

A Sculptural Concept of Iphri as a Symbol of Niger Delta Struggle for Resource Control

OGBA, MARKSON. O.

School of Arts and Design
Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku
marksonogba@gmail.com

Abstract

The imposition of western culture and apparent abandonment of African Justice Value system has no doubt brought about the high level of injustice in our society today. This situation could be corrected by a revival of our cultural values which could be best professed through the medium of art evocation of appropriate traditional institution. Art is still the most effective means of communication since it could be understood by both literate and illiterate persons. This means that the artist uses any medium with which he / she feels can express his / her inner thoughts to create perceptible objects or things. In view of this problem, the research aims at using metals and fibre glass which is a by-product of petroleum to create abstracted sculpture of Iphri. Iphri is a traditional Urhobo sculpture used as a symbol of moderation. When one is very aggressive or too weak to face life challenges, Iphri would be produced for the individual. Iphri is a force that exist in the cosmic world which assists man to take control of his environment in order to succeed in life. Apart from Iphri, there are other naturalistic and semi-naturalistic sculptures produced which are relevant to the research. This project hopes to create awareness about modern usage of direct metal construction because of its importance to modern art / technology. Both metal and fibre glass are closely related to the oil producing industry.

Key words: Iphri, Niger-Delta, Symbol, Sculptural Concept, Resource Control

Introduction

Niger Delta is one of the most important regions in Nigeria. This region is mostly enriched and endured with crude oil, gas and mangrove swamp. In this region is the Urhobo group of people that dwell among others. The entire Niger Delta region has suffered a lot of deprivation due to the abundant presence of petroleum and gas in the area. Their plight is unthinkable and requires serious attention hence this research advances the Urhobo *Iphri* as symbol of struggle for the entire region and a feasible solution that can ameliorate this problem. The researcher is not alone in this view, while venerating the power of Iphri, Bazunu (2009), while reviewing Nelson Edewor's sculptures on Iphri, positioned the sculpture as a symbol of the Niger Delta struggle. While further describing Iphri sculptures which formed the nucleus of Edewor's sculpture, Bazunu posits that *It* is an art form made to moderate the Aggressive impulse of the people, especially male aggression. Bazunu's work is very relevant to this project because it gave an idea about the function and strength of Iphri.

Iphri (Ivwiri in Isoko or Ejiri in Ijaw); "is not a deity or a cult / object, but an idea that is a derivative of socio-religious believe system of the Urhobo, argues that, certain powers exist in the cosmic world which aid man to take control of his world / destiny. It enables him to succeed in life and in his environment (social system)" (Bazunu: 2012). Iphri is a spirit. It has a physical form of appearance. It could be created naturalistic or abstracted depending on the sculptor. It is only through a medium of

a sculptural piece that bears a name of individual (male or female) affiliated to it, through which it bring success, joy, and needs of the individual to make him or her achieve their goals in life. Edewor in Bazunu (2008) wrote that, "I discovered that there was an art form that was prevalent among the Urhobo, Isoko and the Ijaw people. The art form was called Iphri sculptures. The sculpture coincidentally were made to moderate the aggressive impulse of the people, especially male aggression. The figures are produced to tame male aggression". Furthermore, Edewor, as cited in in Bazunu (2008), further enunciates that "if a man is too aggressive in the home and unable to develop himself to meet up with his goals, traditionally, an Iphri would be made for him. This is to help step – down or step-up his aggression and emotional stability. In the pre-colonial days, Iphri was looked up to as a source of strength to the people during the period of Palm oil *Boom*. In order to re-invent Iphri sculpture, the researcher has to translate the visual language of that time to modern visual developmental form by constructing Iphri in metal using pipe like forms similar to the one used in oil refineries or installations.

Modernism has swept away important aspects of Nigerian culture. This was believed by some to have led to many mishaps in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria, especially the deprivation and oppression of the people as a result of the oil exploration politics in the country. In view of these the researcher tries to re-invent Iphri, an Urhobo symbol of moderation by making it contemporarily relevant, both aesthetically, and socially, and to present it as a symbol of struggle for the entire Niger-Delta Region of Nigeria.

To construct Iphri sculpture, using metal and fiber glass as media which is hoped to serve as an enduring art piece in modern time and shall also contribute to the Niger Delta struggle as an image of freedom. To advance the Urhobo Iphri as symbol of struggle for the entire region. To highlight the interrelatedness between sculpture, religion and politics in Africa. Also, the aim of this study is to produce sculptures that will convey the state of Niger Deltans and their suffering caused by oil politics in Nigeria. Furthermore, the construction of Iphri as a symbol of Niger Delta struggle of resource control, will serve as an enduring symbol for coming generations.

Sheet metal which was used to re-invent traditional Iphri forms in this project, has cultural significance to most Nigerian culture since metal has much significance in most religious beliefs of Nigerian people. The research shows that metal sculpture could be used to transmit information to the Niger Delta people in their quest for resource control in the nation's oil politics.

