

UTILITARIAN ART CENTRES IN SUSTAINABLE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT: AN APPRAISAL OF THREE CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN MODELS

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ABSTRACT

The development of people was the main focus of the United Nations Human Development Report (HDR) first published in 1990. Since then, other similar reports have advanced the need for poverty alleviation, entrepreneurial creativity, people economic empowerment, professional partnerships and economic sustainability. The developing world has been targeted for these indications, Africa being in the centre. This paper is a research into one avenue whereby people can be developed creatively, economically and culturally through utilitarian art. Utilitarian art, which combines aesthetics with function, has contributed to the material culture and economic sustainability of many human groups and can stimulate social innovation. This paper looks at three Nigerian models of art practice in people focused development. The models are grass-roots centers, where utilitarian arts are facilitating youth and women empowerment, both economically and vocationally. The centres are in Nigeria at Ogidi-Ijumu in Kogi state, Idumuje- Ugboko in Delta state and Omu-Eleni in Ogun state. These artistic and vocational centres, founded and run by visual artists, have successfully over decades, trained and empowered many rural dwellers to be independent and economically sustain themselves in their environment. Based on field research, the paper analyzes the processes in the development, continuity, impact and contributions of the centres to the socio-cultural and economic development of their locations.

KEYWORDS: *Art, Contemporary, Development, Nigerian, Utilitarian*

Article History

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INTRODUCTION

Development is about expanding the choices people have, to enable them lead lives that they value, also it is a way of improving the human condition so that people can lead full lives in their various societies. According to Streeten (1994), human development is much more than economic growth. By investing in people, human and society's growth and empowerment are enabled. In such opportunity, people are able to pursue many different life paths and patterns, thereby in the process also develop their capabilities. In order to pursue such capabilities people need resources and the skills to use the resources. This paper is about how different resources and skills have been annexed to contribute to human capability and hence development. The paper looks at three art centers in Nigeria, where utilitarian arts have been developed into cottage industries to enable people-development. The centres are Nike Art Centre located at Ogidi-Ijumu in Kogi State, African Designs Development Centre at Idumuje-Ugboko in Delta State and the Mat Wearing Centre at Omu-Eleni in Ogun State.

Streeten (1994) mentions six basic pillars necessary for human development. These are: (i) *equity*: the practice of fairness in distributing development such as the consideration of gender, class and race, (ii) *sustainability*: the right of everyone to earn a living, (iii) *productivity*: the full participation of people in income generation, (iv) *empowerment*: the freedom of people to be part of the decisions that affect their lives, (v) *co-operation*: The mutual enrichment for social meaning and (vi) *security*: the safety of whatever programmes that are introduced to enable human development.

From close observations, interviews, use of photography and the analysis of data, the three centres under study have inculcated all the pillars of human development that have been aforementioned, in the formation, development, sustenance and continuity of the centres. The research reveals that the founders and leaders of these centres realize that the world is rapidly changing and that they must act presently to assure that the people they target will be competent not only to make their lives economically meaningful but also to contribute to society in the future. Such focus, with reference to Rossett, Haddock, and Sheldon (www.josseybass.com), suggests that the leadership is looking ahead, thinking strategically and recognizing critical contributions that their trainees and products will make to both social and economic growth in the future.

The three centres also similarly target strategic and vulnerable groups in society: female gender, youth and rural people. The focus on a particular group such as the rural people in this case is a good strategy to facilitate people – development. Such focus helps to define the vision, helps to identify the many opportunities for professional growth of such group of people and support the planning of scheme for the training and also the results to expect. Requirements for such target group include the consideration of the type of skills the people need, the resources and materials (raw and refined) existing in the area or location of operation, identification of the emergent challenges, new technologies and the implications of such people-development on global outreach and market.

One common approach adopted by the three art centres is the apprenticeship system of training. This approach is most suitable for several reasons: it is the most effective method of transferring skills to rural people with no formal education. It is also a proven way to transfer creativity, artistic idiomatic patterns and culture. Art training and development had thrived on the apprenticeship system of transfer of knowledge. By Egonwa's (1984:78) observation, the traditional society used groups such as the age-grade, cults of titled class, home cells, trade and vocational associations and others to transmit and transfer information and education, mostly through oral tradition. There could be minor variations in different ethnic groups. This type of education was used to train people in the rudiments of arts and crafts practiced by their various families and communities. Most of the traditional Nigerian art was strongly attached to the culture and customs of the people except very few cases of utilitarian arts that were primarily generic functional items.

