

FLEXIBILITY OF APPROACH IN ART PRACTICE AS RESEARCH: HINTS IN OMABE BASED SCULPTURE INSTALLATIONS

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Abstract

Art practice as research is gradually gaining acceptance in art academia around the world. Recently, a number of art institutions (universities) in Europe, America, Asia, and Africa, introduced doctorate programme in studio areas, in which art practice is considered as research. As a new programme however, standard approach and nomenclatures of research in the art practice are still being nourished. Reflecting on a doctoral research, in which sculpture forms in installation were extracted from the contemporary conceptions of *Omabe* tradition to enhance practice, this paper demonstrates that method and approach to research in art practice is flexible. In the research, multiple instruments of participatory observation, interaction, reflection, and conception simulation, were adopted in extracting conceptions of *Omabe* tradition visually and refractive gaze approach, was developed and used, in realizing the conceptual forms in sculpture installation. The installations elicited public discourse on the tradition and a language of practice stood out from them.

Introduction

Contemporary trends in art academia tend to be shifting in favour of multiple or collaborative approaches, where cultural perceptions and personal-professional issues are artistically investigated, thereby, strengthening indigenous knowledge-based concepts in art practice and research. According to Sullivan (2010), studio art experiences are inclusive of the full range of ideas and images that inform individual, social, and cultural actions; and constitute a form of research. The worrisome issue however, is that the notion of art practice as an academic research is new and its method is not quite clear. Gray and Malins (1993) note that, there is yet no universally accepted approach to research, within art and design; so, the traditions within other disciplines should not be ignored. They emphasize that new procedure for art-based research must be based on both a cultural, contextual and specific response to the felt need, and the nature of practice. According to Nimkulrat (2007), the issue of methodology in art and design research, especially in practice-led research, has been a topic of scholarly debate in European countries for some reasonable length of time and still, there is no standard package of methods for a novice researcher to follow. She infers that research in art and design involves multiple methods, primarily visual, originating from practice or adapted from other research paradigms. The crux of the matter now, is that, artistic research method should be creative and multiple in approach. McNiff (2008) informs that, within contemporary artistic training, there is an assumption that one studies various traditions (methodology), but then, builds upon them to

create a new and personal method of inquiry because, the art of the art-based researcher, extends to the creation of a process of inquiry. Rust and Wilson (2001) reiterate that:

...we believe that there is potential for creative individuals in design to make distinctive and significant contributions to research and that there is an opportunity for such people to develop both new methods of inquiry and appropriate forms of communication which may be more direct and accessible than a conventional text.

In this article, the creative nature and multiple approach dispositions of artistic research method is presented for the increased understanding and appreciation of practice-based/led research, and indigenous knowledge-based professionalism, presently being practiced and growing in art academia around the world, but new in Nigeria. The article is an extract from an ongoing doctoral research in Department of Fine Arts, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, Nigeria.

Religion and other cultural practices, proved to be the instrument used to bind people together, under common values and for peaceful co-existence. There has always been a natural desire in man, to seek explanations for cosmic mysteries, beyond language and human understanding; resulting to usage of symbolic visual language (art, especially sculpture) independent of time and place. This symbolic visual language enables people to respect the world beyond human ego and believe in a world diffused with spiritual qualities (Whitehand, 2009). Traditional societies, especially in Africa, used symbolic visual language to harmonize perceptions and thus, held people of opposing characteristics - men and women, young and old, rich and the poor, tall and short, beautiful and ugly – together, in mutual respect for one another, for thousands of years.

Among the Nsukka-Igbo in Enugu State, Southeastern Nigeria, *Omabe* was the central visual symbol upon which the people's philosophy and life forces were expressed. *Omabe* is a culture, centered on the belief on the physical presence of the ancestral spirits, in form of deity. The *Omabe* deity was represented or given visible form by masquerades, initiated persons and adopted plant and animal objects. It was characterized by periodic festive presentation and performance, for entertainment and chastisement of the people. Aniakor (1978) notes that, *Omabe* was used as agent of social control, as its forces were harnessed, to check all the excesses of the people. Under its influence, people of all classes were controlled as they shared common belief and common fears.



Figure 1: (A); *Oriokpa* and (B); *Ujam* types of *Omabe*, Picture, Michael Widjaja, Retrieved Online, 22/5/2012, <http://www.igboguide.org/HT-chapter9.htm>

Today however, Western civilizations, including scientific and technological developments, have influenced different social orientations that have adversely affected the appreciation of myths and traditional inclinations. These developments have rather brought about logic and empirical reasoning, in the contemporary social relationship, including the conception, formation and appreciation of sculptures. This way, the natural forces that kept people together, under common values, have disappeared whereas, individualism fueled by capitalism, in which many people are isolated in their own societal development, thrive (Whitehand, 2009). Religious intolerance has thus lingered, wreaking havoc that is fast dehumanizing all facets of social relation. In Nsukka area, clashes, resulting from interpretations of *Omabe* masquerading, have done serious damage to the society. Interpretation of *Omabe* myths has shifted from communal understanding to divergent, parochial views; and this has brought about serious disagreements, which have resulted to destruction of lives and property, and almost complete restriction of its physical appearance in public places. Thus, the collective conception (understanding) of *Omabe* got lost and the people disagreed in terms of its form appreciation.

Masquerading is generally an important part of the culture and tradition of the Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria. From an aesthetic point of view, according to Enekwe (1987), masquerading is a synthesis of many art forms, including costuming, impersonation, miming, sculpture, music, dance, poetry, movement, dialogue and painting. As the author observes, in masking, the active potentiality of the image is made possible through motion. The nature of the masquerades, varies however, depending on the place of origin, within Igbo-land.

