

Shifting Identity to a Negotiated Space: Wole Lagunju and the Translocation of *Gèlèdè*

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Abstract

Wole Lagunju metaphorically halted his adventure with art, time, and space to steadily address some socio-cultural and political issues through *Gèlèdè* genres. These serialized paintings exude brilliance that initiates another interrogation of some global, socio-psychological subjects. This paper analyzes some of the imageries in Lagunju's *Gèlèdè*-motivated paintings vis-à-vis a contextualization of shifting White and Black identities, and an understanding of the negotiation of contestable Diaspora creative spaces. The study observes that rising global, artistic liberty is propelled through the open-ended, twisted, globalized cultural space; and that informed, creative superimpositions of socio-cultures, events and ideas can harvest unimaginably great results.

Keywords: conflict resolution, contemporary Nigerian art, diaspora art, *Gèlèdè*, Black identity, performance, Wole Lagunju

Introduction: Diaspora and City, Movement, and Influence

Odia Ofeimun (2001:13) poetically describes cities as derivable from similar attitudes: of people, nature, influence, and opportunity. These characteristics have enabled the city as a global phenomenon to enjoy tremendous literary coverage. Ofeimun observes that the “virtual cult of city-bashing has [also] been on the prowl in the literatures with a certain universal ramification.” But interestingly, and for whatever reason, some people enjoy the beats of the cities and get magnetized to the cities' extended axes. This happens from nation to nation. This set of people may then turn immigrants, and extend their search for the hidden, treasured

elements of progress established in other cities outside of their nations. Olawole Olagoke Lagunju, commonly called and penned as Wole Lagunju (Figure 1), and a few other Nigerian artists have participated in this outward exploration of creativity magnetization that is manifested worldwide. But this emigration, with that of others from various nations, has continued to form the unique supposition contextualized as “the Diaspora,” or “Diaspora,” and “diasporas” (Ogunfuwa 2015:3).



Figure 1. Wole Lagunju. Source: Wole Lagunju

The multi-faceted discourse associated with the distinctions is usually translocation, environment, and identity based. Some scholarly studies in this direction include the works done by Isaac Olaleye (1991), Ronald Segal (1995, 2001), Peter Li (2003), Gumisai Mutume (2003), Gray Nash et al. (2004), Olu Oguibe (2004), Akanmu Adebayo (2010), Wiston Jame (2010), and Timothy O. Ogunfuwa (2015). One of such roots of discourse participation in arts and culture, which significantly rests its value on continuous narratives of identity and

(re)location, is Moyo Okediji's online scholarly forum.¹ Many of Nigeria's active/practicing Diaspora artists strive to assert themselves with daring concepts, in this highly contested Diaspora space, to establish their authority. A few of these artists include Yinka Shonibare, Dele Jegede, Chris Ofili, Osi Audu, Moyo Okediji, Sokari Douglas Camp, Victor Ekpuk, Nnenna Okore, Emmanuel Taiwo Jegede, Yisa Akinbolaji, Wale Adenle, Hassan Aliyu, Dayo Laoye, Marcia Kure, and Bunmi Augusto. Ultimately, the question of identity becomes an inescapable phenomenon in the understanding of some aspects of the arts, particularly Diaspora art, which again, can always be accessed from the context of global art or contemporary world art, as is inferred from Belting's *Contemporary art as global art: a critical estimate* (2009:2-7).

Sometimes, the Diaspora artist tries to delineate their root's cultural affinity with, or difference, from that of their new cultural influence and assimilation. These identity narratives are naturally constructed within the spectra of multi-cultural diversity of the Diaspora. Thus, the Diasporic space becomes a negotiated arena for creative contention, equality, and supremacy. Surviving the negotiated space suggests that someone is just a participant. But altering the landscape of that space means that someone is an actor, an influencer. One of such influencers is Wole Lagunju, who has figuratively taken the Gèlèdè masquerade of his indigenous Yorùbá community in Nigeria and its appurtenances along with him as an instrument to artistically contest for space and identity reckoning in the Diaspora. With this singular action, and the appropriation of western subjects to create a new standpoint of creative contextualization where his art is neither a solely African nor western subject, but an in-

¹ Onáism is basically a movement founded primarily by former graduates of the former University of Ife, now known as Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife. Its core value is to promote African traditional values, designs and motifs in whatever form treatable by the artists. Most of the works end up being abstractions and semi-abstraction to manifest the style in its optimal glory. The exploration gradually became studied and researched into by many scholars. Some of the protagonists are Moyo Okediji, Kunle Filani, Tola Wewe, Bolaji Campbell, Tunde Nasiru, Wole Lagunju and Victor Ekpuk. Minus Filani and Wewe, most of the founders are now Diasporas.

between, Lagunju's current artistic productions have continually shifted identities, and switched subject's performances.

In this study, Lagunju's Gèlèdè paintings are interrogated and contextualized using a qualitative research approach, because the exploration of meanings, intentions, and the individuation of images are sought. Masking gods and goddesses in relocated socio-cultures; anonymity and disguise; and design and fashion, are various angles that are also touched in this study. The study mainly extends the contextual presentation of Lagunju's idea of the Gèlèdè series through space (environment), epoch (time and event), and character (personality). Whether the Gèlèdè ideas and genres were consciously or unconsciously derived, they have, nonetheless, been consciously and continuously developed.

