

Living Symbols, Layered Voices: *Ibiebe* and *Ibie'ka* Ideograms as Knowledge, Rhetoric, Spirituality, and Resistance in Niger Delta Art

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Abstract

The visual traditions of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria have long carried a sophistication and intellectual depth that mainstream African art scholarship has yet to fully reckon with. This study examines two of the most remarkable yet underexplored indigenous visual symbol systems in contemporary African art; Bruce Onobrakpeya's *Ibiebe* ideograms, developed between 1978 and 1986, and Nelson Edewor's *Ibie'ka* ideographic system, created in the late 1990s. The problem is one of double invisibility: both systems remain marginal in mainstream African art scholarship while simultaneously facing cultural extinction through institutional neglect and generational disengagement. The study's objective is both analytical and interventionist, examining both systems across four interconnected dimensions. Beginning with their historical foundations in Nigeria's Natural Synthesis movement, the study moves into their rhetorical architecture i.e. the engineered capacity to deliver layered, simultaneous meanings encoding political critique within aesthetic beauty. From this communicative achievement, the argument proceeds naturally into its epistemological dimension, positioning both systems as genuine indigenous knowledge frameworks whose ways of knowing no other visual tradition can fully replicate. Threading through all three dimensions is the most foundational: the spiritual dimension, tracing both systems' roots in Urhobo shrine practice and Niger Delta cosmological tradition, from which their rhetorical power and epistemological depth ultimately derive. Grounded in recent studio explorations by fourth-year painting students at the University of Port Harcourt whose paintings demonstrate with vivid clarity that both systems are actively alive in new hands, the study finds that recognizing *Ibiebe* and *Ibie'ka* as living visual languages repositions indigenous Nigerian art within global contemporary art discourse, strengthens the case for their integration into art education curricula, and challenges the epistemic hierarchies that have historically subordinated African ways of knowing. This paper makes an original contribution to African art scholarship by providing a comprehensive multi-dimensional analysis of both systems within a single unified framework arguing not merely for the recognition of two specific art forms but for a fundamental reorientation of how African art scholarship understands indigenous visual knowledge, contemporary artistic practice, and the urgent global project of epistemic justice.

Keywords: *Ibiebe*, *Ibie'ka*, Visual rhetoric, Natural Synthesis, Epistemology, Epistemic justice.

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Background to the Study

A Question of seeing; a case of Double Invisibility

Imagine standing before a large, beautiful painting filled with intricate geometric forms and flowing lines. You might admire its elegance, photograph it, and move on. Now imagine standing before the same painting as someone from the Niger Delta who has lived through oil spills and gas flaring. They would see not just abstract beauty, but a precise, unflinching record of their suffering, anger, and resistance. This gap between what different viewers see is not a failure; in the art of Bruce Onobrakpeya and Nelson Edewor, it is the whole point. Their visual languages, known as *Ibiebe* and *Ibie'ka* respectively, are speaking pictures, carefully engineered to say different things to different people all at once.

This study focuses on two of the most remarkable yet underexplored indigenous visual systems in contemporary African art. The first is *Ibiebe*, developed by Bruce Onobrakpeya between 1978 and 1986. It is a system of over 120 ideograms capable of encoding Urhobo proverbs, prayers, and philosophical beliefs into visual form¹. The second is *Ibie'ka*, developed by Nelson Edewor in the late 1990s. It is a pictographic system of about 100 symbols organized into three categories: human society, the physical environment, and the effects of oil exploitation, designed to analyse and critique the devastation of petroleum capitalism². These systems suffer from what this study calls double invisibility. The first layer is scholarly: compared to better-known traditions like Igbo *Uli* or *Nsibidi*, *Ibiebe* and *Ibie'ka* have received far less critical attention. The second layer is the threat of cultural extinction: without active engagement from new generations of artists, these living visual languages could be permanently lost.

This study has a dual objective. It is analytical, aiming to provide a comprehensive breakdown of both systems' complexity, and interventionist, arguing for their active preservation and teaching. The study is structured around four interconnected dimensions that build on each other which are;

1. Historical: The foundations of both systems in Nigeria's Natural Synthesis movement.
2. Rhetorical: Their engineered capacity for layered, multi-level communication.
3. Epistemological: Their status as genuine systems of knowledge.
4. Spiritual: Their deepest roots in Niger Delta shrine practice and cosmology.

The final section grounds all these dimensions in the recent work of fourth-year painting students at the University of Port Harcourt, proving that these languages are not museum pieces but living tools³. This paper will proceed as follows. Section 2 examines the origin of both systems in the Natural Synthesis movement. Section 3 analyses their rhetorical architecture, showing how they achieve their layered meanings. Section 4 argues for their

¹ (Onobrakpeya, 2006) p.5 ; (Onekpe, 2021) p. 190

² (Edewor, 2016) p. 143

³ (Onekpe, 2026)

⁴ (Okeke-Agulu, 2015), p. 16

recognition as genuine knowledge systems. Section 5 traces their deep spiritual roots in Urhobo shrine culture. Section 6 presents the recent student works as evidence of living transmission. The conclusion argues that preserving these systems is a matter of epistemic justice.



Fig. 1: Comparison of an abstract *Ibiebe* ideogram (left) and a pictographic *Ibie'ka* symbol (right), showing their different visual grammars. (Source: Author's diagram based Onobrakpeya, 2006, p. 6; Edewor, 2016, p. 144).

