

Environment and Style: An Analysis of Abamwa's Work Since 1991-2011

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Abstract

This study investigates the life and style of some selected works of Oghenekevwe Elizabeth Abamwa. It attempts to highlight on the origins, historical progress and stylistic development of the artist, for the past twenty years. It also emphasizes the sex of the artist and her contributions to her artistic section. The methods used to obtain information are through the Biography, Formalistic, Iconographic, and Psycho-analytical methods. The artists, who had undergone a lot of hardship during her formative years forged ahead to succeed in both artistic and academic levels. Often seen to be very quiet and introverted, she attributes her achievements to the adherence of her traditional up-bringing. Her environment has being instrumental to the large repertoire of forms and styles evident in her work. Influences from the environment are not a new trend in art, right from the palaeolithic to the modern times artist in diverse ways have continued to be influenced by the environment.

Introduction

The environment which comprises the natural world where people, animals and plants live has being a recurrent theme amongst artist worldwide (Oxford, 2010: 491).

A good number of artist being influenced by the large repertoire of forms, derive themes from the environment. It must however be noted that, the role the environment plays is not new. For instance, the palaeolithic Western artist derived influences from their surroundings. A few examples can be seen in their cave paintings and sculptures in the round (fig 1 and 2). Even amongst the Neolithic Egyptian culture, the environment is also represented (fig3).



Fig. 1. Chinese Horse, Lascaux, Dordogne, France, c. 15,000-13,000 B.C. Paint on limestone rock (1.42 m) long. Courtesy of L.S. Adams in A History of Western Art, 2001



Fig.2. Left Section of the Lion Panel. Chauvet Cave, Ardeche Valley, France, c 25,000-17,000 B.C. Black pigment on limestone wall. Courtesy of L.S. Adams in A History of Western Art, 2001

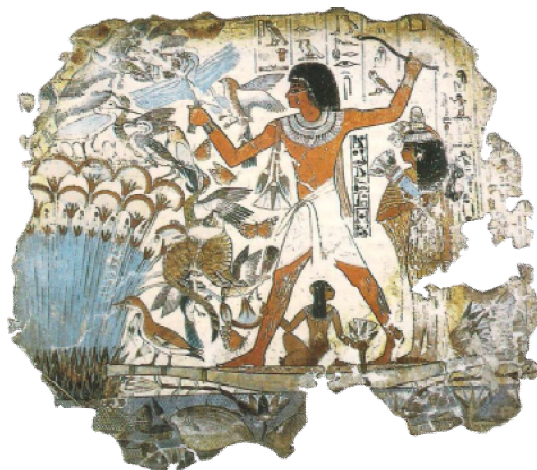


Fig.3. Nebamun hunting birds, from the tomb of Nebamun, Thebes Egypt, c. 1390-1352 B.C. British Museum, London. Courtesy of L.S. Adams in *A History of Western Art*, 2001

Through-out Western art, from the paleolithic to the modern times, themes and forms on their immediate surroundings have been constantly depicted.

In Nigeria, the case is not different as the use of environmental forms and themes are common practice. These forms are noticeable in works of both traditional and modern artist. The traditional artist adopts themes, styles and forms from natural settings. Like the Nok terracotta's which reflect both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic attributes (fig 4). The Igbo-Ukwu, Ife, Owo, Benin, Tsoede, Esie, Akwanshi and many other artistic traditions, all depict themes and forms of environmental dimensions.

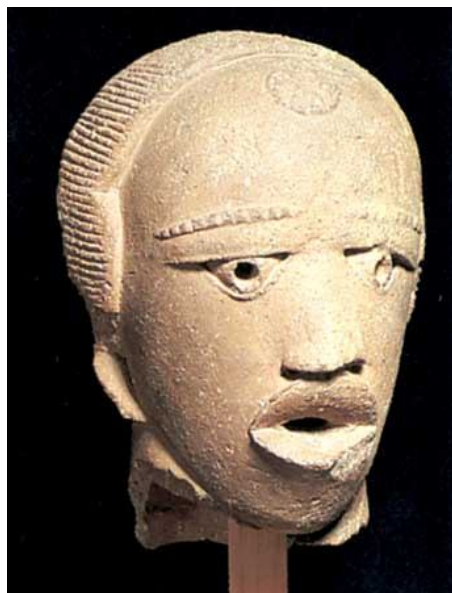


Fig.4. Jemea head. Nok culture. 500BC-200AD. Terracotta (1.9cm). Retrieved from: www.googleimages/nokart.com

Modern Nigerian artists are still depicting motifs, themes and stylistic attributes from the environment to seek new ideas. These depictions are derived particularly from plants, animals and human features.

