

## Full Length Research

# Painting the Cosmos: Mufuonifade in the History and Enlargement of Modern Nigeria Art

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**MufuOnifade is a Nigerian artist(e), who is widely noticed for his technique of painting which he named Araism -Aesthetically Rich Art. To him, Araism is a radical departure from the existing painting convention. His revolutionary use of brilliant colour and exaggerated form to express emotion made him one of the most influential artists in Nigeria. MufuOnifade's proclivity for details is the hallmark of outstanding quality that stood him out in the world of art. His paintings have found their ways to places of high class, and now adorn/grace the private homes of high net-worth individuals, offices of corporate bodies, palaces, castles, government establishments and public institutions.**

**Keywords:** Painting, Araism, Mufuonifade, Modern Nigeria Art

## INTRODUCTION

The creation of man to dominate all other living things is a divine projection which every one treasures and cherished. If such unequalled projection is anything to go by, the competition among human beings has succeeded in carving out a distinction on which human qualities and life's attainment are judged and assessed. As man struggles to make even within

the clutches of nature, he often stumbles upon difficulties. The ability of man to think beyond the ordinary helps him to seek solutions to most of his problems and thus differentiate him from other living things. MufuOnifade is one of such rare gem whose divinely endowed qualities rank first among the equals in his field of endeavour.

## PROFILE

When he was asked, "who is MufuOnifade?" he replied by saying: MufuOnifade is an artist, by training and by practice. He is a total artist. He is what a senior colleague once called "multi-media communicator". I am into all areas of art -visual, literary, performing and reproduction. But I feel much more comfortable to simply introduce myself as an artist. My academic training was in Fine Arts, with specialization in painting; but I also had informal training in performing arts, and writing. So, MufuOnifade is an artist.<sup>1</sup>

MufuOnifade is indeed a man of many parts: a painter, writer, playwright, critic, actor, set designer and

newspaper columnist.<sup>2</sup> He inventedAraism, an authentic African painting technique, after rigorous studio experiments that spanned 7 years (1989-1996). He later launched the technique with a solo exhibition of 32 paintings at the Goethe-Institut (German Cultural Centre), Lagos, in 1998. He has since held another solo show, a joint show, and over 50 group exhibitions. His works have been ceremoniously shown in Ethiopia, Austria, United Kingdom, Belgium, United States, South Africa, etc.

MufuOnifade was born in October, 1966 into the culturally vibrant ethnic group of the Yorubas that

boasts of great artistic traditions. He took his first breath in a culturally buoyant environment of Oyo-Ile, the heart of metropolitan Oyo to which most traditional Yoruba artisans trace their origin and the origin of their arts.<sup>3</sup> Oyo is known for artistic traditions like calabash carving, mat weaving, blacksmithing, wood carving, pottery and other ancient traditions of arts and crafts.<sup>4</sup> One should not be too surprised therefore that he has turned out a 'wonder'.

His father was a farmer, hunter and Ijala(hunter's lyrics) chanter. Through chanting, Yoruba philosophy, beliefs, mythology, folktales and the beauty of Yoruba language are taught. His appreciation for art in his

formative years was also triggered by the Layewu (hunter's) masquerade festival held in their family compound, Ponbe. Zoomorphic and anthromorphic images on the animal skin, costume of the masquerade, over the years kept him wondering and inquiring. Carved images of leopard, python and other hunters'preys are common sight during the festival that was characterized by energetic dances, rhythmic, drum beats, traditional songs and diverse poetry that gave flavour and colour to it. This rich traditional background enriched MufuOnifade's creativity and also groomed him for future encounters in the arts.



**Figure 1:** MufuOnifade© bivnzewordpress.com

In 1985, MufuOnifade joined the Lagos State Council for Arts and Culture, both as visual artist and performing artiste. This Council is an organ of the Lagos State government, dedicated to the development and promotion of the best of the living Arts and Culture of Lagos State, using it as resources for the State integration and unity as well as to serve as catalyst for sustainable growth and development of State. MufuOnifade had the privilege of working with

the big wigs in performing industry. The heavy weight like, TunjiOyelana, YomiObileye, FunmiOduolu, Late SegunTaiwo, BiodunAyoyinka (Papa Ajasco) and GbengaSonuga (now a Royal Majesty and a King) was their coordinator. MufuOnifade had the opportunity to travel around Nigeria, and as well went on a tour of the United States of America in 1986.<sup>5</sup>

Later in 1986, MufuOnifade was admitted to study General Art in The Polytechnic Ibadan, with other

75 lucky students at her satellite campus at Eruwa. Among the fortunate ones were KayodeAdeboye, Steve Adisa, MurthadaLawal, AyandepoAyanladun, KehindeOlanrewaju, GbengaOrimoloye, Robert Olagunju, and Folorunso Akinwinsola.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the local setting of the studios, which were in Okolo(a village on the outskirts of Eruwa town) with no electricity and water, these dogged and determined students would work late into the night: having to, sometimes rent a generator to work on various assignments all through the night and still carry on during the day, on their class sessions without any complaint. They were quite young, determined and full of vigor and energy. They were full of life and would easily bury their challenges amid sheer hard work and productivity.<sup>7</sup>

Of them all, MufuOnifade's proclivity for details was a hallmark of outstanding quality that stood him out in his drawing, painting and sculpture assignment. No wonder, he won the overall best student prize in 1988.<sup>8</sup> In 1992, he became the foremost Nigerian to master and practice painting on animal skin after going through a professional tutelage under Lemma Guya of Ethiopia, at the African Arts Museum and Training Institute, Debre-Zeit, Ethiopia. Fascinated by this quality of work, he was encouraged, even against the background of a humble beginning, to further his education in either painting or sculpture. He chose painting, and pursued his admission which he later gained in the ObafemiAwolowo University, Ile-Ife.

