

International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IJAH)

Bahir Dar- Ethiopia

Vol. 5(4), S/No 19, September, 2016: 136-148

ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print) ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijah.v5i4.11>

Ibie'ka (Ideographs): Developing Visual Signs for Expressing Contemporary Niger Delta in an Era of Petroleum Oil Exploitation

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Abstract

Visual signs (ideographs) are artistic codified expressions that promote social and cultural integration. They are normally based on popular conventions which over a period of time become generally accepted. In pre-western literate Africa, apart from oral communication, visual codes were employed within social groups. The impact of such codifications were usually entrenched in socio-religious and cultural rubrics. In modern society, much of such knowledge systems have become lost to western literate types. The adverse effect of such transference is noticeable in near total alienation of popular visual arts codifications and their appreciation. Persons now rely solely on the written text for communication. Whereas it is important that artistic visualizations should promote and preserve indigenous aesthetics wherein knowledge systems that promote such exists. It is from this perspective that Ibie'ka signs, inspired by rigorous studio explorations as expressed in the researcher's Niger Delta Visuals (NDV) present new possibilities for indigenous communication that espouses conditions of human challenges related to exploitative tendencies of oil exploration in the Niger delta. Based on studio exploratory approach, Ibie'ka signs add to a repertoire of new expressive sinology that aptly promotes indigenous knowledge system in contemporary Africa.

Key words: Ibie'ka, signs, petroleum oil, exploitation.

Introduction

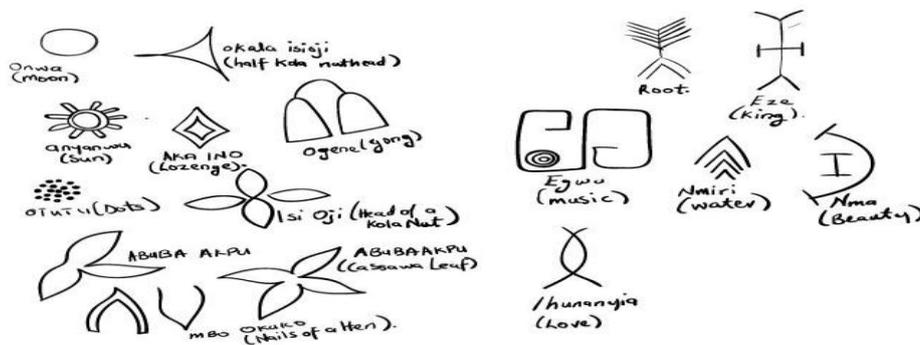
The volition to develop through studio exploration a sign language *Ibie'ka* for expressing the impact of petroleum oil exploitation the Niger delta from the visuals of Edewor Nelson (b. 1970) is apt. This arises from the need to make contemporary visual images which are expressive icons to become common place for impactful communication. It is unfortunate that much of today's artistic undertakings end up in galleries and private homes without much social interaction with the public. If art is a tool for communicating and generating social change, it is important that it is brought closer to the general public for whom it serves. The possibility of making such endeavour commonplace for communication therefore has both artistic and social advantages.

The Niger delta environment has continued to be in the news much for adverse social vises due to petroleum oil exploration, exploitation and maladministration of oil wealth within the local and national circles. Many artistic visuals have been generated to express the immediate and long-term socio-economic and political effects of oil exploitative assault on host communities. In his Ph.D. thesis, Bazunu (2012, p. 9), employed the term "Niger Delta Visuals" (NDV) to classify visuals that explore themes that relate oil issues in the region, and Edewor Nelson's sculptures and drawings constitute part of that research.

Edewor Nelson's expressive trajectory in formalizing NDVs dates to his Masters in Fine Arts (MFA) programme at the University of Benin, Benin City in 1997. Formal discourses through a wide range of media explorations in wood, mortar, bronze, rope weaving, aluminum plates, and other forms of fibre tapestries have developed a stylistic trend which is undeniably original. The style derives its formalism from the synthesis of *Ivri* traditional corpus of Isoko/ Urhobo cultures in Delta state and pipes synonymous with the petroleum industry. Overtime, the idea of creating a sign language from these have been taken into consideration as a veritable instrument to make the image type more commonplace.