Furthermore, Lagunju affirms that he "cannot easily count [the Gèlèdè genres] since I have begun to add drawings" (Lagunju, Wole. Email. May 9, 2017). But images of this serial that abound on the internet, plus recently finished works are over fifty by July 31, 2019. They range in their medium from ink to oil, and acrylic. The images used in this study are mostly sourced from the artist and a few internet web outlets. Other relevant oral information is sourced through electronic interviews, and mail correspondence with Lagunju. Sixteen of Lagunju's paintings are randomly selected to buttress the formal and thematic analysis of this study and are further spread across the eight years that Lagunju seriously and generously devotes to the Gèlèdè concepts; that is: from 2012 till 2020. The samples are therefore, not based on gèlèdè headdress types or the images that have been masked but based on their appropriateness for this discourse. This study also emphasizes the importance of space and time in Lagunju's artistic activities through his attestation, reconstruction, redistribution, and implementation of ideas and history of people and events. He contextually renegotiates his source and imagery personalities from the merger of some clear ambivalences and equivalences in his native root with western socio-culture, political economy, and shift in creativity

enquiries. This study establishes Lagunju's search for a type of artistic identity that is personal, and generational; but also, his imagery can be referred to as proto-classical. It is considered that this study would open up discourse vistas (as Adesanya's 2014 study has done remarkably), to further study the Gèlèdè series of Wole Lagunju, a dynamic and transposable subject that is still ongoing for him. His new-found expression has critically situated his artistic parameters of the Gèlèdè discourse. They extend in dimension from open-ended in racialism and racism, spatial culture and Diasporic limitation/expansion, gender, and identity, to hierarchy and power, deceit with reticence and openness, fashion, and decoration, and more.

Although it is apparent that many of the paintings' stylistic and formalistic approaches are similar in their choice of imagery, the paintings selected for discourse in any particular thematic angle have been perceived as exhibiting a preponderance of the quality of that theme. Lagunju collapsed space and took his own share, to become an enshrined Diaspora artist. He succeeded in merging times through his art. He now manipulates times' peculiar events, and structures them into specific contents. Metaphorically, this imagery possibility creates or redirects his magically poetic sensibility that split-opened his visual creativity boundary. With the possibility of this radical, visual pronouncement, Lagunju validates the concreteness of his ideas with the mental reconciliations in his emotionally, technically, and methodically conscious self. Practically, he has reconstructed events in history by collapsing and relocating times of eras, to merge and reconstruct activities of the global western geographical space with a particular western Nigerian space, thereby shifting both spaces to reconcile two diametrical cultures.

Lagunju's Passage Through Lagos

The movement of professionals, whether Diasporic or not, is usually a progressive mutation when it is voluntary (De Haas 2009; Haidara 2013). Adventurous city people will

often extend their foray international fields to savor the further extensions of the sometimes-profitable individuality, loneliness (and even quagmires) that establish the idioms of the other city or even the mega city. One of such emergent high impact cities in Africa is Lagos, Nigeria. So also, Wole Lagunju is one of the professionals that have participated in and struggled through the unpredictable whirlwinds of fortune that tend to amplify Lagos as a unique entity.

The beauty and tragedy of the image that constitute the individuality in and of the city are the restructured sense of the city's livable space and time, the acceptance of hybrid divisions in all spheres of the city plain, the abstract notion of harmony in the generated diffusions and confusions, which is further heightened by the irregularities in the tied essences of rejection and disassociation with empathy and togetherness, and much more. The city is both a poem lived, and a rhyme experienced. It takes time to understand the city. Actualizing its space dynamism and beneficence also takes time. Of the professionals that enliven the city space, artists play a vital role in its formulation, understanding, historicity and political socialization. The city of Lagos is no exception.

Jegede emphasizes that, "all artists, groups and school...acknowledge the drawing power of Lagos" (Jegede 2001:64). Lagos radiates these imaginations of "drawing" and "power" - whether literal or literary, metaphoric, or artistic. The contemporary landscape of art activities and its commerce in Lagos remain unmatched by any other city in Nigeria, the Federal capital (Abuja) inclusive. Lagos is undeniably the hub for art fairs, salons, and workshops; exhibition halls, artist studios, and galleries; advertising media and brand hotspots; art and craft centers; night clubs and hangouts. Because it is basically the commercial/economic nerve center of the nation, there is no doubt that its trade in art commodities is the highest among Nigerian cities. Invariably, most of the Nigerian Diaspora artists that schooled in Nigeria either had a sweet or bitter taste at one time or the other, of this Lagos panoramic art trade and its caprices, appeals, vagaries, and bounties.

For someone like Lagunju, Lagos re-enforces and enlarges the “drawing” prowess germinating from the deepest recesses of their soul. The exhibition of power skills has also been boundless. The drawing power becomes an overriding identity signifier for such a rational, wise, and lucid artist. And when the dual connections –space and time, and mentally and socio-artistically stable actions—are genuinely interrogated for their dimensions beyond the immediate scope of boundaries, they become the overriding identity of the artist. These boundaries could be geographical, socio-political, artistic, or disciplinary. It is this interrogation that (re)creates, (re)enacts, and then (re)accelerates the ingenuity in the creative individual. With the benefit of hindsight and his evolution in the Lagos spatial and artistic environ, and attendant opportunities, Lagunju’s art has been propelled through the essences of space, time, and creativity performance. This cumulative experience, coupled with the freshness of Diasporic circumstances and participations, has enriched his imaginative acumen, making it potent with fertile creativity from dual-identity expressions and narratives. Lagunju’s Gèlèdè genres are increasingly becoming one of such identity propulsions. The examination of their appositional quality in projecting the power of the spirit, mystical and mythological vis-à-vis the fresh, physical, and temporal existence of (wo)man, the aesthetical appropriation, and a reconstruction in cultural and historic boundaries are also part of the rationale for this paper.

Lagunju was born on March 1, 1966. His biography and philosophy, both pre-Diasporic and Diasporic, are well documented as seen in Ed Cross Fine Art (2021) and Watkins (2020). Lagunju’s specialization as a graphic artist strongly manifests in the decorative quality of his many Gèlèdè-inspired works. So also, his stylistic presentations are a visual language that was developed from the Ife Art school of thought, which germinated from the Department of Fine Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University (formerly known as University of Ife) Nigeria, from where he graduated. Lagunju confirmed that it was the grant from Phillip L. Rayenhill Fellowship in 2006 and 2007, and the visitation to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), USA,

that ignited his disposition to become a Diaspora artist (Cosgrove n.d.; Lagunju, Wole. Email correspondence. May 9, 2017). In the area of painting, Lagunju has had over thirty exhibitions, both solo and group, and both as non-Diaspora and as Diaspora artist. What becomes clear in his work-life style is that he is restless. He was pacing energetically for artistic fulfilment. This propelled his movement towards the Diaspora where, he believed, he can blossom. As well, being in Diaspora freely allows the acceptance of his artistic sensibility and gives meaning as well as substance to his narratives and chosen identity.

