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“Hidden in Plain Sight: Image, Text, and Social Commentary in Victor Ekpuk’s
Cartoons for *The Daily Times of Nigeria*, 1989-1998”

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

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Abstract

“Hidden in Plain Sight: Image, Text, and Social Commentary in Victor Ekpuk's Cartoons for *The Daily Times of Nigeria*, 1989-1998”

By Kaleb William Jewell, B.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2016.

Major Director: Dr. Babatunde Lawal, Professor in the Department of Art History

This thesis provides an analysis of the cartoons produced by Victor Ekpuk for *The Daily Times* newspaper of Nigeria from 1989 through 1998 and the artist's use of ancient *nsibidi* script to “hide in plain sight” his social commentaries on sociopolitical and economic issues in Nigeria. Victor Ekpuk's original cartoons within the permanent collection of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art are examined in the context of indigenous masking practices and other indirect methods employed by indigenous comedians to protect themselves. Moreover, the cartoons' use of caricature and their *nsibidi* scripts within are argued to provide a connotative and denotative dichotomy which allowed the artist to work more freely during a period of oppression.

Introduction

Rationale

This thesis examines the interrelationship of image, text, and social commentary in the cartoons produced by Victor Ekpuk (the renowned Nigerian-born and Washington D.C.-based artist) for *The Daily Times* newspaper of Nigeria from 1989 through 1998 (**Fig. 0.1**).¹ In the process, it will shed some light on the artist's exploration of ancient *nsibidi* script of the Ibibio/Anang of southeastern Nigeria in some of these cartoons (**Figs. 3.1**) to complicate, camouflage, or, rather, "hide in plain sight" his social commentaries on sociopolitical and economic issues in Nigeria during the period.²

It is significant to note that Victor Ekpuk belongs to the Ibibio/Anang ethnic group in southeastern Nigeria where the Ekpe Society (also known as Ngbe and Egbo) has, from time immemorial, used the *nsibidi* script (**Figs. 0.2abc**)³ along with the Ekpo masks (**Fig. 0.3**)⁴ to transmit coded messages among its members. The Ekpe Society's important political role in precolonial southeastern Nigeria is evident in its presence among other ethnic groups in the region (especially the Igbo), who also employ Ekpo masks and the *nsibidi* script for similar purposes.⁵ Consisting of ideographic signs and

¹ See List of Figures for full credit information.

² See List of Figures for full credit information.

³ See List of Figures for full credit information.

⁴ See List of Figures for full credit information.

⁵As a result of the transatlantic slave trade between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, captives from southeastern Nigeria introduced the *nsibidi* script to the Americas where it has since been hybridized.

Christine Mullen Kreamer construes *nsibidi* as a perennial flower breaking ground time and time again with

patterns, the *nsibidi* script and other motifs are usually inscribed on a blue cloth called *ukara* (Fig. 0.4 and 0.5) and displayed inside or outside Ekpe lodges.⁶ The *ukara* may also be wrapped around the waist or worn across the shoulder to identify Ekpe members in public as custodian of the secrets implicated in the *nsibidi* script. As art historian Amanda Carlson has observed:

In its graphic form, *nsibidi* relies upon the simplicity of line to create geometric designs that can be built into complex patterning. Unlike many other writing systems, the purpose of *nsibidi* is not to make information accessible, but to guard valuable knowledge within elite groups. It has been used to express ideas about love and social relationships, tally goods, to document events...to record religious information and ritual procedures, to convey esoteric knowledge, and as decoration.⁷

In effect, the fact that the *Ekpe* Society uses the *nsibidi* script “to guard” and “convey esoteric knowledge” underscores its significance as a kind of mask for hiding messages in plain sight—messages accessibly only to *Ekpe* initiates. This phenomenon is

slight changes in color and form but ultimately of the same variety: “Through the manipulation of both form and meaning, *nsibidi* is infinitely adaptable to new social needs, new cultures, and new media. It offers a poetic dialogue about life that involves both the present and the past.” Evidence suggests the forms have always been dynamic, adapting to individual and societal needs throughout the years; Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, 227-268; Amanda Carlson, “Nsibidi: Old and New Scripts,” in *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art*, ed. Christine Mullen Kreamer, et al (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2007), 153, 147.

⁶ See List of Figures for full credit information.

⁷Amanda Carlson, “Nsibidi: Old and New Scripts,” in *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art*, ed. Christine Mullen Kreamer, et al (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2007), 146.

also apparent in many of Victor Ekpuk's cartoons which incorporate *nsibidi*-like scripts⁸ so that only "informed" or "knowledgeable" Nigerians can decipher them, or, as it were, connect the dots. That strategy became necessary in Nigeria between the mid-1960s and the late 1990s when military regimes toppled democratically elected governments in the country and (as would be demonstrated in Chapter One), curtailed freedom of expression in both the visual and performing arts. Journalists, cartoonists, and critics of the regimes were frequently interrogated by Nigerian State Security Service officials.⁹

By and large, this thesis will attempt to reveal concealed meanings in some of the cartoons that Victor Ekpuk created for *The Daily Times* from 1989 through 1998, the originals of which are now in the permanent collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C.

Terminology

The origin of the English word "cartoon" ("cartone" in Italian and "karton" in Dutch) can be traced back to the Middle Ages when it referred to a preliminary study or sketch for a painting, stained glass, tapestry, or sculpture, among others. In the nineteenth century, *The Punch* (magazine) of London popularized its association with humorous drawings often intended to entertain and educate at the same time. Such drawings also

⁸ Since the scripts in Victor Ekpuk's cartoons are not the original *nsibidi*, but adaptations, they will hereafter be identified as *nsibidi*-like.

⁹ See Editorial. "The Gruesome Murder of Giwa," *Newswatch*, February 2, 2013.

conveyed certain overt or covert messages concerning their subjects, some of which may be positive or negative. Other messages may be ambivalent.¹⁰

According to the famous African scholar and literary critic Tejumola Olaniyan, a caricature may be defined by its “amplification through simplification.”¹¹ Characteristic features of the subject could be exaggerated for humorous and satirical effects. Yet the exaggerations do not interfere with likeness, but rather, contribute significantly to the viewer’s recognition of the subject.¹² Caricatures, albeit humorous, also play to the viewer’s emotions, frequently invoking anger, sadness, praise, respect, or admiration.

Brief History of Satirical Art and Cartooning

Although not the founder of political cartooning as such, the British painter and illustrator William Hogarth (1687-1764) became internationally renowned for his series of didactic engravings such as *A Harlot’s Progress* (1732) and *A Rake’s Progress* (1735) that reminded the general public of the downfall of certain individuals involved in social malpractices like prostitution, gambling, and drug abuse. Hogarth’s work did not become overt political criticism, unlike those of the next generation of British caricaturists

¹⁰ The editorial cartoon is not to be considered as comic art due to the medium’s lack of continuing characters, sequential narratives, and multiple panels. See Maurice Horn, ed., *The World Encyclopedia of Comics* (New York, NY: Chelsea House Publishers, 1976); and Jerry Robinson, ed., *The Comics: An Illustrated History of Comic Strip Art, 1895-2010* (Milwaukee, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2011).

¹¹ Tejumola Olaniyan, “Cartooning in Nigeria,” *Ijele* 1 (2000): 1.

¹² See Dupe Abejide, “Caricaturing, Cartooning and Creativity in Nigeria (Past and Present),” in *Creative Traditions in Nigerian Arts*, ed. Babasehinde Ademuleya, Akin Onipede, and Mike Omoighe (Lagos, Nigeria: Culture and Creative Art Forum, 2003), 90.

typified by James Gillray (c.1756-1815), who is credited for being the first artist to make caricature a full-time occupation. Of his thousands of caricatures, Gillray is most remembered for his personifications of British imperialism and French republicanism during the French Revolution.¹³

Satirical humor may often be lost upon the reader and subject, as was frequently the case with James Gillray's caricatures. Even King George III, with whom Gillray largely aligned, did not fully comprehend his caricatured likeness in *A Connoisseur Examining a Cooper* (1792). This lack of critical comprehension on the subject's behalf was to be effectively utilized by cartoonists to indirectly bypass the authorities during the British colonial occupation of Nigeria (1914-1960) as well as in the postcolonial era.

In the nineteenth century, newspapers across the globe incorporated cartoons to illustrate the political views of the editors and publishers. Accordingly, political cartoons began to be viewed as more than a mere sketch intended to provoke laughter. Founded in 1914, *The Punch* magazine of London started presenting cartoons as complete artworks in their own right. Due to the magazine's popularity, others (especially newspapers) followed suit.¹⁴ The British introduced the newspaper cartoon to Nigeria following its colonization of the county between the late nineteenth century and 1960.

Objects of Study

¹³ Jerry Robinson, "A New Art Form," in *The Comics: An Illustrated History of Comic Strip Art, 1895-2010*, ed. Jerry Robinson (Milwaukee, Oregon: Dark Horse Books, 2011).

¹⁴ Stanley Applebaum and Richard Kelly, *Great Drawings and Illustrations from Punch, 1841-1901: 192 Works by Leech, Keene, DuMaurier, May, and 21 Others* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1981), 15.

Some of Victor Ekpuk's newspaper cartoons will be examined for their apparent critique of corruption and other unseemly activities in Nigeria. They are part of over four hundred original cartoons that the artist donated to the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C. They are in different media, ranging from pen on newsprint to marker on watercolor papers. Improper archival storage prior to their donation to the Smithsonian Institution's collection has resulted in the damage of some of the works.

Literature Review

Thus far, most publications on Nigerian cartooning have dealt with only a few major figures such as Akinola Lasekan (1916-1972), Kenny Adamson (b. 1951), Dele Jegede (b. 1945), Bisi Ogunbadejo (b. 1950), among others.¹⁵ Admittedly, many scholars are beginning to pay more attention to Victor Ekpuk's works.¹⁶ Only a few have taken an

¹⁵ The majority of literature on Nigerian cartooning from the 1970s-1990s is limited to Bachelor's and Master's theses from Nigerian universities which are usually not accessible to outside scholars. For examples of these materials and articles of other mediums see: Iloaputaife 1976; Udechukwu 1979; Azuru 1980; Emi 1980; Oyo 1983; Popoola 1983; Adeniran 1984; Adegbenro 1985; Asuquo and Onuoha 1985; Oyih 1985; Ngarem 1986; Adegbenro 1987; Onwudinjo 1987; Abe 1988; Jegede 1990; Komolafe 1990; Akande 1992; Agberia 1993; Adekanmbi 1997; Olaniyan 1998; Olaniyan 2002; Asowata 2005; Onipede 2007; Medubi 2009; Jimoh 2010; Adejuwon and Alimi 2011, and Adesanya and Falola 2014.

