

Thinking with *Ibie'ka*: Niger Delta Ideographic Practice as Living Curriculum in the Department of Fine Art and Design Studio, University of Port Harcourt

Onekpe, Osikhiana

Department of Fine Arts and Design, University of Port Harcourt

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Abstract

Nelson Edewor's *Ibie'ka* pictographic system, developed in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria in the late 1990s, represents one of the most intellectually sophisticated indigenous visual knowledge systems in contemporary African art. Emerging from the Natural Synthesis tradition first articulated by the Zaria Art School in the late 1950s, *Ibie'ka* synthesizes Isoko and Urhobo *Ivri* sculptural forms with the geometric vocabulary of petroleum infrastructure to create a visual language capable of documenting the social, ecological, and political consequences of oil extraction on Niger Delta communities. Despite its significance, the system remains largely absent from Nigerian art education curricula, and the critical question of whether it can be successfully transmitted to a new generation of student artists has until recently remained unanswered. This paper addresses that question directly. Employing a practice-based research framework and drawing on Bakhtin's theory of appropriation and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development as its theoretical lenses, it examines the studio explorations of fourth-year painting students at the Department of Fine Arts and Design, University of Port Harcourt, who used *Ibie'ka* motifs as their exclusive visual vocabulary for original compositions. Analysis of four selected works demonstrates that the system successfully transmitted across four distinct communicative domains: analytical environmental documentation, ancestral spiritual narrative, interior psychological cartography, and colonial historical argument. Significantly, students did not merely reproduce Edewor's original symbolic vocabulary. They extended its categorical framework into territories its creator did not specifically anticipate, generating new meanings that enrich rather than depart from the system's fundamental cultural logic. These findings provide direct empirical support for the curricular integration of Niger Delta ideographic systems into Nigerian university art education, arguing that such integration constitutes not an act of cultural nostalgia but of urgent and necessary cultural renewal.

Keywords: *Ibie'ka*, Niger Delta ideograms, indigenous visual knowledge, studio transmission, practice-based research, art education, Natural Synthesis, cultural continuity, Bakhtin, Vygotsky

Corresponding Author: Onekpe, Osikhiana

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Background to the Study

In the late 1990s, a Nigerian artist and scholar named Nelson Edewor created something remarkable. Working from his studio in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, he developed a new visual symbol system called *Ibie'ka*, a set of approximately 100 pictographic signs designed to help people see, understand, and communicate the realities of life in one of the world's most oil-damaged communities. The Niger Delta had by that time suffered four decades of environmental destruction, poverty, and political neglect as a direct result of petroleum extraction, yet no existing visual language was precise or culturally rooted enough to document those conditions adequately (Edewor, 2016). *Ibie'ka* was Edewor's response to that problem. By combining the forms of traditional Isoko and Urhobo *Ivri* sculptures with the shapes of oil pipes and industrial equipment, he created a visual language that was simultaneously African in its roots and urgently relevant to the present-day realities of his community.

Prior to this, in the late 1950s, a group of young Nigerian art students at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology in Zaria made a bold argument: that Nigerian artists did not have to choose between being modern and being African (Okeke-Agulu, 2015). They believed that indigenous visual traditions were not obstacles to contemporary artistic practice but its richest possible foundation. That argument shaped generations of Nigerian artists who came after them, and *Ibie'ka* is one of its most important fruits. Another fruit of that same tradition is Bruce Onobrakpeya's *Ibiebe* system, a set of over 120 ideograms developed between 1978 and 1986, drawing on Urhobo cultural and spiritual tradition (Onobrakpeya, 2006; Onekpe, 2021). *Ibiebe* provides useful background for understanding the tradition within which *Ibie'ka* developed, but it is *Ibie'ka* that this paper is primarily concerned with, because of its pictographic clarity, its systematic organization, and the particular importance of the social and environmental conditions it was created to address.

Despite its significance, *Ibie'ka* is not widely known outside a small circle of scholars, and it has rarely been taught in Nigerian art schools beyond Edewor's own university. This raises a question that matters enormously for the future of the system: can *Ibie'ka* be successfully passed on to a new generation of young artists who had no connection to its creation? Can its symbols become genuine personal tools in the hands of students who did not invent them? This paper argues that the answer is yes, and it provides clear evidence to support that argument. The evidence comes from the studio work of fourth-year painting students at the Department of Fine Arts and Design, University of Port Harcourt, who used *Ibie'ka* symbols as the sole visual vocabulary for original paintings addressing their own lives and their community's history (Onekpe, 2026).

What these student works reveal is both exciting and important. They show that *Ibie'ka* is not a closed or finished system whose meanings are fixed forever by its creator. It is a living, open visual language that grows and produces new meanings when young artists engage with it creatively and honestly. The students did not simply copy Edewor's symbols. They thought with them, using the inherited vocabulary to tell their own stories, analyze their own

communities, and express their own most personal experiences. This is what a living language does, and it is what this paper sets out to demonstrate. In doing so, it makes a broader argument that has real consequences for how Nigerian art is taught: that bringing indigenous visual systems like *Ibie'ka* into the university studio is not a sentimental gesture toward the past but a serious and necessary act of cultural renewal.

Statement of the Problem

A visual language that is written about but never practiced is not truly alive. It may survive in books, journal articles, and museum catalogues, but without artists actively using it, teaching it, and making new things with it, it gradually loses the one quality that makes it valuable: its ability to speak to the present. This is the central problem that this paper addresses. *Ibie'ka* is a sophisticated and culturally important visual knowledge system, but its survival cannot be guaranteed by documentation alone. It needs to be practiced, and it needs to be taught. Since Nelson Edewor first published his definitive account of *Ibie'ka* in 2016, scholarly engagement with the system has remained limited to a small number of researchers, mostly working within the Delta State University environment where Edewor himself teaches and the University of Port Harcourt (Bazunu, 2006; Bazunu, 2012; Onekpe, 2019). This is a significant problem. A visual language known only to a handful of specialists is a language in danger. The symbols, the grammar, the cultural logic that holds the system together, all of these require a community of active practitioners to remain genuinely alive. Without that community, even the most sophisticated visual knowledge system can fade quietly into irrelevance.

