

**MURAL ARTS IN ANAMBRA STATE-NIGERIA: IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF
SELECTED STREET ARTS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS TO NATION- BUILDING**

By

Kosy Anulika Okafor

Department of Theatre and Film Studies

Faculty of Arts -NAU Awka

ka.okafor@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

In recent times, mural arts have become increasingly popular urban arts, attracting attention both locally and internationally. Murals can create a sense of community, beautify urban spaces, express historical and cultural identity, raise awareness about social issues, and inspire creativity and wonder but its impact in nation-building in Anambra State has remained the major drawback to this study. This research therefore investigates mural arts in some selected street arts in Anambra State and seeks to assess their impact, contributions and challenges to nation-building. The study adopts a narrative and case study techniques as approaches to qualitative research method; analyzes some selected street arts in Anambra state such as Bridge-Head Onisha, Nibo and Aroma Flyover Awka and tries to identify some of the recurring themes, symbols, and messages associated with these arts in nation-building. Also, personal observations, insights, and interviews with artist(s) involved in the creation and maintenance of these murals on nation-building were highlighted and discovered that murals can foster a sense of identity and cultural appreciation among citizens by creating a positive urban art environment in the state. The study therefore recommends that mural arts are viable tools that can influence how individuals perceive and understand their surroundings, fostering a sense of pride, belonging, and patriotism.

Keywords: Anambra State, Mural Arts, Nation-Building, Street Arts, Urban Arts, Spaces

Introduction

Essentially, murals play a significant role in preserving and expressing cultural heritage, not just in Nigeria but around the world. A tremendous increase in mural art has been experienced in Africa over the past few years. As a relatively cheap form of public art, murals are perceived to serve diverse purposes ranging from upliftment, education, job creation, skills development and cultural expression, to the encouragement of a sense of place and ownership. Murals often depict scenes from everyday life, historical events, or religious themes. They can be found adorning public spaces such as marketplaces, flyovers, community centers, and religious buildings, serving as both decorative elements and educational tools. Additionally, murals provide a platform for local artists to showcase their talent and express themselves creatively while contributing to the cultural landscape of the region.

Mural arts refer to a form of visual art that is created directly on a wall or other large permanent surface. It is a form of art that utilizes large-scale painting or drawing to create a piece of artwork. It has been around for centuries, evolving from simple paintings to complex works of art. The term mural derives from the Latin word *murus*, which means wall. Historically, mural art has a rich history with many different types of mural painting. Murals have been used to tell stories, convey cultural values and promote political and social messages; and were also used to decorate religious establishments such as churches and temples.

Murals have been an integral part of human artistic expression for centuries, with examples dating back to ancient civilizations. Mural art is like storytelling on a larger canvas. It's a form of public art where large-scale paintings or designs are created directly on walls or other surfaces. These murals often convey a message, reflect cultural themes, or simply add vibrancy to urban spaces. What is most fascinating about this kind of art is how they engage with the community, transforming ordinary walls into canvases that speak to everyone. Thus, Maevskaya (2022) further emphasizes the role of murals in enhancing the imagery of a city and forming its local identity. Murals have also been used in political settings to depict important figures or events. It can be a powerful tool for social and political commentary, as well as a celebration of heroes and creativity in public spaces. No matter the style or technique used, murals are always meant to

capture a moment in time and share those memories with the commuters who view it. They can be used to inspire people and tell stories through vibrant colors and intricate details.

Although murals play a vital role in Nigeria's contemporary public art scene, this vibrant art form has received surprisingly little attention from art critics, art historians and among other scholars. While the need for an in-depth analysis of the imagery of mural art in Anambra State will be considering three different places in the city, this paper will attempt to critically assess — with respect to a case study of murals at three major centers in Awka city such as; Amawbia, Nibo and Aroma flyover all in Anambra State.

In Anambra State, Nigeria, murals are particularly notable for their representation of local customs, traditions, history, and beliefs. They serve as visual narratives, telling stories that reflect the identity and values of the community. Anambra State however harbors a rich tapestry of cultural diversity; and murals serve as a means of celebrating and preserving this diversity for future generations. They not only beautify the environment but also foster a sense of pride and belonging among the residents. Moreover, murals have the power to promote social cohesion by bringing people together to appreciate and engage with their shared cultural heritage. For the Anambrarians; Murals are important cultural heritages of this region but many precious murals were damaged during history. Thus, these mural restoration is very important for the protection of Anambra cultural heritage.