Although the name Nsukka connotes three levels of socio-political organization of people, (a community, a local government area, and a cultural zone), it is in this broadest sense, as a socio-cultural and political zone, with an estimated population of 1,377,001 people, in the 2006 census (Ugwu, 2012), that it is reflected in this research. It is important to point out that the nature of the tradition was that there is *Omabe* and there is *Odo*, which split the communities into two groups: *Omabe* operating communities (Igbo *Omabe*) and *Odo* operating communities (Igbo *Odo*). As Aniakor (1978) points out, the difference between the two was only in the maintenance of the philosophy of duality and balance. To the people, it was *Omabe* and *Odo* in the balance of the spiritual realm. *Omabe* was associated with masculinity and his festivals were marked on Eke/Orie market-days whereas *Odo* was inclined to femininity and her festivals were marked on Aho/Nkwo market-days. *Omabe* and *Odo* were performed in alternating years and that was why the Lunar-calendar (Ahua), in the area, was only two: Ahua *Omabe* and Ahua *Odo*. The interval in the performance of *Omabe* or *Odo*, however, varied from one community to another. *Omabe* is therefore, used interchangeably with *Odo*, in this research, to refer to the same ancestral spirits that shaped the cultural practice of the Nsukka-Igbo.

In its original state, *Omabe* manifested in different ways and on different objects, performing basically two functions: law enforcement (Figure 1A) and entertainment (Figure 1B) and there were masquerades, initiated persons, as well as, possessed animal and plant objects, used as special agents, for each purpose. All the objects on which *Omabe* manifested its power were feared and respected by everybody in the society, including women and children. *Omabe* tradition lived, grew, and solely enjoyed the worship and submission of Nsukka people, until the early 20th century, when Christianity came in. At the advent of Christianity, the monopolistic control and command of *Omabe* was challenged and threatened, bringing about variety of spiritual governance and religion to Nsukka people. Converts were made from *Omabe*

worshippers to Christianity and the struggle for dominance between the two forces started. The two spiritual groups (Christianity and *Omabe*) engaged each other in both spiritual and physical wars, employing all sorts of strategies to subdue, dominate, and even oust the other, and this had continued even to the period of this research with a lot of transformations. Dinjos (2012) notes: "..., as the modern masquerade got even more careless and ruthless, society began to lose her respect and admiration for it. There have been cases where an angered community set a masquerade on fire". Even though Western civilization is exerting such overwhelming influence on the people, mobilization of the masses for general reconciliation or total acculturation has not been possible in Nsukka.

Interestingly, in postmodernist installations, elements of burning social issues, especially eroding cultural practices of this kind, are utilized in artistic design, to elicit public discourse, for possible reconciliation. Specifically, installation is a kind of conceptual art style, in which, familiar objects are idealistically put in strange ways or designated as arts, to extract reaction from the observer (McEvilley, 1999). The aim of this study was to create sculpture installations from the contemporary conceptual interpretations of *Omabe* masquerade mythology in Nsukka. Significantly, the outcome would instigate conception diffusion in *Omabe* tradition and relocate the researcher's sculpture practice, from individually appreciated formalism, to the internationally valued indigenous knowledge-based professionalism (idealism).

Review of related literature and works revealed that: Material culture harbours forms of its user and although significant attributes of *Omabe* have been lost to Christianity, form revealing remnants of it could be found via its architecture, shrine, groove, costume and musical instruments, and its general characteristic features are traceable in the life experiences and inclinations of the descendants of its adherents; Postmodernist installation could accommodate *Omabe* tradition because it is flexible and well related to African Traditional Religious observances; requiring reflective approach; And artists, who worked on installation and traditional concepts and forms, adopted physicalism and subjectivism in their approaches, leaving a gap of inclusion in the practice.

The Creative Process

For the general purpose of this research, qualitative research methodology was adopted and the research design was specifically, based on practice-based research technique. The nature of the research problem: developing out of practice, involving re-examination of eroding tradition through interactive approach, and the expected outcome not being hypothetical, justified the adoption of the practice-based, tinted with elements of practice-led research. Practice-based/led research has greater advantage over all other types of research in studio-based aesthetic inquiry, because, apart from allowing subjective expression of creativity (Gray and Malins, 1993), it is also flexible and recognizes artistic products as complete research data upon which new knowledge could be based. Being a visual research, images and pictures of some of the objects and processes of work are also presented as data. The flexibility nature of practice-based method enabled adaptation of multiple instruments and application of elements of quantification that diluted subjectivity as desired in this research. So, sets of statistical data, of which some were personally reflected by the researcher and others generated from the people, were artistically constituted, to form tangible evidence upon which, studio exploration was

based. According to Nimkulrat (2007), practice-based research method enables an artist undergo series of creative stages, involving reflection and application.

Information (Form) Generation

The procedure of work in this research could be classified into two: Data Generation and Development of Form. Methods or techniques used in generating information that shaped the outcome of this research are multiple. Apart from the revelations in review of related literature and artworks, data used in framing of form, were generated from: Reflection, on popular statements (musical lyrical, oratory and song) of and about *Omabe*; Participatory Observation, of *Omabe* activities; Interaction, with the key players; Conception Simulation, involving metaphoric description of *Omabe* tradition by the natives; and Previous Collections and Documentation, of unusual developments around *Omabe* tradition. According to David Hume's philosophy of reality (Dukor, 1994), "memory as well as observation is required to justify our knowledge of constant conjunction between invents".

Reflection on Personal Experience

The role of practitioner-researcher, characteristic of art practice as research (Sullivan 2010), was given pre-eminence, at all stages of this research. Popular sayings of and about *Omabe*, were recalled and reflected upon, in the development of form in this research. Particularly, an encounter with *Omabe*'s idiomatic expression (rhetoric), musical lyrics, and praise song, were adapted. Although personal experience seems contradictory, conveying a sensation of bias, as a part of the indigenous people, whose conceptions were considered for form development, prior experience of the artist-researcher, based on recurring actions, known to the people in question, was considered essential in practice-led research. It served as a catalyst for appropriate stimulation of reactions for conception generation and form analysis in this research. According to World Bank Education Programme (2015), personal experience is necessary for proper coordination of indigenous knowledge-based practice.

