

Chike C. Aniakor

The Community and a Congregation of Figural Elements

Okechukwu Nwafor

all photos by Chike Aniakor, except where otherwise noted

Chike C. Aniakor (b. 1934) is one of the greatest artists and scholars to emerge from the Art Department of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka otherwise known as the Nsukka School. Educated at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science, and Technology (NCAST) later named Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria from 1960–1964 and at Indiana State University from 1973 to 1978, Aniakor sojourned in the United States as an art historian and artist in different institutions, including Southern University in New Orleans, where he taught art from 1979 to 1980; at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he was a research associate and a student of Roy Sieber in 1984; and the Metropolitan Museum in New York, where he served as a senior fellow from 1994 to 1995. His eventual return to the University of Nigeria at various periods in the 1970s, 1980s, and from 1995 till his retirement in 2005 contributed to the conscious search and eventual founding of a compelling artistic ideology of the Nsukka Art School launched through the creative idiom of *uli* experiments in the 1970s and 1980s.

Along with Chuka Amaefuna, Uche Okeke, Obiora Udechukwu, Ola Oloidi, El Anatsui, and others, Aniakor pushed for a particular intellectual orientation focused on analysis of indigenous Igbo/African art and incorporation of motifs from these as a basis for contemporary practice that would eventually influence generations of artists of the Nsukka Art School. It is unfortunate that no text has articulated Aniakor's efforts at crystallizing this intellectual turn despite the fact that Aniakor taught some of the most vibrant intellectuals of the Nsukka School such as Obiora Udechukwu,

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Olu Oguibe, Sylvester Ogbechie, Chika Okeke-Agulu, Krydz Ikwuemesi, this author, Nnenna Okore, and Ugochukwu Smooth Nzewi, among others. No studies have been able to critically discuss or argue Aniakor's huge scholarly contributions with convincing endorsement or counter criticisms, or engaged, in precise intellectual terms, the debates Aniakor has raised in his writings, or even reviewed the general formal and textual characteristics of his huge creative oeuvre. Overall, this is a disservice to one of the great intellectuals, artists, and art historians of Nigerian and African art.

In this paper, I take a holistic view of Aniakor's artistic and scholarly engagements for the obvious modernistic persuasions they hold in Nigerian and African art scholarship. I evaluate his works for their thematic interests and stylistic renditions, which remain relevant to contemporary Nigerian society and Igbo notions of art and community in particular. His seminal book *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos*, coauthored with Herbert Cole, is still the only significant overview of Igbo art to date (Cole and Aniakor 1984). His works offer an artistic style and an overarching intellectual reach that has remained foundational in Igbo studies. The paintings and drawings offer a traditional approach rather than the hyperconceptual and there is a tendency to populate the surface of his picture plane with numerous figures suggestive of his belief in the congregational, communitarian existence of humanity, especially in his Igbo region of Nigeria. Again, this approach suggests a unified, collective struggle against societal forces and draconian laws imposed by a common enemy, defined in this instance as either a political gladiator or dictator against the masses. Aniakor's figural enemy can also be interpreted in terms of cultural enemies drawn from ethnic interpretations by communities or cultural groups in Nigeria and elsewhere (For how Nsukka artists tackled ethnicity, see Ogbechie 2016).

CHIKE ANIAKOR: EARLY LIFE

Aniakor was born in Abatete, Anambra State in Eastern Nigeria on August 21, 1939. World War II broke out in 1939 while Nigeria was still under British colonization. Despite the war's overarching



1 Chike Aniakor (b. 1934, Nigerian)
Descent of the Falcon (1993)
 Line etching on paper; 70 cm x 50 cm

2 Chike Aniakor (b. 1934, Nigerian)
The Descent of the Falcon (Falcon Descent on the People) (1992)
 Pen, ink and water color on paper; 70 cm x 50 cm



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effect on the African continent, Nigeria witnessed rapid urbanization significant enough to alter her economic as well as political history. By 1945, when the war ended, Aniakor was just six years old. However, his mother did not find her career as an *uli* artist an impediment to nurturing the infant Aniakor through the war period until he entered primary school in the 1950s. Indeed, one can infer that Aniakor's mother, being an *uli* artist, must have had an influence on the development of Aniakor's precocious artistic talent. Between 1955 and 1959 Aniakor attended New Bethel Primary School, where his teacher, Emmanuel A.J. Ulasi, encouraged him to pursue art as a career. It is important to note here that Ulasi himself was associated with the K.C. Murray School, which marked an important genealogy in the discourse of postcolonial modernism in Nigerian art (see Okeke-Agulu 2016). Ottenberg (1997: 85) writes that "Under Ulasi's guidance, with art classes almost every year, Aniakor created landscapes, still life drawings and watercolors. During this unusually intensive art training for his age, and at the time in Nigeria, he determined to make art a career." Aniakor himself has noted that during his days at New Bethel, "oftentimes, I saw that my works were always displayed and also at one point, they took us to Festival of the Arts in Enugu, where I won some prizes" (2005: 135).

Aniakor attended the Nigerian College of Arts, Science, and Technology, Zaria (NCAST) from 1960 to 1964. He graduated with

a BA in painting. His period at NCAST coincided with, and placed him in, a period of great artistic and intellectual ferment around the time of the Zaria Art Society's (ZAS) (1958–1962) agitation for the nativization of art teaching. However, while Aniakor's activities during this time has not been adequately attended to by scholars, Aniakor confirms that he attended some of the meetings of the ZAS and could not gain the confidence of either their set goals or ideology (Ottenberg 1997). Ottenberg seems to perceive the ZAS as insular, "self-protective," and self-serving, making it impossible for students such as Aniakor to become members. After graduation he took up a teaching career at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1970 as an assistant lecturer. He, along with Uche Okeke and Chuka Amaefuna, was among the formative staff who injected a new vigor into the methodology of the Nsukka Art Department in the 1970s after the Nigerian/Biafran civil war (1967–1970).

