

**THE STUDIO ARTIST AND THE Ph.D. SYNDROME IN COMTEMPORARY NIGERIAN  
UNIVERSITIES**

**H. C. Ngumah**

**Department of Fine and Applied Arts,  
Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria**

**ABSTRACT**

*Recently, the National University Commission (NUC) has as a matter of innovation declared with certainty that every lecturer should have a Ph.D. degree as basic condition to aspire for certain status in the academic ladder. That is in terms of promotion. In the past that is since the establishment of universities many people (academic dons) have grown and risen to the position of senior lecturer, associate professorship and professorship with masters degree or even with first degree. There are however, some professional courses such as Fine and Applied Arts and the like with masters as a terminal degree. Such degrees like M.F.A., B.Arch. (now M. Arch.) are studio based. That is they are more practically oriented. With the formal introduction of Ph.D. degree as a veritable condition to reach certain position in the academic ladder, many of the studio artists who had already reached the academic echelon had to look on to the theory areas to quickly seek Ph.D. This no doubt has far –reaching effects. This paper will among other things consider the studio artist and Ph.D. syndrome and their implications in contemporary Nigerian universities versa vis the society.*

***Key Words: Studio artist, Ph.D. syndrome ,contemporary, MFA.***

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**INTRODUCTION**

The dynamism of human life and activities are matters of circumstance and situation. The change in human life is constant; it may be positive or negative in accordance with a people's way of life within their environment. Naturally people prefer positive to negative changes. People respond to changes (social, economic, political, religious, academic and more importantly creative) in any given situation, (Ngumah, 2008:4) confirms. When the application of change occurs as a result of good plans it becomes rewarding and productive to the entire society. Generally, the essence of making changes in the scheme of doing things is to improve upon the existing ones. However, some interests may be affected though negatively because of the circumstances. Recently in Nigeria, the National Universities Commissions (NUC) introduced a new dimension or approach into the University academic system. That is, that every lecturer should obtain a Ph.D. degree as basic qualification to be promoted to any senior position in the academic circle. In his reaction, Ikwuemesi (2004) notes:

Recently, many universities have decreed that faculty must obtain the Ph.D. before they can be promoted to senior lecturers or professors. This directive was issued and has been carried out without consideration for certain disciplines which traditionally do not have the Ph.D. as the terminal degree.(p 4.)

In the past, when the Universities were established many lecturers grew and rose to such positions like senior lecturer ship, associate professorship and professorship with many Masters degree (even with first degree) through effective scholarly publications. Since human beings are desirous to grow in their work places, many lecturers enrolled for their Ph.D. programme in various areas. In fact, there is mass exodus of lecturers in various Universities in Nigeria scrambling for course areas for studies in order to accomplish this academic feat-title. It is sad to observe that this academic measure for up-ward growth did not consider some course areas with Masters Degree as terminal point. "MFA" is one of the

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terminal degree areas. *The University of Nigeria Nsukka School of Post-graduate Studies Information Handbook for Prospective Post-graduate students (1993/94)* notes:

(MFA) is in the studio areas of print-making, painting; sculpture; textiles design and ceramics; visual communication design and photography; while MA and Ph.D are for Arts History and Art Education (the theory based areas).

This means that the terminal degrees for the studio areas as earlier noted is 'MFA' Masters in Fine and Applied Arts in the programme is purely studio based. The artists involved are in other words erroneously called studio artists. This paper is focused to examine the so-called studio artist, his fate and the Ph.D. syndrome in contemporary Nigeria Universities.

