

# Style and Selected Works of Asuquo Alfred Akpabio, a Modern Nigerian Artist

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**Abstract:** There are many artists who have worked without notice in Nigeria. Most of the indigenous Artist of Akwa Ibom state may be forgotten and their works may become unheard of in contemporary Nigerian Art and the society. This paper therefore focuses on Chief Akpabio's, a sculptor and wood carver of Akwa Ibom State origin to the growth and advancement of art in Nigeria. The thrust of the study is on the artist's style and medium. Information for this study was collected through primary and secondary medium. The paper recommends that awareness should be created on indigenous artists by documentation.

**Keywords:** Stone Age Art Gallery, Mbopo, Akwa Ibom, usoro uso, Africanness

## I. INTRODUCTION

The development of the indigenous artist in Nigeria begins from the primary, secondary up to the tertiary institution. Tradition training starts from home practice, the workshops and studio practice, apprenticeship, workshops and studio practices under tutors of art. These Workshops and studios have produced numerous artists who executed art pieces that serve various purposes at home, offices, farms, shrines, palaces and royal courts. However, many artists of especially those Akwa Ibom origin have worked unnoticed and undocumented either as a master or under tutors or masters in studios and workshops to improve their skills.

Asuquo Alfred Akpabio is one of those artist that may be unnoticed and undocumented that have worked under tutors and presently a master and director of his own studio named Stone Age Gallery Art Garden, which was registered as Akpanam Super Arts, located in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State. His aim of practicing art was to document the rich culture of Akwa Ibom state and also promoting same using various mediums of art with predominancy on sculpture.

Asuquo has exposed the youths of Akwa Ibom state to modern Nigerian art tradition after his experiences under credible masters. With his modernistic approach to art, he has invited both informal and formal art participants nationally and internationally. In all, knowledge dissemination that characterized the workshop centres is the same with that of the Stone Age Gallery Art Garden: a centre of creativity where f Asuquo Alfred Akpabio was able to impact on apprentices who practice under him, his wealth of experience. Despite all these achievements, Asuquo Akpabio's artworks and his style are on the verge of being forgotten by the older

generation and not known by the younger generation even among artists. This paper therefore focuses on the works, style and the contributions of Asuquo Akpabio, a sculptor and wood carver of Akwa Ibom State origin, to the growth and advancement of art in Nigeria. The study aim at documenting the style and medium of Asuquo Akpabio. Method of sourcing for the information needed for this study is by primary and secondary sources. The significance of this study is that it will help revive the indigenous artist and serve as an instrument of encouragement to other indigenous artists. This study will also serve as a source of information about indigenous artist in Nigeria.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was anchored on two theoretical frameworks namely: Bourdieu's Sociological theory of Art perception and John Dilworth's content theory of Art.

### 2.1.1 Bourdieu's Sociological Theory of Art Perception:

this theory according to Pierre Bourdieu (1984) states that "Any art perception involves a conscious or unconscious deciphering operation". An act of deciphering *unrecognized as such*, immediate and adequate 'comprehension', is possible and effective only in the special case in which the cultural code which makes the act of deciphering possible is immediately and completely mastered by the observer (in the form of cultivated ability or inclination) and merges with the cultural code which has rendered the work perceived possible. The works of Asuquo Akabio have a peculiar style and form significant to the people of Akwa Ibom state. This makes it possible for an observer to easily identify the cultures of which the art works represents. Despite the fact that most of the works are philosophical in interpretation, the visual representation still depict the culture of the people of Akwa Ibom State. This study adopts this theory to agree that, a symbolic meaning for art only exists for as person who has the means to decipher that meaning. In order to pick apart the meaning in Asuquo Akpabio's works, one must acquire institutionalized or non-institutionalized training.

### 2.1.2 Content Theories of Art by John Dilworth:

A content theory of art identifies an artwork with the meaningful or representational content of some concrete artistic vehicle, such as the intentional, expressive, stylistic, and subject matter-related content embodied in, or resulting from, acts of intentional artistic expression by artists

(Dilworth, 2007). This theory was adopted in this study to affirm the fact that the content of Asuquo Akpabio's works are embodiment of the rich cultural heritage and activities of the indigenous people of Akwa Ibom state.

