

## **Psychoanalytical Interpretation in the Works of Three Nigerian Artists**

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### **Abstract**

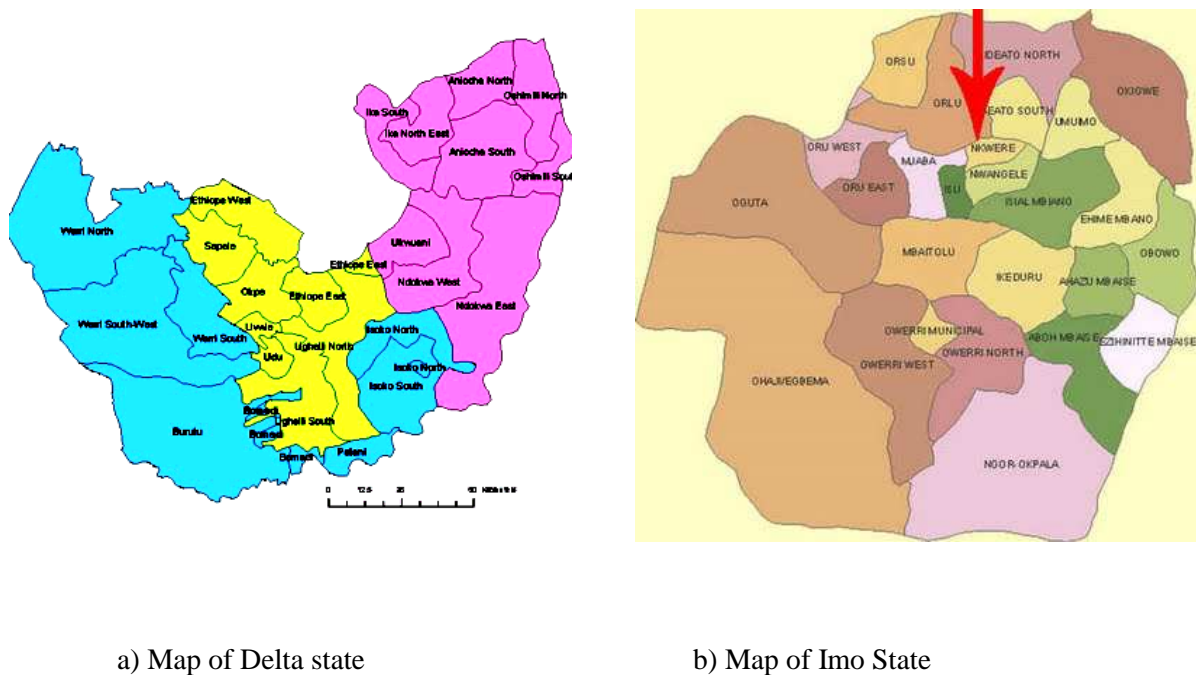
This paper examines some of Freud's theories on the lives and works of some Nigerian artists. Its aim is to prove that a good number of Nigerian artists are governed by their unconscious minds. That some of the elements or attributes of their works are actually personal maps and features of the artist such that their fears, pains, strengths, failures, successes, hates, love, determination and many other attributes are reflected in their works. The method however used to examine this fact is based on the theory of psychoanalysis. That works of art are like the circuit boards of the scientist, as each fuse relays and contains aspects of the artist's life.

**Keywords:** Theory, therapeutic, hybridized, interaction, culture.

### **1.0 Introduction**

The minds of artists are reservoirs of conscious and unconscious attributes of an individual. In some cases information via the art form can be straightforward while others are concealed into diverse forms. These forms however vary, while some may be representational others may be non-objective. The question of deciphering its meaning then becomes a major challenge, even in its representational or non-objective form. It is at this point that the researcher employs the method of psychoanalysis to analyse and comprehend these art works along with their creators.





a) Map of Delta state

b) Map of Imo State

**Fig.1:** Map of Nigeria showing the main towns of Delta and Imo States

## 1.1 Psychoanalytic Explanations

Psychoanalysis is a nineteenth century method of analysis developed by Sigmund Freud (Adams 200:1). It is a branch of psychology which deals with imagery, history and creativity. In art history, it deals primarily with the unconscious significance of works of art (Adams 1996:179). Adams' sees psychoanalysis is a complex method that involves both art work and artist. Like the archaeologist, it deals with the reconstruction of the past by taking artifacts of mental life such as dreams and memories which tend to be fragmentary and connects them to an earlier time in the life of the individual (Adams 1996; 10). It is both a theory and therapeutic method based on the idea that mental life functions, at both conscious and unconscious levels (Encarta, 2009).

