

## CONTESTING THE MODERN

### Artists' Societies and Debates on Art

**DESPITE IBADAN'S IMPORTANCE** as a center of contemporary art and cultural activity in the first years after Nigeria gained independence from the United Kingdom, Lagos quickly attracted many of the leading artists, critics, and writers. By the middle of the 1960s, Lagos had completed its evolution as Nigeria's modern art capital, thanks to the supporting institutions established during this period.<sup>1</sup> Apart from the many artists who relocated from Zaria to Lagos, graduates of the local Yaba College of Technology and a few artists returning home after training overseas also settled in Lagos. They were attracted by the many exhibition opportunities offered by the invigorated Exhibition Centre and other emerging art galleries, the patronage from foreign agencies and expatriate collectors, and employment opportunities in civil service, schools, and the arts industry. The shift from Ibadan to Lagos moreover precipitated a significant change in the scope and tenor of debates, discussions, and transactions within the Nigerian art circles during the 1960s.

This chapter focuses on developments in Lagos in the period between the Nigerian Art exhibition of October 1960 (see ch. 4) and the 1965 publication of Colette Omogbai's historic manifesto in *Nigeria* magazine, a text that in unmistakable terms marked the high noon of a contemporary art world increasingly dominated by young artists who were both critically and historically self-aware.<sup>2</sup> I examine the role of cultural organizations, societies, and artists' groups, the work of some key artists, and some of the significant debates on contemporary art that took place in the middle of the decade. Within a discursive space expanded beyond that of *Black Orpheus*, Mbari, and Beier's critical networks, an art world that came to shape late twentieth-century Nigerian art fully emerged. What is more, a view of this period, defined as it was by the euphoria of political independence, reveals in equal measure the anxieties, tensions, and power plays of emergent and old-guard stakeholders, all competing for control of or at least influence over the direction and discursive infrastructure of modern Nigerian art.

### **AMSAC, the Arts Council, and the FSAH**

Of the few available venues for art exhibitions in Lagos in the early 1960s, the Exhibition Centre and the American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) gallery were the most important. Established by the colonial government in 1943 as a space for exhibiting work by emerging contemporary Nigerian and expatriate European artists, for decades the Exhibition Centre offered the only functional space for shows in Lagos. Yet if the center seemed adequate for exhibitions by the few practicing artists in 1950s Lagos, the influx of artists from Zaria and overseas after 1960 made the addition of alternative exhibition galleries in the city both necessary and urgent. Thus when Michael Crowder became director of the center in 1959, his regular schedule of exhibitions by young and established Nigerian artists inaugurated an era of unprecedented growth in the art industry, but it also made more apparent the inadequacy of the center as the sole space for contemporary art exhibition in Lagos.

On the other hand, AMSAC, which like the Congress for Cultural Freedom was funded by the CIA, was mandated to promote African culture by building "bonds between American blacks and black Africans who had their struggle for freedom in common."<sup>3</sup> Merging in 1957 with the Council on Race and Caste in World Affairs (CORAC), which monitored the extent of communist exploitation of race relations for political gains and officially incorporated in 1960, AMSAC, with its West African regional office in Lagos, promoted work

by African and African American musicians, writers, and artists.<sup>4</sup> In addition to organizing a festive conference attended by prominent African Americans during the 1960 independence celebrations in Lagos, AMSAC offered a regular schedule of cultural workshops and symposia with renowned scholars, artists, writers, and critics from the United States, Nigeria, and the West African region. In its gallery, AMSAC mounted art exhibitions, mostly featuring works by African American and other expatriate black artists. The society thus facilitated, as did the Mbari Club in Ibadan, the circulation of black international art in Lagos.

In December 1961, as part of AMSAC's occasional program of discussions on art and literature, Calvin H. Raullerson, its Lagos director, invited Uche Okeke, Simon Okeke, the African American painter Hale Woodruff, and William Lewis of Liberia to organize an exhibition of Nigerian and African American artists at J. K. Randle Hall in Lagos.<sup>5</sup> The society also partnered with Mbari Ibadan to host exhibitions by such African American artists as Jacob Lawrence and William H. Johnson and the Ghanaian sculptor Vincent Kofi, but it rarely showed the work of Nigerian artists. However, despite the fact that it contributed significantly to the traffic of international art in the Lagos art scene, the AMSAC gallery was not an ideal exhibition venue. As the artist-critic Okpu Eze noted in his review of Kofi's 1962 exhibition:

[Sculptures] were dumped among books and light intruded upon them from all conceivable angles. The transparent linen (or was it nylon?) used for window blinds played the trick of bringing the "carryings on" on the street below so close up to the eyes thus robbing the hall of the atmosphere conducive to the "monuments" on show.<sup>6</sup>

Whereas AMSAC focused on bringing foreign art and artists to Nigeria, the Nigerian Council for the Advancement of Arts and Culture (NCAAC), established in 1959 by the federal government, was charged with "the preservation, revival, development and encouragement of arts and crafts, music and traditional culture."<sup>7</sup> Intended to expand the focus of the colonial-era Nigerian Festival of the Arts, the council's board consisted of eminent Nigerians and expatriates in the arts. The attorney and nationalist Kolawole Balogun was its founding chairman, and Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, a medical practitioner, was its founding secretary. The council inaugurated a Federal Government Trophy to be awarded to distinguished artists and writers based on a single major work. Jimo Akolo won the trophy for his mural in the Northern House of Assembly in 1962, and Ben Enwonwu for his *Sango* sculpture for the Nigerian Electric Commission, Lagos, in 1964 (figure 6.1).<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 6.1** Ben Enwonwu, *Sango*, bronze, 1964. Nigerian Ports Authority, Marina, Lagos. Photo, the author. © The Ben Enwonwu Foundation.

As I noted in chapter 4, the intrigues surrounding the organization of the 1960 Independence Exhibition revealed that the relationship between the expatriate board members of the Lagos branch of the NCAAC and Nigerian artists was often a fraught one. This was evident in the frictions between Michael Crowder and Nora Majekodunmi on the one hand and artists Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko on the other during the preparations for the 1960 Nigerian Exhibition. There was also, of course, Enwonwu's feud with the council over the independence exhibition. A major reason for this animosity was the feeling on the part of Nigerian artists that the art administration, represented by the expatriate-dominated and all-important Lagos branch, was too slow in decolonizing, thus keeping out capable Nigerians and preventing them from taking full responsibility for contemporary art programs in Lagos and around the country. This was the motivation behind Enwonwu's influen-

tial essay “Into the Abstract Jungle,” a veiled critique of the council and its expatriate officers’ support of young abstractionists. For his part, Okeke wrote to Evelyn Brown at the Harmon Foundation, “We have no central art organisation in this country and I must tell you frankly that Mrs. Majekodunmi cannot judge or value my work. They are different from what she understands.”<sup>9</sup> Simon Okeke also believed that the council, with its British bias, denied Nigerian artists access to the more desirable US art markets.<sup>10</sup> These critical observations notwithstanding, the Lagos branch organized contemporary art exhibitions at the National Museum, Lagos, and facilitated the participation of Nigerian artists in overseas events, such as the 1962 São Paulo Biennial. It also established Gallery Labac (an acronym for “Lagos branch of the arts council”), the city’s first commercial gallery, directed by Afi Ekong (1930–2009), the most visible female artist on the Lagos scene and a well-known television personality.

