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# 1

## Making Man

### Aesthetics and the Mythic Imagination

Ife kwulu, ife akwudobe ya, ife di, ife adidobe ya  
(Where one thing stands, something else stands beside it  
Where one thing exists, something else exists beside it)

—Igbo Proverb

The story of anyone's life is never the simple unfolding through time of an internally programmed narrative, even if it exhibits what one might call a standard episodic structure. . . . What makes biography worth writing and reading are the accidents, the intersection of crossed causal histories that produce events not strictly predictable from either chain.

—Arthur C. Danto

#### Africa's Greatest Artist

In 1950, Ben Enwonwu, a young Nigerian artist presented a series of exhibitions and workshops on the eastern seaboard of the United States of America. Enwonwu's visit to the United States generated a lot of public interest, perhaps because he was the most internationally acclaimed modern African artist of the period. In addition to the paintings and sculptures he exhibited during his visit, he gave many public lectures about modern African art and received substantial media attention from the American press. The African American style magazine, *Ebony*, in an earlier article on the artist, praised Enwonwu highly and identified him as "Africa's greatest artist," taking care to point out the unique integration of African and Western aesthetics evident in his art.<sup>1</sup> The *Washington Post* praised Enwonwu's talent and described his sculptures as a sophisticated interpretation of the art traditions of his homeland.<sup>2</sup> The New York-based *Time* magazine, however, expressed reservations

about the overall quality of Enwonwu's art and chided the artist for abandoning the style and traditions of his ancestors.<sup>3</sup> For *Time*, Enwonwu's effort was commendable but ultimately represented an unsophisticated mimicry of outmoded Western styles and artistic positions.

The opposing opinions expressed in these publications framed the local and international reception of Enwonwu's art through most of his career, which began in the early colonial period of the twentieth century and ended with his death in 1994, thirty-four years after Nigeria became independent of British colonial rule. In the discourse of modern Nigerian art (and modern African art in general), Enwonwu's longevity engenders ambivalence and his career has often been characterized as a liminal practice that reflects the identity crisis of African subjects in the colonial and postcolonial era. Many extant analyses of modern Nigerian art chart the transition of Nigerian artists from indigenous cultural practices to contemporary modes of expression and often have trouble dealing with artists such as Ben Enwonwu who were instrumental in developing the visual language of modernist aesthetics in their various contexts of practice. Analysis selectively focuses on indigenous African arts and then jumps to the practice of postcolonial avant-garde artists (principally members of the Zaria Art Society), the latter defined as representatives of the principal innovative impulses in contemporary Nigerian art.<sup>4</sup> This kind of analysis usually inserts Enwonwu as a bridge between these two polarities and represents his artistic endeavor as an ambiguous phase of expression between the certainties of traditional modes of symbolic communication and an emergent modernist sensibility.

The American media's response to Enwonwu's art shows that his struggle to define a unique mode of modernist practice was often misinterpreted, reduced in most instances to a basic narrative of the impact of colonial formal education on his development as an artist or the supposed ambiguity of his art in general. In actuality, the artworks encountered difficulties because they proposed a new aesthetics whose integration of Igbo mythopoesis with modernist forms challenged established notions of modernist practice even as it validated Enwonwu's unique position as a modern African artist. Like Okonkwo, the protagonist in Chinua Achebe's episodic novel—*Things Fall Apart*—Enwonwu's mere presence compelled attention but critics did not always view his actions with approval. Nevertheless, most contemporary commentators of his era agreed that Enwonwu was an important modern artist even though there was much disagreement about the importance of his art and the extent of his impact on the development of visual languages of modernist expression in art in general, and particularly in African art.

