

MBAISE ART IN TRANSITION: A STUDY OF MBARI ART SCHOOL IN MBAISE, IMO STATE

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Abstract

Mbaise Art School, also known as Mbari Art School refers to artists of Mbaise extraction and members of Mbari Art School. The group was very popular after the Nigeria-Biafra civil war in 1970's and their creativity has spread beyond traditional art media and ideology, hence they were classified as transitional artists, Transitional period in Nigerian art history lies between Traditional and modern period. Despite the popularity and uniqueness of these artists whose work ardon many galleries in Nigeria, Europe and America, not much scholarly work has been written on them. In view of this problem, this study attempts at documenting the works and achievements of this group in order to project them and accord them the rightful place they deserve in the History of Nigeria art. The study employs a qualitative method of research and data were analyzed descriptively. The was revealed that the ideology of the original Mbaise Art school has been kept alive in the works of some contemporary artists of Mbaise extraction, spearheaded by Evarest Ibe. Others include, Bright Eke, Hycent Nguma among many others. The pioneering efforts of the founders of MbaiseArt School now continues in teh works of these Neo--Mbaise artists.

Key Words: Mbaise Art, Transition, Mbari Art, Neo-Mbaise, Modern period.

INTRODUCTION

Mbaise people of Imo state in Nigeria are known for their unique art which is suffused with Igbo mythology. This ancient art tradition has survived in the work of the artists of the Mbaise school of Art which became very popular in the 1980's. These group of Transitional artists that tried to continue the traditional Mbaise art mainly wood carving. According to Ngumah (2013), The Mbaise artists tried to repnegant different deities and gods using sculptural pieces which reflect their social-culture and religious belief. They are also makers of different local musical instruments with wood, animal skin and metals.

Mbaise gods/deities are symbolized in masks, masquerades and Mbari images. Some of the gods and deities and cultural /social activities represented in their are Amadioha, Kamalu, Ogwugwu, OfornaOgu, Ogadazu, Anyanwu, Ala, Eke, Nguma, Alaukwu, Igwekala, Arusi, Agwu, Edele, Ekpo, Ulaga , Mmanwu, Ojionu, Okorovo, among others. Ngumah further states that each village, town and individual has connection with divinity, cultural/tradition which is symbolized with sculptural effigies. To buttress this, Ekeanyanwu, (1990) states that individuals, families and communities, emanate from the gods controlling them, that is why the names of both villages, communities, families and individuals are connected with their gods, for example, Nwanguma, Nwaala and Nwagwu are different names for individuals while Umuarusi, Alaukwu Ogbe, Umuofor, Umuagwu are names of villages and communities. These individuals and communities have deities (sculptural images) related to their names.

Elekwachi (2005) stated that Mbaise art are influenced by the folklores of the Igbo society where images of both animals, plants, humans and instruments of different functions are combined and used to form sculptural figures for different purposes. This is to say that the every motif used in sculptural has its interpretation and function based on its characteristics.

The images are carved either in relief (panel) or in the round (free standing) and mainly with hard woods which are resistant to termites. Mbaïse works of art were known for their uniqueness in composition while the motifs are mythologically related with blends of eclecticism and sculptural synthesis. Indeed, the then Mbaïse School was characteristically symbolic and linear. The style could be the combination of realism and naturalism which was local executed.

The Transitional Period of Mbari Art

This period started during the colonial period and was spearheaded by Mbari art school in Ibadan, which lasted from 1960 to the late 1980's with these pioneering members: Duru Omenka S.A.O. Chukwuegu, Omenka Long John Mbazugwe, Gogo Anyanwu, Omenka Geoffrey Nwogu, Omenka Josiah Nwogu Anyanwu (the father of Geoffrey Nwogu), later Omenka C.C. Chukwuegu and Sylvester Chukwuegu (the sons of Duru Omenka A.O. Chukwuegu); and H.C. Ngumah joined as apprentices. This was in the early 1970's and their workshop/studio was at Nkwogwu in Aboh – Mbaïse, Imo State. All the artists are indigenes of Mbaïse, but there were other members who are not from Mbaïse like Evans Osuchukwu and others. Members of this art school had little or no formal education and their art training followed the traditional apprentice style, hence their classification under transitional period (Egonwa, 2017). In 1971, Uche Okeke visited their studio and introduced them to Obiora Udechukwu who gave them wider exposure and encouraged them to collaborate with the Nsukka Art School. The regime of Ukpabi Asika in 1972 as the then East-Central state Governor gave them an opportunity to participate in an exhibition and art competition in which some of their members won prizes, (see plate I).

