

INTERNATIONALISM AND ETHNICITY IN MODERN NIGERIAN ART

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The last three decades have witnessed a great upsurge in artistic activity in Nigeria sustained by growing public interest. This can be explained by a combination of factors.

In February 1977, Lagos was the venue for the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) organised round the theme "Black civilisation and education". This was a major event in the history of Nigeria which assembled Africans from Africa and the diaspora for a celebration of Black culture.¹ The major streets in Lagos were transformed by hanging banners and large plaques in low relief bearing designs of African origin. The National Theatre, as well as being the venue of the symposium, housed exhibitions of books on Africa, African architecture, Christian and secular art from Ethiopia (which was designated "Star Country"), modern African art and a display of archaeological materials focusing on the origin of man in Africa. Musical and dance performances were held at other venues in Lagos. The shops around Tafawa Balewa Square served as mini-cultural centres where African countries displayed their artefacts. The National Museum assembled masterpieces of Nigeria art in an exhibition entitled *2000 years of Nigerian Art*. New hairstyles and fabrics were created, the Benin ivory mask, chosen as the symbol of FESTAC, frequently occurring as a motif. For the first time in Nigeria, Africa was extolled as the centre of cultural achievement, instead of being derided as a poor imitator of western culture.²

The exhibition, *2000 years of Nigerian art*, accompanied by a lavishly illustrated book, had great impact on both Nigerian and foreign visitors. It highlighted the skill of Nigerian artists of the past and stimulated an interest in the work of Nigerian artists of the present. When the exhibition went on tour round the world, it received wide acclaim and the Nigerian government realised that works of art were a means of enhancing Nigeria's image abroad.³

In 1981, the National Gallery of Modern Art was commissioned in Lagos. It houses a

¹Lt. General Olusegun Obasanjo, *FESTAC '77*: London & Lagos, Africa Journal Ltd. and The International Festival Committee, foreword.

²FESTAC '77 received extensive, positive coverage in the Nigerian press but there were a few dissenting voices, notably that of the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo. See Ola Rotimi, "I beg to disagree Sir", Lagos, *Sunday Times*, 21 December 1975, p. 9.

³A vast collection of modern works from Africa and the diaspora was also on display at the National Theatre.



1. Plastocast "Emetore"
by Bruce Onobrakpeya

permanent display of art works by modern Nigerian and foreign artists inside the National Theatre. Guided tours are provided. The Gallery is moving toward its objective of "making Nigerian art part of every home" through the publication of postcards and greeting cards bearing reproductions of works in the Gallery. The catalogue of the Gallery's collection, *The Nucleus*, provides reproductions of the works in colour and black and white. Thus positive steps have been taken to familiarise members of the public with modern Nigerian art.⁴

The premises of the National Theatre are used for exhibitions by modern Nigerian artists. In September 1990, the Society of Nigerian Artists assembled a large collection of works by members and arranged an exhibition to coincide with the 30th anniversary celebrations of Nigeria's Independence. An enormous variety of styles was represented with contributions from "Old Masters" like Grillo and Onobrakpeya as well as recently qualified artists. This event was given prominence in the *Daily Times*, a long-established newspaper with a wide national circulation.⁵

In the early 1980s, the National Museum began to offer gallery space to modern artists for exhibitions lasting for one or two weeks. Each exhibition is accompanied by an illustrated catalogue, free to viewers, with biographical details of the artist and a statement of his artistic philosophy.⁶ Reviews of the exhibitions appear in the national press. Art criticism has now become professional and critics have recently formed their own association – Art Writers of Nigeria.

Whilst in previous decades artists had been largely dependent upon foreign government agencies (e.g. the British Council, the Goethe Institute, the Alliance Française, the Italian Cultural Centre and the United States Information Service) and expatriate collectors to

⁴Sina Yussuff, *Establishing a National Gallery of Modern Art, the Nigerian experience*. Unpublished diss. University of Manchester, 1983. The National Gallery of Modern Art has now become a parastatal, The National Gallery of Art, with its headquarters in Abuja.

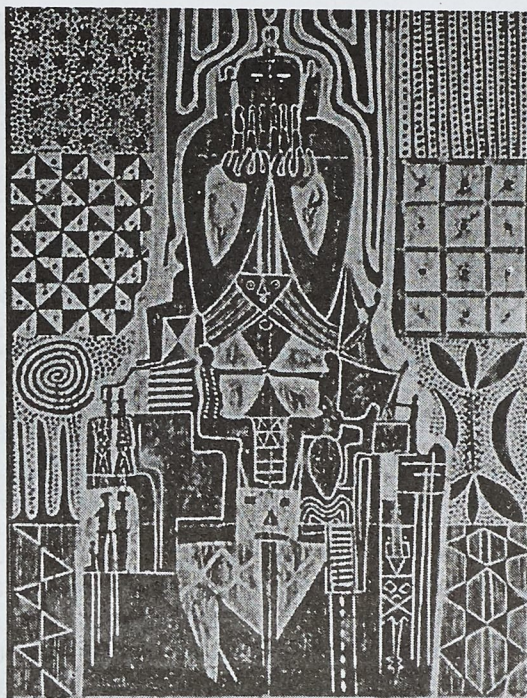
⁵Adebisi Tijani, "Nigeria's modern artists," Lagos: *Daily Times*, 29 September, 1990, pp. 9-11, 15.

