



THE NIGERIAN RENAISSANCE OF ONA

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Ona started as a ripple of rhythms radiating from Ife-Ife as the mythic origin and center of the world, trying to reach the outer most part of the globe, spreading in a subtle, soothing and sonorous sweep, like the glowing and translucent tidings of the full moon. The warmth of lunar bathes and melts the frozen plumage of Nigerian art and Ona soars out in ripping myths of avian joy, carrying in its eloquent beak, a fresh twig, the promise of a new vision and the birth of a new world. ¹

– Moyo Okwudili, 1991

¹ Mabel, Awogbade, and Ibenero Ikechukwu. The Use of African Traditional Art Symbols and Motifs. (Saarbrücken, Germany: LAP Lambert Academic, 2010)

“Onaism, as an artistic concept, has its interest in the revival of Yoruba art forms, motifs, and philosophies through constant experimentation with local materials, patterns, and images.”² Ona is intrinsically linked to design, colors, and symbols used in Nigerian Shrine paintings. It will be important to provide a brief history of Nigerian art whereas much of the Ona movement was about rediscovery of the past and like the European Renaissance, this was a rebirth built on the foundation of the artists who preceded it. This paper will analyze four works from three artists tied to the Ona movement. I will search their work for connections to the artistic roots of Nigeria, with emphasis on the symbols and artistic styles found in shrines. *A History of Art in Africa*, credits the founding of this group to Moyo Okediji, but is this an erroneous history? Did Robin Poyner tell the wrong side of the story concerning the founding of the Ona Movement? This paper will address the controversy surrounding the founding of the Ona Art movement.

A (VERY) BRIEF HISTORY OF NIGERIAN ART

Many Europeans viewed the abstracted figures of traditional Yoruba art and labeled it as primitive. Individual artists would be forgotten, identified not by name, but by their tribe. Philosopher Gene Blocker when speaking about African works and their artistic value wrote, “My refusal to call them works of art cast reflection more on the traditions and institutions of the people than it does to the objects themselves.”³ Westerners destroyed African cultures breaking the link to their histories, and then assumed that art was communal and thus the individual artist did not have value in that lost culture. It would be artists such as Olowe of Ise, Dada Arowoogun, and Lamidi Fakeye, who would preserve the traditional art forms in the face of western colonialism. In colonial Nigeria people learned that adopting western education and conforming to western art styles was the best way to succeed. Even during colonial oppression, artists such as Akinola Lasekan and sculptor Justus Akeredolu used art to ennoble the ordinary people, “they adopted the very technique (realism) the West used to impose colonialism and turned it into a weapon of resistance.”⁴

Post-1960 following Nigerian Independence, artists did not need to react against an outside force, and they could absorb western influences to combine them with their cultural and personal styles. Artists at this time were creating fantastically raw and original works of art. They created art that was expressive, personal, and many connected to the Orisha, or spirits. Under the guidance of Susan Wenger, Ulli Beier, and Georgina Beier artists of the Oshogbo School such as Twins Seven-Seven, Rufus Ogundele, and Nike

² Godwin Ogheneruemu Iriwieri. “Onaism: An Artistic Model of Yoruba Civilization in Nigeria.” *African Research Review*. p. 236

³ H. Gene Blocker. “Is Primitive Art Art?” *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 25, no. 4, pp. 87–97.

⁴ Moyo Okediji. “African Renaissance, New Forms, Old Images in Yoruba Art.” *University Press of Colorado*. p45

Okundaye created art that infused traditional patterns and designs with rich spiritual symbolism to create paintings that erupt with color and detail. Artists re-discovered their culture while creating genuinely modern and original works of art. The art they were creating would be compared to twentieth-century European artists, in response Rufus Ogundele stated, “Europeans also buy my paintings, but sometimes I get annoyed with their kinds of compliments; some of them call me ‘the Picasso of Nigeria.’ I never saw Picasso’s work when we started with Georgina and I was told it was he who was influenced by African art. Then what sense is there in saying that I, an African, produce work which resembles the man who has copied African art? That’s nonsense: Rufus is Rufus.”⁵ The creative climate was right for the start of an art movement rooted in tradition. It would be a group of artists during the mid-1980s with interest in Orisha shrine painting and art history from the University of Ife, who would research the past to find inspiration for creating contemporary works of art.