Section 2: The Historical Foundation

The Natural Synthesis Movement; A Quiet Revolution in Zaria

In the late 1950s, a quiet revolution was taking place in the studios of the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology in Zaria. A group of young art students, including Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, and Bruce Onobrakpeya, were wrestling with a crucial question: "What should a modern Nigerian artist look like?" They had been trained in a colonial curriculum that taught Western art as a universal standard while treating African visual traditions as mere ethnographic curiosities⁴. These students refused this framing, and they called their new program Natural Synthesis. The core idea was elegantly simple: Nigerian artists did not have to choose between being modern and being African. The supposed opposition between tradition and modernity was a false one, a product of colonial ideology⁵. As Uche Okeke wrote in the Zaria Art Society manifesto of 1960, "We must grow with the new Nigeria and work to satisfy her traditional love for art or perish with our colonial past"⁶.

The Natural Synthesis movement had practical consequences beyond theoretical debate. It insisted that indigenous Nigerian art forms like *Uli*, *Nsibidi*, and Yoruba *Ona* motifs were not primitive but were serious intellectual resources⁷. For Okeke, this meant developing a contemporary practice grounded in *Uli*, the Igbo women's body and wall art tradition. For others, it meant exploring the calligraphic traditions of Arabic scripts or the geometric precision of local textile designs⁸. The most important thing Natural Synthesis gave artists like Onobrakpeya was confidence: the confidence to take indigenous Urhobo visual knowledge seriously as a foundation for a major contemporary artistic project⁹. This was a form of

⁵ (Okeke-Agulu, 2015), p. 11

⁶ See Okeke, 1960 as cited in (Okeke-Agulu, 2015), p. 110

⁷ (Ezuluomba, 2018), p.1

⁸ (Onekpe O., 2021)

⁹ Ibid p. 189

intellectual decolonization, a recovery of the right to see one's own heritage as a source of sophisticated, modern art.

Bruce Onobrakpeya: From the Shrine to the Studio

Bruce Onobrakpeya was born in 1932 in Agbarha-Otor, a town in Delta State. His father was an Urhobo carver, and he grew up surrounded by shrines, masks, and ritual objects. Growing up, he was surrounded by the visual culture of his people: the carved figures of ancestral spirits, the ritual objects placed on shrine altars, the patterns inscribed on ceremonial walls, and the masks danced at community festivals. This environment was not merely decorative; it was a living classroom where he learned that visual marks could carry spiritual weight, encode philosophical ideas, and serve as a bridge between the living and the dead¹⁰.

As Onobrakpeya said of this formative period: "My childhood experience of the cultural environment of Urhobo and Benin formed the artistic bedrock on which I continue to build. My early exposure to these arts sustained my artistic expressions by giving me access to a world of imagination, through bridging the thin gap between realism, surrealism and abstraction"¹¹. This "world of imagination" was not a fantasy. It was the cosmologically structured reality of Urhobo spiritual culture, where the boundaries between the visible and the invisible, the living and the ancestral, are understood as permeable and continuously negotiated through visual practice. He later attended the famous Zaria Art School, where he was a key member of the Zaria Art Society¹². It was here, as a student member of the Zaria Art Society, that the intellectual program of Natural Synthesis gave formal articulation to the creative direction his entire formation had been pointing him toward. As he himself has said: "the college gave him technical skills, but the Zaria Arts Society shaped his perspectives as a professional artist" and "gave him the confidence to seek a personal expressive idiom that would project a Nigerian identity"¹³. That idiom took decades to fully develop and eventually become the *Ibiebe* ideograms, a visual language that synthesized his ancestral Urhobo heritage, his admiration for Chinese and Japanese calligraphy, his technical mastery of printmaking, and the philosophical ambitions of the Natural Synthesis movement.

Nelson Edewor: Art as a Response to Petroleum Capitalism

If Onobrakpeya's *Ibiebe* emerged from a spiritual and cultural imperative, Nelson Edewor's *Ibie'ka* emerged from a more directly political one. Born in 1970 in the heart of the petroleum-producing Isoko region of Delta State, Edewor grew up witnessing the devastating impact of oil extraction on his community¹⁴. Unlike Onobrakpeya, who grew up surrounded by the sacred visual culture of shrines and carvers, Edewor grew up surrounded by the industrial infrastructure of petroleum capitalism: flow stations, flare stacks, pipeline corridors, and the constant presence of oil company vehicles and personnel. This was his visual world, and it would become the raw material for his art.

¹⁰ Ibid p.190

¹¹ (Artnet, 2025) para.2

¹² (Wikipedia, 2025) , para. 4

¹³ (Wikipedia, 2025), para.4

¹⁴ (Edewor, 2016) p. 2

For Edewor, oil exploitation was not an abstract political topic drawn from newspapers or academic journals. It was the lived, daily, intimate reality of the community in which he had grown up: a reality of environmental degradation (creeks turned black, fish dying, farmland polluted), social disruption (family members displaced, traditional livelihoods destroyed), economic dispossession (wealth extracted while communities remained impoverished), and cultural transformation (the erosion of traditional values and practices under the pressure of petroleum capitalism). He had observed all of this directly, and he felt compelled, as an artist and a scholar, to document it and to critique it.

For Edewor, the problem was that existing artistic languages were inadequate. Figurative realism could document individual suffering (a portrait of a woman crying beside a dead fish, a landscape of a polluted creek) but it could not systematically analyze the complex social structures of petroleum capitalism. It could not, for example, show the difference between a militant fighting for community rights and a soldier hired by the state to suppress that fight. It could not show the difference between an expatriate oil executive living in a company compound and an indigenous fisherman whose ancestors have lived on that land for centuries. Abstract expressionism could evoke an emotional response to environmental destruction (e.g. a chaotic splatter of black paint might suggest oil, a wash of grey might suggest sadness) but it could not encode the precise distinctions between different types of pollution, different social positions within the oil industry hierarchy, or different forms of violence and dispossession. A new, precise, analytical visual language was needed. Hence *Ibie'ka* was his answer.

