



Promoting the Indigenous Culture of Cross River State through the Contemporary Arts Practices of Victor Ekpuk and Umana Nnochiri

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ABSTRACT

While culture remains the way of life of a people, their ancient artistic representations not only take from that culture, but also serves to propagate it. Thus, when artists take and employ ancient cultural materials in contemporary visual works of art, they sort of propagate the local culture in a globalised art space. Post modernism and contemporary art culture today seem to be a plus to the studio artist by making the world a global “art” village. Contemporary artists therefore have global access through the internet to propagate, appropriate and domesticate artistic media, techniques and forms. This access holds true, whether the art-form is performative, multi-mediated or even textual as the case may be. Using the qualitative analysis of works by Victor Ekpuk and Umana Nnochiri, based on ancient artistic representations of Cross River State, this paper explores how two contemporary visual artists combine the mnemonics, formal structure and linearism of traditional culture with the impetus of the global art village, to create works that promote indigenous culture and serve the visual needs of today.

KEYWORDS: Cross River State, Ikom Monolith, Nsibidi, Ebirambi, Indigenous culture, Promotion

Introduction

Culture is said to be the defining aspect of what it means to be “human” even as it remains a people’s identity, including the arts and what make a people unique and different from others (Eagleton, 2016). The history of arts suggests that the word “culture” and “arts” are inseparable, in the sense that one cannot talk about a people’s culture without talking about their art as well. That is because, arts such as the very phenomenal ones of Cross River State, showcase and document the culture and tradition of a people (Enamhe and Unimke, 2017). It therefore means that, while culture remains the way of life of a people, the arts are representations of that particular culture (Enamhe, 2008).

Cross River is one of the South-South States of Nigeria. It is bordered in the North by Benue State, in

the West by Ebonyi and Abia States, in the South-West by Akwa Ibom and in the East by the Republic of Cameroon (Alogoa, Tekena and Tamuno, 1989). With an estimated population of over 3.8 million as at 2016, Cross River State has many cultural products like the *Ekpe* of the Efik, *Moninkim* of the Ejagham people, *Ebirambi* of the Agwagune, amongst others. The unique indigenous culture of Cross River State is evidenced in the 1500 year old Ikom monoliths, also known as the *Akwansi* of the Ejagam people. The monoliths are over 450 engraved standing stones, spread around over thirty communities in the Ikom area of Cross River State (Enor, 2012). These stones depict an ancient form of ancestral writings, designs and complex codified iconography, perhaps for the sake of communication and religious purposes. Another of Cross River’s ancient cultural examples is the ancient Efik terracotta unearthed through

archaeological excavations in the 1970s. This terracotta tradition has existed for over 800 years and consists of some coiling technique of pot-making than any other materials (Ekpo and Violetta, 1988). Samples show the rich expressive, artistic culture of Cross River peoples such as the linear structure of the famous *Nsibidi* ideograph. Another example is the complex structure of the *Ebirambi* war masquerade of the Agwagune people that has existed prior to the twelfth century BC. As a work of art, what is interesting in this masquerade is the complex mixed mediated technique deployed and amplified by continuous overlapping of forms in various hues, tones and visual accent that hints at the people's philosophy, spiritualism and religious symbolism. Post modernism and contemporary art culture today seem to be a plus to the studio artist by making the world a global "art" village. Contemporary artists therefore have global access through the internet to appropriate and domesticate artistic media, techniques and forms. This access holds true, whether the art-form is performative, multi-mediated or even textual as the case may be (Odum, 2021). Using the qualitative analysis of works by Victor Ekpuk and Umana Nnochiri, based on ancient artistic representations of Cross River State, this paper explores how two contemporary visual artists combine the mnemonics, formal structure and linearism of traditional culture with the impetus of the global art village, to create works that promote indigenous culture and serve the visual needs of today.

