



VOLUME 14 ISSUE 1

The International Journal of the

Image

New Images of the Niger Delta

Visual Expressions of Nelson Edewor

HARRIE UVIETOBOR MAKPAMIEKUN BAZUNU

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF THE IMAGE
<https://ontheimage.com>
 ISSN: 2154-8560 (Print)
 ISSN: 2154-8579 (Online)
<https://doi.org/10.18848/2154-8560/CGP> (Journal)

First published by Common Ground Research Networks in 2022
 University of Illinois Research Park
 60 Hazelwood Drive
 Champaign, IL 61820 USA
 Ph: +1-217-328-0405
<https://cgnetworks.org>

The International Journal of the Image
 is a peer-reviewed, scholarly journal.

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New Images of the Niger Delta: Visual Expressions of Nelson Edewor

Harrie Uvietobor Makpamiekun Bazunu,¹ Delta State University, Nigeria

Abstract: Nelson Edewor (b. 1970), is a contemporary Nigerian sculptor. Apart from commissioned works, his major media of expression are mortar, bronze, and wood, embellished with aluminum plates, ropes, and fibers. Other embellishing materials include cowries, pigments, beads, and non-ferrous metals. He incorporates certain elements of traditional Niger Delta sculptures, especially Iphri (a statue of aggression and social control), and forms of oil exploration/exploitation apparatuses; these make his sculptures look robot-like. This paper adopts a biographical method, coupled with regional and cultural semiotic approaches to examine Edewor's works and determine his intent as presented in his New Images of the Niger Delta. It also attempts a retrospective view of his developmental trajectory, style, and the meanings which may be garnered from the images here presented.

Keywords: Petroleum Visuals, Traditional Iphri Sculpture, Neo-Traditional, New Images

Introduction

The previously traditional sculpture-dominated and the current oil-suffused environment of the Niger Delta finds synergy and vent in the visuals of Nelson Edewor. Osa Dennis Egonwa (2008) acknowledges the thematic focus of Edewor's visuals as the plight of the inhabitants of the Niger Delta. He further submits that the artworks speak volumes on the variegated but related issues they address. In a doctoral thesis, "Semiotic Elements in Selected Artworks on the Niger Delta," Harrie Bazunu (2012) studied some of the artworks of Bruce Onobrakpeya, Osa Egonwa, Peju Layiwola, Micheal Kpodoh, George Osodi, Timi Willis Amah, and Nelson Edewor, among others. In the study, Bazunu observes that symbolic and thematic traits run in the selected visuals. Among the symbolic traits, he notes cultural signs, symbols, and images/imageries that are Niger-Delta-events-oriented. These signs, symbols, and images, as singularly and/or collectively shown in the visuals, chronicle the lived experiences, current and existential realities/living conditions, and hopes/aspirations of the people living in the triangulated region of Nigeria, called the Niger Delta. Consequently, Bazunu (2012) christened the selected artworks, "Niger Delta Visuals."

Among these visual chronicles, Edewor's works stand out as emotion-laden and thought-provoking, and his formal register is a reconfiguration of visual elements from historical, traditional sculpture, and modern apparatuses of petroleum exploration in the region. These are tellingly woven to describe and chronicle the nightmarish experiences of the Niger Delta peoples, occasioned by oil exploitation activities. To this end, Niger Delta Visuals, of which Edewor's works are a part, are visual archival materials. As Tobenna Okwuosa puts it "a true work of art is a visual archive; such a piece reveals a people's history and cultural experiences" (2015, 59). In an earlier five-person group show in November 2000, in which Edewor exhibited with Abiodun Olaku, Alex Nwokolo, Fidelis Odogwu, and El-Dragg Okwoju, Beity Interiors, the organizers of "Crossroads" describes him as "a young rebel...wood sculptor who has exhibited remarkable talent in his use of wood to create what he calls 'neo-traditional style'." In this statement, Beity Interiors acknowledges Edewor's budding talent, his departure from the mainstream, and his traditional wood carving styles, through his application of motorized equipment, reconfiguring traditional elements in synchrony with petroleum exploration gadgets

¹ Corresponding Author: Harrie Uvietobor Makpamiekun Bazunu, Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Delta State University, Abraka. Delta State, Nigeria. email: humbazunu@delsu.edu.ng; h.bazunu@gmail.com

to create his unique wood sculptures with brownie, a burnished finishing like tantalizing roasted yam. Maureen Ebulue (2010) writes about Edewor's wood carvings in her curatorial statement, stating that they are sculptural works that have in no doubt bridged the gap between contemporary and traditional art as existent in the African multi-cultural and multi-ethnic continent. Bruce Onobrakpeya's submission about him and his works may explain the rationale for this study: "Dr. Nelson Edewor captured my attention in 1999 when I saw his captivating works published in the Guardian Newspapers announcing his first solo. Since then he has remained astute and enthusiastic in his visual discourse centered on the Niger Delta region. The major feature in his works is his technique in woodcarving and constructions" (2018, 1). Onobrakpeya expresses further that at the annual Harmattan workshops, Agbarha-Otor, Delta State where he has featured actively as a facilitator in the woodcarving section several times, Nelson's creative oeuvre continues to add new formal dimensions to the themes that characterize the annual creative meet (2018).