There is also the belief that childhood experiences are powerful psychological influences on the individual (Encarta, 2009). Another fact about psychoanalysis is that apart from artworks, aspects which reveals the content of the unconscious mind like dreams, jokes tongues slips as well as neurotic symptoms are analysed (Adams 2001). The oedipal (Oedipus complex) reading which speaks about relationships of children to their parents is also emphasized.

## 1.2 Analysis of Three Nigerian Artist Lives and their Works

Evidence of dreams, the Oedipus complex and other interpretations can be applied to the works and life of Kenneth Njoku (b. 1968). Njoku who hails from Ochi Mbaitoli in Imo State of Nigeria, is a sculptor. He is described as a prolific Nigeria Artist who uses diverse methods for his cultural productions (Perspective 2011). Between 1975 – 191- in his primary school days he started producing sculptural pieces.

The rhythm of Africa (**fig.2.**) of 2000 shows a bronze female figure with filigree designs. In this work Njoku attempts to combine the rich Igbo culture with modern movements of dance from other parts of Africa. This creative interaction has resulted in interplay of forms.

Njoku describes his works as hybridized sculptures (Perspectives 2011) probably because the theme and style of his work is derived from his cultural background. Of recent, Njoku has

embedded a futuristic approach to his work as well as some modernistic tendencies. Such that what he now produces are mechanical subjects with cultural under toning. However, this work in question possesses influences from his immediate environment with traces of Igbo-Ukwu characteristics. **Fig.2** shows a female figure titled rhythm of Africa (2000). This bronze female figure with filigree designs combines his rich Igbo culture with modern movements which display an interaction of forms and shapes. Starting from the head, a long coiffure which symptomatically connects



**Fig.2:** Kenneth Njoku, Rhythm of Africa 2000, Bronze 45x30cm

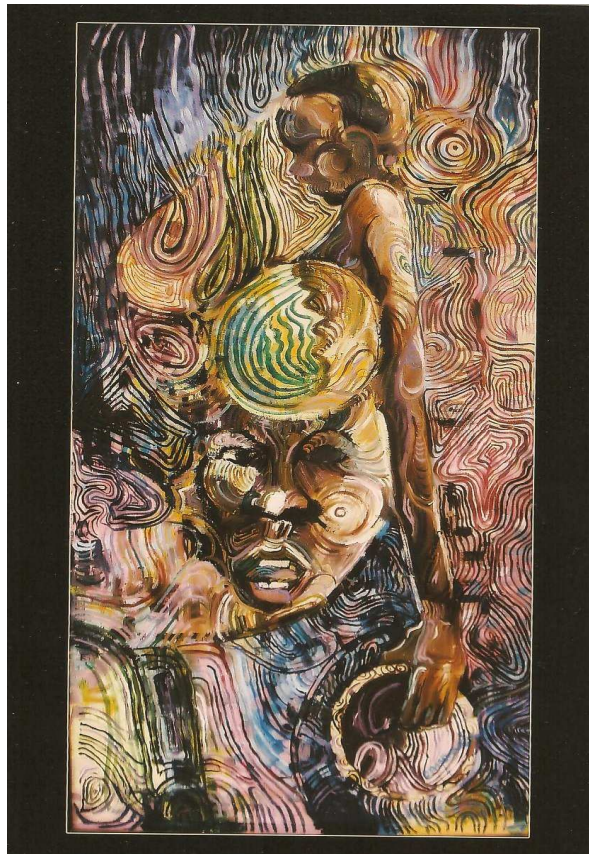
with the Spinal cord, runs down in a straight line. The head which has some marks, lie the Igbo Ukwu types, seem to be titled upwards with a little push to the side. On the neck are three beads which have some sort of symbolic meanings. The figure has outstretched arms which signify a form of gesture. The skirt worn by the female figure seems to move in rhythmic dimensions. Njoku certainly integrated musical sounds and movements into his works. The swinging of the arms, skirt and movement of the leg all create a form of musical rhythm. Possibly, the rhythms that originated from the artist thought patterns.

