

# **An Analytical Study of the Concept of Adaptation in the Paintings of Abiodun Akande: A Review**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper examines the paintings of Abiodun Akande with the aim of adding to the body of existing knowledge in the field of Visual Arts in Nigeria. Abiodun Akande is a painter and his paintings have close resemblance to Yoruba traditional sculptures. His examined paintings include Ikunle Abiamo, Babalawo, Epa Spectacle, I am Because We are, and Awon Agba. The study is, however, premised on the concept of adaptation. Adaptation is an ideological concept which has to do with the process of revisiting the art work of a particular culture and copying its characteristic features into the rendition of one's art work. The aim of the study is to investigate and document the paintings of Abiodun Akande in order to put in proper perspective his contributions to the evolvement of contemporary Nigerian art. The objectives of the study are to examine the historical background of the artist, discuss and analyse the concept of adaptation in his works. The study also adopts qualitative research design, using historical and descriptive approaches. The data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. The study discovered that, Abiodun Akande revisited and adapted Yoruba art proportion, style, and themes in the execution of his paintings. This makes his paintings to have cubical appearance and most at times, they are characterised with angularity of forms. The study affirmed that Abiodun Akande has contributed to the resuscitation of the dying Yoruba cultural motifs, style and themes in contemporary art practice.*

*Keywords: Abiodun Akande, adaptation, artist, painting, Yoruba*

## **Introduction**

Artists of different cultures have engaged in concept adaptation when ren-

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dering their works. In Western visual art, the first known artist to adapt foreign cultural art style was Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), who was a leader of cubism. Cubism is a Western art movement that emerged in 20th century whose members explore basic shapes in the execution of their works. Cubism as an early-20th-century avant garde art movement that began in Paris to revolutionise painting and visual arts, and influenced artistic innovations in music, ballet, literature, and architecture. Cubists depict the subject from multiple perspectives to represent the subject in greater context. Picasso saw an African sculpture at Musee d' Ethnographie du Trocadero in Paris, which later influenced his art practice and eventually metamorphosed to the formation of Cubism Art Movement, an art movement that its members rendered their works in basic shapes.

However, the origin of concept adaptation in Visual Arts can be traced back to Negritudism otherwise known as Negritude Movement which evolved in 1930s. Negritude is an ideological and literary movement that originated during the 1930s with the aim of breaking down established boundaries and stereotypes of blacks that had been cultivated through several centuries of enslavement and colonial rule (Ibao, 2008). The ideologues of Negritudism believe that colonisation had stripped their culture of its uniqueness and the means of expressing it. As a result, they see Negritude as the best means of expressing the essence of black identity. The movement provided an impetus to African literature in the 1930s, it helped an entire generation of authors and intellectuals to develop an awareness and appreciation of their racial and cultural identities (Ibao, 2008). It equally helped pave the way to national and political freedom for many African countries. In a nutshell, negritude means black is good, which made its ideologues to vigorously embrace the movement in order to reassert their identities that had been eroded by colonialism. However, at the break of the Second World War, the leaders of Negritude left Paris (where it was formed) for Caribbean and Africa, and a new form of Negritude arose in these locations, which includes 'Creolisation'

in the Caribbean and 'Natural Synthesis' in Nigeria (Tate, 2016).

In Nigeria, however, Kenneth C. Murray (1903-1972) is always remembered for his pioneering efforts of encouraging his students to look inward into their respective cultures for possible adaptation of motifs, themes, techniques, styles, among others into their art rendition. In some cases, Murray encouraged his students to merge the indigenous art style of abstraction with Euro-American art style of naturalism, which produced hybridized art style called 'Natural Synthesis', and this is apparent in the works of one of his students, Ben Enwonwu (Alawode, 2023). For instance, *Anyanwu* (Awakening), Enwonwu renders this work in hybridization of style, that is, it is rendered with the combination of African style of abstraction with Euro-American art style of naturalism, and it is characterized with elongation of forms.

