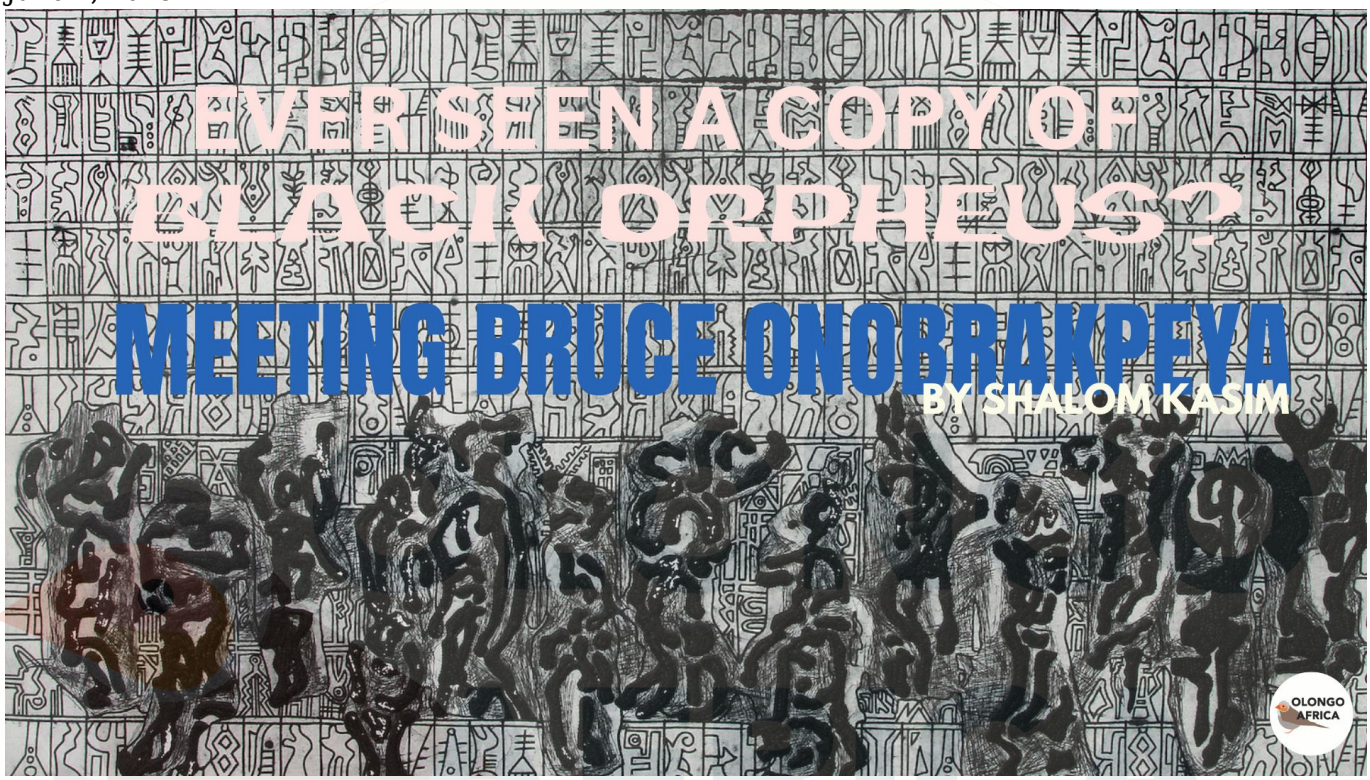
‘Ever seen a copy of Black Orpheus?’ – Meeting Bruce Onobrakpeya

Kọ́lá Túbọ̀sún
June 2, 2025



Agbarha-Otor is a short drive, twenty minutes at the most, from Ughelli, one of 24 communities that make up the Urhobo ethnic nationality, and also functions as the administrative headquarters of Ughelli North LGA in Delta State. The coordinates, for those interested: 5°53′N 6°06′E.

I found a commercial bike rider willing to take me from Ughelli to Agbarha-Otor. As we rode along, the okada rider pointed out several landmarks, and I couldn’t help but feel a little foolish for not doing more research beforehand. I had assumed Agbarha-Otor was a small, compact town with a traditional ruler detached from the outside world. I was wrong.



One name you cannot escape in Agbarha-Otor is the Ibru Family. Their name is on monuments, including a private university (Michael and Cecilia Ibru University), and on the private airstrip they established in 1972. They also founded Superbru, a once-thriving malt-producing company. The family has a long list of prominent figures: Michael Onajirevbe Ibru, industrialist and patriarch of the Ibru dynasty; Felix Ibru, an architect, businessman, and the first democratically-elected governor of Delta State; Goodie Ibru, a hotelier and former president of the Nigerian Stock Exchange; Alex Ibru, founder of The Guardian newspaper and a former Minister of Internal Affairs; Lady Maiden Ibru, media executive and publisher of The Guardian; Cecilia Ibru, Nigeria's first female bank CEO; Oskar Ibru, a billionaire businessman; and Elvina Ibru, an actress and media personality.

Agbarha-Otor is also home to the 222 Battalion of the Nigerian Army.

To meet my resource person, I had to travel approximately 1,090 kilometres to Lagos, then another 410 km down to Warri, and finally 56 km to Agbarha-Otor, arriving on a Thursday. It wasn't until the afternoon of my third day there that I finally sat across from Professor Bruce Onobrakpeya – Baba, as everyone called him.

