

Artistic Odyssey: Printmaking As Expression of Life's Adventures

Bruce Onobrakpeya

Abstract

Autobiographical study is a leading tradition in academic scholarship to recreate the artistic voyages of world's leading writers/artists. It affords the public the opportunity to benefit from insights of the socio-historical background that informs the choice of artistic strategies as well as the biases in the diverse experiences from which the writer/artist's creativity derives. This artist's self-presentation is therefore a celebration of the artistic career of one of Africa's greatest printmakers, Bruce Onobrakpeya. It examines the evolution of his professional experience, challenges, successes, and the demand for artistic continuity and adventures. The aim is to challenge the younger generation of artists to explore all positive avenues to develop their talent and skills and, in so doing, contribute to the artistic achievement of the country.

It is indeed a great honour and privilege to be invited to do these reflections. I thank the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Osayuki Oshodin, for giving me the opportunity to exhibit my artworks and present this talk in the renowned University of Benin in Ugbowo Campus of the University of Benin. I am also very grateful to Professor A. O. Ofuani and the staff of the Faculty of Arts who initiated the programme as part of activities to honour me in the year-long celebration of my 80th birthday in 2012. I feel very happy because being here is like home-coming. I spent part of my childhood and boyhood days in this environment, which was mainly farmlands and thick forests dotted with isolated villages.

After the University of Benin was established in 1970, I had occasions to visit it a number of times to see my son, Ufuoma, who was a student in the Fine Arts Department. During the visits, I interacted with the former Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Adamu Baikie and his deputy, Prof. Solomon Wangboje, who were my colleagues at the Nigerian College of Science and Technology, now Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. I have also met many lecturers and students of the Fine Arts Department of Ekenwan Campus who have been participants in the Harmattan

Workshop programmes at Agbarha–Otor, Delta State, which I initiated in 1998 to accelerate the development of our arts.

1. **Artistic Odyssey**

The theme for this talk “**Artistic Odyssey: Printmaking as an Expression of Life’s Adventures**” is a window to share with you some of my experiences as a Printmaker, beginning from a playful hobby to a point where it grew to an important contemporary art medium which also inspired the establishment of the Harmattan Workshop, an informal educational forum where artists meet to hone their skills and share ideas. This is an opportunity to tell some of the stories of my life as an artist.

2. **What is Printmaking?**

As a child and young adult, I watched traditional priests and native beauticians thumbprint white chalk or cam wood red on the foreheads and bodies of people seeking blessing or as cosmetic beautify. In this indigenous printmaking, the shape of the thumb, with the natural marks on it, is repeated to create a pattern. Each mark is literally a print. Another example of print is the office stamp. Names and motifs are engraved on rubber or any other surface and inked on a pad before it is transferred onto a document. Printmaking follows the same process. The artist creates a design on a plate, and then it is inked and transferred onto a paper with the aid of a press or any other pressure tool. This could be repeated to create multiple pictures. Printmaking involves artistic and technical abilities. Among its advantages is the fact that, instead of one picture, the plate can cast several identical images, each of which can be owned by a person and enjoyed as original art. The other advantage is that the picture is much more affordable, nothing comparable to the price paid for one of a kind picture. This is also why printmaking is considered a democratic medium of art.

The graphic nature of prints makes it possible to use the various techniques associated with it to recreate and give visible body to our beliefs, experiences, thoughts, philosophy, history, myths, legends, folklore, fantasy and all the elements that constitute our culture. In short,

prints help us to draw from our selves, real or imagined, ideas which show who we are. Printmaking also helps us to come face-to-face with our fears, analyse and confront them.

Although prints as artworks enjoy some popularity, the different classifications are however not very well known. There is difficulty in distinguishing print which is an original art from reproductions which are copies of original art works. A print is an original idea or design engraved or prepared by an artist. Proofs can be drawn out of it by another person. On the other hand, a photograph of an original art work is called a reproduction. In this age of computer, a photograph of an object can be manipulated through the computer to produce what is termed as a CAD (computer aided design) print.

3. **Playful Beginning with Stamp Engraving**

My Urhobo parents settled in one of the villages along the Okeruvbi valley not far away from the University of Benin. My father enrolled me in several of the one-teacher schools which existed in those days. These schools shut down as frequently as the itinerant founders departed or found something more lucrative to do. Leaving the rural schools, I gained admission into the now defunct Eweka Memorial School at Iyaro near the Benin moat. Whilst there, precisely in Standards One and Two, I carved stamps as handwork from conical thorns I extracted from silk cotton trees in the forest a little beyond the University of Benin campus. Little did I know then that I had launched myself into a fulfilling life-time career of printmaking.

