



A CRITICAL HERMENEUTICAL READING OF BONIFACE OKAFOR

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Introduction

A critical and hermeneutical analysis of an artist seeks to establish the interpretation and understanding of his works assessed within the historical, social, political and cultural ideologies in which he produced them. Boniface Okafor was a major artist in Nigeria who has not been given a critical historical account in the Nigerian art scene. He elicited so much which has not been well rivaled in recent times.

The multifaceted character and complexity of understanding and interpretation of images will lead to the development of various methodological approaches (Adams, 2001). A hermeneutic study of Boniface Okafor's paintings emphasizes "understanding and interpretation" to reveal the multisensory components of his experiences (Hocking, 2019). His lived experiences and historical events in his life reflect the spiritual, mystical, social, political and philosophical themes, content and concepts, that make his paintings unique and deeply engaging. His contemporary views helped him produced artworks with social significance in the struggle against poverty, wars, corruption, religious bigotry, etc.

A hermeneutical study of Boniface Okafor is important because it is the basis of all knowledge pertaining to his artistic contributions of achievements. His biographical outlook historically places him in the context of the world around him. The reviews of the 1966 Nigerian Civil War, the Bigard Memorial Seminary training to become a priest, his academic art training and his relationship with Rosicrucianism, present historical records of how the artist felt in particular places and time.

Biographical Account

Born on 16th March, 1950, a brief biographical account of Boniface Okafor reflects on his humble upbringing in Numan, North and Nigeria, where his artistic talents manifested early in life. By 1966, the political instability in Nigeria had degenerated into a pogrom in the north which was characterized

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by the wanton massacre of Igbo people. Boniface Okafor was caught up in this ugly situation and his academic progress was disrupted.

The eventual full scale war made a lasting impression on the 17 year old Boniface Okafor. In 1969, the human sufferings of the war inspired him to join the Marist Brothers, a Catholic Church Brotherhood that helped the sick and maimed during the war. Following this exposure to humanitarian activities, in 1969, he enlisted to study at the Bigard Major Seminary in Enugu to become a priest of the Catholic Church. By 1973, at a point in his studies, he realized he could no longer pursue the career to become a priest. In December, 1973, he finally left the seminary with Distinction in Theology and Philosophy.

Upon leaving the seminary, art became the only discipline he was in love with. He pursued it vigorously and in 1975, enrolled at the Institute of Management and Technology, Enugu, for a 4-year programme in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, with a specialization in Graphic Design. His remarkable feat in academics, with a Distinction at the end of his studies, earned him an automatic employment as a lecturer at I.M.T in 1980. He later transferred his services, along with a few others, to the Federal Polytechnic, Oko, Anambra State in 1992.

Studio art practice shot Boniface Okafor into the limelight as a skilled and talented graphic artist. His drive for artistic perfection extended beyond graphic design. From 1982, he began to reproduce his deepest thoughts and emotions into visual forms. His paintings became self-reflective and explored concepts on the social, cultural, political and philosophical ideologies that were significant in his life. His visual media, packed with surreal imageries, resonated a deep sense of a mystical search with oneness with God.

In 1985, Boniface Okafor had his first sole art exhibition at the National Museum, Lagos titled ***The Grain of Corn***, with an accompanying brochure with the same title. This is also the title of one of his notable paintings that reflected a unique concept for personal, social and universal rebirth. Boniface Okafor constantly participated in group exhibitions, notably the Aka Circle of Exhibiting Artists, from 1986-2000. The collaborative efforts of the 13 artists accomplished a shared goal of achieving a greater dedication, expressiveness, a sense of expansionism, experimentation and innovations.

Many of Boniface Okafor's works are indicative of a personalised narrative and style, generating visual imageries which permit the audience to have a glimpse of the artist's inner visions. His concern for societal values and being at one with the God within, strengthened his style, personal convictions and philosophical intuition. He was able to bring together the traditional and contemporary for a unique multisensory experience that the viewing audience could relate with.

A hermeneutic study of the works of Boniface Okafor reveals the connection between modernity and traditions, the real and surreal, a gateway into the sacred, mystical and secular dynamics that offers the viewer a different perspective on art appreciation, criticism and scholarship.

On 29th August, 2002, Boniface Okafor was shot and killed by unknown assailants bringing to an end the artistic and creative endeavours of a great artist who contributed his own quota to the progress of Nigerian contemporary art.