As his colleague and collaborator Bazunu has written, Edewor's work emerges from a "biographical method" grounded in direct, sustained, intimate knowledge of the Niger Delta's conditions. The formal vocabulary of *Ibie'ka* i.e. the way human figures are constructed from crossed pipes, the way scarification marks identify indigeneity, the way a helmet signifies oil company employment, was not invented in a studio abstractly. It was discovered through the process of living in and observing a world where the human body, the industrial pipeline, and the landscape itself have become fused into a single, painful, and beautiful reality¹⁵.

Two Systems, One Intellectual Tradition

The Natural Synthesis movement, which began in a Zaria classroom, created the intellectual space for both *Ibiebe* and *Ibie'ka* to emerge. Onobrakpeya inherited its confidence to translate Urhobo spiritual knowledge into a new visual language. Edewor inherited its toolkit to synthesize Isoko sculptural traditions with the new forms of industrial pipes and oil rigs, creating a visual critique of modernity itself¹⁶. To understand the art of the Niger Delta, one must first understand this history. The ideograms of Onobrakpeya and Edewor are not isolated inventions. They are the living children of Natural Synthesis, and like all children who honor their inheritance by growing beyond it, they have become something genuinely their own.

¹⁵ (Bazunu, 2022) p.28

¹⁶ Ibid p.28



Fig. 2: Bruce Onobrakpeya with author at the Harmattan Workshop 2018, a key institution for transmitting indigenous visual knowledge. (Source: Authors' Photo Archive).

Section 3: The Rhetorical Architecture

The Power of Speaking in Layers

A central argument of this chapter is that *Ibiebe* and *Ibie'ka* are sophisticated instruments of what scholars call visual rhetoric i.e. the study of how images argue, persuade, and communicate ideology as powerfully as words¹⁷. Their genius lies in their engineered capacity for layered meaning. They are designed so that different audiences (the international gallery viewer, the Nigerian art student, the Urhobo elder, the oil company executive) can look at the same work and see completely different things¹⁸. This is not a flaw. It is a survival strategy. In the Niger Delta, where speaking openly against the oil companies has historically been dangerous, art that looks like abstract decoration to the uninformed but carries detailed political critique to the informed is not just clever; it is necessary.

The political scientist James C. Scott developed a powerful framework for understanding such coded communication. He called it the hidden transcript¹⁹. Scott argued that oppressed groups develop off-stage discourses like rumors, folktales, songs, and symbols to express their true critique of power in a disguised form that the powerful cannot easily punish. Niger Delta ideographic art is a perfect example of a hidden transcript. The Edewor sculpture that looks like a formal, abstract assemblage to an outsider is, to an Isoko community member, a precise

¹⁷ (Foss, 2005) p. 141

¹⁸ (Onekpe, 2021) p.192

¹⁹ (Scott, 1990) p.4

analysis of an 'oil staff expatriate' (the helmet symbol) dominating an 'indigene' (the scarification symbol)²⁰. The political critique is encoded safely within the aesthetic form.

The Architecture of *Ibiebe*: Abstract Incantations

Bruce Onobrakpeya's *Ibiebe* operates on the most abstract end of the scale. The symbols do not look like the things they represent. As the Smithsonian Institution notes, the *Ibiebe* glyphs are "very abstract and do not bear any naturalistic shape... they are visual codes which anyone will find difficult to interpret"²¹. To interpret them, you need to know Urhobo culture. For example, the *Ufoma* ideogram (peace) is denoted with opposing weapons rendered harmless by a mediator between them. The *Omakpokpo* ideogram (health) is shown by plant-like forms projecting from a medicine container²². To the uninitiated, these are interesting geometric shapes. To the informed, they are a visual chant, an invocation of peace and wellbeing²³. This abstract quality provides *Ibiebe* with its aesthetic legitimacy, its first layer of protection.

The Architecture of *Ibie'ka*: Pictographic Documents

Nelson Edewor's *Ibie'ka* is more pictographic i.e. its symbols bear a visual resemblance to what they represent, making them easier to learn. A human figure is a circle atop crossed pipes; a river is wavy lines²⁴. This pictographic quality provides cultural accessibility, the second layer of protection. The work can be exhibited as a documentation of 'traditional culture'. The true political depth lies in the system's precise categories. It does not just show 'pollution'; it distinguishes between gas flaring on land and gas flaring offshore. It does not show just 'violence'; it distinguishes between a militant and a soldier. It does not show just 'kidnapping'; it distinguishes between the kidnap of an indigene and the kidnap of an expatriate²⁵. These are not mere descriptions; they are analytical categories for understanding the political economy of the Niger Delta. The deepest layer of protection is what this study calls the epistemological barrier. To access the full, most critical meaning of these symbols, you need to know very specific details about Niger Delta history, its local politics, and its spiritual traditions. An oil executive might see a 'man with a helmet'; an Isoko community member sees 'an expatriate oil worker who lives in a company compound and whose presence has caused my uncle's fishing pond to die'. This specific knowledge acts as the ultimate filter, ensuring the deepest critiques remain within the community²⁶.

From Masters to Students: The Student Works as Rhetorical Act

The most compelling evidence for this rhetorical layering comes not from the masters, but from the students. When a student like Emily Reebe creates a painting called *Ibie'ka*: The

²⁰ (Edewor, 2016) p. 144

²¹ (Culture., 2025) para. 3

²² (Onobrakpeya, 2006)p.15

²³ (Onekpe, 2021) p.193

²⁴ (Edewor, 2016) p. 144

²⁵ (Edewor, 2016) p. 146 - 147

²⁶ (Onekpe O., 2021) p. 38

Language of the Land, she structures it as a grid. One block contains the symbols for 'Oil Palm' and 'Sun' (life and wealth) in warm colours. Another block contains 'Gas Flaring' and 'Water Pollution' in dark, cold colours. The argument is made by the very composition: Niger Delta life is a battle between life-giving nature and corporate destruction²⁷. This is just not a student exercise; it is a young person using a sophisticated inherited language to analyze her own world.



