

The Enigma of Bruce Onobrakpeya: The Artist's Major Ideas that Bridge the Surreal to the Real as Universal Themes in a Classical Urhobo Culture

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Abstract

Innovator, a master of his own style, Bruce Onobrakpeya, since the 1960s till this very day, became the turning point of African descent in experimentalism. His traditional philosophies and techniques exerted a greater influence on art, as they redefined concepts, rather than products. His postcolonial challenging ideas, changed, inspired and reshaped the printmaking techniques as fundamental artistic contemplatives on the strange spiritual pathways and folklore in his works, although in their quasi-classical expressions, provocatively linked to Surrealism, and the fertility of the unconscious mind, Onobrakpeya could not be ruled out of this probable. Thus, a profound understanding of the underlying motivations behind his works will connect the superior or surrealist nature of his ancestral classical themes and serve as a bridge between his mind, the recipients of his culture and the basis of that strange art that reflects a deeply spiritualized society. This paper, will provide a review of related idealisms and motivational categories in such selected works, on this enigmatic artist, as having a surreal embodiment for references in future research.

Keywords: *Experimentalism, Traditional philosophies, Concepts, Strangeness, Unconscious mind, Surrealis*

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Background to the Study

This paper explores the uncommon ideas which describe a selected Urhobo ancestral thoughts in the works of Bruce Onobrakpeya (b.1932), with the synthesis of the Ejagham Nsibidi glyphs as a subliminal message, which will be read contemporarily. The paper establishes the subconscious operates as possible influences in his works to encourage new ways of reading art. It also focuses on how these ideas could be reinterpreted to provide added meanings, in what Onobrakpeya creates, as to retell a contemporary story of the Urhobo people, in what may consider at least in part, a displacement activity in that culture as heathen. That is, their customs, beliefs and way of life is thus comparable to the expectations of the European ways, in which custom is displaced as demonic practices, and how the artist urges us to see differently. Although, Freudian psychology, and how it describes the unconscious substitution of original ideas or practices as dangerous and unacceptable in preference to a new or favourable culture (Christianity), is what displacement psychology infers in Onobrakpeya's works. The artist, having explored folkloric themes that are 'displaced forms' of his ancestral Urhobo culture, uses artistic licensing to underpin ancestral veneration as a valued culture.

There is no artist as famous as Onobrakpeya here in Nigeria, that have used printmaking as a veritable method of expression to reach a wider audience as artistic ambassador to Africanize opinions in representing culture. Onobrakpeya is a pioneer, a master and a perpetual enthusiast of ancestral ascent, as notable in his explorations, experiences, beliefs and motivations. To say that Onobrakpeya dominated printmaking, with the radical positions of Natural Synthesis, advanced from the (1963-1964) Mbari Mbayo experimental art workshop programme, and the Ibadan and Oshogbo informal art schools, only gave him the type of much needed maturity that increased his perceptions today, into the repositioning of his cultural idealisms globally.

Onobrakpeya's Expressions beyond Naturalism

To achieve the ideas Onobrakpeya explores, we must move away from naturalism, for he communicated his inner sensitivity, and felt the dramatic communication of traditional philosophies in plastocast technique. More so, Onobrakpeya could be metaphorically referred to as a fleeting dinosaur – a rare fossil of his own renditions and indigenous traditions, his works are executed in low sculptural relief process, using Plaster-of-Paris and a liquid epoxy resin. His further experimental techniques became the epitome of an enduring investigation into the Urhobo folktales.

Onobrakpeya, yet known for his masterpieces, particularly stood at the intersection of the physical and spiritual worlds as a deep-seated idealism in his enduring creative works. Of one such work, is the Egodo Mami Wata, (1976), from his mythologized virility? His knowledge on it is undoubtedly vast, but in conceptual approach, it creatively imitates the phantasm sphere – to replicate – particularly, if compared within the theoretical advancements of thinkers, such as Plato, Aristotle, Theodor Adorno and Sigmund Freud. One of such appealing arguments on diegesis is the relationship from a story's narrative that underlies one's experiences. In connection, this also syncs with Aristotle's view that natural change, or decay, also occurs as cyclical phenomenon in art – especially drawing from timeless causes – natural ideas, or an immortal idea – or spirit forms becomes creatively available to the active thinker: in this context, is the artist.

