

Socio-Economic Paintings of Ben Ibebe

MUHAMMAD, Aliyu (Ph.D.)

Department of Fine Arts,
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

&

OGALA, Jeremiah

Department of Fine Arts,
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

Abstract

Ben Ibebe is a vibrant contemporary Nigeria visual artist who has mastered the impasto technique of painting and has utilized the expressionistic style of painting in his artwork. Ben has participated in a number of group exhibitions within and outside Nigeria. The artist's paintings are among several bodies of artworks executed in Nigeria with poignant statements but unfortunately have not received adequate documentation through scholarly review. Consequently, this paper is an attempt to project and bring to the understanding of the general public Ben Ibebe's Paintings which address the socio-economic activities in the country. In doing this, Ben's exhibitions and commissioned works executed were also appreciated. Lastly, seven paintings that portray socio-economic activities were analysed.

Keywords: Socio-Economic Paintings, Ben Ibebe, Visual Artist, Expressionistic, Impasto, Style.

Introduction

Contemporary Nigerian art is a product of the colonial encounter. It was through the pioneer artist, Aina Onabolu (1882-1963) together with Kenneth Murray, trained many young Nigerian artists to establish firmly the concept of contemporary art in Nigeria (Babangida, 2010). Thus contemporary Nigerian art has made considerable impact in the arts of Africa in various forms such as painting, sculpture, textile, and ceramics, among others. In contemporary Nigerian art scene, Egonwa in Muhammad (2006) states that, "Contemporary art refers to all artistic expressions currently existing in Africa. It consists of works created by College trained artists and their apprentices, and self-trained artists as well". Danjuma (2010) infers that, contemporary Nigerian art is said to have had extra-ordinary development since its beginning in the 1920s with Aina Onabolu inspired by the desire to prove a point that Nigerians are up to the task to produce paintings like that of their counterparts both in Nigeria and abroad, through the use of foreign styles and thematic representations.

However, these contemporary Nigerian artists started to express themselves through modern conventions using modern media and technique.

In line with the above, Muhammad (2006) states that, “Contemporary Nigerian art has come a long way, finding its path through the wilderness of experiments and schools of various orientations. It has through time, matured into a formidable expressive force for both the artist and the society in which it is produced”. Muhammad stresses further that “since the early and mid-1960's Nigeria has had a diverse upsurge of creative and stylistic outbursts from artists formally trained and those who acquired training from being apprenticed to local artists at workshop”. It would be inferred here that, “the art of any country is the exponent of its social, political, and economic virtue”. Since the 1920s, at the emergence of contemporary Nigerian artists, their expressive talents had a wider range of themes which were manifested by addressing various issues in the society. Babangida (2010) posits that, “the expressionistic artist is only too aware of pain and suffering in his age”. Contemporary Nigerian art, by implication, is a manifestation of the socio-political, economic, and political realities within the Nigerian society.

There are innumerable visual artists who have worked with a wide range of themes from within their immediate environment in particular and the world at large. Ben Ibebe is one of such artists who have been deeply affected by his immediate environment due to the various happenings in the Nigerian society. Ibebe decides to freely express his feelings through his paintings, influenced by his choice and preference for themes, colours, techniques and styles that stem from an innate obsession with his environment.

Ben Ibebe is an internationally known African visual artist based in Kaduna State, Nigeria. His works are showcased in major museums and private collections around the world. Ben focuses on images of Nigeria, West Africa and Africa using vibrant, captivating and solid paintings in oil and mixed media featuring everyday scenes of Nigerian Life. Ben's distinctive impasto technique gives each work an almost three-dimensional surface, adding character to bright colours and geometric composition. Using scenes from Nigerian life, Ben captures the lightness and joy of life contrasted with misery and prevalent dissatisfaction that is ever present. One can vividly see from array of his works the rhythm of a life fraught with struggle by individuals of groups in order to survive. The universality of emotion in his work speaks to its viewer regardless of the seven continents from which one hails. The paintings of Ben Ibebe are among several paintings produced by contemporary Nigerian artists with poignant statements. Despite being one of the artists who have produced quite a number of paintings, the writers (Muhammad and Ogala) have no knowledge whether Ben's artworks have been documented through scholarly review. This has subsequently created a gap as far as art historical documentation is concerned. It is on the basis of this development and inspiration that the writers undertook a review of some of Ben Ibebe's socio-economic paintings.