Informed by his characteristic quest for creative references derived from the Igbo culture, Aniakor's scholarship, along with those of Uche Okeke and others, contributed to the incipient ideological grounding of the department on *uli* revivalist experiments. *Uli* is the Igbo traditional wall- and body-painting tradition championed mostly by women in traditional Igbo society. Its materials were derived from plants and earth and used to decorate walls and bodies of men and women during important ceremonies. *Uli* designs were inspired by mundane visual iconographies and other ritualistic imageries. *Uli* eventually became an expressive, experimental device deployed by educated male pioneer artists of the Nsukka Art School, among them Aniakor, who reinvented *uli* aesthetics to grasp the psychic, intellectual, as well as the spiritual component of Igbo art and community. In fact, Aniakor himself has described *uli* as, "That linear idiom of artistic expression reinvented from



3 Chike Aniakor, (b. 1934, Nigerian)
Our Stories (1988)
 Pen, ink, and water color on paper; 70 cm x 50 cm

4 Chike Aniakor, (b. 1934, Nigerian)
The Political Oppressor (1988)
 Pen and ink; 70 cm x 50 cm

tradition and now adapted as modernist creative tool for scouring the inner and outer boundaries of art and life” (2005: 58).

THE NIGERIAN MILITARY REGIME AND A CONGREGATION OF OPPOSING FIGURES

Aniakor’s works, produced mainly from 1970 to 2000, resonate between two primary interests: Igbo sense of community and the socioeconomic predicament engendered by persecution under Nigerian military regimes. There is need to invoke the thematic and formalistic attributes of these works in the present, especially since they seem to capture the prevailing ambience of the Nigerian state at the time. Most of his themes revolve around the concept of aggregation, visually accentuated by a dynamic movement that achieves a formal balance with a central figural element. Sometimes a spatial design is interposed with an imposing form that stands in constant conflict with crowded images, which themselves conjure a sense of collective endeavor.

Ottenberg sees Aniakor’s career as divided into two periods: the 1970s, when he drew heavily on Igbo tales, myths, and ritual, and the late 1980s, when the degeneration in Nigeria’s sociopolitical landscape prompted the creation of “an image of a powerful leader or leaders, in human forms or metaphorically” (Ottenberg 1997: 89) who had a negative impact on the body politic. Indeed, since the 1970s Aniakor’s works have witnessed a gradual progression from a search for an enduring creative signature rooted in Igbo cosmology to a time in his career when his drawings, oils, water colors are defined by a vertical, linear quality with elongated human figures, sometimes punctuated by interwoven textures and patterns

of rhythmic lines and in some instances depicting frantic crowds and restless people engulfed by the looming embrace of a singular figure. A striking quality of Aniakor’s style rests in the profuse congregation of massive figural elements to either suggest an embattled social landscape or to invoke the Igbo concept of community and cosmos. In 1997, Ottenberg argued that “since the Biafran war [Aniakor] has increasingly been making visual social and political statements” (1997: 89). For example, the work titled *Descent of the Falcon* (Fig. 1) metaphorically represents an emergent beast-prey relationship between the government and the masses in Nigeria during the heydays of the military junta—exactly the period when Aniakor produced this work, 1993.

On June 12, 1993, the military junta of Ibrahim Babangida annulled the supposedly freest and fairest election in Nigeria, bringing the inglorious rascality of the junta to an all-time low. Could this now be a valid explanation for Aniakor’s conscious, visual incongruities in his linear interpretations of the falcon? Aniakor’s swooping falcon, when scrutinized close-up, surrenders its identity as mere absurdity, clearly inconsistent with the prowess of the falcon. The military junta may look like a government but they always, savagely and relentlessly, swoop upon the hapless masses of Nigeria as their prey. They lack vision although they claim to



possess the greatest visual acuity. They claim knowledge of leadership yet stifle the transition processes to democratic governance. In other words, the falcon is an apt metaphor to illustrate the vices of the Nigerian military junta, whose excesses could be likened to a vast desert landscape where neither vision nor knowledge existed. Aniakor claims that his social and political works attempt to connect with the suppressed masses of Nigeria while at the same time deploying Igbo cultural motifs (Ottenberg 1997: 90).

There has always been a tendency in Nigerian art historical scholarship to cast into insignificance Aniakor's efforts at spearheading the *uli* experiment at Nsukka. A keen examination of his singular efforts at Nsukka would suggest that he was among those who spearheaded a decolonial turn in the curriculum through his pioneering exertions in *uli* style. This decolonial turn centered around a pedagogical approach that appropriated the *uli* idiom through what Aniakor (2005) has described as "an art historical reconstruction" derived from local sources. His teachings at Nsukka, therefore, relied more on a combination of ethnography and visual ideas that derived from Igbo *uli*. Regarding his teachings at Nsukka with his pioneer students, Aniakor remarks, "if you look at all the projects done, they were all reflecting this experience gained from the field and, therefore, invariably each time we were doing any studio work we always chose themes on indigenization of artistic expression" (2005: 137). There is a manifestation of his stylistic legacy, and influence, in the works of some of his early students such as Obiora Udechukwu, Bons Nwabiani, Paul Igboanugo, and Osita Njelita, among others. In fact, in a more specific example Aniakor (2005: 138) affirms:

If you want, you can interview Bons Nwabiani and he will show you the exhibition he held immediately he graduated in 1972 and you are going to see *jigida* and all of them. These are the things we used in the studio practice in Mixed Media Painting. I think I have strong conviction that the motivation came not only from the intellectual but also practical level from African art fieldwork and seminars presented by students.