The situation is made more urgent by a broader pattern that affects indigenous visual traditions across Nigeria and indeed across much of Africa. Younger generations of artists are increasingly drawn toward globally circulating visual styles, many of which carry the prestige of Western art education and international art markets. Indigenous visual systems, no matter how intellectually rich, struggle to compete for attention in an educational environment that does not actively make space for them (Kaya and Seleti, 2013). This is not a failure of the systems themselves. It is a failure of the institutions responsible for transmitting them. Nigerian art education at the university level has not yet fully responded to this challenge. While individual scholars and artists like Onobrakpeya and Edewor have made extraordinary personal commitments to keeping Niger Delta ideographic traditions alive, the structural integration of systems like *Ibie'ka* into formal art education curricula remains limited and inconsistent. Students in most Nigerian art departments complete their degrees without ever encountering *Ibie'ka* in the studio, not because the system is irrelevant to their practice but because no one has created the curricular space for that encounter to happen.

This paper identifies one further and more specific problem within this broader situation. Even among scholars who recognize the value of *Ibie'ka*, there has been insufficient empirical evidence to answer a question that matters enormously for any argument in favour of curricular integration: can *Ibie'ka* actually be transmitted successfully to student artists who had no direct connection to its creation? Can young painters, encountering the system for the first time in a university studio, genuinely learn to think with its symbols rather than merely

reproduce them mechanically? Without a clear answer to this question, the argument for integrating *Ibie'ka* into art education curricula remains theoretical. This paper provides that answer through direct, documented evidence drawn from the studio explorations of fourth-year painting students at the University of Port Harcourt, whose work demonstrates with striking clarity that *Ibie'ka* is not only transmissible but generative, capable of producing new meanings and new artistic achievements in the hands of a new generation (Onekpe, 2026).

Methodology

This paper uses a practice-based research approach. Practice-based research is a form of scholarly inquiry in which the making of art is not merely the subject of study but the primary means through which new knowledge is generated and tested (Sullivan, 2005/2009). Rather than studying *Ibie'ka* only through written texts, historical records, or formal analysis, this paper examines what happens when young artists actually use the system in the studio, what they make with it, what meanings they generate, and what those outcomes reveal about the system's capacity for transmission and growth. The studio becomes, in this framework, both a laboratory and a classroom, a space where inherited visual knowledge is tested against the urgency of personal and community experience. The primary data for this study consists of four sources. The first is the finished paintings produced by fourth-year students at the Department of Fine Arts and Design, University of Port Harcourt, during a structured studio exploration exercise conducted in 2026 (Onekpe, 2026). The second is the written artist statements each student produced alongside their work, in which they explained their compositional choices, their personal connection to the themes they addressed, and their understanding of the *Ibie'ka* symbols they used. The third is direct compositional analysis of the paintings themselves, examining how students deployed *Ibie'ka's* symbolic vocabulary, how they organized symbols within their compositions, and what new meanings emerged from those organizational choices. The fourth is Edewor's own published account of the *Ibie'ka* system (Edewor, 2016), which serves as the foundational reference against which student interpretations and extensions of the vocabulary are measured.

The studio exploration was structured around a clear and deliberate pedagogical constraint: students were required to use *Ibie'ka* motifs as their exclusive visual vocabulary. They were not permitted to supplement the system with unrelated imagery or decorative elements drawn from other visual traditions. This constraint was not a limitation but a pedagogical strategy, designed to ensure that students engaged deeply and honestly with the system's internal logic rather than using its symbols superficially as decorative additions to compositions built on other foundations. The constraint also made the data more reliable: because every visual decision in each painting was made within the *Ibie'ka* framework, the resulting works provide clear and direct evidence of what the system can and cannot do in the hands of student practitioners.

Four student works were selected for detailed analysis in this paper, chosen because together they demonstrate the widest possible range of *Ibie'ka's* communicative capacity. Emily Reebi's work demonstrates the system's analytical and documentary range. Olulu

Ayibanengimote's work demonstrates its capacity for spiritual and folkloric narrative. Jenny Godspower's work demonstrates its ability to map interior psychological experience. Geteloma Empress's work demonstrates its reach into colonial history and intercultural vision. Each of these works is discussed in the Results and Discussion section with direct reference to the student's own artist statement, ensuring that the analysis remains grounded in the student's own creative intentions rather than imposed from outside. Two theoretical frameworks guide the interpretation of the findings. The first is Bakhtin's theory of appropriation, which explains how artists generate new meanings by creatively engaging with existing cultural forms rather than simply reproducing them (Onekpe, 2019). This framework helps explain why the student works are not mere copies of Edewor's original system but genuine new contributions to it. The second is Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, which describes the expanded creative and intellectual capacity that learners achieve when they work with cultural tools that extend their individual reach (Vygotsky, 1978). This framework explains why engaging with an inherited visual vocabulary like *Ibie'ka* enables students to produce work of greater depth, complexity, and cultural resonance than they could achieve working from their individual artistic resources alone. Together, these two frameworks provide a coherent interpretive foundation for the paper's central argument: that structured studio engagement with *Ibie'ka* constitutes a genuine act of cultural transmission, one that does not merely preserve the system's existing vocabulary but actively extends and enriches it through the creative intelligence of each new generation that inherits it.