Libations for Gèlèdè

In many cases, visual artists oscillate between historian and fiction writer. They usually historically decipher the socio-cultural past, and pictorially express this with the present and imagined future. Thus, they turn into the Nostradamus of their era, mentally and oftentimes technically, working out the immediate and extended visual predictions of their situations and that of the world. For many artists to actualize an imagination, they must encounter space and time, and navigate their structures to determine the extent to which their involvement can be successfully sustained in their production. When Lagunju finally arrived as a Diaspora artist in the USA in 2007, he resumed full-time painting. For him, it could be hypothesized that, while as a new Diaspora artist who was moving through space, he was encountering the times ceaselessly, but not manipulating them. This is obvious in many of his artistic productions from 1988 to 2007, when he had not yet fully crystalized a new, strange dimension to develop his Diaspora art. Obviously, Olagunju was still tied to the cord of his former contextual representation, presentation and decoration of the *Ọnà* art movement.² From 2012 to date he could no more resist resolving some intrapersonal artistic and practice conflicts, which many

² Moyo Okediji has made literary and visual knowledge of African arts and Diaspora issues and cultures an online interactive forum. He initiated this based on his scholastic exposure on African and Afro-American arts and cultural issues, and he tagged the forum University of African Arts (UAA). Okediji lives and works in Texas.

times are necessary tools for artists to break new grounds of artistic discovery. Now his creative concentrated attention on Gèlèdè becomes even more noteworthy.

Lagunju's artistic form and context have generated some scholarly interests in recent times, among art historians, art critics, and literary gurus, Nigerians, and non-Nigerian, including Biodun Jeyifo (2007), Dele Jegede (2014), Aderonke Adesanya (2014), Liz Connor (2015), Emily Watkins (2020), and Ed Cross Fine Art (2021). Out of these publications, it is Adesanya's study that extensively focuses on the Gèlèdè series of paintings, and the study remains the most elaborate on this set of Lagunju's paintings. Adesanya's study discusses the history, the reasons for the display of the Gèlèdè, and its spectacle among certain Yorùbá groups of Southwest of Nigeria. Figure 2 shows a Gèlèdè masquerade resting during a performance. Adesanya contextualizes the transposition of the mask and headdress on selected western portraits, although with political, imperial, social, religious, gender, fertility, and power implications. Adesanya also shows Lagunju's broad treatment of the Gèlèdè series as continuous visual exposition, extending the interrogation towards fashion in contemporary settings. This expansion of the narratives shows the inexhaustible possibilities of discussing the Gèlèdè as a form and movement, as a mask in history, as a youth and adult, as gender, generation, and class.



Figure 2. *A Gèlèdè Masquerade at Rest Source: Art and Life in Africa*. Christopher D. Roy. 1985. Print. Photo credit: John Drewal and Margaret Drewal. 1972.

Nonetheless, there are diverse possibilities of interrogating the subject matter. A range is: Gèlèdè vis-à-vis Yorùbá geographical cum-extended boundaries and socio-cultural diversity (Lawal 1996, Drewal, n.d.). Another is the discourse of Gèlèdè as spirits and goddesses, women, and identity, (Drewal and Drewal 1983:7-9; Ancestral Pride Temple n.d.; Ose Meji Temple 2015). Another possibility is looking at Gèlèdè as factors of spectacle and costume, mask, and masquerading (Drewal and Drewal 1983; Harper and Picton 2017; Drewal, n.d.). Also possible is the navigational point of Gèlèdè as satire and parody (Drewal 1992:177), and as a source to address fertility and abundance, good and evil, life and death (Rand African Art n.d.), lampooning and admonishing, and so on. And the second is: re-presentation of iconic western female images of different eras for several imaginable reasons. Therefore, the accompanying literature to an exhibition, such as Adesanya's in 2014, may hardly do justice

to the several, possible discourse angles raised and the evolving trends visible in Lagunju's current works. More so, Lagunju is daily intensifying his study of the Gèlèdè phenomenon. As such, a paper of this nature does not also pretend to achieve a conclusive feat. This study buttresses Adesanya's viewpoint and takes its roots of discourse therefrom.

Gèlèdè: The Goddess and the Spectacle

There is a need to understand at least in brief, the phenomenon called Gèlèdè, in order to access and apprehend the line of thought in this essay. The Gèlèdè society, in contemporary times, has largely been reduced to an object of spectacle, of entertainment, and performance. This function is one of Gèlèdè's main traditional roles, and purposes in the Yorùbá communities where it is performed and celebrated. It is also a correctional medium, and history recorder/provider of communal events that are showcased through elaborately carved headdresses and dance performances. The *Intersection curriculum* of Fowler Museum UCLA notes that Henry Drewal categorizes Gèlèdè into four main types:

Those that recognize respected members of the society, such as hunters, warriors, drummers, market women, and particularly the powerful "mothers." Those showing hierarchy, usually with several figural compositions or motifs of animals. Those that commemorate mythical events or people. Satirical masks making fun of a person or situation (n.d.:145).

Lawal (2012:21-2) also observes that the masquerade is mainly found among the Ketu, Egbado, Olori, and Awori Yorùbá of southwestern Nigeria. Gèlèdè, in its wholeness, exudes the physical and metaphysical attributes of the feminine gender, with the male as its traditional, and authentic or original promoter. Drewal and Drewal (1983:13-6) state that Gèlèdè is indeed

the art of singing, dancing, costuming, and music (Figure 3); it is an homage to the spiritual powers of women. In its celebration and performance, it entails some activities, and accompaniments, like the *Alé èfè* (Night of satire), *Òrò èfè* (Voice of satire), *Ebo* or *Ìpèsè* (a sacrifice/pack of sacrificial objects, sometimes filled with edibles or non-edibles, or both. In some instances, *èfè* is also regarded as a type of *Gèlèdè* (Waite, 2016:46-67).



Figure 3. *Gelede Dancer with Mask with Two Snakes Devoring Antelopes*. 1971.

Rand African Art.

