

AFTER ZARIA

IN CHAPTER 4 I EXAMINED the role of *Black Orpheus* and Mbari Ibadan in the development and transaction of postcolonial modern art and art criticism. As I made clear, Ulli Beier's criticism and cultural network shaped Ibadan's participation in this process, even as parallel networks in Lagos began to exert their own considerable influence on the Nigerian art world as it played out in the capital city. In this chapter I refocus attention on the work of individual Art Society members in the years after Zaria, at which point they had become leading exponents of an artistic vision most suited—as they and their supporters believed—to Nigeria's sovereign, postcolonial culture. Though this vision was underwritten by a shared interest in the theory of natural synthesis, I contend that there was no singular understanding of how the theory should relate to or determine the style and subject matter of their post-Zaria work. In fact, as their individual styles emerged in the early 1960s, the idea of natural synthesis yielded a wide range of formal procedures, given the manifold possibilities of what “native” art traditions constitute and the equally

capacious archive of the modernist heritage from which their new work derived some of its technical and formal protocols. To be sure, I do not claim natural synthesis to be the singular force motivating this new work. Rather, I suggest that the underlying idea, that individual artists had the freedom to negotiate their relationship with inherited and appropriated artistic sources, remained paramount even as those artists, unfettered by the strictures of the academy and the demands of the curriculum, began to assert individual preferences. They did so in terms of media and themes and how they positioned themselves and their work in the context of the discursive spaces of the evolving modern art scene.

This chapter is important to this book's larger narrative for two reasons. First, a close reading of key moments in the unfolding work of leading members of the Art Society, as presented here, shows how stylistically different this work is from that of their predecessors. Second, by demonstrating the stylistic diversity within the work of this small group of like-minded artists, this chapter foregrounds a crucial argument: that it is impossible to reduce postcolonial modernism in Nigeria to a given set of formal tactics; that is to say, a national style.

Uche Okeke: Experiments with Igbo Uli

On completion of their final year of work at Zaria in June 1961, Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko spent some time in Ibadan, where, as part of the inaugural events of the Mbari Club, they had a joint exhibition of their work; as a focal point, Okeke painted a large mural inside the Mbari courtyard. To Okeke and Nwoko, the prospects of a career as practicing artists seemed attractive and feasible, especially when, in their final year as students, the visiting German ambassador, Count von Posadowsky, impressed by their work, announced the award of a travel scholarship to each of them to live and work in Germany. Thus, after the Mbari exhibition, Okeke began preparations for his trip to Germany, while Nwoko, having already received a scholarship from the French embassy, made arrangements of his own travel to France.

Germany was especially attractive to Okeke, for he had developed a keen interest in the Weimer-era Bauhaus schools and wished to establish a similar institution in Nigeria. As he imagined it, this Bauhaus-inspired research center and museum, to be sited in his ancestral hometown of Nimo, would be "dedicated to the working out of new African Art-Culture," providing artist-teachers, artisans, and students space for theoretical and practical experiments with old and new methods and materials.¹ The trip to Germany



Figure 5.1 Uche Okeke, mural at the courtyard, Mbari Ibadan, 1961. Reproduced from *West African Review* 32, no. 408 (December 1961): 42. © Uche Okeke.

was therefore a crucial step toward transforming his modest cultural center, established in Kafanchan with a growing art collection and library in 1959, into a major national, privately run institution.

While his travel documents were being processed, Okeke lived in the Abule-Oja suburb of Lagos, where he began a series of experimental drawings inspired by Igbo Uli, a purely decorative form of traditional body drawing and mural painting in eastern Nigeria. The direct impetus seems to have been the designs he made for his cousin, a metal-gate fabricator, in which the main motifs were spiral forms reminiscent of those found in Uli art. The project seems to have reawakened in Okeke his earlier interest in this art form and triggered an impulse to go beyond the tentative engagement with its pictorial possibilities suggested by his late-Zaria-period painting *Ana Mmuo* (see ch. 3, figure 3.11) and the mural he did for the courtyard at Mbari Ibadan (figure 5.1).

The mural, painted on two walls of the interior courtyard (often used for theatrical performances), consisted of flat, organic, abstract shapes similar to the ones he had used in *Ana Mmuo*. However, while the earlier work combines black, linear forms with bold shapes of color, the mural featured amorphous shapes of black and Indian red that seem to float, unanchored, like aquatic organisms across the blank wall space. Recognizing the novelty of Okeke's style, the critic Dennis Duerden speculated that these forms "might

be human figures or leaves blown in the wind, or birds, but they are dancing and floating, mysterious and compulsive and very distinctive.”² Nevertheless, the mural figures appear to be variants of the flat shapes bounded by black lines that Okeke painted in *Ana Mmuo*, except that the empty spaces within the lines in the earlier work have now been filled in with solid black or red. But where the connection between the formal qualities of Igbo Uli art and those of the Mbari Ibadan mural and *Ana Mmuo* is tentative, the Uli provenance of his drawings from late 1961 onward are decisive and unmistakable. A brief outline of the main aesthetic principles and forms of Igbo Uli is necessary for an appreciation of Okeke’s post-1961 pictorial experiments and the extent to which this new work announced the realization of his own interpretation of the theory of natural synthesis.

Among the Igbo of eastern Nigeria, Uli artists, who were exclusively female, relied on an extensive lexicon of motifs that differ in form and meaning from one Igbo community to another, though several motifs were more widely distributed. A considerable number of motifs were abstractions based on natural forms—local flora and fauna, celestial bodies—and man-made objects. These range from what Obiora Udechukwu has called “archetypal shapes”—such as the *ntupọ* (dot), *akala* (line), *isinwaoji* (curvilinear triangles and rectangles), and *oloma* or *onwa* (circles and crescents)—to more complex motifs derived from them, including *agwọlagwọ* (the concentric coil associated with the sacred python, prevalent in Igbo metal gate designs) and *mbọ agu* (the double triangle representing the leopard’s claw).³ These motifs were usually deployed on the wall or the human body in compositional schemes determined strictly by individual stylistic predilections rather than in accordance with any communally sanctioned system or any relation to their symbolism or meaning. Although the matrices, techniques, and pigments are different for body drawing and wall painting, the design principles and motifs are similar. But whereas body painters make use of just one pigment, also called Uli—a clear liquid from certain plants that oxidizes into a dark ink and fades after several days—mural painters have a palette of two to four colors made from natural sources.⁴ For his work Okeke focused on the body art, relying on its most salient formal characteristics: primacy of the line, simplification of otherwise complex forms, and what one might call the poetic balance of negative and positive space (figures 5.2–5.5).

Signs of Life, an undated series of drawings produced between late 1961 and early 1962, clearly gives a sense of how Okeke approached his new work. While he interspersed bold motifs with lines that typically end in spiral *agwọlagwọ* motifs, suggesting an attempt to deviate from traditional conventions,

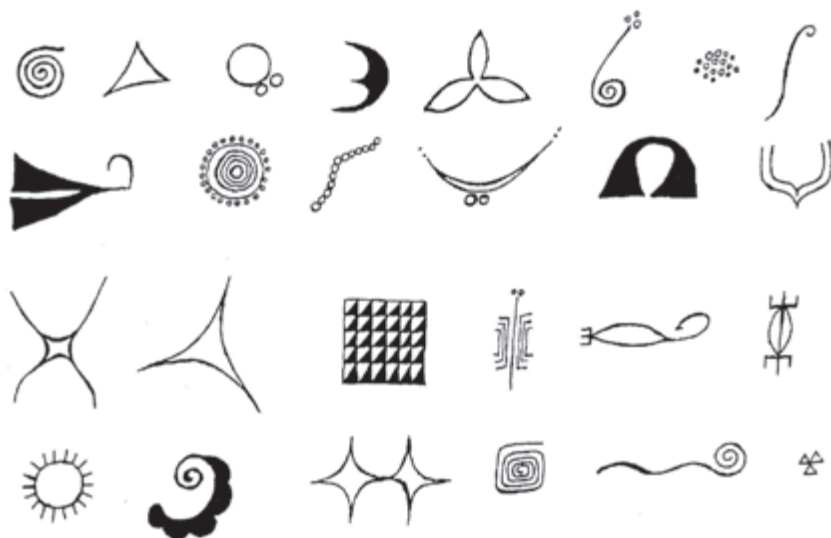


Figure 5.2 Some Uli motifs (illustration by the author).



