Bruce Onobrakpeya
Nigeria's Master Printmaker
INTRODUCTION

A distinguished British Scholar once wrote, a propos of contemporary African painters and printmakers, "They are Africans and they are artists, but they are not African artists." Impling that the only true African art is traditional African sculpture. Fortunately, Africa is possessed of too much vitality to be bound by such quibblings. Nigerian print-maker Bruce Onobrakpeya symbolizes the creative genius that abounds in Africa but which has, until recently, been overshadowed by this pre-occupation with traditional African sculpture. It is now time for modern African artists in Africa to receive their due.

The art of Bruce Onobrakpeya first caught my attention in 1972. At that time his prints were known only to a small circle of aficionados. Since then, that circle has grown to encompass museums, galleries, private collectors--even Chiefs of State--in lands far beyond his native Nigeria. Now it is my pleasure to introduce this gracious, talented artist to an even wider audience.

This small book will, I hope, give readers an insight into one of Africa's finest artists at the height of his career. For the present it must suffice, awaiting the compilation of a complete, definitive account of his enormous contributions to Africa and its artistic heritage.

Wendy Lawrence, who wrote the essay which follows, has been a keen observer of Bruce Onobrakpeya's career since her teaching days at the University of Lagos. She has lectured extensively on African art and culture and written review articles for African Arts magazine. Her admiration and respect for Onobrakpeya's work have infected all who have helped put this book together.

Special thanks must be extended to the following people:

Sherman Delsol, who photographs have captured the richness of Onobrakpeya's prints;
Scott Barkley and Controlled Media, who supervised the layout and printing;
All the collectors who so graciously allowed their prints to be photographed;
And the many people who over the years have encouraged Bruce Onobrakpeya and those who have helped make his works known to an ever-growing number of admirers.

Robert Barde
The Best of Africa
Toronto, Canada
April 1978

Introduction to the Web version of Bruce Onobrakpeya

Bruce Onobrakpeya: Nigeria's Master Printmaker was first printed in 1978. It was a cooperative effort involving the artist, the gallery, and a number of people who cared deeply about Africa and about African art. Three of those people were my partners in The Best of Africa--Susan and George Barkley, and Barbara Barde. During its brief life (1976-83), The Best of Africa brought many African artists and their work to North America, giving Canadians and Americans what was often their first opportunities to meet these artists and view their works. Susan, George, and Barbara were as instrumental as I in making that happen.

The web version is slightly different from the original, print edition. Although I have scanned all of the original text, the original photographs and colour separations are not available now, and scanning the printed pages has, in some cases, proven unsatisfactory. In several instances I have substituted other versions of the same design for a particular print so that at least the subject matter referred to in the text can be appreciated.

Bob Barde, Academic Coordinator
Institute of Business and Economic Research
University of California, Berkeley
May 2003

Cover: "Emedjo" 11/12 1974. Deep Etching; Collection of Ellen McIntosh
Bruce Onobrakpeya: The Spirit in Ascent

by Wendy Lawrence

“Two hands a man has.” So states a proverb of the Urhobo people of Nigeria, acknowledging the two strands, one from either parent, which wind together to create each individual. Poet John Pepper Clark borrowed the saying in 1965 to sum up in metaphor the situation of the artist in contemporary Africa, where traditional roots remain firmly embedded, yet the influence of Western culture has also taken hold: “I sometimes wonder what in my make-up is ‘traditional’ and ‘native’, and what ‘derived’ and ‘modern’. ‘Far from despairing, Clark went on to explain that the ‘colonial’ had taken “possession of attributes that the master had held as his distinctive marks and emblems”. The implication is clear - when used judiciously, imported means of artistic expression can be claimed and fashioned to serve African themes. Artists in Africa today may choose the best from their own heritage, fuse it with the best from Europe, and rejoice in the result: transcendent works that go forward, speaking with an entirely new voice to generations of the present and future.

While Clark employed language to announce his decision in favour of cultural synthesis, some of his fellow artists were making an equally definite aesthetic statement in visual terms. One of the leaders among these graphic artists was Bruce Onobrakpeya.

Onobrakpeya must have been long familiar with the proverb quoted by his friend, since he was born in 1932 into an Urhobo family at Agbara-Otor, a town in what is now Nigeria’s Bendel State, straddling the delta of the Niger River. His father was a carver, and, true to local custom, Onobrakpeya took early to the tools of his father’s craft. The lush natural surroundings of the district were also to leave an indelible impression on his imagination: the delta is a region where fertile reddish soil brings forth dense vegetation that remains green the year round; rivers and smaller streams cut their way to the sea; and intense sunlight pierces through an atmosphere of continual heat and humidity. In the villages, farming and fishing are the economic mainstays of a peasant way of life.