Art Workshop Centres in Nigeria

The late 19th and early 20th centuries brought enormous changes to traditional African life. Adepegba (1995) explains that more than ever before, Nigerians were exposed to various alien ideas and cultures during this period. Also this period experienced the influence of Christianity, Colonialism and Islam on art. In the northern part of Nigeria, Islam wiped off most traditional religions and all the art forms that went with it. Christian missionaries set up various art workshops hinged on the apprenticeship system before the introduction of art training in tertiary institutions. The earliest art workshop in Africa was the Cyrene Workshop set up by the Protestant Church in 1936. In Nigeria, the first art workshop started in 1947 in Oye-Ekiti in Southwest Nigeria. It was run by Father P.M. Kelly of the African Mission

Society. This move was the outcome of the encouragement by the Catholic Church for the clergy to explore ways to interact with the local people and to study their cultures.

Apart from the Oye-Ekiti workshop, there were other successful art workshops in Nigeria. These included the Abuja Pottery Workshop led by a British Potter named Michael Cardew. Two other workshops extended from Oye-Ekiti to Ijebu-Igbo, led by Father Kelvin Carroll and Ondo town led by Father O'Mahoney. There was the Mbari Art Centre founded in 1955 at Eke Nguru, Mbaise in present south-eastern Nigeria, by Sylvester Chukwueggu. The Mbari- Mbayo Workshop was founded in 1962 at Osogbo by Ulli Beier, Georgina Beier and Suzanne Wenger. The Ori-Olokun Workshop was started in 1968 at Ife by Michael Crowther and was nurtured to maturity by Solomon Wangboje. (Mount, 1973:70). The main impact of the workshop centers was the legacy of art and cultural values. These workshops promoted Nigerian art, artists and culture. The system of training harnessed the inherent skills and experiences in the apprentices and other participants. At Oye-Ekiti, professional traditional woodcarvers worked alongside amateurs. This enabled growing skill transfer and development. One famous outcome of Oye-Ekiti workshop was the world renowned late Lamidi Fakeye (1925-2009). The Osogbo workshop built on craftsmanship of local craftsmen who practiced bricklaying, carpentry, house painting and such likes. These already skilled men were introduced to artistic methods and processes. They were allowed to source their own themes from their traditional experiences and surroundings. The fame of Osogbo artists especially between the 1960's and 1980's was an explosion that overshadowed the expectation of the founders and participants. Artists such as Taiwo Olaniyi (Twins Seven Seven), Jimoh Buraimoh and Nike Davis Ekundaye became world famous.

Most of these workshops were founded, run and promoted by foreign patrons, funding was mostly from external sources and the economic values of such workshops also looked outwards towards foreign patronage. The famous artists from these workshops sold their art mostly in Europe and the United States of America. The thematic focus on folklores, myths and traditional lifestyles appealed to the non-African market. However, the beneficiaries of the foreign patronage were limited to the artists and their immediate affiliates. Most of the workshop centers did not impact the communities where they were located, economically or vocationally, especially after they became defunct. There were some of their limitations. The only exception is the Osogbo centre which released a new entrepreneurship in the arts within the community. Today, many residents of the town source their living from the practice of art, craft and culture. Theatrical performances such as drama, dancing, music and drumming also traditional religion and medicine are presently thriving business in Osogbo town. The annual Osun-Osogbo festival is a world-famous carnival and the Osun-Shrine located in Osogbo is named a world heritage site by UNESCO. These have elevated the economic status of the city of Osogbo, the state of Osun and Nigeria through the steady promotion of tourism. The Osogbo workshop also rippled into some other more contemporary workshops such as the Maroko School, Abayomi Barber School and Nike Art Centres (Fasuyi, 1983). One of the prominent workshops from Osogbo still making impact presently which this paper discusses is the Nike Art Centre founded by Madam Oyenike Davies Ekundaye.

Nike Art Centre, Ogidi-Ijumu

The founder of this centre, popularly called Nike, is a textile artist and a designer whose origin is from ancient culture but thriving in modernity. She was brought up amidst the traditional Yoruba weaving and cloth-dyeing in her native village, Ogidi-Ijumu in Kogi state of Nigeria. Nike was introduced to art from birth being from a traditional art family. She started her training with her great-grand-mother who was a local textile dyer. Nike moved to Osogbo after she learnt

about the Osogbo art workshop. At the workshop she was assisted with her skills by Suzanne Wenger and also a male co-art-trainee, Taiwo Olaniyi, who later became her first husband. After gaining the knowledge and perfecting her skills, she developed her own unique style which made her works extraordinary. Nike has extended her traditional Nigerian textile art to audiences around the world. In the past two decades, she has been able to exhibit her colourful *Batik*, *Adire* and paintings across Europe and the Americas. Nike's decision to share her knowledge and help others establish a means of livelihood from traditional textile production led her to establish her own workshop centre in 1983. The first centre was started at Osogbo and the pioneer trainees were young ladies that Nike herself picked up from the streets. The centre now has four annexes at Lagos, Ogidi-Ijumu, Abuja and New-York. The Ogidi-Ijumu Centre established in 1996 focused on the empowerment of the rural women of the community both vocationally and economically. Presently the centre employs and empowers more than two hundred women (Adiji, Kashim and Oladumiye, 2012).