Figure 5.3 Uli mural, Nsugbe, Anambra State, 1994. Photo, the author.



Figure 5.4 Uli mural, Eke shrine, Uke, Anambra State, 1987. Photo, Dr. Liz Peri.

Figure 5.5 Woman decorated with Uli, Nimo, 1994. Photo, Dr. Liz Peri.

the Uli motifs and designs remain unchanged from the indigenous prototypes. The result is that these drawings lack the spatial poetics of traditional Uli. Thus it is fair to speculate that in the *Signs of Life* series, Okeke was simply trying out pictorial possibilities by juxtaposing motifs drawn directly from the Uli corpus. Put differently, his primary interest was in familiarizing himself with the motifs and their behavior in diverse spatial contexts before mobilizing them to perform more complex pictorial tasks.

In 1962 Okeke made *From the Wild Region*—a set of three drawings with borders reminiscent of the Uli drawings collected in the 1930s and now at Oxford University's Pitt Rivers Museum—and the Oja Suite, his first major Uli-inspired series, named after the Abule-Oja neighborhood in Lagos. Typical of the Oja Suite drawings is *From the Forest*, depicting a shrub growing along a vertical axis on the left side of the composition, while similar linear forms suggesting a forest background occupy the rest of the picture plane (figure 5.6). The image resembles a very shallow depth-of-field photograph of a tendriliferous plant in a forest, yet the lines are crisp and elemental. That they are spontaneous, gestural marks requiring acutely coordinated mental process and rapid hand movement is attested to by the effortless manner in which single lines negotiate various paths, at times angular, at other times curvilinear. In *Head of a Girl*, a straight vertical line runs from high up on her forehead down to the nostrils, which are merely indicated by a corrugated M- or W-shaped line (figure 5.7). This line, broken below the nostrils, ends in an *agwɔlagwɔ* mark, which represents the mouth. Crossing this vertical midline are two horizontal ones marking either the upper eyelid on the left or the eyebrow on the right. As with the mouth, the same *agwɔlagwɔ* motif, representing her bundled or curly hair, suggests the eyes and pupils in one single gesture. Even the many other short gestural lines tend to end in spirals, as though several autonomous centripetal forces pull the lines toward the center as soon as they emerge. It is also as if—when one imagines the drawing process—the artist's pen was dancing on the paper, leaving the drawing as an index of that activity. This reading is apparently not entirely far-fetched: Okeke has himself made a connection between dance and Uli, in that both the artist's hand and the dancer's movement are lyrical gestures.⁵ It might seem like a small point, but the use of the spiral motif in this work, as well as in many others in the Oja Suite, is in fact a key aspect of what I want to call Okeke's system.

This system is most evident in another quite remarkable drawing from 1962 (figure 5.8). In it, we initially see vertical lines broken into long and short linear marks. Between some of them are high-density zigzag marks,



Figure 5.6 Uche Okeke,
From the Forest, pen
and ink, 1962. Artist's
collection. Photo, the
author. © Uche Okeke.



Figure 5.7 Uche Okeke,
Head of a Girl, pen and ink,
1962. Artist's collection.
Photo, the author. © Uche
Okeke.



Figure 5.8 Uche Okeke, *Owls*, ink on paper, 1962. The Newark Museum, Gift of Simon Ottenberg, TR91.2012.38.42.
© Uche Okeke.

some of which end in spirals. These are mostly in the lower part of the picture and at the top corners. In the top right area especially, we see bolder marks, suggestive of dense foliage. On top of these is a large spiral at the apex of a triangular formation of spirals, four of which are placed diagonally on the picture plane. Between the two sets of spirals are marks reminiscent of *okala isinwaqji* motifs, and around all of these are concave lines breaking up the vertical ones. Once we realize that the title of this drawing is *Owls* it all begins to make sense: the two sets of lower spirals are pairs of eyes belonging to two owls, the *okala isinwaqji* being their vastly exaggerated beaks, while the moon hovers above them. Whereas in *Head of a Girl* the spiral form signifies the hair, eyes, and mouth, in *Owls*, it signifies (bird's) eyes and the moon. In other words, with just one graphic gesture, the artist represents human, animal, and cosmic forms. Thus there is a conscious decision on Okeke's part to invent new ways of seeing and representing not only the folktales he collected but also genre subjects. Indeed, this system of notation in its very extreme tends to become somewhat abstract, as is the case with some of the works he produced during his residency at the Franz Meyer Studios, Munich, in 1962 and 1963.

The Munich Suite drawings include a few head portraits, such as *Munich Girl*, which presents another clear case of the polysemic power of the spiral form (figure 5.9). The eye on the right is unambiguously present, or so it seems, for the spiral mark that asserts its presence is, really, a lock of hair hanging down her forehead and ending in a curly bang. Perhaps testifying to the precariousness of this signifying gesture, the viewer has a hard time differentiating the left eye from what might be a long strand of hair that seems to hang over the eye, ending abruptly. Other Munich Suite ink drawings continue these visual tropes, modified only by the unique graphic qualities of brush and ink (compared to pen or charcoal). Thus, whereas in *Munich Girl* the lines glide effortlessly across the picture plane, defining the subject's curly hair and frilly dress in linear detail, in *Birds* and *Girl with Flowing Hair* there is a struggle to force the liquid lines into curvatures-that-refuse-to-be-spirals and to tame the ink-loaded brush well enough to negotiate without breaking subtle curvatures and spirals. It seems, nevertheless, that what Okeke has done in all these drawings is confront us with the polysemic potential, actually the emptiness, of the motifs/signs. They do not carry meaning in themselves; instead, the context fulfills their signifying task. This is the ultimate lesson of the Oja and Munich suites.

My argument for the instability of the spiral form in Okeke's work draws from the research and writing of Rosalind Krauss and, more pertinently,

Figure 5.9
 Uche Okeke,
Munich Girl, charcoal
 on paper, 1962.
 Reproduced from
*Art in Development:
 A Nigerian Perspective*
 (1982), p. ix. © Uche
 Okeke.



Yve-Alain Bois, specifically their semiological reading of Picasso's cubism. In Krauss's critique of what she called "art history as a history of the proper name," she argues against the tendency by art historians to read Picasso's works as biographies; that is, explaining particular works by the artist's relationship with mistresses, wives, friends, even pets. For her, the postcubist collages by their very nature are allegorical and polysemic.⁶ She argues, after Ferdinand de Saussure's semiology, that the artist's use of the musicological "clef" sign in his collages represents not the guitar, an object, but an idea: perspectival depth, in a picture-making mode that clearly spurned the use of perspective.

For his part, Bois incorporated Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics in his analysis of Picasso's cubism. Significantly, Bois determined different semiological phases in the artist's cubist period, but the one that interests us here

is the second phase, which he defined as the search for a “unitary system of notation.” Within this phase, says Bois, is the first of two periods during which, as in the artist’s *Three Women* (1907/8), “the same geometric sign, the triangle, is used over and over with a different semantic function, each time determined by its context.”⁷

This unitary system of notation to which Bois refers is evident, as we have seen, in Okeke’s use of one icon, the *agwɔlagwɔ* spiral, which in Uli represents the coiled python but which acquires a polysemic potency in Okeke’s drawings. While the spiral form serves a unifying purpose—after all, it seems as though every line aims at ending up a spiral or a segment of it—its referents are not static; its meaning depends entirely on the other lines, motifs, or spaces to which it relates.

