The Masquerade in the Marketplace: délé jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́'s Introspections and Reflections In Colors and Lines

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Abstract

This essay is about the art and life of délé jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́, one of the foremost Yorùbá artists and cartoonists. The essay argues that délé jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́'s oeuvre is a mirror of his life experiences and journeys depicting contemporary conditions of lifestyles, economics, and politics that he has witnessed, the harsh conditions of life in Africa, and the consciousness of exile. A striking focus of délé jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́'s art is on underdevelopment and its consequences, particularly on poverty, politics and policies of change, identity, and violence. The discussion is centered on the artist as a scholar; the artist-scholar in Africa (Nigeria); and the artist-scholar in the Diaspora (United States). In each of the tiers, délé jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ comes across variously as a committed artist, a spectator, an interrogator, an advocate, an environmentalist, and much more.

> *My art is cathartic. It is an averment of my personal aesthetics: an articulation of the pangs and anxieties, the sociocultural bemusements and conflicts, and the political conundrums and economic predilections that have continued to assault my sensibilities as a Diasporic citizen.*
>
> (délé jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́,[1] 2011).

The recent body of work produced by délé jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́,[2] a seasoned and celebrated artist, reveals him at his most mature moment, what the Yorùbá call the *ọjọ́ alẹ́* phase, used here metaphorically as that stage of wisdom when the mind is free of fear, when reflections are communicated in idioms and

1. The use of lower case for délé jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ is not an error here — he prefers to spell all his names in lower case as part of his identity as an artist.

2. "Peregrinations: A Solo Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings by dele jegede," Nike Art Gallery, Lagos, Nigeria, April 30th–May 12th, 2011.

proverbs, when silences speak volumes, and when the desire to reimagine the future against the background of present failures takes precedence over other elements in the thought processes. If the elderly are tired, délé jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ is strong, as all his recent works reveal boundless energy, and even an unapologetic endorsement of youthful rascality. His 1996 painting entitled *One World* embodies this; this painting suggests one who is able to sit inside to engage in deep reflections while his two eyes look permanently outside to see all the important moves and events and hear all the news and gossip. Fresh air enters the room to invigorate his congested mind. He is the unseen man in *One World* whose introspections are to create societal equilibrium, whose dialogue with the unseen forces and spirits will assure us of the communion with our ancestors, and provide balance between creation and environment. When he sticks his head outside of the house, we expect more reflections on the lessons of life. When he steps outside of the house, he wears his mask, his voice and tonality change, he becomes a guest from another land. The masquerade collects respect, which redounds to those who give it.

His oeuvre is a mirror of his life experiences and journeys, depicting contemporary conditions of lifestyles, economies, and politics that he has witnessed firsthand, the harsh conditions of life in Nigeria, and the consciousness of exile. His art inscribes a visual text, allowing us to intellectualize the history of his people and the climate where he lives.

In this essay, I intend to merge jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́'s recent body of work with his work of the last thirty years to explain what he represents, and to analyze the meanings of his work, the significations embedded in the lines and contours of many paintings, and his cumulative contribution to African art. As I do so, I am mindful of the contexts; first, of the Yorùbá/Nigerian/African/diasporic cultures within which his work is situated; second, of the locations of his being based first in Nigeria, then the United States, and his constant movement between both; and third, of the relevance of his art, that is, the aesthetic and ideological statements being communicated by his oeuvre. As an historian, the strengths and limitations of my discipline, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of my own capacity for understanding images, shape my readings. I have set jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ in the context of two branches of a discipline that are treated both as separate and conjoined: African art history and African diaspora art history. The extensive literature on both[3] reflects the range of ideas supplied by these two branches in which jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́'s career and art can be situated.

Facts and visuals are combined with interpretations to talk about jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ as an artist. His biography is underplayed, only to the extent that some elements

3. An extensive bibliography is provided below.

of it enable us to understand his creativity. Three tiers are prominent: the artist as a scholar; the artist-scholar in Nigeria (African artist); and the artist-scholar in the United States (diaspora artist). Suffice it to say that he is an art historian, art critic, and studio artist.[4] His experience has both depth and breadth. In 1974, he started his career as the art editor for a leading Nigerian newspaper, the *Daily Times*, where, for three years, he not only exercised professional oversight for the art and design of the newspaper, but also commented on art exhibitions. In 1976, he started a weekly cartoon strip, *Kole the Menace*. In 1991, he and three other colleagues established the country's first full-color spread of cartoons entitled the "Funny Cords," published by another newspaper, the *Sunday Concord*. He was later to combine his practical and academic interest in a 1983 Ph.D. dissertation on "Trends in Contemporary Nigerian Art," which examined the works of two leading artists, Bruce Onobrakpeya and Twins Seven Seven. Since 1983, he has published extensively as an art historian and engages in studio practice, both interests united in his concerns on African art and popular culture. He has curated several exhibitions, both group and solo. In addition, he has played a leadership role in academic organizations, at one time serving as the president of the Society of Nigerian Artists (1989) and the acting director of the Center for Cultural Studies from 1989 until 1993 when he relocated to the United States, first working at Indiana State University, Terre Haute, and later at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.[5] In the three tiers that his career represents, there

4. jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ retired as Professor of Art History from the Department of Art at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio (USA). He was born in Ìkẹ́rẹ́-Èkìtì, Nigeria. In 1973, he graduated First Class Honors (B.A. in Fine Art) from Ahmadu Bello University with specialization in Painting and Drawing. He excelled as a student, and was awarded three of the Department of Fine Art's five prizes, including the Nigerian Arts Council Prize for the Best Final Year Student. Between 1979 and 1983, he undertook his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees at Indiana University, USA. Source: (http://tribunengrworld.com/jegede-returns-in-peregrinations-2675608.htm).

5. Since 1993, his career has been grafted to the academic and visual art concerns in both the United States and Nigeria. In "Peregrinations," he provides a self-description of his post-1993 career in the following words: "Professor jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́'s academic, administrative, and studio careers have remained complementary and intertwined. In the United States, he was in Washington, DC in 1995 as Senior Post-Doctoral Fellow at the National Museum of African Art, the Smithsonian Institution. In 1996, he was elected President of the Arts Council of the African Studies Association (ACASA) for a two-year tenure. As Professor of Art History at Indiana State University, he developed and taught various courses on African and African American art at the graduate and undergraduate levels. He was appointed Professor and Chair of the Department of Art, Indiana State University, from 2002 to 2005. In July 2005, he was appointed Professor and Chair of the Department of Art at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Since 2000, Professor jegede has been active on accreditation visitations to several universities in the U.S. as a member of various Visitation Teams of the National Association of Schools of Art and Design,

are overriding statements: that the past and global connections are important; that we are products of our past and societies; and that past and current events shape our future.

In self-expression, artists have the option of choosing from a variety of media including installation, digital media, water- or oil-based media, photography, or a combination of these. Jégẹ́dẹ́ works in a two-dimensional medium. Specifically, he is a painter who is interested in exploring a painterly effect in resolving aesthetic issues. While he is versatile in watercolor or gouache, he has produced more work in other media, specifically oil or acrylic on canvas. His superb draftsmanship is apparent not only in the graphite or charcoal studies, which he has done using live models, but he has also done a substantial body of work, mainly cartoons, in pen and ink and without models. His canvases vary in size and, depending on the subject matter, may be executed in one fell swoop or in a prolonged engagement that may last for weeks, months, or even years. In other words, how long it takes jégẹ́dẹ́ to produce a piece of art depends more on the "temper" of the subject matter rather than the size of his canvas. Because of his concern for safety (the combustible nature of oils and acrylic make them very unsafe for work in enclosed spaces), jégẹ́dẹ́ has, in recent years, added latex paint to the range of preferred media.

NASAD. He currently serves on the editorial and advisory boards of some major publications on African art and African Studies. While Professor jégẹ́dẹ́'s administrative and academic commitments may have occupied a good part of his time, they have not dampened his studio work. He took part in several faculty exhibitions at Indiana State University and Miami University, the most recent being the 2009 Bicentennial Faculty Exhibition in Oxford, Ohio, where he had earlier in 2005, had a solo exhibition. In 2006, he had another solo exhibition of "*Abuja Series*" at the Coleman Center for Arts and Culture in York, Alabama. He has been invited to participate at international art exhibitions and conferences, including the "Sesta Biennale d'Arte Sacra" in Italy and "An Inside Story: African Art of Our Time" in Japan. In 2000, he curated two major exhibitions: "Women to Women: Weaving Cultures, Creating History," which featured Ndidi Dike, Sokari Douglas Camp, Ìyábọ̀ Abíọ́lá, and Marcia Kure at Indiana State University, Terre Haute, and "Contemporary African Art: Five Artists, Diverse Trends," which featured Magdalene Odundo and Ezrom Legae among others at the Indianapolis Museum of Art. He has delivered several academic papers and keynote addresses at local and international fora. In 2008, he delivered a lecture at the first Africa Regional Summit and Exhibition on Visual Arts (ARESUVA). In the spring of 2010, he delivered the second keynote lecture, "Bruce Onobrakpeya: The Legacy," at the Grillo Pavilion in Ìkòròdú. His essays on various aspects of African and African American art have been published in learned journals, encyclopedia, and in books as chapters. Early in 2009, his 293-page book, *Encyclopedia of African and African American Artists: Artists of the American Mosaic*, was published by Greenwood Press. Professor jégẹ́dẹ́ is a member of the Arts Council of African Studies Association (ACASA), African Studies Association (ASA), and the College Art Association (CAA). Source: (http://tribunengrworld.com/jegede-returns-in-peregri nations-2675608.htm).

The resolution of his paintings may take more than the application of colors, whether latex, oils, or acrylic. Often, jégédé's concern for the outcome of a piece of art is accomplished through mixed media: encrustations, sand, bottle caps, strips of rope, paper towels, polymer, newspaper and magazine clippings, all materials used to actualize his concepts.

Jégédé has a strong penchant for socially relevant topics, a characteristic that probably stems from his cartoon practice — cartoonists tend to be more inclined to social criticism. In the artist's manifesto that he issued for his 1986 "Paradise Battered" solo exhibition in Lagos, Nigeria, jégédé was emphatic about his interest in using his art not as a cosmetic tool but as a platform for highlighting sociopolitical issues. His 1991 solo exhibition, again in Lagos, was devoted exclusively to highlighting social inequality in Lagos. For example, he focused on the disorderliness that was public transportation in Lagos. Buses, vans, and cabs painted in the distinctive Lagos transport colors, yellow, with two thin horizontal black lines in the middle of the vehicles, populate jégédé's canvases and reveal his humorous side. One of his paintings, *Osa Straight*, which featured an emaciated bus conductor canvassing passengers, became a visual sensation. As he became comfortable with his role as a visual critic, jégédé abandoned the picturesque landscapes of the early 1970s in favor of abstract and conceptual canvases.

