

## TRANSACTIONING THE MODERN

Ulli Beier, *Black Orpheus*, and  
the Mbari International

**IN SEPTEMBER 1956**, the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists opened at the Sorbonne, Paris.<sup>1</sup> Organized by Alioune Diop (1910–1980), the Senegalese teacher and entrepreneur and the publisher of the cultural journal *Présence Africaine*, the congress brought together some of the best-known black writers, critics, and artists from Africa, the Caribbean, the United States, and Europe. Following on the heels of the Bandung Conference of 1955, where leaders of several colonized and newly independent African and Asian countries resolved to push for the end of colonialism and establish a network of nations unaligned to either the NATO or Soviet power blocs, the Sorbonne congress set out to rethink the cultural implications of decolonization, as well as the role of artists and writers in the process. It was, as the organizers imagined it, the first major platform for spreading the artistic and political ideas championed by the founders of negritude. In his opening address, the Haitian writer Jean Price-Mars (1876–1969) declared that the participants were responding to the “fervent appeal of *Présence Afri-*

caine, this glowing fire of black culture,” and that the objective of the congress was the affirmation, exaltation, and glorification of the culture of the black peoples of the world.<sup>2</sup>

The Paris conference is important to the making of artistic modernism in Nigeria precisely because it catalyzed and to a large extent shaped the ideas and critical vision of Ulli Beier (1922–2011), a Jewish German instructor of English in the extramural program at the University College, Ibadan, who (so this chapter contends) was the single most influential figure in articulating this modernism. Impressed by the robust debates and presentations by distinguished intellectuals convened at the congress, Beier also realized that the nascent anglophone African writing, some of which he encountered in Nigeria, could never match the vitality of its francophone counterpart without an anglophone literary forum comparable to *Présence Africaine*. Within one year, in collaboration with the German writer Janheinz Jahn (1918–1973), the foremost advocate of negritude literature, he cofounded *Black Orpheus*, a literary magazine that soon became the defining space for the work of the new generation of anglophone African and black diaspora writers and artists. Four years later, Beier also founded the Mbari Artists and Writers Club at Ibadan in partnership with several young African writers and artists, including Demas Nwoko and Uche Okeke. This chapter narrates the specific ways *Black Orpheus* and the Mbari Club, propelled by Beier’s art criticism, his curatorial projects, and his international network of critics and artists, produced within the space of a few years the most important theater of postcolonial modernism on the African continent during the midcentury.

To be sure, the role of *Black Orpheus* and the Mbari group in the development and propagation of modern African literature during the 1950s and early 1960s has received some critical attention from literary scholars; still, how these two legendary institutions actively participated in and shaped the discourse of artistic modernism in Nigeria and Africa is largely unexamined.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter I track this emergent discourse through analyses of art criticism, reviews, and portfolios published in *Black Orpheus* and by way of exhibitions at Mbari Ibadan. I show the specific discursive protocols through which the cultural and literary arguments of negritude impacted and shaped mid-twentieth-century Nigerian artistic modernism, through the critical agency of Ulli Beier in particular. This is important because it returns to the preceding chapters’ claim that the work of Art Society artists and their Nigerian contemporaries is indebted to what one might call the “tactical root finding” of pan-Africanism and negritude rather than to the adaptationist ideas of Kenneth Murray. Further, an examination of the particular issues and critical networks that defined this period of great political transformation will help

explain the radical difference between Onabolu's colonial modernism and the postcolonial modernism of the Art Society and its generation.

### ***Black Orpheus* and Modern Art**

The first and only *Black Orpheus* editorial statement, printed in the journal's inaugural issue, observed that because a "great deal of the best African writing" published in French, Portuguese, or Spanish remained inaccessible to English-only readers in Africa, the journal hoped to break down colonial language barriers by publishing this new literature in translation.<sup>4</sup> The journal would also publish "Afro-American" writers, "because many of these are involved in similar cultural and social situations and their writings are highly relevant to Africans."<sup>5</sup> Finally, reiterating the objectives of both anglophone pan-Africanists and the negritude movement, the editorial proclaimed a dual program: to encourage new African writing and study the "great traditions of oral literature of African tribes. For it is on the heritage of the past, that the literature of the future must be based."<sup>6</sup>

The editorial did not explain the meaning or origin of the journal's name. It is significant because it came from the title of Jean-Paul Sartre's introductory essay for Senghor's seminal anthology of negritude poetry.<sup>7</sup> In it Sartre compared the "Orphic poetry" of the new black poets with the story of Orpheus, who in Greek mythology descended to Hades to reclaim his bride, Eurydice, from Pluto. By naming the journal after Sartre's essay, Beier and Jahn identified it with the idea of a symbolic return to and revalidation of ancestral Africa implied in both Sartre's articulation of negritude and Césaire's seminal creative work *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939). In other words, the model of cultural reclamation proposed by negritude and powerfully articulated by Sartre was fundamental to the *Black Orpheus* critical project.

Though the editorial made no mention of the visual arts, focusing instead on its mission as a literary journal, Beier's desire to extend its work to African art was clear from the outset. During his tenure as coeditor (1957–1966), the journal regularly featured portfolios, vignettes, essays, and reviews on art; indeed, it was the only major, consistent voice for contemporary mid-twentieth-century African and African diaspora art and artists on the continent. An examination of Beier's exemplary texts on art in *Black Orpheus* reveals how far his critical interventions went in determining the journal's coverage of modern art; what is more, it provides a perspective on how his art criticism and ideas about modern art shaped and nurtured the discourse of modernism in Nigeria and Africa as a whole.

Ulli Beier arrived in Nigeria in October 1950 with his artist-wife, Susanne

Wenger, a founding member of the Viennese Art Club. Her work, well received in Paris in the 1940s, was influenced by Jungian psychoanalysis. Hired as an assistant lecturer in English phonetics at the University College, Ibadan, Beier later transferred to the Extra-Mural Department, where he became a roving tutor for the western region government, a position requiring him to visit major towns to set up classes in African culture and literature.<sup>8</sup> In addition, his frequent travels afforded him the opportunity to further his interest in the visual arts of the Yoruba and other southern Nigerian cultures and to conduct seminal research, which he later published in the government-sponsored *Nigeria* magazine and elsewhere.<sup>9</sup>

While Beier published a remarkably diverse range of art and artists in *Black Orpheus*, two strings connect them. First, he presents to his Nigerian audience artist models who, in his estimation, have attained the right mix of modernist, antiacademic impulse and a sympathetic translation of indigenous African forms and concepts; second he supports emerging Nigerian and foreign artists who have shown a similar attitude toward modernism. Thus, Beier's inaugural contemporary art-related *Black Orpheus* essay focused on the work of Susanne Wenger (1915–2009), who had become a priestess of the Osun cult in Osogbo, where they lived until Beier left Nigeria in 1966. To Beier, Wenger's work exemplified a progressive and radical interpolation of negritude ethos into the artistic sensibilities of European modernism.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, she belonged to the ranks of Western artists and scholars who, disillusioned by the failed promise of technological progress in the aftermath of World War II, embarked on a journey to reestablish a connection with the irrational, mysterious life forces tragically lost by modern Europe. Going beyond the merely formal interests of the Parisian modernists, she and others like her—including Placide Tempels (1906–1977), Pierre Verger (1902–1996), and Maya Deren (1917–1961)—went to Africa (or Haiti in Deren's case) to immerse themselves in African culture and its philosophy. Wenger, Beier argues, went the furthest in penetrating “more deeply into the mysteries of traditional African life.”<sup>11</sup>

In this essay, Beier offers Wenger's work as a visual equivalent of literary negritude—in the sense of an art that synthesizes European and African cultural experience and artistic traditions. This new art, though situated within the modernist pursuit of innovative, experimental form, rejects the aestheticism of Parisian modernism to instead identify with the more mystical aspirations of German expressionism and the affirmative, universal humanism of negritude. Although—as Beier illustrated with Wenger's *Ogboinba (Ijaw Creation Myth)*; see also her *Iwin*, (ca. 1958; figure 4.1)—this type of work is



**Figure 4.1** Susanne Wenger, *Iwin*, screen print, ca. 1958. Iwalewa-Haus, University of Bayreuth collection. © The Susan Wenger Foundation, Zöbing am Heiligenstein.

more pertinently the product of a deep encounter with “mysterious” African cultures and may even directly address a recognizably African subject matter, it alludes only loosely, if at all, to any specific African or, for that matter, modernist European art form or style.

Yet in spite of Beier’s claim for Wenger’s visual negritude, he notes that it was all but impossible for the new generation of African artists to emulate her work simply because their art school training would have already destroyed their innate creative originality. Whereas Wenger herself was redeemed—cleansed of the dross she might have acquired during her time among the Viennese avant-garde—by deep immersion in the liberatory, mysterious, precognitive world of Yoruba religion and ritual, modern African artists, unable and unwilling to return to this source and pressed by the imperative to be modern, faced a precarious path to true originality. This, in fact, is the core of Beier’s criticism of modern African art: the belief that colonial (and any) formal art education subjected African artists to a doctrinaire system that claimed their individuality and in so doing thwarted their access to progressive developments in contemporary art, specifically surrealism and expressionism.

Beier’s anxiety and distrust of formal education, reminiscent of the Austrian art educator Franz Cižek’s theory of art education, was influenced by the work of the Swiss artist Jean Dubuffet, who famously proclaimed the authenticity of *art brut* in the 1940s.<sup>12</sup> His antiformalist attitude also helps make sense of Beier’s simultaneous promotion of the work of two mentally ill patients, which showed enough compelling artistic talent to demonstrate a link between mental illness and artistic originality. In his second *Black Orpheus* essay on art, Beier remarked that the astonishing freshness of the paintings and drawings of these patients—whom he and Wenger encouraged to take up art at a local mental home—was guaranteed by their mental condition and illiteracy, which in turn liberated them from the strictures of Western education.<sup>13</sup> That is to say, the boundless, nonlogical freedom associated with insanity allowed them greater formal expressiveness and a predisposition toward new and unpredictable approaches to pictorial composition and representation.

In these two seminal *Black Orpheus* essays, Beier thus outlines the thrust of his future art criticism and aesthetic preference. He would promote, for the most part, only artists whose work showed a formal or conceptual synthesis of modernist avant-garde techniques and the sense of enigma he identified with indigenous art and religions of Africa. Such work must at once be formally expressive and intuitive rather than deliberate or mannered but



also suggestive of some indeterminate spirituality and indirectly evocative of Western modernist and indigenous African artistic traditions. These characteristics—evident, so he believed, in the work of Susanne Wenger and the two mentally ill painters—determined for the most part his choice of artists to feature in *Black Orpheus*. These two essays provide a useful view of Beier's critical practice and artistic preferences, hedged as they are by skepticism about academic training and faith in the power of raw artistic originality.