Fig. 3: The three analytical categories of the *Ibie'ka* system, showing how symbols for social identity (left), ecology (center), and industrial violence (right) work together to create a complete picture of Niger Delta reality. (Source: Author's diagram based on Edewor, 2016, pp. 143-147).

Section 4: The Epistemological Dimension: Art as a Way of Knowing Can a Painting Think?

For much of Western history, the answer to this question has been no. Art was seen as the domain of emotion, while science and philosophy were the domains of true knowledge. But this separation is not a universal truth; it is a cultural assumption²⁸. This chapter argues, on the contrary, that *Ibiebe* and *Ibie'ka* are not just art; they are genuine knowledge systems. They are structured, organized, and teachable frameworks for understanding the world. To engage with them is not merely to appreciate beauty, but to enter into a way of thinking. This leads this discuss to another question; what does it mean to call a visual system a 'knowledge system'? Scholars have identified four key criteria. First, organization: the system must be internally structured and not just a random collection of symbols. Second, referential adequacy: it must provide precise categories for the realities it addresses. Third, transmissibility: it must be capable of being taught and learned. Fourth, generativity: it must be able to produce new knowledge, not just repeat old information²⁹. Both *Ibiebe* and *Ibie'ka* satisfy all four criteria.

Organization

A genuine knowledge system is not a random or chaotic collection of elements. It has an internal structure, a grammar, a set of rules that govern how its parts relate to each other. A

²⁷ (Onekpe, 2026)

²⁸ (Wiredu, 1996) p. 136

²⁹ (Kaya & Seleti, 2013) p.31; (Onekpe O., 2021)p. 15

language that cannot be learned systematically is not a language at all; it is noise. A knowledge system that cannot be mapped, described, and taught is not a shared intellectual resource; it is a private code. Both *Ibiebe* and *Ibie'ka* meet this criterion. *Ibiebe* comprises over 120 ideograms, including 42 alphabetic characters with special phonetic symbols for the Urhobo language. These are not a random set of marks; they are organized into a coherent system where each symbol relates to others in predictable, learnable ways³⁰. *Ibie'ka* is organized into three precise categories: human society and social relations, the physical environment, and the effects of oil exploitation³¹. This categorical organization is not arbitrary; it reflects a deliberate intellectual design for understanding the different dimensions of Niger Delta reality.

Referential Adequacy

A genuine knowledge system must provide adequate conceptual categories for the realities it addresses. Its categories must be precise enough to distinguish between phenomena that matter, and general enough to connect individual instances to broader patterns of understanding. If the system is too vague, it cannot support analytical thinking. If it is too rigid, it cannot adapt to new situations. *Ibie'ka's* distinction between "gas flaring on land" and "gas flaring offshore" is a perfect example of referential adequacy. This is not a minor technical distinction; it is a politically and environmentally significant one. Gas flaring on land directly affects communities living near the flare stacks, causing respiratory illness, damaging crops, and contaminating soil. Offshore flaring, while still environmentally harmful, does not affect specific communities in the same immediate, concentrated way. By creating two separate symbols for these two phenomena, *Ibie'ka* provides a conceptual tool for understanding how environmental violence is distributed across the Niger Delta landscape³². A system that lumped both phenomena under a single "gas flaring" symbol would be referentially inadequate; it would collapse a crucial distinction.

Transmissibility

A genuine knowledge system must be capable of being passed from one knower to another. Knowledge that cannot be transmitted is not social knowledge; it is private experience, locked inside a single mind and destined to die with that person. A knowledge system, by contrast, is a shared resource. It can be taught in classrooms, learned by students, and extended by new practitioners. This is one of the most important criteria for distinguishing a genuine knowledge system from a personal artistic style. Both *Ibiebe* and *Ibie'ka* have been taught and learned. Onobrakpeya has taught *Ibiebe* to generations of artists through the Harmattan Workshop, an annual gathering in his hometown of Agbarha-Otor that has hosted over 1,300 artists since its founding in 1998³³. Edewor has taught *Ibie'ka* to students at Delta State University, Abraka, and his system has been the subject of doctoral and master's research by scholars including Bazunu and Onekpe. The University of Port Harcourt studio explorations documented in this chapter are further proof of transmissibility: fourth-year students who had

³⁰ (Onobrakpeya, 2006) p.5

³¹ (Edewor, 2016) p.143

³² (Edewor, 2016) p. 146

³³ (Stanley, 2011) p.23

no direct connection to Edewor's original development of the system were able to learn *Ibie'ka's* vocabulary and apply it in their own original compositions³⁴.