⁶The catalogue of Kolade Osinowo's exhibition, *Cultural Treasures*, Nov. 10-17, 1990, contained 28 pages with 20 black and white reproductions of works on display.

sponsor exhibitions, the 1980's witnessed a growing interest among individual Nigerians who organised exhibitions in their own homes, charging a commission on sales. Corporate bodies such as First City Merchant Bank, Ventures and Trusts Limited and Guinness also sponsored exhibitions accompanied by illustrated catalogues. In 1983, Chief and Mrs N.C. Jibunoh opened their Didi Museum on Victoria Island which serves as a venue for exhibitions by modern artists.⁷ The moneyed élite of Lagos, like their counterparts in other countries, are now acquiring works of modern artists to enhance their own status and prestige.

The favourable social climate of the 80s encouraged many young artists with academic qualifications varying from Ordinary National Diploma to Master of Fine Arts to exhibit their works at any venue possible, sometimes before they were ripe. Lagos remains the Mecca of the art world since it has a large number of art-lovers with the sophisticated taste as well as the means to acquire works of art. These include expatriates attached to embassies, and wealthy Nigerians who have begun to see the acquisition of art works as an investment as well as a status symbol.⁸ Invitations are issued for the opening day of the exhibition when an important personality makes a speech and declares the exhibition open. The artist then takes the visitors on a guided tour, pausing before each work to give a comment or explanation. Photographers and journalists are much in evidence on these occasions. Some younger artists adopt an aggressive sales policy. If a visitor pauses to contemplate one of the works on display, he is accosted by the artist or his agent, asking if the visitor wishes to buy it. The agents of other artists with exhibitions forthcoming in the near future distribute invitations to visitors who show a keen interest in the works on display.

Seasoned artists such as Bruce Onobrakpeya, Jimoh Buraimoh and Kolade Osinowo



2. Lino cut "Aro Osomo"—Bruce Onobrakpeya

⁷Gbile Oshodipe, "Didi Museum: repertoire of African culture," *Lagos Life*, 8-14 March 1990, pp. 7-9.

⁸Nduka Nwosu, "Art as big business: Nigeria joins the league," *Lagos: Daily Times*, 7 Nov 1990.



3. Painting "Man and two wives"—Bruce Onobrakpeya

and expatriates – working in Anambra and Enugu States," the AKA Circle holds an annual exhibition accompanied by a crisply designed catalogue.⁹ Most of the AKA artists are of Igbo origin and reflect their Igbo cultural background in their works. Those who are not, derive elements in their work from the Igbo cultural milieu. Members of the AKA group who have established a sound reputation both nationally and internationally include Tayo Adenaike, El Anastui, Chike Aniakor and Obiora Udechukwu.

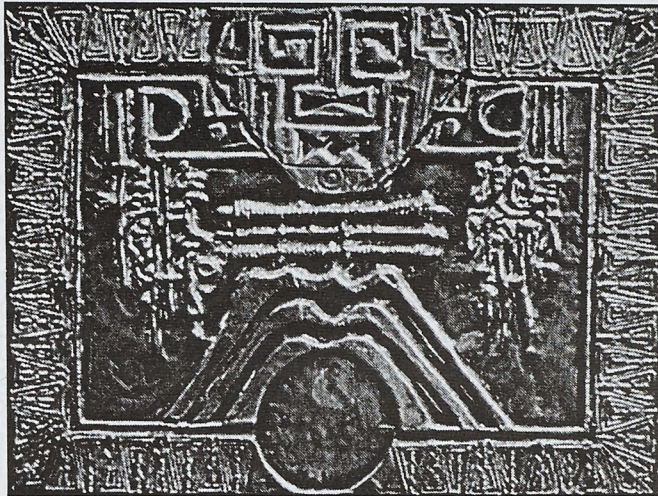
The *ONA* group of artists which crystallised in Ile-Ife in 1989 are united by their aim to incorporate traditional Yoruba decorative motifs into an art of social comment. Members of the *ONA* group have conducted research into indigenous painting and experimented with materials ranging from clay and calabashes to plastic chippings and plastic sheets. The *ONA* artists are predominantly Yoruba and include Don Akatakpo, Bolaji Campbell, Kunle Filani, Tunde Nasiru, Moyo Ogundipe, Tayo Ojomo, Moyo Okediji, Idowu Otun and Tola Wewe.¹⁰

A growing concern for the environment was felt in the 80's. This manifested itself not only in activities to remove rubbish from private and communal living-space (Environmental Sanitation) but also in activities designed to enhance the environment. Raising flowers and creating floral decorations for social occasions such as weddings became very important. The public environment in towns was beautified by the erection of statues on roundabouts.

⁹AKA 86, *Inaugural exhibition catalogue*: Enugu, AKA, 1986, p. 5.

¹⁰Adetola Wewe, *ONA: a revolutionary art movement in contemporary Nigeria?* Paper presented at the 1990 Conference on Yoruba Art at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, 24-28 April 1990.

The Marina roundabout in Lagos has a mother and child group of heroic size. Roundabouts in Ibadan are now graced with the presence of characters from local history such as Ogunmola, Oluyole, Bishop Akinyele and Efunsetan, executed in naturalistic style. The roundabouts in Kaduna are embellished with abstract works in keeping with Muslim decorative art.