The *Alé èfè* is the night that adherents propitiate the spirits of the ancestors, and also to satirize current events within the community that need to be culturally captured and recorded. During this period, new masks are also sometime unveiled, and new songs are composed on the night that kicks off the ceremony. It is accompanied with music, and vigorous dancing. Just like several other masquerade types of the Yorùbá people, various recognized *Ìgà* (homesteads, and traditionally recognized family compounds) are identified with old masks and headdresses, and newly commissioned ones are introduced to the celebrating community. More importantly, Oshadipe affirms, *Gèlèdè* masks are commissioned to celebrate particular things, periods, or events in the lives of a family, or a community (Oshadipe, Gbile. Personal interview. June

2,2017).³ These include but are not limited to a bountiful harvest year, fruitfulness, and safe delivery among the womenfolk, access to western commodities like bicycle, planes, or awareness of novel phenomena. Oshadipe also narrates that the Egbado people, for example, have an affinity for the leopard, an iconic sign of bravery, and this frequently appears as images on their masks (Oshadipe, Gbile. Personal interview. June 2, 2017).

Generally, among the communities that celebrate Gèlèdè, the masquerade is ultimately a male ensemble with several functions attached to it in the community festival (the seven Ibarapa communities exempted).⁴ This is demonstrated in dance rituals. “This is usually accompanied with heavy and sustained revelry, 100 per cent-proof gin, undiluted palm wine, *Èkúrú* (unsalted bean pudding), *Èkó* (corn meal), bush meat, and products of farm harvest,” Oshadipe emphasizes. He further reiterates that through the masks, or headdresses, one can sometimes identify the Gèlèdè as Gèlèdè *Ako* (male Gèlèdè), Gèlèdè *Abo* (female Gèlèdè), or Omọ Gèlèdè (pupil or child Gèlèdè).

Generally, the Gèlèdè festivities are packed to promote “respect for women within a particular culture...where men dominate the institution of kingship” (Lawal 2012:21). He went further to provide two reasons for this “pro-female stance”:

³ Gbile Oshadipe is a renowned journalist, photographer, former editor of *Lagos Life*, *PM News*, and a specialist on the history of the Egbado people. His unpublished M.Phil. degree thesis is titled: *Socio-economic history of the Egbado people*. Department of History, Faculty of Arts, University of Lagos, Nigeria, 1986.

⁴ Femi Johnson Taiwo, the son of Taiwo Oguntade Ogundele is a native of Aiyete in Ibarapa North Local Government of Oyo State, is a well-grounded traditionalist. He points out that, in the whole of Ibarapa region of the Yorùbá people (comprising of seven communities) towards the Okeogun environs, the Gèlèdè takes a different peculiarity in the form of its costuming. No mask, or masking, or headdress. Everybody appears in their new traditional attire (*bùbáandiró*- traditional blouse and wrapper for the women and *bùbáandşóró*- traditional top and trouser for men). For these people, Gèlèdè is a form of traditional music extravaganza (*orinibílè*) and performance where men, women and children of musico-dramatic talent participate with equal poise and pageantry. In Ayete, for example, regular Gèlèdè festival is held very January 2nd and families are noted for their dexterity in the Gèlèdèact will come to streets climbing rooftops, singing, and dancing to drumbeats led by *àpésin* (head drum) and supported with the *ómélé* (minor drum). However, what is common among all the Gèlèdè types of all Yoruba regions and communities is song functions: praise, humour, dirge, expository, warning, and congratulatory (Personal interview. June 8,2017).

The first is that the preservation of humanity depends on the role the female as mother, and the second has to do with the popular belief that certain Yoruba women called *àjé* [Our Mothers] have access to the mystical power the Olódùmarè gave to the first woman, venerated by the Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ society as Ìyá Nlá [the Great Mother] (Lawal 2012:21).

In all, some words reverberate when discussing the Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ society/festival, its activities, and societal functions, as noted separately by Drewal and Drewal (1990), Lawal (2012), and Adesanya (2014). These words include veneration, God/god and goddess, mask and masquerade, carver, femininity and mothers, fertility, authority, identity, respect, entertainment, *òsòròngà* (ubiquitously translated as witches, but fundamentally about the power of women as powerful custodians of mysteries, who are endowed with *àse*: the power to do and undo) (Abiodun, 1994); costume, performance, gender, family and community, lampoon, spirit and ancestors, sacrifice, song and dance, animals, everyday materials, technology, and colonial masters. With all this in mind, then, the “transposition” made by Lagunju, the interlacement of symbolic elements of the Yorùbá (Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀) masquerades, and the Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ iconic imagery, with primarily that of the western classical human images can be easily given analytical direction.

Lagunju’s Conflict Generation and Artistic Resolution

“My conscious artistic romance with Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ started with some graphic illustration” (Figure 4), and these were rendered in ink wash (Lagunju, Wole. Email. May 5, 2017). At this stage, Lagunju’s serious archival research into the constituents of Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ could still be at its infancy. A series of intrapersonal conflict would have engaged Lagunju’s artistic journey at this crucial time of creative determinacy: whether to explore the Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ in canvas painting or not, which he eventually did in 2012 and 2013. The background of the first series of painting

were elaborately patterned and colored. The paintings titled “*The gods, women and kings*” (Figure 5) and “*Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ’s opera I*” (Figure 6) were part of them. His Ọnà painting style was still prevalent and dominating, images in geometric and stylized patterns contest for attention. The decorative tendency overlaps consistently, but it all seemed also logical: it was a carryover of his established style of *Ọnàism*. But before the end of 2013 he started restricting the elaborate coloration to the costume (Figure 7). At this time, he began to fully engage a painterly interrogation of the nobles and monarchy of Great Britain, and the ever-burgeoning fashion industry in the West in relation to functional, physical, pretensions ascribed to Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ as a group of masks and a masquerading entities and phenomena.

