

'ART IS LIFE'

- NIKE OKUNDAYE

**An Exclusive interview with
Chief [Dr.] Mrs Nike Davies Okundaye**

Chief (Dr.) Mrs. Nike Okundaye, who is reputed to be one of the most famous artistes in the world with many awards to her credit, is a Nigerian born woman and an icon in the area of creative arts. She is a mentor to many young artistes and her works have gone round the world, bringing fame and credit to Nigeria. She is hardworking, resilient and adorable. The Editorial crew of Livinghope magazine had the rare privilege of interviewing this great woman in her Lagos art gallery where she created for them a very conducive atmosphere and made an impression that is memorable as she takes them through the memory lane relating to the origin and development of art in Nigeria. Excerpts below:



Chief (Dr.) Mrs. Nike Okundaye

ARTS AND CULTURE

LHM: How would you describe the origin of Art & Culture and in what ways would you say they have impacted positively the living patterns of Africans?

NIKE OKUNDAYE: I want to thank the American government for giving an opportunity to somebody like me. It is true that I am an artiste and I have a friend who was based in the United States, who found me because she was looking for a female artiste to be a friend with. Then the other one is called Alan Donovan who came to feed the Biafran children during the war. He visited Oshogbo in 1967 and he saw the work I was doing and he wanted to buy some. So, I said my work is really becoming money and he asked if I could be sending my work to Kenya. That was how it started. I started sending my work to him in Kenya and later he invited me over to Kenya. Alan Donovan was from Colorado and the director of the African heritage in Nairobi, Kenya, a gallery that he started in 1970. That opened up my art and that was like a breakthrough for me.

Then I had another friend who was also from the United States. Even though we were artistes, but how many people were buying our works then other than the foreigner? When these foreigners came we were always excited and danced. The other person whom I said was from the United States was Victoria Scott and she came to Africa because of Nigeria mask. So, you can see how art is very powerful. She was 20 years old while her husband was 50 and she followed her husband, a professor, to Nigeria just because of African mask. She wanted an African friend and we became friends and she introduced my work to the United States.

Art has been living in Africa for long. It was the artistes who were making the images that the kings were putting in their palace. So, the kings were the custodians of all the art works that the artistes were making in those days. For example the status of Sango would be put in the palace of the "timiofede" and the status of Ooni of ife that one would be put in the palace of the Ooni in Ile ife. So, for a lot of these arts, the kings were the cus-

todians and Nigeria had been doing art for long before the colonial era. During the colonial era, the Europeans invaded Benin City and took away all the artifacts from the palace to Europe and that is why you find those African works in different museums in Europe.

LHM: How did you get baptized into this profession and what are your sources of motivation?

NIKE OKUNDAYE: My great grand-mother was an artiste and I am a fifth generation of a textile artiste from my direct background. My father worked with beads and he was among the people who made the crowns for kings with beads in those days and they were called the "asindemade" meaning those who beautify the crown of the kings with beads. Growing up with my father, it was very hard because my mother died when I was 6 years old. My great-grand-mother was the head of all the weavers in the village and my grand-mother made "indigo". So, I was born into the art but I was unable to go to school and that made me to focus on what I knew and I did it well, with the mindset that it will one day take me to a greater height. To be sincere, I did art just because of poverty. If I had gotten money to go to university, I may not have been an artiste today.

LHM: You are reputed as one of the most popular artists in Nigeria. How did you get to these points and what are the hurdles that you had to cross before getting here?

NIKE OKUNDAYE: As I was growing up, I became a baby-sitter when I concluded my primary school education. I was doing embroidery and I wanted to do the bead with needle like what they are doing now, the beaded garment. I was doing the using embroidery to write "the Lord is my Shepherd" on plain cloth and I will put the picture of an Angel on it and the reverend sisters will buy it from me and put on their altar. The woman I was baby-sitting for was a teacher at Saint Augustine College in kabba. My salary was one pound but

ARTS AND CULTURE

during my break hours in the evening, I will be doing baby-sitting and I was using the money from it to pay my school fees. That was how the work started growing. At the age of 15 my father wanted to marry me off because he had no money. He hardly made one kobo per day and he was a very good farmer who also worked for the church and kings all his life time. I ran away to avoid being married out and joined a travelling theatre. This helped me because if not I will not have left home and I will probably have been married out by father. My mother's sister lived in Oshogbo and I was taken there on a visit at the age of 11 but I could not stay with her and I had to return to school. The art is what was connecting me to all people. After I escaped the first marriage in the village and coming back to Oshogbo again, I got married to "twin seven seven", a man who had fifteen wives and I was one of the fifteen wives. Living in that polygamous family, in 1974 the American government was looking for artistes to take to United States to teach the African-Americans their own direct craft, so that they can always say this is from my root. They took 10 men from the 54 countries but no single woman was picked. Because most of the African-Americans that were to be taught in America were females, the government felt it was needful to have female teachers also. So, they decided to visit different museums to see if they could find works done by African women. So, they went round the states and found my work in New York at the museum of natural history where my work was sold in the craft-shop for between 2 dollars and 3 dollars per a batik wall hanging. That was how my work was found and the man who found it said it was lovely because I did it on hand-woven and they found it interesting. They wanted to know more about the artiste and that was how they came to Oshogbo. When they found me and saw samples of my works, they were fascinated by them. Being married to a husband who also was an artiste and will not want me to leave without him used the opportunity to present some of his work too and was taken for one of them. I was chosen for weaving and that was how both of us travelled to America. That was how my



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breakthrough came in 1973. Travelling to America opened my eyes and changed my perspectives for the better.