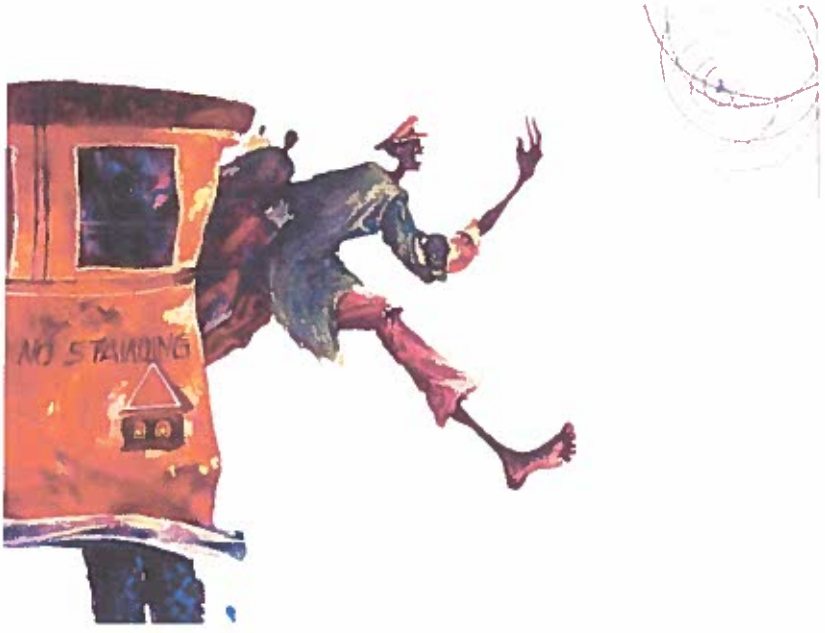

Image 1. *Osa Straight*

The themes that jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ has explored (and is still exploring) are diverse, and each with its multiple layers. To me, the most salient focus is on underdevelopment and its consequences; notably poverty, politics and the policies of change, identity, violence, and much more. A painting can embody layers of meanings. In one layer, themes of sexuality, identity, and historicity can interface and in yet another, politics and violence can merge. The reference points are also diverse: Nigeria, Africa, and the African diaspora.

If the artworks are diverse and multiple, they reveal the personality of the artist. Jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ comes across variously as an angry artist, a spectator, an interrogator, an advocate, an environmentalist, and much more. These nuances stem from his past engagement as a cartoonist. Indeed, his profile is cast in iron, which is why even the forms in his paintings have not changed significantly from the scraggy-looking creatures that characterized his cartoons of the 1970s, 1980s, and possibly 1990s. A few paintings are mute in terms of their non-figurative and non-referential formats, while some with vibrant colors and without figurative elements can be characterized as loud.

If we find in his colors intimation of peace, progress, and development, we are also reminded of violence and caution. Thus, jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ manipulates the material to articulate social moods and values. Progress is prefaced by struggles, the complications emanating from conflicts, the unresolved questions in the management of resources that make the rich richer and the poor poorer, and the ever-widening gap between the powerful and the powerless. Thus, we find the venerable jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ speaking in multiple tongues and voices: those of the ancestral masquerade in the deep voice asking us to look back to look forward, warning that the "world is upside down;" that of the educated man saying that society needs a rebirth, and for this to happen we need a new conceptual framework, one that we must emancipate from the carelessness that has shaped our lives till now. *State of Anomie* shows the dangers of mismanagement, the corruption of politicians, the abuse of power by the military, and the disorderliness of the forces of globalization. It speaks truth to power and pricks the conscience of those who mismanage Nigeria.

The powerless are not weak, subdued, or hopeless. Their dreams flourish, their energy is vibrant, their testimonies are positive. And there is power in resistance, made possible by the use of that instrument of violence — imported guns capable of discharging bullets with force and rapidity. No work brings this to our attention more than the "Niger Delta Series" where the environmental degradation and poverty experienced by the people in the region since the 1950s have unleashed intense acts of violence. Resistance fighters, connected to the ever-growing small-arms industries, are able to create multiple insurgency wars.

In empowering the poor, even if through guns, jégédé affirms the domains of peace, law and conflicts. Law, to ensure peace, is supposed to be regulated by the state and by a social contract. Where both break down, as in the case of Nigeria, conflicts take over, law runs out, riots run in. Lacking sensible leaders with progressive ideals, there is no honest arbiter. As in the paintings on the "Niger Delta Series," methods of fairness and justice run out. In the moment of crisis, in the Niger Delta and elsewhere, everyone acquires an equal right — not necessarily the right to the positive affirmations of society's progress, but to any means necessary to bring justice and fairness.

In reflecting on society and the equations that shape it, the running thread, which our competent artist labels as "Ancestral Series," connects the ideologies drawn from old mythologies with new modernities to lay out the contours of contemporary society. The mixed symbols (as in *Ancestral Symbols* and *Hoosier Daddy*) are reflective of three eras — traditional, colonial-modern, and post-colonial — such that the hoe and the rockets can cohabit the same space; Stone Age sapiens can live with modern humans without disrupting the ecosystem. Some recall rock paintings of southern Africa and others comment on the rock paintings of the Dogon of Mali, which index initiation rites and their famous ancestral figures (the popular sacred woodcarving of Dogon couple, now sold in the market place). The old gods (as in Èṣù) are not rejected in the growing world of aggressive fundamentalists, both Christians and Muslims.

Image 2. *Èṣù*

Image 3. *Just Do It*

In *Just Do It*, the energy of the forest and the energy of youth are aligned to deal with the energies of animals as they all display the agility of survival.

As the humans run, leaving the animals in the jungle, they move to cities, sometimes crossing the Atlantic to become part of the new identity that created a painting that he calls *Kwaanza*, where the ideas left behind in Africa are revived to preach the cause of unity and hope.

The abstract nature of some of the work combines with hidden mythologies to expose the multiple sides of contemporary Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. The seen forces of humans and the unseen forces of non-humans, combined with machines, narrate the experiences of interactions, multilayered in the institutions of women and men and the world of the spirit. Careful splashes of ink, orchestrated in signs and symbols, show the intermingling of law and order, the artist's disdain for chaos with a deeply cautious sensibility fuelled by the search for progress.

Nigeria in Focus: Cultures and Artistic Imaginations

Délé jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ was born in Nigeria and lived there until he migrated to the United States in the 1990s. One of the most important countries in Africa, Nigeria was governed by the British for the first sixty years of the twentieth century. Its post-independence history since 1960 has been mixed: potentially rich with resources, especially oil, the country has been grossly mismanaged by corrupt and greedy politicians and bureaucrats.[6]

Nigeria has a long creative tradition, boasting some of the best three-dimensional artworks from Africa, such as the Nok terracotta sculptures and bronzes from Igbo Ukwu, the Benin Kingdom, and the Lower Niger area. Some of these works preceded the Christian era, as in the example of Nok terracotta. Among the most reported of the ancient works, made possible by archaeological discoveries and random collections, are terracotta figures found on the Jos Plateau in the 1940s; beautiful bronze works dated to between the ninth and tenth centuries, found in 1938 and in the 1959 excavations at Igbo-Ukwu; and terracotta and bronze sculptures from the ancient Yorùbá city of Ile-Ife found in 1910 by Leo Frobenius, to say nothing of many others that were found in later years.

Jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ taps into and brings alive these past traditions in new paintings. Thus, we see elements of indigenous rock painting in *Just Do It*, and of indigenous sculptures in the "Ancestral Series." In "modernizing" the past

6. On the history of Nigeria, see Toyin Falola, *The History of Nigeria* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1991); Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Toyin Falola, ed., *Nigeria in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2002).

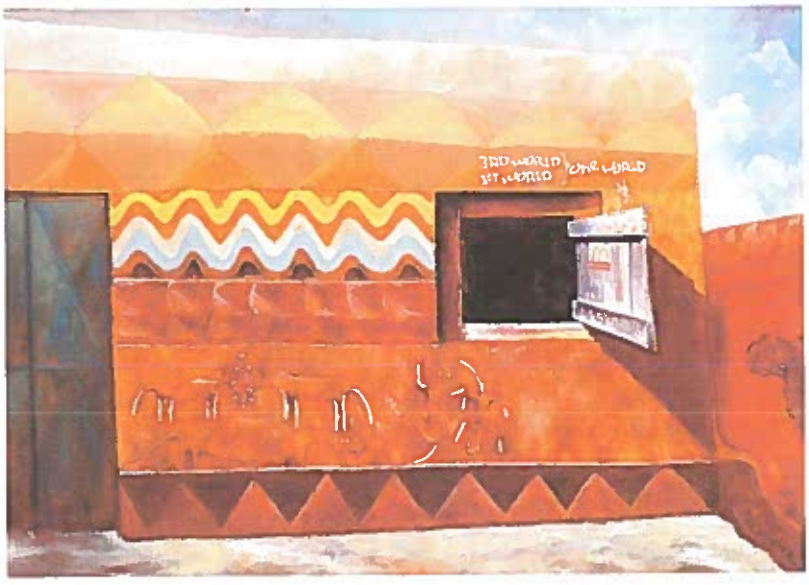

Image 4. *One World*

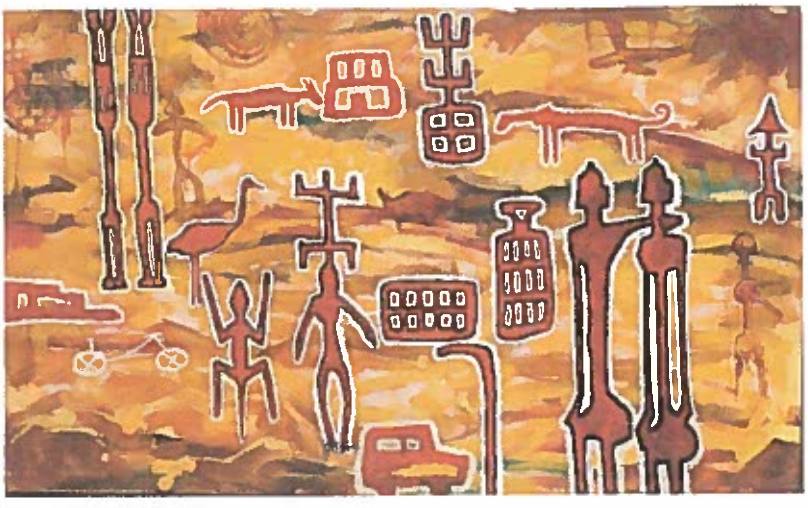

Image 5. *Ancestral Symbols*

three-dimensional figures, jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ combines the ethnological present with the ethnological past. The artworks of the past that did not survive, such as those of wood and clay, are legitimized in his work, as in *One World*, and *Ancestral Symbols*, thus revealing the depth that defines art in Nigeria. By integrating

the ancient scriptural traditions into his paintings, jégédé offers both a synchronic and diachronic perspective.