The Necessity of Iphri

In Africa and the world over, sculpture has been so significant that its imprint on civilization and development of societies are apparent. As a result, sculpture is tied with the socio-cultural perception of life. It is also interwoven with religion as could be seen in the creation or composition of forms or objects through ideas and other beliefs which are inherent to culture and religion. Sculpture among the Urhobo, Isoko and Ijaw people serve some important specific purposes and have their own matrix of existence.

It is through sculptural pieces that the history of a people's religion or cultural activities, their rich cultural heritage, and genealogical advancement of existence vice versa were known. Like the Yuroba, the Binis of old, mighty men, warriors, conquerors, kings were represented in bronze heads such as the Oba of Benin, heads of Ooni of Ife and Queen (Queens mother head in Benin used in the world second Black festival for Arts and culture held 1977 in Lagos, Nigeria) prince and princess were also sculpted. In the past, the *Iphri* sculpture was depicted in wood because in the rain forest region, metal or ore was very rare. This medium of wood used in sculpture after some period of time would decay if not well preserved. Also, the nature of the environment in which it is being preserved matters.

In recent times about four decades now the issue of resource control, killing of people fighting for their rights in their own home land and having a fair share in their God given oil wealth has become

a multi-dimensional issue. The issue is centred on enabling the oil producing communities to have at least even 50% (fifty percent) of the crude oil revenue. The Federal government has remained silent and adamant to it. This is a problem between the government of Nigeria, whom the multi-national oil companies represented (contractors to the Federal Government) and the people of the oil communities where the crude oil is produced, agitating for their right of ownership. This oil resource had made Nigeria, the highest oil producer in the African continent. In this conflict, the government is still tied to the apron string of the capitalists. They would not let go of the oil or address the degradation and poverty stricken Niger Delta environment.

The government has turned deaf ear to the demand of the people of the region in their quest for resource control. This resulted in the killing of fore-sighted nine (9) Ogoni men who stood against the Federal Government. "Ken Saro Wiwa was the leader of the Nine Ogoni. They were killed by General Sani Abacha military junta in 1995" (Oronto: 2005). In support of this view is Bazunu (2008), who states that "The Youth in the Niger Delta reacted to the immature act of the evil killing. From that moment till date, the people's minds got suffused with oil matters. The negative impact of oil exploration on the environment has affected the lives of the citizens in the region". This contentious issue which has caused several debates in the National Assembly is of great concern to the researcher. It inspires him to look inwards, to what could be used to depict the scenario of the oil politics in Niger Delta. So that the message could be imbibed by millions of people across the world. This conflict for resource control in the Niger Delta and lack of meaningful infrastructural development of the region, calls for the introduction of Iphri to the problem.

Studio Procedure for production of Iphri in metal

Sketches of various *Iphri* in cubist style were drawn in line with modern oil pipe-line and storage facility. It is also depicted as a form of an industrial oil facility. Some of the sketches were selected and later a Marquette was created which served as the model and guide to aid this project. Below are some of the drawings, which were later combined to arrive at the desired drawing of Iphri (see fig. 1, 2 and 3)

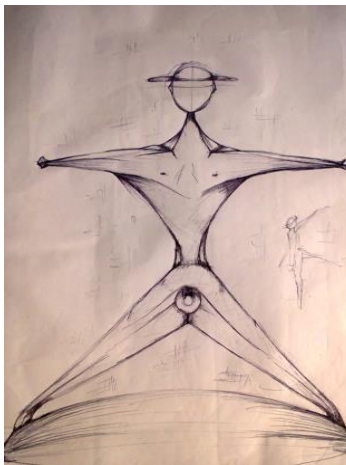


Fig. 1: A sketch of Iphri



Fig. 2: A sketch of Iphri



Fig. 3: A sketch of Iphri



Plate.1: Picture showing armature for the Marquette of Iphri

Plate. 2 Modeling of Work in Clay for Marquette

After the structural frame work, the Marquette was modeled in clay using the earlier drawing as a guide. The Marquette was very useful in the production of a life sized sculpture of Iphri in metal which is the highpoint of this project.

Production of Project in Metal

This is the processing of metal into cylinders of various sizes to symbolize the pipe in oil facilities. These steps are elaborated as follows.

Cutting and Folding of Sheet Metal

The initial step in the construction of metal sculpture and the mapping of dimension through tape must be taken. This include drawing of line of different length and width of each volume, by using universal snips or cutting machine to cut the parts to desirable sizes, which were folded into various sizes as follows:



Plate. 3. Cutting of metal into parts



Plate. 5. Folding of metal plate to produce forms

Hammering Metal Sheet into folds and shapes

Hammering parts into different volumes with the use of vise to clamp the metal plate and using anvil to fold the forms into shapes as shown below;



Plate. 6 Using Hammer and Anvil to shape forms



Plate. 8 Rings fold to achieve circular shape

The metal frame work is joined together with electrical welding machine. The earthy wire is hooked to the metal rod cut in sizes of measurement and electrode from the welding machine is used to fuse the parts formed together. This is shown above.



