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Impact of Colonialism on Contemporary African Art

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Dr. Nwauwa

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“If you don’t know history, then you don’t know anything. You are a leaf that doesn’t know it is part of a tree.” – Michael Crichton

Studying history provides insight and explanations for what is present in today’s society. Colonization is not the only piece of Africa’s history, but it is a major contributor. Studying the history of Africa, pre and post colonialism, provides explanations for how Africa arrived at its present and where it is headed in the future. Colonization had a major impact on Africa’s culture and history, including contemporary African art. Contemporary African art, including description, materials, subjects, and purpose, were greatly influenced by the culture of the European countries that colonized Africa. In this essay, a brief history of the colonization of Africa will be described, use of “tribal” and “neo- primitivism” descriptions will be explained, and contemporary African art will be defined. African art from three specific countries, Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, will be discussed and ultimately, the impact of colonization on contemporary African art will be explained. Just as Michael Crichton eluded, studying contemporary African art, without the understanding the impact colonization had on it, would be ignoring its history and relevance.

The “scramble and partition” of Africa began in 1880 when Europeans saw opportunity for economic, political, and social expansion. The British, French, and Portuguese were three of the major European countries that saw Africa as prime real estate, open for the taking. Europeans viewed Africans as primitive and inferior, which allowed them to justify their actions and continue with their imperialistic plans. Europeans also used their idea of their natural and scientific superiority to convince Africans that they were less than and inferior.¹ After prolonged

¹ Stilwell, Sean. 2002. *The Imposition of Colonial Rule*. Vol. 3, in *Colonial Africa*, by Toyin Falola, 3-26. Durham: Carolina Academic Press.

mistreatment, Africans began to view themselves as inferior as well. Because European colonization impacted the economic, political, and social aspects of Africa, it greatly influenced the development of c, past and present.

“The Africans consider the impact of colonization on them to be perhaps the most important factor in understanding the present condition of the African continent and of the African people.”²

According to James Giblin, History Professor at The University of Iowa, history has a profound impact on art, including African art and its connection to colonialism. Giblin explains that the African’s participation in the slave trade and experienced oppression under colonial rule, had a direct impact on contemporary African art. Art reflects and “expresses values, attitudes, and thought, which are the products of their past experience.”³ Because the African people were viewed as inferior and primitive, their art was and continues to be viewed as such, as well. The classification of African art as “tribal” began under colonial rule and has continued into the age of contemporary African art. Because African art reflects the values and experiences of its people, which is different than the accepted European and western ideologies, contemporary African art continues to be classified as “tribal”, reflecting the difference of value westerners place upon it. By maintaining the description of “tribal”, African art has maintained its status as abnormal, different. Contemporary African art maintains the spirit and artistic expression of the

² Khapoya, Vincent. 2013. *The African Experience*. 4. Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education, Inc.

³ Giblin, James. 1998. *Art and Life in Africa Online: Issues in African History*. November 2015. www.zyama.com/Iowa/African%20History.htm.

African artists, but due to the extensive impression of colonialism, their art has continued to be influenced by their history, and as Giblin explained, it always will.⁴

Similar to the continued use of the term “tribal”, as explained above, Tony Monda provides insight into the term “neo-primitivism” that is used by art critics to describe contemporary African Art. Neo-primitivism is a term used by western art critics to continue the marginalization of African art. Due to the small role contemporary African art plays in the global art realm, critics often justify its unimportance. In addition, by referring to their art as “primitive” they are reinforcing the colonial ideas of African inferiority.⁵ Although the decolonization in Africa has occurred, the impacts are lasting.

Before delving any deeper into the impact European colonialism had on contemporary African art, a definition of contemporary African art needs to be explained. Simply, contemporary art is explained as art that is created in and reflects the present time period. Unfortunately, as years pass, that time period changes, thus changing what contemporary art is referring to. Thus, historians and artists find it very difficult to define contemporary art in strictly one context. When describing the impact colonialism had on African contemporary art, it is described as art created in the time period of post-colonialism, into the late 20th century and into the early 21st century. Contemporary African art is also described as art that has made a “departure from traditional styles and values”, which can be directly connected to the influence of colonialism. When art critics are analyzing pieces of contemporary African art, a term that they often include, is the “Africanness” of the piece. Due to the impact of colonialism, the “Africanness” of a piece of contemporary African art is relevant because it provides insight on

⁴ Giblin.

