

## A FORMAL AND INTERPRETATIONAL ANALYSIS OF SOME IFEJIOKU TERRACOTTA FIGURES

ESE ODOKUMA

DELTA STATE UNIVERSITY ABRACA  
P.M.B 1 ABRACA, DELTA STATE OF NIGERIA, Nigeria

### Abstract

Ifejioku figures are not new developments in the Nigerian art scene. Quite a number of these pieces adorn galleries and museums across the world. A few are located within the country but not sufficient for scholarly studies. Dates of the nineteenth to the twentieth century have been attributed to the production of these pieces. Ossissa is still chosen as the location for its fabrication, yet, no workshop is located there. This study however, attempts to address issues of Origin, age and the workshop location of these magnificent pieces. Methods including the Iconographic and classificatory approaches are adopted for this research. Evidence shows that the style and form of this montage derives largely from Ossissa. Influences from other related art cultures like Urhobo, Isoko, Ekoi, Igbo, Ijo and Ekpeya are noticeable. However, the practice of burying the pieces before and after use is indicative of a societal tradition. It is evident that in the nearest future pre-historic, Modern and Post-modern art works would soon be used to answer not only questions of origin but of social behavioural patterns, artistic tendencies and past cultural interactions.

**Keyword:** Typology, Montage determination, influences, illustration.

### 1.1. Introduction

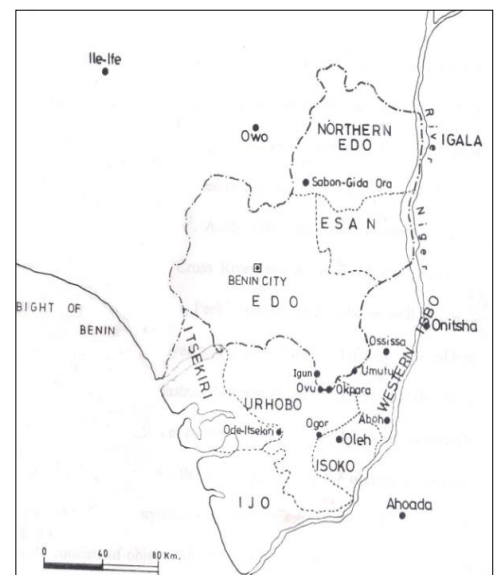
In 1999, Bridget Nwanze made a major contribution to the study of art pieces from Ossissa. She distinguished various types of pieces through studies and research. Concerning the origin of these magnificent pieces, she was able to establish their Ossissa heritage. Through her study, she searched for information from the libraries and Museums in Lagos, Benin, and Ibadan. She even went back to the Ossissa town were quite a number of fragments still exist. More so, the search took her as far as to the British Museum in London, and Scotland, were quite a number of examples adorn their collections. It was these early efforts that led to this present research. This study not only looks at the likely origin of the pieces but attempts a classification and interpretation of these art forms.

### 1.2. The Ossissa people and concept of Ifejioku

Ossissa is a town in Ndokwa local government area in Delta State, Nigeria. They are close neighbours with the Urhobo and are basically an agricultural community (Nwanze, 2013). As regard their origin, tradition speaks of Igala and Benin influences (Nwanze, 2013). With respect to their language, the Igbo language as well as other linguistic traits combine to form an Ndokwa dialect. The town has a history of terracotta production which dates between the early nineteenth to twentieth century respectively.

Despite these dates, there is a tendency to believe that the works maybe older than the dates associated with them. Nwanze (1999) claims that during all Ifejioku festivals in Ossissa that the remaining works are excavated for rituals. Then after the ceremony, they are returned to the ground. In other words, if this is a normal procedure, how then can these pieces be effectively dated?

The question thereof arises, Are the dates associated with these works exact? Secondly, if these works are actually done by the Ossissa people? Because if the works were made by the Ossissa people, then why bury them after every ritual? Or were they trying to hide the left overs from traffickers? Before we make our summations, it is important for us to know the concept of Ifejioku (yam cult) in Igbo land and observe the diverse forms of these Ifejioku pieces.