## 2.2 *Early Life and Educational Background of Asuquo Alfred Akpabio*

Asuquo Alfred Akpabio, a sculptor and woodcarver, was born on the 17<sup>th</sup> of July, 1956, at Mbiaya Uruan in Uruan Local Government Area in the present Akwa Ibom State. He is of Ibibio parentage. He was self-trained as a wood carver and sculptor. Chief Asuquo Alfred Akpabio hails from the family of carvers that engaged in apprenticeship system at the family compound. According to Asuquo Akpabio, his creative interest as a child, and his constant work experience in his uncle's tailoring workshop, rekindled his pursuits to be a renowned carver. He further stated that he enrolled at Saint Augustine School, Uruan, in 1968. After his primary education, he left his father and came to Uyo in 1972. Although he came to learn tailoring he ended as a carver. On a faithful day, he borrowed a pen knife and matchet, went into the bush, got some wood and started carving. He was driven into art by inspiration from the grandfather who engaged in carving and making of drums for use at festivals (Akpabio, group communication, June 11, 2019).

Asuquo Alfred Akpabio survived many difficulties in life. He forgoes the higher educational pursuits to concentrate on workshop practice. This rekindled his desire for more experimentation with much vigour and a burning passion to appropriate what, to him, is an ancestral legacy. His passion made him to perfect the method of manipulating delicate carving instruments like chisels, knives and other sharp objects to define his carving techniques.

During his active days of service, he had up to 16 apprentices all of which he trained them free of charge. As part of his philosophy that, God, gave him the talent free without charge, so he also trained people free without charge. He has produced so many artists who ventured into other skills except for one of them who is still in the practice till date. His favorite medium is wood. Most of the tools he uses are fabricated by him. His works stand the test of time and the wood he uses do not have any defect. This is as a result of his careful selection of the material he works with. Most of his works depict the traditional activities and culture of the people of Akwa Ibom State.

Despite the Nigerian and Akwa Ibom State political structure which does not favor art, he has not relented his effort in the production of Art. He has exhibited widely. Recently, he exhibited in the art exhibition sponsored by the Akwa Ibom state government entitled, *Usoro Uso*. Amongst his contemporaries in art is late Sunny Jackson, a renowned sculptor in Ibesikpo Asutan LGA of Akwa Ibom State.

## 2.3 *Akpabio's Style*

Traces of carving traditions of Ibibio sculptors could still be gotten. But recording of the visual forms of these sculpture traditions have been adumbrated in some contemporary artistic styles. The modern application of these forms started with Picasso and Braque (Grieder, 1990: 428); their Africanness attribution and qualification to some certain aspects of modern aesthetic meaning are a part of the significant contributions of Nigerian (and African) traditional sculpture to world art and world's artistic morphology (Kalilu and Oladugbagbe, 2013).

Alfred Asuquo Akpabio sculptural pieces always betray his love for subject-matters relating to the race, culture and lore of the Akwa Ibom people. As a traditional woodcarver, he still utilizes modern formalism to invent an independent language. This is in line with what Fosu (1986: 2) opines that, traditional art usually "expressed definite timehonoured ethnic beliefs" as well as ideal. Chukueggu (2010), observed this in his study on modern Nigerian Art by stating that, the patterns and designs applied in modern Nigerian artworks were usually rooted in classical conventions, which were not easily amended. However, such conventions were cautiously repeated with occasional modifications in order to inject new experiences and forms where necessary.

