



Olakunle Osundina and his Paintings

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Abstract. This study examines selected works of Olakunle Osundina (1971-2018), a contemporary Nigerian artist, and his contributions to Nigerian art. It highlights the underlying Yoruba philosophical expressions encoded in the works of Olakunle. The study relied more on the fieldwork carried out between May 2016 and January 2017 where several studio visits were made to his studio in Akute, Ogun State. Oral interviews were conducted with Olakunle where first-hand information was gathered about his artistic development, studio practice and philosophy. Photographs of some of his works were taken, examined and analysed to bring out his socio-cultural inclination. The study adopted Stuart Hall's concepts of representation to analyse the themes of selected works. It is concluded that Olakunle was not just an artist who was merely interested in the visual representation of events around him, but one with a solid root of his socio-cultural and ethnic background and this is evident in his works, which represent Yoruba philosophical teachings and learnings.

Keywords: Yoruba, visual art, idiomatic expression, Olakunle Osundina, and Onaism.

1. Introduction

In the developmental studies of African art, the early scholars erroneously conclude their criticism and evaluation perhaps because they have a limited understanding of African cultures and artistic traditions. Their perception of African art does not conform to what the ideal work of art is. On this note, they misunderstood the artworks from other regions and labelled them with negative terms such as primitive, childlike, naive, crude, and object of curiosity, (Adrain 1904:14). Later in 1910, Leo

Frobenius discovered an equal finesse of western works made of bronze from Africa, particularly the Court art of Benin and the *cire perdue* cast from Ife. The astonishing quality of the bronze cast from Ife and Benin contributed to a change in their bias, and therefore reasoned that if such great quality cast could come out of Africa, then there must be reasons for the abstraction; the major characteristic lies in the essence of the works. Hence, Trowell (1953: 20 & 60) asserted that the only way to appreciate works of art from Africa is to understand the cultural and historical backgrounds of the people who produced them, as this will inform them about the reasons for the forms and meaning embedded in the artworks. Therefore, this arouses the need to further interrogate the socio-cultural background of the people together with their artworks for proper understanding and appreciation. Olakunle Osundina (*plate 1*), falls into the group of contemporary artists who adopted the representational canon of traditional African art where forms are loaded with insightful philosophical meanings. This is often in line with the essence and expressive content embedded in his works notwithstanding his exploration of foreign materials and tools. In order to critically examine the paintings of Olakunle Osundina some paintings were purposively selected. The works selected were examined in detail to bring out the interpretation of his symbolic forms and images (iconography) and their expressive connotations. This further reveals the artist's interaction and understanding of his socio-cultural (Yoruba) background thereby, placing his forms in proper perspective and understanding. As insiders of the same cultural background as the artist, the appreciation of his works caught our attention because they are loaded with both 'exoteric and esoteric' which only the insiders (initiates) can decode. The appraisal of the

works brings out the messages and meanings embedded in the paintings.

A critical appraisal of Olakunle Osundina's works is geared towards bringing to the fore the underlying interpretations of the 'hiding treasures' in the paintings. This becomes necessary because the paintings selected were rendered in a semi-abstract manner typical of the characteristic of ancient African art that requires logic to comprehend their link to the people and happenings in the built environments. The lack of critical appraisal by the early Western scholars and art critics on traditional African works, as regards the embedded meanings of forms and symbols, contributed immensely to their prejudice in judging the works erroneously based on their physical appearance. Thus, their aesthetic appreciation was in the reverse of the Yoruba aesthetic judgement as exemplified in this saying *ìwà lewà* (the character is beauty). A good-looking person may have a bad character while someone considered ugly may possess a good character that will make such a person preferable and acceptable in society.

To better appreciate and understand the works of Olakunle Osundina; his form, style, theme and message (expressive content) which is the chief goal of this study, his background and creative history are also germane.