A scion of the royal house of the Obong of Calabar and daughter-in-law of the Atta of Igbirra, Ekong studied fashion in England at Oxford City Technical School (now Oxford Brookes University), as well as art and the history of fashion at Saint Martin’s School of Art and the Central School of Art and Design in London in the 1950s. She had her first exhibition, the first by a woman artist in Nigeria, at the Exhibition Centre, Lagos, in 1958. She also had a well-publicized solo exhibition at the Galeria Galatea in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in April 1961. In her work, which often depicted masks and genre subject matter, she sometimes combined a rich palette of brilliant color activated by expressive brushwork; at other times her colors are muted and heavy, with understated brush marks (figures 6.2 and 6.3). Ekong’s appointment as executive board member and art manager of the Lagos Art Council and art supervisor of the Gallery Labac confirmed her influence in the Lagos art and social scene and assured her a listing in the *New York Times Magazine*’s feature on the new African woman in 1963.<sup>11</sup> In 1962 she ran *Cultural Heritage*, a Nigerian Television Channel 10 cultural promotion program featuring Nigerian traditional dances alongside the work of several young and established Nigerian artists, including Felix Idubor, Yusuf Grillo, Simon Okeke, Uche Okeke, and Festus Idehen.

The Gallery Labac, designed by a prominent Lagos-based British architect, Robin Atkinson (b. 1930), was not dedicated simply to exhibiting contemporary art. Rather, it displayed and sold works of contemporary artists as well as craft works—mostly traditional jewelry and souvenir-type wood sculptures—from around the country. One might think that the lack of emphasis on contemporary art in the gallery’s operations was symptomatic of a





**Figure 6.2** Afi Ekong, *Meeting*, oil on canvas, 1960. Federal Society of Arts and Humanities collection, University of Lagos Library, Lagos. Photo, the author. © Estate of Afi Ekong.



**Figure 6.3** Afi Ekong, *Cowherd*, oil on canvas, early 1960s. Federal Society of Arts and Humanities collection, University of Lagos Library, Lagos. Photo, the author. © Estate of Afi Ekong.

recurring tendency established by the colonial-era Festival of the Arts (from which the council evolved): the official focus on indigenous crafts, festivals, and traditional performances as modern Nigeria's exemplary cultural products. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Gallery Labac's boutique atmosphere, its indiscriminate presentation of craft and art for sale, met with the resentment of Lagos-based artists who expected it to provide a new, respectable alternative to the Exhibition Centre.<sup>12</sup>

Besides the question of the quality of the gallery's operations, another source of tension and, on occasion, outright confrontation within the NCAAC board was the push by the artist-members to transform the council into a more professional, effective entity actively engaged in qualitative cultural production and discursive transactions. The less controversial of this group's two major initiatives was a first-rate and provocative literary magazine planned in 1962 by the Lagos branch, with Chinua Achebe and Onuora Nzekwu (b. 1928) as leaders of its editorial board. Imagined as a magazine with substantial coverage of art exhibitions and reviews, *Labac* magazine—named after the Lagos branch—would have been a Lagos-based alternative to *Black Orpheus*. But due to extensive deliberations and debates by the magazine committee and prohibitive production costs, plans for the magazine were later shelved.

The magazine's fate reveals the crisis of identity or, rather, the disagreement over the mission of the National Arts Council, constituted as it was by four classes of mostly Lagos's cultural elite, all with different stakes in and ideas about the work of culture in postindependence Nigeria. The first group consisted of British serving and former government officials who still had extensive, if waning, influence in the city and country's political and social institutions. This included people such as Kenneth Murray, Major J. G. C. Allen, Michael Crowder, and Nora Majekodunmi, who gradually withdrew from active participation in cultural circles or left Nigeria for good as the government's "Nigerianization" policies took hold of the public sector. The second group included members of the Nigerian political and social elite, committed to sponsorship and support of Nigerian arts as part of their investment in the new nation. The most prominent among these were Dr. O. Adeniyi-Jones, Mrs. Aduke Moore, Mr. Kunle Ojora, and Chief Kolawole Balogun, the council chairman. The third and fourth groups consisted respectively of influential and established artists and writers (e.g., Ben Enwonwu, Aina Onabolu, and Cyprian Ekwensi), and a cadre of young artists and writers of the independence generation eager to assume control of the structures of knowledge production and transaction in the arts. The different

visions projected onto the cultural sector by these groups catalyzed perennial debates about the relevance of the council; a dramatic display of competing ideas was sparked by a memorandum that Ben Enwonwu wrote (December 1960), seeking the reorganization of the council in order to professionalize it.

Enwonwu's memo, written just months after his conflict with the Lagos branch over the 1960 Nigerian Art exhibition to celebrate the nation's independence, is striking in its tone and substance. Apart from insisting on educating the masses through public lectures on art and art history to be organized by the council, the memo proposed that the reorganized body be mandated to "combat all reactionary tendencies which would lead to commercialisation of creative talents in the society." It also proposed the following:

- Members should be given authority to prevent an attempt by any other members of the Council from wielding a bad influence in the country by publishing fallacious views of Nigerian art.
- To create a distinct qualities [*sic*] between true art and its counterfeit; and to prevent egalitarian ideas of artists which are bad from prevailing in the society whereby young and inexperienced artists and craftsmen are encouraged to regard themselves as rival[s] of the more experienced and advanced artists.
- Members of this body should be Africans. And this body should be limited in its membership to Nigerians.<sup>13</sup>

While the earlier Nigerian Art exhibition clash must have reminded the council's expatriates and Nigerian members of the well-rehearsed grounds for Enwonwu's antagonism toward them, his desire to have the group sanction the delegitimization of its expatriate members and authorize his challenge of their relevance or the pertinence of their work (by restricting the council's important art-related programs to Nigerian-only "professionals") opened a new battle line. While there was apparently no formal response to the memo, Enwonwu soon moved his campaign for a Nigerians-only professional body, what he called a Nigerian academy of art, outside the council, momentarily collaborating with Uche Okeke to forward his agenda.