### THE STUDIO ARTIST

In order to explain the studio artist in a proper perspective, it would be pertinent to identify who is an artist? An artist is a person who creatively produces images or impressions in any medium for both aesthetic and utilitarian purposes in the society. According to UNESCO (1980:20) an artist:

*Is taken to mean any person who creates or given expression to or revives works of art, who considers his artistic creation to be a essential part of his life, who contributes in this way to the development of art and culture and who is or asks to be recognized as an artist, whether or not he is bound by any relations of employment or associations.*

Again, an artist is simply a person who produces works of art such as painting, sculpture, graphics, or does something with exceptional skills, or entertains professionally. Encarta Dictionary (2009) defines an artist as creator of art: somebody who creates art especially paintings or sculptures. In answering the question, 'what is an artist? Encarta Microsoft Premium (2009) jokily noted: for every thousand people there's nine hundred doing the work, ninety doing well, nine doing good, and one lucky bastard who is the artist. For purpose of classification an artist can be studio based or academically based. By the writer's frame of thinking academically based artist is one whose focus is on the theories, methodologies and history of art works. While as, the studio artist is an artist whose interest is in the practices of art in various media. He takes delight in the exploration, experimentation and radicalization of his subject matters for purpose of exhibitions and workshops. A studio artist in the context of this paper is both 'academic' and art 'practices' in orientation. He is an artist who has obtained his Masters degree in Fine and Applied Arts (MFA) in any of the accredited Universities in Nigeria or abroad. By the planned programme in the University, the MFA is a terminal degree. Whoever is in possession of it no doubt has proved his/her worth in the visual art practice. According to College Art Association (CAA) Board of Directors (2002) on issue of terminal degrees remarked:

The Master of Fine Arts (MFA) is the terminal Degree for visual arts. No academic degree other than the MFA or equivalent professional achievement should be regarded as qualification for appointing the professional rank, promotion, or tenure. Degrees in education and other related fields shall not be required except for faculty appointed specifically to teach courses in education.

This means that MFA unlike most master's degrees is the highest level of professional competence in the visual arts. Thus, it is the equivalent to terminal degrees in other areas such as the Ph.D. The person could rise steadily to any attainable academic height in the University. The MFA programme as a terminal degree in the University has sincerely served the people in all purposes – creatively, socially and economically, until the recent curriculum innovation which has marked the beginning of a new era in the growth of academicians. Many academicians particularly those who believed they had reached their academic echelon were not happy about the new development. As a result there were series of counter-reactions on the NUC's academic proposal. In other to sensitize the public on the possible effect, the Pan African Circle of Artists

(PACA) under the chairmanship of Krydz Ikwuemesi organized a conference on “Re-interrogating the Visual Curriculum and Standards in Nigerian Universities and other institutions” at Delta State Abraka on July 22 – 24, 2004. The conference which attracted many art scholars from different Nigerian Universities created opportunity for the people to air their views on the new issue. Among those who presented well researched papers were Professor Ola Oloidi and Professor Osa Egonwa. A communiqué was issued to the government and the various universities in Nigeria on the stand of the art scholars on the issue. Most universities did not comply with the new directives in terms of implementation until late. The evolution of art as a professional course or studio experience in higher institutions in Nigeria can be traced to (NCAST) Nigerian College of Arts Science and Technology, Zaria in the late 1950’s. Oloidi (2008) remarks: “...Zaria School as a department had produced a radical society that eventually paved the way for ideological schools in Nigeria” (p14). The method of offering admissions to art students was mainly based on aptitude or skills discovered in the students and not by the University academic requirement. Ikegwononu (2004), critically remarked that “students were recruited in the arts department based on the aptitude (flair) and not necessarily on any qualification”. That is, the basic entry qualification was observable creative aptitude found in the students. The pioneers of this creative endeavour include Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Yusuf Grillo, Bruce Onabrakpeya, F.I N. Ekeda, Simon O. Okeke and among others. These people were given various diploma certificates in art. Some of these men rose to a reasonable academic height with the awarded certificates having worked hard creatively. With the acceptance of art as a noble profession and having been approved as a programme at degree and other definite levels at the Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, formal defined entry qualification in line with other courses was introduced. This further enhanced the status of art as a course of study and many people welcomed and cherished it. Sequel to the new dimension infused into the University academic programme, many lecturers are now on a race for a course to offer at Ph.D. level. This is more worrisome to the MFA holders. Some are still in dilemma on how to start.