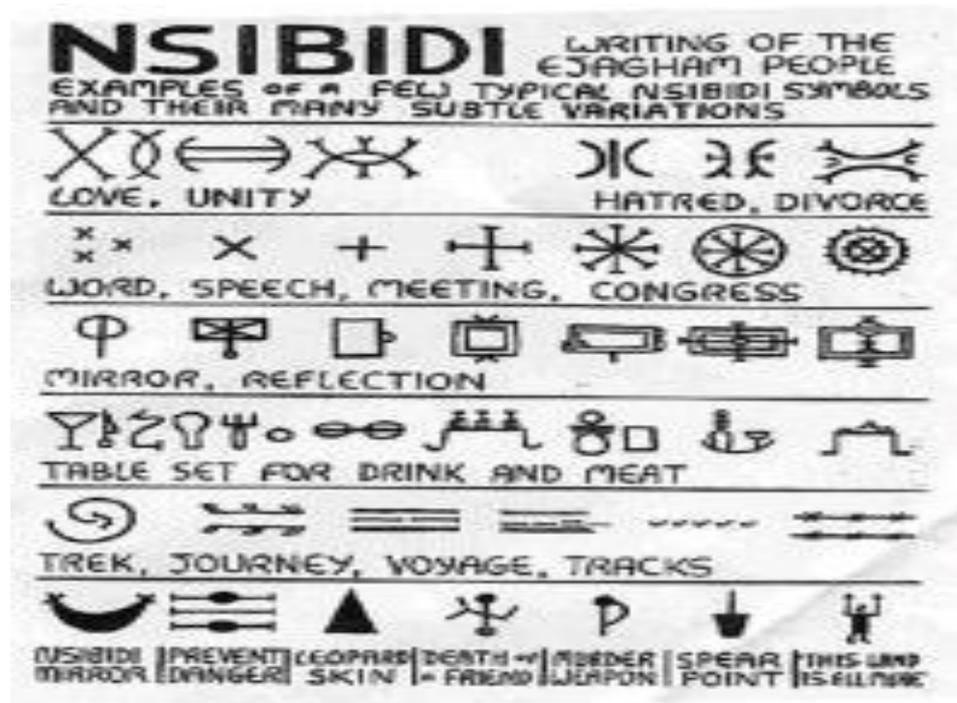
This studio initiative drew inspiration from practices associated with past African traditions where sign communications were popularly accepted and entrenched in social communication. The examples of Uli signs in Igbo land, Nsibidi of Ibibio (figs 1 and 2) as well as diversity of signs as related to many royal stools have been instructive. According to Udeani (2014), "Uli painting is a spontaneous process of exploration and experimentation. Inspiration is derived from diverse experiences and so are the motifs, which draw from forms in nature and issues in existence".

Fig. 1, Some Uli signs of Igbo culture.



Source. www.skillshare.com

Fig. 2, Insibidi signs of Ejoghan (Ekoi), Cross River state.



Source: <http://nsibiri.blogspot.jp/> | Wikipedia Nsibidi | Nsibidi writing system

Ibie'ka (Ideographs): Visuality and Communication

Ibie'ka is an Isoko compound word made up of *Ibie* "mark" and *Eka* "signs". Transliterating, *Ibie'ka* is simply "mark of sign". In this definition, a sign is a function of a visible mark which represents something else (idea). Its essence being to communicate ideas through a mental decoding system (cognitive) which is ignited as a result of previous experiences. The tripartite relationship of "object", "sign" and "interpretant" (Potts, 1992) resolved the complexities of the subject matter. At that, an object (mark), assumes the status of 'sign' based on the interpretant's meanings (symbolism). He further opined,

If we envisage a work of art as a sign or combination of signs, our understanding of its form no longer operates at a purely visual level, but also concerns the articulation of meaning (p. 18).

