

**ABSTRACT ART AND THE CONTESTED GROUND OF
AFRICAN MODERNISMS**

By PATRICK

MUMBA

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Supervisor: Tanya Poole

Co-Supervisor: Prof. Ruth Simbao

ABSTRACT

This submission for a Masters of Fine Art consists of a thesis titled *Abstract Art and the Contested Ground of African Modernisms* developed as a document to support the exhibition *Time in Between*. The exhibition addresses the fact that nothing is permanent in life, and uses abstract paintings that reveal in-between time through an engagement with the processes of ageing and decaying. Life is always a temporary situation, an idea which I develop as *Time in Between*, the beginning and the ending, the young and the aged, the new and the old. In my painting practice I break down these dichotomies, questioning how abstractions engage with the relative notion of time and how this links to the processes of ageing and decaying in life. I relate this ageing process to the aesthetic process of moving from representational art to semi-abstract art, and to complete abstraction, when the object or material reaches a wholly unrecognisable stage. My practice is concerned not only with the aesthetics of these paintings but also, more importantly, with translating each specific theme into the formal qualities of abstraction. In my thesis I analyse abstraction in relation to 'African Modernisms' and critique the notion that African abstraction is not 'African' but a mere copy of Western Modernism. In response to this notion, I have used a study of abstraction to interrogate notions of so-called 'African-ness' or 'Zambian-ness', whilst simultaneously challenging the Western stereotypical view of African modern art. I have also related the theoretical and practical analysis of abstraction to scholarly debates on abstraction and 'African Modernism', arguing for multiple African Modernisms.

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that all the sources I have used have been acknowledged by complete references. This is being submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for Master of Fine Art at Rhodes University. I declare that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination at another University.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis complements the abstract paintings in my exhibition titled *Time in Between*. The paintings address 'in-between time', engaging with the process of ageing and decaying. In this body of work I have painted various stages of ageing and death in living creatures and in plants, and the decay of objects and materials. I have linked this to the aesthetic process of moving from representational art to abstract art. The practice of working in abstraction has enabled me to engage theoretically with abstraction's relative absence in Zambia. Together, the exhibition and the thesis analyse in depth abstraction and its role in 'African Modernism'.

In Chapter One, I critique the Western notion that abstract art is not 'African' and that African abstract art is a mere copy of Western Modernism. To contribute to the research on abstract art in Zambia, and the contested debate on African Modernism, I analyse in detail paintings of Zambia's late and most well-known abstract artist, Henry Tayali. I have also related the theoretical and practical analysis of abstraction to scholarly debates on abstraction and 'African Modernism' arguing for multiple African Modernisms.

Okeke-Chika-Agula (2006), Okwui Enwezor (2008) and Salah Hassan (1996) have argued that an analysis of African Modernism needs to consider different modernisms, as the notion of a single African modernism is too homogenous. According to Hassan (1996:39), "Today the study of African art has remained largely a Western discipline. The scholarship on African art has been a product of Western sensibility and an expression of Western aesthetic responses to African visual culture". As such, there has been a mismatch between what is written and the art itself. Although it is a well-known fact that some pioneers of Western Modernism, such as Picasso, were influenced by African art, surprisingly little is mentioned about this African contribution to the process and development of Western Modernism.

Hassan (1996:39) points out an observation by Jan Vanisa, who suggests that African art is usually the label given to the visual art of people south of the Sahara, and that the arts of other parts of Africa are perceived to be less 'African'. Okeke (2013 b) has argued that African modern art has been an anomaly on the map of twentieth-century artistic

modernity. It has always been with us from modernism's inception, and yet, in a kind of cyclical ritual, time and time again it has seemed to need validation within the study of twentieth-century art. Whether or not colonialism unwittingly planted the seeds of African modern art, the extent to which that art is accountable to Europeans' methodologies remains a subject of intense debate. Hassan (1996:43) further argues that the history of modernism, taken solely from the Western perspective, tends to exclude from recognition not only the plurality of cultures, but any object of 'high' culture produced by 'others' as well.

The Zambian art scene, which I have discussed in Chapter Three is relatively small, and, currently, abstract art remains rare in Zambia. There is a tendency for Zambians and foreign collectors to think that abstract art is the preserve of Westerners and that Zambian artists should produce paintings based on realistic themes. As such, working in abstraction has raised my awareness about how abstraction is perceived in Africa (Okeke 2006) and how this relates to broader trends in modern and contemporary art (Hassan and Aitbach 1996; Simbao 2004; Peffer 2009). In response to the above tendency, I have situated my abstract paintings within the context of Zambian art and related my works to the abstract paintings of Henry Tayali.

The background to my practice has been my concerns with the despoiling of the Zambian landscape by the copper mines. Although mines are one of the strong subtexts of my work, landscape, colonial greed, African greed, personal experience, aesthetics, and painterly abstraction also impact my work in one form or another. In some works I have used rusting metals because of my interest in time and erosion. The idea of rust also stands as a metaphor for the damage done to the landscape of Zambia through mining and bringing the metals to the surface, which then oxidise. I have used this because it is a clear visual metaphor relating to time, and to the chemical and physical reactions, and to the elements of water and rain which precipitate these reactions. In my practical research, I have considered the influence of time as I have observed nature, including the unique aspects of the weather and how it affects our life-span. In the period between the 1960s and late 1970s, Zambia witnessed growth in the mining industry, which brought a lot of development in the country. Citizens enjoyed a better standard of living, which they referred to as modern life. However, this modernity in between the 1960s and 1970s did not last long and, due to the fall of commodity prices on the international market and

poor management of the mines, copper prices dropped and this resulted in the closure of some mines (Sardanis 2014).Sardanis (2014: 114) writes that:

They squandered the resources of Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines on hare-brained wasteful projects, a few of their own invention but mostly dictated by the politicians or their friends and, in the process, transformed ZCCM from a respectable mining house into a mindless conglomerate encompassing all sorts of irrelevant businesses.

In life all situations are temporal and, due to the problematic process and effects of mining, the boom period in the Copperbelt which brought modernity in Zambia ended as copper prices slumped. Over time, some areas in the Copperbelt were badly destroyed and vast patches of land have been despoiled and heavily polluted due to the process of mining driven by human greed for more wealth and modernity (Sardanis 2014). Due to the process of destruction, the ravages of the passage of time, and natural and human-made disasters, most of the objects which were symbols of modernity have changed and most of them have perished. In my practice I use these decayed materials and objects to create new forms of abstraction. When materials or objects decay, this process exposes their characteristics, and when they assume new form I see different elements of abstraction in them. Interestingly I find beauty in the old and decayed materials and objects because working with these materials reveals the strength of their material properties, their colour, their forms and the passage of time.

This research provides an original contribution, as no comprehensive research on abstract art in Zambia has been published, apart from a few 'coffee table publications' about art in Zambia, which are tailored largely for tourists and are not very scholarly. The only publications are: *Art in Zambia* by Gabriel Ellison (2004) and the *Lechwe Trust Collection* (2009). These, however, have not fully argued or engaged with the theoretical aspect of abstract art in Zambia. As such, this research will contribute not only to ongoing projects on African Modernism and abstract art in Zambia, but will also bring out new ideas and knowledge through the integration of new primary research.

The primary research I conducted included interviews and physical inspection and discussions of Tayali's work with Andrew Sardanis, who owns most of the late Henry

Tayali's abstract paintings, which are housed at Chaminuka Lodge in Lusaka. I also interviewed Cynthia Zukas, the Chairperson for Lechwe collection, which also owns Tayali's abstract paintings. Further, I physically inspected Tayali's abstract paintings which are housed in the Lusaka Museum. The abstract paintings which are at Chaminuka Lodge range from his early works from the 1960s to the late 1980s and provide a good picture of the 'time in between' his representational art and abstraction. This research contributes to the bridging of the gap that has been created by neglect in the documentation of the history of visual arts in Zambia.

CHAPTER ONE: MODERNISM AND AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES

Modernism is defined by many scholars today as an art movement that, along with cultural trends and changes, arose from wide-scale and far-reaching transformations in Western society in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The development of industrial societies led to the growth of cities, and the horror and effects of the First World War were among some of the factors which shaped Modernism (Brettell 1999:3). In the first decade of the twentieth century, some artists, notably Picasso and Matisse, led the rejection of realism which, at that time, was regarded as the main traditional means of the structuring of a painting, as abstraction became the modernist theory of painting (Walz 2008:3). Artists such as Picasso and Braque also became individualistic and protested against strong rules concerning reality and imitation (Moszynska 1990:9). Modernism¹ encouraged self-consciousness, and artists started working with different and non-traditional materials, as a new way of representing their subject matter (Moszynska 1990:14). They experimented with form and new techniques and also paid attention to the actual process of creating a painting. One of the examples of the new techniques was the extreme fragmentation of form, which signaled a fundamental break from the traditional modes of pictorial expression (Moszynska 1990:11).

Many artists started slowly engaging with forms of abstraction, to various degrees. For example, in his *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*, Picasso starts to abstract his figures, shown in the way the five women's faces have been stylised, registering some resemblance to African sculptures (Russell 1981:100). Picasso's abstract painting was sketchy, lacked detail and could be most appreciated from a distance (Brettell 1999:17). The artists such as Picasso, Braque and Kandinsky claimed freedom from the old way of rendering paint on canvas and looked elsewhere for inspiration; they explored new ideas, and challenged the notion that art should always be realistic in the way it depicted the world (Walz 2008:9–10).

¹ Modernism is defined differently by different authors, and usually when it is used to refer to socio-philosophical movements it is written with small letter, and when it refer to an art movement it is written with a capital 'M'. However, modernism, which brought many radical breaks in European culture and introduced the 'tradition of the new,' significantly contributed to the development of Modernism.

These artists rejected the classic code of composition, the careful execution of the painting, which carried heroic themes, most often prescribed, and painting indoors (Walz 2008:4). The artists claimed that human beings did not see objects but instead saw light itself (Russell 1974:19), therefore they opted to paint outdoors and were mostly concerned with the immediate effect of light on an object, not necessarily the reality of the subject matter (Russell 1974:18). Brettell (1999:83) points out that “In 1930 the Canadian painter Emily Carr gave a lecture in her native Victoria entitled, *Fresh Seeing*. Her message was that successful art is not so much a mode of representation as it is a mode of seeing” (Brettell 1999:83). What she emphasised was that a good painting does not have to be one which easily engages with the audience; at times what matters is the way the painting is viewed (Brettell 1999:83). Looking at and seeing a painting are two different phenomena, for *seeing* is considered by Brettell (1999: 83) to be a rational activity. Hassan (2010: 454) argues that:

Modernity, as defined by many scholars today, engages those social changes implied in becoming modern, urbanization, industrialization, wage labour and factory systems, and so on while modernism designates artistic practices, whether in European or other contexts, also signals a sense of continual difference, a self-conscious process of refashioning the self and the projection of particular attitudes toward the past and the present.

The following section provides a brief definition and history of abstract art and discusses critical issues raised by the major authors of African Modernism (Okeke 2013b; Hassan 2010, 2008; Araeen 2004, 2010; Enwezor 2008; and Nicodemus 2013). The most contentious and important points are what constructions of European Modernism have excluded, and to what degree African Modernism is perceived from a Western perspective.

1.1. AN INTRODUCTION TO ABSTRACT ART

Abstract art can be a painting or sculpture that does not depict a person, place or thing in the natural world in a representational way; the depiction may be distorted or exaggerated to varying degrees (Moszynska 1990:46). Therefore, the subject of the work is based largely on what one sees: colour, shapes, brushstrokes, size, and scale and, in some cases, the process. Abstract art has baffled many people because it seems unrelated to the world of general appearances (Moszynska 1990:7). Because abstract

art tends to refer to an 'invisible', inner state, it challenges the viewer as it raises questions in terms of what it stands for and what it is trying to say. Some people question whether abstract art is art at all, or just a mere decoration (Moszynska 1990:7) This is so because abstract works of art if not properly produced tend to be repetitive and decorative. It is important to note that abstract art exists in different forms. There is abstract art which is 'abstracted' from natural appearance and abstract art which has no resemblance to the external world (Moszynska 1990:7). From the Western perspective, abstract art began in 1910 and has been attributed to an untitled abstract water colour (1910) by the Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) (Pohribny 1979:42). However, I will argue that Africans were engaged in abstraction before 1910, long before abstract art evolved in the West (Okeke 2013b:28).

