

IMPACT OF VISUAL IMAGES IN COMMUNICATING SOCIO-CULTURAL AND POLITICAL MESSAGES IN BRUCE ONOBRAKPEYA'S ARTWORKS TO NIGERIAN PEOPLES

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ABSTRACT: *The impact that visual images has on the dissemination of Bruce Onobrakpeya's symbolic messages to the Nigerian peoples is the focus of this paper. The researchers stress that Onobrakpeya started to experiment with symbolic images of the Urhobo people and a complete set of ideograms that he calls IBIEBE symbols has emerged from this experiment. They reappraise the varied symbolic images that Bruce Onobrakpeya had used to disseminate national security messages to the Nigerian peoples. The study also places emphasis on the usage of colours in passing cultural messages in African society. It is, however, revealed that in some African cultures colours give contextual connotations to peace, danger and life respectively. Onobrakpeya's childhood encounter with the colour red was used by the researcher to support this argument. It is concluded that through the inherent symbolic representations and communicative messages in his prints Onobrakpeya has encouraged patriotic ideals as a Nigerian citizen.*

KEYWORDS: Symbolic messages, Cultural messages, African society, Symbolic, Representation, Communicative message

INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s, Onobrakpeya started to experiment with symbolic images of the Urhobo people and complete set of ideograms that he calls *IBIEBE* symbols has emerged from this experiment. These symbols were merged together as complete visual forms that are used in explaining the underline meanings in his artworks. Among his *Ibiebe* symbols are *Ufuoma*; meaning "Peace and Contentment" (plate 1), *Idolo* (plate 2), which represents a zoomorphic form bearing two horns. *Otovwe*; meaning "long life" (plate3), *Omokpokpon 'efe*; meaning "Health is greater than Money" (plate 4) and *Abiverh'ohwo* (plate 5), which symbolizes two sides of a coin. These symbolic representations have been used by Bruce Onobrakpeya to decode his artistic presentations and to disseminate important socio-cultural and political messages to the Nigerian peoples.



Plate 1

Plate 2

Plate 3

Plate 4

Plate 5

Beside Onobrakpeya's attempt to experiment with myriads of visual images of his people, the Urhobo, to disseminate socio-cultural and political messages to Nigerian peoples, a great number of scholars, namely, Willett, Mount, Lawal and Kennedy, among others, have taken time to critically examine in their various studies how he became popular through the innovation of a new etching technique he called *plastograph*. These studies provide literature on Bruce Onobrakpeya and his prints from which this researcher draws some of his secondary information. Willett's (1971) book: *African Art*, features Bruce Onobrakpeya's silk-screen print titled: *Leopard in a Cornfield* (Plate 6) as example of African art, but it fails to discuss print making technique. The omission is, perhaps, largely due to the fact that at the time of Willett's study, Onobrakpeya had not made any significant impact in his art of etching.

Mount (1973), however, provides adequate data on Onobrakpeya and his print making technique. He focuses on Bruce Onobrakpeya's bronze lino relief that betrays his interest for fantasy and a lessened concern for composition and design. He emphasises that Bruce Onobrakpeya's forms are much more amorphous (without definite shape or structure: shapeless; without crystalline structure) and less expressive. "These qualities", according to him, "probably stem from Onobrakpeya's participation in various summer schools". Mount also notes that Onobrakpeya is drawn to subjects from Benin legends and myths that he learned as a young man. He further stresses the fact that Onobrakpeya excelled as a graphic artist. "This success", he says, "makes Onobrakpeya to execute scores of extremely interesting prints within the techniques of linocut, etching and woodcut".

Lawal (1968) discusses Onobrakpeya's search for new ways of expression, most importantly the development of a bronze-lino technique and its subsequent success. He observes that Onobrakpeya always highlights the mysterious aspect of life in his works and that his art intrigues viewers visually, aesthetically and emotionally. He also notes that viewers are mostly captivated not only by the wealth and depth of Onobrakpeya's art, but also by the unique way he has been able to adapt the modern technique of printmaking to communicate in an original and unmistakable African idiom. Kennedy's (1972) study harps on Bruce Onobrakpeya's sources of inspiration. She writes:

Onobrakpeya was able to draw on his own

Urhobo mythology and imagery from the angle of using
the images as ingredients of artistic
heritage within contemporaneous perspective

(Kennedy, 1972:5).

Also, Kennedy (1972) observes that Onobrakpeya's art moves easily from culture to culture within Nigeria. According to her, "Onobrakpeya integrates a variety of design patterns and symbols as well as incorporates imagery from Yoruba *adire* fabric with symbols from Hausa embroidery".

Lawrence (1979) discusses the influence that the traditional culture has on Onobrakpeya's prints:

A number of Onobrakpeya's prints
seek to record a traditional way of

village life in the Niger Delta, even

as it is encroached upon by manners

and goods from outside

(Lawrence, 1979: 28).