Furthermore, the sign could be seen from the perspective of "representation". Here the operations of what a mental image is, as against the actual, are very important (Summers 1992, p. 3). The actual image or mark could be viewed as the sign while the mental image of what it represents or means produces the deductive meaning. In seeking understanding for the sign therefore, Potts (1992, p. 28) further emphasized that signs or ideographs which are visual imaginative attributes are not only mediated but in a large part activated by cultural conventions.

A peep at pre-western literate Africa, presents a society in which communication was transmitted through oral and encoded visual signs through ceremonial ritual practices and ceremonies. Most mask traditions were employed as symbols with instructive purposes during initiation or performances and ceremonies. Examples abound from ancient Africa till now. The Egyptian hieroglyphic writings were visual syllables with effective instrumentality for communications developed from ideograms and phonograms. The pictures (ideographs) employed were developed as portals to ideas of thought entrenched in their cultural conventions. In a hieroglyphic writing for example, the hieroglyph of walking legs indicated motion, while a hawk represented swift things (Adams 1999, p. 82). In pre-colonial Nigeria, Nsibidi of Cross Rivers and Uli of Ibo cultures cultural conventions which were domesticated as signs with codified meanings within the communities that produced them. Emphasizing sign language in African traditional communication, Des (1987) identified the following,

...numerous traditional forms of communication in Nigeria's old Calabar province. ...They can be broadly divided into eleven classes, namely: (i) Idiophones (ii) Membranophones (iii) Aerophone (iv) Symbolography (v) Signals (vi) Signs (vii) Objectifies (viii) Colour Schemes (ix) Music (x) Extra-mundane communication (xi) Symbolic displays (p. 91).

For the purpose of this study, symbology and signs becomes more appropriate for Ibie'ka signs which according to him are defined thus

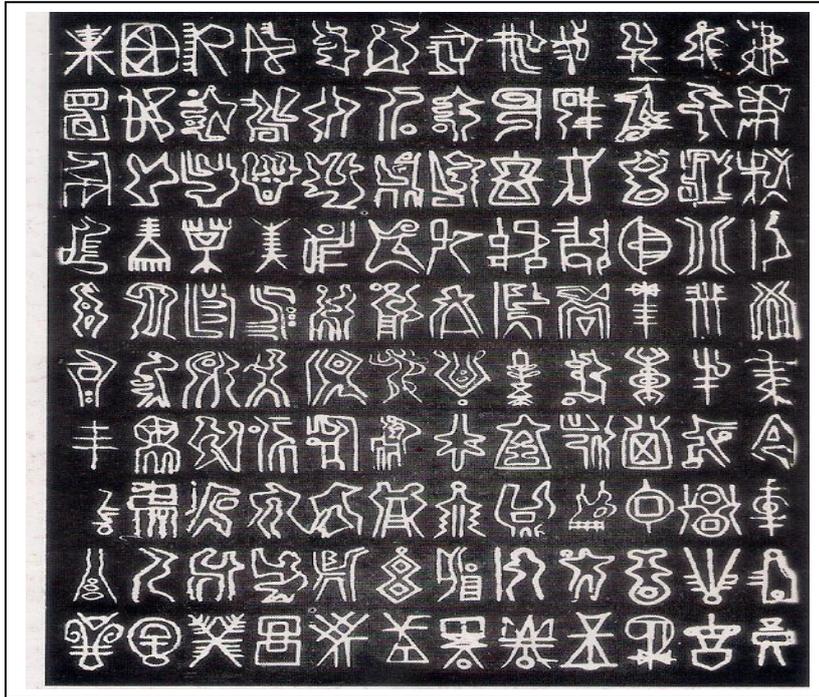
Symbology: ...symbolic writing or representation. [whereby] Communication takes place when an encoder uses graphic representations to convey a message which is understood within the context of a known social event and an accompanying verbal message. It is a descriptive representational device for conveying meaning. Signs: Marks which are meaningful, or objects or symbols used to represent something are signs (p. 92).