¹⁶ Amanda Carlson, "Songs of Ancient Moons," in *Songs of Ancient Moons: A Catalogue of an Exhibition of Paintings by Victor Ekpuk*, ed. Victor Ekpuk (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Ancestral Legacies, Inc., 2004): 3-6; and Amanda Carlson, "Nsibidi: Old and New Scripts," in *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art*, ed. Christine Mullen Kreamer, et al (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2007), 145-153.

in-depth look at his cartoons which visualize the issues at hand during the 1990s due to limited access to relevant materials, especially those previously unpublished. This thesis intends to fill some of the gaps in the scholarship pertaining to his works.

Victor Ekpuk's autobiographical publication on his 1996 one-man show in Nigeria, *Dream: A Catalogue for Exhibition of Drawings and Paintings*, is the most widely available catalogue on his cartoons for *The Daily Times*. In the introductory essay, the artist references his use of lines, minimalist forms, and patterns to convey deeper meanings. One of the contributors to the catalogue, critic-cum artist Don Akatakpo, identifies some of Ekpuk's *nsibidi* paintings as covert attempts to promote some kind of unity in the country now called Nigeria—a geographical area previously inhabited by a constellation of different ethnic groups and subsequently colonized by the British at the beginning of the twentieth century. He also notes that some of the artist's paintings allude to the social inequities in Lagos, the nation's former capital and its most urban and populous metropolis.

In her essay in *Songs of Ancient Moons: A Catalogue of an Exhibition of Paintings by Victor Ekpuk* (2004), Amanda Carlson draws attention to certain universal elements in Ekpuk's paintings, as well as the polysemic and subversively multilayered forms in some of his newspaper cartoons. The artist confirmed the latter in an interview published in the exhibition catalogue *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art* (2007), published by the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of

African Art. According to the artist, those *nsibidi*-related forms “tell a story and...different aspects of the story...in one composition.”¹⁷

The ambivalent messages in Nigerian newspaper cartoons induced equally mixed responses from the viewing public. In his contribution to the book *Cartooning in Africa* (2009), edited by John Lent, Oyin Medubi draws attention to the “grudging appreciation” and “indifference” of the Nigerian public towards newspaper and magazine cartoons as well as to “a sad paucity of scholarly documentation on the subject in the country.”¹⁸ In short, there are a few publications by Nigerian authors on the subject.¹⁹

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Since it focuses on Victor Ekpuk’s use of “visual diplomacy” in some of his cartoons, this thesis employs an interdisciplinary approach that relates the artist’s stratagem to a similar phenomenon in indigenous Nigerian culture. The latter is reflected especially in masking practices and other indirect methods employed by indigenous comedians to protect themselves from retaliation.

¹⁷ Christine Mullen Kreamer and Allyson Purpura, “Songs of Ancient Moons: Victor Ekpuk on his Art,” in *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art*, ed. Christine Mullen Kreamer, et al (Washington DC: Smithsonian Press, 2007), 230.

¹⁸ Oyin Medubi, “Cartooning in Nigeria: Large Canvas, Little Movement,” in *Cartooning in Africa*, ed. John A. Lent (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 2009), 197.

¹⁹ Akin Adejuwon and Shina Alimi, “Cartoons as Illustration: Political Process in Nigeria,” *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 4, no. 3 (March 2011): 57-76.

In the book *I Am Not Myself: The Art of the African Masquerade*, edited by Herbert M. Cole,²⁰ the various authors draw attention not only to the use of the mask/masquerade for concealing and revealing ideas and spiritual forces, but also to the protection the mask affords the masker. This is particularly the case when a masker plays the role of a judge, taking certain decisions that could put his or her life at risk had the mask not concealed his or her identity from the public. Similarly, Victor Ekpuk's combination of abstract *nsibidi*-like scripts with highly stylized cartoons and brief English captions performs a similar function, though in a different manner. By "veiling" his messages and thus blurring the line between the *signifier* and *signified*, it gives him some leeway to deny the obvious, should he be accused of slander or queried by the military government.

According to the French linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), the relationship between a symbol (sign/signifier) and what it symbolizes (referent/the signified) is arbitrary and psychological since both phenomena are human constructs.²¹ In other words, a sign is simultaneously subject to different interpretations and capable of eliciting different meanings. The resulting multivalence has led another famous French theorist and semiotician Roland Barthes (1915-1980) to draw attention to the fact that a given image frequently has two principal meanings, the *denotative* and *connotative*. While the *denotative* refers to the primary meanings undeniably evident in

²⁰ Herbert M. Cole, ed., *I Am Not Myself: The Art of the African Masquerade* (Los Angeles, CA: Regents of the University of California, 1985). See also Iris Hahner, Maria Keckesi, and Laszlo Vajda, *African Masks: The Barbier-Mueller Collection* (Munich, London, New York: Prestel, 2012), 11-36.

²¹ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1916/1983), 14-15, 66.

the image, the *connotative* hints at the secondary meanings any viewer can read into it — meanings which may not be intended by the author.²² In this respect, the *connotative* aspect of a cartoon can easily be denied by a cartoonist in favor of purposeful ambiguity when taken to court or pushed to the wall. As will be demonstrated in Chapter 3, comparable dynamics are evident in some of Victor Ekpuk’s cartoons, thus suggesting his exploration of a “poetic license” not unlike those wielded by professional comedians and indigenous masqueraders in precolonial Nigeria.

Needless to say, Victor Ekpuk’s conflation of image and *nsibidi-like* scripts further complicates any attempts at a definitive interpretation of his cartoons. This synthesis recalls what the famous American theorist W.J.T. Mitchell (b. 1942) identifies as the *Image-Text*—that is, “an inextricable weaving together of representation and discourse”²³—to the extent that the visible almost becomes readable to those with the required insight. Additionally, multiple image texts can be present within a given space at the same time. By the same token, the abstract images and *nsibidi-like* scripts in a typical Ekpuk cartoon would convey much more than meets the eye to insiders, especially those with a first-hand experience of the events or crises signified.

Chapter Summaries

The first chapter provides a brief history of satire in Nigeria from the precolonial to the postcolonial period. It discusses the threats posed by military regimes to freedom

²² See also Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. and ed. Stephen Heath (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1977).

²³ WJT Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 418.

of expression in the visual and performing arts and the methods employed by some artists to protect themselves. The second deals with Victor Ekpuk's biography and artistic philosophy, in addition to an analysis of his juxtaposition of contemporary issues and traditional forms, and his range of artistic output, relating the indirectness involved with his use of humor and *nsibidi* forms to Ekpe/Ekpo traditions of southeastern Nigeria. The third chapter analyzes some of his cartoons in the permanent collection of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C., drawing attention to his use of the *nsibidi* script to complicate their interpretation. The conclusion focuses on his artistic development and achievements since he migrated to the United States in 1998.

Chapter 1

From Satirical Imagery and Ritual Theater to Newspaper Cartoons in Nigeria: A Brief History

Before the introduction of newspaper cartoons to Nigeria in the early twentieth century as a result of British colonization (**Fig. 1.1a and Fig. 1.1b**),²⁴ many cultures in the area had a variety of satirical practices. The latter ranged from stereotypical portraits in wood, ivory and brass to songs and ritual performances by masquerades with headdresses featuring humorous images. As early as the 16th century, artists in what is now the Edo State in western Nigeria depicted European visitors to Ancient Benin as “strangers,” focusing on their cone-shaped hats, excessively long hair, large beak-like noses, big beards, thick mustaches, and tight-fitting dress to underscore and covertly ridicule their “Otherness” (**Fig. 1.2**).²⁵ Similar depictions have survived to the present day in a variety of wood carvings now mass-produced for the tourist market (**Fig. 1.3a**).²⁶ Genre subjects have since been added, including acrobats, farmers, drummers, dancers, hawkers, and palm-wine tappers as well as local dignitaries (**Fig. 1.3b**).²⁷

Given its public appearances, the mask was the most popular means of mass communication in pre-colonial Nigeria and still is today. While most masks perform in religious contexts, others combine ritual with social, aesthetic, and entertainment

²⁴ See List of Figures for full credit information.

²⁵ See List of Figures for full credit information. For more details, see Nii O. Quarcoopome, ed., *Through African Eyes: The European in African Art, 1500 to Present* (Detroit, MI: Detroit Institute of Arts, 2010).

²⁶ See List of Figures for full credit information.

²⁷ See List of Figures for full credit information.

functions. Their costumes and carved headdresses are usually designed to complement such functions. The fact that their satires are not always negative is evident in the following account of a performance of *Egungun* masks in the Yoruba town of Katunga in 1826 (organized by King Mansola) to welcome European visitors to his palace. As Richard Lander, a member of the British entourage, observed:

During our stay at Katunga, we were witnesses to a kind of pantomime, which amusement the inhabitants generally prefer, in honor of the king, as was the case in that instance. The place chosen for the exhibition was a large enclosure, contiguous to the king's residence...

A most astounding din from drums, horns and whistles, was the signal for the performers to begin their maneuvers. The first act consisted of dancing, capering and tumbling by about twenty men...

...The second act commenced almost immediately after...one of the dancing sacks came out of its concealment, and fell gently and most conveniently on the ground...

...The third and the last part of this extraordinary ceremony, consisted in the representation of the caricature of the white man. One of the sack dancers, placed himself on a clear spot of ground...gradually detached his covering, and exposed the figure of a man, of chalky whiteness, to the fixed looks of the people, who set up so terrific a shout of approbation that it startled us, prepared as we had been to expect some such explosion. The figure walked indifferently well, and mimicked our actions so badly...and a universal roar of laughter expressed the delight which filled every bosom. The pantomimic incident had now attained its utmost bounds, and all eyes, swimming with tears, were directed first to us, and then, to the intended representation of us, as much as to say, "What a faithful and striking resemblance!"²⁸

²⁸ Richard Lander, *Records of Captain Clapperton's Last Expedition in Africa* (London, 1830), 116-121; cited in Babatunde Lawal, "Oyibo: Representations of the Colonialist Other in Yoruba Art, 1826-1960," *Discussion Papers in the African Humanities*, AH Number 24 (Boston, MA: African Studies Center, Boston University, 1993), 5-6. For more details on the *Egungun* masks of the Yoruba, see Joel Adedeji, "The Alarinjo Theatre: A Study of a Yoruba Theatrical Art from its Earliest Beginning to the Present Time" (PhD diss., University of Ibadan Nigeria, 1969); Joel Adedeji, "Traditional Yoruba Theatre,"

Fig. 1.4 is a visual reconstruction of the performance by the British artist Harry Johnston (1858-1927).²⁹ The variety of carved facial caricatures on *Egungun* masks in pre-colonial Nigeria can only be imagined from a sampling of early 20th century headdresses in **Fig. 1.5**.³⁰

The *Okumpa* theater masks of the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria (**Fig. 1.6a and Fig. 1.6b**)³¹ operate in a similar manner, combining indigenous and Western costumes in their skirts to entertain and, in the process, educate the public.³² The *Okumpa* is unique in that its performers belong to the younger generation; yet, the fact that they are wearing masks associated with spirits empowers them to criticize the misdeeds of elders. As Simon Ottenberg puts it, the maskers “are not asking for a social revolution, but rather

African Arts 3, no. 1 (Autumn 1969): 60-63; Kacke Götrick, *Apidan Theatre and Modern Drama: A Study in a Traditional Yoruba Theatre and its Influence on Modern Drama by Yoruba Playwrights* (Goteborg: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1984); and Yomi Ola, *Satires of Power in Yoruba Visual Culture* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2013). For another category of Yoruba satirical masks, see Henry Drewal and Margaret Drewal, *Gelede: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983); and Babatunde Lawal, *The Gèlèdè Spectacle: Art, Gender, and Social Harmony in an African Culture* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1996).

