Weighing the tensions of nostalgia, necessity, and care in contemplating the future of the nigerian design-scape

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Abstract · (Handle with care/Inclusivity track)

This paper presents perspectives derived through methods of critical reflection and from my positioning as a Nigerian product designer and researcher aimed at defining a research gap and constructing a contextual framework on which planned research can be undertaken. The planned research inquiry asks, what could the future of design ethos, production, and even definition in Nigeria hold today? What lies at the intersection of contemporary designing and efforts to preserve her myriad cultures and heritages? This paper contemplates three tensions - the *nostalgic* motive for, the overall *need* for, and the consideration and duty of *care* required to engage in this inquiry. As a general contribution, the reflections discussed encourage the adoption of a nuanced mindset, well-considered urgency, and ethical bedrock for designers and researchers planning and engaging in decolonization research and practice.

These reflections are informed first through a grounded understanding of Nigeria's relationship with art and design over its formation and then through a review of literature, such as Svetlana Boym's critical musings and cautions on nostalgia, Gui Bonsiepe's writings on design activity and potential in the 'global south,' and the potential value of traditional points-of-origin for contemporary designing as discussed by Demas Nwoko, amongst others. Contemplatively relying on Uche Okeke's theory of *natural synthesis,* — which embraced hybridity as a remedy in fine art making as Nigeria transitioned to independence in 1960 — predictions for a methodological approach for this continued research in Nigerian design transitions and cultural preservation are also introduced, and discussed.

Author keywords

Design, decolonization; Nostalgia; Necessity; Care; Nigeria

Nigeria, art, and design

"The negro, many have believed, is a man without a past," historian Basil Davidson (1960, p.20) writes in *Old Africa Rediscovered*, "No ingenious manufactures among them, no arts, no sciences," commented David Hume." Throughout history, European commentators have tried to downplay the contributions of Africa and its history, questioning the quality of *art* and whether *design* even occurred. This served to justify and glorify colonial conquest. Despite the hierarchy established by colonialism, historical African art objects, most of which reside in Western museums, significantly influenced modern concepts of form. However, their context and function were often disregarded (Parker & Rathbone, 2007, p.58); These things were displaced from their physical origins, thus unable to continue shaping the culture from which they originated. On the other hand, local perceptions of these things grew negative as the foreign and modern were deemed better. Efforts of decolonization and decolonial thinking are ongoing, working on challenging this narrative and re-examining past interpretations to create a new perspective on the future.

As a researcher, these spaces hold interest: *past, future,* and *design* in relation to Nigeria. Designer, Victor Papanek (2019, p.03) called design the underlying matrix of life. Everyone designs. Humans have created unique ways to interface with the world around them in response to their need and by imitating the design and order seen in diverse environmental landscapes. If design is the ability to communicate, plan, *solutionize,* and shape, culture is the *context* through which all this is done. The common understanding of *art,* unlike design, is individual creative expression. However, in a general African understanding, this isn't always the case; some African languages don't even have a specific word for 'art' (Parker & Rathbone, 2007, p.58). Arguably, a thicker connecting line can be drawn between art and design here. In Nigeria's myriad pre-colonial societies, objects and systems were made for specific functions (physical and metaphysical). *Art* was an integral consideration in *design*ing everyday things. To craft was to express but also record-keep.

Over time and through acculturation, art and design in Nigeria were divorced and compartmentalized. In 1958, charged with the excitement of impending independence, Nigerian painter Uche Okeke (2019, p.23-24) reflected on the role and purpose of 'Nigerian' creativity moving forward. He founded The Zaria Arts Society, made up of eight fellow student artists (*the Zaria Rebels*), with the goal of *synthesizing* traditional Nigerian creative practices with the Western form they were being taught. The society's mission was to give its members a sense of direction as Africans and artists concerned with making work in a colonized reality and tussling with "culture conflict" (Okeke-Agulu & Picton, 2006, p.03). Nigerian fine art today — like the ethereal watercolors of Tayo Adenike, which preserve the Igbo practice of *Uli* mark-making on paper rather than skin, textile, or earthen-wall — has become a vessel for preserving