Training at Nike Art Centre at Ogidi-Ijumu tilts towards apprenticeship. In such training the apprentices start from copying their trainers then gradually they develop peculiarities in techniques, styles and forms as they advance. Their themes however remain similar with their teachers longer. In Nike Art Centre trainees are allowed to decide what they would study or work upon, after which they are apprenticed to a master amongst the numerous textile artists already trained at the centre. According to Press (1992), Nike Art Centre is a place where high quality training in art and craft is given free of charge. At the centre the following are taught: embroidered tapestry, *Balik*, *Adire* (tie and dye) Appliqué, quilt-making, sculpture, calabash carving, painting, drawing and drum-making. The trainees also participate in dancing and drumming. Nike supports her trainees by giving free accommodation. The centre is opened to people of all ages. Most trainers are voluntary though there are a few paid staff. The centre is maintained by the sale of good art works and such proceeds are usually shared equally between the artist and the centre. Through the centre and her marketing efforts, Nike is empowering her trainees to overcome one major challenge in Africa today, which is poverty. Secondly, her cottage industry is contributing to the indigenization of products that have been otherwise overtaken by Western products, such as clothing, textile and music. Nike opened her centre with the intention of creating jobs for Nigerians especially rural women who had no means of livelihood and had no plans to engage in any employment. She enrolls such women, encourages them to produce art and then sell such art for a living. Though the centre started as a charity venture, today all the goals of the centre are achieved and the people are empowered. Since the establishment of Nike Art Centre, her contributions have tremendously developed art and artists in Nigeria. It has also expanded Nigerian art heritage beyond the African continent.

African Designs Development Centre, Idumuje-Ugboko

The African Designs Development Centre, Idumuje Ugboko was founded by Demas Nwoko, a formally trained artist from a Western-styled education. He studied art with specialization in painting between 1958 and 1961 at the Department of Art at Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria (presently Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria). The type of training Nwoko had produces what Kasfir (1999) refers to as an artist-intellectual. The characteristics according to her include: high self-awareness and art-consciousness, mastery of techniques with specialized materials, tools and equipment, familiarity with world art history and trends also contemporary initiatives and responses. All these in addition to his exposure to studies in Europe and Japan had sufficiently prepared Nwoko for all his achievements in his over fifty years of successful practice as a painter, sculptor, architect, stage designer, interior decorator, furniture designer, builder, ceramist, academic, author and politician. Nwoko's high place in the development of contemporary Nigerian art cannot be disputed. He has prominently played vital roles in providing leadership for artists in Nigeria. He has also clearly defined what he believes in as the role of the contemporary African artist in society, which is, art production that is not

only relevant to the people but also develops the people economically. This he has steadfastly been practical about in his production of utilitarian art (Ayodele, 2010:41-74). In 1978 after Nwoko left his teaching job at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, he retired to his hometown of Idumuje-Ugboko to pursue his people-focused development of his rural community. His aim was to proffer a solution to Nigeria's socio-economic ill of rural to urban population drift. His one-man effort was quite tasking. His intention then was to establish an integrated industry in a rural location where raw materials existed abundantly. Such an industry was to bring along with it other amenities such as electricity, water, good roads, health care centre, postal system and telecommunication and good schools. With such a laudable dream, Nwoko established an African Designs Development Centre at Idumuje-Ugboko in present Delta State of South-South Nigeria. The goal of the centre was the production of utilitarian artistic items such as building components such as doors, windows, industrial and domestic furniture.

In 1978 the workshops were built. Artisans and able-bodied labour force were employed. To make this project workable, a comprehensive secondary school was founded by the Idumuje-Ugboko community at the initiative of the artist, Nwoko. The plan was to train students in subjects such as Introductory Technology which was not taught at the secondary school level at that time. On completion of the secondary school education the students were employed to be part of the African Designs Development Centre. This experiment was a tremendous success until 1981 when the centre was temporarily closed down due to socio-economic and infrastructural problems that emanated from government's delay to provide roads and electricity to the community as was promised. In 1990 the centre was revived and has continued its operations with all the artist's children also involved in the project. Skilled local labour is still employed from the vicinity. Nwoko hopes that the Idumuje-Ugboko experiment will eventually become a national model.