²⁹ See also David Kerr, *African Popular Theatre from Pre-Colonial Times to the Present Day* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995), 53.

³⁰ See List of Figures for full credit information. See also David Kerr, *African Popular Theatre from Pre-Colonial Times to the Present Day* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995), 53.

³¹ See List of Figures for full credit information.

³² For more details, see Simon Ottenberg, *Masked Rituals of the Afikpo: The Context of an African Art* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1975).

the proper execution of traditional leadership...”³³ In other words, “the use of masks and costumes as ‘screens’ helps to facilitate the outlet of anxieties and aggressive feelings without fear of counterattack.”³⁴

Among the Islamized Hausa of northern Nigeria, who no longer wear masks, comparable satirical skits are called *Wasan Kwaikwayo*. Called Bori, the pre-Islamic ritual theater of the Hausa (still performed) is in the form of a trance experience during which a spirit manifests in the body of a medium (**Fig. 1.7**),³⁵ who may use the occasion to give full rein to subconscious impulses and, in the process, subvert or “invert the power relationships between oppressed groups and their oppressors.”³⁶ According to theater historian Osita Osagbue, “most mediums claim total ignorance and amnesia of what they do or say while possessed, and so do not expect to be held answerable for their actions or utterances.”³⁷ It suffices to say, skits by masked actors are intended to oblige their targets or anti-social elements in general to turn over a new leaf. Although different aspects of pre-colonial satire continue to the present day, some of their former contexts and function have been modified to reflect the dynamics of change.

³³ Simon Ottenberg, *Masked Rituals of the Afikpo: The Context of an African Art* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1975), 131.

³⁴ Simon Ottenberg, “Humorous Masks and Serious Politics among the Afikpo Ibo,” in *African Art & Leadership*, ed. Douglas Fraser and Herbert M. Cole (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1972), 116.

³⁵ See List of Figures for full credit information.

³⁶ Osita Okagbue, “Deviant and Outcasts: Power and Politics in Hausa Bori Performance,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (2008): 271.

³⁷ Osita Okagbue, “Deviant and Outcasts: Power and Politics in Hausa Bori Performance,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (2008): 280.

The Beginnings of Comics and Cartoons

The introduction of photography and newspaper to Nigeria in the nineteenth century paved the way for new forms of satire such as comics and cartoons. The first newspaper to be published in pre-colonial Nigeria was *Iwe Irohin*, a periodical in the Yoruba language established in 1859 by the British missionary Rev. Henry Townsend (1818-1886). However, this newspaper did not carry any cartoons, especially since, according to Townsend himself, “my objective is to get the people to read.”³⁸ Other early and important newspapers include *Nigerian Weekly Record* (1891); *The Nigerian Chronicle* (1908); *The Daily Times* (1925); Hausa language *Gasikya Ta Fi Kwabo* (1936); *West African Pilot* (1937); *Nigerian Tribune* (1949); *Nigerian Citizen* (1965); *New Nigerian Newspapers* (1966); *Observer* (1968); *Punch* (1971); *Triumph* (1980); *The Guardian* (1983); *Vanguard* (1983); and *Newswatch* (1985), among others. Of these newspapers, the *West African Pilot* was the most prominent during the colonial period because of its use of cartoons to buffer its editorials on European exploitation of Africa (**Fig. 1.8**).³⁹ The paper was founded by Nnamdi Azikiwe (1904-1996), a Nigerian who had studied at Lincoln University, Columbia University, and the University of Pennsylvania in the United States between 1927 and 1933. Because of his desire to utilize the newspaper as a tool for empowering the anti-colonial movement and the quest for political independence in Nigeria, Nnamdi Azikiwe hired Akinola Lasekan (1916-1972),

³⁸ Luke Uka Uche, *Mass Media, People, and Politics in Nigeria* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1989), 93.

³⁹ See List of Figures for full credit information.

a Yoruba artist and book illustrator, as the newspaper's first cartoonist in the 1940s.⁴⁰ Prior to his hiring, Lasekan had trained as a commercial artist via correspondence courses administered by the Normal College of Art in London, which awarded him a Fine Art Diploma in 1937. He rose to prominence during a time of critical consciousness when the Western-educated elites in Lagos grew increasingly aware of the hypocritical alliance between British colonialism and evangelical Christianity. These elites then encouraged Lasekan to use his cartoons to draw public attention to the alliance, as well as the economic exploitation of Africa by Europe.⁴¹ His December 8, 1950 cartoon for the *West African Pilot* titled *Poor Africa* (**Fig. 1.8**) depicts (on the left) "European Imperialists" holding forks and knives and cutting the map of Africa, like a cake.⁴² It alludes to the famous Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 during which a number of European nations peacefully negotiated an agreement for partitioning the continent among themselves to

⁴⁰ Onyema Offoedu-Okeke, *Artists of Nigeria*, ed. Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie (Milan, Italy: 5 Continents, 2012), 44; and Oyin Medubi, "Cartooning in Nigeria: Large Canvas, Little Movement," in *Cartooning in Africa*, ed. John A. Lent (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 2009), 198.

⁴¹ As Oyin Medubi has noted, "his vitriolic attacks on the then colonial government often attracted the...fury and censorship of that government, which many times threw him into jail"; Oyin Medubi, "Cartooning in Nigeria: Large Canvas, Little Movement," in *Cartooning in Africa*, ed. John A. Lent (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 2009), 198.

⁴² See List of Figures for full credit information. Kojo Fosu, *20th Century Art of Africa*, Revised Edition (Accra, Ghana: Artist Alliance, 1993), 10, plate 6; and Yomi Ola, *Satires of Power in Yoruba Visual Culture* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2013), 86, fig. 2.12.

facilitate colonization and economic exploitation.⁴³ The two figures on the right represent the United States of America and the Soviet Union (USSR) witnessing the peaceful agreement.

Equally significant is another cartoon that Akinola Lasekan created for the newspaper the same year (October 20, 1950) with the caption *Freedom for All but Africans?* (**Fig. 1.9**).⁴⁴ It is a critique of the *Atlantic Charter* of August 14, 1941, a joint declaration by the United States of America and United Kingdom of their intention to enter World War II (1939-1945) and their vision for the world after the war. Among others, the Charter declared that “all nations have a right to self-determination.”⁴⁵ Here, the artist hints at the fact that five years after the end of World War II, during which thousands of African soldiers died in order to liberate a significant portion of Europe from the Nazi Germany, many African countries still remained under colonial rule, despite the Charter’s declaration that “all nations have a right to self-determination.” The burden of European colonization on Africa resonates in the imagery of a black figure serving as a cushion for a white imperialist. The latter holds a document that looks like a summary of the *Atlantic Charter* evidently intended by the cartoonist to remind Europe

⁴³ Stig Forster, Wolfgang J. Mommsen, and Rowland E. Robinson, eds., *Bismarck, Europe and Africa: The Berlin African Conference 1884-1885 and the Onset of Partition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Muriel E. Chamberlain, *The Scramble for Africa*, 2nd edition (London: Longman, 1999).

⁴⁴ See List of Figures for full credit information.

⁴⁵ The paradox is that African soldiers were drafted to go and assist in the liberation of some European countries from German, Japanese, and Italian occupation when many African countries were still under European colonization! For more on the objectives of the charter, see Douglas G. Brinkley and David Facey-Crowther, ed., *The Atlantic Charter* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1994).

that some of its pre-war promises to African countries were yet to be fulfilled. In many of his cartoons, Akinola Lasekan used size, posture, and gestures to emphasize the skewed power relationships between the colonizer and the colonized.

Art Schools in Nigeria

By the late 1950s, many newspapers in Nigeria had started using cartoons to address both national and international concerns. There was an increase in the number of locally trained cartoonists—thanks to the introduction of more formal, European-type art education programs in primary and secondary schools as well as in teacher-training colleges throughout the country. The need for more artists (especially designers) in the advertising, publishing, and related industries led the colonial government to establish the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology in Ibadan (western Nigeria) in 1953 where certificate and diploma courses in the visual arts were offered. This unit was later transferred to the northern Nigerian city of Zaria in 1955 when a similar institution was created there. The same year, a third art department was established at the Yaba Technical Institute in Lagos, Nigeria's capital. After the country attained political independence from England in 1960, many universities were created and some of them established art departments in response to the call for a revival of the country's artistic and cultural heritage to reinforce its national identity.

Founded in 1960 and inspired by the American education system, University of Nigeria, Nsukka became the first institution to offer a degree course in the visual arts. Two years later when the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology in Zaria became known as Ahmadu Bello University, the institution started awarding degrees

instead of diplomas. Other degree-granting art departments would subsequently be established in different parts of the country, including the one at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), Victor Ekpuk's alma mater.⁴⁶

The Press and Military Dictatorship in Nigeria, 1966-1998

The travails of the Nigerian press began in January 1966 when the military, led by General Johnson T.U. Aguiyi-Ironsi, toppled the democratically elected government headed by Alhaji Sir Abu Bakar Tafawa Balewa. Thereupon, the junta curtailed press freedom and harassed political activists. Six months later, General Aguiyi-Ironsi was assassinated in a counter coup and replaced by General Yakubu Gowon. A civil war followed, as the eastern part of the country seceded and called itself the State of Biafra. The war ended in 1970, with the country remaining intact. In July 1975, General Yakubu Gowon's government was toppled by a military coup led by Brigadier (later General) Murtala Mohammed who replaced him as the new head of state. In February 1976, the latter was assassinated in an abortive coup that eventually brought General Olusegun Obasanjo to power. After serving as head of state for about three years, Obasanjo handed over power back to a democratically elected government led by Alhaji Shehu Shagari in October 1979 (see **Appendix I: Chronology of Postcolonial Nigerian Political History**).

⁴⁶ For a survey of leading art institutions in the country, see Chinedu C. Chukueggu, "The Origin and Development of Formal Art Schools in Nigeria," *African Research Review: An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal* Ethiopia 4, no. 2 (April 2010): 502-513.

