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EXPRESSION OF URHOB0 CULTURAL AESTHETICS IN BRUCE ONOBRAKPEYA’S ARTWORKS

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Abstract

The artistic works of Bruce Onobrakpeya are derived significantly from the folklore and myths of his Urhobo people. The symbols used by the artist include masks, animal and human figure representations and plant forms. The artist employs these symbolic expressions to tell stories about the belief system of the Urhobo people as well as that of other cultures. Onobrakpeya utilizes different techniques for his artistic expressions. These efforts have been acclaimed in various publications and in several reviews of his numerous exhibitions across the globe. However, there seems to be a dearth of critical study of the value of the cultural aesthetics in his artworks. This paper, therefore, attempts to examine the aesthetic aspect of Onobrakpeya’s works from the perspective of Urhobo culture. In doing this, the descriptive research method is employed. Among the findings is the ethno-significance of the objects from the localities used as motifs in his compositions that are simultaneously ornamental and symbolic. His application of bold textures to conceptualize human figures is a signifier of aesthetics in Urhobo cultural context. This informs the conclusion that the skillful manipulation of technique by Onobrakpeya and his invocation of local mythological subject matters are influencers of aesthetic judgment by the appreciators of his art works.

Introduction

In African societies, artists use symbols to tell stories about the cultural beliefs of their people, which include norms, values and ways of life. Most often, symbols are represented as objects or human and animal figures. The stories are told through a visual medium such as Painting, Sculpture, Graphics, Ceramics and Textile design. Sometimes, the narratives are told in order to make corrections or popularize a concept within an environment or the world at large. According to Folorunso (2004), art is the sum total of the norms, values, and the religious life of a people expressed in visual form. Nabofa (2004:3) reinforces this view when he says that the Urhobo people believe that individual spirits of status occupy the spiritual world. These spirits are worshipped through establishment of shrines. Similarly, Abamwa (1995) states that some of the

shrines through which the Urhobo people worship the spirits are known as: *Orise, Orhan, Ughere, Aderha, Urhie* and others. Diakparomre, (2001:32) observes that in terms of religion, the Urhobo share with their neighbours beliefs such as duality of existence, pre-destiny, and existence of gods superintending for the Supreme God.

The values of any society are based on the philosophies of such a society. These values are developed into beliefs which are used to monitor the people's interactions with one another and they are commonly translated and rendered as proverbs, riddles, wise sayings, poems, and nicknames which are taught to individuals, especially members of the younger generation. Before the advent of Western civilization into Africa, works were commissioned by people who were endowed with the skills of modeling and carving to produce artworks of symbolic significance to the society. Many of these works are representations of ideology for indigenous worship. This conservation spirit gave birth to neo-traditional carvers' school under the aegis of Chukwuegu and Mbazulugwe families; the project was aimed at arresting the total extinction of traditional carving tradition for which the area was known (Egonwa, 2011:140).

However, the assessment of African aesthetics started changing its focus in favour of Western view of aesthetic judgment. In the African context, the beauty of an artwork lies in the ability of the art piece to be able to satisfy the purpose the artwork is made to serve. The workshop centres that were opened by the art teachers that were invited from abroad to mind the art curriculum and the teaching of the visual arts, the likes of Ulli Beier (1922 - 2011), Susanne Wenger (1915 - 2009), started changing the themes to the ones we are not familiar with. These foreign influences left for us elements and principles of design which are the main ingredients for assessment of the art based on western ideology. Folorunso, (2004:11) links this to the undue haste in meeting the demands of European clients which led to the emergence of workshop centres where less educated youths were hurriedly trained as artists. As this was gradually having its firm roots the first and second generation artists noticed the interference and attempted to suppress the differences in terms of cultural interplay; it was the third generation artists, including Demas Nwoko (b. 1935), Chief Erhabor Emokpae (1934 - 1984), Yusuf Grillo (1934 - 2021), Bruce Onobrakpeya (b. 1932), among others, who made a distinction by tagging the new approach to art as Natural Synthesis (Ikpakronyi, 1999:15).

Under the inspiration of the new ideology known as Natural Synthesis, Onobrakpeya developed novel areas in printmaking through experiment and handwork. His original art works are today synonymous with his name and other artworks emanating from Nigeria. The terminologies for new art forms, according to Onobrakpeya, are plastograph, plastocast relief, bronze and lino relief, intaglio, among others. His subjects include mask, plant forms, human and animal figures and many others. Folorunso, (2004:11) thinks that Onobrakpeya, in creating his art forms, employs themes from day-to-day life activities around himself such as religion, people, their joy, sorrow, and hopes as well as places, nature, plants and animals. Other sources of his themes are folk design, folklore and myths. His drawings and portraits are either stylized or abstracted. Most of the artworks have intricate designs with interesting textures that are aesthetically appealing. In confirming the above assessment, Egonwa, (1999:3) argues that Bruce Onobrakpeya is endowed with the skills and techniques to transform a sorrowful occasion into an object of international aesthetic appeal with deep symbolism and historical context.

