

# JOURNAL OF AFRICAN ARTS & CULTURE

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<https://jaac-sca.org>

ISSN 2637-3610

Volume 2 Issue 1

September 01, 2018

## Reminiscing 'the milk of Nigerian womanhood' exhibition: Entrepreneurial marriage of art and tourism

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Citation: Okogwu, A. (2018). Reminiscing 'the milk of Nigerian womanhood' exhibition: Entrepreneurial marriage of art and tourism. *Journal of African Arts & Culture*, 2(1), 33-44.

### Abstract



This pro-feminist discourse attempts to appreciate the 'Milk of Nigerian Womanhood' which was the first International Art exhibition outing held in United Arab Emirates, Dubai, Deira, on the 24th – 26th April 2012 by the Female Artists Association of Nigeria. This article is a report of *The Milk of Nigerian Womanhood* exhibition. It is hinged on qualitative narrative description mode of research. It stands on the tripod of Art, Tourism and Entrepreneurship. The main thrust of the article is art appreciation of the entries into the various specialized areas of art such as Ceramics, Bead Art, Sculpture, Textiles/Fashion, Painting, Graphic design, Film and Performance. Art, tourism and entrepreneurship are interlaced in the discourse.

**Keywords:** Art, feminism, tourism, discourse, women artists.

## **Introduction**

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The Exhibition took the female artists of Nigeria to United Arab Emirate hence art tourism. The purpose was to sell the artworks outside Nigeria to earn foreign currency and as such could be associated with Entrepreneurism. A three-pronged discourse of this nature should naturally address Art for what it is and link-up art with tourism and move-up to the business avenue, which is entrepreneurship. It is only when this is done that one can open up the main thrust of this article which is appraisal of the Milk of Nigerian Womanhood that is the first international exhibition by Female Artists Association of Nigeria, initiated, coordinated and curated by Antonia Okogwu. The frame on which this report is structured as aforementioned, was in three fold.

## **Brief origin of Female Artists Association of Nigeria (FEAN)**

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The association started in the year 2001. According to Nwanze (2011) who was the first president of the association, Paul Chike Dike the then director general of National Art Gallery observed the waning impact of the Nigerian female artists and then initiated the call in an exhibition of eighteen female artists. Boma Bromilo Jack, a former minister for Arts and Culture supported the formation of female artists association. The major underlying drive was a wakeup call for the female artists in Nigeria, therefore, the association started with the initial few members.

## **Art and its definition**

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Leo Tolstoy cited in Ugiomoh (2012) defined art as a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through. Others are infected by this feeling and experience them as means of union among men. Roskil (1989) has written concerning conceptual problem of the definition of Art. It is the act of creating with the cognizance of the elements of aesthetics either intuitively or otherwise. Therefore, this exhibition displayed elements of design and creativity expressed in different media that could be seen in the total package of the Arts in the Milk of Nigerian Womanhood, ranging from two dimension to the three-dimension, and to acting, miming and writing.

## **Tourism in the milk of Nigerian womanhood**

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Tourism is a composite activity that involves travelling, recreation or leisure, hotels and accommodation activities, all-embracing hospitality businesses. The nature of the exhibition that involved travelling from Nigeria through Kigali, then Mombasa before landing in Dubai Airport gave it a touristic tang. More so, the underlying idea for the

exhibition is to expose the artists to the trade hub of Dubai and to understudy the trade activities in it. In this particular area, Art and academic tourism and business were the focus. The underlying essence of this particular tourism was to expose the artists and their art to international circle and invariably usher in sales and commerce.

## **Art entrepreneurship**

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Finding business models within the arts and connecting dots, shoehorning the arts with other facades of line of thought is what 'Milk of Nigerian Womanhood' sets out to explore in the area of art tourism. It is not enough to be creative but to translate creativity into money by going into the business avenue for entrepreneurial ventures. Attraction to exhibitions to the populace is waning, in this dispensation of depressed economy. Creative repackaging is what is really required to survive in this area of endeavour.

Artists understanding the complex Nigerian economy are no longer waiting for formal exhibitions and salons. Rather, they are shoehorning artworks in carnivals, tourism-sites, church activities, birthday celebrations, burials, within, and outside the shores of Nigeria even into the cyberspace. Such exhibition that has recently followed this trend is Motherhood is Golden, a solo exhibition by Afagha Opudo Vivian at Otuoke in Bayelsa state of Nigeria. She combined the exhibition with her mother's fiftieth birthday. Elizabeth Wogu's Ezinne (Good Mother), a solo exhibition also shoehorned into her grandmother's burial in Isiopko in River state, Nigeria.

