



“Footstep Guide”: The Adventurous “Walk” of Bruce Onobrakpeya

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Abstract. Walking suggests motion, movement, and a non-static state. Although walking is in the domain of psychomotor, however its operations transverses and permeates other domains such as Cognitive and Affective. Walking in life begins with a step which could be ignited by Cognitive calculations, while the affective cultivation driven by dream is responsible for the dynamics in the walks of individuals. Ogunfuwa captures it in his the poem “Footstep Guide”, “Ahead, now look! A thrust in conquest be. Step guide to excellent adventure. Fear not, footsteps shall plant wisdom in few”, Artist life is a walking life, a sojourn into the world of creative ingenuities without return. This paper therefore reviews and traces the “Footstep guide”, stages of “Creative Walking” of one of the most documented and oldest practicing artists in Nigeria and one of the most leading artists in Africa who turns 90 this year. Each decade in the last 60 years of Bruce Onobrakpeya is a walk into experimentations of a new form of art. A compendium of art and culture whose creative journey is captured in 3 stages of “Footstep Guide”, trained as a painter in 1962, walking with vigour into printmaking, navigating into plastography, additive plastography and collagraphy. This last decade witness his untiring quantum leap and adventurous walk into three dimensional arts of metal and plastic sculptures. Onobrakpeya is a “culture protagonist” walking in the regalia ornamented with experimentations. An attempt is made to review the different stages of his transformations and its implications on Nigeria art and artists as walking of discovery of media and forms.

Keywords: Walking, experimentation, Foot-guide, navigating, chameleon.

1. Introduction

Footstep refers to the mark of one’s foot or distance covered by a step, which is synonymous with

“walking”. In the context of creativity, these two words (footstep and walking) connote advancement, experimental, braking of bounds and exploration and these are what Bruce Onobrakpeya is noted for. He is an artist of many parts, widely documented and one of Africa’s best known and highly respected. Although Bruce Onobrakpeya is widely documented as artist with a great emphasis on his print making and additive plastograph, little is mentioned about his unconscious three dimensionality in his relief plastograph and his eventual migration fully into the realm of three dimensional arts of “sculpture”. His involvements in all forms of visual arts is are like beginning with footsteps along the journey of life - a uniquely uncommon demeanor which is worth academic discourse. A trained painter, a master print-maker and a converted sculptor. His practice of over six decades is carefully segmented into four sections for the purpose of this study. His early life and training, his painting career, print making experiments and mastery and his sculpture sojourn in the last two decades.

1.1 Early Life and Education of Bruce Onobrakpeya

A local adage says “if a girl-child plays with her mother’s shawl, she gets to master fast the act of tying a rapper”, so was the case of Bruce, who had a carver as father and his mother a craft and bead collector. Born on August 30, 1932 in Agharha- Otor, Delta State, Nigeria, He had his elementary school in Ughelli and Sapele in Delta State and attended Western Boys High School, Benin city where he encountered art through Mr. Ivehiboje Edward with extra drawing classes at the British Council Art Club. His alma-matta was established in 1947, which may suggest why he was retained upon graduation to teach art probably for his expertise and for want of instructors. This gesture is a way of giving back to

one's community and notably this attitude cultivated at his early years became an attribute that consumed his adulthood. After leaving Ondo Boys High School in 1957, he was admitted to study Fine Art (a four-year programme) in Nigerian College of Art, Science and Technology at the instance of the Federal Government. He also completed postgraduate degree in arts education; this helped him greatly in teaching career at St. Gregory's College, Obalende, in Lagos State. As a professional in training, two things sharpened his proficiency; one according to the artist is the technical skills received through the Western tradition of representational arts, another is his membership of Zaria Art Society popularly called Zaria Rebels; a discussion group which sought to forge a unique style aimed at African aesthetics and natural synthesis. Although Bruce did not pursue his academic beyond the second degree, he taught in some secondary schools in Lagos before his final bow into full time studio practice. His involvement in workshops and in both local and international residences surpasses all his counterparts. His fluidity, flexibility and mobility in art related programmes was next to none of his Zarianists.

Stanley (2011) affirms that:

Onobrakpeya had participated in and helped run several print work-shops: at the Mbari Artists' and Writers Club print workshop in Ibadan (1962), at the Mbari Mbayo print workshop in Oshogbo (1964), and in 1974 at the University of Ife's Institute of African Studies, at the invitation of director Ulli Beier".

The wealth of experience garnered in the sixth decade of 20th century became potent tools and freedom to explore and experiment materials without fear of mistakes.