***Ibie'ka*: Origins, Structure, and Political Purpose**

Nelson Edewor developed *Ibie'ka* in the late 1990s in direct response to the conditions of petroleum capitalism in the Niger Delta. His Master's dissertation, completed in 1999 at the University of Benin, was titled *Petroleum Exploitation in Isoko Community of Delta State*, a title that makes the political urgency behind the system immediately clear (Bazunu, 2006). As Bazunu's detailed study of Edewor's visual practice documents, *Ibie'ka* emerged from a careful synthesis of *Ivri* sculptural forms from the Isoko and Urhobo traditions with the geometric shapes of oil pipes and industrial petroleum infrastructure, creating a visual language that was simultaneously rooted in Niger Delta cultural identity and adequate to the specific social, ecological, and political conditions that oil extraction had created (Bazunu, 2022). The system comprises approximately 100 pictographic symbols organized into three categories: human society and social relations, the physical environment, and the effects of oil exploitation and politicization (Edewor, 2016). Onekpe's doctoral study confirmed that unlike more abstract ideographic systems, *Ibie'ka's* pictographic character makes it more immediately accessible to viewers while retaining the cultural depth that comes from its indigenous roots (Onekpe, 2019).

Scholars working on indigenous knowledge systems across Africa have consistently identified transmission as the most critical and most vulnerable dimension of any effort to keep such systems alive. Kaya and Seleti argued that without active artistic engagement, many indigenous ideographic systems face permanent disappearance, and that the most

fundamental requirement for keeping them alive is not better documentation but more making (Kaya and Seleti, 2013). The African Quarterly Social Science Review identified three primary challenges facing indigenous knowledge transmission in the African context: loss of interest by younger generations, insufficient support from governmental institutions, and limited access to markets for finished artistic products (African Quarterly Social Science Review, 2025). All three of these challenges apply directly to *Ibie'ka's* situation. The Springer study of indigenous knowledge in African education further confirmed that transmission is mostly practice-based in character, making it inherently vulnerable to interruption when the social conditions that sustain active practice are disrupted (Springer, 2025). These findings collectively underline why the studio-based transmission approach examined in this paper matters so much: documentation alone cannot keep a visual language alive.

Bakhtin's Theory of Appropriation and Visual Languages

One of the most productive theoretical tools for understanding what happens when a student artist engages with an inherited visual vocabulary is Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of appropriation, developed in his landmark work *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981). Bakhtin argued that language is never a neutral or empty medium. Every word, every symbol, every visual sign already carries the intentions, accents, and cultural meanings of those who used it before. As Bakhtin himself wrote, the word in language is half someone else's, and it becomes truly one's own only when the speaker populates it with personal intentions and accent, appropriating it to serve new semantic and expressive purposes. (Kimjaxon) This understanding of language as something inherited and then personally transformed applies with remarkable precision to what happens when a student artist engages with *Ibie'ka* symbols. The symbols arrive carrying Edewor's original intentions and the cultural authority of the Niger Delta tradition from which they were drawn. But they become the student's own language only at the moment when the student fills them with personal meaning, deploys them in new compositional contexts, and uses them to say something that Edewor himself did not say and perhaps did not anticipate.

Bakhtin explained the generation of meaning through what he called the primacy of context, arguing that to make an utterance means to appropriate the words of others and populate them with one's own intentions. When a student uses *Ibie'ka's* symbol for water pollution not merely to document an environmental fact but to narrate a community's grief, or deploys the symbol for prayer not in a spiritual context but as a map of personal psychological suffering, that student is doing precisely what Bakhtin described: appropriating inherited forms and populating them with new intentions that generate meanings beyond what the original context contained. Research drawing on Bakhtin's concept of appropriation has shown that students deepen their learning by borrowing others' words and symbols, and that this process of borrowing and personalizing is inseparable from the broader cultural context of the classroom and the community (Academia.edu) (Appropriation and Cultural Tools, 2013). In this paper, Bakhtin's framework helps explain why the UNIPORT student works are not mere copies of Edewor's system but genuine new contributions to it.

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and Studio Learning

The second theoretical framework that guides this paper is Lev Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, which describes the gap between what a learner can achieve independently and what they can achieve when supported by culturally provided tools and more experienced guidance (Vygotsky, 1978). In the context of studio art education, this concept has a specific and important application. When students are given access to an inherited visual vocabulary like *Ibie'ka*, they are not simply being handed a set of images to copy. They are being given cultural mediating tools, semiotic instruments that carry accumulated wisdom, analytical power, and community authority, all of which extend their creative and intellectual reach well beyond what their individual artistic resources alone could achieve. As the study applying Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to art education confirms, culture is a direct influence on design, and when students engage with visual vocabulary from their own cultural tradition, they draw on meanings they have absorbed from their community in ways that deepen and enrich their creative work (ERIC, 2025). The zone of proximal development in the UNIPORT studio explorations is therefore not merely the gap between a student's existing skill and a more advanced technique. It is the gap between what a student can express from their individual experience alone and what they can express when that experience is channeled through the inherited wisdom of a visual language rooted in their own community's history and struggle.

Practice-Based Research as a Framework for Knowledge Generation

This paper also draws on the tradition of practice-based research in the visual arts, which holds that the making of art is not merely the subject of scholarly inquiry but itself a primary means through which new knowledge is generated and tested (Sullivan, 2005/2009). Graeme Sullivan, whose foundational work on art practice as research established the theoretical basis for this approach, argued that studio practice generates knowledge that no other form of inquiry can fully replicate, because it operates simultaneously across cognitive, cultural, and sensory dimensions in ways that verbal and analytical methods alone cannot access (Sullivan, 2005/2009). In the context of this paper, the student studio explorations are understood not merely as pedagogical exercises but as acts of knowledge production in their own right. Each student work examined here is treated as evidence, as data that reveals something specific and irreplaceable about *Ibie'ka*'s transmissibility, its generative capacity, and its continued vitality as a living visual language in the hands of a new generation.