FOUNDING OF ONAISM

In 2011 an essay was written by Moyo Okediji titled *Beyond Dispute: Origins, Travails of Ona* in response to what he considered false reporting in Nigeria of the origins of the Ona Movement. Okediji believed that the concept of starting this art movement was his alone. This was reiterated in our text by Robin Poynor, who gave credit to Okediji for founding the movement. According to Okediji’s timeline, Ona started in 1986 and developed from research for an essay on Lamidi Olonade Fakeye. “I named the group Ona, borrowing from Fakeye’s middle name, OL-ONA-DE.” Ona is also a term that “encompasses all forms of creative and artistic productions, including literary, musical, and performance arts.”⁶ He invited his graduate students Bolaji Campbell and Tunde Nasiru, to join him in this movement. They produced a few solo shows, the first being Moyo Okediji’s *Circlesopes*. The Ona art movement, according to Okediji, began with three members, all shared equal roles. Eventually, Kunle Filani and Tola Wewe joined this group and as Senior Lecturer Moyo Okediji was the leader.

When this essay hit the papers of Nigeria in 2011, it caused an uproar in the Nigerian Art Community. In Nigeria, Kunle Filani received much of the credit for founding Ona. After reading the essay Kunle Filani decided he needed to respond, partly because he believed many of the issues raised were distorted but also because the essay referred to him as a “moderately talented” artist.

In Filani’s retort titled *Ona Trajectory: The Disputable Claims of a Traducer* he claimed Okediji was “Blinded by egotism” and that “Moyo Okediji became ridiculous in his attempts to attribute a collective beginning to himself by using totalitarian and uncomplimentary words.”⁷ Filani claimed the group

⁵ John Pemberton III. “Ulli Beier and the Oshogbo Artists of Nigeria” *African Studies Review*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Apr. 2002), pp. 115-124.

⁶ Moyo Okediji. “Beyond Dispute: Origins, Travails of Ona.” *The Nation*. July 27 2011, pp 32-33.

⁷ Kunle Filani. “Kunle Filani and the Battle for the Soul of Onaism.” *African Arts with Taj*. 22 Oct. 2011.

emerged out of the intellectual think tanks that developed in Ondo in the mid-eighties. It was within one of the discussions that Filani and Wewe started the Ona Group of artists. The group was first mentioned in print in 1988 when an article by Donatus Akatakpo discussed a group of seven artists called ONA that emerged out of Ondo State. Filani also created a print in 1986 titled, *Onaism – Ija lo’de ti orin di owe*. According to Filani, “I articulated the group’s name by elaborating on the peculiarities of Yoruba art forms and motifs.”⁸ Tola Wewe, when asked about the controversy, weighed in by stating, “it has been established that five people formed the Ona group. My position has always been that it was a group thing. My theory is that no one person can form a group.”⁹

Regardless of the controversies surrounding the beginning of this movement, or the bitterness and rivalry of its founders; the group was united at the opening of *ONA I: Maiden Exhibition* in 1989. The members sought to create art that connected with their past and as part of their research began to study the paintings in the shrines throughout Yorubaland, incorporating the symbolism and style into their art.

ORISHA SHRINE PAINTING

Shrines (figure 1) dedicated to the many Orisha, or spirits, can be found throughout Yorubaland. The paintings act as a symbolic representation of sacred ceremonial clothing, covering the Orisha. “Valuable textiles are what Yoruba use to celebrate the power and presence of their ancestors.”¹⁰ The shrine paintings are erased and renewed annually as part of a celebration dedicated to the shrine’s Orisha. The paintings are generally created and maintained by female artists, but there are some places where males play a role in the creation. The shrines became a place to preserve the traditional religion from the pressures of colonial Christian and later Muslim influences. While there are differences in the process of renewing the shrine paintings depending on deity and region, the process of creation tends to follow a standard process. The shrine painters generally fall into four categories, women who share a household lineage who paint in the open, sometimes allowing others to participate. Professional groups, managed by a priestess, they paint accompanied by music, song, and clapping, and professional painters who work in silence. Finally, some painters are male and work in secret to create their images. The painters believe they are “divinely inspired” and that the Orisha is controlling the art.