Yet the polysemy insinuated by Okeke’s drawings is culturally motivated; this is evident in their connection to Uli spatial program. The compositions depend on a key formal characteristic of Uli: the dynamic and poetic use of negative and positive space to organize the picture plane constituted by the body or the wall. Chike Aniakor eloquently captures some of this when he argues that

In *uli*, the line dances, spirals into diverse shapes, elongates, attenuates, thickens, swells and slides, thins and fades out from a slick point, leaving an empty space that sustains it with mute echoes by which silence is part of the sound. . . . At other times, the line is a sweeping curvilinear shape with dotted edges powered by rhythmic echoes of negative spaces.⁸

In other words, the motifs engage their surrounding space in a dialogic and dialectical conversation, thereby turning empty space into zones of silence that amplify the positive spaces defined by motifs and outlined forms. For this reason, Uli body artists are sensitive to what constitutes appropriate designs for each human canvas. “They will,” as Cole and Aniakor have noted, “amplify a thin girl with bold patterns and modify corpulence with delicate ones.”⁹

I want to suggest that this same principle is evident in Okeke’s drawings of 1962, where, for instance, the intervening spaces between the brief notations of plant/zoomorphic forms play an active rather than a passive role in our experience of the plants/animals or figures. They do not constitute a background; rather they are the “mute echoes by which silence is part of the sound” of which Aniakor speaks. In a way, the “empty space” seems willing and ready to lift or clear like a mist, revealing more of the forms it covers or holds back. This deferred possibility is what makes it an active yet nega-



Figure 5.10 Uche Okeke, *Birds in Flight*, brush and ink, 1963. Artist's Collection. Photo, the author. © Uche Okeke.

tive space. This dialectic of positive-negative space, in addition to the lyrical quality of the line, guarantees the poetic quality of Okeke's drawings and thus connects them to the visual and gestural poetry that is the hallmark of traditional Uli art.

In Okeke's *Birds in Flight*, where the picture plane is dominated by heavy dark masses, even the white untouched areas of the paper seem to acquire their own presence or their own form, such that it is always possible to think of the drawing as a negative image, the white parts representing positive forms (figure 5.10). What Okeke achieves in these works, from the perspective of modern drawing, is reminiscent of Alberto Giacometti's inventive abrogation of the figure-ground distinction, compellingly argued by Krauss.¹⁰ However, whereas Giacometti's sculptural program radically altered sculpture's normatively vertical orientation, realigning it to a horizontal plane and

thereby merging it with the ground from which it always projected, Okeke's drawing participated in what might be called the dialectics of figure and ground. That is, in these drawings, neither the figure nor the ground, the positive or negative form/space, subdues the other; instead, they hold off and sustain each other in a visual symbiosis.

Okeke's 1962 and 1963 drawings, therefore, are crucial not so much for formal inventiveness as for heralding what must be seen as the ultimate artistic implication of the idea of natural synthesis. For it is here that he successfully and rigorously examines and exploits the *formal* potential of an indigenous art form, based on a sensibility that comes from his internalization of the experimental approach to image making typical of twentieth-century modernism. Unlike his Zaria paintings, in which he adapted figural qualities of Igbo sculpture in a rather illustrative, albeit inventive, manner, his post-Zaria work relies on a sustained inquiry into the principle of design, as well as the conceptual parameters of a specific, traditional art form, Uli body art. Given this premise, what does one make of Ulli Beier's assertion in 1968 that "[Okeke] was less interested in adapting certain forms of traditional African art. To him it was of vital importance for the artist to study and understand the content of African art"?¹¹ To be sure, Beier rightly notes Okeke's deep interest in Igbo folklore, which furnished the themes for many of his works. But he apparently did not recognize the significance of the change that occurred in the artist's work after 1962. Beier's statement flies in the face of the decisive role Igbo Uli played in Okeke's reconstitution of his formal style, an experience crucial to understanding the artist's vision of postcolonial modern art and his place in it.

Demas Nwoko: Encounters with Igbo and Nok Sculpture

As Okeke did before leaving for Germany, Demas Nwoko executed a large mural, *The Gift of Talents* (1961), in Tedder Hall at the University of Ibadan before he left for Paris in late 1961 for a nine-month course in scenography and fresco painting. Where Okeke's mural marked the beginning of a decisive break with his Zaria-period work, Nwoko's articulated a figural style inspired by Igbo sculpture but with a palette and color attitude still redolent of postimpressionist painting (figure 5.11).

Unlike the resolutely abstract composition of Okeke's Mbari mural, the main feature of *The Gift of Talents* is a dark, deific female form distributing stringed beads to her wards, who are represented in two horizontal registers: at the top, smaller figures try out their ornaments; the lower register shows seminaked figures already donning their beads, as well as naked ones



Figure 5.11 Demas Nwoko, *The Gift of Talents*, mural, Tedder Hall, University of Ibadan, 1962. Photo, Obiora Udechukwu. © Demas Nwoko.

reaching for theirs. Although the theme has biblical origins—the Parable of the Talents in the Gospel according to Saint Matthew (25:14–30)—Nwoko locates the scene in an imaginary Igbo world by replacing the male master in the biblical story with *Ana*, the Igbo earth goddess. Crucially, the disfigured facial anatomies, the schematically rendered trees at the flanks, and the surrounding flora, as well as the palette, are reminiscent of his earlier work. So rather than mark a rupture in style, the mural connects Nwoko’s *Zaria* work with his evolving 1960s painting and sculpture.

In France, Nwoko designed the stage set for Mozart’s opera *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* during the Théâtre Lyrique’s annual summer school at Vichy. This was his second major stage design, after the one he did for Wole Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forest* in October 1960. He also had a well-received joint exhibition with Uche Okeke at the now defunct Galerie Lambert, Paris (May 1962).¹² The trip to France, followed in 1963 by another short-term study of theater design in Japan, hastened the shift of Nwoko’s focus from painting and sculpture to theater design and finally to architecture from the late 1960s onward. Nevertheless, in Paris he produced an important set of five paintings, the *Adam and Eve* series (1962), in which his early mature style became apparent.

Nwoko’s *Adam and Eve* ostensibly refers to the biblical first couple, but they also quite pertinently signify the principle of dynamic duality implied by the aphorism *ife kwulu ife akwudebe ya* (“when something stands, something else stands beside it”), a concept discussed in this book’s introduction. They also draw on Igbo sculptural representation of the primordial or ancestral couple, which is a recurrent form in African sculpture. Specifically,



Figure 5.12 Igbo artist, male and female figures, 20th c. Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida, Gainesville; Gift of Rod McGalliard. Photo Credit: Randy Batista Photography.

Igbo sculptors made male and female pairs of tutelary figures, usually kept in family or communal shrines. These wood figures, to which the living give votive offerings, often stand frontally, palms facing up, perpetually ready to receive ritual gifts, their columnar legs ending in fat, stunted feet with barely defined toes (figure 5.12). Nwoko mixes some of these elements with Western iconography in his *Adam and Eve* paintings and sculptures.

Nwoko's series, four of which are now lost, consisted of two paintings depicting a modern European couple in an urban setting (figure 5.13) and three other paintings of a naked couple set within a primordial, tropical, Eden. The first two, based on Nwoko's observation of Parisian life; one shows an elderly couple in winter clothing clutching each other's waist and facing the viewer with severe expressions. The woman holds a tiny dog, wearing what must be protective body covering, by a short leash. Because Nwoko came from a



Figure 5.13 Demas Nwoko, *Adam and Eve*, oil on canvas, 1962. Artist's Collection. Photo, the author. © Demas Nwoko.