**Fig 1:** Map showing major towns including Ossissa from Western Niger Delta of Nigeria

Ifejioku, as Njoku (2012) claims, is an Igbo yam festival. It is an Igbo conceptual reference to civilization, fertility and harvest (Nzumafo Njoku, 2012). It is believed that as yam being the prestige and culturally important crop of the Igbo people, its cultivation and harvesting is linked with Ifejioku (Nzumafo Njoku, 2012)

Ifejioku, Aniajoku, Ufejioku, Njokuji, Ihinkoku, Aniajoku, Ahajoku, Fijioku, Ajoku, Aja Njoku or Ajaamaja are all the various names the yearly yam festival in Igbo land is called (Njoku, 2012). Njoku (2012) states that it is a festival that encapsulates all aspects of the Igbo life and culture including cosmology, religion, philosophy, work, leisure and many more expressions. Ifejioku centres around the yam myth were yam saved the entire Igbo culture from starvation. In Igbo culture, according to (Njoku, 2012) yam is the king of all crops as well as measure of manhood. The new yam festival is regarded as the biggest festival in Nri tradition (Nwokoye 2012). Nwokoye claims that the Nri people call it Omwa Asato or Ilo Muo festival as myth had it that "Chukwu" God instructed Eze Nri to sacrifice his first son, to avert famine. According to the legend the Eze Nri obeyed Chukwu's (Supreme God) instruction and yam sprouted on the grave of his son. It is in memory of this event that Eze Nri ritualized yam as Ifejioku and crowned it as the king of crops (Nwokoye, 2012).

Small wonder, the Ossissa people depicted sculptural pieces in honour of this tradition. The display of male figures flanked by his female wives and members of his family forms a significant aspect of their culture.

Considering the influences of Ossissa origin, were Benin and Igala cultures were mentioned, the origin of their sculptural traditions are questionable. As questions regarding the origin of Ossissa pieces, are attributed to Benin artist? Since the Benin's had a tradition of both metal and mud traditions. Or were their works executed by Igala or Igbo neighbours? At this point, it is important to hear the views of some scholars as regard the form and possible origins of these figures.

### **1.3. Views of some scholars as regard the forms and origin of the Ossissa Ifejioku figures**

Quite a number of scholars such as Fagg (1990), Adepegba (1995), Willett (2000), Mack (2000), Price (1976), Nwanze (2012) Odokuma (2001), Njoku (2013), have written on the origins and forms of these art pieces.

Speaking of the form and origin of these pieces, Fagg (1990) says that the Ifejioku terracotta alter piece is a yam spirit of the Ukwuani Ibo people of Ossissa west of the Niger. Fagg (1990) shows in his book, a central male figure flanked by his wives, one pregnant and the other one giving suck. He claims that right in front of the male figure, is an Ikenga, in the form of a flat stool and a fowl (chicken) which is about to be sacrificed. A child like a figure is depicted in front without legs. Since the figure is carrying a box like a container near the altar he may be a priest.

Nwanze (2012) opines that the Ifejioku sculptural terracotta of Ossissa is symbolic images representing the yam god-Ifejioku. She claims that the pieces convey very little of the impression they give in their actual place of use. She further speaks of the existence of eight different pieces with most of them in the Museum of Scotland Edinburg and the British Museum in London. Others in her words are in the National Museum Lagos and Benin respectively with few fragments in Ossissa. She believes that these are works of the Ossissa people.

Concerning the presence of the Ikenga (personal altar), it is important for an explanation and possible a definition of this concept. Since, it forms part of the paraphernalia found in the Ifejioku montage.

Ikenga means a personal altar which is dedicated to the right hand among the Igbo and Igala. (Visiona *et al.*, 2001). This concept is related to the belief that strong hands or arms are agents of physical power in such actions as hunting, farming, and warfare. (A history of Africa, 2001). The forms of Ikenga vary in different communities, while some are depicted in human forms others are simply designed as a stool.

Cole and Aniakor (1984) describes the Ikenga as the prevailing idea of an excellent yam farmer who accumulates wealth and prestige, titles, a large family and finally an honoured place among prosperous and respected.

Although, the structure of Ikenga is not what this study is about, the fact is that, as part of a collective whole, the Ikenga features in the Ossissa montage.

Roy (1979:116) relates the Ikenga to success and achievement which is based on the ability of the right hand. This concept seems to be shared by the Igala, Urhobo, Isoko Esan, and Ijo groups and parts of the lower- Niger.

(Odokuma, 2001). A lot of literature on the origin and significance of the Ikenga is studied by historians such as Delange (1994).

Adepegba (1995) talks about the much published Ifejioku figure as a sculpture rather than pottery with up to five to seven figures.