1.1 Who is Olakunle Osundina?

Olakunle Osundina was born in Ibadan on 27 July 1971, and until his death on 2 November 2018, he was a strong and active member of the Ona art movement. Olakunle attended Government College Ìbàdàn. He studied Fine Arts at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, where he bagged his B.A. Ed. and MFA (painting) in 1999 and 2014 respectively. His practice from graduation to death was based in Lagos, the artistic capital of Nigeria and Akute, Ogun State. He succeeded in leaving his prints in the sands of time within the short time he lived. Olakunle's name was becoming a force to reckon with in the contemporary Nigerian art scene when he met his untimely death. He has two solo exhibitions to his credit and several group exhibitions. According to Ohiomokhare (2009:2), his love for culture makes his paintings speak from the aegis of tradition.

Sharon Pruitt (1999:76) observes that the individual freedom of expression in pursuit of a personal or national identity led to the emergence of a variety of styles", this is perhaps the case of Olakunle. He consciously rejected stylistic borrowing from Western academic traditions and embraced instead, an

approach that addressed the issues of his Yoruba's visual languages and in particular, the Ona Philosophy (Folárànmí & Umoru-Òkè, 2019).

During his rather short time, Osundina lived and worked in his private art studio, a section of his apartment at Akute (which is a border town to Lagos State) in Ifo Local Government of Ogun State. His paintings revealed stylistic renderings influenced by the Ona art movement to whom he was exposed while at the university. He was influenced by most of his lecturers at Ife, who are exponents of the Ona art movement. It had become a tradition that the Ife lecturers have consciously instilled in their students to emulate their footsteps and preach it to the world. Hence, Osundina's paintings revealed high interest in the Ona style, which is an adaptation of the Yoruba artistic traditions and values; the spatial relationships involving flattened shapes, frontal presentation, and stylised forms-elements traceable to traditional Yoruba works in nature.

He was happily married to Yemisi (nee Ajiboye), an artist and the first daughter of Josy Ajiboye, one of the famous Nigerian artists (a painter and cartoonist).



Plate 1 Olakunle Osundina October 31 2010 at the Quintessence Gallery Ikoyi Lagos
Photograph: Nanashaitu Umoru-Oke

Another explanatory concept that influenced Osundina's paintings can be found in *àdìre eléko* (tie and dye) textile design, one of the Yoruba people's artistic heritages. This is evidenced in his painting as the entire scene plays out against a background based on an *àdìre eléko* fabric design, a traditional Yoruba indigo resist-dyed technique. The motifs in "Diplomatist" and "Wasted Libation" show a typical geometric form and pattern synonymous with the Yoruba indigo textile design as the figures are enclosed in a circular compartment, surrounded by a border with shapes made from stencilled animals, plants and geometric design. He passionately appeals, that traditions are the bulwark of one's identity, personal strength, and means of survival. His worries

were basically about artists who jettison to reflect cultural elements in their artworks, Osundina (2014). He expressed his displeasure with artists who refuse to borrow from their cultural background, according to him, such artist/s are not proud of their identity and forms that could enrich their creativity.

2. Analysis of Olakunle Osundina's Paintings

For a proper and objective appraisal of the selected paintings of Olakunle, the assertion of Feldman (1967) on critical performance is employed. This is a descriptive analytical tool that includes, formal analysis, interpretation and judgment. Critical performance is a systematic approach to investigating the meanings of works of art to understand the themes, including the social and cultural context of the artworks. The basis of critical performance is to arrive at the point of aesthetic or critical judgment, where the context, thematic thrust and stylistic direction(s) of the selected works are analysed.

Description in art criticism draws attention to the elements of art used. To do this it requires *sùúrù* (patience) to painstakingly make a proper observation, identification and understanding of the elements found in the work for descriptive purposes. Formal analysis focuses on the elements and principles of design. That is, emphasis is laid on the arrangement and qualities of the elements of design such as line, shape, colour, texture and space relationship used in the work. This answers the question of the quality, that is, how they all look individually and the interpretation which could be taken for what is the meaning of the work and its essence.