Specifically, *Omabe*'s oratory or idiomatic expression (rhetoric), considered is included a particular encounter, in the middle of night, sometime in 1982, in which *Udele Idenyi* (a kind of *Ishi-maa*) described itself as shaman. Similarly, form was reflected from *Omabe*'s regular musical lyrics. For instance, the degree of carefulness in the life style, under the influence of the tradition, was visible in a particular *Omabe* musical lyric, which says that: *keke akpoleh ogwubengala neh keke obh angh aluakwa eshi ahua na- abo*; (meaning literally), any thorn which pierces chameleon, that thorn cannot regain its freshness in two years. It implies that life style under *Omabe* tradition is as careful as that of chameleon and anything that injures it must be at extreme state of disrepair.

Finally, a reflection on the praise song, used in 1986 by Umu-oka village group, in reporting the overwhelming performance of its masquerade, in a public display, generated forms considered in this research. In it, *Omabe* was described as *Enyimenyi* (Elephant on a mountain), *Okpe* ([male] Eagle on an iroko), *Ube* (Favourite fruit-plant that yielded bountifully), and *Mhnyi ukwu* (Heavy rain that penetrates hollows).

Participatory Observation

Being familiar with the operations of the subjects of this research, the researcher, in most cases, observed issues directly, as they occurred. On many occasions in the course of this research, grooves, shrines and houses of Omabe, were entered, enabling the researcher partake in its musicals, dance, and incantation; where he observed, and assimilated things. Through this way, the contemporary operations and operating icons of Omabe, were accessed and compared with the relics of the ancient order. Apart from direct assimilation of information, in this participatory observation, asking questions and receiving response flowed freely, in mutual trust and sense of solidarity. Identification of most manifestation items and transformation elements of the Omabe, in this research, came through this means.

Specifically, Omabe/Odo musicals and festivals were encountered in Ohodo, Opi, Ohebe, Ochima, Obollo-Afor, Leeke-Isi-Uzo, Enugwu-Ezike, Orba, Agbamere-Eharumona, Ishiakpu-Nsukka, Obukpa and Lejja. Photographing of the musical performance was allowed only in few of these places as shown in figures 2 and 3.



Figure 2: Encounter with Omabe Musical, Oje n'ikpogwu Feast, Umuile, Idi-Opi, 2012



Figure 3: Encounter with Omabe Musical, Oje n'ikpogwu Feast, Amojó – Ohodo, 2012

Interaction

Interaction is a kind of empathetic interview where the interviewer shares fully in the world of the interviewed. In this case, the interviewer first familiarizes with or encounters the state of the interviewed, to the extent that the interviewed sees the interviewer or the researcher, as part and parcel of him, in his course of action. Then, on the existence of such rapport, the interviewer simply interacts with the interviewed on the subject matter. Interaction interview is related to fictional interview and exploration recommended (McNiff, 2008) for art-based research.

Interaction was used extensively, in this research, to generate information from chief priest and agents of Omabe as well as church leaders and victims of the cultural clash. Through these people and this technique, detailed information on Omabe was gathered, its secret icons were accessed and ambiguities on its dispositions clarified as shown below and in figure 4:



Figure 4: Interaction Session with Onyishi, Ugwu-eg Egbo, after a Performance, Umueszikenwoke–Ohodo, 2012

Forms of Omabe: The following are names of different forms in which entertainment type of Omabe (Masquerade) appeared: Ujamh-Ezugwoke, Okokoro, Koprh, Maa-Er-ro, Ne-maa, Mgbedike, and Okpacha. Others include Ugele, Edi Ogbene, Agbeji, Egbe Ochealh, Otunju, Oshagenyi, Ijiri, Adada, Obodike, Ojoba, Ekwe-Idi, Uroko, Ugwuoke Edi, Onye-kwur-onye, and Uhuaho. For better appreciation of the forms, some of the masquerades are described. Ujamh-Ezugwoke/Ugele/Echaricha (figure 5): The principal form of Omabe masquerade is the Ujamh-Ezugwoke, simply called Ujamh, Echaricha or Ugele in some quarters. Ujamh is believed to be expressing the concept of mystified beauty, divine radiance, ideal probity and immense wealth. Covering the entire body are silver coated buttons skillfully knitted unto the fabric which is sewn to give the masker a tight fitting from the chest to the knees. Together, these buttons reflect the

sun's radiance. As Nwoko (1989) observes, the content of the Ugele masquerade derives from the meaning attributed to its elemental forms. For example, the sun-burst motifs of the eye slits which represent the rays of the sun are believed to depict power. Forms of Mgbedike, and Koprh of entertainment Omabe are shown in Figure 6.



Figure 5: Ujamh/Echaricha/Ugele, Entertainment Masquerade, Omabe



Figure 6: Mgbedike and Koprh, Entertainment Masquerade, Omabe

Law-Enforcement Types of Omabe: The following are the names of the forms in which the law-enforcement types of Omabe appear: Oriokpa, Akatakpa, Ogiri, Ekewo, Ogede, Ekpere-Maa, Udele-Idenyi, Ewurh, Okpe, Nkele, Utobo, Uzoka-anyinya, Ozigbo, and Udele-Ugwu. Some of these Masquerades are also referred to as Ishi Omabe (Head of Omabe). They walk around, physically masked, frightening and adjudicating on matters. Many of them are also regarded as deities. Oriokpa/Egbe-ochel (meaning: the kite that guards the land) is the most popular law enforcement type of Omabe. Its masquerade (figure 1A), is the chief overseer of the land during and after the Omabe season; though its operations are underground in a none-Omabe year. Agbeji/Udele (Ishi-Maa) plays both entertainment and law-enforcement roles in the Omabe

hierarchy. Like the Ugele, Agbeji is associated with prestige, peace, elegance and wealth. Although Ishi-maa (figure 7) entertains with great rhetoric and proverbial power, it also acts as law enforcement agent, settling dispute and reconciling people to ancestral protection.