To cut a long story short, the various military juntas harassed many of their critics, incarcerating some of them without trial. For instance, because of the popularity of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's 1976 album *ZOMBIE* which drew attention to the excesses of the military, soldiers invaded and vandalized his clubhouse (the Kalakuta Republic). In addition, they threw his mother out of a second floor window. She later died as a result.⁴⁷

In August 1983, Alhaji Shehu Shagari was re-elected to a second term as president but was ousted four months later by a military coup led by Maj.-Gen. Muhammadu Buhari, who would, in turn, be overthrown in 1985 by General Ibrahim Babangida. After ruling for about eight years, Babangida voluntarily stepped down and handed over power to an interim civilian head of state Ernest Shonekan in 1993 to pave the way for a return to democracy. Unfortunately, General Sani Abacha overthrew Shonekan two months later and made himself the Chairman of the Provisional Ruling Council, a position he held until his death in 1998 after which Nigeria returned to a democratic government in 1999.

Again, like the first (1966-1979), the second military junta (1985-1998) brutalized all those who challenged its authority. In fact, the new regime was more violent, openly threatening critics, most especially journalists who dared to cross its path. On October 19, 1986, Dele Giwa, the founder and editor of the Lagos-based magazine *Newswatch*, was killed by a parcel bomb two days after being interrogated by Nigerian State Security Service officials.⁴⁸ Moreover, in April 1990 the editor of the *Punch* newspaper was

⁴⁷See Tejumola Olaniyan, *Arrest the Music!: Fela and his Rebel Art and Politics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004).

⁴⁸ See Editorial. "The Gruesome Murder of Giwa", *Newswatch*, February 2, 2013; and A.K. Togun, *Dele Giwa: The Unanswered Questions* (Lagos, Nigeria: Bamboo Books, 2002).

arrested for publishing a cartoon which insinuated that many Nigerians were displeased with an unsuccessful military coup organized by one Major Gideon Gwaza Orkar against General Ibrahim Babangida.⁴⁹ Poets and musicians who dared to criticize the military rulers in public were harassed by armed soldiers or arrested by the police and imprisoned on trumped up charges.⁵⁰ The editors of the *African Guardian* magazine were charged with treason for a seditious portrayal of the government in 1993. The publisher, Alex Ibru, escaped an assassination attempt the following year.⁵¹ Journalists working for the *Tell magazine* were assaulted for describing General Babangida as fraudulent and the magazine was subsequently placed under surveillance.

Admittedly, security agents often ignored anti-government masquerade performances, because, as Eli Bentor has observed, "...the anonymity of masqueraders gives them protection from personal liability."⁵² However, cartoonists did not enjoy a similar privilege, being required to sign their works. No wonder, Victor Ekpuk, like many of his contemporaries, was obliged to conceal his criticisms and social commentaries behind a mask, using *nsibidi*-like scripts and other strategies to complicate the

⁴⁹ Tunde Olusunle and Dan Okereke, "The Journalist as Patriot – Onyema Ugochukwu at 65", *Vanguard*, November 8, 2009.

⁵⁰ See also Sylvester O. Ogbachie, "Dele Jegede: Portrait of the Art Historian as an Artist," in *Art, Parody and Politics: Dele Jegede's Creative Activism, Nigeria and the Transnational Space*, eds. Aderonke A. Adasanya and Toyin Falola (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2014), 251-252.

Joel Adedeji, "Traditional Yoruba Theatre," *African Arts* 3, no. 1 (Autumn 1969): 60-63

⁵¹ Olayemi Akande, "A Semiotic Analysis of Political Cartoons: A Case Study of Nigeria" (PhD dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 2002), 73-74.

⁵² Eli Bentor, "Masquerade Politics in Contemporary Southeastern Nigeria," *African Arts* 41, no. 4 (2008): 42.

interpretation of some the cartoons he created for *The Daily Times* newspaper during the second military junta in Nigeria.⁵³

⁵³ For more details of the crises that followed Nigeria's attainment of independence in 1960, see Eghosa E. Osaghae, *Crippled Giant: Nigeria since Independence* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998).

Chapter 2

From Uyo to Ife: The Emergence of Victor Ekpuk, the Cartoonist

Born in 1964 in Uyo, the capital of what is now the Akwa Ibom State in southeastern Nigeria, Victor Ekpuk belongs to the Ibibio/Anang ethnic group. In the past, each village in the area was headed by a chief (*obong*), though the leaders of the Ekpe Society constituted the governing body. The Ekpe derives much of its political authority from a popular belief that it has the capacity to harness the power of a metaphysical leopard (*ekpe*) and use it to not only maintain law and order, but also promote the spiritual well-being of the community. Masks employed by the society during its private and public ceremonies are known as *ekpo*. They are divided into two broad categories, namely, the good-looking one (*mfon-ekpo*) signifying the soul of a deceased person who had led a morally exemplary life, and the ugly-looking one (*idiok-ekpo*), associated with the soul of a morally bankrupt person (**Fig. 2.1**).⁵⁴ It is worth mentioning at this juncture that *ekpo* masks are not confined to the Ibibio/Anang. They are also found in many parts of southeastern Nigeria and western Cameroon, especially among neighboring ethnic groups such as the Efik, Ejagham, Ekoi, and Igbo. In the past, public performances by

⁵⁴ See List of Figures for full credit information. Joseph J. Akpan, "Ekpo Society Masks of the Ibibio," *African Arts* 27, no. 4 (Autumn 1994), 48-53, 94-95; John C. Messenger, "The Carver in Anang Society," in *The Artist in Traditional African Society*, ed. Warren L. d'Azevedo (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973), 101-127; Herbert M. Cole and Chike Aniakor, *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos* (Los Angeles, CA: Museum of Cultural History, University of California, 1984); and Judith Perani and Fred T. Smith, *The Visual Arts of Africa: Gender, Power and Life Cycle Rituals* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998), 193-196.

these masks were expected to influence human behavior, as they still do today, though they are increasingly being modified to reflect the dynamics of change.⁵⁵

Before the twentieth century, fishing, farming, weaving, iron-working, pottery, and trading were the main occupations in southeastern Nigeria. Due to their location near the coast, the Ibibio/Anang had one of the earliest contacts with European missionaries and slave traders dating back to the seventeenth century. Also, they were one of the first ethnic groups in Nigeria to be exposed to Western education in 1894 when Scottish missionaries established the Hope Waddell Institute (HWI) in the neighboring town of Calabar (formerly known as Akwa Akpa). Courses taught at the HWI included building technology, carpentry, metalworking, dress-making, and domestic science.⁵⁶

Given the popular association of carvings with indigenous religion (which the early missionaries associated with paganism), figure sculpture was excluded from the curriculum of most early mission and colonial schools in Nigeria, though new art programs were instituted with an emphasis on the “fine arts” of painting, sculpture, and graphic design, among others.

Education Background and Early Influences

Notwithstanding the fact that the Hope Waddell Institute (HWI) in Calabar offered some art and crafts courses as early as the late nineteenth century, it was not until 1983 that a major high institution of learning with an art department—the University of

⁵⁵ See also Eli Bontor, “Masquerade Politics in Contemporary Southeastern Nigeria,” *African Arts* 4, no. 4 (2008), 32-43.

⁵⁶ William H. Taylor, *Mission to Educate: A History of the Educational Work of the Scottish Presbyterian Mission in East Nigeria, 1846-1960* (New York, NY: Random House, 1983), 110.

Cross-River State—was established in the Ibibio/Anang/Efik culture area. The institution was renamed Akwa Ibom State University during the 2010-2011 academic year.

However, Victor Ekpuk's desire to study at an older and reputable art department led him to seek admission to the Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife (Osun State, southwestern Nigeria). Founded in 1962 and formerly known as the University of Ife, this institution started offering courses in the visual arts in 1968 and soon became famous for encouraging students to combine advanced technical skills in the studio with a deep knowledge of the humanities as well as indigenous African art and aesthetics. According to Babatunde Lawal, the head of the Ife Art School between 1984 and 1987:

[Located] in Ife whose ancient civilization produced the world-famous [highly naturalistic] bronze and terracotta figures, among other art treasures [dating between the 12th and 15th centuries C.E.], the Ife Art School is committed to not only transmitting the spirit of this rich artistic heritage to the [present] and coming generations, but also fostering a new national identity out of [Nigeria's cultural diversity]. To this end, the [School] provides a unique setting for students from different ethnic groups to study, appreciate and assimilate the ancient artistic traditions of Nigeria in the context of a common heritage.⁵⁷

In a 2009 interview published on the online blog *Seeds and Fruit*, Victor Ekpuk reflected on one of the early influences on his life as an artist:

As far back as I can remember, I could draw good resemblances of objects and people before I learned how to write. I would say that my mother was the first nurturer of my artistic gift. At a very young age, she encouraged me to enter competitions. So strong was my love for art that I could not think of anything else I'd rather study in college, and my parents did not dissuade me from this path. I am grateful to them for that.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Babatunde Lawal, *The Ife Art School: Evolution of Nigerian Art, 1974-1984* (Lagos, Nigeria: National Council for Arts and Culture, 1984), 8.

⁵⁸ <http://www.seedsandfruit.com/2009/09/victor-ekpuk-artist>

Besides, Victor Ekpuk was also influenced by *uli* designs of the Igbo through the “Natural Synthesis” theory formulated in 1958 by the first graduates of the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria (otherwise known as the Zaria Art Society). Led by the painter Uche Okeke (1933-2016), the society urged its members and contemporary Nigerian artists, in general, to relate the past to the present in order to determine the future of modern art in Africa.⁵⁹ Thus, as Chika Okeke aptly puts it:

...the society’s artists embarked on an aggressive recovery of traditional Nigerian art forms in all their historical variants. Combining media and techniques learned in an art school, they encouraged less reliance on European subject matter and formal tropes. They were also concerned with the role of the artist in a culture in transition. The confidence inspired by impending independence, as well as the impulse to define a Nigerian modernism, propelled this interest further.⁶⁰

It suffices to say that by experimenting with *uli* designs in his drawings, paintings, and prints (**Fig. 2.3**),⁶¹ Uche Okeke (formerly the head of the Art Department, University of Nigeria, Nsukka), would popularize their use in contemporary Nigerian art, laying the foundation for what is now known as the Uli Movement, though associated mainly with graduates of the Nsukka Art School.⁶² The works of one of Uche Okeke’s former

⁵⁹ For more details, see Paul Chike Dike and Pat Oyelola, eds., *The Zaria Art Society: A New Consciousness* (Lagos, Nigeria: National Gallery of Art, 1998).

⁶⁰ Chika Okeke, “Modern African Art,” in *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (New York, NY: Prestel, 2001), 33.