Figure 1. Igbo chair. European influence in form, yet Igbo creative vocabulary is seen in the structural pegs (solely holding all components together) ornamented with human and animal figures. From *Bonhams,* (n.d.). (https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/21022/lot/183/)

cultural elements as well as individual expression. *Industrial* design creatively transforms material with solution, efficiency, and/or enhancement in mind, specifically driven by the speed and benefit of technology and mechanized production. Gui Bonsiepe – a design theorist focused on design in the global south (Latin America, specifically) – writes that industrial design is closely tied to the socioeconomic context in which it is used (Bonsiepe et al., 2021, p.326). Today, Nigerian "industrial design" is budding yet less assured; dependence on foreign imports and poor leadership has hindered the country's ability to refine available materials and produce diverse goods. Fellow *Zaria Rebel* Demas Nwoko advocates for traditional inclusions in present-day Nigerian design and production through his architecture, furniture, and creative efforts. Nwoko (2022, p,205) recognized that connected '*artdesign*' that defines Nigerian creative history and material culture in saying, "To our ancestors, Architecture was a Fine Art just as the performing Arts was." The African Designs Development Centre (ADDC), set up in 1978 in his hometown of Idumuje Ugboko, was an experimental "production unit" producing goods (Nwoko's furniture designs and building components) out of the area's abundant forest timber (Nwoko, 1992, p.126-128); it was a model for local-first production that employed and taught skilled locals and relied on sustainable material sourcing. With this rich historical foundation, there is room for today's Nigerian designers to define a method of design and production that makes sense socioeconomically and sustainably. Could cultural and historical preservation be an optional consideration like it is in Nigerian contemporary fine art? What could the future of design ethos, production, and even definition in the Nigerian design-scape hold?

In this paper, tensions born from critical questions such as, *"of what benefit to the future is gazing at the past?"* will be addressed in the context of these intended research motivations. Three tensions are contemplated - the **nostalgic** motive for, the overall **need** for, and the consideration and duty of **care** required to weigh when defining the rationale for decolonization research and practice.

Isn't this nostalgia?

The topic of "cultural transference in design" is gaining traction in academic design discourse and research; Wenjin Yao's (2013) investigation of capturing "Chineseness" in product design is a prime example. Despite understanding the inherent value of cultural knowledge to its people, Bonsiepe (2021, p.165) labeled such investigations *nostalgia* and didn't consider it possible or practical because of perceived false equivalence: "How could a pocket electronic calculator or a water tap be designed with formal elements of the Maya culture? Nostalgia is not an effective way to prepare for the future," he postulated.

To be nostalgic implies giving a romantic and somewhat futile look at the past. Cultural critic Svetlana Boym (n.d) defines two distinct types of nostalgia: restorative nostalgia, which seeks to restore the past in the present, and reflective nostalgia, which reflects on the past in the present. While restorative nostalgia is characterized by a romanticized desire to return to a lost or idealized past, often through the reconstruction or preservation of historical sites, objects, or traditions, reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, is characterized by a critical and self-aware engagement with the past. Boym recommends a healthy fear and responsibility when looking backward and proposes that both reflective and restorative can co-exist, but it is important to distinguish between them. In short, nostalgia as "countercultural practice" (Boym, n.d.) needs to be handled with care. Compared to Bonsiepe's earlier stance, Nwoko (2022, p.155), speaking as a Nigerian, thought differently, "Our industries will remain in the woods until it admits the activities of indigenous creative designers into its product development process." For designers in a post-colonial space, a knowledge gap exists between historical *thens* and contemporary *nows* that could affect design approach and process when explored. To look back and examine the usefulness of one's historical *thens* should remain an open right and choice, and an ability to recognize nostalgic tensions could keep the investigation bias-free.

It is pertinent that the designer and design researcher, culturally connected to a once-colonized space looking to offer decolonial options by choosing to examine the past, intentionally widen the gap between '*post*' and '*colonial*' in their approach; the history of a post-colonial space is not linear; like multiple fibers woven together in a tight braid, multiple *histories* make up the history of a once-colonized nation. If '*postcolonial*' is agreeably a term that "registers the ongoing effect of colonialism on a former colony" (Tsang, 2021) and the introduction of the hyphen in '*post-colonial*' marks simply the time after colonization, '*post colonial*,' with a confident space in-between, can describe a desire to *move beyond* being *defined* by a period of colonization, despite its paradoxical appearance. Recognizing that colonialism was not the story's beginning allows for the desire to engage with the unique perspectives and contribu-

tions of the past in a forward-looking present. This mindset keeps the decolonizing designer/researcher aware and helps them engage with the past responsibly. Basil Davidson (1960, p.21) poetically cautions against being caught on either "the rock of prejudice" or "the whirlpool of romance" when generally enquiring into African past and history; it's also important in this reflection not to force the observed past into the mold of "modern convention" to valorize. Responsible nostalgia looks like this: determining what stays in the past and what can be meaningfully brought into the now for the future. 'Reflective *decolonization*' with a '*post colonial*' motivation is a position worth taking.