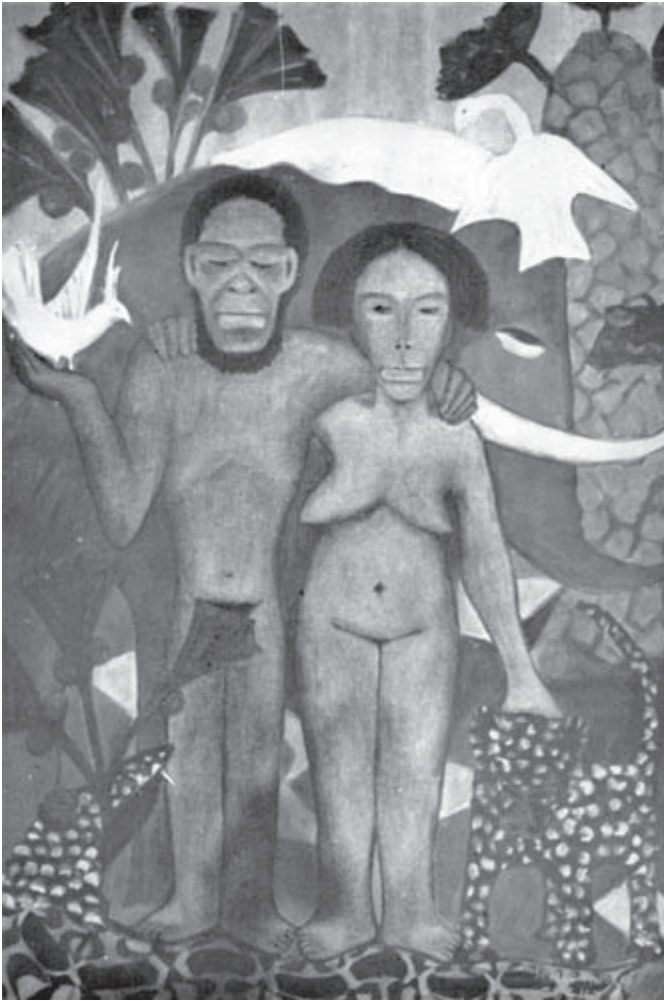


Figure 5.14 Demas Nwoko,
Adam and Eve, oil on canvas, 1963.
Reproduced from *Black Orpheus* 15
(1964). © Demas Nwoko.

culture in which elderly people often enjoyed the company of their extended families, the sight of a lonely couple and their dog, as the picture conveys, seemed pathetic and ridiculous to him. Nevertheless, the transformation of quotidian scenes into a simultaneously comic and serious commentary on the human condition, the smooth brushwork, the use of complementary colors, the caricatured facial features, and the densely packed composition are all holdovers from his late-Zaria painting.

In the other three paintings, Nwoko has transformed the male and female figures in *The Gift of Talents*—the two in white skirts, their backs turned to the viewer—into an Adam and Eve couple. There are familiar codes from the biblical story: paradisiacal conviviality of bird, man, and beast in one panel, and the postexpulsion story of lost innocence and existential hardship for the biblical first couple in another (figure 5.14). The lushness of the flora

in the one canvas and the withered thorny vegetation in the other, with the contrasting expressions of satisfaction and apocalyptic guilt on the faces of the couple, further amplify the tragic implications of that primordial act of disobedience. In what should be the second of the three pictures, however, Nwoko shows Eve bathing in a brook while Adam, attracted perhaps by her nakedness, spies on her. This apocryphal scene reminds us of his *Bathing Women* (1961; see ch. 3, figure 3.17) and thus conflates the biblical story with what might be autobiographical narrative.

Back in Nigeria in 1963, Nwoko joined the theater arts faculty at the University of Ibadan, producing sets and costumes for Mbari Ibadan plays. That same year, he produced an important wood sculpture, *Adam and Eve*, in which he translates into three dimensions the figural style based on Igbo sculpture he had already explored in his Tedder Hall mural and Paris paintings (figure 5.15). Despite the fact that *Adam and Eve* and another carved figure, the seated *Philosopher*, also of 1963, held the promise of a new sculptural style based on a structural analysis of Igbo wood sculpture, the style of the two works indicates that Nwoko imagined traditional sculpture not as a model to be faithfully quoted but, as with Okeke, as a basis for developing a distinctly personal, modernist style.

Building on the lessons of the 1963 wood sculptures, in 1964 Nwoko began to work on a stylistically coherent, rigorously focused body of work: terra-cotta sculpture inspired by ancient Nok figures—sub-Saharan's oldest sculptures, produced by Iron Age cultures from northern Nigeria. The significance of this work is twofold. First, it marked the culmination of his formal examination of his relationship with indigenous Nigerian artistic traditions (as it happened, it was his last important series as a fine artist).¹³ Its intensity and experimental rigor not only matches Okeke's work based on Uli; it also testifies to their shared ideas about the role of specific indigenous art forms in the emergence of postcolonial modernism. Second, in looking beyond his native Igbo culture for an inspirational source, he announced his divergence from Okeke's and other Art Society artists' ideas about ethnicity and artistic modernism in postindependence Nigeria. To appreciate the extent of Nwoko's achievement with his terra-cotta sculptures, let us consider briefly what ancient Nok art had to do with his work.

Classic-style Nok figures have large cylindrical heads, triangular or semi-circular eyes with prominent perforated pupils, tubular torsos and limbs, and minimally defined, stumpy hands and feet (figure 5.16). Even in their weathered state, these ancient figures, dating from around 500 BCE to about 200 CE, are modeled with impressive coiffures and headdresses, armbands,





Figure 5.16
Head, classical
style, Nok culture,
terra-cotta, ca.
400 BCE–200 CE.
Photo © Corbis.

and neck and waist beads. Although Nok figures are relatively small, the size of certain heads and fragmentary body parts suggest that some figures might have been up to four feet tall—a considerable feat for artists using a supposedly rudimentary clay-firing process. This corpus is remarkable for its surprising artistic merit—and for its age, particularly within the context of Nigerian archaeology and cultural history—yet Nwoko’s attraction to it hinges on the fact that it helped him clearly articulate, as never before, an artistic vision already in formation in his undergraduate studies at Zaria.

Nwoko was interested in the formal style of Nok terra-cotta, the process involved in its modeling, and the clay-firing technology that made it possible. He started experimenting with clays used by traditional potters in southern Nigeria around 1964. However, in the attempt to replicate the varied surface patina (produced by resinous matter) characteristic of ancient pottery and

Figure 5.15 Demas Nwoko, *Adam and Eve*, wood, 1962–1963. Artist’s Collection. Photo, the author.
© Demas Nwoko.

terra-cotta, he realized that the open-air firing normally used by local potters would be inadequate due to its thermal inefficiency and low operational temperatures. All this led to a ten-day terra-cotta sculpture workshop organized by Mbari Ibadan and the Department of Extra-Mural Studies of the University of Ibadan in the summer of 1965.

At the workshop, Nwoko devised a sunken outdoor kiln similar to the bowl furnace—a very old type of iron-smelting furnace still used in Nigeria as late as the nineteenth century—by combining designs of the ancient northern Nigerian kilns with the open firing method used by contemporary Igbo potters. Nwoko's kiln achieved the optimal firing temperatures needed to fuse the mix of grainy white sand particles and clay he used for his sculptures. The kiln's design also caused the clay objects to come in direct contact with the burning teak logs, so that resinous matter from the wood gave the fired clay objects a variegated color and surface quality comparable to those of Nok terra-cottas. The result, as critic Denis Williams noted rather hyperbolically, was historic: "As for the aesthetic merit Mr. Nwoko has produced work, in my view, immeasurably superior in concept and in sensitivity to the finest examples we know from Nok, and hardly inferior, in the originality of his idiom, to the masterpieces of Ife."¹⁴ Nwoko's ingenious effort to re-create an ancient firing technique and process for his terra-cotta figures testifies to his experimentalist sensibility, a willingness to venture into uncharted territory motivated by the possibility of realizing a new way of making art. Yet in replicating both the methods and furnace technology putatively used by the Nok sculptors, he established an ancient genealogy for his new sculptural language.

There is yet another aspect to this series. Given the fragmentary state of the Nok corpus—usually consisting of heads without torsos, figures without heads, or fragments of both—Nwoko's mostly full-figure compositions rhetorically reconstitute and make whole the Nok artistic heritage. Yet this is not a merely restorative project, an attempt to revive the formal style of classical Nok. Rather, what makes this body of work so utterly fresh is, paradoxically, its idiosyncratic archaism, a quality we have seen in the sculptures of the award-winning Brazilian sculptor Agnaldo dos Santos (cf. ch. 4).