In doing that, the method of data collection for this review was carried out through visits to the artist's residence and studio at Kaduna where oral interview based on structured interview schedule, was conducted. The artist was asked about the titles, themes, styles, and techniques of his paintings, his sources of inspiration, philosophy surrounding his thematic focus and educational history. The artist's response to the interview assisted tremendously in the analysis of the selected works.

Lastly, the conceptual framework for this study is hinged on Québec theory (2009) which states that, “all art is political in the sense that it engages society in some way, either influencing or influenced by it. Some works speak more directly to issues relating to human rights, corruptions, and the distribution of class, wealth, sexual abuse, criminal violence and injustice”. All these are concerns of Québec Government measures that sought to address issues in a society. It is in that sense that this paper relied on the conceptual articulation of Québec.

Profile of Ben Ibebe



Ben Ibebe was born in 1966. He hails from Ughelli Local Government Area of Delta State Nigeria. Ibebe began his early education at Local Education Authority Primary School, Ughelli, Delta State in 1978. In 1986, he bagged his first School Leaving Certificate at Ogbaveweni Grammar School, Useifon, in Delta State. He was involved in art activities all through his primary and secondary school days. Ibebe's initial interest was in graphics, but later found out that he could draw inanimate objects within his immediate environment and paint relatively well from a young age. However, Ibebe was greatly influenced by his still life drawing teacher, Prof. J.T. Agberia who happened to be his career guardian. Agberia counseled Ben Ibebe and was instrumental in his decision to opt for art as a profession; specializing in painting.

Ibebe considered his art as an inborn talent, and pursued it with great passion

and determination. He graduated with Bachelor of Arts (B.A) degree in Fine Arts in 1994 from University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State. Ibebe participated in the National Youth Service (N.Y.S.C) programme in 1995 and carried out his primary assignment at Mr. Tayo Quaye's Art Studio in Kaduna State. Since leaving the University, Ibebe has been practising as a full time studio artist, and has participated in several art workshops and exhibitions within and outside the country. Ben Ibebe derives his sources of inspirations from people around his immediate environment and as influenced by the way they respond to economic forces in their daily living. The issues, ideas and events arising from human's quest to contain and contend with these forces, form the subject matter of his paintings. Ben's paintings are highly figurative. His paintings are finished in an impasto technique with a palette knife as a tool in place of a brush. This may be partly due to his draftsmanship skills and partly his inclination to human beings as the centre of focus. The artist is happily married and has three children (two boys and girl), Ben presently resides in Kaduna state, Nigeria.

The Artist's Exhibitions and Commission Works

Ben Ibebe's sociable spirit is better appreciated when one considers the number of solo and group exhibitions he has participated in both Nigeria and abroad. He has indeed created niche in the contemporary Nigeria art scene. Some of the group exhibitions he participated in are: the 1994 Group Graduating Final Exhibition Port Harcourt, "1999 Mindscapes" at Alliance Francaise Kaduna, in 2001. In 2006, Ben Ibebe attended a show "Freedom" at the Shell Trustees Estate Abuja sponsored by Vincent Del Buono and Jennifer Pothier in Nigeria. In 2009, he participated in a group show at Columbus Art Centre in University of Toronto which was sponsored by Toronto Health Centre and the Nigerian Embassy in Canada. Also in the year 2012, he participated in the 2nd Pump House Show, Niagara on the lake of Canada, among many other shows and exhibitions.

Ibebe has also been involved in the organization of some important art events in Nigeria and Abroad. To a great extent, Ben has done several paintings and commissioned portraits for prominent leaders home and abroad. Examples are portraits of the Chief Justice of Nigeria (Mohammed Uwais), and Governor General of Canada (Adrienne Clarkson), as well as portraits of private individuals in Nigeria, France, Holland, Austria, Germany, USA, Canada, South Africa and England. Women are accorded prominent attention in his paintings compositions and this is deliberate. This is because; the African woman is strong, beautiful and gorgeous although she leaves in a male dominated society. Ben Ibebe celebrates them by weaving his composition around them in their hours of need, joy and pain. Notwithstanding, men also feature in his compositions but as allegories in his political statement and are highly stylized.

According to Danjuma (2010), "the use of a recognizable theme was born and

there is every possibility that it remained an integral part of Nigeria's art. The author further explains Nigerian artists had drawn before now various themes that address the social, economic, political and everyday life happenings in Nigerian societies". Ben's participation in many group exhibitions and workshops organized both in Nigeria and abroad through the thematic and stylistic representations observed in his paintings is commendable. He is therefore seen as an ambassador of the country who also promotes Nigerian art. This and many more insightful ideas about Ben Ibebe's paintings are discussed in the course of this study for modern art appraisal.

