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## **Bruce Onobrakpeya: Categorization of Mythical Realism Period: 1959 to 1966**

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### **Abstract**

Bruce Onobrakpeya is a renowned Nigerian master printmaker, whose work has been categorized into various periods, one of which is the mythical realism period. This period (1959-1966) witnessed the creation of artwork inspired by ideas he acquired in college, as well as in workshops he attended. It is also a period which highlighted the growth of his style and techniques which manifested in the creation of artistic narratives of myth and folklore expressed in semi-reality, naturalistic and abstract forms. Most of the themes of these works were also influenced by his environment, particular that of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria and his people the Urhobos. This article focused on various aspects of Onobrakpeya's work of the mythical realism period, their impact on his growth as an artist and on the development of contemporary art in Nigeria and Africa.

**Key Words:** *Onobrakpeya, mythical realism, art, development*

### **Introduction**

The mythical realism period of Onobrakpeya's work is the period of the artist's expression of his early beliefs, aspirations and perceptions of natural phenomena from which he derived the theme and art form (imaginary or nonexistent) of his works based on Urhobo, Edo and Fulani culture. This period stretches from his time as a teacher in Western Boys High School (1955 - 1956); Ondo Boys High School (1956 - 1957); as a student at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria, where he obtained a Diploma in Fine Arts and an art teacher's certificate in 1962, and as a studio apprentice in 1962 with Late Benjamin Chuka Enwonwu

(1921-1994), a second generation contemporary Nigerian artist who trained at Goldsmith College, London in 1944.

The mythical realism period came to an end when Bruce Onobrakpeya assumed the position of a teacher at St. Gregory's College. He also studied printmaking with Rudolf Harold Van Rossam (1924-2007) through workshops he attended in Ibadan and Oshogbo between 1963 and 1964. In an interview with Nics O. Ubogu at Agbarha-Otor, venue of the Harmattan Workshop, in March, 2006, Bruce Onobrakpeya remarked that his early works, from 1959 to 1966, were referred to as "The Mythical Realism of Bruce Onobrakpeya" by Professor Babatunde Lawal. Lawal further asserted:

The art of Bruce Onobrakpeya is a poetic projection. It is an attempt to express in visual terms the inner substance of things and the non-visible aspects of reality. Thus, the expressive content of his art straddles the border of fact and fiction, tangible reality and dreams (1976, p. 50)

Lawal also explained that the art of Onobrakpeya intrigues us visually and aesthetically and captivates not only because of the wealth and depth of his formal resources and how he has skillfully and sensitively dovetailed with content, but also by the unique way he has been able to adapt the modern technique of print making, drawing and paintings to communicate in an original and unmistakably African idiom (1976, p. 50). Evidently, Onobrakpeya's imagery is deeply rooted in Urhobo world view and mythology.

### **Categorization of Mythical Realism**

The works done by Onobrakpeya during this period were based on the philosophy of the Zaria Art Society, the trend moving from natural synthesis toward the philosophy of African Art and the exploration of African images and motifs. As a student, Onobrakpeya was a member of the Zaria Art Society, which existed for four years between 1958 and 1961. The philosophy of the Zaria Art Society was adopted by its members among whom were personalities such as Uche Okeke, Yusuf Grillo, Williams Olaosebikan, Oselaka Osadebe, Demas Nwoko, Okahukwu Odita, I. M. Omagie and Felix N Edeada. Others were Simon Okeke and Ogbonnaya Nwagbare. Uche Okeke, leader of the Art Society, in his inaugural address to its members in 1958 said:

We must fight to free ourselves from mirroring foreign culture. The great work demands will power, originality and above all, love for our fatherland. We must have our own School of Art independent of European and oriental schools but drawing as much as possible from what we consider our native art culture (1982, p.1)

Lawrence (1979) also confirmed the use of the term "Mythical Realism" in relation to Onobrakpeya's works and the existence of the period in the following words: "The giant stride of Bruce Onobrakpeya cannot go unnoticed. He is referred to as a mythical realist and an artist of outstanding creative ability" (p. 27).

