

# Bruce Onobrakpeya: Envisaging the Concept of Akpo in Urhobo Mythology in Visual Form

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## **Abstract**

*In Urhobo mythology, the word 'Akpo' is a prefix denoting different aspects of the Urhobo people's lives. In their long history of survival, the Urhobo have developed some thought forms, beliefs, religious concepts, rich folklores and images that reflect and reinforce various aspects of their culture. Bruce Onobrakpeya, a distinguished Nigerian artist, printmaker, painter and art historian, has successfully synthesised the vitality of Urhobo traditional thought forms with the convention and style of modernity in a medium that speaks of the past and present to the future of the sociocultural and religious life of the Urhobo. The Urhobo concept of 'Akpo' and Bruce Onobrakpeya's artistry have both attracted scholarly attention, but not the encapsulation of the former in the art medium. Therefore, this study examines the Urhobo philosophy on Akpo, its conceptualisation and by extension in two-dimensional format (prints) by Bruce Onobrakpeya and the artist's own original rendition of the vitality of Urhobo mythology on Akpo. Bruce, in trying to explain the term, has used different works to express this concept. This is with a view to interpreting and foregrounding the nature and religious significance of the Akpo myth. The study adopted Umberto Eco's semiotic theory, which claims that pictures possess signs and statements signifying cultural and religious values. Bruce Onobrakpeya, in synthesising and extending the Urhobo traditional mythology on Akpo in his artworks, has created an interface between the Urhobo people and their belief system. Thus his works document and integrate the Urhobo concept of Akpo in contemporary visual arts.*

## **Introduction**

Bruce Onobrakpeya (1) is one of Nigeria's best-documented artists who obviously needs very little introduction in the visual art circle both

within and outside the shores of Nigeria. He is regarded as a living legend; he has devoted his life to his works and today his visual art works are regarded as one of the main sources of documentation and custodian of Urhobo philosophy, culture and religion. Among the Nigerian painters and master printmakers, Bruce Onobrakpeya is one artist who has successfully synthesised the vitality of Urhobo's great tradition with the convention and style of modernity to form a sort of natural synthesis. He has fused his training in western techniques and materials with his own heritage, cultural experience and an inventiveness that is undeniably African. The results are the creation of paintings and prints of vivid colours, imaginative and magical, necessary in a medium that speaks of the past and present to the future.

### **What is 'Akpo'?**

*Akpo* is a loaded term in Urhobo philosophical mythology. Literally the word means "life" or a spiritual force in man. The Urhobo would say, *Owho r'akpo*: (person – in- this world) to designate the living. *Akpo* is the diametrical counterpoint to *erivwin* (the spirit or supernatural) and also a place of the spirit world and of *Ughwu* (death), hence *owho erivwin* (dead person, ghost or spirit). this shows the close connection between the physical and spiritual worlds. *Akpo* also means 'world' the human physical world we live in. This definition embraces culture, society, life-style and other socio-culture aspects of the Urhobo life. For instance, when elders of Urhobo talk about '*akpoaware* and *akpo oke na* (the olden days / modern days) it is to differentiate the social changes in the society. The older generation is, generally associated with authentic and the modern or new age with corruption or changes from outside (acculturation, civilization and modernization) influences. In Urhobo ontology, no two individuals not even identical twins, have the same *Akpo* or *Urhievwe*, that is, destiny. Hence the Urhobo have the adage *Ovue Akpo ro ye*, meaning each person has his or her own *Akpo* or destiny and each lives in accordance with the way it has been predestined. (Nabofa, 2005: 288-303)

From time immemorial, the Urhobo people have been asking some pertinent questions about the meaning and purpose of life (*Akpo*). They have often reflected on questions such as, *what is the purpose of Akpo (life) who am I? Where did I come from? What is my reason for coming*

to Akpo? What is the mystery of life (Akpo)? No doubt, the Urhobo have been trying to probe into the meaning of human life and existence. Why are we here on earth? One of the attempts made in seeking answers to some of these crucial questions could be seen in a popular Urhobo classical and ancient lyric titled *Ejajughe*, which goes thus:-