Beier sought out artists working in other parts of the world who confronted historical and social conditions similar to those of modern Africans and who had invented ambitious, radically new work. During a trip to London in 1959, for instance, he saw an exhibition at Gallery One featuring the work of Francis Newton Souza (1924–2002), an expatriate Indian artist who was beginning to garner critical attention in the London art scene. Souza was born in Goa, a Roman Catholic enclave and former Portuguese colony annexed by India in 1961. In 1947 Souza cofounded the influential Mumbai-based Progressive Artists Group (PAG), recognized as India's first modernist avant-garde group. The group rejected the native revivalism of the Bengal school, initiated by the pioneer painter Ravi Varma, and scorned the academicism of colonial art schools. The basis of the group's cohesion, despite its members' diverse political affiliations and backgrounds, was a belief in a rigorous combination of formal styles and techniques of European modernists, particularly the impressionists and German expressionists, and those associated with traditional Indian art.<sup>14</sup> Excited by Souza's work, Beier, upon returning to Nigeria, published an essay and several of Souza's drawings in *Black Orpheus* under another of his pseudonyms, Omidiji Aragbabalu.<sup>15</sup>

Returning to his now routine criticism of West African artists' failure to develop an ambitious new modernism based on a radical synthesis of European and indigenous West African influences, Beier declared the successful creation of such a synthesis by modern painters in India. Souza's work epitomized this achievement; not only did he exploit the techniques and visual language of modern painting, but his work also insinuated early Christian rather than Hindu art. This act of bridging two cultures, Beier concludes:

is of great significance to us in West Africa. It goes to prove that the tide is now beginning to turn; the force of the cultural attack from Europe seems to be spent and from the ruins of our various traditions in Asia and Africa we are beginning the work of synthesis and reconstruction.<sup>16</sup>

It is worth noting, however, that while Souza's strict Catholic background and Romanesque Spanish art had considerable influence on his work, as

did the work of the French fauvist Georges Rouault and the cubist Pablo Picasso,<sup>17</sup> his experiment with the formal style of the Khajuraho temple sculptures from South India, famous for their sublimely erotic imagery and ritual symbolism, escaped Beier's analysis.<sup>18</sup> Earlier in his career, Souza had protested the prevailing influence of second-rate realism — what Beier called Victorian imagery in Nigeria — by turning to native Indian art, developing in the following years an intensely iconoclastic style that his critics often found too shocking for commentary (figures 4.2 and 4.3).<sup>19</sup> Thus, Beier's claim that "it is an Early Christian, rather than a Hindu atmosphere that we sense in his work"<sup>20</sup> ignores the fact that Souza combined *both* with a modernist aesthetic sensibility and with what one might call postcolonial and post-Christian existential ennui, graphically indexed in his oeuvre.<sup>21</sup> Despite these observations, Beier's overall argument is that Souza's successful synthesis of various indigenous and Western artistic modes, his invention of a powerful and original personal style, and his rejection of staid academic realism provides a crucial model for West African artists at the cultural crossroads of late colonialism. While he does not make the connection, Beier's suggestion of Indian modernism as a model for West Africa remarkably echoes the widespread hope on the part of the region's nationalists that India's political independence in 1947 would inspire immediate sovereignty for African nations. (Even before that, the early twentieth-century Lagos intellectual elite had looked to Indian nationalists in their own struggle with British colonialism.)<sup>22</sup> More broadly, he hoped that artists from the non-Western colonized world or oppressed minorities such as blacks in the United States would develop a radically new art based on their political and cultural encounter with Western modernity and its associated aesthetic traditions.

A few months before the publication of the Souza piece, Beier made a trip to Zaria to see the work of Jimo Akolo and some members of the Art Society. He was impressed and surprised by the quality of the work, so much so that he was convinced it signaled the emergence of a distinctly Nigerian modernism, which he had thought impossible, as he noted in the Wenger article only months before. In a short but important *Black Orpheus* essay on Demas Nwoko published shortly after his Zaria trip, Beier introduced Nwoko as the most compelling and innovative of the Art Society artists. Nwoko's work, moreover, provided Beier the opportunity to restate once more the problem of modern art and colonial education in Nigeria: the failure of Onabolu's and Murray's followers to identify with the formal experimentation of the European avant-garde, beholden as they were to the sedate anatomical correctness and "sentimental story telling" of so-called Victorian art.<sup>23</sup>



**Figure 4.2** Francis Newton Souza, *Two Saints in a Landscape*, oil on board, 1961. Tate Gallery, London. Photo © Tate, London 2013. © ARS, NY.



**Figure 4.3** Francis Newton Souza, *Crucifixion*, oil on board, 1959. Tate Gallery, London. Photo Credit: Tate, London / Art Resource, NY. © ARS, NY.



The trouble, Beier argues, is the erroneous assumption that the Nigerian artist must assert his cultural and national identity simply through the choice of local *subject matter* rather than by experimentation with culturally familiar *form* or aesthetic qualities. The preponderance of “folkloristic subjects,” village scenes, and other genre imagery, he noted, could not be the basis for determining the character of Nigerian modernism, because the means of realizing themes, rather than themes themselves, are what matters in discussions of style in art.<sup>24</sup> Against this colonial modernist status quo, “one cannot but admire,” declares Beier, with the Zaria group in mind, “those few young artists who have not succumbed to these trends” but are poised to connect, albeit dialectically, to the aesthetic rhetoric of international modernism.

The publication of Demas Nwoko’s work in *Black Orpheus* thus marks the crucial moment of alliance and alignment of the work of the Art Society at Zaria with Beier’s critical muscle against the bipolar anchors of colonial modernism represented by Aina Onabolu and Kenneth Murray. This text also coincided with Beier’s famous art review in *Nigeria* magazine, in which we see the extent of Beier’s belief in Nwoko’s work, as well as in his Art Society colleagues Uche Okeke and Bruce Onobrakpeya and their friend Jimo Akolo as exemplars of progressive and modern Nigerian art. The review and the show itself—both unprecedented in their scope and impact—mark the triumph of Beier’s art criticism and his successful insinuation of the Art Society artists into the national consciousness; but the context of the production and reception of the exhibition and review also highlights the intense struggle for the driver’s seat among power players in the expanding Lagos art world.

### **Nigerian Art Exhibition, 1960**

The Nigeria Exhibition—a sprawling national fair on a thirty-five-acre space on Victoria Island in Lagos, directed by a Mr. R. H. C. Hammond—was a major part of Nigeria’s October 1960 independence celebrations.<sup>25</sup> While the fair was dominated by immense industrial and commercial pavilions mounted by federal and regional institutions, the relatively modest arts and crafts exhibition organized by the Lagos branch of the Nigerian Council for the Advancement of Art and Culture provided an unprecedented opportunity for a survey of contemporary Nigerian art. As it turned out, the exhibition, simply called *Nigerian Art*, became the first major platform for Art Society members and their colleagues to present their work at the national level and to establish their reputation as major players in postindependence Nigerian art.

The circumstances surrounding the involvement of Uche Okeke, Demas

Nwoko, and to a lesser extent Bruce Onobrakpeya in organizing the art section of the exhibition are not entirely clear. But we know that by May 1960, after much deliberation, the council appointed a selection committee—composed of Michael Crowder, Aina Onabolu, Nora Majekodunmi, Afi Ekong, and others—for the exhibition to be installed at the Kingsway Stores premises in Lagos.<sup>26</sup> Within the same month, after a visit to Zaria by Mrs. Majekodunmi—chair of the Lagos branch of the arts council at the suggestion of Crowder, the editor of *Nigeria* magazine and staunch supporter of the Art Society—Uche Okeke, Simon Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya, and Jimo Akolo were invited to submit work for the Kingsway show. The plan to exhibit at an offsite location rather than at the main Victoria Island grounds appears to have been prompted by news that the powerful Federal Council of Ministers had appointed Ben Enwonwu to take over from the Lagos branch the responsibility for the official arts and crafts exhibition. But a crisis erupted when, in July, the Lagos branch received a directive from the government to take over the official art exhibition from Enwonwu, who had resigned his curatorial appointment.<sup>27</sup> The arts council, in turn, invited Uche Okeke to cocurate the exhibition and, along with his friends, to execute murals at the arts and crafts pavilion.<sup>28</sup>

On August 25 and 26, as part of the arts council's publicity program, Radio Nigeria broadcast an interview by Deinde George with Okeke, Nwoko, and Onobrakpeya in which their work for the Nigeria Exhibition was highlighted. Okeke used the opportunity to affirm his belief in the significance of the Art Society's natural synthesis in Nigeria's emergent modernism:

We are faced with alien artistic medium of expression in painting and have continued to experiment with them [*sic*], thereby giving new expression to our art forms. Thus by way of natural synthesis of old and new we strive to evolve what may well be New Nigerian Art.<sup>29</sup>

Although Crowder managed the publicity given to the Zaria artists and arranged meetings between them and senior government officials, their friendship soon unraveled, if only for a time (figure 4.4). Okeke and Nwoko in particular seem to have drawn the ire of Michael Crowder and Nora Majekodunmi—the British wife of the Federal Minister of Health, Dr. Moses Adekoyejo Majekodunmi, arguably the most influential figure on the Lagos art scene—for more or less taking over, without oversight, the pavilion's design and decoration.<sup>30</sup> Even so, the higher-stakes feud between Enwonwu and the expatriate members of the Lagos branch—it came to a head in July and August, when Enwonwu mass-circulated a letter exhorting Nigerian artists and



**Figure 4.4** Okeke and Onobrakpeya working in Michael Crowder's residence, Lagos, summer 1960. Photo, courtesy of Uche Okeke / Asele Institute, Nimo.

craftsmen to withdraw from the exhibition—forced the council to embark on a massive media blitz, coordinated by Crowder, focusing on the work of Zaria artists. The council concluded that such a media counteroffensive might restore public confidence in the exhibition in the wake of Enwonwu's high-profile onslaught. His campaign culminated in a sensational article, "African Art in Danger," published in the *Times* of London on the eve of political independence. In it Enwonwu decried the threat posed to the development of art in postindependence Nigeria by a social elite that had seized "control of art with cheap commercialism" but also to the fact that "most of the young artists [art students at Zaria] . . . are being attracted away from following a [Nigerian] leadership by European keenness on 'art collection,' or else by patronage."<sup>31</sup>

The picture that emerges from these layered, multidirectional frictions is one of struggle for not just the direction and course of the independence exhibition but, more crucially, for the fate of modern Nigerian art. It was a struggle pitting three power players on the art scene: the established Enwonwu, the expatriate arts administrators and critics, and the irreverent Nwoko and Okeke, who had become the de facto leading voices of a new generation of artists.<sup>32</sup>

**OKEKE'S VAST MURAL** *Mother Nigeria* (1960), painted on straw mat support and measuring about thirty-by-fifty feet, depicts a mother figure in a brilliant lemon yellow dress with her children gathered in her maternal embrace. Rendered in flat colors, with the figures defined by hard-edge outlines, their anatomical features only barely suggested, the composition achieved a powerful monumentality, both through suppression of unnecessary details and by its sheer scale. Although there is no indication of the ethnicity of the mother figure or her children—perhaps an acknowledgment of the fraught nature of ethnic nationalism in Nigerian politics—the image of a dominant mother gathering her children together forcefully conveyed the need for the country's fractious ethnicities to rally together under the protection of free mother Nigeria. A symbolic representation of unity in Nigeria, *Mother Nigeria* predictably turned out to be a major attraction for the more than five hundred thousand visitors to the fair.