## **Perception of feminism**

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Feminism is one word that has several connotations and strikes varied notes to different individuals. It also has different meanings, approaches and angles. Whichever turn it takes, it has to do with the female gender and issues of her disadvantages with the male counterpart in the family, society, economy or politics. However, one can trace the beginning of the gender disparity from the Jewish tradition that inferred that women do not possess souls. In other words, they are inferior and should be treated as such by those that have soul (Edwards, 2007). With this notion, women had to struggle for everything including their rights within the society. This continuous struggle is what gave rise to the word Feminism. In the case of Africa and her view to life, some cultures within it see female not just as one that has no soul, but one that is not to speak or be heard. In some cultures like the Tiv in Benue State of Nigeria, a man could transfer his wife to pass the night with his friend without the consent of his spouse and without questioning. The wife is expected to simply obey without a word (Agenor, 1985, June 20,

personal communication). In other words, women are just regarded as chattels in some parts of Africa. Therefore, African feminism is anchored on the opposition to patriarchy, which later gave rise to African Victorian Feminists in Sierra Leone, Bantu Women's League, Mau-Mau rebels, Aba women in Nigeria. This also gave birth to female activists such as Margret Ekpo, Fumilayo Anikulapo-Kuti and Susan Wenger.

## **Feminist agenda in Nigerian contemporary art**

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The perception of what feminism is should be disabused as a negative movement against men, neither is it an issue of isolated tales of angry women (Evia Woman, 2013). Rather it is from the angle of level playing ground for all. The spirit of feminism was rekindled after the Beijing conference in 1995 and the feminine proactive ambience of the current political situation in Nigeria set a favourable stage for the growth of feminist agenda. It is in this favourable atmosphere that the founders of Female Artists Association of Nigeria cashed in and started the association with just three women. However, there is an all-encompassing umbrella body, Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA), which is duly registered and widely recognized and accepted in Nigeria.

## **Sponsorship drive and finance matters**

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Most often in Nigerian, this is a very hard nut to crack, especially, when it has no direct political undertone and no immediate gain prospect. The president of the association took time to peruse and digest before accepting the proposal because of the volume of the cash involved in the project. Visits were made to various bodies such as the National Gallery of Arts (NGA), the Women for Change Initiative, the Oba of Benin Palace; the first lady of Delta State and other bodies like Nigerian Universities. Promises were made but only Five-Hundred Thousand naira was redeemed at the heat of the matter. The president of the association supported with Five-Hundred Thousand naira while the coordinator brought in One-million naira; and we opted out of the famous World Trade Centre for a cheaper place, Coral Oriental Hotel in Deira for the exhibition. Individual artists were billed Two-Hundred and Ten Thousand naira in addition to the cost of Two-Hundred and Sixty Thousand naira being the cost of return tickets, visa fees and accommodation for three days.

## **The exhibition: Milk of Nigerian womanhood**

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The first international art exhibition by the Female Artists Association of Nigeria (FEAAN) under the able leadership of Ngozi Akande, is the Milk of Nigerian Womanhood. The focus was on trying to expose the Nigerian art to tourist destinations overseas in order to promote commerce as well as expose the entrepreneurial possibilities in the United

Arab Emirate to the Nigerian female artists. This product was initiated and curated by Antonia Okogwu in Deira area of Dubai, United Arab Emirate. One would wonder why the choice of an Arab country which could be perceived as an anti-art country or place? There is indeed new turn in visuality as it concerns trade and tourism. There is actually a new turn of openness and policies put in place in the United Arab Emirates to boost trade and tourism. As a matter of fact Dubai is unanimously tagged the world destination in tourism (Sharpley, 2008).