Lawrence further cites the example of a work titled: *Edido* (plate 7) in which Onobrakpeya portrays aspects of the socio-economic life of people living in the village. Lawrence's study attests to the fact that forms and draughtsmanship are not the hallmark of Bruce Onobrakpeya's prints rather his works are characterised by themes of everyday life. Plant (1991) stresses that Onobrakpeya uses symbols to mediate between the intentions or projection of meaning and its comprehension. He also notes that Onobrakpeya uses styles and themes derived from Yoruba myths and legends. Examples that he gives are his etchings that are based on Amos Tutuola's literary works, namely, *Palm-wine Drinkers* series and the *Ghost Stories*, and D.O. Fagunwa's *Forest of Thousand Demons*



Plate 6

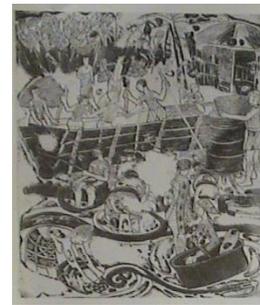


Plate 7

Jegade (1984) focuses on the role played by Bruce Onobrakpeya in the development of contemporary Nigerian Art. He draws attention to the syncretistic tendency in Onobrakpeya's art, noting how he synthesizes Urhobo and Yoruba motifs to create a new art form. While appraising his love for Urhobo arts and legends Jegede submits:

The strength of Bruce's art stems in part not through the green, swampy forest transverse by the tributaries of the Niger River, but through chemicals and plates on to paper ... Onobrakpeya's themes had been consistent over the years: they leave no one in doubt about the fact that he is Urhobo-centric (Jegade, 1984:10).

He also confirms that Onobrakpeya's art expresses individual and group identity and the relationships between people and the land. Darah and Quel's (1992) book is an insightful creative analysis of the works of Bruce Onobrakpeya. The very logical presentation of the essays in this book can assist the reader in understanding and appreciating the development of Nigerian deep etching technique started by Onobrakpeya some decades ago. The book is a documentation of paintings and engravings made over a period of eleven years – 1967 to 1978, by Onobrakpeya. It covers a wide range of subjects, people, folklore, religion, philosophy, myths, legends, landscape, architecture and adventure. Almost all the subjects are drawn from

physical and cultural environment. The subjects have a central theme of looking inward for relevance and fulfilment in our changing world.

Fosu's (1986) study outlines the contemporary works produced by African artists of the twentieth century. He focuses on the early development of contemporary African artists and points to the fact that the gradual development and challenges faced by African artists brought about a new approach to selling the contemporary African arts to ordinary people rather than to the European market. He notes that the church relied on the creative expertise of these artists to promulgate Christian concepts in Africa. Of Bruce Onobrakpeya, he says, "his art is an aspect of African culture that relates to other social activities" (Fosu, 1986:25). He, however, declares that the epoxy-base deep etching method is counter linocut technique because it departs from the traditional printmaking technique peculiar to Europe. Fosu's book, which is well illustrated, does not only deal with the life and works of Onobrakpeya, but also provides much information on the works of other artists in Africa. Writing on Bruce Onobrakpeya's popularity, Adepegba (1995) says:

The advantage of reproduction in printmaking, the special area in which Bruce Onobrakpeya is especially famous, makes his works popular at home and outside (Adepegba, 1995:92).

In her own case, Kasfir (1999) discusses Onobrakpeya's experiences and activities at Zaria and Mbari club. She stresses the fact that "Onobrakpeya's recent installation work converges in interesting ways with that of El-Anatsui, as he inscribes small written symbols on larger, harder materials such as wood" (Kasfir, 1999:50).

Filani (1989), writing on printmaking in general, mentions some Nigerian print-makers including Bruce Onobrakpeya, David Dale and Solomon Wangboje who have distinguished themselves in the art. He discusses deep etching technique while trying to analyse the works of Bruce Onobrakpeya and David Dale. He informs that the sources of Onobrakpeya's themes for his works are basically Nigerian legends, myths, religious beliefs and philosophies. He remarks that Onobrakpeya derives inspiration for his etchings such as *Ahwaire, the tortoise and Onemu, the bird* (plate 8) and *Uloho, the Urhobo god of fortune* (plate 9), from Urhobo culture. Folarin (1989) discusses the development of new ideas and cultural awareness, among contemporary Nigerian artists. He states how artists like Bruce Onobrakpeya developed new techniques of art that are uniquely Nigerian. Also, he traces the historical development of Onobrakpeya's deep etching technique from 1967; when it was discovered at Osogbo.

Elebute (1987) examines the life and works of Onobrakpeya. He classifies Onobrakpeya as one of the most publicized Nigerian artists and traces the origin of his deep etching techniques to Mbari workshop at Osogbo. He writes:

His progress in this workshop
experiment was due not only to talent,
but also to his sense of purpose...In the
workshop experiment his creative mind

was put to test (Elebute, 1987:26)



Plate 8



Plate 9

Elebute (1988), also, elaborates the stages in the development of creative ideas of contemporary Nigerian artists including Bruce Onobrakpeya and highlights the use of imagery in their works. According to him:

Certain contemporary Nigerian artists
like Onobrakpeya, Buraimoh and
Osinowo have allowed their feelings
and imagination to influence their
images; this has a bold reflection in
their artistic productions
(Elebute, 1988:9)

In another contribution of his in a society magazine, Elebute views Onobrakpeya's work: *Rain and Cry at Otorogba* (Plate10) as a general statement on contemporary event as affected by Urhobo myths and legends.

Campbell (1989) reviews Bruce Onobrakpeya's book: *Sahelian Masquerades* and devotes attention to his artistic endeavour. He focuses on the international dimensions of Onobrakpeya's art and stresses that his interest in the semi-arid region and its culture dates back to his student days in Zaria. In her own case, Oyelola (1992) refers to Onobrakpeya's *Sahelian Masquerades* as a lavishly illustrated catalogue of his works. She notes that Onobrakpeya's five-year sojourn in Zaria offered him the opportunities to travel throughout Northern Nigeria and neighbouring countries to observe the devastation caused by drought and famine.

According to her:

These experiences, coupled with
recent environmental problems

in the area, moved Onobrakpeya
to create a series of prints
featuring masquerades who dance
to appease the forces of nature.