*Ko! Ko! Ko! Ko!*  
*Ono che urch owheri me na?*  
*Mevwe Ejajughe*  
*Die wo vwe urhe na rue?*  
*Urhe re me owo kano odo.*  
*Die wo vwo odo rue?*  
*Odo re me vwo duvwe egun?*  
*Die wo vwo egun rue?*  
*Egun me vwo yoro imo*  
*Die wo vwo imo rue?*  
*Imo re mi vwe yere Akpo*  
*Die wo vwe Akpo rue?*  
*Akpo na me di yere yra oma*  
*Oda be vwe ku me kpo.*

**Translation:-**

Hark! Hark! Hark! Hark!  
Who is felling a tree in my farm?  
I am, Ejajughe  
What do you want to do with the tree?  
The tree I shall use to carve a mortar  
What will you do with a mortar?  
I use a mortar to pound yam  
What do you do with pounded yam?  
I use pound yam to rear my children  
What do you do with children?  
I use children to live life  
What do you do with life?

I just live my life on; behold my emptiness, my nothingness, my vanity. When I'm tired I go back to my creator. I am living life just for the sake of living. I

do not know the mysteries behind my life and living in Akpo, behold the vanity in human life. (Nabofa. 2005; 288)

We can see from the above lyric that in Urhobo philosophy of life, as it also obtains in many other African cultures, children constitute an essential ingredient of good living and continuity of existence.. Thus in the thinking of the Urhobo people, *Akpo* is a mystery which cannot be totally understood. However, in practical terms and daily occurrences, there are occasion in which the people overtly exhibit their inner reflections on what they consider to be the meaning and purpose of life. They give different interpretations to what they believe life or existence means. The importance that the Urhobo people attach to *Akpo* makes them give their children names with Akpo's prefix. Example *Akpobaro*: a propitious life is ahead; *Akporode*: the mysterious world; *Akpofuoma*: world of Peace; *Akpooghene*- Oghene's world and so on.

### **The Manifestation of Akpo as Man**

The physical tangible and visible world is called *Akpo*. Paramount in the creation order of Oghene is man (Ovwo). Zoologically, the origin of man is traced within the context of primate evolution, especially as human's share a common progenitor with the living representative of the ape family (Ubrurhe 2003: 33). However, until 1859, when Charles Darwin published his book entitled *The origin of species*, the biblical belief in the creation of man was still current. By the time the attack and counter attacks on Darwim has settled, it became accepted that humans like other animals evolved in keeping with the evolutionary theory. This conclusion was reached due to the anthropoid apes and man. Both share some anatomical and behavioural characteristics. This is the western scientific concept of man (Pawson 1997: 124-125).

In the Urhobo belief system and in other religions, this revolutionary theory of the origin of man is greatly questioned. As in Christianity, the Urhobo believe that the Supreme Being created man. Mythical stories abound in Africa that relate to the creation of man. Essentially, the Yoruba creation myth is a paradigm. The myth has it that *Olodumare* delegated authority of moulding lifeless man of a peculiar shape, looks and colour to His arch divinity, *Orisa-nla*, while the prerogative right

to give life (breath of life) was reserved for *Olodumare* (Awolalu 1981:13). The Urhobo tell of a similar myth but in it the uniqueness of *Oghene* is emphasised. The Urhobo view man as constituted of *Ugboma* (body) *envwe* (breath or heart) and *erhi* (Spiritual double). *Envwe* (breath or heart) is man's intangible and indestructible soul, which Brandon describes as "a non-physical entity in human nature" (Ubrurhe. 2003: 33), while G. E. Okeke describes the "soul as something in man which is incorruptible and departs the body at death" (1981: 10). The three components of man (body, soul and spirit) affect the wellbeing of one another.

Although there are three components (body, soul and spirit) the Urhobo look upon them as two that is the *Erhi* (soul and spirit) and *Ugboma* (body). When referring to these two human parts at the same time people normally mention *erhi* before *Ugboma*, since it is the former that gives meaning and expression or reality, to the latter. They worship these entities through certain physical objects, the *erhi* cult symbol is a twig from a special tree, which is tied with a piece of white cloth and placed in a white bowl. The only object used in worshipping it is *orhe* (white chalk) (Ubrurhe. 2003:34). The *Ugboma* cult symbol is *Oma*, a carved object mounted on a wooden bowl. *Ugboma* is regard as a channel or canal through which *erhi* flows and expresses itself.