Bruce Onobrakpeya at the Nigeria College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria, specialized in painting, life and still life paintings, drawings and compositions of landscapes. However, Chukwueggu (1998) observed:

The culture-based approach and his evolving masterly techniques notwithstanding his philosophy and focus have been very consistent with

cosmology, landscape, animals, myths, legends, folklores and other themes of his rich Delta background. (p. 113).

Onobrakpeye's interest in print, the linocut and screen-printing processes on which he started experimenting as a student and, later as a teacher in Benin City before his admission into The Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria, was not abandoned; he effectively combined both of them. Moreover, he was a student when he had his one-man art exhibition of water colour paintings, linocut and fabric prints in Ughelli (formerly Midwestern State, then Bendel State, now Delta State of Nigeria), in 1959, using the exhibition to thank his friends, teachers, and colleagues, who advised him to take art as a career.

Onobrakpeya's earliest works, completed when he was a student (1958 - 1962), dealt with Urhobo folktale subjects. For example, *Eruvo*, (1958), *Shells* (Print, 1958) and *Ivwie* (Drawing and wash, 1958) all fall within the category of Mythical Realism. *Ivwie* is a drawing and wash (water colour) abstract form with what looks like an eye on the top left-hand side of the drawing and an ear at the bottom left hand side. *Ivwie* is like a facial expression with geometric forms. *Ivwie* (fig.1) gives a visual inkling of the gangsterism and oppression in Urhobo life. The artist remarked:

...very often there is an emergency and one suffers because one cannot receive help which, under normal circumstances, could have easily been obtained. For instance, a man from a large and well-protected family is molested or beaten up by gangsters in a situation where he cannot receive help from his relatives, the Urbobo call this the *Ivwie*. (cited in Lawal, 1976, p. 50)

*Ivwie* (fig. 1) in its dominant form is an abstraction of the human head, and the expression of twisted and battered shape shows an overwhelming oppression. "Thus, *Ivwie* could as well refer to the Sharpsville shooting in South Africa, or the massacre of the Jews in Nazi Germany" (Lawal, 1976, p. 50).

In 1958, Onobrakpeya (as a student in Zaria) produced *Eruvo* (fig. 2), an expression of abstraction with lines, similar to Uli form used by his contemporary, Uche Okeke. Uli art idiom was introduced by Uche Okeke at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1972. *Eruvo* looks like an expression of the movement of the intestines of the stomach.

*Shells* (fig. 3) was another work produced by Onobrakpeya in 1958, using a silk screen, with shells dominating the print. The artist became acquainted with shells as a growing child in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. He was able to combine the shells with leaves in the print. The print is associated with the myths and rites of Urhobo deities of the artist's home area. The shell is a symbol of wealth in Urhobo land.

In 1959, Onobrakpeya started the *Ahwaire* (tortoise in Urhobo) Series with different titles: *Quarrel Between Ahwaire the Tortoise and Erhako the Dog*, 1959 (fig. 4); *Ahwaire and the Harp*, 1962 (Fig. 5); *Ahwaire and the Fish*, 1960 (fig. 6); *Ahwaire and the Bird*, 1959 (fig. 7); *Ahwaire and Spirit World*, 1960 (fig. 8); *Ahwaire and the Calabash*, 1960 (fig. 9). In the *Ahwaire* Series, one can see the use of lines, curved linear lines, colours, elongated figures and forms. Paintings were decorated based on African Arts of the Niger Delta region, rooted in the African religion, mythology and folklore of the Urhobo people. *Ahwaire* paintings and prints were Bruce Onobrakpeya's early works as a student in Zaria from 1958 to 1962. These works were later exhibited by the Agbara Literate Youth Association, in the Catholic School Hall in Ughelli from September 21- 22, 1959. The exhibition was opened to the public free.

