

Creative Art, Cultural Exchange and Economic Development in Africa

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Introduction

The focus of this paper is on “creative art” as opposed to “creative arts,” which is a wider umbrella that accommodates all forms of arts, literary and artistic. The creative arts are synesthetic that is, having the capacity to interpret one art form into another as richly evident in carnivals and festivals. The creative art is also referred to as visual arts or the fine and applied arts with different sub-sections of studio practice such as painting, sculpture, graphic designs, textile and fashion designs, photography, drawing, ceramics and so on. These are the skill-based areas of visual arts with learnership competences and professionalism that can help African countries overcome some of their economic, social and political challenges through job creation, skilled manpower development and economic growth that align with 21st century productivity requirements.

The creative art, through its biennales, workshops, residencies, cross-border collaborations, exhibitions and knowledge sharing platforms, helps to promote cultural exchange and create economic opportunities for African artists and their countries. The transformative power of cultural exchange through creative art also promotes tourism and hospitality. For cultural exchange to drive economic development, African governments must create the enabling environment through policy frameworks, support for artists to share their works on the world stage and encourage intra and inter-continental artistic mobility. The cooperation of African artists is an urgent imperative rather than a pious ideal.

According to African Development Bank (AfDB), Africa’s economic development challenges range from conflicts, climate change, high debt service costs, poor governance, weak human capital and dependence on oil. The last two challenges underscore the need for a critical shift towards human capacity development in the creative sectors with emphasis on skills development and strengthening the technical capacities and operational capabilities of agencies and institutions that support the creative art as a viable alternative to oil and gas within the ambience of the creative industries.

What is Creative Art?

Creative art refers to the fine and applied arts or visual arts discipline or simply the subject art which involves drawing, painting, sculptures, ceramics, textile and fashion, craft, graphic design, photography, printmaking, industrial design, installation art, performance art, new media art and so on. The creative art is essentially a knowledge domain which deals with the faculties of conception, perception and appreciation with particular references to visual images either expressed as ideas, mental abstractions and in two or three-dimensional formats.

The creative art employs a variety of materials, media, tools, methodical processes and techniques to communicate ideas in visual forms through encoding and decoding of messages which are perceptible to physical senses, expression of thoughts, intuition, deduction and identifications necessary for tourism experiences. Creative art involves the making of objects that are aesthetically pleasing which may be decorative, conceptual or purely functional and utilitarian, and may be used for various purposes ranging from commercial and industrial productions to private pleasure, social use, for domestic or public environment.

Creative art embodies the cultivation of talents and skills, imaginations, memory and inspirations by Artists which might also entail their use of familiar materials to create. For instance, car tyres can be used to create unfamiliar images of objects in a way that stimulate emotional responses, express enquiries into something, for entertainment, for advocacy or to symbolize societal aspirations. Creative art encourages spontaneous development of new ideas, critical thinking in the exploration of ideas and materials, and the appropriation of the values of lateral thinking, creativity, appreciation, entrepreneurship, improvisation, resourcefulness, innovation, experimentation, precision among others, as part of the creative art process.

The creative art remains a significant part of a nation's social capital and a vehicle for economic and cultural identities which transmit values and ideas of a nation, creating job opportunities and defining patterns of life and human experiences across time and space. If properly harnessed can contribute to tourism exploration and development and as a vital tool for economic growth and national development. It is also part of the creative industries which provides objectified cultural capital of creative goods and services, and belongs to the larger sector of creative economy with economic activities derived from creativity. Creative art is part and parcel of a nation's cultural resources which include heritage sites, craft traditions, artistic expressions, monuments, architecture and artifacts, and are considered national treasures or national assets which contribute to national identity and

pride, social and intellectual growth, and the economic wellbeing of a nation. All over Africa, the creative art is contributing to the experience economy of tourism, hospitality, entertainment, customized design experiences, interactive and memorable sensory stimuli that create immersive experiences for tourists as may be witnessed in museums, galleries and carnivals. Creative art helps to upgrade a city's image by increasing the attractiveness of the city through public arts in roundabouts, parks, public buildings, landscapes and festivals which attract tourists and benefit the city socially and economically.