### **The Manifestation of Akpo as the World:**

Among the Urhobo, there is the belief that God created everything, but they do not have a clear idea as to how the earth was created. They do not even have any myths of creation comparable to the Yoruba myth of creation, let alone the Hebrew stories of creation, which have been given religious sanction. What may be described as stories of creation were in fact stories told to explain the characteristics of certain creatures like chameleon and the Toucan and story about the origin of death illustrated with the dog and toad symbols. (Onobrakpeya.1995: 337)

The chameleon and the Toucan (*okpogho*) were engaged in a hot controversy in an attempt to see who is the eldest. The chameleon claimed that when he was created the earth had just been formed. The whole earth was still loose, molten and not firm. He claimed, that was the reason for treading gently on the solid earth. He trod gently in order

that the earth might not collapse under its feet. The Toucan on his part claimed that he was created at a time the sky and the earth had not been formed. The Chameleon then asked, where was it perching when it flew? (Onobrakpeya 2005: 23). The Urhobo believed that God created the world out of nothingness, just as the Christian faith talk about God creating the world with his words. “let there be Light” (*Gen 1 vs 1<sup>ff</sup>*).

Another creation myth among the Urhobo is linked with the toad (oghwokpo) and the dog (erako). The belief was that the first human on earth send these two animals to God to find out the eventual fate of man on earth; either to live forever or to die. The toad carried the message of death while the dog was to decree that man would live forever. The first animal to get back to man on time, its message stands. Unfortunately for man the toad won the contest. So the decree that man must die stands. The Urhobo questioned the rationale behind man sending animals to God on such vital issue relating to their life (Nabofa 2005: 345).

### **Bruce’s Rendition of Akpo**

In Urhobo mythology, there is the saying that before the earth was created, the world (*Akpo*) had only one big tree where the spirit perched. This idea is illustrated by this lyric

*Oghwo Oghwo, da mukere*  
*Oghwo oghwo, da mukere*  
*Urhe oro no rogo, damukere*  
*Me da cha me da mu, da mu kere*  
*Oto ma-a, da mukere*  
*Enu ma-a, da mukere*  
*Oghwo, oghwo damukere*  
*Oghwo, oghwo damukere*

Meaning:

*There was a lone tree we have*  
*When I fly, I perch on it*  
*When I jump, I land on it*  
*Land has not been created*  
*Sky has not been created*

This lyric inspired the artist to produce his own rendition in print titled *Urhe ovo No Ro Ojo* (see print below) meaning the first tree in creation. The print shows a very big tree with lots of branches with various animals perching on them. Among the animals is the Chameleon (*Eghwughwe*), believed to be the oldest of living creatures, which explained the reason why he treads the soil softly because it witnessed the formation of the earth. The Yoruba still holds such belief about the Chameleon (Idowu 1962: 25).



*Urhe ovo No Ro Ojo* (A big Tree in the Forest) 1973 Plastograph 61.2cm x 46.3cm

### **The Emeravwe (Moon) in Print**

Apart from the creation story illustrated in his work, he also made prints depicting the Urhobo understanding of the lunar moon (See fig below), which deals with the concept of time. There have been series of debates among scholars about the Urhobo concept of time. The main thrust is on the Urhobo perception of the distant future, whether it exists or not in the minds of the Urhobo? Some Urhobo, out of naturalistic verve,

contend that they conceive time as the westerners whose time moves from the past through the present and to the future. Others maintains that Urhobo pay no attention to the chronometric reckoning of time. (Ubrurhe. 2003:28-31). It has been observed that, the movement of the sun, moon and stars, help the Urhobo to divide the activities of world into months days, years and also to determine the season of the year. The day is divided into *Irioke*, *Ogheruwo*, *Ovwovwo* and *Aso* (Morning, Afternoon, Evening and Night) *Otu phrun emeravwe* is the beginning of a lunar month. *Emeravwe de no muoto* is full moon. *Emeravwe da temuria* is a period when the moon rises late in the night. *Eduona*, *Eduona* is a dark period when a new moon is being expected and this Bruce represented with the print titled *Emeravwe*.