Generativity

This is perhaps the most demanding criterion, and the one that most clearly distinguishes a living knowledge system from a dead archive. A genuine knowledge system must be capable of producing new knowledge. It must not merely be recording what is already known, but providing frameworks through which new phenomena can be understood, new distinctions drawn, and new analyses developed. A system that can only repeat what its creators originally encoded is a record, not a knowledge system. A system that can be used by new practitioners to understand situations its creators never anticipated is a living, generative epistemology. Both *Ibiebe* and *Ibie'ka* demonstrate generativity. When student Jenny Godspower uses *Ibie'ka* symbols to map the interior psychological experience of a woman's silent suffering in her painting "Broken", she is generating new knowledge that Edewor's original system did not explicitly contain. Edewor designed *Ibie'ka* to analyze social conditions: family structures, labour relations, environmental destruction. He did not design it to map the geography of repressed fear or self-denying love. But Godspower discovered that the system's vocabulary could be extended to do exactly that. She took the symbol for 'Fear', usually used in the context of community violence, and placed it on the lower back of the head of a female silhouette, representing the anxieties pushed to the unconscious. She took the symbol for 'Prayer', usually used in the context of spiritual invocation, and placed it at the top of the head, representing conscious hope. This is generativity: the production of new knowledge through the creative use of an inherited conceptual framework³⁵. These four criteria provide a rigorous framework for evaluating any claim that a visual system constitutes a knowledge system. As the following subsections will demonstrate in detail, both *Ibiebe* and *Ibie'ka* satisfy all four criteria with remarkable completeness. They are not merely interesting art. They are genuinely epistemological achievements.

***Ibiebe*: Encoding Urhobo Philosophy**

Onobrakpeya's *Ibiebe* encodes the proverbial and philosophical wisdom of the Urhobo people. In Urhobo culture, proverbs are not just wise sayings; they are the primary vehicles for storing and transmitting complex philosophical ideas³⁶. An *Ibiebe* ideogram like *ederor'avwerhe r'ukokho*, which translates to "when one considers the good taste of an egg, one will not have the chicken for sacrifice," encodes the philosophical principle of saving for the future, of delayed gratification³⁷.

The ideogram does not illustrate the proverb; it is the proverb, translated into a new visual medium. This translation is a profound epistemological achievement: it takes an oral, time-based form of knowledge and makes it visual and permanent, allowing it to be exhibited in a

³⁴ (Onekpe, 2026)

³⁵ (Onekpe, 2026)

³⁶ (Etieyibo, 2016) p. 21

³⁷ See Onobrakpeya 2006, cited in (Onekpe O., 2021) p.192

gallery in London while still carrying the full weight of its original Urhobo philosophical meaning.

***Ibie'ka*: Naming the Previously Un-nameable**

The philosopher Michel Foucault argued that knowledge is not just about discovering facts, but about creating the very categories through which we understand the world³⁸. Without the category of 'acid rain', the phenomenon exists, but you cannot think about it systematically. This is the hermeneutical injustice philosopher Miranda Fricker describes: when a gap in collective interpretive tools puts a community at a disadvantage in making sense of its own experience³⁹. This was the situation in the Niger Delta before *Ibie'ka*. The community had the experience of gas flaring and water pollution, but it lacked a precise visual and analytical vocabulary for these phenomena. Edewor's great epistemological intervention was to create that vocabulary. The *Ibie'ka* symbol for 'acid rain' (three arrows pointing down into a dotted land shape) is not a description; it is a new conceptual tool. Once it exists, you can use it to think, to compare different sites of acid rain damage, and to make a precise political demand for it to stop⁴⁰.

Student Proof: Generating New Knowledge

The ultimate test of a knowledge system is its generativity: can it be used to understand new situations? The University of Port Harcourt students prove that *Ibie'ka* can. Their studio explorations, documented in full in Section 6 of this chapter, provide multiple examples of knowledge generation across different domains: ecological, historical, psychological, and spiritual.

First, ecological knowledge generation. When student Olulu Ayibanengimote created *The River That Remembered*, she used *Ibie'ka* symbols to narrate the folkloric story of the Ogbia community of Bayelsa sacred relationship with their river. The work traces the arc from ecological health (the Fish symbol of abundance, the Oil Palm symbol of life) through disruption (the Snake symbol of poison, the Fire symbol of destruction) to renewal (the Rain symbol of cleansing, the Sun symbol of new beginning). In constructing this narrative, Ayibanengimote was not merely illustrating a pre-existing story. She was using *Ibie'ka's* environmental vocabulary to think through the causal relationship between ritual neglect and ecological disaster. The knowledge she produced (that environmental health in the Niger Delta worldview is understood as dependent on maintaining correct spiritual relationships with water spirits) is a genuine insight that emerges from the process of visual composition⁴¹.

Second, historical knowledge generation. When student Geteloma Empress created *The Sun Remembered Us*, she used *Ibie'ka* symbols to narrate the story of colonial slavery. The work begins with the Earthworm symbol (representing the pre-colonial condition of "easy life" and

³⁸ (Foucault, 1994) p. 168

³⁹ (Fricker, 2007) p.1

⁴⁰ (Edewor, 2016) p.146

⁴¹ (Onekpe, 2026) p.2

ecological prosperity). It moves through the Snake symbol (colonialism as poison), the King symbol (imposed foreign authority), the Cutlass and Hoe symbols (exploited African labour), and the Journey symbol (the forced passage of the Middle Passage). It closes with the Sun symbol (renewal, light, the possibility of a better future) and the Infant symbol (future generations and the continuity of resilience). Edewor designed *Ibie'ka* to analyze petroleum capitalism. Empress discovered that the same analytical framework (identifying a condition of abundance, diagnosing the forces that destroy it, tracing the mechanisms of exploitation, and affirming the possibility of renewal) could be applied to the history of colonialism. This is generativity: the extension of an analytical framework to a new historical domain⁴².

