



## The place of art in nation building: The Nigeria example

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### Abstract

The paper addresses the place of art in nation building using Nigeria example. Art, as we all know, is a profound profession; a landscape of the soul of man and his nation. The need for inquisition to ascertain the contribution of art to Nigeria's growth since 1960-date is galvanized, becomes pertinent. It is glaring that art is looked at through a very narrow lens. There has been little or lack of encouragement for the pursuit of art as a profession by institutions and mostly parents who believe there could be no future for their children. But should this be the reason for not encouraging art practice at all levels for nation building? Can art generate intrinsic values for nation building? The purpose of this paper is to situate art as a potential contributor to Nigeria's economic growth. This was achieved through archival and participant observation methods. The findings reveal that art contributes and has continued to make huge impact on the development of Nigeria since independence in 1960 to date, in the areas of education for a more just and egalitarian society; acts as a social vehicle that shifts perception and changes society; boosts economic growth in nation building. It is recommended that government should legislate the establishment of an "Artist Registration Council" to further the contribution of arts to nation building.

**Keywords:** Art, nation building, education, economy, culture

### Introduction

The history of any national art practice mixes up with the history of its nation. It is obvious that in the process of building a nation, art plays a decisive role in the formation of the nation state. Art provides a window for national development. The place of art in nation-building cannot be overemphasized as artists are seen as social critics, visioners and aesthetic purveyors.

It is pertinent to define what art is, despite the varied definitions ascribed to art, based on how people have experienced art. The definition advanced by Leo Tolstoy which states that:

*"Art is the activity by which a person, having experienced an emotion, internally transmits it to others"*, suffice.

Therefore, art is defined by individual perception. It is not surprising that art is defined by a set of rules, especially the academic component which distinguishes artists from craftsmen. With the passage of time, artists no longer subscribe to a set of rules, and creativity began to be seen from a more subjective vantage point. Art's unique position is to move, inspire, incite new questions and provoke curiosity, outrage and excitement.

Art has a very high potential of serving as an instrument for nation building or as a weapon of political ideologisation and self-determinism. It might be needful to reiterate that part of the struggle for independence in Nigeria was fought through creative works of art in form of cartoon graphics. When Akinola Lasekan released his cartoon in the West African Pilot Newspaper, published by Nnamdi Azikiwe, in 1958, his philosophy of creating the cartoon can be seen from the point of view of his role as an artist to help Nigeria regain her independence from her colonial masters.

Apart from the political struggle for independence, art is also an efficient medium for enhancing social order and nation building. Apart from the political struggle for independence in the 1950's, another virulent struggle was

silently breeding through art by Nigeria's college trained artists. Foremost in this struggle were committed art scholars like Aina Onabulu, Akinola Lasekan, Uche Okeke, Yusuf Grillo and a few other who saw the need to correct the strict European academism in the learning of art through what came to be known as "Rebels", in what we can term "Revolutionists" today, relying more on traditional Nigerian art forms for inspiration for their creativity.

The consciousness of art in the late 1950's was the tonic that the political class needed for the emancipation of Nigeria's political independence in 1960 through the use of art for social change. However, it should not be lost on us that pre-independent Nigeria was replete with cultural artforms like music, dance, folklore, arts and craft with a distinctive Afrocentric flavour. These were artforms that modelled Nigerian societies into disciplined and well ordered communities. Notable among the traditional artforms are: "Nok Terra Cotta", "Benin Bronze", "Ife Bronze", "Idoma" "Anjenu" "Ikom Monoliths", "Ibo Uli", "Yoruba Ifa", "Ibibio Nsibidi", "Hausa" "Alama", among other myriads of artistic icons for various purposes that were used to shape traditional societies for a well-structured development.