The studio explorations examined in this section were conducted by fourth-year painting students at the Department of Fine Arts and Design, University of Port Harcourt, in February 2026. Each student was required to use *Ibie'ka* motifs as their sole visual vocabulary for original painting compositions addressing themes drawn from their own experience and their community's history. Four works were selected for detailed analysis: Emily Reebe's *Ibie'ka: The Language of the Land*, Olulu Ayibanengimote's *The River That Remembered*, Jenny Godspower's *Broken*, and Geteloma Empress's *the Sun Remembered Us*. Together these four works provide clear and compelling evidence that *Ibie'ka* is a living, transmissible visual language capable of generating new meanings far beyond what its creator originally

anticipated. Each work is discussed below with direct reference to the student's own artist statement, ensuring that the analysis remains grounded in the student's creative intentions.

Emily Reebi: *Ibie'ka*: The Language of the Land

Of all the student works examined in this study, Emily Reebi's *Ibie'ka*: The Language of the Land is the most systematic and the most analytically ambitious. Reebi herself described the work as her visual dictionary, a deliberate and revealing choice of words that immediately signals her understanding of *Ibie'ka* not as a decorative resource but as a genuine knowledge system, a structured vocabulary through which complex realities can be organized, documented, and communicated (Onekpe, 2026).

The compositional structure of the work reflects this understanding directly. Reebi organized her painting as a grid of separate colour-coded sections, each housing a distinct *Ibie'ka* symbol and representing a different dimension of Niger Delta experience. She explained her colour logic clearly in her artist statement: reds and yellows represent the heat of the sun and the wealth of the oil palm, while darker blocks represent the industrial side, specifically gas flaring and water pollution (Onekpe, 2026). This colour coding is not merely decorative. It maps directly onto *Ibie'ka*'s three-category analytical architecture, with the natural environment symbols occupying the warmer, brighter sections of the composition and the oil exploitation symbols occupying the darker ones. Reebi has not simply learned the system's individual symbols. She has absorbed its deeper organizational logic and made it her own compositional language.

What makes the work particularly significant is the treatment of the background. Between the main grid panels, Reebi scattered miniature symbols of hunger and anguish across the entire composition, explaining that she wanted to show that the people of the Niger Delta are at the centre of these environmental changes, surrounded and permeated by suffering that does not announce itself loudly but is always present (Onekpe, 2026). This compositional decision demonstrates what Bakhtin would recognize as genuine appropriation: the student has taken *Ibie'ka*'s inherited symbols and populated them with her own intentions, generating a meaning that the symbol alone did not contain. The hunger and anguish symbols scattered across the background are doing something Edewor did not specifically design them to do. They are functioning as atmosphere, as emotional weather, as the silent condition within which all the other symbols exist. This is a genuinely new application of the system's vocabulary, discovered through the creative intelligence of a student who was thinking with the symbols rather than merely using them.

Reebi's closing statement in her artist statement is one of the most eloquent expressions of cultural transmission as artistic purpose in the entire body of student work. She wrote that she saw the painting as her way of preserving her culture before it is lost to time or pollution (Onekpe, 2026). This statement is important not only for what it says but for what it reveals about the quality of transmission that has taken place. Reebi has not merely learned *Ibie'ka*'s formal vocabulary. She has understood and personally embraced its deeper cultural and

political mission, the understanding that engaging with these symbols is an act of community documentation and cultural survival, not merely artistic exercise. In Vygotsky's terms, the inherited vocabulary of the system has extended her creative zone of proximal development, enabling her to produce a work of cultural analysis and personal commitment that her individual artistic resources alone could not have generated (Vygotsky, 1978).

Figure 1.

Exploration by Emily Reebi (2026)



Title: *Ibie'ka: The Language of the Land*

Artist: Reebiartmillia

Medium: Acrylic on canvas

Size: 2 * 3 ft

Year: 2026

Olulu Ayibanengimote: The River That Remembered

Olulu Ayibanengimote's *The River That Remembered* demonstrates the system's capacity to carry spiritual meaning, ancestral memory, and community folklore across the boundary between generations. Where Reebi approached *Ibie'ka* as a visual dictionary, Ayibanengimote approached it as a storytelling language, a medium through which the deep cultural memory of the Ogbia people of Bayelsa State could be given visual form and passed forward to those who come after (Onekpe, 2026).

The painting narrates a complete folkloric story. It traces the sacred relationship between the Ogbia people and their river, moving through a sequence of *Ibie'ka* symbols that include the sun, fire, calabash, oil palm, human identity, community, drum, fish, communal fire, and finally land and settlement. The river runs through the entire composition as a connecting thread, linking every symbol in the painting and serving, as Ayibanengimote herself explained, as a witness to history, the one constant presence that has observed and remembered everything the community has experienced across generations (Onekpe, 2026). This compositional decision is both visually striking and intellectually sophisticated.

The river is not merely one symbol among others in the painting. It is the organizational principle of the entire composition, the visual equivalent of a narrative voice that holds all the other elements together and gives them meaning in relation to each other.

The folkloric story at the heart of the work concerns a young fisherman named Tari, whose ritual gratitude to the river sustains the ecological and spiritual balance of her community. When that gratitude is forgotten, the balance is disrupted, the fish disappear, and the community suffers. It is only through a dream vision in which a water spirit restores the sacred relationship between the people and their river that healing and renewal become possible (Onekpe, 2026). This narrative arc, from harmony through disruption to renewal, is encoded entirely in *Ibie'ka* symbols, demonstrating the system's capacity to sustain complex multi-stage storytelling rather than merely isolated symbolic statements.

What is particularly significant about this work in the context of this paper's argument is the way Ayibanengimote extended *Ibie'ka*'s symbolic vocabulary into the domain of spiritual narrative. Edewor designed the system primarily as a tool for social and environmental documentation, yet Ayibanengimote used its symbols to encode an ancestral cosmological story of the kind that has sustained Niger Delta communities for generations. This is a clear example of what Bakhtin described as genuine appropriation: the student has taken symbols designed for one purpose and populated them with intentions drawn from a different but deeply related cultural domain, generating meanings that enrich rather than distort the original system (Onekpe, 2019). The symbols did not resist this extension. They accommodated it, demonstrating a flexibility and depth that speaks directly to the quality of the indigenous cultural knowledge from which they were drawn.

