

## THE SEMANTICS OF NELSON EDEWOR'S *THE CHILD MUST BE KING*

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### **Abstract**

Shrine-like installations before a large body of viewers are often a puzzle to many. Moreso, many rarely see them as works of art, especially due to their awe-inspiring nature. This paper focuses on the 2004 Installation, *The Child Must Be King*, by Nelson Edewor. The aim is to create an understanding of the meaning of the work. Thus, through the visible and tangible elements in the work, and its correlation as signs, symbols, and pointers, the paper adopts a descriptive approach coupled with the semiotic method. Interviews were conducted with the artist in addition to library and online sources utilized in the process of studying the work. Apart from possessing strong characteristics of art, and the Niger Delta traditional shrine installations, the work breeds some complexities and exhibits certain predictive and prophetic ambience concerning the turn of events in the present day Nigeria. The installation – ‘*The Child Must Be King*’, also has certain ritual connotations that links it to the poem ‘*Viaticum*’ by Senegalese poet and storyteller Birago Diop.

**Keywords:** Work of art; Shrine; Semantic, Environmental Aesthetics; Nelson Edewor; Prophecy; Viaticum.

### **Introduction**

A work of art is a product brought into existence by a producer through a process, with an intent or purpose. This product is often closely related to a historical context. In the view of Frederick Hartt (1985:13), the term ‘art’ derives from a Latin word that suggests ‘skill, way, or method’. Hartt’s Latin pointer emphasizes a producer/process. He also notes that the term has taken on the requirement of aesthetic appreciation as distinguished from the utility as its principal characteristic in most societies. Whichever way, this opinion is viewed, whether from a utilitarian or perceptual standpoint, it suggests intent or purpose and the observer. Hartt goes further to subscribe to John Dewey’s view that ‘all of the human experience, beautiful and ugly, pleasurable and painful, even humorous and absurd, can be distilled by the artist, crystallized in a work of art, and preserved to be experienced by the observer as long as that work lasts’. Dewey’s explanation, in Hartt, does not only suggest what may constitute art, it also indicates, among other things, a source of inspiration for the artist, the artistic process, the ultimate artwork, and the observer’s interaction with it. This ability to embrace the human experience of all sorts and transmit it to the observer, according to Hartt, (1985) distinguishes the work of art. Regarding the experiences embodied in an artwork, Hartt queries: whose experiences? He then submits that the artwork inevitably ‘includes some

reference to the artist's existence, but often even more to the time in which he or she lived' (1985:14).

In the same vein, Osa Dennis Egonwa (2007), p. 2, believes that 'the arrangement of an experience or experiences via the numerous media of the visual arts by the sentient personality called artist, is for both self and others; and may represent well-known or unknown features'. This view, expressing the historical perspective of the artwork, is in tandem with Abel Mac Diakparomre's (interview, 14 March 2005) assertion that art is a purposive human activity with the intent of eliciting an aesthetic response. Elsewhere, he opines that the product of this activity must, in addition, be perceptible and tangible, and concludes that the 'definition of art is impacted by the subject itself, social and religious environment, creative awareness and the perception of individuals and social group' (Diakparomre, 2019:1).

### **Shrine and a work of Art**

Like a work of art, a shrine has social and religious aspects. These aspects represent the experience(s) of the devotee. In Nigeria's Niger Delta, and especially in traditional settlements, up to modern, such as Benin City, Warri, and their surrounding cities, towns, and villages, shrines are ubiquitous – in and around houses, trees, groves, and riversides. Even in modern societies, different types of shrines have emerged for different religious purposes. A shrine tends to captivate the interests of worshippers. Similarly, an expressive work of art can captivate an observer's interest and command his attention in an awe-inspiring manner. Visual artists know this and often explore such elements that can create similitude of shrine or altar experiences in their artworks, especially installations. Amongst such visual artists from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, Bruce Onobrakpeya (b. 1932) and Nelson Edewor (b. 1970) stand out. Bruce Onobrakpeya's *Shrine* set and *Akporode* are both shrine-like installations that have been exposed to a large body of viewers. Both installations anticipated this awe-inspiring appeal. Nelson Edewor's *The Child Must be King*, while adopting the same awe-inspiring character, breeds an obfuscation of the artist's intent and keeps observers guessing where to place it – a work of art or shrine or a bigger puzzle – an oracle? To comprehend the meaning of the work, *The Child Must be King*, we may need to look at artworks in traditional shrines and artworks in modern church altars.

### **Artworks in Traditional Shrines**

Apart from draped palm fronds or raffia, mud or brass sculptures, decorated or incised calabashes, brass bells or ferrous metal gongs, installation of stones of varied sizes, wood sculptures, and carved wood representing canoes and seamen, which make a traditional Niger Delta shrine a complex installation and a work of art, there are other accoutrements like iron and/or brass implements which further contribute to the shrine's complexity and aesthetics. Background coloration and decoration, or shrine environmental aesthetics, is one art genre that practitioners of religion carry out as part of their services to deities. This form of art is present in almost every shrine(see figures 1&2).