Based on this outlook, a range of studies have explored the impact of mural arts on communities and their environments. Marschall (1999) and Rezk (2021) both highlight the positive effects of murals on the local community, including upliftment, education, and the encouragement of a sense of place and ownership. Murals or street art in its forms have gained popularity as a vehicle for cities to gain attention and esteem; yet understanding its various roles in some places remain limited especially within the context of image making and nation building; where it appeals to multiple such as the local residents, domestic and international tourists.

Within the domains of tourism, murals also known as street tourism promote colourful masterpieces created by a variety of established and emerging local artists as tourist attractions. Murals beautify cities with visually stunning paintings, culture, and historically art-focused paintings/drawings which have become increasingly popular. Husen (2022) underscores the

importance of participatory murals in increasing the appreciation of fine art and fostering community involvement.

Mural art has grown to become a widely appreciated skill. Local areas come to life as artists use their skill and talent to brighten and captivate with their designs. Murals are transient and dynamic elements that vary in sizes, styles, and legal status. Some are actively promoted by the establishment, individuals, or by communities, while others are created informally from the ground up. They can materialize as government-driven artworks, as community-based initiatives, or alternatively as unsanctioned insurgent artworks. The latter are created without the consent of government and/or property owners, therefore potentially challenging community norms and the boundaries of public spaces (e.g., Austin, 2010; Cresswell, 1992; Ferrell, 1993; Schacter, 2008). Connecting Mural Paintings, Street Art and Graffiti within the context of three forms of urban art expressions; it is imperative to first separate them to see where the lines are drawn.

Essentially, street art can be allowed on certain walls or buildings as a government or local authority deems fit. This means they can designate areas for urban artists to practice their craft and express their messages and personality. This differs slightly from murals which are often large pieces of artwork on flat surfaces, like an entire wall or building. These are often commissioned or planned in advance, often even requiring multiple artists working together to create a collaborative mural project. Street art, on the other hand, often doesn't involve the full painting of the wall and can usually take other urban elements and incorporate them into the artwork.

On the other hand, graffiti is done ad-hoc and is usually rooted in illegal or gang activity. This doesn't necessarily mean that all graffiti is bad, however, graffiti can contain political messages in an oppressed society or be a tribute to someone or something. It's difficult to list or explain every situation where graffiti could be used, but the major difference is in the style. Graffiti is usually text-based and rarely ever uses elaborate colors and images, unlike street art. e.g., Austin, 2010; Cresswell, 1992; Ferrell, 1993; Schacter, 2008). Consistent with other scholarly contributions, the study excludes from the scope of this paper gang graffiti, political graffiti, and tagging (e.g., Dovey et al., 2012; Ferrell & Weide, 2010; Gomez, 1992; Halsey & Young, 2002)

Differences in the three types of urban artwork can also come down to the techniques and tools used. Street artists typically don't have any limitation and are free to use what they're comfortable

with, whereas mural painters often use long-lasting paints that are resistant to weather effects and often have a wider choice of tools and colours. On the contrary, graffiti artists will typically carry spray paints or even pen markers due to their ad-hoc nature. This leads to the conclusion on how the three forms of urban art are related; it's all about social expression.

Murals, thousands of years ago depicted what society was like and was eventually used to spread social and political messages, graffiti's origins are in rebellion and fighting against an oppressive society and street art is a form of contemporary art that allows artists to make public statements about society and politics through sanctioned public artworks. While the three share very similar definitions today, they all have vastly different origins.

However, in recent times, murals can be found in many urban spaces; including on walls and ceilings, in public and private spaces, and even on the sides of buildings. These artworks are often characterized by their scale, as they cover significant expanses of space, and they can be found in both indoor and outdoor settings. Over time, more secular subjects were incorporated into mural arts, including landscapes and portraits. Nowadays, there are all sorts of mural styles and techniques; from realistic renderings to abstract designs. Therefore, creating a mural becomes an exciting challenge that can bring life to any space.