The four paintings selected for analysis in this study have distinct elements that constitute their total form. The work titled "*Question Mark*" (plate 2) was rendered using brighter colours, and hues such as red, yellow, blue, green, and violet. Basic shapes such as squares, rectangles, and triangles are represented in the lower left-hand corner and the upper right-hand corner of the painting. In the main body of the painting are people standing by a long queue of kegs and buckets to fetch water. The long queue recessed into the background to a vanishing point that form a question mark '?' to the water tap stand. The water tap-stand is the typical potable water source and a fetching method adopted in Nigeria in the 1970s and still reoccurring to date. This is one of the public water sources mostly in urban cities and towns where people in scores fetch water in containers. The subjects are seen fetching and carrying buckets of water on their heads, suggestive of the scarcity of potable water in Nigeria which brings

us to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The colours are harmoniously used, the upper part of the painting to the right-hand side is rendered in a mixture of indigo/Prussian blue, violet and midnight blue with touches of orange and red; while the lower part to the left-hand side contains hues of green, red-orange and yellow. In the middle of the painting are shades of yellow that accentuate the radiating glow that fuses the entire painting. This, thus, gives the work a warm touch with the crisp cross strokes of lines (associated with a cubist style of painting), which are arranged harmoniously and effectively.

The piece "*Question Mark*" has a reason and a message it passed to the audience. A view of the work at a glance raises curiosity in one's mind which leads to self-enquiring why the arrangement of the objects (a keg and buckets) in a form that depicts a question mark icon? This is because; the symbol is usually placed at the end of an interrogating statement. Thus, looking at the artwork will arouse questions as to why this symbol? This could lead to engaging in dialogue or exchanging ideas with individuals, particularly in the situation depicted in the painting. This situation could be linked to Nigeria, a country where infrastructure facilities are inadequate and resources are not well managed. It is also metaphorical and could be likened to the poor situation in Nigeria where crude oil is being mined in large quantities daily and yet, the masses are suffering from the scarcity of its products (Premium Motor Spirit and Diesel). The painting thus raises questions, such as, what are the roles of the government in the welfare of the governed? How are the facilities and resources in Nigeria managed? These and more are the questions being asked by the painter.



Plate 2 Olakunle Osundina *Question Mark* 2007 (Oil on canvas, 36 by 48 inches)

Photograph by: Tolulope Sobowale 2009

Olakunle used this work to make a critical statement about how Nigerian leaders handle the country's resources to which only a few have access to its benefit at the expense of the masses. Nigeria is blessed with natural resources, which are readily available in abundance yet inaccessible. Also, in Nigeria, the few in governance constantly mismanage and embezzle the nation's treasury at the expense of the general populace. Just as the minority in the society anticipates better things to come and watches helplessly at a distance how their political leaders are selfishly enjoying alone what ought to have been enjoyed by everyone, in the manner Osundina depicted the people at the top of the question mark icon in the composition.

The artist's work critiques the pervasive corruption and societal ills which characterise the twenty-first century. Olakunle draws attention to how corruption has become entrenched in our society, highlighting the need for critical examination and collective action to

address these pressing issues. By confronting the audiences with the stark realities of our time, the artist invariably encourages us to reflect on our involvement and responsibility in perpetuating or challenging the status quo.

In "*Wasted Libation*" (plate 3), the composition is centred on a gourd (*kèrègbè*) and the content coming out of it. A calabash (*igbá*) is placed close by the gourd, and there is a palm leaf representation at the upper right side of the painting. On the lower left side is also a lizard motif. There are geometric shapes of irregular triangles, squares, circles and rectangles, and various lines are used to create a rhythmic flow on the surface of the work. The lines also create an interconnectedness that prevents the composition from appearing disjointed, thereby allowing each of the hues (red, blue, violet, orange, and brown) to maintain its distinct and vivid appearance.