Furthermore, in order to adapt concepts and ideas from indigenous culture, the students of Zaria Art School formed a society called 'Zaria Art Society' in 1958 and disbanded in 1961 (Alawode, 2023). They equally propounded the theory of 'Natural Synthesis' along with the formation of the society to decolonise the already colonised art practice. However, 'Natural Synthesis' means merging of indigenous art style with the Western ones to make a visual statement that asserts the pride, independence and uniqueness of Africa. Looking at this theory, one can deduce that it favours the incorporation of indigenous concept of art and ideas into Western art practice to critique the Eurocentric view in visual arts, and to also portray African art to be at the same level with any art from anywhere in the world. Oloidi in Alawode (2023) informs that, "The 'Zaria Art Society' was formed to challenge the colonial extrinsically parasitic nature of their curriculum and instruction at the school, which the students considered as unrealistic to Nigerian situations." The students, therefore, revolted against the teaching, which alienated their culture from what they were learning.

As students of Zaria Art School graduated, they either established the art

departments of other art schools in Nigeria or they joined the existing art departments. This made the concept of adaptation to spring up in other art departments in Nigerian tertiary institutions, and one of the art departments is that of University of Nigeria, Nsukka where the artists of the school incorporated the Igbo Uli symbols into their art rendition. This later metamorphosed into Uli Art Movement in 1970s, and the works of the artists of the movement are rendered in linear designs.

The graduates of Ife Art School equally adapt styles, motifs, themes, media among others from Yoruba indigenous culture, which later culminated into a movement known as Onaism formed in 1989. Onaism later metamorphosed into Araism in 2006. Despite the metamorphosis that occurred in the movement, the philosophy of adaptation of indigenous motifs, styles, themes and technique is still the same. The only difference that can be observed is that, when Onaism changed to Araism, the Araist painters adapt the characteristic features of Yoruba batik into their paintings, and this gives their works crackle effects.

In view of the foregoing, this paper examines, analyses and documents the paintings of Abiodun Akande with specific focus on his exploration of the concept of adaptation in his paintings. This will put Akande's contribution to the development of contemporary Nigerian art in proper perspective and it will also add to the existing knowledge on contemporary art of Nigeria.

### **Literature Review**

The concept of adaptation entails the exploration of the characteristic features of a particular culture in a given art work. It means adapting the features of a culture into the rendition of an art work. It could be the transferring a work of art from one medium to another. For instance, rendering the work which was initially in wood or stone in acrylic on board or oil on canvas. Hutcheon (2004) summarises the concept of adaptation as thus;

Perhaps it is the very possibility of telling the same story in

many different ways that provokes us to make the attempt. When we adapt, we create using all the tools that creators have always used: we actualize ideas; we simplify and extrapolate; we make analogies; we critique or show our respect. When we do all this, does it matter whether the narrative we are working with is 'new' or adapted?

Daniel (2023) strengthens this point by informing that, "to adapt means to transpose from one medium to another. It is the ability to make fit or suitable by changing, or adjusting. Modifying something to create a change in structure, function, and form, which produces a better adjustment". Looking at Daniel's explanation on adaptation, he emphasizes changing from one medium to another like adapting from wood to acrylic on board or other medium. This is exactly what Akande does, he mostly adapts from Yoruba wood sculpture to acrylic on canvas to make his visual statements. Another key phrase worthy of elucidation is 'modifying something to create a change'. This aligns with Akande's method of rendering his paintings, because he modifies Yoruba traditional images, forms, styles, idioms, proverbs and techniques to create his art works and this has made his painting to be characterised with angularity of form.