(Oyelola, 1992:3)

In another article: “The Earth as Anchor to the Spirit in Ascent”, published in 2000, Oyelola says that the prints of Bruce Onobrakpeya highlight the *work-a-day* world; and are about ordinary people and their activities. She also corroborates the point raised by other scholars who claimed that Onobrakpeya’s prints are derived from Urhobo culture. To support her argument, she selects and discusses six works of Bruce Onobrakpeya’s that articulate the Urhobo cultural heritage. Ifeta (2000) traces the development of 21st century Nigerian art and outlines the active role played by Onobrakpeya in its growth. She, however, claims that Onobrakpeya is a major link between the old and young artists. Like Oyelola, Ifeta emphasizes the fact that Onobrakpeya’s themes are influenced by Urhobo culture and justifies her observations by citing the examples of such works as *EMETE AYUVBI* in plate 11 (This plastograph 46.9cmx62cm printed in 1972 shows women bathing in a stream; the name *Emete Ayuvbi* refers to beautiful women in Urhobo folktale); and *APENE* in plate 12 (This plastograph 50cmx68cm printed in 1973 is a picture whose theme *Apene* means the game of draught or checkers in Urhobo language). “These prints”, according to her, “are characterized by simple deep-etching technique”



Plate 10



Plate 11



Plate 12

Ovraiti’s (2000) article “Nightmare at Noon” discusses trends in modern Nigerian deep etching method and highlights the fact that *adire* pattern of the Yoruba has become a major source of inspiration to Onobrakpeya and his pupils. Ovraiti also extols the creative qualities of Bruce Onobrakpeya’s deep etchings and describes them as works derived from the traditional Urhobo sculptures. Onobrakpeya (2004) conveys the intensity of personal Urhobo art forms and the degree to which the Urhobo worldview impresses itself on his art productions. His dense description of *Agbogidi* (plate 13), a study of fertility shrines made in plastography method/print-water colour (53cmx78cm) in 1972, is the recording of his sharp and experienced artistic mind. Onobrakpeya turns to Urhobo shrine arts for inspiration in *Agbogidi*; a theme developed out of visits that he made in the 1970s to Northern Urhobo villages of Ogharefe and Idjerhe. Picton’s (2004) conclusions about Onobrakpeya’s work can be more widely applied to the development of Urhobo culture in international scholarship. He writes:

Modernity is always local and international,
and Onobrakpeya’s art has a proven capacity to

assert Urhobon, Nigerian, and African social and aesthetic identities within an international art world. (John Picton, 2004:131).

Bakaren (1988) describes Onobrakpeya as one of the fore-runners of modern Nigerian art. He infers that a number of budding contemporary Nigerian artists admire and hope to attain the level of artistry of seasoned artists like Kolade Oshinowo and Bruce Onobrakpeya. However, Obiagwu (1988) observes that Bruce Onobrakpeya's nephew, John Onobrakpeya, a painter who graduated from the University of Benin differs in this respect. He often denies any influence from his uncle. This notwithstanding, Obiagwu remains convinced that one of John Onobrakpeya's etching: *Festivity* shows a sign of his uncle's influence. Nucleus, a catalogue of works of some contemporary Nigerian artists published by the Federal Ministry of Information in 1981, features a number of Bruce Onobrakpeya's prints, namely: *Ada Erinvin* (plate 14), a 68.5cmx49cm produced in 1976. The artwork shows a man lying down at the edge of a forest where an invisible road leads to the spirit world. *Ovigue* (plate 15), a deep etching of about 55cmx 41.5cm in size, printed on orange background and *Izobo* (plate 16) also a deep etching of about 60.5cm x 45.5cm in size, which deals with relationship between the human and the divine as well as *Ofeto* (plate 17), an etching of about 61cmx43cm printed on blue background.



Plate 13



Plate 14

Singletary (2002) shows that contemporary African art is as viable as its traditional counterpart, and that both deal with different aspects of the African experience. He uses the works of Bruce Onobrakpeya as a case study to illustrate the inventiveness of the new African art forms. He highlights the ethnic, national, international and modernistic impulses in Onobrakpeya's works as they are related to the dynamics of change in Africa in general, and Nigeria in particular. He also combines art historical and anthropological approaches to relate Onobrakpeya forms to content, context, and meaning. From the above analyses, it is obvious that most of these scholars focus mainly on Onobrakpeya and his popularity without making any appreciable reference to the *Impact of Visual images in communicating Socio-Cultural and Political Messages in Bruce Onobrakpeya's Artworks to Nigerian Peoples* and this is a gap in knowledge that this present study attempts to fill.



Plate 15



Plate 16



Plate 17

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Three theories relating to communication and visual art are germane to lay the ideational structure and/or the basic foundational discourse for this study on the *Impact of Visual Aesthetics in Communicating Bruce Onobrakpeya's Symbolic Messages to Nigerians*. The theories are (1) Symbolic Communication Theory (2) Semiotics Theory and (3) Aesthetic Theory. The theories will be discussed within the context of visual and oral languages that the artistic signs and symbols of Bruce Onobrakpeya are disseminating to the art viewers and the connoisseurs alike.