Bruce Onobrakpeya's mural consisted of fourteen large panels on the covered way that connected the art pavilion to the craftsmen's pavilion. Each panel had an autonomous image; his style ranged from the realistic rendition of a butterfly in one panel to an abstract geometric image of a figure with a long pipe in another. On the whole, the artist's decorative program relied on generous use of hard-edge geometric shapes, bold decorative patterns, and schematically rendered forms, thus announcing Onobrakpeya's talent as a superb illustrator. The multipanel mural depicted episodes from Urhobo folktales (figure 4.5) but also included contemporary Benin and Urhobo personages and ceremonial events. For his part, Demas Nwoko, besides assisting Okeke, executed his own mural (also helped by Okeke) at the crafts section of the Arts and Crafts pavilion. Part of the composition, dealing with the theme of Nigerian crafts, depicted four figures engaged in embroidery, leatherwork, smithing, and welding.<sup>33</sup> Like that of Okeke and Onobrakpeya, Nwoko's work was rendered in flat colors, but his palette and pictorial program—consisting of dominant brilliant reds and white, his figures and major color areas marked





**Figure 4.5** Bruce Onobrakpeya, sketch for panel of his *Covered Way* mural (detail), gouache on paper, 1960. Photo, the author. © Bruce Onobrakpeya.



**Figure 4.6** Demas Nwoko, mural, Arts and Crafts pavilion, Nigeria Exhibition, Lagos, 1960. Reproduced from *Nigeria 68* (March 1961), p. 31. Courtesy National Council for Arts and Culture, Abuja. © Demas Nwoko.

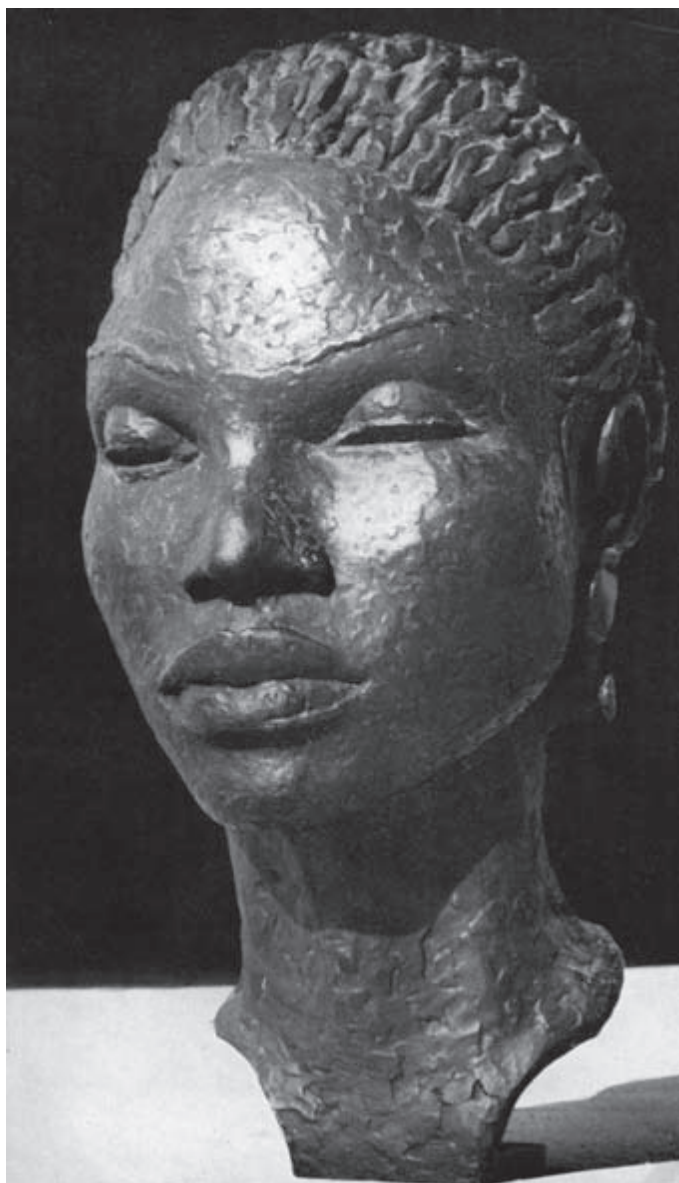


out with heavy white or dark lines—resulted in the most dramatic and accomplished work of the group (figure 4.6). The refusal by the three artists (least so with Onobrakpeya) to seek recourse to illustrating iconic, easily recognizable African/Nigerian art forms, amply evident in Enwonwu's "authentic" African style, or to produce the kind of pictorial realism popularized by Lasekan, Onabolu, and Enwonwu left no one in doubt about their desire to inaugurate a new pictorial order, the authenticity of which depended not so much on a literalist deployment of indigenous themes and pictorial symbols as on its articulate deployment of modernist formal principles.<sup>34</sup>

The art exhibition drew forty-one participants, ranging from artists with formal art school training to those who, as with traditional African artists, had apprenticed with master sculptors. Of the first generation of Nigerian artists, Akinola Lasekan showed his realistic portraits of Nigerians besides his well-known *Market Scene* (National Gallery of Art, Lagos collection); J. D. Akeredolu (1915–1984), the putative originator of thorn carving, small figures carved from thorns of the wild cotton tree (shown in the crafts section), was represented by a wood sculpture, *Mallam*; and Lamidi Fakeye (1928–2009), a former student of the famed Yoruba sculptor George Bandele and possibly the best-known graduate of Father Kevin Carroll's workshop at Oye-Ekiti, exhibited six sculptures. Onabolu was surprisingly absent from the exhibition.

Among Kenneth Murray's students, A. P. Umana (b. 1920), exhibited several paintings, as did Enwonwu, represented by older Murray-period work, as well as more recent sculptures and paintings, including *Head of Afi* (ca. 1959), a bronze bust of the Lagos-based artist Afi Ekong (1930–2009; figure 4.7). Enwonwu's putative rival on the Nigerian art scene, the sculptor Felix Idubor (1928–1991), who was initially apprenticed to a Bini master carver but later taught at Yaba Technical College, exhibited his own bronze *Head of a Woman*, in addition to two other figures.<sup>35</sup> Where Enwonwu's *Head of Afi* displays the artist's mastery of academic portraiture, Idubor's, with its highly polished surface and almost impersonal features, is remarkably evocative of early Benin court style.

Despite the fact that the exhibition ostensibly presented a wide-ranging panorama of then modern Nigerian art, the sheer number of works by members of the Art Society group, in addition to their popular onsite murals, provided them an enviable opportunity for national visibility. They garnered considerable media attention in the form of interviews with Radio Nigeria and a full-page Nigerian *Daily Times* feature on their murals and contributions to the exhibition, triumphantly titled "big job for young artists,"—all perhaps part of the scheme by Michael Crowder and his arts council cohort



**Figure 4.7** Ben Enwonwu, *Head of Afi*, bronze, ca. 1959. Reproduced from *Nigeria* 68 (March 1961), p. 39. Courtesy National Council for Arts and Culture, Abuja. © The Ben Enwonwu Foundation.

to challenge Enwonwu's previously uncontested national influence. But in spite of this Enwonwu-versus-arts council chess game, Okeke and his group, recognizing this singular opportunity, seized it in a bid to claim the front seat of modern postindependence Nigerian art. And this is where Beier's influential *Nigeria* magazine review of the exhibition intervened, declaring in unmistakable terms that Nwoko and Okeke, in particular, but also Akolo and Onobrakpeya were among the stars of new order.<sup>36</sup>

Beier's review, as he made clear from the outset, was a subjective perspec-

tive on a show of eclectic work ranging from the impressive to the mediocre. Like John Danford a decade before, Beier clearly saw the independence show as the manifest beginning of a new phase in contemporary Nigerian art, which consisted of “artists of widely different backgrounds and ideas,” such as Lamidi Fakeye, who trained in a traditional Yoruba workshop, and the classy Slade-educated Ben Enwonwu, whose work demonstrated “all the routine and all the ideas acquired by moving for years in the artistic circles of Europe.”<sup>37</sup> In spite of his guarded enthusiasm for the work of the sculptors Fakeye, Ovie Idah, Festus Idehen, and Osagie Osifo for their “conscious and sophisticated use of traditional forms,” he concluded that the young Zaria artists were the show’s greatest revelation.<sup>38</sup>

In his usual telegraphic style, Beier framed his artists in the best possible light. Jimo Akolo, the “coolest formalist among them,” reflects in his work—here the critic seems to invoke the colonial British stereotype of Muslim emirate candor, simply because the artist comes from a northern Yoruba town—the “cool, detached dignity” of northern Nigeria; while stating that Yusuf Grillo, the most technically advanced, has an inclination toward a well-constructed compositional style suited for mural painting (figure 4.8). Bruce Onobrakpeya, with his fertile pictorial imagination and “fine sense for the decorative,” came through as a talented illustrator and experimental printmaker, whereas Simon Okeke, using a “meticulous renaissance [*sic*] technique,” painted fascinating, weird, and mysterious figures “distorted according to some hidden law we cannot fathom.” These pictures, rather than the ones in which the artist tried to depict, as Beier says, the “pretty side of life,” have the same affective power as the artists’ apparently frequent horrific visions. Unsurprisingly, Demas Nwoko and Uche Okeke, according to Beier, produced the most important work in the show, partly because they adapted formal qualities of Igbo sculptures in their work rather than directly quote them, as did the less artistically accomplished and older Festus Idehen and Osagie Osifo.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, their work, unlike anything before it, “is more genuinely and more authentically ‘Nigerian’ while it is at the same time far more modern in approach. It is the finest monument to Nigerian Independence we could have wished for.”<sup>40</sup>

Even if we grant Beier the privilege he claimed to subjectively assess the Nigerian Art exhibition, we cannot ignore some of his more tendentious, overdetermined declarations. Consider, for instance, his all-important concluding statement on the authenticity of the Zaria work. His analysis neither explains the parameters of authenticity for *Nigerian* art or how Nwoko and Okeke might have met them any more than, say, Idehen or Fakeye nor con-



**Figure 4.8** Yusuf Grillo, *Two Yoruba Women*, oil on canvas, 1960. Reproduced from *Nigeria* 68 (March 1961), p. 44. Courtesy National Council for Arts and Culture, Abuja. © Yusuf Grillo.

vincingly makes a case for their supposedly more modern approach. Nevertheless, the *Nigeria* magazine review fits into Beier's larger critical project, already begun in *Black Orpheus* with his Wenger, Souza, and Nwoko essays. It shows Beier at the height of his advocacy for a new approach to modern art that, until the emergence of the Zaria group, was either too nativist, as that of Murray's students was, or, in the hands of Onobolu and his followers, too naturalistically "Victorian."