Masquerade traditions in Africa provided certain communicative intentions for social health. The Yoruba Gelede masquerades are very iconic in communicating cultural values that emphasizes womanhood (Drewal, 1974). In Urhobo culture, Odokuma (2009, p. 23), identified the concept of *Urhoboglyphics*. Using the wooded female figurine, the author asserts that certain symbolic canons in Urhobo figurines infer salient meanings that can succinctly deduced from the images.

In modern day Nigerian art practice, many artists have resorted to the use of signs and symbols derived from their cultures or elsewhere as such suits the meaning of their works. Popular amongst these are Uche Okeke, El Anatsui and Bruce Onobrakpeya. Others are Tayo Adenaike, Obiora Udechukwu, Moyo Okediji, Olu Oguibe, Kunle Adeyemi, Ndidi Dike and a host of other younger generation artists. Such coinages as Ulism and Onaism are popular signatures. In this matrix, it is only Bruce Onobrakpeya who has deliberately developed a set of sign alphabets from an artistic perspective (Fig 3) which he calls in Urhobo language as *Ibiebe* (letters).

Bruce's signs and ideographs developed in 1983-84 are intended to express some Urhobo cultural conventions. His signs are highly abstracted with some similarity to Arabic lettering stylistics. There seem to be an overweighed interest of the artist on form rather than conventions that bear commonplace meanings. This makes them quite difficult to decode by commonsense. Being that as it may, Bruce has continued to use the signs in his creative exploits. Reacting on this attempt, Singletary (2006, p. 2), stated that in African contemporary art scene, Bruce's signs can be viewed as a bridge that now links the North-South divide of the Sahara Desert in the use of codifications and signs.

Fig 3: Bruce Onobrakpeya, *Ibiebe* Alphabets and Ideograms, 1983-4.



Source: Bruce Onobrakpeya: *Ibiebe Alphabet and Ideograms*

Niger Delta Tale of Woes: A Prelude to Ibie'ka

The Niger Delta in the Nigerian Polity over the years has assumed three inclinations. First, Niger delta refers to the South-South geo-political zone. Secondly, it the petroleum oil rich region of the country which accounts for over eighty percent of the nation's gross earnings. Thirdly, it connotes exploitation, neglect and deprivation (Edewor, 1999). The subsequent militancy with the dreaded Niger Delta Avengers on the prowl is one of such responses to the continued lack of government's willpower to develop the region even though it produces so much to the nation's coffers.

It is well articulated that since 1956 when oil was first discovered at Oloibi, the petroleum oil exploitation in the region has been the cause of the down-slide loss of indigenous commerce the region. Coupled with international oil politics, federal government insensitivity and moribund legislative tenets, the common man in host communities have continued to suffer grievous deprivation and exploitation. Different Environmentalists, Geographers, Sociologists and others align with Onaibre's (1999, p.12) position that, "the public view on the corporation (oil companies) depicts that it

depletes more than it creates, corrodes more than it enhances, exploits more than it invests and reaps less than it sows”.

It is important to note that due to the long years of assault of continued unwholesome and unprofessional conducts of prospecting oil companies through gas flaring, oil spillages and general environmental pollution (land, water and air), vandalized pipes leading to fire inferno crisis where thousands have lost their lives have inadvertently altered the psyche of the human community especially the youths in the host communities who continue to take up arms over the years to protest and fight for the control of their oil resource. Today’s Niger Delta Avengers NDA militant group is a serious case to consider.

Ibie’ka (Ideographs) as Derived from Edewor Nelson’s Visuals

As mentioned earlier, formal and stylistic conventions developed in Edewor Nelson’s sculptures, (figs 4 & 5), are inspired by Isoko /Urhobo *Ivri* sculpture tradition (fig. 6) in synthesis with petroleum oil pipes (fig. 7) to conceptualize abstract human formalisms that expresses socio-political and economic deprivation due to oil exploitation. It is this convention that has also been adopted for the *Ibie’ka* signs to further enhance and develop formal iconic signs for the regions oil discourse.