The reminders are instructive, so much so that the tracking is undisguised. In the lineage of "ancestral spirits" we can even go as far back as the rock engravings and rudimentary paintings in the Stone Age when stone tools were used as instruments to provide a living as well as create leisure. As a contemporary artist using modern tools, the lost moment reappears. He used better tools and paints, but jégédé is not forgetful of caves, walls, and homes to point to how such spaces can become avenues for profitable expressions of creativity. Oil paint may replace vegetable dye or local media, but the ideology connects old and new eras in terms of the beautification of spaces, and the use of intelligence and creativity to make a statement. An argument can be made that by connecting his work to the ancient past, a statement is being made that the past was civilized, and that the artwork represented by it was not primitive. He is rejecting the statement that indigenous African art was primitive.

In addition, much more recent ethnographic arts of the Yorùbá are integrated into jégédé's paintings. This is understandable not just because of the element of time, represented in those works dealing with ancient times and the more recent ones, but also because of the diversity of the country itself in terms of cultures, ethnicities, and identities. William Fagg, in *Nigerian Images*, one of the earliest books on the subject, pointed to this diversity when he describes Nigeria as a microcosm of Africa.[7] Jégédé has observed the diversity, thereby partaking in Africa's general spirit, but at the same time making use of identifiable localities in the contemporary urban settings of places such as Zaria, Maiduguri, and Lagos where the experiences of indigenous culture merges with the urban context of cities and streets. In these locations, jégédé would have witnessed endless celebrations of arts in festivals, rituals, dance, and funeral processions, all of which provide subjects for his art.

Whether in reference to ancient or recent ethnographic arts, jégédés art affirms a definition of art that inserts how Africans perceive and define art objects into its Western meaning. Among the Yorùbá people where jégédé comes from, as well as many other African groups, a work of art may not necessarily be characterized as an entity unto itself but understood in relational terms to needs and context. To be sure, definitions are contested, even when there is some agreement that artworks should evoke some kind of emotional response, display a level of technical skill, and manifest creativity. He accepts that African arts should meet these criteria, in addition to age-old definitions of art in relation to beauty, admiration, and appropriateness. In accepting the African roots, art must have an objective, usually in association with an aspect

7. William Fagg, *Nigerian Images* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1963).

of culture. Usually handmade, each object was unique, marked by character and individuality, even if it offered a collective expression.

Art works based on history and culture affirm some statements from them, both directly and indirectly. A return to the past affirms the principle of using art to promote the idea of diversity and respect for indigenous traditions and wisdom. Drawing from the "Ancestral Series," one notes allusions to a world long gone, to the living void of the past before humans intruded to create chaos. There are colors that represent day and night, with unseen forces providing the light, a notion of divine temporal space and time. The sun supplies the energy for creation, as the formless becomes form. Within this framework, jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ provides animals, plants, and land, all interrelated, to create a system: the soil nourishes the trees, but the trees give the soil cohesion and humus; if the smith and tools do not collaborate, there will be no iron; and if women and men do not come together, there will be no children to reproduce the world. The interdependence in this ecosystem is such a powerful running thread in his culturally embedded work and worldview.

There is an implicit assumption that everything has its own "soul" and "spirit." This "spirit" is power, as each object manifests its role and importance. Even when the artwork is muted, we are being challenged to listen to voices — the voices of water and wind, bush and ancestors. There are deeper meanings behind the objects in terms of what their silences mean. Human beings seem to possess the greatest force of all, as they shape their environments. However, humans cannot manifest themselves and their force without connections to non-humans. Thus, both visible and invisible forces appear connected in the images. They must also support one another — if the herdsman does not wish the grass well, his cattle will perish! There is equally an ethic of linking the dead and the living, as if the living cannot exist without the dead. To know about an object, jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ seems to be saying, one has to know about its essence, linking one object with another, as in the mask with the dead; the airplane with globalization. An object is a representation of life force, a force that is hard to really grasp because it is invisible; it is sacred. The force combines history — of the past and present — and also embodies the vision of the future. If we are visible, the force is asking us to appeal to creation to reveal itself.

The piece on *Èṣù* (see image 2 above) shows how jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́'s work is so much rooted in the culture of his Yorùbá people. He moves us into a ritualized space and stage where, in celebrating Èṣù (the deity), we recognize his centrality in the pantheon of gods and goddesses. As one engages with Èṣù, one draws in other spiritual and ancestral forces that are capable of seeing what we, as humans, cannot see. Èṣù is a clear affirmation of the life force. Èṣù has the capacity to let us actualize our destiny while also disempowering us if we are

careless. Our defenses, if constructed on secularist values, cannot withstand Èṣù's wrath. The simplicity in Èṣù's representation is a decoy: an encounter with him is not a coincidence; his plays are not distractions; with him all dialogue must have a purpose.

Èṣù's symbol, as he is represented by jégédé in his painting *Èṣù*, supplies an aesthetic beauty to a god that is sometimes demonized and vilified by Christians and Muslims alike. In this symbol is the power to invoke meanings, not two or three, but multiple ones when those made on one occasion can be favorable, and yet on another occasion unfavorable. The symbol reflects the contradictions in humanity, presented as a dualistic encounter of good and evil, but which, in Èṣù's grammar of operation, is more a duality of complementarity than opposition. Just as we, humans, live within these contradictions, so too does the universe. Èṣù rejects a static view of the universe, portraying it a dynamic context that needs oppositional forces to maintain its balance. Èṣù is in motion, an image that jégédé captures too well, even suggesting that this god can fly if he so chooses. Yes: Èṣù can fly since he travels between heaven and earth as the appointed errand boy of God. When Èṣù enters the individual, one becomes the embodiment of motion, in a trysting-place located at the crossroads of space and the forces of life.

Nigeria in Focus: Postcolonial Dysfunctionality

> My canvases function as receptacles: archives for deeply personal visual soliloquies that are uttered on those occasions when the need for visual pungency trumps the desire for the promulgation of beauty. In the two intervening decades since my voluntary peregrinations, my work has become the platform for parsing the anguish that is a concomitant of the aborted dreams that Nigeria emblematizes. From the Niger-Delta imbroglio and the government's shocking tepidity in responding to the massive environmental degradation that is ongoing, to the political charade in which political actors plunder the collective wealth, and promote a culture of unprecedented self-aggrandizement, I stand for an art that nags our social conscience.
>
> (délé jégédé, 2011)

The Nigerian postcolonial situation has consumed almost all of the attention of scholars and artists, jégédé included. Some of jégédés work tends to reveal him as lion-hearted, using his talents to support liberty and democracy. His art signals a process of change, not a conclusion. We understand what he wants — change — but not necessarily the destination of this change. There is

a gesture in his work that suggests Nigerians understand the chaos around them, and seem disturbed, worried, and sometimes hopeless.

The route to change may not lie in dialogue, a point made clear in the "Niger Delta Series." Gun-wielding activists are not afraid of the state and its instruments of violence. Wielding their own guns and knives, they appear from their hideouts, tottering to the "front lines" where they show courage in confronting the police and army. In his artistic representation of the struggles in the Niger Delta, the faces are determined, sometimes of a determination hard to surpass, an astounding grit. With some mouths closed, some faces covered, the resistance fighters are ready to hurl rocks, to engage in pitched battle with clubs, bricks, Molotov cocktails, guns, and any other instruments available to them. Their actions are accompanied by narratives of heartbreaking suffering at the hands of corrupt Nigerian political leaders and callous oil companies.

Successive Nigerian leaders have disgraced themselves and their offices, leading to the representation in *State of Anomie*. Under the military, dictators such as General Sani Abacha unleashed brutal crackdown, forcing some activists into exile, putting journalists in prison, and hunting down human rights activists. In *State of Anomie* and related pictures like *New Work 4*, dele jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ turns provocative, aggressively challenging us not to rethink Nigeria, but to confront its messy politics; the face of leadership becomes the face of lies and deceit, of torture and thuggery, of evil, exile, and separation. The painting is bold in its imagination, conception, and execution, as he uses a long history of chaos and corruption to trigger a narrative of penetrating intelligence and erudition. As the works show, the Nigerian state is clearly disorganized and despotic and its "infrastructural" outreach promotes decadence rather than progress. Our conceptual understanding is refined by the images, and we see, in graphic forms, the problematic of power in a postcolonial state.