Bruce Obomeyoma Onobrakpeya, 92, is a printmaker, painter, and sculptor whose works grace some of the most prestigious art galleries and institutions across the globe, including: the Tate Modern in London, the National Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C., and the Malmö Konsthall in Sweden. His artistic journey began in Agbarha-Otor, where he was born into a family with deep creative roots, his father having been a carver. Raised as a Christian, he was equally immersed in the traditional beliefs of his people. As a child, his family relocated to Benin City, Edo State, where he attended Western Boys High School. It was here that his love for art was nurtured under the guidance of Edward Ivehivboje, a teacher. The young Bruce joined the British Council Art Club, refining his skills in drawing. His artistic inspirations came from a combination of the watercolours of Emmanuel Erabor, and a lecture by Ben Enwonwu, arguably the most influential

African artist of the 20th century (illustrator of Amos Tutuola's 1958 novel, The Brave African Huntress). After high school, Onobrakpeya taught at Western Boys High School from 1953 to 1956 – moving on to teach at Ondo Boys High School for another year. In October 1957, he gained admission to the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology – now Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. With the support of a Federal Government Scholarship, he received formal training in the Western tradition of representational art. Rather than merely absorbing these techniques, Baba began to carve his own path, blending Western methods with Nigerian folklore, myths, and legends. Crucial to this awakening was the Zaria Art Society, the group in which he was a founding member alongside the likes of Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, and Yusuf Grillo. A quiet revolution was brewing in Nigerian art, and the so-called Zaria Rebels, including Bruce Onobrakpeya, were the arrowheads.



Bruce Onobrakpeya. *[Source: Mọlará Wood (Wordsbody, 2010)]*

Baba went on to attend several printmaking workshops (in Ìbàdàn, Òṣogbo and Ifẹ̀) before travelling to the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Maine, USA. In 1959, he held his first solo exhibition in Ughelli. That was just the beginning. In 1999, he established the Bruce Onobrakpeya Foundation, an artist-led non-governmental organisation dedicated to developing artistic growth and cultural appreciation, where he serves as president. Central to its work is the Harmattan Workshop, an annual art gathering in his hometown of Agbarha-Otor. It was here that I met him.

"Good afternoon, sir," I greeted. It was the last day of the workshop. He had just had lunch and returned to his seat.

He looked up. "Good afternoon. Well done," he replied, and then added warmly, "Doh! Doh," a greeting in his Urhobo tongue.

"I'm a researcher working on an aspect of Black Orpheus and the Mbari Club." I reached into my bag and brought out a letter. "I'm working on documenting the story behind Black Orpheus, and since the journal and the Club were closely linked, I wanted to hear your perspective, your experiences."
Baba gestured for me to sit. "Are you part of our workshop?"

No, I wasn't. "I was looking up the Mbari Club on Wikipedia, and I saw your name mentioned. But it didn't specify whether you were published in the journal or if your artwork was used, maybe on a cover page or somewhere inside."

He let out a thoughtful sound, as if scanning the past for confirmation. "Yes, I think they used my artwork for a cover page," he said, "and also a page or two inside."

"That was when Ulli Beier was the editor?"

"I don't know who the editor was at that moment," he paused, "but they used it. Ulli Beier was the head of it all. He was the moving spirit there."

I had read about Ulli Beier's role and his indisputable influence in shaping Black Orpheus and the Mbari Club as incubators for African literary and artistic expression. Hearing Baba, one of the artists who had lived it, calling him 'the moving spirit,' was quite something. Chief Horst Ulrich Beier was born in July 1922 in Glowitz, Weimar Germany (now Główczyce, Poland), into a Jewish household. His father, a medical doctor who had a strong admiration for the arts, nurtured in him a love for creativity. The rise of the Nazis in the 1930s threw the family into upheaval. Stripped of his ability to practise medicine, Beier Snr. had no choice but to seek refuge elsewhere, leading the family to relocate to Palestine. Their arrival was met with suspicion by the British authorities, who briefly detained them as 'enemy aliens.' Beier continued his education, obtaining a Bachelor of Arts degree remotely from the University of London. Later, his academic journey took him to England for a graduate degree in Phonetics. However, with universities prioritising war veterans for academic positions, Beier found himself struggling to get a job, pushing him to broaden his search for opportunities. He married Austrian artist Susanne Wenger, and together they embarked on a new chapter in 1950, when they relocated to Nigeria. Beier had secured a position at the University of Ibadan. There, he shifted focus from Phonetics to the Extra-Mural Studies department, and developed a deep fascination for Yoruba culture and artistic expression. Eager to immerse himself beyond the staid academic setting, the couple ventured into the towns of Ede, Ilobu, and later Ọṣogbo, where Beier directly engaged with Yoruba communities. In 1956, he attended the First Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris, hosted by Présence Africaine at the Sorbonne; and, inspired by the intellectual discourse, he returned to Ibadan with a vision. The following year, in 1957, he founded Black Orpheus, named after Jean-Paul Sartre's essay, *Orphée Noir.*

