

## MARK ON THE SANDS OF TIME

*(Pa Osahon's biography)*

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### Abstract

Man has existed on planet earth for quite some time now and in the course of his existence here; he has had to leave a lot of evidence of how he had fared behind. The evidence has been in various forms. Most in base materials, which today have been used to visualize how he had lived out his time on earth. The analysis of Shaw (1972), on Igbo Ukwu art discoveries state that: We have evidence of well-developed institutions, distinctive artistic traditions, highly sophisticated metal work and a concentration of considerable social wealth at a period which seems to be dated to the ninth or tenth centuries A.D., typifies the kind of base material evidence we are referring to. Other evidence comes in the form of records in typography or in the narrative. The record below is a biography of a designer, who lived, worked and died in Nigeria after contributing his quota to the development of arts in the country. It highlights his life, education and contribution to art in Nigeria. This paper also takes a look at record keeping in Nigeria and made recommendations.

### Introduction

"Records" according to the Longman family dictionary (1984), are materials; "converted into a permanent form fit for reproduction". The Egyptians who have a lot of edifices as records representing their past, called a sculptor "He-who-keeps-alive", (Artifacts 1993). It is unfortunate that most of the third world has failed in keeping most of her great past alive, thereby losing most of her past history and values. This might not be unconnected to her present situation of poor record keeping habits. Fafunwa (1974) states that;

History is to a people, what memory is to the individual. A people with no knowledge of their past would suffer from collective amnesia, groping blindly into the future without guide-post of precedence to shape their course. Only a thorough awareness of their heritage allows them to make their private ones. For possible educational reforms, reflection on previous events and policies will assist considerably in planning on a future course of action.

Fafunwa cannot be more right because most of our records and cultural practices have been supplanted by western or eastern ones. A good example is in the names we bear; Abdul Mustahin, Abdul Bar, Moses, Emmanuel and Smith etc. The facilitators of this act i.e. the west and eastern powers make us believe that our records and cultural past are primitive, savage and even barbaric. Dike (Artifacts 1993); a renowned historian in Art states that;

It is remarkable that the promoters of the movements for the development of museums in Nigeria derived from the same countries whose missionary nationals sometimes condemned African arts and cultural heritage generally as pagan and primitive.

These contentions would not have thrived if most Nigerian were honest enough to challenge them. This country has been blessed with a very rich cultural past and currently also; a lot of epoch-making events and personalities keep evolving and / or appearing on a daily basis. But unfortunately, most of them do not get recorded. The reasons for this are numerous, but briefly we will look at a few:

- Lack of funds, the Nigerian society is basically poor, so staying life takes preference to trying to get remembered, (Bruner 1972).

*Nigerian Academic Forum, Volume 10 No. 2, May, 2006.*

- Governments lack of commitment to encouraging information storage e.g. birth certificate can be bought, one can declare any age one likes and as many times as one wants. A sizeable number of our politicians and civil servants fall into that group.
- Most materials published on events and people are for public relations purposes. The materials used are manipulated to suit the patrons/authors whims instead of the fact, (National Encomium, Ovation etc).
- There is also the popular habit of destroying records and covering up of (mainly) fraud i.e. monies stolen, blunders made and disinformation for tribal, nepotic and other narrow-minded reasons.
- Our poor reading and writing culture. Few Nigerians read and write. Most are distracted by television and internet.

In the world today, methods of keeping records improve everyday as technological innovations dictate the pace. Africa's popular methods in the past have been through the use of art, folklore (Fable) and ballads - groits and bards; have been our human historical repositories over the ages.

At the start of this paper it was indicated that the essence of keeping records is to keep alive in whatever way convenient, to help us remember, see, recall, understand and be able to reproduce the past.

This printmaker has now passed on. But there would have been no records to state that he had treaded these parts before, if not for the chums made by a certain student (Ambrose Ah University, Ekpoma Nigeria) stating that, my father reproduced the Festac Mask used in 1977. Though it was discovered that he did not produce the Festac mask, but below are the records the research unraveled. Pa Osahon

Pa Felix Imasuen Osemwengie Osahon was born on September 15, 1920 to Mr. Osahon, who hailed from Iguegia, Ovia Northeast Local Government Council area of Edo State. His mother was Benin and a potter. Felix got his artistic inspiration from her, because for quite some time he assisted her in making pots.

