"THE IMPACT OF ART, MUSIC, AND RESISTANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA AND NIGERIA, 1970S-ONWARD: EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF APARTHEID/POST-APARTHEID AND PROTEST ART"

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Abstract
Art has long served as a powerful tool for social commentary, resistance, and propaganda. This study explores how artists in Nigeria and South Africa have employed various media—particularly visual art and music—to challenge oppressive regimes, promote social change, and shape political thought. It critically examines the role of art in responding to apartheid, post-apartheid realities, and protest movements in both countries.Through a comparative analysis, the research investigates how artistic expressions reflect and confront systemic racism, oppression, and resistance. The study is grounded in Critical Race Theory, which provides a framework for understanding the intersection of race, power, and representation in art. A secondary research methodology was adopted, relying on scholarly articles, online resources, and conference reports to reach its findings. The primary objective is to evaluate the impact and role of artists in shaping anti-apartheid, post-apartheid, and protest art discourses. A secondary objective is to examine selected artists and their works, highlighting their contributions to the fight against racism and oppression. Lastly, the study traces the trajectory of resistance art from the 1970s to the present day in Nigeria and South Africa. This research is original in its comparative scope and offers insights into the socio-political influence of art across different historical contexts.
Keywords: Apartheid, Protest Art, Visual Art, Resistance, Propaganda, Nigeria, South Africa

Introduction

Before examining the role artists played in apartheid, post-apartheid, and protest art in Nigeria and South Africa, this study first interrogates key terms to enhance a comprehensive understanding of the research.The term “apartheid”, derived from the Afrikaans word meaning "apartness" or "separateness," describes the institutionalized racial segregation and discrimination that was officially implemented in South Africa from 1948 to the early 1990s. However, the practice of racial segregation predates 1948 and was deeply rooted in earlier Dutch and British colonial policies (Anti-Apartheid Legacy, n.d.). Contrary to common assumption, apartheid was not implemented based on a demographic majority of white people; rather, it was a system imposed by the white minority over the Black majority population. The apartheid regime legally enforced political, economic, and social discrimination against non-white communities, particularly Black South Africans. Urban areas were racially zoned—residential and commercial spaces were designated for specific races, and people of other races were forbidden from residing or operating businesses there. This resulted in the mass displacement of thousands of Black, Coloured, and Indian South Africans (Britannica, 2024). Although apartheid officially ended with the democratic elections of 1994, the question arises: do forms of apartheid still exist in the contemporary world? Archbishop Desmond Tutu (2002) argued that similar systems of oppression exist today, citing the Israeli government's treatment of Palestinians. According to Tutu, Palestinians—who are not classified as Semitic Jews—have been systematically displaced and oppressed, much like Black South Africans under apartheid. The Israeli state, he claimed, invoked the label of "anti-Semitism" as a tool to silence criticism, while enacting policies that strip Palestinians of their homes and lands—echoing the tragic history of dispossession experienced by Black South Africans. In South Africa, apartheid led to the dispossession of rural lands, sold at low prices to white farmers. This caused widespread homelessness and economic disenfranchisement among the Black population. By the 1960s, the repression had reached its peak. A defining moment of resistance was the Sharpeville Massacre of March 1960. During a peaceful protest organized by the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC)—a splinter group of the African National Congress (ANC)—South African police opened fire on unarmed protesters, killing 67 people and wounding 180 others. This massacre marked a turning point in the anti-apartheid struggle, leading both the PAC and ANC to abandon peaceful protest in favor of armed resistance. Amid this resistance, art and artists emerged as critical voices of dissent and documentation. Artists used their creative platforms to interrogate apartheid policies, amplify marginalized voices, and rally international solidarity. In 1983, a group known as the Association of Artists of the World Against Apartheid, led by Ernest Pignon-Ernest and Antonio Saura, collaborated with the United Nations Special Committee Against Apartheid to organize an international exhibition titled *Art Against Apartheid*. Featuring 85 works, the exhibition premiered in Paris and traveled across the globe—including to Spain, the Netherlands, Greece, the United States, Korea, Canada, the Caribbean, and Japan—underscoring the global resonance of resistance art. In South Africa, artists such as David Koloane, Dumile Feni, and Ezrom