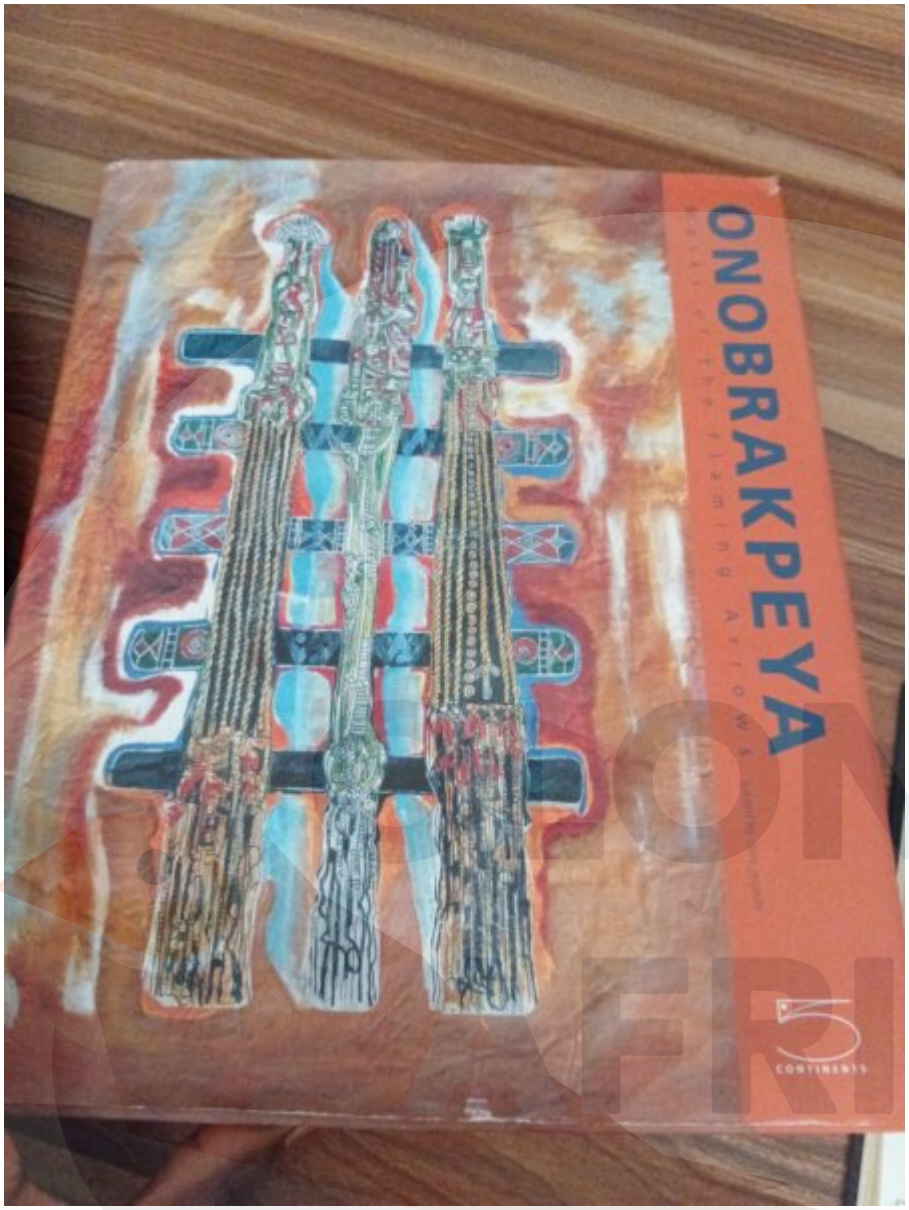


Photo taken by Shalom Kasim

Onobrakpeya continued: “Ulli Beier was always there at the Mbari Club, but there were others working with him as well.” Beier may have been the catalyst, but the movement was sustained by a community of writers, painters, sculptors, and intellectuals. “He would have known everything that happened there.”

I seized the opportunity to explain my purpose in greater detail. “One of the things my research organisation is working on is collecting and digitising copies of Black Orpheus.” I brought out my phone. “These are some of the issues we have digitised. We want to make them accessible again, because right now, Black Orpheus is almost completely absent from Nigerian history. It has almost disappeared.”
He looked up at me, with interest. “Are you sure?” he asked. I could hear a tinge of skepticism in his voice. “There should be copies… at the institute – what’s it called? The Institute of… something… African something-something, in Ọṣogbo.”

That was an unexpected lead. I had not come across any mention of an archive in Ọṣogbo. “Okay,” I said, making a mental note to follow up on it. If copies still existed there, then perhaps not all was lost.

“Yes, they should be there,” he reaffirmed, as though reassuring himself as much as informing me.

A contemplative silence passed between us.

“Anyway, it is good to do the documentation,” Baba said suddenly.

“Yes,” I responded. Hearing him say it was a form of endorsement.

“And possibly, to reprint and revive it,” he added.

That was the real challenge. Documentation was one thing; revival was another. Could Black Orpheus be revived in an era where print culture had drastically changed? Would today’s readers engage with the kind of literary and artistic discourse that had once characterised each edition?

“It is good to do all that,” he said, as though passing on a responsibility.

I nodded. “That’s actually one of the reasons I became interested in this project in the first place,” I admitted, reaching into my bag for a book. “One day, I came across this,” I said, handing it to him. “It’s a mini collection of some of the works published in Black Orpheus, from various issues. It’s very old. I’ve held onto it for close to ten years now,” I said, feeling a strange sense of pride.

He took it in his hands, carefully flipping through the pages. He studied it for a moment longer, and then looked up at me. “This is not Black Orpheus,” he observed.

True, it wasn’t Black Orpheus – not the actual journal, at least. I’d held on to the book for close to ten years, thinking I had the thing. I was wrong. The book’s title has eluded me, mostly because it has neither front nor back covers; no author details, and no pointers in footnotes.

So, I compiled a table detailing the collected works cross-referenced with the metadata provided by OlongoAfrica.

Baba turned a few pages before setting the book down.

“What was the relationship between Black Orpheus and the Mbari Club?” I asked. “From what I’ve read, Black Orpheus started out before the Mbari Club was established.”

Baba leaned back slightly. “I don’t know the origin of Black Orpheus, but I know it was connected with the Mbari Club in Ibadan. Mbari Writers and Artists Club, Ibadan.” Black Orpheus was a magazine, while Mbari was the artist and writers’ club. One was a book journal, and the other one was an institution. “The Mbari Club put its weight on literature,” Baba went on, his hands gesturing as if sculpting the memory in the air, “drama, paintings, carvings, workshops, all of that.”