The process begins with erasing the old paintings through ritual removal. The removal represents the death of the old year and the beginning of the new. They prepare materials, brushes, and paint pigments for the process. There are ceremonies performed in the inner sanctuary by a religious leader to awaken

⁸ Kunle Filani. “Battle for the Soul of Onaism.”

⁹ Tajudeen Sowole. “Tola Wewe’s Footnotes” African Arts with Taj. 16 Dec. 2011. Web.

¹⁰ Adiji, Bolajoko E., Moyosore F. Fagbenro, and Jide D. Makinde. “Sacred Textiles of the Yorubas of South Western Nigeria.”

the spirits. The artists divide the wall space, generally into vertical rectangles or sometimes triangles and images are outline sketched into a composition. The priestess or an experienced painter oversees the artwork to make sure that it is appropriate for the Orisha and maintains the integrity of the design and composition.

Colors grouped by hue and value are used to fill in the outlined sketches, the shrine colors fall into three categories. Awo pupa encompasses all bright-hues (red, pink, orange, yellow, and light brown), awo dudu includes dark colors (indigo, purple, burnt sienna dark brown and black), awo funfun are light colors (grays, white, cream, light blue and transparencies).

The shrine paintings are composed of a variety of design elements that vary depending on region or Orisha. The art must have precise, straight, and sharply defined line-work (Gigun). The painter's goal is to create distinct, clear, readable images (Yiyo). Artists also strive to create a well-designed and stimulating composition (Sisu) and there must be an appropriate overall plan for composition (Sisin/ Fifin). The end goal is to make the entire shrine painting beautiful (Ewa) with a perfect degree of finish (Pipe). The priestess or experienced painters are often responsible for the finishing touches, adding details and dots, and overseeing the removal of unwanted lines or paint in the final steps.

In the finishing stages, dots are often added to the composition, filling in the spaces around each painted element in the design. The dots are a common occurrence in Nigerian art, used in ceremonial body painting (figure 2), and also added to sculpture (figure 3). The dots could be the markings of the guinea fowl or beans that are often presented as offerings to the Orisha. They could also refer to eyes covering the body, part of the all-seeing nature of a deity. Animal symbols can be found in many shrine paintings and relate to the nature of the Orisha. For example; a leopard would represent an Orisha who is a courageous hunter or fighter. A lizard evokes a vile temper. A dove, or sometimes a snail or tortoise, reflect a non-excitabile, contemplative nature. The tortoise also could mean longevity in life. Snakes (especially in a spiral) are symbolic of regeneration, fierceness, wealth, potency, and wrath. Since the snake and the tortoise can be found in water and land and often slip inside holes in the earth, they hold a special connection to the ancestors, whom the Yoruba believe live underground. In Arowoogun's *Atahun Atejo* (figure 4), a monumental door carving there is a register that features a snake trying to swallow a giant turtle—in a battle to the death. The scene is based on a Yoruba proverb that states, “The snake is hungry, but the turtle struts nonchalantly about: both snake and turtle will soon become someone else's dinner.”¹¹ The snake and the turtle are a symbolic representation of the warring African tribes

¹¹ Moyo Okediji. “The Shattered Gourd” University of Washington Press, Seattle and London. p. 20-21

becoming easy prey for the British, who will devour them both. It is a beautifully placed protest against British involvement in the region using a traditional Yoruba proverb. Understanding the more profound symbolism of the two animals, I wonder if this could have a deeper meaning concerning the destruction of their connection to their ancestors?

