

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF RATIONALITY-SKILL ACQUISITION IN FINE ART AT THE JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL (JSS) SUB-LEVEL OF NIGERIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM.

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Abstract

Nigerian Fine Art student is faced with rationality-skill-acquisition problem which is partly caused by the method of teaching and learning Fine Art. That method itself is traceable to the period before the Dark Ages. This writer traces that problematic teaching method to its genesis and unravels how it has undermined the learner's rationality-skill acquisition. He then recommends a more rationality-promoting method of teaching and learning Fine Art that holds out the prospect of facilitating the learner's rationality-skill acquisition

Introduction

A rational person has been described as one who is able to think clearly and make decisions based on reason rather than emotion (Hornby 2006); and reasons to which clear thinking leads are always altruistically prudent. Oroka (2005:108) observed that "Nigeria has become a country with wrong value orientation". For several years, Nigeria has maintained the unenviable record of being one of the most corrupt countries in the world. In the year 2003, the Switzerland based Transparency International rated Nigeria as the second most corrupt nation in the world, Bangladesh being the first (Orere-Clifford, 2004:2, citing Vanguard, 2003:3) (*sic*). Although Nigeria no more occupies that position, her corrupt practices still abound. However, being corrupt is not the crux of the matter. Amaele (2004:4) opined that corruption has become such a tradition in Nigeria today that

whoever finds himself in an elevated position in which he can fraudulently enrich himself but refuses to do so, is regarded as a fool. He is ridiculed by his friends and relatives.

The crux of the matter is the reaction of the one regarded as a fool and scorned by friends and relatives for maintaining moral integrity. If such one absorbs the shock produced by the responses of friends and relatives and stands his ground, sooner or later his steel-like moral resolve reproves or even condemns at least some of those friends and relatives, thereby winning them over to his side. But if he cowers in the face of the ridicule and scorn, then, he would be giving them the impression that his erstwhile, moral resolve was made in error with the result that the debauchery of his ridiculers would seemingly be justified by his cowardice.

Certainly, that is the Nigerian situation which makes it all the more imperative for Nigerians, especially young Nigerians, to be imbued with the sort of moral disposition which defies every scorn and ridicule and which enables its subjects to keep going morally in the society, no matter how tough the moral going may be. As one of the renowned Nigerian philosophers of education puts it:

Part of the task of the educator here is to find ways to develop strength of will, consistency, persistence, and so on in children to enable them to be able to stand up to what they believe in the face of counter-inclinations, social pressures and their own moods (Adewole, 1989:156).

In the context of this article, the educator is that of Fine Art; and the strength of will is meant to enable the student stand his ground no matter what others say or do. But to be so resolute, a student must be totally convinced that the position he has taken is the best to be taken and for such a total conviction to be possible, the student and the teacher must have recourse to the use of rationality in the teaching and learning of all subjects, including Fine Art. This article identifies the factors militating against rationality in the teaching and learning of Fine Art, and which - therefore created a rationality skill-acquisition problem. The trail of that identification was brazed by a renowned Artist who himself address the subject in an inaugural lecture. The writer then proposes possible solution to the problem.

Art and Fine Art: A Relationship

What is art? The simplest and probably the most widely accepted definition of art is anything man-made. Sometimes the term "art" is restricted to man's aesthetic creations. Thus, the art departments in 20th century colleges and universities are usually those of painting and sculpture (and sometimes architecture). Going by the definition above, everything made by man (building, furniture, automobile, cities, garbage dumps etc): every change that human activity has wrought upon or in nature, be it positive or negative, beautiful or ugly, beneficial or destructive is art (Hospers, 2005).

Art could also be defined as the use of imagination for expressing ideas or feelings particularly in painting, drawing or sculpture; and the skill of creating objects such as paintings and drawings, especially when it (the skill) is studied. Fine Art is in turn, defined as forms of art, especially painting, drawing, and sculpture that are created to be beautiful rather than useful. Judging from these definitions, one could conclude that while art work generally may or may not be useful in addition to being beautiful

(and beauty is in the eyes of the one beholding it), Fine-Art work does not have to be useful in addition. Another difference is that while Art may refer to Fine Art itself, music, theatre, literature, or other non-technical, non-social-science, non-science subject (and when all or more than one is taken together, the word art becomes pluralised), Fine Art never includes other subjects. A fuller treatment of Fine Art should therefore transcend the sub-province of Fine Art. That is why this writer starts from Art itself.