Plate 3 Olakunle Osundina *Wasted Libation* (2010 Oil on canvas 40 by 48 inches)
 Photograph by: Tolulope Sobowale 2010

In "*Wasted Libation*" Olakunle draws inspiration from the ancient customs and traditions of the Yorùbá people of Southwest Nigeria. In Yorùbá culture, a gourd is a versatile domestic object with multiple purposes, serving both sacred and secular functions depending on its intended use. Traditionally, gourds are used for storing various items such as herbs, grains, water, and palm wine, as depicted in this artwork. The gourd and calabash share a common purpose, with the latter serving as a plate for communal dining in traditional Yoruba settings, both in domestic and ceremonial contexts. In this setting, libations are poured on the floor as a sign of reverence to ancestors before communal meals, underscoring the significance of respect and tradition. However, the gourd's precarious positioning suggests a dire situation, abandoned and neglected, with no apparent effort to

rescue it from total waste. The round base of the gourd, unable to stand alone, serves as a poignant metaphor for the vulnerability of cultural heritage without support. This scene is creepily reminiscent of Nigeria's political landscape, where elected leaders recklessly squander resources, prioritising personal gain over the welfare of the masses, despite the abundant wealth. Olakunle's artwork is a powerful indictment of this systemic failure, a clarion call to action against the greed, and the neglect that promotes suffering amid plenty.

The calabash in the painting symbolises the plight of the common people, who are helpless and struggling in abject poverty due to the reckless and greedy leadership that has squandered resources. This is a direct result of their wasteful and careless behaviour,

where what could have been sufficient for all has been lavishly wasted. The calabash, which is meant to hold and contain, is not yet full, but its contents are being poured onto the ground, where it will be of no benefit to anyone. In contrast, the fresh palm leaf representation in the painting is a sign of hope and relief. It signifies God's favour and blessing on Nigeria, the land which is richly endowed with lush vegetation and abundant resources.

The background of the painting features surface embellishments in various shapes and degrees, these represent the diverse minerals and natural resources that abound in the country. However, these resources are not equally accessible to all, as they have not been properly harnessed or managed. The use of radiant colours in the painting suggests a hopeful future for the country, where things are done right and resources are utilized for the greater good. The lizard motif, perhaps represents the smaller group of people who are currently benefiting from the country's wealth, but in a way that is wrong and unjust, as depicted by its robust appearance.

In the painting "Diplomatist," the artist demonstrates a profound affinity with Yorùbá iconography, symbolism, and imagery. The foreground features a male figure holding a flower, accompanied by a female portrait adjacent to him. Two silhouetted figures appear on the upper right side, there is also an umbrella and a stick drawing of a zoomorphic representation, likely a goat. To the left of the male figure, a stalk of leaves emerges, juxtaposed with cracked walls beneath and a lizard motif above.

Geometric shapes constitute a dominant element of the composition, while a harmonious palette of yellow, red, orange, brown, green, indigo, and blue creates a visually striking effect. This artwork exemplifies the artist's mastery of Yorùbá cultural symbols and his ability to integrate them into a cohesive and aesthetically pleasing whole. A closer examination of the painting's iconography and symbolism reveals a rich tapestry of meaning, inviting further analysis and interpretation.

The silhouetted figures, skillfully integrated into the background, serve as a visual metaphor for the budding stages of the relationship between the two individuals of opposite sexes depicted in the artwork. Their bodily posture and positioning convey a sense of reciprocity and mutual acceptance, underscoring the development of a romantic connection. The central figure's gesture of proffering a flower, a symbol of affection and devotion, signifies his passionate desire to establish a deep emotional bond with the woman. This act of gift-giving, a ubiquitous trope in romantic relationships, necessitates patience, persuasion, and dedication, as the suitor endeavours to win the heart of his beloved. Upon achieving his desired goal, the man's countenance exudes a sense of serenity and fulfilment, accompanied by a subtle, self-satisfied smile. In stark contrast, the woman's facial expression reveals a complex mix of emotions, including remorse, regret, and perhaps a hint of disillusionment, subtly hinting at the power dynamics and gender roles that underpin this romantic encounter.