**WHILE THE ARTS COUNCIL** was the undisputable locus of activity and debates on art and culture during the 1960s, the Federal Society for the Arts and Humanities (FSAH) complemented the council's work. Unlike the council,



FSAH was nongovernmental; it focused on nurturing and institutionalizing the modern and contemporary arts of Nigeria. Founded by some well-known art patrons—the first chief justice of independent Nigeria, Sir Adetokunbo Ademola; Chief A. Y. Eke, registrar of the University of Lagos; and other members of the Lagos social elite, including Nora Majekodunmi of the arts council—FSAH also included some Lagos-based artists, including Bruce Onobrakpeya, Erhabor Emokpae, and Yusuf Grillo, who was later appointed FSAH secretary.<sup>14</sup>

Besides organizing contemporary art exhibitions, mostly at the J. K. Randle Hall in Lagos, the signal project for FSAH was to open a national gallery of modern art and a recital hall in Lagos. By the mid-1960s the society had secured the support of the Ford Foundation, New York, to help finance the gallery project; subsequently, FSAH initiated an unprecedented art acquisition program, amassing perhaps the most important collection of 1960s work by both emerging and established Nigerian artists.<sup>15</sup> The fact that FSAH occasioned the convergence of Lagos's social and cultural elite for the promotion of the visual arts was remarkable, both for what it says about widespread optimism in the first years of the independence decade and because the group's commitment to building a national collection was one of the earliest symbolic gestures by this class of Nigerians to imagine the nation through art. The gallery project never materialized, however, due to friction between government officials, who wished to control the administration and funding of arts and culture, and FSAH members, who were unwilling to cede such powers to state bureaucrats.<sup>16</sup> The failure of the project, moreover, revealed widening fissures, as the decade wore on, between a political bureaucracy that saw nothing of modern art's supposed cultural and symbolic capital and a social elite that believed this art was crucial to the making and consolidation of a new national culture. With everything else that was happening in the political sphere, the collapse of the very project that gave FSAH its *raison d'être* signaled the end of utopian visions inaugurated by national independence.

### **Society of Nigerian Artists**

The increasingly complex, sophisticated, and charged field of modern art in the Lagos scene of the early 1960s, concentrated as it was around NCAAC, FSAH, and other group or individual initiatives, compelled artists in the city to seek an independent professional forum outside the direct tutelary powers of the social elite networks. But the idea of establishing a national profes-

sional artists' organization was already a part of the Art Society initiative. For while disbanding in the spring of 1961, the Art Society leaders vowed to continue the group's work beyond college (cf. ch. 3). Arriving in Lagos after graduation, some of the society members continued to meet informally and soon began exploring the possibility of a national association of artists. This is where their goals and that of Ben Enwonwu converged.

In late October 1961, Uche Okeke, just back from Zaria and on his way to Munich, met with Enwonwu to discuss the formation of the Nigerian Art Academy—already proposed to the arts council by Enwonwu—as well as their shared misgivings about the council. Their meeting, which led to the November 18 inauguration of the academy, was also attended by several renowned artists, including Aina Onabolu, Felix Idubor, Demas Nwoko, Simon Okeke, Yusuf Grillo, Festus Idehen, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Afi Ekong, Clara Ugbodaga-Ngu, Jimo Akolo, Erhabor Emokpae, T. A. Fasuyi, J. Nkobi, and M. A. Ajayi. Onabolu and Enwonwu were elected president and vice president-director, respectively. Fasuyi was appointed secretary, and Uche Okeke was named publicity secretary. Despite widespread interest shown by the academy's inaugural members, however, the idea died soon afterward. Why the art academy idea failed is unclear, but we could speculate that the initiative was doomed from the onset for two primary reasons. First, it must have been confronted by the complicated logistics of creating a state-sanctioned professional organization with the powers of censorship. Given the tension already existing between the artists and the still powerful expatriate officials of the arts council, the academy, which must have been viewed as a possible power rival to the council, stood little chance of getting official support. Moreover, recalling the explicit resentment for the social elite expressed in Enwonwu's *Times* article and his antagonistic memo to the arts council of just months before, it is impossible to imagine how he could have secured governmental support for this project, even with his official position as the federal art adviser. Second, given the conflicting agenda of the two principal players within the “academy”—Enwonwu and Okeke—its core mission, as imagined by Enwonwu, was unsustainable. Here was Enwonwu, bent on both asserting his leadership and preeminence and controlling the irreverent, supposedly misguided young artists with their “egalitarian ideas”; then there were Okeke and his cohort, committed to breaking out of Enwonwu's shadow and becoming an alternative to his leadership of the art scene.

The academy thus seems to have been a collateral victim of the struggle between the old guard and the young avant-garde, with their irreconcilable ideas about the role of modern art in postindependent Nigeria. But whatever the reasons for the collapse of Enwonwu's initiative, the fact that it at-

tracted the “misguided youths” openly distrustful of his leadership clearly signaled the artists’ collective will to establish an institutional platform for managing their own affairs.

On parting ways with Enwonwu, several of the young artists, led by the Lagos-resident members of the Art Society and other Zaria graduates, returned to the original idea of an artists’ advocacy society rather than the regulatory entity Enwonwu envisioned. Thus, in January 1964 a group of twenty-four artists held an inaugural meeting and exhibition of the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA) at the Exhibition Centre, with Yusuf Grillo as founding president and T. A. Fasuyi as secretary. Writing to the Harmon Foundation a month later to solicit its support, Fasuyi outlined the aims of the society.

- To create a forum for Nigerian professional artists to come together;
- To protect and promote Nigerian Artistic heritage; and
- To foster the understanding and appreciation of the artist in Nigeria.

He also noted that the society planned an annual exhibition of works by members, in addition to sponsoring other exhibitions. The group hoped to organize lectures and debates, publish its own magazine, and collaborate with other organizations with similar aims.<sup>17</sup> The speed with which the society consolidated, expanded its membership, and initiated projects to raise awareness about its activities was a clear indication of the near desperate need, collectively felt on the part of the artists, to impress on the public the relevance of the modern artist to the new, postindependence Nigerian society.

By mid-1964, the secretary’s report to the society, justifiably upbeat and celebratory, outlined the progress made in the group’s first six months. Its membership had increased to forty-four, mostly because of new members from the eastern region, and there were art exhibitions in all the regional capitals. In collaboration with AMSAC it had organized two major lectures: by the African American scholar and artist James Porter (1905–1970), professor and chair of the Art Department at Howard University, and by the noted African American artist Jacob Lawrence, who was on his second visit to Nigeria. As part of its publicity campaign, SNA supported Afi Ekong’s monthly art program, broadcast on Nigerian Television Service, which had already featured Emokpae, Festus Idehen, Yusuf Grillo, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Uche Okeke, and many other artists, thus facilitating the society’s effort to reach the wider public.<sup>18</sup> These programs are noteworthy because although the society frequently collaborated with the arts council, there was no question that the Zaria group and its allies had taken firm control of the field, if not quite the leadership, of the Lagos branch of the arts council. Thus empowered,

they reintroduced the idea of professionalizing the council by restructuring it in ways far more radical than those Enwonwu proposed in his 1960 memorandum.

