

Where Gods and Mortals Meet:



Continuity and Renewal in Urhobo Art

DATE:

18th May, 2005

VENUE:

National Museum, Lagos

MAA

INTERNATIONAL
MUSEUM OF AFRICAN ART

Museum for African Art

INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION



NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR MUSEUMS AND MONUMENTS

CCA LAGOS LIBRARY

05 APR 2011

SIGNATURE



Where Gods and Mortals Meet
Continuity and Renewal in Urhobo Arts

Where Gods and Mortals Meet ...

Curator

Dr. M.O. Hambolu

Project Director

Dr. Perkins Foss

Project Coordinators

Anum R. N (Mrs)

Grace A. Ifeadi

Editor

L. K. Kingi

Graphics

Edet J. Okon

Exhibition Design/Installation

Collins Onuosa

Akintunde Seriki

Curators

Oriyomi P. Otuka

Wilson Onime

Cynthia Iruobe

Cecilia Orji

Nkechi Asi

Sharon Nworgu

Computer

Ojei Leonard

Audio-Visual

Festus Umukoro

Foreword

This exhibition is the first to focus exclusively on the art of the Urhobo people of Delta State. The display has numerous components, including a selection of large banners, artworks from the historical period from around the year 1800 to today, comprised of monumental wood figures, household shrines, as well as images of extraordinary multimedia masquerades. Also displayed are historical photographs of exalted Urhobo dignitaries, including Chief T. E. A. Salubi and Chief Ughwanogo, the Okparuku of Orogun.

Also included are contemporary works by Dr. Bruce Onobrakpeya, an Urhobo by birth and one of Africa's foremost artists whose style draws upon historical Urhobo art as its key source of inspiration.

The full exhibition, which included eighty artworks and accompanying explanatory material—was produced by and exhibited initially at the Museum for African Art, New York, prior to traveling to The Museum of Art, Columbia, South Carolina, and subsequently to the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington, DC.

The National Museum, Lagos has also mounted a parallel exhibition of selected objects from its collection of Urhobo art. Included is a wood statue of a seated male that, at 240cm tall, is among the largest human images in all of African art.

The exhibition also includes excerpts from seven films, shot between 1971 and 2002, of Urhobo performance and cultural activity.

Where Gods and Mortals Meet addresses the effort to preserve culture, religion and art in the face of modernization. This exhibition introduces the spiritual beliefs, social and economic life, and the role that art plays among the Urhobo. As rural economies suffered an inevitable decline, the custom of maintaining traditional Urhobo art has experienced a parallel atrophy. The resultant deterioration of Urhobo culture has prompted a response among many Urhobo who want to celebrate and preserve their traditions for future generations.

Dr. M. O. Hambolu
Curator
National Museum, Lagos

Acknowledgements

The National Museum, Lagos must give full acknowledgement to the Director General of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments Dr. Omotosho Eluyemi, for giving permission to stage the exhibition with a parallel exhibition of high grade objects from the Commission's collection to complement it.

Our gratitude also goes to Professor G. G. Darah, Chief O. J. A. Idudu, Professor Bruce Onobrakpeya, Mr. Obaro Osah, Mr. Ekpo Udoma, Mrs. Mercy Oparavero and the entire staff of National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Onikan, Lagos. The staff of the Documentation, Exhibition, Security, Education, Conservation and Graphics units were particularly resourceful. Mrs I. I. Kola-George the AD [ES&T] with Mrs S.N. Jalani, Femi Esuola and Ernest Ewekey facilitated the organisation of the programme.

The Museum for African Art would like to thank many individuals including: Elsie McCabe (President), Frank Herreman (former Director of Exhibitions), Jerome Vogel (Deputy Director), Laurie Ann Farrell (Curator), Giacomo Mirabella (Registrar), Margo Donaldson (Senior Grants Administrator).

'Debo Sangsanya of FK:G2, Ikeja designed the banners with great detail and energy; they were printed with care by Ru-Marong of Apapa.