The allusion by Snowball (2016) that there is growing international interest in the potential of the cultural and creative industries to drive sustainable development is in tandem with this discourse. In Nigeria, the arts is looked at through a very narrow lens. There is little or no encouragement for the pursuit of art as a profession by government, institutions and mostly parents. But should this be the reason for not encouraging art for nation building? Think, for example, of the role played by art and literature in the fight for Nigeria's independence, while other economic and development indices exist, can art generate intrinsic values for nation building? A well-developed art curriculum can produce creative entrepreneurs that can impact our nation Nigeria. Artists will have to expropriate

art to exert their potentials in order to free themselves from the cronyism of governments who place emphasizes on other disciplines for economic growth. Therefore, the focus of this discourse is on the place of art as potential contributor to Nigeria's economic growth and job creation. Undeniably, art have been the cement that binds together, heart to soul, societies and nations, as everything in the world is interconnected. Without artists, and the likes, it would be difficult to open ideas up to what is around us. Nation building would be nothing without artists, writers and all those who give vision and illumination to what is a simple thought or idea. The artists' vision gives rise to the science of ideas that builds a nation. Through works of art, a nation is called to order and given a leeway to its expected development.

This paper relies on Leo Tolstoy's art theory of communication, as propounded by Jahn (1975), as the framework for the discourse. Tolstoy's position on the definition of art lies in its function rather than in the concept of beauty, given that there is no objective way of defining beauty. Art serves numerous functions. The paper will venture into how art can promote national development, its importance, contribution to economic growth and upliftment of a nation, as well as how art can change the Nigerian nation.

### **Art and national development**

In what ways can art contribute to national growth? Through art education, art helps to build a nation by creating a more just and egalitarian society. Art has the power to reinterpret what life consists of through the artist's view lens, as it presents the world in a way that changes the perspectives and values of society towards reality, thus acts as social vehicle that shifts perception and changes society. Art's social functions are present in form of advertisement, artistic expression of humanitarian concerns – political and ideological, satire, as well as graphic messages. Art educates and creates empathy and understanding that leads to improvement of lives and hence boosts economic growth in nation building. Art brings about culture change through creative inventions in technological advancement that has had broad impact on our way of doing things. Today's artist readily acknowledges the vital role that the industrial revolution played in bringing about social change. Art was key to its success. We should not undermine the fact that visual art is instrumental to pictorial imageries that communicate ideas to an audience, thereby appealing to their sensibilities and simultaneously driving home a social agenda packaged aesthetically in creative form of expression.

Art, as we understand, contributes to the piquancy of a nation's environmental appeal, making life more comfortable and conformable. Art contributes to the making of Nigeria a better place to live. Art dots the landscape of Nigeria in virtually every major city in public and private space, attracting tourists, acting as therapeutic release of energy for all that visit the sites where public arts are erected, painted or showcased in museums and art galleries. This has been achieved mostly by the efforts of corporate organisations and individuals without government input, as a national endowment for the arts is lacking. This has been significant for healthy and economic development of Nigeria from 1960 to date. Through the synergy of artists, corporate organisations and individuals in environmental

art, social capital is built for both artists and government through taxation.

Artists today have continued the legacy of public art as handed down by great masters like Ben Enwonwu, Ben Ekanem, Kolade Oshinowo, Gani Odutokun, Yusuf Grillo, Bruce Onobrakpeya among others, for an enduring national development. Art impacts on our daily life as it brings to bear on our understanding of our cultures, history and traditions, thus creating a vision of a more just world. More so, it makes the place we go and spend time more interesting. Art allows people from other cultures to share in the communicative symbols and provide a platform for reflection and building cross-cultural communities.

According to Bhumika Solanki; "In today's fast moving world we just need a different set of eyes and a heart to appreciate art". Nigeria itself is not less than a piece of art as our pioneer artists earlier mentioned left no stone unturned to glorify our nation. Through them we have eye catching monuments like "Anyanwu", "Osogbo grove", "Murals at the Murtala Mohammed International Airport", "Queen Amina" Statue at the National Theatre, Lagos etc. where tourists visit. The tourists pay visits to these sites and Nigeria earns revenue, adding to our economy.

As Nigeria attained her independence, people started to appreciate art more, as they began to realize that works of art show remarkable effect on their lives. Art began to have impact on the economy, since everything in the world is enchained. Businesses and products with works of art on them began to thrive and this had a huge impact. A creative artist has the power to impact Nigeria in Nation building. What is lacking in Nigeria is policy direction to integrate art in the mainstream with a regulatory body.