The Mbari Club emerged in 1961 as an artistic, cultural, and literary hub in Ibadan, spearheaded by Ulli Beier. It attracted a dynamic group of young writers, including Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe, the latter of whom proposed the name “Mbari,” an Igbo concept symbolising creation. The club quickly became a gathering place for some of Africa’s most influential cultural figures, such as Christopher Okigbo, J. P. Clark, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Amos Tútùọlá, Frances Adémọ́lá, Demas Nwoko, Mabel Ṣẹ́gun, Uche Okeke, Arthur Nortje, and Bruce Onobrakpeya. The Club embodied the spirit of post-independence Africa, in an era bursting with creative energy and optimism. It was here that Fẹlá Kútì made his debut as a bandleader, and artists and intellectuals from across Africa, America and the Caribbean found a space to share their ideas and works. While it was a celebration of Nigeria’s burgeoning creative scene in the wake of independence, it was also a melting pot of global artistic exchange. Writers, musicians, and visual artists from across the continent and beyond found a home there. The Club staged groundbreaking performances, including Wọlé Ṣóyínká’s *The Trials of Brother Jero* and J. P. Clark’s *Song of a Goat*. It also welcomed internationally acclaimed artists such as

Langston Hughes, Jacob Lawrence, and Pete Seeger. However, this golden era of artistic collaboration was abruptly disrupted by the Nigerian Civil War, which broke out in 1967.

By the time the war ended, most of the people who formed the Club did not return.

“I’m also speaking with other people,” I told Baba. “From here, I’ll be moving on to speak with Pa Demas Nwoko. I think he was associated with both entities: the Mbari Club and Black Orpheus.”

Baba nodded knowingly. “Demas was in Ibadan all the time. He’ll know quite a lot about Mbari,” then, pointing to the gallery, he added, “Demas designed this building.”



Photo taken by Shalom Kasim

I sat up straighter. “This building?” I had not yet stepped inside.

He nodded. “Where are you domiciled?”

“At the moment… I’m staying at Las Vegas,” I said, pausing briefly before adding, “but I stay in Jos. I came in for this research.”

Baba’s brow furrowed slightly. “Where is Las Vegas?”

“The hotel just after the barracks,” I explained, unsure if he was unfamiliar with it or if he was only intrigued by the name.

“There’s a Las Vegas here?”

“Yes, sir.”

We both laughed. “The Agbarha-Otor Las Vegas,” I added with a chuckle.

“Exotic name,” Baba remarked.

I shifted my focus to the space around us. “What year was this structure built?”
Baba exhaled slightly. “We did not start doing the work until 1988. So, from 1989, 1990 to 1998, we were building.” It was a long process. Nearly a decade passed between the foundation being laid and the work commencing proper.

“Then we started the Workshop,” he said.

“And since then, it has continued,” I noted, “because I know this is the 26th or 27th one that you’re doing?”

“The 26th one,” he confirmed. “The first place we built was this,” he said, his hand moving towards a structure. “Then, little by little, the other buildings followed, one after the other. We didn’t stop building.”

“You and Pa Demas must have been very close,” I said.

“We were in secondary school together, then went to Art School in Zaria. Since that time, we’ve been together. He built this place, and I visit him at Idumuje now and then.”

A lifetime, compressed into a few words. I caught a flicker of nostalgia in his eyes.

Baba then said something interesting. “We have a small library here. Maybe we have some copies of Black Orpheus in there.” He scanned the compound as if searching for someone. “Let’s call and check if we can find it.”

I watched as he placed a call to the librarian. After a brief exchange, he turned to me. “Have you ever seen a copy of Black Orpheus?”

I shook my head. I had read about it, knew of its significance, but I had never held a copy in my hands.
He studied me for a moment, and then gave a slow nod. “Somebody will take you around,” he said finally.
The librarian was now standing by, assuring us that there was a master list cataloguing all available titles along with their classification numbers. “The title is Black Orpheus,” I said. I handed over a printed copy of the metadata I had to the librarian, who nodded before going off into the library.
Meanwhile, I explained the structure of my research to Baba. How I had been selected for a fellowship designed to explore various aspects of Nigerian history, making them accessible for younger generations. “There are ten of us,” I continued, “each working on a different theme, different moments in history that shaped the country.”

“Why Black Orpheus?” Baba asked. “There are other books, books that have been published – are still being published – that are just as relevant to Nigerian literature.” His scepticism was not dismissive, but an invitation to justify my choice. It was true: while Black Orpheus was significant, it was not the only publication that had left an imprint on Nigeria’s literary landscape. “In Nsukka, there’s Okike. Who’s working on Okike?” he asked, his voice carried this expectation that someone would surely be doing that.
Okike is a Nigerian literary journal founded in 1971 by Chinua Achebe. The journal’s name is derived from the Igbo word for ‘creator’ or ‘artist.’ It was established primarily with the goal of providing a platform for African writers to publish their works, promote African literature and encourage artistic expression. The journal’s founders aimed to create an outlet that would allow African writers to share their unique perspectives, experiences, and cultures with a global audience.

Okike has published poems, short stories, essays, and book reviews. But no one in my fellowship cohort was working on it.

I hesitated before answering. “No one.”

He seemed unsurprised but slightly disappointed. “And in Ibadan, there’s Odù. There’s a copy of it here,” he added. “We have ‘Agbarha-Otor’, too.”

“In this place?”

“Yes.”