The Ikom Monoliths

The Ikom Monoliths also known as the *Akwansi* by the local Ejagham people, constitute over 450 engraved standing stones spread around more than thirty communities in the Ikom area of Cross River State (Okwochie et al, 2021). Carved in textured basaltic rocks and shelly limestone, and varying in height from around 0.91-1.83m (3-6ft), the stones are said to be over 1500 years old (Figs. 1-3). They depict an ancient form of ancestral writing, design and complex codified iconography perhaps for the sake of communication and religious purposes (*World Monument Funds*, 2008). It is believed that the stones served as a place for sacrifice and community meeting. Others believe the monoliths were created as memorials of the departed heroes and beloved family. Hence, as African ideographs and communicative strategy, they represent powerful ancestral spirits to which rituals and offerings may be made, also to the gods of harvest (Akpang, 2013). The common characteristics of these monoliths includes but not limited to, suggestive stylized figurations, rounded eyes and mouth, two heads with five fingers, emphasis on the head as a point of interest and the entire body tapping into the base from which they stand. Weather conditions such as climate change and human actions have been the major problem as regards their disappearance if not extinction (Nwankwo,



Fig. 1: Carved monoliths, Alok, Cross River State, Nigeria. The incised decoration is heightened with collared chalk in preparation for the 1991 New Yam Festival.

Source: Ekpo Eyo.



Fig. 2: Image of Ikom monolith

Source: <https://africanrockart.britishmuseum.org/country/Nigeria/ikom-monolith%20/>



Fig. 3: Image of Ikom monolith

Source: <https://africanrockart.britishmuseum.org/country/Nigeria/ikom-monolith%20/>

Ugwamanam and Obieluem, 2018). However, they are only seen as mere artefacts and monuments through western/European anthropological and archaeological discuss, forgetting the artistic attributes, content and context (Akpang, 2004).

Calabar Terracotta

Calabar terracotta refers to works found in contiguous areas in Cross River, Akwa Ibom, Ebonyi, Abia and Port-Harcourt. Made by the coiling technique of pot-making, these terracotta works have existed for over 800 years (Enor, 2012). Uncovered in the late 1970s, the Calabar terracotta includes vessels, headrest, decorated bowls and the display of expressive stylized figuration (Figs. 4-6). The surface decorations include varieties of discrete geometrical motifs, concentric circles, spirals, lozenges and cruciform. Some of these mirror the nature and content of the *nsibidi* ideographs (Carlson, 2003). Characteristics of these terracotta includes: made of clay, coiling technique, the heads shows endless assortments of shaves, coiled braded coffers or head-gear, used as monuments for the deceased or as ritual vessels, the objects are divided into segments – base, body, neck and head with demarcations. The Calabar terracotta stones provide important evidence of complex social organization and status, sophisticated art production, body decoration, and a visual language that is comparable to *nsibidi* (Slogar, 2005).

The Ebirambi Masquerade of the Agwagune People

The Agwagune community is located in Biase Local Government Area of Cross River State. It could be found from about 150 kilometres from Calabar, the Capital City. The agrarian community traded palm oil and other farm produce before the 17th century even as they were taken into slavery during the slave trade era (Olagunji, 2017). The Agwagune culture includes *Ebia-Abu*, *Egip Aneba*, *Ebirambi*, *Evin* (New Yam Festi-



Fig. 5: Concentric circles. Small (incomplete) terracotta bowl from Okang Mbang. H. 7 cm, D. 14 cm. National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, Old Residency Museum, Calabar.

Source: Christopher Slogar



Fig. 6: Interlace. Base of a small terracotta bowl from Okang Mbang. D. 11.1 cm. National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, Old Residency Museum, Calabar.

Source: Christopher Slogar.



Fig. 4: Terracotta bowl from the Old Marian Road site, Calabar (1998). D. 31.1 cm, H. 15.6 cm. National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Old Residency Museum, Calabar.

Source: Ekpo Eyo.