The Digensis of Bruce Onobrakpeya's Egodo Mami Wata

In Urhobo, Egodo means “compound” that is, an enclosed group of houses in a communal setting of close relatives. In context, compound also means made up of two parts which means to combine things: to add together or add one thing to another to form a whole.

It is this compounding of and understanding of classical ethnic phenomenon in dialoguing with spirit beings, in their existences and interactions that becomes culturally revered in the Niger Delta regions of Nigeria. These exemplifications is what Onobrakpeya is able to present to his viewers as an interior view of a world he is accustomed to amongst the Urhobo people of his place of origin, Delta State of Nigeria.

His works entails explicit narratives of story-telling and in the form of diegesis where “The narrator tells the story. The narrator presents the actions (and sometimes thoughts) of the characters to the readers or audience” (Wikipedia, 2015) as looked up from the cited dictionary source. However, Onobrakpeya's famous examples of this sort, is of classical illustrations on one of several novels, “Books of legends and folktales such as *An African Night's Entertainment*, by Cyprian Ekwensi,” (Egunlae, 1985.p.243).

Onobrakpeya's Egodo Mami Wata, predominates, the land and theoretical issues of association with the spirits of the water world, each derived in the exceptional knowledge and interactions with such beings, as considered in several volumes of publications that have dealt with the concept by notable scholars, such as Martha G. Anderson and Phillip M. Peek's *Ways of the Rivers: Arts and Environments of the Niger Delta*, 2003; and Robin Horton's *The Kalabari Ekine Society: A Borderland of Religion and Art*, 1963, and *The Gods as Guests: An Aspect of Kalabari Religious Life*, 1960, are but a few examples of the type of subconscious appeals stemming from Onobrakpeya's Egodo Mami Wata.

Onobrakpeya's Egodo Mami Wata, was done in a representation of black and white contrast (monochrome) – the type of feeling you get when contemplating a classical narrative of photographic images taken during the (1930s). Preferably, the rare Kalabari headdress of a Janus type from Talbot's photograph of the same identity taken at the same period of Onobrakpeya's birth (1932), suits the intended description of Onobrakpeya's piece. It presents to us, the idea of an archetypal age slithering into view as the *oru nama* –water spirits – often shape-shifting appearances like a snake for example, a crocodile, or a shark, amongst other known forms, are often symbolized as a familiar through animism, in wooden or stone displays. These are also accustomed experiences of the type of existences that is aquatic to its practitioners – half human, half fish creatures from the water vicinities, thus is affiliated with the “Ijo, who conceive of the owu as half-human and half-animal, often combine both elements in mask iconography, (Drewal, 2003, p.207).

In Egodo Mami Wata – its calmness, its shimmering resemblance with the skin of a fish's scale – surmounted by four similar headdresses of spirit forms that are slowly advancing from the swirling water with headgears first, evokes the eerie position and movements of water spirits – “floating on the surface of the waters”, (Drewal, 2003. p.206). Its concentric circles and

colossal horns, positions the mind of the viewer an ancient cultural orientation with bolting symbolisms that are specific motifs in Bruce's work. These forms have sacred or mysterious meanings to that culture, and Onobrakpeya is particularly inviting us to see a culture and belief system that is becoming obsolete to the contemporary Urhobo man as religion. “The intertwined history of religion and art, reaching back to the prehistoric times, is the record that our ancestors have left of the symbols that were meaningful and moving to them” (Jaffe, 1964, p. 257).