As earlier mentioned, Ahwaire means tortoise. In Urhobo mythology, the tortoise is regarded as a wise animal found in water and on land. It is believed that the tortoise can change its form to stone when in trouble. In most African traditions, it is believed that the tortoise applies its wisdom in dealing with issues concerning everyday life within its environment. Moreso, in the African context, and in folktales in oral literature, it is believed that Ahwaire is a cunning creature. However, this perception varies from one locality to the other. In Bruce Onobrakpeya's painting of Ahwaire and the Bird (fig.7), the Tortoise is standing on two legs discussing with the Bird, painted in a greenish, reddish and yellow colour scheme, depicting a forest environment.

Ahwaire's facial expression captures his full concentration on the Bird. The Bird is likely to be a victim of circumstance. In another painting, Ahwaire and the Spirit World (1960, on oil board), Ahwaire is in the spirit world, standing on one leg, his two hands on the face of a spirit. Onobrakpeya depicts the face of Ahwaire as human. Standing by are other small spirits looking at them. The art work is stylized, and elongated in black, brown, blue colour scheme, with the spirit sitting on a human face, with items of food around them. Ahwaire and Calabash (1960) is an abstract painting like other Ahwaire series. Here, Ahwaire steps into a calabash to collect food. The colour scheme of the calabash has a black and light brown effect.

Another Ahwaire painting is Ahwaire and the Fish (1960). Onobrakpeya did this painting as a mural with Uche Okeke for the Art and Craft Pavilion at the Independence Art Exhibition in July, 1960, in Lagos. It depicts Ahwaire and a Fish. Ahwaire and the Harp (1962), was done in linocut engraving with Onobrakpeya experimenting on linocut. The print was not as detailed as the one done in oil painting. The technique shows that it was an early print, and experimental work of the artist. The Harp and the Ahwaire, was a stylized print but not detailed in terms of the artist's skills.

Another work of Onobrakpeya, The Travellers (pen and wash; fig.10) about 51.7cm x 35cm, was done around 1959. The figures are in traditional Nigerian clothes of Hausa/Fulani cattlemen-two men, each carrying a sleeping mat on his back, water containers, knife and stick. The artist renders the drawing in pen and wash, showing elongated figures and forms with the use of lines, but obeys the law of nature and perspective. The drawing is dynamic with textures that have the effect of light which makes it aesthetically appealing.

Furthermore, the mythical realism of Onobrakpeya could be referred to as a period full of challenges. He began to experiment with forms based on Nigerian folktales, myths and legends concerned with edification and cosmology. By 1962, however, he had moved from painting, pen and wash, landscapes, figure drawing and still life paintings to a more naturalistic art, taught by the European teachers at the Nigerian College of Art, Science and Technology, Zaria, to prints, after attending a workshop where he gained experience in print making (which is more illustrative) with cultural themes.

### **Illustrations and Commissioned Works**

The rest of the period in categorization was a time of success: he graduated with a diploma of Fine Arts in 1961, and an art teacher's certificate in 1962, and worked with Ben Chika Enwonwu in Lagos. He was also appointed as a teacher in St. Gregory's College, Obalende, Lagos, in 1963. His work between 1962 to 1966 marked the end of the period of mythical realism. It was a period of transformation from paintings of landscape, imaginative composition, life and still painting, to a graphical approach to his works in printmaking. This includes illustration of books

and commissions. The work done during this period include the illustration of *African Nights Entertainment* (1962 fig. 11) by renowned author Cyprian Ekwensi (1922-2007) in black and white drawing which Onobrakpeya completed in 1962. Among the fine illustrations in (fig.12) is Zainobe and her mother, characters in the book. The illustrations are interesting, dynamic, and unique. His exploits in the prints show that the illustrations have form, depth, space and the use of light and shade in a manner which tends to be more monochromatic.