Essentially, creating a mural takes time, talent and research. Thus from the conceptual design stage to the point of selection and creation requires absolute carefulness and creative ingenuity by the artist(s). This is geared towards maintaining a positive image of the community and nation building.

Conceptual Design: When designing a mural, a muralist at this stage needs to keep an eye out for some important elements. Mural painting is not like easel painting; the design will be very large and reflect the community it is placed in. At this stage of design, the first step is to investigate, look at how the place for the mural works compositionally with the environment. Also, there is a need to consider the community demographics, and the multiplicity of aesthetics and perspectives of the neighborhood. Additionally, there is a need to talk with community members to get a sense of what is important to them both socially, politically, and historically.

Mural Selection: After the conceptual designs are made, they are presented for selection. It will present a final rationale and designs that depict the compositional strategy for critique. Important question to ask is; does the image address political, historical, cultural, and contemporary culture? The designs are then presented to the authorities or local members. The artist may then adjust the design based on any feedback from the community leaders and local residents.

Creating the Mural: After the mural is selected, the muralist can now begin the glaze painting process. He starts by applying a gesso layer to prime the area to be painted. The area is then chalked out with a numbered grid, which is used to translate the scaled down image design to the mural site. Finally, the mural is painted using the glaze painting technique, which uses multiple layers of paint to create the image.

Consequently, this study investigates mural arts in three major selected street arts in Anambra State and seeks to determine how the murals necessitate image making and nation building. However, the study through a qualitative research method of some selected street arts in the state adopts a narrative and case study approach to identify some of the recurring themes, symbols, and messages associated with these urban art forms in image making and nation-building. Based on this outlook, the narrative research approach focuses on understanding the stories behind the murals and how they carefully weave the personal thoughts, experiences, feelings and values into urban arts to perfectly represent a given region or cultural enclave. While the case study approach focuses on the three selected street arts in three communities in Anambra State - Nigeria, especially paying attention to its patterns, themes and symbols that gives recourse to the image of the community. The case study approach being the primary form of data collection requires visiting the sites of the three selected street arts for picture capturing and personal notes and observations. Also, through personal observations and interviews with artist(s) involved in the creation and maintenance of these murals; valuable insights into the intentions, motivations, and impact of the mural arts on image making and nation-building will be highlighted. Despite the benefits of this art form; murals have been neglected by stakeholders and community members. This is because some of the urban spaces where these urban art forms are situated have been used as bus stops and parks; while some others have deteriorated to areas of defecation, especially the mural at Bridge-head - Onitsha. Unfortunately, the environment surrounding this mural has been used for loading

of buses and mini-market activities. This however makes the surroundings dirty and unattractive to commuters and tourists.

Aside from negligence and a dirty environment, comes the issue of property rights and ownerships. Based on the information from the respondents through interview; before any mural is painted on public spaces, permission must be obtained from the owner of the wall or property (Interview 1-2023). Amongst the challenges observed are several religious posters and flyers of obituary announcements pasted on the surfaces of these urban art forms; thereby hindering its potential to the promotion of culture and identity of the community in view. These negative attitudes by the community and stakeholders have been identified as parts of the major drawbacks to this study.

Historical Overview of Mural Arts in Anambra State-Nigeria

The Mural Arts scene in Anambra State, Nigeria, has a rich history that reflects the cultural tapestry and artistic vibrancy of the region. Anambra State, located in southeastern Nigeria, has been known for its diverse cultural heritage and has had a long history of artistic expressions in uli body designs, house and wall paintings. Likewise, many indigenous communities in Anambra State often used wall paintings and drawings to tell stories, celebrate festivals, and communicate important cultural messages. Uli for instance is a celebrated traditional Igbo art form particularly, in Anambra State. The word uli refers to a number of plants in Igbo land, the berries of which are processed to produce a dark dye that was traditionally used to draw tattoo-like designs on the skin. These murals were usually created with a limited palette of locally available earth pigments – white (nzu), yellow (edo), red (ufie) and black (oji).