In the opening of the centre, Nwoko also opened an economic life for many artisans who produce carved doors, fittings for houses such as carved pillars and wall panelling. They also produce lightweight industrial tools and machinery. The artists involved in Nwoko's centre have been encouraged not to only produce art for aesthetic reasons but to also venture into functional aspects of presenting their creative endeavours. Many of such artists who were trained at the centre have delved into architectural art and furniture design and production. However none of the artists have continued Nwoko's work in the area of theatre and stage design and production. The major underlining convictions of Nwoko's strides can be summarized as follows: that self-effort is the only way forward for any people- development especially in Africa; that there should be a total blend of art, architecture and environment; each construction, be it an art or a tool should be aesthetically and functionally balanced and economical; the reliance on natural materials, which is often in abundance, should be stressed. Nwoko has followed these convictions in his life-time projects that have spanned over forty-five years. According to Bassey (2000), Nwoko's quest is for a perfect creative climate that uses African aesthetics and concepts infused into modern technology. With this he believes Africa will develop faster and advance.

Mat Weaving Centre, Omu-Eleni

Omu-Eleni is a small community in Ogun state populated by *Ijebu* people, who are ethnically *Yoruba* in south-west Nigeria. Recently, non *Yoruba* groups such as the *Hausa*, *Igbo*, *Nupe* and other *Yoruba*-speaking such as the *Yewa*, *Egba* and *Awori* have come to settle in the town due to the growth of commerce. Even though Omu-Eleni is said to have begun about a thousand years ago, but the Mat-weaving community became a geopolitical zone from 1998. Mat-weaving also is said to be inherent in every Omu-Eleni indigene however only recently has the centre been recognized as a cottage industry with an organized economic flowchart. This development has been due the leadership of certain artists

who have given purposeful direction to the art. These include Adetuberu Olusoga, Adeiye Oshifule, Fatima Salami, Ramotu Oshikoya, Adeola Adebayo, Taiwo Sadiku and Ayinke Subaru. One noticeable social change in the production of mats in Omu-Eleni is the drift from male artists who initially dominated the production to a female vocation. The few men involved only assist with the marketing and other organizational business considered less effeminate such as sourcing raw materials and distributing the mats to markets outside the town. The skills are handed down through the apprenticeship system.

The features that make Omu-Eleni mats stand out are the contemporary designs and aesthetic development. The designs are intricate patterns that are derived from modern symbols and are well rendered. The colours of the mats have shifted quite significantly from the monotonous indigo “blueness” commonly associated with Yoruba mats. Omu-Eleni mats are dyed in expanded multicolour scheme of synthetic dyes that are imported. Another attraction to Omu-Eleni mats is their utilitarian appeal. Traditionally such locally made mats have remained important for many traditional ceremonies such as burial, marriage and child-naming ceremonies and also religious rituals and festivals. The mat’s function is usually for sitting on. However because of the growing market, the artists have creatively moved beyond the traditional use to include uses like bed and seat covers, door and window blinds, floor covers, ceiling, table mats, partitioning for rooms, hand fans, bags, slippers and parts of clothing.

After the weaving of the mat, the artists take their entire products to the central market where they display them for purchase. Many mats are sold wholesale and taken to other locations for sale. The mats are sold in places like Ibadan, Gbogan, Osogbo, Ilesa, Ikire, Ado-Ekiti, Ogbomoso, Lagos and neighbouring countries like Benin Republic, Togo, Ghana and Ivory Coast in the West African sub-region. Patronage has been very good for Omu-Eleni such that traders, investors, tourists and scholars have flooded the town for all forms of trade and interest.

CONCLUSIONS

Certain challenges confront the growth and sustenance of these centres. Many of these challenges are posed by larger social problems such as low level of education of citizenry, corruption, inaccessibility to funds, healthcare and domestic facilities. The founders of the workshop centres and their leaders often attempt to solve problems within their reach. These are often minimal. The danger that is imminent is the possible dissolution of these centres at the demise of the motivators who presently maintain the vision. Formulation of policies that can guide the formation, development and sustenance of such centres is non-existent presently and must be put in place. If the government recognizes these centres as employment avenues, government owned centres may eventually emerge. So far the earlier centres were run by churches and now they are run by individuals.

Recommendations

Considering the global dynamics of human management and development, the developing world needs to create innovative social policies and strategies in order to have anti-poverty programmes that will support poverty alleviation. This paper recommends that individuals, groups such as social and charity organizations like NGO’s (Non-Governmental Organization), religious bodies, ethnic associations and financial institutions should join the academic groups to develop entrepreneurial creativity that will go beyond rhetoric and actually touch the lives of people, especially rural people. There should be professional partnerships and international collaborations which will diminish the challenges presently encountered by the efforts of individual investors and motivators. Government should consider restructuring resource

equity to enable the spread of funds to all sectors. Sectors such as art and craft, culture and tourism, women and youth are sensitive to the growth of any economy and can be boosted if funded adequately. Considering the present near-neglect of very rural people, steps should be taken either communally or through government agents to preserve the rural environment through the sustainability of the viable customs and crafts as in the case of Omu-Eleni community. These will support the much needed people economic empowerment.

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