These works could be referred to as naturalistic realism of Onobrakpeya. Adepegba (1984) noted that his frolic with natural freedom coupled with the joy of his graduation from art school which, to him, meant freedom to do what he liked in his art, gave his picture a bright outlook (p. 2). This is a testimony that Onobrakpeya showcased total freedom of expression in the linocut and silk-screen processes and his book illustrations, after graduating from the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria. Other books he illustrated during the period of mythical realism include *Iwe Ede Yoruba* by Adeboye Babalola (1963); *Sugar Girl* by Kola Onadepe (1964); and *Akpan and the Smugglers* by Rosemary Uwenedimo (1965). In illustrating these books, Bruce Onobrakpeya used his rich, cumulative experience to display skills and techniques in block printing and serigraphy to his advantage, using the West and African art form with symbols of African motifs and landscape depicting Nigerian architecture. These can be observed in the illustrations of *African Nights Entertainment* by Cyprian Ekwensi.

Between 1961 and 1966, however, the artist improved on his style and techniques by resorting to the use of oil colour medium, using some printmaking techniques which played a secondary role in recreating or re-interpreting the themes already treated in painting. (Onobrakpeya, 1992, p. 31). He also disengaged from painting to printmaking. To ascertain this, Bruce Onobrakpeya (1992) stated:

Some of these techniques, block printing and serigraphy, I had acquired while at the art school at Zaria. Others came by 1963 and 1964 through two printmaking workshops. Both were organized by Ulli Beier, first in Ibadan, conducted by Julean Beinart under the auspices of Mbari Artists and Writers Club. The second workshop was conducted by Rudolf Harold Van Rossem (a Professor of Art from Tilburg University) under the umbrella of Mbari Mbayor Art Club, Oshogbo. From both workshops I learnt the techniques of copper engraving and etching. Increasingly, I found that I was being drawn more and more towards printmaking (pp. 31-32).

### **Analysis of Works Under Mythical Realism Period**

After the workshop, Onobrakpeya began to experiment with stylistic traits from old and new ideas in printmaking that he acquired at the workshop he had attended. The level of realism and semi-abstractness in items of creativity in his work was highly developed despite the stylization of form in the prints he produced. Images in most of the compositions showed obvious elements of vertical and horizontal shapes, and corpuses with characteristics of various techniques used in realism. Realism as a process and an aesthetic category is not lacking in his works but offers opportunities for interpreting symbols and motifs used when his works are viewed from a certain distance, revealing a dialogue of cultural values.

However, between 1963 and 1966, Onobrakpeya worked on different media from oil colour to linocut engraving and bronzed linocut reliefs he developed within this period. These also included traditional intaglio and etching. Moreso, these techniques were used to create Leopard

in Cornfield (1965, Linocut engraving), Skyscrapers (Bronze-linocut reliefs, 1966), Palmwine Women (Silk Screen, 1965), Cows (1965), Oil canvas), and Scarecrow (1965).

Onobrakpeya depicts Leopard in Cornfield in oil on canvas in 1963 and linocut engraving in 1965, based on a childhood experience. As a child, he could not differentiate between a living leopard and a leopard on a wall, 'guarding' the entrance of a shrine. Although he cannot remember how old he was then, he feared that the beast might attack him, cried and ran to his mother for protection.

Onobrakpeya's memory has remained vivid over the years and this same leopard, like an imprisoned genie, exploded out of his mind. Now he knows him. He is a beast, but he has tamed him, and let him roam freely in the grassy wild with a tantalizing bird flying above him. He called him Leopard in the Cornfield (Onobrakpeya, 1998, p. 156).

The print and the painting on Leopard in the Cornfield have a strong mythical realism, associated with a folktale from Onobrakpeya's childhood. Both the painting and print are excellent and have an unusually pleasant colour harmony of a dominating red background, with corn stems in a yellowish, greenish combination of colours, which are very appealing but appear flat in the print. The painting has depth, strong tones and a graduation of hues of colours, as Onobrakpeya's early works usually had bold lines, bright colours and deep textures. Most of his subjects were naturalistic or semi-abstract.

One of the first unique and pleasantly bronzed relief works he produced was Skyscrapers (fig.13) that he exhibited at the defunct Exhibition Center, Marina, from 18th to 28th April, 1966. Some of Onobrakpeya's block designs were converted into unique bronzed reliefs.