NIGERIAN RENAISSANCE

Moyo Okediji began to experiment with the earth-based medium used in decorating the shrine walls. He did this out of necessity as government restrictions on imports created a black market for items such as art supplies. The paints were also a political statement against the west and connected his art to the earth. Moyo Okediji's Grandmother Madam Oyewùúmí Okediji was a shrine painter, she taught Moyo the techniques of their shrine painting heritage. From his grandmother, Okediji learned of the core color groups used in the Shrine paintings, awo pupa, awo funfun, and awo dudu. According to Bolaji Campbell's comprehensive study of shrine paintings in his book *Painting of the Gods*, "The large majority of these paintings were executed with indigenous pigments derived from vegetable matters, lateritic soils, and kaolin obtained from alluvial deposits, volcanic dust debris, and riverbeds."¹² Okediji combined these earthen pigments with western-style binding agents to give the paint longevity. Okediji and Campbell studied the shrine paintings and incorporated the color systems as well as shrine symbols and patterns into their work in a medium they called terrachroma. Bolaji Campbell also created a series of soil-based paintings that featured symbols lifted directly from the shrine wall art, *Alaamu* (figure 5) from 1996 is one example.

In his paintings for his solo show *Circlesopes*, (figure 6) the first show as part of the Ona movement, "Okediji liberally borrowed the stylistics and shrine iconography of the muralists,"¹³ but he moved beyond the wall using cloth, raffia mats and woven fibers as the surface for his compositions. Okediji moved away from the rectangular canvas, choosing to work in the round, "Such shapes such as the rectangle force us to conceptualize the world as necessarily square."¹⁴ The round shapes are connected with the moon and sun and relate to the overall theme of *Circlesopes*, creation. The circle likewise relates to the calabash, the ritual gourd, and its importance as the shape of the Yoruba world. According to Nigerian Art Historian and Scholar, Babatunde Lawal, "The top half signifies maleness (ako) as well as the sky/heaven (isálòrun)—the realm of invisible spirits. The bottom half represents femaleness (abo) and the primeval waters out of which the physical world (ayé) was later created."¹⁵

¹² Bolaji Campbell. "Painting for the Gods." Africa World Press. Trenton, NJ. 2008. p. 53

¹³ Nkiru Nzegwu. "Memory Lines; Art in the Pan-African World" Ijele: Art eJournal of the African World. 2000

¹⁴ Nkiru Nzegwu. "Memory Lines"

¹⁵ Ashley Holdsworth. "Liaising Between Visible and Invisible Realities: A Ritual Gourd in the African Collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts." Virginia Commonwealth University 2014

The paintings are a mix of geometric designs, human-like figures, and symbolic creatures, all presented in a series of abstract paintings. Through a series of seven panels, we see the creation of the Yoruba world. His depiction of the Yoruba genesis was intended to “assert the centrality of the Yoruba conception of the world, and to check the rapid erasure of Yoruba values and beliefs by Christian and Islamic ideas.”¹⁶ This series of round paintings relate directly to the shrine paintings in their power of spiritual and cultural preservation.

In the work of another founding member Tola Wewe, we can find connections to the Orisha shrine paintings but also a link to Uli and Nsibidi symbols. Symbols using a variety of lines, dots, and circles, were used by people in Nigeria to mark sacred sites, way-finding, to mark sources of water or game, to tell stories, and to protect the home from the “evil eye.” The thousands of Nsibidi symbols are used as part of the men’s societies and often communicate abstract concepts. The symbols could be drawn on the ground, in the air, or on walls to communicate messages. Wewe employed the use of traditional art and symbols throughout his work. I will examine two paintings by Tola Wewe, *Once Upon a Time* and *Return of Our Mother*.