### Mbari Artists and Writers Club, Ibadan

The months following the independence celebrations were indeed quite remarkable in the Nigerian art and cultural sector. Many of the emerging poets, novelists, and playwrights—mostly graduates of University College, Ibadan—had been published by Beier for the first time in *Black Orpheus*. With Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, and the now famous 1961 painting class soon to graduate from Zaria, it was apparent that a new transdisciplinary group of Nigerian visual and literary artists had emerged, their mass energy requiring a new platform quite different from, if complementary to, *Black Orpheus*. This motley group saw clearly that it needed a lively arena for debate and production of experimental and critical art, literature, and theater—in other words, a laboratory of ideas. Thus after Beier consulted with Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, and several other Nigerian and expatriate writers and dramatists in the Ibadan-Lagos axis, the idea of a writers and artists club was born.<sup>41</sup>

The club, which Achebe named after Igbo *mbari*—the sculpture, painting, and architectural complex dedicated to Ala, the earth goddess and guardian of creativity and justice—opened in March 1961 in a space located on 48 Onireke Street in the Gbagi market area in central Ibadan. Funded primarily by grants from the regional government and the Farfield Foundation—through its subsidiary, the Paris-based Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF)—the club included a Lebanese restaurant, the West End Café (the original occupant of the premises), and a courtyard where discussions, art exhibitions, and open-air theatrical performances took place.<sup>42</sup> The main feature of the courtyard was Uche Okeke's large mural, to which we return in chapter 5. Membership in the club was diverse and cosmopolitan; its core inaugural membership included, in addition to Beier, Soyinka, and Achebe, the poets Christopher Okigbo, John Pepper Clark, and Ezekiel Mphahlele (later known as Es'kia Mphahlele), the South African writer and exile then living in Nigeria.<sup>43</sup> Apart from the Ghanaian sculptor Vincent Kofi (1923–1974), Nwoko and Okeke were the only visual artists among the original Mbari members.

The intellectual atmosphere at the Mbari Club was intense, not so much because of the debates on art and literature as for the fierce individuality of some of its key members, particularly Nwoko, Clark, Soyinka, and Okigbo. With the bar and restaurant, the Mbari activities would suggest that if ever there was an interdisciplinary “avant-garde” moment in Nigeria, it certainly was the period between 1961 and 1964, before the original members dispersed. However, sited in the center of a popular market, with its doors open

to both the intellectual types and curious audiences and spectators from the streets, the club's program—ranging from sophisticated intellectual debates to popular events involving neighborhood participants—not so much resembled the legendary Parisian or Viennese avant-garde café milieu, as Gene Ulansky has suggested, as embodied the communalistic idea inherent in the concepts of *mbari* and the market square.<sup>44</sup> For the Igbo *mbari*, a village would appoint professional artists and amateurs to build, in seclusion, the *mbari* monument in honor of Ala or some other powerful tutelary deity. During the construction phase, the artists also spent time learning dances to be performed at the public opening and dedication of the monument, an occasion of great celebration by members of the commissioning village and their guests.<sup>45</sup> *Mbari* as a concept thus encompasses the material and visual qualities of Igbo architecture, sculpture, and painting, along with the kinesthesia of the dance and ritual performances enacted during construction and on the occasion of the public presentation of the project. *Mbari* also connotes, as Herbert Cole has argued, the very process of accomplishing these visual and theatrical forms; that is to say, *mbari* is the act of sculpting, building, painting, dancing, and singing in honor of the deity.<sup>46</sup> In addition—this is quite important—*mbari* is a monument to collective artistic imaginaries of the Owerri Igbo, a site for the paradoxical entanglements of myths, experiences of colonial modernity, moral education, and erotic fantasies; indeed *mbari* is the sensate and metaphysical world invoked and enacted through word, action, image.<sup>47</sup> Thus, in naming the club after Igbo *mbari*, its core members clearly wished to situate their work, even if only rhetorically and philosophically, within the paradigm of communal rather than elitist art practice.

But there is another aspect to the invocation of Igbo *mbari* in the motivating ideas of the *Mbari* Ibadan: the subversion of generative tension between individuality and collectivity with the context of the *mbari*. In the Igbo *mbari*, for instance, the members of the commissioning community are described as the creators of *mbari*, although the actual complex is designed and supervised by recognized master artists hired for their artistic reputation. It is, then, not necessarily a denial of the creative imagination of master artist and his cohort of sequestered community members selectively appointed to represent their families in the building process; rather, it is a reaffirmation of the minority role of the individual within the cosmological network of phenomenological and metaphysical forces embodied by the community.

As if to announce their departure from the traditional Igbo model and to establish the modernist basis of their practice on the occasional moments



when the club members participated in the production of theatrical work—such as Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) or J. P. Clark's *The Masquerade* (1964)—its authorship or creative ownership belonged, unquestionably, to the individual playwright. Moreover, the location of the club in a building right inside the market—a site for exchange of merchandise but also a meeting place for the living and the dead, the sane and the insane, the rich and the poor—indicated a clear intention on the part of Ulli Beier and his collaborators to place the club in a popular site accessible to the whole community. Nevertheless, the extent to which that goal was met is a different matter, as it largely remained, until its closure sometime in 1966, a meeting place for the emerging Nigerian black international and literary and artistic elite.<sup>48</sup>

### Mbari International

The Mbari gallery gave Beier an opportunity to expand his curatorial work and, with a circle of friends who served as art critics for the gallery's exhibitions, to articulate his vision of modernism with the work of artists he saw as the new vanguard of the unfolding postcolonial order.<sup>49</sup> With partial funding from the Congress for Cultural Freedom, he embarked on an ambitious, unprecedented exhibition program, bringing to Nigeria for the first time significant artists from the rest of the continent, Europe, Asia, and the Americas.<sup>50</sup> Mbari, in other words helped Beier consolidate his position as the most influential figure in Nigerian art in the mid-twentieth century, even as the gallery became the indisputable space where the international dimension of postcolonial modernism became manifest.

The inaugural art exhibition at Mbari, a well-publicized joint show by Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko, opened on July 20, 1961, with the club's president, Ezekiel Mphahlele, and Dr. Onabamiro, the western region's minister of education, in attendance (figure 4.9).<sup>51</sup> While this exhibition is important because it contributed to the rising national stature of Okeke and Nwoko soon after their triumphant performance at the Nigerian Exhibition during the independence celebrations in October 1960, my particular interest is in how it provided Beier the opportunity to lay out his artistic doctrine, which I believe is fundamental to an understanding of the aesthetics and history of postcolonial modernism.

Beier's brief introduction in the exhibition brochure reiterated the arguments he had been making for Okeke and Nwoko: their rising fame even while studying at Zaria, their campaign for modern Nigerian artists to "come



**Figure 4.9** Demas Nwoko and Uche Okeke at the opening of Mbari Ibadan inaugural art exhibition, 1961. In the center background, Uche Okeke's *Madonna and Child* (1961). Reproduced from *West African Review* 32, no. 408 (December 1961): 42.

to terms with” the artistic traditions of their country, and the influence of Igbo sculpture on their work. He also remarked on the distinctness of their emerging personal styles, in spite of their very close friendship, and the “considerable maturity” they had attained since their first joint show in Ibadan a year before. What we can take from Beier’s text is this formulation of the new art as a process of coming to terms with Nigerian art traditions but with the kind of aesthetic distance that is the hallmark of the indisputably modern.

To emphasize the club’s international outlook, the next three exhibitions at Mbari featured works by artists from outside Nigeria, which coincided with the art program of *Black Orpheus*. Both simultaneously championed the work of artists in Africa, Asia, South America, the United States, and Europe—artists at the forefront of defining modernisms inspired by the experience of colonization, racial discrimination, and the encounter between Western modernity and indigenous cultures. In the years 1961–1963, the finest time for the visual arts within *Black Orpheus* and the club, the gallery hosted at least seventeen mostly one-person shows by Nigerian and international artists; several of them were also featured in *Black Orpheus*.

*Art from Makerere*, the first of three shows in 1961 after Okeke and Nwoko's inaugural exhibition, consisted of photographs of painting and sculpture rather than original works. The exhibition, which opened in August 1961, featured artists associated with the art program at Makerere University College, Uganda. A one-person exhibition of work by the Dutch master printmaker Ru van Rossem, a professor of graphic arts at the art academy in Tilburg, Holland, opened in October. In November the Sudanese artist Ibrahim El Salahi became the first African artist to get a one-person show at Mbari or any art gallery in Nigeria. Salahi's exhibition proved to be the most important of the three, not least because of Beier's belief that his work, clearly more advanced than that of any Zaria artist, was exemplary of a rigorous and progressively modern art combining a deep reflection on African art forms and a mastery of techniques of European modernists.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, it must have confirmed for Beier his sense that the new art coming out of Zaria was part of a nascent international phenomenon, just as the literary work of the Ibadan-trained writers was aligned with the postcolonial literary world constituted by writing from former colonies in Africa and the Caribbean, as well as from black America and Europe.

Beier had met Salahi and his colleagues—including Ahmed Shibrain, who also showed at Mbari in 1963—quite by chance. It began when Donald Hope, an art educator at Zaria and coauthor of the memorandum criticizing the effort by other faculty to introduce art history into the Zaria program in 1962, advised Beier to visit the Guyanese artist and art historian Denis Williams (1923–1998) in Khartoum, Sudan.<sup>53</sup> Beier thus included Khartoum in his 1961 continental tour, funded by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. Williams, in turn, introduced him to Salahi, Shibrain, and Kamala Ibrahim (Ishag), who were to become key members of an emerging “Old Khartoum school” based at the Khartoum Technical Institute.

Salahi's Mbari exhibition, a rather modest affair, consisted solely of ink drawings on paper, yet it turned out to be of historic importance and a major influence on the work of some Nigerian artists, including Bruce Onobrakpeya and Obiora Udechukwu (b. 1946), a leading figure in the Nsukka school that coalesced around the work of Uche Okeke in 1970 and after.<sup>54</sup> Although seen by the rather limited number visitors who attended Mbari exhibitions, Salahi's work received wide circulation through two important reviews by Beier in *Black Orpheus* and *West African Review* (WAR) and through a small monograph published by the club after the first one, featuring Uche Okeke. Salahi's exhibition was also significant in that it expanded the normative geography of modern African art, which, perhaps reflecting a colonial-

era paradigm, had separated into northern and so-called sub-Saharan African domains, a scenario that belied the network of political alliances forged among African nationalists from all corners of the continent, especially after the Bandung Conference in 1955. One might argue, in fact, that the international scope of Mbari and *Black Orpheus* depended singularly on Beier's transnational network, which in turn devolved to the important relationships cultivated by artists and writers across national borders beyond the Mbari and *Black Orpheus* years.

