Colonial Gaze and Indigenous Response:Identity Construction in Twentieth-Century African Contemporary Art

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Abstract

The twentieth century was a period of intense political and cultural upheaval for the African continent. From the zenith of colonial rule to the rise of decolonization movements, African contemporary art played a pivotal role in this historical process. This paper examines how twentieth-century African contemporary art functioned as an "indigenous response," deconstructing and resisting the West's longstanding "colonial gaze." By drawing on Edward Said's theory of the "Other," Frantz Fanon's postcolonial psychology, and Homi Bhabha's concept of "hybridity," a four-dimensional theoretical framework is constructed for analyzing identity construction in African art. Research demonstrates that from the philosophical aesthetics of the Négritude movement and the "Natural Synthesis" of the Nigerian Zaria Art Society, to the material and historical reconstructions of contemporary artists El Anatsui and Yinka Shonibare, African artists have continuously negotiated tensions between tradition and modernity, the local and the global. The paper not only reveals the awakening of subjectivity in African art's resistance to Western Primitivism, but also offers a new academic perspective for understanding the "permanent state of transition" of postcolonial art in the context of globalization.

Keywords: *African contemporary art , colonial gaze , identity construction , postcolonialism , decolonization , hybridity*

1 Introduction: The Predicament of African Art under the Colonial Gaze

For much of the twentieth century, African art remained marginalized and misinterpreted within Western academia and museum systems. This condition was rooted in the deeply entrenched “colonial gaze” of the West. As Edward Said pointed out in Orientalism, the West constructed an “Other” through a particular discursive system—one that was backward, mysterious, and in need of rescue—in order to establish its own civilizational superiority and legitimize its domination.In the field of art, this gaze was manifested in the tendency to fix African art as “primitive,” “tribal,” or “ahistorical” craft, thereby depriving it of the status of a modern artistic subject[1]. This discursive construction was closely tied to the political and economic logic of European colonial expansion since the nineteenth century: by devaluing the cultural production of colonized regions as “pre-modern,” it provided an ideological justification for the colonial project’s so-called “civilizing mission.”

In 1984, the Museum of Modern Art in New York held the exhibition “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern, which became a typical manifestation of this colonial gaze. The exhibition presented works of art from Africa and the Pacific Islands as “raw materials” from which Western modernist masters such as Picasso drew inspiration, while completely detaching these works from their local cultural contexts and historical trajectories. In his article published in Artforum, art critic Thomas McEvilley sharply criticized the exhibition, arguing that it was essentially a continuation of cultural imperialism. Rather than granting non-Western art an equal status, it reinforced the hegemony of Western modernism. This controversy triggered intense debates in the Western art world over the following years and became a landmark event in the history of postcolonial art criticism[2].

In response to this systematic cultural oppression and the deprivation of identity, African artists in the twentieth century developed profound responses to the colonial gaze through diverse artistic practices and theoretical explorations. This paper aims to systematically trace this historical process and examine how contemporary African art, within the broader wave of decolonization, has reconstructed a self-determined cultural identity by deconstructing the label of “primitiveness” imposed by the West.

2 Theoretical Framework: Identity and Representation in the Postcolonial Context

To analyze the construction of identity in contemporary African art in greater depth, this paper integrates several core concepts from postcolonial theory to form a multidimensional theoretical framework. These theoretical tools are

not applied in isolation; rather, they complement and reinforce one another. Fanon's colonial psychology reveals the internal mechanisms of identity alienation; Bhabha's theory of hybridity offers a way to move beyond binary oppositions; Mudimbe's epistemological critique points to the power structures embedded in knowledge production; and Enwezor's concept of "permanent transition" provides a macro-level framework for understanding the global condition of contemporary African art (see Table 1).

Table 1. Four-dimensional postcolonial theoretical framework: analytical tools for African art identity construction

Fanon: Colonial Psychology	Bhabha: Theory of Hybridity	Mudimbe: Epistemological Critique	Enwezor: Permanent Transition
Core Work: Black Skin, White Masks (1952/1967)	Core Work:The Location of Culture (1994)	Core Work:The Invention of Africa (1988)	Core Work:The Postcolonial Constellation (2003)
Mechanism of Identity Alienation and Psychological Trauma → from imitation to awakening.	The Third Space and cultural hybridity → deconstructing binary oppositions	The Western construction of Africa through knowledge systems → epistemological resistance	The global condition of postcolonial art → transition as a dynamic and normalized state
Objective of Theoretical Integration: To reveal the multidimensional and dynamic mechanisms of identity construction in African art—from psychological decolonization, to aesthetic innovation, to epistemological resistance, and ultimately to institutional transformation.			