Because of Onobrakpeya's efforts in this area of innovations, his art is recognized and accepted both nationally and internationally. He has been invited to different places and countries of the world to demonstrate his print techniques. For example, he was invited to the United States of America in 1974 and Ottawa, Canada, in 1979. In 1983 and 1984 he was called to the University of Nigeria Nsukka. Onobrakpeya has been artist-in-residence in several institutions, including the University of Ibadan which awarded him an honorary doctorate degree in the 1980s.

Onobrakpeya's pioneering efforts have influenced many scholars to add visual art (printmaking) to their initial professions because of the inspiration they got from him. The family of Orife is a good example in this regard. According to Onobrakpeya, this sort of influence has even gone to the second generation. Apart from Orife being influenced by him (Onobrakpeya), Orife's son was similarly influenced into being an artist by his works

Bruce Onobrakpeya as an Artist

Through series of experiments Onobrakpeya discovered various techniques which he freely chooses from any time he is working. Adepegba (1999:40) confirms that the techniques plus his astute compositional ability have helped in the realization of his images of reality, mystery,

surface value and penetrating reflections which are what he made of Nigerian cultural past and scenes of day-to-day life. In the same vein, Jackson (1999:47) notes that Bruce Onobrakpeya is a pioneer in printmaking, and that he elevated printmaking to a level where it was accepted as a major art form.

Bruce Onobrakpeya was born in 1932 in Agbarha-Otor in Ughelli North Local Government of Delta State, Nigeria. He spent his childhood schooling in Ughelli, Sapele and Benin City (1941 – 51). He also worked as Art Teacher at the Western Boys High School, Benin City (1953 – 56) before departing to the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria (1957 – 62) where he received his art training. Since the artist is a member of his society, the environments and the people's ways of life influence his artistic creation more than the formal education received, particularly when his artistic themes and compositional objects (symbols) are considered. Ikpakronyi (1999:16) agrees with this when he states that Bruce Onobrakpeya uses his artworks to tell stories about the ethnic groups in Nigeria and Africa. This, according to Ikpakronyi, explains why many of his works are suffused with symbols that can be described as graphic interpretations of Nigerian cultures.

Although significant studies have been carried out on the social and cultural importance of Onobrakpeya's artworks, little has been done on the aesthetics of his artworks project in regards to the understanding of Urhobo people, their culture, cosmology and aspirations. This paper, therefore, examines the aesthetic reflections of Urhobo world view in his artworks. In order to achieve the desired objective, survey and the descriptive research methods were employed.

Symbolism in Bruce Onobrakpeya's Artworks

The Webster Dictionary (1971:1909) describes symbols as things or objects that stand for something or suggest something else by reason of relationship, association, convention or accidental but not intentional resemblance. Objects are commonly assembled for aesthetic gratification by Onobrakpeya in the creation of his artistic works. Most of these objects are symbolic because they are representations of one ideology or the other in the Urhobo culture. One vivid example of this technique is the art piece titled: *Egbene I*, meaning Ornamented.



Figure I

Bruce Onobrakpeya, Egbene 1, Print.

Egbene 1 (Figure 1) is an artwork made by Bruce Onobrakpeya. It is an assemblage of different objects. The work symbolizes different philosophical concepts. *Egbene 1* is highly ornamented with bangles, beads, lines, designs, calabashes and human figures. Each of the constituent objects symbolizes aspects of the culture of the Urhobo people. The calabashes (*Ekpan*), plural term for *Okpan*, are very useful in the material culture of the Urhobo. This is reflected in the folk song of the Urhobo that goes thus: *Anyẹjẹovworẹ wan, Anyẹjẹovworẹwan, ẹnyẹnyẹanyẹokp'ajẹovworẹ wan*; literally translated as “submerged but surfacing, submerged but surfacing, submerging and submerging the calabash, yet it keeps surfacing. The ideological context of this Urhobo sing-song is that “no matter how one tends to suppress the upright, such a person will never succeed, just as one cannot submerge an empty calabash in water”. In the aesthetic conception of the Urhobo, the *okpan* is of very high aesthetic value or semiotic significance. This object, *okpan*, is highly valued by the Urhobo people because of the connotation that the objects stand for.