In the *Black Orpheus* review of Salahi's exhibition, Beier painted a picture of an artistic genius emerging from a culturally and artistically arid area: "Great artists turn up in unexpected places. When going in search for new African artists I was certainly not expecting to find one in Khartoum."<sup>55</sup> The Sudan, Beier proclaimed in obvious error, "has no artistic tradition, except Arabic calligraphy"; Khartoum, with its alienated art school and without modern art exhibition venues, seemed a most unlikely place to encounter an artist who might be one of the most accomplished in Africa.<sup>56</sup> According to Beier, the artist's work evolved from the unexciting academic portraits and landscapes he painted while at the Slade School of Art—"foreign conventions" Salahi later found "meaningless"—to a thrilling new work based on his post-London experimentation with Arabic calligraphy. Beier thus argues, as he had with the work of Okeke and Nwoko, that Salahi's mature work began with a tactical disavowal of his formal training at the Slade, followed by research in and experimentation with indigenous Sudanese artistic forms and ideas.

What Beier does not explain, however, are the factors responsible for the radical transformation of Salahi's work, particularly what his artistic choices had to do with the reception of his work in Khartoum. Salahi's training at the Slade—at the time still led by Sir William Coldstream—exposed him to a range of academic and modernist painting styles and resulted in work such as *Untitled* (1954–57; figure 4.10); but upon returning to the newly independent Sudan in the late 1950s, he quickly abandoned the Slade work, turning instead to the gestural draftsmanship of Arabic calligraphy, the graphic symbolism of Arabic texts, and African decorative design (figure 4.11). In the work Salahi exhibited at Mbari, he had just begun to explore the graphic poetry of Arabic calligraphy through an experimental process of deconstructing and reconfiguring calligraphic texts and notations and indigenous Sudanese design patterns.<sup>57</sup> This resulted in a graphic pictorial style—ink drawings in which the artist freely combined mystical abstractions, ritual scripts, and enigmatic imagery into what one might call the graphic poetry of Arabic calligraphy.



**Figure 4.10** Ibrahim El Salahi,  
Untitled, oil on canvas, 1954–1957.  
Collection of the Artist. Image  
courtesy of Salah M. Hassan.  
© Ibrahim El Salahi.



**Figure 4.11** Ibrahim El Salahi,  
*Prayer*, oil on Masonite, 1960. Image  
courtesy Iwalewa-Haus, University of  
Bayreuth. © Ibrahim El Salahi.



We now know that the local reception given the Slade-period work in Salahi's first exhibition in the Sudan turned out to be, for him, an unexpected, transformative moment. Apparently shunned by a public committed to the Islamic aniconic mandate, thus quietly opposed to his impertinent figural style, and rankled by his own sense of alienation, Salahi spent the next two years researching local folk art and Arabic calligraphy in order to develop a new form and style acceptable to his audience. That is, had he been concerned only with his own aesthetic preferences or the internal logic of his evolving style, he might not have rethought his work the way he did. In other words, he discovered that his Slade-period work was meaningless *to his audience*, those with whom he earnestly needed to connect.

In reading Salahi's work, Beier argues that the long-faced animal and human figures that populate his pictures share allusive "formal affinities" rather than direct stylistic similarities with West African Senufo masks; this is what accounts for their profound Africanness. The artist had to descend into his own African soul to retrieve the imagery in his pictures *because* he could not find it in the Sudan, which Beier had described as an arid cultural zone with few or no important artistic traditions. True, Salahi's intensely personal figurative imagery has no formal antecedent in any Sudanese imagistic traditions, not even the ancient Nubian figurative art. Several of the abstract patterns occurring in his pictures, such as the ubiquitous checkerboard, were directly borrowed from indigenous designs on craft objects. Thus Beier's assertion of Sudan's poor artistic heritage discountenances ancient Nubian and Arab calligraphy as valid constitutive elements of Sudanese arts. This is not surprising, but it must be seen in the context of the then prevalent assumption that African art was more or less synonymous with its sculptural art, which invariably led, as Beier's text demonstrates, to the perception of West and central Africa, with their many traditions of figurative sculpture, as the continent's most artistically fertile zones.

In any case, Beier was fascinated by Salahi's novel formal experimentation with Arabic calligraphy and folk art designs, his stunning mastery of line and drawing, and his mystical symbolism. In the *West African Review*, Beier notes that while the formal rhythm and sophisticated elegance of the drawings derive from the letters of the Arabic alphabet, their pictorial integrity did not depend so much on the literal depiction of Arabic script, which is nonetheless present as legible text, as on adapting the calligraphic flourish and structural principles of the script (figure 4.12).<sup>58</sup> Combining these elements with non-Arabic graphic patterns and designs extracted from local baskets, mats, and gourds, Salahi's works resulted in a "perfect and success-





**Figure 4.12** Ibrahim El Salahi, Untitled, ink on paper, 1961. Image courtesy Iwalewa-Haus, University of Bayreuth. © Ibrahim El Salahi.

ful blending of cultures,” thus accounting for the fact that the Sudan itself is at the nexus of Arabic and non-Arabic African cultures. Soon after Beier’s Salahi essay, Denis Williams’s *Black Orpheus* review of Salahi’s 1963 show at the Galerie Lambert, Paris, pressed further, with greater critical sophistication than Beier, the conceptual implication of the confluence of Arabic and African forms in Salahi’s work. His images, Williams notes,

are disclosed with the lyrical clarity of the Arabesque in lines that enclose and release instinctively African myths. . . . His attitude is not that of the magician, not mental, not that of a mind capitulating on the secrets of nature. It is an argument with the myths of the ancestors: a subjection to myth, a fervour that is nothing if not mystical.<sup>59</sup>

Besides Salahi and the Old Khartoum school artists, Beier sought out other artists who soon became a part of the expanding Mbari international network. At University College, Legon, in Ghana, where he saw Vincent Kofi’s monumental wood sculptures, he decided thereupon to introduce them to the *Black Orpheus* readership in 1961 prior to exhibition at the Mbari gallery in 1962 (figure 4.13).<sup>60</sup> The show of five of Kofi’s major sculptures was quite popular, attracting considerable attention from the local community, particularly at Mbari-Mbayo in Osogbo, where the African American

artist Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000) saw it during his first visit to Ibadan and Osogbo in October 1962 (figure 4.14).

Writing about Kofi's wood sculptures in *Black Orpheus*, Beier noted that they "radiate a certain rugged, untamed power," in part because of their characteristically solid, bulging forms and rough chisel work.<sup>61</sup> His figurative style, unlike the naturalistic sculptural style he learned and taught at the art school, depended on dramatic distortions and the introduction of limited interstitial spaces so that the compositions would retain the columnar form of the logs from which they were carved (see figure 4.14). In *Crucifixion* (ca. 1960), for instance, Kofi depicted a tall figure with two short, paddle-shaped hands raised above its head but without the cross. By fitting the crucified figure into the narrow log form, eliminating Christ's cross, he invented an apocryphal crucifix. Rather than remind us of the biblical story of salvation, Kofi's heroic figure, tortured and burdened by some indecipherable, awesome force, expresses the universality of pain. It is perhaps for this reason that Beier found this work both attractive and bewildering.<sup>62</sup>

At once heavy and archaic, Kofi's early sculptures, in Beier's view, do not readily evoke any specific African sculptural tradition and might as easily fit into the modernist tradition of such sculptors as Constantin Brancusi and Henry Moore. He argues that because "Ghana has no great tradition in wood carving, as have the Ivory Coast to the West of it and Nigeria to the East," Ghana was a natural site for the emergence of "one of the most gifted modern West African carvers."<sup>63</sup> How might this be? Beier suggests that the lack of great indigenous traditions in Ghana, sparing its modern sculptors both the anxiety of influence and the burden of tradition, thereby afforded them the freedom to create a new and original sculptural form:

Here [in Nigeria], our sculptors seem to be burdened by the heavy weight of a great tradition. Some of our artists repeat feebler and watered down versions of their forefathers work, [and] in their desperate desire to free themselves, get lost in their attempt to adopt and digest European forms. Only few have attained the originality and power of Vincent Akweti Kofi.<sup>64</sup>

Beier's argument, strikingly similar to the earlier one about Salahi and the supposed cultural aridity of the Sudan, is silent on two important aspects of Kofi's work. First, leaving aside the claim that Ghana was not home to a so-called great tradition of sculpture, such as those of Baule, Benin, Yoruba, and Senufo, Kofi sought to anchor his determinedly modernist style to what he called Ghanaian inspiration.<sup>65</sup> That is to say, he was no less concerned about the connection between his own work and Ghanaian/African artistic traditions as any other modern artist anxious about the fraught relationship

**Figure 4.13**  
 Vincent Kofi at Mbari-  
 Mbayo, Osogbo, 1962.  
 Photo, Ulli Beier.  
 © Estate of Ulli Beier.



**Figure 4.14**  
 Jacob Lawrence  
 with Vincent Kofi's  
*Drummer*, Mbari  
 Mbayo, Osogbo, 1962.  
 Photo, Ulli Beier.  
 © Estate of Ulli Beier.



artists often negotiate with traditions great or small. Second, he sometimes modeled his work after specific sculptural styles from Ghana. In one instance at least, *Africa Awakening* (early 1960s), he borrowed directly from the formal structure of Asante *Akua'mma* figures, suggesting that, unlike Beier, he believed that Ghana had sculptural traditions from which its modern artists could learn.<sup>66</sup> Third, Kofi's training at the Royal College of Art, London, brought him in contact with techniques, styles, and ideas of modern European sculpture. These "outside influences," which he believed were inevitable, positively affected his consciousness of his Ghanaian heritage, allowing both to inform his personal style. For him "no art is produced in a vacuum."<sup>67</sup>

To be sure, most of the essays and art reviews in *Black Orpheus* were written by Beier; they thus offer ample opportunity to examine the extent to which he used art criticism to articulate and chaperone a brand of modernism demonstrably different from the colonial models established in Nigeria by Aina Onabolu and Kenneth Murray. While he was joined in this work by other critics such as Denis Williams and Gerald Moore, who taught English at the Ibadan Extra-Mural Studies program, Beier's evangelical style often differed from the more dispassionate tone of the other *Black Orpheus* art critics. Consider, for instance, Moore's essay on Wilson Tiberío published alongside Beier's on Kofi. Tiberío, a black Brazilian artist born into a community with thriving Yoruba traditions, was accused by white Brazilian critics of "racialism" for painting mostly black subjects; having traveled through West Africa in the 1940s, he painted pictures from his travels in the region. Adamantly against abstraction, which he called "intellectual masturbation," his painting, even after moving to Paris in 1950, remained faithful to a modern realist tradition.<sup>68</sup> Focusing exclusively on black subjects despite living in Europe, his nostalgia for black Africa and its diaspora, noted Moore, might explain the great beauty of his canvases, the powerful rhythm and grace of his composition, and the simplicity of his forms, even when he depicted themes of suffering. In a clear indication of his familiarity with and meditation on modernist figuration, the body of the mother with her suckling child in his *Maternité* is highly stylized—her enormous shoulders and arms, the tubular neck and geometric facial features, as well as the use of bold, flat, linear patterns to represent the cloth covering the lower part of her body. Even when he uses planar forms as structuring devices for negative spaces in his paintings, as in *Les Forçats* (The Convicts), an obvious borrowing from cubism, Moore noted that the appropriations are subordinated to "the humanism and compassion of his art."<sup>69</sup>

Unlike Beier, Moore avoids insinuating Tiberío as a model for West African artists. Nevertheless, the artist must have come across to Beier as a progressive black artist, versed in the language of modernist painting yet ideologically and spiritually committed to his African ancestry. Tiberío's opposition to abstraction and his adoption of a realist style informed by a postcubist stylization and simplification of the human figure indicates, perhaps, that Beier was less against modernist realism as such than premodern, pseudoacademic narrative illusionism.