It can be deduced that even though this piece possesses female features the structure speaks about the nature and the origin of the artist. First, it is obvious that he is greatly influenced by his environment. Second, he is in touch with his origin and third, has the capacity to weave all influences together. The artist most have spent long years in making masquerades. He even claims to have invented dance steps for the masquerades. Thus, most of what he executes has traditional underpinnings.

In relation to his work, Njoku is a kind of masquerade. As his personality is disguised in the form of art work he produces. It seems to transcend beyond human ethos to a more heavenly realm. Thus, his personality and things that happens to him are sometimes unexplainable. He is a level he does not understand.

With reference to the Nigerian society “She” the figure seems to be mockingly clapping her hands towards Nigerians seemly achievements. Although saying about the artist as well as the country.

Another artist with similar psychological trait is Onyema Emene (b. 1951) he is a painter who hails from Orogun in Delta State. His birth has been a source of inspiration and mystery for others as he spent more than nine months in his mother's womb. In fact, he said his mother claims he spent twelve months; this may have symptomatically affected his talent at an early age. At primary school his artistic skills began to emerge and by 1965 his paintings had already assumed the role of master pieces. Most of his works portray themes relating to culture and 'self'. This piece titled "Na wa o, (fig.3) is worth mentioning simply as a result of the contents of the painting. It depicts a woman in the background with a flat object in her hand. In front of her with is a face with an egg like shape on its head.



**Fig.3:** Onyema Emeni Na waoh

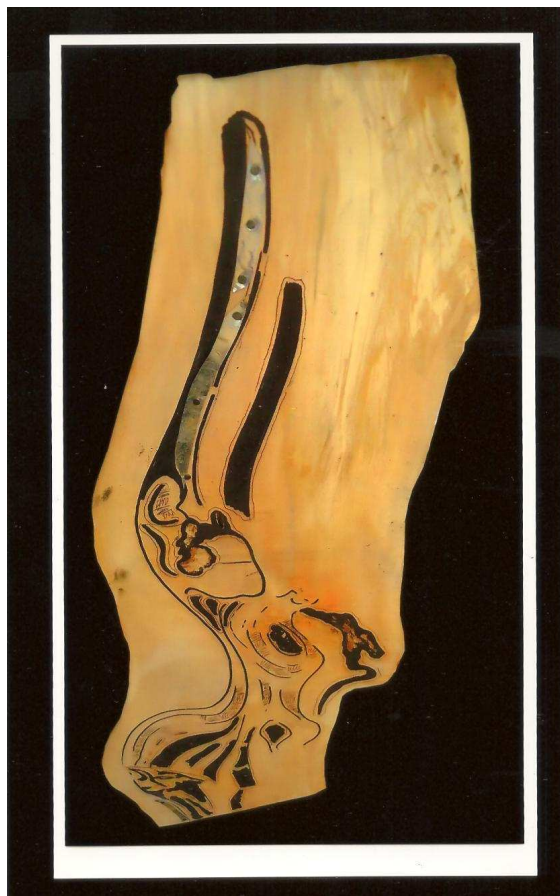
That is Emeni, trying to forge unconsciously his interesting conception. The female figure seems to emerge from the head of the face in fact both egg and human figure are attached to the figure. It is difficult to come up with an assumption that the artist has been depicting himself. But the more one looks, the more one sees some relationship with the artist, his ideologies and his early beginnings.