Throughout 1965 and early 1966, there were frequent deliberations within the arts council over a proposal to establish an Institute for Culture, a governmental entity that would take over and professionalize the council's work. As outlined by the committee charged with implementing the report on the institute—based on memoranda by Afi Ekong and other artist-members of the council—the institute would consist of four academies, sited in Lagos and the three federal regions, supported by the council and by the existing professional societies and associations.<sup>19</sup> In spite of enthusiastic support for the institute by the council's SNA bloc, resistance was firm and passionate, so much so that Major J. G. C. Allen, who had submitted a withering critique of the initiative, resigned his membership. Others, including the former Zaria teacher Clara Ugbo-daga-Ngu, who led the short-lived and little-known Association of Nigerian Artists, were critical of the proposed institute's elitism and of the fact that it seemed to duplicate the work of African studies programs in the newly established universities. Faced thus with an unprecedented internal crisis but also in consideration of the costs involved, the national committee of the arts council shelved the institute idea, although it continued to support SNA.

In any case, despite—or perhaps because of—SNA's early successes, arguments within the Lagos and national art worlds about the fate and direction of modern Nigerian art reached a new high in the mid-1960s. In the pages of magazines and newspapers, young artists and critics, appearing in the cultural public sphere for the first time, engaged a broad range of issues, from the vexing question of the arts council's relevance to the paradoxical failings of the SNA, from abstraction in the work of emerging artists to the scale of their paintings and the price of the new work. In some sense, then, the SNA's founding catalyzed the consolidation of discourses on modern Nigerian art initiated by Aina Onabolu in 1920 and sustained through the years, in different measures, by the work of Kenneth Murray, Dennis Duerden, Ben Enwonwu, Ulli Beier's network, the FSAH, and the arts council.

### Artists and Their Critics

While opening the SNA's inaugural exhibition in January 1964, Ben Enwonwu, in his dual role as federal art adviser and the society's nominal patron, declared that artists were expected to

stress the importance of the academic nature of art, and of the studies necessary for an African today who wishes to become an artist in the true sense. Through its debates and researches, the Society (of artists) will evolve new aesthetic principles based upon knowledge. It will afford reasons to academic debates on what is true art and what is its counterfeit.

The society's accepted principles will help to determine what constitutes the difference between a great work of art and a lesser one, the difference between art and craft, and the difference between an artist and a craftsman. The Society of Nigerian Artists will go further in formulating new aesthetics of African art.<sup>20</sup>

Apart from the fact that this statement recasts the main points that Enwonwu made in his 1960 *Times* article, in which he warned of the threats the social elite and the lack of leadership posed to Nigerian art, his invocation of what he calls the "academic nature of art" implies both a claim to the rigor demanded by modern art practice and the relevance of quality control in the art profession. Although he might not have been speaking of an academy in the institutional sense (as he hoped earlier), he clearly still believed in the value of an effective system of regulation and a structure for imposing and maintaining artistic standards. Only within this disciplinary order—not in the riotous, apparently laissez-faire attitude of the young Lagos artists and their supporters—Enwonwu implied, could a new aesthetics of African art emerge. But we must note, if only in passing, that in this speech Enwonwu referred to the formulation of an aesthetic of *African* rather than *Nigerian* art. This appeal to an African artistic identity is significant no less because it was out of step with the aspirations of many of the younger, independence-generation artists in the audience, whose focus since the establishment of the Art Society had been the search for and articulation of a Nigerian artistic character. Whereas Enwonwu continued to espouse ideas associated with the politics of African nationalists—coded into the rhetoric of pan-Africanism and negritude—that saw Africa and the black diaspora as the relevant space of identity formation, the younger artists, as if heeding the theory of "national culture" proposed by Frantz Fanon (1925–1961), rallied instead to the politically realistic but no less fraught banner of the national.

The January 1964 inaugural speech was only the latest example of Enwonwu's relentless criticism of trends in postindependence Nigerian and African art. Only months before, he had published a widely read essay, "Into the Abstract Jungle," in *Drum* magazine. In it he blamed European critics for the emergence of abstraction as the fashionable mode of expression among Nigeria's young artists. "These funny artists," Enwonwu argued, are

busy copying the proverbial European painter or sculptor who sits in a coffee bar at Montparnasse or Chelsea or Greenwich Village, oozing more with garlic and artistic jargon than with refined sensibility and real knowledge, and whose admirers are the disillusioned people who, for want of better things to do, often go for the *existentialism* of Jean-Paul Sartre.<sup>21</sup>

He further observed that these “copy-cat and scatter-brained artists,” who happened to be completely averse to what he called the “purity of aesthetic ideas,” were the ones “Africanist” Europeans vigorously promoted, thereby exposing Nigerian art to dangerous and unwholesome aspects of modern European art.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, having constituted themselves sole arbiters and judges of African art, European critics invariably encouraged young Nigerian artists to embrace “abstractionism,” which Enwonwu claimed was already sliding into obsolescence in European art. He saw this “invasion of Nigerian art by abstract art as part of the system of artistic colonialisation.”<sup>23</sup>

Let us note that Enwonwu’s rejection of abstraction is indicative of the precariousness of nonnarrative art at a time when art was expected to instruct, teach, and reify (or at least respond to and reflect on) collective imaginaries and experiences, even if from a personal perspective. In contemporary literary criticism, such sentiment was also widespread. Take, for instance, Ali Mazrui’s response to Christopher Okigbo (1930–1967), the great lyric poet and founding member of Mbari Ibadan, who famously declared that his poetry was not meant to communicate any meaning whatsoever. “To put it bluntly,” Mazrui stated, “Africa cannot afford many versifiers whose poems are untranslatable and whose genius lies in imagery and music rather than conversational meanings.”<sup>24</sup> Okigbo and others were accused of willfully aping European modernist poetry, semantic obscurantism, aesthetic decadence, and elitism of the worst kind when they ought instead to have put their work in the service of their communities—a task impossible to achieve with their alienated literary style.<sup>25</sup> On the heels of Mazrui’s critique, in their book on African literature the firebrand critics Chinweizu [Chinweizu Ibekwe], Jemie Onwuchekwa, and Ihechukwu Madubuike excoriated Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, and other Ibadan-Nsukka poets, declaring that they were afflicted, as they called it, by “the Hopkins Disease” for reveling in the muck of formal trickery, lost in the catacombs of lyric mystery. For in their poetry, the critics noted,

there is an abundance of such Hopkinsian infelicities as atrocious punctuation, word order deliberately scrambled to produce ambiguities, syntactic jugglery with suppression of auxiliary verbs and articles, the



specious and contorted cadences of sprung rhythm, the heavy use of alliterations and assonances within a line, and the clichéd use of double and triple barreled neologisms.<sup>26</sup>

Both the formalist writers and their fellow abstract artists, their critics complain, were condemned to a state of literary inauthenticity because of their inordinate mimicry of distinctly European artistic/literary models. In art especially, according to Ben Enwonwu, the real culprits were European critics who, because of ignorance about the religious and social aspects of African art, were leading Nigerian and African artists “into the abstract jungle” rather than “up the artistic garden path.” This justified his assertion that no foreigner could sit in judgment on African art except for an *artist*, for only then could he appreciate the profound, if subtle, differences between African and European art.<sup>27</sup>