#### **ATTRIBUTED REASONS FOR NUC’S DECISIONS**

The introduction of the new promotion strategy in the Universities by NUC has attracted a lot of reasons in its favour. Some of them are as follows: To make the lecturers become more research oriented and conscious as well as update their knowledge in their areas of specialization. That if a lecturer can through paper publication, seminars, workshops and exhibitions rise to notable positions such as professorship, why should the same person under normal circumstances not carry out a Ph.D. research work? That the society is dynamic; the world is generally developing fast technologically and otherwise. That the University as an instrument per-excellence should be up and doing. Therefore, the lecturers should be able to meet the academic demand and challenges.

That socially, the new title elevates one’s position in the society. That, there are some key positions in government offices and committees in the society that are exclusively reserved for people with Ph.D degree. Psychologically, the Ph.D. title or nomenclature adds a new feather to the status of the beholders; it has a kind of aura. This reminds me of a remark once made by critical observers, thus “...it is very important and dignifying for a lecturer to be addressed as ...Dr. (Ph.D.) or Professor...” Obviously, this enhances the status and position of the lecturer especially in a society where much emphasis is placed on paper qualifications. Another reason though, latent is that the Ph.D serves as a measure of instrument of elimination or condition for employment of lecturers in certain disciplines in the Universities. Hence, it has become an index for value, social strata and the hub of knowledge.

#### **THE MFA AND THE PH.D. SYNDROME: IMPLICATIONS**

With the dawn of the new promotion formula in the Universities and other higher institutions many lecturers appear to have woken up from their academic slumber and stupor. The ‘MFA’ holders that is, the “studio artists” have started applying (that is, those who have not already applied) to other fields for their Ph.D. degree since ‘MFA’ is a terminal degree. The nearest related fields to rush to, are art history and art education. Other areas though not closely related which find easy expressions of the Ph.D. degree include Educational Technology; history, history archaeology, theatre arts, anthropology and mass communication. In all intents and purposes, the primary objectives of this genre of Ph.D. seekers are to obtain the degree and resort to their studio practices for which “MFA’ equips them. Who suffers and who is to blame? For examples what can a holder of ‘MFA’ who threw himself into it heart and soul for a very long time do with History, Archeology or Educational Technology he studied at Ph.D. level? Will this person introduce the courses studied in his area or will he transfer to the “new call”? This is truly cross carpeting of disciplines resulting to non-performance in the areas. The implication is that the degrees grabbed may not worth the salt. That is, they will not serve the purpose for which they are meant.

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One may unequivocally question the rationale and functionality of the Ph.D degree. Is the Ph.D degree a mere acquisition of knowledge? This typifies the views of some people who see Ph.D degree as a colorant; an embellishment, a beautifier, a cosmetic and a showcase of all other degrees. Even when the Ph.D degree is an addendum; it has something meaningful to offer. Therefore, if a particular degree cannot serve the purpose it originally intended, the essence becomes defeated. It has also been observed that 'MFA' (studio artists) holders who studied Art history or Art Education purported to have close affinity do not perform well for obvious reasons. This is because they may not fancy the idea of not fertilizing their so to say major areas of the visual arts. However, in an attempt for some holders of Ph.D. (as an addition to 'MFA') to show proficiency and justify the claim in their new area, their major calling (MFA) tends to suffer. Much of their time will be spent looking for materials for research on critical essays. Involvement and participation in paper presentation during conferences, symposia and seminars will be increased at the expenses of full participation in both solo and group exhibitions. Even when 'studio artists' turned art historians or art educators feature in art exhibitions works displayed (exhibits) reflect their old memories. The creative energy is reduced. Anything half-measure is usually not the best. It is better for one to be in an area where one is proficient and capable than wallowing in abject dilemma because of the Ph.D. syndrome. Which way is Nigerian education system? Another implication is focused on the course areas hunted with its effects on the course specialists. In any art department where a studio artist has his Ph.D degree in Art History or Art Education may be forced to either by design or circumstance to teach courses in the disciplines. Art historians or art educators seeking for lectureship appointment in such institutions (departments) might not be considered because of the presence of the quasi or circumstantial lecturers. This no doubt, will enhance the unemployment in the society. If the curriculum planners and implementers do not properly guide this academic problem, the art theory based lecturers (art historians, art educators, aestheticians) will suffer. Again, the wrong notion that 'any person can teach art history/ art education' has caused a lot of unimaginable harm to the study of art in general education. To rectify this problem a new art proposal should be advocated. This proposal is given attention in the next sub-heading.