4. **Printmaking Hazards**

A Fountain Pen Thief

I left Benin City for Sapele and in my new school, Zik's Academy, I continued my handwork of stamp engraving which had become a profitable hobby. I became so proficient that commissions poured in from my school mates. On passing out of elementary school I returned to Benin City for my secondary school education at the Western Boys High School then located at the East Circular Road at Sapele Road and at the High School in Benin, the first real hazards of engraving and reproducing motifs cropped up. First, at Sapele, my guardian seized a fountain pen which I bought with the proceeds from my commissions. He thought I stole the money that I used to buy it.

Police Arrest

Secondly, all the stamp carvers, as they called us then, were rounded up by the police on a particular day when the college principal's rubber stamp and signature were forged to collect a registered parcel at the post office. Fortunately, we were soon released. But not until Professor Ru Van Rossen of Tilburg University, Holland, told me what he used the knowledge of engraving to do when his country was under German occupation, during World War II (1939-1945), did I realize the power an engraver had. Van Rossen who taught etching (a printmaking technique) during the Mbari Mbayo workshop I attended at Oshogbo in the 1960s confessed to forging a postage stamp when his country was under German siege.

The Bomb Scare

Much later, as a practising artist and already fairly well known, I experienced another shock which I believed had racial undertones. I was invited to show my prints in Geneva and was being expected at the opening of the show. But at the last minute, I cancelled my trip because of a domestic emergency. And so I did not know the details of how the show was received. Later, however, I learned that there was a bomb threat which marred the show. They thought I cancelled my trip because I had a fore-knowledge of the bomb!

Narrow Escape from Exploded Dynamite

While still a student at the Nigerian College, Zaria, I went in search of subjects for my newly acquired lino and silk screen printing processes. I decided to sketch some animals against the low hills overlooking Zaria city. I spread out my art materials and had scarcely begun to draw when two boys, apparently Fulani cattle rearers, raced towards me and I greeted them "Sanu". A hasty answer came from one of them but both shouted "Gudu," a word I did not understand. And before I could ask questions, they disappeared along a path behind me.

Two minutes had scarcely passed when suddenly I was completely deafened by an explosion. A thick dust rose into the air and down rained pellets of stones. A big piece landed just a foot from me. I did not know when my sketch book dropped. As I stood frightened, I noticed my mouth was hot and dry and my lips had cracked. The boys came out of their hiding and raced towards me laughing. Many workmen rushed also from the same direction back to the

spot where the dynamite had exploded. Then, I understood that I was in the Public Works Department quarry.

Defiance of Ancestral Anger

Even today, among the many clans in the Delta area of Nigeria, it is taboo either to draw or photograph a shrine. Anyone caught violating the rule could face severe penalties, including being physically beaten up, paying fines and facing ancestral anger. So, when I visited my wife's romantic town, Arhavwarien, which could only be reached after crossing a large body of water, I passed by a community shrine which I wanted very badly to be translated into prints. I duly asked for permission to draw it, but was vehemently refused. So, I went round the law by resorting to memorizing the structure and reproducing the parts bit by bit in my sketch book. And as soon as I returned to Lagos I developed the drawings and transcribed them into a print later named "Aro Ezomo". The prints from this plate, together with those from a larger one, also made up from studies of life in the island titled "Life in Arhavwarien", did very well. In the first month of release, I was able to cover the cost of the trip to and from Arhavwarien as well the other expenses which I incurred while we were in this enchanting island.

Apollo and Threat of Blindness

The large paintings of the 14 Stations of the Cross which I made for St. Paul's Church, Ebute Metta, Lagos, were duly blessed and commissioned by Bishop, later Cardinal Olubunmi Okogie. The experiment to adopt traditional art to the worship of the Christian God started at the workshop in Oye-Ekiti by Sean O' Mahony and Kevin Carrol, two expatriates from the United Kingdom. The paintings did not go down well with the laity of the church. A protest led by Bishop Sanusi threatened the continued stay of those paintings in the church. After a summons, I presented a long essay to defend the works, but it failed to convince them. And there was the apprehension that the pieces would go down anytime.