Experimenting with Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ and finding a suitable equivalent to match his intended visual discourse has, to date, become Lagunju’s steady engagement in artistic form, and context presentation and manipulation. Consequently, the fantasy of incorporating the Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ mask/headdress, and masquerading has gradually altered Lagunju’s initial Ọnà artistic truism, which he has retained over the years, and of which quality is emboldened on its decorative mission. This initial fantasy is intensely obvious in Figure 5 with all manner of Yorùbá traditional forms, symbols, coloration, and decoration. The painting turns out to be the summary of the intersection of Lagunju’s old and new narratives of his native root in a Diasporic state and space. However, before his fantasy got entrenched and conceptually expressed in his current narrative, he announced his reunion with the Diaspora emphatically through his metaphoric color language in 2007 and 2008, in the painting series titled “*Globalization*.”⁵ But having resolved his conflict of artistic and cultural identity through the transpositions of archetypal and iconographical narratives from the Yorùbá of African descent

⁵ Globalisation Series were mainly reflections of Lagunju with the other worlds known as the Diaspora. The works were mainly paintings on canvas with accompanying installations of related and sometimes unrelated articles gathered and painted. They were done around 2007 and 2008 when Lagunju decided to become a Diaspora. They were abstract reflections of his experiences and expectations.

and the western world, Lagunju's new exploration, confidence, authority, and freedom clearly unfold in our view. A new art form through the potential capillarity for an inexhaustible identity narrative is born in the Gèlèdè series. Nonetheless, the African/Yorùbá motifs of 2012-13 have virtually vanished from Lagunju's design material pool, leaving only the Gèlèdè masks and headdresses. (Compare Figures 7 and 8 with Figures 5 and 6).



Figure 4. Wole Lagunju. 2007. *Graphic adaptation of gèlèdè*. Size: Variable dimensions. Source: Wole Lagunju.



Figure 5. Wole Lagunju. 2012. *The gods, women, and kings*. Acrylic painting on canvas. Size: 101.6cm x 203.2cm. Source: Wole Lagunju



Figure 6. Wole Lagunju. 2012. *Gèlèdè's opera I*. Acrylic painting on canvas. Size: 101.6cm x 203.2cm. Source: Wole Lagunju.



Figure 7. Wole Lagunju. *Gèlèdè II*. Acrylic painting on canvas.

Size: 160.2cm x 125.73cm. Source: Wole Lagunju.

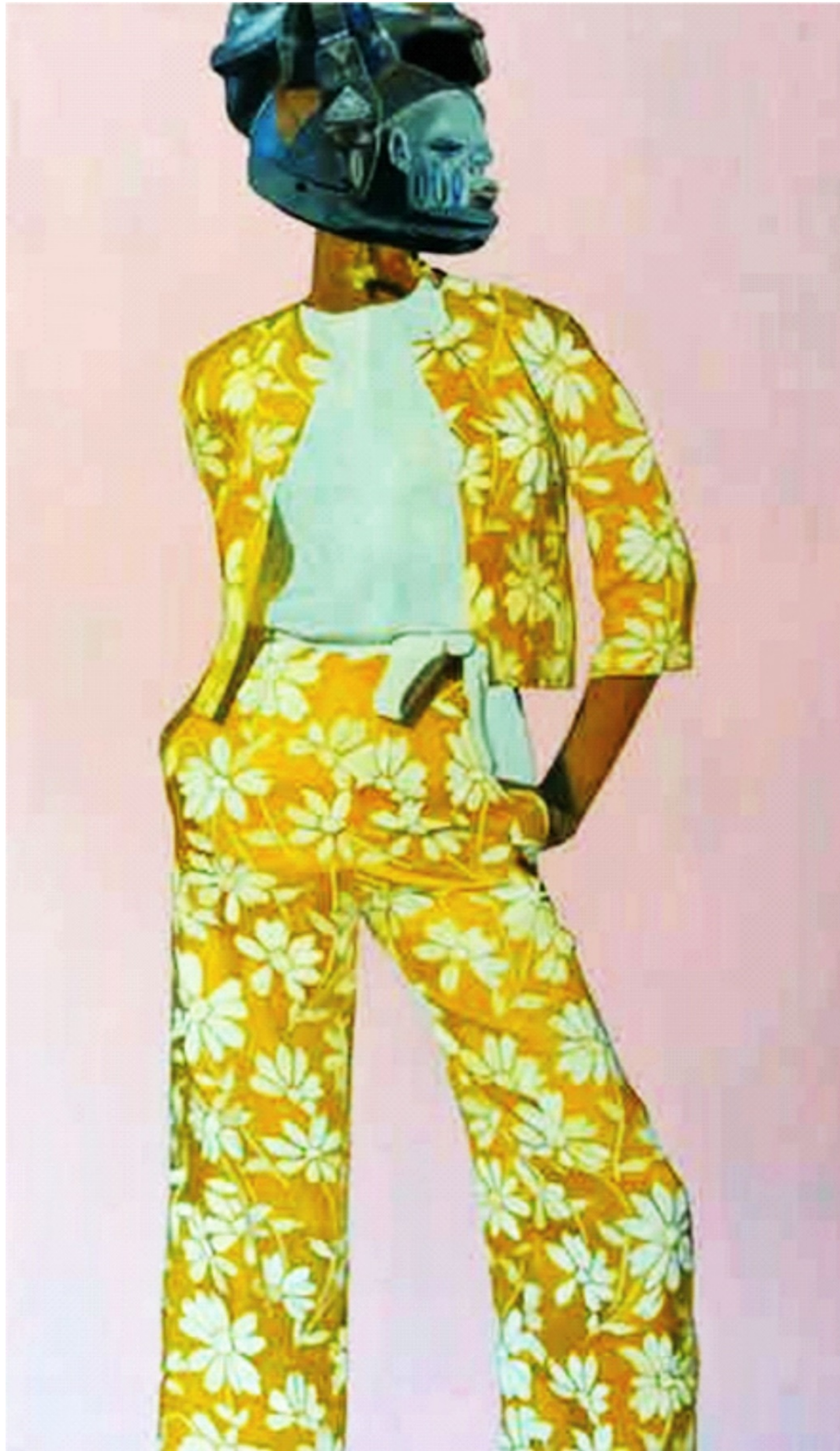


Figure 8. Wole Lagunju. 2014. *Vintage Glamour, 1965*. Acrylic painting on canvas.

Size: 154.94cm x 91.44cm. Source: Wole Lagunju.



Figure 9. Wole Lagunju. 2016. *The independence years*. Oil painting on canvas.