Inspired by theorist Walter Mignolo's stance on options over alternatives, the intended research is also driven by the belief that while '*cultural-preservation-through-design*' as a potential product design method is not obligatory, its occurrence is arguably invaluable for creating designed options accessible to all and the growth of the Nigerian design-scape. "If you look for alternatives, you accept a point of reference," Mignolo (2011, p.xxviii) states, "instead of a set of existing options among which the decolonial enters claiming its legitimacy to sit at the table when global futures are being discussed." Nigerian designers can actively investigate *options* that could move Nigeria towards the future and actively deconstruct colonial systems and thinking. All in all, there should neither be dependence nor dismissal (by labeling investigation itself as futile nostalgic activity), but the inherent curiosity known to every designer in rediscovering what once was and a recognized responsibility in the method, purpose, and goal of rediscovery, especially if there is a connection through one's heritage.

Still, is it absolutely necessary?

"Genuine disalienation will have been achieved," Frantz Fanon (2008, p.xv) writes in *Black Skin, White Masks*, "only when *things*, in the most *materialist sense*, have resumed their rightful place" [emphasis added]. Though this *restorative* statement could be identified as "relinquishing critical thinking for emotional bonding," as Boym (n.d.) warns, a critical pause is needed to consider what this truly implicates. Again, in a post-colonial context, there could be an argument that for the actual people whose creative histories are alien due to external forces and internal disregard, this is less of a nostalgic exercise and more necessary retrieval. A remedy to embedded insecurity. Material restoration as decolonization, as expressed in Fanon's statement, can be interpreted as an urgent push towards situated options that introduce balance and harmony (in the most *tangible* sense) in these spaces, driven by a *post* colonial motivation (as introduced in the previous section).

The dominant belief is that modernization is necessary for progress, and industrialization is the way to achieve it; anthropologist Arturo Escobar (2018, p.209) puts it evocatively, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of modernity." For designers in post-colonial spaces defining contextual modernity, remaining critical about what that looks like — what Boym (n.d.) calls 'off-modernism' — is necessary *because* of coloniality; Mignolo (2011, p.2-3) defines the Western rationale for colonialism, expansion, and civilizing as the logic of coloniality, of which modernity is its other, darker side; one does not exist without the other. The ideas of "backwardness and progress" have been used to construct weak hegemonies of knowledge,

race, and others; Davidson (1960, p.32) calls out this "illusion of Europocentric...thought" and stresses that "the interplay of men and their *environment*" are a better indicator and metric for interpreting and planning progress. Man's *overplay* of the environment has reached a breaking point. Manufacturing processes are being rethought in response to the warming climate. Sustainability has become a design responsibility. Gisela Carrasco-Miró (2017, p.104-105) critically dissects "growth is good" rhetoric by revealing that sustainable development tells "a totalizing modernity story with capitalism as its universal telos and that it hinders the possibility of accessing the critical insights of those who have been 'left behind', colonized, or bulldozed over in the Capitalocene"; Carrasco-Miró proposes saying '*sí*' — meaning '*yes*' — to engaging with currently devalued economies for a more equitable approach to sustainability practice and discourse.

Design does not and can not *save*; design advocates for the better and encourages a hopeful shift toward it. Nwoko (1992, p.82) believes that developing spaces need the freedom to evolve their own voice and design better futures while balancing outside influence, to make and learn from mistakes to improve. To experiment with options for how modernity manifests. In this experimentation, decolonial options to unsustainable modernity emerge that benefit the local *and* global. Nigerian economist and World Trade Organization (WTO) Director-General Dr. Ngozi Okonji-Iweala makes a case for continued engagement with globalization. "Re-globalization," she calls it, is "bringing more countries into international production networks." She petitions for "deeper and more diversified international markets" to fortify the global supply chain (Hermosa, 2022, 19:58). It is necessary for makers to experiment for local benefit and more *equitable* global exchange because out of experimentation comes options and answers to needs — known and unknown.

Where does care come in?

In the context of this intended research, ethical care for the *process* — this inquiry into product design as 'preservation' — is vital. This looks like avoiding gimmicks or playing into over-saturations; for determining the right method for investigating *then* for application *now* in designing the *onward*. The ether is more saturated with Afrocentric signals that bear little to no foundation in any specificity than those that do. Bonsiepe (2021, p.176) speaks to a similar "*indigenism*" phase in design in Latin America in the 1960s (which was also a way to counteract echoes of colonialism) and the concerns and aftereffects of what might be considered a poor practice of cultural transference method and result, "...the rich stock of forms for craft products is linked to a traditionally rather narrow range of products. By romanticizing the notion of "design" it then becomes possible to present these products as authentic design informed by hypostatized Latin American essence." This intended research hypothesizes that correct transference can go *beyond* crude aesthetic interpolation, but determining the method's feasibility will only come through trial. By doing so, an etiquette for recognizing and classifying tangible and intangible elements in a historical object and its "transference" to a designed product through experimental making can emerge. Bonsiepe (2021, p.176) also calls out the ethical and exploitative ramifications of poor transference practice, "When industrial designers adopt craft designs and deliver products then