The critical analysis and intellectual history of Enwonwu's professional career enunciated in this book unfolds against the above controversy. I attempt a deep reading of the artist by evaluating what Arthur Danto described as "the crossed causal histories" that affected his life and professional career, hoping

thereby to make sense of the diversity of his practice and his pioneering role as an African modernist artist. This first chapter investigates the cultural contexts in Nigeria that framed Enwonwu's emergence as a modern African artist and his formal education with the British colonial educator and cultural activist K. C. Murray, whose exhibition of his students' artworks at the Zwemmer Gallery in London in 1937 set the stage for the internationalization of modern Nigerian art. Issues of contextual definition, appropriation, and mimicry juxtapose the practice of the Murray Group (Enwonwu and his student colleagues) with indigenous modes of representation in African art, and the European conventions of representation they absorbed through their colonial education. I also proffer a brief review of Igbo aesthetics and philosophies of cultural practice as a basis for an alternative interpretation of Enwonwu's art, which derived influences from indigenous African aesthetics, techniques, and philosophy of art production as well as European conventions of representation in general.

## Early Years

Benedict Chukwukadibia Enwonwu was born a twin on 14 July 1917<sup>5</sup> in Onitsha. His twin brother, Jacob, died shortly afterward.<sup>6</sup> Enwonwu's father, *Odigwe* Emeka Enwonwu, hailed from the Umuezeoroli Quarter<sup>7</sup> of Onitsha, where he worked for the Royal Niger Company (RNC) fleet as a technical assistant who assisted ship engineers in repairing and servicing their vast fleet. *Odigwe* Enwonwu traveled with the fleet for fifteen years. Most of these voyages were made in the southern region of Nigeria. During his career with the RNC, *Odigwe* Enwonwu obtained a good grasp of English and made many friends among the European employees of the RNC. His experiences on this job (among other factors) facilitated a decision to provide his son with a European education.<sup>8</sup> *Odigwe* Enwonwu was also a sculptor and around 1910 he retired from the RNC to devote more time to his art and was inducted into the prestigious *Agbalanze Ozo* society of Onitsha.<sup>9</sup> Members of this organization were exempted from manual labor, obtained the right to bear ivory, sat on the *Ozo* council (a political organization integral to Onitsha's indigenous political and legal systems), and by virtue of their investiture became sacred personae in Onitsha society. *Ozo* members assumed a title name upon their induction, and the elder Enwonwu received the title name *Odigwe* (a diminutive of *Odi n'Igwe*), which praised him as an exalted person.<sup>10</sup> He was apparently respected as an artist by his age grade since he also received the honorific *omenka*, which in Igbo societies recognizes an individual's specialized skills in art.<sup>11</sup>

Ben Enwonwu's mother, *Ajie* Iyom Nweze Enwonwu, also hailed from Onitsha and was a successful trader in textiles. She traveled frequently and

although both mother and son became very close in later years, Enwonwu admitted he barely knew her as a youngster owing to the itinerant nature of her trade. Iyom Nweze was an independent woman in a society that boasted a tradition of powerful women of considerable influence. She possessed a strong will and an aggressive imposing presence.<sup>12</sup> After the death of her husband in 1921, Iyom Nweze became an important force in the Enwonwu family until her own death many decades later.

Onitsha long straddled an international trade network that linked hinterland Nigerian populations with European merchants who converged to trade at its famous market. This congregation ensured an influx of different ethnic groups that gave the town a cosmopolitan aura. Onitsha is one of nine Igbo towns that claim origins in the Edo kingdom of Benin.<sup>13</sup> The remaining eight towns are located on the western side of the River Niger. All these towns consider themselves distinct from Igbo societies and use the term Igbo to refer to populations of the upland Awka-Orlu area.<sup>14</sup> Their language is a dialect of Igbo but is heavily influenced by the Edo language. They also deploy elaborate Edo-influenced kingship traditions superimposed on Igbo social and political structures based on kin-group relationships. The nine towns are collectively identified as *UmuEzechime* and constitute a clan-group whose oral narratives are constructed around the culture hero, *Eze*<sup>15</sup> (king) Chime.<sup>16</sup> The Ezechime narrative is important to analysis of Enwonwu's career as a modern Nigerian artist since he hails from Onitsha. The narrative asserts that the culture-hero Chime was a nobleman of Benin during the reign of *Oba* Esigie who fell foul of the king because of a conflict with the queen mother over land rights.<sup>17</sup> The king ordered his execution and Chime fled toward the River Niger but died (presumably from wounds sustained in a skirmish with the *Oba's* soldiers) and was buried at Obior. His sons led the population farther east and each dropped off to establish new towns along the way. Ado (also called Oraeze), the founder of Onitsha, was one of the youngest of Ezechime's sons. A dispute over land tenure and succession rights caused Ado-Oraeze to lead his followers across the River Niger from Illah (where they had settled for some time in the community founded by his elder brother). Once safely across, Ado and his followers subdued the indigenous population and established a town named Onicha-Ado (which was later anglicized to Onitsha during the colonial period) to distinguish it from other Ezechime towns like Onicha-Ugbo, Onicha-Olona, and Onicha-Ukwu. There are variations to the above narrative in the nine towns but the central characters and approximate historical period of the migration are consistent.<sup>18</sup>