Figure 1. Bruce Onobrakpeya, Egodo Mami Wata, 1976, Plastograph, 84, 5 x 58.5 cm. Private collection. www.voice-online.uk

The currents and magnificence of Egodo Mami Wata, shows an unending relief that is intended to create an illusion of space –it warps the viewer of its translucent power of a seemingly dual existence. The powerful depiction of water-spirits in the Egodo, Mami Wata, as the name implies, 'Mother of the compound of Water Spirits' is but from the parallel worlds, and can only be perceived by its ardent believers. However, the work further indicates on a single hut in which it is observed that, this signifies a conscious unification of the whole and not as a denotative cluster of compound houses used as an individual existence.

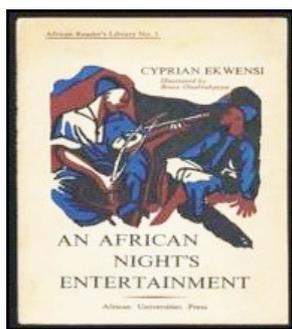


Figure 2. Bruce Onobrakpeya, an African Night's Entertainment: A Tale of Vengeance, (Front cover illustration for the book by Cyprian Ekwensi), 1962. www.amazon.com.

Particularly it implies a contextual signification, of a nucleus type of ancestral setting – a fast-eroding awareness in reverence of a deity, where cults are enacted to support such traditions.

One related example is of the Ekpe Leopard Secret Societies in the Cross River and Akwa Ibom States of Nigeria, where Onobrakpeya appropriated some of the signs in the Urhobo culture. At the center of the water, mami-wata spirits are seen advancing, with what appears to be a queen mother of the water spirit worlds depicted in black and white form. Its unique appearance gives a picture of the kind of visual purity in contrast to the dark figures –possibly her subordinates shielding her sides.

The depiction of minji (water) worshippers, at the top-right-hand path of the piece, is another recurrent iconic element of two female forms, with pointy projections as braids, which could be seen approaching these entities with offerings, from the woods behind the single hut in view. What emerges in the whole, when considering the single Janus horned-hut type, is the unification of a communal consciousness with identical clarity of the sort of cultural significations Onobrakpeya's narrative explores, that must be taken seriously in its own rights.

Corresponding relatives and enigmas of the physical and psychic appearances of the Urhobo art forms are projected in many of Onobrakpeya's works. The unimaginable contents that his arts provides, are main subjects of Natural Synthesis or Modernist Nigerian art. It is characterized in the position advanced by Anne Jaffe (1964):

For the main subject of modern art is, in a certain sense, unimaginable too. Therefore much modern art has become abstract. The great artists of this century have sought to give visible form to the “life behind things” and so their works are a symbolic expressions of a world behind consciousness (or, indeed, behind dreams, for dreams are only rarely non-figurative) (p.303).

But it must be realized that what the artist particularly suggests to his viewers, in fact, remains something that is far greater than the realities of the physical senses. His goal, if observed, is centered on the reactions of the viewer into contemplating the subtle background, and the inward traditional belief of mysticism of the Urhobo culture represented as signs. According to Onobrakpeya, from Kate Ezra's (1990) account: “Producing art works backed the ideas and philosophies which are calculated to help upgrade and lift the life of the people [by providing] a way to give our people self-identity” (p. 79).

The spirit consciousness is the central significance in Onobrakpeya's *Egodo*, *Mami Wata*, and no artist in the modern artistic era, sensed this type of mysticism background of art more undoubtedly or spoke of it with grander desire than the Russian artist, Wassily Kandinsky (b.1866). In Onobrakpeya's works, we begin to see the real significance of greater expressions of modern art. Jaffe, asserts that, “Like the hermetic movements in the middle Ages, it must be understood as a mysticism of the spirit of earth, and therefore as an expression of our time compensatory to Christianity.” (Jaffe, 1964, p. 307).

However, Onobrakpeya's doggedness in his use of lingua franca themes of his descent, are firmly lodged in history in his plastocast as ever was or will be. Bruce Onobrakpeya's oeuvre filled the minds of those who have gazed at and participated in the vernacular philosophies of

his ancestral wisdom. He is the artist whom virtually every known institutions offering arts –printmaking, had to reckon with from an indigenous fervor. There is scarcely any aspiring printmaking student that he did not inspire through his creative plasto-prints and techniques. It was the subconscious experiences of modernism that created his modernism, and this reflected in his choice of materials and ideas.