Figure 7: Utobo, Ozigbo, and Udele-Idenyi, Kinds of Ishi-Maa/Ishi-Omabe

Manifestations of Omabe: The following deities, persons, animals, plants and objects are believed to possess special attributes in which Omabe manifests its super-natural powers. Through them, Omabe keeps watch and record of the activities of the people whether or not it is physically present. Omabe in forms of deities with masquerades, some of which have been mentioned earlier, are: Idenyi-Upata, Ezugwu-Oshimiri, Ojiyi, Ehurh, Egbiyi, Adaro, Iyiuzu, Adada, Api, Ebonyi, Uhere, Onumonu, Echeg, Eke, Aki-Nkwome, Ne M-rh-Igbo/Ndushi Alh-Igbo, and Numu-Nkwome.

Humans: Onyishi/Attama (the Eldest Man/the Chief Priest), Oha/Ozo/Oszioko (Titled-man), Ogbh-ishi/agh/atu/esfu (Killer of human-enemy/lion/buffalo/cow), Dibia (Native Doctor/Shaman), Diochi (Palm-wine Tapper), Ogbanukwu (Omabe Escort), Umh-Ada (Titled Women), Oyima (Woman-Friend of Omabe), and Ogbhyehmeh/Ogbh-ngwa (Woman Spoiler of Enemy Camp/War Implement).

Animals: Ude-g-de (Spider/cob-web), Uriom/Ekwa Okh-ko (day-old chick/egg, used as ransom for collective sin), Awu (Reddish bird), Udele (Vulture), Nkele (a kind of bird), Ugo (Eagle), Egbe (a kind of Hawk), Ebhle (Ram), Agh (Lion) Eddi (Hyena), Attu (Buffalo), Ebbi (Porcupine), and Eke (Python).

Plants: Oji (kola-nut), Uroko/Ngwu/Inyi/Uvurh/Ube/Udara/Achi (kinds of Iroko Tree, figure 8), and Omh-Nkwu (virgin palm leaf).

Objects: Ite (earthen pot for ablution), Ojjih (Metallic Rattle-staff), Oho/Arua/Okpaneka/Odu-Atu (Arc of Covenant), Ekpototo (Traditionally Woven Fabric), Ola/Echi/Okachodu (Currency in form of metallic bell and rod), Obele/Agbhgba (Gourd/Calabash ware), Umma/Obejirh (machete), and Egedu/Okoko (Metallic Hat). Ezhza (Broom), Nth (Firewood Ash), Nzu (Whitish Clay), and Odo (Extract of Cam-Wood) are also used.

Omabe Musical Instruments: Ogele/Ivomh (Gong), Ekwe (Wooden Saxophone), Kporokpototo (a kind of Drum made with Bamboo), Abia/Okpiyi/Ogwe-alh (Wooden Drum), Nmgbrigba/Errorh (Special Bell), Ntti (Special Stick for beating Ekwe and Drum), Osu/Oph (Flute), and Osha.



Figure 8: Ancient Log Preserved as Enya (Eye of) Omabe, Otoibo Amojó-Ohodo, 2012

People's Names (in Relation to Omabe Tradition): Another area of life in which the traditional Nsukka people showed great attachment and form definitions to Omabe was in their names. The following are some of Omabe related names borne by the people. Male Names: Ugwoke, Otaka, Duhu, Maama, Udele, Nkpume, Odo, Okpe, Attama, Onyishi, Asogwa, Omabe-Oha, Eze, Esedu, Edoga, Ozo, Ikpogwu, Ogbobe, Ezema, Okwo, Ugwu, Al, Ogbuu, Ugwuanyi, Didi-Ugwu, Ngwu, Egbe, Omeke, Omeye, Onaa, Ogiri, Ajogwu, and Eze-Ugwu. Female Names: Oyima, Idenyi, Ogbhyehmeh, Ogbhebo, Odobo, Owushi, Iyeanyi, Onoyima, Arua, Onyugwu, Obnoko, Ogbhngwa, Lolo, Oyerh, Nshinaa, and Oyinna. Adherence to these names in the present day Nsukka ideology was also checked in this research, name being an expression of people's perceptions, interpretations of which, revealed forms used in this research.

Changes (Transformations) in Identity

Omabe is believed, by the informants, to have undergone the following noticeable transformations in its identity: Originally, Omabe was completely formless, communicating only super-naturally, through the chief priest. At a stage in its struggle with the Western civilization, however, Omabe shifted from manifesting on sacred objects and animals, in which it stayed to observe the affairs of the people quietly, to appearing physically in human structure, masked in some of those revered objects, like virgin palm leaf (Omh-Nkwu) and calabash (Aghhgba), to take direct action. At another stage, it started appearing in more human structures, putting on cloth made of special fabric used for divinations (Ekpoto), to enable it move faster and match action with action, in punishing offenders. These changes continued, until Omabe started dressing in every type of cloth, wearing shorts, putting on shoe, wrist watch and using machete, handset, and automatic rifle. Necklaces of Christian Cross and Catholic Chaplet are even becoming integral parts of Omabe's costume (figure 9).