Once Upon a Time (figure 7) created in 2004 is acrylic on woven fabric. The artwork appears to be a collection of animals, houses, objects, and symbols contained within a frame of geometric designs. The objects are purposely rendered to look unsophisticated as if created by an inexperienced artist. The composition is organized and stacked in three registers. There seems to be an emphasis placed on the tortoise in the lower third, and the fowl and sun in the upper register. The line-work of the painting is bold and defined, all objects outlined with bold black. The patterns used in the frame area dance around the central composition and the geometric shapes lead the eye in different directions. Used throughout the border is Traditional Yoruba patterns such as inverted triangles, technomorph diamonds, crystal chains (diamonds in a chain), circles, and half-circles.

This painting uses traditional colors that can found in the shrine paintings. Awo pupa can be found throughout the painting to give elements a punch of bold color, especially red. Awo funfun is present in the background fabric, which creates a light yellow color in the negative space, the blues contrast and balance the red colors. Awo dudu is used in outline, as registers, and for some of the buildings.

This painting is about abundance, wealth, and creation. The objects and patterns all tell the tale of a better time. In the frame area, triangles are everywhere; they could be symbolic of the female pubic area used to signify regeneration or creation. Crystal chains (linked diamonds) and other diamond patterns

¹⁶ Nkiru Nzegwu. “Memory Lines”

are found throughout the border frame and may allude to affluence. Other symbols such as a stylized bowl may be a symbol of support and love. Dots and ovals could be cowrie shells yet another sign of wealth. Finally, we find the snake in the lower-left section of the frame; this may represent a connection to the ancestors or Oshunmare, who is associated with regeneration and creation.

Like *Circlescope*, *Once Upon a Time* may reference the Yoruba creation myth. In the myth, the deity Obatala comes to earth on a chain suspended from the sky. He holds a chicken, a snail shell full of dirt, and a palm nut. He releases the snail shell spilling the dirt. The chicken then scratches the dirt about creating land. Obatala plants the palm nut to grow a palm tree, which he uses to make palm wine. While inebriated, he creates man, imperfectly, from clay and then the first village, Ife. While this art has a deeper meaning about a more prosperous time in Nigeria, many of the elements of the creation myth appear to be in this painting. The turtle in the bottom register could be a connection to the ancestors and the spirit world. *Once Upon a Time* is a fantastic painting about the past, prosperity, and regeneration.

Return of Our Mother (figure 8) was created in 2011 for a joint exhibition with Moyo Okediji. Okediji, in his controversial 2011 essay, described wanting to revive “the waning flame of the Ona movement”¹⁷ as the reason for this exhibition. The show “both celebrates the return of Wewe’s mother from captivity and invokes the Great Mother to maintain social harmony generally.”¹⁸ The painting depicts Wewe’s mother being escorted out of the forest by a Police Commissioner. Numerous forest spirits are protecting his mother and the Commissioner on their journey. The painting is divided, masterfully into a grid-like structure, and forest spirits require individual focus to find them among the blocks of patterns and symbols. The grid creates a quilt-like effect. Not surprisingly, the symbols and patterns relate to nature. Floral symbols abound in this painting. The triangle check motif and other patterns commonly used in Yoruba fabric fill each block of the grid to provide clothing (and cover) for the forest spirits. The painting is divided into thirds, with the lower two-thirds being the forest spirits and the two travelers, the top portion breaks from the grid with images and symbols such as the sun, lizard, and cowries. The colors in this painting are muted colors juxtaposed to bold blues, oranges, and reds. The heavy black lines of *Once Upon a Time* are not present in this painting as lines are more delicate, contrasting colors and value define areas and shapes. Wewe does a fantastic job of keeping the values close enough that the shapes require the mind to search to piece together the forest spirits hiding in the background.

When analyzing the main subject of this painting, Wewe’s mother and her police escort, it is impossible not to see the connection to the traditional Yoruba sculpture of artists like Olowe and Fakeye.

¹⁷ Moyo Okediji. “Beyond Dispute” pp 32-33.

¹⁸ Janine Sytsma. “The Return of Our Mother” African Artists’ Foundation. Civic Centre Lagos July 9-July 11, 2011.