Third, psychological knowledge generation. When student Jenny Godspower created Broken, she used *Ibie'ka* symbols to map the interior emotional geography of a woman experiencing marital breakdown and suppressed fear. The composition is a female silhouette. At the top of the head, she placed symbols for Prayer and Family, representing the conscious hopes and aspirations that dominate the woman's waking thoughts. At the lower back of the skull, she placed symbols for Fear and Divorce, representing the anxieties pushed down into the unconscious. Across the chest, covering the heart, she placed symbols representing the woman's self-sacrifice for her husband, her positioning of his needs before her own. Edewor's original system contained symbols for Fear (from the oil exploitation category) and Divorce (from the human society category), but he used them to document public, social conditions (fear of militant violence, fear of military repression, the social fact of marriage dissolution). Godspower discovered that these same symbols could be redeployed to map private, interior experience. She used the spatial grammar of the human body, the top of the head for consciousness, the back of the skull for the repressed, the heart for love and self-sacrifice as a new organizing principle for *Ibie'ka's* vocabulary. This is not merely applying pre-existing categories; it is generating a new dimension of the system's analytical reach⁴³.

Fourth, spiritual knowledge generation. When student Obinna Amarachi Godsgrace created The Prayer, she used *Ibie'ka* symbols to explore what she called "a psychological and ancestral dialogue i.e. a movement from burden toward release." The central figure is bent and compressed, symbolizing the weight of human experience: struggle, responsibility, fear, and survival. A flowing light form emerges from the figure's head and upper body, representing prayer as energy, as something living and moving rather than static words. Surrounding symbols include spiritual pathways and ancestral networks (upper section), descending arrows representing divine response (middle section), and key-like symbols representing access, revelation, and opened spiritual doors (lower section). Godsgrace used *Ibie'ka's* vocabulary not to document an external social condition but to visualize an internal spiritual process. This required her to think about what in the Urhobo cosmological tradition makes such a visualization possible: the understanding of prayer as a dynamic energetic exchange between the individual spirit (*Erhi*) and the ancestral and divine forces (*Edjo*) that surround

⁴² Ibid p.4

⁴³ (Onekpe, 2026)

and sustain it. The knowledge she produced (a visual model of prayer as spiritual dialogue) is a genuine epistemological contribution, extending *Ibie'ka's* reach from the social and political domain into the domain of individual spiritual experience.

What these four examples collectively demonstrate is that *Ibie'ka* is not a closed system of fixed meanings. It is an open, generative framework. Its vocabulary can be applied to ecological narratives (The River That Remembered), to historical analysis (The Sun Remembered Us), to psychological cartography (Broken), and to spiritual exploration (The Prayer). Each application produces new knowledge that Edewor's original taxonomy did not explicitly contain. This is the mark of a genuine, living epistemology.

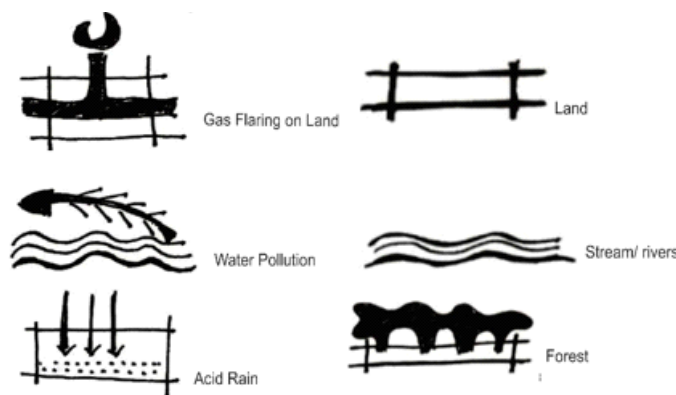


Fig. 4: Three *Ibie'ka* symbols for environmental violence (left) and the real-world ecological devastation they name and analyze (right). (Source: Author's diagram based on Edewor, 2016, pp. 143-147).

Section 5: The Spiritual Dimension: From the Shrine to the Canvas

The Ancestral Foundation

Before it was art, the visual grammar of the Niger Delta was a spiritual technology. For the Urhobo people and by extension the Niger Deltans, a shrine is not merely a building; it is a conversation i.e. a carefully constructed space where the living speaks to the dead, where the present reaches back into the past, and where the visible world opens onto the invisible one⁴⁴. The carved figures, symbolic markings, and ritual objects within a shrine are not decorations. They are a visual language, and the shrine as a whole is a sacred text, one that must be learned, interpreted, and continuously renewed by each generation. Bruce Onobrakpeya grew up inside this world. His hometown of Agbarha-Otor hosted *Ekene* shrines, family shrines, and the full repertoire of Urhobo sacred visual practice⁴⁵. The *Ibiebe* ideograms he developed are not merely influenced by this tradition; they are its continuation, translated into the new medium of the plastograph and the contemporary canvas.

⁴⁴ (Foss, 2005) p. 12

⁴⁵ (Onekpe, 2021) p. 190

***Ibiebe* as Visual Incantation**

Onobrakpeya has described his *Ibiebe* ideograms as visual incantations⁴⁶. An incantation is not just a prayer; it is a performative speech act. It does not just describe a spiritual reality; it actively invokes it. The same is true for a correctly deployed *Ibiebe* ideogram in a sacred context. This is most visible in the work *Ibiebe Aro Ogua*. The piece is not a painting about a shrine; it is structured as a personal shrine. It is divided into two parts: the top section contains a sequence of prayer symbols for purity (*Orhen ighitophu*), family (*Ekru/Orua*), health (*Omakpokpo*), love (*Eguomo*), and longevity (*Otovwe*). The bottom section contains images of spiritual forces and animal totems. The entire composition is a visual chant, a prayer made visible⁴⁷. Engaging with it is not an aesthetic exercise; it is a spiritual one.

Ecological Spirituality in *Ibie'ka*

Nelson Edewor's *Ibie'ka* is also deeply spiritual, but its spiritual register is different. It is grounded in what this chapter calls ecological spirituality which is, the understanding that the natural world is not a collection of resources but a spiritually charged presence, inhabited by ancestral forces⁴⁸. The Isoko and Urhobo peoples believe that the rivers, creeks, and forests are home to spirits like the *Owu* (water spirits) who govern the wellbeing of the community.