The submissions of the scholars above underpin the subject of this discourse. Okwuosa (2015), while discussing the paintings of Ben Osaghae, laments that most contemporary Nigerian artists, for economic reasons, engage mundane issues like milkmaids and market scenes instead of existential issues of postcolonial realities. Edewor, unlike most contemporary Nigerian artists, semiotically chronicles postcolonial issues of existential realities by engaging and interrogating real-life experiences (lived and anticipated) of the Niger Delta peoples as influenced by petroleum oil exploitation activities in the region. These make his visuals worth the attention and the focus of this article.

Born in 1970, Nelson Edewor is a product of the practice of the visual arts of the University of Benin where, in 1993, he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Fine and Applied Arts, majoring in Sculpture. In 1999, he received a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree in Sculpture from this same institution. His other postgraduate degrees in Art History (MA 2007 and PhD 2009) were under the tutelage of Professor Osa Dennis Egonwa and Professor Ese Odokuma-Aboderin at the Delta State University, Abraka, where Edewor is currently a professor of Sculpture and Art History (since 2018) in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts. His engagement with the elements of traditional Iphri sculptures of the Niger Delta and petroleum oil exploration dates back to 1997 when he began his postgraduate studies in the studios of the University of Benin (Bazunu 2006b). During the program, he produced a large number of drawings, mortar/concrete, and wood sculptures, for which the region is now known. The Jesse petroleum fire disaster of 1998 was a huge impetus as theme, form, idea/concept, and a finishing element in Edewor's petroleum visuals. The expression, "Edewor's Petroleum Visuals" was coined by Bazunu (2006a) in his Visual Art History Dissertation at the Delta State University, Abraka to describe and classify a group of artworks produced by Nelson Edewor, which thematically and formally interrogates and engages the import of petroleum oil exploration on the people and environment of the Niger Delta. In the dissertation, Bazunu discusses the formal and material elements, thematic focus, and stylistic inclination of Nelson Edewor's drawings and sculptures. Having viewed, assessed, and analyzed Edewor's visuals, the living condition of the Niger Delta peoples, and the environment, Bazunu (2006a) concludes that the petroleum exploration activities in the region were entirely exploitative. Writing the introduction of Edewor's first solo exhibition, Jerry Olopete describes him as someone "who knows it feels it" (1999). In essence, Olopete sees Edewor's expressions as first-hand information from an insider. Therefore, the visuals are authentic. Olopete further says that as a contemporary artist who is aware of the challenges of the Niger Delta, Edewor, while drawing sustenance and inspiration from his roots (Isoko art), developed and brought into a concrete existence "a new language" to solve his artistic problems (1999).

Edewor's visuals' thematic focus is oil exploitation, especially the catastrophic and devastating aspects as it relates to life in both oil-bearing/host and oil-imparted communities of the Niger Delta. Bruce Onobrakpeya's painting *Smoke from the Broken Pipe Series*, 1998–1999,

references the political angle as it shows the mortal extreme to which the Nigerian government is willing to go on oil issues and protests, to keep the Niger Delta people silent. George Osodi photographically captured real-life experiences of the nightmarish conditions, a function of oil exploitation, in the Niger Delta. Some of his titles include *Ogoni Oil Spill*, 2006; *Christmas Tree II*, 2007, *Abandoned Flow Station*, 2007; and *Delta Conflict*, 2004. Edewor's visuals tell these and many more with two- and three-dimensional artists' impressions. In formal representation, the identifiable elements in Nelson Edewor's drawings and sculptures are largely geometric, tubular, and cylindrical. Other elements include linear incisions and scarifications; projections and protuberances; recessions and depressions; highlights and highpoints; voids, cavities, and spaces. These elements also generally ornament traditional Niger Delta sculptures, especially Iphri, a symbol for aggression and social control, which formerly dominated the Niger Delta visual-cultural, spiritual, and religious space (Foss 1975; 2004; Ikpama 2004; Diakparomre 2009; Clarke, n.d.). These, either singularly or collectively employed, accentuate and define the contours of forms and are deployed advantageously in Edewor's visuals. As a social control mechanism, Clarke (n.d.) opines that Iphri is employed as a deterrent against urban violence, and Diakparomre (2009) concurs that it is reputed to create communal harmony and maintain peaceful social relationships in traditional Urhobo society.

