
NWOMMO TRADITIONAL ART OF THE IBIBIO PEOPLE: A CASE OF EXHIBITION OF THE REJECTED

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Abstract

Ibibio traditional art exhibition is a permanent display in a building called *Nwommo* (Warrior Shrine). It has a chief priest as the custodian and curator. On display are various sizes of ceramics pots for storage and mixture of herbal medicinal concoctions. The exhibition huts also have numerous sculptures, masks, wall paintings, graphics symbols and textiles loins, wrappers for theatrical spectacle, hunting expedition and body adornment respectively. However, these traditional exhibitions are viewed as scary, diabolic and fetish. Therefore, they are rejected within Ibibio societies and beyond. They are seen except for the initiates as non-conforming to acceptable values. This paper, attempts to use the example of exhibition of the rejected, a non-conformist group in France to discuss the impact of traditional art exhibition as found amongst

Nwommo permanent display. The objectives were to discuss the materials and production of Ibibio traditional art; the influence of *Nwommo* traditional art on contemporary art and; position *Nwommo* traditional art as exhibition of the rejected. The method used was unstructured interview and reviews from related literatures. Findings reveal significant activities of administration, religion, communication, preservation, entertainment and aesthetics in *Nwommo* Ibibio traditional art. The inference drawn from the study on the exhibition of the rejected is that of allowing for unconventional creative outlet as a means of reforms within a given society. The paper recommends restructurings through original works of traditional art as against rejection. The Ibibio traditional art exhibitions are avant-garde resources, reminiscent of the socio- economic and socio - political standards of the society.

Keywords: Avant-garde, Exhibition of the Rejected, French Academy, Ibibio, *Nwommo*, Traditional Art.

Introduction

Ibibio people like other ethnic groups in Nigeria are rejecting their traditional and cultural products in the face of new religion and technological developments. The whole of their Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) is eroding as a result of rejection. *Nwommo*, (Warrior Shrine) a traditional Ibibio art and architecture is among the “inventions” that suffer seeming absolute rejection. The consequent is its loss. The *Nwommo* which doubled as a funerary art and a gallery for the display of the deceased personal items is seemingly going extinct. Undoubtedly, there must always be reasons for rejections. The reasons can be objective, or subjective. Whichever way, rejection is rejection and it leads to agitations to say the least. There are documentations such as Ukim, 2020; Ekanem, 1994, Ekwere 2000, Umoanwan and Nyah, 2015; on *Nwommo* traditional art of Ibibio. However, the aforementioned literatures are mostly centered on its funerary functions, the art objects therein, and their influence on contemporary art practice. There are still existing gaps. The one identified by the writers of this paper is that of using/converting *Nwommo* Art into an exhibition of the rejected. This is informed by the Exhibition of the Rejected in France in 1863.

The rejection of over fifty percent of art works submitted by artists for the Paris Salon was a denial. This led to agitation and protest. That resulted in the holding of Salon des Refusés in 1863 in France. It was a development that brought about avant-garde art and movements. The artists of the Salon des Refusés were rejected by a committee of Juries, while *Nwommo* is rejected by its people. Its rejection is as a result of the current prevailing religion - Christianity in the region. Nevertheless, there are some features of *Nwommo* that can be retained, hence this advocacy. This paper, therefore, advocates that those features of *Nwommo* that have to do with art, aesthetics, exhibitions and the preservation of Ibibio traditional material culture should not be rejected. Thus, the rejected graffiti, exhibits, motifs and patterns on *Nwommo*, and the unique triangular design of the structure should be reconsidered for contemporary use. Undoubtedly, the totality of *Nwommo* is an exhibition of the rejected in its rights. It is a gallery, a museum and an exhibition space in one structure. This paper is, therefore, set to discuss the materials and production of Ibibio traditional art; the influence of *Nwommo* traditional art on contemporary art and; position *Nwommo* traditional art as exhibition of the rejected. The method used was unstructured interview and reviews of related literatures. The work was delimited to the study of *Nwommo (Warrior Shrine)* awhile of the rejected. This is premised upon the knowledge that it can bring beneficial results just as Salon des Refusés did. Thus, the writers are prompted by the need to appropriate *Nwommo* to Modern Exhibition.