Operationally, Omabe started acting in strange ways: speaking foreign (English) Language, emerging from personal residential houses and enclaves other than its official house or groove, touching women, driving or being driven in vehicle, and fighting private instead of communal cases. Omabe's secrets became divulged by its agents and initiates; women and *Ogbodu* started touching Omabe's manifestation instruments, speaking language and singing song of Omabe. At a stage, people, including women, started confronting Omabe to a fight,

beating it up, stripping it naked publicly, and getting it arrested and locked up in police station, owing to one abomination or the other, committed by it. Thus, Omabe's paraphernalia were abandoned in many locations

On the cause of the unbecoming attributes of Omabe, Ugwueg (2012) points out that Christianity carried away the people and destroyed Omabe. That most of the people who tended to come back to give support to Omabe were no more "pure minded"; rather, they were products of adulterated philosophy, who lacked the strength of unwavering loyalty, which Omabe tradition thrived upon. Thus, they committed all sorts of atrocities in the name of Omabe. According to him, Omabe is esoteric and restricts its understanding to only a chased few. Masses only trailed it with fear, respect and amazement because there must be fear for respect to be sustained. He notes that Christianity was feared and respected, similarly, at its inception in Nsukka area, but in its struggle for dominance, it opened up Omabe and itself (their secrets) to all classes of people and as such, both lost the very pillar on which value attachment rests; fear. As Omabe did not accept such exposition, its nucleus died and Ogbodu (uninformed) carried its molts (Ukpokoro) to the Church, "a hiding place, with which identity is shaded, for abomination to be swallowed with chilled water". Thieves, murders, and adulterers who ran away from the anger of the spirits (Omabe), he clarifies, are now hiding in the Church, attacking the very tradition which they are obliged to.

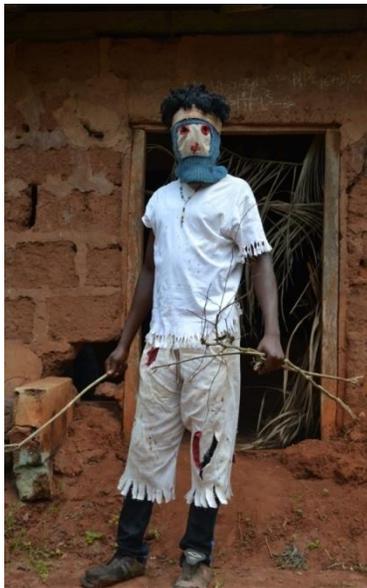


Figure 9: Oriokpa Dressed in Ordinary Cloth, Shoe and Catholic Chaplet, Obukpa, 2012

In a show of dual assimilation and loyalty, many Christians in this area bear two names; first name and second name, apart from their surnames. And in it, traditional (Omabe related) name, usually represented with the initial letter, is blended with foreign (Christian) name to give the bearer a sense of belonging to the two religions, so as to secure protection in a matter of uncertainty, whoever hold-sway; an indication that forms of Omabe are in the churches operated in the area. Ironically, belief in the powers of fetish objects like Charm and Witchcraft is very high in this area, to the extent that accusations and counter-accusations and mutual suspicions of

its attack, involving Christians, frequently come up. Here, most deaths and misfortunes are associated to diabolic or fetish means and as such, there is no remarkable distinction between Christians and Traditionalists in seeking protection from the under-cover forces; thereby making sorcery (Ivu Amuma) a lucrative business. It is mainly the suspicion that Omabe possesses harmful demonic and diabolic powers rather than mere avoidance of idol worship that appears to be responsible for its snub by the people. Offiah and Okike (2009) observe that, “now, you can hardly see any young man or woman who will like to be identified as an idol (Odo) worshipper. This does not mean that all the youth in Ikolo community are Christians, but because it is the order of the day, many are pretending to be Christians, just to belong.”

Justifying some of these mixed practices, in Christianity, Ogara (2002), a Reverend Father with St Theresa’s Cathedral, Nsukka, points out that, the church in Nsukka area is responding to the call by the central leadership of the Catholic Church, for “inculturated evangelization.” The author points out that the Catholic Church noted that the gospel message of Jesus Christ is for all peoples in all cultures and adopted inculturation technique in its evangelization mission because Christ becoming a Jew among the Jews is the greatest example all missionaries should follow if they want their works to bear the desired fruits. According to the priest, there are many naturally good and true elements in every culture which church missions are encouraged to adopt into the church; thus valuable elements in Nsukka Culture are being effectively “inculturated” in churches in the area. Blending of opposing forms, therefore, became inevitable in this research.

In light of this development, all Nsukka natives, men and women, Christians and Traditionalists, were considered in their dispositions as ‘Omabe’ in this research. So, people’s name, architectural, agricultural, religious, and musical implements and performances as well as their clothing, became reference points from where many forms and materials were generated.

Conception Simulation

At a stage in the development of this research, individual perception was needed in making statements that could bear reliable testimony of their positions on the subject matter. So, the researcher was faced with the task of extracting the perceptions and conceptions of the general Nsukka people on Omabe tradition. Some specialists in related fields were therefore, consulted and collaborated with, as research assistants, to consolidate on their experiences and proximity to distant areas of the research. Using the Department of Fine and Applied Arts of the University of Nigeria Nsukka (where one of the research assistants lectures sculpture) as a meeting ground, the group met severally and arrived at the decisions: that people’s true attitude and perception could be better accessed on a kind of conception simulation, involving real icon of Omabe; and that the simulation should first be conducted together, by the group, at Nsukka Urban, before each member conducts same in his own location or side of the region. For the simulation, Kporokpoto Omabe (the most common musical instrument of Omabe) and Ojjih Omabe (metallic rattle-staff of authority of Omabe), were selected on the belief that, they bore enough symbolic elements that could evoke Omabe sensation instantly, in the mind of the people, on sighting them. So, Kporokpoto Omabe and Ojjih Omabe were gathered from shrines and houses of Omabe (some were bought in local market) and used for the conception simulation.

In the conception simulation exercise, people were first asked to identify the object, its use and the user (see figure 10). Those people who identified the objects correctly as symbolic icons of Omabe were asked to metaphorically describe it according to their perception or understanding of the whole of its tradition. According to Baxter et al (2008), metaphoric interpretation leads to conceptual blending, needed in understanding of qualitative research.