Size: 177.8cm x 134.62cm. Source: Wole Lagunju.



Figure 10. Wole Lagunju. 2016. *Attitude rocking*. Oil painting on canvas.

Size: 179.07cm x 125.73cm. Source: Wole Lagunju.



Figure 11. Wole Lagunju. 2006. *Adire I*. Acrylic painting on canvas.

Size: 91.44cm x 91.44cm. Source: Wole Lagunju.

On the other hand, when the elaborate background decorations reappear in late 2015 and beyond, with equally colorful, eclectic images in standing fashion profiles, Lagunju creatively displays freedom that knows no bounds. Example of this trend can be seen in Figures 9 and 10. This visual repositioning of commentary is with all pomp and pageantry: in a characteristic Art Nouveau manner, while remaining basically biomorphic in their simple forms and collations. He has thus, reprocessed his Qnáism sense of artistic truism (Figure 11 shows the initial Lagunju Qná style) into a sense of artistic realism, where all forms of abstraction are totally disengaged and a neo-romanticism in Qnáism develops. So far, Lagunju's engagement in Western costumes and fashion mimicries through the Yoruba socio-political lens is constructing a landmark reconnaissance of a gradual archetypal formulation.

Furthermore, 2016 and 2017 were the periods when the manifestation of this crucial and noticeable romance with unlimited, unrestricted freedom that is inherent in Western

modernistic form and style, where hard-edged patterns are downplayed in culture, politics, art, economic policies, and management. Rigid forms, bodies, and backgrounds also intermix in their visual and color relations (Figure 11). Lagunju's new emotion, where history, time, and pattern do not take precedence, is again gradually overriding the status quo. A symphonic playfulness appears. A new standpoint has again emerged and has gradually been established (compare formal renditions in Figures 9 and 10, with Figures 5 and 6). As Lagunju noted in an electronic conversation with the author in 2018, he was then engaging in a body of work on Gèlèdè in inks (Figures 12 and 13). With this, he took a brief stop to interrogate masking tradition and the proverbial usage of the word "masquerade." *Eégún òlá ní nk'èyìn ìgbàlẹ̀* (the big masquerade is the last in conclave - to come out in the spectacular grand finale, to show its prowess in public).

Lagunju's 2019 paintings started to present the Gèlèdè from a political and militaristic personality point of view (Figures 14 and 15), invariably conjuring a chauvinistic undertone. The earlier paintings were dominated by images from the purviews of British monarchy and subsequently, the field of American entertainment. In essence, Lagunju's most daring achievement is in the exploration of the infinite nature of liberty promised in one of the qualities of what are modern arts.



Figure 12. Wole Lagunju. 2017. *Harem mask*. Ink drawing on papers.

Size: 30.48cm x 22.86cm. Source: Wole Lagunju.



Figure 13. Wole Lagunju. 2017. *Harem mask*. Ink drawing on papers.

Size: 30.48cm x 22.86cm. Source: Wole Lagunju.



Figure 14. Wole Lagunju. *Head of State*. 76.5cm x 102cm. Source: Wole Lagunju.



Figure 15. Wole Lagunju. 2019. *Head of State II*. Oil painting on canvas.

Size: 106.68cm x 55.88cm. Source: Wole Lagunju.

The Spirit of Gèlèdè in the Queen and Other Images

As people's thoughts and actions expand, so do their appetite for new things increase. This observation can be traced in the modern (and postmodern) behavioral tendencies of many contemporary artists around the world. Wilder (1969:35) acknowledges that "A great many modern artists and critics speak for special new strata, new kinds of men, produced by the conditions of our society...." In fact, this behavioral circumstance provokes some level of dissidence and counter-movements in many of the artistic productions of recent times. The resultant effect is, however, mostly imaginative when properly handled (Prost and Vincent 1991:147-48). Ogunfuwa (2015:89-90) explains that when artistic creation is behind the charting of a new course of thought or line of action, intrapersonal (and occasionally interpersonal) dis-alignments occur and the resolutions of these manifest or end up as artistic explorations, discoveries, innovations, and/or developments. These are conflicts that sometimes lead to exemplary development and resolutions. These conflicts have been resolved through several styles that evolved. Wilder notes this tendency earlier:

Not only is the individual artist conditioned by his own particular form and degree of exposure to the cultural shift but various aesthetic and philosophical versions of the situation have their influence: surrealism, apocalypticism, psychologism and existentialism. The main point to bear in mind, however, is that all such psychodrama and creativity seek contact with the real (1969:46).

Whenever Lagunju engages in an artistic romance with a particular conceptual idea, oftentimes revolves around his personal convictions, he is painstaking in his attention and execution. For example, his current interrogations of artistic ideas revolve around an engagement with the real, or what can be referred to as the natural; and the culturally unreal,

but of which conception can be mentally conceivable and be contextually intelligible (Figure 16). His enactment of new ideas can be likened to the process of romanticism.

Romantic ideas blossom when realities are engaged with other elements from, or of our dreams and fantasies, and all are blended in proportion to result in aesthetically pleasing images or presentations, irrespective of the unnaturalness of romanticism. Historically, romanticism as an idea reacted to naturalism and this conception evolved between the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Gombrich 1984:382, 471, 486; Karl 1985:22, 481; Weston 1978:14-5, 171-74). The new romanticists, however, surfaced in the late nineteenth century and made waves in the fine arts, music, and literature until approximately the early twentieth century (Huyghe ed. 1969:397). Their motive was to further the ideology behind classical romanticism. They value emotion, fantasy, dream, exotic image, symbol, myth, sheer beauty, poetry, survival, heroism, adventure, and, at the pinnacle, romance. A description that states a general feeling of Neo-romanticism is given by Wakelin in the catalog of a British neo-romanticism art collection (2004:5). It is the distinctive infusion of “Modernist idioms” with “Romantic themes.” From this angle, therefore, a scholar may also begin to see, understand, and interrogate many of the Gèlèdè painting genres of Lagunju and their hidden conceptualizations.