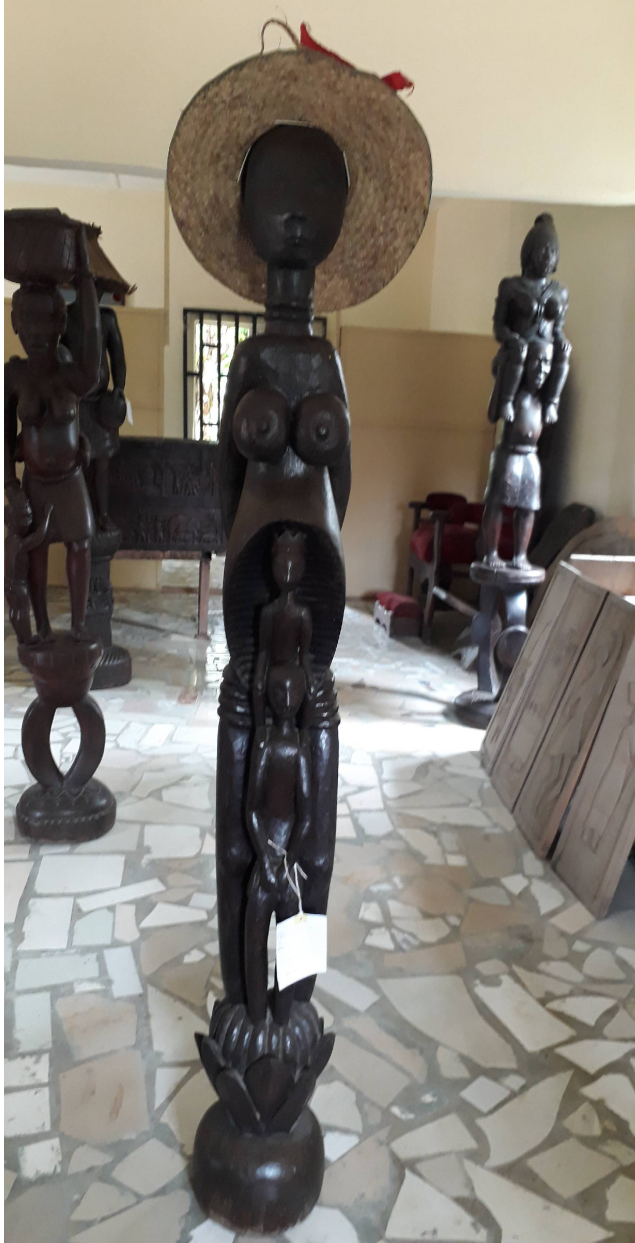
Akpabio's indigenous forms and symbols are admired by art connoisseurs who are ready to learn from the pristine primordial messages derived from the Ibibio cultural heritage. His stylistic and technical progressions are attributable to self discipline and mastery of his working tools. His tools respond not only to the functions he intends them to perform, but also to the visual aesthetics that he advances in his visual imagination. The way he handles the instruments determines the quality of his artistic renditions and output. His tools are classified into different categories in which the smallest ones are used to carve delicate areas of the wood, while the big ones are used to carve hardest portions of the wood. The chisels that he uses in carving are always kept neat, well sharpened, oiled and lumped together to prevent rust (Akpabio, May, 2019).

Whenever he is commissioned to produce an art piece, Alfred Asuquo Akpabio mostly makes a Marquette or a small sample of intended work, which serves as a model before embarking on the real project. While working on a large art piece, he usually marks the areas that he will chip off with white chalk. This technique allows him to remove unwanted parts around the space he has marked with the white chalk and the technique equally acts as a guide to avoid mistakes. During the carving exercise, he lays down the wood flat on the ground or in an up-right position while chiselling out the unwanted parts one after the other. With a broad hammer, he chips and chops out unwanted flesh of the wood.

Asuquo Akpabio's style can be likened to that of Bisi Fakeye, Felix Idubor, Ben Osawe, Igbinovia Idah and many other Benin carvers. They are bold and full of vigor.

*Some Works of Alfred Asuquo Akpabio*

The following are some of Alfred Asuquo Akpabio's works



Title: Destiny Creation

Medium: Wood

Year: 1982

The work depicts a king inside the mother's womb. According to Alfred, before one is born into this world, one is already destined to be a king or whatever God wants the person to be. Chief Akpabio carefully romanticizes the anatomical structure of the mother and child to conceptualize

the work *destiny creation*. He tries to depict the secret that no one sees during the conception period, but he, however, presents this as a secret that will be unveiled after the day of delivery.



Title: The Love of a Mother

Medium: Wood

Year: 1987

The work executed using wooden panel represents the love that is naturally deposited in a mother. While most artists represent the connection between a mother and a child using medium such as painting or other technique of sculpture, this work differs in the style of rendition, that is, carving on wood. The work shows a mother, despite other responsibility of catering for the home, she still have time to look after the children.