This project is the fruit of 40 years of involvement in Urhobo culture by Professor Perkins Foss. It has also benefited from assistance by many Urhobo artists, scholars, traditional chiefs and elders.

Research in Urhobo-land benefited by the assistance of numerous individuals whose names are listed in the full catalogue. Especially helpful has been Chief William Okorotete, of Effurun and Orho-Agbarho.

The Nigerian Museum has been supported by public spirited individuals and corporate organisations especially from Urhobo land to whom we are all grateful.

The Banner Exhibition has been generously funded by a grant from the Institute of International Education.

Contents

Foreward	iv
Acknowledgement	v
Introduction	8
Festival for Water Spirits	9
Umalokun	10
Opha 1	12
Agbogidi	13
Ovughere	14
Ohwoorhu	18
Owedjebo	19
Iphri	20
Aramuewmu	21
Images	26
Opha 2	28

Introduction

Where Gods and Mortals Meet: *Continuity and Renewal in Urhobo Art*

This is the first major exhibition devoted to the art and culture of the Urhobo people of the Niger River Delta in Nigeria.

This exhibition presents Urhobo art through its religion, society, history and aesthetics. Also included is art by celebrated contemporary artist Bruce Onobrakpeya. His prints interpret traditions from a present-day perspective.

This project is the fruit of 40 years of involvement in Urhobo culture by Professor Perkins Foss. It has also benefited from assistance by many Urhobo artists, scholars, traditional chiefs and elders. Urhobo are seen both as a trained western scholar sees them and also as they see themselves, from both outside and inside.

This Banner Exhibition is derived from an exhibition that has been seen in New York City; Columbia, South Carolina; and at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington, DC. It was created and produced by the Museum for African Art, New York, with major funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC.

The accompanying catalogue was edited by Perkins Foss with a Foreword by Peter Ekeh and Contributions by G. G. Darah, Michael Y. Nabofa, Tanure Ojaide, Bruce Onobrakpeya, John Picton; and Appendices by Ikpama Aduri and Chief Oghenegweke.

Festivals for water spirits



Festivals for water spirits

The most widespread Urhobo water spirit, Ohworhu, originated in the waters to the south, among the Ijo. On festival days, villages stage elaborate performances that feature complex structures made of raffia and split bamboo. The largest one is called *eranvwe gangan*, the Big Animal.

Shown here is such a structure from Ewreni, in 1972.

Edjo n'ame rhe ("Spirits come from water")

Urhobo proverb, Ewreni 1972

Sakpregidi Children

Boys dressed as *Sakpregidi*, "children of the fifth generation," on the occasion of the funeral of their great-great grandmother. These children wear the feathers, beads and colours of warriors (*Ogbu*), because they are said to have, metaphorically, been responsible for their elder's death. Such a belief comes from the Urhobo concept of destiny, which states that five generations of a family alive at the same time create an imbalance that is only resolved upon the passing of the eldest.

A common Urhobo prayer of blessing is, "May you live to have *Sakpregidi*."

Oto-Edo, Ughienvwe 1972



Boys dressed as *Sakpregidi*

Umalokun

Umalokun, a Water Spirit. This masquerade, performed on the Ughelli River, takes the form of a canoe carrying thirty paddlers and singers. This style originated among the neighbouring Itsekiri people, and was brought to Ughelli in the 1940s by Urhoho fishermen who had lived in Itsekiri country.

The term itself comes from the Itsekiri language: *Umale* (a spirit) and *Okun* are contracted into Olokun, the spirit of the rivers and the sea.

Ughelli 1971



Umalokun (Water Spirit)

Opha - 1



Opha (Urhobo Brides)

Opha: Urhobo Brides, Young ladies parade through town, in celebration of their coming-of-age. As part of a process that extends for many months, the girls wear rich coatings of red camwood dye (*isene* or *ohwa*.) They are surrounded by cheering family members.

Urhobo bridal customs have close connections to those of the neighbouring Ijo and Efik people.