Onobrakpeya's works are instrumental towards the revival of Urhobo indigenous people's belief systems as we have come to know, but it allows the viewer to enter into his dreams, his thoughts, and above all, from what and where he had been about –perhaps against his own will? Often times, art is tyrannous from self-explanation, and it is this mediumistic connectedness that Jackson Pollock argued as shamanistic revelations –letting his work communicate to him, as the vessel, making him do what it wants. Egodo Mami Wata, fits this type of solipsistic inclinations with Onobrakpeya as the “Urhobo Shaman” from the visual artistic context.

In his works, the aim was to go for the strongest point of feeling. Onobrakpeya conveyed it with a great plastocast force, crammed in suggestive layers. His works were intended to unify the viewer into the mystical environment and culture space of the Urhobo people, as earlier said, but his exertions gave the viewer a feel on the weight of folkloric forms and the implications of their socio-cultural relevance in Modernist arts. Despite the fact that Western modernism rejects story-telling in place of formal relationships, Onobrakpeya could be seen as a radical amongst his contemporaries in his artistic oeuvre. Of course, he did not decline into triviality.

Forms in a Landscape

This piece reveals that, Onobrakpeya recurring passion tilts to a period of intense soul's searching for of those symbols that are gradually becoming archaic to his people. In it, he seeks the reawakening of self, by repositioning the consciousness of man in this creative dual landscape – physical and or spiritual existences. The possibilities here, if observed closely, is established for the viewer to simply search and understand the influences these transcendental beings have on humanity from Onobrakpeya's cultural perspectives. Although Christian by birth, his traditional religion seems to hold firm influences in his works, as he represents a crude crucifix behind of the mami wata (spirit) beings, dominating the central view of the etched piece. The piece is centered at dawn, or the setting of the sun – especially relating to the hour of supernatural appeasing from devotees to deities. Thus, this type of disposition transcends the Urhobo boundaries, yet it provides lessons for other ethnicities about the rise of cultural-patriotism.

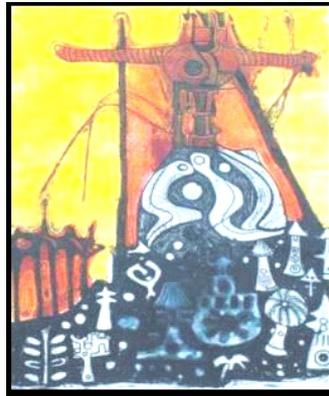


Figure 3. Bruce Onobrakpeya, Forms in a Landscape, (Red Base), medium: etching, 1973. 60x45cm. (23.6 x17.7 in.). www.artnet.com

Forms in a Landscape, however, demonstrates to the viewer, a dual existence – an Urhobo vista, within the vastness and majesty of the unexplored underwater worlds and its fine beings, who are seen nested on the shores of a type of trawling locality. Its settings presupposes the type of subconscious elevations Onobrakpeya is accustomed to – perhaps, capturing the worlds reminiscent of the artist's subconscious affirmations. Let us consider the central grandeur of the composition in earnest. In the composition, Onobrakpeya, depicts in a breathtaking emphasis of the spirits within an abstracted settlement, possibly a fishing port, in which they are washed ashore but remains in the essence of the water by maintaining close contact as possible if any form of emergency or to maintain their elusiveness arises. Perhaps the idea could be a convergence for religious pacification of some sort, of which, these spirits appears to grow out of the landscape. They certainly seem to embody the precious limited space of Onobrakpeya's artistic support. The sublime range of these beings which guards the people, symbolize a crucial difference between the far water world, and the humanly possible landscape they are revered for in keeping close ties with their human subjects. On the right, in the lower end of the piece, is seen a stylized jellyfish, the ocean bed plants –other creative components are seen scattered around the composition. The pathways and underwater houses, with their awkward appearances, signify the external sexual organs of the male – beckoning for copulation with their human subjects, often leading to marital solace and spiritual wealth – children and power. This is peculiar with Homer's Olympian gods.