Singletary (2002) observed:

Two Adventures and Skyscraper I are noted works of this period. He continued to synthesize elements from an array of religions, traditions, philosophies, myths and peoples. The world he creates allows for these differences, but it is not just a temporal world, it is also the world of nature mystically united with the world of the spirit (p. 5).

This is quite different from the painting of Cows (fig. 14) oil on canvas, 1965. This painting is naturalistic with yellowish, greenish background. The cows, seven in number, are painted in brownish, white colours with graphical numbers on their heads, with number two and nine, extreme left and middle of the painting, depicting a sunny day and cattle scenes portraying the Northern Savannah Culture around Zaria. The paintings are based on recollections, observations and reactions based on Onobrakpeya's experiences as a student in Zaria (1958 - 1962).

Finally, within the mythical realism period, Onobrakpeya was commissioned to do some paintings and murals. The first public commissions were a series of murals for the University of Lagos Teaching Hospital, completed in March, 1963. He also painted a frieze for the Health Centre, Apapa in 1964 and series of murals for the Mbari Club, Ibadan, in 1964.

In 1965, Onobrakpeya, at about the age of 24, hit international news stands during an exhibition of contemporary African art organized by Dennis Duerden (as part of the Commonwealth Festival in Cardiff and London) when his work attracted the attention of the Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Philip, a notable figure in the world, who purchased two of his prints. It was a remarkable acknowledgement of the successful development of African Art.

### Conclusion

Onobrakpeya excelled during the post-independence era of Nigeria. His early works as an artist were radical in approach and showcased what intellectuals termed the “Natural Synthesis” that emanated from the Nigeria College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria (now Ahmadu Bello University). These works explored African cultural art forms and their themes were influenced by the savannah of Zaria in Northern Nigeria where he schooled, and by his immediate environment of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria where he hails.

Onobrakpeya’s preliminary works address critical artistic issues through myths and folktales of Urhobo, Edo, Yoruba and Hausa/Fulani Culture in Nigeria. Based on his observation of the mythical trend in Onobrakpeya’s early creative works such as oil paintings, serigraphs and prints, deep etching, and engraving that was printed intaglio, Lawal remarked that “from his earliest prints, Onobrakpeya has completed his visual images with inscriptions and narratives that explain his complex use of mythology, indigenous motifs and metaphors” (cited in Onyema Offoedu-Okeke, 2012, p. 130).

The mythical realism period under categorization highlighted Onobrakpeya’s unique style and techniques. Through his work, the artist has also promoted the Nigerian culture, especially that of the Niger Delta region and the Urhobo people in particular. His illustrations have also enriched African literature and the works of renowned authors such as Cyprian Ekwensi, Adeboye Babalola, Kola Onadepe and Rosemary Uwemedimo. Onobrakpeya’s commissioned works have also made an impact internationally and brought him much recognition and praise.

Evidently, the mythical realism period of Onobrakpeya’s artistic endeavours contributed greatly not only to the advancement of his career as an artist, but also to the growth of contemporary art in Nigeria and Africa.

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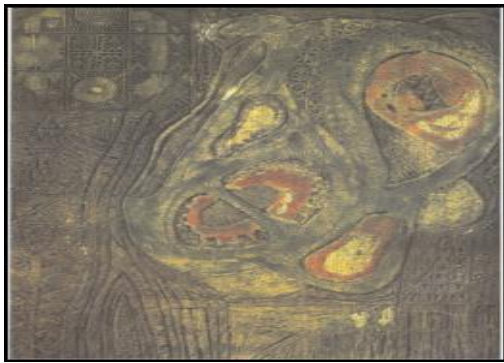


Fig. 1. Ivwie (oppression),  
Plastograph, 61.5cm x 46cm, 1972.



