

## DIALOGIC MODERNISM: YORUBA SPIRITUALITY AND THE BLUE AESTHETIC IN YUSUF GRILLO AND PABLO PICASSO

**Victor ONIBERE**

Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Delta State University, Abraka  
[voonibere@delsu.edu.ng](mailto:voonibere@delsu.edu.ng)

And

**URIEN, Ijeoma Felicia**

Fine and Industrial Art Department, University of Southern Delta, Ozoro  
[jenniferwabude101@gmail.com](mailto:jenniferwabude101@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

This article examines the chromatic and epistemological significance of the colour blue in the works of Pablo Picasso and Yusuf Grillo, arguing for a dialogic rather than Eurocentric understanding of modernism. While Picasso's Blue Period reflects existential alienation and a universalizing modernist ethos, Grillo reconfigures blue through Yoruba concepts of *tùtù* (coolness) and *àṣẹ* (spiritual potency), embedding chromatic symbolism within an indigenous cosmological framework. Drawing on visual semiotics and decolonial aesthetics, this study undertakes a comparative iconographic and stylistic analysis of selected works, including Picasso's *The Old Guitarist* and Grillo's *Blue Women series*. It demonstrates how Grillo indigenizes modernist form through the philosophy of Natural Synthesis, thereby challenging Picasso's appropriationist model of innovation. The paper advances the notion of "dialogic modernism" as an interpretive framework, foregrounding Africa's intellectual and aesthetic agency in shaping global art histories. By repositioning Grillo alongside Picasso, this study redefines modernism as a polycentric constellation of aesthetic philosophies rather than a unilinear Eurocentric narrative.

**Keywords:** Dialogic Modernism; Yoruba Aesthetics; Decoloniality; Picasso; Yusuf Grillo; Blue Aesthetic

### **1. Introduction**

The colour blue has carried profound symbolic resonance across global art traditions, from Byzantine spirituality to Islamic architecture and European modernism. In the twentieth century, Pablo Picasso's Blue Period (1901–1904) became emblematic of modernist melancholia, translating the hue into a visual register of existential alienation and fragility (Cooper, 1994; Richardson, 1991). At roughly the same historical moment of modernism's global expansion, Nigerian artist Yusuf Grillo reimagined the same hue through Yoruba metaphysical concepts of

*tùtù* (coolness) and *àṣẹ* (vital spiritual force), imbuing his Blue Women series with dignity, composure, and spiritual equilibrium (Drewal, 1989; Oloidi, 2003).

Scholarly attention has long framed Picasso's modernism in terms of innovation achieved through the appropriation of non-Western forms (Rubin, 1984; Blier, 2019). Conversely, African modernists such as Grillo are often treated as regional figures rather than as interlocutors in global debates on form and philosophy (Okeke-Agulu, 2015; Ogbechie, 2008). This imbalance reflects a broader Eurocentric bias in art history, where Africa appears primarily as a source of influence rather than a site of theoretical production.

This article seeks to redress this imbalance by comparatively examining Picasso's and Grillo's uses of blue as chromatic and epistemological devices. It asks: How does Grillo's Yoruba-inflected modernism challenge Picasso's universalist appropriation, and what does this reveal about the nature of global modernism? To address this question, the article adopts a comparative visual analysis framed within visual semiotics and decolonial aesthetics.

The argument advanced is twofold: first, that Picasso's engagement with blue exemplifies a monologic model of modernism rooted in appropriation; second, that Grillo's reinterpretation of blue embodies a dialogic modernism—one that integrates Yoruba cosmology with modernist form, thereby repositioning African aesthetics as central to global art history. By foregrounding Grillo's contribution, this study proposes dialogic modernism as an interpretive framework for rethinking modernism as a polycentric rather than unilinear narrative.