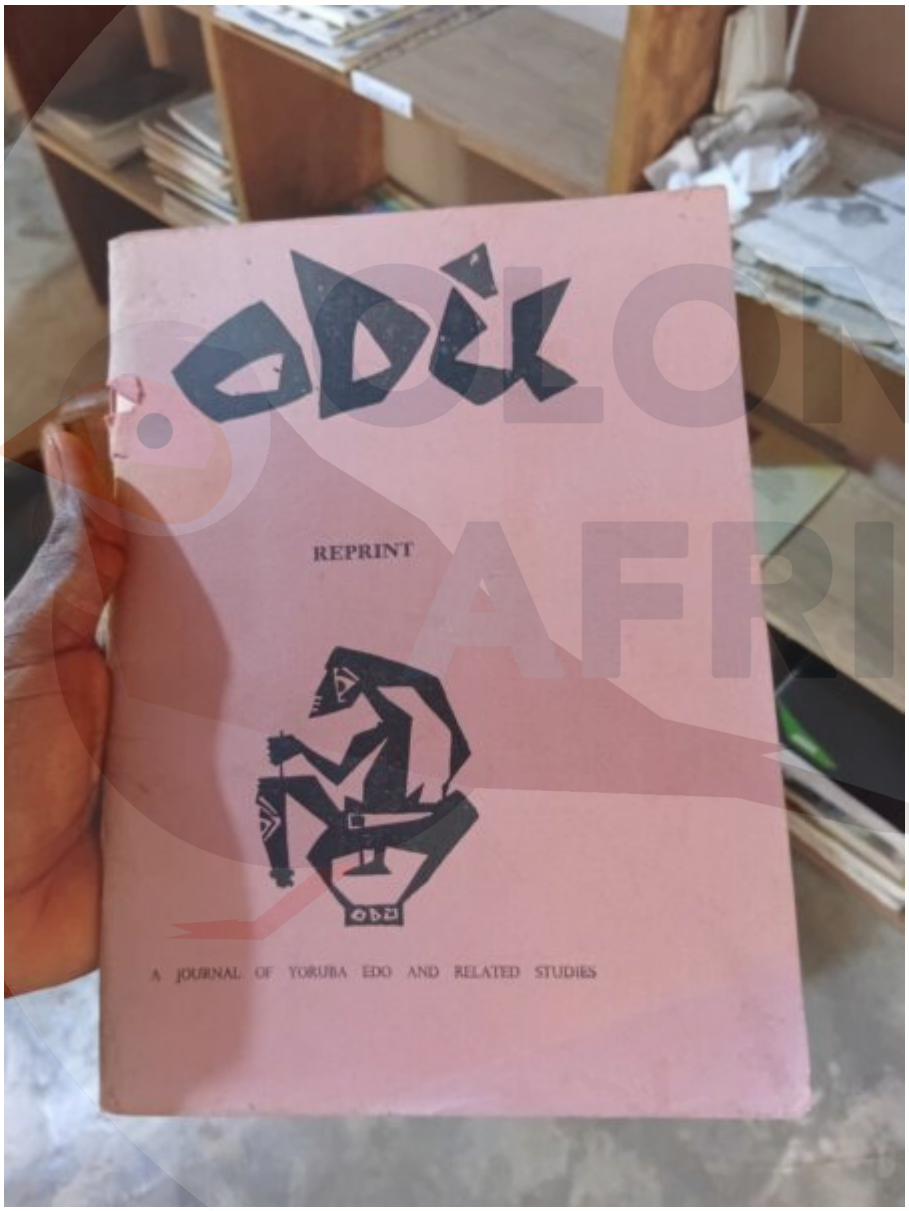


Photo taken by Shalom Kasim

“For this workshop centre?” I needed to understand whether this was an archival record or an ongoing literary tradition.

“Yes,” Baba said again. “We still publish it. We did one last year. The workshop we had last year—” He paused, then continued, “We just prepared a double edition. It’s about to go to press.”
The conversation moved to broader themes of historical documentation. I touched on the different research topics my colleagues were working on: one exploring the Biafran War; one examining the

Sani Abacha years; another investigating the Japa phenomenon, the wave of Nigerians leaving the country in search of opportunities abroad.

He listened, nodding occasionally before asking, “No one is working on any other Nigerian magazine?”

I shook my head.

Baba sighed, though whether in resignation or contemplation, I could not tell. “Nigerian magazines have a lot of…” He trailed off. “There’s The Nigerian Field magazine. It’s published by the Nigerian Field Society.”

Our conversation shifted from a broad discussion of Nigerian journals to a focused exploration of Ulli Beier’s legacy and the cultural movements he helped nurture. Conscious of Onobrakpeya’s wealth of knowledge, I ventured, “So, how was it? When did Ulli Beier leave Nigeria? How did the Mbari Club run?” I pressed. “Or did it collapse the moment he left?”

Baba was quick to correct the assumption that Beier’s departure signalled the immediate end of the movement. “No,” he said, shaking his head slightly. Then, as though reconstructing a timeline in his head.“He also brought in people like Twins Seven Seven and Muraina Oyelami. They were active in the Osogbo prints and the workshop scene.” “[Beier] eventually left Osogbo to take up the job of Director of African Studies at [the then University of Ifẹ̀].”

“And his work?” I asked, eager to understand the scope of Beier’s contributions beyond literature.

“His collection is particularly rich in African art,” came the reply. “And, you know, the work that he and Susanne Wenger did in Òṣogbo, especially around the Ọ̀ṣun Festival and the workshops, helped [Ọ̀ṣun Òṣogbo Sacred Grove] to be named a UNESCO World Heritage Site. That Òṣogbo workshop series was even richer than the one we’re having here. I attended the Workshop myself. And some of the things I couldn’t do in college Art school, I did them there. It was like a remedial experience; things I had missed out on, I finally learned. Beyond that, the workshop that Beier and Georgina started helped to open up the entire area.” Then Baba turned to me with a question of his own. “Have you been to Òṣogbo before?”