In Urhobo cosmology the stars are not just there but they are placed at various positions for a purpose. For example, the star called *Avwebo Emeravwe* (the moon's favourite wife) is the bright star that is always seen near the moon. *Eghwuru* (media) is also one of the moon's wives but she wants patiently to move to the position of the favourite (*Avwebo*) whenever the occupier dies. (Ubrurhe. 2003:32).

Here, Bruce Onobrakpeya represented the Urhobo myths about the moon with his print titled *Emeravwe*. The work is in two parts. The first part of the print is a man incarcerate on the moon with his axe as punishment for working on *Edewor* (the Sabbath or market day)(2). This belief is also drawn from the Christian mythology, which state that Christians must keep the Sabbath day holy. The second part is about an old woman and a white goat. In Urhobo mythology, there is a fable that the moon usually assumed the form of a white goat and descended on earth in the thick of the night to vegetate like any ordinary animal. On one of such nocturnal visit, an old woman caught the lunar-goat and tied it to a pole in her hut. As a result of the imprisonment of the lunar-goat, there was no moonlight for a long time. The elders with the help of the oracle located and released the goat, and the moonlight returned to the world thereafter. The moon never came down again but views the world from above. This story is common among the Agbarra-Otor and hence once the moon is out you will hear the children singing *Emeravwe de de emu wvo re shako wvo ka vwere*. (Welcome moon give us the leftover food). *Emeravwe de de, emu mi shere kovwe, ochro lalo* (Welcome Moon, your food had been eating by the rat).





Emeravwe Moon (Lunar Myths) 1983, Plastocast, 65cm x 94cm

According to the artist, the moon plays an important role in Urhobo mythology. To him, the picture is made up of two independent compositions joined into one. It could be seen as an example where ancient and modern beliefs fired by imagination are blended into one. (Ubrurhe.2003:28)

The importance of weather and time in *Akpo* among the Urhobo is determined by the position of stars in the sky. The wet season (*Okiosio*) and dry season (*Okiuvo*), are the planting and harvesting seasons. They also have different names for the stars, for example, *Emetasa* is a very bright and always twinkling star. *Ogiogun* (the king of the blacksmith) *Onioho ve emo* or *Onioho vike* is a dominant star close to a cluster of stars. The Urhobo name for the shorting star is *Eton* (powerful curse) that is sent to destroy enemies. *Agbaran* (thunder) is also believed to be used for vengeance, a kind of ballistic missile. (Ubrurhe 2003: 29). From all we have said, you can see that Urhobo have the concept of time which is embedded in their myth of *Akpo*. It is definite here that the Urhobo concept of time and cosmology differ from that of the west. The Urhobo like other scholars disagree with Mbiti when he says that

the African have no concept of the distant future (Mbiti 1969: 33). His conception was based on his research conducted among the Akan of Ghana which says that “Africans do not have a concept of a long or infinite future, for surely a concept of an eternal infinite implies a concept of infinite time” (Erivwo 1991: 23).

The Urhobo concept of time, like most other Africans, is cyclical, corresponding with the agricultural calendar. The Urhobo have a phenomenon calendar in which the events or phenomenon consisting time are closely related to one another as they occurred. Hence Kalu, O.U. remarks: “*Time is peopled with events related to the movement of the sun, most important events in the lives of the family, clan and village group and social economic events mark such as market days and so on. It is never abstract*” (Ubrurhe. 2003:45). Among the Urhobo, time is reckoned by event. For example, the year begins with *Oke ra 'kekako* (plantain seed) *oke ro rho* (flood season) *oke ro ore* (festival period) and *oke ro whe* (flood time). While the weather is referred to *oke ose* (rainy season) *oke ro uwvo* ( dry season) and *oke ro gwagwa* (harmattan period). Thus, the death of a man, birth of a child and the period when things happen are immediately related to and reckoned with events

### **Onobrakpeya’s Installation of Akpo**

Bruce Onobrakpeya, in trying to give his own interpretation to the word *Akpo*, created an installation, a personal shrine called *Akporode*. The installation was exhibited in London in 1995 and in Malmo Sweden in 1996 and Los Angeles, USA in 2003. According to him “*Aporode represents a striving towards higher, richer and bigger life.*” The word *Akporode* is derived from two Urhobo words *Akpo* (life or world) and *Orode* (big or great). The work is an assemblage of art works (both linear and sculptural) of different shapes, colours, designs, and materials, which together reflect the grandeur and beauty often associated with Nigerian traditional religions, shrines and the architectural décor of places. He further explained that:

The art pieces created through experiments over a period of two decades have themes based on the worldviews of our people and their cultural values, wisdom, belief, mythology and cosmology. The varied items repeated in different techniques and materials, is

an attempt to discover the best visual representation of the ideals, local and foreign, which is as an attempt to create synthesis. (Onobrakpeya 1995: 234)



*Akporode* Installation by Bruce Onobrakpeya 1995

The shrine is an ensemble of indigenous Nigerian religious practices, including Yoruba *Ifa* divination, Yoruba Leather *Shango* wall hangings, Benin bronze Plaque, Fulani talisman and Tubular bronze staffs from the Urhobo shrines. In these installations, there are references to diverse religious practices in a cultural synthesis. Onobrakpeya employs the elongated structures; ceremonial staffs, walking stick and miscellaneous staff from Igboland. The fan is another symbol of authority/ wealth and as symbolic as the staff is, it appears in his art work. This shows the complex nature of the world (*Akpo*); full of divinities, principalities and powers. Clementine Deliss, commenting on the success of the installation, writes:

In the course of his (Onobrakpeya) search for a rich and complex Symbolic form, he has incorporated into his plastocast, Akan brass gold weights, Fulani leather works and other assorted objects from diverse African cultures. The monolithic nature of the rolled-up column is in itself a comment on the tubular bronze

staffs of Urhobo shrines, the bronze ivory mounts of Benin court art and the thousand year old cylindrical bronze anklets unearthed at Igbo-Uku in the heart of Igboland.



Aro Eghwere: Installation by Bruce Onobrakpeya 2012

This installation work of Bruce Onobrakpeya shows the diversity of *Akpo*. It helps to explain the meaning of *Akpo* in Urhobo mythology. They do not believe that the world is a bed of roses but full of lots of principalities and powers that one must overcome.

### **Conclusion**

From this study, we have seen that the word *Akpo* is mythical in Urhobo cosmology. There are basically two elements necessary in myth: experience and the expression. All over the world, cultural belief starts with an experience which deals with the object of worship revealed itself either in a vision, dreams or in concrete form. The expressions, which depend upon the sort of revelation received, are come in various artistic reinventions. The Urhobo during their developmental stages have developed some thoughts, beliefs, religious concepts, rich folklore

and mythologies out of experience that reflect and reinforce various aspects of their spiritual belief.

Bruce Onobrakpeya on the other hand, used his visual art form to express the different concept of *Akpo* in Urhobo land in print. As a distinguished Nigerian, renowned Urhobo-born artist, printmaker, painter and art historian, he has successfully synthesised the vitality of Urhobo tradition with the convention and style of modernity in a medium which brings about continuity and change in the socio-cultural life of the Urhobo. A semiotic interpretation of Bruce Onobrakpeya's works on Akpo could be classified into two parts. The first part examines Urhobo people's myths on Akpo reproduced by him in two-dimensional format (prints) and the artist's own original rendition of the vitality of Urhobo thoughts, beliefs, in installation. This he created for better understanding of the people's belief system and mysteries of Akpo.

In conclusion, Bruce Onobrakpeya leads us back to the Urhobo history of Akpo, as we can tell from the expression in his form of art. He has successfully created an interface between the Urhobo people and their belief system especially those in diaspora. Most Urhobo believed that his art works give them the opportunity to access and interact with their past through the present. To the Urhobo the word Akpo is more than just a word it is a window to their belief system which has helped the world to know more about the Urhobo and their concept of Akpo.

## Notes

1. Most of the information contained in this work was obtained from Bruce Onobrakpeya himself during my PhD fieldwork and the rest was obtained from different citations by scholars. Dr. Bruce Obameyoma Onobrakpeya, is a Nigerian print maker, painter and sculptor and a graduate of the Nigerian College of Art, Science and Technology, now the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Onobrakpeya was, in the 1950s, trained in the western tradition of representational art. At the same time, he began to experiment with forms in relation to Nigerian folklore, myths and legends. Much of his work uses stylistic elements and compositions derived from traditional African sculpture and decorative arts.

2. Edewor: Urhobo traditional Sunday which is the equivalent of the Christian Sunday or Sabbath day.

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