## **2. Literature Review**

Scholarship on modernism has historically privileged European narratives, situating artists such as Pablo Picasso at the centre of innovation while relegating African traditions to the margins. The discourse around Picasso's *Blue Period* and subsequent Cubist experiments frequently highlights his engagement with "the primitive" and African sources (Rubin, 1984). Foster (1985) critiques this dynamic as the "primitive unconscious of modern art," wherein African forms serve as catalysts for European creativity without acknowledgement of their originating epistemologies. Recent reappraisals emphasize that Picasso's engagement with African objects must be read within

a longer history of “primitivism,” a contested category that continues to require critical re-theorization (Visonà, 2020; Etherington & Spinner, 2024).

In contrast, studies of African modernism emphasise the ways artists negotiated colonial legacies while forging new visual languages. Grillo, a key member of the Zaria Art Society, emerges within scholarship on *Natural Synthesis*—the integration of indigenous African traditions with Western artistic techniques (Okeke-Agulu, 2015; Ogbechie, 2008). Comparative scholarship on Nsukka and other Nigerian schools demonstrates parallel translational strategies across African modernisms that reposition indigenized formalisms as theoretical interventions (Onibere & Egonwa, 2024; Translational Acts, 2025). Drewal (1989) and Fosu (1986) situate Yoruba visual philosophy, particularly concepts such as *tùtù* (coolness) and *àṣẹ* (spiritual authority), as central to the spiritual and aesthetic orientation of Nigerian modernism. However, Grillo’s chromatic and formal strategies remain underexamined in comparative art historical discourse.

Decolonial scholars such as Mignolo (2011) and Mercer (2005) argue for recognising “multiple modernities” and challenging Eurocentric art historical narratives. Edewor (2014) also indulged the same narrative while exploring Gani Odutokun’s “Dialogue with Mona Lisa” as import of the interface of Western and African contexts. Their frameworks illuminate how African modernists like Grillo should not merely be seen as derivative of European models but as interlocutors shaping global modernism in dialogic terms. This comparative study contributes to that emerging discourse by juxtaposing Picasso and Grillo as co-constructors of modernism rather than as innovator and follower, thereby addressing a critical gap in the literature.

### **3. Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

#### **3.1 Theoretical Framing**

This study adopts a comparative visual and iconographic analysis to examine how Picasso and Grillo mobilize the colour blue and female figuration within their respective cultural contexts. Visual semiotics provides the interpretive foundation, enabling close reading of compositional elements, chromatic choices, and figural symbolism as carriers of cultural and philosophical meaning.

The analysis is framed by decolonial aesthetics, particularly the call to foreground non-Western epistemologies as autonomous frameworks rather than supplementary to Western modernism (Mignolo, 2011). Yoruba cosmological concepts of *tùtù* and *àṣẹ* are employed not merely as cultural background but as analytical categories that shape the interpretation of Grillo's oeuvre. A decolonial aesthetic approach allows the analysis to treat Yoruba cosmologies as epistemic resources rather than background context (Oliveira, 2023). This theoretical choice aligns with scholarship that insists on the epistemic agency of African thought systems within global discourses (Okeke-Agulu, 2015; Ogbechie, 2008).

### 3.2 Method

The methodological approach proceeds in three steps:

1. **Case Selection:** Key works from Picasso's Blue Period (e.g., *The Old Guitarist*, 1903–04) and Grillo's Blue Women series (e.g., *Mother and Child*, *Woman in Blue*) are chosen for their chromatic and thematic resonance.
2. **Iconographic and Stylistic Comparison:** Each work is analysed in terms of colour symbolism, figural construction, and formal synthesis, highlighting points of convergence and divergence.
3. **Epistemological Interpretation:** The findings are interpreted through the lens of dialogic modernism, contrasting Picasso's Universalist appropriation with Grillo's indigenized formalism rooted in Yoruba spirituality.

This approach allows the study to move beyond aesthetic description toward a critical reassessment of modernism as a dialogic and polycentric phenomenon, thereby repositioning African modernism within global art history. Recent work on settler aesthetics and visual politics underscores how canons and display logics reproduce colonial erasures, strengthening the case for a dialogic reframing of modernism (Malot, 2024).