Symbolic Communication Theory

In symbolic communication theory art is viewed as a sign written in its own distinctive visual language. This is the reason why Buser (2006) says that "Communication through art implies that both the sender and receiver of the message may have understood the same basic language". This statement by this theorist may also presuppose the fact that "the receiver of a message must understand the visual language of the sender for communication to take place". There is also an argument by some theorists that the understanding of the message will only take place through symbolic representation if the cultural background of the sender is different from that of the receiver. It is this aspect of scholarship that has been used to tag the visual art as a universal language. This is what makes visual art a dynamic communication mode. The symbolic communication theorists have the belief that both the sender and receiver must operate within a fluid context in which the importance of visual images and signs is constantly changing. The art historical scholar Buser (2006) has reinforced this belief by reiterating the fact that "vital context surrounding the visual language gives the artistic signs their meaning, just as the meaning of a spoken language is derived from its immersion in the surrounding culture". Symbolic communication theorists also view art as an important part of human daily genre as viewed within the context of a Highway Sign that can tell motorists the distance that lies ahead of them. This system of Highway Code is a typical symbolic communication that human beings come across on a daily basis. It is worthy of mention at this juncture that Bruce Onobrakpeya has conveyed a different kind of information from his prints, pictorial and textual examples in that the signs created by him have been textured with memories and coloured with emotions to give a rich meaning.

Semiotics Theory

Semiotics is a general philosophical theory of signs and symbols that deals with their function in both artificially constructed and natural languages. It comprises the following areas of study: The syntactic, semantics and pragmatics. The Syntactic deals with the formal relations between signs and expressions in abstractions and between significations and the interpreters. The semantic deals with relations between signs and what they refer to, that is, the relations between the signs of a system, and human behaviour in reaction to signs including unconscious attitudes, influences of social institutions, and epistemological and linguistic assumptions. The pragmatics deals with the relations between signs and linguistic expressions and their users. According to Schutz, as noted by Webster (1961: 76), "Semiotics relates to the meaning or relationship of meaning of a sign or set of signs. It involves observing and interpreting signs; studying the relations of a sign to its referent and to other signs within a system; studying the connotations and ambiguities of words and their function in communication and propaganda; distinguishing between codes and messages, and between denotation and connotation". Also, semiotics deals with the "historical and psychological study and the classification of changes

in the signification of words or forms viewed as factors in linguistic development and including such occurrences as specialization and expression of meaning, ameliorative and pejorative tendencies, metaphor and adaptation” (Webster, 1961:107). Reads (1960:61) also states that: “semiotics system is exclusively the study of various types of discourse, which makes use of language” However, Saussure (1857 - 1913) opposes this idea of exclusivity while proposing that it is not only sounds or marks on paper that can create meanings, but any distinguishable object can as well be used to create meanings. Sims (1991) supports Saussure’s argument when he reiterates that colour can be used as an informational and directional code, distinguishing one object from another. He states that: “red, yellow and green are symbolic colours for traffic safety in big cities”. The green light stands for: “go” and red light stands for:”stop” while yellow light stands for “get ready to start” or get ready to stop”. In this instance, it is the difference in hues that creates the meaning, not the actual colours themselves. Semiotics is an analytical tool, which has been used to explain natural occurrences in philosophy, sociology, linguistics, anthropology and visual arts. Its application to the study of Onobrakpeya’s artistic achievements has revealed a lot of information about his artworks within the context of African culture.

Aesthetic Theory

The developers of this theory had proposed that **aesthetics** is a branch of philosophy that attempts to describe what makes something an art and to analyse the psychology of artists and the people experiencing art. But despite the intrinsic valuation of art by the theorists many people have been trying frantically to isolate the concept of art while explaining it. As a result nobody has come up with a conclusive explanation, which is now leading to the proposition of myriads of answers to the question: what is art? This misleading proposition has given rise to different definitions and many of the primordial explanations of art have been rejected in the process as artists themselves are always reluctant to give accurate answer to the question: what is art? While trying to solve the sordid problem of art conceptualization the aesthetic theorists began to analyse the characteristics of the images that are created by artists by classifying the images as something beautiful. This classification harps that artists create a beautiful image by combining a representation of something **real** and a conceptual **ideal**. This presupposes the fact that artists make a special kind of image by showing in it what they actually see: *the real* and, equally showing something they know or imagine: *the ideal*. The great philosopher, Aristotle, in the 4th century has supported this theoretical postulation while proposing that the fundamental principle of art was the imitation of nature. “This idea”, according to Buser (2006) “has been repeated whenever artists work from models to reproduce what they see before them”. **Mimesis**, a school of thought derived from these Aristotle’s postulations, had also asserted that “creating a work of art is like holding an *archetypal* (emphasis mine) mirror to copy nature in order for artists to reflect what they see”. However, Plato, in his earlier propositions had questioned the theory of imitation. He had averred that “nature is an imitation of higher ideas and that if artists only copy nature they will copy these higher ideas”. Plato had hammered that “an idea is an archetype that exists in a state of absolute perfection...because there exists an idea of what constitutes perfectness...as such an idea is real and material things exist because they participate in and imitate the universal ideas”. Bruce Onobrakpeya has been making some efforts as done by these two great philosophers in explaining the real and ideal of African art in cultural terms. For example, he supports the contextual philosophy of his people, the Urhobo who live in Niger Delta area of Nigeria, that “the Colour Red represents fertility, danger and mystery” (the real) and that “this hue embodies the concept of Urhobo art” (the ideal).

