

Urbane Perspectives in the Multivalent Ejagham Signs in Tayo Adenaike's Paintings

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Abstract

This article presents Tayo Adenaike's Rejuvenation and Allegory of the Lost Paddle and As Time Passes, paintings in a new and important information on the Nsibidi and Uli creative and cultural art forms as under the pressure of globalization. It exemplifies the autochthonous sign system from the Ejagham people of Nigeria as morals. These signs are gradually going into extinction. As a result, artists using the signs have known little about its multivalent meanings. However, Adenaike establishes a modern visual inscription of subjective understandings of the sign. The paper relates significant information on the latent ideas he explores as transcendently driven.

Keywords: *Elections, Multiculturalism, Democracy, Violence, Crime and Rationality*

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Background to Study

This paper presents a discursive insight on the ideas the artist, Tayo Adenaike (b. 1954), explores, and gives a new or different interpretation to his use of creative licensing with uncommon insights that are based on his personal themes and motifs to create paintings on issues sanctioned on lost moral obligations operative on culture shock. It will look at his explorations multifactor ally from metaphysical concepts which the indigenous visual arts signs of Uli, an Eastern Nigeria Igbo name for their traditional mural and body art beautifications by women, which employs the use of indigo dye from several plants to produce paint pigment to express artistic culture. In particular, Adenaike examines more of the Nsibidi signs - an esoteric writing system of the Ekoi people of Cross River State: Akampka, Idom, Odukpani, and Calabar Local Government Area - in his paintings with minimum emphasis on the uli logograms. While the Igboid cluster straddles the south-central and southeastern part of Nigeria, the Ekoi people, known as the Ejagham spans the extreme southeast and extending eastward into the southwestern region of Cameroon.

The symbolism in Adenaike's works embodies a much deeper creative philosophy in a tradition that is vanishing but can be institutionalized. This paper certainly deliberates on his creative ideas models on issues important to the select indigenous communities, especially on the veneration of ancestral worship and creative practices that are gradually becoming extinct on the notion of fetish. The paper will address these in context and as part of a continuum. But, of foremost importance to this paper, is on the profundity of the artist's creative insights, from a contextual viewpoint.

Thus, Adenaike is first and foremost an artist and ardent avatar of African philosophies and is a Yoruba descent – a native of Idanre. He is pluralistic in the harmonization of uli and nsibidi sign systems with the artistic principles of design incorporated into a contemporary exploration. As such, he uses acrylic, pen and ink or oil to express topical issues. Having studied uli art forms at the University of Nsukka Nigeria, in (1979), this third-generation artist, as he views himself, was under the tutelage of Obiora Udechukwu, a second-generation artist, and Chike Aniakor and Uche Okeke as the first generation Nsukka artists.

One close example in his painting's philosophies is the 1997 exhibition entitled, *The Poetics of Line: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*, which involves expressing subjective concerns that bordered around self-criticism and social-cultural criticisms, as closely observed in Adenaike's 'Rejuvenation' painting. In this, his artistic method, specifically explore the medium of watercolor paintings and acrylic, in retrospect of the peculiarities on self-awareness as a sign in ancient traditions.

Identities: Traditional and the Popular World

Taking the post-colonial examples on investigating older epochs of indigenous signs, Adenaike used Western methods and materials to create contemporary expressions, where he treats both the nsibidi and uli sign systems as cultural diversity under global pressure. He identifies the structures of both signs as polymerous between the material and the immaterial foundations of the symbolism of ideas and practices as culture. The term for the individual

manifestations as signs he chose to represent in the stylistic polarity of his paintings are considered as parallel automatism associated with the surrealist and cubist expressions. In these representations, he, Adenaike, empties his mind and allows the unconscious operates associated with the signs to direct each of the works he had created to underpin both secular and psychic essentials by which the Ejagham people are governed with. These are the common and uncommon signs as laws, and in it, he, Adenaike, asks through his *Allegory of the Lost Paddle* (2004) painting (see Fig. 2), what local artistic life, and indigenous morals remains in this era of globalization in the best of both of the Nsibidi and Uli pasigraphic sign systems for the upcoming generations?