It is pertinent to note at this juncture, that women also play a significant role in the depiction and adaptation of environmental features into their art forms. This study examines one of such women. One who has dedicated almost all of her life to the study and practice of Ceramics who transcends the ethos of greatness as her large repertoire of wares depict features derived from her immediate surroundings and childhood experiences. Abamwa Elizabeth Oghenekevwe is that ceramist.

This study, however focuses on how the artist has being able to integrate environmental traits into her work between 1991 and 2011. It also examines using the biographic, iconographic, psychoanalytic and formalistic methods in understanding the artist life. More so, the origin, development and contributions of Abamwa in the field of ceramics would also be determined.

Methodologies

The following are the varied approaches used to analyse the life and works of Abamwa;

The Biographic approach attempts to interpret works as expressions of the artist, lives and personalities (Adams 2001:10) Arnold (2004:5) stresses that biographical histories work well when evidence of youth, maturity and old age are evident in the artist work. However, Adams believes that this method emphasises authority and can be applied to iconography by using the artist, life as an underlying “text”. (Adams, 2001:10).

Iconography is an approach introduced by Erwin Panofsky (Adams, 1996:36). It emphasizes the interpretation, classification, description of works of art. Adams (2001:9) claims that it deals with content over form, in individual works of art. Arnold postulates that it is the art of representation by pictures or images, which may or may not have a symbolic as well as apparent or superficial meaning. (2004:9)

Arnold (2004:86) defines psycho-analysis as the study of the unconscious mind, which was championed by Sigmund Freud. Adams (2001:11) sees psycho-analysis like art history, because it deals with imagery, history and creativity. It is not surprising however; that the imagery found in this approach can be found in dreams, jokes, slips of tongue and neurotic symptoms.

Formalism is an approach which grew out of the nineteenth century aesthetic Art for Art’s sake. In formalism, a work of art is viewed independently from its context, functional or content (Adams, 2001:9). In this case, an attempt would be made to study and isolate the formal elements in Abamwa’s works.



Map of Delta State Showing Ughelli South

Life and Artistic Development

This remarkable artist Oghenekevwe Elizabeth Abamwa (b.1965), hails from Ughelli South of Delta State, in Nigeria. Born in Warri, to Grace Abamwa, she was only eight years old, when her father died. She was however left alone with her mother who struggled hard to send her to school. Since her mother was still very young after the death of her husband, she remarried Vincent Anuita and had three other children for him.

As a child, Abamwa obtained her primary education from Baptist Primary School Warri. She claims that... “I was interested in art at a very tender age”... This passion led her to become one of the best Students in Geography, during her secondary education. Young Abamwa attended Ibru College at Agbarha-otor from 1976 to 1979, where she was tutored by Simon Erukanure, who, later became her colleague, in Delta State University, Abraka. Between 1980 and 1982, she studied at Evwreni teachers training college, now Model Secondary School, Evwreni. In 1985, she studied and obtained an N.C.E (National Certificate of Education) in Warri, in 1988, she attended Ambrose Ali University Ekpoma(A.A.U), Abraka Campus, where she graduated in 1991, with a degree in Fine Art Education.

... “Art is about the culture and values of my people”...

Oghenekevwe Elizabeth Abamwa



Oghenekevwe Elizabeth Abamwa, Self portrait.

The Nsukka Experience

Between 1991 and 1992, she participated in the compulsory National Youth Service Corps (N.Y.S.C) programme, at Akwa Ibom State. There she won the best corps price of the year. That was the same year she made her *citadel of knowledge* in 1991(Fig.5)



Fig. 5. Citadel of Knowledge, 1991.
Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria
(15cmx20cm) Glazed Clay

This piece is a clear representation of the artist drive for knowledge cushioned with environmental forms. It illustrates a human being in a curved up position studying. The object being studied which is a book is systematically placed on the stylised legs of the figure. To her, the essence of this work signifies research in an academic environment.