Despite the compelling ancient appearance of Nwoko's sculptures—they do not look like objects of recent manufacture—his terra-cotta figures represent contemporary Africans rather than subjects who existed in the past. A female figure, *Titled Woman* (1965), with huge anklets, arm bangles, and necklaces, for instance, depicts a modern titled western Igbo woman in her ivory and coral bead ornaments and fly whisk (figure 5.17). Another figure



Figure 5.17 Demas Nwoko, *Titled Woman*, terra-cotta, 1965. Artist's Collection. Photo, the author. © Demas Nwoko.

with a long flowing gown, small wristbands, and a huge dome-shaped coiffure or headdress comes across as a contemporary, perhaps even urbanized, African woman of no specific ethnic origin. On the other hand, two well-known figures, *Senegalese Woman* and the Asele Institute's *Philosopher* (1965; figure 5.18), wear generic traditional attire, but rather than represent fabric folds realistically, Nwoko uses rounded threads of clay to barely suggest fold lines, thus guaranteeing both the archaic effect of the sculptures and, in a sense, their timelessness.

It is clear from the foregoing that Nwoko's experimental work, based on Nok (and to some extent ancient Ife) terra-cottas, though coming slightly later, compares with Uche Okeke's Igbo Uli-influenced drawing and painting, in the sense that both artists derived their aesthetic logic from the formal characteristics of a particular traditional art form. The result is a coherent



body of work that further argues for the viability of natural synthesis as a theoretical model for new work in Nigeria. But his appropriation of Nok sculptural language for Nwoko's own work is significant for another reason: it shifted the notion of native belongingness inherent in Okeke's understanding of natural synthesis, as well as the constitution of artistic heritage, from an ethnos to a nation-state basis. Moreover, Nwoko's Nok-inspired sculpture invariably raises important questions about how different Art Society artists imagined their relationship with ethnicity, culture, and history in postcolonial Nigeria. For it departs from the assumption implied by the Zaria-period mandate that members research the art forms and traditions of their *native* cultures—in other words foregrounding claims of ethnic authenticity as nationalism—which authorized Okeke's Igbo Uli-based work. Yusuf Grillo makes this point about the centrality of ethnicity as the locus of nationalist subjectivity in Nigeria:

The very first thing for an artist (Chinese, Japanese, Nigerian, European [sic] etc.) is to know who he or she is. You have to know where you are coming from. You have to know your roots. Not because you are an artist, but for the simple reason that you are a person. For example you have been born in Benin. You have to know Benin, its traditions and history. If you are born in Ife, you ought to know all about Ife, the origin, mythology, the names of past Obas, the belief system and the culture of the people.¹⁵

Grillo, it seems to me, suggests that the assertion of a Nigerian identity implies an open identification with one's ethnicity, which—if we are to believe anticolonial, nationalist politicians—is the locus of both political and existential authenticity in the context of the modern multiethnic nation-state. But there is no consensus in the Zaria group on the question of the role of ethnicity in the national imaginary. For instance, Okeke's pervasive focus on Igbo arts and cultures—as an artist, a folklorist, and a historian—testify to Grillo's way of thinking about nationalism, whereas Nwoko's sculptures suggest sympathies with transethnic nationalism; indeed both represent two distinct positions on the centrality of ethnicity and religious difference in the discourse of Nigerian national politics in the post–World War II period.¹⁶

Despite the pan-Nigerian and pan-Africanist outlook of early twentieth-century politicians, emblemized in the late 1930s by the Nnamdi Azikiwe-led Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM), ethnicity became a major factor in the rhetoric and practice of politics in Nigeria during the last decades of colonization. Nationalist politicians took this road—a process described by James Coleman as “regionalization of nationalism”—partly to fend off questions

Figure 5.18 Demas Nwoko, *Philosopher*, terra-cotta, 1965. Collection of Asele Institute, Nimo. Photo, the author. © Demas Nwoko.

about the authenticity of their popular mandate and partly to appeal to the strong ethnic nationalisms of their constituent power bases.¹⁷ Among the political elite, in other words, ethnic identification was a crucial part of their quest for national sovereignty, although it also complicated feelings of national belongingness among the nation's diverse constituent peoples.

In his rigorous experimentation and total identification with Igbo Uli art, Okeke seems to echo the brand of nationalism anchored on ethnic identity. On the other hand, Nwoko, like the early *NYM* and the associated Zikist movement, substitutes the national for the ethnic; in other words, for him one is first a Nigerian, then an Igbo or Yoruba or Hausa. Nevertheless, Nwoko's nationalism does not amount to a denial of one's ethnicity. Instead, it is the recognition of an orientation and allegiance to a wider social and political space, the nation-state, which in the Nigerian situation is, however, always fraught with difficulties arising from fractious interethnic relations. By seeking inspiration from Nok culture in the mid-1960s, Nwoko reiterated and signified his politically unfashionable commitment to the idea of a Nigerian nation with common national interests and heritage.¹⁸ His work proposed that whatever belonged to one ethnic nationality or group (contemporary Jaba people) could be rightfully claimed by any citizen (Nwoko, an Igbo) of Nigeria. This is what makes Nwoko's Nok series an important political statement masked, partly at least, by the force of its formal achievement.

Bruce Onobrakpeya, Folklore, and Experimental Printmaking

Bruce Onobrakpeya's work in the early 1960s developed along two crucial, though ultimately complementary, lines. On the one hand, he sought to exhaust and transcend the possibilities of standard printmaking techniques and procedures; on the other, he focused on developing a new expressive style based on his study of his native Urhobo art, Benin royal and ritual sculpture, and Yoruba *adire* textile design. The meeting of these two paths sometime around 1965 resulted in the distinctive style that would characterize his mature work.

Unlike his Art Society colleagues, Onobrakpeya (along with Jimo Akolo and Solomon Wangboje, also from Zaria) participated in and gained tremendously from the Mbari Ibadan and Mbari-Mbayo, Osogbo, summer workshops led by the South African architect Julian Beinart and the Dutch sculptor and printmaker Ru van Rossem (figure 5.19). Having garnered some critical attention for his experimental printmaking while in Zaria, Onobrakpeya was introduced in the workshops to new and unorthodox materials



Figure 5.19 Bruce Onobrakpeya and Ru van Rossem at summer workshop, Mbari-Mbayo, Osogbo, 1964. Photo, Ulli Beier. © Estate of Ulli Beier.

and techniques that suited his approach to image making. Moreover, Julian Beinart's assertion during the workshops, that a vibrant modern art in any country must seek inspiration from its folk art traditions, coincided with Onobrakpeya's focus on Urhobo folklore and art as sources for his themes and design forms. To him, Beinart's statement further vindicated the Art Society's prescription of rigorous inquiry into indigenous art and craft as the basis for new work.

Apart from the theoretical impetus that Onobrakpeya got from Beinart's ideas, Ru van Rossem introduced him to copper engraving and etching techniques that would, by dint of a studio accident in 1967, yield innovative technical procedures characteristic of his printmaking from then onward. Van Rossem's workshops convinced Onobrakpeya of the viability of printmaking as major art form, one not only amenable to an incredible range of formal and technical experimentation but also with the potential to supplant painting as his primary medium. Coincident with this gradual shift of emphasis away from painting was a drastic reconfiguration of his pictorial style around 1963 and 1964. Onobrakpeya's paintings increasingly took on the graphic elements of his Zaria-period linocut and lino-engraving prints. This is evident in *Man with Two Wives* and *Dancing Masquerader* (both 1965) where, de-

spite the occasional modeling and painterly passages—as in the man’s face—Onobrakpeya achieves a dramatically graphic effect mostly with structural Prussian blue outlines and bold decorative patterns and images set against flat pictorial space (figures 5.20 and 5.21).

The impact of his printmaking on his 1965 paintings is profound, so much so that the paintings’ formal qualities seem to derive directly from those of his prints. Note, for instance, that the same compositional elements characteristic of his early prints—flat color, reductive palette, bold structural lines, decorative patterns, extreme stylization—appear in his 1965 canvases. Whereas in his earlier paintings and prints, such as the covered way mural at the 1960 Nigerian Art exhibition or *Quarrel between Ahwaire the Tortoise and Erhako the Dog* (ca. 1960), he used what one might call generic abstract decorative patterns, by the mid-1960s he was looking to specific indigenous design and art, as Okeke had a few years before. Appropriating Yoruba *adire* textile design and Urhobo and Edo sculptural forms and motifs, Onobrakpeya developed a pervasively decorative style often dependent on folk narratives for thematic focus.