4. Copper foil "Eton" by Bruce Onobrakpeya

The new National Policy on Education published in 1981 encourages the teaching of art at both primary and secondary levels.¹¹ Previously, art was a very unpopular subject, regarded by most parents as frivolous and a waste of time. It now features as one of the core subjects at Junior Secondary level. There are now more than 40 tertiary institutions offering fine art courses from which potential art teachers may be recruited. The Institute of African Studies of the University of Ibadan started a Master's programme with the option of specialisation in African art history in 1980. In 1988 the Cultural Policy for Nigeria was published with sections dealing with the promotion and encouragement of fine arts and crafts and the practitioners thereof.¹² Thus art is now clearly a matter of national concern.

During the 80's and 90's, Nigerian artists exhibited their works in Europe and America, sometimes as individuals, sometimes as Nigerians and at other times as Africans. The catalogue which accompanied the exhibition, "Contemporary African Artists Changing Tradition", organised by the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, in 1990, raised the question of the identity of modern African art: does exposure to western education and ideas compromise the "Africanness" of the work of art? This recalls the statement made in 1963 by William Fagg, doyen of the British school of African art historians:

African art is a tribal art – or rather a multitude of tribal arts – and what is not tribal is not African: "contemporary art", like the sky-scrappers, is a part of the

¹¹*The National Policy on Education* (revised). Lagos: N.E.R.C., 1981, p. 17.

¹²*Cultural Policy for Nigeria*, Federal Ministry of Information, Dept. of Culture, Lagos, 1988, pp. 10-12.



5. Painting "Have you heard?"— Bruce Onobrakpeya

extension of Europe in Africa.¹³

This statement coloured the attitude of many people towards modern African art. Delange and Fry, however, in their contribution to the catalogue of a major exhibition of modern African art held at the Camden Arts Centre in London in 1969, regarded this attitude as an indication of "Cultural imperialism", which understood (African art) only as a glance towards the past, a future that would be specifically African was never envisaged... The writings of archaeologists and ethnologists... have constantly bound up artistic production with social and religious imperatives beyond which it is impossible to imagine a new perspective. The Black African world is imprisoned in our minds by these scholarly studies which, for the

most part, have not bothered about the living, projective aspects of the communities they analyse... We simply refuse to consider this production (i.e. modern African art) as "authentically African... We still stagnate in the same ideological atmosphere as our parents—Africa is a conservatory, a continent wide museum, and is refused the right to take a living, creative part in the construction of a new world."¹⁴

This attitude described by Delange and Fry still persists in some quarters today and is an obstacle to the appreciation of modern African art on its own terms. Critics would be wise to remember the words of the Nigerian poet, Christopher Okigbo:

¹³William Fagg, *Nigerian Images*. London: Lund Humphries, 1963, p. 121.

¹⁴Jacqueline Delange and Philip Fry, *Contemporary African Art*. London: Studio International, pp. 6-7.

"The truth is that the modern African is no longer a product of an entirely indigenous culture."¹⁵

External influences on African art are not restricted only to the 20th century. Each of the many ethnic groups in West Africa, while retaining certain elements of cultural specificity such as language, cuisine and dress, for centuries have influenced, and been influenced by other peoples with whom they came in contact through intermarriage, trade, war, evangelisation and colonisation. The movement of groups and individuals within West Africa itself, voluntarily in pursuit of trade, or involuntarily in flight from war, led to the diffusion of ideas, techniques and goods which the receiving community selected and adapted in conformity with their own social and aesthetic norms.

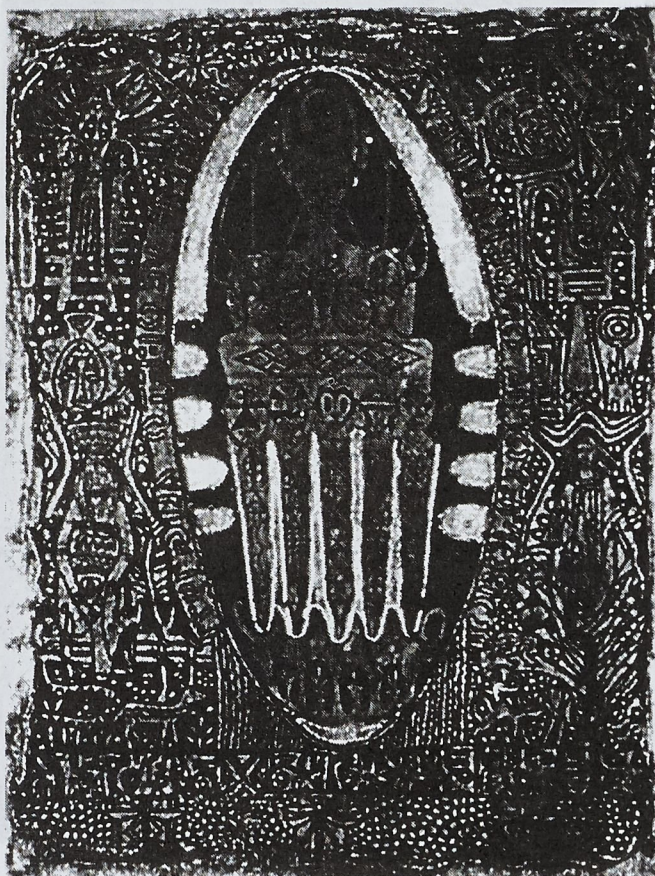


6. Plastograph "Eclipse" by Bruce Onobrakpeya

International influences on academic Nigerian art of the twentieth century have been exerted mainly through western education received by the artists both within and outside Nigeria. Two dimensional techniques such as printing and easel painting, not found in pre-colonial Nigeria, were taught at secondary and tertiary levels. These produced works for decorative purposes to be hung on the walls of western-style buildings whose large windows provided the necessary light conditions in contrast to the dim interiors of traditional rural dwellings.