Few of his students, like Obiora Udechukwu, eventually extended the poetic significance of *uli* as initiated by Aniakor and Uche Okeke. For example, while Udechukwu's style further attenuated the spatial interconnectedness with linear shapes, Aniakor maintains a massive clutter of struggling lines with spaces. While lines have become further thinned and less copious in Udechukwu's works, they increasingly grew in multitudinous expansion in Aniakor's (for more on Udechukwu's drawings, see Okeke-Agulu 2016; Ene-Orji 2019). Oloidi (2016: 5) notes that "there is no doubt that Chike Aniakor has trained students, both in painting and art history, and he joined in advancing the *uli* art ideology immediately he came. He also influenced many of his painting and art history students, particularly from the 1980s."

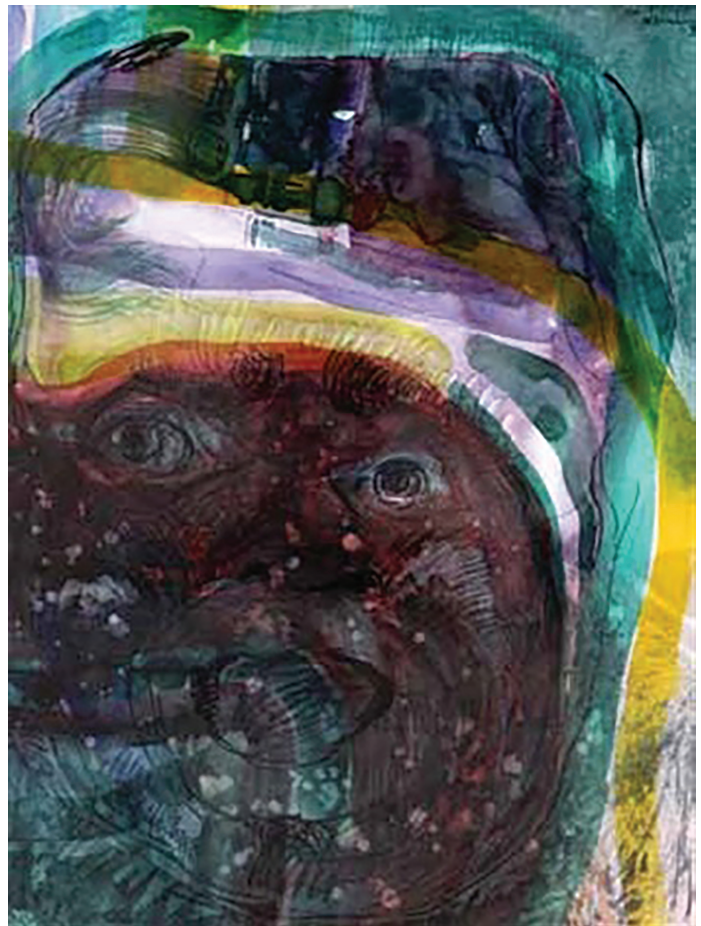
Later, in the mid-1990s, Aniakor continued his fieldwork experiment with his painting students, this time to El Anatsui's studio. As one of his former students I participated in one of the visits to Anatsui's studio. During those visits, which happened at the inception of most academic semesters, Aniakor advised students to take sketches of Anatsui's burnt woods and reconceptualize them in line with their own formal ideas. Aniakor believed that Anatsui's studio, then located at Ibagwa Nsukka, was an inspirational space that could galvanize inert formal ideas and challenge

painting students to look at forms beyond conventional painterly styles. The visits, in addition to Aniakor's excellent tutelage, enabled many students to articulate their direction during those formative periods as painting majors.

When references are made to the poetic linearity and the attendant inventive spontaneity of lines by artists of the Nsukka art department, one recalls Aniakor's experimental dialogue with the visual and the verbal. A combination of experimental lyricism interposed with interpenetrating color patches have featured prominently in most of his paintings and drawings. He has a number of poetry collections, which were juxtaposed with descriptive illustrations.

There is no doubt that Aniakor found special beauty and significance in the lines and textures of copious things inserted into familiar experiences. In the *Descent of the Falcon* there is a subtle interplay of linear contours around the aerial form of the bird that achieves an organic unity with the numerous human figures below. The falcon's descent is a puzzling presence, difficult to interpret in relation to the human figures below. However, considering that falcons have exceptional visual acuity, several times that of humans, it is then a visual conundrum that Aniakor interprets the falcon here as a bird with a seemingly difficult vision, given the manner in which it stares at the humans below. Falcons are reputed among the fastest-moving creatures on Earth, so one also wonders why its

5 Obiora Udechukwu (b. 1946, Nigerian)
Portrait, *The Politician Is Up* (1993)
Ink on paper; 40 cm x 30 cm
Photo: Obiora Udechukwu





6 Chike Aniakor (b. 1934, Nigerian)
Rhythms of New Life (2001)
 Pen, ink and water color on paper; 70 cm x 50 cm

speed in this work seems attenuated. Its descent, as Aniakor may suggest, seems interrupted by its need to scrutinize the prey underneath. Falcons also kill with their beaks. This explains, perhaps, why Aniakor concealed the feet and emphasized the beak. Does it mean that its descent will scatter the seeming quietude of the human kingdom beneath its fold?