Though this set of work will continually promote the possibilities of contextualizing and expanding visual periscopes and commentaries for critical thinkers in the humanities through cultural, historical, and symbolical severances and realignments of two culturally disparate images, Lagunju’s visual play with a seventeenth century painting of Queen Elizabeth I (Figure 17) and a few other noble and personalities may still provoke negative criticisms from conservative observers. How will the present Queen Elizabeth III or members of the royal family appraise or react to *Gèlèdè II* (Figure 7), *Foibles of imperialism* or *The spectacle?* (Figure 16). Some of pieces in the Gèlèdè series were displayed at the London Art Fair of 2018. All paintings in this thematic frame of monarchical interpretation or connection

remain in the artist's collection to date. The question then is, though *Gèlèdè II, The golden age* and a few others were exhibited at the Fair without censorship or partial open reproval, why was not a single one sold? This query becomes necessary because almost all other thematic paintings in the *Gèlèdè* series, which are not monarchically related, are already in private collections. It is high time therefore, that a deeper understanding of the gallery and art collectors' realms—that is, the working state of its political and sales complexities—particularly in England and generally in Europe, are subjected to continuous scholarly interrogation.



Figure 16. Wole Lagunju. 2013. *The spectacle*. Acrylic painting on canvas.

Size: 160.02cm x 114.3cm. Source: Wole Lagunju.



Figure 17. Artist unknown. c. 1600. *Elizabeth I of England in coronation robe*. Oil painting on panel. Size: 127.3cm x 99.7cm. Source: Nation Portrait Gallery, London.

Let us, also consider Queen Elizabeth I's characteristics: lover of dance, user of heavy make-up, which she used in covering the scars on her face (marks resulting from smallpox infection as a child), as well as lover of Britain to the extent that she satirically wedded it, and this became her political symbol. These characteristics are functionally similar to some of those of the Gèlèdè. The masquerade is usually a skillful dancer, his headdress is usually heavily painted, and his (her in disguise) admonition is to correct vices of people in his community. As such, the Queen and the Gèlèdè understandably become spectacles of poise, pageantry, and exaltation. This paradigm may justify Lagunju's play with superimpositions of iconoclastic

images to logically emphasize the appropriateness of some of his ideas to modern, unhindered thoughts.

Morrill and Greenblatt (2019) reiterate a notion by Roger Ascham, who was one of Queen Elizabeth I tutors. They quote Ascham as admitting that Queen Elizabeth's "mind has no womanly weakness... her perseverance is equal to that of a man." Should we, then, also admit that the adornment, so to say, through the mask (see Figures 7) is justified, at least, in honor of her masculine quality? More so, she reigns in her majestic form in a patriarchal society. From a parallel equation, such duty is given to Gèlèdè: where the woman in all her symbolic and iconic qualities is revered and celebrated by the men in a patriarchal Yorùbá society. These cultural situations, in their unique forms and appearances, reflect some similarities. The determination of which mask or headdress goes on an image is, however, determined by aesthetics, chance, design, and harmonious consideration.

Since the spirit of design (even in people's physiological make up) has a mission to "creating solutions," Lagunju has employed this elaborately in this set of works. However, one noticeable dimension in the genre is that while design has been articulated for the purpose of appropriating and longing for contextual meaning, playfulness with form, color and image positions begins with the fashion models whose stage presence, skill and performance are usually proto-typical of the Gèlèdè. The paintings in this style illustrate Lagunju's placement of these works in the-now context of imagery and youth behavior; that is, contemporaneity, neo-romanticism, and postmodernism. The artistic display extensively engages us in satire, humor, and parody, to liberate the contextual premises of the art from their encasement in artistic, cultural, and historic irrelevance. Additionally, the simple understanding of design as something created through patterned principles, through some functional, basic elements for visual presentation, also manifest in these paintings. And just as the neo-romanticists extoll beauty, sometimes to its utopian limits, so is this romance visible in an historic search by

Lagunju, which culminated in many of the paintings in this genre. Color, pattern, and icon were juxtaposed to create symbolic beauty that is rationalized from the aestheticism of the African cultural performance, beauty, and adornment, with an extension of the personification and spiritualization of the human head, *Orí* in Yoruba language. Notable discourses on Yorùbá aesthetics and cosmological relevance of *Orí* are Rowland Abiodun (2014), Osi Audu (2004), Adeboye, Fọlárànmí and Umoru-Oke (2018), Babatunde Lawal (2012:13-4; 1985). Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́ adorns the head with its headdress, knowing the importance of the preservation of that part of the human body.

The Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́ paintings have created new aesthetic appraisals and reference. Nonetheless, Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́ has its known meaning in Yorùbá cultural context. Likewise, the many Western classical portraits that Lagunju appropriated. However, the transposition creates a new meaning from a deconstructionist's point of view. A few examples shall suffice. In Figures 6 and 18, similar Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́ headdresses are used for the two images that represent two different classes and races, or skin colors. In essence, this may be translated to mean that irrespective of color, or race, or class, what matters is what is in the head, and the archetypal woman is the same. Furthermore, the headdress in Figure 10 was taken from Figure 19, while the lady used in *Vintage glamour, 1965* (Figure 8) was also borrowed from the site of Figure 20.

Altogether, Lagunju skillfully presents a story crafted from two parallel cultures influenced in time and environmental space through a protracted intermingling of race, commerce, and socio-politics. As such, he captivates the viewer by introducing an unsettling mood into their sensibilities. A twenty-first century naturalistic painting of Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́, for instance, has the tendency to say nothing new, but to reiterate the facts already known about Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́. The same goes for a classical Western portrait painting revisited today. As Pink (2006:103) points out, “what begins to matter more is the ability to place these [already known] facts in *context* and to deliver them with *emotional impact*” [Italicized emphasis his]. The mood

or emotion that is inevitably cultivated is propelled by story formulation, for the artist turns to a heightened explication of the natural with feelings emerging from the innermost senses, which are then pictorially summoned and rendered. As a counterpoise to story building, Ronald Inglehart says: there is “a gradual shift from ‘materialist’ values... toward ‘postmaterialist’ priorities (emphasizing self-expression and quality of life)” (Pink 2006:219). Nonetheless, Gregg Easterbrook emphasizes that, “A transition from material want to meaning want is a progress on an historically unprecedented scale—involving hundreds of millions of people—and may eventually be recognized as the principal cultural development of our age,” which is the conceptual age (Pink 2006:219).

