Developing Modern Niger Delta Formalism: The Contextual and Conceptual Applications in the Stylistic Oeuvre of Edewor Nelson’s Sculptures

Edewor Uyoyou Nelson O

Abstract

Edewor Nelson (b. 1970) is a sculptor whose works depict configurations that espouse contexts associated with inimical and exploitative tendencies of petroleum oil exploration and exploitation in the Niger Delta region. His expressions represent a new formalism that is iconic of the region’s reality in terms of environmental degradation and fundamental human rights abuses. This motivation became imperative in the seemingly failure of other artistic explorations on the subject to adequately reflect modern formal archetypes for which the region’s dilemma can be expressed. The challenge of analytic study of this effort for attaining interpretative insights into this studio practice is pertinent. To realize this, corresponding Ivri traditional art form associated with the past in the region has been studied alongside petroleum drilling–related forms. This provides the fulcrum on which this article approaches an analysis of contextual and conceptual applications attributable to the stylistic oeuvre of Edewor’s practice since 1997. It uses formalism and iconography interpretative tools for its critical discourse.

Keywords
modern formalism, Ivri, petroleum oil industry, synthesis, exploration

Introduction

The artistry of Edewor Nelson (b. 1970) with a challenge of developing new Niger delta visuals (NDVs) spans over a decade. This new formal expression was conceived during his Masters of Fine Arts (MFA) studies at the University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria, in 1997. Edewor has earned recognition as a NDV art crusader from visitors to his numerous exhibitions. The classification “Niger Delta Visuals (NDV)” was coined by Bazunu (2012, p. 10) to distinguish works from the region.

Edewor’s NDVs are based on the theoretical framework referred to as “Social Realism” (Edewor 1999:8). The concept admits conceptualizing reality as a revolutionary development, which combines the task of ideological remaking and education. Read (1960) posits thus: “. . . the artist instead of attempting to create self-sufficient ‘pure’ work should use his talents to interpret the phenomenal world” (p. 230). This quote further strengthens the concept of sociology of art as discussed by Hanna (1970), which interrogates how the work of art “can live beyond their time and seem expressive and meaningful in complete different epochs and societies” (p. 3). Thus, the artist is a socio-political and environmental commentator. This ideology is instructive to this discourse. Studio exploration of media and methods to visualize a social phenomenal world is a product of the 20th-century European art development utilized in the “Communist Manifesto.” Artists such as Kasimir Malerich, Vladimir Titlin, Antonio Pevsner, and Naum Gabo were part of those influenced by mechanization of civilization. Read (1960) quotes the group as saying,

We cannot go on inventing machines, constructing machines, using machines, without in some degree being influenced by machines . . . The machine is the universal and cohesive symbol of our age. (p. 228)

This perspective differs not from modern African art experience. Ato (1976 ), Ghanaian painter writing on “Dilemma of the Contemporary African Artist” (p. 16), affirms the complexity of working in today’s space and how the artists’ work becomes a visual document that is contemporaneous with his time. He opined,

I find myself born in an environment partly westernized and partly retaining its traditional culture. All my life I have seen

1Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

Corresponding Author:
Edewor Uyoyou Nelson O, Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Delta State University, Abraka 33061, Nigeria.
Email: nelsonedewor@gmail.com
cars, western styled buildings . . . So being a socially conscious artist, I try to express the environment, the whole physical and spiritual concept of my society in the flux of change, using both my knowledge of western and traditional concepts to make my imageries on a two dimensional surface effective and significant.

This concern agrees with stylistic approaches among the first Nigerian art graduates who studied in Nigeria in the late 1950s. For this group of artists, “Natural Synthesis” concept served as ideological base for their new art strand. It is from this premise that Edewor’s studio search can be understood. They bother on the ability to visualize a new phenomenal world through the use of diverse media associated with old and new systems obtainable in the Niger delta society. In this case, both media and context are simulated for expressive purpose.

In concert with the above, Edewor’s studio exploration sets to harness different frameworks of human, industrial, and artistic elements in modern Niger delta. It also focuses on developing new iconic signature that amplifies a formal identity for interpreting contemporary life in the region. This, he presumes, will invigorate other researches for further formal studies that espouse social challenges. This article therefore aims at discussing and analyzing conceptual and stylistic developments in Edewor Nelson’s practice. Attempt is also made to classify Edewor’s sculptures within the spectrum of media, technique, and style. In doing this, interpretations of some of works are attempted.

Three strands can be identified as contexts for Edewor’s new configurations. These are the artistic (Ivri traditional art forms), industrial machines (pipe elements of oil exploration), and social human responses to petroleum oil exploitation.