⁶¹ See List of Figures for full credit information.

⁶² See Simon Ottenberg, *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group* (Washington DC: Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, 1997). For more information on art schools in Nigeria before and after independence, see Marshall W. Mount, *African Art: The Years Since 1920* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973); Onyema Offoedu-Okeke, *Artists of Nigeria*, ed. Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie (Milan, Italy: 5 Continents, 2012); and Chinedu C. Chukueggu, “The Origin and Development of

students, Obiora Udechukwu, (**Fig. 2.4**),⁶³ has had a major impact on Victor Ekpuk as well. In his words:

Towards the end of my third year in college, I came in contact with the drawings of Obiora Udechukwu. I was struck by the linearity and his use of *uli* and *nsibidi* symbols...I believe that that encounter summed up my learning experience and gave a perspective on how I could approach realizing the artistic philosophies and teachings that I was receiving at Ife... Even though I knew of *nsibidi* growing up in Uyo...I never thought of *nsibidi* as writing, until my encounter with Obiora's works.⁶⁴

That encounter is reflected in this Victor Ekpuk's cartoon of Obiora Udechukwu (**Fig. 2.5**).⁶⁵ In short, by the time he graduated from the Obafemi Awolowo University in 1989, Victor Ekpuk had started experimenting with *nsibidi* and *uli* elements as well as other indigenous Nigerian ideograms and artistic forms.

Early Career at *The Daily Times* (1989-1998)

On graduating with a BA degree (Fine & Applied Arts) from the Obafemi Awolowo University, Victor Ekpuk secured a job with *The Daily Times* newspaper of Lagos as an editorial and political cartoonist. Initially influenced by his colleagues in the establishment (such as Yomi Ola and Wole Langunju), his early cartoons reflect an attempt to capture resemblance so as to make it easier for the general public to recognize

Formal Art Schools in Nigeria," *African Research Review: An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal* 4, no. 2 (April 2010), 502-513.

⁶³ See List of Figures for full credit information.

⁶⁴ Christine Mullen Kreamer and Allyson Purpura, "Songs of Ancient Moons: Victor Ekpuk on his Art," in *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art*, ed. Christine Mullen Kreamer, et al (Washington DC: Smithsonian Press, 2007), 230.

⁶⁵ See List of Figures for full credit information.

instantly the individual portrayed. **Fig. 2.6** is a case in point.⁶⁶ Representing Fela Anikulapo-Kuti (1938-1997), the famous Nigerian Afro-beat music icon and critic of the military government, the cartoon accompanied a review in *The Daily Times* of Fela's latest (1990) record album entitled *Confusion Break Bone* (CBB). In the lyrics, the musician satirized the "many wrong things in Nigeria" – the consequence of an incompetent military administration, corruption, favoritism, and frequent violations of human rights by the police and army. He also drew attention to himself as one of the victims of the latter as well as to the overcrowded hospitals and, most especially, the mortuaries filled with fractured corpses of victims of vehicle accidents caused by dilapidated roads, among others.⁶⁷

Notwithstanding the fragile frame of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti in this cartoon, his doggedness is unmistakable. Hence his lyrics inspired many Nigerian youths; as Victor Ekpuk admits:

Fela was our social conscience, the mirror that reflected the decay that had beset Nigeria. He became the voice of the common man; he was courageous enough to put his finger in the eye of those who held guns to our heads. He lightened our burdens by creating an escape through humor and sarcasm in his music. We loved him for inviting us to mock the "V.I.Ps. (Vagabonds In Power)" who had squandered our wealth.⁶⁸

Fig. 2.7 depicts General Ibrahim Babangida (head of the military junta between 1985 and 1993) looking sideways to avoid eye to eye contact with the viewer.⁶⁹ This imagery is bound to remind many Nigerians of the General's mannerism as well as

⁶⁶ See List of Figures for full credit information.

⁶⁷ See <http://afrofunkforum.blogspot.com/p/fela-kuti-lyrics.html>

⁶⁸ See http://www.victorekpuk.com/victorekpuk.com/black_president.html

⁶⁹ See List of Figures for full credit information.

indifference when questioned by journalists at press conferences. Here, the artist uses cross-hatchings to darken Babangida's face and, by extension, draw attention to the authoritarian nature of his regime.

For those Nigerians familiar with the events surrounding the June 12, 1993 Elections, the cartoon in **Fig. 2.8** is “worth more than a thousand words.”⁷⁰ As noted earlier, the military head of state, General Ibrahim Babangida, decided to step down in 1993 after ruling for eight years. As a result, elections were held all over the country on June 12 of the same year in order to pave the way for a return to a democratically elected government. Preliminary results indicated that the candidate of the *Social Democratic Party of Nigeria*, Chief Moshood Abiola (a Yoruba from the south), was far ahead of his opponent, Bashir Tofa of the *National Republican Convention* and a Hausa from the north. But to everyone's surprise, General Ibrahim Babangida (also from the north, though not Hausa) decided to nullify the election before the announcement of the official results and despite the fact that international observers had declared the election as free and fair. Moshood Abiola's refusal to accept General Babangida's annulment precipitated social unrest throughout Nigeria.

On August 26, 1993, General Babangida relinquished power to an interim civilian administration headed by a Yoruba in the person of Ernest Shonekan. But the latter would be overthrown three months later (in November) by another military coup led by General Sani Abacha. And since Chief Abiola continued to insist that he had won the election and declared himself as the democratically elected president of the country, General Abacha ordered that he be arrested for treason in 1994 and detained indefinitely

⁷⁰ See List of Figures for full credit information.

without trial. Many of Chief Abiola's supporters subsequently took to the streets, clashing with the riot police. In 1998, such was the international concern for the uproar over Chief Abiola's detention that the United States government sent an official delegation to Nigeria to help negotiate a solution. Unfortunately, on June 8, 1998, General Abacha succumbed to a sudden heart attack inside the Presidential Villa in the capital city of Abuja. Chief Abiola himself died mysteriously on July 7, 1998—the very day he was to be released—during a meeting with the American delegation.⁷¹ The crisis thus ended in a stalemate.

This realistic cartoon depicts General Abacha (wearing his signature sunglasses)⁷² denying Chief Abiola access to the Presidential Villa, signified by the chair to the right of the General. Victor Ekpuk's decision to use only the date of the nullified election (June 12, 1993) to caption the cartoon is understandable, as any open reference to military dictatorship would have predictably turned him into a target of the Abacha administration.

⁷¹ See Yemi Ogunbiyi and Chidi Amuta, *Legend of our Time: The Thoughts of M.K.O. Abiola* (Lagos, Nigeria: Tanus Press, 1973); Toyin Falola, *Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religious Politics and Secular Ideologies* (Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 1998); and Wayne Madsen, *Genocide and Covert Operations in Africa 1993-1999* (New York, New York: Edwin Meller Press, 1999).

⁷² See also Yomi Ola, *Satires of Power in Yoruba Visual Culture* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2013), 120.

Chapter 3

Revealing the Concealed: An Archaeology of Selected Cartoons with the *Nsibidi* Script

To further protect himself from being targeted by the military, Victor Ekpuk stylized some of his forms. In addition, he employed the *nsibidi* script to camouflage and obscure his critique of the status quo, and therefore provide a loophole of escape if confronted. For example, the denotative significance of the “Wailing Woman” in **Fig. 3.1** is anyone’s guess: the work is rife with illusive meanings, i.e. connotations.⁷³ All the same, given the figures holding guns in the background, she may very well be the wife of one of the targets of the frequent military assaults that characterized the 1990s or the mother of a victim of armed robbery--a common spectacle during the same period. According to Victor Ekpuk, since becoming a professional artist, he has focused on “the human condition explained through themes that are both universal and specific: family, gender, politics, culture, and identity.”⁷⁴ Many of the *nsibidi*-derived motifs in his cartoons often reference themes⁷⁵ of global love, pain, and hope. In a recent interview, he declared that one of his objectives, as an artist, was to “bridge the communication gap between the different peoples of the world, irrespective of color, caste, or social

⁷³ See List of Figures for full credit information.

⁷⁴ Victor Ekpuk, LinkedIn Summary, <http://www.linkedin.com/in/victorekpuk>.

⁷⁵ Christine Mullen Kreamer and Allyson Purpura, “Songs of Ancient Moons: Victor Ekpuk on his Art,” in *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art*, ed. Christine Mullen Kreamer, et al (Washington DC: Smithsonian Press, 2007), 233.

stratums.”⁷⁶ The *nsibidi* spiral motif stands out in this work and several others.⁷⁷ It not only signifies the sun, but also serves as a personal symbol for life, solace, and perseverance. In addition, it is expected to be a source of hope for the hopeless and for those fellow Nigerians whose lives were being “snuffed out by [military] decrees and bullets.”⁷⁸ A second motif that recurs in other works of the artist is the interlocked *nsibidi* ideogram for co-existence, reconciliation, unity, and marriage, among others. It has polysemic and sometimes ambivalent meanings. While certain motifs may denote acceptance, love, harmony, and gender complementarity or collaboration,⁷⁹ others may be slightly modified to indicate opposition, unrest, inequality, and injustice, thus making it difficult to pin down all the messages in Victor Ekpuk’s cartoons. Frequently, the spiral, two-interlocked curves, and other *nsibidi*-like ideograms are so comingled that they

⁷⁶ Victor Ekpuk, “Dream,” in *Dream: A Catalogue for Exhibition of Drawings and Paintings*, ed. Victor Ekpuk (Lagos, Nigeria: Goethe-Institut, 1996), 10.

⁷⁷ See Don Akatakpo, “Beyond Our Dreams,” in *Dream: A Catalogue for Exhibition of Drawings and Paintings*, ed. Victor Ekpuk (Lagos, Nigeria: Goethe-Institut, 1996), 5.

⁷⁸ Victor Ekpuk, *Wind Songs: A Catalogue for Exhibition of Drawing and Paintings by Victor Ekpuk, June 27-July 22, 1995* (Lagos, Nigeria: French Cultural Centre, 1995).

⁷⁹ In 2006, Ekpuk noted his position on violence: “In the days of fear and wars, tolerance should not only be accommodating the few differences in others, but recognizing and embracing our many similarities. If we only stop to look we might see out laughter, love, fear, and pain in another’s eyes. Perhaps then we may grant others the respect, kindness, and freedom that we are willing to allow our kind and ourselves.”; Aderonke Adesanya, “Blurring the Thin Line between Meaning and Metaphors: Victor Ekpuk,” in *Victor Ekpuk: Drawing Metaphors*, ed. James Madison University (Harrisonburg, VA: James Madison University, 2011), 15.

appear readable from a distance, thus inviting the viewer to move closer only to find them unreadable.