made by craftworkers – primarily by women – this brings with it the danger of using these workers purely as labor rather than fostering their innovative abilities". For the design researcher, the attitude of participatory decolonization research should be non-hierarchical; it is not a mission of design knowledge depositing but of expanding the knowledge *of* design for oneself and the field at large. One way to do this is through the centering of local knowledge-makers. Co-creating and co-futuring is a decolonial method in its own right, given its focus on communal skill sharing. Ethical care for participating designers is key.

Care also applies when considering the *person* impacted by all this design contemplation, and people *within* cultures spark musings of individual and collective *identity*. Boym's (n.d.) position that a nation's nostalgia-driven rediscovery of identity "puts an end to mutual understanding" since "the universality of longing" in the human experience can cause us to alienate each other as we focus on being part of a certain group may place greater value on outer considerations when insular ones remain fractured; not all nations evolved equally. Nigeria is a once-colonized, "imagined community" (Anderson, 2016, p.07) of ethnic societies (wholes and fractions) under a green and white banner, named by a Brit after a river. Still, for Nigeria, it is worth considering Boym's position carefully, as postcolonial *tribalism* can be fed if this investigation into the past is unbalanced in its source of reference. On an individual level, Bonsiepe (2021, p.165) believes "identity is not the realization of a potential that lies hidden somewhere in the lower depths of what is believed to be [indigenous] character" and is "not in the past; rather, it needs to be created." Ideally, identity needn't lean on these things. However, colonization of one's surrounding culture, and consequently of oneself and perspective, can lead to a distorted understanding of identity and place in the world. There is a need to decolonize lingering ways of thinking; revisiting the past could be an essential reckoning with a *part* of the self, not the whole, and for the designer, could affect process and output.

People make culture and not the other way around. Designers and researchers engaging in decolonization practice should care for *what* is created and how it inserts into public realms for tactile engagement, for "cultures thrive when they best serve and reflect the people" (Adichie, 2023). Design theorist Tony Fry (2017, p.28) speaks on designers in the "global south" providing care by designing ontologically *caring* things; Care becomes transmutable and tangible when designers understand the impact of the things created and put out and their power to transform by "making and unmaking." Only with uninhibited and consistent interaction by *all* can these design experiments — these caring objects and experiences — communicate a new possible future.

Conclusion

To reiterate Demas Nwoko's (2022, p.155) warning, Nigerian industries "will remain in the woods until it admits the activities of indigenous creative designers into its product development process." What emerges — once all tensions are taut — is a gap to examine this "admission" Nwoko speaks of. The *how*.

Therefore, the research plan is to explore the role of design in Nigerian historical preservation — through ethnography, co-design, observational engagement with objects from Igbo historical culture (as a case study), and personal practice — through the methodology of '*synthesis*' (as historically experimented with in Nigerian fine art) over transference; if hybridity as creative remedy was explored when Nigeria was transitioning to an independent state, it might be a worthy methodology for researching her future transitions. As a Nigerian product designer and design researcher, this reflection uncovers an opportunity (for myself and Nigerian designers alike) to rethink and deconstruct the consciously or subconsciously dominant definitions and processes of *design* itself for the benefit of the Nigerian design-scape and the spaces and people it creates for. The historically and culturally backed perspective of '*artdesign*,' discussed in the first section, forces one to consider its effect on the contemporary order of operations for design ideation, production, and manufacture.

Okeke (2019, p.23) saw synthesis in fine art as a *natural* happening, an instinctual, "unconscious" response and responsibility between the artist and the historical reference being preserved; the projected next step in this research process is to ask: *does the same apply to the product designer today or are there models for product designers, looking to preserve culture in post-colonial spaces by offering options for sustainable transitions into a more self-reliant future, to apply when approaching this process?* There is ripe potential to explore this through the development of new methods for *proper* synthesis in making and unmaking design processes, to define what *proper* and *improper* synthesis looks like and if those distinctions even exist, and to determine *what* can be synthesized with or into *what* in order to inform this possible etiquette of synthesis, through experimental and engaging practice.

As an overall contribution, these contemplations ultimately encourage the adoption of a nuanced mindset, well-considered urgency, and ethical bedrock for designers and researchers, particularly those with heritage aligned with the researched space, to decolonially (with a *post* colonial motivation, as earlier introduced) reflect on the past to individually and collectively make and un-make the future in once-colonized spaces.

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