Although most of the works shown at Mbari Ibadan or featured in *Black Orpheus* were by academically trained artists, Beier's earlier interest in the art of the mentally ill was part of his broader understanding of what constitutes progressive art. Stressing originality of vision irrespective of the artist's social status, level of training, or formal style, he began thinking about the possibility of establishing an alternative space in which he could encourage artistic and theatrical productions outside the academic circles of Ibadan. Thus, barely a year after the opening of Mbari Ibadan, a branch of the club opened at Osogbo, a smaller, less urbanized Yoruba town northeast of Ibadan.

More popularly known as Mbari-Mbayo, the Mbari Club at Osogbo was the brainchild of Duro Ladipo (1931–1978), a Yoruba actor who soon became a celebrated Nigerian playwright and dramatist.<sup>70</sup> Imagined by Beier as a truly popular creative arena rather than the elitist space that, to his disappointment, Mbari Ibadan had become, Osogbo was to be primarily an experimental workshop for nurturing artistic talent, uninfluenced by Western art and academic practices. Although Beier continued to promote the work of formally trained artists, Mbari-Mbayo represented a facet of his artistic philosophy that can be traced not to his dalliance with negritude and its invocation of the mythic pasts but to his longtime attraction to outsider art, which to him represented truly original artistic creativity. Mbari-Mbayo thus provided Beier with the opportunity to explore and expand these interests without exciting the antagonism of his Mbari Ibadan colleagues.<sup>71</sup> Its gallery often cohosted, with Mbari Ibadan, exhibitions of work by Nigerian and international artists also featured in *Black Orpheus*.

During his tour of southern Africa in 1960, Beier met the Mozambican architect and painter Pancho Guedes (Amâncio d'Alpoim Guedes; b. 1925) and his colleague, the South African architect Julian Beinart.<sup>72</sup> Beier also met the Mozambican painter and poet Malangatana Valente Ngwenya (1936–2011), then a twenty-five-year-old whose artistic talent Guedes recognized and encouraged. Although Beinart (and Guedes) came to Ibadan to direct the first summer art workshop—modeled after similar programs that Beinart had

already established in Lourenço Marques (Maputo)—an exhibition of Malangatana's work did not materialize until June 1962 at Ibadan, from where it traveled to Osogbo.<sup>73</sup> Beinart's article on Malangatana, amplifying the arguments Beier had already made for the artist's work in the exhibition brochure, appeared in *Black Orpheus* almost simultaneously.

Beinart noted that most black artists in the western native townships in the Lourenço Marques area, like their counterparts in Nigeria, as Beier argued, "either thrive on corny postcard traditionalism" or are enthralled by European models. However, Malangatana was among the very few southern African artists who had attained a "personal synthesis of their own experience which [was] rooted deeply in an African past and at the same time exposed to the new contacts of a different cultural experience."<sup>74</sup> Disconnected from decorative folk art traditions of the townships, Malangatana invented a personal style that combined his technical naiveté with an ambitious, fertile, and terrifying pictorial imagination (figure 4.15).

Described by Beinart as a brand of surrealism but without the "intellectual games" of European surrealism, Malangatana's work conjoins erotic fantasies, occult visions, and eschatological concerns.<sup>75</sup> In *Secret Voyage*, one of his earliest major paintings, a great long-haired nude and a strangely skeletal figure dominate a landscape filled with disembodied eyes and heads, multi-colored humanoid forms, and flowers. The palette is eclectic, the brushwork unsure, the drawing loose, yet the artist seems to have been impelled by the need to quickly and completely describe the myriad forms populating this imaginary landscape. A "true dream picture," according to Beinart, *Secret Voyage* conveys the seamless oppressiveness of a terrible nightmare and enigmatic visions of a troubled mind. This and others of Malangatana's early works, such as *To the Clandestine Maternity Home* (1961), left no doubt of his unusual ability to invent pictorial compositions that powerfully articulate the unpredictable outcomes of the clash of the postcolonial subject's multiple religious, social, and political worlds (figure 4.16).

In his *Black Orpheus* article, Beinart reproduced several paragraphs from Malangatana's unpublished autobiography that revealed his experiences as the son of a migrant-worker father and a mentally disturbed, overprotective mother. The excerpt narrates his childhood life of poverty in a family and society where sorcery and militant Christianity coalesced, resulting, Beinart invariably suggests, in the fantastic imagery the artist depicted in his canvases. By inserting the artist's interesting autobiography in the middle of his text, Beinart confirms Beier's assertion that the artist is "full of stories"; more importantly, the artist's own text frames the paintings within a bio-





**Figure 4.15** Malangatana Ngwenya, Untitled, oil on canvas, 1961. Image courtesy Iwalewa-Haus, University of Bayreuth. © Fundação Malangatana Valente Ngwenya.



**Figure 4.16** Malangatana Ngwenya, *To the Clandestine Maternity Home*, oil on canvas, 1961. Image courtesy Iwalewa-Haus, University of Bayreuth. © Fundação Malangatana Valente Ngwenya.

graphical narrative dominated by witchcraft, familial jealousy and violence, and imponderable mystical experiences. In other words, despite his strange, darkly surreal imagery, despite his undoubtedly fertile imagination, the artist's work testifies, Beinart asserts, to the reality of his life experience and so might be considered realistic painting.

By inserting Malangatana into the debate about Africans' response to the putative clash of Western and indigenous cultures, Beinart presents the artist as successfully achieving the positive synthesis that many southern African artists failed to attain. With virtually no formal art training, the artist arrived at a fresh, modern, expressive style, at once naive and sophisticated. Malangatana thus represented one of the bright lights among the "exciting new generation" of African artists.<sup>76</sup> He indeed became exemplary of the successfully modern and African artist whose creative originality and depth of vision remained fresh *because* of his lack of formal art training. Malangatana's work, put differently, was proof of Beier's insistent claim in his critical writing that modern artistic expression at best did not depend on and at worst was impoverished by formal European art school training.<sup>77</sup>

The most ambitious exhibition ever at Mbari Ibadan was that of a 1962 presentation of twenty original woodcuts by the leading German expressionist, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff (1884–1976). To see the exhibition's significance, note that apart from a small Henry Moore show in Kaduna and Ibadan organized by the British Council in 1957, the Schmidt-Rottluff exhibition was the only exhibition of the work of a major modern European artist in Nigeria. Its successful realization testified both to Beier's organizational genius and to his utter conviction that new Nigerian art had to engage with classical African art, albeit without directly emulating its formal characteristics, even if that meant presenting the work of European modernists as models for such enterprise.

Sometime in 1961, Beier traveled to Frankfurt, Germany, for the opening of Susanne Wenger's show, organized by Janheinz Jahn, coeditor of *Black Orpheus*, at Frau Hanna Becker vom Rath's Kunstkabinett gallery. Seeing Becker's considerable collection of German expressionist work, Beier asked to borrow some Schmidt-Rottluff prints for a show at Mbari, Ibadan. With the help of the German embassy in Nigeria, which paid the insurance and shipping costs for the works, Beier put together the show that opened on February 20, 1962, with the German ambassador as guest of honor. The exhibition proved to be Mbari's most expensive project and, in historical terms, among its most significant.

The exhibition consisted of woodcut prints made between 1912—a year

before the dissolution of Die Brücke—and 1923. It included such important works as *Kneeling Woman* (1914) and *Girl before a Mirror* (1914; figures 4.17 and 4.18). The latter depicts a naked woman with a disarticulated and distinctively African masklike face standing before a mirror, her reflected nude figure amplifying the erotic tenor of the composition. The anatomical structure of *Kneeling Woman*, on the other hand, conveys a powerful presence despite the figure's otherwise alluring pose. This formal quality arguably derives from the influence of African statuary, a possibility made more concrete by the presence of what must be an African carved stool in the background. The exhibition also included *Melancholy* (1914), *The Sun!* (1914), *Mother* (1916), *The Three Kings* (1917), and *Table of Contents for the J. B. Neumann Portfolio* (1919).

Beier's introductory text in the exhibition brochure did not, as one might expect, adopt the kind of polemical language evident in his critical work. He did not, for instance, justify this show of work by a European modernist in Nigeria, whose artists, as he argued repeatedly, needed proper redirection. Rather, he more or less synopsisized the radical aesthetic and politics of the Die Brücke and Schmidt-Rottluff's place within the group. Die Brücke (the Bridge) was formed by four architecture students, Fritz Bleyl, Erich Heckel, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, in Dresden in 1905. The older members, including Emil Nolde, Edvard Munch, Cuno Amiet, and others, joined later, yet the group's "internal logic," according to Reinhold Heller, "demanded a new cohesion of individuals with a mutual identity in the concept of youth."<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, Beier's analysis of Die Brücke is revealing, particularly in the way he frames it:

They wanted to take art seriously. [Max] Pechstein once said: "Art is not a game; it is a duty towards the nation, it is a public matter." They wanted to shake off every type of academic routine. They believed in the absolute supremacy of the artistic personality and rejected all traditional rules.

They were not interested in the imitation of nature. They were disinterested in the problems of space, proportion and perspective. Above all they protested against middle-class aestheticism. They did not want to paint pretty pictures, which could adorn the drawing rooms of well-to-do citizens.<sup>79</sup>

It is hard to miss the point of Beier's argument, for its relevance to the Nigerian situation is quite clear: The politics and aesthetic of Die Brücke supported his criticisms of the academic realism of Aina Onabolu and Akinola Lasekan and the bourgeois lifestyle of Ben Enwonwu; it also provided a mod-



**Figure 4.17** Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, *Kneeling Woman*, woodcut on cream wove paper, 1914. Gift of the Estate of Dr. Rosa Schapire, 1956.53. The Art Institute of Chicago. © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.