Figure 10: Women Describing Omabe through Kporokpoto, Umu-owula, Ogbozara-Opi

At the end of the conception simulation, the results were collated and it was discovered that the form-descriptions fell into two basic groups: horrific form descriptions and glorious form-descriptions. Of all the responses (collected from communities, covering all the local government areas under Nsukka), most of them described Omabe and its tradition dreadfully or horrifically as Devil, Serpent, Viper, Vulture, Hawk and Hungry Lion; another group described it deceptively as Thief, Monkey, Onye Awuwo (Deceiver), Chameleon, and Spider; some described Omabe tradition rather humorously as Amag-ama (Strange Thing), Ad-nmeta (Insatiable), Ad-ngbala (Unavoidable), Enwe-Ogbo (No Comparison), and Omego-nteli (Uncompromising); whereas a few of them described it gloriously as Eze-nna (Caring father), Nna-nna or Nna-m Ochie (Forefather), Ne-Mh-rh Oha (Mother of all), Enyanwu la-g-de Ike-gwu Esfusfe (When the Sun goes, Day becomes weak) and Onyi-monyi (Satisfier of the people).

These form definitions agreed with the ones contained in the collections/documentation, musical lyrics, oratory, praise songs, and names (of Omabe and human beings) captured earlier; in which Omabe was portrayed as shaman, grandfather, chameleon, eagle, elephant, favourite-fruit-tree, terror, deceiver, co-protector, and saviour. Names like Ugwuanyi (our hill), Ogbh-yeh-meh (dispenser of crowd), Odo-abuchi (Odo/Omabe is not a god), Uroko (Iroko) and Kpakpande (star) also portrayed Omabe in glorious and horrific forms. Generally, the implication of this outcome is that, Omabe's form definition, as it is today, is a battleground between its protagonists who reflect its past glory (yesterday) and its antagonists who project that the science prone future (tomorrow) has no place for it; each, trying to commandeer it to its side.

Previous Collection and Documentation

Collection and documentation of elements of the subject matter – installation performance and Omabe tradition - at any occasion they occurred (physically and intuitively), since they started occupying the central position of the researcher's creative eye, was one of the

major ways information was generated in this research. This documentation came in form of sketches, notes, audio tapes, video tapes, photographs, and collection of physical objects of Omabe tradition and its activities. In the studio exploration of the subject matter, these reserved documents were consulted and they provided a lot of information that guided the work.

Documentation in this research however, is continuous. Photographic documentation of stages in the developmental process of the studio exploration was also made and used in the evaluation and interpretation of the research outcome. According to Nimkulrat (2007), documentation helps the practitioner-researcher play the researcher's role and look back at the preceding artistic process. Specifically, plate I conveys a development, in 1988, when a woman was forced to operate musical instrument of Omabe and she portrayed it as a terror. She cried, "I beat you to death in Jesus name". Plate I shows an occurrence, in 1990, where an Onyishi (chief priest) that abandoned Omabe tradition and joined Christianity, publicly warned Omabe to stay out of his life, portraying it as a deceiver and a huge disappointment. He told Omabe; "Stop calling me! I am no more with you. My name is no longer Ugwuoke; I am now Emmanuel". Plate II reflects an occasion, in 1998, in which some of the elders of Umuezikenwoke village of Ohodo, came out publicly and wept the demise of Omabe tradition in the dominance of Christianity; portraying Omabe as their saviour. They are extracts from the researcher's diary.

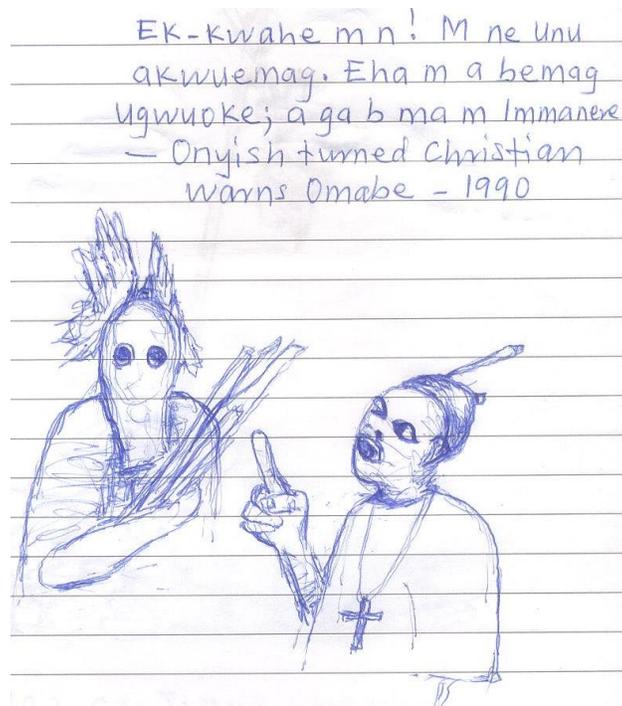


Plate I: Omabe's Encounter with an Onyish-Turned-Christian, Orh-k-uwelh, Ohodo, Sketch, 1990, Researcher's Diary

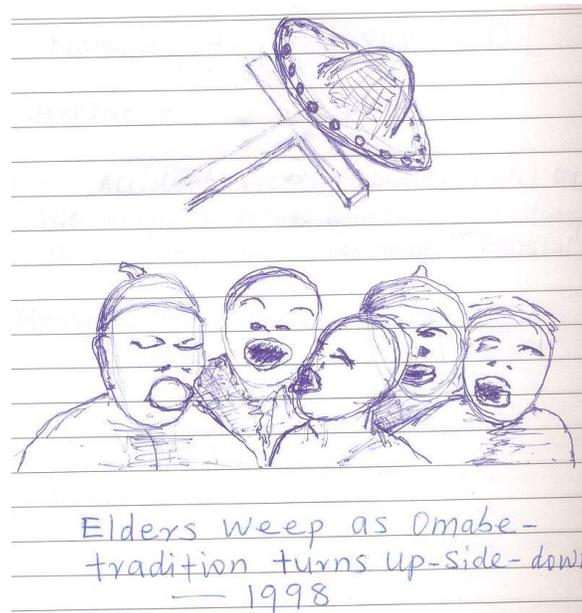


Plate II: Elders Weep as Omabe Tradition Disintegrates, Umuezikenwoke, Ohodo, Sketch, 1998, Researcher's Diary

Through all the methods and processes stated above, contemporary perceptions and conceptions of Omabe tradition in the area were encountered, internalized, and physical forms of it conceived. Thus, the researcher moved into the studio, manifesting Omabe intuitively, in diverse ways.