METHODOLOGY

The data for this study were collected through two principal sources: Primary and Secondary. The primary data were collected through Participant Observation, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and In-Depth Interviews (IDIs). The secondary data were existing information collected from books, journals, magazines, catalogues, newspapers and the Internet. Data collected from these two sources were first subjected to scrutiny by this researcher in order to ascertain their veracity and validity. After ascertaining the data to be genuine, they were then synthesized. After synthesizing the field materials, they were treated with data analysis tools to summarize, simplify and to interpret a mass of information. The data were descriptively analyzed by giving an account of events recorded during the field investigation in words before arriving at meaningful and conclusive decisions. The analyses were begun with encoding of the data; using coding sheets. The encoding of the data made them amenable for analysis. After encoding, the data were entered into the computer machine for analysis. The data were decoded and analysed by describing and summarizing facts, using descriptive data analysis tools such as: iconography and cryptography. The iconographic analysis was used to study, describe, catalogue and make collective representation and meaning of Onobrakpeya's works in the photographs taken. In cryptographic analysis, the symbols used by Bruce Onobrakpeya were first encoded and later decoded through extensive theoretical study, power of observation, inductive and deductive reasoning and vivid imagination guided by good judgement. The analysis of the symbols was reduced into three basic steps: (1) identification of the symbols used by Onobrakpeya to disclose characteristics of manifestations such as repetitions, patterns and symmetrical phenomena (2) recognition of the characteristics manifestations when disclosed and (3) explanation of the characteristics manifestations when they were recognized by the researcher.

DATA ANALYSIS

The study has established the fact that values, idioms, expressions, attitudes, colours, daily activities, sayings, signs and symbols communicate certain cultural and symbolic ideas on how to relate with or handle traditional and modern ideals in the Nigerian society. It is, however, a belief in most African cultures that colours give pejorative connotations to peace, danger and life respectively. Onobrakpeya's childhood encounter with the colour red has been used by this researcher to support this belief. For example, an article by Onobrakpeya's in the year 2004 confirms that "his encounter with colour red remains indelible in his mind and affects his responses to red objects". This encounter, however, has helped him to understand the symbolism of Urhobo belief and art. He has emphasized that in Urhobo culture, as an example, red colour is said to represent life in the world of (*Akpo*) and the red hue is a symbol of fertility, mystery and danger. In the traditional African society, there was also a belief that thought prefigures all physical existence, and that thought could be expressed by graphic signs, such as those employed in rock and wall paintings, which articulate the African world concept. These signs are closely related to the notion of the creative force of speech and are related to African accounts of the creation of the world, in which the primacy of word and sign are conceived of as having existed since the beginning of time. The traditional African signs and symbols, therefore, serve as models for Bruce Onobrakpeya to imitate in modern African setting. They serve as archives of ideas and events, which allow him to integrate into the orderly working of his immediate milieus.

Also, it is established that African signs and symbols belong to the internally coherent system which refers to a number of events that permeate even the simplest daily act, that is, the daily semiosis. It is therefore observed that the African graphic signs and symbols have provided a kind of notation system around which group of Onobrakpeya's symbolic messages are clustered, it is not surprising to find that several of his artistic images are related to three dimensional forms which also incorporate references to mythical acts and symbolic states of beings in African socio-cultural system. Therefore there are many examples of direct and indirect relationship between his signs and symbols, and creative artworks such as paintings and sculptures some of which will be discussed in relation to the *impact that visual images has in communicating socio-cultural and political messages in Bruce Onobrakpeya's artworks to Nigerians*. It is observed in some of the artworks produced by Onobrakpeya that signs and symbols used are derived from Yoruba *adire* fabrics as it is in one of his earliest prints titled: *Eclipse*. This is a deep etching of about 38.5cm x 26.5cm produced in 1968. Its components are welded together with geometric mesh and textures derived from Yoruba fabric design. More so, the Hausa/Fulani tendency towards the decorative motifs is clearly evident in his work: *Emeravwe PhruGro-O* (Plate 18). This is a 1988 plastograph that measures 68.1 x 49cm and also depicts Hausa/Fulani embroidery and wall decorations. Significantly, the crescent moon and star, placed at the top right segment, identify the work as Islamic in iconography.



Plate18



Plate 19

Bruce Onobrakpeya's artworks have intricate designs and motifs that add beauty to them. The theme of these works can be divided into four. They are: (1) Themes on Daily Life Experience (2) Themes on Religious and Mythical Ideas (3) Themes on National Unity and (4) Themes on Niger Delta Issues. Examples of Bruce Onobrakpeya's themes based on daily life experience are: *Ivwie*, *Edido* and *Erhue Orise*. (1) *IVWIE* (Plate 19) is a deep-etching of about 61.5 cm x 46 cm produced in 1972. The word *Ivwie* means suffering, oppression or depression. The dominant image in the print is an abstraction of what looks like a battered human head that signifies helplessness in the face of overwhelming torture and agony. This abstract image symbolizes horrors of violence, inhumanity and social injustice. In the lower section of the print, Bruce Onobrakpeya depicts a form that looks like a mouth clipped together with a lock to prevent the victim of injustice from crying for help; a symbolic *culture of silence* for the *mass media* that was perpetrated in Nigeria during the military regimes. In the top central of the panel are curvilinear designs derived from Hausa/Fulani architecture. In the upper left corner of the print, he depicts a circle of Yoruba *adire* motif called *sun bebe* meaning "lift up the beads" or to raise the beads from a lower to a higher position. Below left is an abstract image of a lizard crawling towards the *adire* patterns. The artist associates this episode of oppression he etched on metal plate with two events in human history; these are the massacre of the black Africans in the apartheid enclave when, in the year 1960, the police opened fire on

a crowd, killing 69 at Sharpeville, an African township, thirty-five miles from Johannesburg and the pogrom attack on the Jews by the Nazi Germany in the 1930s.