Fig. 7: The Ebirambi Masquerade of Agwagune. Source: Freedom Odum 2019.

val) amongst others. The masquerades synthesise a complexity of forms such as religious costumes, weaving, wood carving, amongst other techniques that have been there even before the encounter with Europe, passed on from one generation to another. An example is the *Ebirambi* masquerade that uses a complex compositional strategy that involves the synthesis of textiles weaving, ram hide and carved wooden shield tied to the left arm – in addition to the sacrificial live cockerels appended to the costume (Fig. 8). The masquerade also holds a cutlass (*imani*) and spots a red cap that embraces the skull. Just like other African art forms, this masquerade is more spiritual and religiously symbolic than purely aesthetic. The underlying cultural philosophy and the formal composition may have spearheaded its dreadfulness – as a cultural amalgam of terror, war, peace and entertainment. This context tends to make what was visibly scary and dangerous to become beautiful again.

Discussion: Two Nigerian Artists in Contrasted View

Victor Ekpuk

The US based Nigerian born artist, Victor Ekpuk, is known for his iconic paintings and drawings, which mirror the philosophies in indigenous African *nsibidi* and the *uli* art forms. Focusing on the creative arts of exploring the human condition, his works assume a minimalistic approach through visual inscriptions as well as the abstract nature of *nsibidi* ideographs of the indigenous people of Cross River and Cameroon (Searcy, 2016 and Sowole, 2020). To an extent, his works are composed to bridge and overcome the problem of communications amongst dialectical sociocultur-



Fig. 8: The Ebirambi Masquerade of Agwagune and its cult members .
Source: Freedom A. Odum 2019.



Fig. 9: Victor Ekpuk. *The Prophet 11*, 2019.
Aicon Gallery (Sold).
Source: www.artnet.



Fig. 10: Victor Ekpuk. *Ibibio Girl*, 2002.
Aicon Gallery.
Source: www.artnet.com

al groups. Through the *nsibidi*, he communicates the contemporary publics through the very ancient and unspoken language that associates with indigenous cults such as the *Ekpe* society (Ekpuk, 1995). In this sense, his works through media and technique has a way of reminding us that Africa remains for its artists, a site of powerful imaginaries, a historical epicentre to which they are bound by ancestry and ideas. In so doing, the works elicit powerful aesthetics and symbolic actions. In other words, his works project Africa as an ancient artistic subject through the very age of intense globalization, migration and mobility of ideas with and beyond ethnic, national, continental and racial boundaries (Okeke, 2013). Ekpuk's visual poetic lines accumulate and reflect the signs and symbols from a very complex mind (Fig. 9). The very large complex script Ekpuk describes as his "Scribbling", includes ideographs, Egyptian Hieroglyphics, elements of Yoruba visual forms as well as the occasional alphabetical and numerical references (Ogbeche, 2008).

Ekpuk's idiosyncratic technique of composing visual forms with the linearism and abstractions of the *nsibidi* ideographs sets him apart from his contemporaries. This is perhaps evidential in this piece titled The Ibibio Girl (Fig. 10). What is interesting in this work is the simplified, minimalistic facial features of the stylized female figure, as against the compact zone composed of the *nsibidi* inscriptions, suggestive of a rich African hairstyle as a cypher to the glory of womanhood. To create movement and contrast in this piece, the artist deploys negative spaces that are seen within and around the composition of ideographs towards the hair and the facial region. This to an extent is a creative

strategy unleashed by the artist to unify, if not to integrate the entire pictorial composition. In this sense, the background has become part of the composition itself. In addition, the figure's neck region is almost reduced to what looks like a money sign. This possibly, is a deliberate attempt to hint at the very costly hairstyle of the "Ibibio Girl". Maybe, it is because, it is often said that "Beta soup, na money kill am" – the Pidgin English for "good quality soup is made with money". This popular saying means that things of quality cost more money. The warm, rich monochromatic colour choice in this piece, underscores the very truth and innocence of the young Ibibio Girl. At the end, what seems like



Fig. 11: Victor Ekpuk. Cockrow at Dawn (41/ 41), Lithograph on Paper.