Like many people of his ethnic background, Onobrakpeya was raised as a Christian, yet also had the old faith passed down to him orally, through myths and legends. Far from leaving him stranded between contradictory beliefs, this mingled inheritance allowed him the opportunity to investigate and use motifs from two distinct traditions, which managed to live side by side in peaceful coexistence. As for the religious systems themselves, they are perhaps less distant from each other than one would expect: they share the concept of a rather remote deity of creation who is felt in the world through the energies expressed in nature and in human achievement. It could be argued that Christianity lays its emphasis on the divine spark in the person of Jesus as an ideal of human behaviour, while the tendency of the African tradition is to elaborate on the forces of nature as well as celebrating human powers. Effecting a proper balance between the natural, supernatural and the human is thus a major concern in African religious practice, and ancestors play a role as figures mediating between these realms. Furthermore, in a setting where harvesting crops and fish is essential to survival, the elemental spirits of land and water understandably hold special sway.

But the Urhobo tradition was not the only artistic influence during Onobrakpeya’s youth: his family moved to Benin City, so that, at a young age, he came into contact with other cultural streams. As the seat of the great Edo empire, Benin had a proud history of accomplishments in art and commerce. Since its hegemony once stretched as far as Lagos, Benin has had ready access to textiles and other goods from this area to the west. Onobrakpeya seems to have developed a particular affection for the Yoruba resist-dye cloth known as adire, famous for its deep indigo blue colour and ever-changing design patterns. But more important still was Benin’s own cultural heritage, especially the distinctive and internationally admired art produced over the centuries by bronze casters attached to the king’s court. Whether in three-dimensional sculptured figures or in relief plaques, the Benin bronzes are recognized far and wide as masterpieces of idealized naturalism. Through such images are those of the obas, their chiefs, wives, and royal leopards, the artists in bronze exulted the heroic qualities associated with nobility - courage, power, beauty, and proximity to the divine.

Once Onobrakpeya had completed his secondary schooling, he took up teaching, first in Benin and then in neighbouring Ondo. Upon deciding to further his studies in art, he travelled north in 1957 to Zaria, site of the Nigerian College of Technology, which has since become the Ahmadu Bello University. The effects of this change of scene were deep and lasting. Educationally, he was exposed to the concepts of art history, as well as to practical studio work in a wide range of materials and styles. Not only that, but the external environment was also a complete departure from his home territory to the south. In Zaria, trees were rare and thus stood out starkly against the bleached land, as did such other strikingly tall forms as the huge anthills. Even the architecture was different: the Arabic-influenced buildings were low, flat-topped, and often decorated with painted designs and small turrets. Onobrakpeya responded to all of these new experiences with curiosity, welcoming the contrasts. Later, some of his prints would explore the natural forms undergirding the northern vistas: at the centre of Erhele (Plate 11) for instance, he has placed an abstract form reminiscent of a gnarled tree: around it are arranged stylized mound shapes suggested by giant anthills, together with small motifs typical of northern
ornamentation. As often happens to those who travel, Onobrakpeya developed an appreciation of the achievements of diverse cultures without discarding his own strong regional and ethnic identification.

The decade between 1955 and 1965 was a time of great excitement in Nigeria, as the country moved into its independence after long years of colonial rule. Members of the new generation of intellectuals - schooled in European thought, yet intensely aware of the contribution of African civilizations - were engaged in a sophisticated aesthetic debate about the role of the contemporary artist in this transformed society. One such circle - including such writers as Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe, composer Akin Euba, and painters like Uche Okeke and Demas Nwokog - among others - was intent on establishing a high standard of practice and criticism in all the arts. The new journal Black Orpheus contained original work and reviews by these writers and artists, together with certain visiting expatriates who were sympathetically attuned to the wave of creativity. In Ibadan, the Mbari Club was founded, and became a centre for exhibitions, discussions, and publications. Individual energies were unleashed. Contact with like-minded peers ensured the new interpreters of stimulation and support, and the fact that these colleagues came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds seemed not to matter. In 1964, a Society of Nigerian Artists was launched, with Onobrakpeya one of its organizers.