This especially true when compared to Olowe's *Jagunjagun* (house post) (figure 9) and its mounted rider with weapon in hand. His power and glory displayed through the exaggerated scale of the figure compared to his horse. In Olowe's piece, the warrior is held aloft by nude female figures. In this painting, the female figure is the same scale as her male counterpart; she is riding side-by-side—her power and glory are equal, not supportive. This painting honors Tola Wewe's mother, her rescuers, and shows an appreciation to her spiritual protectors that provided for her safe return after twelve days in captivity. The complexity of this piece while maintaining order is astonishing.

“Onaism changed the visual language throughout Nigeria, starting from Lagos. Virtually all notable artists in Nigeria have demonstrated direct and indirect connections to and influences from Onaism.” The future lies in the hands of Ona's founders, their students, and all who are influenced by their work. I was able to ask a few questions to Moyo Okediji as part of this paper; the quote above are his words when asked about the future of Ona. Artist Victor Ekpuk was encouraged to explore his Nigerian roots as a student of Moyo Okediji at the University of Ife. He was a native of Ibibio in Nigeria and used Nsibidi symbols as the main focus of his work. The sacred language of symbols is a beautiful art form on its own but shines in the hands of an artist like Ekpuk. He admits he does not entirely understand the complete sacred Nsibidi system, but he blends traditional symbols with those of his creation, creating a unique language. Ekpuk uses his blend of traditional and original symbols to create code-like patterns to express his personal experiences. In Ekpuk's UK Installation called *Shrine of Wisdom* (figure 10) he created a curved blue room covered in white and red “coded” Nsibidi-hybrid script; the script covers the walls and floor. Ekpuk creates this script at an incredible speed in a flurry of strokes. At the far end of the shrine is a bold red recess displaying a small contemporary sculpture, also by Ekpuk, fittingly named “*The Philosopher*.” Seating can be moved into the shrine to provide an area for visitors to sit and enjoy the space or read. The connection to Nigerian Shrines is apparent. Ekpuk described the room in an interview as saying, “People come into the room and feel like they are in a sacred space where they should learn something. They're always eager to know what the symbols mean. The idea was to have an interactive space where people would walk in and be engulfed, (and) feel like they are in the womb of this knowledge.”¹⁹ In Ekpuk's installation, the tradition of shrine painting has come full circle and is now a modern interpretation dedicated to the Orisha of Knowledge.

¹⁹ Milly Chan “Victor Ekpuk: ‘Black Panther Made It Easier to Talk about My Work’.” CNN. Cable News Network, 26 June 2019.

Professor Okediji has stated that he feels Onaism has failed and that he wishes he could have deleted some of what he said in 2011. He is currently working on a project in Nigeria called GownTown, which according to him, “specifically turns the entire ancient city of Ile Ife into a university campus, incorporating all the indigenous cultural centers, shrines, temples as creative departments. In addition, the indigenous priests, priestesses, traditional chiefs, and devotees function as traditional libraries, bibliography, and professors of the GownTown program.” With the rise in popularity of Nigerian art in western markets Okediji worries that the art is created for the elite and not connected to or benefiting the average Nigerian. The GownTown project is his answer to this issue, fostering a new generation of artists who will learn to understand and appreciate their culture. I am volunteering to help with some of their graphic design needs and look forward to playing a role, however small, in the continuation of this Nigerian Renaissance.

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▲ FIGURE 1 YORUBA SHRINE PAINTINGS



▲ FIGURE 2 RITUAL OF IMORI (KNOWING THE HEAD)