Ibibio People

In the context of this study, Ibibio people are seen in the light of the ethnical relatedness of the traditional Northern Ibibio, Southern Ibibio, Western Ibibio, Central Ibibio, and Riverine Ibibio. See Map of Ibibio, Figure 1. The Ibibio people are distinctive ethnic group found predominantly in the South South geopolitical region of Nigeria with a population of about four million people. They are the fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria (Ukim, 2020; Demographics of Nigeria, n.d; Okonofua and Ukim, 2016). The Ibibio has several networks of independent sub-groups comprising Efiat, Okobo, Andoni, Efik, Ibeno. Oron, Eket and Annang communities (Udo, 1983; Ukim, 2020; Minahan, 2002 and Ekanem, 2000). The traditional art exhibition of

these sub-groups which is an affiliate of a people's cultural practices and language of communication are similar in context. This is so because they are ethnically related (Udo, 1983). Their economic, religious, aesthetics and political institutions are reforms enabling and by implication should not be rejected but adopted at that level.



Figure 1: Map of Ibibioland showing the Ibibio sub-group
Source: Ukpong, D., Akpan, M. and Akang, N. (2001) P. 12

***Nwommo* Traditional Art of Ibibio People**

Nwommo is a building erected in honour of the dead of an Ibibio warrior at the time of burial among the traditional Ibibio people. It was usually a tall rectangular structure. A large cloth was usually hung inside the *Nwommo*. The cloth was usually made of patchwork and appliqué techniques. Very bold geometrical patterns and figurative panels were clearly visible on the cloth (Nicklin, n.d). The warriors, members of the Ekong society were very special people in Ibibioland. They occupied special places and received unprecedented honours both in their lifetime and after their death (Udo, 1978). Udo observes that they were so honoured that “in some villages they were decorated for their bravery with grant of oil palm bush” an award aimed at encouraging the young men to fight wars and defend the land from external aggressors”.

At death, the body of an Ekong initiate was embalmed, dressed in the Ekong costumes and made to ‘sit’ for some days on a special chair so

people could pay him the last respects (Udo 1983; Akra, 2021). They were immortalized by burying them in a large and adequately decorated and embellished edifice – an artistic architecture called *Nwommo*, Fig 2a and 2b. *Nwommo* (Warrior Shrine) was normally adorned with graffiti (Ukpong, Akpan, and Akang, 2001). *Nwommo* was perhaps the largest shrine in Ibibioland. It was one of the most expensive items of the burial of any person in traditional Ibibioland.



Figure 2 a and b: *Nwommo* (Warrior shrine)

Source: Udo, E. A. (1983)

Death in traditional Ibibio societies was viewed as a transition and continuation of life in another phase. Therefore, death was not seen as an end of life. They, just like the traditional Egyptians, believed in life after death. They believed even more in the efficacy of influence of the dead on the living. Thus, the maxim, “*ekpo akpa ayin, ikpaha utong*” is an Ibibio adage that expresses the alertness of the dead to the activities of the living. This means that the dead are still alive and are still hearing; therefore, they have the powers to mediate in matters for the living (Ukim, 2020, Ekanem, 1994 and Akra, 2021). This explains the reasons for provisions of afterlife status as observed in the accompaniment of household items and embellishment. Udo (1983) avers that it is “*Uno Ufok*, the giving of the dead man a house” Amongst these were ceramic pots of varied size, wall paintings representing the deceased occupation, prestige and accomplishments, sculptural mortar,

and pestle as well as textile apparels for the successful maintenance of life beyond (Ukim, 2020, Ekanem, 1994).