The use of reddish-orange hue, puts in plain view the tints and traits of the setting sun, which makes up the same fundamental phenomenon, of the supercharged beings to skillfully blend into humanly possible environments unnoticed. Because of their fine structures, they can bend time, shape-shift and bend molecular structures of their body, in no difficult way. The ability to use that part of the brain which man is yet to develop in all aspects of his spiritual arousal is what makes these beings superhumanly possible in Onobrakpeya's work. This is what makes them spirits – or demi-gods, per se.

No landscape like this exists in the real world, except that the artist merely disguises the original version of such existences with design principles in arts. By this, approximate symmetry balance is achieved which equivalent but not identical forms are used to conceal any conceivable traces of spirit forms which the artist wants us to use our imaginations to make sense of. By capturing the immensity of these beings into our human world, the spirit of including awe-inspiring dispositions in this work is evoked. It is this rather democratic and artistic twist in the manner of projecting artistic licensing, that Onobrakpeya employs in the piece, that is, to respond to what the artist's intentions were at the time, and to experience what the work might project to the viewer in the form of subconscious visual stimuli. It is as a result to the type of experiences which only surround half of what the Urhobo people largely perceive –that is, by accommodating the necessity of spirit forms as culture. This is what recurring observations on the artist, Onobrakpeya indicates through his works.

While the lower part of the work reveals the ideas behind the spirits and their existences, it also replicates both worlds and their natural vegetation with the use of pseudo-motifs peculiar to the artist. It clearly signifies the human and spirit worlds as preferring the company of devotees and vice versa (each other), for material and spiritual supplications.

Aro Osomo II (Father's Shrine)

The world as we see it is central to spiritual awakening of the inner self from material grandeur at a time that was epic with the Urhobo people. It is one of such customary reasons why the generations before colonial inceptions, recounted a close contact and necessitated beliefs in both their personal and communal gods. Each man converted and upheld a religion of his own design: pacifist and self-abnegating for a grander course – that is, for a magical-spiritual influence.

His religious conviction led to a drastic lifestyle which extends to his immediate family members, with a penchant to raise the generational consciousness of his people, by reflecting perfectly the ideals espoused by his ancestors, likely handed down to his father. In no small way, Onobrakpeya remembered the lifestyle his father devoted himself to, and depicted him as a staunch defender of a society and religious practice that veils itself even from the keen eyes.

This lino engraving clearly duplicates an isolated practice of the Ekpe Leopard Secret Society and their aspects of the Leopard paws, which could be seen from the middle-left part of the composition, particularly immediately below the thirty-five starry signs in a square by the head of the figure which appears to be consulting an entity with outstretched hands. This is associated with speech in the Ejagham Nsibidi signs. This goes to show that, the secret society is also an intimate practice in the Urhobo culture – though in one of its many indirect forms. This indeed, positions culture as a nomadic entity. The culture is dominated by strict adherence of utmost secrecy. It is thought that, Onobrakpeya wanted us to share in his subconscious feelings, and in his father's role as a shaman, and ardent believer of the Ekpe secret society. If the engraving does not accurately reflect the Ejagham cultural practices in its undiluted forms, it almost certainly reflects Onobrakpeya's own feelings about it.

In the artistic world, the variety of symbols, forms and other visually aesthetical ideas obscures those signs that should reveal the Ekpe practices, by making it difficult to recognize them easily. The uniform flat burnished-bronze hue used to suggest such practices as suggested is been done in the woods, or some private environment, especially when considering the weeping willow's drooping branches at the upper-right part of the engraving. This puts forward Onobrakpeya's aim of guiding the viewer to see the landscape that is inaccessible to all, from his father's traditional roles as a druid. In fact, the composition is central in a carefully encoding of a grander meaning. Composed according to an artistic sense of principles of unity and simplicity in absolute relief forms, the work elevates an aboriginal consciousness in the most plain, and sublime view, in a yet, uninteresting manner for the untrained eyes.