As I review these images, my mind goes to how the government has expanded its network of inefficient institutions and corrupt practices into the nooks and crannies of the country. Local chiefs and bureaucrats are part of this infrastructural network of power, taking the power of the state to villages and towns. The police and the court clerks, the tax collectors and the schoolteachers, all become integrated in this sprawling structure that promotes the visibility of power in the day-to-day lives of ordinary citizens. Even the private sectors cannot exist independently of this state power, as "contractors" in their ever-flowing *agbádá* togas (used to cover their enormously large stomachs filled with cattle organs and pounded yam) parade through the corridors of power. The corridors are tollgates to collect and share money, that is, the loot from public treasuries. The infrastructural network of power is enhanced by technologies and the technologies of power. The big cars and big

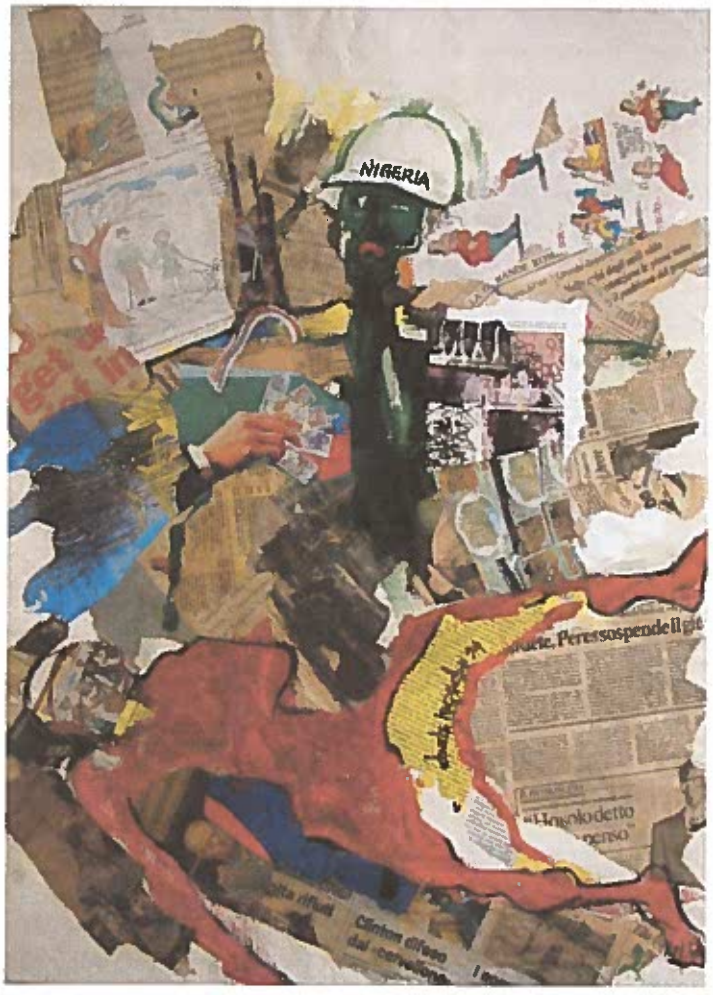

Image 6. *State of Anomie*

houses of public officials are the end product of stolen money. For the "big men" to engage in theft, they have to deploy the technologies of power and knowledge — the collection of oil revenues from oil companies, the collection of taxes from citizens, including peasants struggling to survive, and the manipulation of ethnicity to control people and power. Thus, jégédé's images have to confront the aggrandizing Nigerian state and the power-seeking cabal. A "garrison state" has been created, not by way of curtailing temporary freedom, but by simply condemning millions of people to the prison of poverty.

Nigeria represents opportunities and challenges. There is oil and too much oil revenue. A tiny number of those in power and those connected with them benefit the most from the revenues. This tiny elite is fragmented, fighting

among itself to secure the best access to oil wealth. Their fight is presented to the public as if they are representing their ethnic groups or religions. The fight had once degenerated into a civil war and countless other tensions in which the lives of innocent people were lost for nothing. The military wing of this elite had also captured power, and when out of power, the generals who had stolen money used part of it to become civilian leaders in a corrupt democratic process. Jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́'s works seem to be suggesting that the suffering youth should take power into their hands. The wisdom vested in the elders in agrarian societies cannot be assumed for elders in the politics of modern Nigeria. The dossier of the contemporary elders reveals their greed and sinister role in keeping the country down. An image of tête-à-têtes between the military and businessmen is in *State of Anomie*, with their legitimacy in question. Their insanity is reflected in this disorganized space. One fraction of a faction of the opposition to this parasitic class is shown in *Niger Delta: Militancy*—one man carrying a gun to kill and kidnap the members of this ruling class. The lone gunman is dealing with a formidable force.

When the painting, *State of Anomie*, is read along with *Niger Delta*, these two and related ones are seen to have been instigated by the economic problems and social malaise that Nigeria and the majority of African countries experience. With this background in mind, art becomes a means of conveying the depressing messages of poverty in a way that the visual image renders unambiguously clear and candid. Realism becomes an image and text that require no deconstruction; it is declarative in its context and agenda. The artist's intent is neither to jolt nor cajole, but to bond with the struggling masses. This bonding reveals the interdependence between art and society, between the thought processes of jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ as an artist and the events around him.

Diaspora Connections

> In recent decades, my creative temper has become increasingly apathetic to the production of art that cosmetizes. The social, intellectual, and emotional tensions imposed by voluntary exile — the contradictions inherent in living in an adopted home but incapable of, or unwilling to, sever the umbilical cord to my ancestral roots — are confronted, addressed, but remain unresolved in my art.
>
> (délé jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́, 2010)

A sizeable number of African scholars, artists, and art historians have emigrated from Africa in the last thirty years. Although only a few have attained a distinguished status, the work of this generation of expatriate African

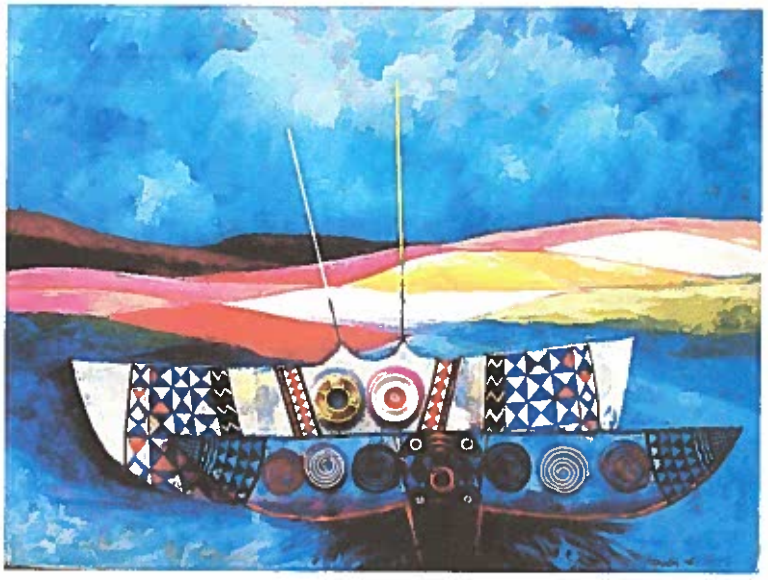

Image 7. *Kwaanza*

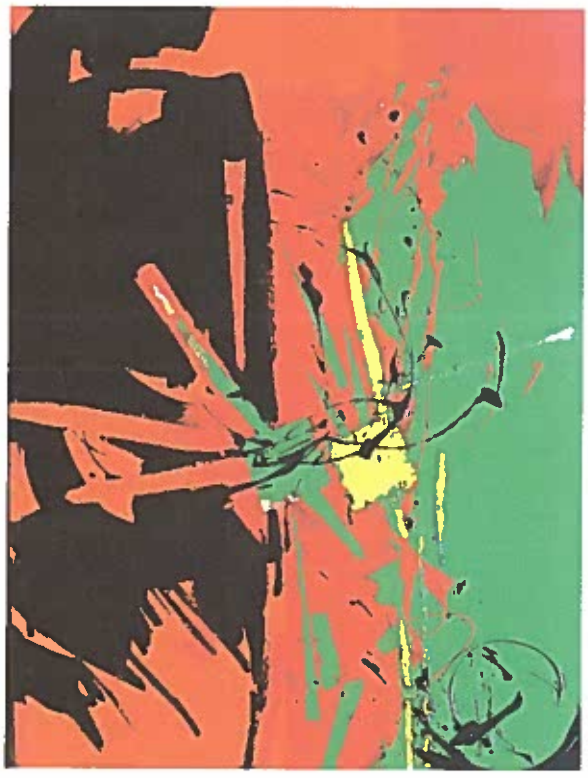

Image 8. *Abuja Charade*

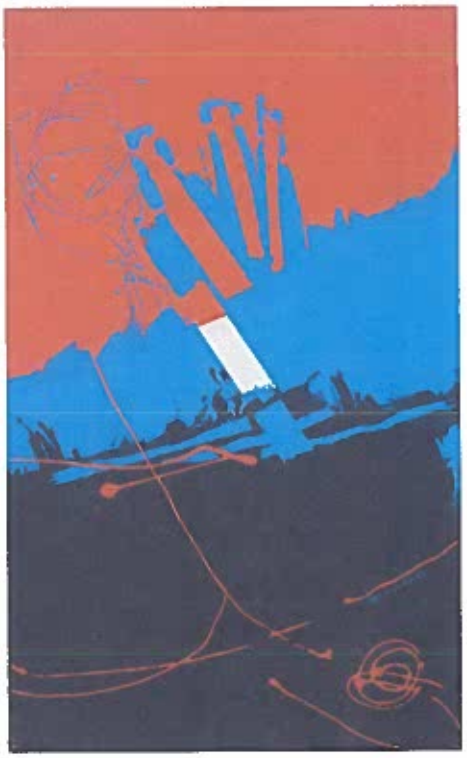

Image 9. *Abuja ER*

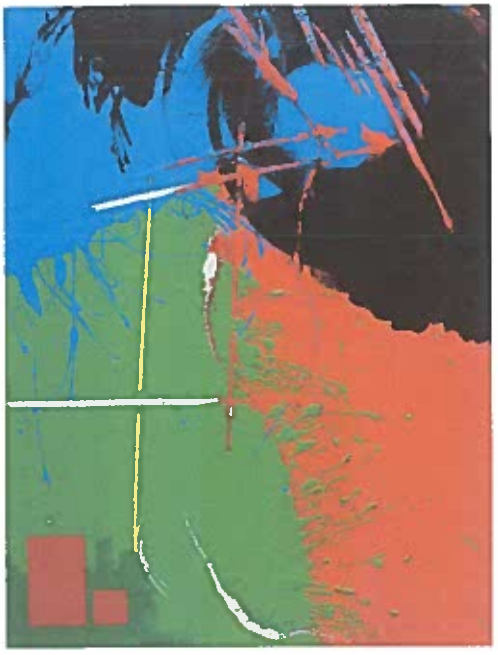

Image 10. *Abuja Things Fall Apart*

intellectuals is now being introduced to college students, advertised on the Internet, exhibited in museums, and analyzed in journals.

Délé jégédé is part of a journey, from an ancestral route to a global village. If his work *Kwaanza* marks the affirmation of his older route, *New Work* refers to his location to a far-flung foreign zone that one cannot use legs to walk the distance in between. The *Abuja Charade*, *Abuja ER*, and *Abuja Things Fall Apart* strenuously contest the notion of order without disorderliness, the valley without the mountain. What rises to the sky can fall. The police can have power, but so too the underclass. We discover a mass and a mess, a leviathan. The dense lines are metaphors of social organization — rather than a society that is integrated we see the horizontal dimensions of power and sprawl. As men with guns intrude themselves on the landscape, jégédé reminds us of the power of the individual over the collective, the relegation to the background of public interest by the aggrandizement of a few, and the limits of private competition to tame ambitions.