Adaptation is the practice of transcoding (changing the code or 'language' used in a medium) as well as the assimilation of a work of art to other cultural, linguistic, semiotic, aesthetic or other norms. It is obvious that the concept of adaptation transcends painting and sculpture; it permeates all branches of art such as fine art, music, dance, film or theatre, literary studies, among others. Ditya (2023) informs that, adaptation in art is like a dancer who combines classical moves with modern styles to create breathtaking performances that resonate with the contemporary audience. Ditya's view is more of the reason why artists adapt, because to him it is just to create breathtaking works from the combination of traditional and modern art styles. Ditya further states that,

“reasoning is our North Star, guiding our intellectual journey. Just as a detective changes their investigative techniques to solve complex cases or an architect designs buildings with sustainability in mind, we must adapt our reasoning to keep up with a world in constant motion.” The above quotation is much more on deep reasoning to create the art that aligns with a dynamic world so as to maintain one’s relevance. In his view, “adapting our reasoning” means to open to new perspectives, reevaluating our beliefs, and integrating fresh information into our thought processes. Looking at Ditya’s submission, one can infer that, adaptation in art propels creative exploration through critical thinking. In a nutshell, an adaptation is just like telling a new story, or a retelling of an old story in a new media form that is based on an already existing work.

In theatre and film studies, an adaptation could be seen as the recreation of a piece of art, using the same concepts but changing certain aspects such as the setting or the characters. Despite the fact that this explanation is much relevant in literary and theatre studies, it is still useful in visual arts because what an artist that adapts from one work to his works does is to recreate the one been adapted to fit the new work. Hutcheon (2004) corroborates this by asserting that, “adaptation is the reworking of a text, film, etc. to fit within the needs of contemporary society.”

It is pertinent to note that, an artist can adapt the theme, style, technique, motif, medium, among others into the rendition of an art work. When an artist adapts a style, motif, technique or theme from a particular culture as his or her own, it is called appropriation. Appropriation according to Alawode (2019) means to recontextualise what has been borrowed to create a new work. It means to properly adopt, borrow, recycle or sample aspect (or the entire form) of human-made visual culture. However, in a situation when an artist adapts a style from a culture with modification, and such modifications can take the form of merging the indigenous art style of abstraction with Euro-American art style of naturalism, this is either called natural synthesis

or hybridization of styles (Alawode, 2023).

Brokenshire in Nutsukpo (2019) observes that adaptation has “a plurality of meanings and applications most of which allude to the process of changing to suit an alternative purpose, function, or environment”. However, the concept of adaptation in creative studies has been an old human endeavor because artists from immemorial have been adapting from one work to the other, most especially in visual arts, literary and film studies, etc. For instance, Shakespeare adapted *Romeo and Juliet* from the Roman poet Ovid’s ‘*Pyramus and Thisbe*’. Also, *The Gods Are Not To Blame*, written by Ola Rotimi, was adapted from the Greek classical play entitled *Oedipus Rex*. The story is centred on Odewale, who at his birth was predicted to kill his father and marry his mother. This prediction comes to pass despite a serious attempt made to avert it. The Artifice (2004) observes that, adaptation is not a new process and asserts that humans have been adapting texts from different forms for thousands of years: it is the process of creating paintings, and visual art based on histories and spoken legends; it is the translation of poetry into prose; of stage to the screen; and of course, it is the novel or similar literary source into television and film

Also in visual art, Pablo Picasso was the first known artist to adapt concept and ideas from African wood sculpture into his painting. Adaptation of concept and ideas spread to Africa, and contemporary Nigerian Artists were not left out. Based on this, the contemporary Nigerian artists look back at traditional forms for their intrinsic qualities and possible adaptation into their contemporary art practice, and this is what Adepegba (1995) describes as re-visitation and adaptation of traditional forms. Adepegba (1995) clarifies where contemporary Nigerian artists adapt concept from by stating that,

It is not from figures alone that contemporary Nigerian artists adapt traditional forms; masks are of particular interest to a good number of them. While there are instances where particular Nigerian masks are depicted, most of the mask forms

in contemporary Nigerian art are personal inventions of individual artists.

Looking at the above quotation, one can infer that some contemporary Nigerian artists take a step further by not only adapting concept from their respective cultures but also invent.