Around 1965, after he finished at Zaria, Onobrakpeya concluded that although he had received national renown for several notable book illustrations using conventional woodcut and linocut, these traditional printmaking techniques offered him no further technical challenges. He thus developed a collage process using canceled linoleum blocks to create composite relief panels. Calling this new work “bronze-lino,” because he built his images from linoleum-cut panels and gave them a bronze finish to enhance their visual appeal, he developed a sculptural relief style based on printmaking processes and materials. In *Skyscrapers* (1966), a bronze-lino piece published in *Nigeria* magazine that year, he built a composite relief panel with linoleum blocks, from which he printed illustrations for Cyprian Ekwensi’s 1962 short story collection *An African Night’s Entertainment*.¹⁹ Arranged on a rectangular plywood support, the blocks define a geometrically irregular outline resembling the silhouette of an urban cityscape. Partly because each block has its own independent system of textures—with its own pictorial composition in reverse—the panel is nonnarrative and resolutely sculptural and, with the bronzed color, invokes diverse traditions of relief sculpture, from royal Benin to the Italian Renaissance and early twentieth-century modernism. Onobrakpeya’s subsequent bronze-lino works, such as *Untitled* and *Pot* (ca. 1966), become more pictorially complex, combining legible forms and expressive abstract gestures achieved by pouring glue over all or parts of the composition. He extends the textural range by gluing found objects onto the composition (figures 5.22 and 5.23).



Figure 5.20 Bruce Onobrakpeya, *Man with Two Wives*, oil on board, 1965. Collection of Federal Society of Arts and Humanities, University of Lagos Library, Lagos. Photo, the author. © Bruce Onobrakpeya.



Figure 5.21
Bruce Onobrakpeya,
Dancing Masquerader,
oil on board, 1965. Photo,
the author. © Bruce
Onobrakpeya.

In 1967, having acquired an etching press similar to the one used in the Mbari workshops, Onobrakpeya began in earnest to make copperplate engravings and etchings at his new painting and printmaking studio in the Palmgrove area of Lagos. It was here that an incident occurred—the artist called it a “hydrochloric acid accident”—that yielded the third process that revolutionized his technical procedures. He had ruined his first zinc plates because instead of nitric acid, he had used the more corrosive hydrochloric acid to etch them. Months later, Erhabor Emokpae, a fellow artist working at the time on the monumental *Olokun*—a tall wooden sculpture covered with copper coins, now in the collection of the National Council for Arts and Culture, Lagos—introduced him to Araldite®, an epoxy resin glue. Onobrakpeya used the resin to seal corroded parts of his zinc plates, but in the test proofs, the hardened drips of glue formed unanticipated deep bosses on the



Figure 5.22
Bruce Onobrakpeya, *Untitled*,
bronze lino, ca. 1966.
Collection of National Council
of Arts and Culture, Abuja.
Photo, the author. © Bruce
Onobrakpeya.



Figure 5.23
Bruce Onobrakpeya, *Untitled*,
bronze lino, ca. 1966.
Collection of Federal Society
of Arts and Humanities,
University of Lagos Library,
Lagos. Photo, the author.
© Bruce Onobrakpeya.



Figure 5.24 Bruce Onobrakpeya, *Travellers*, deep etching, 1967. Reproduced from *Bruce Onobrakpeya: The Spirit in Ascent* (1992), p. 34. © Bruce Onobrakpeya.

paper. He realized that by pouring more glue on the plate, he could abrade and engrave the raised resin surfaces to produce a hybrid image combining delicate intaglio printing and soft embossed reliefs. He called the prints pulled from these altered plates “deep etchings” or “plastographs” because of their unique three-dimensionality (figure 5.24).

Onobrakpeya’s initial deep etchings, exemplified by *Bathers I* (1967), attest to the technical challenges of controlling his newfangled medium. In this work depicting three figures with impressive body decorations, a proliferation of accidental marks and deliberate designs spreads across the entire compositional surface, creating a pictorial tension absent in his earlier prints or paintings; the bathers seem only barely able to resist dissolving into the formless space around them (figure 5.25). But as he mastered the deep etching and plastography techniques, Onobrakpeya seemed to come



Figure 5.25 Bruce Onobrakpeya, *Bathers I*, deep etching, 1967. Reproduced from *Bruce Onobrakpeya: The Spirit in Ascent* (1992), p. 37. © Bruce Onobrakpeya.

to terms with their susceptibility to more profoundly serendipitous results; they compelled him to rely, even more than before, on the pictorial possibilities of simplified figuration, decorative motifs, and surplus symbols adapted from royal Benin sculpture, Urhobo ritual art, and Yoruba *adire* design. Once reconciled to the idea of the value of accidents as catalysts for new techniques, his work increasingly depended, on the one hand, on repetition and recombination—of themes, motifs, forms—and on the other, on his invention of new processes in which printmaking, sculpture, and painting combine seamlessly.

Simon Okeke and the Myth of Igbo-Ukwu

As the work of Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, and Bruce Onobrakpeya demonstrates, the desire to develop formal solutions to the conceptual problems raised by natural synthesis was a strong motivation for post-Zaria work. Simon Okeke's work reveals a different understanding, perhaps even a rejection, of the formalistic implications of natural synthesis operative in the work of the Art Society triumvirate. For Okeke, the desire for a style rooted in the traditional arts of Nigerian peoples or for the invention of a radically new

form, different from the familiar language of figural realism acquired from his art school training, was not important to his modernist vision.

Upon graduation from the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology in Zaria, Simon Okeke was appointed curator of the National Museum, Lagos, a position that provided him ample opportunity to study and research the museum's extensive ethnographic collection. In 1962 he traveled to Salisbury, Rhodesia (now Harare, Zimbabwe), with that collection. The works were to be included in an exhibition organized by John Picton of the Lagos Museum and Frank McEwen, who convened the First International Congress of African Culture (ICAC), held at the Rhodes National Gallery in Salisbury (now the National Gallery of Zimbabwe), from August 1 through September 30. Attending that historic conference were such art world dignitaries as Alfred Barr Jr., founding director of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; William Fagg, keeper of Ethnology at the British Museum; and Roland Penrose, cofounder of the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London; as well as the surrealist artist Tristan Tzara and several African scholars and artists. During the conference, Simon Okeke delivered a well-received paper on Nigerian art, later visited the Great Zimbabwe and local cave art sites, and met a number of contemporary artists working in Salisbury. While these experiences shored up Okeke's profile as a curator and expanded his understanding of the arts of Nigeria and Africa, they seemed to have had little effect on the development of his work as an artist. Nevertheless, his trips to major museum collections in France, Greece, Italy, and Libya might have deepened his appreciation of the Western premodernist figurative traditions evident in his post-Zaria work.

Despite the fact that Simon Okeke continued to make sculptures after Zaria, he turned to watercolor as his primary medium, developing a formal style described by art historian Marshall Ward Mount as the most unusual of the Zaria graduates.²⁰ Presented in Okeke's first major art exhibition in 1963, which was organized by *Nigeria* magazine at the Exhibition Center, Lagos, these watercolors secured his reputation as a painter. The watercolors are intriguing in part because of their sculptural illusionism; that is to say, they strikingly mimic the impressionistic three-dimensionality of his earlier sculptural reliefs. The optical quality of the drawings is achieved, first, by meticulous abrasion of the heavy paper that has been washed with dark colors to reveal the constituent pictorial elements of his composition. By selective and successive use of dark lines, shading, and further abrasion, he modified the image until it acquired a virtual three-dimensional quality. The resulting strong chiaroscuro (sometimes a softer sfumato) effect speaks to a

keen sense of mass and volume acquired from his training as a sculptor and his familiarity with European Renaissance-era pictorial techniques.