As jégédé moved from Nigeria to the United States, he became a member of what, in search of an appropriate name, can be labeled as "diaspora artists," in terms of the theme they explore — linking Africa with the African diaspora — the themes of power, exploitation, and domination; the creolization of experiences — drawing from multiple national, ethnic, and racial traditions; and the audience — work targeted to non-Africans and Africans alike.

The origins of this African diaspora lie in the transatlantic slave trade from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Voluntary migrations followed during the twentieth century, producing a "new African diaspora" whose origins and experiences were not connected with slavery and plantation systems. Blacks in the diaspora have had to seek connections with Africa, as Alain Locke pointed out in 1925 when he demonstrated the enduring links with Africans in religion, culture, and philosophy.[8] Indeed, Locke inspired a new generation of artists to seek inspiration from Africa, thus laying the groundwork for artists like jégédé to build upon. In two interrelated books, Moyọ Ọkédìjí has examined the works of artists whose experiences were shaped by the fractures and legacies of the transatlantic slave trade. In the first,[9] he isolates the Yorùbá impact on the work of African American artists using, as his starting point, the metaphor of the broken calabash that represents violence, enslavement, and forced migrations. What African American artists have done, as he falls on the metaphor again, is to mend this calabash. This project of restoration involves the art of protest, of community celebration,

8. Alain Locke, *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: 1925; Touchstone, 1997).

9. Moyo Okediji, *The Shattered Gourd: Yoruba Forms in Twentieth-Century American Art* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2003).

and of self-identification in forms and meanings that draw from Africa, thus marking them as different from the resources of American culture. In this repackaging, so-called folk art becomes so-called high art. In the second book, less grounded in disguised metaphors and allegories like the first, but with far clearer contextualization, Òkédìjí explains how Yorùbá art itself has changed in relation to global tendencies, starting from the imposition of colonialism. As part of this process, modern Yorùbá art crosses across the Atlantic and can now be viewed in some museums. Jégédé is part of these Atlantic crossings, this time, a voluntary movement that does not emanate, to use Òkédìjí's metaphor, from any shattered gourd so that there is no need for further restoration work, but rather for the making of new calabashes.

The myth that Blacks had no art (similar to the myth that they had no history) was exploded not just with a remarkable array of talents but by landmark publications as those by Evelyn Brown[10] and James A. Porter.[11] If jégédé has relocated to the U.S. to be part of the cast of diaspora artists, we must always remember that a number of African Americans have also gone to Africa to draw inspirations. I am reminded of at least one example, John Thomas Biggers (1924–2001), the versatile sculptor, painter, printmaker, muralist, and author who went to Africa with his wife in 1957. Visiting Nigeria, Ghana, Togo, and the Republic of Benin, he learned new things, became reinvigorated, published a book on African culture,[12] and created many murals that highlight African imagery and symbols.[13] With Biggers and others like him, Africa's imprint becomes implanted in diaspora art. Jégédé is now extending this orientation. One may not know where a journey will end, but one definitely knows where one is coming from.

Whether "old" or "new," the diaspora artists have resorted to various media — painting, photography, installation, sculpture, quilting, digital art, and others — to communicate multiple ideas. Many have excelled as curators, critics, and authors. A few have become superstars, such as Okwui Enwezor, David Clyde Driskell, Donald Odili Odita, and Kara Walker. Of course, none has acquired the stature of Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988) whose untitled 1981 painting was purchased at a Sotheby's auction in 2008 for the staggering sum of $14.6 million. Perhaps to further hype his work and sales, Jean-Michel Basquiat was described in 1999 as "the only black American painter

10. Evelyn Brown, *Africa's Contemporary Art and Artists* (1966).

11. James A. Porter, *Modern Negro Art* (Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1992).

12. John Biggers, *Ananse: The Web of Life in Africa* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1962).

13. Olive J. Theisen, *The Murals of John Thomas Biggers* (Hampton, VA: Hampton University Museum, 1996).

to have made a substantial mark on the history of art."[14] This startling statement highlights an ideology which negates the important contributions of Black artists to art history on a global scale. Their works, whether in Brazil or the United Kingdom (as in the works of Shonibare MBE) or the United States, have added substantially to national and global cultural experiences, enriched the fabric of culture, and moved the art world in different directions. They have, on one hand, questioned the idea of the unique universality of Western arts by saying that the non-Western art is also universal. On the other hand, they have directed serious attention to the integrated nature of local and global experiences, saying in effect that that which is local can be global, and that which is global can be local. The statements that the diaspora artists make are as varied and wide ranging as their styles, but the message is always connected with struggles of the Black experience, their history in the context of imperialism and globalization, the restoration of African values, and of course the assertion of their own freedom and individuality.

For a very long time, the creative context of diaspora African arts was shaped by the experience of migrations, especially forced migrations associated with the transatlantic slave trade, and of the experience of exploitation and marginalization, both in the context of race relations. Experience shaped the creative fervor that is communicated in many images. In communicating the various strands of the experience, new languages and styles had to be invented. The reality of poverty and struggles supplies the creative fabric. Indeed, as many also failed as artists, the failure itself becomes a story, resembling many of those lines communicated in depressing Blues music.

Like jégédé, the works of many of these diaspora artists have been marginalized, understated, or ignored. In the circulation of art in public and private spaces, access to gallery spaces and exhibitions is crucial. Problems of sponsorship and a perception of the limited relevance of the works of diaspora artists have limited their exposure in the public domain. Without the gallery space and exhibitions, the writings on the work of jégédé and others are diminished in quality and quantity.

It appears that the more the work of an artist is exhibited, the more scholars and journalists write about it. And the more they write about it, the more it becomes a subject matter in discourse. It is important to underscore the connections between exhibitions and writing. Without the biographical narratives of artists and critical discussions on their works, it is difficult to attach meaningful values to what they produce, to connect them to the art market, and to shape (sometimes manipulate) public perception which often drives the acceptability of the artists. As artists gain recognition, and independent

14. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Exhibition Catalog* (Milan: Charta, 1999), 1.

sources of income, they can free themselves of worries and impose more individuality on their creativity. Individualized personal aesthetics may emerge, gain recognition, and influence the emergence of others. A few succeed in creating what is called a "school," a term often applied to those who follow specific styles and approaches, although sometimes it may end up stifling creativity in cases where some rigid definitions are imposed. Certainly, the visibility of works by diaspora artists is limited; and those artists based in Africa suffer more marginalization. Many of these artists have done enough work to justify scholarly books and conferences. Jégédé is one of them.

In the works that have appeared thus far, it appears as if artists and scholarly analyses are being racialized and ethnicized — Blacks write on Blacks, the Zulu write on the Zulu, the Igbo write on the Igbo. While we must praise this kind of scholarship, we also have to point to the danger of racial and ethnic categorization that produces more of a "silo effect" in which members of the choir talk to one another instead of reaching the congregation and crossing the aisles. Not only must we be active in seeking more publishers to create outlets for the scholarship on African arts and artists, we must move the voices to the classrooms at all levels of the education system and to all public libraries.

To be sure, prominent diaspora artists have had their works exhibited and explored in the literature; délé jégédé himself has done service to 66 of them in short biographies, discussing the works they produced and information on the ideas and doctrinal basis that shaped them.[15] In the real world, they number far more than 66! Street artists are everywhere, and thousands of Black artists are scattered all over the world. The few that are known have been written about in journals and books. This essay is an affirmation of this kind of approach. Most artists dream of and consciously work toward having an exhibition, and jégédé has benefitted from this as well. Such exhibitions often come with artist statements and catalogues that explain and announce the body of specific works. Whether they attract small or large audiences, the end of the exhibitions may mark the end of fame for the artist — the media attention comes to an end; the quality of the catalogue is dependent on funding and the quality of its contributors to it; and ultimately, the circulated catalogues are in private hands where they may end up in trash cans.

It appears that the barriers in the art world of exhibitions are being corrected, at least to some extent, by the globalizing networks of the Internet. I have heard about the diaspora artists more from the Internet than from museums and books. Perhaps the Internet will bring the works of old, new, and

15. dele jegede, *Encyclopedia of African American Artists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009).

emerging artists to public attention in ways that lead to greater appreciation. While many of these works can now be brought to our homes and classrooms, they do not necessarily expose the significance beyond the individual ego of the artist as each praises himself and his work, as in the way in which King Sunny Adé, the Nigerian musician of Juju music, praises his patrons to obtain cash from them. In such Internet images, it is not always clear where propaganda takes over from creativity as the artist becomes totally manipulative of the public, telling them the brilliance of his imagination and the beauty of his aesthetics. It is unclear how many thousands are fooled. It is also unclear how many others have downloaded such images and manipulated them for negative effect. Thus, opinions and facts may compete. Honorary facts may acquire more significance than verifiable facts.

Like oral traditions, art images have enriched our understanding of the lives and experiences of the African diaspora in Europe and the Americas. To some extent, artworks tend to fill some of the gaps in written documentation. There was a paucity of written information on the African experience in the transatlantic slave trade. Where there is no history in written form, transmitted words and images have provided some limited understanding of cultural experiences, as images capture the memories, sometimes drawing on epics, legends, and even such esoteric knowledge as divination and rites of passage.

To take an example on the issue of cultural connectivity, jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́'s *Kwaanza*, which combines iconography with colors, connects to the Afrocentric conception of Africa, borrowing cultural principles from Africa to create empowerment and sources of reflections for African Americans during the major holiday periods. Created by Professor Maulana Karenga, Kwanzaa's objectives are to use African values and communal ethos to inculcate "seven communitarian values and practices which strengthen and celebrate family, community and culture[:] Umoja (unity), Kujichagulia (Self-determination), Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility), Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics), Nia (Purpose), Kumba (Creativity), and Imani (Faith)."[16]

jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́'s *Kwaanza* takes us back to the Middle Passage where the colorful ship hides the depression and agonies of the enslaved. Decorated in the African motif, the ship takes aboard various cultures of African origin, moving them slowly across the Atlantic. The visual dictionary is African, but with ideas taken from different places. The motifs, lines, color strategies and concepts are decidedly of Black provenance. The colors of Kwanzaa[17](the celebration) are red, green, and black. In jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́'s *Kwaanza*, we have red, blue, yellow,

16. See The Official Kwanzaa Web Site, http://www.officialkwanzaawebsite.org/faq.shtml.

17. Note here the difference in spelling, as jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ uses a medial "aa" in the title of his work, apparently to distinguish it from the final "aa" in the name of the celebration.

green, black, white, pink, burnt orange, and some other combinations. The symbolic meanings of the colors in the Kwanzaa celebration are red for struggles, black for race representation, and green for future aspirations. In jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́s *Kwaanza*, the meanings of the colors are not explicit, either in the ship or the ocean waves. However, they are as vibrant as those of Kwanzaa.