Onobrakpeya's reverence for his father's practices, is consciously evident in this engraving, it is clear that he wants to reveal something more. The variety of visual motifs or ideograms from the Nsibidi signs is used sparsely. The spiral form, which in Nsibidi means, continuity, rests on yet another important sign in its outstretched form as though are the stumps of three fingers, which mean plenty of money or wealth, in Nsibidi. The zigzagging sign in Nsibidi, which also signifies voyaging, or depends on the particular symbol used, in its variants, is but another ideogram in Nsibidi that suggests A man drawn in the river, all of which are depicted on the left part of the composition. It may as well reflect those existing cult institutions that the artist may be sympathetic with.



Figure 4. Bruce Onobrakpeya, Aro Osomo II (Father's Shrine), 1977. Original Plate (Lino Engraving), 85.4 x 60 cm. (33.5 x 23.5 in.). www.arthouse-ng.com.

Considered in whole, the signs raised here, can be thus read: the speech of the shaman amongst the willow tree is a sacred practice, in continuity of a wealthy tradition which must voyage beyond its accustomed rivers in its devout practice by a man, to other landscapes. Note here that, this statement is used to deconstruct the type of encoded meaning that is inaccessible to non-members of the Ekpe secret society. It is used to put in plain sight, a typical understanding of a difficult and secluded practice that might suggest an untaught perception into their philosophy.

The organizing logic behind Bruce Onobrakpeya's Aro Osomo II (Father's Shrine) is that, this type of practice involves a system of belief unlike that of most other religions in the world. It is unique in its sense as portrayed in art the art of Onobrakpeya. Each of the works here discussed, marks the existences of ancestral beings in the world we live in, adjacent to the ones we cannot physically see, but disguised as sign. Images of these beings, ideograms, and expressions, are maps to a greater existence – a makeup or part of a greater bulk of Africa's variegated indigenous artistic practices. Thus, Henry M. Sayre, in his *A World of Art*, holds similar view amongst Aboriginal arts, when he asserted that, “The landscape itself is a record of the Ancestral Being's passing” (2003, p.8), and Onobrakpeya's artworks are understood as a concise depiction of a geography that is thus full of rich untapped history that is declining in indigenous practices. Africa's age-long practices are currently understood to be undermined Eurocentrically. This is a force that is far greater than the previously encountered colonialism era, and Onobrakpeya wants us to see these changes in his creative explorations.

Conclusion

To a greater degree, all three of such selected works by the artist that we have shed light on are articulated roles of the artist's accent, to review, record the world, and of course, and to give tangible form to the type of ideas that are inaccessible to some of us. By this statement, the paper made known the guise of aesthetics, through plastocast to exemplify the philosophies inherent with the Urhobo people as custom in a mixed media relief printing technique. It enables us to see in a new and innovative way to make artistic licensing a significant tool of expression in our respective cultures.

For example, in discussing Onobrakpeya, it was established that his central existence is an enigma, a contemplative reality as seen in his works, which are far from being figments of his imagination. This tells us something important about the creative icon, Onobrakpeya, and his plastography inventiveness, which is to give three-dimensional seeing, to a transcendental existence. The intent was to elevate the scene, and move it to his receptive audience.

This paper has created room for the reader to explore more of the creative processes of Bruce Onobrakpeya's artistic convictions, and of course in his father's druid practices, through such examples posited here. You will find his in-depth ideas as enriching as ever done on plastograph.

But more than helping one to understand the importance of seeing and thinking creatively, these arguments are enshrined within the localities of the Niger Delta regions. It revealed that the practice of the signs by the Ejagham people or the employment of such signs by artists is uncommon to upcoming artists, who may read them differently from the interpretations of certain indigenes who may describe them as demonic. In other words, the reader must be an explorer, by stripping the mind off redundancy, and begin to elevate the consciousness beyond common practices, and explore the immensity of cosmic realizations with arts as medium.

Finally, it is hoped that the reader will take from this paper, the knowledge and anticipation that were constructed towards self-discovery of Onobrakpeya's artistic discipline, and the fluid ideas he brings forth in their awe-inspiring ways.

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