As a consolation to myself, I decided to convert the original studies of the paintings into prints which will then get to a large number of people outside the church by creating sets, assembled as a portfolio. Cutting the main plates and the numerous background ones was a long and tedious exercise. In the process of engraving and proofing the pieces, I began to suffer from the attack of conjunctivitis locally called "Apollo". The doctors could not diagnose the cause of

the frequent attack, but fortunately for me, a friend, the late Professor Agbo Folarin from the Fine Arts Department of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, visited me and advised that the lighting in the room where I worked was dull and was therefore the cause of my eye problems. He suggested brighter bulbs. I took his advice and the threatened blindness was averted. There were still other threats though not as severe as the one above. The continued inhaling of chemical fumes and food poisoning resulting from eating with hands that had been contaminated with chemicals had always been real dangers. There is also the issue of carpal tunnel which engravers suffer as a result of handling tools.

5. The Re-appearance of the Scary Leopard

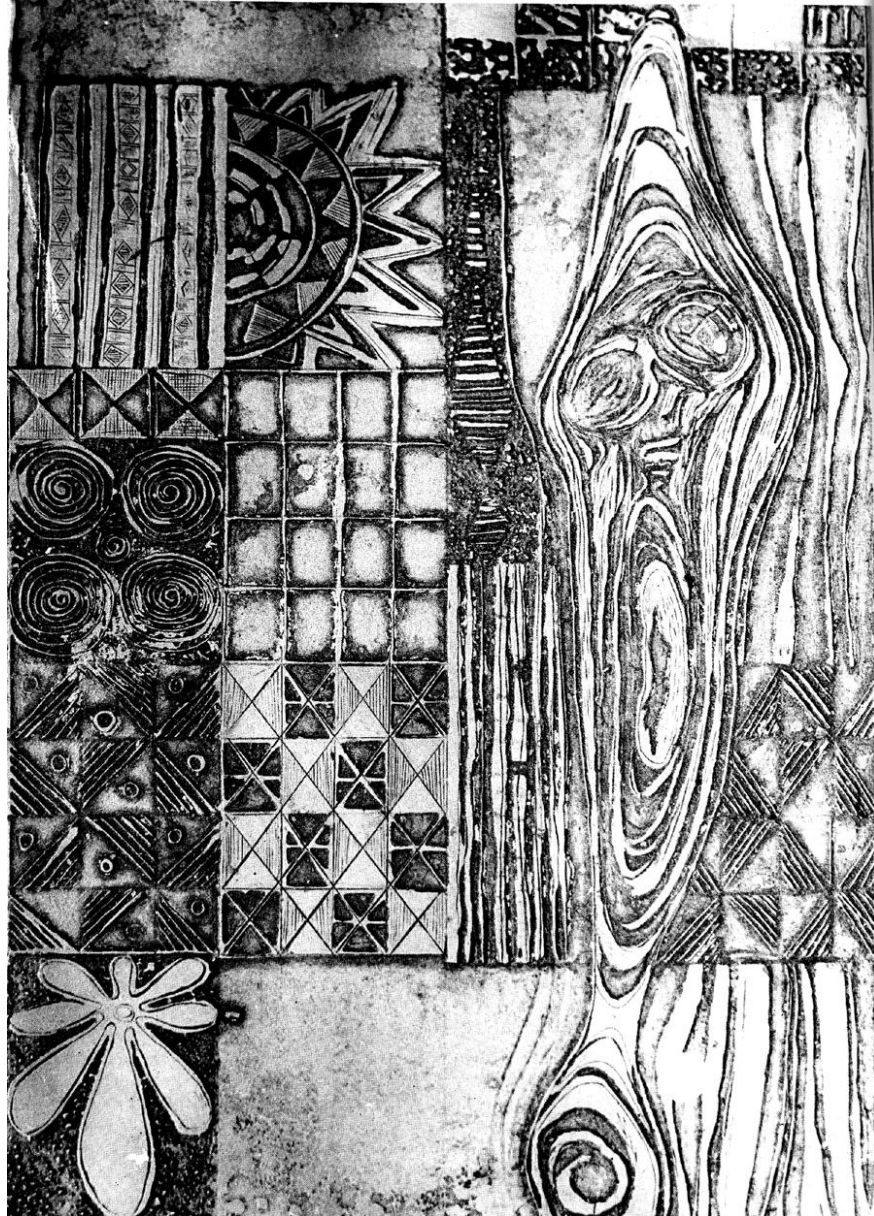
- The second phase of my printmaking development came at the Art School in Zaria when, under the general art lecturer, Mr. Todd, I learned the techniques of lino cut, wood cut and silkscreen. Again, another playful act taught me how to use the technique to translate experience into tangible visual art. This was how it happened. Long ago, as a child, I had accompanied my mother to Idinogbo village up hill at the Okeruvbi Valley.