Historians are divided over their interpretation of the Ezechime narrative, and most define the Ezechime migration as a retrograde movement of Igbo peoples formerly domiciled within the old boundaries of the Edo Kingdom.<sup>19</sup> The great Edo territorial expansion of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries under the reign of the Edo warrior kings Ewuare and Esigie created mass movements of people in the lower Niger region and

may have caused such migrations as recounted in the Ezechime narrative. Igbo societies that were affected by the Edo expansion basically moved eastward toward the River Niger as they fled the massive army and Portuguese mercenaries of the Edo war machine. A lot of ethnic integration occurred during this period, which partly accounts for the anomalous location of Yoruba-speaking peoples among western Igbo societies and might account for the Ezechime clan's claims of Edo origins.<sup>20</sup> Historian Chudi Okwechime concurs that a migration of populations out of areas of Edo jurisdiction indeed resulted in the formation of the Ezechime clan whose population shift he dated to 1750.<sup>21</sup> He concluded that the original Ezechime kin-group was principally an Igbo society although they absorbed or integrated with many non-Igbo peoples on their migration eastward. Okwechime evaluated this complex interaction through the history of Onicha-Ugbo, a principal town of the Ezechime clan whose current population descends from western Igbo and Nri (Anambra) Igbo, Benin Edo (through marriage and kin relationships), Niger Delta, and Yoruba peoples. The complexity and poly-ethnicity of this group are not accounted for by extant studies of Igbo culture, and many Eastern Igbo peoples question the Igbo ethnic identity of the Umuezechime, who for their part, resolutely contest their identification as Igbo peoples.

Art historian Richard Henderson interprets the Ezechime narrative as an ideology constructed by Onitsha society in response to their existence in a hostile environment.<sup>22</sup> He argues that "Onitsha lacked an elaborate mythology as its cultural charter, and instead emphasized a quasi-historical 'ideology' based on stories tracing the founding of its villages to prehistoric migrations and political fission. This concern with the past . . . was associated with the development of an ideology of kingship . . . and royal genealogies."<sup>23</sup>

Henderson's analysis establishes that Onitsha society originated west of the River Niger even if it doesn't concur with its claim to an Edo origin. This fact speaks to its precarious location among the larger eastern Igbo population and because of it, identity issues are paramount in Onitsha traditions in which forms of ritual display emphasizing difference and cultural supremacy are highly valued. Onitsha indigenes consider themselves superior to their Igbo neighbors and subsequently evolved some of the most elaborate cultural displays and visual markers of cultural identity to be found among Igbo societies. The attendant aesthetic sophistication and aristocratic attitude thus fostered became defining characteristics of Onitsha culture and sufficiently impressed the first Europeans who visited the area.<sup>24</sup> This cosmopolitan attitude informed the vibrant nature of Onitsha's indigenous arts and provided Enwonwu's father with a decent income after he retired from his job at the RNC.

The *Ozo* were major patrons of art in Onitsha and their demand for ritual objects and display items provided a brisk trade in wood, metal, and ivory

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