Willett (2000) writes that the pottery sculpture of Ifejioku is the giver and protector of yams from the river-rain Igbo village of Ossissa west of the river Niger. He further claims that the figures he had shown in his book, is one of the several pieces taken to England in the 1880s.

Mack (2000) only illustrates one Ifejioku piece and says it is a terracotta altar for the yam cult. He comments on the complex human figure which shows elaborate body scarification. He concludes that the piece was probably made by either a man or by a post-menopausal woman.

Price (1976) only illustrates the Ifejioku piece in her book with little information.

Nwanze (1999) conducted a detailed research on these figures. Since she is from the community, she feels she would be able to communicate effectively with the priest and people and at least conduct a more precise research.

Odokuma (2001) attempted a classification of the various examples evident in some Museums in Nigeria and in Europe. She observed about two major types, based on the treatment of the eyes. She claims that type (style A) has two sub styles. The eyes of this type A is completely closed while the style B the eyes are opened.

Most of the scholars reviewed based their opinions on the oral tradition collected from the people. The foci of their claims were however only on the history of the people, with the exception of Odokuma and Nwanze who examined the forms. However, this study would attempt to examine the origin of the Ossissa Ifejiokwu styles through an interpretation of their forms and traditions. As well as a classification and analysis of intricate textile ornamentations. Relationships with other cultures would also be addressed.

#### **4. Method of analysis**

In order to study these pieces effectively, a formalistic and iconographic approach is used. It is indeed, important to explain what and how these approaches are used. As regard formalism, it is an approach that stresses the importance of form over content, as the source of pieces subjective appeal. (Adams, 1996:16) in other words, a formalist, recognizes primarily the aesthetic effects created by the constituent parts of the design (Adams, 1996:17). Adams (1996) says that balance, order and proportion as well as pattern and rhythm constitute the basis of the artist visual language. Then of course, the composition of the work (Adams 1996:17). Basically, formalism has to do with art, for art sake the way elements and principles of art are used and not its symbolic meaning.

The other approach used in this study is iconography. Iconography deals with the meaning of an art work. It delves into the significance of the subject matter, content or theme of any artwork.

Adams (2001) defines iconography as an approach which considers content rather than form. One of the leading pioneers of the iconographic method was from Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968).

He recognized three levels of reading works iconographically. The first level he calls Pre-iconographic or primary or subject matter (Adams 1996:36). The second level which is the secondary level, he calls the level of convention and precedent. Then the third level has to do with its intrinsic meaning. Which Adams (1996) refers to as the synthetic level of interpretation where data is combined from diverse sources.

#### **5. Classification, Analysis, Description, and Interpretation of some Ifejioku figures**

They are two distinctive styles based on the treatment of the eyes. The first style is style A which has two other sub-styles. The eyes are completely closed (Odokuma 2001:40).

This style shows a highly stylized depiction of the Ossissa Ifejioku pottery figures. Here, the eyes are completely closed while the mouth is sealed and other facial features are geometric. The figures seem to be wearing elaborate coiffures as their faces show diverse cultural marks. They also seem to be carrying some implements and other cultural accoutrements. One of the female figures depicted, seems to be pregnant. Other figures both male and female are attached to the wall of the pot.

##### **Style A (1800-1900 A.D)**



**Figure 2:** Ossissa Ifejioku Terracotta (style A)  
Courtesy of Christina Price, made in  
West Africa, Studio Vista, London 1976.

The first sub-style of style A shows a more rounded feature (figure 3). Here, the eyes are completely closed as well as the mouth. The nose and mouth are proportionately executed. Unlike the previous Ifejioku in figure 2 this one is mounted on a stand. More so, its features are more rounded and it is not as naturalistic as its “style A” counterpart. Possibly, it was done by another artist in a different period or area. This piece in question shows a central male figure flanked by two female figures. Noticeable on the chest of the woman are some cultural accoutrement possibly relating to farming or ancestral worship. Along obvious mark runs down the forehead of the figures to the nose. Similar facial mark depictions are common in the Ekoi mask (figure 4), Urhobo figure (figure 5), Isoko figure (figure 6), Igbo (figure 7), Ekpeya (figure 8), and the Ijo figures (figure 9). (Odokuma, 2001).

#### Style A Substyle 1(1800-1900 A.D)



**Figure 3:** Ossissa ifejioku figure (Style A) (sub Style 1) Terracotta  
Courtesy National Commission for Museums and  
Monuments (Nemm) Benin in Odokuma (2001)  
Institute of African Studies University of Ibadan.