#### 4. Comparative Framework: Picasso vs. Grillo

To clarify the epistemological and aesthetic distinctions between Picasso and Grillo, Table 1 provides a comparative framework highlighting their chromatic philosophies, figural strategies, and cultural motivations.

Dimension	Pablo Picasso	Yusuf Grillo	Interpretive Implication
Chromatic Philosophy (Blue)	Expresses melancholy, grief, alienation; Blue Period linked to existential despair (Cooper, 1994; Richardson, 1991).	Embodies <i>tùtù</i> (coolness, serenity) and <i>àṣẹ</i> (spiritual potency), conveying moral balance and sacred energy (Drewal, 1989; Fosu, 1986).	Blue as existential void vs. spiritual equilibrium — two epistemic registers.
Figural Representation (Women)	Female figures often depicted as fragile, spectral, or abstracted for formal experimentation (Green, 1987).	Women dignified, maternal, spiritual vessels; echo Yoruba ideals of fertility, resilience, and communal harmony (Oloidi, 2003).	Women as universalised vulnerability vs. culturally rooted dignity.

<p>Formal Strategy</p>	<p>Cubist abstraction, appropriation of African masks/forms; emphasis on universal innovation (Rubin, 1984; Blier, 2019).</p>	<p>Natural Synthesis: blending Cubist geometry with Yoruba aesthetics; indigenised modernism (Okeke-Agulu, 2015; Ogbechie, 2008).</p>	<p>Appropriation vs. Indigenisation.</p>
<p>Cultural Orientation</p>	<p>Universalist modernism—positions art as detached from specific cultural frameworks.</p>	<p>Dialogic modernism—art embedded in Yoruba ontology and cosmology.</p>	<p>Monologic universalism vs. polycentric dialogue.</p>
<p>Motivations/Philosophy</p>	<p>Innovation through cultural borrowing; Africa as “inspiration” but stripped of context.</p>	<p>Cultural reclamation and decolonial agency; Yoruba spirituality as epistemic framework.</p>	<p>Colonial gaze vs. Decolonial reclamation.</p>
<p>Modernist Positioning</p>	<p>Icon of European modernism; canonised globally.</p>	<p>African modernist interlocutor; often underrepresented in global canon.</p>	<p>Need to reposition Grillo as co-architect of modernism.</p>

## 5. Analysis

### 5.1 Chromatic Symbolism: Blue as a Visual Language

The colour blue occupies radically different epistemic registers in Picasso's and Grillo's oeuvres. For Picasso, the Blue Period (1901–1904) translated personal grief into a chromatic metaphor for universal despair. Works such as *The Old Guitarist* (1903–1904, Figure 1) embody spectral fragility, where monochromatic tonality amplifies the alienation of the solitary figure (Cooper, 1994). Blue thus functions as a signifier of existential void, detached from any culturally specific ontology.

Grillo, conversely, mobilises blue as a vessel of Yoruba metaphysics. In his *Blue Women series*, the hue does not connote emptiness but *tùtù*—a state of composure, serenity, and moral balance—and *àṣẹ*, the spiritual potency that imbues figures with sacred vitality (Drewal, 1989; Fosu, 1986). Rather than melancholy, Grillo's chromatic strategy projects dignity and contemplative depth, exemplified in works such as *Mother and Child* (Figure 2).

Placed side by side, these chromatic codes illustrate what this article terms the **epistemic split in modernism**: Picasso's universalised melancholy versus Grillo's culturally rooted spirituality. Where the European artist abstracts emotion into a global sign, the Nigerian artist embeds colour in Yoruba ontology.