He graduated with B.A.(Hons) degree in Fine-Arts with overall best result in 1997. He however pursues a master degree in Art-History from the same University. MufuOnifade was among the selected sixteen artists from Ghana, UK, USA, Trinidad, Cuba, Brazil and Nigeria commissioned to feature at an international exhibition titled 16 Pieces. This was packaged by I-YCAT, London, and sponsored by the London Arts Board in 2000. He was curator/artist-in-residence for Ajibulu-Moniya in Lagos between 1997 and 2002.<sup>9</sup>

## ARAISM

The conventional view of a painter at work is almost universal. Like pioneers of movements in art before him, MufuOnifade insists art can be realized differently, or through a different technique, and with the same aesthetical appeal, what he calls a "radical departure from the existing convention".<sup>10</sup> In 1989, he conceived an idea which he thought will take not more than six months to perfect. The gestation period dragged on for seven years. By 1996, the artist has finished his experiment with what is now known in Nigerian art circle as "ARA" -Aesthetically Rich Art.

"ARA" coined from Yoruba word of "Ara", -which depend on pronunciation could mean "Ara",

community; "Ara", body; "Ara", wonder and "Ara", thunder; and also Igbo root word for breast and madness. "Ara" which can be translated to wonder seems to be the main word there. This technique evolved from artistic study of batik crackles and effects, and the back of a tree. The combination of the two is the basic propelling design that formed the fundamental development of Araism which we now have today. Further research has necessitated the use of polychromatic approach to colouration. A combination of hobbytex and acrylic would eventually achieve a result that re-established gradual stability and acceptability for Araism as a technique in transition.<sup>11</sup>

As a painting technique, it was launched in 1998 with a solo exhibition by its inventor, MufuOnifade. Araism as a movement was born in 2006, with an official grouping of interested students (Member), who are today known as disciple – all of them sharing a common fraternity with their teacher. MufuOnifade has so many disciples too numerous to mention. However, some of them are OlaniyiOmojuwa, Tope Oguntuase, DotunPopoola, AbiolaMantin-Akande, Jonathan Ikpoza, JimohSaliuBabatunde, Jonathan Imafidor, BolarinwaOlowo, Tope Adebayo and AliuAzeez. Araism has conveniently found a place in Nigerian contemporary art.<sup>12</sup>

In writing, MufuOnifade has written several plays and prose. Among the plays he has written are *Lami-lami* and *Love is Blind*; while *Nnamba's Curse* and *The Claims* are novels to his credit. MufuOnifade's contribution in art history has been in reporting, criticism and curatorial services. He is the brain behind several packaging of Best of Ife exhibitions and seminars that emanated from them. He was contributing editor of *Nigerian Videos*, an arts, culture and entertainment Magazine published in the United Kingdom. He also maintained weekly critical column in Nigerian newspaper, *Culturesque* in *New Age*, *Artsseement* in the *Guardian* and *Art of the Matter* in *Next*.

MufuOnifade is the Deputy Director, National Gallery of Arts, Abuja;

Director of Publicity, National Association of Nigerian Theatre Art Practitioner, Lagos State Chapter-2006 – 2009; Chairman, National Association of Nigerian Theatre Art Practitioner, Lagos State Chapter -2009 till date;

Secretary, Universal Studio of Art, Lagos;

Member, Society of Nigerian Artists;

Member, National Society of Painters, Sculptors and Printmakers, UK;

Member, Association of Nigerian Authors;

Member, Arts Writers Organization of Nigeria;

Member, International Association of Art Critics;



## CONCLUSION

Considering the above collections, MufuOnifade can be seen as a distinguished player in the development of arts in Nigeria of today. His art, no

doubt, stand tall among contemporary Nigerian arts. He has a lot of works to his credit, some of which are shown below:



Figure 2: © bivnzewordpress.com



Figure 4: Awelewa, © Ara online



Figure 3: Gelede, Acrylic on canvas,  
© africanvoiceonline.co.uk



Figure 5: Petite Deity, © Ara online



**Figure 6:** Allau Akbar,  
Tempera On Board, © ARA online



**Figure 8:** Ajeji, © ARA online



**Figure 7:** Omulya Dun, Tempera On Board, ©ARA online



**Figure 9:** © ARA online



**Figure 10:** Orange peelers,  
Tempera On Canvas, © ARA online





Figure 11: First Experience,  
Tempera On Board, © ARA online



Figure 13: Chief Sunbomi Balogun, Oil on Animal Skin, © ARA online



Figure 12: Tibi Tire,  
Tempera On Canvas, © ARA online

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