Ayibanengimote's own words about the work are as revealing as the painting itself. She explained that the river, drum, knot, fire, and calabash in her composition are not objects. They are voices of her ancestors (Onekpe, 2026). This statement captures something fundamental about the nature of living visual languages and about what successful transmission actually means. A student who experiences inherited symbols as ancestral voices rather than borrowed decorations has not merely learned a vocabulary. She has been genuinely welcomed into a tradition, and she is now speaking from within it rather than about it from outside. In Vygotsky's terms, the cultural tools provided by *Ibie'ka*'s symbolic vocabulary have become genuinely internalized, extending her creative and intellectual reach into territories of spiritual and ancestral knowledge that her individual artistic resources alone could not have accessed (Vygotsky, 1978).

The River That Remembered also demonstrates something important about the relationship between *Ibie'ka* and the broader Niger Delta cultural tradition within which it sits. The ecological cosmology encoded in Ayibanengimote's painting, the understanding that rivers are spiritually alive, that human communities are bound to the natural world by relationships of sacred reciprocity, and that forgetting those relationships has consequences, is not merely a charming folkloric theme. It is the same ecological and spiritual worldview that gives *Ibie'ka*'s

environmental symbols their deepest meaning and their most fundamental moral authority. When Edewor designed symbols for water pollution and fish death, he was not merely documenting environmental damage in a neutral scientific sense. He was encoding a violation of sacred relationship, a rupture in the spiritual bond between a community and the living world it inhabits. Ayibanengimote's painting makes that dimension of the system visible in a way that no purely analytical reading of the symbols could achieve, and in doing so, it adds a layer of meaning to *Ibie'ka* that deepens rather than departs from Edewor's original intentions.

Figure 2.



Title: The River That Remembered.

Artist: Olulu Ayibanengimote

Medium: Acrylic on canvas

Size: 2 * 3 ft

Year: 2026

Jenny Godspower: Broken

Jenny Godspower's *Broken* takes *Ibie'ka* into territory that neither Emily Reebi's analytical documentation nor Olulu Ayibanengimote's spiritual folklore fully explored. Where those two works turned the system's visual vocabulary outward toward community history, environmental conditions, and ancestral memory, *broken* turns it inward, using *Ibie'ka* symbols to map the interior psychological and emotional experience of a single individual. In doing so, it demonstrates one of the most surprising and consequential findings of this entire study: that *Ibie'ka's* communicative range extends not only across the social, ecological, and political dimensions of Niger Delta life but into the deeply personal and universally human territory of private suffering, silent fear, and the quiet courage of someone who keeps holding on when everything around her is falling apart (Onekpe, 2026).

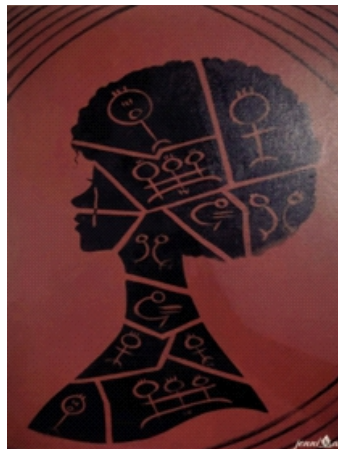
The composition is built around the silhouette of a woman's figure. Godspower placed *Ibie'ka* symbols drawn from the system's human society and social relations category directly onto

and around the body of this figure, using their physical placement within the composition to communicate psychological meaning. Symbols of prayer and family appear at the top of the figure's head, representing the hopes and aspirations that dominate her conscious thoughts. Symbols of fear and divorce appear at the lower back of the head, representing the anxieties that she pushes below the surface of awareness but that are always present, always pressing upward (Onekpe, 2026). This spatial logic, using the geography of the human body as a map of psychological experience, is an entirely original application of *Ibie'ka's* symbolic vocabulary, one that Edewor did not design the system to perform but that the system proves fully capable of performing in the hands of a student who engaged with it with genuine creative intelligence. What Godspower has done here is significant from a theoretical standpoint. Edewor's original three categories for *Ibie'ka* were designed to document external social reality: the relationships between people, the state of the physical environment, and the effects of oil exploitation on community life. Godspower has taken those externally oriented categories and turned them inward, discovering that the same symbols that can document a community's social stratification can equally document an individual's psychological stratification, the internal hierarchy of hopes, fears, prayers, and pain that structures a person's inner life just as surely as petroleum capitalism structures the social life of a Niger Delta community. This is a genuine extension of the system's categorical framework, a new application that goes beyond what its creator originally anticipated and that enriches rather than distorts the system's fundamental logic.

Bakhtin's concept of appropriation is directly visible in this creative decision. Godspower appropriated *Ibie'ka's* social vocabulary, symbols designed to document external human relationships, and populated them with entirely new intentions drawn from the domain of interior psychological experience (Onekpe, 2019). The symbols responded to this appropriation productively, generating meanings that neither the symbols alone nor Godspower's personal experience alone could have produced. The prayer symbol placed at the top of a suffering woman's head means something different and something more than it means in Edewor's original system. It carries not only the cultural weight of Niger Delta spiritual practice but the specific, personal, and deeply moving weight of one woman's silent hope that her family will survive intact. This doubling of meaning, the cultural and the personal speaking simultaneously through a single symbol, is precisely what Bakhtin meant when he described the process through which a speaker makes an inherited language genuinely their own. Godspower's artist statement is simple, direct, and devastating in its clarity. She wrote that *Broken* is the story of a woman who is emotionally divided, and that despite her fears, her only prayer is for her family to stay together (Onekpe, 2026). There is nothing complicated about this statement, and that simplicity is part of its power. The work does not reach for grand historical narratives or sweeping ecological arguments. It stays close to a single human being's experience of pain and hope, and it uses *Ibie'ka's* inherited vocabulary to give that experience a visual form precise enough to be immediately recognizable and universal enough to resonate far beyond the specific individual whose story it tells.