Style and Developmental Trajectory

Every artist has a developmental pattern of moving from the general to the specific. Edewor's pattern is not much different. He has engaged visual formalization with clay resulting in realistic, abstract, and stylized terracotta pieces. From scrap metal and machinery parts, interesting and expressive abstract sculptures have emerged from Edewor's interrogation of materials. He has produced many sculptures that are commissioned by clients, and works that are not commercially induced but triggered by environmental forces around him. These we call works of self-expression. The stylistic leaning of his commissioned works is often a function of the taste of his commissioners. When he is given a photograph and asked to produce a commemorative sculpture, he is restricted to realism. He was once commissioned by Mr. Albert Esiri of the Turf Abraka Club to produce a bull for his club. Edewor's stylistic response was also realism. His works of self-expression, which are the focus of this paper, are influenced by his feelings, society's input, and the statement he desires to make about the Niger Delta society. In making his visual statement on the Niger Delta peoples' experiences, he picked traditional visual registers that the people easily identify with, and familiar modern forms from oil exploration equipment that have become domesticated in the region and imprinted on the peoples' psyche. This led to the nomenclature for his style that has oscillated between "trado-modernity" and "neo-traditionality." He is eventually more comfortable with the stylistic nomenclature, "neo-traditional."

Stylistically, Nelson Edewor started his formal handling with realism as shown in his 1993 sculpture titled *Ogbu* (Warlord), Figure 1. This sculpture, depicting a traditional Isoko warrior in action, was executed using the direct-cement modeling approach at the University of Benin. It was at that time the climax of his creative prowess, his undergraduate Special Project. A warlord is called *Ogbu* in the Isoko and Urhobo language, a military general in an English language equivalent. In this figure, aggression and poise for an attack and/or defense are shown. The realistic human figure bears a machete, which in the Niger Delta region, apart from being an implement for farming, is associated with aggression, war, and personal protection (Edewor 2014). The machete, therefore, as a security index for both food and self-preservation, is presented as a force (that bears the aggression) to be reckoned with in this sculpture. The figure seems to express the popular saying in the region about the Isoko people: "*Isoko tol'opia!*" meaning, "Isoko man, arm yourself with a machete!" The *Ogbu* is perhaps Edewor's realistic depiction of Iphri, a "statue of male aggression" (Foss 2004), and social control and communal harmony (Clarke, n.d.; Diakparomre 2009) among the Isoko, Ijo, and Urhobo people of the Niger Delta.



Figure 1: Nelson Edewor, 1993. *Ogbu*. Mortar/Concrete, 215cm high, University of Benin, Ekehuan Campus, Benin City
Source: Bazunu

During Edewor's postgraduate program, 1997 to 1999, his earliest presentation of form and material was traditional, and the medium was wood, as evident in *A Hungry Man* (Figure 2). This three-dimensional form is a product of the glyptic approach to sculpture. As suggested by the sculpture's frame, it was carved out of a straight piece of wood and bears a machete like *Ogbu* in Figure 1. The figure is presented with downcast eyes on an oval head atop a cylindrical neck, and a flat chest, indicative of breasts without nipples. It also has a flat abdomen and a pair of hands fallen on both sides of the body. The figure's right-hand bears a machete that seems buried in its textured but drape-less wrapper. This act of sticking the machete to the figure's body is a pointer to helplessness, an inability to lift the weapon/tool for defense or attack, and subsistence. Everything about this sculpture points downwards, making it look like the letter "I" with no room for projections, dynamics, and sufficient spatial relations. The flat abdomen is indexical of hunger and starvation. While Figure 1 appears ready to strike or defend itself against an assailant, its machete-bearing counterpart, Figure 2 seems overwhelmed or inundated by hegemonic forces beyond its control such that it could not so much as raise its arm. The hegemonic forces here mentioned are the sculptor's tools that in the course of creation did not shape and liberate the sculpture for sufficient spatial relations but confines it to a rigid straight log. These tools, as hegemonic forces, in reality represent the Nigerian government's policies, actions, and inactions that have consistently milked the Niger Delta of its natural resources and keep the region perpetually impoverished. The hungry man, therefore, longs to be free from the forces that are a huge burden on his back.