Generally, Lagunju’s Gèlèdè series has been extensively contextualized by Adesanya (2014:12-68). Her discourse brought to fore stories, poetry, and parallelisms among Lagunju, Diaspora art and artists, and visual idioms of African and Western cultures. Thus, heroic sensations can be reasoned from her study and eulogy. Her story of the Gèlèdè painting series has also been made to span over two centuries, and the lessons learnt will gradually become impactful in the scholarship of Afro-Western art, and African Diaspora art and artists. In essence, she has compressed space and time, the ability achievable in artistic and literary endeavors: the real (natural) and the imagined (relatively untrue or fictional) are compressed and blended into one and meanings are deduced. All of this we are bound to ultimately seek. Lagunju in these paintings encapsulates this dimension of contemporary thought and set a course for the longing for meanings attributable to the Gèlèdè series.

Finally, the amplification of a symphonic moment is an eventual coming to terms with the perfect assemblage of the rhythmical, the counterpoises, and the re-created. It is the organization of abstractions, brought into logical cohesion. The symphonic thinking dictates the ability to coralize, manage, and balance relationships, while connecting individual elements to produce something new. Occasionally, the greatest ideas arise from a simple combination

of two existing ideas, which no one previously imagined could be united. Lagunju's Gèlèdè paintings are implicitly encrypted with these properties. Some forms and elements that were already used in his earlier Gèlèdè paintings are re-explored. The paintings titled *Marilyn Monroe and my African sensibilities* (Figure 21) and *Yoruba blues, cassava leaves* (Figure 22), easily come into view. A part of the elaborate patterns on the flowing gown that Marilyn Monroe is clayed with, is incorporated into Figure 22 like embroidery. Monroe has been spared the Gèlèdè headdress, which is hung by her side, just like a couple of other paintings without mask or headdress. Since Monroe was a celebrity with lots of panache during her heydays, and because several paintings sold in the 1980's by other artists display her bright, yellow-tinted hair, unmasking Monroe becomes symbolically, commercially, and gender-significant. This same reverence Lagunju gives Queen Elizabeth I in *Gèlèdè II* (plate 6) where he retained the Queen's crown and used a mask, rather than as headdress. These unique templates further show that Lagunju consciously determines and carefully selects his images and transpositions.



Figure 18. Wole Lagunju. 2017. *Gender rites, spectral performances*. Oil painting on canvas. Size: 190.5cm x 125.73cm. Source: Wole Lagunju.



Figure 19. A gèlèdèheadress appropriated by Wole Lagunju. Source of mask: <https://www.hamillgallery.com/YORUBA/YorubaGeledeMasks/YorubaGelede06.html>. Accessed May 22, 2017.



Figure 20. *La modellaveruschka....* 1965. Product advert. Source: <https://www.archiviostore.it/magazine/irene-galitzine-la-principessa-che-invento-il-pigiama-palazzo/>. Accessed May 8, 2017.



Figure 21. Wole Lagunju. 2013. *Marilyn Monroe and my African sensibilities*. Oil painting on canvas. Size: 153.67cm x 125.73cm. Source: Wole Lagunju.



Figure 22. Wole Lagunju. 2018. *Yoruba blues, cassava leaves*. Oil painting on canvas. Sizes: 132.08cm x 117.8cm. Source: Wole Lagunju.

Conclusion

A critical mind may not attempt to understand fantasy and mythological expressions without coming to terms with time and space. Based on this creative dimension, and with an unhindered expression of images in, and of cultural and artistic time and space, a cautious writer can coherently discuss the works of past and contemporary artists. In concrete terms, this dimension culminates in epochs, eras, Movements, and so on. In historic times, this dimension ends up in the ideologies and conceptual “isms” of artistic periods. It is the different philosophies and/or characters that embody these Movements and basically the adherents of such fantasies and mythical hegemonies, whether emotional, political, artistic, or socio-cultural, and their justification.

Lagunju has treaded this line in recent artistic time and space with a view to capturing in a unique way, a peculiar form, style, and contextual relevance in the global art market. The understanding and manipulation of space-time have become his utmost weapon, while sensibility only apportioned usage and the length allotted. On a two-dimensional surface, his Gèlèdè mask has been contesting for attention by playing a visual game with the White and nonwhite people of the West. The interlock of two major disparate images has created a compelling sense of time-trap. It forces the viewer of any of the Gèlèdè paintings to visualize or create a momentary identity shift, an inescapable participation in a psychological drama of image separation; of image abuse, or guilt, or recompense; and of how the mask takes control of image wearing it. And because Lagunju’s expressions in this series are getting more colorful, there is then a signal of approval of these satirical images, which in themselves are silently, politically comical, of our pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial times. This may be annoying for a fixated mind, but humorous for an open-minded observer of the painting. As such, through the Gèlèdè painting, Lagunju has successfully taken a location in the Diaspora, where he will participate in the discourse of Black and African identity expression, and

Africa's incursion into political and socio-cultural dominions of the West. The Gèlèdè masquerade, with its costume re-conceived as attires for the Elizabethan, Victorian, and dandy eras, is a manifestation of all these and more.

Lagunju's revelation could also have suggested some complex reversals. One, satirically, could be: what you see is the reflection of what the image is. And two, paradoxically, could be the ghost suspended in our imaginations for an African re-presentation, socio-historic and political knowledge. Other implications can also be surmised. So far, the mimicry and engagements of Lagunju in Western costumes and fashion through the Yorùbá socio-political lens are constructing a landmark reconnaissance of gradual archetypal formulation. His presentations of this serial, then, present a multi-complication, but they also give room for possible variables of potent analyzes. Lagunju, overall, has prompted us to see extensions generated in space-time as conditioning entities for our reflections on, and of things, and activities around-and-about us. But in all, the works have drawn us, effectively, to that eclectic sovereignty deposited in contemporaneity, which today's arts pulled themselves to attain. It is in this dominion of creativity, which willingly entangles nature with exotic imagination, to which most of Lagunju's Gèlèdè paintings from 2012 to the present belong.

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