Her quest for academic excellence saw no bounds as she later went to University of Nigeria, Nsukka, between 1993 and 1995 to get a Master's in Ceramics. She soon started her teaching career, to be precise, on the third of July, 1996. Following her appointment as a lecturer in Delta State University, in 2003, she went back to Nsukka (University of Nigeria) to obtain a PhD in art education which she completed in 2010.

Since then, she has been teaching and practicing Ceramics and is currently on another Studio programme at PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) level in ceramics, at the University of Port Harcourt.

Abamwa's Traditional background led her to view art from a more holistic dimension. To her, art is very important in humanistic development as she strongly believes that every individual has expressive tendencies within them. Thus buttressing Adams (2001:1) views that;

...Art is a vital and Persistent Aspect of Human Experience...

The artist delights in using African Motifs. She claims that most of her works are derived largely from her Urhobo cultural foundations. In her words, she states that... **'the beliefs', norms and values of the Urhobo people, form, one of the major bases of my work'**... she sees these influences emanating from the kind of education she received in her early days, as well as the cultural values engraved on her, during her formative periods.

Analysis of Some Works

Abamwa's work comes in diverse techniques. While some are thrown, others are hand built, in plaque forms and depictions of other artistic dimensions. The motifs are mostly derived from her culture and the environment with minor Nigerian and Western influences. Of the six works to be analyzed, the first piece is one of her most appealing works with environmental features.



Fig. 6. The Whale, 1991.
Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria
(8cmx30cm) Glazed Clay

She explains that this work *the whale* (Fig.6) is highly creative, as she attempts to integrate environmental themes with human expressions. Look how she systematically merged zoomorphic features with anthropomorphic attributes. Thus, creating forms of unity between nature and her surroundings. Using Western glazing techniques, the choice of glaze has added colour and depth to the Whales fins. She sees the whales as a depiction of male and female relationships.



Fig. 7. Ikoro and Igben. 1993.
Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria
(48cmx46cm) Glazed Clay

Another excellent example of the artist work is *Ikoru and Igben* (Fig.7). Designed in form of a Calabash, the artist claims that the concept and composition of *Ikoru* derives from a calabash worn by influential women who want to show class and wealth of their husbands in some Urhobo societies. She argues that *Ikoru* is like a hand bangle cut into slices. In fig.7, the pot's ribs bulge out in rhythmic dimensions. The rim is turned, while the body of the pot is hand built. The quality of the pottery is slowly transforming as the artist, attempts to fuse environmental traits into her cultural forms. The engravings on the pot are called *Igben*. They are derived from the natural world. These key like engravings are commonly worn by circumcised ladies and women. The artist stresses that the pot is glazed in two colours, blue and white. Blue symbolises love while white purity. The symbolism of these colours are derived from Western concepts. The brown colours dotted on the pot are a reaction experienced during glazing. Composition wise except for the inclusion of the handles, it is reminiscent of the *Venus of Willendorf* (Fig.8).



Fig.8. Venus of Willendorf, Austria, c. 25,000-21,000 B.C.
Limestone (115cm) high. Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna,
courtesy of L.S. Adams in A History of Western Art, 2001.

The body seems to comprise three segments, the upper, middle and lower parts. The structure of the pot is not new, as far as the 4th century B.C. in Greece, potters made similar pots of such magnitude. Sieber believes that these pottery forms in Greece were not intended to be vases, but had different shapes and functions (Sieber, 2007:11).



Fig.9. Achilles and Ajax playing a Board Game, 540-530 B.C
Terracotta (6.1cm) high, courtesy of L.S. Adams in A History
of Western Art, 2001.

The Greeks were considered masters of pottery building and design. As regards their designs, they incorporated their artistic ideals and environmental traits on the face of their forms. So, it is not just about pottery but pottery as a medium of historical preservation. For it was from these pottery designs that Greek paintings were preserved and there after interpreted as Fig.9 shows *Achilles and Ajax playing draught*. One significant factor about Greek pottery is that, it shows the Greek skills in painting as well as the ability to juxtapose traits from their surroundings.

