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## Artwork Information Sheet

# 08

### ONOBRAKPEYA'S IBIEBE ALPHABETS



*Ibibie Alphabets and ideograms*, Bruce Onobrakpeya, 1982, Bronze foil relief plastograph, 106x134cm

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**raditional signs and symbols have been used by African artists in pre-western times, within their society to promote cultural values, and most importantly for communication. To date, Nigerian symbols such as Uli and Nsibidi are incorporated in the art of contemporary artists to keep the culture alive.

It is on this note that one of the propagators of modernism in Nigerian art, Bruce Obomeyoma Onobrakpeya (b. August 30, 1932), developed within 1983-84 the Ibiebe alphabets, signs and symbols while he was a resident artist in the University of Ibadan. It was within the fourth segment of his studio practice (which is dubbed the 'historical Vignettes') period that he carried out the experiment. He created to express Urhobo cultural conventions (Edewor, 2016). According to Onobrakpeya (n.d), the Ibiebe is a concise package of most of the signs and symbols found in Onobrakpeya's paintings, prints and drawings. This time, in his usually favoured sculpture relief genres, metal etching, Onobrakpeya displays his Ibiebe Ideograph experiment for his art lovers to appreciate African symbolism.

## THE ARTIST

Referred to by Yibowei & Ubogu (2018) as a master of experimentalism, Bruce Onobrakpeya's reputation precedes him. In the words of Odokuma, (2017), "he has made relentless efforts at forging the synthesis between his tradition, personal experiences and modern experiments". As a pioneer member of the Zaria art society, he and likeminded artists initiated the synthesis of traditional arts with western techniques (natural synthesis) to promote cultural awareness. This became successful and is presently the driving force of their art. Onobrakpeya draws his inspiration from his Urhobo cultural heritage, since he hails from Agbarah-otor in Ughelli North Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. The artist mostly explores Mythical and folkloric themes and goes beyond naturalism to express the delicate

subject. This inspires writers such as Oyetola (2003) to write,

*Bruce creates an artistic universe redolent of Nigerian culture and stamped with his personal style. Myths (referred to by Wole Soyinka as "our wise co-habitants") also find visual expression in the hands of Bruce who harvests them from the fleeting word and makes them accessible to a wider audience, opening the viewers' minds to worlds beyond their own.*

Although trained as a painter, from the art program at the Nigerian College of Art, Science, and Technology in Zaria in 1961 Onobrakpeya also expresses himself through sculptures, drawings, and printmaking. At the Mbari Mbayo Print Workshops in Oshogbo, through an encounter with Ru Van Rossem in the 1960s, he was introduced printmaking which he developed a keen interest for. Consequently, he experimented with techniques such as deep etching, additive plastographs, and plastocasts (Stanley, 2011). He thus became renowned for his proficiency in these art genres. To give back to society, Bruce Onobrakpeya established The Bruce Onobrakpeya Art Foundation in his home town, which Odokuma (2017) refers to as "a Mecca for artist and art lovers across the globe". There, a yearly Harmattan workshop and other art inclined events takes place to enhance artistic growth through interaction, experiments, and research.

## IBIEBE ALPHABETS AND IDIOGRAMS

The Ibiebe alphabets and ideograms are some of Bruce Onobrakpeya's many experiments. They are a script of ideographic, geometric and curvilinear glyphs which reflects his knowledge of his Urhobo heritage and rich proverbs. American scholar and professor of African art, Dr. Richard Singletary, in Onobrakpeya (n.d)'s review of the book, *Ibiebe Alphabets and Ideograms*, observed that the artist dedicated some time to "think, and draw", inspirations from his earlier works. Onobrakpeya formulated the system of rendering in graphic form the sounds of Urhobo language and also developed ideograms for

the benefit of the Urhobo culture (Oyetola, 2003). He therefore executed it in bronze foil relief Plastograph. The patina coated bronze foil is graced with the arrangement of the protruding symbols symmetrically as one side is a copy of the other. Observing the forms, they do not seem to take any naturalistic shape or depict any known structure or objects. Odokuma (2017) states that some of Onobrakpeya's works like the *Ibiebe* letters and symbols are not simply aesthetic decorations or indigenous combinations; they are visual codes that many artists and art lovers may find difficult to comprehend. Some of the symbols are, *Idolo* (wealth), *Ufoma* (peace and contentment), *Otovwe* (longevity), *Omakpokpo* (health). Viewers bring imagination to interpret of these symbols, however, certain features illuminate their meaning. Oyetola describes the symbols further:

*Ufuoma (peace) suggests opposing weapons that have been rendered harmless by a mediator coming between them. Idolo has horn-like features recalling the Ikenga figures of the Igbo which convey the message that achievement resides in the strength of the hand. Otovwe (longevity) resembles a stylised figure raising vigorous arms towards the creator. Omakpokpo (health) shows plant-like forms projecting from a container used to brew remedies from healing herbs. The theme of peace is taken up by another work in the portfolio entitled "Evwe" (kolanut) shown as a dominant, four-lobed red form. The kola nut is of important symbolic value in Nigerian culture, being offered to visitors as a sign of peace and goodwill upon which all else depends.*

## PRODUCTION TECHNIQUE

Onobrakpeya's experiments with deep etching have led to innovative printmaking and relief sculpture techniques.



Figure 1. **Ibiebe Alphabets and ideograms** (Detail), 1982, Bronze foil relief plastograph, 106x134cm, © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art.

He began these experiments in 1963 after a fortunate accident at a print workshop with hydrochloric acid destroying one of the plates he was preparing. He repaired the plate by filling it with araldite. However, on producing a print from it, he noticed that the work had an interesting sculptural quality, giving rise to his deep etching methods (Eyitayo et al. 2019). Subsequently, he uses a commercial epoxy resin to augment and ultimately replace the use of acid in the conventional etching process.

In a nutshell, Onobrakpeya uses etching tools to carve his design on the metal foil. Thereafter, he reinforces it with resin and fiber and uses industrial glue to mount it on plywood. Finally, he coats the plates with bronze to make the plate into a piece of art work (Cantone, 2016).

## CONCLUSION

Bruce Onobrakpeya's *Ibiebe* expresses the capacity of an art form to weld a bridge and enhance the understanding of different ethnic groups and cultures, using his Urhobo heritage. He was able to make studies of other cultural writing systems in to propagate his own. This, in turn, serves as a medium to challenge other artists drawing from the same pool of inspiration of values, to produce further ideas that express freshly, the customs of their people.

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