Ottenberg (1997: 93) has suggested that the falcon flying overhead is “typical Aniakor, a common metaphor, representing a government that has the freedom to do what it wants, while the people are tightly packed together, as if in a container, controlled by the leader.” Ottenberg’s statement is directed on another version of the *Descent of the Falcon* produced in 1992 and here titled *Falcon Descent on the People* (Fig. 2). This seems to herald the second descent of the falcon in Figure 1. This is because the falcon in Figure 2 seems to maintain a meaningful distance from the people beneath, while the falcon in Figure 1 has almost swooped on the helpless prey, two versions highly evocative of the gradual descent to anarchy in Nigeria from 1992 to 1993, when the draconian military decree finally descended on the masses. A noticeable difference between Figures 1 and 2 is the blood on the falcon’s beak in Figure 2. The blood could have heralded the bloody encounter that followed the annulment of the June 12, 1993, election in Nigeria, whereby ethnic violence rocked the city of Lagos and resulted in loss of lives and property.

Our Stories (Fig. 3) is not unconnected with Aniakor’s numerous engagements with the social conditions in Nigeria during the military era. This work is reminiscent of Aniakor’s 1988 collections, where crowded figures accompany segmented planes or where strands of images accumulate to suggest the dispossessed citizenry of the military junta. By the time Aniakor produced this work, Nigeria was already at the height of the dictatorial regime of Ibrahim Babangida, whose drastic economic policies under the neoliberal requirements of austerity measures manifested as existential insecurity for otherwise meaningful livelihoods. The military’s 1988 subsidy removal in fuel price occasioned sharp rise in

prices of goods in the larger market economy, whereby transportation alone rose by 50–100%. The result was civil unrest, especially by students, who went on strike. The military government was forced to lower the prices of fuel again, and Nigeria became, once more, a route for black-market trafficking of petroleum products into neighboring countries.

Aniakor’s crowded figures are narratives of collective despair, misery, and deprivation that encapsulate the suffering of the people under atrocious military decrees and their attendant aftermath. It is assumed here, in each of the segments, that different elemental arrangements prefigure shades of individual or collective experience. One constant feature in all the segments is the looming imposition of a

sizeable figure with capricious movement suggestive of irregular system, civil confrontation and carnage that engulfed Nigeria from 1988, and eventually, marking a decisive turning point with the annulment of June 12, 1993 election by the military.

The visual style of *Our Stories* can also be seen in *The Political Oppressor* (Fig. 4), also produced in 1988. Here the rapacious essence of the political figure is laid bare. The concreteness of collective social trauma is divested in the very substance of a brutal figure. What constitutes oppression here is not an all-encompassing amplification of the masses’ disturbing narrative but a metaphysical reduction of national hazard to the singular form of the oppressive politician in whose towering form we encounter fragments of individual worlds of the people. Once the Nigerian state is defined by oppression, Aniakor renders the contrasting inequalities of the citizens’ daily lives with somewhat baroque lines. In such manner, linearized silhouettes meander inside the gigantic belly of the oppressor. Where the oppressor is represented as singular, immovable, voluminous, unperturbed and static, the oppressed inside its belly are presented as multitudinous, congregating, unsettled, precarious, miniaturized, and insignificant. This is often the case in many of Aniakor’s works that deal with the political: the crowd often congregates and constitutes the fallen while an oppressor is singularized and looms over the multitude.

One wonders why the metaphor of the politician would constitute a dominant visual iconography for not just Aniakor but other visual artists in Nigeria during the height of military dictatorship. For example, Obiora Udechukwu dwelled on the concept of the politician in his 1993 work *Portrait, The Politician Is Up* (Fig. 5). However, it is possible that these artists see in the figure of the politician a reprehensible officeholder who must be visually appropriated to offer a critique of the civil misfortune in Nigeria engendered by the misadventure of the elite. This politician concept is pushed even further by Udechukwu through the widening of the mouth and eyes of the figure of the politician in his artwork. His deliberate decision to leave the mouth agape suggests that the

political figure is loud-mouthed and unable to deliver or that the promises of the politicians are as deafening as their preposterous pronouncements and inability to deliver on their promises.

IGBO CONCEPTS OF COMMUNITY IN ANIAKOR'S WORKS

Aniakor's sense of community seems to have evolved early during his academic sojourns in the United States. Between 1960 and 1970 Aniakor had already come under the influence of Igbo ethnoaesthetic tradition that was transforming rapidly under the impact of colonialism. In the immediate postindependence period (1960–70), such traditions were evolving into vibrant contemporary forms. Overall, Igbo ritual dance, music, art, and architecture were instrumental in shaping Aniakor's burgeoning artistic psyche. Aniakor completed his secondary school education and taught briefly at Community Secondary School Nnobi in Eastern Nigeria, where he taught students the rudiments of art and encouraged them to derive inspiration from the traditional repertoire and other extraneous local factors that would concretize their understanding of Igbo community life. Aniakor affirms that before he came to Nsukka he was already doing the same fieldwork that derived from Igbo culture at Community Secondary School Nnobi.