⁵ Monda, Tony. 2013. "Colonialism Taints Contemporary African Art." *The Herald*, January 21.

how much influence European colonialism had on the artistic expression of the artist and subject. Another definition that is relevant when defining African art, is Afropolitanism. Afropolitanism is new contemporary art work that is created by young, African artists. Their art reflects the history of their culture and people, but also includes a modern perspective due to their personal values and experiences, which are entirely post-colonialism.⁶

During post-colonialism, conceptual art design began to make its way into contemporary African art. Conceptual art gets its name due to the fact that it is entirely conceptualized before creation, the artist values the process of creating the piece more important than the final result. Abstract art, that was common during the colonial era as influenced by Europe and western ideals, began to diminish as conceptual art increased. The “gap narrowed considerably with the great political changes experienced and new and exciting imaginations prospered.”⁷

Contemporary African artists, in the aftermath of colonialism, also became very inventive and resourceful. They began using recycled objects, which they had found, into their conceptual sculptures and art installations.⁸

“Africa is a continent of richness and opulence of cultural material and resilience of creativity”⁹

Tony Monda believes in the power of the African culture and creativity of the people, even under the most enduring, oppressive circumstances. Monda expresses though, that although resilient, post-colonial African art was not independent of the cultural influences of the colonizers. Contemporary African artists were rejuvenated after decolonization, but they were

⁶ Evans, Bronwen. 2010-2013. *Contemporary African Art*. November 2015. www.contemporary-african-art.com/contemporary-african-art.html#sthash.ceuvSPkE.dpbs.

⁷ Evans.

⁸ Evans.

⁹ Monda, Tony. 2014. "The Effects of Colonialism on Contemporary African Art." *The Patriot Reporter*, August 28.

not immune from the impact of colonization. Monda explains that one of the largest influences of contemporary African art, were the “fine art” schools that were opened in accord with Christian missionary schools.¹⁰ Christian missionaries either arrived to the African region prior or immediately following colonial takeovers. In addition to converting the African people to Catholicism, Missionaries were responsible for building, funding and running schools. Although religion was a tool used to distract the Africans while they were under colonial rule, the missionary schools were proponents of providing education increasing the knowledge of the African people.¹¹ Fine arts schools, created by the missionaries during the colonial period had a lasting impact on contemporary African art. The schools provided new art techniques, aesthetics, and a hybrid form of African art that heavily reflected their traditional culture with the culture of their colonizers.¹²

Contemporary African art, including description, materials, subjects, and purpose, were greatly influenced by European colonization. The increased use of color and new found style of the art began to reflect western art. The subjects of the contemporary African art also began to reflect Western culture as well. Less indigenous symbols were used as art began to reflect the culture and values of the colonizers, the impact of the Christian missionaries was especially profound. For example, crucifixes and Nativity scenes began to be produced in the traditional African mediums and were given their symbolism, not from the indigenous people, but the colonizers themselves. Techniques and materials also changed, especially since the increase of trade allowed for different, all new materials to be acquired. Oddly enough, even though African art began to reflect and symbolize Western culture, their contemporary art continues to be

¹⁰ Monda August 28.

¹¹ Khapoya, 143-144.

¹² Monda August 28.

referred to in the “primitive discourse” is always had and their artists and art itself is still considered “tribal” no matter how renowned. Ultimately, the purpose of contemporary African art shifted away from its indigenous roots. The purpose became a hybrid of what Westerners valued and what Africans were willing to sacrifice for recognition.¹³

In another related article, Tony Monda explains the impact of colonialism on contemporary African art in northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Monda explains that the impact of colonialism can be clearly seen in the art of the Mangbetu people. During colonialism, which continued into post-colonialism, they were introduced to a new style of art called naturalism. Naturalism is the recreation of “artistic landscapes”. The artist’s particular technique and specific landscapes provide individualistic expression, but the new style was an impact of colonialism and was integrated in contemporary African art.¹⁴

Sculpture continues to be a prominent art form in African culture, but due to colonization, the subjects and appreciation for them have changed. When colonizers arrived to Nigeria, they did not view the African sculptures as art. Because the sculptures, “masks, totems, and statues”, reflected the “religious, fertility and social contexts” of the Nigerians, they were misunderstood and underappreciated. The colonizers and Christian missionaries did not understand the religious and social practices of the Nigerians, thus they did not understand their associated sculptures. Rather, they described them as “uncontemplated fetish, tribal, and nonsensical products”. The misunderstanding of the Nigerian sculptures never subsided by the colonizers, thus their view

¹³ Kasfir, Sidney. 2000. "Artists' Reputations: Negotiating Power Through Separation and Ambiguity." *African Arts*.

