

## **Deployment of Visual Arts as an Empowerment Tool for Cultural and Societal Renewal in Lagos State, Nigeria**

**Princess Theresa Iyase-Odozi**

*Creative Arts Department,  
University of Lagos, Akoka*

### **Abstract**

*The essence of a vibrant society is its ability to both preserve and reinvent its culture, thereby conserving its history and heritage while creating new forms of expression for the present. Thus, for several decades, some states in Nigeria have carried out beautification projects that entail the use of visual arts. A recent example is the effort of the Lagos State Government in the “Lagos @ 50” Project. This is an ambitious effort that fully engages artists to create and unveil community murals and other forms of artwork to validate and celebrate the historical past while using public art works to revitalise streetscape improvements. Also, some privately-owned organisations, such as Terra Kulture and Nike Centre for Arts & Culture, both in Lagos, have been involved in deploying visual arts as a means of preserving the society’s cultural heritage. This study examines how visual art activities are being deployed, particularly through the engagement of artists, as a tool for cultural and societal renewal in Lagos State. The methodology adopted involves the direct application of first and second-hand observations as well as bibliographic studies geared towards a qualitative research. The Meta-theory of Empowerment is deployed to establish the theoretical foundation for the study. This paper articulates the roles of visual-arts in society and the forms in which they are being deployed towards culture and societal renewal in Lagos State. It concludes by noting the challenges faced and making recommendations on how they could be surmounted in order to enhance these roles.*

**Key words:** *Visual Arts, Empowerment and Cultural and Societal Renewal*

### **Introduction**

In the last five decades, visual arts, in the form of murals, art installations and monumental sculptural works, have been used by successive administrations in Lagos State as a vital tool for preserving and advancing cultural heritage while beautifying the different IBILE (Ikeja, Badagry, Ikorodu, Lagos and Epe) communities. However, most of these art treasures have been adversely affected

by lack of care, wilful damage or vandalism, and inevitable deterioration arising from the passage of time, use and the effects of weather and other natural disasters.

Meanwhile, in 2017, as part of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the creation of Lagos State, the government embarked on an ambitious project of urban reconstruction and renewal. A high-profile Planning Committee, co-chaired by Wole Soyinka and Rasheed Gbadamosi, was commissioned to organise the mounting of murals, art installations and sculptural works across the state, among other responsibilities. Appropriately, the Festival logo was christened: “Enhance the Heritage, Advance the Future” and the Festival emblem was a unique sculptural installation. Over a dozen artists were commissioned to produce and install art works that had various topical themes. This paper addresses various dimensions of the latest effort of the Lagos State Government to use visual arts as an empowerment tool for cultural and societal renewal.

### **The Objectives of this Study**

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- i. Determine the roles of visual arts in the society.
- ii. Discuss how visual art activities have been deployed in promoting cultural and societal renewal of Lagos State, with the Lagos @ 50 Project in focus.
- iii. Ascertain the roles of the various key stakeholders in the articulation and implementation of the visual arts aspects of the Lagos @ 50 Project.
- iv. Highlight the constraints and challenges in deploying visual arts as an empowerment tool for cultural and societal renewal in Lagos State and make appropriate recommendations for dealing with them.

### **Profile of Lagos State**

Lagos State is located in the South-West geo-political zone of Nigeria. It was created on May 27, 1967 as part of the political restructuring of Nigeria into a Federation of 12 states, following the civil crisis that engulfed the country. The state capital, Lagos, was the capital of Nigeria until 1976 when the country’s capital was moved to Abuja. The state is the commercial/industrial and financial hub of Nigeria. Its motto is ‘Justice and Progress’ and its slogan is ‘Centre of Excellence’.