The symbols of ritual, like those of an image, are like a foreign language that requires interpretation or translation. The colors, symbols, and images are codes and metaphors drawn from culture. A ship is a work of labor that needs constant tending, like the crops or food served at dinner. The message is to seek collective labor to produce for the greater good. Patterns on the ship lead us to the orality of expressions, the idea that oral tradition and the visual images they lead to supply the foundation to build. It is not a rejection of knowledge drawn from books, but as a different constitution knowledge that seeks to empower people through the wisdom and ideas of their ancestors. In this form of knowledge, elders transmit ideas to empower the next generations. The unity of different generations is to affirm the power of continuity without compromising the agency and impact of change. jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́'s patterns in *Kwaanza* marry formalist idioms with traditional text in a way in which the patterns complicate the meanings of artistic representation. Patterns are not necessarily accessible to interpreters but behind their aesthetic relevance lays a network of coded messages. In reordering the popular symbolism of the Kwanzaa, jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ not only moved the last "a" in the spelling but moved the idea from the dry land to the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. It is a self-expressive way to accept the reasons behind an idea but to also expand its meanings. His *Kwaanza* explores the ancestral and philosophical link between art and migrations.

Living in the U.S. provides jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ with the opportunity to become a cultural mediator, bringing Africa to the U.S. and the U.S. to Africa. By mediating this traffic and representation, he fuses multiple traditions, voices, and messages. African traditions are used to present globalization and modernization. As he approaches issues of poverty and power, he deals with two pervasive conundrums. His creativity reflects plural and multicultural issues whether in the images or the colors of threads. Values of youth culture are expressed in a way in which the globalization of popular culture is revealed. The colors can also be read as a collage of ideas and cultures that are not specific to one place. The superposition, supposition, and juxtaposition in the collage may gesture us towards different interpretations, even one in which one's mind can operate within the paradigm of counterculture.

In a sense, the theme of culture connects the "Ancestral Series" with *Kwaanza*—the desire to bring cultural elements of the past to explain contemporary issues; the need to clothe representation in the garb of older

traditions; and the fusing of his cultural background in Nigeria with his experiences of living in the United States. Jégédés *Kwaanza* represents the blending of multiple cultural interpretations. In the patterns in *Kwaanza* are text, the coded messages on the ship that reveal the merger of interiority and exteriority — the interiority of "historical texts" and the exteriority of the ship. In combination, they simultaneously hide and reveal meanings. In the Yorùbá culture of jégédé's origin, it is not unusual to use idioms and proverbs to disguise intentionality. The patterns connect to the indigenous ideas of text expressed as patterns, in some ways similar to how Obiora Udechukwu has used Igbo's *uli* patterns of adornment and beautification in his works.[18]

In other works that connect jégédé with the diaspora, the themes of politics and globalization are pervasive. Abstract works (such as *Abuja Charade*) are suggestive of how webs of relationships are constructed within and across the Atlantic. There seems to be no center to the idea of power and empire in a diasporic framework, perhaps an allusion to the diffusion of power suggested by Michel Foucault. It appears that all the parties in this network can influence one another, rather than dictate to one another. The autonomy of black, green, and red in *Abuja Charade* is indicative of various strands in complex societies and diasporic relations. The power of each strand is seen in *Abuja Charade* in the display of esoteric symbols of knowledge and power. *Abuja Masquerade* suggests how the various components can be blended. There is a response to the language of power, that it is certainly false to think that there is an end to history.

Struggles for domination continue within the global order, with various nations and individuals competing. Materialism definitely remains a problem. The *Abuja series* is significant in the oeuvre of jégédé's work, constituting a departure from his work in Nigeria and the interruption of his "Ancestral Series." The *Abuja series* questions the power equations in globalization that divide society and pauperize the poor.

With the ingredients of change and obscurantism in some of them, we see jégédé's displeasure with the fate of the underprivileged. In *Abuja Things Fall Apart*, he bristles at disempowerment of the poor, reflecting his abiding activism that is manifested in his *Kole the Menace* cartoons of the 1970s. The *Abuja series* attests to his grasp of the conditions in the African diaspora, his artistic versatility, and his comprehensive awareness of cultural and sociopolitical issues that trigger nationalism and resistance both at the national and global levels. The *New Work* is a rich statement on politics and the personalities that shape them. He must have undertaken them to draw attention to his location in relation to his point of departure, definitely an ambience of

18. See Simon Ottenberg, "Sources and Themes in the Art of Obiora Udechukwu," *African Arts* 35 no. 2 (Summer 2002): 30–43; 91–92.

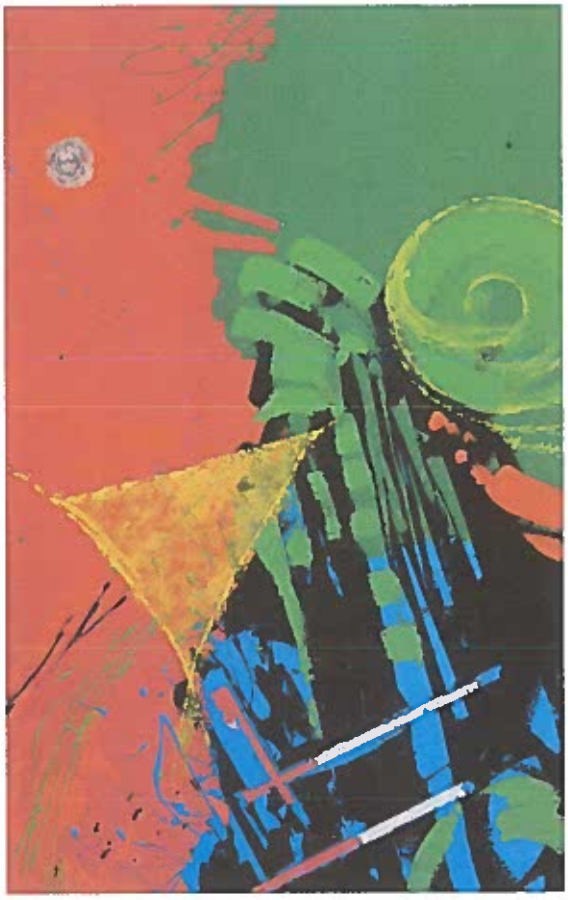

Image 11. *Abuja Masquerade*

poverty and horrors. There is the revelation on the use of power, but also on the limit of power.

The abstract paintings remind me of the chaos in such cities as Lagos, London, and New York. More appropriately, this is "organized chaos" since these cities actually function, each in its own ways. In these, jégédé displays an assortment of lines — like an assortment of roads and spaghetti bridges — that are organized by geometric proportions and curvilinears that run into one another. As the colors merge and also separate, narrow and wide vistas are seen like alleys and cul-de-sacs in city streets. The space is never empty, even when the colors are fragmented. Where the colors and lines are oppositional, it appears as if jégédé is using the space to create a story line.

Modernity-at-Large

jégédé reminds us that society is not static in relation to the uses to which it puts artworks, the frontiers of creativity, and the fusion of ideas. On the first point, the uses of art, we see a marked departure from the motive that led to his "Ancestral Series" and from the traditional motifs that inspired them. He seems to have adopted the European tradition that artwork is created by an artist, then set apart (in private and public spaces) to be admired. However, the art of old Africa, even when admired, were not museum objects to be appreciated solely for their aesthetic value. Objects of old, even when they portrayed beauty, were meant to have utilitarian functions, as in decorated containers for objects, or symbols to represent gods and goddesses.

If use is intended in the modernist presentation of jégédé's work, it is defined differently to communicate aesthetics, although it can communicate social commentary. Issues of taste come into play, in terms of what different individuals like, such that each of jégédé's works may appeal to different people on the basis of their sensibilities and interests. Thus, one can examine the aesthetic component of jégédé's oeuvre and note the vibrancy of colors and the flow of lines, sometimes interrupted with abstracted curves, with the plain becoming a valley, and a sudden hill appearing.

The character of his aesthetics emerges in these colors and lines, revealing the imagination that connects a lost past with the imaging of the future in the context of a convoluted present. Thus, in a sense, it is clear that jégédé is conscious of the aesthetic components of his work, creating alignment in the definition of art in relation to appearance, in addition to art in relation to function. He often locates images in the collectivity of the community. However, in several of his paintings, jégédé presents figuration within an abstract form, with lines and objects, affirming their individuality, even their aggressiveness as they dominate space or even tumble in spaces without boundaries where they, like the artist, lack constraints or even a sense of the proportion of power. The abstract ones, read simultaneously with the non-abstracts, enable him to disguise his presentation of explosive and radical issues.

If the producers of sculptures in indigenous African societies were sometimes anonymous, one way by which we discuss the work is through the identity their sculptures portray. Thus, rather than label some works using a modernist geographical label such as "Nigerian," many have been characterized as Yorùbá, Igbo, Benin, etc. In the contemporary art world, jégédé gives his name to his own creation. The collective ethnic vision in indigenous works gives way to an individualized one.

In this individualized project, the definition of jégédé's work as African, Yorùbá, or Nigerian becomes both right and wrong—right in the sense that

his identity is all these; wrong in the sense that the division of art into the Western and non-Western world can be misleading and anachronistic. Such previous categorization was intended to undermine African art, framing it as "tribal." However, jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́'s work is not "tribal" even if it draws from his ethnic background. If the mask of old appears strange and familiar, its recreation in abstract works is definitely familiar and creative. The forms adopted by jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ fall within what can be studied in Western art schools within the framework that can be described as both African and "universal." African art history as a discipline engages in fragmentation as it labels, but the work and its maker may be much harder to cut into pieces, as a work, as in the case of jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́'s paintings, may show its origins, traditions, orientations, inspirations, and identity, to say nothing of changing visual forms and movements over time.

The use of artwork to capture moments of modernity in Nigeria in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has been a mainstay of the studio art and art history worlds since the 1950s. Many of the works, such as those of Ben Enwonwu, have been celebrated.[19] Several others are yet to receive notice. Those by jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ have revealed clarity, theoretical sophistication, and comprehensiveness. In various works (see, for instance, *Expectation*) he has presented the meanings placed on encounters between the past and the present, the West and Africa, the rural and the urban. His works suggest that beneath encounters lies the desire for change and cultural retention by many Nigerians. However, as the society itself is stratified, we see how (in *State of Anomie*) there is an incurable ambition for influence, control, and power on the part of those in government. These desires are not always easy to reconcile, and the outcomes defy easy representation in images.

Jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ has seen and lived much of the art that he makes. Living in Nigeria and the U.S. exposed him to issues of underdevelopment, ethnicity, racism, poverty, and other aspects of stratification within and between nations. His work has captured all of these issues, some in a realistic form (as in his cartoons) and many in abstract paintings. Subject matter, more than the medium, shows a dexterity and familiar reading of contemporary politics, which explains why we see in a number of works a chaotic ambience, an apocalyptic rendition of the Niger Delta, and dysfunctional modernity and globalization. *Niger Delta* and *Abuja Series*, both with young men carrying guns, reveal the forceful and energetic mode of jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́, prints of masculinity that reflect the visual evocation of the "terrorism" and social violence that can be observed today in the Niger Delta and some dangerous cities. He has sufficiently mastered his media to be able to sublimate his work to specific ends. Even in works that evoke violence and anger, the process of painting, which he seems to enjoy, probably serves as a "pain-killer."

19. Sylvester Okwnodu Ogbechi, *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of African Modernist* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2008).

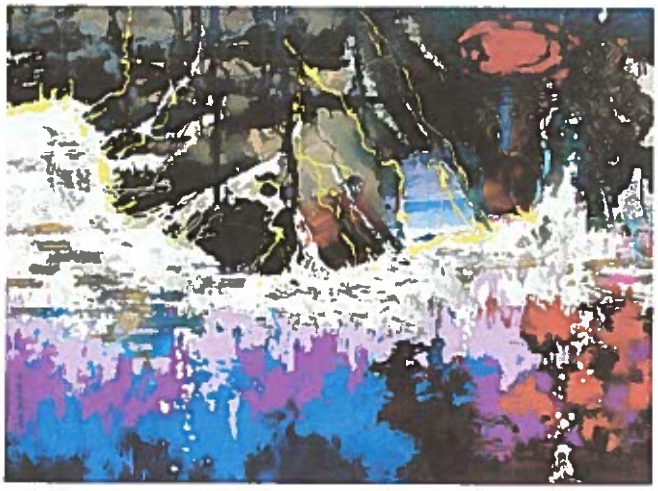

Image 12. *Niger Delta*

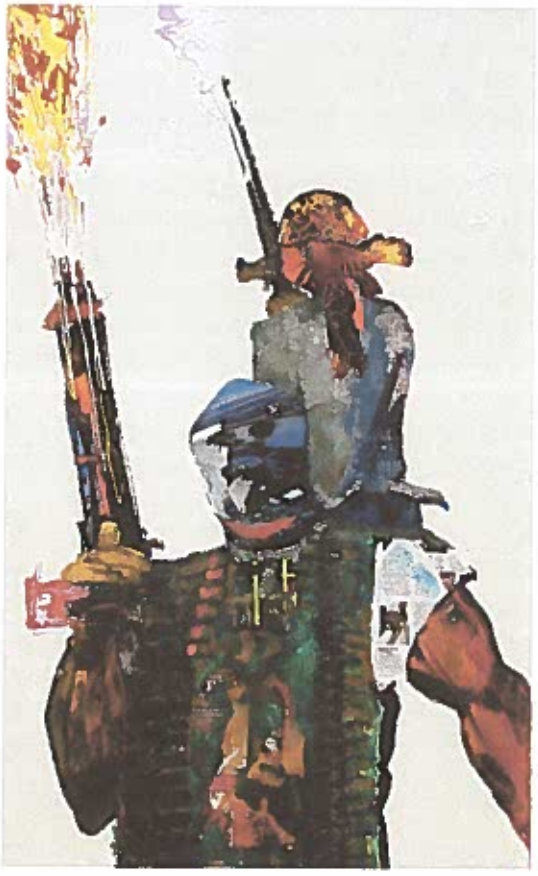

Image 13. *Niger Delta Militancy*

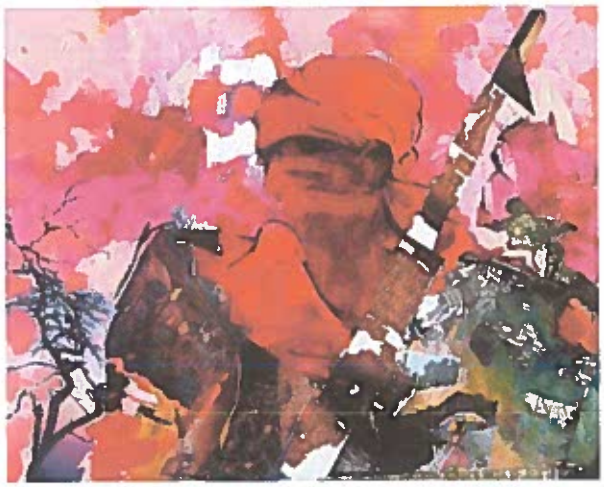

Image 14. *Niger Delta Militancy*

The culturally embedded images (as in *Herdsman in the Morning*) remind us of the communal ethos in society — of how work and labor cement social ties, and encourage mandatory social obligations and forms of reciprocity (even exchanging items such as drinking water in a small bowl). Importance is attached to the dignity of work in taming cattle; rearing a herd is as respectable as any other job. The cattle, too, deserve respect — the cane carried by the herdsman is not to abuse the cattle or engage in violence but to lead and guide the animals to grazing land, water, and resting abodes. Exchanges are not necessarily valorized in monetary terms or as sources of profit and wealth accumulation — as in what now obtains — but outside the logic of the market. jégédé tends to gesture to ideas drawn from agrarian societies, which stress family, kinship, and social alliances. Elders, as leaders, manage these social alliances as well as shape the dialogue and control with their neighbors. But we also have anti-democratic forms in which power and its use promote excessive political hierarchies.

The modernity represented in jégédé's work supplies an entry to a context bigger than his own representation. Sylvester Ogbechie, an indefatigable scholar of uncommon talent, established a journal, *Critical Intervention*, to reflect more broadly on the meanings and representations of African art history and visual culture. He calls for new ways to foreground the history of modernity and reflections on art history.[20] Ogbechie challenges us to investigate the works of jégédé and his colleagues in terms of understanding their

20. Sylvester Okwnodu Ogbechie, "Is African Art History?," *Critical Intervention: Journal of African Art History and Visual Culture*, no. 1 (July 2007): 3–5.

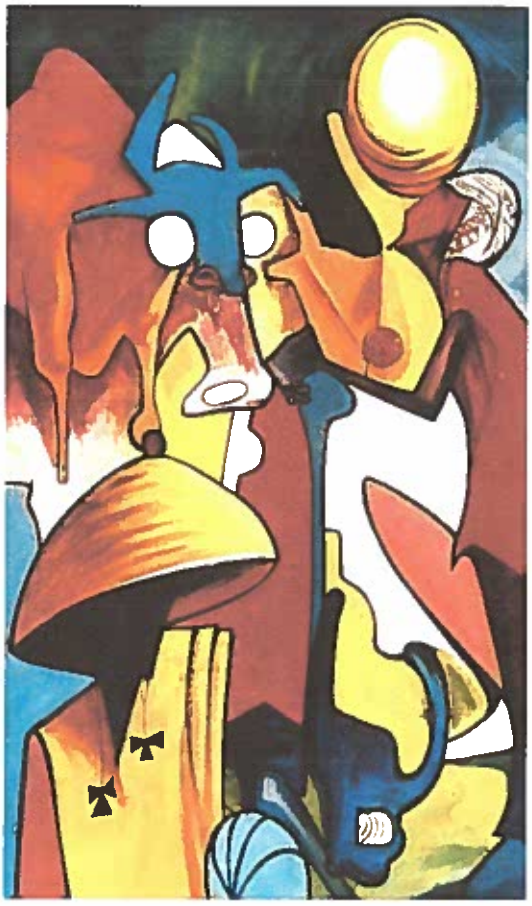

Image 15. *Herdsmen in the Morning*

value in relation to African art and culture in a global economy and its "mediation protocols." In a sense, this essay responds to this important challenge, bringing out such crucial elements as commodification, reception, and the knowledge system that shapes production. It may be argued that African art is undervalued, just as African knowledge systems are.

Ogbechie's statements on modernity are truly impressive and innovative. Much more so is how he wants the reconstituted knowledge to give prominence to creative works. In other words, he is saying that jégédé should be studied but that this study should popularize jégédé's work and, therefore, lead to more recognition and the sales of his artwork.

It may be argued that Ogbechie's enthusiasm is talking to an era yet unborn. The knowledge about Africa has not really been connected to a large-scale market consumption and validation of African art in a capitalist

framework. If the argument during the colonial era was the erasure of African knowledge as it was being replaced by Western, its revival in the post-colonial era has not brought the desired recognition. Often dismissed as "self-knowledge," its contents are treated as irrelevant to so-called universal concerns. When Africans point to its relevance, critics counter that the knowledge is neither interesting nor original. Yet, the African art world (and the writing about it) is not only original but also innovative. The objects lead us to knowledge; but just as the objects are limitless, so too are forms of knowledge that illuminate those objects. The forms may speak to what is already known, but also to what we do not know or ever care to know about. On the one hand we think that we are discovering the objects when, on the other hand, the objects discover our ignorance, the limit of our knowledge, indeed our incapacity to learn and frame the right set of questions.

Issues around modernity also lead us to questions how objects have been framed as an "archive" of established knowledge rather than as the memory of residual or lost knowledge. Knowledge will always be lost — there is little we all can do about this. However, how we frame that which is lost in distinction to that which is reclaimable is a problem. In reading a number of works on African art history, I can see how they confuse honorary facts with true facts, history with memory, and impose this confusion on the interpretations of objects. I can see an obsession with "self-knowledge" — which is good, but so grossly inadequate, as in saying that only a Yorùbá can understand Yorùbá objects and no one else can! The knowledge and recitation of local ethnographies become, by themselves, a source of academic power, but ultimately a weakened one with limited connections to many issues of substance.