Traditionally speaking, uli was an artform practiced by women. The mural painting especially was a communal art amongst the Igbo women dynasty. The roots of this art form can be traced back to indigenous communities in Anambra such as Nibo, Awka, Agukwu-Nri, Amansea, Igbo-Ukwu, etc. where the art form has played significant roles in conveying the stories, traditions, and aspirations of the people. Both body and mural designs were ephemeral so much so that when painted on the body may last a week or two before fading; while wall paintings would typically be renewed annually after the rainy season or in the days before festival. Many of the design motifs of this body art were also used in murals often painted the mud/clay walls of shrines.

For this same purpose; Thomas around November 1910 and December 1911, alongside his local assistants conducted field research in approximately 18 different towns in Awka District. Thanks to the anthropological inquiry of Thomas, notable designs in some communities in Anambra State were documented. He made photographs of what we would readily identify as uli wall paintings within the towns of Agulu, Agukwu Nri, Nibo, Nise and Amansea (Thomas, 1910). There are also photographs of other, less characteristic wall paintings and designs – some including typical uli motifs – either incised or moulded in relief in the fabric of the walls. Unfortunately few of Thomas's field notes survive from his Igbo surveys. What has survived, however, is an intriguing collection of annotated drawings of uli motifs, suggesting that Thomas did make enquiries about them. These artforms was largely focused on mural designs.

With Nigeria's independence in 1960, came a renewed sense of cultural identity and artistic expression that reflects the dynamic nature of Anambra's cultural landscape through murals. This era saw the emergence of artists who incorporated traditional elements into more contemporary forms, influencing mural art. However, the late 20th century witnessed a cultural renaissance in Anambra State, with a growing interest in preserving and promoting indigenous cultures. Mural Arts became a powerful medium to depict historical events, folklore, and the resilience of the Anambra people. Besides the cultural renaissance of these art forms in the 20th century; Mural Arts have become community projects in recent times; engaging local artists and community members. These murals served not only as artistic expressions but also as communal spaces that fostered a sense of pride and identity. Additionally, murals frequently explore religious and social themes so much so that Churches and community centers often commission artists to create murals that reflect religious narratives, moral values, and community cohesion.

Impact Assessment of Three Selected Street Arts in Anambra State and Their Contributions to Nation- Building.

Ultimately, the Mural Arts scene in Anambra State continues to evolve, influenced by a dynamic interplay of tradition and modernity. Like any artistic movement, mural arts in Anambra face challenges such as funding constraints, preservation issues, and evolving societal values. However, they also present opportunities for cultural exchange, educational tools, empowerment of local

artists and collaborating murals into cultural tourism initiatives which will not only contribute to the economic development of the region but also impact on image making and nation building. By way of exploring the validation for this style of art in image-making and nation-building; murals have been characterized by unique features that necessitate its significant impact on public spaces such as;

Public Expression: Murals are often created in public spaces, allowing artists to communicate messages to a broad audience. They can serve as a form of public expression, conveying cultural, social, or political themes, religious and educational ideas to the commuters, villagers and tourists.

Community Engagement: Mural creation frequently involves collaboration between artists and the community. This participatory approach can foster a sense of community ownership and pride in the artwork.

Urban Revitalization: Murals have been used as tools for urban revitalization, transforming neglected or blighted areas into vibrant and culturally rich spaces. They contribute to the visual aesthetics of a neighborhood and can attract positive attention.

Cultural Preservation: Murals often reflect and preserve cultural identity. They may depict historical events, cultural symbols, or narratives that celebrate a community's heritage.

Street Art and Graffiti: While not all mural arts fall under the category of street art or graffiti, these forms of urban art expression share some similarities. Street artists often use murals as a medium for conveying their messages, making a statement, or beautifying urban spaces.

Tourism and Cultural Tourism: Well-known murals can become tourist attractions, drawing visitors to a particular area. Cities around the world have embraced mural arts as a way to enhance their cultural heritage and attract tourists.

Educational Tools: Murals can serve as educational tools, conveying information in a visually engaging way. They may be used to communicate historical events, traditional and cultural visual effects, scientific concepts, among other educational contents.

Obviously, mural arts play a dynamic and impactful role in the intersection of art, culture, and public spaces, providing a powerful means of communication and expression for artists and

communities alike. Murals or Street arts have been impactful in image making and nation building especially in the area of preservation of cultural heritage, economic and cultural development, and beautifying the environment; thereby making it attractive to locals and visitors. These findings suggest that mural arts in Anambra State, Nigeria, may have similar positive impacts on the local community and contribute to nation-building.

