



YEMISI SHYLLON
MUSEUM OF ART
PAN-ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

Artwork Information Sheet **23**

ERABOR EMOKPAE'S IYA ABIKU



Iya Abiku, 1977, Wood, 95 x 39 x 39cm © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University

INTRODUCTION

Erhabor Emokpae was a Sculptor, painter and graphic artist of deep intellectual reasoning. He is also known for his contribution to the planning and execution of the Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) held in Lagos, Nigeria in 1977.

His work “Iya Abiku” discussed in this paper was also exhibited at this historical festival. The work’s title; ‘Iya Abiku’ is a Yoruba phrase that refers to a mother of a spirit child. The Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art is proud to have it as part of its collection.

THE ARTIST

Born in Benin City on May 9, 1935, Erhabor Emokpae hails from Irede local government area in Edo State. He is regarded as one of the pioneers of modern art in Nigeria. He was the son of Late Chief Ogieve Emokpae who was then a titled Chief in his community (Nzoiwu 2014). His first interaction with sculpture was in his childhood in the workshops of the Benin Guild of carvers whom he found around him.

Emokpae started his education at Government School Benin and had his tertiary education at Technical College, Yaba now Yaba College of Technology. He also apprenticed privately with a graphic artist working at Kingsway; a department store in Lagos (Je ge de , n.d.). After his tertiary education in 1953, he went to the Ministry of Information where he worked first as an intern, then he became a full time staff in 1954.

In the same year, he was transferred to Enugu to also work for the Ministry of Information and in 1957, he got married. In 1958, he left the Ministry of Information Enugu and moved to Lagos where he got employed in the West African Publicity as the Creative Visual Artist in 1958 (Nzoiwu, 2014). By Independence, he was one of the major modern artists in the country. He helped organize the Eastern

Nigeria Festival of Arts (1956- 59) and served as the secretary for the newly founded Society of Nigerian Artists and the Lagos Arts Council (Guardian Nigeria News - Nigeria and World News" 2021).

Early 1966, he was promoted to the position of the Senior Creative Advertisement Visual Artist and in 1973 to the position of Creative Director. Much later, he founded his own company called ASA Productions Limited where he continued preparing graphic content for customers and employed other people to work for him.

Some of his well-known works were for the 1977 Festival of Arts AND Culture (FESTAC) and the National Theatre building, Lagos. He made the replica of the 16th century Benin Ivory mask, used as the emblem for FESTAC 77. A mask which over the years has become an emblem of African and Black art, was initially worn by Benin kings as an ornament at royal ancestral ceremonies (Guardian Nigeria News - Nigeria and World News" 2021).

Erhabor is known for his constant depiction and reference to spirit forms and ideas. He constantly engaged with the concept of duality in his works which he defined as “an attempt to explain fact by reference to two co-existing principles-positive and negative- and that throughout the system of creation, the two opposites permeate the entire spectrum” (Je ge de , n.d.).

He held several solo exhibitions in Nigeria, Germany and Brazil. He also designed the maces of University of Benin (UNIBEN) and University of Lagos (UNILAG). He has received the national honor of Officer of the Order of the Niger (OON) for his contribution to the development of art in Nigeria and Africa. In February 1984, he died and was buried in his hometown, Benin, Edo State (Guardian Nigeria News - Nigeria and World News" 2021).

THE ARTWORK



Fig 1.1 Iya Abiku, 1977, Wood, 95 x 39 x 39cm © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art

Figure 1 shows the art piece, “Iya Abikun” which has a rather long neck and slopes gently upwards to a round head. The eyes are little slits which rest on two bulging oval shapes. The curve from above the eyes to the nose forms the brows and the nose. The mouth is formed with a slight dash on a little carved mound beneath the nose. There is a seeming circle beneath the shoulders which has a miniature figure which is the exact form of the larger figure only that it is hollow like a keyhole. The little hollow that holds the figure is textured to a rough finish.

In Yoruba, “Iya Abikun” is the descriptive title for the mother of any other-worldly child who makes cyclic

journeys into this world- a child who chooses his mother, and dies at will, only to be born again and again (Je ge de , n.d.). “Abiku” is the Igbo equivalent of “Ogbanje” a spirit child. There is a widely held belief that when some children were born in the past, they realized with their supernatural powers that they would not be able to leave a mark in this world because of the tough competition in the world. Upon this realization, they decide to die and go back to heaven but when they get there, they are prevented from entering because it was discovered that their lack of zeal to struggle was the reason they had returned. To discourage this form of behavior, they were prevented from entering heaven and told to return to the world. In a bid to avoid being regarded as non-achievers in life, they formed a society in the spirit world with a selected forest as their abode (Asakitikpi 2021).

They carry out their activities on big trees like the baobab, and since they are spirit beings they cannot be seen with the normal eye. They have playful activities in the forest and every now and then, may decide to be born into the world just to experience it a little after which they would die and return to their spirit abode. They take an oath to mark their comradeship with their other spirit brethren and when coming to the world, have a plan of what they would do, and the date of return to the spirit world. They usually choose a significant day for their death; it could be their birthday or the birthday of a family member. This is usually before their fifth birthday (Asakitikpi 2021). This does not mean that *Ogbanje* children do not live beyond their 5th birthday. Some live till adulthood and die on the day of their marriage. The reason behind choosing such a date is that the child would be the center of attraction and what could not be achieved through hard work is achieved through death. Afterwards, the cycle is repeated usually to be reborn into the same family. Tales like this which could be regarded as myths, are nevertheless tied to the beliefs of the people which in turn shape their behaviors. While in a typical cultural

setting, some parents would engage the assistance of a medicine man to stop this trend of occurrence in their families, others would employ persuasion by giving the child such names that would persuade them to stay. There are examples such as “*Kokuma* (he will not die again); *Malomo* (don’t die again) among the Yorubas; *Onwubiko* (death, I implore you) among the Igbos; and *Akpoyama* (the world is good) among the Urhobos” (Asakitikpi 2021).

The fact that such names exist in some cultures suggests that the *Ogbanje* phenomenon has been culturally defined and accepted and these names are given to the children to appease them to stay. However, if these pleas are not effective, the dead child is mutilated by a medicine man. In the hope that the kindred spirits would reject the child due to the ugliness that would result from the mutilation (Asakitikpi 2021). This sculptural piece which is focused on the mother of such a child, perhaps alludes to the sufferings and trials that these mothers go through. The hollow figure in the sculpture could represent the child who constantly comes and goes leaving a hole in the mother’s heart.

CONCLUSION

Through this work, “we have an understanding of the artist’s preoccupation with dualism, as well as his exploration of the sequences of life and death, positive and negative; the inevitable dialogue that orders cosmic relationships” (Je ge de , n.d.). The artist’s execution of this belief in a sculptural form also portrays his concern and interest in the culture and customs held widely in his environment.

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