Figure 2: Nelson Edewor, 1997. *A Hungry Man*, Wood (Ebony). Artist collection
Source: Bazunu

Still, with the direct-cement modeling approach, Edewor's stylistic tendency progressed in his 1997 *Burden is Our Reward* (Figure 3) to incorporate traditional elements such as linear scarifications, protuberances, and cylindrical pipes, barrels, and tubular forms of oil exploitation activities in the region. Of Edewor's stylistic approach, Ellis Erimona, writing a foreword to Edewor's first solo exhibition, held in 1999 on the Ekehuan Campus of the University of Benin and titled "Nightmare at Noon," relates the visuals to "our native past and the present familiar industrial forms" (1999). Corroborating this, Abel Diakparomre in a foreword to another of Edewor's solo exhibitions titled "Totalities" states that "it is simultaneously traditional and modern; and that this approach satisfies the position of functionalist and structuralist theorists in the visual arts" (2010, 4). The submissions of the two scholars above find a resting place in "trado-modernity" and "neo-traditionality."

The visual *Burden is Our Reward* is presented as four barrels, all connected, with one representing the pelvis from which the lower, tubular arms project, and these, seemingly, keep the figure in motion. The other barrel is in place of the thorax/shoulders, from which the hands are forged. The last two barrels rest on the first two in a manner that suggests pressure, and are supported by a hemispherical form that takes the place of the head. Linear scarification runs from the head and across the barrels and seems to mark each barrel in two equal halves. Apart from the traditional *akpusi*, which delineates the figure in two halves, all other elements presented in this sculpture (barrels, pipes, cylinders, and spheres) are modern and oil-oriented. The artist opines in this sculpture that the totality of the modern Niger Delta man is oil-suffused—he lives oil, thinks oil, sees oil, acts, and touches the oil. The oil and gas that were supposed to bring the Niger Delta people development has brought them woes, and the people are under excruciating burden as a result of oil exploitation activities in the region. Olopete (1999) says that the story is a calamity for the people of the Niger Delta region and that the land once pregnant with fertility has given birth to barrenness. Bazunu compares Edewor's *Burden is Our Reward* to the "hunchbacks of Oba Market" in Benin City (2012). They were popularly

called “any work?” in the 1970s and early 1980s. Before the advent of wheelbarrow boys, it was these hunchbacks who daily conveyed on their backs heavy (between 30 and 65kg) sacks of different goods like garri, rice, beans, or onions from one shop to another or from shops to motor parks. Over the years, these men became bowed and curved like hunchbacks, even while standing erect. Although they were paid for their services, they used to be easily provoked. One does not recall seeing them smile. It appeared as if they carried the burden and sufferings of the entire market, while sellers and shoppers smiled home with more money and goods respectively. Seen through the above prism, the region from whose “sweat” Nigeria prospers appears the least developed. She has become the hunchback of the nation. She suffers while her oil becomes a coin. On the one side, it brightens the country’s image economically and swells the pockets of bureaucrats; on the other, it darkens the life experiences of people in the region and marginalizes them. Perhaps this necessitated Ogaga Ifowodo’s query in his poem *The Pipes War*, “Can anyone think of the Niger Delta and not feel an ache in his heart?” (2005, 52). As a result of this burden that has become the reward of the Niger Delta people, there have been numerous cases of violence, protests, unemployment, and youths’ restiveness in the region. Allwell Ome-Egeonu and Paul Kinikanwo Samuel (2014), blame these on oil multinational companies and government concerning environmental protection and a failure on the multinational companies to create local employment as well as support local entrepreneurship.



Figure 3: Nelson Edewor, 1997, *Burden is Our Reward*. Mortar/Concrete, 79 x 137 x 97cm,
University of Benin, Ekehuan Campus, Benin City
Source: Bazunu

Stylistically, therefore, Edewor’s visuals can be further classified as “neo-traditional” since they are a representation of traditional forms in a hybrid format or a reconfiguration of traditionality and modernity in concept, forms, and handling. Some of his other sculptures maintain technical and mechanical stances as they perceptibly demonstrate and express pippy assemblages, barrels, and geometrification associated with petroleum exploration, as expressed in *Burden is our Reward*, *Giant Strides* (Figure 6), *On My Honour* (Figure 9), and *Enigmatic Leader* (Figure 12). These visuals cannot, therefore, be said to be entirely traditional as they represent traditional forms with modern handling. Swallowed up in stylistic modernity, handling, and interpretation, Edewor’s formally reconfigured sculptures appear mechanical and robotized; it seems as if the moment their (the visuals’) joints are greased, a movement will follow, notes Bazunu (2006a).

Since 1999, Edewor has participated in over forty art exhibitions and his body of works has grown steadily. Virtually any material that can be found in and around the Niger Delta environment can be seen in his visuals either as main media for the works or embellishments to enhance visual appeal. Edewor (2016) in “Ibie’ka (Ideographs)” observes that formal discourses through a wide range of media explorations in wood, mortar, bronze, rope weaving, aluminum plates, and other forms of fiber tapestries have developed a stylistic trend that is undeniably original. About the originality of his style, he confirms that its formalism is derived from the synthesis of *Ivri* traditional corpus of Isoko/Urhobo cultures in Delta state and pipes synonymous with the petroleum industry (2016).

