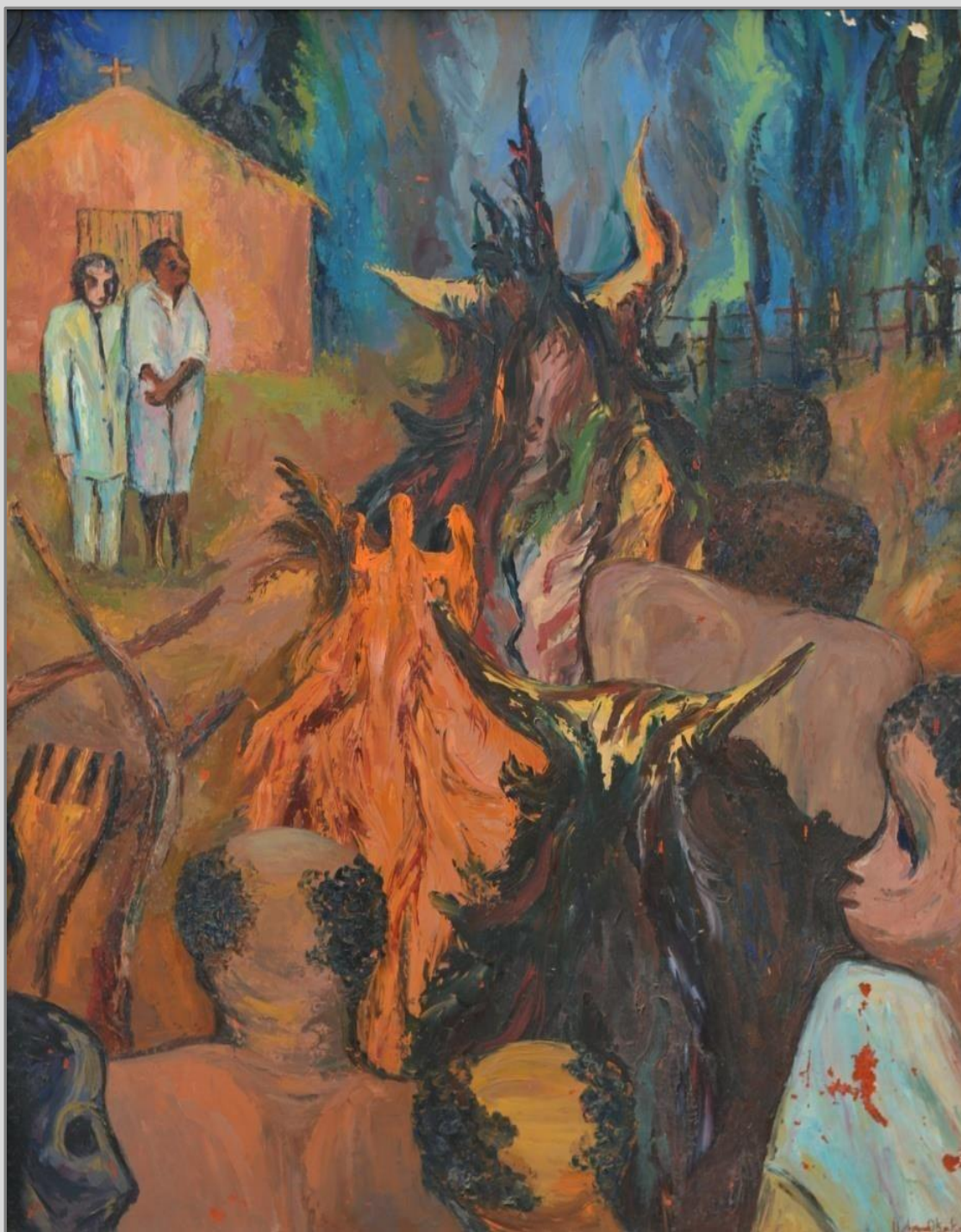




YEMISI SHYLLON  
MUSEUM OF ART  
PAN-ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

# Artwork Information Sheet **05**



## UCHE OKEKE'S CONFLICT

***Conflict (After Achebe)***, 1965, Oil on board, 123 x 91cm  
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## UCHE OKEKE

The Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art (YSMA), Pan-Atlantic University, has in its collection, ten works by one of Nigeria's most celebrated artists, Uche Okeke (1933-2016). One of such works, occupying a prominent place in YSMA, is an oil painting produced in 1965 titled "*Conflict (After Achebe)*". The great relevance of this artist in Nigerian art history and the significance of this work are analysed in subsequent lines.

