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# Relaiming Africa: Art as a Tool for Decolonization

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## **Introduction**

In recent years, scholars have increasingly looked at the damages done to African art in a colonial context. The historian Victor Onibere contextualized that the Scramble for Africa “distorted the perception of African cultures and identities, impacting both traditional and broader African artistic expressions”, and “challenged traditional African artists’ artistic autonomy” (Onibere 88). African artists have experienced incredible limitations to work within their own cultural frame, which led to a movement that started to use art as a tool for decolonization. The place of visual representations in the continued effort to decolonize spaces in Africa is of essence for it addresses decolonization frameworks that can be overlooked but are nonetheless effective. The term Decolonization is used to refer to “the process of addressing and dismantling that history and its effect in the present and future” (Becker 4). It is also a response to the dilemma of what can be done by artists in Africa or the diaspora to contribute to the effort through innovative approaches. By arguing that art can be an effective means to continue the long process of decoloniz-

ing Africa, this paper examines three ways in which art can be an effective tool against colonization; its ability to change narratives, art as a method of advocacy and using Afrofuturism in the artistic sphere.

## **Changing Narratives**

### **Historical Perspectives of Visual Art**

Following many years of Eurocentric framing that categorized the African art scene as primitive, artists have increasingly worked to reclaim their authority. Victor Onibere explains that materials have played an important role in the evolution of African art. Historically, the imposition of European mediums influenced the traditional forms to create new expressions “that reflected the dynamic interplay between traditional African aesthetics and external influences” (Onibere 88). To reclaim their authority in the contemporary African art scene, and dispel the myth of practicing “neo-primitive art,” different art forms are increasingly being used to create stories that reflect the diversity and complexity of modern Africa, eg. painting, sculpture, photography, and digital media. These interpretations

have affected contemporary African art and play a role in the full significance and complexity of the chosen materials and subjects who work to change such discourses of primitivity. It highlights how African artists today work to break down various myths and stereotypical narratives using different mediums.

### **The Power of Recycling**

One of the recurrent ways in which African artists have used their creations as tools against colonization is by recycling materials to represent rebirth. It delves into the idea of the cycle of life that is theoretically joined with a rebirth. Ibrahim Mahama, a Ghanaian artist born in 1987 and Goncalo Mabunda, an artist from Mozambique born in 1975, are both recognized for their work with recycled materials. Mahama used coal sacks, old clothing fabric, fishing nets and much more to create beautiful pieces. His work is also characterized by connections to indigenous art forms, "which is another level of viewing the objects as a rebirth" (Baskett 39). On the other hand, Mabunda uses wax-print fabric that was produced and sent by the Dutch when the Netherlands and West Afri-

ca had colonial relations (Basket 39). The reason for Mabunda's use of wax print fabric is not specified but can be interpreted in many ways, it could be a reminder of a dark past or a claim that they can use western materials to express their own cultural stories. It leaves the interpretation up to the viewer and allows them to find their own meaning and create a narrative that corresponds with their personal background. Additionally, Mabunda is known for the inclusion of thrones in his work. Western collectors have desired to possess African thrones for many years because they saw it as "coveted fine art". However, the significance of thrones for Africans is different as it represents a worshiped part of the regalia and kingship. His thrones themselves are what represents his indigenous origins, and his rebirth of the concept serves to reclaim these origins (Basket 39). By doing so, Mabunda directly confronts the loss of cultural meaning and attempts to regain authority over colonial stories. Through the work of Ibrahim Mahama and Goncalo Mabunda, it can be seen that some African artists use their art to recycle materials, symbols and narratives in order to create something that is new and their own.

## **Art as Advocacy**

### **The Intersection of Art and Advocacy**

Even in other contexts than in Africa, Art has always been known as a powerful vessel for messages of advocacy. Artists are able to use emotive power to highlight injustices and create an empathetic and solidarity movement (Iqbal 27). In South Africa, artists were crucial in the movement of resistance against oppression during the Apartheid. Dr. Farah Iqbal reminds us that in an effort of cultural boycott, international artists stopped performing in the country and national artists like playwright Athol Fugard and musician Miriam Makeba. Both have shed light on the injustices of apartheid, hoping to stimulate resistance (28).