The Factor that Militates Against Rationality-Skill-Acquisition in Art

Egonwa (2007:47, 48) advances this j fervid argument about the major factor militating against skill acquisition in art.

...the Nigerian artist is-very apprehensive of criticism. This may also be a result of ... acquired habit of laziness.

Until after the Nigerian civil war, there were no professionally trained art critics.... This problem was then highlighted by those whom we can refer to as second and third generation art critics/art historians. In my paper, "Improving Art Literary Practice in Nigeria: Notes to None Artist Art Writers (Egonwa, 1986a) I lent my voice to earlier worries of Obiora Udechuku (1976), Ota Oloidi (1979) and Dele Jegede in Akinukawe (1983) (*sic*) about the non-existence of an articulated tradition of art criticism.

(The author does not reference any of those authors he credits.) This writer fastens upon the term acquired, and the phrase: non-existence of an articulated tradition of art criticism, appropriating them as a basis on which to advance a parallel argument. If the word: acquire, means to gain something by one's efforts, ability or behaviour, or to obtain the thing "by buying or being given it" (Hornby, 2006:12), then no average person would make efforts to gain or obtain laziness or accept it as a gift. One can only either unwittingly inherit the

habit, or willingly choose to develop it and in the context of the Professor's Lecture, Nigerians are apprehensive of criticism probably because they inherited it. But from whom?

It should be remembered that Nigerians, like other Africans, are a sturdy race. So the ebullient Lecturer could not have meant physical laziness probably, he means the mental sort of it. In an earlier work, this prolific Writer has thrown his weight behind the position taken by his fellow professionals regarding "professionally trained art critics" whose absence in Nigeria before the Nigerian civil war was their worry. By implication, therefore, from the generation of the Nigeria civil war (1967 - 1970) to the nascent generation of Nigeria, there has always been the non-existence of an articulated tradition of art criticism. Art is an integral part of African culture, just as Nigeria is the territorial giant of West Africa (Boateng, 1997:27). Therefore, whether it is the African third-generation art-critics in general or those of Nigerian in particular, the legacy of being too mentally lazy to criticize, and thereby ratiocinate accordingly was bequeathed to them by their ancestors.

Of course, in fairness to those ancestors it should be realised that they became lazy, not due to any fault of theirs. In fact, they were made lazy. There are certain factors which must not be glossed over in connection with the controversial issue of art and the criticism of it. The factors dealt a deathblow on art and its criticism potentiality. The very first factor is Islam. It is an established fact that:

In North Africa and some parts of central, East and West Africa, including Northern Nigeria, the Arabs arrived in multitudes, which soon overwhelmed the native population. Whether or not they conquered the natives by *jihad*, they intermarried with them. and, in a few generations, it became difficult to differentiate their offspring from that of the natives. All too soon, the Arabian-Islamic influence became profound and long lasting and

little or nothing of traditional African... re-emerged there. KOLE Omotoso observes, in respect of North Africa, countries such as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya remember little of their history and culture... (Ukala, 20,07:14, quoting Omotoso, 1978:146).

As asserted above, arts is a component of that forgotten culture and if art is a forgotten phenomenon, then, its criticism potentiality couldn't have thrived at the time it was forgotten for that could mean thriving in a vacuum. Other factors are the menaces of boundary insecurity (Ekoko, 2004), cultural interference (Mordi, 2005), and cultural imposition (Adamo, 2004), and (then, the surge of African renaissance (Akinpelu, 2005). These four factors are duly enunciated later. It is the cumulative effect of these factors that seems to have undermined art-and its rationality potentiality with the result that some continents of and individuals in the world-at present, including The so-called Asian Tigers have moved faster than we in Africa in terms of responding to the challenge of the info-tech-revolution (Omatseye 2003:29-30). That response is the fruitage of culture criticism on the part of those continents and individuals, which cultural criticism Africa in general and Nigeria in particular and their art seem to lack the ability of.