Orughworun 1972

Agbogidi



Agbogidi

(A Study of Fertility Shrines)"

1972, by Bruce Onobrakpeya, Nigerian, b. 1932

Plastograph print, water colours. 53x78 cm.

Private Collection

Bruce Onobrakpeya has turned to Urhobo shrine imagery for inspiration in his own work. 'Agbogidi' developed out of visits in the 1970s to the northern Urhobo communities of Ogharefe and Idjerhe.

Ovughere



The shrine for the edjo Ovughere

The shrine for the edjo Ovughere, in Ovu Inland, normally stays closed. But on festival days, it is opened so all can see its contents. The interior has been freshly painted, and the statues have been given new white cloth wrappers.



Battle for Ovughere

On the same occasion, families in Ovu Inland stage a mock battle that represents the struggle that founder-hero Ovughere and his family endured while establishing the community.

Ovu Inland 1968

**These distinguished Urhobo leaders
took significant interest in Urhobo art and culture.**



***The Hon. Chief T. E. Adogbeji Salubi, shown here
reviewing members of the Ogbu (warrior) society in
his home community of Ovu Inland, Agbon.***

Ovu Inland, Agbon 1967

[photograph by Wilson P. Foss, father of Perkins Foss]



Chief Ughwanogo, the Okparuku of Orogun.

Chief Ughwanogo, the Okparuku of Orogun. At the time of the photograph, he was the Okpako-Ode (oldest living individual) of Urhobo. Next to him is his eldest son, and behind stand assorted family members.

Orogun 1966

Ohworhu



Mask for Ohworhu, a water spirit

It represents a beautiful young woman (*Omotokpokpo*), whose hair is worn in a pair of thin ascending tufts. This is one of a group of masks, called the "children-of-the-spirit" (*emedjo*) that dance in honour of Ohworhu.

Probably from Ewreni or environs.
Ht. 53cm.

Collection Corice Canton and Armand Arman, New York.

Owedjebo

This formidable statue depicts Owedjebo, the great fighter who, with the help of his family, settled the Agbon town of Eghwerhe. In typical fashion for Urhobo warriors, he holds a cutlass, facing upwards in his right hand, and a spear, facing downwards in his left. Also typical is the top hat, of a style that was worn by visiting Europeans of the time. Around his forehead just below the brim of his hat appears an accoutrement for warriors, called *ibi akon resi*, the teeth of a wild pig.

Eghwerhe 1967

Statue depicting Owedjebo,
the founder-hero of
Eghwerhe, Agbon.
Date: approximately 1825.
Ht. 210cm.



Iphri

An *iphri*, sculpture for male aggression, possibly carved by Dudukuregbe of Oviri-Ogor, in about 1850. In this massive figure, the beast below is surmounted by a family of four individuals: parents behind, and children in front.

Wood, pigment. Ht: 108cm.

Collection of Henricus and Nina Simonis, Dusseldorf, Germany.



An iphri

Aramuemu



Oviede "Aramuemu" Aki (c. 1920 – 1991)

Artist, dancer, historian and leader of the Ohworhu water spirit society of Ewwreni, Oviede Aki stands in front of two masks for Ohworhu that he carved in about 1955.

Across his chest he wears strands of red cylindrical beads called *agigo* that indicate his membership in a leadership society known in some parts of Urhobo as *Ohonvwore* and in others as *Ade*. Similar beads appear across the chests of most Urhobo male, and some female statues.

Ewwreni 1972



An *iphri* performance

An *iphri* performance at Edjekota, Ogor. In the days of inter-village conflict, *iphri* were often carried at the head of a column of warriors. When a community renews the powers of an *iphri*, they hold a mock battle in which the sculpture is carried aloft by the *onotu* (war-leader). On July 17, 1972, Etuke Odjesa, the owner of the Esosuo family *iphri*, arranged a demonstration of such a mock battle.

Edjekota 1972



Iphri (statue for male aggression)

Probably by an artist from the Agbarho area.