Adesanya (2007) while examining the reasons for adapting indigenous concepts and styles in contemporary Nigerian art, observes that it is as a result of tension generated by the action of Europeans who collected the art works of informally trained artists and did not show interest in collecting the works produced by formally trained artists. She states further that the graduates of formal art schools discovered that their works which were rendered in Euro-American art style of naturalism were not collected by the Europeans who preferred to collect the works of informally trained artists, most especially the works of the products of Mbari Art Workshop. This generated tension among the graduates of formal art schools and made them to look inward for possible adaptation of concept, motif, style, technique, theme, media, among other things from their respective cultures to produce a work of art that is novel. Looking at Adesanya's submission, it is very germane to this discussion but not totally captured the essence or origin of adaptation of indigenous concept in Nigerian visual arts.

However, art historians of note have documented the works, techniques, styles, themes, approaches, among others of different artists, among the scholars are Oloidi (1995) and Onyema (2015), who have studied and documented Aina Onabolu and his contributions to the evolvement of modern Nigerian art. Ibrahim (2017) has equally investigated and documented the works of Peju Alatise and Nike Okundaye. Ibrahim's work examines the contributions of self-taught female artists to the growth of modern art of Nigeria. Alawode (2023) examines the style of Oladimeji Tirimisiyu in the execution of his sculptural works. Alawode and Muhammad (2024) also examine and

document the painting works of Modupeola Fadugba. From this, it is obvious that to the best knowledge of the researcher, no scholar has documented Akande's paintings. This therefore, constitutes an academic gap that this study fills. It also justifies the need to investigate, analyse and document Akande and his paintings.

### **Aim and objectives of the Study**

The aim of the study is to articulate the concept of adaptation in the paintings of Abiodun Akande within the context of contemporary Nigerian art, while the objectives are to:

- i) examine the historical background of the artist, and
- ii) discuss and analyse the concept of adaptation in his paintings

### **Research Design and Methodology**

This paper adopted qualitative research design, using descriptive and historical approaches. Descriptive approach was used to describe the paintings of Abiodun Akande as they appear both physically and contextually. Also, historical approach was adopted to unravel the history behind the paintings of Abiodun Akande. Historical research approach dwells on the available records of past events to arrive at conclusion that is useful in increasing knowledge on the phenomenon of study.

**Sources of Data:** Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary source includes the artworks studied and oral interview of the artist. The secondary source of data collection involves reading of books, journal articles in hard copy and electronic form on the internet, and relevant newspaper articles on contemporary art of Nigeria. It is pertinent to note that the materials selected were based on their relevance to the topic.

**Fieldwork:** In the course of carrying out this research, the researcher visited the Department of Creative Arts, University of Lagos to collect data from the artist.

**Population and Sampling Technique:** The population for this study is just only one artist who is Abiodun Akande and the study examines his paintings that manifest the concept of adaptation. As a result, five of his paintings were purposively sampled, analyzed and discussed.

**Research Tools and Instruments:** The research tools used in this study are; tape recorder, photograph camera, personal note and pen. Tape recorder was used to record the audio of the oral interviews conducted, while photograph camera was used for snapping the pictures of the artworks that were used to concretize the information in the research. The personal note and pen were used for jotting down notes and interviews conducted.

The instruments are oral interview and photographs. Oral interviews were conducted for Abiodun Akande and where face to face interview could not be possible, the researcher made use of social media like Facebook, WhatsApp, email, Instagram, among others. Oral interview gave the respondent the freedom, courage and opportunity to express his view. The photographs of the artworks produced were used to discuss and analyse the concept of adaptation in his paintings.