The questions he raises in his works are crucial to artists, cultural experts and historians, along with other factors as precarious to indigenous art systems. Yet, the former American ambassador to Nigeria, Robin Renee Sanders, in her book entitled, *Legendary Uli Women of Nigeria: Their Life Stories in Signs, Symbols and Motifs* (2013), thus offers a strong argument by challenging the protection of the Uli signs with very genuine concerns, “Many scholars suggest that the meanings of the motifs may completely die out within the next generation” (Sanders, 2013). As observed, the uli motifs could be described as a more subtle means of expressing the beautification of the human body and wall spaces for artistic purposes, but the nsibidi secret society logograms is a denser sign system that tilts more into a ritualistic proliferation of their signs. A fraction of this is its accessible signs which are used for communal adjudication, body and wall decoration, utensils and personal effects. Perhaps, its more frightening aspects is that which remains inaccessible – thus, covertly draws from some deep philosophies on magic: witchcraft; the ritualistic eating of human flesh notorious as cannibalism; amongst which voodoo, the worshipping of ancestors in spells, and the practice of talking to the dead identified as necromancy remains part of the inaccessible to the Ejagham people. Today, most of the Ejagham people have turned the negative tides of their culture into a more receptive, accessible and enriching dance and global carnival entertainment.

It presents to those outside of our culture, with new ways of participating in the culture besides the earlier demonic practices which lies with the Ekpe cult. The reason is that the old practices no longer subscribe to the majority who are now Christian converts, and will no longer want to be affiliated to the Ekpe cult practices. But now, Sunder Das, in his book entitled *General Psychology*, breaks down Freud's explanation thus, “The operation of symbolization ensures that elements are not presented in their true form but are represented by appropriate symbols” (Das, 1964, p.130). With this understanding, we then arrive at the situation of Sanders and Das's views, over whether the myths surrounding the signs in this era of global thinking enlarges Adenaike's fears from the perspective of culture shock, per se.

It is here that the views of the “Schools of Psychological” are apt in the explanations on Association – a principle that seeks to explain why “memories of certain events are connected together so that when one such event is recalled, the others related to it are also brought to mind [disassociation of self from a negative circumstance]” (Das, 1964, p. 147). This context clearly reflects on three variables that may be used to consider the issue of a culture shock to the uli and nsibidi signs Adenaike explores:

- i. That, it is only typical of associating witchcraft, and amongst other things, demonic to the Ejagham culture, which must be forgotten,
- ii. While Study shows that, the latter is enough reason for the present-day Ejagham people to have disassociated from the symbol, describing the signs as 'demonic forces' from Western perspectives, premised on culture shock,
- iii. Thus far, the signs for their deepest meanings are equally lost to the contemporary indigenous artists, who unconsciously/ or consciously produce arts purely on aesthetical ends as a way of disassociating from the demonic influences on the signs, is rather uncertain to draw conclusive claims to this argument.

Yet, for this reason, one must look to other sources of discursive enlightenment to distinguish between the visual and the literal ideas and how their functions in this study, is necessitated to advance, and express an empiricist conception of Adenaike's art at the present stance.

For instance, the receiving of signs from the unseen worlds of other real possibilities presents another sort of existence outside ours. It substantiates the sinful, unscientific, obsolete and invalid practices with the elders alone, who it must end with. "The authentic art that may be found by chance among isolated [nsibidi and uli] groups, who are reluctant to abandon certain customs is, therefore, the last trace of a departed era" (Monti, 1966, p. 151).