In 1939, he attended Benin Government School, Benin, where he was taught to carve and draw. He started his teaching career at the Baptist Elementary Teachers' framing College, Benin in 1950 - 1952. Moved to Meolusi College, Ijebu-Igbo in 1953 and was again transferred to Divisional Training College, Ejegbo, near Oshogbo the same year. In 1954 he got employed in the Ministry of Information, Western Nigeria as a Graphic Artist in training under the then head of department of graphics - Mr. M.J.B. Pilchar. It was Pilchar who exposed him to graphic design methods like lithography, screen-printing, monocots, plate making, etc. In-1956, he got promoted to the post of Assistant Graphic Arts Officer, due to his quick grasp of the job and penchant for hard work.

The Ministry later recommended and approved that he be sent abroad to study. So, in 1962 he was sent on in-service training to the State College of Art, Kassel in Western Germany. There he obtained a diploma in graphic arts. In 1963 he came back from Western Germany to find that a new region had just been created called Midwestern region. He was then asked to move to Benin and set up the graphic arts department of the region under the Ministry of Information. There he stayed till 1970.

In 1970, he joined the army in what was tagged "special conscription". The war had just ended and the army had launched an enlightenment campaign to help the Nigerian citizenry get over the effects of the gruesome war. That was why personalities like him (Felix) were conscripted, to see this objective accomplished. He got appointed as head of the graphic arts studio, military public relations unit of the Nigerian Army. And in his characteristic way of been hard working and result oriented, he designed the symbol of the second division of the Nigerian Army The Leaping Tiger. While in the army he produced a lot of posters, handbills, manually cut/photo stencils for cards, bills, posters, books, designs, newspaper layouts, screen printing and general sign writing. For the years he was head of the graphic studio in the army, it was his sole responsibility to design the layouts and visuals for the second division Mirror, the division's magazine.

In 1974, he was honourably discharged from the army and immediately asked to resume at his former place of work, now Bendel State Ministry of Information. From there he was transferred to the Ministry of Health, attached to the health education unit, as an illustrator of health posters.

In 1977, the Bendel State Government transferred him from the Ministry of Health to the Bendel Art Council, now Edo State Council for Arts and Culture. His transfer was done due to a request made by the Council's Permanent Secretary, in the person of Mr. Abraham Osunde (now Chief Osunde). The festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) was due to take place that year (i.e. 1977) and Nigeria had accepted to host it using the Idia mask as the emblem of the festival. The mask at that time was in London, being one of the artifacts looted, when Benin was conquered and the Oba was exiled in 1897. To get the mask back on loan, the British Government had asked for the sum of two million pounds sterling as deposit. Mr. Osunde knowing that Felix was not only a printmaker/illustrator, but also a proficient carver, asked for his transfer back to the Council to assist in the reproduction of a replica. The mask got reproduced under his supervision by one Mr. Joseph Alufa Igbinovia Obayangbona and was used for the festival which is popularly called the FESTAC MASK today.

His contemporaries were Mr. Baldwin Osawiegie a graphic artist with the Federal Ministry of Information, Lagos, and the Ghanaian trained Edward Orewogie who taught in the Government College, Ibadan. He (Felix) could recall that in 1953, late Professor Ben Enwonwu invited him to assist in carving the "Risen Christ" in the Resurrection Chapel, University of Ibadan (which was later destroyed by irate muslim youths).

In 1999 a visit to him at his residence in Benin, showed he was already retired and ailing. He died shortly after on the eight of February, 2000.