The Western notion of African abstract art is that it is 'un-African' and that African abstract art is a mere copy of Western Modernism (Hassan 2010:456). However, Hassan (2010:456) highlights Edward Said's observation that European modernism itself has 'many parents'. "Most histories of European aesthetic Modernism leave out the massive infusion of non-European cultures into the metropolitan heartland during the early years of this century" (Hassan 2010:456). Said points out that European Modernism could not have existed in a void, nor is it possible that Western Modernism could have developed on its own because, during the early years of the twentieth century, Western artists were influenced by other cultures, notably from Africa (Russell 1974:100). Some of these artists include Pablo Picasso and Matisse, whose technique of painting gradually changed after they had an encounter with African sculptures (Russell 1974:100). Mixing the African influence with the European, these artists produced artworks which did not look typically European but included traces of stylised forms of African sculpture (Russell 1974:100). Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* clearly shows an African influence, which is evidenced in the way Picasso composes the faces of the two women in the right hand corner of the painting with resemblance to African sculpture. The West accepts Picasso's painting and crowns him as genius, but at the same time fails to legitimise African art, which greatly influenced Picasso's abstract painting.

Okeke (2013b:28) argues:

Contemporary Western scholars and artists generally acknowledge that one of the sparks for European art's paradigmatic change in direction in the twentieth century occurred as Western artists encountered African and Oceanic 'ethnographic' objects and recognized the possibilities they offered for formal shifts in European Painting and sculpture. But the obverse of this discovery by Western artists was the discovery of European art by African artists born in the same period.



Fig.1. Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.K.R.)* (1935), Oil on Canvas, 8 feet x 7 feet 8 inches, Museum of Modern Art, New York. (Reproduction taken from Museum of Modern Art, New York colour plate 1.)

The Western perspective of African Modernism claims that most African abstract art produced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries lacked 'authenticity' and that it was a mere a copy of Western Modernism (Okeke 2013b:29).

Yet as early as the 1930s abstraction existed in Africa as the paintings of South African artist Ernest Mancoba demonstrate. In 1940 he produced an abstract painting titled *Pivotal Composition* in which he introduced a new technique of painting which was neither European nor African but new and modern and showed no obvious Western influence (Hassan 2010:468). In support of this idea that abstract art could be seen to come from Africa, Okeke (2013b:29) states that “the argument of Fagg and Plass and of generations of art historians worried by what they see as lack of ‘authenticity’ in modern and contemporary African art is quite pernicious, for it denies any possibility of agency on the African artist’s part”. Okeke disagrees with the argument because it implies that, because Africans appropriated a European style of painting, this, in itself, demonstrates their inability to create new intellectual works of art (Okeke 2013b:29). Because African modern art was not perceived to be original from the Western perspective (Okeke 2013b:29), Africans were disqualified from attending artists’ conferences or engaging in any artistic debates taking place around the world (Okeke 2013b:29).

However, as pointed out above, even before the insurgence of Western Modernism in the global context, some African artists like Ernest Mancoba had already started engaging in abstraction (Hassan 2010:469). Reference to Mancoba’s work is necessary because of the critical time at which he was producing his abstract paintings. He was painting in abstract forms at the same period Western Modernism was developing, therefore the possibility that he was copying or that he was derivative of the West is out of the question. Hassan points out Rasheed Araeen’s observation about Mancoba’s painting *Pivotal Composition*:

[Araeen] asks us to move beyond the simple reading of the work as indicative of mixing African iconographies with European techniques to a more critical study of the painting and the ways in which the elements are arranged within the rectangular canvas and whether they yield a new and radical innovation in painting as a modernist medium in the 1940s.' Such a reading in his view situates *Composition* as not only an encounter with modernism but one that produces a form 'whose significance lies' beyond it's 'African-ness' but more importantly in its temporality and historicity (Hassan 2010:468).



Fig.2. Ernest Mancoba's, *Pivotal Composition* (1940), Oil on canvas, 59cm x 50 cm, Wonga Mancoba. (Reproduction taken from EWS 2011 12.11 - 17.12 Ernest Mancoba, Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, and Wonga Mancoba Copenhagen colour plate 2.)

Hassan (2010:469) further elaborates Olu Oguibe's argument that "Mancoba's achievement was not that he was part of a modernist movement that erased him from history (as it was bound to) but that he helped define African modernity". The problem of racism, which caused Mancoba to leave South Africa for Europe, and Paris in particular, also confronted him there, and his abstract paintings were not recognised by critics or his white counterparts, to his disappointment (Hassan 2010:469). However, Mancoba's achievement is attributed to his perseverance, which enabled him, in spite of colonial constraints, to break through as a free artist and make a mark as a pioneer, as one of the contributors to the development and the definition of African Modernism (Hassan 2010:469). To further discredit the Western notion that African artists were unable to create and produce modern art of their own, and that the art they produced was merely a copy from the Western Modernism, Rasheed Araeen (2010:286) argues that:

Mancoba's achievement is that he is likely the first from the whole colonised world – Africa, Asia, the Americas, Australasia and the Pacific – to enter the central core of modernism at the time when this world, particularly his own South Africa, was still struggling under colonialism, and to challenge modernism's historical paradigm on its own terms.

It can also be pointed out that, although the West suggests there was no trace of modernity in the work of African artists during the twentieth century (Hassan 2010:459), the effects of poor documentation of the early works of African pioneer artists has played a role in this assumption (Nicodemus 2013:18). This factor, which was a common practice in many countries across the African continent during the twentieth century (Nicodemus 2013:18), and the negative² attitudes of the colonial masters, has meant that in most cases it is difficult to trace the instances of modernism in African art. However, Hassan (2010:459) argues that "In places such as Egypt and the north of Africa, it is possible to trace instances of modernism in many aspects of art and society to as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century". In Egypt, during the early years of the nineteenth century, artists were inspired by the anti-colonialist and nationalist movement leaders. They looked to ancient Egyptian art in search of their new modern art practice (Hassan 2010:459). It therefore can be argued that the traces of modernism in African art were actually there, as has been evidenced in early Egyptian modern art.

Further, it can be pointed out that the Western claim that it was only Africans who appropriated Western styles of painting is questionable, because across Africa, even as early as the 1930s, African artists produced their own art without direct Western influence. Further, Western artists based in South Africa drew from African art. In the case of South Africa, some white artists were actually inspired by local African culture. John Peffer (2009:6); points out that “In South Africa, the terms defining the general character of Modernism were roughly the same as those in Europe, though the tendency was to respond to modernist principles by means of local historical conditions, as opposed to the presumption of universal relevance assumed by most European artists”. In South Africa at that time, most black artists were producing art under very difficult conditions because of apartheid. As a way of resisting the racist expectation by the white-dominated art world the black artists³ engaged in abstraction and used it as a tool for self-expression. To consolidate their modernist techniques, white South African artists turned to African culture for their inspiration, although, to validate their position as colonial masters, they also copied from European painting styles. According to Peffer (2009:9),

The colonial view of the “educated natives” was that they had “assimilated to” a European culture that was presumed to be universal. The corollary colonial notion that an “African essence” might be contaminated through the acquisition of too much knowledge of Western culture was further hardened into law under apartheid. Black artists who sought advanced art training for their own ends were continually frustrated under this contradictory system. And yet black artists in South Africa, and elsewhere on the continent, viewed the techniques of modernism as a skill set that could be acquired in order to build a relevant local culture that was modern, but not necessarily European.

The Western suggestion that African abstract art is derivative raises the question as to

² Because the colonial masters had political power and authority they had access to resources and controlled the art scene. Therefore, they decided what to document or not; as a result, not all important art works produced by Africans were properly documented.

The Western suggestion that African abstract art is derivative raises the question as to who exactly has claim on the authorship of Modernism and who decides what kind of art is modern and acceptable or is not. From an African perspective, this notion that the West is the originator and centre of Modernism has been rather difficult to accept and has become a point of contestation (Okeke 2013 b: 27). For centuries Africans have been engaged in various forms of abstraction, such as mural paintings by women throughout the African continent. African houses in rural areas were (and still are) decorated with representational and at times with abstract symbols and different motifs and designs which vary considerably (Harris 2001: 508). This practice demonstrates that, even before the introduction of Western Modernism, Africans were already engaging in abstraction, painting abstract symbols using earth colours and natural dyes from plants (Blier 2001:20). This practice was recreational and was also a way of reflecting the aesthetics of their respective societies, and was used to celebrate symbolic relations within their communities and to their ancestors (Blier 2001:19).

The problematic views of the Western authorities and their pursuit of colonialism influenced the early classification of African art into different cultural groupings (Harris 2001:22). Africa was divided into different categories, and arbitrary national borders were created and rigid notions of socio-linguistic groups were enforced. In terms of these Western categories, countries in North Africa and their people, who are within close proximity with Europe, were regarded as less 'African' and presumably more civilised than those, for example, in the southern part of Africa (Hassan 2008:131). This claim is problematic because, by virtue of the effects of colonialism, artists came into contact with art from Europe and from many other peoples and cultures across the globe, an experience that brought many dramatic social and cultural changes in their communities which impacted artistic work (Hassan 2008:132). In any case, the fact is equally unavoidable that, when people of different cultures live together or interact, the two or even more cultures connect to certain degree, as they mutually learn from each other.

³ This racist assumption was based on Apartheid's Bantu Education policy, which expected white artists to produce 'intellectual art' and black artists to produce 'craft'. It was the view of the colonial masters that, during the liberation struggle, black artists were expected to produce 'protest' art only rather than 'intellectual' or abstract art.

Therefore, it can be argued that, in order to understand the idea of African Modernism, it is helpful to consider the several trajectories that contributed to the invention of African cultures which have been riddled with artificial divides. According to Hassan (2008:132), “The classical division into North and sub-Saharan Africa has proven to be misleading and simply unhelpful”. He points out that this notion is very misleading, because how can one prove that Morocco is more African, for example, than Nigeria or that Egyptians are more civilised than South Africans? He further points out that the easy way to understand African art and its culture is only in light of the historical relationship between all African cultures, not by dividing Africa into categories (Hassan 2008:132). Further, Hassan (2008:132) argues that:

Historical or contemporary evidence has proven beyond doubt that such divides are false. Realities of both sides of these divides are hybrid and mixed, and, for the most part, are produced through the mobility of people, goods, commodities and cultural products. Yet such dichotomies not only continue to prevail in the West, they have also been internalized by many people of both sides of these artificial divides within Africa. Many North Africans refer to the rest of the continent as “Africa.” On the other side, many West Africans refer to North Africa as “Arab”.

The documentation of African art by the West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was negative and in most cases poor (Hassan 2008:133), therefore not all important contributions of the first-generation pioneers of African modern art, nor the developments which took place during the late nineteenth and twentieth century, were properly documented (Nicodemus 2013:18). This omission could lead to the assumption that there were no modern artistic activities or discourses in Africa, and hence Africa did not need history in that regard. Hassan (2008:133) observes that “the colonial and orientalist trajectories have contributed to the production of a racialized hierarchy of African people and their cultures”. However, it can be pointed out that Africa was never the changeless continent Western explorers and colonisers depicted. It can thus be argued that Africa as the “heart of darkness”, an isolated continent, is a Eurocentric myth.

Nicodemus (2013:18) argues that:

Western anthropologists and ethnological Africanists, who long functioned as the dominant authorities on African cultures, preferred to treat African cultures as if they existed in an unchangeable 'present past', preserving some mythical primeval origin.

It is a simplistic suggestion on the part of the West to suggest that Africans only engaged in abstraction after the introduction of Western education (Okeke 2013 b: 27). Most African artists' work was subjected to criticism because they produced work which was different from the Western model (Okeke 2013 b: 27). However, that did not deter them from producing new art which was modern but not Western (Okeke 2013 b: 29). Although at that time there were few African artists who were engaged in abstraction, their work attracted a lot of debate later in colonial artistic discourse (Blier 2001:16). Because most of African modern art history was not documented properly, very few early pioneers of African modern art were included in the discourse of African Modernism. Hassan (2008:134) points out that "In between Pan-Africanism and Afro-centrism lay a trajectory of individuals' contributions to the analysis of Africa, the idea of Africa and its historical and contemporary manifestations".