Exhibitions held in Lagos during the past three decades were dominated by two dimensional works, the creation of which relied on the use of imported materials in the form of canvas, paint and brushes. In a counter-reaction which is partly ideological and partly a result of economic necessity, young artists in Nigeria and other parts of Africa have tried to execute

¹⁵Quoted by Dennis Duerden in *Contemporary African Art*, op. cit., p. 15.



7. Plastograph "Ofeto". by Bruce Onobrakpeya

two dimensional works in materials which are available locally. Moyo Okediji of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ife, has carried out research into Yoruba paint-making tradition and experimented with the production of water-based paint, oil-based paint, clay crayon and chalk pastel from local clays.¹⁶ Youssouf Bath of the Ivory Coast uses chalk and coffee as alternative pigments on paper and tree-bark.¹⁷

The Groupe Bogolan Kasobane of Mali uses a traditional resist dyeing technique on narrow strip hand-woven cotton.¹⁸ This means that contemporary African artists were at the same time anxious that the borrowing of western techniques should not result in the loss of their own cultural identity as Africans,

which Senghor and other Francophones had defined as "Négritude".¹⁹ This importance attached to racial identity was a reaction against the attempts by the colonial powers to de-value and even destroy the culture of their subject peoples.

¹⁶Moyo Okediji, "Yoruba painting tradition," *Nigeria Magazine*, 54:2 (1986), p. 20.

¹⁷Grace Stanislaus, *Contemporary African artists: Changing tradition*. New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1990, p. 61.

¹⁸Susan Vogel, *Africa explores: twentieth century African art*. New York: Center for African Art, p. 183.

¹⁹Leopold Sedar Senghor, *Prose and poetry*, edited and translated by John Reed and Clive Wake. London, Nairobi, Ibadan, Lusaka: Heinemann, 1976.

The modern academic Nigerian artist has also been introduced to the art of other countries of Africa as well as other continents through art history courses which form part of his training. Those Nigerian artists who studied abroad have had the opportunity of visiting the numerous exhibitions of art from diverse times and places which are a regular feature of cultural life in European and American cities. They, therefore, have at their disposal a world-wide fund of forms and ideas just like their contemporaries in other countries.

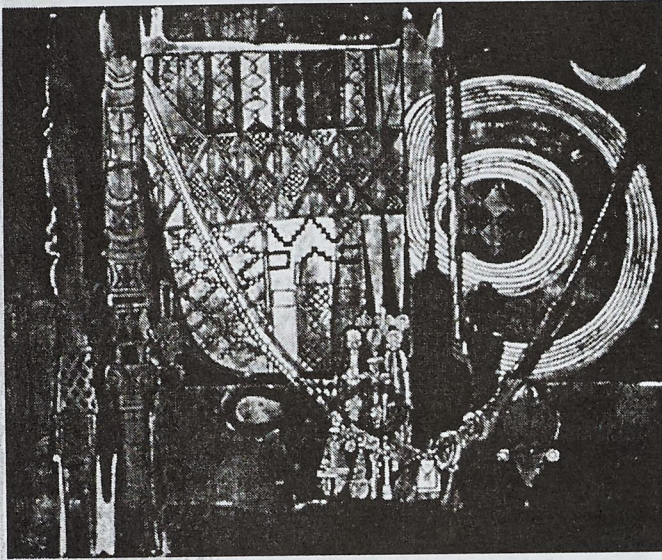


8. Metal foil relief "Asiribo" by Bruce Onobrakpeya

Non-academic artists were not exposed to international art during their formative years. Indeed their mentors, who were themselves European, even tried to keep their budding artists away from foreign stylistic influences. However, the artists were not kept away from foreign patrons especially as they achieved international fame; they even received frequent invitations to exhibit and lecture abroad.

It therefore appears that what distinguishes modern Nigerian artists from their European and American counterparts is their ethnic background which implies their familiarity from childhood with a pre-industrial society with its relics of polytheism, emphasis on interpersonal relationships controlled by a hierarchy based on age, and a vigorous oral culture full of metaphor and allusions to the past. All Yorubas, for example, have their own *Oriki*, or praise-poem, which is recited to them even during their infancy by their mother and grandmother.²⁰ The Yoruba believe strongly in the power of the word and adults feel a sense of pride when they hear their *Oriki* with allusions to family history of the distant past.

²⁰Karin Barber, *I could speak until tomorrow: Oriki, women and the past in a Yoruba town*. London: Edinburgh University Press, 1991.



9. Plastograph "Emeranwe Phru Go-o" (Hail new moon)
by Bruce Onobrakpeya

The *Oriki* re-enforces the individual's sense of belonging to a group and strengthens his sense of identity. In addition the Yoruba artist of today has behind him a vigorous artistic tradition acclaimed throughout the world. It is logical to expect that the work of a modern Yoruba artist will reflect elements of his ethnic culture whose value has been emphasised since his childhood.