This universality is itself an important finding. One of the concerns sometimes raised about indigenous visual knowledge systems is that their cultural specificity limits their communicative reach, and also that symbols rooted in a particular community's tradition can only speak meaningfully to members of that community. Broken challenges that concern directly. The emotional experience it documents, the fear of family dissolution, the silent holding on of someone who keeps praying when she has little reason left for hope, is not specific to the Niger Delta. It is a human experience that anyone, anywhere, can recognize and feel. The fact that *Ibie'ka's* symbols can carry that universally human experience without losing their cultural specificity is one of the most significant demonstrations of the system's depth and range in the entire body of student work examined in this study. In Vygotsky's terms, the *Ibie'ka* vocabulary functioned here as a cultural mediating tool that extended Godspower's creative zone of proximal development in a very specific direction: it gave her a visual language precise enough to map the geography of interior experience with a clarity and a cultural authority that no purely personal visual language could have achieved (Vygotsky, 1978). The result is a work that is simultaneously deeply personal and deeply cultural, simultaneously a private confession and a community document, and that achieves this double character precisely because the inherited symbols through which it speaks carry both dimensions within them.

Figure 3.



Title: Broken
Artist: Jenny Godspower
Medium: Acrylic on canvas
Size: 2 * 3 ft
Year: 2026

Geteloma Empress: The Sun Remembered Us

Geteloma Empress's *The Sun Remembered Us* extends *Ibie'ka's* communicative reach in a direction that none of the preceding works had fully explored: backward through colonial history and forward into the possibility of hope and renewal. Where Emily Reebe

documented the present conditions of Niger Delta life, Olulu Ayibanengimote recovered ancestral spiritual memory, and Jenny Godspower mapped interior psychological suffering, Empress used *Ibie'ka's* symbolic vocabulary to tell a historical story that begins before the arrival of colonialism, moves through the darkness of dispossession and exploitation, and arrives finally at a vision of light and future possibility. In doing so, she demonstrated that *Ibie'ka* is not only a language adequate to the present and the past of the Niger Delta but to the future it dares to imagine (Onekpe, 2026).

The painting depicts two enslaved children during the colonial era. The choice of children as the central human figures is itself a significant and deliberate compositional decision. Children in this context represent both the most vulnerable victims of colonial violence and the carriers of future possibility, the generation in whose hands the question of survival and renewal will ultimately be decided. By placing children at the center of a colonial history painting made entirely from *Ibie'ka* symbols, Empress is making an argument that is simultaneously historical and contemporary: that the children of the Niger Delta today are the inheritors of a story that began long before the discovery of oil, and that understanding that longer history is essential for understanding the full weight of what they carry and what they are capable of becoming (Onekpe, 2026). The *Ibie'ka* symbols Empress deployed across the composition tell the colonial story in precise and systematic stages. Symbols of land, oil palm, goat, and cowry in the opening section of the composition represent the pre-colonial abundance of a community living in productive relationship with its natural environment. The cutlass and hoe symbols introduce the violence and forced labour of colonial extraction. Symbols of hunger and anguish document the human cost of that violence. The journey symbol marks the disruption of community life and the forced movement of people stripped of their homes and their autonomy. And then, at the far edge of the composition, the sun symbol appears, large and luminous, representing what Empress described as renewal, light, and the possibility of a better future for Black people (Onekpe, 2026).

This compositional arc, from abundance through suffering to hope, is one of the most structurally sophisticated narrative achievements in the entire body of student work examined in this study. Empress has used *Ibie'ka's* symbolic vocabulary not merely to document a series of historical events but to construct a complete historical argument, a visual thesis about the relationship between colonial dispossession, present suffering, and future possibility. Each symbol in the composition contributes to that argument, and the argument only becomes fully visible when the symbols are read in sequence, as a narrative rather than as isolated pictographic statements. This sequential narrative logic, the capacity to generate meaning through the relationship between symbols rather than through any single symbol alone, is one of *Ibie'ka's* most powerful structural features, and Empress exploited it with remarkable compositional intelligence.

The material technique Empress chose for the work adds a further and important dimension to its meaning. She executed the painting in low relief, applying fine sand and adhesive to create physical dimensionality in the symbol forms. This decision resonates directly with the

material traditions from which *Ibie'ka* itself was partly drawn. The *Ivri* sculptural corpus that served as one of Edewor's primary sources for the system is itself a three-dimensional sculptural tradition, and the relief quality of Empress's surface gives her *Ibie'ka* symbols something of the physical presence and tactile authority of sculptural objects rather than merely painted marks (Edewor, 2016). The symbols do not simply sit on the surface of the painting. They emerge from it, asserting their presence with a physical insistence that reinforces the historical weight of the story they tell.

Bakhtin's theory of appropriation illuminates what Empress achieved here with particular clarity. She took *Ibie'ka* symbols that Edewor designed primarily to document present-day conditions of petroleum capitalism and populated them with entirely new historical intentions, using them to speak about a period of Niger Delta history that predates the oil industry entirely (Onekpe, 2019). In Bakhtin's terms, she appropriated the inherited forms and filled them with her own accent, her own cultural and historical urgency, generating meanings that the symbols did not contain before she deployed them in this specific compositional context. The symbols accommodated this historical extension productively, demonstrating once again that *Ibie'ka's* vocabulary is not limited to the specific conditions that motivated its creation but is capable of speaking across a much wider range of Niger Delta experience than Edewor's original three categories explicitly addressed.