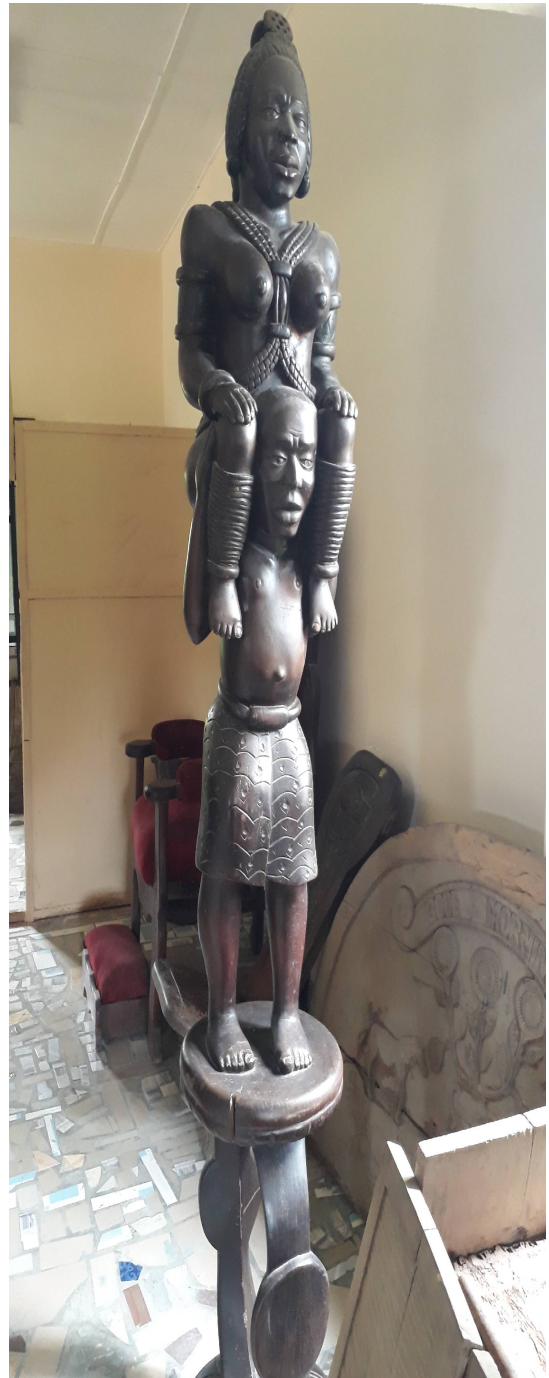


Title: Farmer

Medium: wood

Year: 1981

A good farmer must eat well, make money and must be healthy. According to Chief Alfred, in those days, farmers were much wealthier than others. The work showed the youthful nature of a farmer. The wood is well smoothen and made shiny to portray the youthfulness of a farmer.



Title: The Virtuous Woman (Mbopo)

Medium: wood

Year: 1981

The work depicts a beautiful fat female figure that is carried on the shoulder by a young man with healthy body. The work shows the new husband carrying the wife on his shoulder to the market square to show to the people that he will be able to bear the burden of taking care of the lady.



Title: Treasure Box

Medium: Wood

Year: 1991

This work has the culture and lifestyle of Akwa Ibomites carved on the box. This type of box can only be found in the Kings palace. In the Kings palace, this box is used to hide some treasured items. The forms on the box illustrate the occupational activities carried out by Ibibio people. They include Ibibio masquerade, fishing, farming and hunting. Also, the form depicts selected animals that can be found in the land of Ibibio.



Title: Town Crier

Medium: Wood

Year: 1982

Maduka (1999:10) in Bardi (2017) explains that the *Town Crier* echoes the traditional settings where the use of a *Town Crier* remains the primary medium for disseminating socio-political information and advertisement messages. The positioning of the *Town Crier* appears significant to the contemporary media world in which information is carried above-the-advert-line and below-the-advert-line in the attempt to reach a large, heterogeneous and anonymous audience.



Title: Philosopher

Medium: Wood

Year: 1982

The work entitled *Philosopher* shows that when someone is involved in thinking, there is the need for proper concentration without distraction. The work is depicted by the image of a monkey holding its own head.



Title: Evolution

Medium: Wood

Year: 1982

The work entitled “Evolution” symbolizes education as the key to earthly success. The work depicts the dewenian evolutionary source of mankind, which is an ape. The ape holds a key on one hand and a spanner on the other hand. This signifies that, for a man to be transformed, he needs educational knowledge to develop his skills.

### III. CONCLUSION

Alfred Akpabio is a traditional sculptor who has over the years successfully operated between traditional and modern sculptural styles. When he took over the responsibility and leadership of the Stone Age Art Studio and Gallery, the people and art community in Akwa Ibom State probably, did not really foresee his artistic potentials, capabilities and qualities. His exceptional attitude has developed the psyche of the students he trained and also their artistic talents to professional standard. This has remained a factor in the attainment of good standard in the Nigerian art practice. Alfred Akpabio’s ability to assist and not to be assisted has given him an outstanding quality and image. He has trained many who are self-employed and has immensely contributed

to the growth of art in Akwa Ibom State and Nigeria. His art style is in line with the modern style of art that is practiced anywhere in the world.

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