¹⁴ Monda, January 21.

has continued to impact contemporary African sculptures. Still today, some Africans do not view traditional sculptures as art because of the lasting impact of the views of the colonizers.¹⁵

Prior to colonization in Zimbabwe, sculpting was a respected indigenous art form and stone was their sacred medium. Stone was “carved, etched, and scratched” into the renowned symbols of Zimbabwe, including birds and other great animals, social symbols and even in the likeness of themselves. The respectability and appreciation for the stone sculptures, called “Shone sculpture”, remained intact as they were placed at sacred sites and only few knew the true meaning of their symbolism. Surrounding clan groups, Royals and their subjects were the only individuals enlightened of their meaning, as to preserve their sacredness. When colonization occurred, the colonizers did not understand the sacredness and appreciation for the stone sculptures because they were not provided with their symbolism. Thus, they only viewed the stone sculptures as shallow, meaningless pieces of sculpture. During the colonial era, colonizers began selling the stone sculptures as tourist souvenirs, allowing Westerners to feel as though they had a piece of Africa in their homes. Eventually, during post-colonialism, the stone sculptures were mass-produced and sold without any appreciation for their historical and sacred symbolism. Even today, they no longer have the power, authority, or historical significance in Zimbabwe or around the world. Some gifted sculptures though, unlike the mass produced pieces, continue to distinguish themselves in the global art scene and are able to create stone sculptures with the historical significance and symbolism intact. Colonialism had a major impact on the indigenous,

¹⁵ Ajibade, Babson, Emekpe Omon, and Wole Ololodi. 2011. "African Arts in Postcolonial Context: New Old Meaning For Sculptures in Nigeria." *Medwell Journals* 172-180.

respected art form of “Shona sculpture”, which has continued to impact its contemporary meaning.¹⁶

“There are those who want a text (an art, a painting) without a shadow, without the “dominant ideology”; that that is to want a text without fecundity, without productivity, a sterile text... The text needs its shadow...”¹⁷

Kasfir explains that the influence of colonialism on contemporary African art provides context, meaning and an explanation of the history from that time period. Colonization has cast a shadow on African art, but that shadow is part of the story, part of the art. Without the shadow, the art is incomplete, because African art is “a mirror of Western colonial history.” Not many would describe the impact of colonialism on contemporary African art a positive result, but due to the engrained nature of colonialism in Africa’s history, to remove the colonial impact would be to remove a piece of its meaning.¹⁸

“The reclamation of our knowledge and cultural base should challenge the certitudes within the representative Western art expositions, cultural censorship and social control, which presently exists in the scholarship of our art and culture.”¹⁹

Tony Monda, as quoted above, believes that contemporary African art, although entangled in the colonialism, is influenced by Western culture but is ultimately a reflection of the current values and historical significance of the African people. Colonization had a major impact

¹⁶ Monda, Tony. 2014. "The Colonisation of Cultural Discourse in Zimbabwe." *The Patriot Reporter*, November 20.

¹⁷ Kasfir, Sidney. 1992. *African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow*. Los Angeles: UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center.

¹⁸ Kasfir.

¹⁹ Monda November 20.

on Africa's culture and history, and ultimately contemporary African art as well. The importance of history in the present has been explained, brief history of colonialism was given, and the continued use of descriptors such as "tribal" were discussed. In addition, the explanation of contemporary African art allowed us to see the influence of both indigenous and Western culture, through the change in symbolism, purpose, materials, and value. The discussion of African art from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria and Zimbabwe demonstrates the specific impact colonialism had on contemporary African art. To understand that a leaf is born from a tree, is to understand that contemporary African art was born from its indigenous roots and influence of European colonization.

My research on the impact of colonialism on contemporary African art has solidified the idea for me that colonialism has and will continue to have lasting effects on Africa. Determining the positivity or negativity of the impact became less relevant, than the actual impact itself. To dissect a piece of Africa's culture, one often overlooked at that, provides insight on just how extensive the influence that the colonizers had. To understand how ingrained these ideas and influences are, is to understand that they can never be removed. The impact of colonialism on art, and in every other capacity, reveals that the impact is now a part of African history, not something that can be fixed or removed from it. I enjoyed learning about the impact of colonialism on contemporary African art because it solidified many of the conversations that we talked about in class and made them come full circle. To understand how and why colonialism began, what it entailed, its overall impact and then to connect that all back to the impact it had on one piece of the culture, art, is to understand the dynamics of African history.

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