Kgobokanyo Sebata Legae created visual works that addressed the trauma and injustice of apartheid. Their art captured the emotional, physical, and psychological toll of systemic violence on Black South Africans. In the post-apartheid era, artists like William Kentridge and Sue Williamson continued this legacy by creating works that interrogate historical memory, accountability, and reconciliation. Kentridge's animated films and charcoal drawings evoke themes of complicity and forgetting, while Williamson's installations explore personal histories and the lingering effects of apartheid policies. A similar trajectory can be observed in Nigeria, where artists used visual art and music to challenge authoritarian regimes, particularly during the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s. Fela Aníkúlápó Kuti, through his Afrobeat music, offered biting critiques of corruption, militarism, and neocolonialism. Visual artist Obiora Udechukwu, a leading figure in the Nsukka school, fused traditional Uli aesthetics with contemporary political commentary. Contemporary Nigerian artists such as Peju Alatise and Victor Ehikhamenor have inherited this tradition of critical engagement. Their works explore themes of violence, gender, identity, and postcolonial realities—extending the language of protest art into the present day.

Apartheid Resistance Art In South African (1960s-1990s)

Before exploring the contributions of individual artists to the anti-apartheid movement, it is important to first examine the origins of the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) and the coalitions that supported its cause. Understanding this historical background provides valuable context for the artists' involvement, whose works served as a powerful voice in the broader struggle for justice and liberation. The Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) was established in 1960, evolving from the Boycott Movement that began in 1959. The same year, the Sharpeville Massacre occurred, during which South African police opened fire on peaceful protesters, killing 67 people. This tragic event galvanized resistance within South Africa and drew global attention to the brutality of the apartheid regime. Originally known as the British Anti-Apartheid Movement, the AAM operated throughout England, Wales, and Scotland. It advocated for the complete isolation of the apartheid regime and lent support to liberation movements both within South Africa and across Southern Africa, including Namibia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Angola. The movement opposed South African military aggression against its neighboring states and maintained a broad base of support, including local anti-apartheid groups, trade union councils, student organizations, and political parties (African Activist Archive, n.d.). The AAM also mobilized artists and activists globally. According to Richard Knight and Christi Root (2013) in the African Activist Archive Project, visual materials such as poster art played a crucial role in communicating anti-apartheid messages to the public. Posters producedbetween the 1950s and 1990s carried powerful images and slogans. For example, the Pan-African Liberation Committee in Brookline, Massachusetts created a poster in the early 1970s with the bold caption: *"There are but two sides in a war—she fights on the side of African freedom—Gulf finances the other."* This poster featured a photograph by Boubaker Adjali, an Algerian journalist and filmmaker, capturing the urgency of the resistance. Several U.S.-based organizations also participated in the poster campaign. The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) in Atlanta, Georgia, along with the Georgia Coalition for Divestment in South Africa, launched a *Boycott Coca-Cola* campaign in 1985, which was first initiated at the Midwest Anti-Apartheid Conference in Chicago. Other groups such as the New York Labor Committee Against Apartheid, Illinois Labor Network Against Apartheid, and the Southern African Liberation Committee in East Lansing, Michigan, also contributed to the visual protest against apartheid. Having established a global overview of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, it is now essential to examine the Anti-Apartheid Art Movement itself. This term refers to the activities of artists—whether visual, literary, or performance-based—who used their respective mediums to challenge apartheid policies and support the liberation struggle. Among the various art forms, music emerged as a particularly influential medium during the apartheid era. It resonated widely with the public, drawing large audiences and stirring political consciousness. Numerous musical concerts were organized by anti-apartheid groups both in South Africa and abroad. According to the South African History Online (SAHO), musicians responded fervently to calls for the release of political prisoners, especially Nelson Mandela. Notable among these was the British band The Special AKA, whose song *Free Nelson Mandela*, written by Jerry Dammers, became an anthem of the movement (AAM, 2012). Thus, artists were not mere observers but active participants in the anti-apartheid struggle. Whether through visual art, music, performance, or literature, they provided a critical cultural resistance that complemented political activism and exposed the injustices of apartheid to the world.

Plate 1: Miriam Makeba, performing on the stage

Miriam Makeba: Voice of Resistance Against Apartheid

Miriam Makeba, a South African-born singer popularly known as *Mama Afrika*, was one of the most prominent Black African performers of the 20th century. She used her music as a powerful tool of protest against the apartheid regime in South Africa. During her years in exile, she became increasingly popular and outspoken, using her international platform to condemn racial oppression and injustice. Makeba was not only a celebrated musician but also a fearless activist. Many of her songs directly challenged the apartheid system. Notable among them are *"Soweto Blues"* and *"Beware, Verwoerd! (Ndodemnyama)"*. The latter was a direct reference to Hendrik Verwoerd, the then Prime Minister of South Africa and one of the chief architects of apartheid. Beyond her music, Makeba took her activism to the global stage. According to South African History Online, she dedicated her life to revealing and raising awareness about the struggles of the South African people under apartheid. Her advocacy reached international platforms, including the United Nations. In 1963, she addressed the UN General Assembly and spoke passionately before the United Nations Special Committee on Apartheid, where she pleaded: "I appeal to the UN to use its influence to open the doors of all prisons and concentration camps in South Africa, where thousands of our people – men, women, and children – are now in jail." Through her art and activism, Miriam Makeba played a significant role in the global anti-apartheid movement. Her voice—both in song and in speech—became a symbol of resistance and hope for millions.