**Figure 1: Lagos State Emblem**

Over the years, Lagos has variously been called: *Oko, Eko, Onyim, Lago, de Curamo, Eko Akete, Ilu Eko, Ilu Ogbon, Lagos Lasgidi* (Ambode, 2017). Lagos is predominantly Yoruba-speaking but it is also home to a large number of Nigerian ethnic groups and people of various nationalities from across the world. The original inhabitants are the *Aworis* in Ikeja; the *Eguns* in Badagry; and the *Ijebus* in Ikorodu and Epe; while Lagos Island had its original inhabitants from a mixture of the *Eko Aworis, Binis* and repatriated Yoruba and other immigrants from Brazil and Sierra Leone after the abolition of the trans-atlantic slave trade. With the above heritage and the heterogeneous mix of original inhabitants and migrants in the State, it is not surprising that the people of Lagos have rich and diverse cultural traditions which boast of many notable festivals, dances, masquerades, and arts and crafts from its various constituent communities. These cultural traditions include: the Eyo Festivals (*Adamu Orisa*); *Okosi* (Boat Regatta); *Sato* Festival of *Akarakumo* held in celebration of one of Africa's tallest drums; *Zangbeto*, the Badagry masquerade performance; the *Gelede* masquerade, reputed to be the most fascinating and gentle of the masquerades; and the *Oro* Festival, a highly paternalistic affair which women are forbidden to participate in or witness. Lagos also celebrates three international festivals every year namely: the Yoruba Arts Festival; the International Jazz Festival; and the Black Heritage Festival/Carnival which is organised to showcase not only the rich culture of the Yoruba but also the richness and diversity of the African heritage (Lagos State, 2017).

### **Background to the Lagos @50 Project**

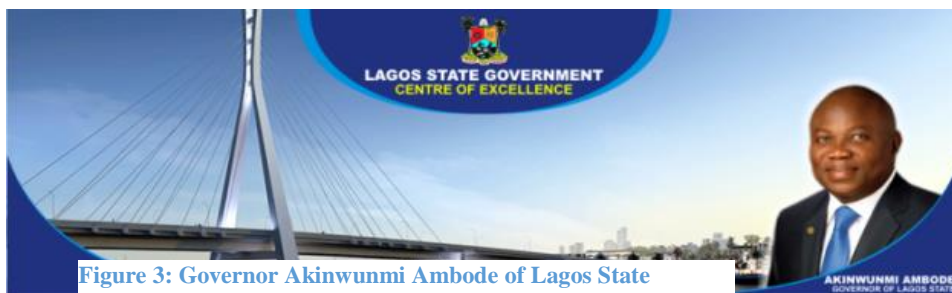
Lagos state is not only rich in culture but also strives to sustain that culture through various festival celebrations and art exhibitions that are held regularly. This periodic re-enactment of cultural traditions witnessed a high point on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the state in 2017, with the launching of the Lagos @50 Project, encompassing murals, art installations and monuments, amongst others. Public sculptures were the dominant forms of visual arts deployed by the Lagos @ 50 Planning Committee towards the realisation of the Project. These monumental sculptural works were produced for the adornment and cultural renewal of the different IBILE (Ikeja, Badagry, Ikorodu, Lagos and Epe) communities, and selected to suit their heritage and needs.



Figure 2: Lagos @ 50 Logo

The Lagos @ 50 Project covered a broad range of activities, including the following:

- a) Films: Five of the highest box office films and five evergreen films screened to local audience in the five divisions of the State, namely Ikeja, Badagry, Ikorodu, Lagos Island and Epe.
- b) Musical Concerts (cultural performances, and modern Jazz, including Grammy award winning Jazz artistes alongside Nigerian musicians).
- c) Boat Regattas.
- d) Art Exhibitions showcasing the state's aquatic assets, Yoruba historical works of art, a photo exhibition and the unveiling of a special coffee table book that captures the essence of Lagos through the lens of 50 accomplished photographers.
- e) Fashion Parades - the evolution of fashion in Lagos State over the past 50 years.
- f) The list and pictures of selected monumental art installations deployed under the Lagos@50 Project are provided below.
  - i. Special Workers' Day celebration by both active and retired civil servants with a special parade, Lagos Carnivals, Festivals (Eyo in Lagos, Gelede in Badagry, Igunnuko in Ikorodu and Oro).
  - ii. Children's Day and celebration of the State's Golden Jubilee were to continue throughout the year with series of festivals and events to celebrate the state's rich cultural heritage.
  - iii. The Governor, Akinwunmi Ambode, met with all former governors of the state at a council for a special state Executive Council session, the Judiciary and House of Assembly.
  - iv. A historic gala night that would have a rich blend of good music and the best of Lagos cuisine.