Plate 1: Calabar Carnival making use of creative art as part of the synesthetic value of art. The picture shows sculpture models of slaves used by a choreographer in dance, music, drama and film.

Theoretical Perspective

The article adopts the functionalist theoretical perspective in the analysis and interpretation of findings that support the role creative art and cultural exchange play in economic development in Africa. Creative art combines traditional and contemporary art to create designs of ethnic and regional character based on African people's aesthetics and their needs. Such designs also changed as African people's desires and needs changed over time through the adoption of new techniques, concepts and methods which have today defined what creative art is in Africa.

The encounter with Western world has brought about new ideas, concepts, culture, technology and methods which combined on a global scale to provide new functions for the creative art as different from what existed in African traditional settings. This has also widened the lexicon of creative art by introducing new forms of art, and the understanding of what art could be and the socio-economic roles it could play. Examples include environmental design, furniture design, industrial product design, graphic design and a holistic design approach to the creative art.

The functionalist framework pays attention to functionality and practicality of the creative art, in other words the full expression of creative art is its function and purpose in society accompanied by its design. Therefore, function and design have a symbiotic relationship. However, we may need to de-emphasize the connection between artwork and function, as art works must not be intended to have a certain function or that it is only good if it has a function. Functionalists do not agree that all works of art perform functions that are viewed as descriptive in definition rather they agree that good art works have aesthetic value or valuable visual characteristics which express thoughts and feelings.

Socrates observed that “anything we use if it fulfills its functional purpose well, it will be both good and beautiful at the same time, and otherwise it will be both evil and ugly at the same time” (Yusheng, L and Rong, C. 2019). Functionalists maintain that art is functional if it is suitable for presentation, intended for a public and enfranchised as art right from its creation. Functionalism as a theory entails the fulfilling of a function which is a special kind of action that serves a certain purpose, and that cultural institutions function to meet the basic physical and psychological needs of people, so also cultural institutions maintain equilibrium and cohesion of a society.

The creative art is part of the cultural institutions and the underlying structures of societies of different cultures that make up a country. Malinowski, the chief proponent of functionalism theory according to McGee and Warms (2000), believed that culture existed to satisfy seven basic human needs: nutrition, reproduction, bodily comforts, safety, relaxation, movement and growth. It is essentially clear that the creative art functions to satisfy the above human needs either as objects capable of affording aesthetic experiences or as forms of people’s spirits expressed in festivals, exhibitions of modern art and display of design products with the embodiment of new technologies.

In this era of economic globalization, standardization and knowledge economy, the engaging of creative art resources at the continental level through cultural exchange provides a wide range of functions towards achieving economic development in Africa.

The Creative Art of Africa

Africa has a long and distinguished creative art history dating back to prehistoric periods of the rock art in the Sahara and across the regions of Africa, and such other creative expressions found in bronze, jewelries, ivories, wood carvings, stone carvings, potteries, brass, leather works, textiles, body adornment, wall decorations, crafts, implements etc dispersed among over 3,000 ethnic groups in Africa. The rich cultural experiences of art

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forms produced by the various ethnic groups portray their adaptations and interactions with the natural environments and survival mechanisms.

The indigenous art of Africa refers to the traditional art of Africa combined with crafts which are rich and diverse. They are produced mostly manually from locally sourced materials with the aim of satisfying utilitarian and functional purposes, particularly community needs. The traditional African arts and crafts are the early sciences, technological discoveries and applications of indigenous knowledge among the various African groups. African creative artworks are part of the cultural cumulative body of knowledge handed down through generations by means of cultural transmission. They constitute part of the visual culture materials that form the larger set of relationships between all living things, people and their environment.

The traditional artists and craftsmen were mostly trained through the apprenticeship system and became the skilled workforce of their societies. They also provided implements for agriculture and cultural products for economic sustenance and creative development of their societies. The traditional artists and craftsmen produced physical objects of artworks that became part of the tangible culture in festivals and ceremonies that embodied cultural values and formed part of the cultural collections which today are housed mostly in museums and art galleries overseas as cultural objects and artifacts.