Leopard in the Cornfield

A red painting of an animal at the entrance of a shrine scared me and I tugged at my mother's legs for protection. The incident was in my mind for several years. While fiddling with discarded textile blocks for possible new designs in the art studio, the form of that animal popped up from my subconscious, bold and still very scary. I developed the motif into silk screen which was further worked on to produce the picture I called *Leopard in the Cornfield*. It was first made as an oil painting on board and later made into silkscreen print series which have now entered the third edition.

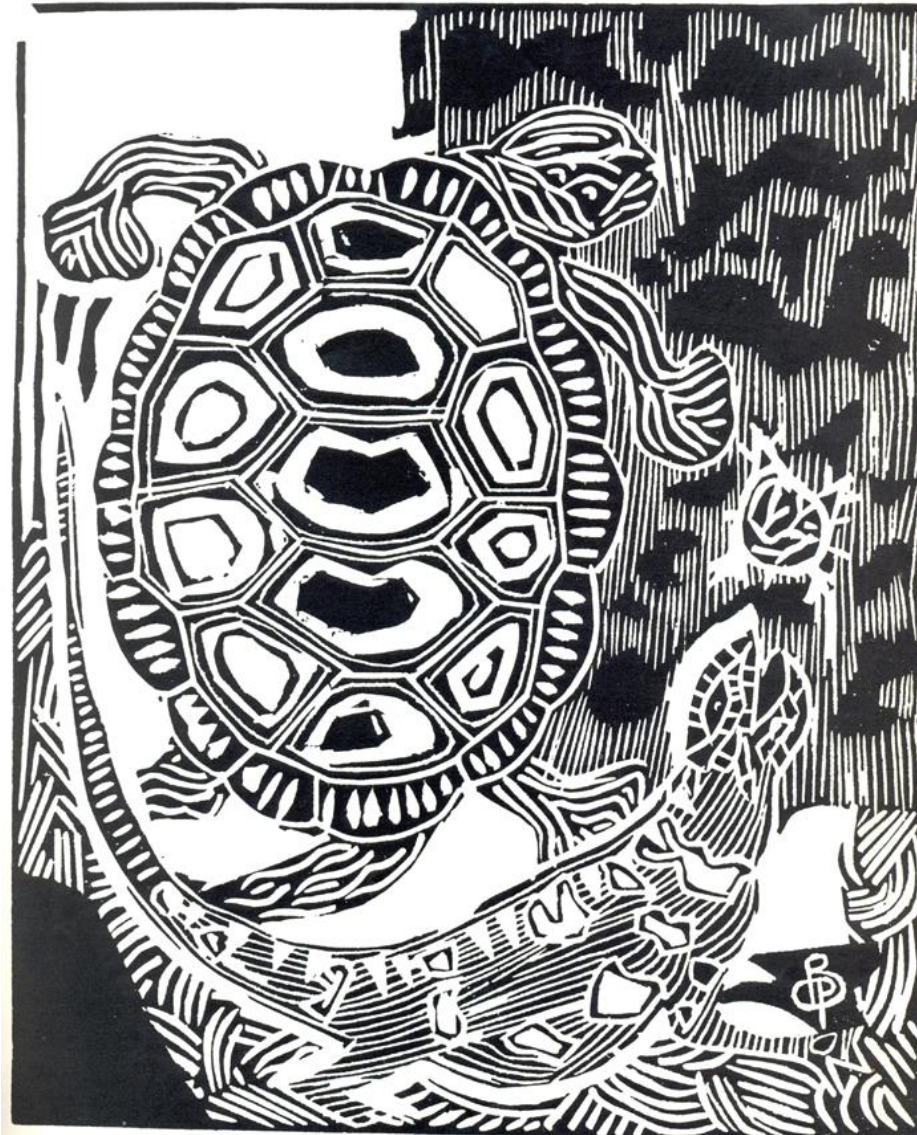
I will give two other examples of how fear had been tackled with printmaking - a kind of therapy. During my Artist-In-Residence tenure at Haystack Mountain School of Arts and Craft in Maine, U.S.A, in 1975, I was allocated a room paneled with fir tree planks that were patterned with knots displaying scary eyes. To stop the "eyes" disturbing me, I made some of them into a composition which was then developed into a print which radiated pleasant forms. That act changed my mood and I slept or stayed in the room comfortably thereafter. The second example was connected with the appearance of a total eclipse which I witnessed in the township of Sapele in 1947. Although this incident was later explained as a natural phenomenon, its disturbing apocalyptic message, pronounced by certain religious sects as the event was happening, did not stop to bother me until I confronted the fears with a print which I called "Eclipse."