The Artistic: Ivri Traditional Forms

The Ivri corpus (Figure 1) is a popular traditional art form among the Isoko-, Urhobo-, and Ijo-speaking cultural subgroups in the Niger Delta (Foss, 2004; Jones, 1984; Peek, 2002). The figure symbolizes the control of the owner’s aggressive impulse. Also Ivri corpus represents personal wealth status. Formally, variations obtain as the corpus combines abstraction of human and animal features. The human figure(s) is(are) usually set over a rotund four legged beast representing a hippopotamus. The beastly form bears ferocious bared teeth with well-developed canine on both sides that look like tusks. Minor, but significant, forms such as hat adorn the head of the human figure(s), vertical scarifications impart the foreheads as well as protruded navel on the cylindrical torso. A formal disposition of the composition can be analyzed with regard to pose, proportion, axis, and stasis.

The figures are enhanced by a bi-symmetrical disposition of forms. African proportions of significance are also logically applied. This is espoused by the large head regions of both the human and bestial forms with diminutive limbs.

Figure 1. Ivri Corpus, Isoko, culture, courtesy (Peek, 2002).
Other facial features include drooping eyelids, vertical rectilinear nose forms, and mouth set at the base of the chin with bared teeth. The overall composition of volumes projects abrupt transitions with cubic characters.

**Industrial Machines: Pipe Elements of the Petroleum Oil Industry**

Modern economy is built around industrialization. One of the wealthiest industries is that based on petroleum oil. Petroleum oil was discovered in Nigeria in 1956 at Olobiri in present day Balyesa state. Since then, it has progressively become main earner for the Nigerian economy. Machines and processes related to petroleum oil exploration (Figure 2) reveal pipe element as its major significant part. The pipe features in the entire process of prospecting, drilling, refining, storage, transportation, and dispensing of petroleum oil products. It has structural apparatus such as L, T, cross (+) shaped junction pipes, stop corks, and valves. The nature of joint parts presents right angles at an L junction or convergence at a T and cross (+) junctions. Its formal surface presents ruled, single curved, double curved, concave, and convex contours. Also the jointing qualities of the pipe provide sectional arrangement through the joining of pipes with a section acting as connector. This reveals abrupt transition of volumes as well as accentuating threading lines.

**The Social: Human Responses to Oil Exploitation**

As stated earlier, *Ivri* images conform to the traditional socio-economic society, whereas the oil petroleum pipe is phenomenal of contemporary wealth status in the region. However, the exploitative impact of oil exploitation/exploration through abusive exploitative processes in the region as a common feature has altered socio-economic and political mind-set of the people. The resultant effect being environmental degradation caused by oil spillages, fire outbreaks, depletion of the ozone layer due to gas flaring, soil degradation, and so on, have been scientifically canvassed by social and environmental experts. They all agree that oil exploitation is the major cause of environmental degradation and deterioration in the Niger delta region (Alakpodia, 1986).

Human responses to these inimical conditions have been alarming and have led to fatal consequences. One of the earliest organized communal resistances to seemingly wholesome activities of oil companies, which drew international attention, is the declaration of the Ogoni Bill in rights of 1990. Since then, the region has been in the wake of news for youth restiveness, communal clashes, arson, oil theft, kidnapping, and vandalizing of oil installations resulting from organized militancy and outright lawlessness and tyranny. All these acts result from aggravated aggressive impulses of youth pressure groups, which, due to lack of any gainful venture as a result of lost local commerce, resort to eking a livelihood through violence (Ibaba, 2011; Jike, 2004).

Beyond these external indicators presented above, the major human response to these adverse activities of oil companies is the seemingly internally altered psyche of the average inhabitants of the region. Persons now associate their misfortune to oil activities, even when concrete evidences to such claim do not exist. This trade of blame on the oil multinational industry aggravates much of the youth restiveness that eventually leads to fatal consequences.

A careful interrogation and systematic analysis of *Ivri* forms, petroleum oil pipes, and human response anchors the new formal reality on which Edewor’s studio findings are hinged. This fusion has become the pivot for presenting or expressing formal tendencies that reflect the effect of oil exploitation in the region with its attendant social and environmental impacts.

**Synthesizing New Niger Delta Formalism in Edewor’s Sculptures**

The synthesis/articulation of organic and inorganic forms (*Ivri* and oil pipes) to evolve a new formal realism that represents a metaphysical structure, which succinctly represents today’s Niger delta crisis, is the basis of the new studio inquiry. Significant minor forms adopted from these two aspects are human navel, genitals, facial scarifications, nipples, pipe elbow joints, stop cork, connecting sockets, and screw threading pattern of the pipe. The vehicle of formal realization depended on the use of cylindrical forms and elements that indulge patterns and rhythms derived from both features.