From the outset, the colonial masters did not recognise the importance of African art, and as a result art education was introduced to Africans very late in the twentieth century once most countries in Africa started fighting for independence (Okeke 2013b:28). The urge to engage in abstraction during this time of struggle for liberation was seen as one of the tools for self-expression and also as a sign of resistance to the colonial imperial culture (Okeke 2013b: 29). Enwezor (2008:111) believes that "the changes in the historical consciousness and political relationships organized by the radical politics of decolonization and anti-imperialism have had a productive effect on the formations of contemporary artistic spheres". Enwezor points out that, despite the effects of colonialism, most African artists were forced to invent new painting techniques and became even more creative, as is evidenced in the different modern works they produced across all the countries in the African continent during and after the struggle for independence. One example is Malangatana Ngwenya, born in Mozambique in 1936, who died in 2011. Malangatana's work consists mostly of semi-abstract figures symbolising the ugliness of human savagery. Most of his large abstract

paintings depict dramatic scenes of the suffering of his people during the struggle for independence. Because of their different historical experiences, African artists produced contemporary images which reflected their African modern ideology and identity (Okeke 2013 b: 29).



Fig.3. Malangatana's *Untitled* (1961), Oil on Masonite, 460cm x276cm, Gallery of African Art, London. (Reproduction taken from photo: Gallery of African Art, London colour plate 3.)

The Western stereotypical view of African Modern Art has been a source of debate among many African intellectuals such as Araeen (2010:281), Nicodemus (2013), Enwezor (2008), Okeke (2013b: 27) and Hassan (2008). Colonialism and the coming of Christianity brought many Western influences to Africans with regard to modern art, and it is because of this that African artists have taken so many different approaches in the way they have developed their modern art (Okeke 2013b:28). One example is Ben Enwonwu, a Nigerian artist born in 1921 who started producing art when he was 17 years old, and, although he later went to study art in England, when he returned to Nigeria his work was still influenced by Igbo aesthetics and philosophy. Therefore the perceived Western notion that, before this colonial education, Africans did not have the ability to create

their own art and that their work was merely intuitive⁴, is false. This attitude implies that African artists lacked the ability to create 'high' intellectual works of art, meaning chiefly abstract art, which at that stage in the early twentieth century was perceived a preserve of Western Modernism (Okeke 2013b:27).

It can be argued, however, that most of what was considered as education for Africans during the colonial days was intended to teach the 'natives' (as they were called then) skills in the field of administration. According to Araeen (2010:278), "The success of the colonial regime depended not only on violence but also on liberal means by which it successfully enticed the natives to participate in its consolidation and administration". It is important to point out that, during the colonial period, education for Africans was tailored to help them become clerks. Most of those who were educated in this modern colonial system went on to assist in colonial administration and, by implication, helped to foster imperial culture (Araeen 2010:278).

1.2. AFRICAN MODERNISM

This section provides a brief history of African Modernism and the major authors who have written about African Modernism, and it discusses critical issues relating to Western Modernism. The most contentious and important point is the origin of Western Modernism and the debate on how African Modernism relates to it. From the Western perspective, there is a notion that African abstract art cannot be African and that African abstract art is a mere copy of Western Modernism (Okeke 2013b: 29). In the past decades, scholars have questioned the historical accounts which represent Europe as the originator of Modernism, and suggest that the art produced by the rest of the world is inauthentic and peripheral. To define what African Modernism is, Hassan (2010:454) writes that:

⁴ African art is often referred to by the West as intuitive, which demonstrates the colonial attitude that artists in Africa should paint from their 'souls' and not their intellect. This racist remark suggests that artists in Africa paint almost like 'children'.

From the outset, two general points must be emphasized in relation to modernity and modernism: the plurality of modernity, even in its European context, and the realization that there are other modernisms beyond the European context. Even at the core of the history of art from the period referred to as modern in Europe there are disagreements about its boundaries, its validity, and its meaning. One point to remember is that modern practice, whether in European or other contexts, also signals a sense of continual difference, as a self-conscious process of refashioning the self and the projection of particular attitudes towards the past and the present.

The Western perspective of Modernism has largely been a linear one; it has not embraced the idea of multimodernism, and, further, it regards other Modernisms as inferior (Hassan 2010:452). Authors writing about African Modernism, such as Okeke, Hassan and Enwezor, question the problematic framing and construct of Africa as one defined entity (Hassan 2010:453), and suggest that Africa should not agree to one narrative about modernism, but should rather even embrace other contradicting narratives. Enwezor (2008), Okeke (2013 b), Hassan (2008) and Araeen (2010) argue that it is necessary to consider the idea of modern art as inherently pluralistic. They point out that, in spite of similarities, specific local conditions in these African countries and the effects of colonialism have caused modernism to take different forms in Africa.

Okeke (2013b: 30) argues that “the obvious implication is that African modern art does not propose a particular narrative of Modernism, as the triumphalist European version did. In Africa one can even speak of a range of Modernisms specific to the continent’s different countries”. Therefore the one-sided negative narrative of African Modernism presented by the West is unfounded.

Due to the fact that African Modernism has not been recognised from the Western perspective as being a legitimate part of the international art scene, the discussion about African Modernism and how it relates to other international artistic discourses (mainly Western Modernism) is very difficult (Okeke 2013b:27). One of the problems is the inadequate literature about the history of the early African artists and their contribution to the development of African Modernism (Okeke 2013 b: 27). This lack of an adequate history has frustrated the process of trying to understand the period designated as the beginning of Modernism in Africa in the context of the history of twentieth century modern art. Hassan (2008:130) argues that “By European standards,

the period we designate as modern in African terms is certainly much more recent as implied by the title of Okwui Enwezor's exhibition and book *The Short Century*".

However, what cannot be disputed is that slavery and colonialism played a big role in the formulation and development of African Modernism (Okeke 2013b: 29), therefore it can be argued that African art is a product of a historically complex entity and global experience (Hassan 2010:453). Okeke (2013b: 30) asks: "Given the . . . more dominant history of European Modernism, how can we discuss art from Africa, which has always been perceived as outside the modernist aesthetic?"

Discussions about modern art internationally tend to side with the Western view, which claims to be the originator of Modernism. However, African scholars such as Okeke (2013 b), Hassan (2010) and Enwezor (2008) have noted that, even from the Western perspective, discussions about modern art tend to heavily criticise and discredit art produced by Africans. Therefore, from the African perspective, globalisation has been received with suspicion and perceived as having indirectly supported the Western modernist notion of centre and periphery (Ogbechie 2010). Nicodemus (2013:21) argues that "The history of the continent, as well as the history of African art and its modern chapter, are stories containing within them multiple different stories, each with its own temporal trajectory and unique relations and exchanges with the outer world, predominantly with the West". What constitutes Africa is not one culture but several, which in most cases cross the boundaries of many countries across the African continent. The way literature about modern art has been framed means that in most cases it is biased towards Western artists. Ogbechie (2010:3) points out that:

. . . while it may appear as if globalization invalidates erstwhile modernist notions of centre and periphery, it is possible to argue that it actually reinforces these binaries since it essentially incorporates the peripheral (Africa in this instance) within the hegemonic narratives of the centre (the West) only insofar as African art conforms to Western prescriptions. Globalization has become a one-way flow that enforces locality on African artists by narrating their contemporary practice as a moribund context of cultural engagements while validating Western contemporary art as a universal rather than local context of production. It also participates in a relocation of African cultural patrimony to Western ownership by enhancing Western authority in defining the value of African cultural production.

Despite the stereotyping of African Modernism from the Western point of view, African

Modernism has evolved in the last five decades, as can be evidenced by the numerous exhibitions and publications that have been the focus of debates about diverse African artistic discourse which have emerged from this progress. One example of these exhibitions is *The Short Century*, curated by Okwui Enwezor, which mainly focused on works produced between 1945 and 1994. In that exhibition, the curator included some works of early pioneers of African Modernism, like Ernest Mancoba, and many more recent modern artists. Art works in these exhibitions clearly demonstrate the high caliber of African modern artists, and also show chronologically the development of African Modernism, which has been sidelined by the West. Another example of the exhibitions is *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*. Some countries with stronger economies in Africa, for example South Africa and Nigeria have seen a steady growth in contemporary art. Hassan (2010:462) argues that:

Above all, it is important to mention that these exhibitions have directly or indirectly transcended stereotypical representations of Africa prevalent in the discipline of Africa and the African diaspora art history and visual culture. These exhibitions challenge the artificial boundaries between North and sub-Saharan Africa, the so-called Arab Africa and black Africa, and stand in clear contrast to essentializing tendencies still prevalent in the field of African art and its scholarship. Contemporary African artists in the international arena have started to enjoy recognition, although it remains limited and relatively less than that accorded by their Western counterparts.

It can be argued that, although there have been numerous debates on African modern art and several art exhibitions and discussions by different authors who have disputed the Western perspective of African modern art, a lot of differences still exist. Therefore, the Western notion that abstraction was essentially a European development cannot go unchallenged without acknowledging the African contribution to the development of Modernism. In fact, one may even be excused for suggesting instead that it could be the Europeans who appropriated African abstract painting. It should be however, noted that in rational terms although Europe colonized the other countries it is possible that it also got exposed to the art of the rest of the world. As discussed in detail in Chapter Two, African artists were engaged in abstraction long before documentation of art produced by Africans started. African Modernism has been legitimised and has contributed to the development of African contemporary art.

CHAPTER TWO: ABSTRACTION

In this chapter I begin with a brief history of abstraction in Western art showing its relationship to abstraction in Africa. I then analyse the works of some African abstract artists in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and write about my own practice as an abstract painter.

2.1. INTRODUCTION TO ABSTRACT ART

According to Moszynska (1990:7),

Abstract art has frequently baffled many people, largely because it seems unrelated to the world of appearances. Like other forms of modernist art, it poses difficulties of understanding and judgment, and calls into question the very nature of art. In fact, abstract art exists in varying degrees and forms. Some abstract art is 'abstracted' from nature; its starting point is the 'real' world. Unlike portrait or landscape paintings, which are believed to represent the world, abstract painting apparently refers only to invisible, inner states or simply to itself. The evolution towards this kind of abstract art did not occur in isolation but was only one aspect of the social, intellectual and technological upheaval that took place at the turn of century.

As already discussed in Chapter One, around the late nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, European artists such as Picasso, Braque and Matisse abandoned their traditional ways of painting and looked elsewhere else for inspiration (Moszynska 1990:11). They thought that the representational paintings they had been producing and the process which accompanied that experience was too restrictive (Moszynska 1990:7). Industrialisation, new technological advances, and rapid transport and communication systems, together with social and intellectual changes that took place at the turn of the century, helped develop abstract art because artists also felt that it was time for them to part from the old ways of painting and create new styles (Moszynska 1990:7–8). At the same time, during the early twentieth century there were changes within painting itself, gradual developments that led to the formation of what is believed to be the first abstract work of art in the early twentieth century (Moszynska 1990:8). A good example is the water colour abstract painting by Kandinsky (1910) (mentioned in 1.1). Artists argued that, in

abstraction, their inner feelings were more important than the finished product and, if the feelings were genuine, the forms presented depended solely on the artist; they did not have to mean or resemble anything (Rookmaaker 1970:113).

Moszynska (1990:8) writes, “Eventually freed from the need to recreate external appearances, many artists turned to the depiction of more subjective, interior realities and emotions”. During the early twentieth century, as artists embraced change, abstract art introduced freedom in painting and encouraged experimentation, which enabled artists to produce works of art which simply referred to the works themselves (Walz 2008:9). Unlike artists before them, they were free of the traditional mode of painting, with its strong emphasis on perspective. Instead, they claimed that the structure of the painting, composition of different forms, colours and the effect of light on the subject matter was what was important in a painting (Rookmaaker 1970:114). Although this change was first noticeable in Russia, it was in Paris that an important theoretical basis for the new aesthetic emerged after the end of the Second World War as artists started to seek international collaboration (Brettell 1999:3). Abstract art contributed to the development of Modern Art and, according to the artists themselves, abstract art became unequivocally related to progress and change in the twentieth century (Brettell 1999:3).