Beneath the calabashes is a flying whisk (*Ujo*). According to Abamwa (2018:97), *Ujo* is part of the regalia for Chiefs and Kings among the Urhobo people. It is also a symbol of authority. In Figure 1, it is used to reaffirm and symbolize traditional leadership. *Ujo* is also used in the

nobility dance-performance of the Urhobo known as *Ema*. This dance is rarely performed and is done usually in honour of Kings.

At the top of the composition is another object called *Ikoru* (bangle). This object symbolizes wealth in Urhoboland. This object was used as index of, or assess to wealth and the wealthy in traditional Urhobo society. *Ikoru* is produced from an elephant tusk which used to be a very expensive material in the past. It was only the wealthy who were able to purchase it. In the composition, the bangles are designed with lines running across and over them as to add more aesthetics (beauty) to their original nature. The bangles (*Ikoru*) are hung in a position that can easily be seen. The essence is to add more aesthetics so that the composition can elicit more meaning in regards to Urhobo value system. At the top of the composition are human figures carefully lined out with white colour against a background of feather-like structures that give sharp contrast in the artwork. Among the Urhobo people, it is only those who fought and won battles that had feathers added to their caps.

Urheṣovorṣ ẹ evurṣogo (Primordial Tree) (Figure 2) is produced by the use of one of the techniques of the artist called Plastocast. The technique was discovered by Onobrakpeya in 1972 and it allows plates to be cast in plaster of Paris. After usage, this plate is reclaimed and retouched and the background is treated with zinc colour and, when mounted, the old plate assumes delightful originality. In this work, a Primordial Tree is used as a symbol of *Urheṣovorṣ ẹ evurṣogo* meaning only one tree that exists in a grass land. The title, as it implies, shows that the tree is the main focus in the art work, and it is therefore expected to protect every other kind of plant or plants that exist within the landscape. The *Urheṣovorṣ ẹ evurṣogo* (Primordial tree) is a symbolic representation of only one rich man or woman in a family, community or town. All the other objects found in the artwork are dependent on the *Urheṣovorṣ ẹ evurṣogo* (Primordial tree) for sustenance.



Figure 2

Bruce Onobrakpeya, Urheqvorq ɛ evureqogo, Plastocast, 80cm x 104cm, 1988.

In considering the aesthetics of *Urheqvorq ɛ evureqogo*, one has to look at the arrangement of the symbolic objects in the *Egbene I* composition, taking into consideration the context of the use. There are two animals at the top of *Urheqvorq ɛ evureqogo* with their tails fixed unto the *Urheqvorq ɛ evureqogo* (primordial tree). According to Onobrakpeya, (personal interview) the human beings and two animals are symbolically represented, constantly feeding on the rich man or woman that is connoted by *Urheqvorq ɛ evureqogo*. He explained further that two animals do not stop at feeding on the rich individual but they announce to other creatures like the snakes, chameleon, worms, birds to come and have their share. The syllogistic conclusion that can be inferred from the foregoing is that a kind of pressure is exerted on the *Urheqvorq ɛ evureqogo* and it has caused the tree to be dwarfed. This work attempts to illustrate the point that it is anomalous for only one rich person to be in a family, community or town.



Figure 3: *Eghrighri*

Bruce Onobrakpeya, *Eghrighri*, Plastograph, 67.5cm x 99.6cm, 1985.

Eghrighri (Figure 3) measures 67.5 x 99.6cm and it was done in 1985. *Eghrighri* in Urhobo language means rainbow. Plastograph is a term given by the artist to describe his deep etching technique which he innovated in 1967 through what he referred to as the Hydrochloric Acid Accident (Deep etching). In an interview held with the artist at Agbarha Otor during the 2012, Harmattan Workshop he explained the concept and how he accidentally invented it (plastograph). He added that today, it has become one of the best approaches that many consumers of his products are highly demanding for. He disclosed further that *Eghrighri* as a concept is derived from a myth which says that the rainbow could fall from the sky to the ground and, when cut with a machete, it may bring fortune or misery. On the basis of this interpretation he was asked to comment on whether the story about the rainbow could be true. He laughed and added that some of the stories are folktales and myths. In this myth, the rainbow fell and when it fell, a legendary

character *Emekperudu* cut it, and he was rewarded with all the good things of life - wives, children, money.

On another instance, when the rainbow fell, another person called *Edoghorokomi* tried his luck. This time, the rainbow unleashed demons and very wild and dangerous animals. Another version of this myth is the emergence of the spirit of adventure and a morbid longing for conquest in man; fighting and killing lions; as well as the multi-headed snakes, including facing the unknown. This art work is an engraving on a low relief surface made of zinc or similar surface matured and printed in the intaglio style. As a matter of fact, Onobrakpeya disclosed that the idea of plastograph came to him after his visit to a sculptor named Erhabor Emokpae's studio (2012:36).