Development of Form (Studio Exploration)

Some of the icons of Omabe tradition, were gathered as stated above, and conveyed from Nsukka area to the postgraduate sculpture studio of the Department of Fine Arts of Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, where the actual artistic exploration started. In addition, some other complementary materials were sourced from Zaria and other cities of Northern Nigeria. This section presents therefore, the approaches followed in exploring research data (forms) out of the materials.

On the realization that today (present situation) was a battleground between yesterday (the protagonists, who wished to drag its culture to the glorious past) and tomorrow (the antagonists, who wished to accelerate its culture into more-science-promising future) in Omabe's form definition; and as each side's description was based on concrete evidence; and in line with the concepts of anarchical representation in readymade designation, as adopted in this research, refractive gaze studio approach was designed to see what they saw and engage them in new environment, via installation. Thus, three approaches, or techniques of work tagged as "Reviewing Today; Predicting Yesterday; and Invoking Tomorrow", were adopted in the exploration approach.

Refractive gaze studio research approach entails looking at an issue the opposite and unusual way, just like the refracted light. It was coined out of the electromagnetic theory of physics. Solymar and Walsh (1993) describe refractive light as wave reflected back; change in direction which occurs when a wave of energy such as light passes from one medium to another

of a different density. It was formulated and adopted for the artistic exploration, by the researcher, not only because, understanding of Omabe's pronouncements and performances thus takes one out of his usual ways of thinking but also because, deconstructive reflections of this nature facilitates creative expression based on assorted metaphysical experiences. According to Nsukka proverb, he who does not act like an animal cannot catch or experience the animal.

"Reviewing Today" is a kind of "refractive gaze", related to direct object exploration. As if today had already been concluded and its result hidden in the ashes of yesterday, contemporary perceptions of Omabe were reflected and refracted directly out of its operating icons, gathered for the research (see figure 11). According to Broad's philosophy of objective reality (Dukor 1994), "knowledge can be acquired by perception of a physical object by means of sensations which the object produces in the mind ...". Being influenced by the contemporary perceptions, the researcher encountered (perceived) elements of the wishes and metaphoric descriptions of the people on the pieces of the gathered Omabe's manifestation objects or icons. Then, the forms identified in each object were defined. Definition of form in this particular exercise was in form of extending further an already distressed part or by placement style. This process of form definition was facilitated by burning, cutting, stitching and attachment.



Figure 11: Defining Perceived Forms in Kporokpoto, Sculpture Studio, ABU, Zaria, 2013

Still on this direct refractive exploration technique, colours symbolizing the contemporary perceptions of Omabe were gazed out directly on some of the gathered Omabe icons. Then the colours were defined out of each object and aesthetic quality of a colour-defined object was further enhanced by placement style.

Works produced in this direct exploration represent artistic understanding of the contemporary perceptions of Omabe tradition in Nsukka-Igbo. It shows both the type and magnitude of wishes the people presently have, for the tradition. According to Eisner (2008), art expresses not only the feelings and emotions, which the artist has, but also those which he empathetically knows. It set the stage for further reflections that characterized the exploration of forms in this research. "Predicting Yesterday" is a kind of indirect material exploration, based on

positive wishes. It was carried out by gagging the forms of Omabe from eyes of those who wished it came back to life. In this approach, those metaphoric interpretations and representations, as in the perception simulation, which symbolized the good wish for Omabe tradition were isolated, meditated upon and refracted in creation of forms. The process made some of the perceived forms to be reflected and refracted imaginarily out of certain objects, under certain arrangements. The desired materials were thereafter sourced out and the conceived forms manipulated.

In the manipulation proper, the positive perceptions and wishes for Omabe, which bordered on the return to the good olden days (yesterday) and the possibilities of its survival in the contemporary heterogeneous society were considered. This process amounted to visualizing yesterday, not in today, but in tomorrow, because as things stand today, restoring the dignity of Omabe appears impossible; but who knows, if the table would turn around by tomorrow? Although almost all the materials used in this particular exploration were related to Omabe objects, they were sourced from the studio environments and the open market places.

“Invoking Tomorrow” is, on the other hand, a kind of multidimensional exploration, based on negative wishes. Just like in “Predicting Yesterday”, exploration technique of “Invoking Tomorrow” involves manipulation of the contemporary perceptions of Omabe on conceived materials. “Invoking Tomorrow” however, is a direct opposite of “Predicting Yesterday” in refractive gaze. It implies gagging of Omabe forms from the eyes of those who wished it did not see tomorrow. According to David Hume, in Dukor (1994), claims about causes and effects do not merely apply to the present and the remembered past, they also apply to the remote past and to the distant future.

In this approach, metaphoric interpretations and other representations, as in the perception simulation, considered to be negative, were exhumed and absorbed or internalized in the studio. The exercise generated conceptions of accelerated tomorrow; wishes that yesterday never was, and fear of elements of yesterday in today. In the perceived forms, fear of certain danger in Omabe tradition of yesterday, and uncertainty in the greater exclusion of Omabe as today unfolds its content, became apparent. In the expressions, those who do not wish it well, tend to skyrocket Omabe on a suicide mission, to a point of no return. In this perception, Omabe acquired so many strange elements that shifted its identity to the point where virtually “anything” could be regarded as it.