Ethnic influences are apparent in the subject matter chosen by most contemporary Nigerian artists. Taking the 1990 exhibition of paintings entitled "Cultural treasures" by Kolade Oshinowo as an example, the following observations can be made. All the titles in the list of exhibits refer to Nigerian peoples, places and artefacts. Oshinowo himself acknowledges the prominence of masquerades, shrines and themes from traditional art in his work, tracing this to his vivid childhood experiences. He gives four of the titles in Yoruba without any translation. These are *Egun nla* (mighty masquerades), *Aso ode* (hunter's garment), *Ere ibeji* (twin statuettes) and *Igbale* (shrine). This emphasises the cultural specificity of the works. Bruce Onobrakpeya, Nigeria's master print-maker, also uses his own language, Urhobo, for the titles of subjects taken from his own ethnic group, but gives an English translation. This is important to maintain communication between artist and viewer. Without a translation, the viewer would feel excluded from the world of the artist.

Ethnic elements are invariably combined with other elements drawn from other parts of the nation, the African continent and the world, according to the artist's own experience. Filtered through his personality and artistic vision all these elements coalesce to make a unique artistic statement which bears the imprint of the contemporary African artist's own individuality. De Jager has summed up this process as follows:

Many contemporary African artists establish a link with traditional African culture by drawing heavily on tradition, custom, legend and folklore and the natural environment. The sources are adapted according to their own personal experiences, and the images produced are consequently rendered in an intimate

and artistically individual manner. Often these sources and other elements of African culture, such as a deep-seated mysticism and an anthropocentric (humanistic) and spiritual perception of man, are blended and fused with contemporary experiences and feelings. In this way a synthesis is brought about between the old, the new and what is personal to the artist.²¹

The Yoruba have a vigorous sculptural tradition which has produced master-pieces which are now acknowledged throughout the world. Neo-traditional sculptors such as Fakeye, Odekunle and Taiwo, who were trained in the apprentice system by Yoruba carvers, employ tools, materials and iconography which have been in use for centuries. Most academic Yoruba sculptors, on the other hand, experiment with new materials and new forms, although their subject matter may come from ethnic sources. This penchant for experiment and innovation is characteristic of academic artists all over Africa, whose approach to their art is highly individualistic. As Jegede says:



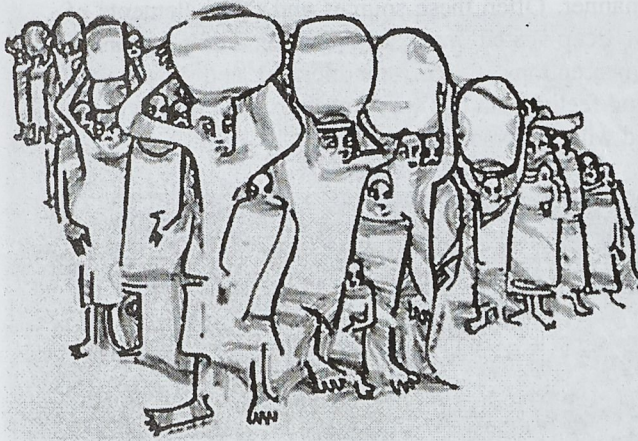
10. Celotex (pressed wood) cut on paper 45.4x45.9x2.5 cm
"Mma Nwa-Uli" by Uche Okeke 1972

Contemporary African art, like modern art elsewhere, is individualistic and elitist. It is an art that glorifies itself – self-conscious, fiercely independent, and certainly uninterested in illustrating or remaining subservient to a socio-religious consensus.²²

Both Bruce Onobrakpeya and Agbo Folarin are pioneering Nigerian academic artists born in the 1930's and educated in tertiary level art schools, Bruce in Zaria and Agbo in London and Washington. Whilst Agbo is well-known for his public works which can be seen

²¹E.J. de Jeger, "African art and artist: a new identity?", *Africa Insight*, 184 (1988), p. 205.

²²Dele Jegede, in Stanislaus, *op. cit.*, p. 34.



12. Ink drawing on paper 41.3x36.2cm "Exodus I (The Refugees)" by Chike Aniakor 1977

integrated with the architecture of Obafemi Awolowo University, Bruce's fame was built on his prints created for the private space of the home.

Bruce Onobrakpeya was born in 1932 in Agbarha-Otor in Delta State where the might of the Niger is spent in the creeks which meander their way to the Bight of Benin. His parents were farmers but also possessed additional skills. His father was a carver of both secular and religious

objects whilst his mother performed the circumcision of children and young women. Bruce received his primary and secondary education in Delta and Edo States, then pursued art studies in 1957 at the then Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria, a town in the northern region of Nigeria. There he found himself in the company of Yusuf Grillo, Demas Nwoko, Uche Okeke, Irein Wangboje and others who were to become pioneers of modern art.

In 1958, they formed the Zaria Art Society which advocated a "natural synthesis of old and new"²³ to build a new art culture for a new society. Bruce was introduced to print-making techniques in Zaria but also attended work-shops organised by the Mbari Artists and Writers Club in 1961, 1963 and 1964. He has since experimented with the print medium and evolved new techniques such as preparing plates with epoxy and creating metal foil relief prints.