The cubist paintings by Picasso (1881–1973) and Braque (1882–1963) were a major stimulus for future development in abstract art. Evidence of a change in style in their new work was their extreme fragmentation of form, which marked a fundamental break with the traditional modes of pictorial expression (Moszynska 1990:11). During the early part of the twentieth century, there was a great shift in painting techniques, as artists such as Picasso, Braque and Matisse engaged in abstraction and, most importantly, introduced new materials (Walz 2008:9) and new painting processes which contributed to the development of abstract art. The old traditional way of rendering paint to canvas gradually changed because, at that time, artists felt they had the freedom to paste other materials on to canvas, for example paper and plastic (Moszynska 1990:14). The new painting process was embraced by many artists because it allowed the freedom to experiment, not only with new painting styles, but also with different materials (Walz 2008:9).

2.2. THE IMPORTANCE OF ABSTRACT ART TO MODERNISM

This section examines the importance of abstract art to European Modernism. To provide a better understanding, I use examples of the artists and the works to which are attributed the development of abstract art and Modernism. At its inception in the early twentieth century, abstract art faced great resistance from critics and the public in general as it introduced a new and radical pictorial practice (Moszynska 1990:119). Because of this radical approach to painting, many critics saw abstract art as art which did not represent anything and, therefore, it was not taken seriously. However, it has become an accepted mode of representation, as Moszynska (1990:9) points out:

In fact, to many artists, the distinction between representational and abstract art now seems meaningless, because their work daily brings them face to face with the fact that in certain essential ways all art is abstract; and equally, all art is representational, in that it represents something if only an intention.

The development of modern art during much of the twentieth century had roots in abstract art (Kuspit 2000:63). As most countries became industrialised and art was simultaneously transformed, abstract art developed and signalled the new beginning which contributed to the development of Modernism (Rookmaaker 1970:111). The beginning of the twentieth century saw the rise of Cubism, which contributed greatly to the development of abstract art as it was the first movement in the early twentieth century to be referred to as abstract (Moszynska 1990:11). It was considered to be very radical, and it signalled a great change in the way paintings were composed (Brettell 1999:98).

A painting which illustrates the importance of abstraction to the development of modernism is *Violin and Pitcher* (1910) by the cubist Braque. There is a possibility that there were other abstract at that time but what was documented to be the first is *Violin and Pitcher*. The artist completely abandons the traditions of pictorial expression and introduces a new style. Instead of approaching a painting as a whole, the artist divides the painting into several visual elements of the subject matter and considers them separately as shape, tone, pattern, texture or form (Moszynska 1990:12). It is the process of isolating a part of the painting in order to consider it separately that is

referred to as 'abstract' (Moszynska 1990:12).

Abstract art contributed to Modernism because it allowed artists freedom to create new forms and opened new possibilities of composing a painting in a way that challenged the traditional notion that man was the measure of everything in the world, as most religious paintings suggested (Rookmaaker 1970:133). One example is that of Abstract Expressionism, which developed in America and was greatly developed by Jackson Pollock and de Kooning. Because of the Western influence of the freedom of artists to create new forms, Pollock introduced the new technique of painting in which paintings were painted 'abstractly' by dripping paint on canvas as it lay on the ground. According to the artists, what was important was not only the finished piece of work, but the process as well (Rookmaaker 1970:164). The other important contribution of abstraction to Modernism is its impact on Western art, as evidenced by the many artists around the world who have worked in abstraction and contributed to the development of the art movements which emerged in the twentieth century (Walz 2008:4). A good example of these art movements are Dada, Constructivism and Surrealism.

Abstract art contributed to the transformation of human consciousness and social well-being during the early years of the twentieth century, as artists looked to their inner selves for inspiration and creativity (Moszynska 1990:46). Abstract art also created an intellectual class among the artists, as those who were engaged in abstraction assumed a higher status in society which, in turn, increased the value of their work (Walz 2008:8). Walz (2008:9) maintains that "As a result, a high value is placed upon innovation and novelty, to make new art that transcends contemporary life and elevates the viewer, reader or audience above the mundane".

2.3. THE IMPORTANCE OF AFRICAN ABSTRACT ART TO MODERNISM

In Chapter One, I briefly introduced African abstract art and argued that it contributed to the development of Modernism (Araeen 2010:284). There is well-documented evidence of the rise of modern trends in Europe in the early twentieth century which contributed to the development of Modernism (Moszynska 1990:11). However, in Africa, describing and defining modernism comes with many challenges (Okeke 2013b: 28). Inadequate documentation of African art has led to the Western assumption that there were no Africans engaged in abstraction in the twentieth century (Nicodemus 2013:18). From the Western perspective, Africans were not able to produce abstract art because it was regarded as a very sophisticated style (Nicodemus 2013:17).

The Western view framed African artists as 'other,' and the art works produced by Africans were regarded as inferior to Western works (Araeen 2010:284). However, although few art works were documented, a number of African artists engaged in abstraction during the early twentieth century and some European artists were influenced by their abstract works (Rookmaaker 1970:113). For example, Picasso rendered form with a visual boldness that drew from African sculptures and masks. Further evidence of abstract art in the late nineteenth century can be seen in African sculpture, textiles, and paintings, for example in the portraits of Yoruba King Ile-Ife (Blier 2001:16). Okeke (2013 b: 29) writes, "Predictably, the first, clear, sustained modernist art in Africa appeared in Egypt, which experienced an early political independence and established a nationalist discourse before World War 1". For example, Egyptian Islamic art embraced Christian art traditions, which emphasised the formulation and creative vibrancy of Islam and Christianity in Africa (Blier 2001:23).

However, it was not until the end of the Second World War and the rise in the struggle for independence in many African countries that the production of modern art became a regular part of African culture (Okeke 2013b:28-29). Because the continent of Africa is so huge, the history of African artistic creativity cannot be traced in one culture or in individual contributions because of the diversity of art traditions which spanned Africa during the late nineteenth century. Harris (2001:508) writes that "Africa became a part of the cultural imagination of artists in the late 1920s and 1930s". However, although

Africa caught the imagination of artists, it was also, from the Western perspective, “. . . a place of separate (and fixed) ‘tribal’ entities which lacked sophisticated political and economic institutions as well as authority” (Blier 2001:21). Blier (2001:19) argues that this was simply not true:

Great inland centres, such as Zimbabwe and Ile-Ife, were flourishing at that time and have left behind striking evidence of the aesthetic and cultural complexity of powerful indigenous political systems.

The major contribution of African abstract art to Modernism was that it attracted and influenced Western Modernism (Rookmaaker 1970:113), changing Western artists’ depiction of form in their pictorial expression, and later contributing to the development of contemporary art. African abstract art laid great emphasis on simplicity of form in its work. What evolved as Western Modernism in the twentieth century had some roots in African abstract art (Rookmaaker 1970:113). European artists who were inspired by African masks and sculptures were attracted by the way the Africans rendered their form and by their visual boldness. Through its diverse cultures and varied artistry, African abstract art contributed to the turning point in the art of the twentieth century (Waltz 2008:4). What triggered the major change in Western Modernism was the uniqueness of the African approach to painting, where the artists stylised and simplified features of their subject matter in such a way that the artwork attracted the viewers’ attention (Blier 2001:16).

The other important contribution of African abstract art to modernism is that it not only signalled the change in painting technique and style, but also defined African modern art and contributed to the development of contemporary art (Blier 2001:19). African abstract work emphasised visual boldness and, because most of it was forceful in its visual impact, it attracted European interest at the beginning of the twentieth century (Blier 2001:16). African abstract art contributed to the growth of modern art as artists of the African diaspora engaged in abstraction as early as the 1920s and 1930s and carried its influence to many parts of the world (Harris, 2001:508).

2.4. AFRICAN ABSTRACT ART DURING THE LATE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURY

It is incorrect to suggest that there was a single African abstract art during the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries because artworks produced across the continent at that time clearly show the diversity of African cultures (Harris 2001:508). Therefore, it is not possible to refer to a singular Modernism in Africa, as each region had and still has its own artistic practices. For that reason, Africa can claim that its art presents many different 'Africas', characterised by its multiplicity of meanings and intellectual complexity (Blier 2001:19). Nicodemus (2013:20) argues that "Despite the unity ascribed to Africa by the West and Africa's relation with the West, in the end it is questionable if one can talk of 'African' modern art or even about 'Africa' as a defined entity". There is similarly no one Europe or one European art.

Therefore, to offer a much better understanding, this section provides examples of some of the major African artists whose abstract works have been documented (Nicodemus 2013:18). From the African perspective, these are the abstract paintings which contributed to the development of modernism (Nicodemus 2013:18) and are among the few which were documented, as discussed in Chapter One, from the Western perspective, because African abstract art was viewed as simply intuitive, and therefore not of much worth (Blier 2001:22).

Despite the poor documentation of the works of African artists in the late nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth century, works of the artists discussed below demonstrate that African artists were already engaged in abstraction during that period (Rookmaaker 1970:113). In addition to Mancoba's achievement, there are many other pioneers of African modernism who were not recognised by the West, for example, Skunder Boghossian, Ibrahim El-Salahi, and Ben Enwonwu. One could argue that racism played a role in this blind spot as African artists were clearly 'othered'. Hassan (2010:452), however, argues that:

Their [African artists'] intellectual production is essential to any reconsideration of what constitutes global modernity as it overlaps with that of their contemporary European counterparts, and their intellectual and cultural production can in no way be analysed as merely reactive assertions of separate native or colonized subjectivity.

A case in point is Skunder Boghossian, who was born in Ethiopia in 1937 and died in Washington D.C. in 2003. He first studied art at a local school in Addis Abba, and in 1955 left for London where he studied at the Slade School of Fine Art. After his studies in England, he left for Paris where he met Klee, Braque and Diop, who later influenced his work. However, his abstract paintings were based on themes of black images and the diversity of blackness. Although he only returned to work in Ethiopia for three years, his abstract paintings influenced a number of artists in his native country and he was regarded as modern, and progressive. His work has influenced artists both in Africa and in America where he taught art (Visona 2001:77).



Fig. 4. Skunder Boghossian, *The Ceremony*, (1989). Monoprint. 32cm x 19 cm (Reproduction taken from www.pinterest.com 299 x 450, colour plate 4.)

Born in 1930 in Omdurman in Sudan, Ibrahim El-Salahi left Sudan for London in the 1950s where he too studied at the Slade School of Fine Art. His abstract paintings have been described as African and Arab, and his themes mostly reflect his joy for life and his deep spiritual faith. He infused his Western influence with traditional Sudanese Islamic art practice and formed a style known as the Khartoum School. In 1957 he returned to Sudan from England, after which his painting style changed as he incorporated strong Arabic influences which, in turn, influenced many Sudanese artists who combined Arabic calligraphy and 'pan-African' styles and themes during

the 1960s and 1970s. His new style of abstract painting was regarded as having African roots (Visona 2001:76). El-Salahi's art became popular and it has been credited with contributing to the development of Modernism in Africa. Hassan (2013:1) writes that:

One of the most significant figures in African and Arab Modernism, Ibrahim El-Salahi's ground-breaking work established a new visual vocabulary in Sudan, which arose from his own pioneering integration of Islamic, African, Arab and Western artistic traditions. His unique style transcends geographic and cultural boundaries and has inspired artists in Sudan and elsewhere in Africa for generations. El-Salahi's art offers profound possibilities for understanding African and Arab modernisms and repositioning them within the context of a broader, global modernity.



Fig. 5. Ibrahim El-Salahi, *Vision of the Tomb*, (1965). 84 cm x 52 cm. (Reproduction taken from www.pinterest.com 451 x 450, colour plate 5.)

Another example of an artist engaged in abstraction during this period is Ben Enwonwu, a Nigerian artist born in 1921. He started producing art when he was 17 years old.