One is tempted therefore to compare some of his works with those of the New York-based Chinese artist Gu Wenda (b. 1955), who manipulates invented, albeit meaningless, Chinese scripts in a similar way (**Fig. 3.2**).⁸⁰ In 1986, the Chinese authorities shut down his one-man show in the city of Xi'an because of the unintelligible texts in many of the exhibits which they suspected to be "masking" subversive messages.⁸¹ Gu Wenda has since explained that his invented scripts are intended to draw attention to the "limitations of human knowledge," in addition to helping viewers prepare "for entry into an 'unknown world.'"⁸² Fortunately for Victor Ekpuk, the pseudo-*nsibidi* scripts in his cartoons are frequently mixed with readable and non-incendiary English texts, thus making Nigerian military dictatorship less suspicious.⁸³

As Battestini points out, *nsibidi* may be interpreted and read in any language so long as the user is part of an "inner" circle. For it is an unusual communication system with trans-cultural meanings.⁸⁴ Yet, the script was never intended to be fully understood

⁸⁰ See List of Figures for full credit information.

⁸¹ See Zhou Yan, *Odyssey of Culture: Wenda Gu and his Art* (New York, NY: Springer, 2015).

⁸² Marilyn Stokstad and Michael W. Cothren, *Art: A Brief History*, 4th edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2010), 592.

⁸³ Kenneth Campbell coined the umbrella term "pseudo-*nsibidi*" to encompass *nsibidi* forms without apparent meaning; see Kenneth F. Campbell, "Nsibidi Update: Nsibidi Actualisé," *Arts d'Afrique Noire* 47 (1983), 40.

⁸⁴ Simon P.X. Battestini, "Nsibidi," in *The Nsukka Artists and Nigerian Contemporary Art*, ed. Simon Ottenberg (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution National Museum of African Art in association with University of Washington Press, 2001), 68.

by every member of the Ekpe Society. The capacity to comprehend fully all the semiotics of *nsibidi* increases not only with age, but also with the performance of various rites of passage associated with clairvoyance both at the secular and spiritual realms.⁸⁵ Similarly, Victor Ekpuk expects the reception and interpretation of his cartoons to vary--depending on an individual's familiarity with the events referenced in them--through his reference to denotative *nsibidi* forms while still leaving room for connotative readings.

In one word, by modifying, hybridizing, and decontextualizing the traditional *nsibidi*, Victor Ekpuk adds to *nsibidi*'s secretive nature and his connection with purposeful ambiguity through connotation.⁸⁶ Thus he creates a sort of visual glossolalia that makes interpretation of his cartoons more complex. As Aderonke Adesanya points out, "the painstakingly inscribed multitude of symbols tasks the viewer and demands fresh interpretation at each gaze. Ekpuk's works present to viewers the dilemma of confronting the vintage cultural vocabulary replete in his oeuvres and deciding whether to seek their meaning or simply to enjoy the forms and avant-garde idioms that have become his signature and creative identity."⁸⁷ So it is that the *nsibidi* motifs as well as

⁸⁵ See also Simon P.X. Battestini, "African Writing, Text, and the Arts: Concepts and Definitions," in *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art*, ed. Christine Mullen Kreamer, et al (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2007), 33.

⁸⁶ Amanda Carlson, "Nsibidi: Old and New Scripts," in *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art*, ed. Christine Mullen Kreamer, et al (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2007), 152.

⁸⁷ Aderonke Adesanya, "Blurring the Line between Meaning and Metaphors: Victor Ekpuk," in *Victor Ekpuk: Drawing Metaphors*, ed. James Madison University (Harrisonburg, VA: James Madison University, 2011), 44-45.

other images in his cartoons combine the old and the new to convey much more than meets the eye, given their capacity to “tell a story and...different aspects of the story...in one composition.”⁸⁸

For a denotative example, **Fig. 3.3** complements an article in the *Sunday Times Magazine* (December 5, 1993) on refuse disposal problems in the city of Lagos.⁸⁹

Reading between the lines, the article urges the military government not to turn a blind eye to the dangers that the phenomenon posed to public health. According to the article,

...overcrowded Lagos has been the worst hit by the refuse menace. Mountainous heaps of refuse can be traced as the root cause of the city’s tedious traffic hold-ups. From Ojuelegba to Oshodi; Isolo to Ojora; Ojota to Ojodu and Agege to Ajegunle, mounds of refuse dot the landscape. Not even the highways are spared...

The spider web at the center of the refuse dump identifies it as a trap that can easily poison many of the homeless people who go there to forage for food. The human figure in the cartoon covers his nose, evidently due to the stench. He also seems to wonder what had happened to the huge revenue that his country earns annually as one of the leading members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

The cartoon in **Fig. 3.4** draws attention to another major health hazard in the country due to air pollution caused by smoking.⁹⁰ The point is that, while many countries (especially in the West) were beginning to ban smoking in public spaces, the military

⁸⁸ Christine Mullen Kreamer and Allyson Purpura, “Songs of Ancient Moons: Victor Ekpuk on his Art”, in *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art*, ed. Christine Mullen Kreamer, et al (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2007), 230.

⁸⁹ See List of Figures for full credit information.

⁹⁰ See List of Figures for full credit information.

administration in Nigeria remained indifferent. Here, the artist uses a helpless infant in the center to plead for immediate action before it is too late.

Corruption has been cited as one of the reasons for the frequent military take-overs in Nigeria between the 1980s and 1990s. Yet it is an open secret that the hands of the military administrators themselves were not clean. The phenomenon was recently confirmed by the decision of Switzerland to return to the Nigerian government more than 2 billion dollars that General Sani Abacha allegedly “stole” and stacked away in European banks.⁹¹ The eye patch worn by the army officer towering above the scene in **Fig. 3.5** speaks volumes about the “corruption” game during the Abacha regime (1993-1998).⁹² The officer holds a whip in his right hand to punish civilians (represented by the figure in the foreground) arrested, tried, and found guilty of corruption. On his left claw-like hand hangs the label “Operation Loot and Go,” which, along with his black eye patch, alludes to the blind eye that the Abacha regime turned to its own misdeeds. Note the characters that dominate the cartoon: military figures holding up male and female civilian figures at gunpoint while they break, steal, and consume their goods; there are also trucks filled with stolen goods, leaving the scene. The whip in the officer’s hand also warns journalists and the so-called social activists to keep off or face the consequence – a threat reinforced by the skull and crossbones motifs adorning his beret and patches.

As Yomi Ola (a former colleague of Victor Ekpuk at *The Daily Times* newspaper in the 1990s) puts it,

⁹¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/18/switzerland-to-return-sani-abacha-loot-money-to-nigeria>

⁹² See List of Figures for full credit information.

Whether in or out of power, the Nigerian military, to the people and politicians alike, is considered a much-dreaded force; hence it remained a major powerbroker in virtually every facet of national life...

[It] is just one part of the double-headed leadership monster that postcolonial newspaper artists confront... [B]rutal military leaders together with their civilian counterparts...display corrupt and inept leadership. In both scenarios, the Nigerian military is a common factor. Upon retirement, some of the influential soldiers tend to swap their military uniform for *agbada* – a long flowing robe – the Nigerian politician’s garb. Moreover, most civilian regimes operate under the pervasive threat of military takeover.⁹³

In other words, the relationship between authoritarian military and democratically elected civilian regimes is complex and yet easily characterized by the metaphor of “the pot calling the kettle black.” Strangely enough and fortunately for Victor Ekpuk, this 1994 cartoon did not come under the radar of the military administration, thus relieving his anxieties⁹⁴ heightened by an encounter he had two years earlier with a state governor.⁹⁵

⁹³ Yomi Ola, *Satires of Power in Yoruba Visual Culture* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2013),

97. See also Bayo Adekanye, *The Retired Military as Emergent Power Factor in Nigeria* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Heinemann Educational Books, 1999).

⁹⁴ According to a 1994 study by J. Fritz, Nigeria was the most cited African nation for inhibiting freedom of the press. On their scale of free press, The Reporters without Borders group ranked Nigeria as #112 out of 180 countries. Finland was the most inhibited at #1 while the United States was placed #46 with North Korea, Turkmenistan, and Eritrea tied for #178, #179, and #180 with a lack of free press in its entirety.

Additionally, the presidential election annulment on June 12, 1993 (later referred to as June 12th) and the subsequent General Sani Abacha regime set into motion over 7,000 journalists, writers, and artists arrests. Charges were not provided. In the 2002 study the United States ranked #17 while Nigeria held #49 out of 139 countries. See RSF.org for more on the group’s methodology and samplings; Olayemi Akande, “A Semiotic Analysis of Political Cartoons: A Case Study of Nigeria,” PhD Dissertation (University of Oklahoma, 2002), 1; For a comprehensive selection of censorship towards cartoonists around the globe, see

Titled *To Serve Nigeria with All My Strength*, the cartoon in **Fig. 3.6** was created to illustrate an article on the 1994 May Day celebration in Nigeria.⁹⁶ Note how the cartoonist utilizes the following words and acronyms, along with the *nsibidi* script, to “mask” and silently echo public dissatisfaction with the military government:

NEPA:	A reference to the frequent blackouts often blamed on the incompetence of the National Electric Power Authority .
VAT:	A reference to the Value Added Tax Act of 1993, No. 102 that requires businesses to charge customers a flat rate of 5% and make regular returns to the government. This VAT Act resulted in price increases that made life more difficult for the “have nots.”
Black Market:	The undercover sale of smuggled goods.
Transport:	Traffic jams and shortage of mass public transit.
Fuel Scarcity:	An allusion to the paradoxical shortage of fuel in a country reputed to be one of the world’s major sources of crude oil.

also Victor S. Navasky, *The Art of Controversy: Political Cartoons and their Enduring Power* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 201-209; and J. Fritz, “The Top Stories of 1993: A Bloody Year for the World’s Press,” *World Press Review* 41, no. 20 (February 1994), 18.

⁹⁵ The closest Victor Ekpuk came to being silenced by the military regime was in 1992 when he published a drawing alongside an editorial by Uthman Shodipe in which the state governor was represented as a lazy, pot-bellied man without a care for the governed. Shodipe was subsequently taken away by the military police while Ekpuk was away from the studio. Peers advised Ekpuk to stay away from the studio that afternoon yet he continued to critique the local authorities in the editorial pages the following day; Personal communications with the artist.

⁹⁶See List of Figures for full credit information. The title is taken from the Nigerian national pledge (emphasis added):

“I pledge to Nigeria my Country
To be faithful, loyal and honest
To serve Nigeria with all my strength
To defend her unity
And uphold her honour and glory
So help me God.”

Task Force:	A reference to various, sometimes, <i>kangaroo</i> tribunals set up by the military.
Dismissals:	Loss of jobs in both the public and private sectors.
Salaries:	Insufficient wages for workers to pay their bills.