The tone suggested that visiting was a necessity for my research.

“No,” I admitted, “but I think I’ll be there soon. I’ll be speaking with Muraina Oyèlámì too.”

Baba nodded approvingly, as if acknowledging that I was on the right path.

When he asked which journals or magazines I was interested in besides Black Orpheus, I mentioned

Transition. Baba listened intently as I spoke about its Ugandan origins, and its remarkable survival under Harvard’s stewardship.

“Ulli Beier faced similar challenges with Black Orpheus and the Mbari Club.” ‘Similar challenges’ meant funding. “He was always looking for funds, not just to keep the magazine running but to sustain the entire Mbari movement, publish books, and support artists. It was never easy. Sustaining a magazine like that is difficult. You need institutional support, and African governments, especially back then, weren’t really investing in the arts that way.”

The librarian returned. “The magazines we have here are *Odù*…”

“Can I see *Odù*?”

Baba nodded. “Yes, follow him.”

I stood up, off to the library. Baba and Nnamdi, the librarian, escorted me.

There the publications were:

A reprint of *Odù*.

The Nigerian Field, Volume 69, Part 2, October 2004. It was a ‘SPECIAL ART AND CULTURE ISSUE ’ with Onobrakpeya’s painting, Isorogun (musical instrument).

There was another December 1981 edition, ‘Monograph No. 3.’ There was a special feature titled *A GEOLOGIST IN NIGERIA*, 1920-1940,’ by A.D.N Bain. The copy sold for N15.00 to Nigerian ‘non-members,’ and £7.50 to U.K ‘non-members.’

USO: Nigerian Journal of Art Volume 1 No. 1, July – December, 1995, was there. Also USO: Nigerian Journal of Art Volume 1 No. 2, July – December, 1996.

I also saw Nigerian Art Reflections: A Journal of the Society of Nigerian Artists, Volume 6, 2006, published annually by SNA, Oyo State Chapter.

Nigerian Journal of Art’s millennium edition, Volume 3 No. 1 & 2, Jan 2000 – December, 2001, was there. Volume 2 No. 1 & 2 January 1997 – December 1998, as well.

There was *Ìjìnlẹ̀ Àṣà: a Journal of Arts, Culture, and Ideas*, Volume 3. 2006. Volume 2, 2005.

The Eye: A Journal of Contemporary Art, Volume 2, No. 1, June, 1993.

“Can I take a photo?” I asked.

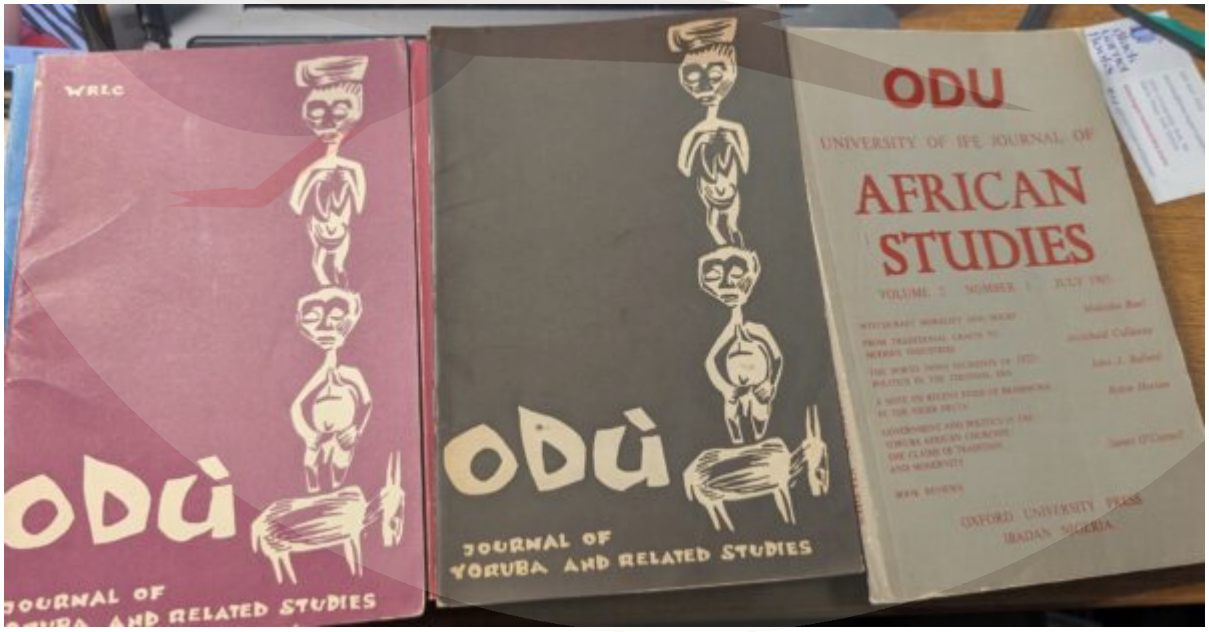


Photo by OlongoAfrica

“Yes.” Baba gave a small, approving nod. “If you come to my place in Owo-Ijawo or you call my number, anytime from Monday, Tuesday, I will be able to give you the name of that institute.” He meant the institute in Osogbo that, as he put it, houses “all past documents and everything about

Black Orpheus." He went on to explain that the building itself was part of a "gift that accompanies the UNESCO site."
We spent about 30 minutes in the library, before Baba left Nnamdi to show me around. We spent about an hour in the gallery and the kiln outside it. When I got back to where Baba was seated, he asked if I had gone around the premises.