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development is equally visible in this work. The inherited vocabulary of *Ibie'ka* gave Empress access to a cultural and historical authority that her individual artistic resources alone could not have provided (Vygotsky, 1978). Without the system's symbolic vocabulary, a painting about colonial history made by a young Nigerian student artist might easily remain at the level of emotional response, expressing outrage or grief without the analytical precision needed to transform those emotions into a structured historical argument. With *Ibie'ka's* symbols as her mediating tools, Empress was able to construct a composition that does not merely feel the weight of colonial history but thinks through it systematically, moving from cause to consequence to possibility with the clarity and coherence of a well-reasoned argument expressed in visual form.

Empress's artist statement captures the spirit of the work with characteristic directness. She wrote that the sun in the painting symbolizes renewal, light, and the possibility of a better future for Black people, while the infant figure represents future generations and the continuity of resilience (Onekpe, 2026). These words are important not only for what they reveal about this specific painting but for what they demonstrate about the quality of cultural transmission that has taken place. A student who can use *Ibie'ka's* inherited vocabulary to speak about colonial history, articulate a vision of future possibility, and connect the suffering of the past to the resilience of the present has not merely learned a symbol system. She has internalized a way of thinking about Niger Delta experience, a cultural and historical consciousness that the symbols carry within them and that they transmit to anyone who engages with them with the depth and seriousness that Empress brought to this work.

Figure 4.



Title: The Sun Remembered Us
Artist: Geteloma Empress's Medium:
Oil on canvas
Size: 3 *4 ft
Year: 2026

Cross-Cutting Analysis: What These Four Works Collectively Prove

Taken individually, each of the four-student works examined in this study tells its own story and makes its own distinctive contribution to the living tradition of Niger Delta ideographic art. But taken together, they tell a larger and more consequential story, one that goes beyond any single student's achievement and speaks directly to the central argument of this paper. That argument is simply this: *Ibie'ka* is a living visual language, not a historical artefact, and the evidence of that living vitality is not theoretical but practical, visible in the specific creative choices these four students made, in the personal urgency with which each work is invested, and in the genuine originality of the meanings each student generated through her engagement with the inherited vocabulary.

The first thing these four works collectively prove is that *Ibie'ka* is genuinely transmissible. All four students engaged with the system's symbolic vocabulary with a depth and intelligence that goes well beyond mechanical reproduction. None of them simply copied Edewor's symbols onto a canvas and called it a painting. Each one thought with the symbols, using them as tools for addressing personal, community, historical, and spiritual concerns that were genuinely their own. This distinction between copying and thinking with is fundamental. A visual language that can only be copied is not truly alive. A visual language that enables new thinking, that gives its users conceptual and expressive resources they did not previously have, is doing exactly what a living language is supposed to do. All four works demonstrate *Ibie'ka* doing precisely that (Onekpe, 2026). The second thing these works collectively prove is that *Ibie'ka's* communicative range is significantly wider than its original three-category

framework explicitly addressed. Edewor designed the system to document social relations, the physical environment, and the effects of oil exploitation in the Niger Delta (Edewor, 2016). These are the three categories that structure its symbolic vocabulary, and they represent a coherent and comprehensive analytical framework for understanding the specific conditions of petroleum capitalism in the region. But the four-student works examined in this study demonstrate that the system's communicative reach extends well beyond those three categories into territories that Edewor did not specifically design it to address. Jenny Godspower extended the system into the domain of interior psychological experience. Geteloma Empress extended it into colonial history that predates the oil industry entirely. Olulu Ayibanengimote extended it into ancestral spiritual cosmology and community folklore. Emily Reebe extended it into the logic of systematic visual documentation, using the system's vocabulary to construct what she herself called a visual dictionary of Niger Delta life. Each of these extensions is a genuine addition to the system's communicative repertoire, and each one was discovered not by Edewor but by a student artist engaging with the inherited vocabulary with creative intelligence and personal urgency.

This finding has important theoretical implications. It confirms what Bakhtin's theory of appropriation would predict: that a visual language of genuine cultural depth does not simply transmit fixed meanings from one generation to the next but generates new meanings at every moment of genuine creative engagement (Onekpe, 2019). The meanings produced by these four students are not contained in Edewor's original system. They emerged from the encounter between that system and four individual creative intelligences, each bringing her own experience, her own community knowledge, and her own artistic vision to the inherited vocabulary. This is not a distortion of the system. It is evidence of its health. A language that can only mean what its creator intended it to mean is already dead. A language that keeps generating new meanings in new hands is alive, and *Ibie'ka* is demonstrably, vigorously alive.

The third thing these works collectively prove is that structured studio engagement is the most effective mechanism for transmitting indigenous visual knowledge to a new generation. All four students encountered *Ibie'ka* not through passive reading of Edewor's published account of the system but through active making, through the experience of picking up its symbols and using them to say something true and important about their own world. It was this active engagement, this requirement to think with the symbols rather than merely about them, that produced the depth of understanding visible in each work. As Kaya and Seleti argued, the most fundamental requirement for keeping indigenous visual knowledge systems alive is not better documentation but more making (Kaya and Seleti, 2013). The University of Port Harcourt Fine Art studio explorations provide direct empirical support for that argument, demonstrating that when students are given structured opportunities to engage with *Ibie'ka* in serious creative practice, the results are remarkable both for the quality of the work produced and for the depth of cultural understanding and personal investment that the engagement generates.

The fourth and perhaps most important thing these works collectively prove is that indigenous visual knowledge systems like *Ibie'ka* carry within them a form of cultural authority that no other visual language can fully replicate. Each of the four students produced work that was simultaneously deeply personal and deeply cultural, simultaneously an individual artistic statement and a community document. This double character, the personal and the cultural speaking together through inherited symbols, is not something that can be achieved with a borrowed or invented visual vocabulary. It requires a language rooted in one's own community's history, struggle, and spiritual life, a language that carries the weight of ancestral knowledge even as it accommodates the urgency of present experience. *Ibie'ka* is exactly that kind of language, and the four-student works examined in this study demonstrate its authority with a clarity and a completeness that no purely theoretical argument could match.

