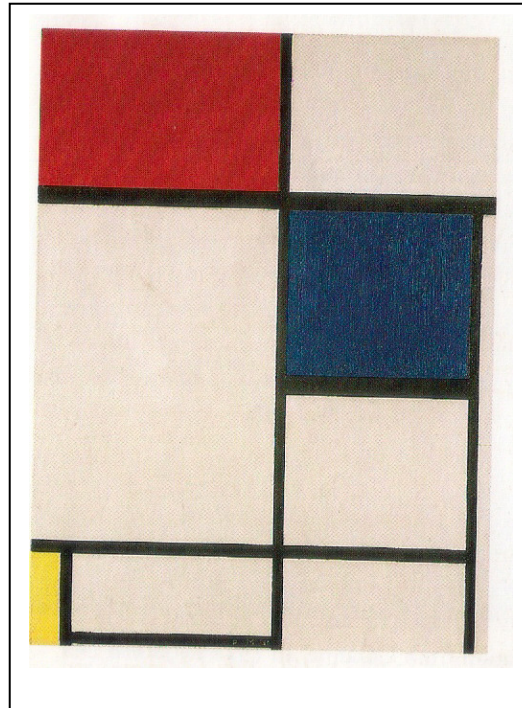


Fig. 4, Piet Mondrian, Composition with Red, Blue and Yellow, Oil on Canvas, 28.5” x 21.5”, 1930

As pointed out earlier, three artistic icons underpin Gani’s work under review. The composition of the three elements infers Euro-African relations while exploring womanhood as metaphor for society and environment. This opinion is shared by (Lois Fichner-Rathus, 2007:489) on one hand when he attests that the “interaction between [the] images [are] symbolic of western and non-western traditions ...playing a cross cultural encounter”, and (Babalola: 2007:107) who opines that womanhood as subject in Gani’s paintings is acknowledged as one of his favorite picturesque choices. Analytically, the composition graphically divides into two parts; *Nimba* mask of Baga (Guinea), figurine on the left while Leonardo's “Mona Lisa” is to the right. Piet Mondrian's abstracted color composition inserts on the chest region of Mona Lisa. These subjects arouse identification and interpretation within their artistry domain.

3. THE NIMBA FIGURE OF BAGA CULTURE IN GUINEA

The *Nimba* figure is a classical artistic creation of African exploration of the Baga culture in Guinea. Trowel, 1968:67 asserts that it is “perhaps the most impressive sculpture in Africa”. It is noteworthy that Africa is a continent of diverse art developments with trajectories not limited to one stream. Instead, art cultures represent local or communal reflections of the people’s aesthetic understanding and interpretations within the context of their worldview. In traditional Baga culture, the *Nimba* figure served socio-religious purposes of promoting agriculture and fertility. Fertility in Africa encompasses productivity of land, livestock, procreation and the ability to perpetuate lineages and strings of life. The use of the female form as definition of this is socially and biologically defined. During ritual or social ceremonies that could include marriages and burials an impressive *Nimba* which could rise to four feet is worn over the head of a performer with seeing openings at the base of the breast region of the carved piece. The carrier is normally concealed with raffia and other ceremonial clothing.



The most impressive feature of this anthropomorphic figure is the facial composition which has a prominent beak like nose. Care is taken to ornate the face with linear patterns which run to the neck region. The head is also adorned with ridge like hear-do likened to the ridge rows of cultivated land. The figure prominently spots a flabby drooping breast on a thrust-out chest. This feature indicates an aged woman. Though ancestral worship associated to male folk is prevalent in most parts of Africa, old age of any gender symbolizes wisdom, lineage perpetuation and preservation as well as protecting cultural values. For a woman, an aged drooping breast is a testimony of long years of active nurture of babies through breast feeding. Fredrick Lamp (1996:22) further interprets the work thus “represents the abstraction of an ideal of the female role in society... vision of woman at the zenith of power, beauty and effective presence... Ultimately, *Nimba* is a reminder of the revered qualities which make up the Baga social system”.