In this post-Independence era, Onobrakpeya like other artists was faced with several options for his future career. He could choose the route of the traditional craftsman, producing works out of set conventions according to the dictates of patrons; he could decide to become a commercial illustrator in the expanding market of advertising; or he could seek to become a new sort of artist, channelling his own imaginative impulses into a highly personal vision. Onobrakpeya took the last of these alternatives. Even here, however, he did not make an exclusive choice: to this day, he does accept commissions that suit his inclinations, and he has accepted invitations to illustrate publications. (see Plates 1 and 2.) About these we will only note briefly that his book illustrations are a means of broadening the popular appeal of African authors writing in English; while they are collaborative efforts involving some compromise, these works can be viewed as another kind of commitment to his colleagues in creative pursuits.

Onobrakpeya, then, has moved closer to a Western model of the artist's role, where a great deal of emphasis is placed on the relationship between the artist and the products of his labour. But must the choice of such a role necessarily bring with it a corresponding diminution of African aesthetic concepts? Not at all. The artist may still act out of the knowledge that obligations are due from the objects of his creation and the worlds, both natural and supernatural, which are their sources of inspiration. Indeed, one of the best recommendations of Onobrakpeya's work is its ability to encompass so much of the teeming energies of Africa. His graphic representations consistently succeed in capturing the forces that pulse through the phenomena of nature, human endeavours, and divine activity.

How did Onobrakpeya come to attain the stature which he now commands as an artist? Like others before him, he went through a long period of training in order to develop the technical capabilities which his challenging ideas were to require. According to his own accounts, he was first introduced to the graphic method of intaglio at a print workshop sponsored by the University of Ibadan and the Mbari Club in the summer of 1963. Dutch professor Ru Van Russem presided as instructor, and returned the next year as well. Onobrakpeya attended both of these sessions, and was prompted to change direction, turning away increasingly from work in oils, drawing, silkscreening, and lino cuts, towards the quite different demands of etching. His invention of a pioneering technique with engraving on epoxy he modestly describes as accidental: in 1967, he imported a press so that he could continue his trials with intaglio - etching with acid on zinc or copper plates. After ruining one plate, he tried to repair it by filling in the unwanted holes and lines with araldite. When he produced a print from the altered plate, he noticed an interesting sculptural quality to it, and he went about exploiting this feature in further experiments.

As he himself has pointed out about his new technique, "Properly speaking, deep etching is not etching at all, it is engraving printed in intaglio rather than the normal relief method . . . A peculiar character of deep etching is that it has three depths which can be inked differently and printed at once, producing low reliefs with subtle or brilliant colours comparable with those of paintings or sculptures." The motorized press that Onobrakpeya has been using since 1976, when he moved into his enlarged Lagos studio, was built by Charles Brand of New York. Its printing format is 30 inches by 50 inches, and it is capable of producing great pressures, thereby eliminating the faults which often occur in prints from hand-turned presses. The printing method is as follows: "Background colours are printed with the help of paper stencils. Then the main plate is inked all over with one colour, usually black. This is then wiped, as in intaglio printing. Small rollers are then used to roll colour onto appropriate areas of the inked block which is now put over the already prepared background (in the printing paper). And the print is rolled off the press. The process is exactly the same as the traditional intaglio printing. The only difference is the bold relief which stands out for easy sectional inking . . . ." Not satisfied with this innovation, Onobrakpeya moved on to the idea of preparing plastocasts from used plates: "The method is the same as the one employed by sculptors: a negative mould is made with plaster of paris, and into it a liquid form of the plaster is poured. It is allowed to set, pulled out and retouched." The result he considers to be a work of art in its own right.

While pioneering with his deep etchings and plastocasts, Onobrakpeya has never lost sight of the virtues of lino cuts. "I noticed that a used lino block has low relief sculptural quality . . . . I mounted a few on hardboards or plywood, painted them with bronze colours; the results were art works of considerable charm. Further experiments showed that several small bits can be joined as in collage to cover large areas and that the method itself is suitable for frieze or large wall design. That is the origin of the bronzed lino relief." Recently, he has been achieving new visual effects from
lino engravings printed on more delicate and fibrous papers. Describing one such effort in 1974, he wrote: "A thin and absorbent Japanese paper is stretched over the surface of the plate. With a small roller, it is depressed into the grooves of the engraving creating low relief effect on the paper over which ink is then rolled. In this type of print, the ink does not touch the engraving at all. The main advantage of this method is that no hard edges are created and colours are very subtle." 6

Clearly, Onobrakpeya has made some distinctive additions to contemporary art through his technical facility. Yet he is no mere technician. What has emerged from the etching processes he perfected in the latter 1960's is a flexible medium which has kept pace with the increasing complexity of his own imaginative demands. With his deep etching method, Onobrakpeya has been able to create works which allow for a singular combination of strong lines and attention to surface texture. His prints of the last few years are his most engrossing precisely because technique has been put to the service of bold investigation, and composition has been inextricably bound up with theme.