As mentioned earlier, volumetric transitions in *Ivri* sculptures are abrupt, which makes them cubic in presentation (Fagg & Plass, 1964). Also the nature of joining pipes implies the same cubic abrupt volumetric character. An application of this trait in both aspects produced a formal type, which became robotic in the earlier sculptures in Mortar (Figure 3). Later works in wood were more organic in nature (Figure 4). This was due to the nature of wood and the expressivity that the sculptor intended to attain.

Onibere (2006:43) on Edewor’s practice identifies some aspects that could be tenable here. In his critical analysis of
the sculptures in mortar, he observed that, when one compares the ratio of human elements with those of the machine parts, “. . . it is clear that the oil pipe cylindrical volume has taken over the human flavor by turning the whole images as tubular structures.” His computer derived structural drawing confirms this (Figure 5). Furthermore, he interrogated a comparative formal analysis between Ivri sculptures and Edewor’s wood and mortar sculptures (Figure 6).

Typology, Media, Technique, and Interpretations of Selected Works

Bazunu (2006) attempts a classification of the works into two groups. These are the drawings (two dimensional) and the sculptures (three dimensional). He posits thus:

. . . the two-dimensional visuals are drawings done with charcoal or pencil on paper, which are characterized with dark circular, semi-circular, grid, diagonal, horizontal, vertical and oblique linear formations, carefully modeled together on the background of the various subjects. These are employed to suggest chaos, confusion, criticality of the atmosphere, tension, anger, furiousness etc., . . . the forms are recognizably human, rendered in tubular, cylindrical and pipe-like structures. They bear scarifications on the foreheads, chests and trunks. Biomorphic rendition of the eyes, nose, mouth, breasts, navels and toes are typical . . .

The three dimensional visuals are free-standing sculptures which are rendered largely in concrete . . . wood. The recurring
decimal in these three-dimensional constructions is the same as the characters mentioned above. (Bazunu, 2006, p. 56)

Beyond this classification, rather than aggregating the sculptures as one category, they can further be classified into three types. These are figural creations, abstract compositions/constructions, and installations.

**Figural Creations**

The sculptures in this category derived their conceptualizations from human figures. As explained earlier, this was generated from the elements of traditional *Ivri* sculpture and pipes of the petroleum oil industry. In developing expressivity for the forms, human gestural possibilities were explored extensively. Furthermore, it became obvious that public aesthetic responses to familiar emotional gestures are germane for quick appreciation. An example is “cry the beloved country” (Figure 5). The work expresses cry over a condition of great loss. Child mortality is high and life expectancy is quite low in the region due to environmental pollution and militancy/violence in the region. The women mostly bear the consequences of these fatal consequences of oil exploitation. The work presents a wailing woman after a great loss of either a child or husband.

Another expressive consideration is the use of objects that easily elicit understanding in relation with certain circumstances. The use of a cutlass in “My Peoples Blood for Cake” (Figure 7) provides easy understanding. The cutlass in the region apart from being an implement for farming is associated with war and personal protection. The work addresses the issue of betrayal of the people’s interest by get-rich-quick representatives with oil companies. Such behavior is akin to taking to slaying one’s own people on the altar of oil wealth.

Media that easily suited these figural considerations were mortar, wood, and recently bronze. Mortar and bronze obtained their form through modeling and casting techniques. For the wood media, the use of teak (*Tectona grandis*) sourced in the region was greatly explored. Its vertical structure with bulging contours influenced much formal sensibilities, thereby making it a choice medium.

Possibilities of these media extended in process and finishing. Although the works in mortar were finished with wax and pigment to generate black antique finish, the wood and bronzes were subjected to burning with gas blow-touch to achieve a desired burnt antique essence. The firing and burning process was aimed at drawing attention to the Jesse fire inferno of 1998 as a result of vandalized oil pipe of which thousands died. It is important to note that the development of this technique/style can be traced to that incident. The process aims to draw attention to the neglect of the environment.