Note: This framework integrates the theoretical contributions of Fanon (1952/1967), Bhabha (1994)[3], Mudimbe (1988)[4], and Enwezor (2003)[5].Said's (1978)[6] concept of the "Other" serves as the overarching meta-theoretical framework. Each dimension operates independently while also complementing the others.

2.1 Colonial Psychology and Black Skin, White Masks

In Black Skin, White Masks, Frantz Fanon offers a profound analysis of the psychological trauma and identity alienation inflicted on colonized subjects by colonialism. Fanon argues that, within a white-dominated social structure, Black subjects are often forced to internalize the values of the colonizer and to wear a "white mask" in pursuit of recognition, resulting in severe self-division and identity crisis. In artistic practice, this psychological mechanism was reflected in the tendency of some early African artists to imitate Western academic styles in order to gain recognition from the colonial metropole[3]. Genuine identity construction, therefore, must be grounded in breaking free from such psychological dependence and confronting one's own cultural roots. Fanon's theory provides a crucial analytical perspective for understanding the psychological transformation of African artists from "imitation" to "awakening."

2.2 Hybridity and the Third Space

Homi K. Bhabha's theory of "hybridity," developed in The Location of Culture, provides an important theoretical tool for understanding the complexity of contemporary African art. Bhabha argues that the relationship between colonizer and colonized is not simply one of oppression and subjugation; rather, their encounter produces a tension-filled "Third Space." Within this space, cultural identity is no longer pure or essentialist, but fluid and hybrid. It is important to note that this "hybridity" does not mean the passive acceptance of colonial culture[4]. Instead, it represents an active and strategic form of cultural negotiation: artists consciously select, transform, and recombine elements from different cultural traditions in order to create new forms of expression with subversive power.

2.3 The Invention of Africa and the Order of Knowledge

In The Invention of Africa, the Congolese philosopher V. Y. Mudimbe argues that the "Africa" known to the West is, in fact, an invented concept—a product of Western knowledge systems and discourses of power.Mudimbe[5] traces how missionaries, anthropologists, and colonial administrators collectively constructed a body of knowledge about "Africa," one that reduced the continent's diverse cultures to a homogenized and backward "Other." Therefore, the construction of identity in African art is not merely an aesthetic innovation, but also an epistemological form of resistance: artists must deconstruct the notion of "Africanity" imposed by the West and reclaim the discursive power to define their own cultures and histories.

2.4 Permanent Transition

In The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition, curator and scholar Okwui Enwezor argues that contemporary art in the postcolonial era is no longer confined within specific geographical or national boundaries. Instead, it exists in a "state of permanent transition," where globalization and localization are constantly intertwined. This concept accurately captures the living conditions and creative characteristics of African artists since the mid- to late twentieth century: they are rooted in local historical memory while actively participating in

the global dialogue of contemporary art[6]. Enwezor emphasizes that this “transition” should not be understood as an unfinished movement toward some ultimate destination, but rather as the normal condition of postcolonial cultural production—a continuous, dynamic mode of existence full of creative tension.

3 Historical Evolution: From “Négritude” to “Natural Synthesis”

3.1 The Négritude Movement and the Awakening of African Aesthetics

The Négritude movement, which emerged in Paris in the 1930s, was the first systematic response by African intellectuals to colonial policies of assimilation. Léopold Sédar Senghor, the first president of Senegal as well as a poet and philosopher, was one of the central figures of the movement. Senghor not only promoted decolonization politically, but also constructed the idea of “African-Negro Aesthetics” at the philosophical level.

In an essay published in 1956, Senghor emphasized that “rhythm” was the ontological foundation and core aesthetic feature of African art. He argued that, unlike Western art, which tended to emphasize representation and rationality, African art expressed vitality and cosmic resonance through a powerful sense of rhythm[7]. Scholar Souleymane Bachir Diagne notes that Senghor’s theory was not only a response to the Western denigration of African culture, but also an attempt to elevate African art to a philosophical level[8].

However, the Négritude movement has also faced criticism for its “strategic essentialism”: while resisting the Western essentialization of African culture, it also, in another way, essentialized African culture itself. Nevertheless, as the first clear call for African cultural self-consciousness, the historical significance of the movement remains undeniable. It laid the intellectual foundation for later, more pluralistic and anti-essentialist artistic practices.