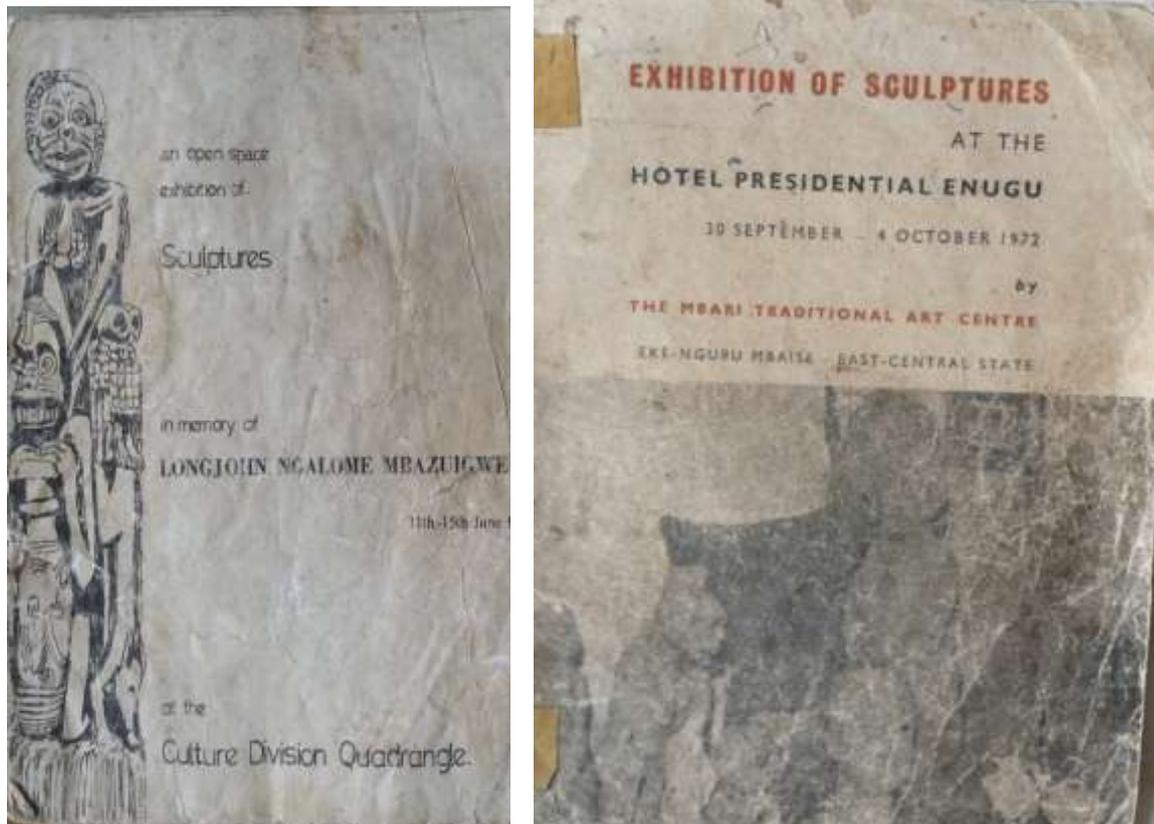


Plate I: An Exhibition catalogued by Mbari Traditional Art centre, Eke Nguru - Mbaïse, East Central State Held at Hotel Exhibition, Enugu from 30th Sept. - 10 Oct. 1972)

Though some of the pioneering members are late, some of the surviving members have developed into authentic contemporary arts and have acquired formal art training for instance, Chinedu .C. Chukueggu is a Professor of Arts in the University of Port Harcourt, Dr. H.C. Ngumah, is an Art History lecturer Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education Owerri, Evans Osuchukwu is still an active sculptor till date and Geoffrey Nwogu among others is also practicing art in the United States of America where he has built Mbari house for various institutions. This generation of Mbaiese Art School based in Mbaiese, participated in the propagation of the Modern Mbari center at Imo State Art and Cultural Council, Ikenegbu Owerri. They also participated actively in the 1977 FESTAC Lagos (Ngumah, 2017). Among the pioneering members of Mbaiese Artists of the Mbaiese art school, that appears to have made most significant impact through his works is Mbazuigwe II, Ngalome Long John who is also listed in 'Who is who in Nigeria'?