Taken together, these findings carry a direct and urgent implication for art education policy in Nigeria and beyond. If four student artists, given structured access to *Ibie'ka* in a university studio, can produce work of this range, depth, and cultural significance, then the argument for integrating Niger Delta ideographic systems into Nigerian art education curricula is not merely persuasive. It is, on the evidence of these works, overwhelming. The question is no longer whether *Ibie'ka* can be transmitted to a new generation. It demonstrably can. The question now is whether the institutions responsible for Nigerian art education will create the curricular space, the pedagogical support, and the institutional commitment needed to make that transmission happen consistently, systematically, and at the scale that the urgency of the situation demands.

Conclusion

This paper began with a simple but consequential question: can *Ibie'ka*, Nelson Edewor's Niger Delta pictographic system, be successfully transmitted to a new generation of student artists who had no direct connection to its creation? The answer, demonstrated through the studio explorations of four fourth-year painting students at the Department of Fine Arts and Design, University of Port Harcourt, is an unambiguous yes. But the significance of that answer extends well beyond a simple confirmation of the system's transmissibility. What these four-student works demonstrate collectively is something deeper and more consequential: that *Ibie'ka* is not merely transmissible but generative, not merely preserved but growing, not merely inherited but actively extended and enriched by every new generation that engages with it honestly and creatively.

The journey this paper has traced moves through several interconnected stages. It began by establishing the intellectual tradition from which *Ibie'ka* emerged, the Natural Synthesis movement of the Zaria Art School, which from the late 1950s onwards gave Nigerian artists the intellectual confidence to take indigenous visual knowledge seriously as the foundation for contemporary artistic achievement (Okeke-Agulu, 2015). It then examined the specific conditions of petroleum capitalism in the Niger Delta that gave *Ibie'ka* its particular political and environmental urgency, and the creative synthesis of *Ivri* sculptural tradition with

petroleum infrastructure forms through which Edewor constructed a visual language adequate to those conditions (Edewor, 2016). It identified the critical gap between the system's documented existence and its living practice, and it argued that closing that gap requires not better documentation but more making, not scholarly preservation but active studio engagement (Kaya and Seleti, 2013). And it provided the empirical evidence needed to support that argument, through detailed analysis of four student works that together demonstrate *Ibie'ka's* communicative range across analytical documentation, spiritual narrative, psychological cartography, and colonial history.

Each of the four students whose work was examined in this paper made a contribution to the living tradition of Niger Delta ideographic art that goes beyond what might reasonably be expected of undergraduate studio practice. Emily Reebi constructed a systematic visual dictionary of Niger Delta life that demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of *Ibie'ka's* three-category analytical architecture. Olulu Ayibanengimote encoded a complete ancestral folklore narrative of the Ogbia people's sacred relationship with their river, demonstrating the system's capacity for spiritual and cosmological storytelling. Jenny Godspower turned the system's social vocabulary inward to map the interior psychological experience of a woman holding her family together under silent and enormous pressure, discovering in the process a new application for *Ibie'ka's* categorical framework that its creator did not originally anticipate. And Geteloma Empress extended the system backward through colonial history, using its symbols to construct a visual argument that moves from pre-colonial abundance through colonial suffering to a vision of future renewal, demonstrating that *Ibie'ka's* communicative reach extends far beyond the specific conditions of petroleum capitalism that motivated its creation.

Two theoretical frameworks helped explain why these outcomes were possible. Bakhtin's theory of appropriation showed that genuine creative engagement with an inherited visual vocabulary does not produce copies of the original but new meanings generated through the encounter between inherited symbols and personal intentions, and that this process of appropriation is not a departure from the tradition but its most vital expression (Onekpe, 2019). Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development showed that cultural mediating tools like *Ibie'ka's* symbolic vocabulary extend the creative and intellectual reach of student artists beyond what their individual resources alone could achieve, enabling them to produce work of cultural depth and analytical precision that no purely personal visual language could have generated (Vygotsky, 1978). Together these two frameworks provide a coherent and well-supported explanation for why structured studio engagement with indigenous visual knowledge systems produces outcomes of the quality and significance documented in this study.

The implications of these findings reach beyond the specific case of *Ibie'ka* and the specific context of the Fine Arts Department of the University of Port Harcourt. They speak to a broader and more urgent challenge facing Nigerian art education: the challenge of creating institutional space for indigenous visual knowledge systems within university curricula that

have historically privileged Western aesthetic conventions at the expense of the equally sophisticated visual traditions developed within Nigeria's own diverse cultural landscape. The evidence of this study is clear: when students are given structured opportunities to engage with systems like *Ibie'ka* in serious creative practice, they produce work of remarkable quality, demonstrate deep cultural understanding, and develop a personal investment in their own visual heritage that no amount of art historical survey teaching could generate. The argument for curricular integration is therefore not merely cultural or sentimental. It is pedagogical, grounded in direct empirical evidence of what structured studio engagement with indigenous visual knowledge actually produces.

There is also a warning embedded in these findings, one that this paper would be incomplete without stating directly. The transmission that this study documents did not happen automatically or inevitably. It happened because specific individuals, specifically the researchers and educators at the University of Port Harcourt who designed and facilitated the studio exploration exercise, made deliberate and sustained efforts to create the conditions under which it could occur. Without those efforts, the transmission would not have happened, and *Ibie'ka* would have remained what it risks becoming without active intervention: a system known to specialists, documented in academic journals, but absent from the studios where the next generation of Nigerian artists is being formed. As Onekpe confirmed in her doctoral study, without artistic engagement, many indigenous ideographic systems may disappear (Onekpe, 2019). This paper has demonstrated what artistic engagement looks like when it is given the space and support it needs. The responsibility now lies with the institutions, the university administrators, curriculum designers, cultural policy makers, and funding bodies, to ensure that space and support are provided consistently, systematically, and urgently enough to make a real difference before more of what cannot be replaced is lost.

Ibie'ka is a living language. These four students proved it. The task now is to make sure it stays alive.

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