Analysis of Mural Art at Bridge Head Onitsha - Anambra State



Plate 1 - The Mural Art at Bridge Head-Onitsha, displaying the history of Onitsha through allusions.

The kilometer long Head-bridge mural art stretching from the Niger-bridge spectacle to the precincts of the premier brewery is perhaps the first thing visitors coming into the city from the West of Nigeria would notice. The mural has been an integral part of the Bridge-Head since the period of Biafran war. The mural art contains quotations, allusions, and direct reference to commuters. The beauty of this mural art at brige-Head lies in its organic formlessness; its apparent multidimensional allusions and references to many literary, historical, contemporary traditions, and its powerful image.

Most importantly, the street art encoded the story between Onitsha and the European traders/missionaries in the nineteenth century; who subtly, used education, church, and trade to

exploit the resources of the Onitsha Community. The urban art expression at Onitsha also captures the cultural dynamics responsible for the evolution of the city from a small trading town into the biggest trade city in Africa. The murals serve as the scenery through which the existential drama of the whole city is played out.

Analysis of Mural Art at Nibo - Awka District

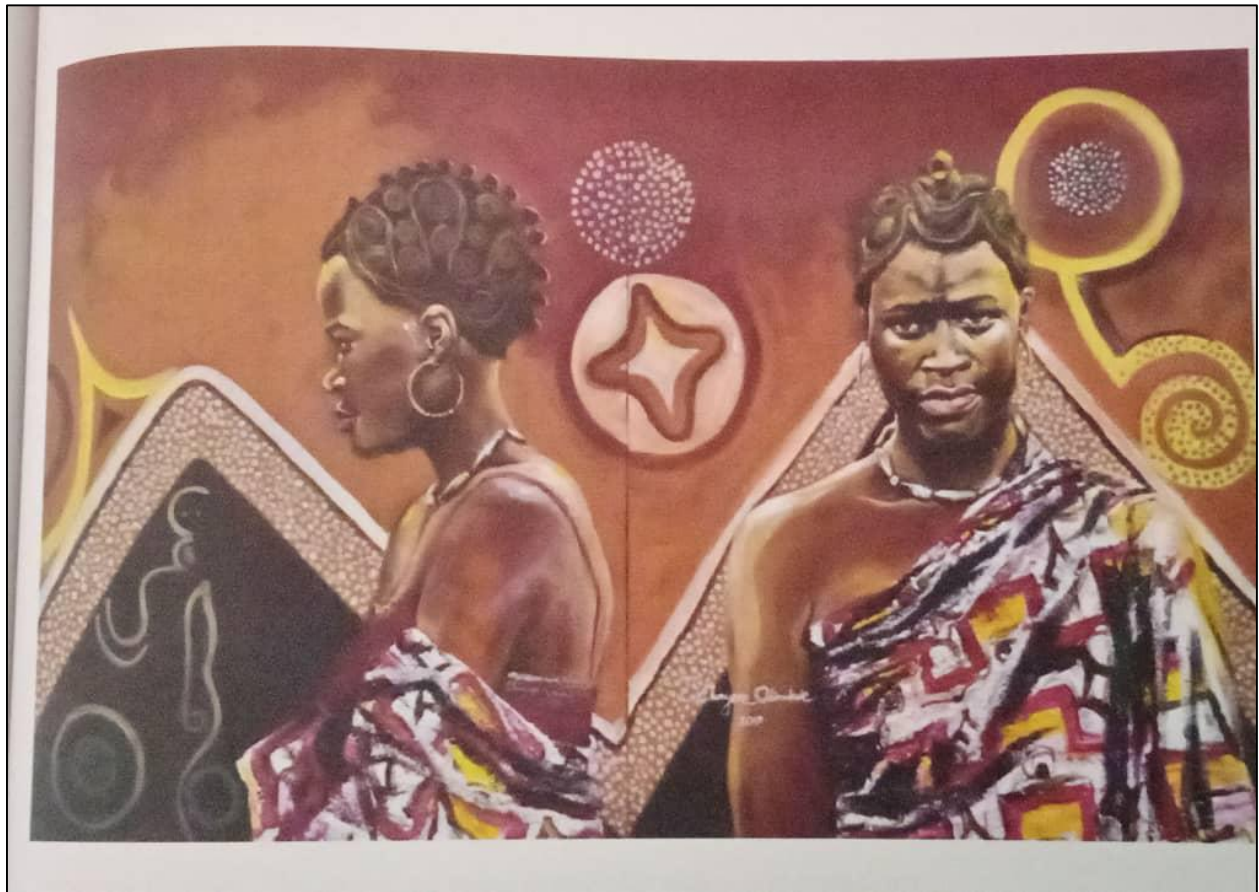