### **Methodology**

The methodology adopted involves the direct application of first and second-hand observations as well as bibliographic studies geared towards a qualitative research. The primary observations were based on interviews, descriptive approaches, comparative analysis, and participants' observations and entailed collecting data in a relatively unstructured manner in natural settings. The secondary observations included secondary data-collection sourced from academic resource materials (books, magazines, journals, brochures, newsletters and newspapers). The researcher was obliged to use both the University and Departmental libraries as well as the libraries of Lagos State, Terra Kulture, Nike Centre for Arts and Culture (NCAC) and other published or related scholarly works, to gather additional resource materials.

### **Conceptual Issues: Visual Arts, Empowerment, Roles and Purposes**

The term 'Visual Arts' is a modern and broad category of art which encompasses several artistic disciplines, such as: drawing, painting, printmaking and sculpture, along with associated activities like graphic art, manuscript illumination, book illustration, calligraphy and architecture and contemporary-art; collage, assemblage, mixed-media, conceptual art installations, happenings and performance art, together with film-based disciplines such as photography, video art and animation. This group of activities also includes high-tech disciplines like computer graphics and giclee printing (Encyclopedia, 2017). Another modern visual art, is the new environmental or land art, which also includes transitory forms like ice/snow sculpture, and (presumably) graffiti arts from various sub-categories. Furthermore, there are more definitive aspects of Decorative-Arts & Crafts which include: ceramics and studio pottery, mosaic art, mobiles, tapestry, glass art (including stained glass); and lastly Applied Arts, which cover textile designs, graphic design, fashion design, and interior design, ceramics & pottery, indoor and outdoor sculpture (public sculptures) (Damden & Lamidi, 2012). In addition, new types of body art may also fall under the general heading of visual arts. These include African body art, tattoo art, scarification, body piercing, face painting, and body painting. It has been established that visual arts has a strong influence on the growth and development of society (Vye, 2017). The role of visual arts in society may be highlighted as follows:

- i. Beautifying and transforming neighbourhoods through murals, art installations, sculptural monuments, landscaping and other works of art.
- ii. Documenting history and promoting and preserving cultural heritage.

- iii. Promoting community engagement and a sense of unity among diverse cultural groups.
- iv. Serving as a didactic tool for propaganda.
- v. Providing social commentary and inciting social change through paintings and other forms of visual arts that bring important issues to light and encouraging discussion, thereby helping in finding solutions to socio-political issues.
- vi. Immortalising dead heroes and heroines
- vii. Entertaining, pleasing, exploring emotion and serving as a means of managing stress.
- viii. Creating images that mythologise history.
- ix. Generating employment opportunities for, and empowerment of, visual artists and other professionals.

### **The Operational Meta-Theory of Empowerment**

Empowerment is often viewed as something positive, a fact that accounts for its popularity or topicality in the current global development agenda (Nina S. , 2001, 2012). For this study, the operational meta-theory of empowerment has been adopted. It seeks to translate an abstract theory into a practical tool of intervention (Sadan, 2004, 2012). The operational meta-theory holds that empowerment encompasses the transition from powerlessness to more control in life and entails a change in both human activity and social structure. Powerlessness is a social phenomenon that has structural aspects which are rooted in the power relations and the disempowering practices that originate in the social systems (Sadan, 2004, 2012). In relation to this paper, this sociological theory is considered suitable as it refers to the process of bringing out the power in people through community engagement and renewal. It also encompasses creation of jobs for visual artists, among other professionals, thereby enhancing their well-being.

