

PRESERVING VALUE SYSTEM OF NDI IGBO IN FOLKLORIC EXPRESSION ARTS EXHIBITION: THE REVIEW

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Abstract

On 13th of November, 2015, an Art Exhibition title "Folkloric Expression" was opened in the National Gallery of Art, Enugu, Nigeria. Organized by Izuchukwu Muoneme and Chidiebere Onwuekwe, the exhibition consisted of over thirty five paintings, drawings and digital illustration which themed Igbo Folk Stories. Folktales are ancient stories which were transferred from oral tradition to literary forms. The tradition has gradually diminished as a result of grave influence of western tradition on the culture of Ndi Igbo. Today, even the bulk of folktales which had been written and published are hardly perished, because of easy accessibility and distractions of the social media and videos. In view of this the two artists embarked on research which involved transformation of existing folk stories written by renowned Igbo authors such as Chinua Achebe, Iroaganachi and F.C. Ogbalu, into visual metaphor, using diverse materials on different two dimensional media. A review of the works displayed by the artists in "Folkloric Expression" will reveal that they have achieved a wonderful feat in preserving Igbo value.

Introduction

In recent times, the culture of reading is going down the drain, particularly now the social media is at large. With such development it would prove difficult to peruse written and printed folktales which were transferred from oral literature.

It is an unavoidable fact that by virtue of our thought, imagination and creative expressions, great works of art have always been produced. Some contemporary Nigerian artists have constantly been influenced by traditional folklores and beliefs. Most of these folklores and constantly been used by some Nigerian

Artists for sources of visual expression and unifying symbol if identification (Muoneme 2015: 32).

Onwuekwe and Muoneme embarked on research to transform some of their important folktales in visual form. Their aim was to force the picture into the sub-conscious minds of both literate and illiterates and to foster Igbo folktales in visual form. These were their main aim of opening “Folkloric Expressions.”

Enekwachi (2015:94) describes the Art Exhibition:

From November 13 to 27 at the national gallery of Art, Enugu, two Nigerian Artists trained at the Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Izuchukwu Muoneme and Chidiebere Onwuekwe showcased body of works inspired by folkloric in a contemporary gallery space. These young artists rekindled in us the nostalgic mode taking us back down memory lanes to those tireless hours of moonlight nights well spent, listening to stories with mixed imageries of animals, spirits and humans.

The works of Onwuekwe and Muoneme numbered up to forty (40) and were made up of drawings, paintings and digital illustrations, which all geared towards one theme: Folklore.

On the Artists and their Styles

The two artists schooled at Igwebuike Grammar School, Awka and were trained by the same art master, Amobi Ebudide, who gave them a very firm foundation in the fundamentals of visual art. Coincidentally, they both gained admission at the same time to obtain formal art training in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka in 2004. On the artists, Adibe (2015:39) has this to say:

The artists, Muoneme Izuchukwu, a graduate of Fine and Applied Arts from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, who is also a staff of the National Gallery of Arts, Enugu and Chidiebere Oswald Onwuekwe, another graduate of Fine and Applied Arts from the same University, were participating in an exhibition tagged “Folkloric Expression.

According to Irabor (2015: 5) “Onwuekwe is a trained visual communication Artist who schooled at Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka. He is a lecturer and

digital illustrator who employs technology as a vehicle of expression in the visual arts.”

Digital illustration is simply computer illustration or digital drawing and painting (Onwuekwe, 2012:72). He simply draws on paper, scans and colours on application such as Adobe Photoshop or Mary studio 5. There he renders suggestive perspective, foreshortening, depth and other element in his works. Enekwachi (2015:94) further describes Onwuekwe and his style when he avers thus:

Onwuekwe bagged a master’s degree in visual communication in 2013 after graduating from the Fine and Applied Arts Department of Nnamdi Azikiwe University in 2007 where he now teaches visual communication. Onwuekwe is a folklore illustrator and visualize. Through the use of digital tools and applications, he accentuates his skills as can be seen in the various rendition of his thematic representations.

On the other hand, Enekwachi (2015) also speaks on Muoneme’s style when he agrees that he creates works of art in the stylistic ranges of realism, expressionism and the experimental but with concatenating subsistence for visual narratives that dress a question his immediate and external social realities and perception.

Izuchukwu Muoneme graduated in 2007 as a painting specialist while he bagged an MFA degree in 2015 in the same department. He experimented with the liquidized drip-technique amongst other styles, leading to the introduction of forms using unbroken lines (Irabor 2015: 5). Izuchukwu Muoneme also dares to experiment with many materials and medium for visual expression. Recently he explores so called solid waste as medium for painting Onwuekwe and Nzoiwu (2015; 316) are that “he devised a means of using discarded bottle tops to prime his support for painting”. With such creative feat, he bagged the 2015 Grand Finale of Life in My City Art Festival Category Award on Best Painting/Mixed Media/Drawing Prize.

Storylines in the works of the Artists

Muoneme focused on Chinua Achebe’s and John Iroagnachi’s folktales titled “How the Leopard got his Claws (1979). The tale goes thus:

In the beginning, all the animals in the forest lived as friends. Their king was the leopard. He was strong, but gentle and wise. He ruled the animals well and they all liked him. At that time the animals did not fight one another. Most of them had no sharp teeth or claws. They did not need them. Even king leopard had only small teeth. He had no claws at all. Only the dog has sharp teeth and the other animals mock him for it. One day, the deer approaches king leopard about constructing a common shelter for the rain. All the other animals embrace the plan... except for the dog who keeps out of the rain in his cave (and the duck, who doesn't mind getting wet). The rest of the animals work hard, each contributing to the construction, and at last completed their work. At the celebratory feast to celebrate the opening of the hall, king Leopard says, "this hall is yours to enjoy. You worked very hard together to build it. I am proud of you". But then rains come, the dog ran from one end of his cave to the other. But the water followed him everywhere. At last he ran out of the cave altogether and straight for the hall of the animals. The deer was already there. He was surprised to see the dog enter the hall. "what do you want here?" said the deer to the dog". "it is none of your business", replied the dog. "it is my business", said the deer, "please go out, this hall is for those who built it". Then the dog attacked the deer and bit him with his big, sharp teeth. The deer cried with pain. The dog seized him by the neck and threw him out into the rain. The other animals came in after the other.