Eclipse

6. Printmaking in Nigerian Folklore and Early Classics

As I gained more experience in printmaking I used different print techniques to create pictures of tortoise and other folktale characters which I learnt from my mother and other story tellers when growing up. I also used them to make pictures of life in the North around Zaria, particularly those of the herdsmen, their cows and the pictures of dye pits which I titled the Zaria Indigo series. The bulk of art works which I showed during the Nigerian Independence Exhibition in 1960 were from this period.



Ahwaire the tortoise and udene the lizard.

The other fallouts of these printmaking techniques were the illustrations for three books – *No Longer at Ease* by Chinua Achebe, *An African Night's Entertainment* by Cyprian Ekwensi and *A Forest of a Thousand Daemons* by D. O. Fagunwa and Wole Soyinka. My first international recognition came when a print from an early period was acquired by the Duke of Edinburgh in a Commonwealth Art Exhibition in Cardiff, Wales, in 1966.

7. **Journey to New Delhi, India, with Neo Classical Plaques**

The Lino blocks which I had used to create prints accumulated and I was reluctant to trash them as print rules say because I was fascinated by the sculptural effects created on them with gorges

during engraving. I arranged them into different montage, glued them onto ply-wood boards and patinated them. This is the origin of the medium I call “bronzed lino relief”. Later the bronze lino relief technique was further developed into low relief art form I named “Plastocast.” All these materials I group under the name “Neo Classical Bronze Plaques,” a designation inspired by the timeless Benin bronze plaques which have become models for me. One such assemblage called ‘The Last Supper’ was entered into the 5th Indian Triennale art competition. It won a prize which I travelled to New Delhi to receive in 1982.



The Last Supper

During that visit I was presented to Mrs. Indira Ghandi, the then Indian Prime Minister, and on my return back to Nigeria I was also presented to Shehu Shagari, the then President of Nigeria

8. The Hydrochloric Accident and the Birth of Plastography

The third phase in my development as a printmaker came when I participated in the 1964 printmaking workshop organized by Ulli Beier at Oshogbo. It was conducted by Ru Van Rossen (mentioned earlier) under whom I learnt Etching and Copper engraving. After the workshop I ordered a press and other materials from Amsterdam to augment the ones donated to me by Ulli Beier. On the arrival of the materials three years later, I set up a Printmaking studio, but I soon

ran into problems with the very first print called *Travellers*. Instead of biting the plate with Nitric acid, I used Hydrochloric acid.

Frustrated I put the damaged plate away. But after visiting Chief Erhabor Emokpae, now of blessed memory, who introduced me to the Araldite glue, I returned to the discarded plate and filled the unwanted holes with the stuff. Not bothering to clean off random drips which fell on it, I proofed the plate. It turned out to be a very interesting picture with exciting lines, textures and relief effects on the paper. This led me on to a printmaking innovation which I called Plastography. The technique is now being widely used by artists in Nigeria and elsewhere.

9. **Printmaking Facilitates Experimentation**

What is clear about this breakthrough is that the printmaking process has a scientific side to it and benefits from accidental results. And I have taken advantage of its dynamic nature to manipulate some motifs or ideas through experimentation to achieve different design effects which have gone beyond borders of known printmaking techniques. Other inventions like bronzed lino relief which came earlier, the Ivorex, Plastocast, Diptilinen and Triptilinen painting on canvas have transformed my prints to three dimensional sculptures as well as large paintings on canvas.