Enwonwu invoked another influential Nigerian voice in his offensive against abstraction. He cited an article published in Nnamdi Azikiwe’s *West African Pilot* by Akinola Lasekan, Uche Okeke’s former art-by-correspondence teacher, who at that time taught at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka’s art department. Enwonwu stressed Lasekan’s clarion call about the disturbing speed with which young, poorly trained Nigerian artists were taking up abstraction as the style of choice. Lasekan, who himself attained national fame for his political cartoons in the *Pilot* and his book illustrations, had in fact proffered two quite sympathetic and more nuanced reasons for the emergence of abstraction in contemporary African art. The first was the young artists’ desire to align their work with contemporary global trends informed by scientific logic; the second was their endeavor to differentiate their work from the cheap, mass-produced image economy, too reliant on realism and mimesis.<sup>28</sup>

The claims Enwonwu makes in the *Drum* essay deserve closer scrutiny. First, most of the young artists, many of them graduates of either Zaria or the Yaba College of Technology, Lagos, had established careers at odds with Enwonwu’s caricaturish view of supposedly indolent European modernists lolling in the coffee bars of Montparnasse or Greenwich Village. The Nigerian postcolonial modernists combined their studio work with employment as teachers and designers in the public and private sectors; the case of Uche Okeke was unusual, in that he maintained an independent studio practice while remaining focused on building his cultural center. Thus in postindependence Nigeria, the closest thing to Enwonwu’s “coffee bar” milieu was Mbari Ibadan, which nevertheless was a structured organization with paid membership and a staff responsible for the production, presentation, and publication of the important new African artists and writers of the early 1960s.

Second, Enwonwu's suggestion that no European could judge or offer a critical opinion of the work of African artists recalls the barefaced essentialism of Sir William Rothenstein's nationalist critique of Parisian abstraction in the 1930s.<sup>29</sup> His construction, à la his former teacher Kenneth Murray, of a seamless transition from traditional African art to the work of modern African artists, sidesteps the fact that the latter is also an inevitable consequence of colonial modernity and Africans' response to it. It is as if, Enwonwu's argument runs, the modern artist's work proceeds directly and uninflected from that of his ancestors and from the cultural ethos that engendered and validated such practices. In other words, against the evidence of his own practice and career, he decouples modern African artists from the modern (art) experience—in which the African encounter with Europe (and its aesthetic traditions) plays a vital role—insisting on its unmediated connection to an imagined African essence. To be sure, this was not the first time Enwonwu had made such an argument about modern African art. At the African Culture and Négritude panel of the "African Unities and Pan-Africanism" Conference (organized by AMSAC at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, in June 1960), Enwonwu argued that African art is mysterious and impervious to the kind of aesthetic analysis possible in European art.<sup>30</sup>

Asserting his personal connection to Africa's mystique and its spiritual vitality, his own practice, he claims, shares the supposed mystical qualities of classical African art and therefore resists analysis based on Western critical principles.<sup>31</sup> The problem with this position is not that it is clearly an adaptation of the black essentialist aspects of Léopold Sédar Senghor's negritude aesthetics, itself informed by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's seminal but ultimately controversial notion of "primitive prelogical mentality," but that it conflates the work of artists working in relatively homogeneous African societies and that of modern artists like himself, as much at home with cultures of global modernity as with their indigenous cultures.

Third, implicit in Enwonwu's argument is an overestimation or misunderstanding of the nature of European critics' influence on young artists in Nigeria. The expatriate champions of the new work from Zaria and Lagos—Ulli Beier, Michael Crowder, and even Dennis Duerden—had different levels of commitment to the artists and for different reasons. Where, for instance, Beier emphasized the connection between modern art and Nigerian cultural traditions and admired the resulting expressionism he found lacking in the work of older artists, Crowder identified with younger artists because of the range of fresh, alternative stylistic propositions they introduced to Nigerian art.<sup>32</sup> Yet as far as we can tell, none of the critics directly influenced the style

of, say, Demas Nwoko, Jimo Akolo, or Uche Okeke, as Enwonwu may have imagined; the changes that occurred in their work were internally consistent with their artistic and ideological convictions. What we cannot dispute is that the expatriates, who in any case were the pioneer critics in the field of modern Nigerian art, provided the independence generation of artists the path to the national mainstream that had been for years singularly dominated by Enwonwu.

The paradox of Enwonwu's argument about the role of expatriate critics in the rise of abstraction is that Beier—the most influential European critic working in Nigeria at the time—had no sympathy for abstract art, and none of the young artists he vigorously supported worked primarily in an abstract mode. Erhabor Emokpae—who, more than any other Nigerian artist of the period, occasionally produced abstract paintings—was not among Beier's favorite artists; he was instead a protégé of Afi Ekong, who introduced him to the Lagos art scene. Enwonwu's attack on abstraction as signifying cultural recolonization thus seems fundamentally flawed, because abstraction was neither characteristic of new trends in Nigerian art nor the preferred aesthetic of the supposedly dangerous European cultural Pied Pipers. His critical interventions might therefore be seen as part of a high-stakes intergenerational struggle for the direction of Nigerian art. They were especially so seen, as the general criticism he received suggests, by young artists, who considered him antiprogessive and resistant to the emergence of new voices.

Given the obvious differences in Enwonwu's and Akinola Lasekan's career paths and artistic styles, their common criticism of abstraction had to have been motivated by other considerations. Enwonwu's work, to be sure, ranged from radical stylization to naturalistic figuration and often depicted female figures with elongated arms and necks that evoke the rhythm and grace of African dance, as in his *Beauty and the Beast* (1961; figure 6.4). His realistic portraits and landscapes, in their painterly vitality, contrast with Lasekan's sedate, illustrative style, thus making them strange bedfellows in the style debate. I am convinced that these two artists' criticism of abstraction was a pretext for resistance to the generational shift taking place in the Nigerian art scene. That is to say, obnoxious, trendy "abstraction" was not so much a problem of style as the symbol of everything that was wrong with the emergence of a new artistic context and sensibility, one with which Enwonwu and Lasekan could not identify.

Although Enwonwu's ire was directed at the Zaria graduates, with whom he vied for national attention from 1960 onward, there were other eligible targets, allies of the Zaria group nevertheless, such as Erhabor Emokpae



**Figure 6.4** Ben Enwonwu, *Beauty and the Beast*, oil on canvas, 1961. Federal Society of Arts and Humanities collection, University of Lagos Library, Lagos. Photo, the author. © The Ben Enwonwu Foundation.