Undeniably, all the belongings of the deceased Ekong member, from his warheads to the personal items he had used in his lifetime were usually exhibited in the *Nwommo* for his “use” in his life after death. They also included knives, plates and climbing rope - *Ikpò*, Machet, Paddles, spoons. Bones of animals sacrificed at the funeral were also displayed. Unquestionably, “the *Nwommo* shrine which usually contained all personal belongings of the dead Ekong member were testimonies to the prestige, achievements and the status of the ancestor so immortalized” (Udo, 1983). The most impressive aspect of *Nwommo* was its lavish decoration (Ekanem, 1994). Without any fear of contradiction, it can be said that *Nwommo* was an art piece per excellent. *Nwommo* were painted with assortment of colours and materials. They were painted with different colours of clay, charcoal, and a variety of shades of greens from plants colours such as *awa* to mineral colours. Shades of reds were obtained from cam-wood and red iron oxide. Blues were obtained from traditional indigo dyes. The motifs were abstract geometric patterns and semi abstract figures and symbols. A variety of materials were used for its painting. Expressively, these traditional art forms were solely for members of Ekong socio-cultural society whose initiates were all males. However, to create balance Ekwere (2000) posits the existence of *Iso Nduongo*, a similar shrine for dead females of repute in the society. Nevertheless, since the scope of this study does not include *Iso Induongo*, it would not be discussed in this paper.

Nwommo decorations required dexterity and calm disposition for execution of arts works. Ekwere (2000) corroborating Cole and Aniakor (1984) maintains that “of all the artistic decorations, wall paintings were the most common, and the most varied with several regional and original styles as well as scores of motifs combined in hundreds of ways”. The decorative motifs varied from geometric designs, naturalistic to symbolic representations of uli and nsibidi, a picture writing used to communicate messages to the initiates in Ekpe Society (Ukim, 2020).

Materials and Production of Traditional Art

African arts of the Ibibio speaking people are often produced by unlettered artisans. Their conceptual approach to medium of expression, thoughts patterns and forms expectedly are untamed, natural yet eco-friendly. The media for production are often based on material availability within the locale. Wood carvings, were produced in the tropical rain forest where wood is in abundance. This accounted for the Ibibio artists using more of wood for their art. The use of non-robust media (wood, clay, raffia and ochre for colours) for their arts has increasingly affected scholarly works and literary discourse. Nonetheless, in recent years, academics are saturating reputable journals with articles in related areas. The materials required for production were easily accessible within Ibibio environments. They were acquired at little or no cost except for labour. Most of the art forms were produced on site where the materials are taken. While others were partially treated and brought back to home for completion.

Umoanwan and Nyah, (2015) observe that;

The inside walls and ceiling of Nwommo were plaited with bamboo split and decorated with cloth wrapped on the inside of the hut. The cloth was dyed with contrasting colours, cut into desired shapes and sewn on the cloth to be wrapped. In this way, pictures of animals, objects and war instruments were depicted, thus justifying the artistic quality of the applique design and the motifs employed.

Asuquo Akpabio – an Ibibio traditional sculptor, for instance, works in wood. The sculptor's themes in wood and clay resonate contemporary impact of Ibibio traditional art on education, marriage and technology. The philosopher in Figure 3 presupposes the ultimate goal of a typical Ibibio parent regardless of status towards tutelage. His dexterity in transforming a rigid piece of wood to a flexible interlocking chain as depicted in “Chain of Love” Figure 4 is the hall mark of marital bliss expressed in Ibibio carving. Perhaps, the ceramic pot (Figure 5) for refrigerating of water and preservation of food during planting and famine season should remind one of the technologies that were prevalent

in Ibibio traditional societies. The apprentice system was observed as they worked masterfully beside the sculptor (Ogbonna, 2019). This helped in the transfer of knowledge from generation to generation.



Figure 3:
 Artist: Asuquo Apabio
 Title: The Philosopher
 Medium: Wood
 Year: 2019
 Source: Stone Age
 Gallery



Figure 4:
 Artist: Asuquo Apabio
 Title: Chain of Love
 Medium: Wood
 Size: 76x8cm
 Year: 2019
 Source: Stone Age
 Gallery



Figure 5:
 Artist: Asuquo Apabio
 Title: Abang Ndisa
 (Refrigerated Pot)
 Medium: Terracota
 Size: 50x40cm
 Year: 2019
 Source: Stone Age
 Gallery

Peters (2019) shows a contemporary approach to the use of materials. See Fig. 6. These works are executed in cement and they depict traditional rulers and police officers on duty. The works reflect on on the administrative role of the Ibibio traditional art.