Plate 2 - The Mural Art at Nibo Community which is used to show the connection of Uli motifs on the wall, uli and hair design in traditional Igbo culture.

The Murals in Nibo-Awka tell the rich histories of historical figures in Nibo Awka. Here, the muralist depicts historical events using two historical figures through their art. Also, this art serves

as a way to educate and inspire locals and visitors alike to begin to appreciate the cultural richness of Nibo town and environment.

Also, the mural art in Nibo which was labeled Odelegu was created in 1911. These art expressions boldly capture the beautiful representation of a man and a woman. Odelegu murals were used to draw attention to the connection between uli body design and traditional hair design in historically Igbo culture. Uli is a celebrated traditional Igbo artform. It has been a subject of many scholarly discourses and has inspired many Nigerian artists especially muralists. The word uli refers to a number of plants in Igboland, the berries of which are processed to produce dark dye; used traditionally to design the body. Many of the uli body design motifs were also used as murals; often painted on the mud/clay walls of shrines. Traditionally, uli is an art form practiced by women only in Igbo land.

Analysis of Mural Art at Aroma Flyover Awka

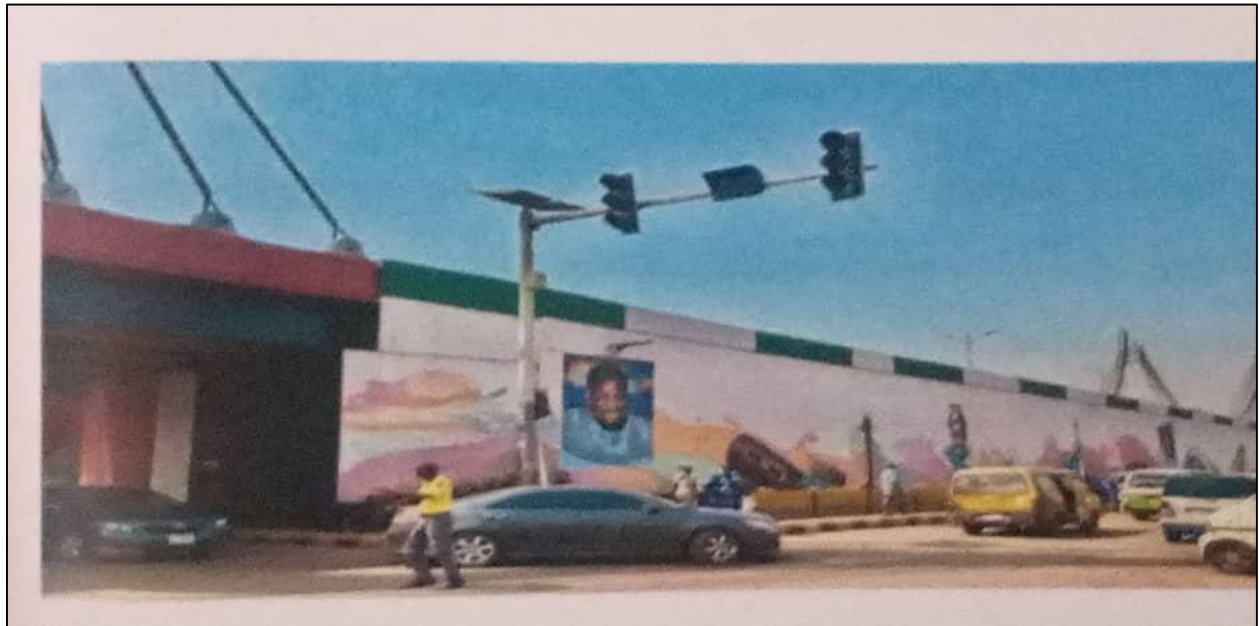


Plate 3 - The Mural Art at Aroma Flyover Awka, shows the present and past political heroes in Anambra State and also their cultural heritage.