In this figural category, as is the case with the other figures in wood, the wood acts as ground on which different accoutrements are pasted. Media paraphernalia such as natural fibers, raffia, cast copper bells, cowries, nails, horse tail, leather hand fan, aluminum roofing sheets, acrylic paints, beads, and shells have been used as appliqué on Edewor’s sculptures.
Abstract Compositions/Constructions

Four categories of abstract compositions/constructions are obtained in Edewor’s works. The first is non-human figural compositions carved out of a block of wood (Figure 8); the second is the motor-saw and router machines aided design of sliced teak wood, which are composed together (Figure 9). The third presents abstract constructions in large scaled architectonic structures (Figure 10). These works were produced during successive sessions at Agbara-Otor workshop organized by the Bruce Onobrakpeya Foundation. In the works of this category, teak poles are joined together with the use of carpentry joinery methods. Here, form and space relation is achieved within the context of media limitations for structural rightness. Fourth, there are the sculpture compositions, which are realized through the joining of wood to achieve figural or abstracted compositions. The work “My Hands Are Clean” (Figure 11) is a typical example. In this work, the limitation of the width of the wood would not have made the outstretched hand possible. Another wood was joined to achieve the composition. “My Hands Are Clean” is satirical to challenge falsehood and abuse of office as well as betrayal of public trust by persons who are supposed to represent the people’s interest in certain quarters of decision making.

Installation

Among the works exhibited in one of Edewor’s solo exhibitions titled “Born to Survive” in honor of Professor G. G. Darah’s 60th Birthday in 2008 was “Litany for the Niger
Delta” (Figure 12). At that time, hostage taking, kidnapping, militancy, arson, and killings in the region were on the increase. The work as the title suggested served as a prayer.
boulevard as advocacy for the restoration of peace and tranquility in the Niger delta. As an interactive performance sculpture, the viewing audience walked through the sculpture plaques, which bore symbols related to social vices in the region. At the crossing of each plaque after contemplating the signs on the plaque, the person prays, “Lord have mercy.” At that exhibition, much of the audience made up of top government functionaries walked through the sculpture led by the artist in offering prayers and supplication for peace in the state and indeed the entire Niger delta region.

Conclusion

Consequent upon the thrust of this studio paper, salient issues have been raised. One of such is formal inventiveness through contextual applications. In this case, though form is sacrosanct, it derives its essence from compelling circumstances. One of such is that identified in this article. Also the diversity of the work types evokes limitlessness of formal expressions associated with postmodern art. The notion being that art is dynamic in its interchanging character. Being that as it may, Edewor’s works provide a stylistic candor, which is now associated with him. This is reflected in tubular abbreviation of form with distinct linear intersections that bridge tradition with modernity, thus providing new thematic and conceptual insights aimed at interrogating the subject of environmental abuse and its effect on man in the Niger delta, as well as deducing answers for the numerous questions that emanate from the activities of oil exploitation and exploration in the delicate region of the Niger delta.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

References

Alakpodia, I. J. (1986). Effects of gas flaring on the micro-climate and the adjacent vegetation in Isoko area of Bendel state (Master’s thesis). Department of Geography, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

Ato, D. (1976). Dilemma of the contemporary African artist. *Transition, 9*(50), October, 16-30.

Bazunu, H. U. M. (2006). *Edewor’s petroleum visuals: A study in formal reconfiguration* (Master’s dissertation). Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria.

Bazunu, H. U. M. (2012). *Semiotic elements in selected artworks on the Niger delta* (Doctoral thesis). Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria.

Edewor, U. N. O. (1999). *Petroleum exploitation in Isoko community of Delta state* (Master’s thesis). University of Benin, Nigeria.

Fagg, W., & Plass, M. (1964). *African sculpture: An anthropology*. London, England: Studio Vista.

Foss, P. (2004). *Where gods and mortals meet: Continuity and renewal in Urhobo art*. New York: Museum for African Art and Snoeck.

Hanna, D. (1970). *Meaning and expression: Towards a sociology of art*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Ibaba, S. I. (2011). *Terrorism in liberation struggles: Interrogating the engagement tactics of the movement for the emancipation of the Niger delta*. *Perspectives on Terrorism, 5*(3-4). Available from http://www.terrorismanalysts.com

Jike, V. T. (2004). *Environmental degradation, social disequilibrium, and the dilemma of sustainable development in the Niger delta*. *Journal of Black Studies, 34*, 686-701.

Jones, G. I. (1984). *The art of eastern Nigeria*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Onibere, V. (2006). *Adaptation of traditional Isoko art forms in Nelson Edewor’s sculptures* (Master’s thesis). Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

Peek, P. M. (2002). *Forms of Ivri*. In *Ways of the river: Arts and environment of the Niger delta*. Anderson, M., & Peek, P. M. Los Angeles: UCLA Flower Museum. pp. 120-125.

Read, H. (1960). *The philosophy of modern art*. London: Faber & Faber.

Author Biography

Dr. Edewor Uyoyou Nelson O, a Senior Lecturer with Fine and Applied Arts Department, Delta State University, Abraka is a sculptor and Art historian. He is also Post-Doctoral Associate Fellow of SOAS, UK, London.