Fig. 4: Edewor Nelson,
Death Has Struck My Egg,
Mortar, 140cm ht. 1998



Source: Edewor Nelson

Fig. 5: Edewor Nelson
Cry the Beloved Country II,
Bronze, 142cm ht. 2011



Source: Edewor Nelson

Fig 6: Ivri Corpus



Source: www.pinterest.com

Fig 7, Oil Installation Pipes and Valves



Source: www.researchgate.net

Composing Ibie'ka Signs

Bearing in mind the objective of these signs, different fabrics of the Niger delta environment in relation to oil exploitation were taken into cognizance. They include the human society and its socialization, physical environment in relation to petroleum oil exploitation, and the effects /prevalent vices resulting from unwholesome oil exploitative activities. Elements for these signs as are drawn from *Ivri* corpus imageries (scarifications and structural attributes), oil pipeline forms which appear as lines or shaded block forms and established conventions from natural representations.

A. The Human Society and Socialization Signs

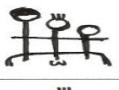
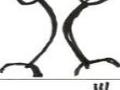
In this section foundation is laid on definition imagery types especially of the human form that will ultimately set the tone for other explorations. Here, a design with circle on top of a structured crossed (+) pipe and bow at its extended bellow present a typical human figure. Gender is further distinguished with a (w) sign between the bows as symbolic of female genital.

Another character of repute is the typical Ivri three (III) scarification sign atop the circular head form. This is to identify indignity of the figure character. In cases where the three line signs do not appear, it represents possibly a non-Delta indigene. There is however another social stratification as identified in the Niger Delta oil related crisis which is made up of oil expatriates that operates in the region. This section is society in these signs is represented with site helmet bearing head form. The helmet appears as a shaded half circular form which also represents the head with extended line in one direction. Helmet is usually used by expatriate's explorers at oil rigs. However, when the helmet also bears the three-lines sign, it relates an oil worker that hails from the region.

There are other stratifications that have to do with social status (Chiefs or traditional rulers) or demography of age distribution. The Chieftain sign is represented with hat over a large circle with three accentuated dots at the bottom part of the loop. The sign for a child is a bloated head figure, whereas an elderly person appears as a curved shaped form. Youth and middle age is represented with the standard figures as presented earlier.

Under this section, human relationship types are codified such as family union, agreement and friendship, disagreement and discrepancy and divorce. Other signs representing obesity, hunger, anguish, resource control agitations, surrender, prayer, fear and community/ oil industry consultations. These signs are represented in the table bearing figs 8-31.

Figs (8-31). 8. Man (indigene), 9. Woman (indigene), 10. Man (non-Deltan), 11. Oil staff expatriate, 12. Oil staff-Deltan, 13. Chief, 14. King, 15. United family, 16. United family (husband is oil staff expatriate), 17. Good working relationship between oil expatriate with indigene, 18, disagreement between both, 19. Divorce between husband and wife, 20. Sitting akimbo (frustration), 21. Old woman, 22. Old man, 23. An infant, 24. Obesity (greed), 25. Hunger, 26. Anguish, 27. Resource control agitation, 28. Surrender, 29. Prayer, 30. Fear, 31.