I assured him, "I went round, everywhere here. I checked it. From the stones, to the woods, to paintings, metals."

"You went to the top?"

I nodded.

As our conversation circled back to Black Orpheus, Baba admitted, almost apologetically: "We thought that we had those Black Orpheus series here. Go to Ọ̀ṣọ́gbo." He explained that Demas Nwoko had his own publication, New Culture Magazine, and while he might have some of the materials I was looking for, his focus was likely elsewhere.

I took the opportunity to express my gratitude. "Thank you very much for your time, sir," I said sincerely. He acknowledged this with a short, "eh!" And then, as though something had just struck him, he asked,

"You went up there?" motioning to the upper sections of the gallery.

"Yes," I replied.

"What did you make of it?"

I described my experience, how I had met a handful of people working in different sections, some painting and others engaged in other forms of craftsmanship.

"I wish you were here when people were working," he said, then asked, "Where do you come from?"

"From Jos," I answered.

"Are you Berom?"

"No, I'm not. I stay in Jos, but I'm not from Jos. I'm Kanuri. They are majorly from Borno, but there are a few in other places like Adamawa, Taraba, Yobe, and Gombe."

He was now interested in my academic background.

I told him I graduated from the Federal University Wukari in Taraba State."

"Taraba State," he said, musing.

"Yes, sir. I studied English Language and Literature. I also write, and I do research, too. My research with this organisation is for six months."

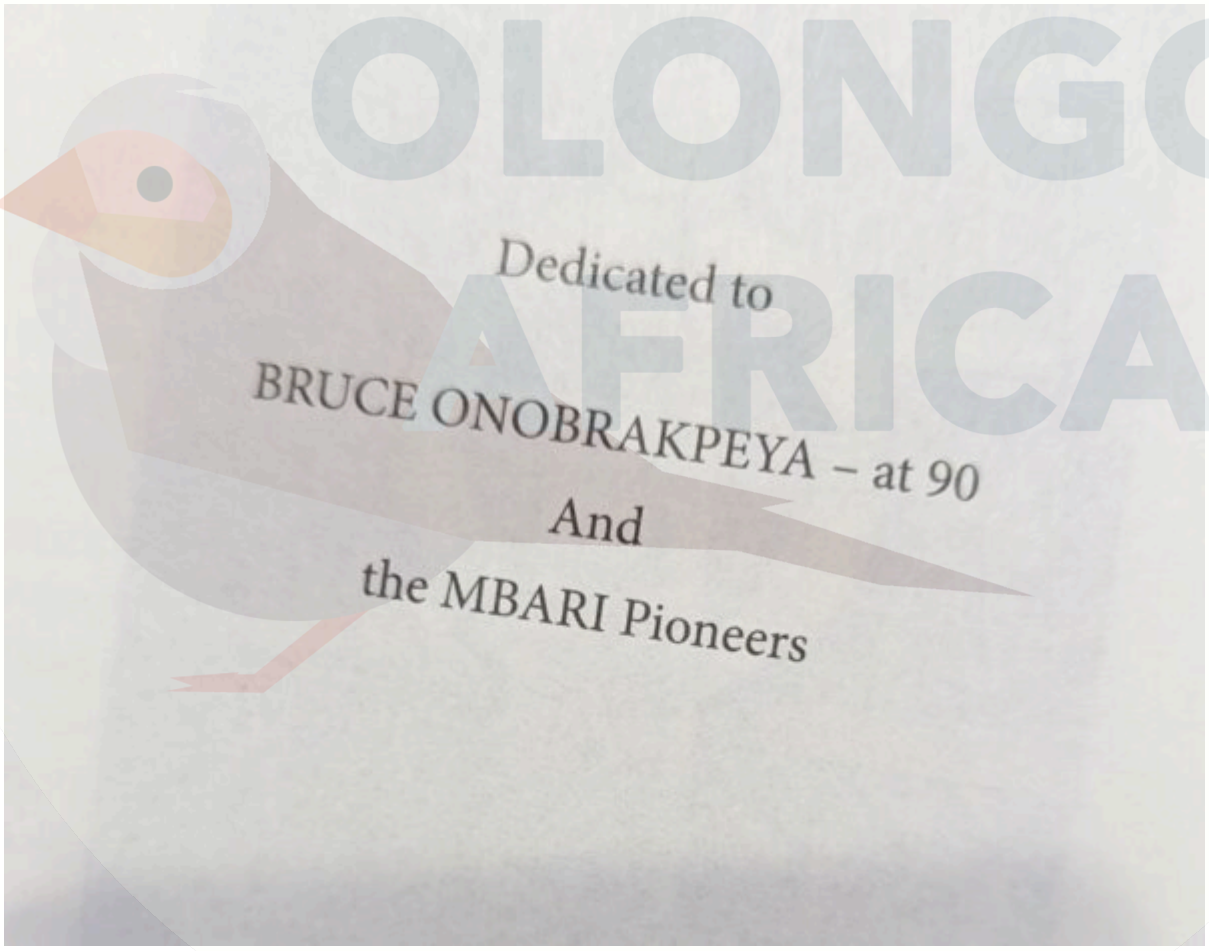
"And it's only for Black Orpheus?"

"Yes," I confirmed. "That was what I proposed to work on. "One of the things I'm working on," I continued, "is to see how I can, like I earlier mentioned, put together all of these chats, these conversations into a document, publish it, and then keep it in the archive so that we can keep going

back to it, to read it and discover it."

