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**Gani Odutokun's Dialogue with Mona Lisa: Interrogating
Implications of Euro-African Interface**

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Abstract

Gani Odutokun (1946-1995) was a formidable creative force at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria where he graduated and taught painting for three decades. He died in a ghastly motor accident while returning from a group exhibition in Lagos. February 2015 marks the twentieth anniversary of this tragic loss. Amongst his celebrated paintings is the piece "Dialogue with Mona Lisa" which only now exists on page 489 of Lois Fichner-Rathus' (2007) Understanding Art since it is alleged to have been lost during an art exhibition in the United States. This piece provides potentials for addressing imports of "cross-cultural encounter" between Europe and Africa. It also poses questions about the relevance and standards of beauty across cultural divides. Employing formalism and iconographic instruments of critical art writing the paper succinctly employs metaphoric reasoning to interrogate technical processes of additive and subtractive methods of art making as underlying elements

for gaining interpretative insights. The paper concludes affirmatively that while detrimental imbalances exists in the interface that Africa and Europe shares, African nationalist efforts must combine concepts of Negritude and Tigritude to reinvent a new African consciousness that rises beyond the ashes of past debilitating conditions.

Key words- Euro-African Interface, Negritude, Tigritude, Implication, Pan-Africanism

Introduction

Gani Odutokun's (1946-1995) memories will linger for his creative prowess in the annals of historical development of contemporary Nigerian art practice and teaching. It will be twenty years in 2015 when the harvesting sword of death claimed his life on his way home from Lagos (Nigeria) where he participated actively in a group art exhibition. Prior to that tragic incidence, Gani bestrode the Nigerian contemporary art landscape from his Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria base for three decades from the time of his graduation. Zaria is symbolic in contemporary Nigerian art history as it signals an entrenching of Nigerian art renaissance from the 1960s of which the Zaria Art Society was the bedrock. 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 is sharing pages in the compare and contrast section of with Leonardo da Vinci's, Michael Duchamp's and Sadie Lees version of the iconic Mona Lisa in Lois Fichner-Rathus' (2007:488-489) *Understanding Art*. The piece is said to have been lost during an art exhibition in the United States. Recently this claim of disappearance 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 two worlds. The iconic subjects in the painting are formal reconstructions of "Nimba fertility sculpture" of Baga in Guinea (fig. 2), Leonardo Da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" (fig. 3) and Piet Mondrian's abstract color painting (Fig. 4).

The objective of the paper therefore is to identify and analyze these iconic themes within their different social contexts, and their new assigned roles occasioned by Gani's reconstruction. Also, it attempts a metaphoric interpretation of the painting to address the nature and import of Euro-African interface since the 20th century. Thus, it elicits artistic denotations and connotations that highlight visible implications of their interface from an artistic perspective. This is aimed at providing answers to the questions of art relevance and standards of beauty, and how they impact on Africa's modern state.

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 a 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, he became a living legacy to both staff and students of the institution. His stylistic oeuvre impacted positively on the art community and beyond overwhelmingly. ABU Zaria is gloriously remembered for two epochs in Nigeria's contemporary art trajectory. These are the premier developments of Uche Okeke and his colleagues "Natural Synthesis" ideology for art that span the period of Nigerian independence and Gani's "Accident and Design" ideology of the 1980s. Concerning this philosophy, 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.

Coincidentally, Gani died in an automobile accident while returning from an art exhibition in Lagos alongside other colleagues on Thursday 16th February, 1995. However today, his art pieces remain staring objects of artistic discourse that confirm the maxim that, though the artist dies, he lives on.

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

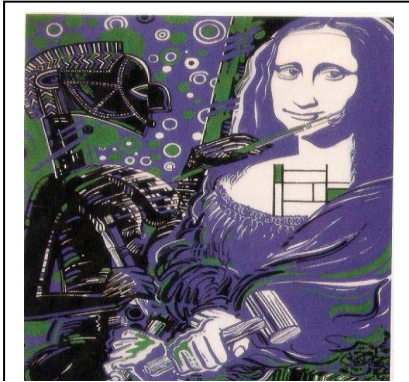


Fig. 1, Gani Odutokun, Dialogue with Mona Lisa, Guash on Paper, 30"x22"cm, 1991

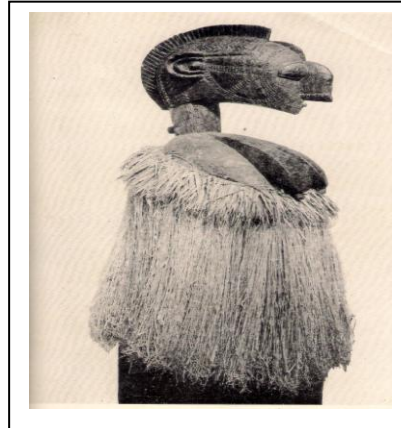


Fig. 2, Nimba Mask, Wood and fibre, Baga, Guinea, 48", (Date unknown)