Figures with related features



**Figure 4:** Ekoi head  
National Commission for Museum & Monuments Lagos



**Figure 5:** Urhobo figure  
Courtesy: African Arts, Vol. IX, No 4, July 1976, Height: 156cm



**Figure 6:** Isoko figure  
Courtesy: African Arts, Vol. IX, No 4, July 1976,



**Figure 7:** Igbo figure  
National Commission for Museum & Monuments Lagos



**Figure 8:** Ekpeya figure  
National Commission for Museum & Monuments Lagos. (NCMM).



**Figure 9:** Ijo figure  
Courtesy: Roy Christopher The Stanley's Collection, 1979. Height: 72.4cm

**Style A Substyle 2**

The second sub-style of style A, are slightly rounded with ball-like hair shapes and fleshy facial features. The cultural mark which runs down from the forehead to the nose is evident here. Compared to the previous montage, this particular one seems to be more naturalistic.

All the figures on this tableau seem to be the seated and fused into the wall of the stand. The style is elaborately decorated and shows a single male figure flanked by two female. The figures are depicted with closed eyes.



**Figure 10:** Ifejioku Terracotta from Ossissa. Style A sub-Style 2 Courtesy of Roy Christopher. Africa Sculpture. The Stanley Collection, 1979.

Another figure also belonging to the second sub-style is the group Ossissa montage of figure 11. It represents a central male figure, flanked by two female figures, as well as children and animals. Once again, the elaborate hair-do and crown are evident. The facial features and body forms are semi-naturalistic with some geometric elements distributed in some prominent areas. For instance, the nose and ears are highly geometric and expressive. Their necks are thin and long and are designed with some intricate decoration. The design on the stand, varies from work to work. In this montage, the male figure in the centre, as in most examples continues to fan himself while his wives take care of the family. The single mark that runs down from the forehead to the nose is obvious. It is important to note here, that most of these pieces show the zoomorphic presence of animals. Fertility features of breast feeding mothers are also evident. Cultural items like gongs, cases, fans, tusks, beads, containers just to mention a few are obvious.



**Figure 11:** Pottery sculpture in the altar of Ifejioku. Courtesy Nigeria Museum, Lagos, In Frank Willett's African art an introduction 2000.

## 5.5

**Style B**

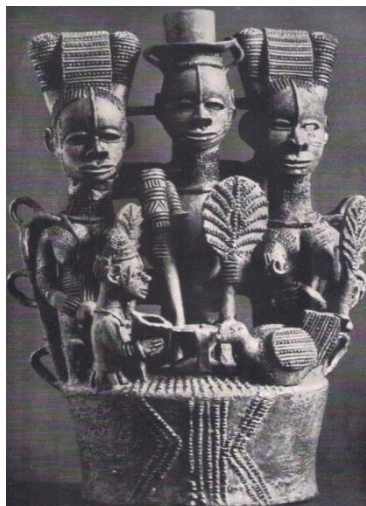
Style B is much more naturalistic than style A. However, the difference between style A and B is in the treatment of eyes. For instance, figure 12 shows another Ifejioku figure with a male flanked by two females.

This time, the coiffure and cap or crown of the male figure are more distinct. The eyes are wide open unlike those of style A. More still, the entire body is depicted naturalistically and proportionally. The neck is not bare but beaded as the central figure carries an intricate fan. Between two female figures, one is breastfeeding and the other is holding a child-like figure. The one holding the child-like figure, seems to be heavily pregnant and the stomach is aesthetically designed. The figure in front of the pregnant woman, is executed in similar style. It seems in one way to be a child and in another an oraclist. The reason for this assumption is simply because, legs were not depicted.



**Figure 12:** Terracotta altar for the yam cult (style B)  
Ossissa. Courtesy of John Mark African  
Arts and Culture.

Some of the best Ifejioku pieces are no more in the Nigerian country. A great deal of them are in the British Museum London and other European and American collections. A good example is this Ifejioku pieces of fig 13. This style falls under style B sub style 2 and it represents a more naturalistic montage which is heavily ornamented. The eyes are wide open and the usual arrangement of the other collections are noticeable here. However, this piece seems to show varied cultural marks. For instance is the presence of the major fore-head mark and five lines under the eye-lid as well as circular marks by the facial sides of the figures. And on the neck of the figure, marks are used to highlight beads on the neck. Both the male and female coiffure, particularly the female are highly decorated.