Plate 4 Olakunle Osundina *Diplomatist* (2010 Oil on canvas 48 by 48 inches)
Photograph by: Tolulope Sobowale 2010

The painting masterfully captures the sorrowful consequences of betrayed trust in a romantic relationship. Accessing the inner world of a woman of dignity requires a gradual build-up of trust, a delicate bond that can be shattered by abuse. The artwork poignantly conveys the emotional turmoil that ensues when this trust is violated, as evident in the woman's facial expression and the warm red and orange hues surrounding her head.

The iconography in the painting is rich in symbolism, reinforcing the artist's message. The cracked wall at the lower right side of the man's arm serves as a powerful metaphor for the woman's vulnerability and consent, echoing the Yoruba adage '*bó g̀r̀i ò la nu, aláńgbá kò lè rá yè wọ bẹ*' that is an outsider's penetration is impossible without an insider's complicity. The lizard motif above, representing the man's interest and ability to exploit any opening, starkly contrasts with the woman's weakness, highlighting the power dynamics at play.

The flower, umbrella, and goat at the upper left of the painting are equally symbolic, reinforcing the themes of love, trust, and betrayal. The artist's skilful use of imagery and symbolism invites the viewer to contemplate the complexities of romantic relationships and the devastating consequences of abuse, making this painting a powerful commentary on the human experience.

The inclusion of the goat in the upper left quadrant of the painting serves as a visual example of the Yoruba proverb, *ohun tó bá di lẹ, le wúré ngbé*, meaning that when an item is carelessly placed, it belongs to anybody, including animals. This aphorism cautions against the perils of complacency and negligence, highlighting the consequences of unchecked vulnerability. The woman's countenance, beset with regret and remorse, reinforces this message, underscoring the importance of vigilance and discernment in personal and political spheres.

The umbrella, positioned closer to the silhouetted female figure, may be interpreted as a symbol of guidance and tutelage, proffering wisdom and cautionary advice. Its presence serves as a reminder of the need for astute decision-making and critical evaluation, lest one succumb to the whims of circumstance. The painting, in this regard, presents a powerful allegory for the political arena, where the electorate must remain vigilant and discerning to avoid the pitfalls of misguided leadership. Through this masterful deployment of symbolism and imagery, the

artist invites the viewer to contemplate the complexities of human action and the consequences of our choices. The painting, in its nuanced exploration of regret, caution, and political responsibility, offers an intense indictment of satisfaction and a clarion call to vigilance.

From a moral perspective, the flower in the painting '*Diplomatist*' symbolizes the man's satisfaction and pleasure after successfully pursuing the woman, while the woman herself appears disappointed, disturbed, and disillusioned. This artwork can be likened to the political landscape in Nigeria, where politicians employ eloquent rhetoric to convince the electorate during election campaigns, only to renege on their promises and fail to deliver on their pledges once in power, leaving the people feeling betrayed and embittered, as reflected in the woman's facial expression. However, if the people stand firm with their conscience and hold their leaders accountable, they will be protected. The umbrella in the painting serves as a symbol of protection and shield, reminding leaders of their responsibility to manage and sustain the mandate given to them by the people. When this mandate is not betrayed or squandered, it can lead to positive and responsive developments in our local communities, environments, and the nation as a whole.

Through this poignant artwork, the artist issues a powerful reminder to leaders to remain true to their promises and commitments and to prioritize the welfare and well-being of the people who entrusted them with power. By doing so, we can foster a culture of accountability, transparency, and good governance, leading to a more just and equitable society.

"A lo ni ti ijapa" (plate 5) by Osundina shows his depth of knowledge about the Yoruba language and culture, encapsulated in the myriads of folktales where animals and plants take on the role of superheroes. They become subjects which, in their daily living, reflect the goodness and imperfections in humans who tell tales. Perhaps it is a means of speaking truth to all indirectly, usually, when a tale such as the one Osundina has visually represented here is told. Yoruba tales usually end in a lesson to be drawn. In this painting, Osundina reflects 'how folktales as a part of communal tradition can invigorate a renaissance in the preservation and sustenance of culture'. Additionally, it suffices to say that most Yoruba tales with zoomorphic characters point fingers at real or imagined people.