Onobrakpeya's work encompasses the total environment of man in Nigeria – ecological, material, mythological, historical, ritual, social and economic. He draws his inspiration for the content of his work mainly from the Urhobo from whom he takes his origin, the Edo with whom he grew up, the Hausa and Fulani among whom he studied, and the Yoruba among whom he has lived for years.

The Urhobo works give dignity and weight to the contribution made by Bruce's parents to Urhobo society. *Edjokpa* shows a male and female figures loaded with palm-nuts under a

²³Uche Okeke, *Art in development – A Nigerian perspective*. Nimo: Asele Institute, p. 2.

palm tree. *Emetore* (plate 1) presents Bruce's mother seated on a raised platform like a goddess in a shrine. The Edo works feature the aristocrats of Benin distinguished by their coral insignia and regal composure as in *Ogiegor* and *Ifieto I*.

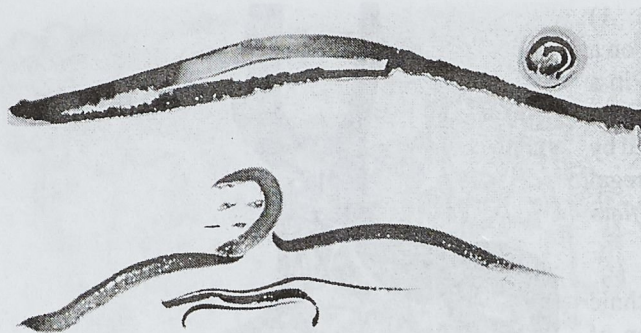
Onobrakpeya does not show ethnic influences only in the selection of subject-matter, however, but also in style and composition. The Urhobo shrine consists of three main elements, dominated by the verticality of the carvings and metal staves which are the focus of attention. Behind them is a back-drop formed by a piece of cloth or the skulls of sacrificial animals fixed to the wall. At the foot are small pots and offerings forming a horizontal base. Some of Onobrakpeya's prints exhibit this three-tier structure, e.g. *Aro Olokun*, *Edjokpa*, *Ifieto I*, *Ogiegor*, *Eshe*, *Aro Osomo* (plate 2).



13. Pen and ink on paper 61x45.7 cm
"Allegory of Power" by Chike C. Aniakor 1996

The bronze plaques from Benin often feature a central, dominant figure flanked by others on each side. This is a compositional device employed frequently by Onobrakpeya as can be seen in *Man and two wives* (plate 3), *Have you heard? Afteki*, *Oranmiyan*, *Ekassa I* and *Okonkwo Adi*.

The Yoruba divination tray (*Opon Ifa*) can be round or rectangular. In both cases, it is framed by a band of low-relief carving. The rectangular format was used by Onobrakpeya for three works: *Annunciation I* and *II*, and *Eton*. The main motifs of the composition are located in the centre of the tray-form, which is surrounded by a band of geometric designs as in its prototype. The face at the top of the Ifa tray represents the watchful eyes of Esu when used in a Yoruba ritual context. However, Onobrakpeya gives this face different connotations. In *Annunciation I*, the face denotes the power of God brooding over Mary. In *Eton* (plate 4) the face symbolises the power of the spoken word.



14. Watercolour on paper 31x41 cm "Untitled"
by Ada Udechukwu, 1990

Motifs from Yoruba cassava-paste batik cloth (*adire eleko*) are found in many of Onobrakpeya's prints. In *Have you heard?* (plate 5) and *Obioko*, geometric motifs appear on the wrappers worn by the figures. In *Okpo Mbre*, a complete *adire* wrapper hangs behind the masquerade costume. In these works, the *adire* motifs are used within the context of clothing, which

is where they originated. In other works, such as *Aro Osomo*, *Eclipse* (Plate 6), *Ogba*, *Understanding through Art* and *Uli*, they are used as space-fillers around the main motif.²⁴ The structure, as distinct from the motifs, of *adire eleko* cloths is reflected in two works. In the most common cloths, the motifs are arranged within a grid of clearly delineated rectangles. In *Ominira* and *Life in Aravwarien*, the picture surface is divided into rectangles, each bearing a self-contained image linked to the title. In less common cloth, known as *Oloba*, an oval medallion contains the image of a king and queen whilst the rest of the surface is covered with stylised flora and abstract motifs. Onobrakpeya imitates this composition in *Ofeto* (plate 7) and *Asiribo* (plate 8).