Ben Ibebe's Socio-Economic Painting Compositions

The term "Socio-Economic" deals with the reciprocal relationship between society and the economic factors. It also means a study that brings about under development, usually in terms of lack of improvement in a society, life expectancy, illiteracy and level of unemployment. It is on this basis that Ben derives his themes and as a matter of fact, he introduces it in his paintings. The paintings analyzed here are: Fuel Scarcity, Niger Delta Bad Terrain Sweet oil, *Mai Kwando*, Fish Market, *Mai Mai*, Striving for the Light, and *Mai KuliKuli*

Fuel Scarcity



Plate I: Fuel Scarcity, Oil on Canvas, 97cmx110cm, 2005, Collection of the Artist.

The painting titled "Fuel Scarcity" (Plate I) was produced by Ben Ibebe in 2005. There are about nine figures in different shades of yellow, pale blue and pale violet colours. Each carries red container on either their shoulders or arms. The figures seem to be walking bare footed. The artist attempts to portray the socio-economic

issues in the society, thereby expressing his feelings towards the situation at hand which depicts people going through an intense hardship in terms of fuel scarcity and lack of financial empowerment. The figures in the painting are rendered in abstraction, and depict the state at which the people are in desperate need of fuel. The painting was done in an impasto technique expressing the feelings of a man in a socio-economic situation. From a more critical observation, one could see at the top of the painting, cars queued up in search of fuel at a filling station. At the bottom of the painting, one could see presumed human carcasses on the ground that was burnt as a result of oil spillage and oil theft. This shows that the people are willing to go any length to steal fuel by bursting oil pipe lines, not minding the risk of their lives. The artist reveals his techniques through lines, harmonious colours to express his feelings.

Niger Delta Bad Terrain Sweet Oil



Plate II: Niger Delta Bad Terrain Sweet Oil (Deprived), Oil on Canvas, 91cmx107cm, 1995, Collection of the Artist.

Plate II presents “Niger Delta Bad Terrain Sweet Oil (Deprived)” is an expressionistic work that captures the lack of attention by the government and multinational oil companies in the region to improve the quality of life of the people. The activities of such multinational oil companies, gas flaring and oil spills, have left the ecology in ruins. The painting also captures the unemployment in the region which is high due to the lack of skilled manpower.

At the centre of the composition is a traumatized hungry looking youth clutching a bowl, he looks lost with the lizard as his only companion. The figure represents the lonely lives of the natives of the remote mangrove swamps. The bowl contains three cowries (money) signifying the “reward” the people get for the exploitation of their land and resources.

The inspiration for this painting according to Ibebe (2014) stemmed from a statement made by late Ken Saro-Wiwa (sic) of blessed memory, one of the Delta's illustrious sons. During one of the forums organized by the government to look at how to deal with the issues of the Niger Delta, the “People's Representatives” demanded a 13% share of the money derived from the oil extraction, while the government only offered 3%. Saro-Wiwa at that point said, “You cannot steal my shirt and offer me three buttons as compensation”

The oil painting was done with palette knife with attempts to recreate the impenetrable mangrove forest with thick heavy paint. This culminated in the lower part of the painting in representing the oily swampy water containing dead aquatics lying upside down. In between the greenish impenetrable mangrove forest are dots of bright colours such as yellow, orange, blue and red all signifying human habitation. To get the feel of climbers and vines, liquefied enamel paints are applied rhythmically dripping vertically across certain portions of the painting.



Plate III: *Mai Kwando*, Oil on Canvas, 118x92cm, 2007, Artist's Collection

The painting titled “Mai Kwando” as seen in Plate III, is an oil painting produced by Ben Ibebe in 2007. The painting portrays two young boys popularly called *Mai Kwando* which means owner of basket in Hausa language, but its English translation is 'load carriers' in the northern region of Nigeria. Attempt is made by the artist to depict the scenario of the young boys who are less privileged, and have no option but to carry loads for people in order to earn a living”. They seem to have equal height, standing facing one another. The one by the left part of the picture frame wears a blue cap while holding his basket. The other figure is clad in blue clothes and his

basket rests on his head. The whole idea, the artist was trying to express was that, these children are supposed to be in school and not to be exposed and engaged in such menial activity. In other word, child labour if observed critically, one will notice that, the faces of these figures look dejected, sad and gloomy. The painting was done in an impasto technique using palette knife and thick paints. In the painting, there is a strong use of colour and palette knife strokes that express the frustration of the circumstances happening in the society. This style of painting is impressionistic and the theme of the painting is socio-economic.