Although he later went on to study art in England, when he returned to Nigeria his abstract work was still influenced by Igbo aesthetics and philosophy. In fact, the ideas, motifs and rituals that originated at Igbo Ukwu a thousand years ago were still present in twentieth century Igbo art and life (Cole 2001:278). Enwonwu was a Pan- Africanist who greatly admired the development of African art and, with a firm belief in himself, he refused to be influenced by European artists (Kwekudee 2013). The themes of his work reflected scenes of the everyday lives of his people in Nigeria both before and after independence. He refused to accept an inferior position for his art in the world (Kwekudee 2013) and maintained that the works of European artists like Picasso and Braque, who were influenced by African sculptures and masks, (Rookmaaker 1970:113) could not have influenced him because they had earlier copied from the African ancestors. His work, which included official commissions, the most notable being that of the statue of Queen Elizabeth II, which now stands at the entrance of the Parliament Buildings in Lagos, has been recognised and collected in Nigeria and abroad. Enwonwu wrote in 1950:

Art is not static, like culture. Art changes its form with the times. It is setting the clock back to expect that the art form of Africa today must resemble that of yesterday otherwise the former will not reflect the African image. African art has always, even long before Western influence, continued to evolve through change and adaptation to new circumstances. And in like manner, the African view of art has followed the trend of cultural change up to the modern times.



Fig.6. Ben Enwonwu, *Crucified Gods* (1967-8).Oil on canvas, (Reproduction taken from nigerianartdiglibrary.wordpress. 481 x 600, colour plate 6.)

The following section provides a brief background to my own abstract paintings, and what informs my work. I also discuss my painting process.

2.5. CONTEXT OF MY PRACTICE

In Lusaka, Zambia, which is my own context of art practice, very few artists produce abstract paintings, and abstraction is often viewed as a 'foreign' mode of working. However, my painting style, which is abstract, gives me the opportunity to connect with the freedom I seek as a painter. Other traditional methods like representational art are in my view restrictive and too controlled. Working in abstraction has enabled me to engage, through practice, with abstraction's relative absence in Zambia.

The background to my practice is my concern with the despoiling of the Zambian landscape by the copper mines. Zambia's economy largely depends on copper, which was mined as early as the 1950s in the Copperbelt and recently also in the 1990s in the North-Western Province of the country. The mining of copper and other minerals has brought significant economic benefits to the nation and has largely helped to improve the living standards of the people as, through taxes from the proceeds of copper, the government has improved public infrastructure and services. However, the benefits from mining copper have come at a cost to the environment because the process of mining has caused a lot of damage to the landscape and, in some cases, encouraged deforestation and pollution. Although mines are one of the strong subtexts of my work, other related themes such as colonial greed, African greed, and personal experience inform my work.

In life, nothing is permanent. Most situations are temporary, and from this I developed the notion of 'time in between' the beginning and the ending, the young and the aged, and the new and the old. In my painting practice I break down these dichotomies, questioning how abstraction engages with the relative notion of time and how this links to processes of ageing and decaying in life. I consider the influence of time as I observe nature, including the unique aspects of the weather and how it affects our life-span. Before the mining of copper, the Zambian landscape was relatively natural and undisturbed. Although nature changes naturally with the passage of time, the rate at which it is changing now is very fast because of the destruction of the landscape, mostly through mining. In my body of work I have painted various stages of ageing, living and dying in creatures and in plants, and the decay of objects and materials. Through these paintings I am constantly reminded of my past personal experiences and, most importantly, how time affects objects and materials around us and how they are transformed as they lose colour and form.

2.6. PAINTING PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY

There is a somewhat chaotic approach to my painting process even though at times I attempt to reflect the beauty of order and simplicity. I start my paintings with the background colour, which I refer to as the controlling mood of the painting. Acrylic

paint⁵ is my preferred medium over oil paint because it dries fast, allowing me the chance to correct the 'mistakes' and make any other changes to the painting. Sometimes I produce preparatory sketches, although my experience when the painting process begins tends to dictate its own direction. I treat my paintings as a process of creation and investigation, producing seemingly random splashes of paint, and it is difficult to predict how the painting will finish, if at all.

I see these paintings as a partnership between design and colour because of the nature of layers and shapes produced during the painting process. To achieve the translucent effect in my paintings, and also to create depth and character, I always apply thin layers of different colours one after another. This process takes a lot of time, even longer when it rains and the humidity slows down the drying process. To avoid painting wet on wet, a layer is only applied when the previous one has dried, otherwise the finished work loses its brilliance and looks muddy. My palette is usually bright and I struggle to tone down the colours in my paintings.

⁵ I find acrylic paint to be flexible and user friendly because it is water-based and cheaper and dries faster than oil paint; instead of using expensive turpentine I use water as medium.

A good example of my bright palette can be seen in the painting below, titled *Earthly Origins* (Fig.7). The process of producing this painting was slow because of my painting technique where a layer is only applied when the first one has dried. Because the paint is normally thick, the time between the painting process and the time when each layer dries is long. In the period between when the paint is wet and when it dries, it is difficult to know clearly what the intensity of the colour will be, as most the colours tend to change when they dry.

Earthly Origins (Fig. 7) recalls the smelting process of copper ore and also demonstrates the bright palette which is usually so difficult to control when the paints are wet. When the paints were wet, the yellow and orange in the middle of the painting were initially not as bright as they turned out to be after drying. The time and energy spent to finally produce copper and, most significantly, the damage to the environment and landscape caused by the mining process, in the long run leads one to argue that the damage outweighs the benefits.

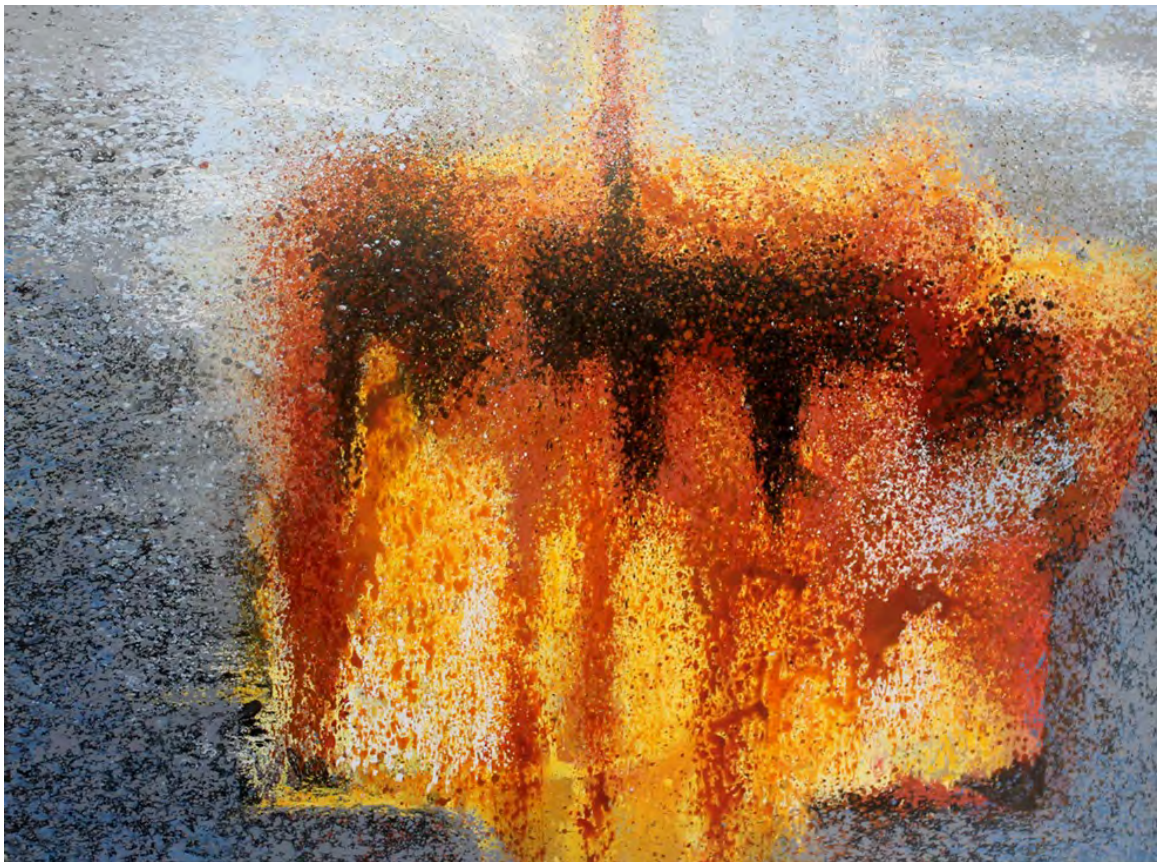


Fig.7. Patrick Mumba, *Earthly Origins*, (2014). Acrylic on canvas. 130 cm x 168 cm

In this painting the middle part that is yellow and orange alludes to the actual fire and the middle patches of dark brown at the top suggest the burning copper ore. The painting is surrounded with grey and dark blue: the fumes coming from the smelting copper. The time in between the process of smelting copper ore and the production of actual copper is long, therefore the damage caused to the environment is immense. Although in the time between the 1960s and 1970s the proceeds from copper brought wealth and modernised the living standards of most Zambians, especially those who worked in the mines, one can also argue that the damage to the Zambian environment and landscape in that boom period was immeasurable.

Memories of Mpatamatu (Fig.8) refers to a township in the mining town of Luanshya in Zambia. From the early sixties, when the mines were operated by the Anglo American Corporation, this town flourished and produced a lot of copper. After independence in 1964, the Zambian Government nationalised the mines and took over their operation, but poor management failed to run the mines at a profit. The situation did not improve, and later, in the seventies and eighties, gradually some mines were closed and most people who worked there or whose businesses depended on the mines were out of employment. Some people relocated to other towns and those that remained had to find alternative means of survival.

Most of the buildings, which housed a number of different shops and businesses during the boom years, were empty and the town looked deserted. As you walked through the township, you were vividly confronted by the decay of the place: most of the buildings had never seen a coat of paint since they were first built. Metal columns of the shafts at the mines were terribly rusted and made the place look dead. Aspirations to modernity and human greed, coupled with poor mining policy, will lead to further environmental decay and disaster in the future if proper measures are not put in place. The township surroundings, which once looked beautiful and green, gradually changed and looked very dry and deserted, making the poverty of the place clear. Those who failed to relocate resorted to selling charcoal and firewood. The process of making charcoal also despoils the landscape and causes soil erosion. As one drives through the

outskirts of this township, smoke from the burning charcoal is clear in the sky. In the painting *Memories of Mpatamatu*, (Fig.8) I have used dull colours for the background to give the painting the feeling of despair befitting the current situation in that township. Although the general mood of the painting is dull, the painting has energy and the dark patches of black across the canvas work as the main frame of the painting, creating the balance and wholeness. This painting can be described in three parts: the top layers of overlapping marks of grey and purple create individual moments of expression and the feeling of smoke in the sky. The left side of the painting is rendered in a grey colour which graduates into a burnt umber, creating the effect of rust and decay of most of the abandoned columns of the shafts at the mine.



Fig. 8. Patrick Mumba, *Memories of Mpatamatu*, (2014). Acrylic on canvas, 145 cm x 150 cm

The right bottom part of the painting has a lightness that has been maintained, despite the thickness of the patches and layers of paint. Sunrise signifies hope at the break of a new day and new possibilities. This corner of the painting is covered with light and bright colours representing life and hope. On the top of

this lower right-hand corner of the painting is a broken black circle, representing the government rumours going round town about the promises to open the mine in Mpatamatu. The patches of lighter green and yellow ochre represent the deforested landscape, with the dark brown marks on the right of the painting representing the burnt wood and pollution caused by charcoal burning. Currently the government has neither the plans nor the capacity to revamp the mine in Mpatamatu, but hopes that some investor will come to resuscitate the mines. In the meantime, the general population in the township carry on with their indiscriminate cutting and burning of trees for their survival, with little or no concern or respect for the conservation of the forest.