### OKEKE'S JOURNEY THROUGH ARTS

Uche Okeke was born in 1933 in Eastern Nigeria Nimo, Anambra State. At an early age, he became acquainted with traditional Igbo folklore and traditions at home and school. His ardent love for the arts can be traced to his mother who was skilful in "*uli*" - a form of body and wall painting popular among the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria. Okeke's mother introduced him to Igbo folktales and encouraged him to develop and explore his artistic talents as a child. Being his mother's protégée, Okeke explored the Igbo folklore and traditions and learnt the basics of "*Uli*". Continuously experimenting, his drawings and paintings acquired a distinct style.

Before his admission to study Fine Arts at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology (NCAST), Zaria, in 1958, he exhibited taxidermy works during a field society meeting at Jos Museum. He also worked with Bernard Fagg in the preparation and presentation of Nigerian Drawings and Paintings. Besides, Okeke had a solo exhibition of drawings and paintings in Jos and Kaduna, Northern Nigeria.

While in NCAST, Okeke founded the Zaria Art Society alongside other undergraduate art students. Among them were Bruce Onobrakpeya, Demas Nwoko, Yusuf Grillo, Simon Okeke, Jimoh Akolo, Oseloka Osadebe and Emmanuel Odita. Together, they embarked on a retrospective tour of their indigenous cultures to fuse local content with western techniques. Uche Okeke called this fusion

"Natural Synthesis". Among other interests, "Members of the Zaria Art Society were concerned with the increasing influence of foreign cultural values and traditions on art in Nigeria, and the consequent erasure or denial of local artistic traditions and ideas" (Ndubuisi, 2018).

Between 1958 and 1959, Okeke produced a series of drawings which he called *Nok Suite* "drawing from his Northern Nigerian experience, particularly at the Jos National Museum where he worked" (Chinedu, 2010). The sculptural pieces on display at the museum inspired him because of their unique abstract style. Then he produced the *Oja Suite* Series, "*a superlative combination of abstract drawings of various flora forms and human faces in Uli style*" (Chinedu, 2010). In 1959, he opened a cultural centre at Kafanchan, in Northern Nigeria, which later became Asele Institute, Nimo.

In 1962, Okeke travelled to West Germany for a fellowship sponsored by the German government. He was attached to the Franz Mayer Studio, a factory in Munich that specialised in mosaic and the production of stained-glass windows. While in Germany, he visited several theatres, museums, art galleries and art schools to advance his knowledge of arts and culture. Upon joining the factory, "the factory was involved in a contract to replace several stained glass and mosaic doors and windows destroyed in Germany during the Second World War" (Chinedu, 2010). He explored another series of works which he called the Munich Suite while in Germany which was very stylized and displayed the linear flow of his "*Uli*" experimentation.

On his return to Nigeria in 1963, he moved to Enugu and became the Director of the *Mbari Art Centre* in Enugu. He occupied this position until the beginning of the Biafran Civil War in 1967. Two members of the Zaria Art Society, Oseloka Osadebe and Ogbonnaya Nwagbara were part of the Centre.

The year 1965 was remarkable for Uche Okeke, as he made the work "*Conflict (After Achebe)*" and



returned to painting, making large scale paintings with renewed strength after experimenting in “Uli” motifs for a long while. These paintings “rather than continue to invoke the lyrical poetry of Uli line...reveal short, nervous strokes, heavily worked surfaces and awkwardly drawn figures” (Agulu, 2015).

In 1970, he joined the art department of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka where he taught until his retirement in the 1980s. As head of department at the university, he updated the department’s curriculum and introduced the PhD and Masters programmes. He encouraged the students to study indigenous designs and motifs hence the polarization of the “Uli” motif which became very synonymous with the “Nsukka Art School” at a point in history.