The Causes of that Lack

Starting from "the 20th century... Africans are experiencing a cultural renaissance, much as the Europeans did in the 15th century and transformed the rather crude overly-religious medieval life into the modern" (Akinpelu, 2005:58, 60). The 15th century Renaissance in Europe was preceded by the medieval period or Dark Ages which in its turn was precipitated by the Norsemen's and the Dorians¹ invasions of parts of Europe "between 18th and 15th centuries BC" (Kpangban, 2005:30).

Partly because of the over dosage of religion in their lives and partly because of those invasions, it was out-rightly impossible for the

Europeans to transform their lives prior to and during the Dark Ages. Christianity was introduced to Europe in the first century, the same time it came into existence during the period of Roman Empire; and Christianity has been the major religion influencing education and culture from the period of the Roman Empire in Europe. Till the period of Renaissance, it was transmitted with the same methods that religion was and those "Methods of transmission were more of indoctrination than teaching" (Oroka, 2005a:45).

Such an academic and cultural milieu invariably engenders the mental stultness which in turn, undermines criticism and foments conservatism. Those invasions themselves produced social instability which aggravated the already bad situation as far as art criticism is concerned in the Europe of that time.

The situation was no better in Africa before the 20th century insofar as it concerns religious over dose (Akinpelu 2005:60) and socio-political instability. The following narrative aptly describes the degree and cause of socio-political instability in the Africa of that time. It has been observed that European territorial interests were acquired and defended in Africa by warfare. In fact African boundaries at that time have been more promotive of conflictual situations than peaceful coexistence; according to Curzonite speaking in parlance, the boundaries have constituted more of war and death for nations that peace and life (Ekoko, 2004:6,15).

Africans must be super humans to think critically in such a situation of war and death as against peace and life. Just as socio-political instability impeded the flourishing of criticism in Europe before the 15th century, so did it obstruct the blossoming of it in Africa before the 20th century. In fact, the unsavoury situation lasted right into the first half of the 20th century, at least in some parts of Africa. It is on record that "1914 was a year of military anxiety in Nigeria; for

example, 13 persons, 11 Africans and two Europeans, died of an explosion in Lagos harbour" (Ekoko, 2004:11). In addition to that, rumours that the Germans would overrun Nigeria and descend on Lagos in full force were spreading. In neighbouring free-French Chad, Italian planes bombed targets between June and October. The fear of a full-blown German invasion of Nigeria was so terrible that the colonial authorities drew up a plan for evacuation of all European nationals resident in Nigeria to Port-Harcourt and Lagos for onward transportation by sea to safety in South Africa (Ekoko, 2004:11).

It is, therefore, no wonder that African art in general and Nigerian art in particular lacked critics up to this time, just as European thought generally lacked same up to the 15th century. There are yet two other potent factors which obstructed the thriving of criticism in art. These are the factors of cultural interference and cultural imposition. Regarding the former factor, Mordi (2005:14), argued that the threats against traditional religion and culture would have been less detrimental had the missionary bodies and authorities not pressed the gains to the point of constricting the ideology of commensalisms (or social solidarity) which bound the traditional world being, according to Mordi (2005:14), that of "the living and the living dead together". The verbal phrase: pressed the gains, conveys the idea of deliberately interrupting one course in a bid to further another one, while the verb: constricting, synonymises the verb: undermining. Therefore, the bottom line of this argument is that the natural course of African art was both interrupted and undermined in favour of Western culture.

As for cultural imposition, another author explained that throughout his years in the Bible College and Seminary in Nigeria he could not remember courses in African culture and religion he ever offered. The only course in African indigenous religion he ever learnt was

taught with the main purpose of showing how "heathenistic" and useless African religion and culture are. According to him, when he first entered the Bible College in 1968, he was taught how to dress like the Americans. By the time he graduated, he had "learned to interpret the Bible the American way;" he preached the Bible "the American way," and in fact tried to talk, walk, eat, and do everything the "American way". More importantly, he concludes, he learned how to condemn African culture and religion perfectly because he was taught that they were not valuable (Adamo, 2004:8,14).