## **Findings**

Since the study is qualitative in nature, the discussion and analysis carried out were also qualitative. Based on this, the following findings were generated:

- 1.It was discovered that Abiodun Akande revisited the traditional Yoruba wood sculpture and adapted its characteristic features into his paintings, which make his paintings to have angularity of forms;
- 2.It was further discovered that most of the themes of Abiodun Akande's works were adapted from Yoruba culture, which make his works to be Yoruba culturally and proverbially inclined;
- 3.It was discovered that Abiodun Akande has contributed to the evolution of contemporary Nigerian art through revisitation, adaptation and appropriation of Yoruba cultural motifs, style and themes into



**Fig. 1:** *Ikunle Abiamo*, Abiodun Akande, oil on canvas, 10x12cm, 2014, artist's collection photographed by the artist

Another work is *Babalawo* (Fig. 2), which also represents Yoruba culture of Ifa divination. According to Yoruba language, Babalawo is a spiritual title that denotes a priest of Ifa, (a divination system that represents the teaching of Orunmila, the Yoruba god of wisdom), who serves as oracular representative of Olodumare (God). Babalawo can also be referred to as herbalist. The artist depicts a herbalist who poses with his divination tray in a manner that portrays him as if he is communicating with Ifa Oracle. The setting looks real with all paraphernalia of divination, Babalawo poses as if he is ascertaining the future of his clients through the interpretation of divining chain, otherwise known as *opele* on the wooden divination tray called *opon* Ifa.



**Fig. 2:** *Babalawo, oil on canvas, 60x90cm, 2013, Artist's Collection. Photographed by the artist.*

A careful observation of the scene reveals a wooden divination tray that contains carved human eyes positioned opposite where the Babalawo sits. The carved eyes symbolise the union between Ifa and Orunmila. The Babalawo in his gestural display of power, leans on a cross-like image, while a cock, which is a symbolic ritual bird of Ifa Oracle, is rendered on top of a branch of cross-like image. The work is rendered in varied tonal gradation of blue, yellow, orange, red and black colours.

It is obvious that Akande revisits and adapts Yoruba cultural motifs, style and themes into his works. In *Epa Spectacle* (Fig. 3), both the theme and motif are culturally connected to Yoruba people. An Epa mask is a ceremonial mask

worn by Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria. It seems to have originated from Ekiti region in the northeast of Yoruba nation.



*Fig. 3: Epa Spectacle. Acrylic on canvas, 60cmx75cm, 2017, Artist's collection. Photographed by the Artist.*

Epa masks are usually worn during Epa festival, which is a ceremony that is concerned with the control and focusing of the divine force for benefits of the community. The control and focusing of Ase (Yoruba medicine used for commanding) is a central theme throughout the different episodes that make up the Epa festival as well as apparently constituting a theme in other ceremonies in which Epa masks are used.

From the painting of Epa Spectacle, one can see a number of people who

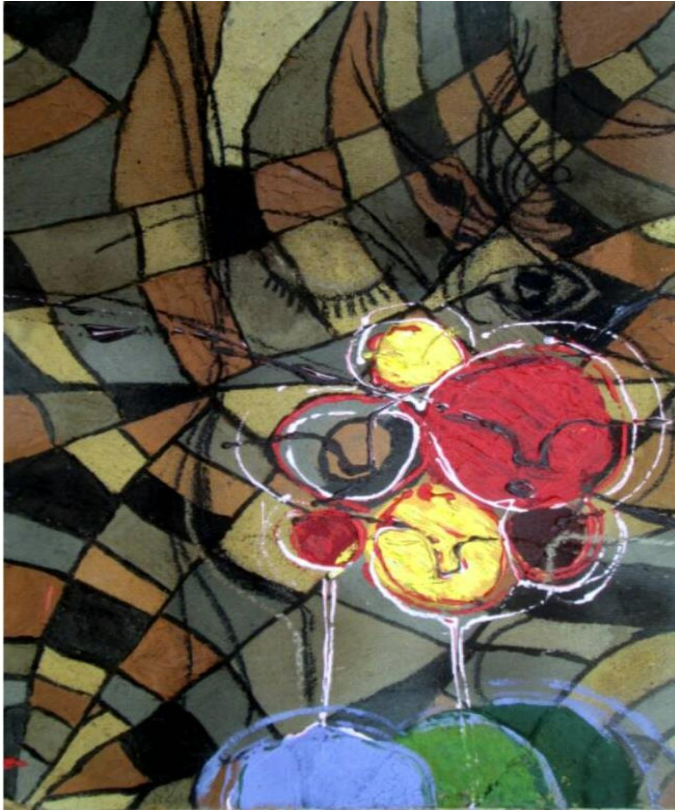
are engulfed in ecstasy due to the ceremony going-on in their community. This large number of people is represented in orange, yellow, green and blue colours, the blue colour is toned to various degrees. Light blue and yellow colours are used to execute the sky, which enhance the aesthetic appearance of the entire work. The Epa mask in its superstructure form, is rendered in brown colour, and its darker part is depicted in deep brown. According to Akande (2018), "Epa mask is a Janus-faced helmet which on its head, there are assemblages of sculptural images symbolising different personages in different poses. There are priests, hunters, farmers, drummers, king, and many other images that adorn the mask, which also add credence to the potency of its spiritual power." The image of the king is conspicuously seen with certain paraphernalia of his office. The image of the whole mask looks stiff, though there is movement of colours which brings life to the work.