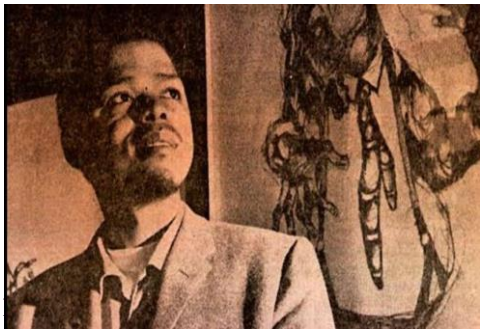

Plate 2: Dumile Feni: The "Goya of the Townships" and His Artistic Protest Against Apartheid

Zwelidumile Jeremiah Mgxaji Mslaba, more commonly known as Dumile Feni (born 1942), was a renowned South African contemporary visual artist celebrated for his expressive drawings, paintings, and sculptures. His work often addressed themes of suffering, oppression, and resistance during the Apartheid era in South Africa.Although never formally trained in art, Feni began drawing and painting from an early age. His artistic journey was shaped by the harsh realities of life under Apartheid, and although his early works were not overtly political, the oppressive climate strongly influenced his creative expression. Living through the height of Apartheid, Feni eventually went into self-imposed exile in 1968, spending time in London, Los Angeles, and New York until his return in 1991. Feni was dubbed the "Goya of the townships" for his powerful, emotionally charged depictions of township life and human suffering. He derived much of his subject matter from daily life, interpreting these realities through a distinctive graphic style—often monochromatic, stark, and symbolic. His love for music, particularly jazz, infused his work with a rhythmic quality; even the postures and movements of his figures appear musically orchestrated. A pivotal piece in Feni's body of work is "African Guernica" (charcoal on newsprint), created shortly before he departed for London. The piece is a direct homage to Pablo Picasso's iconic painting *Guernica* (1937), which protested the horrors of the Spanish Civil War. Feni's *African Guernica* expresses a similar anguish—this time aimed at the sociopolitical trauma and isolation caused by the Apartheid regime. Like Picasso, Feni uses distorted, morphed figures—both human and animal—to illustrate a

chaotic and grotesque tableau of suffering. However, Feni's figures are more organic and fluid in form. By referencing *Guernica*, Feni draws a powerful parallel between the devastation of war and the brutal experience of Apartheid, presenting South Africa as a war zone in its own right. His work serves not only as a personal catharsis but also as a visual protest, drawing international attention to the suffering endured by black South Africans. *Culled from Monica Blignaut (2019)*

uernica

Apiré, an online article described the images in Children under Apartheid, figures peering from behind jail bars. Suppose these are the young victims of state brutality and subjugation, caged inside apartheid's prisons – their fate murky and unpredictable, their cardinal sin being the unflinching petitioning for self-determination. The work further hinges on Feni's typical leitmotifs. In the margins of these graphics, bold and sharp lines that give his subjects a robotic masculinity, loose and faint lines creep up unexpectedly, in ways that refuse to eviscerate their sentimentality and frailty. *Figure 4:*