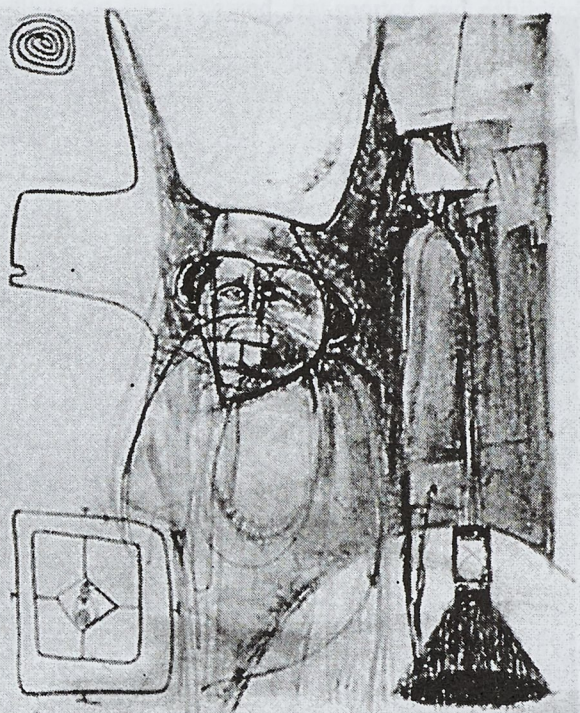
Another form of textile design appears in *Sahelian Masquerades*: the spiral embroidered motif which is found on the back of the Hausa and Yoruba formal man's gown. Onobrakpeya imbues this motif with symbolic meaning and entitles the composition *Hail new moon* (plate 9), an expression of joy at the sighting of a new moon usually accompanied with a prayer for long life. Since the embroidered formal gown is worn only by men who have achieved the status that comes with maturity, it represents the fulfilment of that prayer.

Sahelian Masquerades also show Onobrakpeya's preoccupation with vertical staff form. Staves are associated with various religious cults in Nigeria, e.g. *Orisa Oko*, *Osanyin*, *Ifa*. They must be kept upright at all times, implying a mystical connection between their position and the life of their owner. In several compositions, Onobrakpeya concentrates his design on the staff itself, instead of spreading them over the surface of the print. In *Plant two trees*, for example, there are three vertical staves. The centre one has a blade signifying the destruction of a tree but the staves on right and left have stylised trees sprouting from them, protected by amulets. The titles of other works based on the vertical staff form show

²⁴In Stanislaus, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

that for the artist, this form symbolises striving and survival (see plates 73-76 in *Sahelian Masquerades*).

Two significant movements in 20th century Nigerian art have been built consciously upon ethnic elements – *Uli* and *Ona* – deriving their inspiration from east and west of the Niger respectively. Uche Okeke, (b 1933), one of the first graduates of an academic art programme in Nigeria, who became Professor of Fine Art at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, became dissatisfied with the Western European orientation of his art training received at the hands of British lecturers with no knowledge of Nigerian cultures. He therefore sought inspiration for his work and the work of his students in *Uli*, an indigenous Igbo graphic art form practised on the surface of the



15. Lithograph 50x38.8 cm "People of the Night"
by Obiora Udechukwu 1985

human body, walls and doors. His own mother had been a practitioner of this art form. *Uli* is essentially linear in nature and employs motifs abstracted from plants and creatures significant in the Igbo cosmos. Prominent among these is the head of the kola nut, a motif based on the lines dividing the lobes of the kola nut which symbolizes peace and good-will and features at religious and social ceremonies. However, artists of the *Uli* school do not simply imitate the motifs of the *Uli* art of the past (although they may occur in their art): rather they adopt the design principles of *Uli* where space is as eloquent as line and effects are achieved with an economy of means. In Okeke's *Mma Nwa -Uli* (plate 10) 1972, *Uli* motifs are presented like a piece of abstract art for international appreciation. Indeed, this work is in the collection of American textile historian, Joanne Eicher. In the *Oja Suite* (plate 11) 1962, he makes sparing, sensitive use of lines to create the illusion of mass, form and texture.

Prof. Chike Aniakor, a professor in the Dept. of Fine Art at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, is also an exponent of *Uli* but his style differs markedly from Uche Okeke's. His lines are much more solid and are often used to depict groups or crowds of people, as in *Exodus I* (plate 12), 1977, which shows people on the run during the Biafran War. For the



16. Acrylic on linen 139.8x100 cm "Ugulu (Harmattan)" by Obiora Udechukwu 1993

of the present. Uche Okeke has never believed in cultural isolation: his theory of Natural Synthesis, propounded in the early 1960's, calls for a harmonious blending of the best of local traditions with the best from the world beyond Nigeria's boundaries. Obiora Udechukwu's works in black and white reveal his mastery of the sensitive line exercised in an art of social commentary. For example, he shows us a long line of containers snaking into the distance from a public tap, bloated contract seekers on the road to Abuja ignoring starving beggars by the road-side, and *People of the Night* (plate 15) 1985 i.e. the night soil men. Obiora's artistic talent is not confined to the manipulation of line alone, although this is perhaps what links him most closely with the *Uli* tradition, essentially linear in character. He also displays great lyricism in his use of colour in works which are abstract in character but linked to the physical world. *Harmattan* (plate 16) 1993, cool in colour like the season which inspired it, suggests the wind loaded with the dust of the desert, causing skin to flake and crack.

Inspired by an indigenous ephemeral art form destined for the culture which created it, the modern artists of the *Uli* School now execute their works on internationally accepted and

artists who are exponents of *Uli* principles do not employ them in the pursuit of gratuitous decoration, but often use them to comment on social and political events. *Allegory of Power* (plate 13), 1996, another work by Aniakor, is reminiscent of calligraphy in its use of fluid brush strokes.