His sometimes strangely androgynous, oval-headed, long-limbed human figures—denizens of his imagined premodern, pagan society—seem to emerge from a dark chthonic realm. They appear to be either actively engaged in occult drama or trapped in ritual matrices, the latter suggested by beaded ornaments, ceremonial gear, and a proliferation of ritual pots and egg-shaped forms. Because of these formal and thematic aspects of the watercolors, Uche Okeke aptly described his artist-friend Simon Okeke as a “ritual realist” (figures 5.26 and 5.27).²¹

Let us note a crucial point, which is that the evocation of the mysterious through Simon Okeke’s pictorial style and subject matter was his particular means of responding to what he perceived as the ravages of European and Christian civilizations on Igbo culture and traditional society. Motivated by his own interpretation of the theory of natural synthesis, he had faith in the possibilities of a new, progressive order resulting from the disastrous cultural conflicts that defined African colonial modernity:

I was born in a pagan society which had its charms. I felt myself surrounded by mysteries, supernatural influences and the wonders of a pure happy life. Then came the abrupt change over to Christianity and its teachings. To the new converts, the indigenous culture became a taboo and a mark of primitive living and a sure way to hell. Inspired art became a sinful outrage against the new religious thought. . . . At present, the sophisticated urban life polluted by the worst elements of Western civilization makes one feel a homeless, soulless, materialistic machine. But I entertain a belief that the Christian religion can exist side by side with a sound indigenous culture.²²

It must be said, however, that despite Simon Okeke’s rather naive and clichéd view of what he calls pagan society and modern urban culture—or indeed the tactical shifts from the autobiographical to the anthropological voice—his firm belief in the cohabitation of religions and the synthesis of cultures must be seen as the basis for his thematic concerns. Still, we are hard pressed to find the connection between his desire for a postcolonial cultural synthesis and the sort of formal syntheses evident in the work of Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, and to a lesser extent Bruce Onobrakpeya.

I thus find untenable the claim by Uche Okeke that Simon Okeke “was deeply influenced by the sculptural works of Nok, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife and Benin”²³ or the assertion by Jean Kennedy that “one is tempted to see in



Figure 5.26 Simon Okeke, *Lady*, mixed media on paper, 1965. Mr. and Mrs. Joe Obiagio collection. Image courtesy of Arthouse Contemporary Ltd., Lagos. © Estate of Simon Okeke.

Figure 5.27
Simon Okeke,
Off to Battle,
mixed media,
1963. Princeton
University
Art Museum.
Museum
purchase, Mary
Trumbull Adams
Art Fund 2013–
43. © Estate of
Simon Okeke.



[Okeke's] work influences from the famous bronzes at Igbo-Ukwu, east of the Niger River, where Okeke was born in 1937."²⁴ To be sure, Uche Okeke might have been driven primarily by the desire to extend his own formalist interpretation of natural synthesis to the work of his former Art Society colleague, thus demonstrating the group's ideological unity beyond Zaria. On the other hand, Kennedy's view of Simon Okeke's work as bound to the ancient art of his native Igbo-Ukwu reveals her uncritical acceptance of what had then become a canonical, if unfounded, story of the Art Society's radical rejection of Western art in favor of Nigerian art traditions as the source of their new work. The consequence of Kennedy's roots-finding exercise is to make us lose sight of the crucial fact that the artist's training in modernist figurative sculpture while at Zaria, his studies of Western museum collections, and his keen interest in science fiction and indigenous Nigerian cultures

anticipated a visual language evidently unrelated to any ancestral Igbo or ancient Nigerian art forms. His watercolors reveal that Okeke readily combined traditional academic techniques, which he rigorously pursued in the Zaria sculpture studio and after, and contemporary figural language (remarkably similar to Ben Enwonwu's), with which he explored themes relating to mid-twentieth-century Igbo culture.

It is important to emphasize, on the evidence of Simon Okeke's pictorial program, the difference between his work and that of Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko, for whom the search for a new style based on exploration of the formal qualities of indigenous art was a primary preoccupation. Okeke was convinced that the ideological basis of natural synthesis, though important, did not warrant or necessarily imply a search for new formal styles extracted from any specific indigenous Nigerian artistic traditions. If, as I argue, the years after Zaria saw the realization of the work anticipated by natural synthesis, this work also reveals that even within the Art Society, there was no collective agreement on the specific stylistic direction of the new work, precisely because natural synthesis did not authorize such unitary style. In other words, although these artists concluded that political and cultural independence implied freedom to formulate new work based on the realization of the importance of both inherited and appropriated traditions, they differed in the extent to which these ideological questions should affect or dictate their formal styles.

Jimo Akolo: The London Paintings

If anyone looking at contemporary Nigerian art in the early postindependence period had any doubts about Jimo Akolo's significance as a painter, his honorable mention at the Sixth São Paulo Bienal (1961) and mural commission for the Northern Nigerian House of Assembly in Kaduna laid those doubts to rest. Yet like Demas Nwoko and Uche Okeke, Akolo set his eyes to further travels and training in Europe, but for different reasons: while his colleagues saw the European trip as an opportunity to enhance their technical expertise in the cultural work they imagined for themselves, Akolo saw in Europe prospects for refining his painterly skills. Thus after two successful exhibitions at the Exhibition Centre, Lagos, and at Mbari Ibadan in the summer of 1962, he traveled to England later in the year, with the assistance of Dennis Duerden. In London, Akolo took courses at the Hornsey College of Arts and Crafts, producing several paintings in 1963, some of which were included in his one-person exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute in Feb-

ruary; and in a group exhibition, *Painting and Environment: Nigeria, Uganda*, at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in the summer of 1964. Returning to Nigeria in 1963, he served as an artist/education officer with the Ministry of Education, Kaduna. In 1964 he traveled to the United States, where he enrolled in the graduate program in education at Indiana University, although he continued to make art but not with the vigor of the preceding years.

Akolo's work after Zaria testifies to his firm commitment to the problem of painting as an expressive act and picture making as an end in itself. Yet as though influenced by the rhetoric of his former Art Society colleagues, soon after Zaria he attempted to adapt designs and patterns he associated with Hausa architecture and art into his work.²⁵ Apart from depicting subject matter specific to Hausa and Islamic northern Nigerian cultures, his 1962 paintings—including *Fulani Horsemen* (figure 5.28) and the famed mural at the House of Assembly in Kaduna—are schematic and decorative and often consist of flat shapes of color and graphic lines. The connection between Akolo's subject matter and his new style was not lost on a contemporary critic, who saw in the paintings a "severe discipline of Northern [Nigerian] design and pattern."²⁶ Whether or not these formal experiments were motivated by any sympathy for the arguments of his Art Society colleagues or were simply influenced by technical and political consideration necessitated by the mural commission for the seat of northern Nigerian political power, they were short lived. By the following year, although he continued to compose some of his pictures with colorful hard-edge shapes, he reintroduced the vertical brushwork that had characterized his late Zaria work, effectively marking the end of his brief experiment with Hausa traditional design and pattern.

As was true of Demas Nwoko and Uche Okeke, Akolo's subject matter ranged from genre to the mythological and the obscure. Unlike them, however, he tried markedly different formal styles, perhaps less anxious about putting such work to any ideological service, given his firm commitment to painting as such. He seemed to have quickly dispensed with a brief interest in reflecting through his work a particular cultural signature; his London paintings and, to a certain extent, all subsequent pictures reveal a personal investment in the styles and techniques of modern realistic painting then popular in contemporary British art schools. In fact, more than before, his 1963 paintings come across as more technically daring and more ambitious in scale. They show Akolo as a confident artist, comfortable with the challenges of his medium and with his decision to focus on this rather than on the politics of form with which his Art Society friends were concerned.