10. **The Starry Desert Route to Bagdad and Babylon**

As my printmaking progressed, the resulting prints were chosen to fulfill cultural and diplomatic roles for Nigeria. Around 1996 Dr. Walter Ofonagoro, the Nigerian Minister for Information and Culture, visited Iran and Iraq to solicit new partnerships when the West ostracized Nigeria following the execution of environmental activists, the Ogoni Nine. The Federal Ministry of Information and Culture had acquired some of my prints and one of them called “Idimarha” he took along and gave to Saddam Hussein, the then president of Iraq. Because of the concept of the print which in Urhobo means “birthright that can never be alienated”, President Hussein liked it so much that he invited me to tour Bagdad and the environs to see that country’s arts and culture. The travel from Lagos to Aman in Jordan through Egypt was by air. As Iraq was under international air embargo at that time, myself and my son, Ejiro, who accompanied me had to travel by land route through the desert for 10 hours from Aman, arriving at Bagdad by

midnight. The view of the night sky as we crossed the desert was spectacular; it was very clear and every space was filled with stars which shone like diamonds on the celestial dome. It reminded me of the beauty of the night undisturbed by artificial lights. It was like a reminiscing into childhood when children were lured out to play in the night. The trip which also took us to Babylon put me in touch with Bible history and exposed me to the splendors of Islamic architecture and calligraphy, which experiences on my return to Nigeria helped me to develop further the *Ibiebe* alphabet and ideograms which I invented ten years earlier. Also, while at Bagdad, I saw sculptures that were inspired by characters in the Arabian Night's entertainment stories. Cultural diplomacy which took my prints and I to Iraq is still ongoing. Only recently President Goodluck Jonathan presented my artwork called *Oracle* derived from a print to President Barack Obama during his visit to the United States of America.

11. **Sahelian Masquerades and Totems of the Delta**

The various Printmaking innovations mentioned above have made it possible for me to address issues which relate to the Nigerian environment in two series. The first, the Sahelian Masquerades, are pictures which draw attention to the beauty of the different cultures in the northern part of our country, but also express environmental concerns about humans, flora and fauna as a result of desertification. Similarly, another series by name Totems of the Delta calls for human and divine intervention to stop the adverse effects of mineral exploration and extraction. Both basically address environmental issues.



A plate of Travelers. The print involved in the Hydrochloric acid accident that gave birth to Plastography

12. **The Printmaker as a Global Scholar, Teacher and Showman**

My passion for Printmaking and my relative success as a Printmaker have led to my being invited to practically all the continents for residency programmes in which I doubled, sometimes, as a student and a teacher. Similarly, it got me invitations to numerous group and one-man shows which have taken me to cities like London in the United Kingdom, and New York, Takoma, Elizabeth City, Los Angeles, Deer Isle and Plymouth in the United States, New Delhi in India,

Toronto in Canada, Darkar in Senegal, Abidjan in Ivory Coast, Nairobi in Kenya, and Harare in Zimbabwe. Each of these places led me to different adventures which helped to expand my experience and advance my printmaking technically and professionally. For example, my attendance as Artist-In-Residence at the Haystack Mountain School of Arts and Craft in Deer Isle in 1975 was one of the inspirations towards my setting up the Harmattan Workshop 24 years later in 1998.



Eyes at Haystack



Warring Youth



Idimarha (Lavae)



Oracle

13. **Education, Wealth, Friendship and Peace**

It is not possible to narrate all my Printmaking experiences in this presentation but before I draw the curtain, I'd like to mention that the Niger Delta Art and Cultural Centre which I established at Agbarha-Otor in Delta State was inspired by the need to impart printmaking skills to others, the way I benefited. When my studio in Lagos could not accommodate all the interns, industrial attachés, artists-in-residence and research scholars engaged in producing dissertation for various degrees, I set up an informal art education centre called the Harmattan Workshop which has been running for 14 years. The workshop has served as a forum for artists of different backgrounds from Nigeria, West Africa, Europe and America. It has also served as a retreat for art critics, cultural engineers and has hosted dignitaries, including governors and ambassadors. It has art

galleries open all year round from which school children and students have benefitted. As an informal education centre it has cooperated with higher institutions and universities like College of Education, Warri, the University of Benin, Benin City, the Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Adeyemi College of Education, Ondo, Federal College of Education, Umuze, Anambra State, and the Delta State University, Abraka. The location of the centre in Agbarha-Otor is a source of pride to the communities around it. The Harmattan Workshop employs workers from the community in which it is based while those who acquire skills at the workshop earn income through skills they develop, thereby alleviating poverty. The alumni of the Harmattan Workshop have advanced our art professionally, educationally and economically. Besides these gains, the Harmattan Workshop helps forge networking, national and international friendships and peace. We owe all these to Printmaking – a continuing artistic odyssey open to many more adventures.