7 Chike Aniakor (b. 1934, Nigerian)
Ritual of Oblation (1990)
 Pen, ink and gouache; 70 cm x 50 cm

8 Chike Aniakor (b. 1934, Nigerian)
Seasonal Ritual (1990)
 Pen, ink, and water color on paper; 70 cm x 50 cm

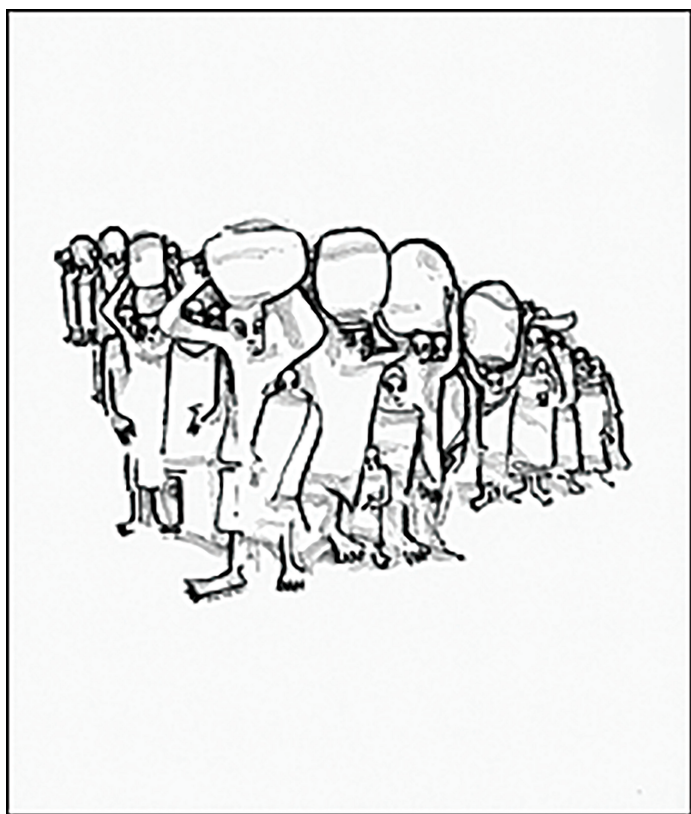


He states, "I have samples of works by students based on wall paintings" (2005: 137).

Aniakor joined the academic staff of the art department at Nsukka in November 1970. In 1973 he left Nigeria for Indiana State University, where he obtained an MA in 1974. He came back to Nigeria for a brief period and then went back after about a year to study for his doctorate. He eventually wrote a pioneer dissertation on Igbo architecture to receive his PhD in art history at Indiana State University in 1978. Aniakor taught for a brief period at Southern University, New Orleans, before returning to Nsukka in 1980. In 1984 he became a consultant and research associate at the UCLA, where his research on Igbo arts culminated in the celebrated book *Igbo Arts, Community and Cosmos* (Cole and Aniakor 1984) coauthored with Herbert M. Cole. Aniakor's numerous academic experiences help us understand why his scholarship is predicated on this sound footing in Igbo *Weltanschauung*. His BA thesis at NCAST was on Igbo door carving, in which he used the various images on carved doors to comprehend the deeper religious, economic, and political conditions that informed the Igbo life and communities in the early twentieth century. *Igbo Arts* extended this initial study of a singular form of Igbo art into a broader analysis of Igbo visual culture.

The concept of community and art was, at the time, a central research device that complicated an understanding of art as an independent discipline from anthropology (Biebuyck, 1969; Adams, 1989; Drewal, 1990). Aniakor's study addressed how Igbo art was defined by the complex modernism of Nigeria in the early twentieth century. In his forward to *Igbo Arts*, Chinua Achebe decried the destruction of Igbo masquerades practices in the colonial era as a dismantling of "an entire eschatology" and the "glue that held us together" (1984: xii). Achebe's reference to masquerades was in tandem with Aniakor's own belief in the masquerade as a central





9 Chike Aniakor (b. 1934, Nigerian)
Exodus I, The Refugees (1977)
 Pen and ink; 70 cm x 50 cm

element of communitarian sociability in Igbo society. Aniakor's book needs to be read in the context of community life in early twentieth century Igbo society, where the conjunction of art and community was a driving force, and masquerades were still considered important aspects of community life. When viewed in the context of the compelling ideological influence of indigenous cultures on African societies during and after colonization, Aniakor's book serves as a historical reference on Igbo cosmology and concepts of community.

Appeals to the Igbo sense of community have resurfaced in contemporary Nigerian politics, necessitated by the struggle for control of power by various ethnic groups who invoke communitarian struggle to advance their demands for tribal unity. Aniakor's paintings and poetry were informed by his grounding in Igbo cultures, and he retained these influences even during his sojourn abroad. For example, between 1994 and 1995 he was a research fellow at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, but even then the drawings he produced there strongly reflected his Igbo roots. In 1996 Aniakor held a fellowship in oral literature at the African Studies Centre of Howard University in Washington DC. Otternberg (1997: 87) argues that "despite his years in the United States, the content of his art is firmly rooted in Nigeria." One may argue that Aniakor subscribed to a problematic notion of cultural authenticity that prevented his art from developing in relation to influences from other sources. In this regard, while other Nsukka Art School graduates appropriated a wide range of sources for their art, ranging from Igbo cultures to other African cultures and even Chinese calligraphy, Aniakor's art remains fundamentally informed by Igbo symbolism and imaginaries.