It has been noted above that before the 15th century, Christianity was taught in Europe exactly the same way Western Tradition Religion was taught there too before the advent of Christianity in Europe in the first century AD.: the way of indoctrination. In the same vein, even after African renaissance has commenced, the same Western propagators of Christianity in Africa squirmed not from indoctrinally imposing their culture on Africa via religion: ostensibly, Christian religion.

The implication of Adamo's (2004) argument is quite distinct: propagators of Western Christianity taught members of the budding African elite that African culture (art inclusive) was "not valuable"¹. How then can this elite which is the cream of African society think critically about what is not valuable? Rationally preoccupying oneself with something valueless is the height of absurdity, those of the elite deduced then, and justifiably so. Yet this elite generation is the very first one (Egonwa, 2007) after the last generation of those who acquired only African indigenous education. That last generation would have bequeathed the legacy of art criticism to that first elite generation, those of which, in-turn ought to have injected rationality and its concomitant criticism into art.

Fine Art and the National Policy on Education (N.P.E.)

In the foregoing pages, the fate of art and culture rationality-wise has been examined in the succeeding pages, fine art and the NPE will be addressed. The objective of addressing them is to determine whether or not the indoctrination teaching-method which impedes rationality is employed in the teaching of Fine-Art at the JSS sub-level. The first revised (1981)- edition of the NPE provided for the teaching and learning of art at (he senior secondary school sublevel; and its other editions (1998 and 2004) provided for the teaching of fine art at the JSS sublevel. That seeming discrepancy between the first and the later editions rather justifies the view that Fine Art is sometime considered to be the same as Art. For that reason, fine art is subsumed under Art as a subject in modern school system or Western education; therefore, whoever teaches or learns Fine Art at once, teaches or learns aspects of art. How Fine Art is taught and learned has been described as follows:

Through communication, symbols could help to maintain order and coherence and this is achieved largely by the use of art objects. This in turn could be as a powerful instrument for indoctrination or as a tool for impressing religious dogma on the minds of the devotees thereby making it easy for the leadership to organize their followers in an orderly manner (Ojo, 2003:38).

The operative terms are: indoctrination and dogma.

For example: "among the Igbo of Nigeria the Ofor (a ritual instrument and a staff of office) symbolises authority and at the same time an earthly representative of the ancestors of the people" (Ojo, 2003:80-81). An Igbo Fine-Art teacher may be African Traditional Religious (ATR) devotee at the same time. If he wishes to impress on the JSS student's mind the religious dogma that Ofor represents the people's ancestors which he (the teacher) himself already reveres, he will draw Ofor and extol it in such a way that the junior secondary school student

(JSSS) will not be free to critically appraise the dogma in order to determine whether or not he could discover from it something that has particular significance for him. ART makes use of indoctrination method and religious dogma in modern system of education (or in Western education) both (indoctrination and dogma) of which undermine the junior secondary school student's (JSSS's) capacity for leading the life of rationality without which art criticism remains elusive. The JSSS's inability to criticise art is the problem militating against his acquisition of rationality skill.

Recommendations

The student should be taught to adduce art reasons rationally hence: (i) To that end, a range of reason from which to choose must be arrayed, (ii) He must be made to justify the reason for the choice he makes, (iii) He must be taught what it takes for a given art work to be beautiful. The teacher for example, may ask the question: Is a student who criticises ceramic, graphic, painting, sculpture, textile, or any other fine art erring? Why? Why not? This set of questions will likely sensitise the JSSS to the need for him to form the habit of rationally adducing reasons for the Fine Art decisions he takes. This habit of adducing rational reasons for taking fine-art decisions will naturally spill over to the JSSS's taking of moral decisions.

The other rationale behind these recommendations is this: one of the two components of the overall philosophy of Nigeria is that her citizens should live as those of one nation founded on the principle of freedom, equality and justice; these are moral principles.

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