(2) *EDIDO* meaning work song, (plate 7) is a plastograph of about 63.3 cm x 49.5 cm produced in 1976. It is a description of one event in a chain of events. In it, Bruce Onobrakpeya captures farming activities of the people living in Oke-Eruvbi: an Urhobo village situated along a fertile river valley via the ancient Benin-City. In it he shows Urhobo farmers who usually sing *Edido* while threshing boiled palm-nuts to extract palm-oil. The print is divided into two sections. In the top section, Onobrakpeya depicts a busy scene in which (1) farmers are crushing the nuts with their feet in a wooden trough (*oko*) that looks like a canoe; (2) a woman carrying a basket on the head with a baby mounted on her back; (3) a man carrying fishing traps and (4) a woman carrying a water pot and moving towards the hut (*utughe edi*). A farmer is also depicted boiling the nuts in a large drum placed near the trough (*oko*). At the bottom section of the print, the artist depicts (1) a bather, (2) people washing clothes and (3) two people fishing; one with a fishing hook (*oghore*) and the other holding a fishing scoop (*ayaro*). The print is rendered in a tone of one hue. Its overall view symbolizes hard-work and dignity in labour.

Erhue Orise meaning *Orise* Cow (Plate 20) is a black and white print measuring 68.5 cm x 91cm produced in 1988. In the print, Onobrakpeya depicts a figure bestridden a well placed in the belly of a cow. The image of the cow symbolizes wealth and cultural endowment in Northern Nigeria. The artist shows stylized figure of a Fulani herdsman, myriads of figural sheaths and carved tent posts that are common in the Northern Nigerian landscape. There is a snake motif depicted crawling at the side of a well. This motif recalls the historical myth of Bayajidda in the story of how the seven Hausa states came into existence. The overall composition of *Erhue Orise* signifies prayer for abundant water for the survival of plants and animals in the Northern region of Nigeria.



Plate 20



Plate 21

Examples of Onobrakpeya's works that are based on religious and mythical ideas are: *An Encounter with Three Ghosts*, *Emedjo*, *Mamiwata Voyibo*, *Eyame Jevwe* and *Agbogidi*. *An Encounter with Three Ghosts* (Plate 21) is a plastograph (61cm x 41.4 cm) produced in 1970. Bruce Onobrakpeya presented this Yoruba oral narrative to connote struggle for power and survival of the fittest. He shows a pictorial impression of an encounter with three ghosts; a theme adapted from *my life in the Bush of Ghosts* written by a Yoruba author: Amos Tutuola. The story is based on a seven year-old boy who fled into the forest when war broke out in his village. His first encounter in the bush was with three old ghosts, who had golden, silver and copper appearance respectively. The artist depicts the boy tied to the body of the silver ghost with rope: this is an indication that the silver ghost has an upper hand over two other ghosts who are now scrambling for the boy pulling him here and there for possession and for sacrifice. Onobrakpeya embellished the print with figural sheaths and intricate decorations. The decorative patterns on the body of the ghosts and the boy can be categorized into four such as

diamond, circle, triangle and square. The images of the ghosts combine both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic shapes. The copper ghost on the right side of the panel has a head surmounted by animal horns. Its form is treated with the neck showing an elongated proportion. The golden and silver ghosts have rigid formula of facial appearance that shows horn headdress. In African society, the images of ram with such horns are mostly used as altarpiece and mask. In Yoruba tradition, representation of horns and ram-like head in artworks signifies sacrifice.

Emedjo (plate 22) meaning masked performance is a plastograph (49 cm x 67.5 cm) produced in 1974. In it, Bruce Onobrakpeya depicts in the foreground a colourful procession of masquerades and drummers that are being watched by spectators who are encased in patches of black hues and dark shades of yellow ochre that recede into the skyline. Bright red and yellow colours alternating with deep blue and dark hues are used to bring out the images of the masquerades and the drummers. These lively colours, which brighten the composition, symbolize festivity. Also, the artist integrates myriads of patterns and shades as well as thick and thin lines to intensify the interplay of the visual and performing arts. The compositional device used by Onobrakpeya is common in most of his prints. For an example, he used white pigment to separate the spectators from the performers. This device has helped greatly in showcasing the colourful spectacle.

Mamiwata Voyibo (Plate 23), 85cm x 59cm print was produced in the year 1976. The *Mamiwata* theme is used by Onobrakpeya to project the image of water spirit that found its way into the Nigerian folklore during the colonial era. Onobrakpeya (2004) refers to the print as “artistic representation of the clash between the old order and the new current at the advent of colonialism in Nigeria.” According to Onobrakpeya “the name *Mamiwata* is derived from the word: *Mermaid*, the half human, and half fish creature in the European mythology”. The print is inspired by Onobrakpeya’s personal experience at the Maine in the United States of America. He claims that he saw blurred images bathing in the warm waters of Echo Lake in the Bar Harbour Holiday Inn of Maine in the year 1975, while participating in a workshop organized for International artists at Haystack Mountain School of Art and Craft. He puts the memory in his sub conscious mind until he was able to interpret the experience through the print medium. Onobrakpeya had used myriads of lines, organic and geometric patterns as well as light and shade effects to project supernatural encounter with the *Mermaid*: the *Mamiwata*. The patterns he used to bring out the forms of the *Mermaid* are the *Ubi* designs of the Urhobo and the *Uli* signs of the Igbo people living in the south-eastern Nigeria.