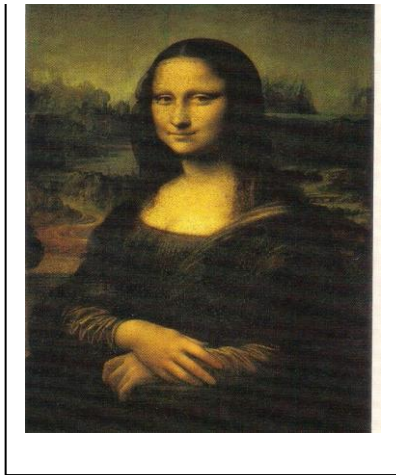


Fig. 3, Leonardo Da Vinci, Mona Lisa, Oil on Panel, 30.4" x 21" (c. 1503)

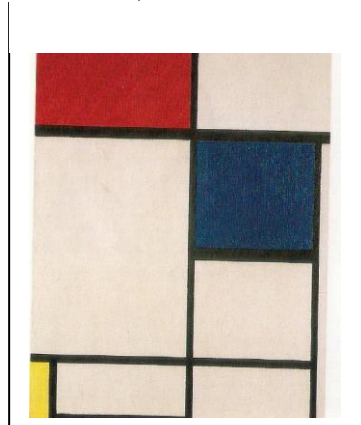


Fig. 4, Piet Mondrian, Composition with Red, Blue and Yellow, Oil on Canvas, 28.5" x 21.5", 1930

As pointed out earlier, three artistic contexts underpin the work under review. Their composition infers Euro-African relations while exploring symbolic classical art forms that indulge womanhood as metaphor for society and environment. Lois Fichner-Rathus (2007:489) identifies this composition as "interaction between images symbolic of western and non-western traditions... playing a cross cultural encounter." Womanhood as subject in Gani's paintings has been acknowledged as one of his favorite picturesque choices (Babalola: 2007:107).

The composition graphically divides into two parts with the painted *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. The amalgam of these subjects arouses the following iconography and artistic enquiry.

The *Nimba* Figure of Baga Culture in Guinea

The *Nimba* figure identifies as a classical artistic creation of African explorations. It is "perhaps the most impressive sculpture in Africa" (Trowel, 1968:67). 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 Nigeria, the Nok, Igbo-Ukwu and Ife art traditions stand out on their own evolutionary trends and sequences.

The choice of Gani in using this particular work from Guinea in West Africa for this composition rather than other classical works of his Nigerian extraction is a puzzle yet to be solved. But one extrapolates a possible continental concern for the choice since issues raised by the painting are not limited to any particular country but that which affects the entire black race.

In traditional Baga culture, the *Nimba* figure served socio-religious purposes to promote agriculture and fertility. The sculpture reflected the figure of the ideal woman which most African cultures adopt as fertility symbol. Fertility in Africa encompasses the land and its produce, livestock and its produce, procreation and the ability to perpetuate lineages and string of life. During ritual or social ceremonies that could include marriages and burials the 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. 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 beautify 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, perpetuation and preservation and security of 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 (internet source) 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”.

In Gani's painterly version of this carving, care is taken to replicate the head and breast portions. There is however a figural reconstruction by the addition of other human features that does not exist in the original composition. These include limbs and torso which are rendered in stylized planes and curvatures. The color scheme of this section of the painting is mostly black silhouette with splashes of purple. Of outstanding note in this composition is the assigned artistic activity of easel painting being performed by *Nimba*.

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 records the “pictorial depicts the wife of Francesco del Giocondo (hence its nickname, La Giocondo, meaning “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 piece which celebrates the human body as metaphor for the earth; flesh to soil, bones to rocks and blood to waterways.

In Gani's painting, the piece is extracted from the background of waterways and rocks and earth while retaining the eternal comely half smile and comfortable sited three quarter pose. In further reconfiguration, Gani engaged the subject in an artistic task of sculpting exploring a carving technique.

Piet Mondrian's Color Abstract Composition

In this painting, an insert of Piet Mondrian's abstract color composition obtains. 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”

Though simplistically composed, this iconic subject is placed on the chest region of Mona Lisa. It occupies the portion below the neck of the figure and some of its part tucked into the curved draped dress worn by Mona Lisa.

Taking into consideration of the peculiar iconographies that images command, the new roles assigned to them and how they engagingly overlap each other, attention is inevitably drawn to concerns which emanate from the socio-cultural interface that exists between Europe and Africa which the subjects represent.