Wood, pigment. Ht. 58cm.

Collection Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal, The Netherlands

In this iphri, the upper figure rises out of the beast below, and grasps its ears as though he is riding the form. Such imagery alludes to the metaphor of the need for an individual to reign in, so as to control, his own aggression.



Chief Erhiaganoma

Standing next to his iphri (statue for male aggression), Chief Erhiaganoma Oyowwikefe of Orhokpokpo holds in his right hand a staff indicating his office as a distinguished elder (opko ononwvorhe). This statue was first owned by Egha, his grandfather, a famous warrior.

The artist of this sculpture was Akpojivi of Orhokpokpo, who was active in the 1840s.

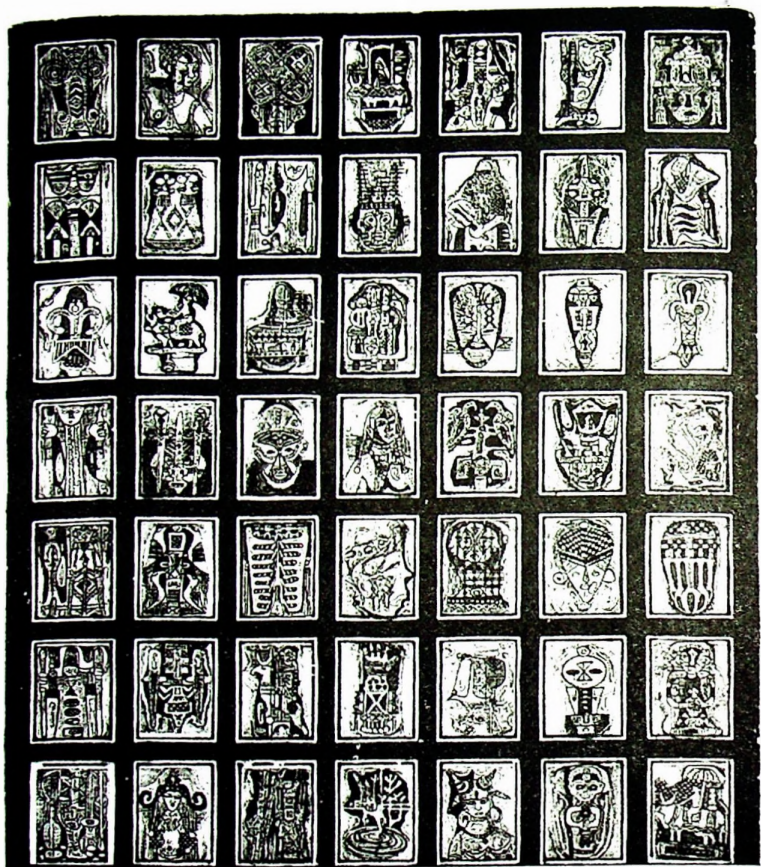
Orhokpokpo 1972



A priestess for the orhan

A priestess for the *orhan* (medicine shrine) of Aduri dances as she spreads scented white talc into the air. She wears the two colours that are central to Urhobo spiritual belief: red and white. Similar colour patterns appear on the tall pole in the background, *opkpo re oghene*, a staff that communicates with Oghene, the Urhobo high god.

Edjekota 1971



Images One

1990. by Bruce Onobrakpeya, Nigerian, b. 1932
 106x78 cm. Plastograph print, water colours
 Private Collection

This print has been made from forty-nine separate plates, each of which portrays a different mask. The artist has invented personal images that he has derived from the Urhobo tradition called *uyovwi edjo* ("face-of-the-spirit"), a type of mask that appears on festival occasions.



The ovie

An *Ovie* (plural *Ivie*) or King, presided over the *edjo* shrine of each Urhobo village group. In recent generations, the *Ivie* have assumed more political roles than in the past. Portrayed here is the *Ovie* of Orughworun, a sub-group of Ughienvwé Urhobo.