The face on the painting looks slightly aggressive as well as dark and weird. The face also appears to be overpowered by the unseemly strength of the female, that is as fragile as the female figure appears, she is totally so energetic that her presence changes the entire atmosphere. Indeed, the female figure seems to absolutely charm or control the male face. With the kind of *adju-adju* (fan) in her hand the male is helpless before her. The fan may be likened to a can of love portion or charm or just mere weakness of a partner.

The oedipal meaning can be transferred to Emeni's conceptual helplessness towards his mother and wife. They all seem to be in control of his life, one way or the other or the reverse.

The painting can also be likened to the power and money, controlled by a lot of politicians in the country.

Psychoanalysis addresses also unconscious expressions like the Venus of faith (fig. 4) 2012. The artist, Ese Odokuma (b. 1968) was born in London (Aziza 2011;3). She has flare for the arts, which include, drama, dancing, singing, puppetry and fine arts. Apart from all these, she engages in writing art historical themes and issues; on Urhobo culture (Odokuma 2009:17-23). The third child among six, Ese noticed her talents, when she was about five (Odokuma, 2011;7) she used to cut papers to make what she and her siblings called “paper girls” (Odokuma and Ogundele 2011;11). These paper girls, metamorphosed into cartoons and today’s pen and inks as well as metal pieces. Initially, she started with cartoons and later at about in the 1990’s she read metal design in the University of Benin. Between 1992 – 1997, she started the pen and ink for health reasons in Ibadan, which she transferred today into diverse mediums.



**Fig. 4:** Ese Odokuma’s Venus of Faith 2012

This piece in question was actually accidentally derived from the natural movement of wood. The female figure in the flat surface seems to be calling out for woman to begin to tell themselves about the “can do it” philosophy. The long horns stand for determination like the horn of the unicorn. Also it could also mean “intuition”. Intuition can be defined as the ability to understand something immediately without the need for conscious reasoning (Oxford, 1999; 743).

The horn again, may possess more than a single interpretation. The term “double” honours ‘seems to be an appropriate designation for the horn section. This is because; running down

that horn is a silver lining which represents the silver tongue. A woman with a silver tongue is described as a woman who is eloquent and persuasive in speech.

The curve on the Venus's head represents the so-called book worm mentality. Under the chin, are three thick lines which speak of spiritual attributes of faith, hope and charity. At the breast portion of this piece, is a circular spot with the shape of a bear-head, lion or a hand. It depicts the attributes of the hand and its capacity. A little lower to the kneel portion are four shapes sprouting out. These are some of the outstanding gifts that the artist possesses.

This piece unconsciously speaks about the personality of the artist that it has become important for the artist to identify her talents and strive to the highest levels. There is need for the artist to burst out of unbelief and enter into the realm of productivity and faith.

## 2.0 Result and Discussion

Based on the above mentioned analysis of these three Nigerian artists, it is indeed obvious that a lot of unconscious actions and information is revealed in their works. In other words, art works are hand writings of an artist personality. Some of the artist may not agree that their personalities can be read from their works, no matter what form it takes. That is, even if the works are realistic, naturalistic, stylized or abstracted, whatever form it takes it does not detach them from what they are". Thus, Freud's method of psychoanalysis, which can be used to translate and interpret forms becomes important.

Even if psychoanalysis is a social science methodology, its artistic features can be used favourably to interpret the artist and his/her works. Through psychoanalysis, unspoken words, traits, and weakness as well as strengths have been revealed within some aspects of their lives and their works.

## 3.0 Conclusion

From this study it is evident that most works of art have some psychological influences. No matter what the artist says either art for art sake or just productions of art works. Personality trait slips into their works in small and sometimes "large proportions. These works if effectively analyzed become instrumental to the comprehension of the artist so much that, some works are life prophecies of things to come while others express present happenings. Some works cannot be studied easily the way they have been made in complex or even simple forms.

You may have to turn them upside down or sideways to get diverse interpretations. Thus, in analyzing works of art one needs a well seasoned method, which addresses more than just the art work but the entire life of the person. It could also reveal the artist dreams, jokes, mouth slips and actions.

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