In sum, the crouching figure below the pictorial, *nsibidi* “glossolalia” underscores the suffering of the lower class, in particular.⁹⁷

Titled *Prisoner of Conscience* (1994), **Fig. 3.7** is one of the most referenced of Victor Ekpuk’s cartoons.⁹⁸ It features a figure crouching inside a house that looks like a prison due to the four vertical bars in front of it. The cartoon accompanies an article titled “Life Behind Bars” published by journalist Yomi Omotoso in *The Daily Times* of October 26, 1994, to draw attention to the deplorable conditions in Nigeria’s overpopulated prisons. As a medical doctor interviewed by the journalist puts it: “Many [of the prisoners] are anemic... [and] can no longer stand up.” Yet, according to Victor Ekpuk, this cartoon was also inspired by Nelson Mandela’s 27-year prison ordeals in Apartheid South Africa before his release on February 11, 1990. In short, Mandela’s ordeals led Victor to create different versions of “Prisoner of Conscience” to surreptitiously draw attention to “the military junta’s incarceration of opposition voices

⁹⁷ In 2002, Victor Ekpuk created another version of this cartoon for a catalogue of a traveling exhibition on the life of the Afro-beat king Fela Anikulapo Kuti. The burden includes words such as TRIBALISM, HUMAN RIGHT ABUSE, POLICE HARRASSMENT, ARMY HARRASSMENT, CORRUPTION and INJUSTICE, among others, to draw attention to some of the issues plaguing the Nigerian nation. See Trevor Schoonmaker, ed., *Black President: The Art and Legacy of Fela Anikulapo Kuti* (New York, NY: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003), 127.

⁹⁸ See List of Figures for full credit information.

like Abiola, Ken Saro-Wiwa etc. in the 1980 and 90s.”⁹⁹ No wonder, the artist only signed the cartoon and did not add a caption, leaving the viewer to fill in the blanks.

To begin with, the term “Prisoners of Conscience,” was first used in an article published in the *London Observer* newspaper on May 28, 1961 by Peter Benenson (the British-born lawyer, founder and later Secretary-General of the human right group *Amnesty International*) to categorize those unfairly incarcerated in different parts of the world for openly and peacefully criticizing the authorities or expressing their concerns about human rights and welfare, among others.¹⁰⁰ As a result, *Amnesty International* declared Nelson Mandela (1918-2013) a “Prisoner of Conscience,” in 1962 when he was arrested, tried and imprisoned by the Apartheid Regime for traveling without valid permits and encouraging workers to strike. And while still in prison, Mandela was tried again, along with eight other South Africans and found guilty in 1964 of organizing an armed struggle against the Apartheid Regime. Although the new charges obliged *Amnesty International* to remove Mandela from the “Prisoners of Conscience” list, the organization did petition the Apartheid Regime about “the fairness of his trial and prison conditions.”¹⁰¹ Hence Mandela continued to be regarded as such in different parts of the world –so much so that *Amnesty International* would later honor him with the “*Ambassador of Conscience*” Award in 2006.

Although many politicians and social activists were unjustly persecuted by the various military governments between 1966 and 1999, the two Nigerians whose arrest

⁹⁹ Personal email communication with Victor Ekpuk, May 5, 2016.

¹⁰⁰ See also <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/1961/may/28/fromthearchive.theguardian>.

¹⁰¹ See “Nelson Mandela and Amnesty International”, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/nelson-mandela-and-amnesty-international>.

and detention sparked the loudest international uproar in 1994 – when Victor Ekpuk drew this cartoon -- were Chief Moshood Abiola (1937-1998) and Ken Saro-Wiwa (1941-1995). Chief Moshood Abiola’s case was cited in the last chapter; therefore, only Ken Saro-Wiwa’s case will be discussed here. He hailed from Ogoni town in the Niger Delta (southeastern Nigeria) and was the president of the *Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People* (MOSOP). The latter was founded in 1990 not only to enable the Ogonis to have a fair share of the revenues accruing from the exploration of the natural resources on their land, but also protect it from environmental pollution, which had already devastated the area as a result of oil drilling by multinational companies--most especially the Royal Dutch Shell Company. The MOSOP also criticized the military government for not protecting Ogoni interests. A disagreement over strategies soon divided the movement into two factions, with Ken Saro-Wawa leading the group that accused the other of being pro-military government.

On May 21, 1994, four leaders of the group that disagreed with Ken Saro-Wiwa’s strategies were attacked and murdered. Although he was out of town that day, Ken Saro-Wiwa and nine other members of his faction were arrested, charged, tried for murder, found guilty, and sentenced to death by a military tribunal. Later, some of the witnesses who testified against Ken Saro-Wiwa during the trial would confess that they had been paid to do so. The trial sparked world-wide protests. *Amnesty International* declared him a “Prisoner of Conscience” on May 23, 1994 (index number AFR 44/003/1994).¹⁰²

On November 10, 1995, Ken Saro-Wiwa and his associates were hanged for the alleged crime despite the international appeal to General Abacha regime that their lives

¹⁰² See <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr44/003/1994/en/>.

should be spared.¹⁰³ The outrage resulted in Nigeria's suspension from the Commonwealth of Nations for three years.¹⁰⁴ In short, Victor Ekpuk's apotheosis of the "Prisoner of Conscience" in this cartoon is intended to not only evoke an empathetic response from the viewer, but also nudge the conscience of the military government as well as *Royal Dutch Shell Company*. On November 8, 1996, the Saro-Wiwa family and others filed a wrongful death suit in New York City against the company, which was settled on June 8, 2009 when the latter agreed to pay \$15.5 million to compensate the family, create a trust to benefit the people of Ogoni, and cover some of the legal costs.¹⁰⁵

By and large, one can only imagine the excruciating anguish of the crouching, emaciated figure in **Fig. 3.7**. Its curvilinear feature has formal connotations with regard to the *nsibidi* script for "voyage", "trek", or "journey"; thus, the artist subtly hints at the process (or journey) through which the figure was placed in such a claustrophobic prison. The white figure in the foreground may very well represent the guard on duty. Yet, the aura around the figure makes it look like the soul of the prisoner in an out-of-body experience that varies from one "Prisoner of Conscience" to another.

¹⁰³ See "Nigeria: Further Information on Unfair Trial/Death Penalty/Prisoner of Conscience/Legal Concern/Health Concern: Ken Saro-Wiwa, Dr. Barinem Kioble, Saturday Dabee, Paul Levura, Nordu Eawo, Felix Nuate, Daniel Gbokoo, John Kpuinen, Baribor Bera," Amnesty International, 10 November 1995, Index number: AFR 44/032/1995, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr44/032/1995/en/>.

¹⁰⁴ B. Naanen, "Oil-Producing Minorities and the Restructuring of the Nigerian Federation: The Case of the Ogoni People," *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 33, no. 1 (1995): 46-78; Abdul-Rasheed Na'allah, ed., *Ogoni's Agonies: Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Crisis in Nigeria* (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 1998); and Kevin Shillington, ed., *Encyclopedia of African History*, Vols. 1-3 (New York, NY: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2005): 282, 1124.

¹⁰⁵ See <http://ccrjustice.org/home/what-we-do/our-cases/wiwa-et-al-v-royal-dutch-petroleum-et-al>

Space limitations will not allow me to analyze several other cartoons that Victor Ekpuk produced for *The Daily Times* newspapers in the 1990s. It is enough to say that his combination of the *nsibidi* script with stylized representation and mundane/ambiguous titles convey much more than meets the eyes, thus enabling him to escape the vindictiveness of the military dictatorship in Nigeria during his tenure with *The Daily Times* newspapers.

Conclusion

Welcome to the USA: Mapping New Directions with *Nsibidi*

In 1998, Victor Ekpuk relocated to the United States to partake of the *American Dream* that has allowed him to abandon cartoon journalism. Since then, he has been giving free rein to his creative impulses, mapping new directions with *nsibidi* through participation in many local and international artists' residences and thus becoming more productive.

No longer living under a military dictatorship, he now experiments with lines, forms, colors, and collage to reflect on different aspects of the human condition. For instance, the two images in **Fig. 3.8** (*State of Being (Totem)*) invoke a number of dualities in nature: such as the natural and supernatural; male and female; good and bad; joy and sadness; as well as life and death, among others.¹⁰⁶ This phenomenon is implicated as well in the blue and red colors against a white background that further stresses the binaries of ultimate reality—binaries also “hidden in plain view” via the *nsibidi* script. According to art historian Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi, the curator of a recent exhibition by Victor Ekpuk at the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire:

Ekpuk [now] composes script-like forms in a staccato fashion with symbols ricocheting off each other, yet carefully amassed on the picture surface.... Early in his career, he was mostly interested in *nsibidi* as an aesthetic resource, pushing the formal possibilities of the ideographic forms and gaining his own unique artistic voice. He has since become adroit at inventing his own scripts of dots, scratches, scrawls, contrived designs, and schematized figures. Yet *nsibidi* remains a point of departure, a cultural memory... a stream of consciousness that

¹⁰⁶ See List of Figures for full credit information.

encapsulates human experience, lived and imagined, inherited or received, personal and collective...¹⁰⁷

Sanctuary (**Fig. 3.9**) is another good example.¹⁰⁸ Apart from commemorating the tenth year of his relocation to the United States, the visual construct combines the old and new. Although the six retreating squares are rooted in ancient *nsibidi* symbolism (see **Fig. 0.4**), they also invite comparison with modernism in Western art, thus reminding us of the influence of African and non-Western art on the latter, in addition to underscoring the continuing relevance of *nsibidi* today, most especially in the study of transnational aesthetics. Little wonder, Victor Ekpuk's works have been attracting the attention of many public and private museums as well as art institutions. Besides, he receives invitation frequently to participate in several international biennales. In April 2016, a major exhibition of his works, aptly titled *Coming Home*, will open in Nigeria to celebrate his international achievements.

A copy of his Curriculum Vitae is attached as Appendix II.

¹⁰⁷ Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi, "Auto-Graphics: Works by Victor Ekpuk," *Hood Museum Art Quarterly*, Dartmouth College, (Spring 2015), 4.

¹⁰⁸ See List of Figures for full credit information.

Figures



Fig. 3.5. Victor Ekpuk (born 1964, Nigeria), Drawing of Clawed Military Official, 1994.

Ink and graphite on laminated paper, H x W: 23.3 x 24 cm (9 3/16 x 9 7/16 in.).

TC2013.3.18. Photograph by Franko Khoury. National Museum of African Art,
Smithsonian Institution.