The Inheritance (Fig. 9), refers to the rusted metals of plant equipment at the old abandoned mine which in the early sixties and mid-seventies were in good condition but, with the passage of time, have become old and rusted. The painting *The Inheritance* (Fig.9) recalls part of an old car body which, in the early seventies, was a new car. During the mid-sixties and seventies, a car was a symbol of status and black people who owned cars were regarded as enjoying modern life. Before independence, most black people lived in rural areas but, in the period between the mid-sixties and early eighties, they flocked to the Copperbelt in search of modern life, although not everyone got jobs so, for some, the prospects of finding modern life in the Copperbelt was a myth (Sardanis 2014). Those who worked in the mines, and who owned a car, possibly a black and white television set and had a flush toilet, were regarded as living a modern life. However, with the passage of time, most of their cars became very old and rusted, to the point where it is difficult to determine the original colour of some of the body parts. Most of these miners have since passed on and those who are still alive are in their old age. In the painting, the dark brown patches represent rusted areas of the car part and the black patches represent the much rusted parts, which look like ashes, making it difficult to identify the original colour. In the right hand corner there are patches of light yellow and grey; they look lighter after many years of constant burning by the sun and the effects of rain. The top and left side of the painting is coated with faded light blue, which has lost its brilliance because of the effects of the sun and rain over the passage of time.



Fig. 9. Patrick Mumba, *The Inheritance*, (2014). Acrylic on canvas, 140 cm x 160 cm

The painting below (Fig. 10), titled *Back and Forth*, represents an area at the rubbish dump site where everyday materials and left-over foodstuffs that are no longer needed are finally dumped. The period in between the mid- sixties and seventies saw the rise of improved living standards for black Zambians, especially those who worked in the mines on the Copperbelt. This meant that a number of black Zambians had access to what was classified as modern life. Instead of living on the land in rural areas, they were able to purchase their food and other goods they needed from shops. However, as is always the case if something is new, with the passage of time it will get old and possibly be discarded because it might have lost its worth, and will end up at the dump site. In the painting *Back and Forth*,(Fig.10)most of the materials which were new at some point have become old and, because of the effects of water, they have eventually decomposed. In the painting, the patches of blue in the middle and left hand part represent water. The red and yellow patches in the painting represent plastics which,

while most of the objects have lost form and colour due to the effects of water and the sun, have maintained their form and colour because of their properties. The five brown patches at the bottom of the painting represent carton boxes which, because of the effect of water, have lost form. The black patches at the bottom of the painting and patches of light and dark purple represent objects which have decayed and have completely lost form and colour.

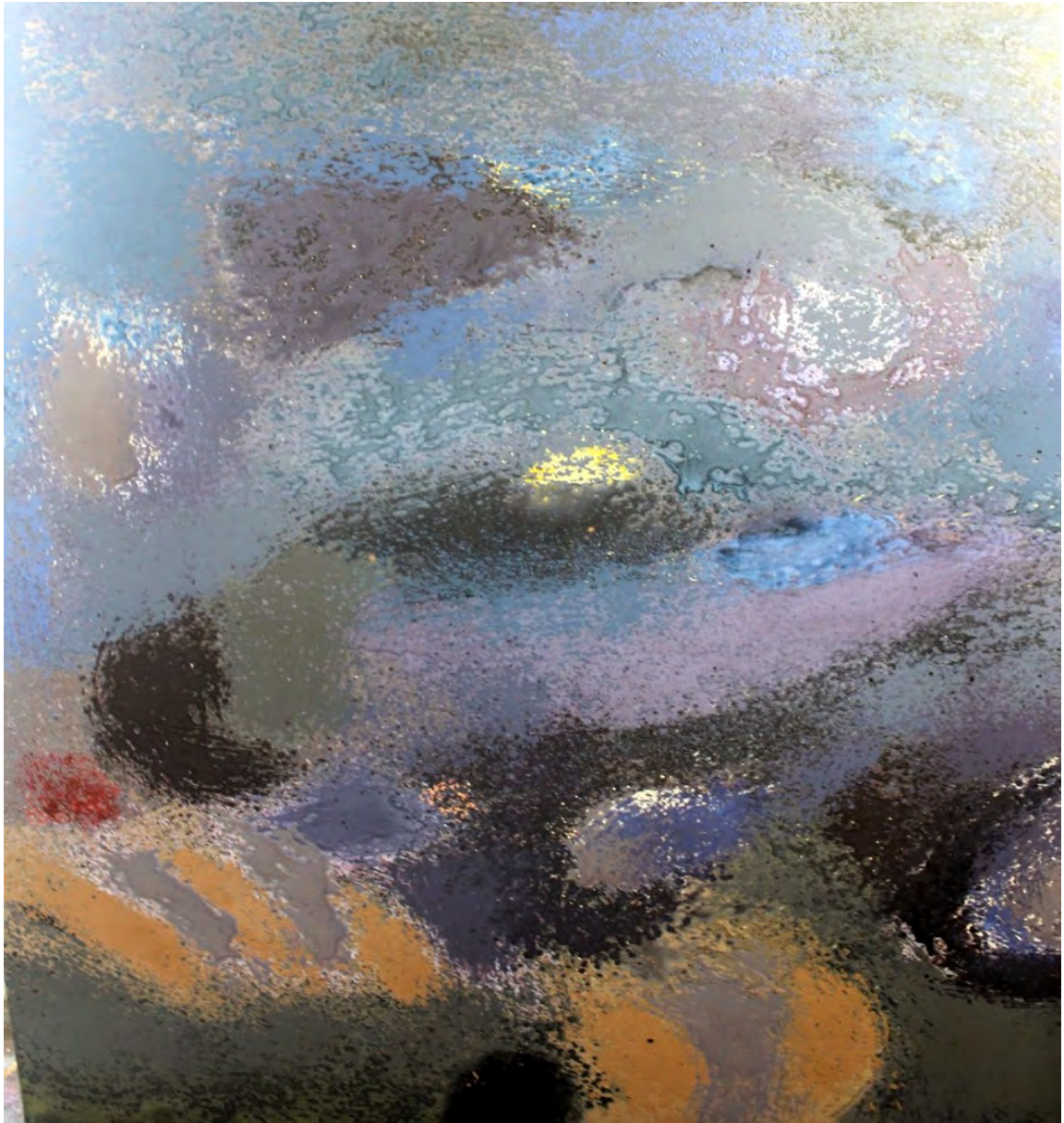


Fig. 10. Patrick Mumba, *Back and Forth*, (2015). Acrylic on canvas, 140 cm x 180 cm

As discussed in the preceding page, my abstract work is largely informed by mines, the landscape in the Copperbelt and themes such as colonial greed, and African greed, and I cannot say that I have been directly influenced by Western artists. Although I use so-called

Western art materials to produce my work, my abstract paintings are produced with abstract style and ideas with an African anchor. My abstract paintings are rooted in the African everyday life and my warm palette is also synonymous with the warm weather in the Southern and Central parts of Africa, and Zambia in particular. My abstract paintings are, therefore, not simply a copy of Western abstract art. Because my abstract style and ideas are not cast in iron, therefore, they cannot remain static, but with the passage of time will inevitably adapt and move forward. The Western stereotypical view of African modern art as one defined entity is problematic because, as an example, my abstract paintings are completely different to those of Ernest Mancoba in terms of content and composition. This is despite the fact that these abstract works of art have been produced by African artists. Therefore, in Africa, it is impossible to refer to one modernism, as each region had and still has its own artistic practices. It is also important to recognise that there is no singular definition of what it means to be 'African' and how the 'African-ness' can be detected in the work of art (Blier 2001:19). Nicodemus (2013:20) argues that "Despite the unity ascribed to Africa by the West and Africa's relation with the West, in the end it is questionable if one can talk of 'African' modern art or even about 'Africa' as a defined entity. It is important to stop pigeon-holing artists and their work; artists should be recognised by their work and not necessarily by 'race', region or perceived identity. My next chapter provides a detailed analysis of abstract paintings by Henry Tayali (1943–1987), who painted from the early sixties to the time of his death in 1987. The period during which he produced his abstract paintings coincides with the boom period in the mining industry in Zambia, a time classified as the beginning of modernity in Zambia.

CHAPTER THREE: ABSTRACTION IN ZAMBIA

3.1. ZAMBIAN ABSTRACT ART

This chapter provides a brief history of the development of abstract art in Zambia and analyses the abstract paintings of the late Henry Tayali who, in the Zambian context, has been the most prominent abstract artist. In Lusaka, Zambia, which is my own context of art practice, very few artists produce abstract paintings, and abstraction is often problematically viewed as a 'foreign' mode of working (Simbao 2004:124). To offer a better understanding about abstract art in Zambia, I have provided a brief history about the development of modern art and abstract painting in Zambia, in particular from the early twentieth century. Abstraction is very rare in the contemporary Zambian art scene (Simbao 2004:124).

In the first part of the twentieth century in Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia⁶), there were virtually no painters in the European tradition because, during that time, most Africans were unable to access modern paints (Ellison 2004:12). Producing paintings with modern materials in the 1920s and 1930s was mostly practised by artists of European descent living in Northern Rhodesia because they had access to the materials (Ellison 2004:12). African artists were more involved in sculpture because materials, mostly wood, were readily available throughout the country (Ellison 2004:12). Those Africans who ventured into painting and were unable to access oils were forced to use earth colours and natural dyes. However, African artists preferred using European materials, which proved more useful and made it easier for them to express their African situation (Ellison 2004:12).

⁶ In 1964 the people of Northern Rhodesia gained independence from Britain and the country's name changed to Zambia.

During the Second World War, some Europeans fled war-torn Europe for Africa, one of whom was Max Piron in 1940, the first European artist to arrive in Zambia (Ellison 2004:12). Whilst in the country, he taught art to some Zambians and later, when the war ended, he migrated to Barcelona in Spain, where he established himself as a reputable artist (Ellison 2004:12). What is important to point out is that, during the war years, a few more European artists arrived in the country, for example, Italian prisoners of war, and their European influence contributed greatly to the growth of the art scene (Ellison 2004:14), opening up local painters' horizons by introducing new ideas and painting techniques to the local scene (Ellison 2004:14). Most Zambian artists painted scenes depicting the life of ordinary people in their communities and, at that stage, their work was largely representational (Ellison 2004:47). As the number of Europeans in the country increased and the interest in art grew, it was introduced as a subject in the Government and European schools, but later, because of poor results and an apparent lack of commitment on the part of the learners, it was regarded as unimportant (Ellison 2004:14). Art was generally regarded as the activity of white people, so most parents encouraged their children to concentrate on other subjects which assured them jobs (Zukas 2014).

However, during the 1940s and 1950s artistic practices increased, although they were mostly concentrated in towns and were influenced by outsiders, notably in painting (Ellison 2004:17). As mentioned before, although some Zambian artists participated in painting, most of them were more comfortable with sculpture (Ellison 2004:17). In 1947, most of those practising artists in Lusaka came together and formed the Lusaka Art Society, whose purpose was to promote the artistic activities in their communities during the 1940s and 1950s (Ellison 2004:17). The Lusaka Art Society did not last long, and was dominated by artists mostly of European descent; very few local artists participated, and later it died a natural death in 1965 (Kausa 2009:3).

3.2. AFTER INDEPENDENCE

The documented history of Zambian contemporary art spans a period of five decades. The earliest paintings done by the first African painters in Zambia come mostly from the Congo, which at that time was constantly at war (Kausa 2009:3). These were artists such as Dongola and Master Diouf, who also made craft pieces, copperware and sculptures

and who settled in Bulangililo and Twapia Townships in Kitwe and Ndola on the Copperbelt respectively (Kausa 2009:3). Kausa (2009:3) writes that “In those days Zambian artists exhibited their art works in council libraries and any other public and private spaces”. Although the Congolese style of painting of that period was characterised by the use of the palette knife and highly stylised images, it started influencing a number of Zambian artists, mostly those on the Copperbelt.