Plate 10: Cylindrical shapes formed from welding



Plate 11: Welding of parts

This is done by the aid of power welding machine to generate current through the electrode and after it must have been earthen to the work in progress through which the parts are joined together. See the following installation of the parts. The dressing is executed by using filing machine to file off the carbons and rough edges, it make the work appear pleasing and beautiful. The plate below shows a finished metal work. The height of the metal work is 8ft. 5inches.



Plate. 12 The support and feet of the sculpture

Painting of Sculpture

After the installation of the sculpture whether is in shape and balance, it is being painted with red oxide three times after being polished and sand paper to prevent it from rust and from adverse weather condition. The following plates show the effect of colour on the painted work.



Plate 13: Parts of Iphri Sculpture Works Painted with red oxide



Plate 4: Title: Statue of Iphri, Media; metal, Artist; Ogba O. Markson Size: 8fts.5inches, Date: 2014, Photo by the Researcher

Visual Analysis of Statue of Iphri

This metal sculpture symbol of Iphri as an Urhobo historical / cultural heritage of Niger Delta is a force or spirit that assists individuals to control his social system, which includes successful trading or businesses even oil transaction. The abstract sculpture constructed from the head to the base is cylindrical and partly spherical in shape in some part. It contains mass and volume. This sculpture depicted in human form was conceptualized in pipe-like structure.

The smooth surface of the sculpture reflects light from dark brown colour of the surface. The sculpture is divided into three major parts for easy analysis. The head connected by the neck, the thorax (chest) connected to the abdomen and part of the thigh has an elongated upper chamber and wider lower chamber. The third segment is the limb or foot connected to the spherical base is a pipe-like form.

The sculpture is designed, conceptualized and constructed with modern medium of merely sheet metal, used depicting all the forms. The head is cylindrical in shape, and connect to the second chamber by the neck which is also pipe-like form. These consist of the eyes, ears, nose and mouth. Surrounding the head top is a circular shaped hat called *eruh* in Urhobo, a symbol of Urhobo cultural heritage worn by men popularly known as resource control hat. The expression of the face emphasizes aggression, of someone who is volatile and ready to attack. The hat serves as function of locking and releasing of oil.

The second compartments consist of the upper and the wider lower chamber. It is cylindrical in shape and forms called the thorax and abdomen that projected from the waist to the knee region. The wider one that has the shape of a drum is the calico worn by warrior in the 17th and 18th century, this upper and lower wider chamber serve as a reservoir for the storage of crude oil.

Thirdly, the connection between the lower wider chamber to a spherical base is the limb or foot which is pipe-like form. The spherical base which the bulk of the weight stands represented the rig through which an elongated pipe-like structure projected to join the hand that is connected to the shoulder. The elongated pipe-like structure serves as a staff of authority as well a defensive mechanism during war. But is an instrument for drilling crude oil. While the pipe-like structure that connected the shoulder, points towards an enemy, sending a warning sign, the pointed hand serves as an outlet where refined products are distributed to the world. The outlet also represent the point where oil spillage occurred to destroy farm-lands, crops, vegetation aquatic organism that brought about starvation, unemployment, poverty and youth restiveness, etcetera.

The sculpture emphasizes the effect of oil spillage in the Niger Delta region which led to the killing of young school leavers, parents, guardian, pregnant women and the uprising for the advocacy for resource control. This led to the coming together of renowned men and women speakers, kings, men of integrity and well known personalities speaking against the marginalization and lack of sustainable development in the region, agitating for resource control.

Conclusion

This research arose because of the need to create interest in metal usage in studio work which many sculptors shy away from because of the intricacy involved. Also, it is focused on promoting cultural revival and values which are fast dying away as a result of post-modern beliefs, that metal could be used for traditional art in sculpture that would make them durable and lasting. Metal especially steel, is mostly used in storage of petroleum products and vehicle bodies because of its durability and water resistant nature. This is because steel is much stronger than other metals used in homes, workshops and as welding equipment. It is only mild steel that has the kind of quality required for oil exploration. Based on these advantages, mild steel has been preferred for the production of Iphri sculpture, which is the main focus of the research.

This is in consonance with what Read (2000) wrote; "Metal such as brass or bronze, steel, iron and aluminum remain the characteristic materials of our civilization and have decisive virtues for sculpture. They can be cut, welded, molded, cast, polished, the final result has a durability that exceeds all but the hardest stones". Secondly, the cubism nature of the cylindrical movement reflects the facilities used in the drilling and the refining of crude oil. The Niger Delta people are saying that the region should be well developed to benefit oil producing states to meet world standard and gainful employment provided for all indigenes. If they are being treated as second class citizens therefore, that may be the last straw that would break the Camel's back. The reason for the lifted hand of the Iphri is a warning to enemies of the region

Finally, the use of metal is very important in the sculpture studio in this present dispensation because it could be manipulated by any given Sculptor who is ready to take or undergo challenges. The re-invention of Iphri as a symbol of Niger Delta people to seek for more peaceful ways of achieving justice and also moderate the anger of the various Niger Delta militant groups.

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