### **PROPOSAL FOR "MFA" AND THE ISSUE OF PH.D.**

It will be recalled that part of the cause why 'MFA' degree is regarded as a terminal degree can be linked to lack of professionally qualified lecturers to handle the programme up to Ph.D. level. Again available records show that art practice as a preoccupation has been based on studio experience and exposure since the evolution of man on earth. The early great masters in art (visual art) such as the high renaissance men acquired their skills of art practice through this method. In support of the above, Adams (2002) and Dela Croix and Tansey (1980) remark that Michelangelo learned the technique of painting in Ghirlandairo's studio..., Raphael studied and work for several years in the studio of Perugino while Leonardo da Vinci was trained in the studio of Verrocchio. Perhaps one can logically conclude that the art programme (studio art) planners must have been influenced by the traditional method. They did not see anything meaningful to theorize what is more of practical. This partly justifies why art (the visual art) is regarded as a terminal degree at Masters Level in most institutions in the world. Since 'change' is permanent and there is no alternative to it, the studio artists must be allowed to grow in consonance with the new dispensation. That is, the curriculum planners should revisit the notion of 'MFA' being a terminal degree. Studio artists should be allowed to pursue their Ph.D. degree of their various areas of specialization. That is, the studio areas such as graphics, painting, sculpture, ceramics and textiles should be studied up to Ph.D. levels. There is no area of study that is completely exhausted. With the trend of events coupled with technological development, virtually all human endeavour requires a creative touch. Therefore, the visual art should move hand in hand with the new trend. The designing of the Ph.D. programme into specific areas is not the major point of this paper. Nigeria has been known as a nation that was colonially immersed, she likes to copy the Europeans politically and otherwise; she should also emulate judiciously some important aspects of their educational system. Ph.D. degree can be obtained in the studio areas in some Universities in USA and other European States. Ikwuemesi (2004:2), in a press statement notes "...some universities in Europe and Japan have recently created the DFA (Doctor of Fine Arts)". At present there is no such degree in Nigeria. Why can't Nigerians do same? However, some Universities in Nigeria such as "ABU" have made effort to introduce the Ph.D. degree programme to no avail. Also, Delta State University has already concluded arrangement to mount the DFA programme. Currently, the University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State has mounted the programme with vigour. Such Universities should be encouraged without further delay. The peculiarity of 'MFA' as a terminal degree is worrisome. Other disciplines which involve practical-Music, Theatre Art (Drama), Engineering, Architecture, Home Economics and even Medicine are studied up to Ph.D. degree level. This is what Anyasodo (2005:10) describes as unnecessary academic discrimination on art. The educational planners of the University

programme should see the present problem as a big challenge. They should organize seminars, conferences and workshops as a parameter to note the various views of the experts as guidance for immediate implementation. This will gear towards finding a lasting solution to the affected interests. The programme should be able to accommodate the new trends and consider the socio-cultural and creative patterns of the people.

### **CONCLUSION**

From the above critical examination the 'MFA' should not be a terminal degree. The studio area should be studied up to Ph.D. degree, as a no area is completely exhaustive. Again if other disciplines such as Music, Theatre Art, Architecture, Engineering and Home Economics can be studied up to Ph.D. level, why would not the visual arts such as painting, sculpture, graphics and textiles follow suit? This consideration will reduce the studio artists' scramble for Ph.D. in areas that are not their interest. This will also minimize acquiring Ph.D. degree that will not be utilized, maximally.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In the present scenario, the notion of Master of Fine Art (MFA) as a terminal degree in Nigeria Universities should be revisited. Thus, Doctor of Fine Art (DFA) programme should be designed and mounted without delay by qualified and experienced lecturers in the various art areas. The government should encourage Nigerian Universities Commission (NUC) in this new line of academic action since it will help to up-date the knowledge of the academic lecturers in the visual art areas. Conferences, seminars and symposia should be organized to create more awareness on the need of the new policy.

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