New Images and Meanings

Recently, in 2016, Edewor developed a set of ideographs that he called “Ibie’ka,” and which he believes would help viewers in understanding both his visuals and the experiences of the Niger Delta peoples, especially as they relate to petroleum oil exploration and the fallouts. He believes that his studio initiative draws inspiration from practices associated with past African traditions where sign communications were popularly accepted and entrenched in social communication (Edewor 2016). To this end, he made references to Bruce Onobrakpeya’s earlier developed *Ibiebe* (alphabets and ideographs) of the Urhobo, *Uli*, and *Insibidi* visual symbols of the Igbo culture and Ekoi of Cross River State. In composing Ibie’ka signs, Edewor notes that he bore in mind the objective of the signs, and the different fabrics of the Niger Delta environment concerning oil exploitation. He also mentions that these include the human society and its socialization, the physical environment with petroleum oil exploitation, and the effects and prevalent vices resulting from unwholesome oil exploitative activities (Edewor 2016).

Cultural and Regional Semiotic Underpinnings

To fully understand the meanings in Edewor’s visuals, picturing the artworks against the cultural/regional semiotic underpinnings is of great assistance. The Niger Delta people are very hospitable, especially the Urhobo, Isoko, and Ijo. To a guest, a host would customarily present a bottle of hot drink (alcohol) and a plate of kola nuts accompanied with money, to “wedge” the kola nuts that they may not “roll-off” from the plate. Harrie Bazunu’s 2007 installation representation of the Niger Delta peoples’ hospitality, titled *Wekobetcha* (You’re Welcome), (Figure 4) helps us understand this better. In *Wekobetcha*, the visible items include two pieces of kola nuts, two pieces of bitter kola (the oval shapes), a N20:00 (twenty naira) bill, a N50:00 (fifty naira) bill, two coins of N1:00 (one naira), and five coins of 50k (fifty kobo) denomination, all well-presented on an open palm.

The hand symbolically represents the host who receives the guests to his house; consequently, he makes the presentation. While the host sits, it is his appointed *Otota* (Urhobo for spokesman) who, traditionally, presents the offerings to the guest(s). From this presentation, it is possible to reconstruct the size of the host’s family, and the likely population of his guest(s). The way each item stands out in the composition tells viewers the different people who likely made contributions to the installation before the guests. The host presented the fifty naira note to “wedge” the kola nuts, and the twenty naira bill accompanying the kola nuts is, traditionally, and specifically for the *Okpako* (Urhobo for most senior person) in his guests’ entourage who will do the honors (task) of breaking the kola nuts. By this singular sign, the host identifies that his visitor is not a single individual, but a group of persons, an entourage, who is led by a senior. Individual members of the host’s family/household would also add their financial support to the presentation to welcome the guests properly. In this case, the two one naira coins in the composition are probably dropped by his two wives, indicating that the host’s family is polygamous. The host’s four children are likely the contributors of four out of the five available fifty kobo coins, and the last of the fifty kobo coins is usually dropped by the

spokesman before the guests would receive their offerings. In some cases, food and water are also presented after the kola nuts and drinks may have been consumed. This is typical Niger Delta hospitality, to make guests comfortable.



Figure 4: Harrie Bazunu, 2007, *Wekobetcha (You're Welcome)*.
Installation: Terra Cotta, Old Naira-Notes, and Coins
Source: Bazunu

To show the hospitality and accommodating spirit of the Niger Delta people, Edewor titled one of his 2003 Material Suggestive forms sculptures "The Hand That Giveth." In the sculpture, he describes them as open-handed, open-minded, welcoming, and accommodating. Among the Isoko and Urhobo people of the Niger Delta, there is a proverb that goes thus: "one, who brings kola nut, brings life...and that kola nut is not to be eaten in a hurry." By implication, a guest is not expected to live his/her life in a hurry. Consequently, he/she is often offered a seat, to relax and enjoy his/her life in the comfort and hospitality provided by the host when presented with kola nuts. In April 2010, under the canopy of e-zzi Gallery in the Twin Oil-City of Effurun and Warri, Edewor had a solo exhibition titled "Totalities" in which wood sculptures, creative and functional furniture made from teak (*Tectona grandis*), which is found in abundance in the region, were presented to the public. In the functional sculptures *Be my Guest* and *Come Chop* series (Figure 5), he brings to the fore the hospitality and accommodating spirit of the Niger Delta people. These functional wood sculptures, carved with a chain motor-saw and treated with black pigment and fire from his blow torch nozzle (Figure 5b), and later finished with layers of wax, bid guests "welcome," with faces carved on the backrests erected on the stands.



