

# Exploring Identity and Sustainability: Yinka Shonibare's Art as a Catalyst for Promoting Contemporary Art in Nigeria

**SANI Muhammad Babangida PhD**

Department of Fine and Applied Arts, School of Vocational Education, Niger State College Of Education, Minna.

**E-mail:** [smbabangida01@gmail.com](mailto:smbabangida01@gmail.com)

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## **Abstract**

This study investigates the sculptural artworks of Yinka Shonibare, a British-Nigerian artist known for his exploration of themes related to colonialism, race, identity, and the complexities of cultural hybridity. The research also seeks to examine and deepen our understandings of his sculptural works, particularly those involving clothing. Some of his outstanding works were taken and analyzed for better understanding. Some artists, authors and scholars whose works or writings could serve as useful references for researching Shonibare's arts were consulted. These artists and scholars have aided this study by providing firsthand information with a range of theoretical, historical, and cultural frameworks that help the research to explore the depth and complexity of Yinka Shonibare's artworks, particularly in relation to post-colonialism, identity, and cultural hybridity. For more on specific exploration of the artist works, Nigerian and African scholars, art critics, and curators, are additional authors who have directly or indirectly engaged with Yinka Shonibare's artwork or whose work connects to the themes they explore, such as post-colonialism, identity, and the African diaspora. These scholars from Nigeria and Africa at large bring critical perspectives on African art, colonialism, and identity that resonate with the themes in Yinka Shonibare's artworks. Their literatures and curatorial contributions help to contextualize Shonibare use of African and diaspora symbols, his engagement with post-colonial histories, make his works to be historic and famous.

**Keywords:** Exploration, Identity, Sustainability, Colonial, Contextual

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## **Introduction**

### **Background of the Study**

In Nigeria, the visual art scene has seen a notable transition from the use of conventional sculptural materials, such as wood, clay, and metal, to more unconventional and innovative materials, including textiles, plastics, and recycled objects. To buttress the above statement, in an interview with Saliu in (2023) said that "this trend reflects the global shift towards sustainability, as well as the increasing importance of mixed media and the creative reuse of discarded materials". Similarly, Muhammad (2023) concluded that "...artists continue to experiment with new materials as they create works that are not only addressing traditional tastes, but also reflects on contemporary issues, such as environmental degradation, cultural identity, and global interconnectedness.

Yinka Shonibare, a Nigerian-born artist in the diaspora, stands as one of the most prominent figures who blends traditional Nigerian heritage with global artistic influences. In Vanguard (2011), reported that "Shonibare is renowned for using brightly patterned Dutch wax fabrics in his sculptures, installations, and performances". This fabric, though associated with African culture, actually has its origins in colonial trade, symbolizing the complex intersection of African identity, history, and globalization. Similarly, The Daily Telegraph (2015) has it that Shonibare's work critically explores issues of colonialism, race, and identity while embracing the possibilities offered by contemporary materials and mixed media.

In another development, Sani (2010) opined that the use of textile fabric as a medium in Shonibare's sculptures marks a significant development in Nigerian contemporary art. The artist's choice of textile materials not only reflects Nigerian heritage but also opens up new

possibilities for artistic expression within the context of global art movements. Shonibare's works challenge traditional notions of sculpture, inviting viewers to reconsider the relationship between culture, history, and materiality (Wilson, 2003). Shonibare's innovates within the medium of sculpture, creating complex, thought-provoking works that invite discussions about identity, culture, and the role of the artist in a globalized world is worth for examining.

This study aims to explore the use of textile fabric materials in Shonibare's sculptures, focusing on how such materials contribute to the conceptual depth and formal aesthetics of his work. By investigating Shonibare's use of mixed media, this research highlights the intersection of Nigerian heritage and global influences in contemporary art.

### **Statement of the Problem**

One significant aspect of Nigerian modern art is the use of innovative materials in sculpture, with the incorporation of unconventional materials. The practice of using improvisation in sculpture can be traced back to the early stages of contemporary Nigerian art, yet this approach has received limited documentation and critical examination. There is a gap in the academic and artistic literature concerning the use of unconventional materials in Nigerian sculptures.

The use of fabrics in sculptures has not been comprehensively explored or documented in existing scholarship. Hence, this study seeks to address this gap by examining how textile fabric is been utilized in Shonibare's sculptures.