FIGURE 3 EPA COVERED IN DOTS ►



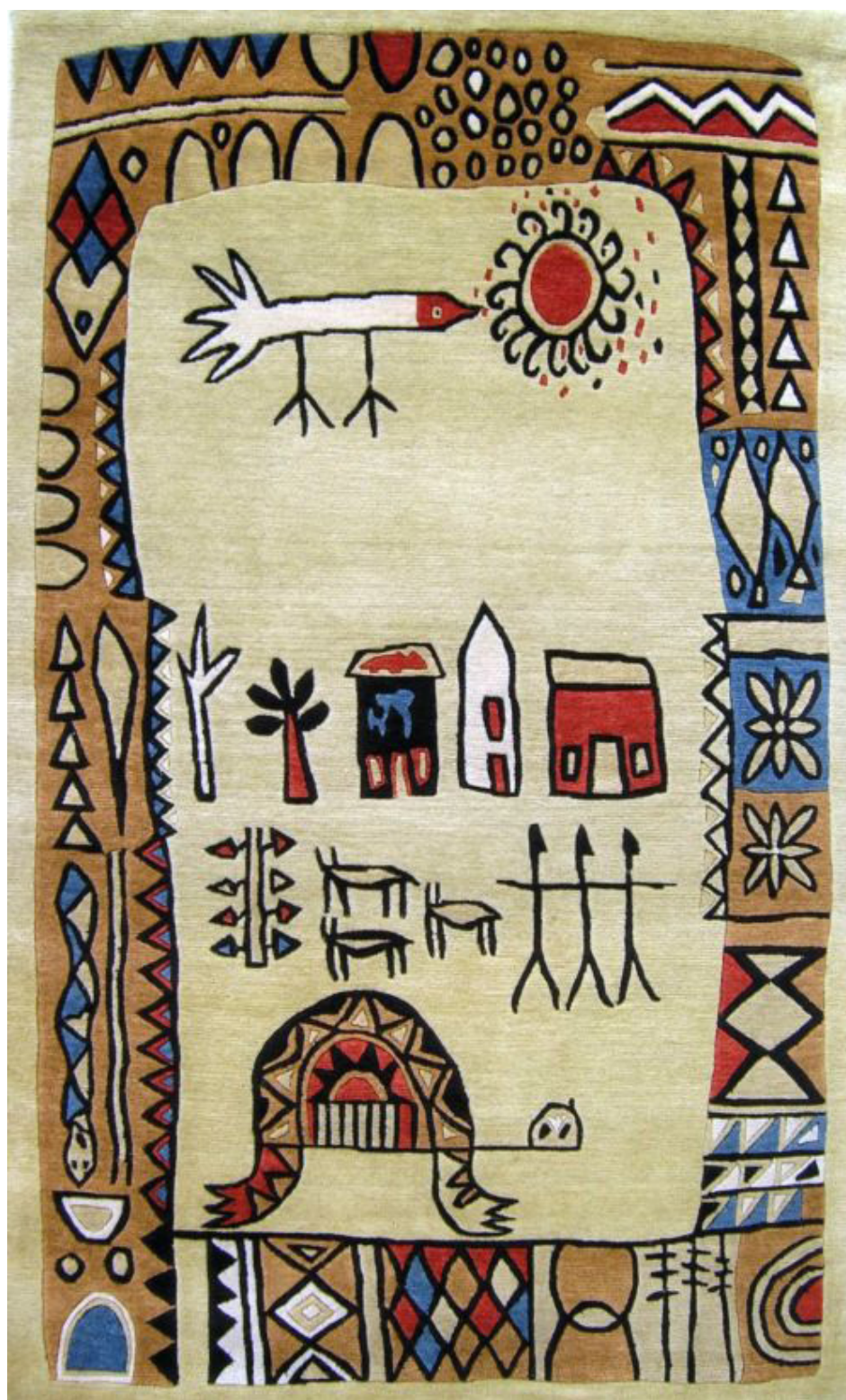
▲ FIGURE 4 ATAHUN ATEJO • DADA AROWOOGUN

▼ FIGURE 5 ALAAMU • BOLAJI CAMPBELL





▲ FIGURE 6 CIRCLESCOPE SERIES • MOYO OKEDIJI



▲ FIGURE 7 ONCE UPON A TIME • TOLA WEWE



▲ FIGURE 8 RETURN OF OUR MOTHER • TOLA WEWE



▲ FIGURE 9 JAGUNJAGUN (HOUSE POST) • OLOWE OF ISE



▲ FIGURE 10 SHRINE OF WISDOM • VICTOR EKPUK