### **Art Stakeholders in the Lagos @ 50 Project**

The Lagos @ 50 Project Planning Committee selected various art stakeholders to work with in planning and executing the art installations project. The main privately-owned art institution responsible for the conceptual stage through coordination, production and installation of the major works of art was 'Terra Kulture' (Lagos State, 2017). Terra Kulture (TK) was founded by Bolanle Austen-Peters in 2003. The organisation has a building that contains a gallery, theatre hall, an exhibition area and a restaurant. Its primary objective is the promotion of Nigerian art and artists. Terra Kulture was engaged as a consultant on the project and to serve as the main liaison between the artists and the

Government, ensuring that the art works were professionally executed. Another art institution involved in the art installation project was Nike Centre for Arts & Culture (NCAC). This organisation was founded by Nike Okundaye, an art icon in Nigeria, and started operations in 1983. It operates from four locations, namely Lagos, Oshogbo (Osun state), Ogidi (Kogi state), and Abuja FCT. Its Lagos centre, which was opened in 2009, consists of a four-floor, ultra-modern building with a huge and well-stocked arts gallery, and a textile museum. The centre has, for decades, deployed the visual arts, particularly tie and dye, in empowering women and the girl-child. The Lagos Centre is well-known for promoting Nigerian arts and culture and a popular tourist attraction. It was, therefore, not surprising that NCAC was commissioned by the Government to organise a tie and dye session for hundreds of children at the National Arts Theatre during the peak of Lagos @ 50 celebrations.

#### **Selection of Public Art Works and Monuments under the Lagos @ 50 Project**

The Project covered a wide range of art works; installations and activities mounted in strategic locations across the state and included the following:

- i. Art exhibitions showcasing the State's aquatic assets.
- ii. Yoruba historical works of art, a photo exhibition and the unveiling of a special coffee table book that captures the essence of Lagos through the lens of 50 accomplished photographers.
- iii. Fashion parades highlighting the evolution of fashion in Lagos state over the past 50 years.
- iv. It is important to note that planning the installations included the following steps:
  - v. The Lagos State Ministry for Tourism, Arts and Culture put together a Project Selection Committee which was charged with project conceptualisation and review of submitted design proposals.
  - vi. Selection criteria included project design, proposed location, options for site-specific artworks and distribution along the IBILE (Ikeja, Badagry, Ikorodu, Lagos and Epe) Divisional framework.
  - vii. The final decision on the location of installations was taken by the State Executive Council.

**Sample of Art Works installed for the Celebration of Lagos @ 50**

Photo Credits: Terra Kulture.

Pictures of some of the Monumental Art Installations during the Lagos @ 50 Celebrations, 2017

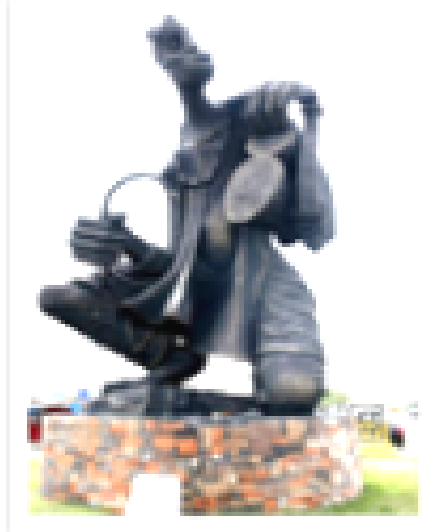


Figure 4: *Big Foot 'WAKA' at Ojodu Berger n . - Artist: Hamza Atta*



Figure 5: *From Ebute at Mobolaji Bank-Anthony Way. - Artist: Ade Odunfa*





**Figure 6:** *The Drummer at Ipakodo, Ikorodu.*  
*Artist: Chinedu Ogakwu*



**Figure 7 -***Fela 'Felabration' at Allen-Opebi Roundabout - Artist: Abolore Sobayo*



*Figure 8: Igunnuko at Isheri- Ikotun Roundabout.  
-Artist: Veronica Otigbo Ekpei*



*Figure 9: The Fisherman at Badagry.  
Artist: Chinedu Ogakwu*



Figure 10: Football Forever at Teslim-Balogun, Surulere. Artist: Ade Odunfa



Figure 11: Murals / Wall Painting, at Berger and Iyana Oworo, Collectively done by a group of Artists

**Art Workshop of Nike Centre for Arts and Culture**

Lagos State Government commissioned the Nike Centre for Arts and Culture to organise the workshop based on GELE/ HEADGEAR tying and TIE AND DYE sessions for hundreds of women and children at the National Arts Theatre, Iganmu, and Freedom Park, Lagos Island, during the peak of the celebration of Lagos of Lagos @ 50 which was targeted at empowering women and youth in Lagos State.