The dog barked and threw each of them out. They stood together shivering and crying in the rain. The dog kept barking and showing his teeth. Then the deer cried out:

*O leopard our noble king
Where are you?
Spotted king of the forest,
Where are you?
Even if you are far away
Come, hurry home
The worst has happened to us
The worst has happened to us...
The house the animals built
The cruel dog keeps us from it,
The common shelter we built
The cruel dog keeps us from it,
(A Publication of the Augustinian Institute)*

*The worst has happened to us
The worst has happened to us...*

The cry of the deer rang out loud and clear. It was carried by the wind. King leopard heard it on his way back from his journey and began to run towards the village hall. As he got near, he saw the animals, wet and sheltering under a tree. They were all crying. As he got nearer still, he could see the dog walking up and down inside the hall. The leopard, who was away at another village returns, but without teeth or claws, he is quickly vanquished. His subjects refuse to rally behind him, but rather capitulated to the dog and name him the king.

The leopard, injured and alone leaves. He make his way to a blacksmith and says, "I want the strongest teeth you can make from iron and I want the most deadly claws you can make from bronze". He then goes to thunder and says "I want some of your sound in my voice... even a little bit." Upon hearing his story, both consent and he returns home armed and ready. The leopard journeyed for seven days and seven nights and returned to the village of the animals. There he found the animals dancing in a circle round the dog. He stood for a while watching them with contempt and great anger. They were too busy to notice his presence. He made a deep terrifying roar. At the same time he sprang into the centre of the circle. The animals stopped their song. The dog dropped his staff; the leopard seized him and bit and clawed him without mercy. Then he threw him out of the circle.

All the animals trembled. But they were too afraid to run. The leopard turned to them and said. "You miserable worms, you shameless cowards. I was a king and gentle king, but you turned against me. From today I shall rule the forest with terror. The life of our village is ended". "what about our hall?" asked the tortoise with a trembling voice. "let everyone take from the hall what he put into it", said the leopard. The dog runs to the human hunter and offers to be his slave in return for sanctuary from the leopard. Today the animals are no longer friends, but enemies. The strong among them attack and kill the weak. The leopard, full of anger, eats up anyone he can lay his hands on. The hunter, led by the dog, goes to the forest from time to time and shoots any animal he can find. Perhaps the animals will make peace among them some day and live together again. Then they can keep away the hunter who is their common enemy. (As cited in Muoneme 2013) The story "How the Leopard got his claws" was subdivided into

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seven scenes. Apart from the major work, there are other works captured in bits, especially interesting scenes like “The tortoise and the Birds” (mixed media, 2013), “The Flight” (Acrylic on canvas, 2013), “Igba nni na Ofè” (oil on canvas, 2012) and “Polygamous Family” (Gouache on paper, 2014). There were scenes from very interesting Igbo folktales.

Narration of “The Tortoise and the Birds”

Onwuekwe focused on F.C Ogbalu’s version of folktale titled “The tortoise and the birds” as narrated by Okodo (2000:49):

Once upon a famine, the birds planned to fly to a distant land of plenty. Tortoise learnt of it and asked birds to allow him to join them. They agreed but reminded him that he had no feather. Tortoise pleaded with them and they accepted to loan him feather from each of them so that he could fly along with them. They flew off. He told them that there was a need for them to take new names. Tortoise took the name – ‘All of You’. When they arrived, they were received. Their hosts gave them various things to eat; food, lumps of meat and wine. When they placed any of the things before them the hostess would tell them that “the things were for all of you”. In each case, Tortoise told the birds that his new name was ‘All of You’; therefore the item was meant for him alone. The Tortoise ate and drank to his satisfaction without the birds taking anything.

When they finally left. They perched on an Iroko tree in their village to hold a meeting. During the meeting the birds expressed their annoyance towards the behaviour of the tortoise and snatched their respective feathers from him and flew away. The tortoise could not fly down, *Mbe* the tortoise shouted to his wife from there and told her to collect sand at the foot of the tree so that he would land on it. His wife thought he asked her to collect stones from their environment and did so. Tortoise fell from the tree, landed on the heap of stones and broke into pieces. Seeing his situation, *Mbe* called the black ant to piece him up. The Black Ant agreed to do the job at the cost of one hundred pieces of silver. Black Ant pieced him up. That is why the tortoise has patched up shell. When the Black Ant came to collect his fee, tortoise quarreled with him and scolded black Ant.

The artist broke the story into fifteen scenes well rendered with draw and paint technique on Adobe Photoshop layout.

Onwuekwe (2003: 38-39) writes on his style and technique:

“Apart from employing digital technique for the illustration, caricaturism and naturalism were employed in developing the concepts. Below each work were messages in English that was used in narrating the story... Also, indigenous figure of sounds or Onomatopoeia was utilized in scenes where necessary.

For instance, instead of using sound “thud!” for a fall, the sound “frr-gbaa” was used as alternative figure of sound. Another typical example “Bang” for a gunshot was replaced with “Kpowai”. All these efforts were made by the artist to make his illustrations indigenous. All these efforts were made by the artist to make his illustrated works indigenous.

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