Figure 5a: Nelson Edewor, 2008, *Be My Guest*. Wood (Teak), 92cm, Artist's Collection
Source: Bazunu



Figure 5b: Nelson Edewor at Work, Fire-Treating His Wood Sculpture in His Studio, February 7, 2009
Source: Bazunu

Of note are the leaf/floral and coiling ideographs (Edewor 2016) on the plaque, indicating lush vegetation and the easy/stressless life expected in the Niger Delta. In reality, however, this anticipated paradise life has become a mirage. Edewor's general burnished treatment given to his wood sculpture is an allusion to the effect of the Jesse, and the numerous petroleum fire disasters on the people of the Niger Delta.

Brown and dark patches as a result of fire treatment are quite evident in Edewor's 2010 *Giant Strides* (Figure 6). The wood sculpture, embellished with aluminum plates and fiber strands, stands tall at 307cm. Asbestos, as shown in Figure 6b, displaced corrugated iron sheets in Figure 6c (foreground), which in turn, ousted palm leaf thatches as architectural roofing material in the Niger Delta; these are now old fashioned. Currently, aluminum roofing sheets (Figure 6c background) of various colors and types are the vogue, and cap modern buildings in the region. Strips and off-cuts from these sheets, apart from being picked up from building construction sites, can also be acquired from junk stores in the region. These sheets have become part of the repertoire of materials that define and embellish forms in the sculptures of Edewor. *Giant Strides* would fall under Bazunu's (2006b) Material Suggestive Forms classification. It represents a human figure standing with both legs apart. The various joints of the tree that has transformed into *Giant Strides* have been reconfigured by the artist to represent a navel, pelvis, knees, and ankle joints, which demonstrably identify the sculpture as human. To contextualize the three-dimensional construct, the artist caps the figure with a hat that has come to be identified as a symbol of resource control in the Niger Delta.



Figure 6a: Nelson Edewor, 2010, *Giant Strides*. Wood, Aluminum Plates, Pigments, and Vegetable Fiber, 307cm
Source: Bazunu



Figure 6b: A Building with Broken Asbestos Roof (Old Fashion)
Source: Bazunu



Figure 6c: Foreground, Left: A Building with Rusty Corrugated Iron Roof (Older Fashion);
Background: A Building with Aluminum Roof (Modern)

Source: Bazunu

A closer look at the dominant male figure that often mounts an Iphri carving, a statue for male aggression (Figure 7 and Figure 8), reveals a prominent feature, a hat, which is often overlooked by many scholars of Niger Delta, visual literature and cultural spokespersons, in their formal description and analyses of an Iphri. Perkins Foss (2004, 59) in his description states thus: “In most Iphri carvings a single male figure, sometimes accompanied by two or more supporting figures, sits or stands atop a quadruped whose oversized face is dominated by a complex display of teeth. The body of this beast usually remains plain and unembellished but assumes a variety of shapes: sometimes a reclining cylinder, sometimes a sphere, sometimes a box.” Foss did not mention the “hat” as a feature of Iphri. The hat that now plays a prominent role in male dressing, costume, and fashion in the region, may have originated from Iphri.

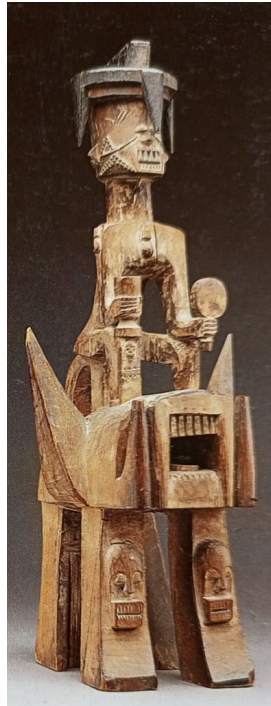


Figure 7: Statue for Male Aggression (*Efiri*) Western Ijo/Ijaw, Wood

Source: Foss 2004, 71



Figure 8: Statue for Male Aggression (Iphri) Urhobo, Wood
 Source: Foss 2004, *Frontispiece*