Eyame Jevwe (Plate 24), meaning “I love my two wives” measures 39cmx18cm. The work is made to commemorate a yearly dance festival called *Geerewol* organized by the Fulani group living in the northern part of Nigeria for young lovers. In this print, Onobrakpeya depicts a young Fulani nomad who is observing the seven day *Geerewol* dance. The young nomad is shown wearing a white turban on the head with elaborate jewellery on his ears. Two female figures are depicted standing above the image of the male nomad. The female figures wear long plaited hairs that are wrapped with brass elements to enhance their alluring beauty. Other artistic elements such as *arewa* signs are woven into their skirt designs to form prestigious pendants. The artist also shows masks that are flanked by two female figures in vertical orientation. Around the masks and the female figures are other human images and animal motifs surmounted by geometrical shapes. Some of these motifs allude to varied cult personalities and to the assemblage of animals of Fulani extraction as well as other elements associated with Northern Nigeria’s milieu.



Plate 22



Plate 23



Plate 24

Onobrakpeya makes an impression of ritual objects in the shrine dedicated to *Agbogidi* (Plate 13): an Urhobo deity who is believed to grant its devotees good fortunes and protection. He divides the picture plane into three sections: the skyline, the middle ground and the foreground. The skyline has cryptic motifs that are rendered with earth colours. The middle ground is covered with deep red hue, which signifies blood; the most prominent figure in this section is *Agbogidi*. The picture has patches of blue hue that symbolizes water in Urhobo mythology. The foreground is painted yellow, a colour that signifies the radiance of the sun that links the physical to the spiritual realm. “The combination of warm and cool colours”, according to Bruce Onobrakpeya, “is an indication of mystical presence which evokes the sublime”: awakening feelings of awe and veneration. Examples of Onobrakpeya prints that focus on national unity are: *Ofeto*, *Ominira* and *Studies of Nigerian Musical Instruments*. The print: *Ofeto* (plate 17) reveals Onobrakpeya’s commitment to Nigerian unity. The word: *Ofeto* means the comb and the artist focuses on the relationship between the comb and the hair. The central figure in the print is an anthropomorphic comb that is used to unite the various ethnic groups in Nigeria. At the top left of the print is a weaver bird that is creating an anthill; a symbol of hard work that is required to build Nigeria as a nation. At the top right is a woman plaiting a gorilla’s hair: a scene that recalls a legend in Urhobo land, which says that a woman cleverly lured a gorilla to plait its hair to avoid being killed by this contemptible two footed mammal. At the left bottom of the print is a Fulani maid and below her are motifs of a snake and a ram. At the opposite side, a Fulani man with beautifully plaited hair is surrounded by the motifs of a fish, a chameleon and a ram. In the foreground of the print are three images of dragonflies, dots and different geometric patterns derived from the Yoruba *adire* fabrics as well as traditional motifs of the Igbo, Ibibio and the Hausa/Fulani: All these images reflect Nigeria’s cultural unity in diversity.

Ominira (Plate 25) is a Yoruba word that means freedom. The work was done by Onobrakpeya to celebrate Nigeria’s attainment of independence. The principal forms in the print are three figures supporting a globe-like object, which symbolizes a united nation and/or the unification of three major ethnic groups in Nigeria and it supports the Yoruba adage that says: *Aro meta kii da obe nu*, meaning “three earth stones support the soup pot better”. It is a stylized work that has human and symbolic structures, which are redolent of the narrative panel common in the Benin and Yoruba art. Onobrakpeya uses curve lines to create an impression of liquid substances. At the upper section of the print are: (1) three vignettes of small soldier ants working hard to sustain their queen (2) mountain climbers bound together by the same rope and (3) masquerades from different ethnic groups coming together to celebrate Nigeria’s freedom from colonial rule. These mental image activities also portray Nigeria’s unity in diversity. At the upper section of this print are motifs of masquerades: assembly of persons wearing masks to symbolize social gathering of all Nigerians to celebrate their freedom from the colonists. Supplication figures depicted directly above the masquerades symbolize faith, while the two men depicted at the extreme left corner of the print, cutting down the thorny tree

of vice with seven vicious head symbolize morality. The overall meaning of the message in the print is that with able leadership, adequate manpower, moral courage and material resources Nigeria can emerge as a successful nation.

The Study of Nigerian Musical Instruments (Plate 26) is a 42 cm x 69 cm plastograph produced in 1975. At the upper part of the print, Onobrakpeya depicts a variety of Nigerian musical instruments such as (1) a double gong of iron (*elaghalogho*), which is struck with an antelope horn in Urhoboland, (2) a *bata* drum, which is sacred to *Sango*, the Yoruba god of thunder, (3) bronze rattles (*elabare*) from Benin, (4) a bowl drum (*gudugudu*) used by the Hausa and the Yoruba, (5) reed trumpet (*aigaita*) used by the Hausa/Fulani, (6) gourd rattle (*sekere*) used by the Yoruba, (7) hourglass drum (*dundun*) used by the Yoruba, (8) a harp (*akpata*) used by the people in south eastern Nigeria, (9) thumb piano (*ubo aka*) used in the Niger Delta region, (10) a carved ritual drum (*agba*) used by the *Ogboni* society of the Yoruba, (11) stringed instrument (*goje*) used by the Hausa/Fulani group and (12) a thumb piano and flute (*odike*) found in many parts of Nigeria. At the foreground of the print is a musical ensemble showing five Nigerian ethnic groups: the Yoruba *bata* drummer, the Hausa *goje* player, the Igbo horn player blowing ivory tusk (*udu enyi*), the slit wooden drummer (*ogere*) from Niger Delta region and Hausa/Fulani long trumpet player (*kakaki*). These music players from different cultures in Nigeria are depicted playing in harmony. Onobrakpeya uses patches of white and brown hues to unite these Nigerian musicians and to create a multicultural tapestry.