			
8	9	10	11
			
12	13	14	15
			
16	17	18	19
			
20	21	22	23
			
24	25	26	27
			
28	29	30	31

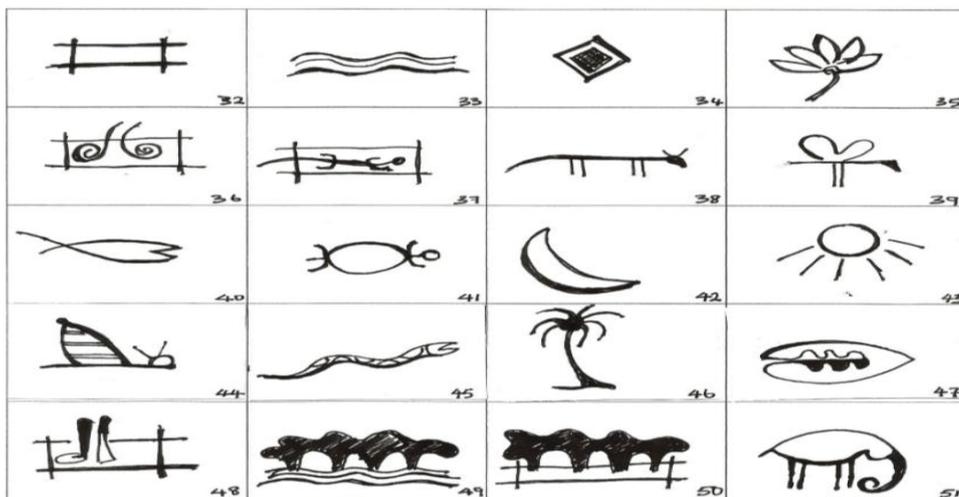
Source: Edewor Nelson

B. Physical Environment Signs

In this section, the natural and physical geographical constituent of the Niger delta environment and habitat has been considered in the sign creation. Most of the choices of the animals chosen symbolize certain human qualities or associated with them. In these signs, land is represented with a rectangular table which four lines run beyond the boundaries whereas three horizontal wavy lines represent the waters and rivers that crisscross the Niger Delta region. Another significant resource associated with the Niger Delta is its petroleum crude oil. This has been represented with a diamond shape with an inner black shape in same contours. This associate the economic wealth attributed to the “black gold”.

It is important to note that in this section; most of the signs relied on established conventions within the Niger delta worldview for their creation. These are shown in the wavy lines associated with flowing streams, flat surface relating land, half sphere for the moon, sun with its rays, vegetation with leaves, commerce associated with cowries, tortoise for wisdom, wall-gecko for habitation, cutlass and hoe for local enterprise, earthworm for want of ease, etcetera.

Figs 32. Land, 33. Stream, 34. Crude oil, 35. Leaf (lurch vegetation), 36. Earthworm (easy life), 37. Wall gecko (habitation), 38. Goat (domestic animal), 39. Bird (flight), 40. Fish (local commerce), 41. Tortoise (wisdom), 42. Moon (season), 43. Sun (light), 44. Snail (slow speed or being retarded), 45. Snake (poison), 46. Oil Palm tree (life and growth), 47. Cowry (wealth), 48, cutlass and hoe (labour and youthful strength), 49. Mangrove (creek hideout), 50. Forest (land hideout), 51. Elephant (power and authority).



Source: Edewor Nelson

C. Oil Exploitation, its Effects and Politicization

The effects of petroleum exploitation in the region include water pollution that result to loss of aquatic life, degradation of the flora and fauna, communal clashes due to land disputes, acid rains, arson, untold hardship due to loss of local economy, militancy and kidnapping which has led to series of national government's politicization of the issues.