The subjects that attract Onobrakpeya's attention are many. It does seem plausible, though, to group them according to a few broad categories: representations of activities from daily life; "catalogues" depicting similar activities performed by different groups; scenes inspired by religious and mythological ideas; and experiments in a more abstract vein, often accompanied by the use of new materials. To date, Onobrakpeya is probably best known for his work in the first of these categories, since it is most accessible to audiences both at home and abroad.

A number of Onobrakpeya's prints seek to record a traditional way of village life in the Niger Delta, even as it is encroached upon by manners and goods from outside. In a work like Edido (Plate 12), for example, he quite deliberately sets out to portray one complete process in the social and economic life of a village, as an onlooker might see it. There is a slight tilt of perspective to the composition, so that the observer seems to be in the river, looking up the bank into the settlement. But an accurate presentation of perspective is not the primary goal of this print, which is organized more around a thematic, the energy in daily cooperative effort carried on in harmony with the natural environment. Water swills around the women washing in the foreground, while the task of the men on the bank requires coordination: "Edido is the chorus to a working song which Urhobo farmers sing while they thresh boiled palm nuts in a large wooden trough called Oko. The picture is based on the memory of life in Oke-Eruvbri, a fertile river valley dotted with many small villages not too far away from the ancient city of Benin."

It is interesting to note Onobrakpeya's reference to memory, since there is a definite flavour of nostalgia to certain of his prints: he is sometimes operating as the chronicler of a cultural scene already passing away. A series on the emotions of women, individual works tracing such everyday happenings as families walking to the farm and market women plaiting hair - in all of these, Onobrakpeya has granted dignity to activities which have nourished and preserved the Urhobo people over many centuries. Nor has he neglected the important traditional festivals. In Emedjo (Cover), lively masked dancers dominate by virtue of their brightly coloured costumes and the actions of their arms which have been captured in mid-gesture.

But while he demonstrates a respect and love for the old ways of the village, Onobrakpeya does not always depict them in idealized terms, cut off from the inroads of both modernity and suffering: Rain and Cry at Otorogba (Plate 13) he calls "an emotional expression of grief at a time of tragedy. It is built around an incident which took place while I was on a visit to my mother's village Otorogba in August 1973. We were roused from a welcome ceremony . . . by a cry of 'Johni wuru!' In a drizzle, the dead body of John supported on a bicycle ambulance by close relatives was being pushed from Ogua Ovie where he died. John's wives and other mourners followed. They beat their breasts and flung their hands over their heads as a sign of deep grief. On the umbrella is an owl, a symbol of witches who are always held responsible for any death.' Here, as in Emedjo, a two-levelled horizontal composition is used, with the procession in the foreground. Although an actual event is being recorded, the gestures and facial expressions of the bereaved are highly stylized, and the body has been given a more decorous bearing than one would have thought possible under the circumstances. Touches like these demonstrate that an over-riding idealization is at work. Its effect is accentuated by the use of a blue wash, which seems to cool the extreme emotions, and also to remove this moment from its particular setting in time. We do not concentrate on individual identities: rather, we contemplate the status of these people as participants in an emblematic drama, the eventual fate of every one of us.

As we have just seen, blue tones can project a sombre mood. But they can also be used to freeze and hold some of the more ephemeral aspects of modern life, as they do in the commemorative adire patterns on which Onobrakpeya frequently seems to be drawing. In Ekrire Krebe (Plate 3), the subject is one of those young men with the latest "hip" look, and the artist's attitude is one of amused tolerance: "This print derives its name from an insect which lives in a cocoon it builds around itself with leaves, small branches of plants, and dried grass. When at rest, this insect withdraws into the cocoon and can lie suspended from a tree with a tiny cord; when it moves, it carries with it, as the saying goes, its entire house. Sometimes I see modern fashion borrowing 'leaves and branches' from this insect. The tendency to bedeck oneself with all sorts of fashionable junk, sometimes carrying one's entire possessions in a pack behind one's back and moving from place to place has become international, and it is in vogue principally with the younger generation. This is the main inspiration behind this print . . . A young man is wearing two sets of eyeglasses, decorating the neck, hands and waist with beads, carvings, bicycle and car spare parts, chains, cowries, ropes, walking stick, manila bangles, and wearing a different shoe on each foot. All these can be very interesting to an observer; the only difficulty is that it can be quite difficult to tell from appearance when a person so dressed is genuinely mad." One can gather from this that Onobrakpeya enjoys what is novel and surprising every bit as much as what has the stamp of tradition.