4. MONA LISA BY LEONARDO DA VINCI

On the right section of the painting, Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* which represents classical Italian art renaissance of the 14th to 16th century AD is conspicuously composed. Many interpretations exist on *Mona Lisa*. Laurie Schneider Adams (1999:555) reporting Vasari, identifies that the portrait depicts the wife of Francesco del Giocondo (hence its nickname, *La Gioconda*, which means “the smiling one”). The circumstances surrounding the commissioning of the painting reflect contextual notations of the social systems that operated in Florence (Italy) in the 15th to 16th centuries. Furthermore Adams (556) provides insight to Leonardo’s metaphorical interpretation of the composition. According to him, the piece celebrates the human body as metaphor for the earth; flesh to soil, bones to rocks and blood to waterways. It is also important to note that, the renaissance art period in Italy (Europe) signpost the society of sophistication and awareness which was anchored on literature and philosophy.

5. PIET MONDRIAN’S COLOR ABSTRACT COMPOSITION

The insert at the chest region of *Mona Lisa* in the composition is Piet Mondrian’s abstract color composition. Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) was a Dutch painter whose abstract explorations represent modern avant-garde expressionisms of European art in the 20th century AD. Belonging to *De Stijl* movement, his style termed *Neoplasticism*, evolved a non-representational form based on vertical and horizontal grids of black lines on white surface with the three primary colors as fills. Quoted by Lois (2007:485), Piet writes concerning his art “all painting is composed of line and color. Line and color are the essence of a painting. Hence they must be freed from their bondage to the imitation of nature and allowed to exist for themselves”

6. INTERPRETATIVE CONNOTATIONS ON GANI’S DIALOGUE WITH MONA LISA

The composition of these iconic elements presents a structure for which interpretation can be engaged. The primal inference that the composition convey is African sculpture (brush in hand) painting *Mona Lisa*, while *Mona Lisa* (holding a chisel and mallet) is carving the African piece. These actions draw attention to two basic techniques of art making; additive and subtractive methods. In painting, color is continuously laid on a given ground to achieve a finished piece. Whereas in carving, undesired parts are chipped off a block to fashion out an appreciable piece. These creative technical processes provide deep insightful meanings. Like laying colours to beatify, Africa’s long years of slavery and colonial rule is essential to the great development and fortunes of Europe. On the other hand, the carving process expresses Europe’s action in her relationship with Africa which suggests eroding of indigenous systems overtime.

David Livingstone (1813-1873) is mostly celebrated for his ardent belief in “civilizing” Africa. In achieving his goals, his tools of Christianity, commerce and civilization, inevitably prepared the grounds for colonialism. Even though Nkomazana (1998) argues that Livingstone was not a conscious promoter of colonization, one cannot refute the fact that his seemingly good intention of “civilizing” Africa practically eroded African socio-political and religious foundations which gave opportunity for colonialism.



Like carving process where parts are continuously chipped off to fashion a premeditated form, Africa has continued to lose its age long traditions built on indigenous systems fashioned by cultural values, language and largely its economic systems to satisfy European interests. Nicodemus Evelyn (2012:10) surmises this as “cultural trauma in Africa”.

Furthermore, the painting interrogates racial indulgence through its choice of black and purple colour for the two interactive racial iconic subjects (Africa painted dominantly with black and Europe in purple). This assertion arises from the contrast of meanings and symbolisms ascribable to black and purple colors. Mario De Bortoli and Jesús Maroto (2001), in compiling meanings and symbols of color according to different world groupings posits that purple in Europe represents royalty and exudes nobility, luxury, power and vanity whereas black is associated with mourning, formality, death, evil, elegance, sophistication.

In Africa, purple as a color does not exist in its palette while black refers to age, maturity and masculinity. Within this broad spectrum of symbolisms, the socio-political definition of Africa by European early explorers who coined the phrase “black continent” was far from any consideration of dignity for identifying Africa. Such negative affixed identity with the later experiences of slave trade coupled with political emasculation of her territory, the resultant racism in the future was most likely inevitable. In contending with black stigmatization, nationalist efforts of early Pan-African movements from the 1940s especially that led by Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906-2001) have provided new definitions for black. The phrase “Black is beautiful” (Negritude) challenges western derogatory stereotypes.

Still eulogizing the concept of negritude in the pioneering effort of Senghor, it would seem that the Zaria art society entrant in early post-independence period of Nigeria and their codified negritude under the banner of “Natural Synthesis” was an effort in the right direction at arriving at a new consciousness that aptly defined the new African state. Yet Wole Soyinka’s popular quote “A tiger does not proclaim his *tigritude*, he pounces” constantly questions the rationale of the Pan-Africanist eulogy of negritude. Victor Ariole’s (internet source) analysis of language content of both *Negritude* and *Tigritude* affords a new understanding where *tigritude* stimulates negritude for purposeful social development.