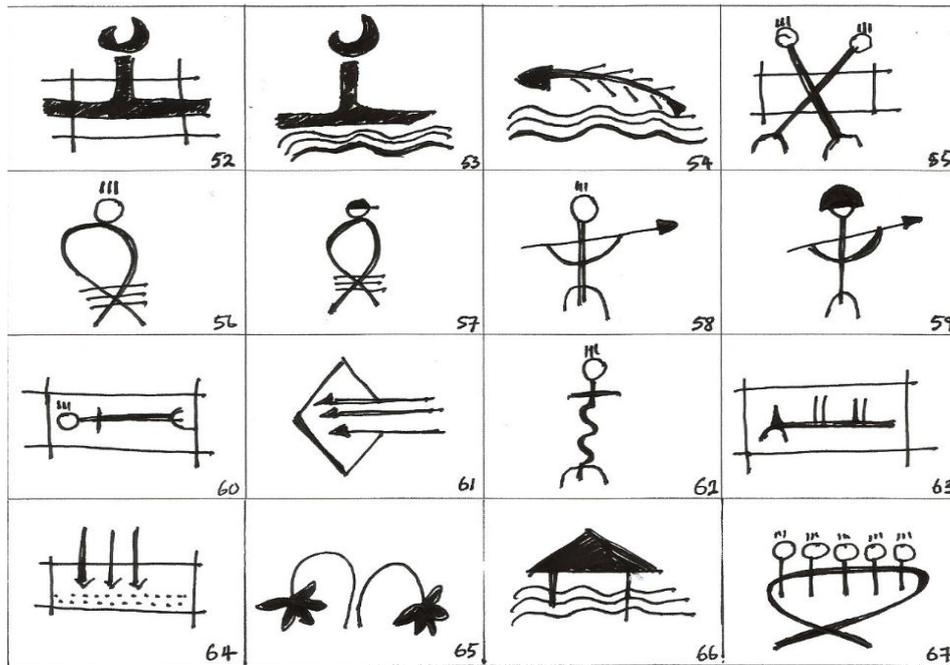
In representing this aspect, different signs have been developed. First to represent petroleum oil deposit, a diamond shape has been employed. The diamond is dotted black in the middle to infer black clouded essence of crude oil. Pollution of the water ways and land is represented with fish skeleton over water, while pollution on the land is replicated with two serrated leaves curved in two opposing directions. Communal clashes are represented with the composition of two symbolic figures (as above) crossed over a land symbol. Variations may also differ here depending on those involved in the dispute. This can be ascertained by the sign above the ball that forms the head.

Acid rains as experienced in the region as pollutant is represented with three arrows pointed downwards into a land shape filled with dots. Hardship due to loss of economy is a major social hazard in the region. This is represented with signs that provide human conventions related to anguish: convoluting curves expressing deprivation and despair.

Also kidnapping associated with militancy is rife in the region. The sign that captures this essence is a sign with a round head from which contorted crossbow form flows downward with lines that represent ropes at the intersection point. On the issue of identification as explained above, any personae and gender under this condition can be identified through the signage atop the head form.

Militancy and firearms struggle is represented with figure carrying an arrow representing warfare. Another variation of that is the helmet wearing figure representing the military or other government security agencies at arms against the militants. The signs also express hunger, arson, death of men and livestock, weathered vegetation, flooding and mass unemployment. These are some of the unwholesome effects of petroleum oil exploitation in the region.

Figs (52-67). 52. Gas flaring on land, 53. Gas flaring off shore, 54. Water pollution, 55. Communal clash over land, 56. Kidnap victim of an indigene, 57. Kidnap of expatriate, 58. Militant, 59. Military, 60. Human death in host communities, 61. Attack on oil installations, 62. Hunger, 63. Death of domestic animals, 64. Acid rains, 65. Weathered vegetation, 66. Flooded community, 67. Mass unemployment.



Source: Edewor Nelson

Conclusion

Ideograph enriches visual communication as its contribution in that direction affirms a visual culture and response that dismantles boundaries between low and high art. This studio effort which delved into creating ideographs within the scope of communicating the Niger delta oil exploitation saga definitely expands the frontiers of knowledge on the subject matter while providing a common ground for enriching the artistic culture and at the same time drawing attention to salient issues of national interest.

The credence of this endeavor situates on the fact that imagery like proverbs make long-lasting impact on the psyche and presence of all strata of human society (literate and illiterate). These *Ibie'ka* provides that avenue. Through this research, it is hoped that the public becomes more integrated with the efforts of visual artists in terms of understanding and participation for the common interest of social integration and development. This will further nurture a better aesthetic value and appreciation as it brings art closer to the people while enriching indigenous knowledge systems in contemporary Africa.

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