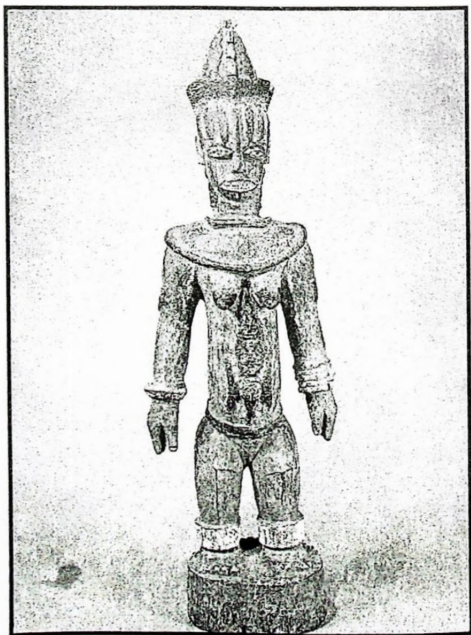
He holds an *okpo*, or staff of office in his right hand, and over his left ear are feathers of *ugo ufuafo*, the white fishing eagle, signifying his membership in the *Ogbu* society of exalted hunters. Behind him a retainer blows an ivory trumpet (*ogban*) that signifies the presence of an *Ovie*.

Opha - 2

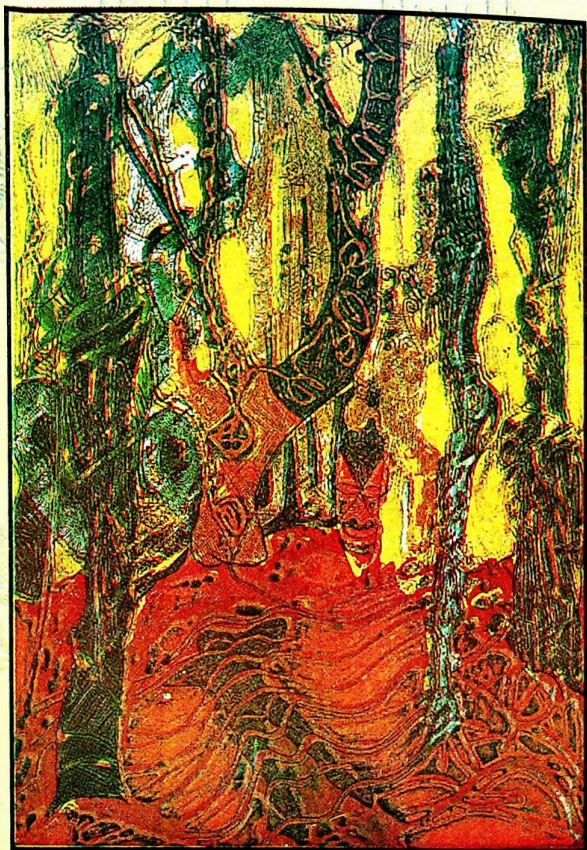
An Urhobo bride, *Opha*. Her body is coated with thick layers of red camwood, as are the brides themselves. On her wrists are *ikoro* (singular, *ukoro*), ivory bracelets that allude to the high, king-like status of the young women who are undergoing transition into adulthood.

Wood, pigment. Ht. 104.2 cm.

Walt Disney-Tishman Collection of African Art
Los Angeles, California



An Urhobo bride, *Opha*.



Ada Erinvbin ("Road to the Spirit World")

1976. by Bruce Onobrakpeya, Nigerian, b. 1932

Plastograph print, water colours, 79 x 53 cm.

Courtesy of the artist.

"Erinvbin [Erivwin] is the abode of the dead, or the underworld of those who have departed from the land of the living. 'Ada Erinvbin' means the cross-road between the land of the living and the dead. The picture shows a man lying down at the edge of the forest where a trackless road, invisible to living people, is supposed to lead to the spirit world. He pretends to be dead in a bid to collect necessary information."

--Bruce Onobrakpeya, *The Spirit in Ascent* (1992)