While many Nigerian diaspora artists ponder "how the condition of diasporicity has remapped the global terrain of contemporary culture by questioning hegemonic concepts of ethnicity, nationality, and authenticity, of center and periphery" (Oguibe 1999: 32), Aniakor never allowed his sojourn abroad to affect his deep grip on his Igbo identity and ethnicity, and thus for him, the question of alienation that trailed the works of African artists who migrated to the West never arose. Perhaps in realization of the fact that he did not belong to these groups of diaspora Nigerian artists, having returned to Nsukka after the Howard fellowship, he sustained his curiosity in local creative idioms to advance the idea of community as a binding force of Igbo society (see Ogbechie 2016 for more on ethnicity, alienation, and identity in art). Aniakor's reliance on Igbo cultural forms explains the congregated figures in many of his artworks. The image of massed crowds constitute the archetypal visual image of his oeuvre for many years: the very belief in the community life of the Igbo. In this belief system the individual is not isolated in struggle but belongs to a community and a congregation of endeavours that is defined by "the demand for what is described as 'beneficial reciprocity'—the realization that no individual is an 'island' unto himself" (Agulanna 2010: 292). This belief has enabled Aniakor to narrate a community of struggling individuals who share a collective despair under the subjugation imposed by a singular tyrant. In Aniakor's terms, the concept of the "evil few" against the "good masses" suggests the awkward practice of democracy in Nigeria. In his words, "change is driven by communal forces."¹

Many Igbo people perceive the Nigerian government as prejudiced and designed to disinherit the Igbo community. The preponderance of oppressors, from a minority ethnic group who dominate the Nigerian political space to the deprivation of other majority ethnic groups, is seen by some Igbo as defeating the logic of good governance, which all should expect as dividend of democracy. In Aniakor's artworks, evil is always represented by the singular towering figure, while suffering is personified in the huddled masses. This style metaphorically x-rays the prevailing practice in contemporary Nigerian political space where minorities, either among the few ruling class or a powerful ethnic minority, have largely subdued the entire nation.

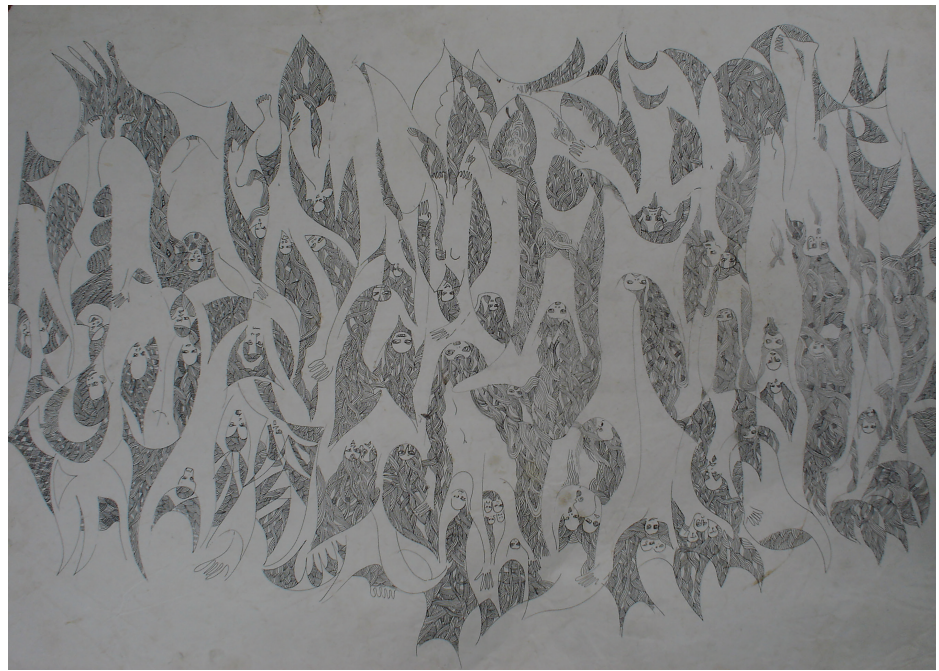
In a similar rendition, festivals or social celebrations are also a matter of collective participation, which in Igbo belief systems is a mark of social existence. Indeed, Agulanna (2010) has argued that for the Igbo, "No individual (or spirit), no matter how strong, is self-sufficient." Uchendu (1965: 11–13) also notes that the notion of "human interdependence" is a constant theme in Igbo folklore and proverbs. Kinship bonds and affiliations find appropriate reference in such sayings as *ikwu na ibe* (person and community). In effect, *ikwu na ibe* "refers to the entire community of kinsmen, children, women and all other relations" (Agulanna 2010). In earlier Igbo societies, ostracism or banishment from one's community was considered one of the greatest punishments, for which, in some instances, the ostracized preferred death to such severance of bonds of kin and community. T.U. Nwala reminds us that "the being of the community is larger than, and prior to, that of any of its individual members since the being of the community as a whole is identical with the being of the total personality of the ancestors" (Nwala 1985: 46, in Agulanna 2010).