Interpretative connotations on Gani's Dialogue with Mona Lisa

The primal inference that the composition convey is an African sculpture painting Mona Lisa while Mona Lisa is carving an 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 arrive at a finished piece. Whereas in carving, undesired parts are chipped off a block of a solid material to fashion out an appreciable piece. In the work interrogation, these creative technical processes provide deep insight meanings thus; while Africa continues to lay down its human, capital and natural resources to develop Europe through long years of slavery, trade and colonial rule, and other forms of servitude, Europe on the other hand by its stance of superior race, indulges a reshaping task of the African state through its instrument of Christian religion, western education, political and economic structures to reinvent a new Africa that measures with its standards. 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 and 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 concerns. Nicodemus Evelyn (2012:10) surmises this as “cultural trauma in Africa”.

Furthermore, the painting interrogates racial indulgence through its choice of black and purple for the two interactive subjects. 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 in Europe purple represents royalty and exudes nobility, luxury, power and vanity whereas black is associated mourning, formality, death, evil, elegance, sophistication. For Africa, purple as a color does not exist in its palette while black refers to age, maturity and masculinity. Within this broad spectrum of meanings, 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 future experiences of slave trade coupled with political emasculation of her territory, the resultant racism in the future was not unlikely to develop. 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 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 defines the new African state. Yet Wole Soyinka’s popular quote "A tiger does not proclaim his *tigrityde*, he pounces" constantly questions the rationale of the Pan-Africanist eulogy of negritude. Victor Ariabe’s (internet source) analysis of language content of both *Negritude* and *Tigrityde* however afford a new understanding where *tigrityde* stimulates negritude for purposeful social development.

The painting also draws attention to modernist challenges in the practice of African art. Nigerian art pioneers modern developments in African art since the beginning of the 20th century through her western styled painting genre of art. Aina Onabolu (1882-1963) who’s pioneering effort brought this to be, further provided opportunity for it to be transmitted through his art teaching curriculum in the 1920s. Arguments exist on the factors that gave rise to Aina’s travel to London to study in 1920 whereas he was quite proficient in his creative task as can be observed in his portraits produced in the first decade of the 20th century. Olu Oguibe (internet source) surmises that Aina’s intent “was to acquire whatever new experience or qualification that they sought in the west, and upon doing so return to Nigeria to continue their practice”. His insistence on introducing western art teaching curriculum in Nigeria after his studies in London in 1922 aptly promoted colonial systems and tools which were aimed at effectively reshaping African thought process for western civilization.

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 art culture of egalitarian sensibility to the arts. Art is now viewed at museums and galleries and private homes

of the upper echelon in society that can afford them, thereby completely detaching art from common society, where it thrived in the traditional past. Nicodemus 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".

This painting also draws attention to a misconstrued posture of African art as being static and possibly drowned in the past as against the projection that European art is dynamic. In the composition, while 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. Piet Mondrian's abstract color painting belongs to the 20th century. This mix connotes evolutionary trends of western art ranging from realistic stereotypes to abstract advent-guard generations; an evidence of a long creative trajectory.

Lastly, the composition also brings to the fore issues that bother on art and artist's authorship, visibility, promotion and continuity. Studies and classifications of African traditional artworks have until recently suffered personalized identification. This stems from the inability of traditional artists to provide literate identification markings or signatures in their works hence providing an anonymous or culture bound identity model for classification of art works by art historians. Such classification as Nok art, Igbo-Ukwu and Ife art are common. Roslyn Adele Walker's (1998) article "Anonymous has a Name" in her book on the study of Olowe of Ise however provides a new approach to obtaining authorship of traditional pieces through stylistic peculiarity identification. Gani's choice of an African piece for this painting seems to invoke the anonymous past. The European art pieces in the composition do not have identity crisis instead they typify the best samples in terms of artist identity and visibility, promotion and patronage as well as universal acceptance furthered by continuity. Whereas the African piece though an excellent sample from other samples consigns to the anonymous rule without artist authorship identity and grossly traumatized with western systems of art trafficking. In this case *Nimba* masks and indeed traditional African culture is consigned to the far past of anonym practices and can only fit for ethnographic viewings in European and American museum as curios.

Implication and Conclusion

It will be twenty years since Gani Odutokun exited mother earth in 2015. Commemorating him 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. That Africa must arise from its seemingly disadvantaged past to embrace new given diverse opportunities available for national development in modern systems. This assertion stems from the significance of purple color splashes within the green color background of *Nimba*. The purple also appear as lines on the black figure. There is as well white reflection possibly cast from the white face and heart sections of Mona Lisa, which becomes visible as lines contrasting the black on Nimba's body. These colors, green, purple and white are visionary for increase, hope, admiration, peace and tranquility. The application of these colors over *Nimba* suggest 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. This advocacy for Africa's reinvention on which note this paper concludes is hinged on the sparing use of black lines and shade that appear on Mona Lisa in the composition which suggests that Europe had its seemingly dark historical past from which it has evolved.

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