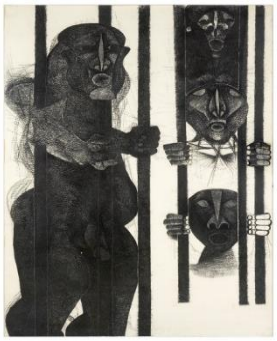

Figure4: Dumile Feni's Chidren Under Apartheid, Charcoal, 1987

Figure 5: Dumile Feni's the prisoner 1971

Ezrom Kgobonyane Sebata Legae was born in Vrededorp, Johannesburg, in 1938. A South African painter and sculptor, Legae became widely known for his uncompromising visual commentaries on the brutality and injustice of apartheid. His artworks presented a harsh yet honest portrayal of life under systemic racial oppression, reflecting the deep wounds inflicted by the regime and the enduring scars left behind even after its formal end. Legae's artistic legacy is marked by a powerful use of symbolism and expressionism to communicate the anguish, degradation, and alienation experienced by non-white South Africans. His works are not merely aesthetic compositions—they are raw, visceral, and poignant responses to political and social turmoil. Through his art, Legae unapologetically confronted the white minority and held them accountable for the suffering of the oppressed. His language was visual, yet his messages were bold, direct, and unflinching. One of his most significant bodies of work is the "Dying Beast Series" (see Plates7 and 8), completed in 1993 during South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy. This series serves as a metaphorical reflection of a collapsing regime—wounded, monstrous, and gasping for relevance. It encapsulates Legae's vision of a decaying system that could no longer sustain itself. In an interview published in *Insight*, an exhibition in which he participated, Legae commented on his role in a post-apartheid South Africa: *"I will continue to talk about things as I see them. People can change, but masters cannot. Change doesn't happen overnight."* This quote underscores Legae's enduring commitment to truth-telling through art. His belief in the power of visual narrative to provoke reflection and discomfort remained unshaken, even as South Africa entered a new democratic phase. This commitment is further illustrated in his painting *Icons de Dakar 'Africa'* (see Plate 6), which reflects his broader concerns about African identity, cultural memory, and the unfulfilled promises of freedom. Until his death in 1999, Ezrom Legae used his creative practice as a weapon of resistance, social critique, and historical witness. His works continue to resonate as urgent reminders of South Africa's painful past and the ongoing need for vigilance in the pursuit of justice.

Plate 6: Icons de Dakar 'Africa', 1996, Ink on paper **Plate 7:** Dying Beast, 1993

Plate 8: dying beast, 1993–94, Ink on paper

Post-Apartheid and Contemporary Art in South Africa

The post-apartheid era in South Africa, beginning around 1993 with the release of Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners, marked a significant shift in the nation's socio-political landscape. This period symbolized a newfound freedom after decades of racial segregation and oppression under apartheid. However, while apartheid as a system was dismantled, its psychological and emotional residue remained. Artists—both trained and self-taught—played a critical role in expressing the collective trauma, resistance, and hope of the nation through their creative works. Contemporary South African art of the post-apartheid period is deeply informed by the visual and emotional memories of apartheid. Artists utilized various media to document, critique, and heal from past injustices. Two leading figures whose work reflects these complexities are William Kentridge and Sue Williamson**.** Their art embodies a powerful commentary on memory, truth, justice, and reconciliation.

William Kenrtridge

William Kentridge, born in Johannesburg in 1955, is a globally recognized artist known for his innovative use of drawing and animation. His distinctive technique involves creating charcoal drawings that he incrementally erases and redraws to produce frame-by-frame animation—a process that mirrors the fragility and mutability of memory. Kentridge's work rarely addresses apartheid overtly; instead, it gestures toward the underlying tensions, ethical dilemmas, and silences of South African history. His pieces are imbued with ambiguity, forcing viewers to confront discomfort without offering easy solutions. In doing so, he avoids either sanitizing the past or rendering it as overly theatrical. One of his most notable works is "Ubu Tells the Truth" (1997), which draws upon the character Ubu, originally from Alfred Jarry's play *Ubu Roi*. In Kentridge's interpretation, Ubu becomes a grotesque, ever-morphing figure who represents power, surveillance, and denial. The piece was created in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)**,** a pivotal institution established in 1995 to investigate human rights abuses under apartheid. Kentridge described the TRC process as a form of public theatre—one where both victims and perpetrators narrated their truths in open forums. In "Ubu Tells the Truth," Kentridge critiques this process, emphasizing its contradictions: as perpetrators revealed more of their violent acts, they edged closer to amnesty, which he found ethically problematic. As he noted, "As people give more and more evidence of the things they have done, they get closer and closer to amnesty, and it becomes more and more intolerable that these people should be given it." The film blends documentary footage, drawing animation, and theatrical performance, highlighting the complexities of justice, forgiveness, and historical memory in post-apartheid South Africa.

Plate 9: Gallery view of the William Kentridge exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, from 24 September - 11 December 2022Less © William Kentridge. Photo: © Royal Academy of Arts, London / David Parry

For Thirty Years Next to His Heart is not merely an artwork—it is an indictment. It documents how apartheid operated not only through violence and spatial segregation, but also through the mundane tyranny of paperwork. The passbook, which should have been a personal document, becomes evidence of systemic dehumanization. Williamson's piece stands as a quiet, dignified protest. Rather than dramatize apartheid's brutality, she lets its quiet cruelties speak through the repetition of stamps, the silence of ink, and the erosion of personhood. It is an archive of trauma, a memory-object, and a call to remember those who lived entire lifetimes within the margins of bureaucratic invisibility.