MbazuigweII, Long-John was a sculptor born on February 2nd, 1949 in Oparachi Ihitte Ezinihitte Mbaiese Division in Imo State, Nigeria. He was trained by Josiah Nwogu Anyanwu through transitional apprenticeship system. Josiah Nwogu was the father of Geoffrey Nwogu, from UmuochamIhitte. Long-John's father, Mbazuigwe I, Long-John was also a wood sculptor before his death. Mbazuigwe II Long-John took over his studio/workshop between 1964-1967. He worked with some other sculptors; such as; SAO Chuwuegu, Evans Osuchukwu and Geoffrey Nwogu at Mbari Art Centre, Mbaiese. He founded and established Wood Peckers' Groove Gallery at Nkwogwu Mbaiese between 1972 and 1975. He was also a resident artist at Marist Brothers, Hopeville Rehabilitation Center, Uturu Okigwe. He was executed many sculpture commissions and his art exhibitions include: "Exhibition of wood carving in Mbaiese", Continuing Education Center (CEC), University of Nigeria, Nsukka, March, 11th-21st 1971., "Exhibition of sculptures at the Hotel Presidential, Enugu", September, 30th-October 4th, 1972., "Mbari Arts Exhibition", British Council, Enugu", September, 1973., "East Central State Festival of Arts, Enuge, 1974"., "Nigerian Contemporary Arts Symposium, Nsukka 1976", Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, March, 22nd-25th 1976., "FESTAC '77", Lagos and Aba 1977, "East Zonal Exhibition: Society of Nigerian Artists". Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, October, 25th-28th, 1978 and "An Open Space Exhibition of Sculptures" captured 'In memory of Long-John Ngalome Mbazuigwe II, Cultural Division Quadrangle, Owerri, June 11th-15th 1979. Some of his works were included in the exhibition. Long John Ngalome Mbazuigwe died on the 15th of December, 1977. One of his prominent commissioned works is "Chief Orji Ogbu of Akpulu, Orlu, 1971. He also received several awards and honors, which include, First prize Certificate in the East-Central State Festival of Arts Competition, 1974.

The study also look at works of contemporary Mbaiese artists who are working towards the Neo-Mbaiese Arts Style by improving and modifying the traditional ideology, techniques, production processes, manipulations of sculpture media used for making sculpture works in this contemporary times. Some of the preferred media are metals, fiberglass, plastic, rubber, synthetic materials and other found materials. The techniques will include recycling, welding, gluing, riveting, up-cycling, modeling and casting, carving, polymerization and among others.

An Analysis of Mbaiese Art Style

The importance of having an identifiable art style in art production are enormous. Having a noticeable way of rendering the elements and principles of art with the aim of having a unique visual identification code for works of art of an artist or a group of artists at any contemporary period strengthens the people's knowledge and perception about the art(s) and the artist(s). This speeds up and widens the popularity of the art within a given time/period

and as well helps to score the progressive movements in art. Although there was no consistency in describing the traditional works of Mbaise Artists since it oscillates between, naturalism or abstractism their sculptures are more identified by their compositions with symbolic motifs unique carving styles and their socio-religious functionalities.