Hermeneutic Analyses of Some of his Paintings

A hermeneutic study of an artist seeks to establish the interpretation and understanding of the artist's works assessed within the historical, social, political and cultural ideologies in which he produced them. The creativity of the artist and art creation in general, his perceptions and lived-experiences within these sphere "can be considered in line with highly descriptive text, metaphors and analogies that can articulate experience".

This overview will use a hermeneutic orientation towards generating meanings and interpretations of selected paintings by Boniface Okafor. This focus generates a historical and descriptive method based on an interpretative analysis (Lavery, 2003). The interpretative approach on form and content using "the principles of semiotics", examines his themes, concepts, signs and symbols observable in the icons he used. (Adams, 2001.)

A study of Boniface Okafor's paintings is an attempt based on different interpretative approaches on form and content using the principles of semiotics. It examines and analyses his themes, concepts and form. The signs and symbols observable in the icons used by the artist reflects and defines his perspective on art.



Plate 1: *On the way to Babel*, Oil on Board, Boniface Okafor, 1982

On the way to Babel, 1982, is a painting in support of Nigeria's war Against Apartheid in South Africa. This is resistance art against oppression and injustice. Against the backdrop of the artist's political responsibility, Apartheid became a location of power within which resistance emerged. Taking a cue from his traditional, spiritual and mystical background, Boniface Okafor unravels his reflections on a world order that has derailed and degenerated into chaos, hate, racial bigotry and religious intolerance (Okafor, 1982). The elaborate and sophistication of *On the Way to Babel* characterizes Boniface Okafor's use of icons and images to reconnect with universal truth, justice and love as foundations for peace. The Rose Flower, Dove, Bob Marley, the Buddha, Christ, Ikenga, are all icons explored by the artist for social emancipation in its historical and contemporary contexts capturing the confusion emanating from intolerance.



Plate 2: *The Grain of Corn*, Oli on Board, Boniface Okafor, 1985

The Grain of Corn, 1985, is a surreal scene with a great mystical and spiritual power revealing some of the mysteries of life, death and regeneration for a personal rebirth and growth. The title of this painting is the same for the solo exhibition of the artist in 1985, at the then British Council, Enugu, and the British Council, Enugu, and the National Museum Lagos. The accompanying booklet titled *The Grain of Corn Thoughts and Images*, published by the artist in 1985, focused attention on a number of national and international issues (Okafor, 1985). The complex code of refined and elaborate images placed at certain angles provide talking points that help appreciate the arrangements in its entirety.



Plate 3: *To the Unknown Chief*, Oil on Board, 23 x 30cm, Boniface Okafor 1985

To the Unknown Chief, 1985, depicts a lost golden age of Igbo history where values were enforced for communal wellbeing. Members of the society who proved themselves worthy were conferred with chieftaincy titles. In the painting, the paraphernalia of office is established: the Ikenga, Ofo, Umuoku (Alter), Red cap with eagle feather, are all symbols that solidify the value system establishing structural frameworks for a positive social order. In this painting, traditional themes in folklore, history and religion, gives a creative impetus and instinct” to an artist like Boniface Okafor in his art practice. In this painting, traditional themes in folklore, history and religion, gives a creative impetus and instinct” to an artist like Boniface Okafor in his art practice. This buttresses the fact that he shares the same basic instinct in his

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dynamic imagination and vision resonating his Igbo cultural background (Nwala, 2001).



Plate 4: *His are the times and Ages*, Oil on Board, 90 x 60.5cm,
Boniface Okafor 1996

- *His are the times and Ages*, 1996, communicates a spiritual upliftment which the artist sought for.
- *Champagne for the Masses and Remake the World*, are some of the imageries that are emblematic of the social degradation of the Nigerian society which has degenerated into a political corruption that has truncated democratic ideals and progress for Nigeria.

Conclusion

A hermeneutic analyses of Boniface Okafor's paintings pertains to his deeply personal identity and narrative that projects a new dimension in visual representation. His works present many independent ideas from the mystical, social, political, to cultural aesthetics. The historical developments that shaped his artistic endeavours, instilled in him values across time and space. With a simple technique of oil paint on board, Boniface Okafor's most outstanding works reveal an artistic journey that reflects his innermost visions.

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