The painting also draws attention to modernist challenges in the practice of African art which over the years have dwindled due to modern values. With this scenario, a total collapse of traditional art systems paved way for the birthing of hybridized western archetypes. This is a denigration of the rich traditional African art heritage for the birth of a new culture of egalitarian sensibility to the arts. Art is now viewed at museums and galleries and private homes of the rich in society, thereby completely detaching art from common society, where it thrived in the traditional past. Nicodemus (2012: np) further posits “it meant a departure from a system of visual production with great traditions of the past, which had been functionally integrated in everyday life in pre modern African societies”.

Furthermore, the painting draws attention to a misconstrued posture of African art as being static and possibly drowned in the past as against a dynamic European art. In the composition, whereas a lone African figure is expressed, two western subjects that interpret and summarizes a wide range of different artistic epochs in European art are showcased. The exquisite and intimidating figure of Mona Lisa represents Europe’s art renaissance of the 14th to 16th centuries and Piet Mondrian’s abstract color painting belongs to the 20th century. This connotes evolutionary trends of western art ranging from realistic stereotypes to abstract advent-guard generations; an evidence of a long creative trajectory.



7. Implication and Conclusion

Commemorating Gani through a study of this painting is a significant milestone which substantiates the saying that “Artist live forever”. The work “Dialogue with Mona Lisa” remains one of the master pieces that expose his grounded conceptual approach to art as an instrument for social reconstruction and mobilization. Through this painting, as elucidated in this paper, insights to factors traceable to modern Africa’s seemingly stunted development are highlighted. These stem from the formal and iconographic analysis of the subjects expressed in the painting. However, an optimistic side opens while reading the composition; an advocacy that Africa must arise from it’s seemingly disadvantaged past to embrace new and diverse opportunities that emanate from her romance with the west. This assertion stems from the significance of purple color splashes within the green color background of *Nimba*. The purple appear as lines on the black figure. Also the white reflection cast from the face and heart sections of Mona Lisa, which appear as lines contrasting the black on Nimba’s body also presents a glimpse of African rejuvenation. The colors, green, purple and white are visionary for increase, hope, admiration, peace and tranquility. Their application on *Nimba* therefore suggests the possibility of an emerging new African state that must rise from the ashes of slavery, backwardation, colonialism and loss of socio-cultural values to embrace new interests that promote the reinvention of a new Africa with sustainable development strategies. The hope of Africa’s reinvention on which note this paper concludes is hinged on appearance of black lines and shade (though sparingly) on Mona Lisa in the composition which suggests that great Europe had also had dark historical past from which it has evolved.



REFERENCES

1. Adams, L .S (1999). *Art across time*. New York, McGraw-Hill
2. Ariole, V. C. Negritude and tigritude: an analysis of language content for development purposes. https://scholasticahq.com/supporting_files/50336/attachment_versions/50359 Retrieved 7th July 2017
3. Babalola, D.O. (2007). Gani Odutokun and African womanhood. *Gani Odutokun: A legend of Nigerian art*. Abuja, N.G.A. Pp 107-110
4. Fredrick, L. (1996). Art of the Baga: A drama of cultural reinvention. *African Arts*, Vol. 29, No.4. Pp 20-33
5. Ikpakronyi, S. (2007). Introduction. *Gani Odutokun: A legend of Nigerian art*. Abuja, N.G.A. Pp 1-45.
6. Ise, A. E. (2007). Gani Odutokun: Background training and influence. *Gani Odutokun: A legend of Nigerian art*. Abuja, N.G.A. Pp 46-48
7. Jacob, J. (2007). Gani Odutokun, Years after. *Gani Odutokun: A legend of Nigerian art*. Abuja, N.G.A. Pp 49-60
8. Lois, F.R. (2007). *Understanding Art*. USA, Thomson Learning Inc.
9. Mario, D. B. and Jesús, M. Colours across cultures: Translating colours in interactive marketing communications. <http://globalpropaganda.com/articles/TranslatingColours.pdf> Retrieved 15th April 2017
10. Nicodemus, E. (2012). *African Modern Art and Black Cultural Trauma*. [Masters or Doctorate by Public Works] (Unpublished). <http://eprints.mdx.ac.uk> Retrieved 10th April 2017
11. Nkomazana, F. (1998). Livingstone's ideas of Christianity, commerce and civilization. *Botswana Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1&2, pp. 44-57
12. Trowel, M. (1968). *Classical African sculpture*. London, Faber and Faber