The answer to these changes is democracy. As a result of the processes of globalization, people rarely feel the need to reconnect with their cultural identity and creative diversity, even if it is threatened. It is easy to get confused in times like these, where the vast possibilities in globalization becomes a counterpoint for primitive practices, especially when they are deemed fetish, and that they must be free to choose beliefs and practices in this age.

The urbane perspectives in creative and cultural endangerment which hAdenaike interprets in his paintings are lucid, yet, each requires us to see differently and objectively. He sees his works in retrospect of the lyrics of line on brilliant canvases that inform by its transparency within an indigenous framework. But also, Adenaike believes that art could establish an even spiritual and subconscious means to respond, to prevailing socio-cultural elements which till date remains unbeknownst to some of us. His method of painting on paper without preliminary sketches remains a well-developed style which deeply reflects lines that are indigenous to Nsibidi and Uli sign systems.

By examining in context, part of the Ejagham personality as patterned on Tayo Adenaike's Rejuvenation (1994) painting, it presents us with a good example of his explorations, on the concept of the tortoise and wisdom in the Ejagham culture. Its uniqueness emanates, in a practical sense, from its reflection of a boy caught in consensual sex with another man's wife, tied up and flogged by the Ekpe executioners, and by the order of the Leopard Council (Ottenberg, 2002). The latter were the pre-colonial system of judiciary and police institutions at the time.

Therefore, there are noticeable similarities between Adenaïke's "Rejuvenation" and that of the sketched tortoise in set: the tortoises' carapace in both images are the same, but the difference is that, Adenaïke signified the boy as a tortoise lacking both wisdom and knowledge as he must bear the burden of the whip on his carapace (back). However, this shows a time where law and order were respected, and the use of Uli and Nsibidi in Adenaïke's painting seems to re-root the person in a black-and-white space. (see Figure 1.). This of course suggests a bygone era, and that, even if the composition took the value of colors, it may not be sufficient enough to reflect Adenaïke's core intentions of the theme: to restore original practices such as custom and ethics in retrospect.

More so, the shell of the tortoise in Adenaïke's greyscale painting is an important study, reminiscing the past as mentioned. It looks beyond the obvious protection the carapace provides the animal, but also identifying it with the Ekpe inaccessible wisdom. In particularity with fossils, the painting of a human tortoise and of its shell is one of the likely significant parts of a culture that may eventually become fossilized. Hence, an understanding of the Nsibidi and Uli signs in this paper reveals the multivalent ideas parodying the realms of supernatural beings or phenomenon and folkloric morals that are open to contemporary reinterpretations.

This provides the paper, with a new viewpoint for looking into the gap of subjectivity in what the individual per se sees, and decides on how to reinterpret them as uncommon signs; each perception in our reception of communication may differ, but in comparison with individual experiences.

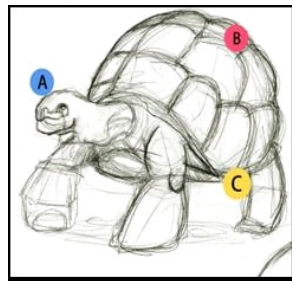
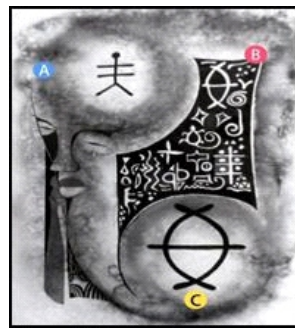


Plate 1. Tortoise Comparison with Adenaïke's Rejuvenation painting



**Figure 1. Tayo Adenaïke, Rejuvenation, 1994.
Watercolor on paper. 61 x 45.7cm.**

The impression behind using monochrome suggests that colors can be very distracting, thereby, making Adenaike to strip away hue, to reveal the simplicity behind reminiscing on self-consciousness in ailing customs and ethics. Very few people will understand the message behind this, as one which expresses reminiscence in grey tone to reflect on past lessons on self-consciousness, which is probably waning, while the other expresses wisdom signifying the source of consciousness hinged on the traditional signs of the Ekpe cult on the carapace.