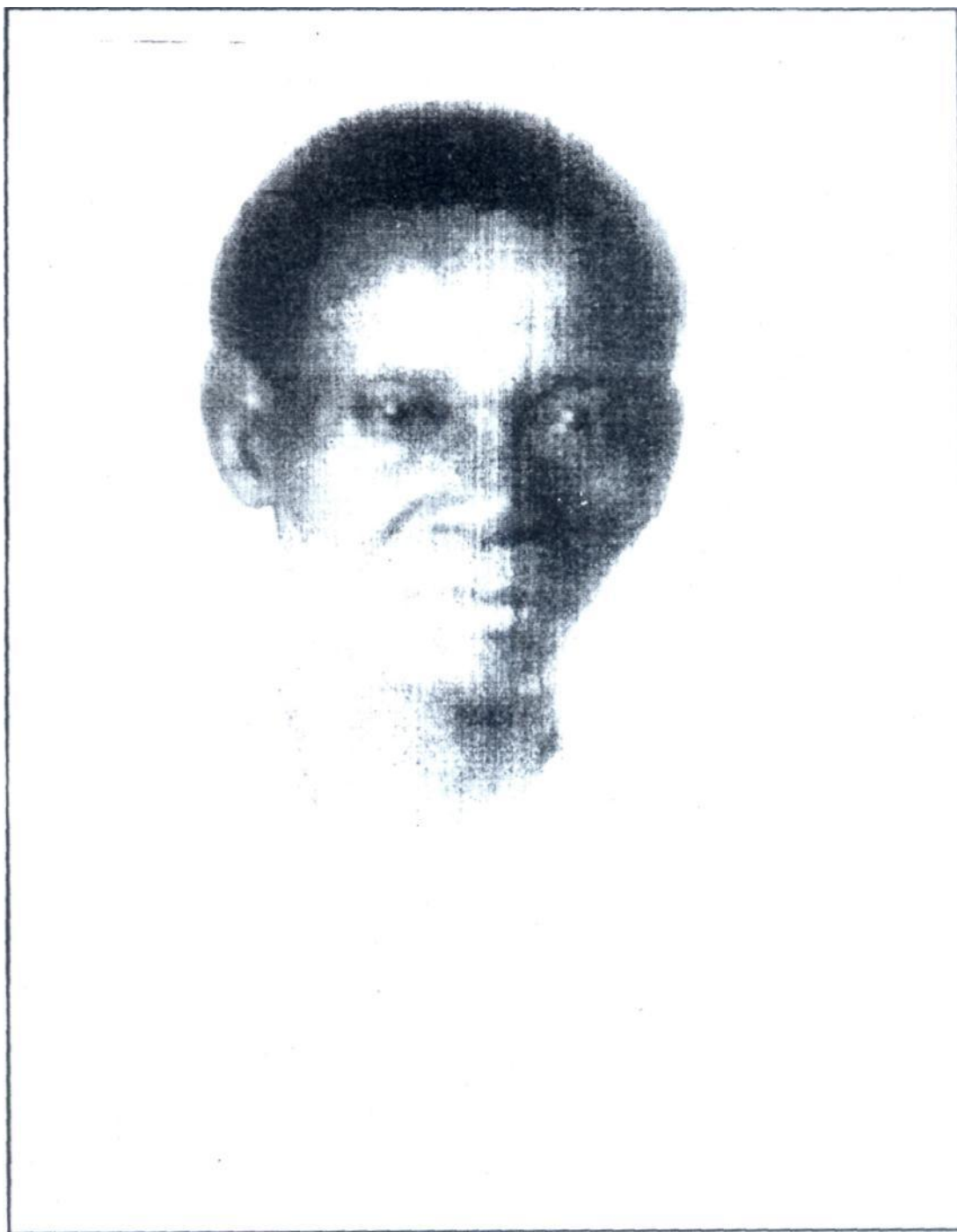
Late Felix was married with many children. And at the time of the interview four of the children had already graduated. He also went further to indicate that most of his children had a flair for arts, though none was practicing as an artist.

Felix was very proficient in screen-printing, his mono-prints were very expressive. You could see from his prints that he had character. His visuals, though, mostly in monochrome, were very illustrative and exhibited a high technical knowledge of reprographics. An example is the Christmas card he made for the Army, printed black on a yellow card. On close inspection, one notices that both the visuals and typography were delineated manually, not with the aid of lettraset or mechanical assistance. In his production of the Leaping Tiger, a logo made for the Second Division of the Nigerian Army, he made his engravings on a lino block, which he then attached to a letterpress cache for printing.

In his sculptural works, evidence of his artistic dexterity was glaringly noticed, especially in the combs, lampshades, bangles, rings, etc. all in ivory, that were still in evidence after his death. The motifs embellished on them were indicative of the graphic background of the producer; there was an obvious symmetry of motifs to be noticed. Recommendations he following are recommendations;

- That a culture of producing objective literary works and their consummation be encouraged.
- That a culture of encouraging commissions, patronage and documentation of arts be introduced.
- That documentation facilities be improved.
- The study of history should not only be done when you offer history major, but a culture of understanding the antecedents of whatever you are involved in, be cultivated.

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