## MIRRORING ACHEBE’S NARRATIVE



Fig 1.1 Uche Okeke (1962), *The Confrontation*. Illustration in Chinua Achebe’s, *Things Fall Apart*, London: Heinemann, 1962 (Reprint ed. 1989), p. 120

Two years before Nigeria’s independence in 1960, Chinua Achebe (1930-2013), then a young Nigerian writer, wrote *Things Fall Apart*, a novel that had an impact on Nigeria’s sense of national identity. Achebe confronted vividly, the complexities of the colonial encounter. The first edition of the book (1958) was one of the titles in Heinemann’s *African*

*Writer Series* and included illustrations by the British artist David Carabine. For the second edition of Achebe’s *Masterpiece* (1962), Uche Okeke produced ink and pen drawings illustrating some crucial passages of the novel. The contrast between Carabine and Okeke’s use of Achebe’s narrative is notable. Okeke’s visual language and Achebe’s literary language had a common ideological vision of how the arts should develop in postcolonial Africa. Okeke and Achebe met in the late 1950s.

Referring to Uche Okeke and the members of the Art Society in Zaria, Achebe notes that these were years when, “*they were wondering, ‘What do we do with the arts?’ And people like me were wondering, ‘What do we do with literature?’ It was a question of language. What language would be appropriate to describe what is going on in our midst?*” (Clarke 2007). “*It would be necessary to mention here that Chinua Achebe, upon completing Things Fall Apart in 1958, had consulted Uche Okeke for the illustrations and Okeke simply translated the Igbo Society into folklorist images especially portraying the anxiety that visited the Igbo nation with the arrival of the Christian missionaries*” (Nwofor, n.d.).

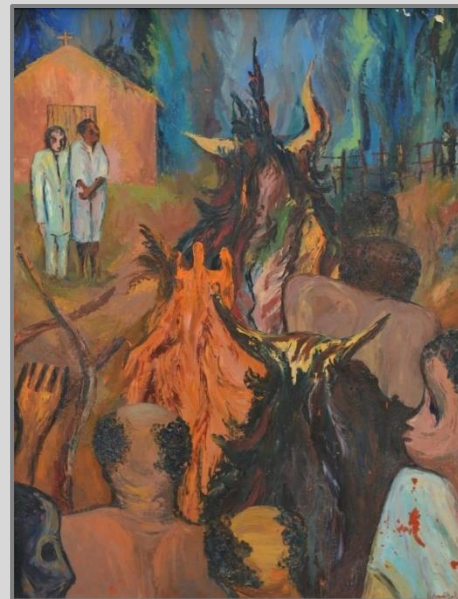


Fig1.2 Uche Okeke (1965), *Conflict (After Achebe)*, Oil on Board. 123 X 91cm. © Yemisi Shullon Museum

The painting titled “*Conflict (After Achebe)*” follows almost exactly the drawing done three years earlier. Only a few minor differences can be observed: there are six elders in the painting, while eight appear in the drawing. In the painting, Okeke following Achebe’s text includes a fence demarcating the compound of the church; the size of the missionary and interpreter relative to the masquerades and crowd is smaller in the painting as if to emphasize the balance of power in the scene. In Achebe’s story, after the convert, Enoch unmasks an Egwugwu—one of the nine masquerades representing the ancestral spirits of the nine villages of Umuofia—the egwugwu burns Enoch’s compound.

Okeke’s notion of “natural synthesis” promoted the combination of indigenous cultures and Western techniques and modes of representation. *Conflict (After Achebe)* is an exceptional example of this quest for synthesis. Done at an important moment in his artistic development, this work is paradigmatic of Okeke’s visual language. Ola Olodi emphasises that the 1960s “produced the most notable or major landmarks in modern Nigerian art traditions” (Olodi 1995). He was not alone in expressing this view. Undoubtedly, “*Conflict (After Achebe)*” is one of these landmarks. The Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art of the Pan-Atlantic University is proud to hold this important work in her collection.

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