Figure 6: Sunday Jack Akpan, Akpan's Works showing traditional Rulers/police officers, Cement Sculpture

Influence of Ibibio *Nwommo* Traditional Art on Contemporary Art

Willet et al (2018) in Ukim, (2020) asserts that traditional African art pieces are significant in various areas namely; entertainment, economic, political, religion or ritual as well as aesthetic. African and indeed Ibibio shrines are built around natural habitats for both indigenous art practice and art collection. Some are found in thick forest, caves, and near waterfalls and running streams. These are captured against ordinary settings that are familiar with the locales. This traditional monument contains earthen wares (*abang ibok*), mask wood sculpture (*iso ekpo*), wall paintings of animals such as *asabo*, *isantim*, graphics symbols (*nsibidi*) and textiles loins (*ukara ekpe* and *ndam*). The Ibibio people refer to it as *Nwommo* - an indigenous hut with the chief priest (*abia idiong*) as the curator or administrator. They use the various sizes of ceramics pots for storage and mixture of herbal medicinal concoctions. Their carvings, masks, paintings, graphics symbols and textiles wrappers were for theatrical spectacle, hunting and body adornment, respectively. Consequently, these performative activities (administration, sacred and artistic) are resources reminiscent of the socio- political values postulated in Willet et al (2018) and Ukim (2020).

Indisputably, *Nwommo* and most Ibibio traditional art forms are near extinction. Reason being what the so called liberated elites within Africa, Nigeria and Ibibio in particular refer as rejected customs. They erroneously view the use of incantations and appeasement of the gods as diabolic and within the context of Christianity, should be excluded. Ekanem (2000) affirms that with the introduction of Christianity, African (Ibibio) traditional culture and the so called rejected arts were destroyed. The motive was to strip these art forms of their original context and, perhaps, assume ownership of the works. This hidden intent is made obvious when some of these works were stolen by the European colonialists for decorating their museums with art works hitherto seen as rejected. Such expansionism by the colonial masters as observed in Andah (1990) later gave rise to African museums being set up in centers that could easily spread the colonial masters' concepts instead of the original setting. Amongst these hubs were schools, churches and colonial administrative towns. Consequently, the Ibibio

shrine (nwomo) was thus treated out of context with bias curators and critic (Ukim, 2020; Ekanem, 2000). Conceivably by implication, such treatment projected the mindset as purely European with no regard to analysis and interpretations from owners of the culture. This pretentious effort arising from the domination of the Ibibio and the Africans at large empowered the colonist, not Africans to determine the unusual and strange aspects of what were referred to as the ways and customs of the natives (Andah, 1990).

African culture and specifically the Ibibio ethos and norms do not need foreigners to set standards for acceptability or otherwise. The Europeans are strangers in Africa and intruder. Therefore, they could hardly collate, curate and exhibit Ibibio cultural identity and distinctiveness as the custodians would. African symbols and motifs are not necessarily for rituals, rather they are dependable resource base for art production in all the genres. The emergence of the Europeans in Ibibio land witnessed the decline of Ibibio people and their traditional art. However, their presence has also enhanced the Ibibio people due to the establishment of schools, hospital and churches. The Ibibio are still known for their artistic dexterity and have drawn upon previous works to produce works with contemporary ethos. Therefore, a pretentious approach to label Ibibio shrine arts as rejected amounts to a denial of one's cultural rights of expressions through the visual arts. The inference drawn is reminiscent of the exhibition of the rejected in France.

***Nwommo* Traditional Art as Exhibition of the Rejected**

Exhibition of Rejected Art literally translated from French "*Salon des Refusés*" This was a case of non-conformist or anti-art, a term that may be applied to various concepts and attitudes that reject prior definitions of art and question art in general. The term "Salon des Refusés", an art exhibition held in Paris, in 1863 to display paintings that had been excluded by the selection agency of the "Paris Salon" reechoes the Ibibio *Nwommo* permanent exhibition. The Paris Salon was the official annual exhibition of French Art. The French Academy, a jury or committee of reputable, conservative artists, drawn from members of the same school were the organizers. Their terms of reference, amongst others, were to approve acceptable artworks or reject works that were

regarded as offensive. The Academy expected true- to-life realistic paintings, free from any trace of brush strokes. The works needed to be absolutely polished to meet the Academy's criteria for selection. Art works considered unconventional in subject matter and style were judged adversely. This means that objectivity in selection of artworks was relegated to the background. The question of what determines the essence of art became inappropriate in the selection process. In view of the stringent rules, in 1863 many artworks could not make the salon due to rejection by the committee. Less than 2,218 representing 44.36% artworks out of 5,000 were accepted.