However, a deeper look into the works of Mbaisiartists reveals a stylistic commonality that show a blend of authentic traditional style, surrealism and stylized naturalism. This style exemplifies the works of Long John II Mbazuigwe (Plate 2), Geoffrey Nwogu (plate 3), S.A.O. Chukueggu (plate 4) Gogo Anyanwu (plate 5)



Plate2.
Title: Ijeuwa
Artist: Long-John II Mbazuigwe
Size: 4ft 6inches
Medium: Wood
N/D

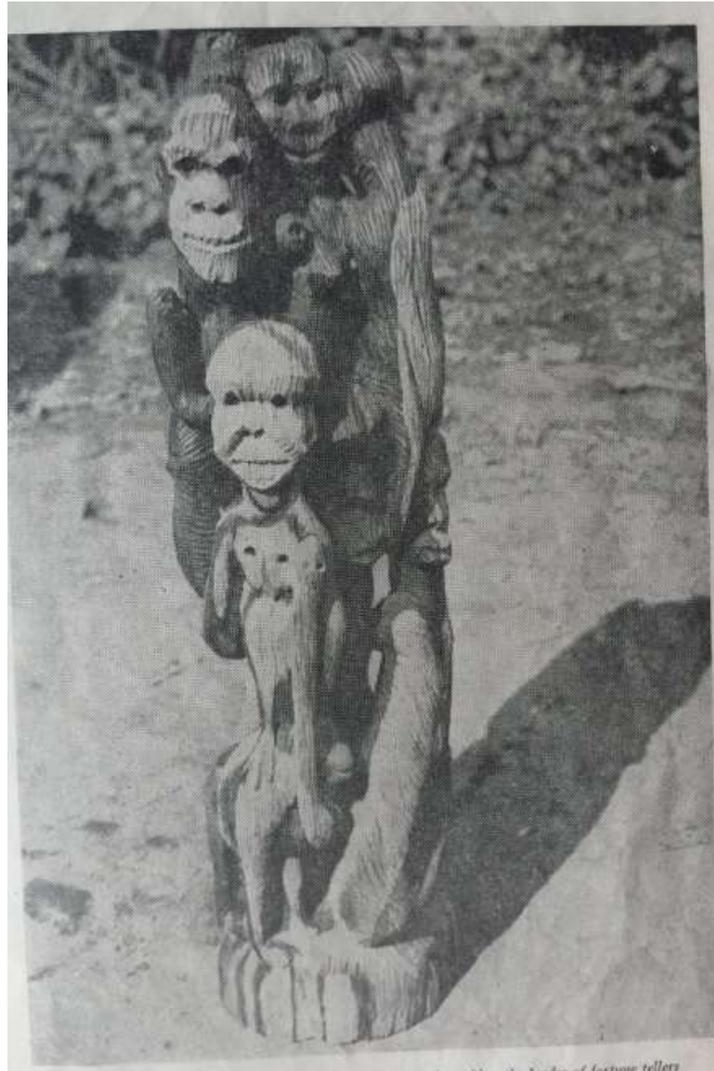


Plate 3
Title: Ajunwa
Artist: Geoffrey Nwogu
Size: 5ft
Medium: Wood
N/D



Plate 4

Title: Oguibe

Artist: S.A.O. Chukuegu

Size: 5ft 5inches

Medium: Wood

N/D

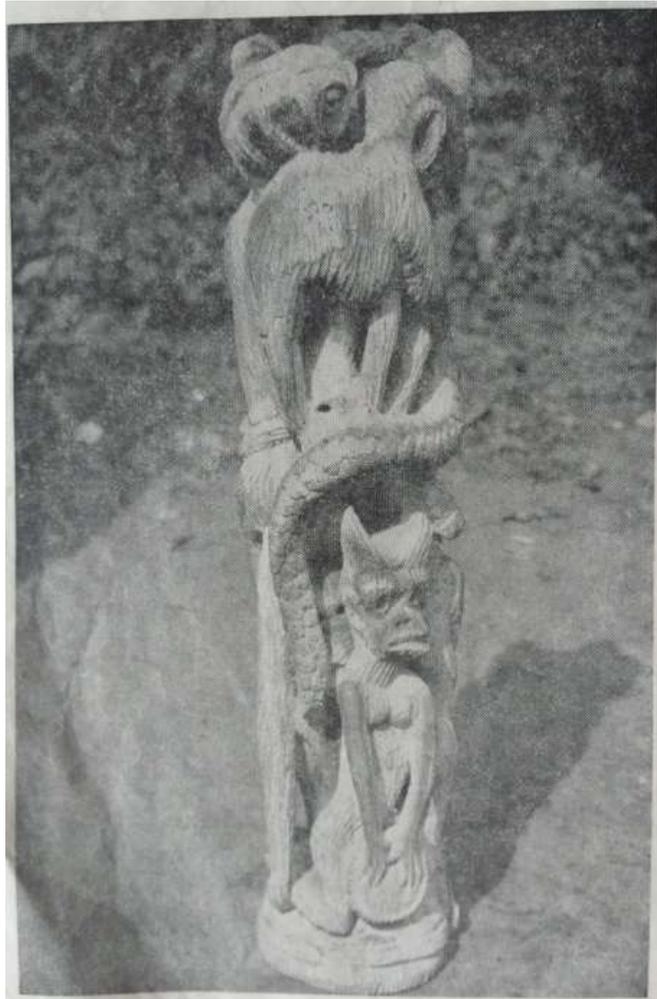


Plate 5.
Title: Aghugho
Artist: Gogo Anyanwu
Size: 4ft
Medium: Wood
N/D.

The world today is experiencing explorations trying to discover unique ways of doing certain things. This philosophy is applicable to every sphere of human endeavour including art production. The contemporary/New generation of artists of Mbaise extraction both locally and internationally were no doubt influenced by the members of the tradition Mbaise art school. Certainly, there are many upcoming and professional artists of the Mbaise extraction who acquired tutelage through academics as stated earlier, that are practicing in this contemporary time. Unfortunately, much efforts have not been made towards coming up with a unique art style in order to ascribe contemporary relevance to their art. Obviously, Mbaise art will go extinction if there is no action in reinventing style. The modern adaptation of the traditional Mbaise art is here referred to as “Neo-Mbaise Art Style”.

Neo-Mbaise Art Style: Works of Evarest Ibe as an Example

Evarest Onyewuchi Ibe, holds a master of Fine Art Degree (MFA) in sculpture from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. He has devoted a lot of time in the study and adaptation