However, this paper draws from the concept of the 'transcendence of morals through archetypes' as a yardstick. This is to make relevant the multivalent signs from the role of the unconscious self. Hence this paper is also concerned with the unconscious operates of the Uli and Nsibidi signs adapted in Adenaike's paintings, and how such signs can be read contextually by providing the viewer with new meanings. Each of Adenaike's paintings will be reconsidered with such obvious use of transcendentalism: a late (1820-1830) eastern philosophical movement aimed at repositioning the intellectual and spiritual uplifting of the individual and nature into divine insights and practices – and pasigraphy: where each of the Uli and Nsibidi symbol represents a concept rather than a language or spoken word. This adds significance in understanding the Ejagham culture Adenaike resonates.

Adenaike's Artistic Genre: Unburdening the Spiritual and Political

The outstanding connection here is that, culture and arts are linked together in so many ways. Of one suitable case in point is of its unification and exhibition of a people before similar cultures with a view to understanding their artistic practices and cultural identity as customary to divinities. This was raised in another article where the synthesis of transcendentalism with design principles in the arts, was explored in the Ghanaian-German born artist, Owusu Ankomah's (b.1956), *Microcron Kusun* (2014) painting series. Thus, a closer look at the history of humankind shows that religion, culture, art and symbolic references are often woven together.



Figure 2: Tayo Adenaike, *Allegory of the Lost Paddle*, 2004, Watercolour, 17.5 x 23.5 inches. Skoto Gallery collection.

In all probability, they undergird the human's connection with the universe. The argument is thus raised that, humanity, symbol and art, clearly belong to each other; each existing as a paradox, with the symbolic as art's principal aim and signification as art's encoding of meanings. This, of course, becomes not only subjective but susceptible to many interpretations. Roland Barthes (b.1915) in his essay, *The Death of the Author*, suggests a

narrative to liberate the reader of texts (here, in this context, is the Ejagham nsibidi signs) from the tyranny of meanings and impressions by the author (Ekpe guardians of the signs) – the reader is thus enjoined to participate in the unity and destination of reinterpreting meaning, rather than from one individual experience (1967).

However, in considering the character behind Adenaike's Allegory of the Lost Paddle, within Jungian archetypes, the orange, blue and brown hues Adenaike chose to retell a story, are highly developed elements of the unconscious operates in the Ejagham (Nsibidi and Uli) signs. Jung believes that the archetypes are unconsciously inherited images which have the potential to manifest through the individual when given conscious attention. Jung's archetypes are in part, based on Plato's 'Spatio-Temporal Forms', and Arthur Schopenhauer's prototypes. However, Jung's archetypes are particularly scaled on the concept of a priori psychic potentialities. The concept behind this is that, the images actually lack solidity and content (unconscious) until when exposed to the conscious part of the mind (imagine, believe and create) which forms a dynamic substratum common to humanity: especially with the active mind. Did not Albert Einstein (b.1879) once say logic will take you from point 'A' to point 'B', but that imagination will take you everywhere?

Adenaike's choice of hue in the Allegory of the Lost Paddle explores Jung's archetypes as model to the Uli and Nsibidi limited hue designs, which provides us with a deep sense of imagining that which situates culture as metaphysical concepts. Jung (1968) observes that, the archetypes are indeed lights on the electromagnetic spectrum. From this perspective, Jung argues that, at the center of the spectrum is the orange light; it signifies the source of consciousness, with its grades showing a diminishing effect leading to unconsciousness. However, the red light in the spectrum, according to Jung, responds to the basic unconscious urges as instincts, to produce with automatist fervors. Particularly, this corresponds with the verb, indicating action (to do), or the state of a condition (archetypal existence with its physical conditions or channels as man). However, the blue light at the end of the spectrum, according to Jung, signifies the spiritual ideas: archetypes (the psychic) as key influences from the unseen worlds linked with man's mind, convertible to energy from the universe when put to proper use, may perhaps be appropriated to the source of artistic creativity. This is also reminiscent of Leonardo da Vinci's (b.1452) 'Vitruvian Man' and the perception that the human body works with the universe.