This is evident in Ubogu (2019) assertion that:

"by 1962, Onobrakpeya had moved from painting, pen and wash, landscapes, figure drawing and still life paintings to a more naturalistic art, taught by the European teachers at the Nigerian College of Art, Science and Technology, Zaria, to prints, after attending a workshop where he gained experience in print making (which is more illustrative) with cultural themes"

His early works portends portend walking into discovery were in oil paints but as a growing artist, he had to grapple with finding the right channel for his art. At the Mbari writers' and artists' workshop in 1963, he discovered printmaking and pursued it. Akatakpo (1998) refers to Bruce Onobrakpeya as the "Epitome of Dream and Realities of the Zaria Art Society". He acknowledges him as one of Nigeria's most prolific printmaker, and perhaps the most

celebrated and publicized contemporary artist in Africa today.

2. Bruce Onobrakpeya and Pablo Picasso: A Similitude

Bruce Onobrakpeya according to Akatakpo (1998), is a rare example of a child brought up in the Christian faith, but through the oral tradition, also imbibed myths and legends of his culture. This he took advantage of, to interrogate his culture by exploring motifs from both experiences of Christianity and Nigerian traditions. Bruce Onobrakpeya's walk in his art sojourn is like Pablo Picasso, Jegede (1992), affirms that Bruce came under the spell of Paul Gauguin whose paintings he very much admired. He ascertains that his paintings titled "cows, "palm wine woman, "have you heard, Ahwaire (tortoise) series were actually a glimpse of the Gauguin's influence. He concludes that "the fact that Bruce majored in painting is often underplayed or missed". This reason for his conclusion is not to demean Onobrakpeya but perhaps stems from the fact that his potentials would have been locked up permanently without breaking the bounds to explore other forms, if he had continued only as a painter.

Bruce had similar background and experience like that of Picasso, both specialized in painting, Picasso had a professor – painter father, this provided direction to walk for Picasso, escalated by his artistic endowment, while Bruce also had a carver as father. This rubbed on him and latter became noticed as he produced relief plastocasts and subsequently three dimensional works in his sixties.

Coincidentally, as Picasso disliked the formal instructions and decided to stop attending classes soon after he arrived at Spain's foremost art schools in Madrid, the Royal Academy of San Fernando. It was revealing that Bruce in the company of other eleven members of Zaria Rebels also disliked Western traditional representational arts and agitated for natural synthesis. Pablo Picasso in Moore (2018) in Moore (2018) affirms "God is really only another artist. He invented the giraffe, the elephant and the cat. He has no real style; He just goes on trying other things". This affirmation from Picasso justifies why great artists were restlessly breaking bounds. Adenle (2020), further observes that in the growing years of Bruce till now, he had tried many impossibilities and broken new grounds; experimentation is his overriding principle. Picasso puts it this way "go and do the things you can't, that is how you get to do them (Moore 2018). While Pablo Picasso [1881–1973] impacted the development of modern and contemporary art with unparalleled magnitude, his his

painting styles transcend realism, abstraction, primitivism, cubism, surrealism and expressionism. This is similar to the comment of Bruce who says that his childhood experience of the cultural environment of Urhobo and Benin formed the artistic bedrock on which he continue to build, His early exposure to these arts sustained his artistic expressions by giving him access to a world of imagination, through bridging the thin gap between realism, surrealism and abstraction. Bruce also impacted and pioneered new avenues in print making, developing plastocast and plastohgraph techniques, illustrating books, producing paintings in multi-media, painting murals and published books, etc. Adepegba (1984), (1995) refers to him as the untiring experimentalist in Nigeria and abroad, he noted that both traditional sculptural forms and craft motifs appeal to Onobrakpeya and stresses that the motifs of craft such as tie and dye, textiles and calabash decorative elements of his prints are often employed as backgrounds. It is also noteworthy that Adepegba made this assertions about Bruce In 1984 and 1995 respectively when he was in his 50s and 60s. The footsteps of Bruce in the last three decades has been such that firmly stuck on the art terrains in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. This is evident in his working/walking and journeying through the genre of art forms.