**Figure 1.** Pablo Picasso, *The Old Guitarist*, 1903–1904, oil on panel, 122.9 × 82.6 cm. Art Institute of Chicago, Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection. Retrieved from <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/28067/the-old-guitarist>



**Figure 2.** Yusuf Grillo, *Mother and Child*, n.d., oil on board, 81.5 × 61.7 cm. Sotheby's Modern & Contemporary African Art Auction, Lot 9. Retrieved from <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2019/modern-contemporary-african-art-119220/lot.9.html>

## 5.2 Stylized Figuration: Women as Vessels of Meaning

Picasso's women, particularly in the Blue Period and Cubist compositions, oscillate between fragile subjects of empathy and formal devices for compositional experimentation. In *La Vie* (1903) and later Cubist portraits and *Crouching Begger* (Plate 4), female bodies often signify vulnerability or function as geometric scaffolding for abstraction (Green, 1987). Their individuality is suppressed in favour of universalized expression or formal innovation.

By contrast, Grillo's female figures—*Mother and Child* (Figure 2) and *Woman in Blue* (Figure 3)—are elevated as bearers of cultural memory and spiritual resilience. Their elongated forms, serene expressions, and luminous chromatic surfaces echo Yoruba sculptural conventions, where women symbolize fertility, continuity, and spiritual authority (Oloidi, 2003; Onibere & Ottuh,

2024). In these works, women are not anonymous forms but cultural signifiers of Yoruba cosmology.

This divergence underscores the dialogic potential of figural representation: Picasso instrumentalises women as *forms of fragility*, while Grillo dignifies them as *embodied vessels of Yoruba identity*.

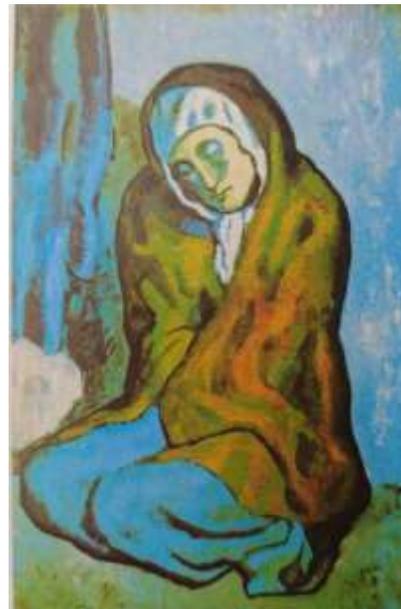


**Figure 3.** Yusuf Grillo, *Woman in Blue*,

n.d., \ oil on board, ca. 90 × 60 cm.

Provenance via Sotheby’s auction archive.

Retrieved from <https://www.sothebys.com/>



**Figure 4.** *Crouching Begger*, Misereue

Accroupie Barcelona, 1902 oil on canvass,

101.2 X 66 cm. Zervos I, 121; DB VII, 5; Palau 726 Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario.

### 5.3 Formal Synthesis and Decolonial Aesthetics

Picasso’s appropriation of African masks and Iberian sculpture catalyzed Cubism but stripped these forms of their indigenous symbolic contexts (Rubin, 1984; Blier, 2019). His modernism, though revolutionary, epitomizes what Foster (1985) called the “primitive unconscious of modern art”—a strategy of cultural borrowing that universalizes through erasure.

Grillo, in contrast, operationalizes Cubist geometry as part of the Zaria Art Society’s philosophy of *Natural Synthesis*. This doctrine sought to integrate Western forms with indigenous Nigerian

traditions as a decolonial strategy (Okeke-Agulu, 2015; Ogbachie, 2008). In Grillo's *Woman in Blue* (Figure 3), fractured planes and stylized geometry echo Cubist form, but their logic is redirected toward Yoruba aesthetics of balance, repetition, and rhythm.

Thus, Picasso's formalism demonstrates appropriation without context, while Grillo's exemplifies indigenization as reclamation. This distinction reframes African modernism as not derivative but epistemically autonomous.

#### **5.4 Cultural Motivations and Aesthetic Philosophies**

Picasso's philosophy of art foregrounded universality and innovation. His borrowing from African forms was not motivated by an interest in African cosmologies but by a desire to transcend tradition and reinvent pictorial form. Africa served as "raw material" for European modernism—its ritual potency erased in favour of abstraction (Rubin, 1984).