**Figure 4.18** Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, *Girl before a Mirror (Mädchen vor dem Spiegel)*, woodcut print, 1914. Publisher: Graphisches Kabinett J. B. Neumann. Printer: Fritz Voigt, Berlin Edition: 75. Committee on Prints and Illustrated Books Fund and June Larkin in honor of Joanne M. Stern. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. © ARS, NY.





ern art-historical basis for the nationalistic rhetoric and modernist aesthetic of the Art Society and its generation of artists. Although he did not make the point, the fact that Die Brücke itself was formed by a group of architecture *students* protesting “academic oversight and official exhibitions” in Dresden must have convinced him of the equally historical importance of the Art Society in the Nigerian context.<sup>80</sup>

Moreover, Beier’s claim, that of all the Die Brücke artists Schmidt-Rottluff was most directly influenced by African sculpture, reveals why he decided on a show of his prints and not the more formally experimental works of Erich Heckel or Max Pechstein. With Schmidt-Rottluff’s prints it was easier to demonstrate that African art had influenced the work of European artists, thus making more forceful the argument he had advanced earlier with the work of Susanne Wenger. If indeed African sculpture and Yoruba *adire* respectively influenced the formal experimentation of Schmidt-Rottluff and Wenger, Beier seemed to say, then the Art Society’s wish to turn to indigenous sculpture, mural art, and folktales for inspiration demonstrated their connection to a very positively modernist sensibility.

In his *Black Orpheus* review of the Schmidt-Rottluff exhibition, Denis Williams provides further justifications for exhibiting the German expressionist at Mbari. Though he contrasts what he calls the logic and clarity of the French and the “clumsy and fumbling” work of the German Die Brücke, both movements, he argues, jettisoned the “debris” of nineteenth-century art, opening “possibilities for a vital and direct approach to pictorial communication never before witnessed in the art of Europe.”<sup>81</sup> For him, Die Brücke searched for the “ecstatic, the hieratic, as functions of reality crucially essential for the life of the imagination.” In this quest, Schmidt-Rottluff, like other members of Die Brücke, found it necessary to invent unambiguous plastic and pictorial forms dissociated from customary cultural vocabularies. It is for this reason, therefore, that the group’s works, Williams implies, are of tremendous significance for African artists searching for new forms expressive of the contemporary experience.

Beier and Williams thus propose Schmidt-Rottluff—whose work was exemplary of the European historical avant-garde’s search for a new aesthetic at a crucial point in Europe’s fast-evolving modern experience—as a model for Africans who themselves were at an equally critical juncture in their cultural and political history. The fact, as Beier and Williams saw it, that the Europeans realized their radical aesthetic through formal experimentation with African and Oceanic art provided the ballast for two key arguments they made for modern African art. First, because the German expressionists bor-

rowed from African sculpture in the process of defining European modernism, contemporary African artists might as well return to the original inspirational source to develop new formal solutions, not just subject matter, for their own artistic problems. Second, in so doing, they lay claim to an international modernist heritage without relinquishing the uniquely African artistic identity resulting from their formal experiments. These considerations further explain Beier's and Williams's reasons for championing the work of some of the Art Society members, as well as those of Vincent Kofi, Ibrahim El Salahi, and others, during this period.

Another major show at Mbari Ibadan was the exhibition of works by Jacob Lawrence, who, along with the African American expressionist painter William H. Johnson (1901–1970), was featured in *Black Orpheus*. Beier first encountered Lawrence's *The Migration of the Negro* series (1940/41) in the 1941 edition of *Fortune* magazine; he saw some of his other paintings in the presentation of Cedric Dover (the author of *American Negro Art*) during the 1956 Sorbonne Congress of Black Writers and Artists. The opportunity to show the artist's work in Nigeria came shortly after the 1960 independence celebrations, when the American Society of Art and Culture (AMSAC) organized a major program in Lagos featuring poet and playwright Langston Hughes, singers Nina Simone and Odetta, and other renowned African American writers, performing artists, and musicians.<sup>82</sup> The Jacob Lawrence exhibition at Mbari, opened on November 1, 1962 by Nigerian historian Dr. K. O. Dike, principal of the University College, Ibadan, was organized by Beier in collaboration with AMSAC.<sup>83</sup> In addition to Lawrence's *Migration* series, the exhibition featured his *War* series (1946/47; figures 4.19 and 4.20).

In his brief introduction in the exhibition invitation, Beier remarked on the qualities that made Lawrence an outstanding painter:

Jacob Lawrence has said that "painting is like handwriting." And indeed his own work is as private and personal as a man's handwriting is. Completely unconcerned with fashionable artistic movements and "isms," Jacob Lawrence tells the story of his people. Only an artist who is very mature, and sure of what he is after, could continue to tell stories in a time when abstract expressionism is the great fashion and when the word "literary" has become a term of abuse in the fashionable art world.<sup>84</sup>

Although Beier found attractive both Lawrence's penchant for telling the untold story of his people in pictures and his rejection of the then fashionable, introverted abstract expressionist mode, he also notes that the artist's



**Figure 4.19** Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration of the Negro, No. 22: Another of the social causes of the migrants' leaving was that at times they did not feel safe, or it was not the best thing to be found on the streets late at night. They were arrested on the slightest provocation.* Panel 22 from the Migration Series, tempera on gesso on composition board, 1940–1941. Gift of Mrs. David M. Levy. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, USA. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. © ARS, NY.



**Figure 4.20** Jacob Lawrence, *War Series: The Letter*, egg tempera on composition board, 1946. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Roy R. Neuberger 51.11. Digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art. © 2009 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

work was not merely illustrative. Rather than appear in a mimetic, naturalistic style, the severely distorted and gesturing figures, in the tradition of modernist painting, powerfully convey human suffering. Writing about Lawrence and William H. Johnson in *Black Orpheus*, Beier further notes Lawrence's mastery of the rigorously composed pictorial space, as well as the fact that his paintings "seem constructed and built up according to very severe laws of pattern."<sup>85</sup> These personal compositional codes, from which the artist has developed a unique style, facilitate his mastery of expression as gesture. Thus, his paintings, Beier argues, are highly moving, powerfully expressive, and—contrary to Cedric Dover's suggestion, in his book *American Negro Art* (1960), that they required extended captions—communicate visually the essence of their subject matter by means of *gesture*.<sup>86</sup>

Jacob Lawrence's Nigerian visit was brief, lasting only ten days.<sup>87</sup> However, he had seen enough of Yoruba culture and enjoyed the cultural atmosphere, particularly at Osogbo, to make him wish for a longer visit in order to "steep myself in Nigerian culture so that my paintings, if I am fortunate, might show the influence of the great African artistic tradition."<sup>88</sup> Two years later, he returned to Nigeria with his wife, Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence, after several failed attempts to get approval from the US government.<sup>89</sup> During this eight-month second visit to Nigeria, the Lawrences stayed on the top floor of Ulli Beier's residence at 41 Ibokun Road, Osogbo. There, Lawrence painted at least eight temperas, in addition to doing several drawings, which he exhibited at Mbari Ibadan in October 1964.<sup>90</sup> In the artist's statement, printed on the exhibition invitation, Lawrence said:

Two years ago in November 1962 I was invited to have an exhibition in Nigeria; an honor accorded me by the American Society of Art and Culture and the Mbari Club of Artists and Writers. It was my first visit to Nigeria—indeed my first visit to the Continent of Africa. As a painter the visit to a country which has made so great a contribution to modern art was an experience of great value. As an American Negro I had looked forward to this experience with excitement and curiosity. The visit in 1962 was so stimulating, visually and emotionally, that I have returned to paint my impressions of Nigeria. I hope sincerely that these paintings are a social statement of some value.<sup>91</sup>

While we are unsure what Lawrence might have meant by the expectation that his Mbari paintings constitute "a social statement of some value," his intention to transpose resources from African artistic traditions into a contemporary artistic language reminds us of a similar aspiration of the Art

Society members. Painted with an unprecedented palette of intense cobalt, cadmium red and yellow, and contrasting black and white, the pictures capture the dense, brashly colorful, and chaotic Osogbo markets and streets in which humans, animals, and corrugated metal roofs jostle for space.

In such paintings as *Street to Mbari* (1964) and *Four Sheep* (1964), Lawrence seems more interested in capturing the sensory intensity and tropical exuberance of the Osogbo/Ibadan environment than in experimenting with any particular Yoruba art form (figures 4.21 and 4.22). Moreover, his use of a strong black pigment for skin color and the retention of the brilliant white of the paper—in combination with saturated reds, blues, yellows, and surplus surface patterns—make his Mbari paintings his most sensorily taxing pictures. Never before had he painted a series of works with such busy, fragmented, highly patterned surfaces, and with such an intensely warm palette. In fact the distinctiveness of the Mbari paintings relative to Lawrence's previous work led to a cold reception—when shown in 1965 at the Terry Dintenfass Gallery in New York—from reviewers who criticized them for their compositional density, intense patterns, and raw decorativeness.<sup>92</sup>

The international program of Mbari gallery was particularly robust in 1963: Ahmed Mohammed Shibrain (b. 1932) of the Old Khartoum school and the Ethiopian Skunder Boghossian (1937–2003) exhibited at Mbari, while *Black Orpheus* featured the sculptures of the Brazilian artist Agnaldo dos Santos (1926–1962), who in 1966 won the (posthumous) sculpture prize at the World Festival of Negro Arts, Dakar. Given the roster of art and artists previously presented at the gallery, Shibrain and Boghossian, along with dos Santos in *Black Orpheus*, are quite predictable. Their work fit the new, stylistically ambiguous aesthetic that Beier imagined the encounter of international modern art practice with local artistic traditions would produce.

Denis Williams's introductory essay in the Shibrain exhibition flyer (re-published in the review section of *Black Orpheus*) frames the artist's work within a nascent Sudanese and Arab modernism characterized by engagement with Arabic calligraphy (figure 4.23). However, this new development, Williams argues, is not historically isolated, given that Japanese prints and Persian miniatures had radically altered European art at the end of the nineteenth century. He also notes that the modernism of the school of Paris, itself a result of the meeting of the East and West, influenced modernist painting in Cairo, where a "province" of the school of Paris had developed.<sup>93</sup> At Khartoum, he argues, while young artists embraced the idea of a modern aesthetic, they were also developing a new strand by focusing on Islamic ornamentation and Arabic calligraphy. The rich conventions of Islamic orna-