In 1994, while Abamwa was still in Nsukka, she made *Ubigho* Fig.10.



Fig.10. *Ubigho* (cowrie) 1994. 38x35cm, Clay and Glaze, Abraka Delta State University.

Ubigho which means Cowry is a glazed ceramic piece. Abamwa confirms that *Ubigho* is a medium through which truths are revealed in Urhobo culture. In the past, cowries were used traditionally for financial transactions and ritual purposes. They were also derived from our surroundings. A critical look at this piece seems to assume the form of a stylized woman wrapped up with an elegant cloak. Only the head is hidden from our view. The ability of the artist to juxtapose the functions of *Ubigho* as a currency and necklace within our modern sensibilities, as an elegant woman, emphasizes her artistic ability at transferring environmental expressions on to her work.



Fig.11. *Ogbon and Orhue* (lampshade) 1994, 54x60cm, Clay and Glaze, Abraka, Delta State University.

Her ability to transfuse environmental traits into her work was achieved also in this piece called *Ogban and Orhue* (fig.11). Using natural depictions, cultural concepts and local materials Abamwa was able to create a lampshade of traditional dimensions. In Urhobo culture in the words of the artist, this lampshade is used to announce the presence of a Chief who has just being initiated. She also stresses that it is also part of the dressing of a Chief, either male or female. Thus, the functions of the *Ogban* and *Orhue* are polyvalent.



Fig.12. Uge (fish trap) 1995. 40cmx55cm,
Clay and Gloze, Abraka, Delta State University.

The environmental traits on Abamwa's works are also reflected on how she combines traditional forms with artistic concepts. For instance, the fish trap in Urhobo culture known as *Uge*(fig.12) takes the form of vase. She claims that although it is a fish trap it has other functionalities. Hence, it can be used as a symbol of safety by traditional medicine practitioners to detect all evil persons in a family as well as an *Orise* stand in the altar of God. This piece which was executed in 1995 during her Nsukka days is in form of vase-like basket. At first, it looks like a vase with straw-like effects, and then gradually takes the shape of a trophy. The *Uge* is divided into four registers as well as consisting of a shoulder, body and base.



Fig.13. Irie (lines) 1998,20cmx30cm,
Clay and Glaze, Abraka, Delta State University.

Another remarkable pot produced by the artist in 1998 is *Irie*(fig.13). In Urhobo culture *Irie* is associated with traditional practitioners and herbalists who use it invocation. *Irie* simply stands for lines in Urhobo. Seven lines are inscribed at the base of the pot which is connected to the root of the deity's powers. Abamwa claims that when in traditional settings these seven lines are drawn the presence of the spirit which has being invoked, appears. It is after this that the priest reveals certain happenings to his client either as regard illness, misfortunes and many more.

In 1999, when Democracy began to find its feet in the Nigerian polity, Abamwa continued to depict and transfuse materials found in her area with her style and concept. This was when she made the *Ovwe*(fig.14), The *Ovwe* produced by the artist is in form of a thrown vase with raffia like lines dropping down the vase's neck. Abamwa explained that despite its environmental tendencies the work is highly symbolic. She reveals that lines depicted on the vase are used to ward off evil spirits, from places. To buttress her point, she stresses that the raffia is used extensively in traditional Urhobo shrines, as shrine curtains or coverings. Although, the vase is not glazed, the treatment and structure given to it, is dramatic. Here, it shows the intense belief in culture and efforts by the artist to juxtapose traditional ideologies as well as modern technicalities with environmental depictions as motifs into her work.



Fig.14. Ovwe (Raffia) 1999, fired clay (30cmx20cm)
Abraka, Delta State University

In spite of these traits, the artist continues to link her art with her up-bringing. Thus supporting Gombrich's view that art means very different things, in different times and places (Gombrich; 2000:15) Apparently, Abamwa was portraying herself on pottery, what she executes is a prophecy of determination in her career. All the strings of the raffia signify her efforts and the length she goes in search of knowledge.