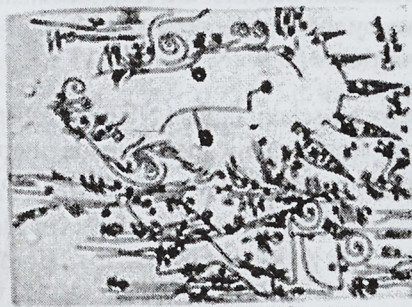
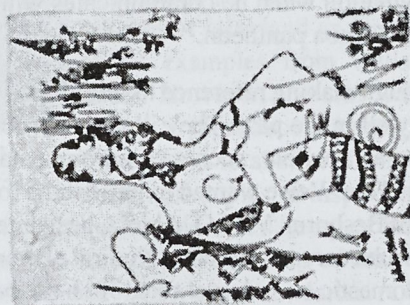
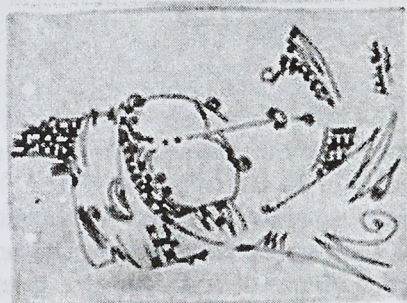
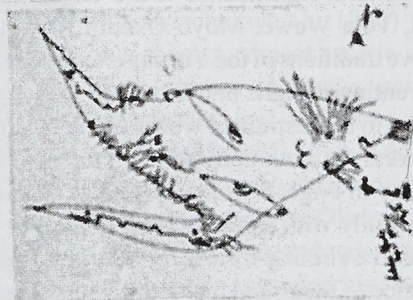
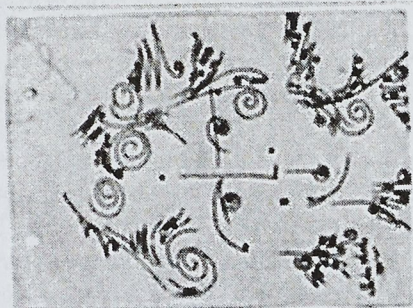
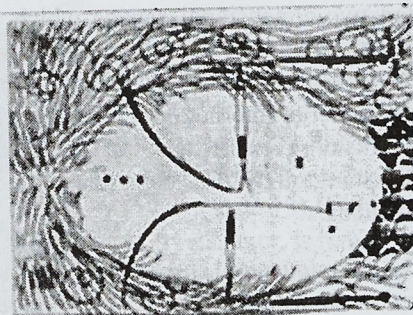
Ada Udechukwu (b. 1960) relies on a sparing, almost ascetic use of brush strokes to evoke personal experiences and emotions as in *Untitled* (plate 14) 1990. Ada is the wife of Obiora Udechukwu (b. 1946), one of Uche Okeke's most talented students and exponents of *Uli*. Uche encouraged his students to research the roots of *Uli* in the villages of Igbo land and to record extant examples from walls and doors. However, the aim was not simply to reproduce the designs of the past but to abstract from them design principles to inspire the art

expected two-dimensional canvas which can be purchased, transported and exhibited permanently in a public gallery or private dwelling. After frequent exposure to viewers east of the Niger and in galleries in Lagos (particularly the Goethe Institute), *Uli* art received the ultimate cachet of international recognition when Simon Ottenberg curated an exhibition of the works of seven artists of the *Uli* school at the prestigious National Gallery of African Art in Washington DC, accompanied by a book which concentrated on the exhibiting artists as individuals.

Like the *Uli* movement in Eastern Nigeria, the *Ona* movement in Western Nigeria was nurtured in an academic environment, Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife, a city of great cultural significance to the Yoruba. The pioneering members of this group – Kunle Filani, Tola Wewe, Moyo Okediji, Bolaji Campbell and Tunde Nasiru – turned to the creative traditions of the Yoruba exemplified in carving, textiles, beadwork and metal-work, re-inventing designs and motifs to create exuberantly patterned canvases which stand in contrast to the restrained works of the *Uli* School. The *Ona* artists make a conscious attempt to express their ethnicity through the medium of paint on canvas, a medium which gained currency in Nigeria in the early 20th century. Moyo Okediji (b. 1956) has experimented successfully with earth colours, ultimate symbol of the locus of the Yoruba artist. He has also used a circular format for a series of pictures called *Opon Ifa* (Ifa tray). This is a direct reference to the round, carved tray used by the *Babalawo* (father of secrets) in the process of divination when he communicates with the deity Orunmila, one of the most important in the Yoruba pantheon.

Although making reference to traditional Yoruba culture in their works, the *Ona* artists do not dwell in the past. They illustrate problems which have affected not only Nigeria, but Africa as a whole, such as environmental degradation and the devaluation of currency. When Tola Wewe wanted to pay tribute to the courage of the assassinated Kudirat Abiola, wife of Bashorun M.K.O. Abiola, he painted a picture inspired by the style and iconography of Yoruba carvers, showing Kudirat on horseback. Yoruba sculptors usually depict women in a domestic or maternal role, often on their knees and almost always in close association with children. Men, on the other hand, were shown on horseback as initiators of actions. Wewe, by showing Kudirat on a horse, is alluding to her courage and associating her with the warriors of old.

Modern, art-school trained Nigerian artists have at their disposal a vast reserve of sources to draw from – ethnic, national and international. Their choice is governed by their own sensibilities resulting (in Soyinka's words) in "unsuspected shapes and tints of the individual vision".



11. Pen and ink on paper (mounted together) 60x84 cm
"Drawings from the Oja Suite" by Uche Okeke 1962