Onobrakpeya seems to place no restriction on the
subject matter to which he will apply the blue wash. The result is a variety of effects, depending on each individual print. At its simplest, the blue may function as a tribute to the time-honoured indigo dye of many Nigerian fabrics. But in *Abiku Spirit* (Plate 14), the viewer concentrates on the malevolent power of the restless child's spirit which returns from the dead over and over again, tormenting its parents with unfulfilled promise. The figure in this print resembles certain masks, common to the Niger Delta area, whose open mouths threaten to engulf the viewer, and Onobrakpeya has emphasized the spirit's maw here by compositional means, as the principal lines converge on a dark centre. Around the figure are arranged small objects, which may represent talismans warding off the *abiku's* influence. In this case, as in *Rain and Cry at Otorogba*, the effect of the blue wash is to cool down violent emotion.

Onobrakpeya's depictions of traditional life do not always deal in subjects that evoke such strong responses. He has produced some prints which operate quite simply as statements of how things are done, at present, by diverse Nigerian cultural groups. *Studies of Nigerian Musical Instruments* (Plate 4) and *Ekuoregbie* (Plate 5) are indicative of this sort of print, with their clean outlines and light, open composition that leaves the impression of pages from a catalogue. No doubt, the fact that both were designed as postage stamps accounts for the simplicity of their design. About *Studies of Nigerian Musical Instruments*, Onobrakpeya has written: "It is a two-tier composition with a top section made up of a variety of instruments while the bottom section shows people demonstrating their use. . . This print has relied heavily on lines and space to interpret and balance the structure of the various instruments."

For the title of his print showing Nigerians from different ethnic backgrounds, each dressed in the "elegance and dignity" of a traditional style, the artist has selected the Urhobo name meaning "the coming together for a common good". Such a statement indicates that, as usual with Onobrakpeya, we are never far from an aesthetic conception that is fundamentally idealist in nature. It should not surprise us that the "common good" to which Onobrakpeya merely refers in *Ekuoregbie* comes into its own as a conscious subject in *Ominira* (Plate 6). Here, the multiplicity of the catalogue structure is pushed one step further, into a composition similar to the narrative panels common in Benin and Yoruba art. What is presented is an ideal of Nigerian unity. The segments of the panel show people engaged in a variety of activities, while the central and largest frame contains human figures in an attitude of aspiration, arms reaching upward to hold an oval shape. The organizing line is that of an elongated "A", a principal form favoured by the artist, and one which admiringly conveys a human longing for all that ennobles. Meanwhile, the panel as a whole is surrounded by blank space, which has had its whiteness emphasized by paint. As in *Edido*, curved lines create the impression of liquid, swirling around the entire panel in this case. The vision of *Ominira*, then, is of a diverse nation in the throes of political and cultural birth, its human order emerging against surrounding primal waters of chaos.

The elongated "A" is also the primary form in *Builders at Work* (Plate 15), Onobrakpeya's commemoration of the building in Lagos of a Presbyterian Church in an extremely modern Western architectural style. Interestingly, while the title focuses on the men involved in the actual daily task of construction, they are so small and lightly drawn as to be scarcely visible. The print is dominated by the skeleton of the church itself, in whose underlying structure Onobrakpeya has discovered a principle of striving beyond human limitations, toward the divine. The shape that dwarfs the men is the actual frame of the building, but figuratively it suggests a desire to reach above the constraints of this world, and Onobrakpeya has responded to this feeling in the architecture with his own form that expresses aspiration.

I have been implying that the decided strength of composition in this artist's work depends in part on a grasp of the simple forms which lie just below the surface of the world around us. No one is more aware of this than Onobrakpeya himself: "Natural or accidental forms on walls, tables or floors may not mean anything to the ordinary layman until an artist translates them into works of art by removing unnecessary details and emphasizing the interesting ones." Yet it would slight him to discuss his work with reference to its aesthetic preoccupations in isolation from what is a genuine religious impulse. Onobrakpeya's faith is important to his life, and it infuses itself in his work in a variety of ways. His Christian devotion is in evidence in illustrations and murals, some of which have been commissioned by religious institutions. In 1968, he produced sixty illustrations for the Catholic National Catechism in Nigeria, while in 1977, his painting on the life of St. Paul was presented to the Pope on the occasion of his eightieth birthday.

Onobrakpeya's art dealing with religious topics has no single generative source. At times, his intention seems to be the straightforward one of providing his own interpretation of a Biblical incident, such as the spreading of the gospel depicted in *The Lord Is My Shepherd* (Plate 7). In contrast what lies behind *Izobo* (Plates 9-10) is a confrontation with a major metaphysical question: what is the relationship between the human and the divine? Here, supplanting human figures seem to be pleading with masked and remote spirits which coalesce into a single serpentine form. The connection between the two sets of beings, each in its own half of the composition, is tenuous and finally mysterious.