(1934–1984) and Okpu Eze (1934–1995). More than any others in the Lagos scene, Emokpae and Eze fit Enwonwu's picture of the young, brash artist lacking rigorous academic training. The proud, charismatic Emokpae, the son of a Bini chief, had a tendency to create controversial work, which made him one of the most visible artists in Lagos. Not formally trained, he worked under a graphic design master at Kingsway Stores, Lagos, until 1953, when he became a graphic artist in the Ministry of Information. His art career began around 1954, soon after he transferred to the Enugu office of the Ministry, where he devoted more time to his art but also to reading.<sup>33</sup> In Enugu, Emokpae met Afi Ekong. She, along with Prince Abdul Aziz Atta, at that time her husband, provided him with art materials; they became his first patrons. With their encouragement he returned to Lagos in 1958, where he joined West African Publicity Ltd., a subsidiary of the London-based media conglomerate Lintas.

Michael Crowder describes Emokpae's early paintings as "naturalistic, lush, and tend[ing] towards the idealisation of the female somewhat like [Ivan] Tretchikoff," the self-taught and vastly popular South African painter whose work is similar to that of the American realist painter and illustrator Norman Rockwell.<sup>34</sup> But Emokpae's style during the late 1950s does not exhibit the elegant drawing and gaudy realism of Tretchikoff. If the clumsy execution and nonnaturalistic palette in *My American Friend* (ca. 1957) is a measure of Emokpae's formal style during this period, it is safe to say that he was, like his Art Society counterparts, drawn to the formal lessons of post-impressionist painting (figure 6.5). By 1962 Emokpae was already painting the pictures that would distinguish him from other young artists also on the threshold of gaining critical attention in Lagos.

In one of his best-known paintings, *Struggle between Life and Death* (1962), Emokpae pays homage to modernist abstraction with black and white, reductively bold and geometric pictorial elements reminiscent of the suprematist work of the Russian avant-garde painter Kazimir Malevich (figure 6.6). Yet Emokpae's interest went beyond formal experimentation to include the use of colors and shapes for their symbolic power. In *Struggle*, the juxtaposition of reversed black and white squares and semicircles, with the addition of his palm prints, serves as a visual code for the dialectical relationship between life and death, being and nothingness:

I see in life and death a dialogue between the womb and the tomb. They are the parentheses within which we love and hate, laugh and cry, grow and decay. This duality appears in varying dimensions throughout the complex pattern of creation and has been very largely the determining





**Figure 6.5** Erhabor Emokpae, *My American Friend*, oil on board, ca. 1957. Photo, Arthouse Contemporary Ltd., Lagos. © Estate of Erhabor Emokpae.

factor in the visual interpretation of my experiences. I speak of good and evil as contained in the motions of our thought and actions. I speak of the physical and metaphysical as expressed in the human experience. I speak of man and woman, their agonies and their ecstasies. I speak above all of life and death as whole.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the thematic density of *Struggle*, its compositional starkness, its resistance to simple narration, and its shocking lack of any of the familiar pictorial devices associated with academic or even modern precubist painting must have seemed too radical and artistically impoverished to many in Lagos—including Enwonwu, who might have had this picture in mind when he wrote his *Drum* article. Although few of Emokpae's other paintings had such minimal imagery, except for the surprisingly colorful *Dialogue* (1962), his fascination with pictorial symbolism, spirituality, and the





**Figure 6.6** Erhabor Emokpae, *Struggle between Life and Death*, oil on board, 1962. Collection of Afolabi Kofo Abayomi. Photo, Anthony Nsofor. © Estate of Erhabor Emokpae.

occult persisted; in a number of instances, his imagery verged on the surreal (figure 6.7).

We do not know the extent, if any, of Emokpae's intentional borrowings from the formal aspects or rhetoric of European surrealism. Nevertheless, on a few occasions he painted compositionally surrealist pictures—surreal in the sense that he juxtaposed in one pictorial plane visual elements and codes that defy the bounds of logic and reality. The two versions of *The Last Supper* (1963), by far his most controversial work, are good examples of this (figure 6.8). Both feature a uniformly dark picture plane with a large earthen vessel half filled with red liquid. Dipped into this and leaning against the rim of the vessel is a white cross, from which (what must be) blood drips back into the receptacle. Twelve hands, outlined in white impasto on the two sides and the bottom edge of the painting, reach toward the bowl of blood. A red cobweb spans the vertical and right-hand crossbars, while green leaves along the top edge of the painting above a red half-moon locate this nocturnal ritual scene outdoors. Emokpae here dispenses with all the grand and hallowed visual narratives of the biblical Last Supper, arguing with his primitive imagery that the ritual event in Jerusalem, as well as Christian reenactments of it, reflect the religion's will-to-cannibalism. The graphic simplicity of the painting, its shocking allusion to a pagan ritual, and Emokpae's vociferous criticism of Christian doctrines made it arguably the most discussed artwork of the decade.<sup>36</sup>

Emokpae's work was also controversial for its ambitious scale and asking price. Although Jimo Akolo produced some large-scale work, as did Okpu Eze, who also painted a number of semantically abstract pictures, Emokpae made the largest paintings by far in the Lagos art scene. His combination of abstract imagery and sparse formal elements with the grand scale and high price did nothing to pacify critics. In one instance, Yusufu Zaki, a *Nigeria* magazine reader who was convinced that the trend toward abstraction was a woeful mask for technical incompetence, admonished the Society of Nigerian Artists thus:

Let the Society arrest the new movement towards larger canvases and bigger sculptures which, though they may lack substance aesthetically, technically, and from the point of view of composition, are becoming fashionable. This movement, I understand, has been sparked off by the news that a new organization (Is it the Federal Society of Arts and Humanities, or The Arts Council of Nigeria or an entirely new body?) with plenty of money is working hush-hush for a said collection for posterity. In fact a friend of mine, who calls himself an artist, is working frantically on his



**Figure 6.7** Erhabor Emokpae, *Dialogue*, oil on board, 1966. National Council of Arts and Culture, Abuja collection. Photo, the author. © Estate of Erhabor Emopkae.



**Figure 6.8** Erhabor Emokpae, *The Last Supper*, oil on board, 1963. Photo, Clémentine Deliss.  
© Estate of Erhabor Emokpae.



*Independence Fantasy*, a 12' × 6' monstrosity which he thinks the organization will lap up for a mere £3,000.<sup>37</sup>

Although neither Emokpae nor Eze was specifically mentioned in Zaki's text, the fact that two of their paintings illustrated it suggests that their work was implicated in the critique. Emokpae's *Tears of God* (1964), much larger than Eze's, is a three- by eight-foot oil painting on board. Pictorially nonreferential and bare, it features a large encrusted circular swirl at the top right corner and another lateral streak at the lower left in an otherwise dark, blank picture plane. The formal qualities of paintings like this further secured Emokpae's reputation as the poster boy for all that was wrong with abstraction in the eyes of Ben Enwonwu and other critics.