LHM: It is believed that some of our cultural heritages were lost due to slave trade and lack of interest and commitment by the educated Africans, what is your take on this and how do you think what has been lost can be recovered?

NIKE OKUNDAYE: My husband actually is from Benin and in my own opinion the whole antiquities had been taken away. The young artistes who are very creative are busy working on new antiquities and all they are creating are more than enough to replace those that were taken from us and these young artistes are our future. The argument about those antiquities taken away from us by the Europeans is that, if they are returned how are we sure that the recipients who are the traditional rulers

ARTS AND CULTURE

have the capacity to maintain them? In my own opinion I think they should be allowed to remain where they are right now and in places where our children who are in diaspora can see and relate to them as some of their cultural heritages. As for the new and young artistes that we have now, they are very creative and are creating new works that will require the building of new places to preserve them. Even if those works that were taken away were to be returned, they won't have the desired acceptability with most people here again because the Europeans have branded them as antiquities, which to the Christians here will mean that one is worshipping idols. Whereas our religion here permits going to the shrine just like going to the Fela Shrine and listening to good music. For instance, the "adire olokun" which is created to celebrate the goddess of the sea, is in the British museum but our people give negative interpretation to going to the beach to celebrate the goddess of the sea and misconstrue it as idolatry and that is not true. The "adire olokun" is created in Lagos and is everywhere outside the shores of Nigeria being celebrated. Thank God that the young Nigerians are buying into our cultural heritages.

LHM: What reasons can you adduce to the interest shown to the African culture by outsiders and to what extent have they been contributing to the development of our culture?

NIKE OKUNDAYE: For instance, coming to Washington DC you find a lot of African-Americans with a lot of collectors wearing hand woven and mud clothes from Mali, which are to be dry-cleaned just because these clothes are from their places of origin and are reminders of their cultural heritages. These people trying to preserve their cultural heritage which was lost probably by their fifth generation parent but are still surviving till today because they are strong and are not easily perishable. This also accounts for while most of them are trying all possible means to return to Africa if not on a permanent residence bases but at least on a temporary one just to see Africa before they die. For instance we are just one tenth of the population of the world and the rest people are whites but if not because of them, appreciating our work wherever they are found and if not for their appreciation of our own works, we ourselves will not have appreciate our creativity. For example, I have one of my works in Nigeria embassy in New York with a description that says Batik by Nike. This work was cleaned up and well framed by one of the artistes over there and used as interior decoration in the embassy. A Nigeria minister saw it and got attracted and got to know that it was created by a Nigerian. He was surprised and out of curiosity asked how much it was worth. He was more than shocked when he was told that the work is worth between five thousand to ten thousand dol-



L - R: Tunde, Mrs. Nike Okundaye, Daughter and Daisy

ARTS AND CULTURE

lars. Whereas, the guy that bought it from me in Nigeria only got it for five hundred naira. For them appreciating our work is what makes our people to appreciate our work of art. The younger people are now investing in works and this is a source of pride for us.

LHM: What are the factors that are hindering the growth and development of the African culture and how do we think the problems can be solved?

NIKE OKUNDAYE: We just have to educate more of our youth because Nigerians can do any work and succeed. But if you don't educate them and you want them to become mechanics, they will be mechanics. On the art part, they have to educate more of our youth because they are our future. Regarding creative art, it does not matter if you have passion for other professions, taking something from it adds something to you while you have nothing to lose. This will encourage more people into the profession when they discover the benefits that are accruable. We artistes have to come under one umbrella like the musicians and Nollywood actors and say this is us. We have to come together as one and make our impact felt in the society so that the government can see us.

LHM: What can you tell us about your gallery and what makes the difference between it and others?

NIKE OKUNDAYE: This is my fourth gallery. My first gallery which is in Oshogbo is the headquarters. I started my first gallery inside my bedroom with one shilling. I used to do labour work "beriponpon". My start pay was 5 kobo and with that I was able to save money which I used to buy materials for my work. The "adire" used to come in 5 by 5 yards and to sell was a challenge. You needed to compete with other sellers at one particular spot called "idisheke" in Oshogbo. Because one needed to become a member and pay some money to register before you can sell. The thought of se-

lling from bedroom came to mind. After the thought of selling from bedroom came to mind, I went to Susan, a white lady who came to Oshogbo a year before I was born in 1950 and who was into painting. I asked her for advice and let her know that I wanted to be like her. I showed her some of the "adire" works I had done and she responded to me by letting me know that I was already a professional and she also advised me not to team up with anybody or join the existing sellers association in Oshogbo. I was always going to show her my work and to receive encouragement and that prompted me to open my gallery in my bedroom and that I would describe as African shop number one. This was how it all started in 1967 and 1982 I opened another gallery, which now serves as the headquarters to all my galleries. I have four galleries in different locations in Nigeria, which are; Oshogbo, Kogi, Lagos and Abuja.

LHM: What else can you tell us about yourself?

NIKE OKUNDAYE: As far as I am alive, I want people to know that art is life. With art you can live longer, you do not need to slum in a party because by the time you are looking at the artist's work, you will be thinking about the work and be deducing from it and that will take away all your pressures. For someone like me, I work with the spirit and when the driver stops I stop. My bead work, my water colour which is called "abule" and my "adire eleko" are great creative works to look out for. I work with different media. I passed my work to my daughters who are professional artistes too. I passed it to them the way they passed education to kids in those days.

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