The world trade centre in Dubai was slated for this exhibition but for some shortfalls in logistics it was relocated. The foreign policies in The United Arab Emirates, one of which is their approach to acquisition of visa and the tourist disposition of Dubai informed the choice of this place for the first international exhibition of this group of artists in Nigeria. Courtesy calls were made to the relevant agencies concerned about art in Nigeria, which are the National Gallery of Art, the Ministry of Arts and Tourism, The Women for Change Initiative and the Oba of Benin Palace, for support and sensitization of the people. Meetings were held in various zones of the country and artists were represented from different parts of the federation. The Rwanda Airline accepted to be the official flight of the association. Right there in Deira, Dubai, Coral Oriental Hotels, Blue Diamond Hotel and Tamari were booked for the participants to lodge in for four days. Banji Micheal, the Nigerian tourist guide anchored and fixed these places and guided the association in processing visas. The coordinator's chair was mounted in University of Benin with some students' co-opted to help the coordinator put things in place. The visa processing, the collating of the various entries were done. The focus was on trying to expose the Nigerian art into a world tourist destination in order to promote commerce as well as expose the possibilities in the Emirate to the Nigerian Society. Female Artists Association of Nigeria for ten years organised exhibitions in various art vibrant cities of Nigeria – Abuja, Lagos, Port Harcourt, among others. It was time to try out international territories for commerce and tourist attraction of which Dubai provided conducive atmosphere. Appreciation of this exhibition naturally took cognizance of the different categories of Art in the classical quintessence and the categories were Ceramics, Bead Art and Jewelry, Sculpture, Textiles/Fashion, Films and Performance and Graphics.

## **Ceramics**

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Professor Grace Ogwu (Ojie) accompanied the delegation and was the only person of this academic cadre in the delegation. Grace is the youngest female active professor of art, currently heading the Department of Fine and Applied Art, Delta State University, Abraka. Her entries were ceramics pieces. One of them was titled *Twist of existence in woman hood*, measuring 24cm x 20cm x 6cm, produced in 2009. The fragile nature of

ceramics was considered for proper packaging before embarking on the journey. Grace Ogwu summed up the situation of the Nigerian woman in one of her ceramic entry of the Nigerian woman in pain and another ceramic work titled *Twist in womanhood*, a Nigerian woman experience. One wonders, if this was the experiences of successes and failures in the story of the Nigerian womanhood brought to bear in the pot. The first pot was jaggedly opened, perhaps, portraying the pain, and buttressed by the unevenness of the mouth of the pot. This pain expressed in a pot is bereft of all forms of comeliness except its smooth finish. Her other entry, is comely than the first with scratched textured body that aptly contracts with bolder stripes of woven clay coils at the mouth of the pot. Others that brought Ceramic entries for this exhibition were Ruth Mataba Gadzama, Abanwa Oghenekevwe and Alewa Jidai Mamza. These ceramists were among the early females academics to embrace the art of ceramics in Nigeria. Ruth Mataba Gadzama's tablewares opened the sales in the exhibition. Gadzama's love for studio practice in ceramics cumulated to her establishment of a cottage industry in Maiduguri. However, considering the situation in Nigeria in Maiduguri, one wonders if this industry is still functional, considering the security challenges of Boko Haram insurgency in Bornu State. The other pot exhibited was titled *Malchyr lju*, which was more of a mixed media of thrown and hand built pot and tilted towards ritualistic pots of Ihandiagu. Abamwa Oghenekevwe, a lecturer in Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria, presented an entry in ceramics – Igbolo flower vase – with the dimensions 35cm by 26cm.

## **Bead art and jewellery**

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Faience beads were made and worn by ancient Egyptians as far back as 3100BC and are associated with the reign of first dynasty of Narmer (Wilkinson, 1999). This ancient practice attracted Ekemute Ejoh, an Uhrobo bead artist who has doggedly followed this passion. In Dubai, she showcased the highest number of art pieces of jewelry and animal forms including cow head and composition of spiderlike creatures in interesting arrangement.

## **Sculpture entries in the exhibition**

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Three female sculptors who presented their works were Omon Enekpe Okokon, Antonia Okogwu and Anita Asachayat. Asachayat exhibited a female figure titled 'Best'. It was made of fibre glass, reminiscent of Venus of Willendorf that sculpturally highlights points of fertility in the female figure. Omon is a female sculptor who teaches Art in Cross River State University of Technology Calabar, Nigeria. One of Omons' sculptures rendered in fibre is titled *To be wrapped in Love*. If Alina Szapocznikow can be described

as an erotic artist, then Omon can be described as a love sculptor. Antonia Okogwus' Nigeria Woman is an idiom with trash metal, a crowned tortoise, symbolizing the wisdom that is crowned in the cunning wisdom typified by the wisdom of the tortoise found in Nigerian woman.

## **Textiles and fashion**

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The nature of Textiles and Fashion are predisposed to the females and as such many women take to Textiles and Fashion. This exhibition paraded outstanding academia in Nigeria who have distinguished themselves in the academy of Textiles and Fashion. Okpu Ogale Omo Juwouvie is a seasoned scholar that has produced three Ph.D students in the studio practice in Delta State University in Abraka. Two of her supervisees Margaret Ajiginni and Uvbi Theresa Osaigbovo also participated in this exhibition with fashions of woven and dyed fabrics. Cyril-Egware Pamela Isemikon is also a seasoned fashion academic. One thing that was obvious in the academics of fashion and textiles is that it is far removed from runway fashion. In fact, the teaching is very different from the actual rippled sensational runway fashion. However, there is the marriage of the academia and the more vibrant paparazzi high way fashions giving rise to the heightened peak of the galaxy.