Through his playwriting, Athol Fugard used visual imagery and narratives that put the audience face-to-face with a reality of injustice, whereas Miriam Makeba offered a musical experience that cut across cultural, linguistic and geographical groups to convey the inequitable reality (Iqbal 2023). Moreover, art can effectively mobilize communities

and create collective efforts. Artistic experiences such as plays, large scale festivals and exhibitions bring people together and allow new connections and dialogues towards social change and the reappropriation of Africa. Since individuals are often welcome to bring their own perspective to creative expression, it was empowering for people to feel that they are part of a bigger movement (Iqbal 2023). Therefore art was a common but popular method of advocacy against colonialism, one historically proven to have made a difference in Africa.

### **Notable African Artists and their Impact on Activism**

There has been a growing global movement by African artists who doubled as activists to call for the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes to Nigeria. The Benin Bronzes is a term employed to refer to the thousands of works of art stolen by the British army when they invaded Benin city in 1897. They were mainly pieces made from brass, wood, ivory, leather and bone that different museums in the Global North acquired during the 20th century (Britannica 2024). The call to return African artworks to their places of origins can be dis-

cussed at great lengths, but the aspect that is relevant to this paper is the role that notable artists have played to shed light on the importance of the situation and movement. They have used their platform of creativity to advocate for decolonisation and cultural repatriation, which contributed to the creation of discussions on ethics and the need to address the legacy of colonization on African art. Along with activists and scholars, artists have been at the “forefront of this movement, challenging the status quo and advocating for the rightful return of the Benin Bronzes to Nigeria, where they can once again be a source of pride and cultural heritage” (Onibrere 94). A notable actor in the movement is the film maker from Ghana, Nii Kwater Owoo. He directed and filmed a short documentary with a global reach named *You Hide Me* in 1971, which was the story of a Black couple who ventured in the basement of the British Museum and found looted African artifacts highlighting the irony of Western museums possessing marauded African artworks. Artists have thus continued to use their creative expressions to mobilize their audience towards challenging the impacts of colonization and reclamation of what was lost

to it.

Yinka Shonibare is a prominent artist of Nigerian heritage known for his provocative pieces around themes such as identity, power relations and colonialism. Shonibare used Dutch wax-printed fabric to create his most famous piece *Scramble in Africa* (2003) – headless mannequins dressed in bright Victorian style clothing (Britannica). Presumably dead bodies of slaves in Victorian clothing personifies the colonial era and its power dynamics of imitation, forceful assimilation and cultural loss. Similarly, Isheanesu Dondo, a Zimbabwean artist did a renowned series of ink and acrylic paintings representing the complex history of colonialism in Zimbabwe through Harare’s freemasonry architecture. To encourage action and reflection from the public he superimposed shapes and lines found in these buildings with characteristics of traditional Bantu architecture (Wong 2024). These artists all challenged their audience and tried to initiate change as part of a broader movement.

### **Afrofuturism**

#### **What is Afrofuturism in the Arts**

In 1994, Mark Dery introduced the term “Afrofuturism” to situate the relationship of black people with science fiction and technology in the future. Since then, the meaning of the term expanded and many scholars offered different modifications that overall centered Africa as a “foundational site for futuristic interventions that impact political and social powers” (Acuff 14). Afrofuturism has served to show that communities that have been subject to attempts of erasure in their past can still imagine possibilities for their future. The goal is to disrupt the present in order to generate a reconceptualization of the future (Acuff 14). Various artists who partake in literacy, musical and visual work have been centering the reality of the African diaspora in the future by imagining roles that were unattainable to them in the past (Acuff 14).