Modernity has to be rethought to reinterpret African art. My own discipline of history weakens the intervention I can make. I will try, nevertheless. The classification into traditional and modern art may require rethinking. In jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́'s work, I do not see that demarcation but their interactions. Also, I do not think that the category of rural and urban art is a useful one if one refers to "traditional" and the other to "contemporary." The piece by jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ on *Èṣù* is modern art drawing from older religious ideas and beliefs, and the imagination that led to it emerged in the city surrounded by new forms of aggressive Christianity very much hostile to this deity. When I first confronted the image, it was on jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́'s website, which connected Èṣù to the globalizing Internet world. Since *Èṣù* (the image) is deeply connected with the world of religion and morality, this image also speaks to a world of ideas — a "virtualizing world" connected to a "visualizing world." As these worlds combine — the globalizing, virtualizing and visualizing — the image of *Èṣù* is neither traditional nor modern, neither rural nor urban. The location of production, as in say Ohio or Lagos, is not enough evidence to contrast the contemporary with

the rural as jégédé could also have produced it at Elépo village near Ìbàdàn (Nigeria) where I spent some of my life as a teenager.[21] To reverse the space, the work, *Herdsman in the Morning*, depicts a rural setting, but it is impossible to juxtapose this with *Èṣù* as if one represents a rural and the other an urban context. The growth of an artist may be contextualized by time and place but producing realities and horizons that we need not contrast as rural and urban sometimes as if the rural connotes the "primitive" and the urban the "modern."

It is hard to resolve the endgame of the identity question, and the positionality of identities in relation to the market. It has become common recently for some to question the notion of Africa and to say that they are artists rather than African artists, as if an individual's capacity to self-definition can then be imposed on others. On the one hand they write to reject universal claims in Western art, and yet on the other hand they undermine the visual representation of "African art" within its local and global contexts. As I see it, they want to decenter the West but embed themselves in it at the same time. Put differently, they want to claim that Africa is not marginal to the center of the art world, but distance themselves from producing art that can be hyphenated as "African art." How hybridity of identity and art should be interpreted and commercialized needs not be done to the extent of ridiculing Africa. In this sense, Africa becomes Èṣù, fighting back to sabotage the works of African or diaspora artists (and critics) that disregard Africa's role in global creativity.

Without resolving this issue in favor of Africa, African artists and art historians will be permanent victims of the relationship between power and definition in the academy where those who work on Western-related (and capitalist, I must add) art get rewarded more than those who work on Africa-related issues. I was struck by the remark made some time ago by Ikem Stanley Okoye about his own subjectivity, precisely how his being labeled as an Africanist undermines his work. In a fascinating and erudite essay, Okoye confesses that he began to "to think of power—in the quite naked form in which it tends to be deployed within the academy—as something that was more crudely linked that I ever could have imagined to the tragic terrain we have come to accept as knowledge."[22] In this mindset, he believes that his relevance becomes constrained "to merely casual discussion about things modern about which I had knowledge."[23] In a rather depressing tone, he asserts that in any "unconscious Western person's thinking of Africa, the image of its

21. Toyin Falola, *A Mouth Sweeter Than Salt* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004).

22. Iket Stanley Okoye, "Identity/Knowledge," *Critical Intervention: Journal of African Art History and Visual Culture*, no. 1 (July 2007): 9.

23. Ibid., p. 10.

material and epistemic poverty and apparent irrelevance to directing global cultures of the future seems to overcome any alternative representation."[24] A scholar trained as a "modernist" had become an "Africanist" and he could note the loss of relevance that accompanied the image change. Identity and knowledge intersect so powerfully, presenting Africa in negative ways that, as Okoye points out, they are not treated as serious, stylish, and rigorous, irrespective of how they do their work. Should artists of African origins then avoid Africa in order to escape their marginalization with Western knowledge systems?

What Okoye described with respect to art is true of virtually all disciplines related to Africa, including my own. I have even had one or two colleagues, incidentally Africans, who denigrated my readers while shamelessly inviting me to admire the products of their own intellectual work. Thus, one can see how a misguided people devalues their own members, forgetting that such devaluation has consequences for their own work as well in a context where, as Okoye points out, identity and knowledge are correlated. Art, history, philosophy, and other disciplines serve as sources of mobility for the Western-educated African elite. Within Africa, their diplomas entitle them to a lifestyle that the larger population does not enjoy. And the diplomas make migrations to other places possible. As a source of refuge, the disciplines may offer far more than enough in terms of the opportunity to fulfill a calling. If the artist claims that his work has empowered him to be free, to do something different from others, to seek isolation when necessary, to define beauty and peace to society, what does it mean if it is labeled as "African?" And suppose it does not sell, what does it mean to equate artist's creative achievements with mere dollar value?

A Peep Into the Future

The cumulative body of jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́'s artworks demonstrates his ability to express his creative interests in different ways, expose his inner vision and reflections, and exhibit his own syntax. The world will be reshaped, jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́ assures us, when positive affirmations and progress take over from the evil forces of disorderliness. In *Yes We Can*, our youthfulness will manifest the strength of physicality, the robustness of action, the confidence of our gaze, and the unrealized vision contained in our dreams. *Yo* rejoices as if our trauma and chaos are about to be left behind us as we say "never again" and dance to the songs of liberation. There is a message of intimacy—between humans and non-humans, and between one person and another in the world that sustains them. In *Yes*

24. Ibid., p. 11.

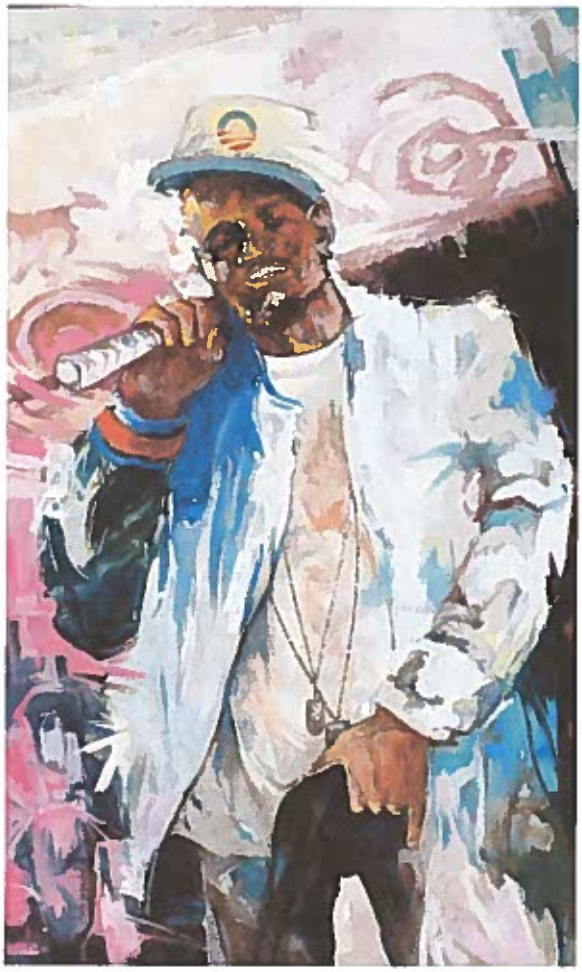

Image 16. *Yes We Can*

We Can, we see the representation of postcoloniality in the Black world. In the case of Africa, not only did Africa overcome European domination, an African American in the truest sense of the word (Barack Obama) now leads the biggest and most influential country on earth. And with respect to the United States, it indicates how the child of an immigrant from a formerly colonized world may become its leader. Jégédé may be celebrating the triumph of the first Black president of the United States, but the relevance of this moment in the context of a postcolonial world is much bigger than the image suggests.

Building upon a model of progressive change in a capitalist setting, jégédé advocates a more egalitarian society, one in which all of us are invested and motivated in promoting an active social interconnectedness of rich and poor,

as givers and receivers in an atmosphere of respect uncorrupted by excessive competition for profits and power. The cultural logic of the agrarian society is being invoked as a process of moving forward so that the traumas of state power and globalization are minimized, and the poor in Africa become less susceptible to the vicissitudes of predatory imperialist networks. Using the work on the Niger Delta as a reference point (*Niger Delta Militancy*), one sees how the demand for oil has reshaped society in such a way that the future of millions of people hangs in the balance.

To the Nigerian government and oil companies, ordinary people become pawns used to advance the search for money and profits. The economic and moral politics of those in power is to enrich themselves. In the process, they have created a nation that makes minimal contributions to humanity and science and is incapable of connecting knowledge to development. Rather than oil becoming an engine of growth, it damages local communities, weakens the authority of local leadership, circumvents indigenous knowledge systems, and devastates farming communities. jégédé uses his "Niger Delta Series" to insist that change must come and that, if caution is not taken, the youth will use violence to reshape ethnic identities, interstate relations, and cultural boundaries. To unify the people and promote peace, injustice has to end. The arteries of oil and water in *Abuja ER* that are mixed with the blood of the innocents will have to be purified so that the Niger Delta brings forth fish again and its banks supply food, so that happiness and social well-being can reappear. The anger in the "Niger Delta Series" does not suggest any apocalyptic narrative of the end of Nigeria, but a vision of hope for new beginnings. The activists are not going to end power, or even equalize it, but press for its reformation. The lone gunman in *Niger Delta 2* is embedded in a community, not a lone man unto himself who cultivates emptiness. For knowledge to spread and travel, it has to be entrusted to this lone man with the gun.

Jégédé's current works suggest the possibility of the emergence of a new sociopolitical power that will take the country's interest as paramount. This new power will not be drawn from the corrupt members of old but from visionary youth — men and women, micro-entrepreneurs and workers' organizations — who will promote a new national development-oriented agenda. A cycle of socially committed nationalists has to create a sense of purpose and belonging that will recreate a sense of an egalitarian community.

Jégédé is not proclaiming one "truth" or one form of understanding a given reality. His "truth" is not one of singularity. *Èṣù* captures his understanding of what truth means — the recognition of tensions and conflicts in society, one in which the truth of those in power will be balanced by the truth of those outside of power, that is, the recognition of what each stands for. Among individuals, the "truth" has to give voice to contradictions and opposite ideas,

prevent anarchy from resolving the antagonistic clashes. His "truth" resembles the Yorùbá "red soup" where many ingredients are combined and the chemistry in cooking creates flavors. Each ingredient disappears to create a whole, where the "truth" of the pot becomes impossible to disentangle in order to privilege the onion over the tomato. The soup is savored to replenish the body, not to destroy it. His creative impulse output supplies us with this truth — the *ọbẹ̀ aládùn*[25] to "chop life"[26] while preventing "life from chopping us."[27] His practice as an artist is devoted to the truth, made evident in his artworks, that our very existence proves that the gods are benevolent; however, as Èṣù affirms through the ages, it is up to us human beings to repair the world.

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25. Delicious soup, used here as a metaphor for goodness.

26. A pidgin phrase that means to enjoy life. Pidgin is the "creolization" of English with African vocabulary, a successful adaptation of multiple languages for communication.

27. A pidgin way of saying that we should avoid self-destruction.

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