### **Importance of art in nation building**

We already know what the term "art" refers to, even though quite undefinable due to the ever-evolving and fluid nature of art, it is pertinent to delve into how art can be understood for its importance to society. Artifacts of different cultures show how they lived in the days of yore. Artists today draw inspiration from past art forms to create new forms of art, as art is timeless and a testament to the different phases of our nation's history.

Art helps in the development of human beings by making difficult concepts easy to learn and understand through cognition, development of motor skills, critical thinking, creativity and social skills. Art stimulates students' interest on other subjects as it increases discipline. Art's intrinsic value lays in its freedom of creativity and expression. Art, as a versatile discipline, helps our complex emotional and mental challenges, thereby enhancing our well-being. It acts in numerous ways to make spaces and our environment visually appealing, thereby adding beauty to our lives. Art, besides being a fascinating creative endeavour, is said to have some surprising cognitive benefits too. The slow, meditative process can help citizens lower the stress-causing hormones in the body, and enhance the production of happiness hormones as we come in contact with art objects, through an intimate dialogue. A happy people is a healthy nation.

The social and financial reward in art comes in various forms like: income generation, which in turn becomes part of a nation's economy, a beacon for improved tourism and income tax generation for government, entrepreneurial and self-reliance organ that takes the weight which

unemployment exerts on government. If we understand the versatility of art and its role in nation building as a powerful tool, its relevance cannot be subverted. As a political medium, art is used as memorials to celebrate significant change makers in national history. Similarly, it is used to convey powerful and significant political or social messages in the form of posters, banners, graffiti, billboards, mural and illustrations in virtually all educational publications that cut-across disciplines. Art involvement in interdisciplinary curriculum cuts across all school subjects, thus contributing to nation building. Let us remember that the cartoon by Akinola Lasekan was created as a propaganda to take over Nigeria from her colonial masters, based on their reluctance to handover governance to Nigerians.

Art is a constant in our daily lives as a nation. It remains the only way we have been the silent voice of our society. It is such a powerful tool employed for the good of humanism, as it allows the people to respond to their circumstances on micro-and macroscopic levels for the enhancement of aesthetics, wellbeing of individuals, deeper spiritual, metaphysical, or bring about changes. Art is a universal language that cuts across cultural barriers, and understood by all, making it a visual language, (Ukim, 2021). It acts as a vehicle that bridges the gap between ethnicities, it is a record of past cultures and history. The importance of art cannot be over emphasized as it can be financially rewarding, makes for inquisitiveness about life and society. It allows us to reflect and open wide our hearts to empathy for others.

#### **Art and economic growth**

In developed countries, art enjoys government support, unlike Nigeria where art is not seen as a priority for its necessary contribution to nation building. However, creative industry sectors like; advertising, books, newspapers, magazines, theatre, performing arts and the visual arts contribute to the economic and social growth of the nation. For instance, in the United States of America, the cultural Times (2022) estimates the contribution of cultural and creative industries to economic growth at US\$250 Billion in revenue in a year. This cannot be said of Nigeria because there are no regulations in the practice of art. Rather, artists produce and create economic growth for themselves without checks and balances. It is anticipated that development of a nation should be production based on a dominant informal economy like the arts. Art is indeed a potentially important contributor to social cohesion and nation building. Art provides direct benefits to a nation. It creates jobs, generates tax revenues, stimulates local economics through tourism and consumerism, as well as attracts investments. Art, as a cultural capital, needs to be invested in, otherwise, it will depreciate and be devalued over time. While art may not have been given its due diligence in the role that it plays in national economy in Nigeria, it should be noted that it shapes our national and individual identities, hence the need to support it. Oyedemi (2015) observes that Nigeria operates a mono-economy, but submits that the visual art has capacity to be a catalyst for developing a local economy in Nigeria. (Buhari 2015), (Omuaru and Nyah 2015), (Odiboh 2011), (Murray 2011), (Udeze 2015) among notable contributors have stimulated the debate on art and economic development in Nigeria by addressing issues of economic viability of art, pricing and art as driver of the Nigerian economy. What remains to be seen is how these views can

be harnessed to formulate a policy document for Nigerian art to take its place as an economic engineer of the nation.