3.2 Nigeria’s Zaria Art Society and “Natural Synthesis”

If the Négritude movement laid the theoretical foundation in Francophone Africa, then in Anglophone Africa, artists explored paths of identity construction through concrete artistic practice. In the late 1950s, a group of young artists studying at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology in Zaria founded the Zaria Art Society, later known as the “Zaria Rebels.”

Represented by figures such as Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko, these artists opposed the purely Westernized art education offered by the academy. Okeke proposed the idea of “Natural Synthesis,” advocating the integration of Nigeria’s indigenous artistic traditions—such as the Igbo Uli linear drawing tradition—with the media and techniques of Western modernism. The key lies in the word “natural”: it emphasizes an organic, internally motivated form of cultural integration, rather than mechanical collage or deliberate hybridity[9].

In his book Postcolonial Modernism, art historian Chika Okeke-Agulu offers a detailed analysis of the significance of this movement. He argues that “Natural Synthesis” was not only an aesthetic strategy, but also a profound political statement, marking the establishment of an independent postcolonial modernist identity among Nigerian artists during the process of decolonization[10].

4 Reconstructing Materiality and History: Case Studies of Contemporary Artists

Entering the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, with the acceleration of globalization, the creative horizons of contemporary African artists expanded significantly. They were no longer confined to the simple appropriation of traditional symbols; instead, they began to reflect critically on colonial history and its contemporary legacies through the deconstruction and recombination of material substances. Artists of this generation often selected materials embedded with colonial historical implications as their medium, and through the physical transformation of these materials, they sought to rewrite historical narratives.

4.1 El Anatsui: Historical Memory in Discarded Materials

The Ghanaian-born Nigerian artist El Anatsui is one of the most internationally influential figures in contemporary African art. He is best known for his monumental metallic tapestries made from recycled materials such as discarded bottle caps and copper wire, often covering entire building facades and shimmering in the sunlight. The choice of these materials is far from accidental: alcohol was once used by Europeans as a major commodity in exchange for African slaves during the transatlantic slave trade. By transforming these discarded materials—marked by the histories of colonial exploitation and consumerism—into astonishing works of art, Anatsui creates forms that evoke both the traditional Kente cloth of West Africa and the powerful presence of contemporary sculpture.

This mode of artistic practice perfectly exemplifies Bhabha’s theory of hybridity: industrial waste materials and traditional weaving techniques converge in his works, serving both as a critical revisitation of colonial history and as a celebration of the resilience of African culture[11]. More importantly, Anatsui’s works possess a distinctive openness:

each time they are installed, their form changes according to space and gravity. This fluidity itself becomes a metaphor for the dynamic and unfixed nature of African cultural identity, corresponding precisely, at the level of artistic practice, to Enwezor's notion of a "state of permanent transition."

4.2 Yinka Shonibare: Dutch Wax Fabric and the Disguise of Identity

The British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare is well known for his signature use of Dutch wax fabric. This brightly colored, richly patterned textile is widely regarded in both the West and Africa as a symbol of the "Authentic African." However, Shonibare exposes the complex colonial history behind it: the fabric actually originated from Indonesian batik techniques, was industrially produced by Dutch colonial manufacturers, and was eventually dumped onto West African markets, where it was later embraced by local consumers. Its so-called "Africanness," therefore, is itself a product of colonial history.

Shonibare often uses this fabric to make Victorian aristocratic costumes, which he places on headless mannequin figures[12]. Through this ironic juxtaposition, he not only deconstructs Western stereotypes of authenticity in African art—as Sidney Kasfir has argued in her critical studies—but also reveals that cultural identity itself is a historical construction and a form of disguise. As Stuart Hall has pointed out, cultural identity is not an already completed fact, but a process of continual production. Shonibare's headless figures further suggest the decentering of identity: in the postcolonial context, no single cultural authority can claim a monopoly over the definition of identity.

5 Breaking Boundaries: Exhibition and Market in Globalizing Context

The construction of identity in contemporary African art does not take place only in artists' studios; it is also deeply reflected in the transformations of international exhibition mechanisms and the art market. Exhibition space is never neutral—it is the material manifestation of power relations, determining which forms of art are seen, how they are seen, and by whom they are seen.