Plate 10: Sue Williamson's *For Thirty Years next to His Heart,* a series, 2014

Nigerian art and Politics (1970s- 980)

Post-colonialism in Nigeria refers to the period following the end of British colonial rule and the country's attainment of independence in 1960. This era marked a transition from foreign control to self-governance, where Nigerians, representing diverse ethnic groups and cultural identities, were expected to exercise democratic ideals. However, the optimism that accompanied independence was short-lived. Between 1960 and 1966, ethnic and political tensions escalated, resulting in the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). Following the war, the country fell under successive military regimes that spanned the 1970s and 1980s. These regimes were characterized by authoritarian rule, suppression of dissent, and widespread corruption. The political instability and lack of accountability created a national atmosphere of disillusionment, despair, and frustration. During this turbulent period, artists across various disciplines—visual art, music, poetry, and theatre—emerged as powerful voices of resistance. Art became a tool not only for documentation but also for protest. Among these, performance art gained particular prominence for its ability to engage wide audiences directly and effectively. Theatre troupes, spoken word poets, and musicians used their platforms to critique the failings of the military regime and to advocate for social justice. According to art historian Chika Okeke-Agulu, *"Postcolonial Modernism chronicles the emergence of artistic modernism in Nigeria in the heady years surrounding political independence in 1960, before the outbreak of civil war in 1967"* (Agulu, 2015). This modernist movement in Nigerian art reflected both a break from colonial artistic models and a reconnection with indigenous traditions and social commentary. Artists such as FelaKuti (music), Wole Soyinka (theatre), and numerous visual artists played instrumental roles in the cultural resistance movement. Their works did not merely entertain; they

challenged authority, exposed injustices, and galvanized public awareness. In summary, the post-colonial era in Nigeria was defined by both political instability and an artistic awakening. Amidst military repression, artists became agents of change, using their creativity to question power structures, preserve collective memory, and push for national transformation.

Plate 11: Fela Aníkúlápó Kútì, performing on the statge

The post-colonial era in Nigeria ushered in an age of political volatility, civil unrest, and disillusionment. In this climate, artists emerged as vital cultural voices, translating the people's collective anxieties, grievances, and memories into powerful forms of expression. Two significant figures in this context are Fela Aníkúlápó Kuti, the Afrobeat pioneer and activist, and ObioraUdechukwu, a painter and poet whose work encapsulates the trauma and aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War.

Fela Aníkúlápó Kuti (1938–1997) was a Nigerian multi-instrumentalist, composer, and political activist widely regarded as the creator of Afrobeat, a music genre that fused traditional West African rhythms with American jazz and funk. Fela's music was not merely for entertainment—it was a strategic tool for political resistance and social commentary. He openly opposed Nigeria's military juntas, using his lyrics to critique the widespread corruption, abuse of power, and systemic violence of the military regimes. One of his most iconic protest songs, "Zombie" (1976), satirized Nigerian soldiers as mindless followers of orders, a daring move that earned him brutal retaliation from the military. In 1985, Fela released *"Beast of No Nation"* with his band Egypt 80, a powerful anti-apartheid song inspired by a statement made by South African Prime Minister P.W. Botha, who said, *"This uprising will bring out the beast in us."* The song served as a bold critique not only of South African apartheid but also of global and African authoritarianism (Rekhets, 2021). Through his music and activism, Fela became an enduring symbol of resistance, courageously confronting injustice through art. His legacy remains a cornerstone in the history of African cultural protest.

Obiora Udechukwu, born in 1946, experienced the horrors of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) firsthand as a young man. These traumatic experiences deeply influenced his artistic and poetic expressions. Udechukwu was a key figure in Biafran visual propaganda during the war and continued to use his art to reflect on the human condition and critique socio-political failures in Nigeria. As art historian Janet Wolff notes, the war was both *"a foundational period in his own life"* and *"a negative turning point in Nigeria's history."* Udechukwu became internally displaced during the conflict and used his skills to document and protest the violence that engulfed Biafra. One of his most harrowing works, "Air Raid: Harsh Flute Series" (ink on paper), captures the aftermath of a bombing during the war. The composition is sparse—most of the page is left blank, emphasizing the destruction captured in the small lower section. A sun and airplane hover above, while beneath lies a city in ruins, scattered body parts, and a ghostly figure screaming in silence. This powerful piece conveys the senseless loss of civilian life and the impersonal cruelty of modern warfare.