Aniakor seems to have treasured this notion of communal

10 Chike Aniakor (b. 1934, Nigerian)
A Celebration (1990)
Pen and ink on paper; 70 cm x 50 cm

bonds in his flickering lines and sensuous textures. For example, in *Rhythms of Life* (Fig. 6), a mass of textured lines dominates other design elements. In this work, exposing the unsteady grandeur and anxious flurry of daily life, the restless images are scrawled with fierce and loving artistry of a master painter. *Rhythms of Life* vibrates with colorful vivacity and a sequence of tiny units that creates its visual form and establishes between the flowery curves and the colorful patches. When viewed in terms of lines and flat, tiny shapes, the primary and secondary elements would be easily integrated as linear textures in the overall composition. Oloidi (1990: 13) describes Aniakor's composition as constituting "numerous, painstaking and microscopic flamy expressions," which aptly recognizes the massing of figures and features in Aniakor's art. Whether in their depiction of certain nonrepresentational concepts or in the adept exploration of the plastic possibilities of unconventional styles, Aniakor's surfaces remain maelstroms of mass convoluted movements, of colors and tones that suggest a special attachment to his Igbo sense of community. Indeed, Aniakor displays evident ingenuity in combining linear inscriptions with representation of massed forms to achieve a rhythm to the endless crowds in his drawings and paintings. For example, in *Ritual of Oblation* (Fig. 7) the center seems to drive the surrounding images, much as it does in *Seasonal Ritual* (Fig. 8). In fact the center, for Aniakor, plays a critical role in the life of every society, much as it plays a crucial role in his own creativity. His contention that the center unifies the various key components that make up the community² enables the center to enjoy that consistent significance seen in most of his works. This idea about the center in the Igbo community also reflects Aniakor's position in artworks that bear political messages. In this case the center drives the surrounding movements either towards mass mobilization against a common enemy or towards an uncoordinated movement that is driven by contingencies.

In Igbo society oblation is performed to invoke the gods and to seek their intercession and blessings, which ensures maintenance of social order. In *Ritual of Oblation* and *Seasonal Ritual*, the images at the center are the forces that either subordinate or are subordinated by the massing of numerous forces. It suggests that sacrifices are not just personal actions, they are also communal activities. Even in cases where sacrifices are seen as an individual activity, the belief in the numerous unseen forces for which the sacrifices are made also allows for a link between the individual and the community. *Ritual of Oblation* and *Seasonal Ritual* also point to the role of ancestors for their influence on the living, even as they depend "on the living to feed them with sacrifices" (Shelton 1972). This explains the connecting strands in *Seasonal Ritual*. Aniakor affirms that "ancestors in African cosmology remain innumerable and thus constitute uncountable figures in his works."



While the surrounding figures could also stand for the numerous good things such as "many children and wives"³ which a sacrifice is expected to bring in the Igbo cosmology, they may also suggest the numerous devotees that have come to pay homage.

The importance and impact of the center is therefore very visible in *Seasonal Ritual*. The work depicts the interconnectedness of the human, natural, and metaphysical worlds. In earlier times, when most Igbo communities were dependent on agriculture, rituals were observed at the beginning of the planting season to pay homage to the gods of the land in supplication for a bountiful harvest. Such rituals are usually accompanied by big celebrations. Chief priests make sacrifices to the gods while, in certain circumstances, many communities stage masquerades and other performances. Even as Igbo societies change in the contemporary era, seasonal rituals are still an important link between Igbos in urban areas and their communities of origin. Each year, large numbers of Igbo return to their hometowns to celebrate important community rituals.

THE CROWD: A SYMBOL OF SUBJUGATION, CELEBRATION, AND RESISTANCE

Aniakor's depiction of the forced displacement of the Igbo during the Nigerian-Biafran war of 1967–1970 is a most powerful depiction of the impact of civil strife, aptly captured in the work *Exodus I, The Refugees* (Fig. 9). In this artwork, panic-stricken human figures with huge pieces of luggage on their heads move *en masse* away from a troubled zone. The work creates a powerful illusion of movement: the vitality of lines and shapes, the sprouting contours produced by the negative spaces, the rhythmic grace of anxious humanity all indicate Aniakor's deep understanding of movement as an essential element in the design-structure of war images. It is important to mention here that one of Aniakor's potent tools is repetitive linear contours: such accents create underlying rhythmic action that translates to an optical illusion of writhing bodies reminiscent of El Greco's *Agony in the Garden* or Pablo Picasso's



11 Chike Aniakor (b. 1934, Nigerian)
Diviner (1997)
 Pen and ink on paper; 70 cm x 50 cm

Horrors of War. Perhaps this understanding suggests that Aniakor was struck by the victimhood and horrendous memories of the Nigeria/Biafra civil war, with its devastating impact on Igbo peoples and villages. Memories of the war subsequently define a large part of his work in the decade between 1970, when the war ended, and 1980. One may argue that his recollection of the travails of war brings an organic vitality and pathos to his work.

The refugee is constituted by kinetic movement and hazards of every kind, as is evident in the spate of refugee deaths in the current global migration across the Mediterranean into Europe. Aniakor's art visualizes the calamitous movement of refugees in general, but specifically in relation to the refugee crisis spiked by the civil war and its effects on Igbo peoples. We can read this from the arrangements of lines and shapes in his artworks, especially in *Exodus I, The Refugees*. All the narrative incidents of the Biafran war are combined in this singular composition: the plight of children, women, and the elderly; the anguish, pathos, and anxiety of the displaced populace; the total blockade on the Biafran enclave that led to terrible diseases such as kwashiorkor and the failure of the international community to provide aid. The wider global discourse of refugee intersects with *Exodus I, The Refugees* and could aptly fit into what Agamben (1998) refers to as *Homo Sacer* and Malkki (1995: 499) describes as "a specific social category and legal problem of global dimensions."

Aniakor's contribution to the crystallization of the *uli* experiment at Nsukka has not yet been adequately theorized or recognized. When he arrived at Nsukka in November 1970, Aniakor remarks:

I introduced African art to the curriculum and my own idea then was that I wanted to take the students back to the field. In fact the courses we taught in African art were based on fieldwork. What we did was that we went out with the students and I remembered that I went to Agulu with Obiora Udechukwu at one point. I followed Paul Igboanugo to Oraifite. We stayed for two days at Oraifite (2005: 136).