Fig. 1: Dr. Bruce Onobrakpeya (88 years, Left) with the researcher. Location: Dr. Bruce' resident, Source: Author

3. Some Selected works of Bruce Onobrakpeya that characterize his "Visual Walking"



Fig 2: Artist: Bruce Onobrakpeya, Year: 1959, Title: Travellers, Medium: Drawing (Pen and wash) Size: 51.7cm x 35cm, about, Source: www.afrevjo.net



Fig 3: Artist: Bruce Onobrakpeya, Year: 1962, Title: Entertainment, Medium: Lino print Source: www.afrevjo.net



Fig 4: Artist: Bruce Onobrakpeya, Date : 1960-70, Title: Cows In Sunshine, Medium: Serigraph Print on Paper, Size: 55.9 x 76.2 cm



Fig 5: Artist: Bruce Onobrakpeya, Date : 1960-70, Title: Have You Heard? Medium: Serigraph Print on Paper, Size: 55.9 x 76.2 cm



Fig 6: Artist: Bruce Onobrakpeya, Year: 2013, Title: Ugbudia (Leadership), Medium: Plastograph on board (Low relief), Size: 111.5 x 81 cm. (44 x 32 in.)

Figures 2-6 above are few of the large collections of lino, serigraph prints and plastograph



Fig 7: Artist: Bruce Onobrakpeya, Date: 2005, Title: Scavenging in the Lost Paradise, Medium: Installation Size: 120 by 220 cm



Fig. 8: Artist: Bruce Onobrakpeya, Date : 2008, Title: Nomadic Masquerades, Medium: Mixed Media Sculpture, Size: 170 x 45 x 61 cm,



Fig: 9: Artist: Bruce Onobrakpeya, Title: Contemplating the Modern City, Year: 2012 Medium: Installation (mixed media), Size: 287x69x625cm

Figures 7-9 above are few of his earlier works in Sculpture (installations and mixed media).



Fig:10: Artist: Bruce Onobrakpeya, Year: 2013, Title: Totems, Medium: Fibre Glass, Size: 155cm

Figure 10 above is one of his many works of "Totems" in Sculpture in the past one decade (installations and mixed media).



Fig: 11: Artist: Bruce Onobrakpeya, Year: 2020, Title: A-Mmasquerader, Medium: Automobile Parts Size: 10 ft x 5ft by 1foot, Source: Author 31/08/2020,



Fig: 12: Artist: Bruce Onobrakpeya, Year: 2020, Title: Ijele, Medium: Automobile Parts, Size: 8ft ft x 5ft by 1foot, Source: Author 31/08/2020



Fig: 13: Artist: Bruce Onobrakpeya
Year: 2020
Title: *Thorax of Antediluvian Insect (Orere)*
Medium: Automobile Parts
Size: 12ft by 6ft by 1foot, Source: Author 31/08/2020



Fig: 14: Artist: Bruce Onobrakpeya,
Year: 2020
Title: *Praying mantis*
Medium: Automobile Parts
Size: 7ft by 2ft by 1foot, Source: Author 31/08/2020



Fig: 15: Artist: Bruce Onobrakpeya, Year: 2020, Title: *Ongoing work*, Medium: Automobile Parts, Size: Varying sizes

Figures 11- 15 above are part of his recent works of plastic experimentation in the last 2 years (2018-2020)

4. Discussion with Bruce Onokbrakpeya

Bruce Onobrakpeya is one of Nigeria's best-documented artists who obviously needs very little introduction in the visual art circle in Nigeria and Africa. He is regarded as a living legend (Ofuafu, 2017). A celebrated Nigerian painter and printmaker for his innovative print-making techniques.

Bruce Onobrakpeya who turns 90 years on 30th August 2022 in his smart stature taking a walk round

his recent experimental works, discussing art as a voyage of discoveries that started with just lines which multiplied into the use of colours. It is observed that when you move you encounter, as long as you keep walking with the expected energy, new discoveries are certain. Bruce in his "movement" said "I specialized in Panting in my art school even though my lecturer Eric Tailor (a white expatriate) advised me to opt for graphics but I declined perhaps because of my shortsightedness of reducing graphics art to working on newspaper, cartooning and the strong force of my associates and ringing names of

masters like Pablo Picasso, Rembrandt, Michael Angelo and a host of others who specialized in painting and sculpture. I later on discovered shortly before and after graduation that that teacher who advised me to go into graphics specialisation was futuristic in his counsel because he saw my potential. Bruce Onobrakpeya in his interview said “I attended 3 workshops where I was exposed to etching - a basic printmaking skill in GRAPHICS. Onobrakpeya said, ‘then I realised that basically I was a graphic artist’”. I stated exploring with lines which multiplied into the use of colours, graduated into relief sculpture and latter to sculpture in the round. In plastocast, I extract what painting teaches and what sculpture teaches.