Plate IV: *Fish Market*, Oil on Canvas, 112x101cm, 2000, Artist's Collection

The painting “Fish Market” (Plate IV) portrays a typical market scene as witnessed in many parts of northern Nigeria where immense commercial activities take place on market days. The market is usually over-crowded with human congestions and other related activities. The idea behind the painting is that, the artist tries to depict a scenario where women struggle so hard to make ends meet in the family. If one looks vividly, one could see many women selling and buying fish that have high level of protein, not minding the stench. A few male figures can also be seen in the fish market. The painting is presented in a subtle landscape format and the theme is within the socio-economic context.

The painting is rendered in impasto skilfully utilized by the artist to define the figures with various shades of red, blue, yellow and green amongst others. The impressionistic painting depicts a typical market scene in northern part of Nigeria, which is usually over-crowded.



Plate V: *Mai Mai*, Oil on Canvas, 99cmx104cm, 1997, Collection of the Artis

The painting titled “*Mai Mai*”, Hausa words which simply mean “oil seller” one who sells oil as seen in Plate V. It is an impressionistic and allegorical painting depicting the state at which lack of fuel in the country (Nigeria) has led some people into petrol theft or hoarding despite huge deposit of crude oil in the country. The painting appears in a portrait format, comprising two figures surrounded with multiple gallons. The painting depicts the fuel vendors in anticipation of more fuel through a negative or positive means, just to survive.

The painting is a socio-economic commentary which dwells on the unwholesome activities of petrol (fuel) dealers, particularly the fuel scarcity that was experienced in 1997 during the regime of late General Sani Abacha. Unfortunately, many fuel accidents and fire incidences were reported as a result of fuel theft or oil spillage (personal experience).

Striving for the Light



Plate VI: *Striving for the Light*, Oil on Canvas, 77x105cm, 2009, Collection of the Artist

The painting titled “Striving for the Light” by Ben Ibebe in 2009 is an expressionistic and allegorical painting that captures the masses in oppression and difficulty; hence they strive for the light which is their freedom as seen in Plate VI. Yellow colour almost occupies the space provided for the composition, while blue colour takes the bottom part of the canvas. The artist attempts to portray the painting of these figures in abstraction, stretching their arms for better days. The artist expresses his frustration and anger because of the state of Nigerians who are going through difficult situations. A distinctive feature of the painting is that, the paints are thick in an impasto technique. If observed critically, the people are hopeful and believe so confidently for a change when they get to the light.

Mai Kuli Kuli



Plate VII: *Mai Kuli-kuli*, Oil on Canvas, 110x102, 2008, Collection of the Artist.

The painting titled “*Mai Kuli-Kuli*” (Plate VII) captures the socio-economic functions of women in the northern part of the country. This colourful oil-painting captures three elderly women selling *kuli-kuli* (groundnut oil and its cakes). Their attire attests to their faith and culture. Their aged features depict rigour and vicissitudes of life. They sit close to each other, but their gaze and focus are far away. They stare fixed, determined and expectant perhaps waiting for customers that are hard to come by. The painting is an expressionistic painting that captures the scenario of the northern people. It was done in an impasto technique using palette knife and paints. In the painting, there is a strong use of colour and palette knife strokes to express the socio-economic condition in our society. *Kuli-Kuli* is a Hausa delicacy used in consuming soaked *garri*, in fact, it is a house hold name amongst students who refer to it as “tom brown”

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper focuses mainly on Ben Ibebe and his paintings which address specifically socio-economic activities in Nigeria. The creation of his artworks were seen as purposeful, for they were they were his personal style. His artistic production is seen as a way of communicating to the general public human encounters and experiences in the society. Ben Ibebe's artworks and his general contribution towards the upliftment of Nigerian art have received considerable admiration from people around the country in particular and outside in general. Lastly, seven of his works which he executed that visually communicates on the socio-economic activities in Nigeria were analysed. On the whole, it is hoped that this paper will serve as a useful guide and valuable reference material for future scholars in the study and documentation of Ben's art works which this paper has not touched or exposed.

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