To critics like Zaki and Enwonwu, the huge asking price for *Tears of God* (£315, more than \$7,000 in current inflation-adjusted buying power), was further proof of inordinate youthful ambition on Emokpae's part (and other young so-called abstract painters', too)—an ambition to command prices generally thought to be reserved for such established contemporary masters as Ben Enwonwu and Felix Idubor. This was not a simple matter, given the hallowed space that Enwonwu in particular occupied in the public imagination. In fact, it was the scandalous price that Emokpae was asking for *Tears of God* that prompted the popular Nigerian novelist and occasional art commentator Cyprian Ekwensi (1921–2007) to publish “High Price of Nigerian Art,” a widely read critique of big, abstract, pricey paintings by young Nigerian artists. In this text, Ekwensi described his encounter with one of Emokpae's paintings:

A very impressive painting by Nigerian Artist Erabor [*sic*] Emokpae, covering an area eight feet by four feet [*sic*] and leaving little room for other paintings in the exhibition by three Nigerian artists. The exhibition was attended by the usual clique of American collectors, sophisticated Nigerians, and television and still cameras. For that price a large percentage of jobless Nigerians would happily give their services for twelve calendar months. How many Nigerians were appreciative enough to write a cheque for that figure and have the painting delivered? And again, was it becoming the vogue to sell paintings by the square foot? The answers to these questions and to many others which plague the mind about Nigerian art and Nigerian artists can best be answered by the artists themselves.<sup>38</sup>

It will come as no surprise that Ekwensi interviewed the two infants terribles of abstract art (Eze and Emokpae) and their chief antagonist (Enwonwu) for this inquiry, but it is Enwonwu's response that concerns us as

he ties together the high price of contemporary art with the core problem he tackled in his *Drum* magazine article: the negative influence of European Pied Pipers on young Nigerian abstractionists.

According to Enwonwu, the “highest price a Nigerian artist should ask for a painting is eighty guineas,” which makes sense to him, given that even he would charge three hundred guineas only for what he considers a masterpiece.<sup>39</sup> The problem, as he saw it, had much to do with the lack of standard criteria for art evaluation in Nigeria whose art market is unlike Europe’s advanced one, where the price depended on such reasonable benchmarks as the artist’s reputation, training, age, professional experience, and the labor input of a given work. Apart from the fact that he saw no logical basis for any Nigerian artist—particularly those he considered inexperienced, lazy dilettantes who had found a safe house in abstraction—to compete with him in the art market, Enwonwu was convinced that the rise of abstract art was a consequence of the scandalous state of the unregulated market. As he put it, the absence of even a basic understanding of the business of art forces the artist to be a mere imitator of European artists; “as a result Nigerian art is being dragged into an abstract jungle.”<sup>40</sup>

These debates, elicited ostensibly by Emokpae’s singular gesture of demanding what his critics considered an inordinate price for a painting by a young artist, further indicated the degree to which Nigerian art had become a multilayered, contested terrain by the mid-1960s. Erhabor Emokpae represented one of its facets in his desire to be unfettered by African artistic traditions, yet he walked along a parallel path of creative self-determination with the Art Society group, whose members were grappling with the consequences of natural synthesis. Both groups, joined by the perception of excessive ambition, had to contend with the opposition of the old guard, represented by Ben Enwonwu and Akinola Lasekan, which was anxious about the displacement and reconfiguration of the normative order by the independence generation.

It bears emphasizing that Emokpae’s aesthetic program, more profoundly influenced by then recent modernist work, was similar to that of Okpu Eze, whom Ulli Beier referred to as a Nigerian surrealist, and of Colette Omogbai (b. 1942), the painter from Zaria who also identified herself as a surrealist. In calling Eze a surrealist, Beier seems to have thought of surrealism in terms of the artist’s depiction of unreal and mythological subjects by means of stylized figural and abstract forms. But as Ekwensi astutely observed, Eze’s paintings result from the effort to “capture attitudes, movements, rhythm, dynamism, fleeting moments, unstable designs.”<sup>41</sup> Even if the constituent



elements of his compositions occasionally coalesce into imagery that seems to hover at the horizon of recognizability, as in *Graven Image* (1963), there is no reason to doubt that his primary interest is in the pictorial tension between order and chaos. Thus, despite his divergence from the compositional certainties of Emokpae's hard-edge symbolism and from the figurative impulse in Jimo Akolo's work (see ch. 5, figures 5.28–5.31), the belief in art as underlying the expression of individual autonomy is paramount in Eze's painting. If the work of Emokpae and Eze pressed hard against either the cult of beauty led by Enwonwu or the art for national culture championed by the Art Society group, Colette Omogbai's arrival on the Lagos scene added a new, resoundingly feminist dimension to the discourse of modern art in Nigeria.

Omogbai's work and rhetoric is remarkable because of its radical rejection of the status quo and its critique of realistic painting and of the comparison often made by Enwonwu of painting and beauty. Her exhibition at Mbari Ibadan in 1963, when she was a senior student at Zaria, caused a sensation as much for the dramatic power of her imagery as for the clarity of her artistic vision. According to her artist's statement, she had tried to work in an academic, realistic style while in college but found it so boring that she had to devise a way of "translating nature into strictly personal language to portray mood, intensity, feeling and emotion"<sup>42</sup>

In rejecting what she called the academic method in her first two years of art training, she opted for a vigorously expressionistic, nearly abstract mode. The result—a muscular style exemplified by *Accident* (ca. 1963; figure 6.9)—had few linear elements and large areas of thick impasto delivered with the palette knife. The mood here, as in her other paintings, is characteristically dark and somber, like her subject matter, and the paint surface is agitated and intense. While *Accident* and other paintings, including *Agony* (ca. 1963; figure 6.10), testify to a preoccupation with the human condition, the figural presence is nevertheless often subordinated to the spatial dynamic of the composition, with passages of dark color punctuated by bright, allusive shapes and highly abstracted forms.

The sheer expressiveness of Omogbai's paintings attracted Ulli Beier's unconditional support. But the terms of her entrance into the Lagos art circles attracted praise and caution from other critics. Here was a young woman artist, as art critic Babatunde Lawal noted, who had just barely proven her artistic originality by painting in a style that lacked a "feminine touch" even as it brandished a "new plaque of revolutionary art." According to Lawal, her premature flight into abstraction—without first demonstrating mastery of mimetic representation—threatened to reduce her work to the aristocratic



**Figure 6.9** Colette Omogbai, *Accident*, ca. 1963. Reproduced from *Black Orpheus* 14 (February 1964): 63. © Colette Omogbai.

opacity of abstraction.<sup>43</sup> Omogbai's painting, Lawal's criticism suggests, was double trouble; for apart from jettisoning good old narrative realism, it destabilized stereotypes of women's work. But if such criticism affected Omogbai, it seems to have hardened her resolve to confront her critics' assumptions about what constitutes feminine art and about the bounds of taste in post-independence Nigerian art. In so doing, she inevitably confronted the wider critique of new work by Enwonwu, Ekwensi, and others.