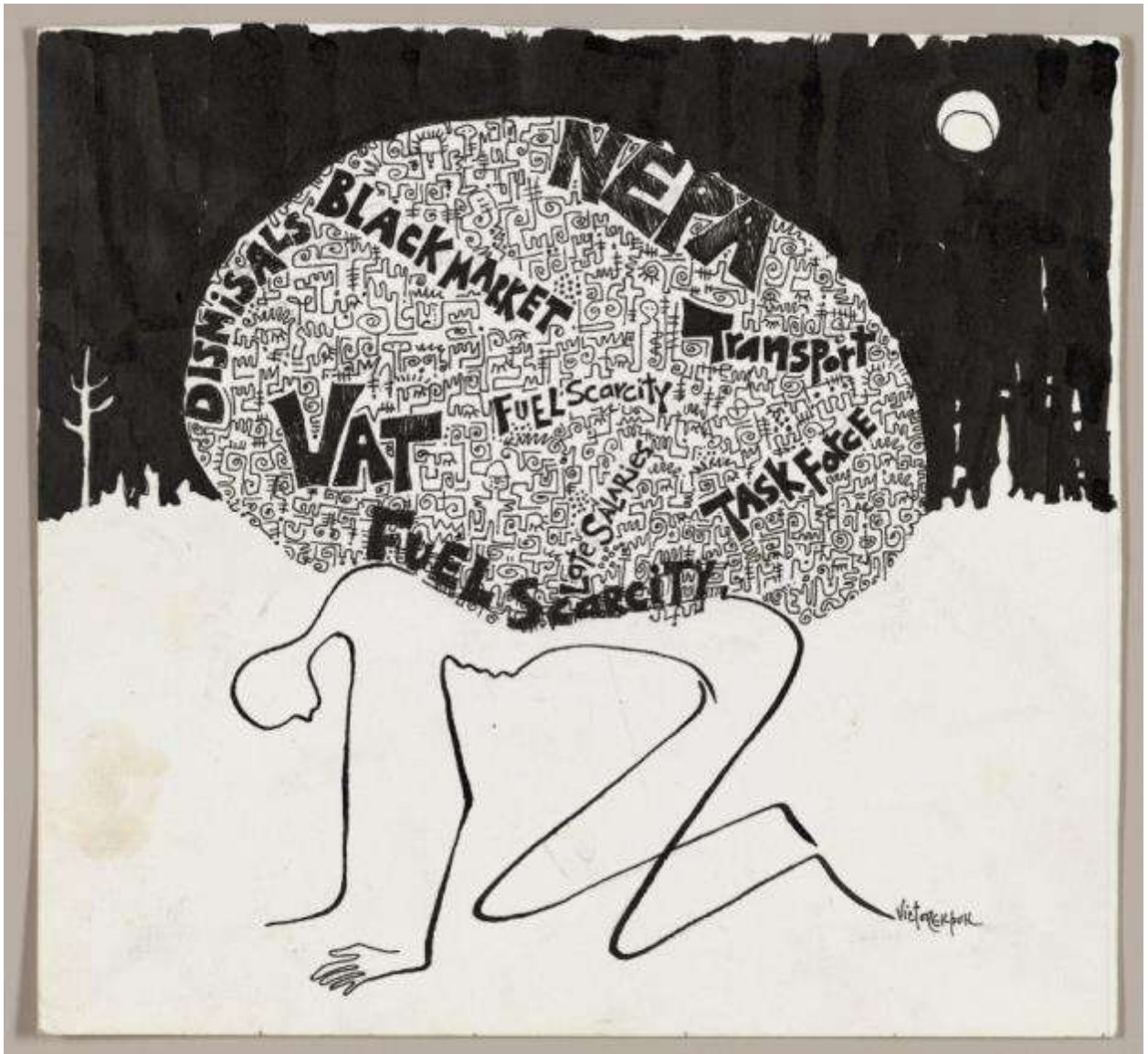


Fig. 3.6. Victor Ekpuk (born 1964, Nigeria), Drawing of *To Serve Nigeria with All My Strength*, 1994. Ink on paper, H x W: 17.9 x 19.5 cm (7 1/16 x 7 11/16 in.). TC2013.9.1. Photograph by Franko Khoury. National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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APPENDIX I: Chronology of Postcolonial Nigerian Political History

First Independent Civilian Government: First Republic Prime Minister Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (1912-1966)	10/01/1960 - 01/15/1966
First Military Government: Major General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi (1924-1966)	01/16/1966 – 07/19/1966
Second Military Government: Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon (b. 1934)	08/01/1966 – 07/29/1975
Third Military Government Brigadier Murtala Muhammed (1938-1976) Lieutenant General Olusegun Obasanjo (b. 1938)	07/30/1975 – 02/13/1976 02/13/1976 – 09/30/1979
Second Civilian Government: Second Republic President Shehu Shagari (b. 1925)	10/01/1979 – 12/31/1983
Fourth Military Government Major General Ibrahim Babangida (b. 1941)	08/27/1985 – 08/27/1993
Fifth Military Government Major General Muhammadu Buhari (b. 1942)	12/31/1983 – 08/27/1985
Third Civilian Government (False Republic) President Ernest Shonekan (b. 1936)	08/26/1993 – 11/17/1993
Presidential Candidate Chief M.K.O. Abioa (1937-1998)	Election results annulled on 06/12/1993
Sixth Military Government General Sani Abacha (1943-1998)	11/17/1993 – 06/08/1998
Seventh Military Government General Abdulsalami Alhaji Abubakar (b. 1942)	06/09/1998 – 05/29/1999
Fourth Civilian Government President Olusegun Obasanjo (b. 1938)	05/29/1999 – 05/29/2007
Fifth Civilian Government President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua (1951-2010)	05/29/2007 – 05/05/2010
Sixth Civilian Government President Goodluck Jonathan (b. 1957)	05/06/2010 – 05/28/2015
Seventh Civilian Government President Muhammadu Buhari	05/29/2015 - Present

APPENDIX II: Victor Ekpuk Curriculum Vitae

Education:

1989 Bachelor of Fine & Applied Art, Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria

Selected Solo Exhibitions:

- 2016 Coming Home, Renault Showroom, Lagos, Nigeria
2015 Portraits, Sulger-Buel Lovell Gallery, London, UK
2015 Auto-Graphics: Works by Victor Ekpuk, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, USA
2014 Auto-Graphics: Recent Drawings by Victor Ekpuk, Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, Illinois, USA
2013 Reminiscences and Current Musings, Morton Fine Art, Washington, D.C., USA
2013 Drawing Memories, Turchin Center for Art, Appalachian State University, North Carolina, USA
2011 Drawing Metaphors, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Virginia, USA
2009 Of Lines and Life, The Richard F. Brush Gallery, University of St. Lawrence, Canton, New York, USA
2009 Victor Ekpuk, Long View Gallery, Washington, D.C., USA
2008 Open Studio, Thami Mnye Foundation, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
2006 Drawing from Within, Galerie 23, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
2005 Storylines: Drawings of Victor Ekpuk, Montgomery College, College Park, Maryland, USA
2004 Trans/Script: The Art of Victor Ekpuk, Brandeis University, Boston, Massachusetts, USA
2002 Manuscript Series (Ancient Symbols/Contemporary Forms), Parish Gallery, Washington, D.C., USA
1998 Songs, 18th Street Arts Complex, Santa Monica, California, USA (Sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation, UNESCO-ASCHBERG Bursaries for Artists and 18th Street Arts Complex International Circle)
1995 Windsongs, French Cultural Center, Lagos, Nigeria

Selected Group Exhibitions:

- 2014 12th National Drawing Invitational: Outside the Lines, Arkansas Arts Center, Arkansas, USA
2014 Dak'Art-Biennale de l'Art Africain Contemporain, Dakar, Senegal
2014 R-EVOLUTION, Arthouse Contemporary, Lagos, Nigeria
2013 TOTEM, Fondation JP Blachère, Apt, France
2013 Diaspora Dialogue, University of Maryland University College, Maryland, USA
2012 Le Temps de l'Eau, Musée des Tapisseries, Aix en Provence, France
2011 Drawing Analogies, Athenaeum, Alexandria, Virginia, USA
2010 Global Africa Project, Museum of Art and Design, New York, USA
2010 International Poster and Graphic Art Festival of Chaumont, France
2010 Them-and-Us, Hudiksvallsgatan, Stockholm, Sweden
2009 Unbounded: New Art for a New Century, Newark Museum, New Jersey, USA

- 2008 Africa Now! The World Bank, Washington, D.C., USA
- 2008 Beyond Boundaries – mapping currents for the 3rd Guangzhou Triennial, Guangzhou, China
- 2007 Inscribing Meanings, National Museum for African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., USA and Fowler Museum, UCLA, Los Angeles, California, USA
- 2007 Art in Red Light, Oude Kirk, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- 2006 Inspired by Spinoza, Vrije Akademie, The Hague, The Netherlands
- 2003-05 Black President: The Art and Legacy of Fela Anikulapo Kuti, Traveling exhibition: New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, USA, The Barbican Galleries, London, UK Yerba Buena Center for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, California, USA, and Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio, USA
- 2001 Arttexts, Jamaica Center for Art and Learning, Jamaica, New York, USA
- 2001 Kunst Rai, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- 1995 Africus, 1st Johannesburg Biennale, Johannesburg, South Africa

Works in Selected Permanent Collections:

- Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of African Art, Washington D.C., USA
- Newark Museum, New Jersey, USA
- The World Bank, Washington, D.C., USA
- University of Maryland University College Art Collection, Maryland, USA

Grants, Residencies, and Artist Lectures:

- 2016 Roundtable Discussion, Goethe Institut Nigeria, Lagos, Nigeria
- 2015 Artist in Residence, Arthouse Contemporary, Lagos, Nigeria
- 2013 Artist in Residence, Santa Fe Art Institute, New Mexico, USA
- 2013 Artist in Residence, Fondation JP Blachère, Apt, France
- 2012 Artist Lecture, Museum of African Diaspora, San Francisco, California, USA
- 2010 Falk Visiting Artist: University of North Carolina, Greensboro, North Carolina, USA
- 2010 Artist Lecture: University of North Carolina, Greensboro, North Carolina, USA
- 2009 Artist Lecture: Smithsonian Institution, National Museum for African Art, Washington DC, USA
- 2007 Artist Residency: Thami Mnyele Foundation, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- 2007 Artist Lecture: Africa Day, The Hague, The Netherlands
- 2004 Artist Residency: Brandeis University, Waltham Massachusetts, USA
- 1998 Artist Residency: 18th Street Arts Complex, Santa Monica, California, USA (Sponsored by The Rockefeller Foundation, UNESCO-ASCHBERG Bursaries for Artists and 18th Street Arts Complex International Circle)
- 1998 Artist Lecture: Pasadena College of Art and Design, Pasadena, California, USA

Vita

Kaleb William Jewell was born on September 11, 1990, in Bowie County, Texas, and is an American citizen. He graduated from Arkansas Senior High School, Texarkana, Arkansas in 2008. He received his Bachelor of Arts in Art (Art History) from the University of Central Arkansas, Conway, Arkansas in 2012.