### **Objective of the study**

The primary objective of this study is to explore the use of textile fabric in the sculptures of Yinka Shonibare. While, the specific objectives are to:

1. identify the types of textiles used, the methods of incorporating these materials, and its role in the overall composition of his works.
2. analyze the cultural and symbolic meanings of textile fabric in Shonibare's sculptures. It will expose how Shonibare use fabric to convey identity, globalization, and post-colonialism.
3. expose the creativeness and skills of manipulating textiles in Shonibare's sculptures.

### **Literature Review**

Comprehensive literature review was conducted to contextualize the study within existing research on Shonibare. The review is also on the use of textiles in Nigerian contemporary art, especially in relation to the post-colonial era, culture, and globalization.

All consulted scholars and materials that positioning Shonibare's work within a larger context of Nigerian and global art were acknowledged. Among them, are Mensah (2011), Charlie (2014), Saliu (2023), Duniya (2023), and Sani (2024).

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study, grounded on the intersection of materiality, identity and post-colonial discourse within the context of contemporary art. As propound by Ocvirk, Bone, Stinson, & Wigg (1998), their frameworks guided the researcher on how to interrogate the artist's sculptural works.

The use of textiles, specifically African wax prints, in Shonibare's sculptures challenge conventional views of sculpture and materiality, which traditionally focused on solid, hard materials like metal, wood, and stone. Gordon (2013) argued that materials in modern art carry significant meanings, often reflecting the social, political, and cultural forces of the time.

### **Methodology**

This study has employed qualitative research of approach focusing on investigation of Yinka Shonibare's sculptures incorporate with textile fabrics. This approach is appropriate due to the nature of the research, which aims to explore the symbolic, cultural, and material implications of

his cladded works. The study has employed several interconnected methods, such as art analysis, literature review, interviews, and case studies. These methods will provide a comprehensive understanding of the use of textile materials in Shonibare's sculptures and their broader implications for Nigerian art.

The analysis has guided by the framework of material culture theory, Gordon (2013), which examines the relationship between physical objects and the cultural meanings. Through art analysis, the study aims to understand how textiles in Shonibare's work function for both aesthetic and symbols of socio-political narratives.

### **Interviews and Expert Insights**

The study sought to get first-hand information, although, it was difficult to directly interview Shonibare, therefore, secondary interviews were conducted to establish comprehensive data. Again, scholars who have studied used unconventional materials, provide an insight into the use of textiles. Such as Prof. Jari Jat Jacob and Prof. Lasisi Lamidi are both artists who have used textile materials in their efforts.

Oral tradition was conducted to the following art connoisseurs in the field of visual art, Professor of Art History; Prof. Emeritus Ahmed Rufai Saliu, and a Professor of Art and Cultural Critics; Prof. Gambo Gilis Duniya and a Professor of Art History; Prof. Muhammad Aliyu. From the Department of Fine Art, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

### **Findings:**

#### **A brief historical background of the Artist:**

The Artist, Yinka Shonibare Member of British Empire (MBE) is a British-Nigerian contemporary artist known for his sculptural installations that explore issues of Post-colonialism. Gayford (2010) reported that Yinka Shonibare was born on 10th February, 1962 in London, United Kingdom. He grew up in Lagos, Nigeria, but returned to England throughout his childhood. He artist attended Byam Shaw College of Art in London, and later received his Master of Fine Art (MFA) degree from Goldsmiths in 1991.

Robert (2023) reported that in 2005, he was honoured with a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE), a moniker continues to officially attach to his name. In another development, he was awarded and decorated with the Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in 2019. In another development, Gayford (2010) stated that Yinka Shonibare received the Whitechapel Gallery Art Icon Award in March 2021 he is the 8th recipient of such award. The award celebrates artists who have made significant contributions to a particular medium. Disability Arts Online (2012) recounted that at the age of 17 years Shonibare came down with transverse myelitis a disorder caused by inflammation of spinal cord. The illness resulted in a long-term physical disability where one side of his body was paralyzed that made him to be on a wheel chair. Despite of his disability, he still produces sculpture pieces with the help of his assistance.