Another aspect where the seeming knowledge of art plays an important role in the enhancement of the shrine aesthetic environment is the arrangement of *Ukhure* (ancestral staff) in the Edo family ancestral altars of Benin city. *Ukhure* is usually arranged vertically against the wall on a raised pavement. The tallest of these are usually situated in the middle, and the others of less height are carefully arranged around them, on both sides, to form a layout. Although there is no compulsion to have this triangular layout, it has become a subconsciously imbibed cultural attribute, and hence many Edo families that still have this type of ancestral altar arrange the *Ukhure* in the ancestral altars to take a roughly triangular layout with the *Ada* and *Eben* (ceremonial swords) flanking the installation on both sides. The arrangement presented in Ben-Amos and Rubin (1983, p.16) “Figure 3: Royal Altars, Benin City, 1966” alludes to this.

### Artworks in Modern Church Altars

It has been mentioned above that in traditional usage, the place for the veneration of deities is called a shrine. But this, it would seem, does not apply only to traditional religious practices but also to foreign religious beliefs that ultimately find adherents in places other than their places of origin. To this end, part of the architecture of the Christian Church building; being a place for the veneration of the Almighty God; passes for a shrine. Within the church hall, is a raised and secluded platform which is referred to as the Sanctuary. The most prominent and perhaps the most important item in this sanctuary is the altar (**Figure 3, 6, 8 and 9**). Modern churches in the Niger Delta use metal and, sometimes marble or wooden railings to mark out the sanctuaries, barring the altars from the larger church halls (figures 6&7). These railings are usually designed and fabricated by artists or artisans. The backgrounds of many of the altars of Orthodox churches are usually decorated with artworks such as crucifixes (figure 3). Also, on the altar tables, can be found, an agglomeration of ritual paraphernalia associated with Christian religious worship.

In contrast to the orthodox churches, most churches of the Pentecostal family (**Figures 3-9**) in the Niger Delta employ artforms different from stained glass and religious subjects. Here, carefully modeled draperies of fabrics in varied textures, forms, and colors are embellished with an assortment of flowers, and occasionally, texts (from Bible passages) accompany the composition. These ‘new’ artforms transform modern church altars, into aesthetically satisfying works of art and awe-inspiring places of worship. The decorative art, together with other religious paraphernalia, create a serene atmosphere, and put the worshippers in the mood of worship.

### The Artist, Nelson Edewor

Nelson Edewor (b. 1970), teaches sculpture, drawing, art history, and entrepreneurial courses in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Delta State University, Abraka. He is from the *Isoko* cultural area of Delta State, Niger Delta, Nigeria. He graduated with a master's degree (M.F.A. in Sculpture) 1999 from the University of Benin, Benin City. In 2006 and 2009 he bagged an M.A and a Ph.D. in art history respectively from the Delta State University, Abraka (Bazunu 2006), and (Dynamic Horizon 2016). Edewor is a 2012 postdoctoral fellow of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). He is also an ordained priest of the Anglican order of the Christian faith. He has served on the executive committees of the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA) both at the

National and Delta State levels from 2008 to 2014. After he was promoted professor in 2018, he served as Director, Centre for Entrepreneurial Studies, Delta State University, Abraka from 2018 to 2022. He was the National President (2021 to 2024) of the Sculptors' Association of Nigeria (ScAN). Looking at the life of Nelson Edewor, one can safely say that the work, *The Child Must be King* somehow reflects the artist's personal growth- a boy, young adult, and a full grown man. Edewor has risen steadily through the rungs on the professional, religious and social ladder.

Edewor, as a visual artist, works mainly in wood, especially teak, which grows as part of the Niger Delta evergreen vegetation. He embellishes his carvings with iron, aluminum plates, brasses, and mirrors. Other embellishments that can be seen on his woodwork are raffias, jute fibers, marine ropes, pieces of clothes, and pigments of varied hues, (Bazunu 2010, 2022). Most of Edewor's sculptures and installations, (produced between 1999 and 2013), thematically address the plight of the Niger Delta peoples concerning oil exploitation. In some of his works, the concept of trinity also finds a vent. Stylistically, his visuals express a blend of traditional and modern tendencies. Apart from sculptures, he produces drawings, paintings, and bush furniture (sculpture-like furniture) that pass more for artworks than pieces of utilitarian sofas (Bazunu 2010). In an earlier study, Bazunu (2006) classified Edewor's visuals into Pipe and robot-like constructions, Figurative sculptures, Material-suggestive forms, and Installation. *The Child Must Be King*, the focus of this paper, is one of Nelson Edewor's installation sculptures.

### **Description of the work**

The installation, *The Child Must be King* is an agglomeration of objects such as machine parts, wood, raffia fibers, metal pipes, and brass bells. Others are basket trays, calabashes, cowries, beads, and stains of red and white pigments. These content-revealing objects are similar to the types of objects that may be found in any typical shrine set up for the practice of traditional African religion in the Niger Delta. Just like in the traditional religious shrine, these objects that constitute the installation makes for an obfuscation of the artist's intent. 'Installation secures its art identity by the instrumentality of significant content-revealing objects capable of sustaining visual and cerebral interest' opines Egonwa (2004, p.2).