*Figure 12 -- Nike Empowerment programme on tie & dye making at the Freedom Park, Onikan, Lagos, 2017*



*Figure 13- Nike Empowerment programme on tie & dye making at the Freedom Park, Onikan, Lagos, 2017*

## Findings

It has been established that visual arts have played important roles in society as far back as the time of the paleolithic man (pre-historic times), particularly in the forms of painting, sculpting and pottery (Vye, 2017). These roles have changed and grown over time but they remain an important part of the development of society. In the modern society, the roles of visual arts include: beautification of homes and public places; documenting history; promoting and preserving the cultural heritage; providing social commentary and inducing social change, thereby helping to find solutions to socio-political issues; and generating employment opportunities.

Visual arts have played an important role as an empowerment tool for cultural and societal renewal in Lagos state since its creation in 1967. Lagos state is not only rich in culture but also strives to sustain that culture through various festival celebrations and art exhibitions that are held regularly. This periodic re-enactment of cultural traditions witnessed a high point during the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the state in 2017, with the launching of the Lagos @50 Project, encompassing murals, art installations and monuments, amongst others. Public sculptures were the dominant form of visual arts deployed by the Planning Committee towards the realisation of the Project. These monumental sculptural works were produced for the adornment and cultural renewal of the different IBILE (Ikeja, Badagry, Ikorodu, Lagos and Epe) communities of the state, and selected to suit their respective heritage and needs.

A stakeholder approach was adopted in the conceptualisation, design, selection and implementation of the Lagos @ 50 Project, which entailed the collaboration of key public and private sector parties, including the following: the Ministry of Works, the Ministry for Tourism, Lagos State Parks and Gardens Agency, professional art consultants and project managers, Lekki Concession Company (LCC), and community leaders (*Obas* and *Baales*).

Their respective roles were as follows: The Ministry of Tourism put together a Project Selection Committee charged with the responsibility for reviewing the design proposals. LCC served as an advisory agent and provided locations on the Lekki axis where installations were done. Terra Kulture was engaged as the Consultant to the Project and to serve as the main liaison between the artists and Government, ensuring that the art works were professionally executed. The community leaders in all locations were engaged to help determine the suitability of proposed sites for installations while the final decision on the location of installations was taken by the State Executive Council.

There have been several constraints and challenges faced in deploying visual arts as an empowerment tool in Lagos State, including the following (Ajayi, 2017):

- i. Limited funding.
- ii. Coordinating work groups and resolving conflicting stakeholder interests in the selection of works and locations for their installation.
- iii. Logistics of replacing old public works with new offsite installations.

- iv. Security and safety issues and inadequate commitment of the community.

### **Recommendations**

1. The transformation of communities and promotion of the cultural heritage through visual art activities should be on an on-going basis, rather than occasional. It should also cover not only new projects but also the restoration of old works of art.
2. Such deployment of art works and activities should not be undertaken only by Government but also should embrace private sector stakeholders involvement in the selection, siting, and funding of public art works and monuments under broad guidelines to be provided by the State Government. This is to enhance the resources available, ensure good order, and engender a sense of ownership and support of community leaders.
3. There is need to sensitise communities on the importance of promoting the cultural heritage and their role in protecting public works of art. For, it is only through such sensitisation that the protection and preservation of such works could be assured.

### **Conclusion**

The experience of Lagos state has shown that visual arts could be deployed as an empowerment tool for cultural and societal renewal. Indeed, the Lagos @ 50 Project has shown that visual arts could serve as a means of beautification and transforming neighbourhoods, promoting the cultural heritage, creating jobs for artists and other professionals and enhancing community engagement. The articulation and implementation of the project entailed consultation with, and participation of, key stakeholders and professionals which contributed to its success. Going forward, more could be achieved by restoring old public works and installations on an on-going basis to minimise the deterioration caused by weather and use over time as well as engaging communities to ensure the protection of public art works located in their neighbourhoods.