Udechukwu's *Air Raid* remains tragically relevant today. It can be read metaphorically in light of Nigeria's current socio-political crisis. The airplane becomes a symbol of the Tinubu-led APC government**,** and the bombs represent issues such as corruption, fuel hikes, kidnapping, injustice,and economic hardship**.** Just as civilians were bombarded during the civil war, so too are citizens today besieged by systemic failures. The chaotic energy in the artwork mirrors the disarray in modern Nigeria—skyrocketing prices, food insecurity, unemployment, and political oppression.Udechukwu's works transcend time; they are not simply recollections of Biafra but ongoing critiques of Nigeria's post-independence reality. His artistic voice becomes a conduit through which history, memory, and present-day suffering intersect. In "Refugee Children" (1970), Udechukwu employs semi-abstraction to depict four malnourished children. Their skeletal frames, visible ribs, and protruding stomachs are harrowing visual references to kwashiorkor, a disease caused by severe protein deficiency. The children's disproportionate limbs and heads evoke both physical suffering and emotional trauma. The painting captures the vulnerability of war-affected populations, especially children, who often bear the brunt of political violence and neglect.According to Okpara, Aniago, and Okpara (2020), Udechukwu's art is a continuous reflection on "the travails of the common man—their strivings, pains, and doggedness." His use of traditional Uli aesthetics—

abstract line drawing from Igbo culture—further localizes his work within Nigerian visual traditions while addressing universal themes of injustice, memory, and survival.

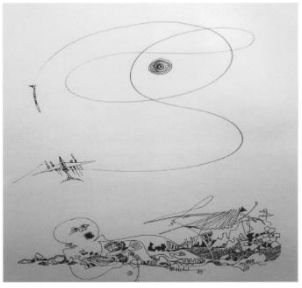

Figure 12:, Obiora Udechukwu, Air Raid: Harsh Flute Series, 1989
Ink on paper, 23.9cm x 18.2cm (9,4in x 7.2in)
Collection of the artist Obiora (Photograph of the work taken by Simon Ottenberg)
Figure 13: Refugee Children, 1970, oil on board,.26.2 x 21 cm. 59.8 x 61.3 Source of both paintings: So Far (exhibition catalogue),Bayreuth: Boomerang Press, 1993.

Contemporary Nigerian Art

Following the long and painful trajectory of Nigeria's modern art, shaped by Western colonization and its impact on indigenous culture, spirituality, and governance, Nigerian artists have consistently fought to reclaim their creative agency. Colonial forces once attempted to suppress traditional values, erode native political systems, and marginalize art from national development. In response, modernist and nationalist artistschampioned the inclusion of art in the national curriculum and sought to recover and reinterpret indigenous cultural idioms in their creative practices.

This study will not delve deeply into the pre-colonial and early colonial art movements but instead focuses on how contemporary Nigerian artistsrespond to the current sociopolitical challenges facing the nation. Particularly, it examines the works of Peju Alatise and Victor Ehikhamenor, exploring how their visual narratives act as tools for social critique and activism.

Peju Alatise (b. 1976) is a leading figure in contemporary African art. As a multidisciplinary artist, writer, and architect, her work traverses media and form, drawing from Yoruba cosmology, mythology, and storytelling traditions to construct alternative realities that challenge Nigeria's sociopolitical dysfunctions, especially those affecting women and children.Alatise's work is unapologetically political, often confronting issues such as gender inequality, violence against women**,** child marriage, and institutional failure. Her artistry merges the spiritual and the social, exploring how myth can be used to critique reality, and how dreams can offer visions of justice in deeply unjust worlds.

Plate 14: Peju Alatise, *Nigerian Women* 2012, Mixed-media on canvas

This piece is a powerful visual commentary on the pervasive violence against women in Nigeria**.** The white background, often symbolizing purity or peace, is disrupted by a conspicuous redblotch—a visceral symbol of bloodshed**.** Surrounding this are various hand gestures, some clenched in resistance, others open in desperation, representing women's struggle against victimhood. The imagery suggests a mass of unseen victims—hands reaching for help, struggling to resist. The work can be interpreted as addressing numerous societal issues: rape, sexual assault, domestic violence, and the systemic silencing of Nigerian women. One can also relate the painting to national tragedies such as the 2014 Chibok girls' abduction**,** where many were reportedly raped, forcibly converted, or killed for resisting Boko Haram's agenda. Alatise's painting becomes a collective memorial, not just for known victims, but for the **"**unseen realities"of many Nigerian women. Beyond gender-

based violence, the piece can be connected to the broader atmosphere of national insecurity—kidnappings in the South-West, banditry in the North, and the rise of "unknown gunmen" in the South-East. These events all point to a fractured statein which the government, under President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's administration, appears unable or unwilling to guarantee the safety and dignity of its citizens. Thus, *Nigerian Women* is not just a feminist work; it is a damning indictment of social collapse**.**