Plate 2: Benin Bronze (at the forefront of restitution of African art).

The creative art of the African continent draws from the rich artistic diversity of styles, techniques and materials derived from diverse cultural influences

of the social, political and religious life which existed long before Arab and European contacts. This has helped to correct the misconceptions that traditional Africa consisted of primitive societies that were incapable of engaging in the noble process of creativity, and run as a homogenous entity with a single culture and without history.

Next to the traditional African arts of the continent are art of external influences, the Islamic art which originated around 7th century AD due to contacts and trade with Arabs and spread across various regions of Africa. Others include the Coptic and Christian arts of 3rd and 4th centuries AD found mostly around Egypt, Ethiopia, Congo and Angola. The next are the Western art of the 18th and 20th centuries which arose out of colonialism. The various art forms of external influences sometimes incorporated traditional African art elements which are today known as contemporary or modern African art with varied styles of expressions, media, materials and techniques, ideas and themes that are not limited by traditional boundaries.

The contemporary/modern African artists are those formally trained in Western art education and are at the centre stage of creative art practice in Africa. The traditional artists and neo-traditional artists are gradually fading away due to shift in patronage and the emphasis on corporate culture. The contemporary African artists, unlike their predecessors, are confronted with new media and technologies with which to explore and extend the frontiers of art, and tap into broader art markets, reach wider audiences and increase their success rates particularly through cultural exchanges.

Cultural Exchange and Economic Development in Africa

According to International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences (2015) "cultural exchange refers to the international sharing and reception of cultural products, leading to the export of meaning beyond national borders and the transformation of cultural interpretations". The creative art is one of such vital cultural elements used as a medium for cultural exchange in promoting economic development in Africa. Cultural exchange covers a broad spectrum of activities ranging from social, political, educational, cultural cooperation to tourism, technology and so on. It provides opportunities for creative artists of different African countries to come together, share ideas, learn new art techniques and offer unique perspectives to their skills. In the process, they learn new methods and styles of art, meet different professionals and key players in the African continents. Thus, they will begin to discover differences and commonalities of the various sub-regions of Africa.

African nations should invest in cultural exchange programmes that focus on economic development by supporting grants and policy frameworks that encourage artistic mobility and cross cultural collaborations as a means of

empowering the creative artists. Corporate organizations and wealthy individuals can also support artists who challenge boundaries and inspire new perspectives. African governments can reduce logistical barriers, such as high cost of travelling, limited funding opportunities, visa restrictions and travel grants all of which can assist African artists to operate within the continent and beyond. Such will assist African nations to harness the transformative power of cultural exchange in driving economic development and ensuring that Africa's creative art becomes part of the global cultural conversation.

The 54 countries in Africa can invest in creative art as a means of cultural exchange for economic development. This is attainable by featuring creative art among nation states through arts and cultural festivals, official ceremonies, art exhibitions, carnivals, art fairs, trade fairs, fashion shows, artistic collaborations, exchange programmes between national museums, national galleries and such other art/cultural institutions. The repertoire of Africa's creative art expressions can empower African artists with sustainable income and opportunities, and create financial stability which enables them to create and innovate thereby contributing to economic growth and development of their respective countries. The gross domestic product (GDP) of any nation after all is the direct results of returns on economic investments.

Travelers seek authentic and unique experiences and are increasingly attracted to destinations where they can experience local arts and culture. The diverse, rich artistic and cultural heritage of Africa attracts visitors and generates revenues for the tourism industry. This leads to increased spending on lodging and accommodations, visits to site attractions, increase on international trade on arts and cultural products, creation of local jobs, encouraging entrepreneurship experiences, museums and galleries exhibitions all of which leads to business prospects and economic prosperity that transcends national boundaries.