It is pertinent to note that the iconographic meaning of the Epa mask cannot be discerned from its elaborate superstructures, but in the pot or mortal helmet, which is a manifestation of the efficacy of its spiritual power and other worldly forces. The Epa mask has two faces, the eyes of one face are opened, looking out to the world of living, while the eyes on the other face are closed, contemplating the realm of the divine and ancestors (Akande, 2018).



**Fig. 4:** *I am Because We Are. Acrylic on canvas, 60x60cm, 2017, Artist's collection. Photographed by the artist*

In *I am Because We are* (Fig. 4), the artist depicts three stylised female figures with disc-like heads. The figures resemble Akuaba heads, and their eye brows are greatly exaggerated, which are rendered in such a way that they are longer than their heads. Their feet are depicted like painting palettes, and their bodies are like trunks of trees. Out of the three figures, one opens her eyes, while the remaining two close theirs. According to Akande (2018), this implies that, the one that opens her eyes, who is the biggest among the three is full of experience and has passed through hills and valleys of life, while the two who close their eyes are inexperienced, and they do not know what life holds for them. The theme of this painting sounds proverbial and illustrative of naivety and sophistication in term of experiences.



*Fig. 5: Awon Agba. Acrylic on canvas, 70cmx50cm, 2017, Artist's collection. Photographed by the artist.*

The work titled *Awon Agba* (Fig. 5) is a depiction of the Yoruba cosmological belief about the power of witches and wizards. The Yoruba believe that witches and wizards are the earthly owners of the world and they can turn it to whatever they want. As a result, witches and wizards are feared, thus Yoruba people normally seek spiritual permission from them if any traditional spiritual task is to be performed. The artist uses intricate lines to depict the essence of spirituality to Yoruba. He also explores tinted black, yellow and brown colours to render the background in geometric shapes. The images are simplistically rendered on well adorned background, the nose, mouth and

other parts of the body are simply indicated. The invisible eyes of the witches and wizards are technically depicted at background.

### **Conclusion**

The appropriation of Yoruba art style by Akande in the execution of his paintings makes them capture the likeness of Yoruba art. His images are vigorous, dynamic and characterised with clarity of details. Akande vigorously presents the dying motifs, styles and themes of Yoruba art in a recontextualised manner. His paintings are grandeur of traditionalism, which are depicted with objectivity and in resemblance of Yoruba art. Akande responds to the effect of colonialism through appropriation of Yoruba indigenous art style, theme and motifs into the production of his paintings. This makes his paintings to resemble Yoruba wood sculptures with their angularity of forms. Akande incorporates Yoruba cultural design into most of his paintings, which makes them to look more of Yoruba traditional wood sculptures

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