While the Allegory of the Lost Paddle may depict a somewhat Vitruvian Man, at the far left of the painting, is a code with the symbols of Nsibidi and Uli descent. It could be seen also as encased in a successive overlapping of triangles, like the type Wassily Kandinsky discussed in his *On the Spiritual in Art*.

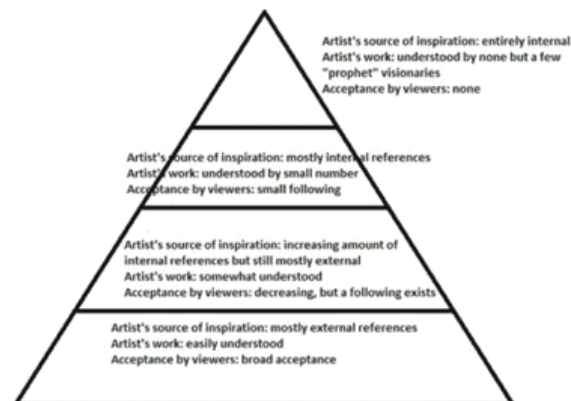


Figure 3. Kandinsky's Spiritual Triangle. www.guillaumehoodveld.net

The dominant signs Adenaike used in this painting are the paddle sign, the concentric circle (Vai of Liberia: meaning 'sleep'), and an upturned wide 'u' sign, (Loma: meaning 'sun' or 'day'). In the foreground is a dried-up river, causing a dirt-washed puddle of orange hue which connects with the tip of the triangle in black, which reminds one of a space devoid of cultural vitality.

Its channel forms the body of an arrow, pushing to the edge of a lone universe the essence of creativity, drawn away from the somewhat 'Vitruvian man', as it connects with the base of the triangle, it forms the head of an arrow with Adenaike's Vitruvian allegorical man stationed close to the tip of a cultural world slowly slipping out of existence. This suggests a sign indicator that man is the natural crisis that affects artistic cultures, and their environments, and for Wandell Berry's views:

A culture is not a collection of relics or ornaments, but a practical necessity, and its corruption invokes calamity. A healthy culture is a communal order of memory, insight, value, work, conviviality, reverence, aspiration. It reveals the human necessities and the [sic] human limits. It clarifies our inescapable bonds to the earth and each other. It assures that the necessary restraints are observed, that the necessary work is done, and that it is done well. (1986, p.43)

The sustenance of cultural identity and artistic forms, are what Adenaike demands in his paintings. Perhaps surprisingly, it becomes clearer in Joost Smiers' words, "It is not self-evident that the freedom of artistic communication can flourish indefinitely. Opportunities for artistic expression that goes against the grain, is rebellious, unpopular, or is in the process of germinating, must be defended again and again" (Smiers, 2003, p. 226).

As Time Passes

Although Adenaike in this painting may not have used recognizable human forms to express the content, this makes it unlikely that culture and creativity are not shrinking away. It does not make much sense that globalization has oligopolistic control of nearly the entirety of world cultural pipelines to ransom. But what makes knowledge and creativity a continuum, is that globalization do not own the individual's content to express in his creative licensing – to be diverse in discuss on salient issues as they affect culture and indigenous creativity under

Eurocentrism. Therefore, as Smiers recounts Janine Jacquet views, “Content is king. Content holds value because many thousands of hours of music and miles of images and texts are needed to fill the pipelines” (Smiers, 2003, p. 59).

Adenaïke's *As Time Passes* looks at the exploits of culture, artistic content and its people in the shackles of slavery, and its reencounter in neo-colonialism as globalization. It is the twenty-first century's most valuable commodity to re-enslave the masses. It would be good to see the artist's point in using signs to address this problem, especially when we continue to neglect them as history, simply to reshape the domain of socio-cultural creativity and sustainability.