Plate 25



Plate 26

Some themes used by Onobrakpeya reflect the issue of oil exploration and land exploitation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Among such themes are *The Execution of the Ogoni Nine*; *the Hawk Prays for Peace*; *Statue of the Nine Ogonis*, *Nudes and Protest* and *Waste to Beauty*. The print: *Execution of the Ogoni Nine* (Plate 27), recalls the inhuman treatment of the patriots from Niger Delta region of Nigeria who protested the continuous exploitation of *Ogoniland* by the foreign firms carrying out oil exploratory activities, which degraded their land, water and people. Onobrakpeya creates the print to protest the killings of the nine men from Ogoniland by the erstwhile military dictator, General Sani Abacha in cold blood. He depicts an imaginary forest of wailing totems to express general displeasure at the killing of the nine environmentalists that had respect to control of water pollution in the Niger Delta region. *The Hawk Prays for Peace* (Plate 28), is a print done by Onobrakpeya to express his feelings about bad governance in Nigeria and mismanagement of revenue generated for the whole Nigerian nation through oil exploration in the Niger Delta region. The print is also a visual interpretation of a political poem written by Tanure Ojaide an Urhobo poet. The poem has expounded a powerful theoretical justification for a peaceful resolution of conflict in a language of lucid elegance and pungency. Ojaide's poetic verses run thus:

After my feathers have turned red with
blood of victims. After I have converted
the moon into a nest and filled it

with the spoils of undeclared war, After I
have seized the arms of the armed and
disabled the fighting spirit of the youth,
After I have become the only bird and all
titles and praise name mine, The only
proprietor of the world. After I have become
immortal. Let there be peace.



Plate 27



Plate 28

The work: *The Statue of the Nine Ogonis* (Plate 29), according to Bruce Onobrakpeya, “was created to attract the interest of human rights activists, especially those who are interested in the Ogoni nine episodes... Some of them have, however, been offering huge sum of money to acquire the print but value must be placed on it for buyers to appreciate it better before putting it up for sale”. In the print, Onobrakpeya uses lines and bright hues to bring out figures of the nine Ogonis being murdered in the cold blood. He employs vivid images to evoke the spirit of the hanged men and to recall a painful episode in the history of Nigeria.

In the print: *Nudes and Protests* (plate 30), Onobrakpeya etches women in the nude protesting against government’s nonchalant attitude towards Niger Delta problems. He shows several elderly naked women holding tree branches to express their grievances against autocratic governance and mismanagement of the Niger Delta resources. The naked appearance of women used in agitating for human rights has been a common phenomenon in the distant past, most especially in the southern part of Nigeria. A good example is that of courageous women who took mass action to combat injustice as at the time of the *Aba Tax Riot* of 1929 in South-eastern Nigeria. Its signification in Yorùbá culture in Nigeria is not different. In Yorùbá social forms deliberate public exposure of the female body is a gesture of extreme gravity of eloquent abomination in the timeless rites of wrongs. The nude figures in this print, therefore, symbolize dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in the Nigerian nation. In the print black lines and ultramarine blue as well as lemon yellow hues are applied by Onobrakpeya to signpost moment of crisis, opposition and disappointment.

The work: *Waste to Beauty* (Plate 31) was produced by Onobrakpeya at the time he started to traverse every nook and cranny of the Niger Delta region scouting for discarded objects, which he arranged to form artistic images and he also developed a very strong affinity for the collection of discarded computer parts, which he superimposed on other found objects to display a meaningful cultural and historical picture of communal activities or to express his political opinion of the events in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. His interest in the collection of discarded objects to disseminate artistic messages to Nigerians arose from a personal desire to fulfil his childhood obsession with machines and tools, and most importantly to satisfy his

predilections for observing the interesting forms and colours fixed firmly in computer machines.



Plate 29



Plate 30



Plate 31

CONCLUSION

The major issues advanced in the study are the following: First is the cursory look into the impact that visual images has on the dissemination of Bruce Onobrakpeya's symbolic messages to the Nigerian citizens. Second is the assessment of Onobrakpeya's experimentations with symbolic images of the Urhobo people and the emergence of a complete set of ideograms that he calls *IBIEBE* symbols. Third is the reappraisal of the varied symbolic images that Bruce Onobrakpeya had used to communicate socio-cultural and political messages to Nigerian peoples and the importance of using colours in disseminating cultural messages in African society generally.

The conclusion is that through the inherent symbolic representations and visual messages in his prints Onobrakpeya has been encouraging patriotic ideals among Nigerians in order to certify his civic duty as a Nigerian citizen. For an example, he has used specific motifs relating to Niger Delta's socio-cultural and political imbroglio to inform Nigerians about the challenges being faced by the people in this region and to expose the realities of land degradation, water pollution, injustices and problems of ecosystem in the area. Examples of works he used to disseminate information on Niger Delta's complicated situations are: *The Statue of the Nine Ogonis* (plate 29) and *Nude and Protest* (plate30).

To further sustain and patronize Onobrakpeya's constructive art base criticism in solving national crisis, it is hereby recommended that a specific and clearly articulated curriculum should evolve in training Nigerian artists to take on local challenges such as abductions, desertification and youth restiveness and propose deliberate solutions to them through visual-art-communication programme. This researcher is also recommending that a deliberate communication policy geared towards creating socio-cultural and political awareness through the key role of visual arts and the professional engagement of artists to national development issues should be put in place by the incumbent political leadership in Nigeria.

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