The use of traditional African sources in *Izobo* is also proof that, in spite of his Christian faith, Onobrakpeya still finds nourishment in the religious ideas of his forefathers. In 1973, he undertook to visit certain household and community shrines in his Urhobo homeland, as he had three years before. The result was a series of studies which Onobrakpeya claimed were motivated by aesthetic appreciation only. His treatment of the subject varies: some of the prints are detailed close-ups of shrine objects from the perspective of a visitor's eye, but there are also more stylized and conceptual renderings of entire shrines. In certain instances, he has depicted the traditional shrines in such a way that no viewer could escape feeling their power as places where metaphorical and physical realms intersect.

*Okunovu* (Plate 16) is a print of this sort, combining both naturalistic and expressionistic features. On its most representational level, *Okunovu* is a study of the contents
of one specific shrine: priestly figures holding ceremonial staffs, cowrie shells on the floor, skulls of sacrificed animals hanging overhead. But the dense appearance of the print, accomplished through its intricate composition and colouring, pushes us towards a further dimension of interpretation. *Okunnu* makes little impact from a distance: it demands that we viewers approach it, and then it draws us into its world. The deeply inked areas create an effect of darkness that is actual but also haunting and evocative, as the human figures seem to loom out of it, only gradually discernible. These figures are all constructed out of vertical lines within the two-tiered horizontal field we have noted in other Onobrakpeya prints, where the upper and lower halves are similarly separated by a band of blank space. Here, it is the sacrificial skulls which are set apart, and the blue shade in which they are coloured contrasts sharply with the bright vegetative colours - green, orange, gold - that decorate the costumes of the human figures below. The ultimate effect of this print goes beyond naturalism; *Okunnu* summons the atmosphere of a half-world where those now living commune with the spirits of another metaphysical domain.

While Urhobo religious tradition evidently still exercises some hold on Onobrakpeya, so does the widely influential artistic heritage of Benin, from which he very obviously derives sustenance in both theme and composition. *Nomore* (Plate 17) is an example of one such allusive work which, according to the artist, "focuses on the Benin attitude towards life and death - the glory of being such an heir." 3 To convey this idea, Onobrakpeya has looked to Benin bronze plaques for organizational strength. His figures all wear the traditional facial expression of stylized serenity, while the central character is presented in the posture and ceremonial garb of chieftaincy. The body borne aloft by the figures is shaded primarily in blue, which suggests that its spirit has gone to inhabit another plane of existence - that of the ancestors and potential descendants. The same colour makes a thematic contribution, as Onobrakpeya emphasizes the timelessness of the noble ideals of the past by means of symbolic images in blue on the skirts of the figures: the central man "wears" a stylized leopard denoting status and courage, while the woman to the right carries the image of a queen whose bearing sets the standard of conduct across the epochs. A bronze wash has been given to the background to suggest a Benin plaque. Even the traditional Benin inattention to details of feet has been used to good purpose, as the artist here stylizes legs into sticks, creating lines that rise upward into the familiar "A" form which serves as the general outline of these human figures. Although Onobrakpeya is capable of such simplicity of line, he also favours elaborate detail, often in the same print. Sometimes these decorative elements are meant to represent realistic features like body adornment, jewellery, and patterned cloth. Sometimes, they are gestures in the direction of the Benin liking for filling in surfaces. But just as often, Onobrakpeya's interior forms have a grounding in theme. One such motif is the womb-like oval like the one here which contains a human form. This motif frequently appears on the abdomen of a female figure, suggesting the continuity of human energies through the fertility of those presently alive.

*Nomore* is, then, a fine example of the richness that can be achieved both thematically and technically by allusive art. Its success is rivalled by *Ivwe* (Plate 18), whose impact also depends on motifs from Benin bronze sculpture and textile patterns. This is a more abstract print than most: the figure of a head appears to emerge out of a darkly textured background suggestive of fabric, and the shape that it assumes seems based on that of traditional bronze leopard sculpture, with its densely patterned surface and attendant associations of power. An ominous quality accompanies this image, giving it the aura of a threatening vision. No more concrete meaning can be deduced, and the effect is finally one of mystery.