Edewor, having republicized the hat in his visual and many other works, also did not leave his wood sculptures unembellished (Figures 5a, 6a, 12, and 15). A shred of additional contextual evidence in the *Giant Strides* is the “palm wine tapper’s climbing gear,” which is an instrument associated with great height attainment, safety, and security. In *Giant Strides*, the artist employed the climbing gear to gird up and secure the sculpture’s loins, signifying that the Niger Delta people have resolved to defend themselves, if need be, and to control their God-given natural resources for their profiting. As an instrument of great height attainment, the artist employs the “palm wine tapper’s climbing gear” as an allusion to crude oil refining, that it is no more “rocket science,” because many local refineries, tagged by government as “illegal refineries,” have sprung up and have demonstrably refined crude oil into many petroleum products that have been used to run automobiles and many other applications successfully in the region (see Figure 9, *Kpo Fire*). Edewor uses this medium to redirect the government to look inwards and genuinely invest in Nigerians, adding that local Niger Deltans and many other Nigerians can conveniently and economically handle crude oil refining when an enabling environment is created. Timi Willis Amah, a Bayelsa State artist, photographer, and lecturer at Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, explaining *Kpo Fire* says, “during the fuel scarcity when the Nigeria Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) went on strike, it was the “Kpo Fire” refined petroleum products that usually sustained the Niger Delta fuel consumption. Beyond the strike period, the daily supply of petroleum products to the market was largely inadequate. These inadequacies were often augmented with products from “Kpo Fire” refineries” (2021).



Figure 9: Timi Amah, 2015, *Kpo Fire*. Photography
Source: Amah 2015

On My Honour (Figure 10), made of bronze in 2011, with obvious tubular and cylindrical forms, scarifications, and protrusions, is a representation of the Niger Delta youths and resource control advocates who have resolved to stand for the truth and take responsibility to defend the region, her people, and resources. In Figure 10, these representatives take an oath of office. Of note is the similarity in the pose of the legs in Figures 6a (*Giant Strides*), and 10. The pose is indicative of readiness and a resolve to take a stand for the people. In these sculptures, *On My Honour* and *Giant Strides*, the artist presents a repentant or new breed of selfless representatives as opposed to *My People's Blood for Cake* (Figure 11) in which the representative's goal was personal aggrandizement at the expense of his people and community.



Figure 10: Nelson Edewor, 2011, *On my Honour*. Bronze, 54cm, Artist's Collection
Source: Bazunu



Figure 11: Nelson Edewor, 1998, *My People's Blood for Cake*. Mortar/Concrete, 155cm Height,
University of Benin, Ekehuan Campus Benin City
Source: Bazunu

Like *On My Honour* and *Giant Strides*, the 305cm tall *Enigmatic Leader* stands firm. It is made from wood, metal, calabash, and cloth trimmings. A product of two technical processes, joinery and assemblage, it took two years to complete. The *Enigmatic Leader* has a somewhat rude imposition. It is made of cuboid-shaped, cut-to-size, well-seasoned little pieces of wood attached, like pieces of blocks, with nails, sawdust, and multipurpose adhesives. The joinery process was particularly challenging to the artist, but he patiently waded through and came up with an erect, phallus-looking, towering form, aptly titled *Enigmatic Leader*. Indeed, there is something mysterious about this tantalizing roasted-yam brown seeming sculpture that cannot be eaten. It speaks of leaders who would refuse to be bought over by forces that exploit the Niger Delta, and anti-development of the region. Yet it stands rudely and boldly before the observer like an undaunted phallus that would not yield. The resoluteness, attitudes, and characters of James Ibori, Gordini Darah, and other Niger Delta freedom fighters and Resource Control crusaders are aptly expressed in the *Enigmatic Leader*. There are obvious voids and cavities, deliberately introduced by the artist, to the wall of the sculpture. These appear to have had no significant negative effect on its structure and form. Instead, the holes and perforations enhance its aesthetic appeal by highly reducing the monotony of the walls and massiveness of the form, and interjecting breathing spaces, which give viewers visual access to the sculpture's internal wall, beautifully "parchmentized" with over-lays of colorful pieces of fabric, like the Biblical Joseph's coat of many colors. Similarly, the artist opines in this visual that the several trials and odds against the Niger Delta crusaders appear to have only resulted in increasing their fame and giving them more followers, as expressed in the colorful cloth trimmings surrounding its base, upon which the sculpture stands. A retrospective view of two recent events—the return of a leader from a self-embarked medical exile cum pilgrimage abroad and another who was said to have been incarcerated abroad—may throw more light on where this sculpture directs its attention, and perhaps shows also, who the artist and Niger Delta peoples see as a leader.