**The Artist: Yinka Shonibare Member of British Empire (MBE)**

### **Photography: David Lindsay, 2003.**

According to Graford (2010) in 2015, Shonibare's work was the subject of the inaugural contemporary exhibition program at the Driehaus Museum in Chicago, United States of America (USA). Shonibare continues to live and work in London, United Kingdom. Today, his works are held in the collections of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis, among others.

Some of exhibitions he held are his first solo exhibition in 1989 at Byam Shaw Gallery, London. During 2008–09, he was the subject of a major mid-career survey in both Australia. Another, one was in September, 2008 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (MCA), Sydney, and toured to the Brooklyn Museum, New York, in June 2009. He staged another at the Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, in October 2009. For the 2009 Brooklyn Museum exhibition, he created a site-specific installation titled "Mother and Father Worked Hard So I Can Play," which was on view in several museum displayed rooms. One of the group exhibitions was at the Centennial commission, which was simultaneously on view at the Newark Museum in Newark, New Jersey, from 1 July 2009, to 3 January 2010, in the dining-room of the museum's Ballantine House. Some of his installation works exhibited are; "Party Time", "Re-Imagine America" among others.

### **The Analysis of Some Selected Yinka Shonibare's Artworks**

Shonibare's artwork is marked by his use of vibrant textiles, which play a crucial role in conveying messages about colonialism, identity, and post-colonial narratives. Five (5) of his artworks were chosen for the purpose for analysis.

The first work to be analyzed is titled "Justice for All" is a standing female figure dressed in full regalia. The head of the figure is suggested by a round object, which is embellished with a world map, symbolizing that justice should be universal. The figure holds a knife pointing skyward in her right hand and a scale in her left hand, representing the formal nature of justice, the work was done in 2019. This piece of work was created using Shonibare's signature approach, employing mannequins dressed in brightly colored Ankara fabric. The figure's hands and neck are painted ultramarine blue, emphasizing the strength and power of justice. The gown, dominated by pink hues with yellow ochre flowers, black lines, and a flowing design, covers the figure's feet. These vibrant patterns represent Shonibare's creative ingenuity in using textile fabric materials. The artwork addresses themes of injustice, colonialism, and political and economic struggles, as it explores the complex interrelationship between Africa and Europe, particularly their historical and economic histories.



**Plate I: "Justice for All", Size: 2400cm x 2000cm, Year: 2019.**

**Source: Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.**

The researcher observed as reported by Kaiser (2003) that Shonibare's primary material is batik, which he started using in 1994. Furthermore, the author stressed that the artist chooses bright

colours of “African fabric” led the artist to later incorporate Dutch wax-printed cotton, which he source from Brixton market in London.

The next work to be analyzed is titled “Headless Man” is a life-size sculpture of a male figure dressed in a combination of African and European styles. The fabric made of coat is a pure African fabric (Ankara), which give the viewers the feelings of appropriateness of the giant work. The figure is headless, symbolizing the loss of identity and the removal of African leaders during the colonial era. The headless mannequins figure with Batik or Ankara textiles, instead of European fabrics which, represent the double faces played by the Europeans. Another opinion by (Stamberg, 2009) said, alternatively, the artist uses this fabric when depicting European art and fashion to portray a ‘culture clash’ and a theme of cultural interaction within post-colonialism.



**Plate II: Title: “Headless Man Trying to Drink” Size: Life-size, Year: 2005  
Source: National Museum of African Art.**

The figure’s body is draped in African Ankara cloth designed in a Western style, as a commentary on the cultural and political imbalances imposed during the colonial period which within the ambit of the Europeans. Yinka Shonibare has created headless figures, examples of such works are “Mr. and Mrs. Andrews” in 1998, “Reverend on Ice” produced in 2005, also was a piece titled “Reverend Robert Walker,” on roller-skating at Duddingston Loch.

This sculpture presents an incongruous situation of a man who is headless trying to drink from a water fountain. The absurdity of this scenario is reinforced by the patterning of the man’s costume, which features the doubled motif of an abundantly flowing tap and water glass. His elegantly tailored late Victorian costume suggests he is gentleman of colourful taste. Jaunty red trousers and green bows on his patent leather shoes lend a foppish note to the figure.

