



YEMISI SHYLLON
MUSEUM OF ART
PAN-ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

Artwork Information Sheet **22**

JIMOH AKOLO'S SOJOURNERS



The Sojourners, 1967, Oil on Canvas, 117 x 74cm © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University

INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, the Zaria school of art has made a significant contribution to modernism. Jimoh Akolo's style, which is reminiscent of European avant-garde expressionists, fauvists, and impressionists, originated from his cradle at the Nigerian College of Art, Science, and Technology (NCAST) in Zaria. His bold colour choices, conventional types and subjects, and impressionist strokes demonstrate this much of the time. His painting within the collection of the Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, 'The Sojourners', exemplifies such attributes. He is often mentioned as a member of the Zaria art school alongside Bruce Onobrakpeya, Yusuf Grillo, Uche Okeke, Simon Okeke, Demas Nwoko amongst others but according to ARTWA.AFRICA (2019), is too often "left out of the narrative." Through the northern-themed painting, 'The Sojourners' we discover tale-worthy elements of the artistry of the artist Jimoh Bola Akolo.

THE ARTIST

Professor Jimoh Akolo is a painter, art educator, and administrator whose work has been inspired by a variety of cultures. This is most likely because he hails from Egbe, Kogi State, was born (1934) in Lagos and schooled in the North. As a result, western-northern elements can be found in his body of work. Akolo began painting in 1951, while still in secondary school at Keffi Government College in Nassarawa State, under the tutelage of Dennis Duerden, a colonial government education officer. Akolo continued his education at the Nigerian College of Art, Science, and Technology (NCAST), where he met his creative peers who founded the Zaria Art Society.

According to Chika Okeke-Agulu in his book, *Postcolonial Modernism: art and decolonization in twentieth-century Nigeria*, Akolo did not join the society because he was certain that a young artist's priority was to learn the craft of painting and he believed joining the group would result in "compromising painting in the pursuit of ideology".

Jimoh Akolo's works, however, possess the elements of the Zaria Rebel ideology, evidently, because of an analogous tutelage, instead of an equivalent dogma. Comparing his style to that of Uche Okeke, Okeke-Agulu notes that the works of the Zaria artists are similar in "the combination of flat areas of intense colour and modeled, volumetric facial features."

In another narrative by Bridget Chinedu in her review of Akolo's exhibition by the National Gallery of Art (NGA), Akolo joined the Zaria Art Society but quit after three months for reasons earlier stated. This earned Akolo the name "Reluctant rebel" (Chinedu, 2019). As a result, Jimoh Akolo had a view of what modernism should be, very different from his contemporaries.

While key members of the society sought to define their modernism by situating it within the rhetoric of cultural freedom, which suggested creating a new art form based on indigenous forms and aesthetics, Akolo's modernism advocates for the individual artist's liberty to appropriate and assert any applicable modernist and Western practices on his terms. (P.226 in Okeke-Agulu, 2015). Despite this, Akolo continued to create socially relevant art pieces.

Producing mostly Hausa and Islamic northern-themed paintings, he chooses subjects that appear to be straightforward representations of human daily activities such as festival celebrations, musicians playing their instruments, riders on horseback, amongst others. Occasionally his works illustrate mythology.

In the 74th issue of *Nigeria Magazine*, Michael Crowder referred to Akolo as "the only northern Nigerian artist so far to have gained national recognition" citing his honorary mention at the 6th Biennale in Sao Paolo, Cuba (Onuzulike, 2014). In the same year, he was awarded Nigeria's National Cultural Trophy.

To gain more experience, Akolo enrolled in art courses at the Hornsey College of Art, London and Indiana State University, Bloomington. While in

London, he held a solo exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery in 1964. According to Okeke-Agulu (2015), while his colleagues saw their European expedition as an opportunity to improve their technical expertise in the cultural work they imagined for themselves, Akolo saw in Europe, prospects for refining his painterly skills.

Afterward, he served as an education officer in the Northern Nigeria Ministry of Education from 1963-1966, before he returned to his alma mater in Zaria, now called the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, where he worked as an educator for three decades. Akolo has participated in numerous home and international exhibitions throughout his career.

THE ARTIST



Fig 1.1 *The Sojourners*, 1967, Oil on Canvas, 117 x 74cm © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art

The painting, “The Sojourners” is the depiction of people traveling from one place to another, with their belongings and camels. The word “sojourner” is synonymous with the words traveler, nomad, immigrant, foreign resident, or stranger. It is used to describe a foreigner who is “residing, either momentarily or permanently, in a community and place that is not primarily their own and is dependent on the “good-will” of that community for their continued existence” (Oxford Bibliographies, 2019). This is an indication that subjects are far from home, exploring a foreign land.

Two African Muslim men are depicted in the foreground of Akolo's work, walking side by side with their camels carrying their belongings on their hunched backs through a sandy desert. The camels are larger in proportion than the people as their long legs, huge hunch, long necks that stretch before them, comfortably occupy a dominant part of the picture plane.

At the far left of the background is another beast of burden, bearing its silhouette owner upon its back. The subjects appear to be Hausa Muslims because of the “babariga” attire, and turban called “Shemagh” “Ghutrah” “Hattah” or “Keffiyeh” in different parts of the Middle East, which is used not only for protection against the harsh sun and sand in the desert but as a religious head covering.

The painting is representative of Jimoh Akolo's signature style. As previously mentioned, this painting, like many of Akolo's works of art, is influenced by western modernist trends. Fauvism and expressionism techniques that highlight and favour painterly qualities and bold color choices over figurative or realistic values are identified through Akolo's audacious fusion of bright blues, browns, white, and pink against a contrasting dark green, blues, and black. Impressionistically, he does not blend his colours smoothly or pay much attention to details as he lays freely what seems to be square brush or palette knife work, mostly vertically.

One stroke after another, he demonstrates a gestural fluidness which gives off an impression of texture. Within the landscape canvas, Akolo appropriates the colours in their natural areas, using browns for skin and sand, and using blues and pinks for the early morning or evening sky.

Akolo had recently returned from his sojourn in Europe to join the department in Zaria when the painting was produced. As a result, the painting may be a nod to his foreign experience and status. Akolo's paintings were more expressive, impressionist, and less informative during this period.

CONCLUSION

Through its expressive components of Northern culture, the art piece articulates Jimoh Akolo's feelings about modernism. Speaking with ARTWA.AFRICA, he says, "I don't think there should be any rules guiding African artists. They should do what they like. They are supposed to create. They don't have to be told what to think." Boldly armed with painting tools and a unique mindset from his contemporaries, without any restriction from ideologies, Akolo paved his way as the Zarianist with a difference.

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