of traditional Mbaise art into modern sculpture using various media and techniques. By so doing, Ibe has broadened the awareness about Mbaise art tradition while the tradition/transitional Mbaise artists work mainly in wood, Evarest Ibe explored new media such as fibre glass, direct metal sculpture, assemblages among others. Some of his exemplary works include; “Ada Mbaise” (Plate 6) Ojionu Mbaukwu (Plate 7) and Agbomma Mbaise (plate 8)



Plate 6
Title: Ada Mbaise
Artist: Ibe Evarest Onyewuchi
Size: 29inches
Medium: Aluminum wire coils
Date: 2017

Ada Mbaise, Aluminium Coils, 29 Inches (high), 2017© The artist
The sculpture depicts the portrait of a lady - The metal coils allude to the fact that the girl is a prospective bride, gorgeously dressed for her marriage ceremony.



Plate 7

Title: Ojionu Mbaukwu

Artist: Ibe Evarest Onyewuchi

Size: 19inches × 8inches

Medium: Aluminum

Date: 2017

Ojionu Mbaukwu Aluminium, 19 x 8”,(2017) © the Artist.

The work depicts a metal mask mounted on a wooden base. The mask titled Ojionu is an entertainment mask which appears during festive periods in Mbaise



Plate 8
Title: Agbogho Mbaise
Artist: Ibe Evarest Onyewuchi
Size: 40inches x 11inches
Medium: Mixed media (fiberglass and wood)
Date: 2018

Agbomma Mbaise is a relief sculpture produced in mixed media. The work epitomizes the virtues of a typical Mbaise maiden which they consider to be as follows: Beauty, wisdom, good morals, patience, perseverance, industrious supportive and innovative.

Conclusion

Understanding and appreciation of Mbaise art tradition will contribute richly to Nigerian art history and practice. This study is focused of the development of Mbaise art from the colonial to the post-colonial period in Nigeria, with emphasis on continuity and change in the art tradition. Changes is constant and inevitable, hence old traditions go into extrication after sometime and the base way to keep it alive is to re-invent it and make it contemporarily relevant. This re-invention was made possible by Neo-Mbaise artists which

include, Evarst, Ibe, Bright Eke, Hycenth Nguma and others. In other words the traditional Mbaise art survived in their works.

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