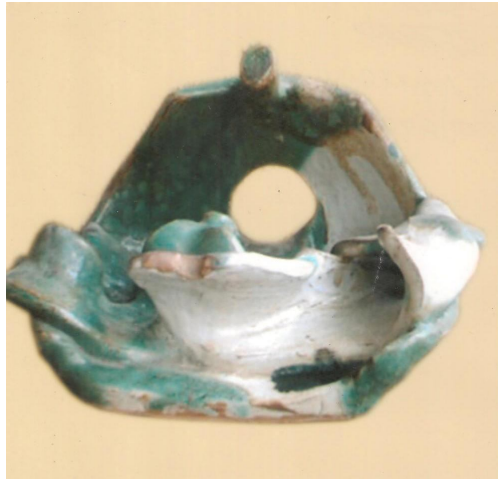


Fig.15. Oppressor (2003)
Glazed clay. 15cmx20cm

By 2003, Abamwa went back to University of Nigeria, Nsukka to pursue a doctorate in Art Education. It was during this period that she made the *Oppressor* (fig. 15). Her *Oppressor* was a visual metaphor of politicians or persons in charge of organization or even the male sex. It shows a male figure that has overwhelmed a group of individuals. She seemed to be depicting the political activities in her surroundings.

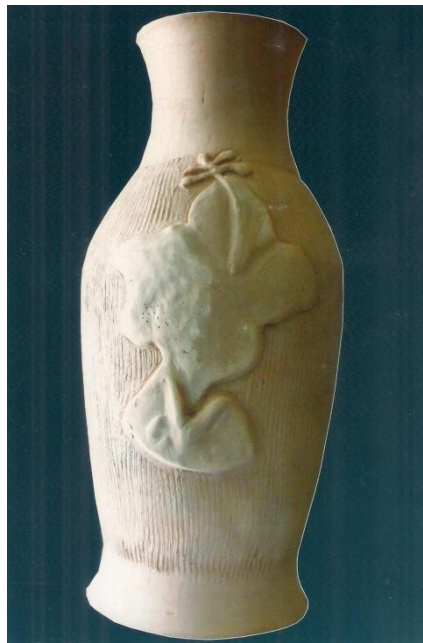


Fig.16. Hibiscus flower (2011)
Fired clay (30cm-20cm)
Abraka, Delta State University.

Between 2004-2011, the artist has continued to represent both works with environmental influences as well as genre activities around her. In the work the *Hibiscus flower*, (fig16) she attempts to transfuse the natural colour of the flower with the significance same colour in Urhobo land. She claims that the Urhobo people have great respect for Red. That red colour is often used by trado-medical practitioners, in festivals and for other ritual activities. The implication is to show to the people that as insects are attracted to the flower so spirits are also attracted to the flower.

Abamwa's pottery form also shows her ability to transfuse elements from her surroundings unto her work. Her dexterity and skill in pot production is of course a welcome relief in the area of human capital development.

Conclusion

It is indeed evident, from this study, that the environment has played major role in the conceptual development of art styles in Nigeria. These art forms could either be in paintings, sculpture, or Ceramics, Textiles, Graphics, just to mention a few. We have seen how the artist was able to synthesize designs from the environment with her ideas to come out with master pieces. Indeed, her surrounding played a major role in her conceptual choice of production. Although, for decades, emphasizes on other artistic areas have not being given adequate attention. Of recent, art history has evolved new ways and methods of interpreting works of art from Ceramics, Graphics, Textiles, Metal design and many others, as they now form part of the art historical narratives. Perhaps, we may consider the fact that art history just like any other subject, is still evolving. In the twenty-first century, adaptations from ones environment have become more common in art practices. It is not as if the trend is new, it is just that, recently, it seems to have taken a new dimension in the whole of Africa. The reason is simply to identify and establish some form of continuity, maybe consciously or unconsciously. So, we can conveniently say that, the environmental influence seen in Modern art forms is a kind of mixture of Early, Traditional, and Modern elements. Since, most African cultures have the capacity to retain and accommodate past and recent activities all at the same time frame. Perhaps, this explains how the artist was able to adopt and pull from the available influences surrounding her.

The condition of this artist has shown that in spite of her profession as an art educationist and a ceramist, she still incorporates environmental elements into her art forms.

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