Others that presented textiles/fashion include Ukpaka Diriyai Desenye and Sweet Ebeigbe. Ebeigbe exhibited Benin royal applique on velvet. Onwuakpa Ebele Lovinas' entry was in tapestry, titled Royal Vestige, which exhibited undefined edges of two females with large headgears and play of light and dark wool patches in the composition. Patience Akpojena Edo's blue beachwear was tagged poverty alleviation. It was not clear whether the beachwears were for the poor or is it the creation of beachwears that alleviate poverty. Phoebe Dashen's batik painting of mother and child in a typical play associated with the African woman is awesome. Degarr Ayam Abur has a flair for wavy lines, which occur in two of her exhibition entries. Umana Ekpe whose nude female dancers 'threw us out' of the World Trade Centre because of the Islamic stand of the entire Emirate tries to discourage nudity. Happiness Amadi also painted on fabrics using the batik technique and her own entry leaned towards cultic nudity.

## **Painting entries in the exhibition**

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The Paintings were many when compared with other areas like Sculpture and Ceramics. The Painters were Ngozi Akande, Aisha Idrisu, Idongesit Akan Udi, Bridget Ofunne Nkeriu Nwanze, Chukwu Mabel, Apeyua Alice Marnlu, Gwa Nguesan Ruth, Priscilla Aletor, Agada Ladi, Onyi Andre, Ese Odokuma and Rose Ayaka. Ayaka also exhibited calabash

construction, which was unique. There were varieties of paintings in terms of method, material, theme and perception explored. Nwanzes' approach is simply 'colourless' lineal representation of alluring nude female figure titled Nigaa Subsidy. Apeyuan follows suit with line rendition but deviates to colour splashing and childlike doddle reminiscent of Jackson Pollock of which Apeyuans' teacher Jerry Buhari is an ardent follower. Idris' simplistic compartmented patches of geometric colours in String of Motherhood is so assertive that you cannot ignore. The entry of Aletor also took another turn to realign with theme of the exhibition, bringing the ancient glamour of Benin woman as an amazon of beauty and grace.

## **Film and performance as art**

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Firstly, there was a regrouping of the various disciplines of Art into compartments but this trend is again changing to accommodate similar areas together and even interdisciplinary studies. It is in the same trend that film and performance were accommodated in this outing, which increased the variety and widened the artistic spectrum. Julie Umuokoro presented a short documentary on the rich Eya marriage costumes of the Kalabari Kingdom in Rivers State of Nigeria while Anthonia Nwabueze from University of Nigeria, Nsukka, pantomimed the presentation of Cola nut in Igbo cosmos that electrified the space leaving a good feeling with the audience as she presented the kola nut in a speechless performance. Igbo male was sort to break the cola nut. Males are the ones that break the Cola nut in line with the Igbo tradition.

## **Graphic logos representation and appreciation in the catalogue**

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"A logo is like a man's name. When I mention a certain man you know well, everything about that man jumps into your mind. A logo does the same thing for a product" (Iyang, 2005). A logo is the signature or graphic identity, trademark or symbol of a company or institution. It contains graphic element or elements that portray the ideals of what it tries to represent. There were array of logos (Figure 1) within the catalogue of this maiden international exhibition. These logos added to the visuality as well as lend credence to the quality of support and backing from the home front in Nigeria. There were eight logos altogether in the catalogue: Female Artist Association of Nigeria FAAN, which is now referred to as FEAAN, National Council of Arts and Culture (N.C.A.C), National Gallery of Arts (N.G.A), Oba of Benin Palace, University of Benin, University of Port Harcourt and Ahmadu Bello University. Looking at the Female Artists Association of Nigeria (FEAAN) logo designed by Bridget Nwanze, one sees a simple linear rendition of the female form in a somewhat assertive posture and pondering on the linearity of the female form. The sharp angular lines are associated with female form in outstanding works. The FEAAN

logo is asymmetrical and the imbalance sway and posture of the form is feminine. The angular elements in the design contrast with the round white frame of the logo. The hair coiffure called kobo- kobo, which the name for the lowest Nigerian coin or tugwulu in Igbo language can easily be seen on the young female artiste in Nigeria called Chidima who seem to have adopted it as her artistic signature. The banner hoisted by the figure bears three distinctive colours: green, white and violet that perhaps symbolises visible or loud femininity. The Nigeria Coat of arms bears the two Horses and the Eagle that symbolises strength. A wreath symbolizes death in a coat of arms. The rich black soil and the green vegetation watered by the two rivers Niger and Benue running across black soil suggests indeed a land that is not only rich in opportunities but also rich in agriculture of which the Nigerian female singer, Bello sang that the land is green. Nigeria indeed is green.