The painter Jean-Michel Basquiat has greatly contributed to the Afrofuturism movement, his most explicit expression was his piece *Molasses*, 1983. Joni Boyd Acuff citing Cui and Wiswell’s commented:

Michel Basquiat’s work, “*Molasses*,” features a derelict-looking robot resigned at the foot of a uniformed

human figure driving a vehicle with bars, a jail on wheels. “*Molasses*” is a likely reference to the slave trade, which produced sugar (and molasses as a marketable byproduct). Slaves, considered property rather than human beings, are made analogous to the robot, suffering at the hands of an authoritative “higher” being. In this way, Basquiat reinvents events of the past through a lens from the future, exemplifying a core tenet of Afrofuturism (14).

Basquiat’s work shows an example of how Afrofuturistic painters have attempted to reclaim their history to increase their autonomy for their future.

Other scholars have identified the movement as a way to reject the static and holistic perception of the past, and through that, the narrowly defined place given to distant African history by colonial narratives (Becker 3). In that way, Afrofuturism allows African people to decide what they want to highlight in their own history. Overall, the work of Artists who fall under the ambit of Afrofuturism show a movement that seeks to put the future of Africa in the hands of Africans as a way to reject

past colonial discourses.

### **Decolonization in Fashion through Afrofuturism**

Another artistic sphere of influence in this movement is fashion. Walé Oyéjidé, one of the two designers of the menswear label Ikiré Jones explained that they purposefully mixed elements of the past and of the future in their designs. Unlike imposing European elements, they combine African aesthetics with Neapolitan tailoring to create “a new perspective through an old lens; a new dialect for an old tongue” (Eismann 69). This concept works to rethink the perception of bourgeoisie, since dandies are always associated with white bohemian males. He hearkens back to the history of black dandyism that surged centuries ago through the initial contract of the slave trade between Africans and Europeans. Black Dandy styles were erased from popular history because of their disruption of social order and cultural superiority (Eismann 70). Ikiré Jones therefore conceptualizes a future that incorporates African aesthetics at the forefront of the fashion sphere.

### **Critique**

An important critique on the movement was brought up by Paul Gilroy who wrote the famous book *The Black Atlantic* in 1993: “There are things that must be said about Africa as a place where there are neo-imperialist or neo-colonialist conflicts. [...] I find the idea of Afrofuturism intriguing, but Africa has got to play a bigger role in this scenario” (Eismann 2019) He highlights that the continent should hold a bigger role in the movement as a tangible place rather than as a concept. Although, as seen in the label Ikiré Jones, the use of Afrofuturism in fashion is still a step towards diminishing the impacts of colonial history in the present.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, this research paper attempted to demonstrate important ways in which art can be used as a powerful tool to contribute to the process of decolonization in Africa. This refers to the deconstruction of the long-lasting effects of the colonial era on the populations of Africa as well as the African diaspora. The historical perspectives of African visual art are challenged today by the use of dif-

ferent materials, including Dutch wax paper, which challenges the past restrictions imposed by the West on what mediums African artists were allowed to use. Furthermore, various artists have used the power of recycling to symbolize their rebirth, away from the past colonial narratives. Next, the paper analyzed different ways in which art can be used as an effective method of advocacy. It was seen that it had historically been efficient in creating public mobilization against the Apartheid in South Africa and is still used today to stimulate action and engagement from the public. Artists have been particularly crucial in the ongoing movement to repatriate the Benin Bronzes. It mentioned a few notable artists that doubled as activists such as Nii Kwater Owoo, Yinka Shonibare and Isheanesu Dondo. The last movement that was addressed is Afrofuturism which has been emerging in the African art scene, especially in the diaspora. The collective effort of the movement has shown a focus on reevaluating the past to increase the future autonomy of Africans in their own culture. Individuals such as Jean-Michel Basquiat and labels like Ikiré Jones mixed African and Neapolitan elements to create a message.

Although, the critique from Paul Gilroy that was mentioned highlights that the movement can still improve by increasing the place given to the actual continent. In sum, this paper attempts to demonstrate that artists' creative expressions contribute to the issue of decolonization and cultural exploration. It highlights that even though there is still room for improvement, art is a tool that would benefit from being increasingly used and valued in the future.

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