The use of army green colour fabric on the figure’s coat and shoes, and the green colour on the supporting stand, possibly signifies the dominance and exploitation of African resources by European collaborators and powers. The “Headless Man” serves as a visual representation of colonialism’s dehumanizing effects.

The next work is titled “Untitled”, done in 2010 and the figure is holding the umbrella with both hands, positioned as if shielding the blowing wind from the environment. The figure’s head is represented by a round object, symbolizing that the world is economically and socially in trouble.



**Plate III: Name: “Untitled,” Size: Life-Size Year: 2010**  
**Source: National Museum of African Art.**

The figure is dressed in a vibrant orange and purple patterned jacket, and the trousers are a combination of light-green, purple, and chocolate shades colours. The boots on its legs made of synthetic maroon colour leather, shining and the reflection suggest the high quality of the boots. Also on the main ground it gives the feeling of a wet ground that symbolizes the effects of climate change on the entire environment. As the figure remain in a straggling position.

The use of textiles in this piece, like the other works, highlights Shonibare’s exploration of post-colonialism and globalism. The hybrid identity embodied in the figure’s attire speaks to the cultural intersections and displacements experienced in a modern world influenced by both Western and African legacies.

The work to be analysed is a 14 seated figures were made out of fiberglass, clothed with African and Dutch made Ankara. The mannequin figures captured the scene the Europeans deliberating on strategies on Africa. The title is “Scramble for Africa” it was executed in 2003. It was a pivotal work for Shonibare in its exploration of late Victorian England and its territorial expansion into Africa during the 1880s. The “scramble” for Africa by leading European and world powers resulted in the carving up of the continent, an act that was formalized at the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 as suggested by (Sheila, 2012). Shonibare’s work depicts this historic gathering, showing various statesmen huddled around a table with a large map of Africa, eagerly staking their claims.



**Plate IV: Title: “Scramble for Africa” Size: Life-size, Year: 2003**  
**Source: The Pinnell Collection, Dallas, USA.**

“Scramble for Africa” is presented upon a raised platform that is lit from underneath, giving it a heightened sense of visual drama. Like actors upon a stage, the headless leaders gesticulate to one another as they scramble for the riches of the continent. Shonibare said the theatricality is

certainly a device in my work, it is a way of setting the stage; it is also a fiction a hyper-real, theatrical device that enables you to re-imagine events from history.

Shonibare's installation art has a unique ability to provoke conversation around race, identity, and the lingering effects of colonialism. His work encourages a re-examination of historical narratives and their impact on contemporary society.

Yinka Shonibare's installation arts are in series, he titled them "Wind Sculptures" and most of them are nearly 20 feet high, the sculpture captures the movement of a billowing bolt of fabric. The design was inspired by the sails of ships whose patterns derived from Dutch wax fabrics. The artist chooses these iconic fabrics to exemplify how signs of national or ethnic identity are culturally constructed, this famous and beautiful work was executed in 2014.



**Plate V: Name: "Wind Sculpture," Size: 610 × 80 cm, Year: 2014**  
**Source: Nathan Keay, MCA Chicago**

Yinka Shonibare's installations serve as rich, multi-layered critiques of history, identity, and power, using vibrant aesthetics to convey complex messages. His works engage with global themes, transforming how viewers think about history, race, and the ways in which cultures interact.

### **Conclusion**

Conclusively, Shonibare's works demonstrate the artist's innovative approach to blending textile fabrics with sculptural forms, creating a compelling visual dialogue about colonialism, identity, and power. The research emphasizes the importance of recycling in art, elevating unwanted materials to new heights of creative and artistic expression. Shonibare's use of fabric in his sculptures provides a critical commentary on historical injustices while simultaneously offering a platform for artistic development in Nigeria's contemporary art scene.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were proffered:

- Institutions should organize workshops to showcase his works through slides shows.
- Shonibare's other works; painting, photography, and film should be researched upon.
- Government institutions to create centers for younger artists to be trained his skills in art.

### **Contributions to Knowledge:**

This study contributes significantly to the body of knowledge in the followings:

- It has exposed a British-Nigerian sculptor, into the space of contemporary Nigerian art.
- It has showed that the use of fabric off-cuts is easily accessible and inexpensive.
- Recycling is an innovation and experimentation, allowing artist(s) to develop new ideas.

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