Figure 12: Refraction of Omabe in Stick, Open Compound Space, Ohodo, the Researcher

The approach to work, in this concept, is embedded in telling anything that “you too can be Omabe” and in letting it be so, without considering ethical issues of any kind, as is evident in the present cultural transformation. Conceived forms were manipulated onto objects (figure 12), animals, trees and persons that had less or completely no relationship with Omabe tradition. Manipulation of materials, in this work approach, was mainly by designation and composition; tying, stitching and placing related and unrelated objects together, in unusual positions. Through all these refractive-gaze manipulative techniques, forms conceived from the encounter or interactions as reported earlier, were internalized, gazed out and given physical representation in household objects, trees, animals and humans. The sequence or process of work was: Assimilation, in which a given conceptual interpretation or form-description was pondered and internalized; Reflection, in which the physical characteristics of the form is considered; and Refraction, in which that very form is related to features of a contrasting interpretation (Assimilation—Reflection---Refraction).

Work Contextualization

Application of the works produced, to meet the dictates of other stated research objectives, especially eliciting of public discourse, on Omabe tradition and developing personal artistic language, was pursued through two different approaches: strategic public location, and tree masquerading.

Strategic Public Location

One of the objectives of this research is to reach the stake holders, with the contemporary conceptions of Omabe tradition in Nsukka area, for possible communal appreciation and reconciliation. In order to elicit public discourse on the subject matter (Omabe tradition), major installations were site-specifically executed in open spaces beside major roads in some high human populated communities in Nsukka and Samaru campus of Ahmadu Bello University,

Zaria. People interacted directly with the works, without inhibition. Figure 13 shows an installation being executed in Nsukka area and people interacting with it.

This public execution and display, provided useful opportunities, for reflection and contextualization of work, in an Omabe natural operating environment. Works were realized in consideration of the natural surroundings and reactions of the observers. Executing a work entailed several attempts at placing, gauging and discarding of parts until a configuration harmonized with the agora in realization of the desired form. So, execution of each piece of installation in its location, took two to three weeks of continuous work, split into four stages: putting up a configuration tentatively; watching and listening to people's conversation and reactions on the work; reflecting over the work in relation to the initial ideas that informed it, observations made and the surrounding; and finally, making adjustment.

It is important to point out here that there is no finishing in the kind of work executed in this research. A work was suggestively made; just to help each observer reflect a particular side of Omabe and intrinsically complement it, with his or her own details. This way, different images of Omabe would tend to emerge from a particular work; depending on the angle, time and mood it was observed and as such, adjustment was continuous in all the works. Consequently, it also became important that pursuance of this particular objective be continuous with adjustment and fresh execution of Omabe-based installation, in locations and occasions, that could facilitate proper reflection of various stories and images surrounding it. This continuous adjustment could not however, halt development of texts in this research, as preceding exercises, yielded tangible results that satisfied the requirements of the set-objective and aided dissertation compilation.



Figure 13: An Installation being Executed in a Field Near Catholic Church, Ohebe-dim

Tree Masquerading

As work in this research is also geared towards developing personal artistic language, tree relationship with Omabe forms and tradition, as perceived in the stages of studio experimentation stated above, was exploited further and marked as future artistic direction. Of all the materials used in this research, tree was considered the most accessible. It was seen to be available in almost every cultural setting; occupying public spaces and assuming forms unconsciously expressed or rather inflicted by the spiritual, human, animal and weather forces. Among organic forms, tree tends to bear the most reliable testimony of a culture unconsciously expressed on its

forms. Thus, different images of a people's philosophy and cultural practices like Omabe, are perceivable in their trees; living or dead. As reported earlier, trees are among the objects from which Omabe generated information about people's conduct, during the time of his absence in the land of the living.

Omabe forms and other characteristics, assimilated in this research, were therefore, gazed out directly in trees. A tree on which valid Omabe features were spotted was designated as Omabe-based sculpture installation. In the designation proper, major obstructions were eliminated and little Omabe manifesting objects were introduced on some areas to facilitate communal recognition and appreciation of the Omabe-masquerade features inherent in a tree. Elimination of obstructing part of a tree was mainly by tentative tying, in order not to harm or injure it. In some cases however, sketches were first made to consider relationship of a particular Omabe manifestation object, in a given location or part of a tree. In this case, a suitable tree and specific Omabe manifesting objects were searched out, for physical realization of a drawing, considered interesting and valid, in the achievement of the desired goal. Plates III and IV are sketch considerations of Omabe features and attributes in different dispositions of tree:



Plate III: Tree and Ground as Omabe-based Installation, Sketch, 2014

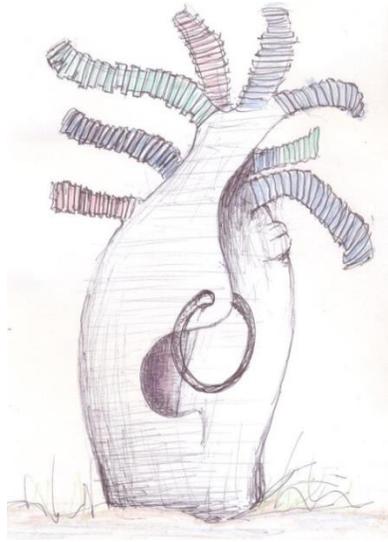


Plate IV: Tree-Branch Formation as Omabe-based Installation, Sketch, 2014

Conclusion

Although the development of the physical sculpture installations is still on-going, it has already yielded positive results in which public discourse on Omabe tradition is instigated and tree-masquerading emerges as language or direction of practice. Flexibility of approach in art practice as research makes the outcome creative and inclusive.

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