He recalls that his teaching methodology involved interviewing the artists and he further advised the students to go to their villages and conduct interviews, assemble data and then present papers on their field findings. This, according to Aniakor, enabled a "more theoretical attitude to culture and its impact, in teaching and learning in the university system and by that people began to return to their roots" (2005: 136). This focus on indigenous culture provided him and his students with a productive space for deeper inquiry in Igbo concepts of community as a creative theme that was framed through an exploration of mixed media. Indeed, mixed media has materialized as Aniakor's creative forte of pen and ink medium. He acknowledges further: "I continued to work with pen and ink in order to energise my works with the usual essays of lines for multiple viewpoints, creative spontaneity and directness of execution" (Aniakor 1986: 8).

We need to understand the role of space in Aniakor's art and creative enterprise. While space is the vital tool of the Igbo *uli* adepts, Aniakor's is legendary for how he deploys space in his drawings and paintings. For example, in *Our Stories* (Fig. 6) a succession of negative spaces emerge from the tapestries of interweaving lines and shapes. These spaces are interwoven into the edges and centers of his pictorial forms. One can call them negative shapes since they are the areas that separate one positive image from another on the pictorial plane. It is necessary to mention here that in ordinary life humans see the shapes of things but do not notice the gaps and intervals between things as definite shapes at all. But Aniakor reminds us in this painting of a basic characteristic of drawing in general: that the shapes of negative spaces are as important to the artistic composition as the shapes of positive images. Far from being regarded by the artist as areas of nonaligned terrain or subjective surplus gaps in the pattern—as it were a pictorial no-man's-land—these negative shapes are used in this work as active tools in the general design and within each section of the pictures they are used to enhance the action and character of the very images whose delineations have defined them.

That a negative shape can exist as an expressive area in its own right may help us appreciate the work titled *A Celebration* (Fig. 10). By itself it is a stirring, exuberant agglomeration of creepy figures. Negative shapes run continuously across the entire picture plane with cascading contours and descending curves thus initiating a substantial flow with the vertical edge of the picture plane. The figures maintain equal levels of significance and dominating presence and their expressive action are never in doubt. The theme of celebration conjures the typical ritualized living of contemporary African communities. In the drawing, several figures raise their hands in jubilation. The same elements seen in this work (its massing of figures and reliance on the interplay between positive and negative shapes) exemplify Igbo systems of communal sociability

that Aniakor has consistently referenced in his oeuvre. In essence, there are hardly any single, independent figures in Aniakor's work; rather his figures are groups of massed figures that could be seen as "subjects of a major plot" (Ikwuemesi 1992: 45). The peopling of his pictorial surface is also an indication of the movement and connectivity that define societal life in Igboland, in which case his "human figures are like narrative characters, like a visual theater in which each player depends on the others" (Ottenberg 1997: 96). The Igbo concept of "Igwebuikwe" (there is strength in crowds) also underscores this interpretation: "The inter-connectedness of the individual and the community in Igboland where the extended family system serves as the framework on which the community is built" (Ufearoh 2010: 100).

Aniakor's interconnected masses speak to Igbo ontology "where humans are not isolated beings but beings in constant dialogue with other human beings including the gods, ancestors, and other visible and invisible beings" (Ufearoh 2010:101). Perhaps, the link has visually impacted Aniakor's works such that either in masquerading, ritual performance, or dance, the concept of congregation is strongly reinforced. Aniakor himself has observed that "when you place a figure in it on its own it becomes static, it doesn't move" (cited in Ottenberg 1997: 94). When people celebrate they exude cheerfulness, suggesting why the facial contours in this work reflect cheery souls. Aniakor seems to believe that lines and shapes are as important in the representation of emotion as the symbolic significance of the theme of "celebration." He once noted that his works "are characterised ... by a symbolic and expressive language and defined by firm boundaries which activate interior surfaces for the interplay of mythopoeic forces of plastic experience" (Aniakor 1986: 8).

It is possible, following Aniakor's submission, that symbolic imagery plays a key role in his creativity, and yet he does not seem

to confuse us with his personal symbology. This is because Owen (1970: 18) has noted that "we can appreciate any great painting without recourse to a dictionary of symbolic codes." One may submit that Aniakor's style is a deep voyage of intellectual curiosity; one that confronts the viewer with a great visual force. Even the incongruous linear compositions that unfold as a shoal of silhouettes between one figure and another are activated not only by their conscious association with the dynamic, physical action of movement itself (just like that of striving streams of roots and bifurcating nerves), but by their psychological association with an energy evocative of festivals.

CONCLUSION

Aniakor's lines are sharp, strong, and assertive, much as his words are. Indeed his words and lines have a touch of the magical that promises a depth of insight into his life as a great artist and academic. Most of his artworks border on depicting humanity with connecting strands of movement strongly evocative of communalism in the Igbo context. In this essay I highlight the gap that exists in studies of the Nsukka School and the *uli* revivalist movement in general that has failed to recognise his epochal place in Nigerian art history. Through his numerous exploits, ranging from championing the intellectual aspect of Nigerian art history to the corpus of his masterly creative output, from his fantastic mentoring and tutelage in art institutions of Nigeria to his erudite dialogues at academic forums, one may say that Aniakor is a revolutionary scholar, teacher and artist par excellence who deserves serious scholarly investigation. The few of his artworks described here hint at his vast creative repertoire in an effort toward greater understanding of Aniakor's creativity, which speaks directly to the Igbo sense of community and to the fraught sociopolitical history of Nigeria.

Notes

- 1 Chike Aniakor, interview with author, 2013.
- 2 Chike Aniakor, interview with author, 2018.
- 3 Chike Aniakor, interview with author, 2018.

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