Grillo, by contrast, situates art within Yoruba cosmology. His works such as *Eyo* (Figure 5) and *Blue Head* (Figure 6) explicitly reference Yoruba ritual, spirituality, and communal philosophy. For Grillo, formal innovation is inseparable from cultural responsibility—the artist is a custodian of heritage as much as a modern innovator.

Here the divergence is stark: Picasso advances a modernism of universalist rupture, whereas Grillo advances a modernism of dialogic reclamation, reinserting Yoruba metaphysics into the language of global art.



**Figure 5.** Yusuf Grillo, *Eyo*, 1993, oil on board, 111 × 87 cm. Sotheby’s Modern & Contemporary African Art Auction.



**Figure 6.** Yusuf Grillo, *Blue Head*, ca. 1960s, oil on board. Auction provenance via Mutual Art, entry “Head, 1966.” Retrieved from <https://www.mutualart.com/>

### 5.5 Toward a Dialogic Modernism

The foregoing comparisons reveal two distinct trajectories within modernism. Picasso represents a monologic narrative of modernism—innovation achieved through appropriation, presented as universal. Grillo, conversely, embodies a dialogic modernism—a mode in which modernist form is mediated through Yoruba spirituality and cultural philosophy, producing a polycentric rather than unilinear art history.

Dialogic modernism thus recognizes that modernism was not exclusively authored in Europe but co-constructed across cultural frontiers. By juxtaposing Picasso and Grillo, this article argues for repositioning African modernists not as peripheral imitators but as epistemic interlocutors in global modernism. In Grillo’s hands, blue is no longer the colour of absence but of presence, dignity, and spiritual depth—an aesthetic and philosophical counter-narrative to Eurocentric modernism.

## 6. Conclusion

This comparative study has examined the divergent yet intersecting trajectories of Pablo Picasso and Yusuf Grillo, focusing on their use of the colour blue and figural representation. While Picasso's *Blue Period* translates personal grief into a universalist register of melancholy and alienation, Grillo's *Blue Women* series reconfigures blue as a chromatic embodiment of Yoruba spirituality, affirming *tùtù* (coolness) and *àṣẹ* (spiritual potency). These chromatic strategies reveal two epistemic orientations: Picasso's monologic universalism, grounded in appropriation, and Grillo's dialogic modernism, rooted in cultural reclamation and ontological depth.

The contrast extends beyond colour. Picasso's women, fragile and spectral, reflect existential vulnerability or serve as scaffolds for Cubist abstraction. Grillo's women, by contrast, embody dignity, fertility, and communal resilience, resonating with Yoruba aesthetic philosophy. Similarly, Picasso's formal innovations emerge from the erasure of African spiritual contexts, whereas Grillo's geometry exemplifies *Natural Synthesis*—an indigenization of modernist form that anchors abstraction within Yoruba cosmology.

Together, these divergences advance the argument that global modernism cannot be understood as a unilinear narrative emanating from Europe. Instead, modernism is better conceptualized as dialogic, forged through intercultural exchange and sustained by polycentric epistemologies. By repositioning Grillo alongside Picasso, this article affirms Africa's active role in shaping modernism—not as a peripheral source of inspiration but as a site of theoretical and aesthetic production.

The implications are twofold. First, the framework of dialogic modernism invites a rewriting of art history curricula to foreground African and other non-Western modernisms as co-architects of global modernity. Second, it underscores the need for further comparative studies that place African artists in conversation not only with European counterparts but also with Asian, Latin American, and Middle Eastern modernists. Such scholarship will deepen our understanding of modernism as a truly global and entangled phenomenon.

Ultimately, Grillo's chromatic philosophy dismantles the melancholic universality of Picasso's blue and reclaims it as a colour of presence, dignity, and spiritual depth. In doing so, his oeuvre

asserts that modernism's history is incomplete without recognizing the epistemic and aesthetic agency of Africa.

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