The Lusaka Art Society was revived in 1967 as the Art Centre Foundation after the country had gained its independence from Great Britain in 1964. Some of the prominent artists who served as members of the organising committee for the Lusaka Arts Society included Henry Tayali, Cynthia Zukas, Bert Witkamp, Gabriel Ellison and Bente Lorenz (Kausa 2009:3). These artists produced mostly paintings and prints from the prefabricated buildings behind Evelyn Hone College, which they used as studios (Kausa 2009:3). The common themes of most of the artwork produced by members of the committee and other local artists at that time were scenes of day-to-day life, while artists of European descent painted mostly landscapes and sunsets. Henry Tayali was the only black Zambian artist on this organising committee, and his paintings were dominated by scenes of the suffering of the ordinary people in society (Kausa 2009:3). In 1973, Department of Art and Design was established at the Evelyn Hone College⁷, and the Government designed a programme to train students in art and design (Kausa 2009:3). The graduates who obtained certificates in art and design later worked as graphic artists and served in Government ministries, although most of them joined industry, which offered attractive working conditions (Kausa 2009:3).

The Zambian art scene is relatively small and the situation of the visual arts can be described as an ongoing project. There are very few art galleries to support artists; most exhibitions are hosted in wealthy people’s homes, often expatriates and diplomats who are not trained as artists or curators. Generally speaking, most Zambian artists are self-taught, although some are college trained and a few have a university education, mostly obtained from European universities and the privately-owned Zambian Open University (Kausa 2004:3). The government has failed to establish a school of fine art at university level, and as such most of the training in art is informal, which, coupled with inadequate infrastructure for the production and display of art works, has made the development of

visual art rather slow.

In 2004, two Zambian artists based in Europe, Anawana Haloba and Kalinosi Mutale, held an exhibition titled *Konse Kubili*, which means “Both Sides”, at the Henry Tayali Art Centre. Mutale produced abstract, ephemeral works drawing directly onto the gallery walls. The use of abstraction and ephemerality challenged local viewers, who tended to brush this work aside as being ‘un-Zambian’ (Simbao 2004:124). The situation is worsened by the major buyers, the expatriates and tourists who, after bargaining for the lowest prices, also tend to dictate what Zambian art should look like. Some of these foreign collectors do not expect a Zambian artist to produce a sophisticated painting, so the works of the few artists producing abstract paintings are labelled as unoriginal. Most of the buyers who think a work should be realistic, and if possible figurative, have also voiced their negative comments and concern about the ‘un-African-ness’ in Zambian abstract art (Simbao 2004:124).

In 1979, the Mpapa Gallery was established as a privately-owned exhibition space. Before this time, the Lusaka-based artists exhibited their art and craft along the roadside, and those who were acceptable exhibited their art at the Anglo-American Building (Kausa 2009:3). In fact, some of these roadside display centres still exist today, notably the one at Twapia Township on the Kitwe-Ndola road. Zambian artists have produced contemporary artworks that are not only of aesthetic value, but also are historical records of the many different situations the country has witnessed, ranging from the good economic days when the copper mines were at their peak in the sixties, to when the economy collapsed in the early eighties and, most importantly, to the current period with the advent of HIV/AIDS (Kausa 2004:3).

⁷ I am currently the Head of the Education Department at Evelyn Hone College, which is mandated to train Secondary School Art and Music Teachers in Zambia.

3.3. HENRY TAYALI

3.3.1. BRIEF BACKGROUND

Henry Nkole Tayali (1943–1987) is widely considered the most established and well-known abstract artist of his generation and in the history of Zambian modern art in general. He was born in Serenje, in Central Province of Zambia, and his interest in art was spotted at a young age. Tayali attended secondary school in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia), where his parents were working at the coal mine (Sardanis 2014)⁸.

Soon after Zambia became independent in 1964, Tayali returned to Zambia and, shortly after, he was offered a government grant to study for his first degree in Fine Art at Makerere University in Uganda from 1967 to 1971. When he graduated, he joined the University of Zambia as a lecturer and resident artist. Later, from 1973 to 1975, he attended the Kunstakademie in Dusseldorf, West Germany, where he graduated with an MA in Art Skills (Zukas 2014). Although he was a very educated artist who trained in the West, he did not simply copy from Western artists, but developed a sophisticated abstract manner and maintained an ‘African touch’ (Sardanis 2014). A good example of some of his early abstract style is his painting *Expression*, in which he overruled realistic representation and created a painting with abstract forms only, but with an African anchor (Witkamp 2013; Sardanis 2014). Unfortunately, there is no written documentation of his abstract paintings, despite his great contribution to the development of what is classified as Zambian modern art (Sardanis 2014).

⁸ Sardanis, A. 2014. Discussion on the work of the late Henry Tayali (Personal communication, 29 October 2014). Given the fact that Henry Tayali passed away in 1987, I could not conduct an interview with the artist himself. The information provided was the result of an interview I had with Sardanis, the owner of the largest collection of abstract paintings by Tayali at Chaminuka Lodge in Lusaka.

The scant literature on his work comes from a few exhibition brochures before his untimely death, mostly from his paintings currently in the Chaminuka and Lechwe Trust collections in Lusaka, Zambia (Sardanis 2014).

3.3.2. TAYALI'S EARLY PAINTINGS (1960–1970s)

Tayali started painting with watercolours at an early age, producing work with great detail. Gradually his painting style changed from realistic to abstract in the 1950s and the 1960s (Sardanis 2014). Tayali not only painted, but also produced prints. His woodcut and silkscreen works often commented on the social issues of the ordinary people in society (Sardanis 2014).



Fig.11. Henry Tayali, *Untitled* (1960), Oil on canvas, size 54cmx 89 cm, Lusaka Museum.

This untitled (Fig .11) abstract painting by Tayali shows the struggle he faced to move from representational art to abstraction. Looking forward in time to his development as an abstract painter, one can trace the resemblance of this painting to his painting

Destiny, which was in between representational and abstract. Tayali's development as an abstract artist can be seen in *Destiny* (1960–61), *Untitled* (1960) and also in his woodcut titled *Women's Talk*. The abstract paintings he produced during this period can be referred to as in between representational art and abstraction. This is so because it took Tayali some years to completely develop his process of abstraction. During the time in between representational and abstraction, he gradually developed his painting style and produced his abstract paintings with 'pure' form. His abstract paintings were modern, and were regarded in a Zambian context.



Fig.12. Henry Tayali, *Women's Talk*, (1979), woodcut, Size 64cmx 53cm, Artist's family collection.

His painting *Destiny*, which he painted when he was a young man in 1961 in Southern Rhodesia, depicts the suffering of humankind now and in the future. Every figure in it is painstakingly observed, studied and translated into paint, and each one of the over 90 figures is depicted with great attention to detail (Zukas 2015)⁹. Trevor Ford (1993) writes, "The painting *Destiny* is a remarkable piece. Executed whilst he was a school boy, it has qualities reminiscent in many ways of English artist, Stanley Spencer". After *Destiny*, which was representational, most of Tayali's paintings moved towards abstraction and as such attracted resistance from the general public who failed to

understand his style. As a result, most of his exhibitions were poorly attended and less than favourably received. The ordinary people in society wanted Tayali's work to depict his or her day-to-day African activities, but the abstract paintings he produced during the early 1970s did not seem relevant to the average viewer (Sardanis 2014).

⁹ Zukas, C. 2015. Discussion on the work of the late Henry Tayali (personal communication, 9 April 2015). The information provided was the result of correspondence with Cynthia Zukas, who owns Tayali's painting *Destiny* and who personally interacted with the late artist in the mid-1970s when they were both members of the Lusaka Arts Society.



Fig.13. Henry Tayali, *Destiny*, (1961), Poster paint and gouache, 97 cm x 140 cm, Lechwe collection.

3.3.3. TAYALI'S SHIFT BETWEEN REPRESENTATIONAL ART AND ABSTRACTION

Shortly after he painted *Destiny*, Tayali's painting began to change from representational art to abstraction (Sardanis 2014), as can be seen in *People in summer*, rendered with less detail compared to *Destiny*, but maintaining African-related themes from everyday African life. Tayali's process of progression from representational art to abstraction demonstrates that any form of art, due to the passage of time, cannot be based in one position: it adapts and changes and varies from one group of people to the other. The painting titled *People in summer* is one example of Tayali's 1970s abstract paintings in which the composition was mainly created by strokes of paint with minimum detail of the subject matter. Tayali's use of yellow, yellow ochre and burnt umber creates harmony with the touches of cobalt blue, and the yellow background creates movement. In my view, Tayali's brush strokes

in this painting achieve a high level of sophisticated simplicity and expressiveness, and he uses colour as a structural tool, reducing its intensity while simultaneously maintaining its value. In my opinion, this painting is one of the abstract paintings which marks the turning point from representational art to abstraction in his painting career and demonstrates his ability to produce abstract work in the Zambian context.

According to Ellison (2004:45–46), when asked to comment on his new abstract paintings, Tayali felt that, although his paintings were, in most cases, misunderstood by the public and some of his themes were interpreted as irrelevant (Ellison, 2004:45-46), it was the sophistication in his work which, if not studied properly, made it difficult for most people to comprehend his abstract paintings (Tayali cited in Ellison 2004:45–46). “Because most people do not immediately recognise anything in my paintings that, in itself, does not mean that the paintings have no meaning, my painting career is a journey: each painting I make is a step towards completing my big painting. After all, African art is traditionally abstract” (Ellison 2004:45–46). Regardless of negative response to his abstract paintings, Tayali continued with abstraction, taking its shift away from representation art even further, as seen in *Untitled* (1980) (Fig.14).



Fig.14. Henry Tayali, *People in summer*, (1975), Oil on Canvas, 58 cm x 89 cm, Lechwe collection.



Fig.15. Henry Tayali, *Untitled*, (1980s), size 58cm x 89cm, Oil on canvas, Artist family collection.

Although Tayali's work was informed by the people and their everyday lives in an African urban township, he moved back and forth between representation art and abstraction, which was especially evident in his landscapes, as can be seen in *Untitled* (1980s) (Sardanis 2014). This trend is common to abstract artists in Zambia, who from time to time shift from representational art to abstraction. In my view, this is so because of the failure of many Zambians to embrace abstract art. Therefore, the work of the few abstract artists in the country is seen as copies of European abstract art, which is not the case: after all, Africans have been engaged in abstraction for centuries (Sardanis 2014). To achieve the introduction of the abstract human figure into his paintings, Tayali experimented with brushstrokes and eventually achieved extremely economical use of brushstrokes. During his career as an artist, his paintings were at some times completely abstract and at other times semi-abstract as he introduced human figures (Sardanis 2014). In addition to water colours and prints, the bulk of Tayali's abstract work consisted of oil paintings on canvas, for which he generally combined three techniques of painting. Sometimes he used a brush, and sometimes a palette knife, to create the thick impasto effect in the paintings,

and to create a solid thin and boldline, he poured paint on the canvas (Sardanis 2014). Tayali not only used canvas, but also painted murals on the walls of different public and private buildings in Lusaka; one good example of such a mural is on the reception wall at the German Embassy in Lusaka (Sardanis 2014). His paintings can be described as modern, with a Zambian anchor¹⁰ as is evidenced by most of his print of people in their day-to-day life, as can be seen in *Women's Talk* (Sardanis 2014). Hassan (1996:38) writes:

Modernization, often perceived as Westernization, is believed to have led to the near extinction of Africa's great traditions in the arts. The contemporary forms, especially in the visual arts, continue to be underestimated and neglected, with no serious efforts to study, collect, stage, or exhibit them.

According to Amir Nour, because African art and culture have not developed in isolation from other cultures, there has been and there will always be some form of outside influence; what is important is that the African modern forms have to come from within our society and our African traditions (Hassan 1996:38).

However, Zukas points out that Tayali was also greatly fascinated with traditional symbols of Zambia and the African architecture which also could have informed his work. Later his palette changed to red, warm colours associated with the earth in many African contexts. Before Tayali went to Europe, he worked closely with his friend Margaret Plesner, who was an abstract painter and, at that time was a teacher of art and cultural history at the Evelyn Hone College (1970 to 1974) (Kausa 2009:62). According to Sardanis (2014), "Plesner was painting abstract landscapes, abstractions that in some way inspired Tayali's abstract paintings". However, despite the fact that

¹⁰ I have used 'anchor' to demonstrate that art which is a form and always part of our lives cannot be based in a fixed position or place; with the passage of time it is bound to change. Therefore, the Western stereotypical view of African art should change, as African art has for centuries developed and will always keep on evolving.