Source: <http://www.motonfineart.com/artist/victor-ekpuk>

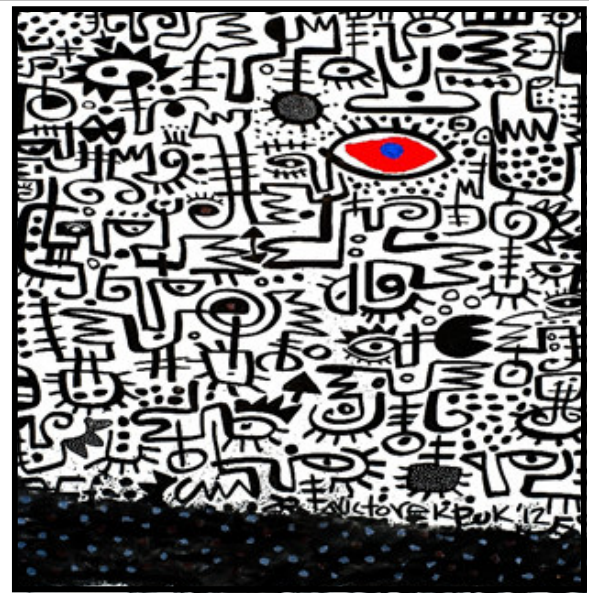


Fig. 12: Victor Ekpuk. Vigilante 2, Ink and Collage on Paper. 48 by 36. 2012.

Source: mortonfineart.wordpress.com/2013/09/13/Nigerian-artist-victor-ekpuk-solo-remembrance-current-muses-opens-at-mfa-in-dc

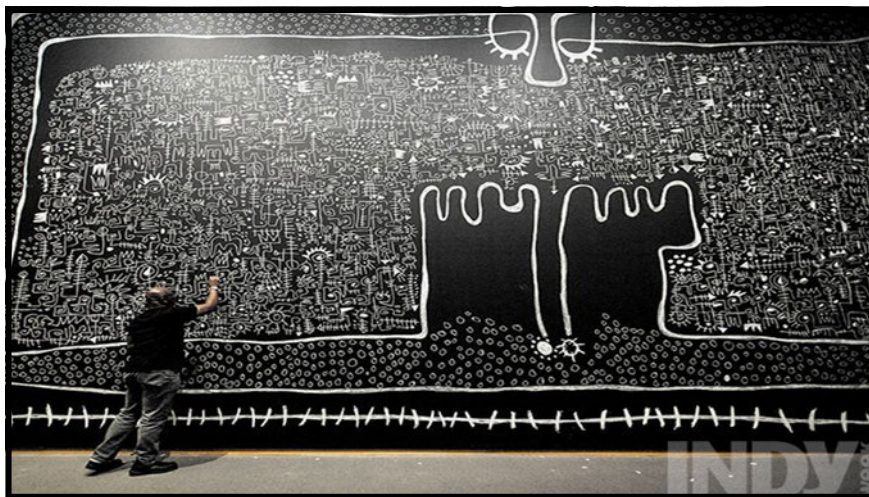


Fig. 13: Victor Ekpuk. Divine Mural at the North Carolina Museum.

Source: <http://www.motonfineart.com/artist/victor-ekpuk>

careless colourful visual truth has become a carefully conceived sociocultural truth. Through the mastery of media, technique and form, the visual artist has successfully projected to the international art space, the ancient, rich culture of the indigenous people of Cross River State (Figs 9-13).

Umana Nnochiri

Umana Nnochiri is known for her peculiar technique in textile production that is powered by abstract linearism of the *nsibidi* ideographs of Cross River State. Her notable works include the *Na Mgbere* range of textile Designs that create visual literacy by synthesising the *nsibidi* ideographs and the linear inscriptions from the famous Cross River State monoliths (Ecoma, 2016). Often titled in the Ejagham language, her works through media and technique mirror the origin, culture, religious and social significance of Cross River State. Umana's mobile arts, through costume, is coded with different narratives that seem to bridge the gap between the past, present and the future that often reflect socio-cultural and political human experience (Nnochiri, 2022).