Creative artists at the individual levels contribute to economic development by creating cultural goods and services in a variety of sectors as designers in manufacturing, commercial, information, communications and advertising. They participate in wholesale and retail trade, scientific research, and render other professional and technical services. In this regard, creative artists are known to play great roles in African textiles and fashion industry by introducing styles and trends that are contemporary in the world of fashion. Examples are abound, the Ghana Kente which fuses traditional Kente patterns into modern fashion, and the Aso-oke fashion of the Yoruba of Nigeria, among others. South Africa's thriving tourism industry is attributable to her vibrant art scenes and cultural heritages. The Maasai art of

beads, crafts and fashion have marketed Kenya's tourism by attracting tourists and promoting local economies.

Carnivals remain a major instrument for cultural exchange and economic development among African countries where creative artists play crucial roles in creating immersive experiences through fabricating creative objects, designing floats, fashion fabrics, installations, decorative and model objects (Ecoma, 2012). Artists remain the backbone of all carnivals' visual spectacles, conveying powerful cultural expressions as seen in most carnivals in African countries, namely Nigeria, Morocco, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Togo, Cameroon, Angola and South Africa. Artists visually project the social ideas of cultures and traditions of such nations, interpret the themes and elements of history and present them in carnivals for public view and appreciation.

The Pan African Art Movement which started in the early 20th Century was a response of African artists to the oppressive forces of colonialism. This led to the Negritude movement led by African intellectuals, artists, and writers who sought to redefine African identity and celebrate its cultural heritage. In the 1960s and '70s, as many African countries gained independence, the emergence of African art festivals started with the World festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal in 1966. It was followed by the second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture in Lagos, Nigeria in 1977 popularly known as FESTAC. The third edition of FESTAC AFRICA was held in May 2023, at Arusha in Tanzania, the 4th was in Kisumu, Kenya (August – September 2024). The events brought together participants, creative artists, entrepreneurs, academics and performers from across Africa and beyond. The major aim of the festival is to promote cultural exchange and economic development in Africa.

In Africa, creative artists also collaborate through biennales, workshops, exhibitions and residencies for cultural exchanges and economic opportunities. The biennales include the prominent Dakar Biennale in Senegal, Luanda Biennale in Angola, East Africa Art Biennale with headquarters in Tanzania, Lagos Biennale in Nigeria, Johannesburg Biennale in South Africa among several others. The Bruce Onobrakpeya Art Foundation of the Harmattan workshop attracts participants from African countries and Europe. Bodies like Arts Connect Africa (ACA) founded in 2019 and also African Culture Fund (ACF) are all expanding their thriving ecosystems to include the African visual arts. These creative art events attract international investments and collectors, increase recognition of artists at the global stage and boost the economy of the host countries.

Conclusion

Africa Pulse, World Bank (2024) report states that over the next three decades Africa will experience the fastest increase in the working age population with a projected net increase of 740 million people by 2050, and up to 12 million youths will enter the labour market yet only about 3 million new formal wage jobs are currently created each year. It also recommends that the stride towards recovery should be investing in human capital and fostering economic diversification in the non-oil sector.

The creative art as shown in this article has the capacity to drive innovations and cultural exchange, and contribute to employment generation, trade in cultural goods and services, create skills acquisitions and entrepreneurship as strides towards investing in human capital development and fostering economic diversification in the non-oil sectors of African economies. The potentials of Cultural Creative Industries in Africa are generally underutilized, and lack comprehensive estimates and reliable data collection mechanisms to measure their impacts on African economies. This explains the need for African countries to improve on data collection and analysis, address intellectual property rights, and formalize the informal creative art sector in order to align it with the public and private sectors. The social media is contributing significantly in promoting the creative art in the huge international arts and leisure industries. Therefore, African countries must see the need to apply methodologies and models that will help them to assess the economic impacts of creative art sector in their respective economies. This paper lends a voice to the need for policy makers to direct more investments in the creative art sector of Africa recognized as the 5th largest creative market of cultural products globally.

The *Creative Economy Outlook* of the United Nations (2024) shows that the cultural creative industries have a role to play in shaping Africa's economic future. This paper therefore, recommends that African governments should support entrepreneurs and start-up businesses in the creative art sectors, promote artists internationally, attract foreign investments from international banks and agencies such as African Development Bank, Canadian International Development Agency, French Development Agency, Japan International Cooperation Agency, European Union, German Agency for International Development among others.

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