## References

- Ajayi, L. (2017). Consultancy and Advisory Manager@ Terra Kulture. (P. T. Iyase-Odozi, Interviewer) Lagos State. July 13-31
- Ambode, A. (2017). Foreword. In Osumah, P. C. & Taiwo, E. *Historical perspective of Lagos State: Then and now*. Lagos: La Roche Leadership Foundation, p.5.
- Cook, S., & Kabeer, N. (2009). Socio-economic Security over the life course: A global review of social protection. Institute of Development Studies.
- Damden, S. K., & Lamidi, L. (2012). Demolition of public sculptures: A threat to arts and its development in Northern Nigeria. *Gender & Creativity: Journal of Female Artists Association of Nigeria*, 64.
- Encyclopedia, V. A. (2017) [www.visual-arts-cork.com-definitions](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com-definitions). Retrieved from Visual Arts: Definition, Meaning History and Classification: [www.google.com](http://www.google.com). May 22nd
- Iyase-Odozi, T. (2016). The Visual Arts in Empowering the Women and Girl-Child in Nigeria: A Study of Nike Centre for Arts & Culture. *Unpublished*. Lagos.
- Lagos State, G. (2017). Celebrating Lagos @ 50 and Inauguration of the Committee Members. *Lagos @ 50 1967-2017 Enhance the Heritage & Advance the Future (BROCHURE)*. Ikeja- Alausa, Lagos State, Nigeria: [www.lagosat50.org.ng](http://www.lagosat50.org.ng). May 2
- Lund, F. (2009). Social Protection and the informal economy: Linkages and good practices for poverty reduction and empowerment. In *Promoting pro-poor growth: Social protection*. Geneva: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), pp.69-88.
- Nina, S. (2001). Conceptualising Empowerment as a transformative strategy for poverty eradication and the implications for measuring progress. In E. G. Eradication” (Ed.). New Delhi: United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW).
- Nina, S. (2001, 2012). *Conceptualising empowerment as a transformative strategy for poverty eradication*. Stockholm: Retrieved from [www.Un.Org/Womenwatch/Ep6](http://www.Un.Org/Womenwatch/Ep6). 19-11-2001
- Sadan, E. (2004) (2012). Developing a theory of empowerment. In E. Sadan, *Empowerment and community planning* (p. 166). Retrieved from [www.mpower.Org](http://www.mpower.Org).
- Sadan, E. (2004, 2012, July). Developing a theory of empowerment. In E. Sadan, *Empowerment and community planning* (p. 166). Retrieved from [www.mpower.Org](http://www.mpower.Org).



- Shyllon, Y. (2003). *Perspectives on culture & creativity in Nigeria art*. (A. A. Filani, Ed.) Lagos, Nigeria: CCAF, Anchor Creativities.
- Vye, A. (2017). *The Role of Visual Artists in the Society*. Retrieved from <http://work.chron.core/role-visual-artists-society-225>: www.google.com. July 13
- WikiAnswers, C. (2017, June 20). *WikiAnswers.com//Definitions//What is Culture and Societal Renewal*. Retrieved from www.google.com.
- www.visual-arts-cork.com-definitions*. (2017, May 22nd ). Retrieved from Visual Arts; Definition, Meaning History and Classification- Visual Arts Encyclopedia: www.google.com

### **Plates and Figures**

- Figure 1: Lagos State Emblem
- Figure 2: Lagos @ 50 Logo
- Figure 3: Governor Akinwunmi Ambode of Lagos State
- Figure 4: Big Foot 'WAKA' at Ojodu Berger n . - Artist: Hamza Atta
- Figure 5: From Ebute at Mobolaji Bank-Anthony Way. - Artist: Ade Odunfa
- Figure 6: The Drummer at Ipakodo, Ikorodu.
- Figure 7: Fela 'Felabration' at Allen- Opebi Roundabout - Artist: Abolore Sobayo
- Figure 8: Igunnuko at Isheri- Ikotun Roundabout.
- Figure 9: The Fisherman at Badagry.
- Figure 10: Football Forever at Teslim-Balogun, Surulere.
- Figure 11: Murals / Wall Painting, at Berger and Iyana Oworo, Collectively done by a group of Artists.
- Figure 12: Nike Empowerment programme on tie & dye making at the Freedom Park, Onikan, Lagos, 2017
- Figure 13: Nike Empowerment programme on tie & dye making at the Freedom Park, Onikan, Lagos, 2017