Her series of works show her mastery of artistic media through the technical handling and manipulations of abstract forms and colour using linearism, geometrics and the complex nature of the *nsibidi* ideographs and the ancient monoliths of Cross River State. To create visual contrast in *One amongst the Emenghe* (Fig. 14), the artist used bright colours for the motifs as against the rich dark background of the base fabric. This method of rendition, to an extent, allowed the motifs to harmonize with the light blue coloration of the fabric towards the right hand side of the picture plane that seem to resonate the same content of motifs in their endless unfolding manner. The sudden beauty and elegance commanded by her posture is accentuated through the subtle flows of drapery in their meandering nature, to simply suggest the rich cultural heritage she represents in her royal, complex and stylistic costume. This is evidential through her colour choice, body adornment, sophisticated African head tie, as well as the mnemonics of the sacred *nsibidi* ideographs. In this context, the coded sacredness that is richly embedded in the *nsibidi* ideographs suddenly dissolves into beautiful contemporary mobile textile art that one can wear around. In other words, through creative improvisation, experimentation and production, her audiences through patronage have a chance to participate and, at the same time, promote the indigenous culture of Cross River State. In the final analysis, what was once hidden and coded in sacredness suddenly becomes public through Umana's arts (Figs. 15-18).

Conclusion



Fig. 14: Umana Nnochiri. One amongst the Emenghe Series of Textile Designs. Batik and Tie and Dye.
Source: New Orland Museum.



Fig. 15: Umana Nnochiri, 2016. Costume made for Calabar Carnival.
Source: New Orland Museum.

From the ancestral markings and geometrics seen in the Ikom monoliths, to the decorative surfaces of the ancient Calabar terracotta and the complex structure of the *Ebirambi* Masquerade costume of Agwagune, one finds the iconographic innuendos from which the rich works of Ekpuk and Umana derive not just their inspiration, but also the entirety of their being. In executing their unique range of works, each artist none-

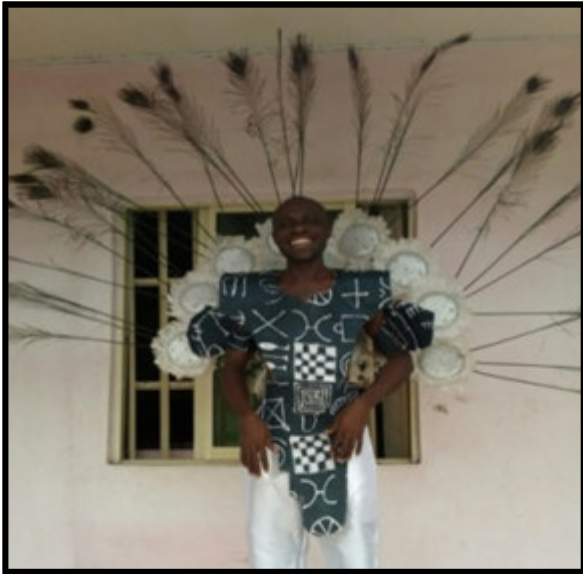


Fig. 16: Umana Nnochiri, 2016. Costume made for Calabar Carnival.

Source: New Orland Museum.



Fig. 17 Umana Nnochiri, 2016. Costume.

Source: New Orland Museum.



Fig. 18: Umana Nnochiri, 2016. Costume.

Source: New Orland Museum.

theless propagates as much as takes from the culture of Cross River State. However, while Ekpuk, appropriates and domesticates the structure and linearism of the *nsibidi* in his painting and drawings, Umana's concern is simply to resonate the linear inscriptions of the *nsibidi* into fabric decoration in textiles using the batik and tie and dye techniques respectively. Perhaps through patronage, the audiences of both artists will simply be able to continue to participate, consume and project the indigenous cultures of Cross River State.

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