In a 1965 *Nigeria* magazine essay that reads like a classic manifesto, Omogbai challenged what she called man's love for the "sweet and senti-



**Figure 6.10** Colette Omogbai, *Anguish*, ca. 1963. Image courtesy of Iwalewa-Haus, University of Bayreuth.

mental” and his parallel fear of and distaste for pictures of great intensity.<sup>44</sup> Though she does not directly address a specifically Nigerian spectatorship, speaking of generic “man” instead, there is no question about her target, for she ridicules most, if not all, charges leveled against young artists like herself, Emokpae, Eze, and others who unapologetically dismissed illustrative, pretty, or narratively coherent work:

Art to man is not a thing in itself. It is dependent. Paint must be explained in terms of words and in story-telling words too. Man believes in meaning that can be expressed by clear and distinct ideas. He fails to realise the fact that to look for an explicit meaning in art is a fundamental error, based on a complete misunderstanding of the medium.<sup>45</sup>

Further on, she states that

Man frowns at “Modern Art.” It is no use since it has no meaning. It is useless because it is out of keeping with the Old Masters vision. “It is art of the toddlers,” Man dismisses carelessly. . . . “Sit down my child, your eyes have not seen as many days as Abraham.” “Wait till you have stiffened for fifty more harmattans.”<sup>46</sup>

In these passages, Omogbai, then a twenty-three-year-old Zaria graduate, responded indirectly but nonetheless forcefully to critics of expressive, non-realistic, visually disturbing work—work generally and erroneously lumped under the rubric of abstraction. Her stance against pretty, mimetic, or narrative imagery, her insistence on the individual artist’s freedom to experiment with new forms, and her right to question received aesthetic traditions must be seen as part of the demand by a young generation of artists for fresh, sophisticated artistic practice, the future of which would be in its hands. That this new work and criticism sympathetic to it were opposed by older artists, along with the fact that it was stridently challenged by some emerging critics, testified to a general anxiety it caused in the Lagos art scene of the mid-1960s. Omogbai’s essay thus marked the moment when the genie of post-colonial modernism had escaped from the proverbial lamp and taken flight, ready to confront the past and present in its own voice, poised to assert its claims to the driving seat of Nigerian art.

**I BEGAN THIS CHAPTER** by noting the shift that had occurred in the early 1960s when Lagos displaced Ibadan as the center of discourse in contemporary art and culture. Whereas *Black Orpheus* was the voice of the Ibadan era,

*Nigeria* magazine, a much older general-interest publication, provided critical space for art discussions in 1960s Lagos.<sup>47</sup> It bears emphasizing that the rise of Nigerian artists and critics as major players in debates on contemporary Nigerian art coincided with the displacement of expatriates who, for the most part, determined the tone and scope of the discourse in the first years of independence. As we have seen, Ulli Beier, with his circle of expatriate friends Gerald Moore, Denis Williams, and Julian Beinart, contributed most of the art criticism published in *Black Orpheus* during Beier's editorship. *Nigeria* magazine, on the other hand, though also initially dominated by expatriate contributors, expanded its coverage of art criticism and commentary by Nigerians, especially during the editorship era of Michael Crowder (1960–1962) and, even more so, the Nigerian writer Onuora Nzekwu (b. 1928; editor 1962–1966). Thus we could argue that if *Black Orpheus* inaugurated the discourse of postcolonial modernism, *Nigeria*—after its makeover as the cultural magazine of postcolonial Nigeria—provided the space for its elaboration.

Until Crowder's tenure as editor, coverage of contemporary art in *Nigeria* was rare. But once Crowder took the helm, while simultaneously serving as director of the Lagos Exhibition Centre, he marshaled resources toward support of contemporary art, particularly the work of Zaria graduates. Even so, *Nigeria* magazine under Crowder, in terms of its contemporary art coverage, was still eclipsed by *Black Orpheus*. Everything changed with the arrival of Nzekwu, whose inaugural novel, *A Wand of Noble Wood* (1961), joined the work of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and other independence generation writers in grappling with the consequences of Euro-African cultural conflict in colonial and postcolonial Africa. From the start of his tenure, besides including a highly influential literary supplement, Nzekwu established a section called "Art Gallery," a lively space for short art reviews and commentaries that, in addition to the combative letters-to-the-editor section, captured the raw, discursive energy of an emerging field. Moreover, apart from featuring art and artists presented at the Exhibition Centre, the "Art Gallery" covered events at the galleries of AMSAC, Mbari Ibadan, and Osogbo, thus strengthening the magazine's position as the leading platform for contemporary art in Nigeria. Looking at the list of post-1962 contributors to the art pages of *Nigeria* and in the way it changed from expatriate writing to Nigerian voices, one could reasonably say that Nzekwu gave voice to his fellow emerging Nigerian artists, writers, and critics as they defined and occupied the postcolonial modernist mainstream. Put differently, Onuora Nzekwu irrevocably inaugurated Nigerians' effective control—perhaps even decolonization—of the discourse on their own art and literature.<sup>48</sup>



**THE ACCOUNT THIS CHAPTER** gives of the debates surrounding and the developments in Nigerian art in the first half of the 1960s, though necessarily incomplete, sufficiently maps out the important questions that artists and critics contended with in Lagos in the immediate postindependence period. One major development, signaled by the increasing critical discourse in *Nigeria* magazine and elsewhere and the founding of the Society of Nigerian Artists, was the simultaneous marginalization of expatriate critics and the emergence of Nigerian critical voices. In a sense, this was precisely what Enwonwu had pushed for since the 1956 Black Writers and Artists Congress at the Sorbonne. Enwonwu's *Drum* essay, intended to elicit responses from other Nigerian artists and critics, must be seen as a fresh attempt on his part not so much to suppress emerging artists as to displace entrenched expatriates from the driver's seat of contemporary Nigerian art criticism. The problem was, of course, that as the Nigerianization of art discourse unfolded, it did not follow the direction he anticipated, due to the emergence of younger voices resolutely loath to accept his leadership and opposed to his vision of modernism.

Despite disagreements on stylistic trends and because of increased traffic in artistic practice and debates, the Lagos and Nigerian public took notice of this efflorescence, leading to calls for greater visibility of new and emergent as well as established artists. In fact so popular were such national sentiments that Nzekwu was motivated to publish a historic two-part series, "Our Authors and Performing Artists," in the first half of 1966.<sup>49</sup> But the sudden end of his editorship of *Nigeria* soon after that series was published also speaks to the critical juncture at which the newly independent Nigerian nation had arrived that same year. For whereas the celebration of the stars of Nigeria's literary and artistic modernism was an emphatic statement about the dramatic transformation that had occurred within the short period of political sovereignty, Nzekwu's departure belied the crisis that had engulfed the new nation, following the first military coup of January 1966 and the subsequent civil war of 1967–1970.<sup>50</sup> In other words, postcolonial modernism in Nigeria, after riding the euphoric wave of political independence, came of age at the very moment the nation, weakly constituted as it was, began to unravel.