This is why *Ibie'ka's* environmental symbols carry such moral weight. The tortoise is not a random animal; it represents the ancestral wisdom of patience. The fish is not just a source of food; it represents the abundance of the sacred river. When Edewor creates the symbol for water pollution (a fish skeleton over wavy lines) he is not just documenting an environmental fact. He is visually articulating a spiritual violation: the killing of a sacred realm and the severing of the community's relationship with its ancestral water spirits⁴⁹. The political critique of oil pollution is thus rooted in a profound spiritual claim.

The Student Continuation of Sacred Grammar

The University of Port Harcourt students demonstrate a deep, intuitive understanding of this spiritual grammar. Olulu Ayibanengimote's *The River That Remembered* is not a realistic landscape. It is an ideographic map of a sacred relationship. The work narrates the folkloric story of a young fisherman, Tari, who forgets to show gratitude to the water spirit before fishing. The river becomes polluted and the fish disappear. Only after a dream-vision of the water spirit does Tari restore the ritual of pouring water back into the river as a sign of thanks, and the ecosystem is healed⁵⁰.

This student work perfectly encapsulates the entire logic of Niger Delta ecological spirituality: the environment is sacred, human beings have ritual obligations to maintain it, and neglecting

⁴⁶ Ibid p. 192

⁴⁷ Ibid p. 193

⁴⁸ (Edewor, 2016)p. 145

⁴⁹ (Edewor, 2016) p. 146

⁵⁰ (Onekpe, 2026) p.3

those obligations leads to disaster. Ayibanengimote is not just telling a folktale; she is using an ancient spiritual grammar to critique the modern arrogance of oil extraction. The student has become a vessel for the ancestors.



Fig. 5: A detail from Onobrakpeya's *Ibiebe Aro Ogua* (1984). A sequence of ideograms representing prayer, purity, and longevity function as a 'visual incantation,' transforming the artwork into a personal shrine. (Source: (A. R. Singletary 2002)).

Section 6: The Living Tradition: Student Works as Evidence of Renewal

The Ultimate Test of a Living Language

The most decisive test of whether a visual language is truly alive does not happen in the studio of its master. It happens in the classroom, in the moment a young artist picks up the inherited vocabulary and, with genuine personal urgency, makes something new from it. Neither *Ibiebe* nor *Ibie'ka* would be anything more than a historical curiosity if they could not be learned, used, and extended by those who were not present at their creation. The studio explorations of fourth-year painting students at the Department of Fine Arts and Design, University of Port Harcourt, provide definitive proof that both systems are living, generative traditions⁵¹.

The students were not asked to copy existing artworks. They were asked to use *Ibie'ka* motifs as the exclusive visual vocabulary for original paintings addressing themes from their own experience and community history. This method aligns with the educational theory of Lev Vygotsky, who argued that learners achieve their highest potential when working within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) i.e. the space between what they can do alone and what they can achieve with guidance and cultural tools⁵². The *Ibie'ka* symbols acted as those 'cultural tools,' extending the students' creative and analytical reach.

⁵¹ (Onekpe, 2026)

⁵² (Vygotsky, 1978) p.89

The Works as Evidence

a) **The Visual Dictionary: Emily Reebi**

Emily Reebi's *Ibie'ka: The Language of the Land* is a systematic, grid-based composition. One block uses warm reds and yellows for symbols of the Sun and Oil Palm (life, wealth). Another block uses dark, cold colours for Gas Flaring and Water Pollution (industry, death). A swarm of miniature symbols for Hunger and Anguish floats between the panels⁵³. Reebi describes this work as "my visual dictionary... my way of preserving our culture before it is lost to time or pollution." The composition itself is an argument: Niger Delta life is a war between life-giving nature and corporate destruction.

b) **Ancestral Memory: Olulu Ayibanengimote**

As discussed in Section 5, Ayibanengimote's *The River That Remembered* uses *Ibie'ka* symbols to narrate a complete folkloric story. It moves from the Sun (creation), through the Flame (ancestral presence), the Calabash (culture), the Palm Tree (ecology), and the Drum (community), to the final restoration of the land. She writes, "...the river, drum, knot, fire, and calabash are not objects; they are voices of our ancestors"⁵⁴. This is not a student copying symbols; this is a young artist participating in the spiritual conversation of her people.

c) **Psychological Cartography: Jenny Godspower**

Jenny Godspower's *Broken* demonstrates that *Ibie'ka* can map interior experience. The composition is the silhouette of a woman. Symbols for Prayer and Family are placed at the top of the head (conscious hopes). Symbols for Fear and Divorce are placed at the lower back of the skull (repressed anxieties). Her heart is covered with symbols representing her self-sacrifice for her husband⁵⁵. Godspower has extended *Ibie'ka's* analytical power from public, political critique into the realm of private, psychological pain.

d) **Historical Narrative: Geteloma Empress**

Geteloma Empress's *The Sun Remembered Us* uses *Ibie'ka* symbols to narrate the journey of colonialism. It begins with the Earthworm (easy pre-colonial life) and Oil Palm (abundance), moves through the Snake (colonial poison), the King (imposed authority), and the Cutlass and Hoe (exploited labour), and ends with the Sun (renewal) and an Infant (future generations). She has taken a political language designed to critique oil companies and used it to analyze the deeper history of colonial extraction.

Collectively, these student works demonstrate five specific dimensions of *Ibie'ka's* living vitality.