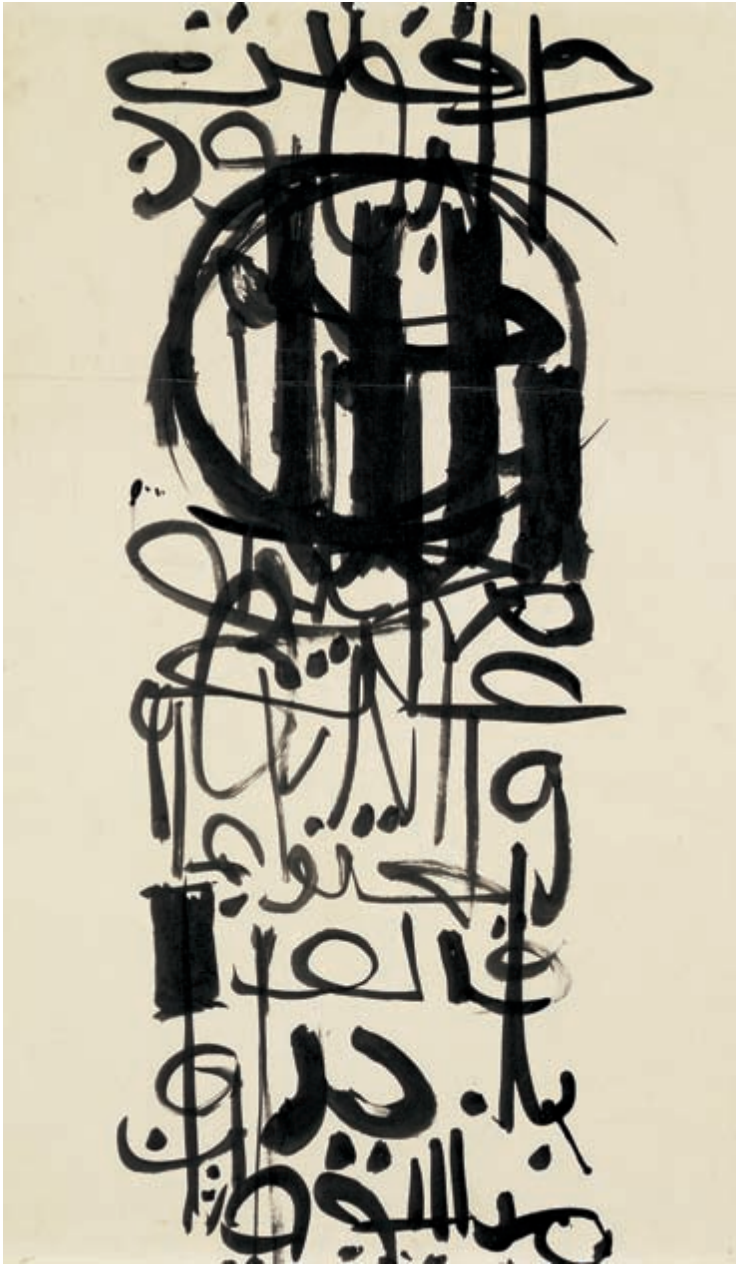




**Figure 4.21** Jacob Lawrence, *Street to Mbari*, tempera, gouache, and graphite on paper, 1964.  
Photo: National Gallery of Art. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James T. Dyke 1993.18.1. © ARS, NY.



**Figure 4.22** Jacob Lawrence, *Four Sheep*, tempera and gouache on paper, 1964. Private collection.  
Photo: The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation / Art Resource, NY. © ARS, NY.



**Figure 4.23** Ahmed Shibrain, *Calligraphy*, ink on paper, ca. 1962. Image courtesy of Iwalewa-Haus, University of Bayreuth. © Ahmed Shibrain.

mentation, says Williams, “are now being strained by these new artists to encompass on one hand the findings of contemporary plastics and on the other to reflect something of the dynamic or modern African thought.”<sup>94</sup> Asserting the pivotal role of Shibrain and Salahi in the group that was on the way to becoming a Khartoum school, Williams claims that this nascent school constitutes “the most formidable body of talent to be found anywhere . . . on the African continent today.”<sup>95</sup> Let us note in passing, the crucial difference in Williams’s and Beier’s understanding and valuation of artistic tradition within the Sudanese context. Whereas Beier saw Sudan as a culturally arid region, because it did not have the familiar sculptural traditions that had come to represent African art, Williams, perhaps more conversant with the high status of calligraphy in Arab aesthetics, regarded this particular form as equal to sculpture in West Africa and thus with comparable influence on modern Arab artists.

Although Shibrain’s work is based on the tradition of solar wood engraving prevalent in Sudan, he creates visually impressive textual characters by reducing forms to their fundamental structures, with emphasis on the contrast between heavy and thin lines and the dynamic tension between negative and positive spaces. In these drawings the gracefulness of Islamic arabesques is animated by the confident expressiveness of an artist for whom the abstraction inherent in Arabic calligraphy provides the opportunity to explore the graphic possibilities of pure form. In strictly formal terms, Williams suggests, the drawings that Shibrain showed at Mbari come closest to the work of the lyrical abstract French painter Hans Hartung.<sup>96</sup>

Whereas Beier’s and Williams’s art criticism is determined to chaperone the new African or black modernist work, Louise Acheson’s critical introductory essay to Skunder Boghossian’s work concentrates mostly on the artist’s subject matter and avoids making big claims for the work. Noting recurring images of birds, insectlike forms, skeletal figures, and eggs, she suggests they result from the artist’s exploration of a new brand of surrealism in the service of his “Afro-Metaphysics.”<sup>97</sup> In this metaphysical cosmos, the artist’s work from this period shows, life turns to death, to rebirth, and to life again in an endless cycle (figure 4.24). Significantly, Acheson argues that Boghossian’s formal inventions owe more to the influence of “African art and Western technique than by Coptic [*sic*] art of Ethiopia; although in certain paintings some decorative motifs and formal structures are Byzantine in feeling.”<sup>98</sup>

Acheson’s reading of Boghossian is, at the very least, most curious, for two reasons. The first is that it assumes, quite wrongly I think, that what she calls





**Figure 4.24** Skunder Boghossian, *Juju's Wedding*, tempera and metallic paint on cut and torn cardboard, 1964. Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller Fund, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY © Estate of Skunder Boghossian.

“African art” is foreign to Ethiopia and that Christian Orthodox artistic traditions are synonymous with Ethiopian art, especially given that Boghossian’s early painting, as Solomon Deresa has rightly pointed out, was influenced by Konso and Oromo funerary sculpture.<sup>99</sup> Second, Acheson’s interpretation precludes the obvious influence of the painting and ornamental design traditions of Ethiopian Christian art on Boghossian’s use of dense, circular, or dotted marks to enrich parts of his canvases—a trend that began sometime in 1962 and became increasingly inalienable in subsequent years. As a student in Paris, Boghossian had come under the influence of negritude’s call for the recuperation of black subjectivity and in due course encountered the paintings of the Chilean surrealist painter Roberto Matta and the Cuban painter Wifredo Lam, which profoundly affected him.<sup>100</sup> An artist of stupendous eclecticism, Boghossian was also attracted to the cosmogonies and my-

thologies of the Dogon peoples of West Africa and the metaphysical realism of the Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola's novels; taken together, they account for the pictorial complexity and compositional splendor of his masterpiece, *Night Flight of Dread and Delight* (1964; figure 4.25). In any case, it is indeed quite likely that Beier recognized this enigmatic rather than literalist conjunction of surrealist imagery, Ethiopian Christian ornamentation, and Oromo funerary sculpture in Boghossian, for that would place him squarely in the league of Salahi and Kofi, two exemplary Africans developing an aesthetic resulting from a combination of formal aspects of European modernism and indigenous African art.

Similarly, the work of Agnaldo dos Santos seems to have recommended itself to Beier for its evocation of an African "feeling," not from any direct relationship with a particular tradition of sculpture in Africa, except perhaps that of the Nguni of South Africa. Beier met dos Santos, a former apprentice to the renowned Brazilian modern sculptor Mário Cravo (b. 1923), during a 1962 tour of Bahia and Recife, Brazil. Of African descent, dos Santos made work with "a certain African feeling about it," as Beier described it, despite the fact that he was barely familiar with African-based religious practices and had little or no knowledge of African sculpture.

Dos Santos made wood sculpture singed and polished to a black sheen; but his expressive forms evoke African sculpture no more than they evoke, say, Mexcala-style figures from the post-Olmec culture in Mexico. The unmistakably archaic quality of his figures, such as *Nun* (1950s–1960s; figure 4.26), without parallel in modern sculpture, is due in part to his surface treatment but also to the compactness of his figures. Like an ancient carver working with crude tools, he seems unwilling to do more than define the basic anatomical features, presumably because of some ritual imperative (figure 4.27). In this narrow sense dos Santos's work might be said to induce an "African" feeling; that is, if we are willing to suppose that religious and ritual needs, as earlier European modernists assumed, determined form in African sculpture.

## Conclusion

The fortunes of *Black Orpheus* and Mbari Ibadan differed, as did their longevity and overall impact and reach. Mbari Ibadan had considerably lost its original verve after 1964; by that time many of Beier's early collaborators at Ibadan had dispersed or moved on. The journal survived under Beier's direction for ten years, before its quick decline after the twenty-second number





**Figure 4.25** Skunder Boghossian, *Night Flight of Dread and Delight*, oil on canvas with collage, 1964. North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh. Purchased with funds from the North Carolina State Art Society (Robert F. Phifer Bequest), 98.6. © Estate of Skunder Boghossian.

**Figure 4.26** Agnaldo dos Santos, *Nun*, wood, ca. late 1950s. Vilma Eid collection. Photo, Romulo Fialdini. Courtesy of the Galeria Estação.



**Figure 4.27** Agnaldo dos Santos, Untitled, wood, ca. 1950s. Photo, Joao Liberato. Courtesy of the Galeria Estação.





**Figure 4.28** Naoko Matsubara, *Ravi Shankar*, woodblock print, 1961. Image courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum, © ROM. © Naoko Matsubara.

**Figure 4.29** Naoko Matsubara, *A Giant Tree*, woodblock print, 1962. Image courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum, © ROM. © Naoko Matsubara.

in 1967. More importantly, by the mid-1960s the journal's coverage of visual art had become somewhat vitiated. Instead of important feature articles on individual artists, most artworks were presented as decorative vignettes or portfolios and through occasional reviews.

For its part, Mbari kept a busy exhibition schedule until 1966. In 1965 there were two important exhibitions, besides the William H. Johnson show of screen prints: a one-person exhibition of woodcuts by the Japanese printmaker Naoko Matsubara (b. 1937; figures 4.28 and 4.29), whose style is influenced by the Mingei folk art practiced by her former teacher, the master printmaker Munakata Shiko (1903–1975); and a group show of Ukiyo-e woodcuts featuring the mysterious Tōshūsai Sharaku (active 1794–1795), Kitagawa Utamaro (ca. 1753–1806), and others. Following Maxine Lowe's exhibition of paintings and tapestries (August 1966), Ben Osawe (1931–2007), a Nigerian sculptor recently returned from England after training at Camberwell School of Art and Crafts, London, presented his sculptures in December.

Notwithstanding these impressive activities, the dissipation of Ibadan's influence continued with the establishment of Mbari Enugu in 1963; it soon became the locus of artistic, theatrical, and literary activity for artists from eastern Nigeria, some of whom, like Uche Okeke, had been part of Mbari Ibadan. Further, the formation of the Society of Nigerian Artists in 1964 in Lagos marked a significant shift around this time: Ibadan had increasingly ceded its position as the center of artistic activity in postindependence Nigeria to Lagos, where many artists took up residence and participated in the founding of cultural institutions that were to play important roles in the development of 1960s Nigerian modern art (see chapter 6). Perhaps most important was the growth of critical discourse among young and established Nigerian artists and critics, but these debates took place in the pages of the Lagos-based *Nigeria* magazine, not in Ibadan's *Black Orpheus*.