Fig. 2 ERUVO Drawing 17 x 22 cm

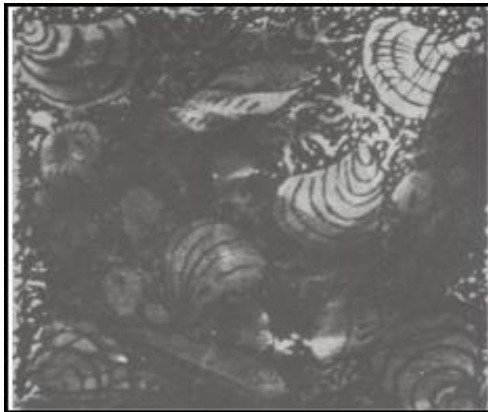


Fig. 3. SHELLS (15.5 x 15.3) cm  
Silkscreen 1958

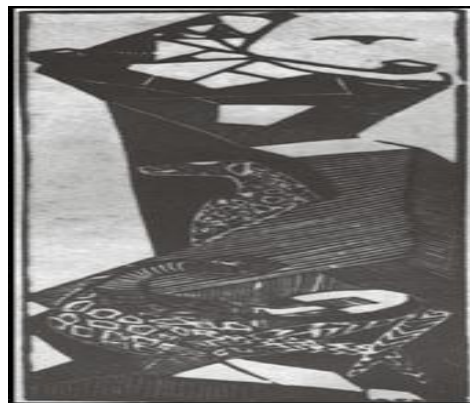


Fig. 4. Ahwaire and the Dog



Fig. 5. Ahwaire and the Harp  
Lino Engraving 30.5 x 20.5 cm zaria 1962

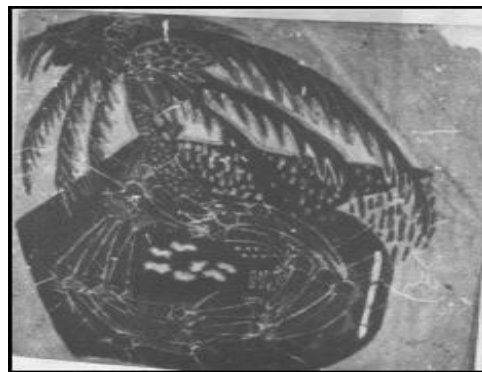


Fig. 6. Ahwaire and the Fish





Fig.7. Ahwaire and the Bird,  
oil on board, no dimensions.



Fig. 8. Ahwaire and the Spirit World. 1960,  
oil on board, dimensions



Fig. 9. Ahwaire and the Calabash



Fig: 10. Travellers, Drawing (Pen and wash),  
51.7cm x 35cm, about 1959.



Fig.11. Entertainment 1962.  
By Cyprian Ekwensi



Fig.12. A-Flino Cut Illustrations for an  
African

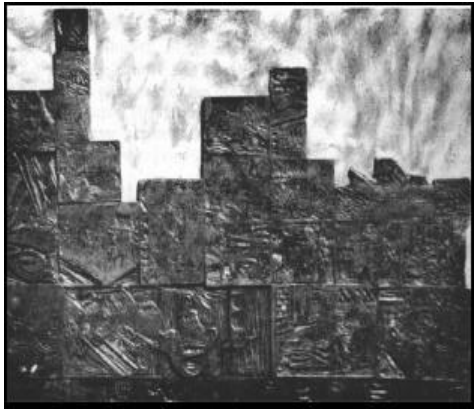


Fig.13. Skyscrapers

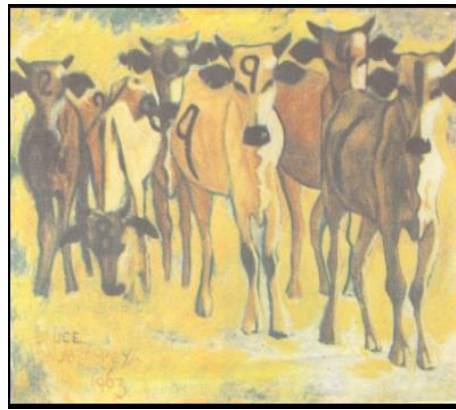


Fig. 14. Cows

*List of all figures - Courtesy of Bruce Onobrakpeya's foundation*