Figure 5 Olakunle Osundina *Alo ni ti Ijapa* (2013 Mixed media 60x80cm)
Photographs by: Stephen Folaranmi 2013

In this painting, the main subjects are *Ijapa* (the tortoise) and his in-laws. On a single panel of mixed media rendering, Osundina captures the various scenes in the tales to direct our attention to the roles played by *ijapa* in this tale. In Nigeria, many artists, writers, and musicians use their creative professions to address burning issues in the Nigerian space. This painting, like many of Osundina's paintings, aligns with such perception or intervention. As Babalola and Oananuga (2019:166) put it 'Folklore has many cultural aspects, as it had served, and can also serve to validate a culture, as well as transmit a culture's morals and values. As a nation formulates educational philosophy, economic policies, political philosophy and religious philosophy, the cultural philosophy through which a nation maintains its national identity is preserved in the languages indigenous to such a country. And this can be passed on to the younger generation quite effortlessly through folktales, anecdotes and ditties. Could this be the philosophy that also drives Osundina's visual representations? Is he drawing attention to something that we have to unravel?

From time immemorial, art in Africa has always been for essence and the reason why it is clearly stated that there is no art for art's sake among Africans (Willett: 1971). Thus, contemporary African artists in order not to lose track of their progenitors (traditional African artists) have put conscious efforts to borrow ideas and mannerisms of the old in the execution of contemporary works of art. This is very evident in Osundina's paintings as he employed the use of motifs and iconography known with the traditional African artworks in his modern paintings.

Osundina's use of motifs and symbols rooted in his tradition is a continuous effort to make his work relevant and in line with the philosophy of the Ona art movement to which he belonged. In this regard, he was

able through his visual ingenuity, to propagate the act of natural synthesis in his works.

The thematic expression of the paintings in this study is highly expressive as they all communicate to society in the best way the artist could contribute his quota in sanitising the behavioural attitude as regards socio-cultural, political and economic matters. The works are very relevant as they communicate ideas on the present situations of the happenings which they stand to correct. Revealing the essence of the paintings through its contextual analysis also helps in projecting the value beyond aesthetics. Osundina's works in this study could be regarded as having dual purposes as they all possess physical beauty, pleasing to the eyes and fineness (Adepegba (2009:6) and Ohiomokhare (2009:2).

In this regard, a work of art is like a literary work such as creative writing and cinematography. The reader or viewer respectively understands the plot independently of the author. Expressively, the reader or viewer can understand more than the author intended since there are many stories/concepts behind a work of art. In contrast, instrumentalism focuses on the ability of art to serve an end more important than itself. That is, an artwork is excellent or meaningful if it fulfils its thematic thrust or is useful to society.

Conclusively, Filani's word rightly comes into play when he expresses in Osundina's works that "I fancy the appraisal of such paintings using the warmest of words, not only because of the freshness of the colours but also because of the ebullience of the subject matter. However, as the Yoruba often opined there are times when words abound but time constrains; while sometimes time abound but words are limited". The former is the case now. Olakunle's artwork serves as a

powerful indictment of Nigeria's political landscape, where elected leaders prioritise personal gain over the welfare of the masses. Through his masterful use of symbolism and imagery, Olakunle skillfully conveys the devastating consequences of corruption and mismanagement. As an artist deeply rooted in Yoruba culture and tradition, Olakunle's work not only showcases his technical skill but also his commitment to preserving and promoting the rich cultural heritage of his community. Ultimately, this paper highlights the significance of Olakunle's artwork as a catalyst for social change, urging viewers to confront the harsh realities of Nigeria's political landscape and demand accountability from its leaders.

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Personal Communication

Osundina Osundina (age 43) Saturday, April 4, 2014.
At his residence/studio, Akute, Ogun State.