Figure 3: Tayo Adenaïke, *As Time Passes*, 2004, water colour. 17.5 x 23.5 inches. Skoto Gallery collection.

The painting adapts the nsibidi and Vai ideograms native to Liberia, Sierra Leone, and is used to signify a person or persons tied up after disciplinary actions have been taken by the Ekpe cult judges. The sign, if read thus, shows that the person or culprit is concealed in a sort of makeshift material on board a sailing vessel churning the waves to a correctional location to atone for his or her crimes. Underneath the waves, is a Vai sign for sleep. This means that the subject must have been sedated for the journey, or is asleep and contemplating his or her crimes. This is customary to eradicate undesirable persons who are found guilty of crimes punishable by exile, from the community, and often times, which leads to internal or external slavery of the culprit. On the top-left corner of the painting is a sign depicting two persons in disagreeable views. The brisk stroke of vibrant orange-hue underneath it could signify emotional flushes of indifferences with washes of pale orange hue bleached with brown-hue.

Adenaïke sets the tune under sunset but with no visible ship transporting the accused to an undisclosed location. It recalls the constraints of a once free individual, in a parallel position of facing his or her crimes such as with his *Rejuvenation* (1994) exploration. Adenaïke believes that colonialism and contemporary global views of displacing indigenous cultures as demonic practices are models that are gradually making people in those cultures to no longer ascribe to those customary laws which once guided their every actions towards a better and fulfilling lifestyle. Whether Adenaïke did this to provoke the mind with more of the uncommon signs that operate in those cultures or to cause the translucent washes such as those under the painting is quite unclear. In this, Adenaïke, leaves but a somewhat washed-up

thumbprint signage just directly at the bottom of the enciphered convicted man. The red hue: indulges both Adenaike's mind and ours, to reminisce how time passes with the disavowal of indigenous cultural views. The employ of the blue hue, being the shortest in brushstroke length, intensifies the gradual disavowing of the spiritual (stemming from Kandinsky's color theory) from the consciousness of Adenaike's Vitruvian man, into a semi-unconscious state of his culture. This is what Freud's disassociation theory portends, distancing oneself from his or her primeval roots.

Conclusion

To conclude this paper, it must be emphasized that the study of indigenous sign systems from two major southeastern parts of Nigeria, provides a contemporary intellectual discuss with new observations and reinterpretation of the uli and in particular, the nsibidi sign systems. In the most important area of reinterpretation and informing on the character of the slow passing away of the uli and nsibidi knowledge that will probably die with the older generations, the paper appropriated meanings by examining Adenaike's works who understood the dichotomy of the signs, as having being broken in the hands of globalization.

The paper began by discussing the profundity of Adenaike, his methods in expressing the content and context of cultural signs stemming from the Natural Synthesis theory revered by artists of the Nsukka group, by combining traditional and Western concepts to communicate culture through creative licensing.

The individual per se, discovered that a new perspective on the concepts Adenaike responded to, are uncommon to younger artists who only explore the signs for aesthetical means. It became imperative to understand the context of his paintings as significant to Jungian archetypes, as it equates the creative cultural diversity of the uli and the Ejagham nsibidi symbols under pressure in this age of globalization. The logical consequence of this would be that while globalization have come to stay firmly, the importance of cultural diversity must not be sacrificed on the altar of contentious Western approach. In closing, St. Augustine, in his *Hermeneutic and Homiletics* offers a better understanding to this argument, and in it he says: the individual per se, in the cause of interpreting the signs, must possess an active spirit of closely examining the latent meanings behind the signs, and should not hesitate to learn and use Pagan knowledge to understand and support a rich and fulfilled Christian learning. In this, he believed that, truth is universal when it comes to God. This will lead the individual per se, to divine access of transcendent wisdom.

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