*Arts and culture-related industries provide direct economic growth for the state and local communities...*

*Arts and culture create job opportunities and also stimulate local economics through consumer purchases and tourism.*

*Tourism centred on....arts contributes greatly to state economic growth by providing revenues Stewart, (2019).*

This is clearly evidence that no nation can develop beyond its artistic contribution. Art is key to nation building.

#### **The power of art to change Nigeria for growth**

Art has the capacity to motivate a nation for positive growth as it can mitigate the numbing effect created by the lack of motivation from appropriate authorities. Art can motivate citizens to turn thinking into doing. This is what Eliasson (2016) posits that “art encourages us to cherish intuition, uncertainty, and to search constantly for new ideas; artists aim to break rules and find unorthodox ways of approaching contemporary issues”. It is not a hidden fact that art can engage with Nigeria to change Nigeria as we postulate that in the future, artists would be included in policy formulation and discourse on social, political and ecological engagements, to consider the challenges that confronts Nigeria today.

Art is non-verbal, a powerful communication tool that unites us across space and time. Art chronicles and preserves the ever evolving human story. It invites us to reflect on our lives and, add our creativity to the exploration of timeless images that tells us who we were, are, and project into the future (futurism). Art makes us think. This has a transformative impact on the way viewers see themselves and the way they understand their capacities. This transformative impact is witnessed everyday when we bring art to bear on our psyche as a nation. The artist explores the human condition, using art as a guide and a springboard. Through cultural experiences and day-to-day life experiences, emotions and personal perspective, the artist impresses on others his shared vision. The created images, become a platform for collaborative reflection – about our relationships, the nation.

Art is the perfect detailed roadmap and record of a nation’s journey. Art takes us to places we have never been, and forces us to examine our collective engagements. It models humanity at its worst and at its best. Most importantly, art shared publicly with others reveals the contribution of arts to the society. Art has had a major impact on the development of society. It has shaped civilizations, changed political systems and exposed injustice. Art gives us a detailed preview of human existence, allowing individuals and society to connect on basic levels of desire and emotion. Art is thought provoking, it allows us to get curious, and this gives us a deeper understanding of the real complexity of human experience. Art provided one with the opportunity to further one’s education to continuously learn new skills, styles, techniques and be exposed to a plethora of ideas for nation building.

#### **Conclusion**

Art is a vehicle for social change, influence a nation’s consciousness by changing opinions, instilling values and translating experiences across space and time. Through images, art allows people to communicate with each other. A socially charged art can bring about the processes of

change, as well as provide a platform for reflection, collaboration, and building a nation. Art for social change is imbued with a vision and intentional input that sets an agenda that has the power to alter how people think about their nation's predicaments, in order to foster a vision of a just and egalitarian society. The economy of the Nigerian nation can be grown through the interweaving of the arts and culture with new innovations that attracts tourists. It is expected that everybody in the ecosystem - citizens, cultural organisations, businesses and government benefit.

Access to art and art education is essential to every nation's growth and development. Art is for humanity, and should never be the exclusive reserve of the elites. Art, in synergy with all other disciplines of human endeavor of a nation works to interrogate authoritarian governance by proposing new ways to live and strive for progress. Art moves people into action as they create a significant cultural contribution via big, revolutionary, and visual ideas. Thus, art can engage with the nation to change the nation. The ripple effects of art production and marketing will undoubtedly generate employment and impact positively on our drive towards national economic development. An essential catalyst for nation building through the arts will bring about self-reliance, self-sufficiency, entrepreneurship and economic independence when the authorities realize the importance of art. Government should ensure that all necessary support including legislation for the establishment of an "Artists' Registration Council" to foster nation building be granted an Executive Bill.

There is no doubt that art too has contributed for a long time now, and can turn the pages of our national lives beyond what it is today if only we agree to make it work. We must all join hands to be a part of our nation building.

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