It would be a waste of energy, Baba said, to concentrate six months of research on just one magazine. "Within that period, you could have researched many magazines, many journals, Nigerian magazines. Have you heard of *Nigeria Magazine*?"

"No, I haven't heard about Nigeria Magazine." I hesitated. "Some of these magazines, you can hardly find any material about them online. "That's why Black Orpheus and Transition Magazine were the ones I could attempt. Given the time constraints, travelling for extensive research wasn't feasible."
Baba leaned forward slightly. "You didn't do enough research before you started. You don't know much about what literature has come up in Nigeria, whether in education, science, formal or informal. You didn't dig deep enough. But now that you're here, you can see that a lot has shown up." He gestured toward the library. "Okike, Odu, they're all there. At least, they go back more than 25 to 30 years. Okike is focused on Igbo art and philosophy, while Odu covers Yoruba culture, art, philosophy, and more."
I took a deep breath. "I think I still have a lot of research to do."



The dedication page in Wole Soyinka's *Selected Poems* (2023)

"If you would like to go to the library and see more materials on what we are doing, you are free to go there."

"Thank you, sir."

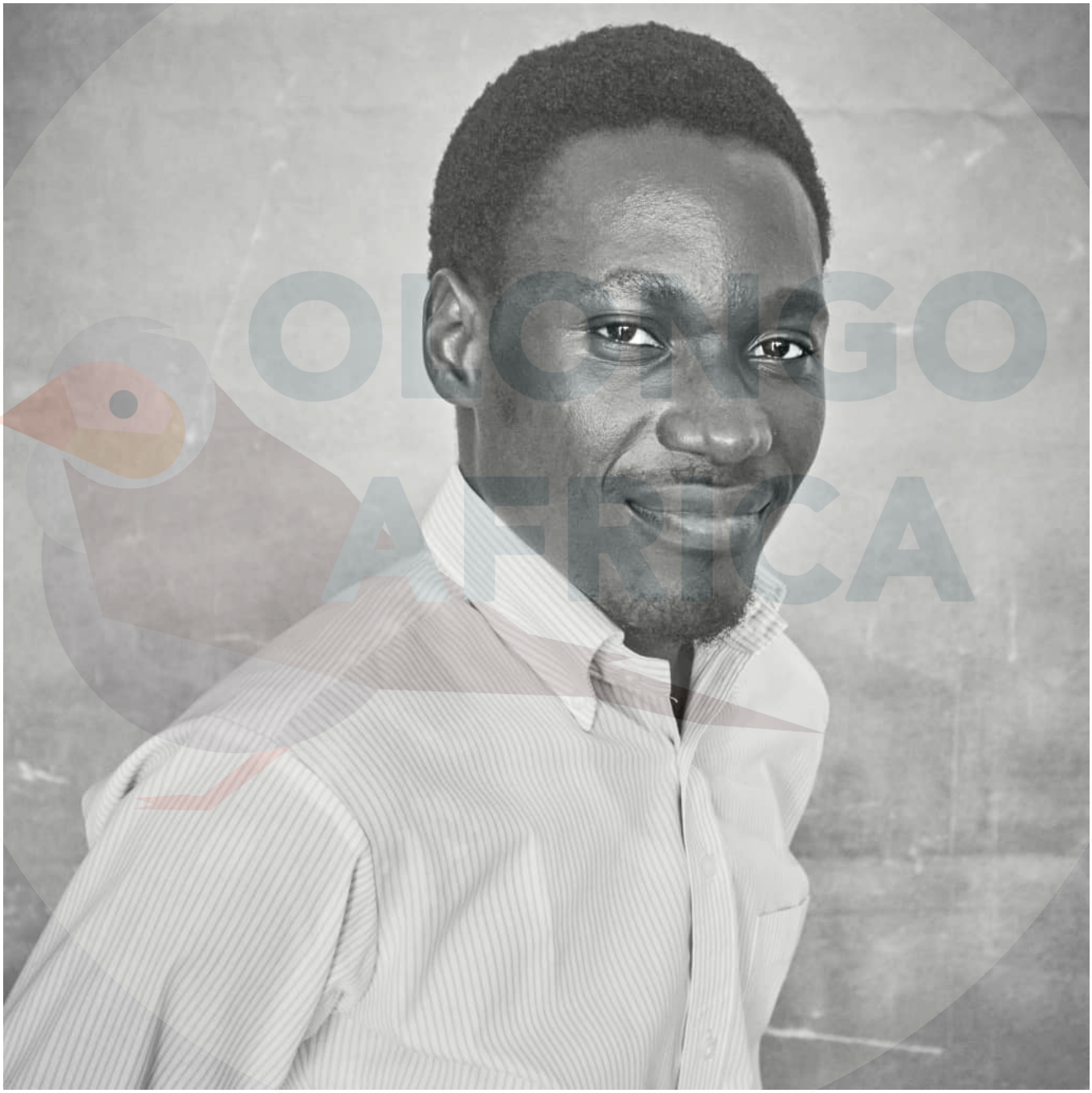
"Instead of going to your hotel and sleeping more," he paused. "Or swimming," he added, jocularly.

I wasn't going to swim for two reasons: first, I couldn't, and second, there was no pool in my hotel.

I stood up, took a bow, clutched my tote bag, and walked to the library.

By the time I left the library about an hour later, Baba had retired to his study.

And I went back to Las Vegas, the Agbarha-Otor one.



Kasim is the Managing Editor of *Mud Season Review* and lives in Jos Plateau, Nigeria. He is a fellow in our **Black Orpheus Exploration Project,** chosen in collaboration with Archivi.ng. You can find his other pieces, centered around his adventures in the fellowship here (*February*), here (*March*), here (April), and and here (May). You can read more about the project here.