Tayali studied in Europe that in itself does not indicate that his abstract paintings are a mere copy of Western abstract art. Tayali's painting *The Gods Spoke* (Fig. 15) clearly demonstrates his ability to create abstract painting with 'pure' form without direct influence from Western artists. Hassan (1996:54) writes:

It is important to examine new directions in African visual arts, especially the modernist experience. It is time to appreciate modern African artistic expression on its own terms. This should be the way to approach the study of contemporary African art forms and the intellectual premise upon which that study should be based.

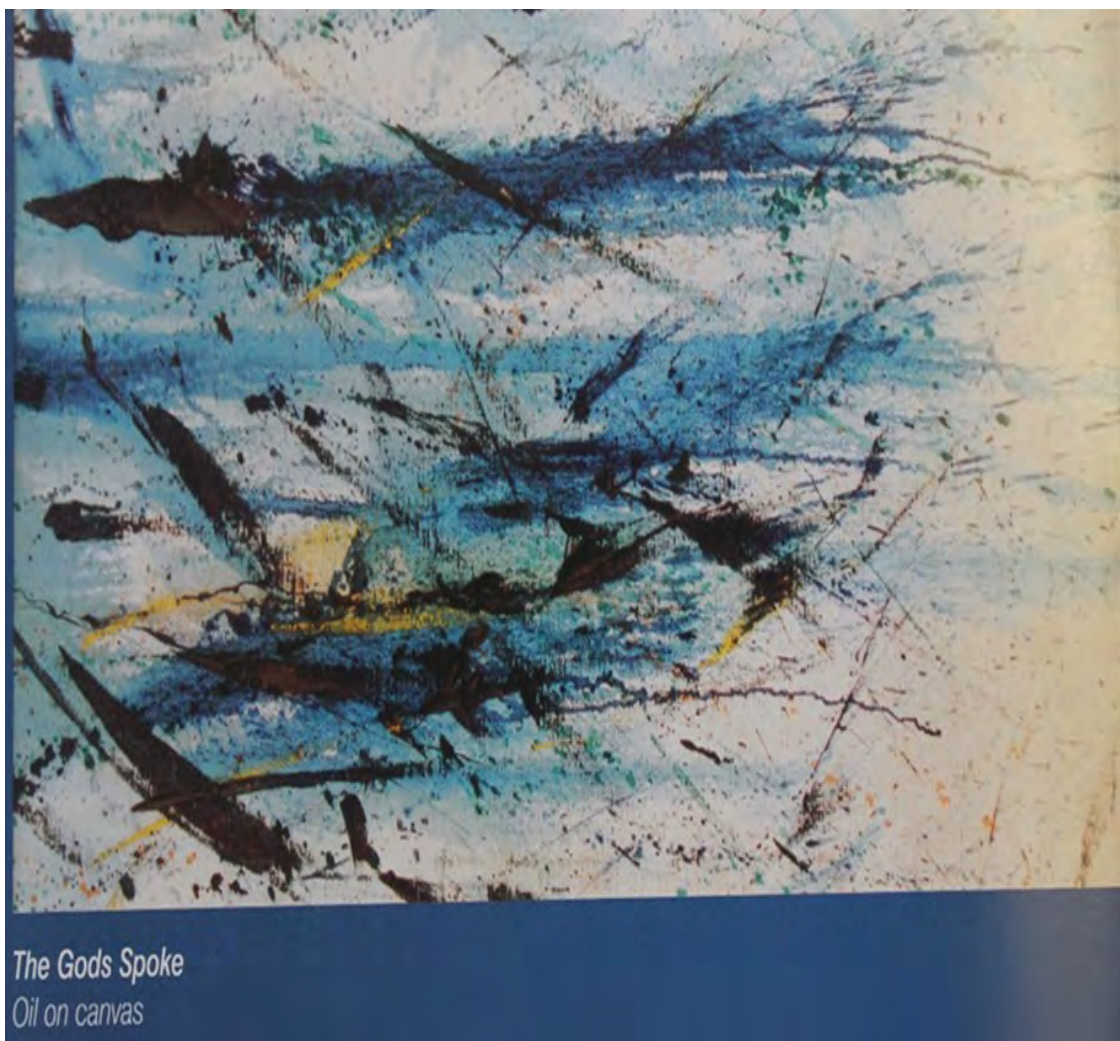


Fig.16. Henry Tayali, *The Gods Spoke*. (1974), 60 cm x 90 cm, Oil on Canvas, Andrew Sardanis collection.

3.3.4. TAYALI'S LEGACY AND ITS IMPACT ON ZAMBIAN ARTISTS

Although Tayali spent much of his time producing works of art, he also had commitments beyond art. Besides his work at the University of Zambia, he was involved in many projects, exhibitions and workshops, both at home and abroad, which benefited a good number of local artists (Sardanis 2014). To honour Tayali after his death, Zambian visual artists formed the Zambia National Visual Arts Council in 1989 after a general meeting held at Evelyn Hone College in Lusaka (Ellison 2008:41). The main purpose of the formation of the Visual Arts Council was to promote and foster the interests of artists in the country, and it was to be managed by artists themselves (Zukas 2014). The artists came up with this initiative because, until then, there had been very limited support given to artists by Government (Ellison, 2004:41). Since its inception, the centre has hosted numerous art exhibitions and workshops for local and international artists, thus exposing most artists to international art trends, including abstract art.

While Tayali has been the most prominent abstract artist in Zambia, a few other artists have also produced abstract work, such as Kalinoso Mutale, Vincentio Phiri, and Godfrey Setti (Ellison 2004:49; Simbao 2004:124). Setti (1958–2002) used mixed media to produce his abstract paintings, and in most cases he incorporated ready-made elements such as labels, scrap metal and plastics on canvas (Ellison 2004:49). According to Ellison (2004:49), Setti's European university degree exposed him to a number of abstract influences; however, he did not directly copy from Western artists, as can be seen in his themes, which depict African traditions, evidenced, for example, in his painting titled *Girls dancing for the tourists*.(Fig. 17) In the painting titled *The Blues*,(fig.18) the artist completely abandons representational form and uses colour as a structural tool to compose the abstract painting with 'pure' form. Many Zambian abstract artists have followed this trend of shifting from representational art to abstraction, as discussed above.



Fig.17. Godfrey Setti, *Girls dancing for tourists*, (1988), Acrylic on canvas, 20 cm x 15 cm, Lechwe collection.



Fig.18. Godfrey Setti, *The Blues*, (1990), 100 cm x 120 cm, Acrylic on canvas, collection of the Lusaka Museum.

As mentioned earlier, Zambian abstract artists tended to move back and forth between representational art and abstraction, as can be seen in Setti's work *Girls dancing for tourists* (Fig.16) and *The Blues* (Fig. 17).

Tayali's influence in Setti's abstract painting is evident in his economical use of colours; with a limited palette, using only blue and red with a yellow background, he creates an abstract painting which, in my opinion, is similar to Tayali's abstract painting titled *The Gods Spoke*.

In my view, the reason for the trend of Zambian artists producing more representational art than abstract is that many artists assume that it is their responsibility to produce painting based on realistic themes, as is too often expected of them. There is ambivalence about the acceptance of abstraction in Zambia, largely due to European misconceptions of 'African art' (Zukas 2014).

CONCLUSION

While it can be argued that, in Africa, artists have been engaged in abstraction for centuries as it has been part of their heritage, from a problematic Western perspective, African abstract art is perceived as merely a copy of Western Modernism. African abstract art, however, is legitimately African and varies across different African socio-linguistic groupings (Hassan 2010:456). In Africa, describing and defining modernism comes with many challenges (Okeke 2013 b:28), but there is evidence that, before the insurgence of Western Modernism in the global context, some African artists like Ernest Mancoba had already engaged in abstraction (Hassan 2010:469). Therefore, the assertion that Africans copied from the West is erroneous.

It is difficult to understand how one group of people, whether in the West or in Africa, can claim the authorship of Modernism. From the African perspective, African modern art has not been recognized by the West as having contributed to the development of the so claimed dominant western Modernism. How can that notion be justified when Abstraction in Africa has been practised for centuries? The difficulty is that it is not possible for one group of people to live in isolation because by the virtual of different groups of people leaving together there will always be mutual learning from one another. I have attempted to suggest that the problem lies with the lack of cohesion between Africans and their Western counterparts in appreciating African abstract art and the diversity of African Modern art in its context. I am of the opinion that African abstract art should be seen in an African context, and the tendency of Westerners to judge it and simplistically compare it to that of the West is problematic. Each time such comparison is made, the outcome tends to be negative, since, from the Western perspective, art produced by 'other' artists tends to be either viewed as not good enough or not 'authentic' enough. There are a number of Africans who have trained in Western universities who, in my view, despite their Western influence, have maintained significant aspects of their own artistic traditions, as evidenced in their work reflecting their artistic heritage as Africans (Hassan 1996:52).

Hassan (1996: 54) writes that:

It is time to appreciate modern African artistic expression on its own terms. This approach to African art will offer a fresh look at modernism, and even postmodernism, from an African standpoint, and at issues of cross-cultural and transnational aesthetics. It is important to emphasize the reciprocal flow of influences and traffic that has existed between Africa and the West. This will make it possible to reverse the erroneous perceptions of unilateral influence, according to which Africa and African art serve as recipients of Western culture and artistic influence, a narrative in which African artists have been projected as passive, silent and invisible.

In my view the West has misunderstood the idea of authenticity of African modern art, and assumed that it is not 'authentic' (Okeke 2013 b: 29). Due to the fact that African art and culture have not developed in isolation from other cultures, there has been and always will be some form of outside influence, and it is important to note that this influence is multi-directional. I support Okeke's disagreement with the argument that, because Africans supposedly appropriated a European style of painting, this in itself demonstrates their inability to create new intellectual works of art (Okeke 2013b: 29). Although Africans might use so-called Western materials to produce their art, this does not mean that African abstract art is merely derivative, as evidenced in the works of the artists discussed earlier in Chapter Three.

My research has uncovered the differences in the decaying and ageing process in different materials and contexts. My exhibition of abstract and semi-abstract paintings has addressed 'In between time' through an engagement with processes of ageing and decaying and has uncovered the relationship between the notion of time and abstraction. I have used a study of abstraction to interrogate notions of so called 'African-ness' or 'Zambian-ness', whilst simultaneously challenging the Western stereotypical view of African modern art. My research on abstraction in Zambia has shown that, although abstraction has been practised in Africa for many centuries, most Zambians do not fully appreciate this style of painting, as evidenced by relatively few local artists engaging in abstraction (Sardanis 2014). This situation has not improved, and I am of the view that linking monetary gains to art has been the biggest challenge facing Zambian artists who produce art for sale: any art that they presume may not sell (mostly abstract art) is not thought to be acceptable. If abstract

art is to develop in Zambia, it would be important for people to embrace abstraction not as a European phenomenon but as a legitimate part of their African heritage; for, after all, European abstract artists were, as I have discussed, influenced by African ancestors (Rookmaaker 1970:113).

Through the realisation of my research, I have come to the conclusion that the life-span in human beings is the same; the effect of time on our bodies between the young and the aged is mostly the same across all groups of people. With the passage of time, our bodies experience gradual transformation; as we age we lose our youth and our appearance changes. However, the process of decay in materials varies and is mostly dependent on the weather patterns and the nature of the material itself. One of the examples is my painting titled *Back and Forth*, in which I have referenced plastic. Plastic has come with its own benefits, but it is very stubborn and it can maintain its form for a long time compared with other materials, for example vegetables or paper. Plastic has become a nightmare in most African countries as it is very difficult to dispose of. While it could be argued that when human beings and other living creatures age and decay, they lose their beauty, my practical research demonstrates that there is a beauty in old and decayed materials.

In this thesis, I have related the theoretical and practical analysis of abstraction to scholarly debates on abstraction and 'African Modernism', arguing for multiple African Modernisms. Through an analysis of the works of Chika Okeke-Agulu (2006), Okwui Enwezor (1996) and Salah Hassan (1996), I have argued that there is no single African modernism. Further, I have argued that African forms of abstraction legitimately form part of these African modernisms and are not to be merely viewed as belated copies of a dominant Western Modernism.

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