Onobrakpeya is also capable of exploiting quite different effects in works with strong, clear lines and open spaces. One such print, *Three Fishes* (not illustrated) was the product of an experiment with water-based plastic, and in discussing it, Onobrakpeya compared the result to what is likely his best-known work, done many years earlier with silkscreening: "It is not possible to engrave on this plastic, so results of such prints are simple and bold and never over-worked. In a red base, three fishes have the type of mystique found in my earlier print *Leopard in a Cornfield*." 14 The visual effect is as close as this artist wishes to go towards the expression of decorative and abstract impulses, since he has departed from his usual vegetative colouring in favour of brighter and less natural hues.

The same principles of this more abstract approach - stripping down of surfaces, freeing up of shapes and colours - are also detectable in *Erhele* (Plate 11), and even in *Bokolo* (Plate 19), both of which are based on observations of northern Nigerian life. The latter, according to the artist, "is made up of two-tier composition with lined human figures occupying the top small half while the cows and the birds, both treated in low relief, take up the big bottom half." 15 He produced this print while teaching in the United States, and worked from studies he had done earlier. "The subject of the picture is the Fulani herdsmen, their milk maids, and the short-horned cattle called 'Bokolo'." 16 Onobrakpeya's description of his print is interesting in that he emphasizes the environmental factors: these cattle are very much under human control, and live in relationship to other animals too, as the birds standing beside them indicate. Nevertheless, their bodies are outlined with sweeping and graceful strokes reminiscent of those used by early African cave artists to suggest the power of the beasts they hunted. Whether the allusion is conscious or not, the strong and simple lines with which Onobrakpeya has traced his cattle do grant them a certain dignified presence.

Although Onobrakpeya shows a willingness to digress into experiments with new materials, techniques, and types of composition, he seems most temperamentally at ease with engraving, since it allows the greatest scope for complex ideas and correspondingly intricate organization. Recently, he seems to be journeying even more deeply into Urhobo myths and legends, so that his ideas demand more than a single print for their development.

The water spirit or goddess is the subject of one such series, and Onobrakpeya has described its genesis as
follows: "Mamiwata is claimed to be full of human compassion and believed to bestow fortune on people. Traditional artists depict her as a human being, but very rarely we see her shown in local drawings and paintings as half human and half fish. Although I have always wanted to work on this subject, the idea did not mature until I saw a blurred figure of bathers under the warm waters of Echo Lake, near Bar Harbour, Maine." 16 The prints that have come from this inspiration are quite varied. In one, Onobrakpeya fancifully imagines the "possible underwater decor for the court of mamiwata", replete with lobsters, seaweed, and abstract forms in artificial colours. 16 Other prints such as Mamiwata Voyibo I (Plate 8) proceed instead by illustrating incidents from the legends which have grown up around the mamiwata figure: "The arrival of colonial rule in Nigeria created some myths which have now formed part of our oral literature. Many of the technological wonders which the white man performed could only be explained in the context of the supernatural powers of the gods and spirits in which the people already believed."

"The legend of mamiwata and the white man centred around the construction of the Jebba Bridge. The story says that the mamiwata residing at that spot refused to be disturbed, and so did not allow the work of construction to go on. The white man or engineer, himself spiritually equipped, went under water and at first tried to persuade the spirit, but when that failed, he resorted to other means. He entered a bottle and mysteriously came out of it. Then he challenged the mamiwata to perform the same feat. Yes, she went in very easily, but before she could come out, he placed a lid on the bottle, barring the spirit . . . So he won. After that encounter, there was peace in that section of the Niger River, and the famous Jebba Bridge was finally built. Even today, the huge computerized constructions going on around us still appear mysterious, and success in erecting them is still credited to supernatural powers of the engineers." 17

In Mamiwata Voyibo I, Onobrakpeya has depicted the force of the water spirit. Note the commanding presence she has due to her attenuated and highly natural form, in contrast to the rather stolid figure of the engineer, whose pose and costume hark back to those of the earliest European invaders, as immortalized by the Benin plaque makers of the sixteenth century.

The same narrative treatment has also been applied in some recently created prints which investigate the theme of quests to the "underworld of spirits": 18 Ota Gbinowe? (Plate 20) "shows part of the adventure of a man who succeeded and entered the spirit land . . . The man was dissatisfied with his fate here on earth and he decided to go to ask his creator for a better lot. On arriving there, he wandered all over the place and never saw his creator. However, he stumbled into an assembly where someone was addressing a group of people, above whom was a flying spirit from whose underside some recently dead people projected. This flying spirit also held a white chalk with one hand and a sword with the other. The man returned to earth more confused than ever. He then consulted an oracle to help him explain the significance of the assembly scene. The oracle explained that the spirits were planning their future government and the flying spirit poses the question, 'Ota gbinowe? (Will the future be bad or good?)' The oracle said that if the deliberations of the assembly reflected wisdom which was learned from previous experiences, they will be blessed with the symbolic white chalk. But if their decisions showed selfishness, corrupt minds and unwillingness to learn from previous mistakes, then the sword of destruction will do its work in their midst. The oracle then directed that the troubled man should apply the lesson of 'Ota gbinowe?' to his life and his creator will reshape his fortune." 18