Plate 15: Peju Alatise, *Sim & the Glass Birds*, 2022

In *Sim & the Glass Birds,* Peju Alatise visualizes a fictional narrative of a girl named Sim**,** a character she developed to represent the inner lives of oppressed Nigerian girls. Sim retreats into a dream world, an alternate realm of safety, where she finds refuge from a society that denies her rights, voice, and future**.** The artwork is a commentary on the lived realities ofunderage girlsin Nigeria. In a country where a girl under twelve can legally be married, and where child labour remains rampant, Sim's fantastical escape into a mythic dimension is not just poetic; it is a psychological necessity. In the real world, these girls are invisible. In Alatise's world, they are gods**,** protectors, and survivors. Drawing from Yoruba folklore, Alatise gives Sim access to divine companions—glass birds—through whom she navigates this imaginary cosmos. These mythic figures stand in contrast to the harshness of her reality, but they are also calls to action. By situating her critique within African mythology, Alatise does not reject tradition but reclaims it as a space of protection and empowerment.

Victor Ehikhamenor is a Nigerian-American multidisciplinary visual artist, writer, and cultural critic known for his vivid, densely patterned works that explore African cultural heritage**,** spirituality**,** and postcolonial critique**.** His practice is rooted in the symbolic vocabularies of Benin'svisual culture**,** fused with contemporary aesthetics and sociopolitical narratives that speak to the global African diaspora. One of his most recent large-scale interventions, *Miracle Central*, exemplifies his commitment to addressing the intersections of religion, politics, and cultural memory **i**n Nigeria. Installed at the iconic Tafawa Balewa Square (TBS) in Lagos, *Miracle Central* is a mixed-mediainstallationthat transforms the historic public space into a contemplative and immersive environment. The piece draws upon the scale and symbolic weight of TBS—a site originally constructed as a racecourse and later used for Nigeria's 1960 independence ceremony—to provoke reflection on how public spaces evolve under new socio-religious meanings. The installation is draped with thousands of white handkerchiefs, a recognizable symbol of the Pentecostal movement in Nigeria, often waved during revival meetings and "miracle" crusades as emblems of spiritual cleansing, deliverance, and emotional release. Suspended within this environment are various objects of worship—rosaries sewn into lace fabric in Ehikhamenor's signature tapestry style, alongside traditional ritual items and Western Christian paraphernalia. These elements do not merely coexist; they converge**,** engaging in a rich visual and conceptual dialogue that speaks to the duality and hybridity of Nigeria's contemporary religious landscape. Ehikhamenor explains: *"I extend the focus of my ongoing interrogations on the duality found in expressions of religion and culture to Pentecostalism… Miracle Central invites meditation on the hallowed space to be found at the intersections of religion, politics, history, and expressions of belonging"* (Ehikhamenor, 2024).*Tafawa Balewa Square* has, in recent decades, undergone a significant transformation from a nationalist symbol to a religio-cultural performance arena**.** It has hosted large evangelical gatherings, including events by prominent figures such as Archbishop Benson Idahosa, whose *"Expect a Miracle"* crusades in the 1980s and 1990s drew thousands to the site. By selecting this venue for *Miracle Central*, Ehikhamenor underscores the multipurposing of public space—from colonial parade ground to political landmark to spiritual arena.The installation's title—*Miracle Central*—evokes the performative spectacle of NigerianPentecostalism, where faith is often dramatized and commodified in urban spaces. Yet, it also suggests a place of refuge**,** healing**,** and collective transformation—not unlike the aspirations of the independence movement once celebrated on those same grounds. As with many of Ehikhamenor's works, material choice and texture are integral to meaning. The juxtaposition of delicate lace (a fabric often associated with Nigerian Catholic and traditional ceremonies) with beaded rosaries**,** handkerchiefs, and suspended ritual objects serves as both aesthetic strategy and cultural commentary**.** The installation

challenges viewers to confront the ways in which spirituality and politics inhabit shared terrain, how public spaces are charged by belief systems, and how art can frame dialogue around belonging and national identity.