5.1 From Magiciens de la Terre to Global Biennials

In 1989, the Centre Pompidou in Paris hosted the watershed exhibition Magiciens de la Terre. Curator Jean-Hubert Martin sought to challenge Western-centrism by presenting the works of fifty Western artists alongside those of fifty non-Western artists on an equal footing. Although the exhibition was criticized by postcolonial scholars for its underlying tendency toward exoticization—the discursive framework, evaluative criteria, and audience expectations of the exhibition were still largely shaped by the West—it nevertheless opened the door for contemporary African art to enter global visibility[13].

Thereafter, with the rise of curators such as Okwui Enwezor, who worked from a postcolonial perspective—for example, in his curation of Documenta 11 in 2002—contemporary African art gradually moved beyond the ethnographic display framework and became an indispensable component of global contemporary art discourse. As the first African-born artistic director of Documenta, Enwezor's curatorial practice carried profound symbolic significance: it marked the moment when African intellectuals were no longer merely objects to be displayed, but active shapers of global art discourse. In The Predicament of Culture, anthropologist James Clifford predicted that, in modernity, the exotic would become increasingly familiar, while the familiar would be rendered distant.The normalization of African art within global exhibitions is precisely a real-world reflection of this cultural predicament[14].

5.2 The Rise and Challenges of the Art Market

In recent years, contemporary African art has shown strong growth momentum in the international auction market. According to data from MoMAA (the Museum of Modern African Art), since 2017, the cumulative sales of dedicated contemporary African art auctions held by major auction houses such as Sotheby's and Christie's have exceeded USD 100 million (see Table2)[15].

Table 2. Trend of dedicated African contemporary art auction sales at major auction houses, 2017–2025 (Source: MoMAA, 2026)

2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Unit: (million $)
~$5M	~$8M	~$12M	~$9M	~$18M	~$22M	~$15M	~$11M	Cumulative>$100M

Note: The annual figures are estimated values based on the aggregate figure reported by MoMAA, which states that cumulative sales have exceeded USD 100 million since 2017. Since year-by-year data have not been publicly disclosed, the specific annual figures were extrapolated by the author based on market trends. The chart data are based on MoMAA's (2026) African and Diaspora Art Market Outlook, which confirms that dedicated contemporary African art auctions at major auction houses have generated cumulative sales of over USD 100 million since 2017. The year-by-year figures were extrapolated by the author based on market trends and are intended for illustrative purposes only. The decline in 2020 reflects the overall downturn in the global auction market caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This market recognition has, to some extent, enhanced the international status of African artists, but it has also brought new challenges. Does the logic of capital create a new form of the "market gaze," compelling artists to cater to the aesthetic expectations of Western collectors? When works by African artists are sold for extremely high prices in

auction houses in New York and London, does this represent a genuine recognition of the cultural value of African art, or yet another consumption of "exoticism" by global capital? How to maintain the independence and criticality of cultural identity amid the tide of commercialization remains an important issue facing contemporary African art.

6 Conclusion

The history of contemporary African art in the twentieth century is a history of struggle: one in which African art survived within the constraints of the colonial gaze and eventually achieved an awakening of subjectivity. From the philosophical foundations laid by the Négritude movement, to the practice of "Natural Synthesis" by the Zaria Art Society, and further to contemporary artists' profound reconstruction of materiality and historical memory, African artists have deconstructed the labels of "primitiveness" and "Otherness" imposed by the West with remarkable creativity and resilience.

They did not simply retreat into a closed notion of tradition. Instead, they courageously embraced the "hybridity" of the postcolonial condition and opened up a vibrant "Third Space" at the intersection of tradition and modernity, the local and the global. As Enwezor (2003) argues, this "state of permanent transition" is not only a defining feature of African art, but also the shared condition of all cultural production in the age of globalization.[6] The analysis in this paper demonstrates that the construction of identity in contemporary African art is a multilayered and multidimensional dynamic process, involving psychological decolonization, aesthetic innovation, epistemological resistance, and institutional transformation.

Looking ahead, contemporary African art must not only remain alert to the hidden continuities of Western-centrism, but also uphold its own cultural roots and critical spirit within the increasingly prosperous global art market. With the rise of digital technologies and new media art, African artists are exploring new forms of expression and channels of dissemination, offering new possibilities for the continued evolution of identity construction. Only in this way can African art truly move beyond the shadow of colonial history and contribute richer, more diverse, and more profound cultural value to the global ecology of contemporary art.

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