The mural art at the long flyover at Aroma- a popular junction located in Awka was created in 2022 and was commissioned by the Anambra State Government. These urban art expressions were used to showcase some of the historical and political heroes; past and present. Among the art expressions on the long flyover is Igbo Ukwu Bronze which is used to showcase the ancient town known for its astonishing metal crafts. This bronze artifact was first noticed in 1938. Additionally, Mural arts in this locale reflect the cultural identity and heritage of the Awka community. The Muralist(s) tried to tailor home the cultural identity of Awka region through the use of symbols, motifs, and historical references to celebrate and preserve the cultural richness of Awka and environs.

Conclusion

In summary, mural arts contribute to nation-building by promoting cultural expression, fostering community engagement, addressing social issues, beautifying public spaces, documenting history, educating the public, inspiring individuals, facilitating public dialogue, shaping narratives, promoting inclusivity and diversity, offering social commentary, and serving as a visual representation of identity. Due to the uniqueness of murals, it has a great potential to contribute to the tourism sector. The impact of mural arts is not only aesthetic but also deeply rooted in its ability to shape narratives and perceptions at both local and national levels. They have the power to create a visual narrative that strengthens the social fabric and contributes to the overall well-being of a nation. Perhaps the biggest beneficiaries of the success of mural arts are the local businesses and local artists through skill empowerment and creation of employment opportunities. The study, through semi structured interviews, discovered that murals are encumbered by numerous challenges which hinders its potential in contributing to image making and nation building. Going further, the interviews highlight both the cultural significance of murals and the obstacles that murals could encounter in fulfilling these roles. According to the information gathered from the muralist; considered several challenges such as political restrictions, lack of funding, community resistance, environmental factors, and among many others (Interview, 2023). However, each challenge could suggest different strategies for enhancing murals' impact.

Also, the muralist (Chibuzor), also identified the roles of murals in shaping the image of a city which includes; enhancing urban aesthetics, promoting tourism, reflecting on societal values and

historical narratives (Interview, 2023). However, the muralist (Chibuzor), lamented that different stakeholders might view the value and challenges of murals differently. For instance, government officials, local artists and oftentimes, community members may have varying perspectives on the importance of murals and how they contribute to nation building especially through themes, symbols or historical stories that are felt to be more effective in image making and nation building (Interview, 2023). However, capturing all these views could help to enrich and foster good narrative for nation building using murals.

However, murals are faced with numerous challenges that militate against its development. Despite its significant contributions to economics, socio-cultural, and historical values; the study has identified the following, such as; lack of funding, issue of property rights and ownerships, negligence to walls and public spaces by stakeholders and communities as parts of the major drawbacks to its contribution to image making and nation building. The study therefore, recommends that in the quest for positive image and nation-building in Anambra State; Governmental and Non-governmental organizations, Private Sectors, and Community leaders should not neglect its potentials in image making but, create sustainable platforms and infrastructures for more community mural projects; develop a framework for the protection and maintenance of mural sites; engage both local and professional artists in mural projects. This collaboration would help to reflect the values and views of the state and community in question. Ultimately, the study also suggests that stakeholders should involve local residents in the creation of community mural projects. This is because their views remain paramount in the development of their community.

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Plate I: Mural Art at Bridge Head - Onitsha, which tells the story of how the European traders and missionaries in the nineteenth century used education, religion and trade to exploit the resources of the Onitsha metropolis. These mural paintings are displayed in allusions.

Plate II: The Mural Art at Nibo created in 1911. The mural includes beautiful representations of human forms. The mural is known as 'Odelegu'. These murals were used to showcase the cultural heritage of Nibo Community which is Uli.

Plate III: The mural at Aroma Flyover Awka created in 2022, showcases the cultural heritage of Igbo-Ukwu; which is the popular Igbo-Ukwu Bronze first noticed in 1938 and some important political and historical heroes in the State.

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