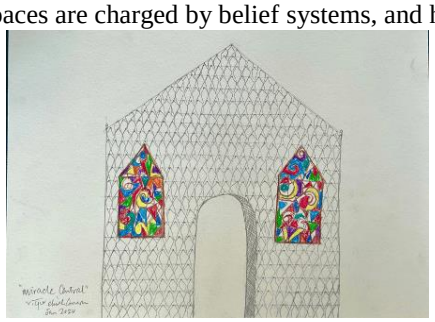

Plate 16: Victor Ehikhamenor, Miracle Central 2024,

Plate 17: Victor Ehikhamenor Miracle Central 2024,

Courtesy of the artistdrawing of entrance.

Findings

This study reveals that contemporary African artists continue to play vital roles in shaping sociopolitical narratives in their respective countries. Through the works of artists like William Kentridge, Sue Williamson, Peju Alatise, and Victor Ehikhamenor, it becomes evident that art functions not only as a form of aesthetic expression but as a powerful tool for resistance, memorypreservation, and social critique. First, the findings highlight that art is a potent medium ofsociopolitical commentary. Artists in Nigeria and South Africa, working within postcolonial and post-apartheid realities, engage themes such as political oppression, historical trauma, corruption,gender-based violence, and religious conflict. Their works provide critical responses to national crises, functioning as visual commentaries and alternative historical narratives. Second, memory and history emerge as dominant themes in the contemporary art of postcolonial societies. Artists like Kentridge and Williamson revisit apartheid archives and personal testimonies, using art to question, remember, and heal. Similarly, Udechukwu's wartime drawings, such as *Air Raid*, serve as visual documents of the Nigerian Civil War, projecting past horrors onto present sociopolitical instability.Third, the study finds that artists like Peju Alatise use their practice to address genderinequality, childhood oppression, and cultural silencing. Her works, such as *Nigerian Women* and *Sim & the Glass Birds*, interrogate female experiences in a patriarchal society and provide alternative narratives through Yoruba spirituality and myth. This reflects how art becomes a voice for the marginalized, especially Nigerian women and girls. Furthermore, Victor Ehikhamenor's *Miracle Central* demonstrates how public space is politicized through religious and cultural performance. By converting Tafawa Balewa Square into a reflective art installation, Ehikhamenor questions the dual role of religion as both a site of hope and political manipulation in Nigeria. Another key finding is the fusion of cultural idioms and indigenous knowledge systems. These artists draw heavily from African cosmology, ritual objects, symbolic patterns, and oral storytelling traditions. This blending of traditional and contemporary forms exemplifies cultural resilience and challenges Western artistic dominance.Final, the study confirms that the role of the artist hasexpanded beyond studio-based creation to that of activist, educator, and public intellectual. Contemporary African artists now act as cultural mediators, using their works to critique, preserve, and reimagine society. Their interventions are essential in confronting social injustice, reclaiming historical narratives, and fostering national dialogue.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the powerful role of art in resistance, propaganda, politics, and critical thought in Nigeria and South Africa from the 1970s to the present. Through qualitative analysis of case studies, archival materials, and artist practices, it is clear that art has not merely reflected society but has actively shaped it, serving as a catalyst for political awareness, social transformation, and cultural reclamation. Artists such as Fela Aníkúlápó Kuti and Miriam Makeba employed music as a weapon of protest, confronting apartheid and military regimes through rhythm, lyrics, and performance. Their activism extended beyond the stage into global advocacy, using their voices to amplify the struggles of the oppressed. Visual artists like Obiora Udechukwu documented the horrors of the Nigerian Civil War and the failures of post-war governance, creating deeply symbolic works that continue to resonate with present-day crises. In contemporary times, artists such as Peju Alatise and Victor Ehikhamenor extend this legacy by interrogating issues of gender, spirituality, religious manipulation, and socio-political injustice. Their practices blend indigenous knowledge systems, cultural heritage, and modernist experimentation, creating visual languages that challenge dominant narratives and

reclaim African identity from colonial erasure. Moreover, the findings reveal that public space and memory have become battlegrounds for meaning**,** as seen in Ehikhamenor's *Miracle Central* and Alatise's *Sim & the Glass Birds*. These works reclaim narrative agency and serve as platforms for collective reflection, mourning, and resistance. The ongoing use of symbolic media, spiritual motifs, and participatory installations underscores the evolving role of the artist as witness, commentator, and activist.Ultimately, this research affirms that in both Nigeria and South Africa, art has been — and continues to be — a potent tool of resistance and reimagination**.** It offers not only critiques of political systems and social inequalities but also visions of hope, healing, and transformation. As long as injustice persists, the artist will remain a vital force in challenging power, preserving memory, and envisioning alternative futures.

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