The Nigerian coat of arms is similar to that one of England that also bears the unicorn that represents Scotland, but differs with a balancing with a lion and in the place of an eagle in the case of Nigerian coat of arms. The crown is placed at the position of the Eagle. The logo of the palace of the Oba of Benin contains the two African royal swords *ada* and *ebe* crossing each other, the lion, the eagle and the elephant that is imbedded with human figure. Ahmadu Bello University logo is triangular, that is the mythical triangle that encases the logo, the northern knot symbol which is typical symbol associated with the Northern Nigeria and the Arabic inscriptions bearing *Jamiat* which means University, and Ahmadu Bello. This Islamic Arabic inclination could be misleading because this University is a contemporary cosmopolitan one and not an Islamic one though it is situated in the northern part of Nigeria that is predominantly Muslims. University of Port Harcourt logo designed by Jubilie Owei exhibits aquatic splendor with the boat icon right in the middle of the light blue patch, representing water that occupies two third of the entire logo emphasizing the geographical location of the school, the book spread and the sun illuminating it. The symbolic white cloth hoist by the boat is always associated with the marines and peace. A common factor is a blend of Nigerian flag designed by Michael Taiwo Akinkunmi in 1959 and bears two bands of sea green and a single patch of white symbolizing unilateral peace. Ahmadu Bello University Logo and that of University of Benin do not exhibit any trace of symbol of Nigeria unlike other logos that exhibited the Nigerian colour green and white (Table 1).



Figure 1. Logos found in the Exhibition catalogue

Table 1  
Analysis of Logos

	<b>Names</b>	<b>Orientation</b>	<b>Items of design</b>	<b>Colours</b>
1	Nigerian coat of arms	Irregular	Eagle Two horses Black shield Sun flower Wreath	Red white Green White Black Yellow
2	Female Artists Association of Nigeria (FAAN)	Circular	Abstract linear female Banner African Symbols	Green white Black Violet
3	University of Benin	Circular	Festival of Arts and Culture mask A book African royal swords (Ada x Ebe)	Purple

4	National Gallery of Arts (NGA)	Circular with edge of writings	Easel Brush. Writing N.G.A. Nigerian coat of arms	Shades of green White Red
5	Ahmadu Bello University	Concave side	The Northern North symbol Arabic writing.	1.Green 2.Black
6	Oba of Benin	Circular	Writing Eagle Elephant Lion Two royal swords ( <i>adah</i> and <i>ebe</i> ) Human figure 1 circular disc.	1.Black 2.White 3.Green
7	National Council for Arts and Culture	Rectangular with Eclipse	Nigerian coat of Arms Nigerian Flag The letter NCAC NCAC	1 Green White Brown Black Yellow
8	University of Port Harcourt	A Crest A band of Banner	1.Nigerian Flag 2.A boat 3.Sun 4.A book 5.white Sail 6.Sea 7.Boatman	1.Green 2.White 3.Yellow 4.Blue 5.Black

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## Conclusion

*The Milk of Nigerian Womanhood* pulled out many female artists within Nigeria from a wider geographical spread in cognizance of federal character to participate in this maiden international exhibition in Dubai. It did not only represent the different areas of Nigeria, but also packaged variety of art corpus including film, pantomime and writing. Art as a discipline in contemporary time of regrouping of spheres of study should evolve and associate with other areas to survive. The First international exhibition of F.E.A.A.N was a pathfinder package upon the tripod of art, tourism and entrepreneurship that are interlaced.

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## About the author

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Antonia Okogwu, a senior Lecturer in University of Port Harcourt holds PhD in Sculpture (studio). She is the head of the Sculpture Unit and Seminars and exhibitions in the Art Department. Antonia is a member of professional bodies including Society of Nigerian Artists, Rivers chapter, Nigeria; Female Association of Nigerian Artists and Sculptors Association of Nigeria. She has had ten solo exhibitions and several group exhibitions within and outside Nigeria. Antonia, a passionate developer of Art enterprise, is married with children to the Izomo of Umuebu Kingdom.