Figure 12: Nelson Edewor, 2015-2016, Enigmatic Leader.
Wood, Cloth Trimmings, Calabash, and Pigments 305cm
Source: Bazunu

Devoid of wood and fibers in the making process, one of Edewor's materially thought-provoking sculptures is the simulated stone *Atiboroko* (Figure 13). The 215cm high white simulated marble sculpture expresses a unique pose that is typical of a psychedelic figure, with an introduction of a tilt to the hip and shoulder line and a slight rotation of the head. There are noticeable scarifications on the thorax and abdominal section of the trunk. There is a sure indication of breasts on the upper thorax and a navel on the lower abdomen. The figure's waist down is covered in carefully modeled draperies as its right-hand rests on the lap of its right leg, seemingly surging forward. Its left hand bends at the elbow to touch the right midway. This gives the entire figure a seductive appeal, with a small head, broad and projecting eyebrows, small nose, and a small mouth that is not even open, saying no word, yet speaking so audibly and clearly. With scarifications typical of Iphri sculptures, and predominantly cylindrical forms reminiscence of oil pipes of the Niger Delta, one is not at sea as to where the inspiration for this figure comes from and where the forms are likely directed. With the figure's elegance, seductive posture, and white marble finishing, highlighting its purified, Niger Delta oil-bearing beauty, one may want to ask, "Is this the likes of Stella or Maryam, such irresistible beauties that attract military Generals?" One's response will certainly determine how far one goes on this journey of discovery. Edewor's *Atiboroko* reminds one of Dennison Yibowei's *Delta Lisa* (Figure 14), the once beautiful oil-adorned queen that was snatched away by the forces of hegemony, oligarchy, and dictatorship. One significant difference between *Delta Lisa* and *Atiboroko* is that the former, by the forces aforementioned, has been eaten, battered, and tattered while the latter is yet fresh, green, and untouched.



Figure 13: Nelson Edwor, 2018, *Atiboroko*. Simulated Marble on Wood, 215cm
Source: Bazunu

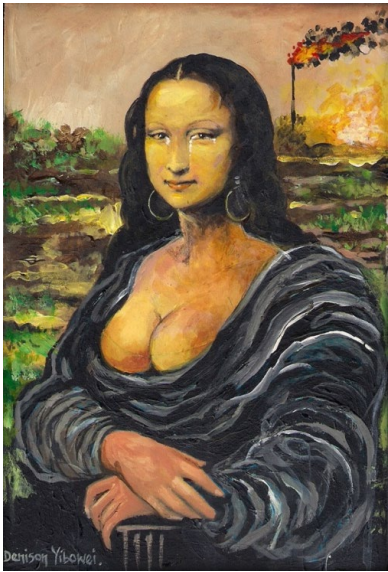


Figure 14: Denison Yibowei, 2009, *Delta Lisa*. Acrylic, Pen, and Ink on Cartridge Paper, 13.97 x 10.16cm,
Artist's Collection, Yenagoa, Bayelsa State
Source: Bazunu

In *Against All Odds* (Figure 15), which spent more than five years (2012–2018) in the production process, Edewor makes another visual statement on leadership. The 300cm high installation sculpture of mixed media, made up predominantly of wood and partly of iron-reinforced fibers, is a visual commentary in form and color of non-pigment origin. The artist here points out that a leader who is upright, truthful, and whose policies are people-oriented will stand tall amongst peers. Though his/her early stage may be rough like the lower half of the installation, made of predominantly brown vegetable fibers, not woven in any particular manner, his/her latter stage will be aesthetically pleasing like the colorful, synthetic fiber tapestries of the upper half, woven in a unified and fluffy manner. *Against all Odds* is a visual statement of hope for the Niger Delta that better days are ahead in the region.



Figure 15: Nelson Edewor, 2012-2018, *Against all Odds*. Mixed Media, 300cm
Source: Bazunu



Figure 16: Nelson Edewor at Work, Weaving the Fiber Tapestry Part of His Sculpture *Against All Odds* in His Studio
Source: Bazunu

Conclusion

The formal reconfiguration of visual elements of Iphri sculptures, local vegetable fibers representing the traditional, and objects associated with petroleum exploitation, such as pipes, gears, building materials, bronze, assorted fibers, and fabric materials standing in for the modern, has resulted in the production of neo-traditional and hybrid contemporary sculptures. This stylistic tendency is typically and originally Nelson Edewor's approach to formal rendition and expressiveness. The sculptures presented in this study show that Nelson Edewor employs objects that easily elicit understanding concerning the context in which they are created and or domesticated. With these objects, he creates a body of visual literature: New Images of the Niger Delta, which are hybrid sculptures that expressively articulate the Niger Delta oil-suffused environment, its people, experiences, culture, and aspirations. This is the direction on which Nelson Edewor's new images of the Niger Delta focus.

Acknowledgments

The manuscript for this publication was prepared with the support of an African Humanities Program (AHP) fellowship, established by the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) and supported financially by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and was originally used as part of a thesis by Bazunu, Harrie U. M., "Semiotic Elements in Selected Artworks on the Niger Delta," Delta State University, Abraka, 2012.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Harrie Uvietobor Makpamiekun Bazunu: Sculptor and Art Historian, Curator of the Bruce Onobrakpeya Art Gallery; Senior Lecturer, Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Faculty of Arts, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

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