In another version of the same story, Ikpakronyi (1999) stated that the artwork titled *Eghrighri* carefully describes a belief among the Urhobo, which says that whenever a rainbow appears in the sky, anybody who gets hold of a cutlass on time and slices a part of the rainbow will become very rich. Without doubt, it is obvious that this belief originated from folktales or myths which are part of the rainbow.

The aesthetic value that is derived from the Urhobo belief system as represented in the *Eghrighri* symbol is that the Urhobo people often interpret the universe through myths and anecdotes. That a man may act on the interpretation he gives to the myths by jumping into sky and thinking that he would reach out to the sky and be able to slice a part of rainbow and become rich. Instead of succeeding, the law of gravity affects him and as he is falling or responding to the law of gravity he can fall on the people who are watching him slice the rainbow. The implication of the aesthetics here is that the artist is able to represent this myth clearly, and from the artwork, it becomes so easily understood.



Figure 4: *Travail*
Bruce Onobrakpeya, Travail, Mixed Media, Agbarha-Otor, 1999.

A number of scholars, including Perkins Foss and others have mentioned the Urhobo concept of *Obo* in their papers. In Figure 4, Onobrakpeya uses a representational symbol of human hands that is popularly known as *Obo* among the Urhobos to depict one of the beliefs of the Urhobo, namely, the power that brings success in all endeavours. According to Ubrurhe (1990:1&2), *Obo* can also be referred to as *Oneki*. The symbol can be represented in full human figure or sometimes only the wrist to the palm region of a hand. Ubrurhe noted that before a business man or woman goes for his business he or she needed to pray and ask *Obo/Oneki* for success.

The hand representation in the art piece referred to as “*Travail*” is interpreted in Urhobo language as *Obo/Oneki*. The *Obo* representation which is a symbol of human hand and red piece of cloth (*Ibosu*), with cowries and coins are joined in a string and tied around the hand. In the piece some of the earliest forms of currency accepted for transaction known as cowry are arranged in straight lines on the ground near the *Obo / Oneki* immediately after the coins. Also, stones are arranged in a half circle along the back view of the *Obo/Oneki*, thereby creating an opening towards the front view of the image. The aesthetic implication is that the materials used, especially the cowries, connote wealth while the red cloth tied unto the image symbolizes the power and authority in making wealth in any form of business (Abamwa, 1995).

Rain and Cry at Otorogba (Figure 5) is one of Onobrakpeya’s popular works. He confirmed that the images in the work are based on personal experience in his mother’s village, Otorogba, and that the art work was produced among others in the year 1974 according to <http://www.bonhams.com>. He said that he heard some people passing by and crying that John had died. Following the people crying was the corpse of John on a kind of bicycle hearse led by two of his wives, one holding the head while the other held the bicycle: <http://www.bonhams.com>. It was drizzling at the time so there was an umbrella to prevent the rain from touching the dead man. Standing on top of the umbrella is the figure of an owl. Onobrakpeya explained the Urhobo folk

belief that nobody ever dies without a witch having a hand in it, adding that the owl, therefore, symbolizes the witch, and it is put in the scene to represent the witches that were responsible for the death (<http://www.bonhams.com>.)

The placement of owl on the umbrella was symbolic folklore (Egonwa, 2011:110). That fact was gathered from the people's belief. Hence, it is represented in the work by the artist to draw attention to the same belief in practical form. No bird can stand on a moving umbrella.



Figure 5

Bruce Onobrakpeya, *Rain and Cry at Otorogba*, Plastograph plate, 45.5 by 61cm, 1974.

Conclusion

The concept of “natural synthesis” helps Onobrakpeya in the use of cultural philosophies in the creation of his artworks (Ikpakronyi, 1999:11). Many of his ideas and themes are sourced from indigenous setting. Even his styles and techniques are unconventional, yet experimental and they have been tried over and over again. Onobrakpeya's themes are influenced by the

environments that the artist had contact with while schooling and working. This is given credence by the fact that beauty, as a concept, differs from one culture or environment to another. This is why Otite (2019) says that the requisites of what is beautiful are predicated upon values that could be historical, socio-cultural or politically interpreted, depending on the perspective or angle from which the work is viewed. More importantly, a lot of his themes are based on the myths, folklores and symbols of the Urhobo people deployed in their cultural context. In addition, the skilful manipulation of techniques in the production of the art pieces creates room for a better understanding and appreciation of aesthetics as conceived by the Urhobo people.

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