In the said period of time that Bruce referred to i.e. that is, before and after graduation, Stanley (2011) in her account says that the first and second workshops, in 1961 and 1962 in Ibadan under the auspices of the Mbari Writers' and Artists' Club, were for secondary school art teachers. They were initiated by Ulli Beier and led by Julian Beinart, Amancia Guedes, and Ru van Rossem. Ijisakin E. Ademuleya B. and Ajiboye O. (2019) also confirm that an expatriate artist named Ru Van Rosem demonstrated some printmaking techniques in both the erstwhile Nigerian College of Arts, Science, and Technology, Zaria (now Ahmadu Bello University) and Mbari art workshop at Ibadan in 1962; and Mbari Mbayo art workshop at Osogbo in 1963.

Although the range of Printmaking techniques explored and developed in the post independence include woodcuts, linocut, engraving, deep etching, dry point, lithography, screen-printing, collagraphy, and plastograph among others. However, Ijisakin (2019), affirms that printmaking methods had long been employed in Nigeria, especially in indigenous art practices as a means to certain aesthetic ends if not as an end in itself. This is evident in wood carving, ivory carving, calabash carving, blacksmithing, and other decorative arts that share affinities with woodcut relief, intaglio, and serigraphic processes of printmaking.

Some of the printmakers that benefited from the earliest workshops are late Solomon Irein Wangboje, Bruce Obomeyoma Onobrakpeya, Jimoh Adetunji Buraimoh, Rufus Ogundele, Jacob Afolabi, Adebisi Fabunmi, Yinka Adeyemi, Segun Adeku, Felix I. N. Ekeada, Ogbonnaya Nwagbara and so on.

Bruce Onobrakpeya experiments with a great variety of media and print techniques, has mentored hundreds of contemporary artist either as a secondary school teacher or through apprentice method of

training, personal contacts and workshops. This passion leads him to establish Harmattan Workshop - an informal educational setup in form of a retreat, where artists and non artists meet, learn, think, work, experiment and share ideas.

Participants come with the view to develop and sustain their creative endeavors towards the development of the arts, particularly the visual arts. It was founded in 1998 patterned after workshops of 1960s and 1970s organized by Ulli Beier at Ibadan, Oshogbo and Ile Ife in Nigeria and the Haystack Mountain School of Arts and Crafts, Deer Isle, Maine, USA, (Adenle 2020)

The Harmattan Workshop since inception in 1998 is open to both male and female participants, regardless of age and status, the workshop is an annual event where professionals, academic artists, students of art and artists- in- training gather to learn new things – skills, techniques, materials, media and also exchange ideas. According to Stanley (2011), Bruce was quite open to participating in and benefiting from more informal, egalitarian workshops. He was not bothered working alongside untrained, aspiring artists and students at those early Mbari workshops, an attitude he employs even in his 80s for inspiration. For instance, many years of his presence at the HW,(Harmattan Workshop), his interactions with other artists has multiplier effects on him such that the more he gets older, the more curious he gets and the more he turns out conceptually engaging masterpieces of art works. Moore (2018), Pablo Picasso opines “God is really only another artist. He invented the giraffe, the elephant and the cat. He has no real style; He just goes on trying other things”. This explains why Onobrakpeya continues to “walk” the forms through varieties of media to achieve aesthetic spectacles for his audience.

5. Conclusion

Ogunfuwa’s Poem “Footstep Guide” -
“Ahead, now look!

A thrust in conquest be.
Step guide to excellent adventure”

The art engagements of Bruce Onobrakpeya is thus comprehended as looking ahead, thrusting to conquest and a guide to excellent adventure.

- “Ahead, now look! - typifies Onobrakpeya’s school days,

- A thrust in conquest be - refers to his several early 1960s workshops participation in etching, which was greatly influenced by the artists he met; for instance when many artists with academic training were naturally reluctant to flow with untrained

participants, he sees the work of self-trained artists objectively, this is likened to Kennedy (2014) - Step guide to excellent adventure” connotes his experiments in media and forms.

His academic training, workshop experiences and exposures have all contributed to his being versatile, experimental and creatively restless. He cultivated ability of working with the old, young, professional and non-professional, experienced and inexperienced which endeared him to the heart of many growing and upcoming artists. This gesture coupled with the establishment of Harmattan workshop paved ways for his influence on professional artists, non-artist and students to develop and sustain their creative endeavors towards the development of the arts, particularly the visual arts in Nigeria and Africa as a whole.

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