A defining characteristic of Akolo's London paintings was the displace-

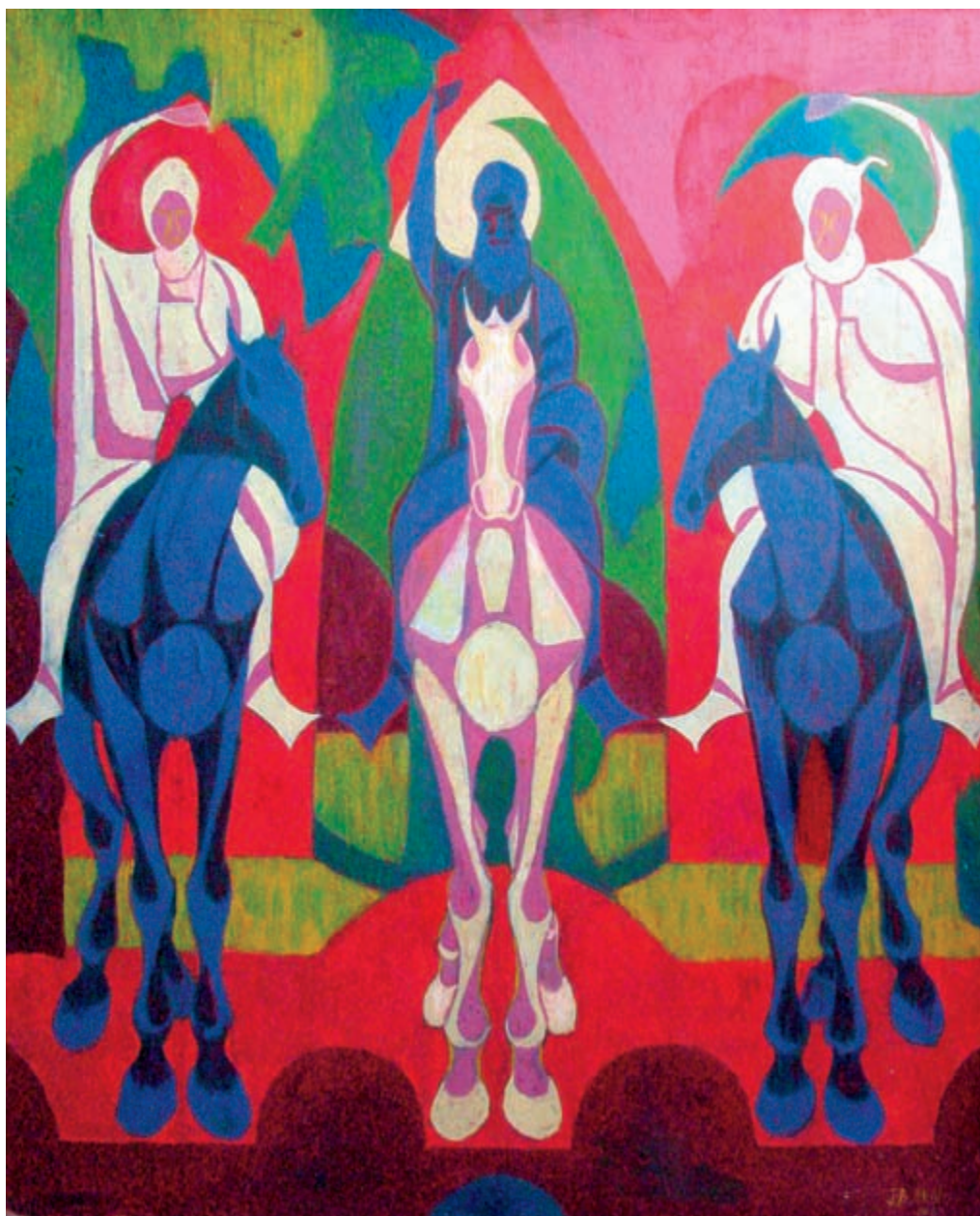


Figure 5.28 Jimo Akolo, *Fulani Horsemen*, oil on canvas, 1962. Courtesy of British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, Bristol, UK. Photo, the author. © Jimo Akolo.



Figure 5.29 Jimo Akolo, *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 1963. Courtesy of British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, Bristol, UK. Photo, the author. © Jimo Akolo.

ment of the earlier methodical brushwork by a very fluid paint application that left drips of color on the canvas surface. Even when he depicts human figures or covers large areas with brush marks, he does so with a remarkably gestural freedom; this is so despite the persistent tendency, as the brushwork shows, for his hand to move in predictable vertical sweeps. Where in his previous work his figures are summarily depicted with very little, if any, attention to anatomical details, the reduction becomes even more drastic, his drawing more imprecise and more self-assured. In an untitled painting of 1963 depicting a couple in a landscape, for instance, he creates a tightly designed composition by reiterating the two figures' verticality with his brushwork, as well as with long drips of color (figure 5.29). Despite the limited palette, the use of diverse textures and abstract shapes, as well as the dramatic combination of dark and light areas of color, emphasizes the artist's increasing mastery of the craft of painting.

In what might be his most ambitious painting of the period, *Man Hanging from a Tree* (1963; figure 5.30), Akolo's preoccupation with picture making as such is even more evident. About six feet high and easily one of his most abstract paintings, only a figure with a white triangular body and red skull hanging upside down at the top right corner and a dark, disembodied skull at lower right point to the painting's somber subject matter. Yet this man, far from commanding the viewer's attention, seems like a mere pictorial element in the overall arrangement of large expanses of indefinable shapes of



Figure 5.30 Jimo Akolo, *Man Hanging from a Tree*, oil on board, 1963. Courtesy of British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, Bristol, UK. Photo, the author. © Jimo Akolo.

dark and light, almost white, color. The sudden shifts from black to white and from cadmium red to occasional cobalt blue and yellow ochre dramatically convey a mood that is at once disturbing and tense, effectively reifying the work's dark, understated, subject matter. The drips here, unlike elsewhere, are agitated, as if violently splashed against the canvas surface, leaving irregular traces of paint. Perhaps he is trying out—something equally evident in another painting, *Northern Horsemen* (1965; figure 5.31)—the gestures of action painting or just practically emphasizing that the painter's primary task is *making pictures* rather than telling stories or championing cultural ideologies.

If Akolo's work powerfully extends his Zaria-period critique of the Art Society, it also reminds us once more that the problem of artistic-cultural authenticity and freedom in the context of the decolonized nation was not a simple matter. Undoubtedly, in their aspiration to develop postcolonial



Figure 5.31 Jimo Akolo, *Northern Horsemen*, oil on canvas, 1965. Courtesy of University of Sussex. Photo, the author. © Jimo Akolo.

modernism, members of the Art Society and Akolo were concerned with the meaning and implication of the idea of freedom symbolized by political independence. Yet where key members of the society sought to define their modernism by situating it within the rhetoric of cultural freedom, which implied developing a new artistic form based on indigenous forms and aesthetics, Akolo's modernism argues for the individual artist's liberty to appropriate and claim, on his own terms, any relevant modernist and Western traditions. Akolo's position on the question of postcolonial artistic language is moreover remarkably similar to that of the Senegalese painter Iba Ndiaye (1928–2008), who in rejecting Ibra Tall's institutionalization of the negritude aesthetic at the École de Dakar in the early 1960s stoutly defended his commitment to the formalist concerns of the post–World War II school of Paris. It also reminds us of the Ethiopian abstract painter Gebre Kristos Desta (1932–1981), who in affirming his enchantment with modernist (abstract) painting rather than his Ethiopian Christian art heritage, famously declared: “What interests me is pure play with forms and colors. I’m not attracted by political and religious aspects of art.”²⁷

IT IS NOTEWORTHY THAT IN SPITE of the stylistic and conceptual divagations evident in the work of the artists examined in this chapter, they saw themselves as cotravelers on a journey of discovery, as inspired wanderers compelled by the thrill of political independence to push modern Nigerian art in many uncharted directions. And as Uche Okeke noted later, despite their “intensely individualistic” work, they were mutually committed to experimentation with diverse artistic forms and concepts, which he identifies as the hallmark of modern Nigerian art after 1960. Predictably, this quest for new imagery and attitudes, the bewildering cacophony of it perhaps, elicited vehement criticisms (as the next chapter shows) from older artists and critics disturbed as much by the loud, aggressive, and supposedly substandard quality of the emerging art as by the collusion of expatriate critics in pushing it to the mainstream.