1. Narrative Range: The system can tell folkloric stories, historical chronicles, and intimate personal narratives.

⁵³ (Onekpe, 2026) p.4

⁵⁴ Ibid p.2

⁵⁵ (Onekpe, 2026) p.3

2. Analytical Depth: It provides frameworks for understanding social, ecological, and psychological conditions.
3. Cultural Transmissibility: Students who were not present at the system's creation learned and applied its vocabulary with genuine personal investment.
4. Generativity: The system produced new meanings, from psychological cartography (Broken) to colonial history (The Sun Remembered Us), that its creator did not originally anticipate.
5. Spiritual Continuity: The ancestral wisdom encoded in the symbols continues to resonate for young artists, as seen in The River That Remembered.

These works are the most powerful evidence in this entire chapter that Niger Delta ideographic art is not a dying tradition, but a vibrant, growing, and urgently needed voice for a new generation.

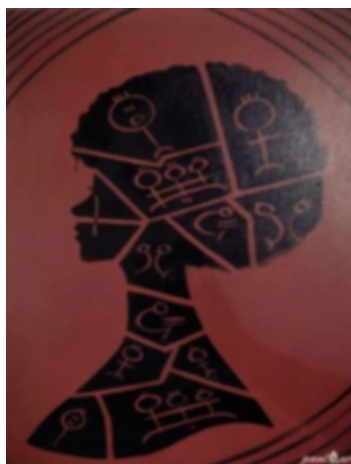


Fig. 6: Jenny Godspower, Broken (2026), Acrylic on canvas.

Ibie'ka symbols map a woman's interior emotional landscape, demonstrating the system's extension into psychological analysis. (Source: Onekpe, 2026, University of Port Harcourt Studio Documentation).

Conclusion

This paper began by posing a problem: the double invisibility of the Niger Delta's most sophisticated visual languages. It has examined *Ibiebe* and *Ibie'ka* across four interconnected dimensions to make the case for their significance.

First, it traced their historical foundations, showing how both systems emerged from the Natural Synthesis movement's project to create a modern Nigerian art from indigenous roots. Second, it analyzed their rhetorical architecture, demonstrating how their engineered layering of meaning allows them to communicate political critique inside the protective shell of

aesthetic beauty. Third, it made the epistemological argument that these are not mere art but genuine knowledge systems, providing conceptual categories for understanding the world that no other tradition can fully replace. Fourth, it explored their deepest spiritual dimension, showing how their visual grammar springs from Urhobo shrine practice and the ecological spirituality of the Niger Delta⁵⁶. Finally, the student works proved that this tradition is not a museum artefact; it is a living, generative language, actively being extended by a new generation.

The question now is 'What would be lost if *Ibiebe* and *Ibie'ka* disappeared'? The loss would be multiple and permanent. There would be the loss of specific conceptual categories (the distinction between 'gas flaring on land' and 'offshore,' or between a 'militant' and a 'soldier') that communities use to think analytically about petroleum capitalism⁵⁷. There would be the loss of specific ways of knowing, such as the understanding that ecological health and moral order are linked. And there would be the deepest loss of all: the severing of the spiritual grammar that connects the living to the ancestors and the community to its sacred landscape. These losses would be permanent. No amount of future scholarship can restore a visual language that has ceased to be practiced. The tacit knowledge of how to make with these symbols (the compositional judgment, the cultural sensitivity that only comes from active practice) would be gone forever⁵⁸.

The survival of *Ibiebe* and *Ibie'ka* depends on active, intentional intervention across four fronts.

For scholars, the call is to write about these systems with the depth and rigor they deserve, and to make that writing accessible.

For educators, the call is to integrate both systems into Nigerian art curricula, not as history lessons but as living studio practice, following the proven model of the University of Port Harcourt⁵⁹.

For artists, the call is to engage with these systems in their own work, not as a cultural duty but because of the unique creative rewards they offer.

And for institutions (universities, galleries, the government), the call is to provide the financial and infrastructural support that makes this engagement possible.

The UNESCO Director-General, Audrey Azoulay, has stated that "many of the solutions to the problems of our century can be found in our living heritage"⁶⁰. The living heritage of Niger Delta ideographic art (its ecological wisdom, its political precision, its spiritual depth) is exactly this kind of resource. It must be kept alive.

⁵⁶ (Foss, 2005); (Nabofa & Elugbe, 1981)

⁵⁷ (Edewor, 2016) p. 146-147

⁵⁸ (Polanyi, 1967) p.4

⁵⁹ (Onekpe, 2026)

⁶⁰ (UNESCO, 2024)

This chapter closes where it began: with the students. The contributions of Bruce Onobrakpeya and Nelson Edewor are foundational. But the students are the truest test of what this paper has sought to prove. When Emily Reebi calls her painting her "visual dictionary," when Olulu Ayibanengimote says that symbols are "the voices of our ancestors," and when Obinna Amarachi Godsgrace describes prayer as "a movement from burden toward release," they are speaking as people for whom this visual language is not a foreign subject, but a native tongue⁶¹. They are the evidence that the transmission has succeeded. They are the most powerful argument that the living voices of the Niger Delta will continue to speak, in their own visual language, with the depth, authority, and urgency that the full weight of their people's experience demands.



Fig. 7: Emily Reebi, *Ibie'ka: The Language of the Land* (2026), Acrylic on canvas. A grid-based composition that uses colour-coding to contrast environmental abundance with industrial destruction. (Source: Onekpe, 2026).



Fig. 8: Olulu Ayibanengimote, *The River That Remembered* (2026), Acrylic on Canvas. An ideographic narrative of the Ogbia people's sacred relationship with their river, water spirits, and the restoration of ecological balance. (Source: Onekpe, 2026).

⁶¹ (Onekpe, 2026) p.1-8

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