In this print, we see yet another spirit figure hovering above the world of men, whose desire to communicate with it is suggested by the central elongated "A" shape that we have met as a recurring motif in Onobrakpeya's work. The over-riding narrative approach here and in the mamiwata series asks that the viewer make the effort to "read" the picture, and, what is more, go outside its bounds in order to understand it fully. Of course, the further we go beside the artist in his explorations of theme, the more rewarding will be our experience of his work. However, the visual strength of these prints is such that viewers not inclined to travel into African myth may still respond to the artist's sophisticated manipulation of line, surface texture, and colour.

From all that has been said, it should now be clear that Bruce Onobrakpeya is in the forefront of those who are consciously defining a new role for the artist in Africa today. Certain aspects of the traditional role are being maintained: social obligations are deeply felt and acted upon. Like the craftsmen of old who transmitted their knowledge to apprentices, Onobrakpeya is a dedicated teacher, eager to pass along to young artists and students the techniques he has painstakingly developed. As a proud citizen of Nigeria, he has served his nation in the capacity of advisor on cultural matters, and has shared his artistry with people the world over, thereby opening minds to the wealth of the African heritage.

In his art, Onobrakpeya has constantly moved forward, exploring frontiers with techniques that could not have been conceived of by his forefathers. And yet he has kept faith with the ancestors. It is their legacy which he has sought to reshape, transforming it by his powerful imagination. His is a unique achievement, one destined to endure.
Notes

5. Ibid.
7. Ibid., #40.
8. Ibid., #6.
11. Ibid., #13.
12. Ibid., #19.
15. Bruce Onobrakpeya, Notes and Comments on 46 Prints, #16.
16. Ibid., #22-3.
17. Ibid., #24-7.
18. Ibid., #32.
Plate 8 "Mamiwata Voyibo I" 18/50 1976. Lino Engraving. Coll.: George and Susan Barkley
Collections and Commissions

Onobrakpeya’s prints and paintings grace many collections, including those of Queen Elizabeth of England (presented to her in 1973 by then-Head of State Gen. Gowon) and the Duke of Edinburgh (purchased from the Commonwealth Exhibition of Art in 1965). Other major purchases have been made by such groups as the (Nigerian) Federal Society for Arts and Humanities, the National Theatre (Lagos), the Universities of Ife, Lagos, and Nsukka, and the Vatican Museum (this last being a gift to the late Pope Paul on his 80th birthday).

Onobrakpeya has received many commissions within Nigeria. They range from the 1970 1/8d. Nigerian postage stamp (one of four called the Nigerian Stamp of Destiny) to murals for Nigerian churches, universities and cultural centres to illustrations for books by Nigerian authors. A complete listing of all his many commissions is to be found in Notes and Comments on 46 Prints (August 1974 to February 1978). The following is a partial listing of those books which have been graced by Onobrakpeya’s prints and illustrations:

1961  
*Afrikan Nights Entertainment* by Cyprian Ekwensi.

1962  
*No Longer at Ease* by Chinua Achebe.

1963  
*Iwe Ede Yoruba* by Babalola.

1964  
*Sugar Girl* by Kola Onadipe.

Akpan and the Smugglers by Rosemary Uwemedimo.

1968  
*Catholic National Cathechism* (Nigeria).

1970  
“Flight from Home” by Kola Onadipe for *Children Annual*, Chicago.

The Magic Land of the Shadows by Kola Onadipe.
Exhibitions

A complete listing of the exhibitions in which Onobrakpeya has participated would be much too lengthy to include here. His works have been included in over thirty exhibitions in Nigeria alone. I have taken the liberty of selecting a representative, but by no means exhaustive, sample of important exhibitions featuring Onobrakpeya’s prints. For a detailed list, see Notes and Comments on 46 Prints (August 1974 - February 1979).

1959  First one-man exhibition. Ughelli, Bendel State, Nigeria.

1960  Group show of contemporary Nigerian art in the Independence Exhibition, Lagos.


1969  International Book Fair, Bologna.

1970  St. Andrew’s School, Middletown, Delaware, Howard University, Washington, D.C.


1972  Gallery Watatu, Nairobi.


1977  FESTAC ’77, Lagos.

1978  Tenth one-man exhibition at the Goethe Institute, Lagos.
References