**Style B Substyle 2**

**Figure 13:** Ifejioku terracotta altar pieces from Ossissa (style B)

Courtesy William Fagg's Nigerians images 1990.

The style B (sub-style 2) is also significantly outstanding. The treatment of the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and neck is highly naturalistic. The coiffure as well as their cultural accoutrements are decorated. This time, the figure, which seems at one stage to be a priest is shown with his legs sitting on a chair. The Ikenga fowl and gong all seem to be present. The stand's design is significantly different from the other styles. However, with the exception of a smile this montage is like style B sub-style 2, however, the smile can be described as the "Ossissa smile".



Figure 14: Ifejioku piece.

## 6.0. Interpretational iconography

Since iconography (Adams, 2001) has to do with writing about an image, the interpretation of these works lie in what they signify. These works individually, depict a man with wives and in some cases, the whole family. Features of kingship or nobility are displayed on most of these pieces as well as ancestral worship. To buttress the point, Nwanze (2012) states that since it was the tradition of Ossissa people to renovate their ancestors, Ifejioku was conceived as farmer spirits who ensures production and fertility. Looking at the works critically, one is made to see that these Ifejioku pieces are simple reflections of the social, spiritual, and professional lives of the people. The form of the head and structure of the entire figure proves that these works are actually done by and for the Ossissa people. Although, of course influences from neighbouring cultures such as Igbo, Ijo, Urhobo, Isoko, Ekoi and Ekpeya are noticeable. There are also slight Benin influences particularly in the hierarchical positioning and various depictions of stands. The figures also display elaborate texturing which may connote some form of authority and language.

Since the Ifejioku pieces were supposed to be made to glorify the yam cult, one cannot really see any depiction of it. In most of the pieces discovered, the yam crop seems not to be shown. Could it have been made for another purpose? Or is the yam synonymous with fertility? Are the pregnant women a reflection of the fertile soil and the children, the yam?

It is indeed obvious that the male figure in most of the montages, seem to be content and satisfied with his achievements as well as his possessions. The presence of the Ikeuga shows this contentment, the Ifejioku montage is a holistic collection of the origin, history, social life of the people's lives.

## 6.1. Discussion and result

The findings reveal that despite the fact that the Ossissa people trace their origins to Igala and Benin cultures with traces of Igbo incursions, evidence of diverse cultural influences is noticeable. However, two styles are identified by the number of works found within and outside the country. Style A and B were distinguished with their sub-styles. This classification was based on the treatment of the eyes. Another outstanding trait in their depictions, is the presence of a male figure flanked by two female figures. The centrality of the male may be connected to the position of males in the society. That in some parts of Africa, life evolves and revolves around the man. In other words, the male is like the sun as other planets revolve around it.

Also, the polygamous nature of African men is depicted on the montage. One must not forget the simplicity of the figures as well as the intricacy of the body designs. From all indications, it is evident that the Ossissa people may have been behind the production of these art works. And certainly the works were made specifically for



ancestral worship. The total Igbo cosmological belief system is depicted in these corpuses. However, each of the figures represented can be interpreted into certain functions. The male, female, children, items constitute a holistic view point their belief systems and cosmology.

## **7. Conclusion**

It is indeed true that certain traits from neighboring cultures such as; Igbo, Igala, Benin, Urhobo, Isoko, Ekoi, Ekpeya, just to mention a few, show affinities with Ossissa figures. There is a great possibility that more distant connections with Ossissa origin can be traced using the attributes of these images. It must be mentioned here that the interpretation of art forms through formal analysis is one of the ways of tracing the migration of a people. Even if, oral tradition is regarded as an important historical source of information, it can be manipulated and distorted for political reasons.

But documentary records of events is a sure way of preserving information. However, in Africa south of the Sahara, art forms were used to record events. Other methods include; festivals, incantations, songs, dances, language, and greetings just to mention a few.

As regard the Ifejioku pieces the question of where it was produced and why the production stopped has not been adequately addressed. What led to the stoppage of its' production? Was it by the ruler-ship? or did the real artists behind these magnificent works migrate? Or could it be that the artists were not living in Ossissa? There is also the issue of the continuous excavation of the remaining pieces in order to perform the Ifejioku ceremony. It is indeed important to note that in Edjekota a town in Urhobo land lies a terracotta head whose origins are unknown (Foss 2004 and Odokuma 2006). The possibility that since these works were buried, means the production of the works may have ceased. In the case of the Ossissa figures, the production of these pieces also ceased. However, the works carry a form of Ossisaic "origin" particularly as regard its form, facial features, and content. Although, "yam" is not shown in the montage, the signature of its significance is depicted. Since the yam cult signifies fertility and ancestral worship, these traits, however, can be observed in the presence of the pregnant and sucking mothers. For now, we can still accept that these pieces were possibly executed by the Ossissa people, but where their workshops are, can not be found.