The French Academy was the traditional proponents of orthodox art which were known as academic. Therefore the majority of the jury voted against artworks which were unconventional both in subject matter and style. A rejected work was bad news for artists whose work was not selected for the show which provided opportunity in the French Art Calendar for him to display his works to dealers, art critics, writers and collectors (Salon des Refusés, n.d.). There were series of complaints. Consequently, in order to allow the public to judge the merits of the rejected works for themselves, Emperor Napoleon III ordered a new exhibition to be organized. Thus, it was the resulting protest over denied opportunities to attract buyers, critics and gallery representation that made the emperor to open a separate exhibition for the rejected artists. The emperor was sensitive to the plight of his people including the Artists. The Salon des Refusés drew crowd more than a thousand per day (Salon des Refusés, n.d.) and recorded unprecedented success besides giving rise to avant-garde artists and art movements. The assemblage of found objects as some works of Marcel Duchamp of Dada movement such as "The Urinary" was accepted as revolutionary forms of art. Significantly, their protest yielded good result as it gave birth the like of Manet, Renoir, Picasso, Braque, Degas and Cezanne. It also birthed the avant-garde group and ushered in creativity, originality and more freedom of expression in the visual arts as the Salon was held to show works of innovative artists. These were series of the first sensitive attention to the impressionist group who were non-conformist.

Ibibio *Nwommo* art like The Exhibition of the Rejected represents a break out with original concepts from creative minds. They are peculiar and context driven art forms that reflect indigenous art practice. Their standards for acceptance or rejection are ethnic based. The implication thereof is the fact that Ibibio *Nwommo* traditional exhibition has been projected in the limelight with scholarly recognition. Consequently, the Ibibio socio-economic, socio-political and socio-cultural values are exhibitions with unique narratives akin to ‘Exhibition of the Rejected’ in France. Their perceptions and values although impressionistic and archaic in approach are tried and tested reforms which transcends contemporary restructurings through visual arts exhibitions.

Conclusion

Premised on the discourse of Ibibio traditional exhibition, the paper observes that *Nwommo* display is a permanent exhibition with unique narratives. It is significant in administrative, socio-economic, political, educational and technological matters. It also plays dependable role in communication and preservation of the cultural values and norms of the Ibibio people. The Ibibio traditional art adopts a non-conformist approach, a case similar to the exhibitions of the rejected in France. In view of the artworks on display at *Nwommo* and the nature in which they are showcased, the writers of this paper make bold as to say, *Nwommo* art is important just as the French Exhibition of the Rejected for three reasons, as observed in Salon des Refusés 1863, (n.d.), namely; i) it undermines the infallibility of academic traditions; ii) it highlights the need for alternative “unofficial exhibition” to prevent highly conservative academic bodies from dominating both aesthetics and public taste in art and; iii) it makes new art forms and styles (Avant-garde art) legitimate. It therefore, suggests that *Nwommo* can be viewed as an art form as well as an exhibition platform – a gallery and a museum of a sort. This days, the term “Salon des Refusés” is used to denote any art exhibition that displays works rejected by a juried art show (Salon des Refusés 1863, n.d.). Similarly, today in Ibibioland, *Nwommo* is rejected. Its exhibits are equally rejected in ignorance thought. Therefore, the writers of this paper reason that if *Nwommo* is advocated for and exhibited accordingly; it could turn out to give similar results as did Salon des Reject of 1863 in France. It should be noted that

the rejected stone has always been the chief corner stone. Since this art resonates reforms through creative outlet, the paper recommends synergies and collaborations in place of outright rejection.

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ORAL INTERVIEW

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