### References

- Adams, L.S. (1996). *The methodologies of Art an introduction* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). Colorado, West view press.
- Adams, L.S. (2001). *A history of Western art* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition) New York, Hy: mcgrawn-Hill.
- Adepegba, C.O. (1995). *Nigeria art its' traditions and modern tendencies*. Ibadan, Jodad publishers.
- Arnold, D. (2004). *Art History a very short introduction*. Oxford University press.
- Cole, H.M, and Aniakor, C.C. (1994). *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos*. Regents of the University of California.
- Fagg .W. and List, H.(1990) (2<sup>nd</sup> Editor) *Nigeria images*(2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Lagos National Commission for museums and Monuments.
- Foss, P. (2004). Where gods and mortals meet continuity and renewal in Urhobo art. Museum for African Art. New York Snock publishers.
- Mack, E. (2000). Africa Arts and Cultures. London, the British Museum press.
- Njoku , N.N (2012, April 17). *Spirit of Ifejioku* (Aja Njoku) -7 spirits of Chineke (God) Retrieved from <http://aniajoku.com/about/.2oahigoku.html>.[www.unesco.org/culturdich/doc/src/00274-EN.doc](http://www.unesco.org/culturdich/doc/src/00274-EN.doc).
- Nwanze, B. (2012). Images of yam gods. Retrieved from [www.theartworld.com/articles/yam gods art htm](http://www.theartworld.com/articles/yam_gods_art.htm) ukn-DDf 2hp.
- Nwanze B. (2013, August 25) *Ifejioku art and origin of Ossissa people*.
- Nwanze, B. (1999). The Ifejiokwu sculptural terracotta of Ossissa. (Doctoral dissertation) University of Ibadan Nigeria.
- Nwokoye, C. (2012). September 28 “Onwa Asato or Illo Muo” (New Yam) festival in Nri. Retrieved from [www.nigeriavilagesquare.com](http://www.nigeriavilagesquare.com).
- Odokuma, E. (2001). An Enquiry into the variations between Art styles of Benin and its' lower Niger Neighbour (Unpublished Doctorial dissertation). University of Ibadan , Nigeria.
- Odokuma, E. (2006). *The likely source of the Terracotta head found in Edjekota Urhobo land in the Niger Delta*. *Ela Journal of African Studies*. Pp. 99-110.
- Odokuma, E. (2011). View on the origins, structure and Hierarchy of some Niger Delta mud sculpture styles of southern Nigeria. *The Anthropologist International Journal of Contemporary and Applied studies of man*. 13(1):45-59.
- Price, C. (1976). *Made in West Africa*. London, studio vista.
- Roy, C. (1979) *Africa sculpture*. Owa, publisher by the University of Iowa Museum of Art.
- Visiona, M.B, Poynor, B. Cole, H.M, & Harrison , M.D.(2001). *A History of Art in Africa*. New York, Harry N. Adams incorporated.
- Willet F. (2000). *Africa art an introduction* (revised edition). New York Thames and Hudson.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

Though I cited quite a number of authors in this paper, I want to especially thank Professor (Mrs) Bridget Nwanze for initiating this study. If not for her efforts during our doctorate programme in the nineties I may not have even noticed these fantastic works of art. There is also the American art-historian of whom I call my artistic-sister. She is the person of Professor Laurie Schneider Adams. I have continuously admired her writing style and artistic flow. To my late supervisor “Great” Professor Cornelius Oyeleke Adepegba, the man who gave me academic confidence, I say wherever you are! Thank you... thank you for dragging me along to carry your slide bag and admitting me into the Institute of African Studies, Ibadan Nigeria. I want to thank my amiable Vice Chancellor Professor V.F. Peretomode, Professor and Professor (Mrs) Eric Arubayi, Professor and Dr. (Mrs) A.E. Anigala, Professor (Mrs) and Mr. Aziza, Professor A.M. Diakparomre, my Dean Professor (Mrs). G.N. Ogwu, Professor Osa .D. Egonwa just to mention a few. And most of all, my parents, siblings as well as husband “Bros Aujie” and children, thank you for being there.