The work is a composition of three sticks, organized in a tripod arrangement. The organization of the two sticks at the anterior view makes them meet the third, from the posterior end, at a point that bears semblance to the shoulders of a human figure. It gives the impression of a figure standing astride with two outstretched arms, the shoulders bend downward and the trunk fully stretched at the rear. Slightly below the perceived shoulders are three shorter pieces of the stick connected triangularly in a horizontal format, from which strands of raffia hang down loosely. These sticks brace the upper part of the tripod on all three sides. Below the raffia-draped shoulders are two branches of the frontal sticks, carefully aligned downwards and crossing each other (See **figures 10&11**) to give the impression of two swords positioned for defense.

Around the middle of the obliquely-positioned sticks that form the tripod are two pieces of the stick that brace the two frontal posts to the one behind. The two pieces of stick reinforce the wide-spread 'legs' of the figure. Under the braces, is a large metal sculpture measuring about 85cm in height that is made from a 12.5cm diameter pipe. This piece of sculpture is adorned with beads

and is seated on a circular basket tray. The metal sculpture, representing a human figure – the child in the composition – is seated in an *Okidiagbara* (aristocratic) pose, consonant to the posture idioms of the Urhobo and frequently expressed in some *Iphri* (figures of male aggression), and the mud sculptures of the Niger Delta region.

The seated metal figure is situated in what looks like a triangularly protected hut, shielded with raffia on two sides, and a threshold on the third side. On the network that links the braces above the metal sculpture (**Figure 11**), lies a smaller basket tray, upon which are mounted two semi-circular calabashes; one partially covering the other and revealing a rough-bodied gourd as the content of the slightly opened receptacle. Cowry shells and brass bells are also contained in the half-opened calabash. Directly under the smaller basket tray is situated a small fish trap, with the entrance slightly facing upward. To the right of the picture plane, in-between the fish trap and the head of the seated metal figure is located another, smaller calabash with a white circle and dark spot in its centre (**Figure 10**). A division of this installation into formal components yields three sections: the bottom section where the metal sculpture is located; the middle section in which the cowries, calabashes on a basket tray, and brass bells can be seen; and the upper section that is akin to the head and shoulders of a human figure.

### Interpretation of the Installation

The first impression conveyed by this three-dimensional installation is that it is a shrine, given the aforementioned characterizing features of a shrine, and especially with the agglomeration of objects that are commonly used and found in traditional religious shrines in the Delta region of Nigeria. This probably explains why the *Omù* of Asaba, (a well-known and respected traditional-religion believer in Asaba; the Delta state capital), paid what may be described as a religious salutation, to this artwork at an exhibition in 2004 at Nelrose Hotel Asaba. On encountering this artwork, the *Omù* lifted her right arm and stretched it, three times towards the installation, in the traditional manner of paying homage to a deity or ruler. This action puzzled many viewers at the exhibition, and some of them remarked: “This idolatress is venerating the sculpture as though it were an idol or a deity”. But the Wise men in biblical narrative from the account of Matthew chapter 2 verses 1-2 and 9-11, did nothing less in the case of the infant Jesus. They had seen his star and went to worship him.

From the description above, the installation is imbued with many signs. Each of the three sides of this tripodal artwork presents a triangular layout and the three points of contact by the pods with the ground present yet another triangle. The cylindrical shape of the sticks and their calibrations reflect petroleum oil pipes with their joints. This is further accentuated by the pipes used for the construction of the metal sculpture over which the tripod strides. The different sections – the bottom, middle, and top – may represent the earth, the atmosphere, and the heavens respectively. As perceived in this installation, the triangular form or tripod becomes indicative of many things. In the view of Egonwa, (2004), it echoes ‘stability’. This is in tandem with the Edo proverb that says *Ikewu eha ne muẹ evbare kua*, which translates as ‘tripodal cooking stands do not spill food’. It suggests ‘strength’, as corroborated in the biblical threefold cord that is not easily broken (Eccl. 4:12); and is also evocative of the Niger Delta, as expressed in one of Edewor’s

(1998) early cement sculptures titled ‘Abundance’. The raffia strands highlight seclusion, being set apart, protected, and sanctified when interpreted through traditional canons, compare (**Figure 1**): Madam Oghobaghase’s shrine, veiled with palm fronds.

Traditionally, basket trays are used for the display of wares in marketplaces. They go out filled with sellers’ wares and return filled with buyers’ money. The basket tray here appears suggestive of ballot boxes that go out hypothetically ‘filled’ with contestants’ ideologies, promises, and manifestos, and return filled with cast votes. The seated metal sculpture piece being made from pipes implies that the spirit that dwells in the figure is the aspirations or desires of the people from the ‘piped region’ – the Niger Delta, whose destinies appear either to have been starved away in or transported through oil pipelines and sold around the world. The beads bedecking the neck of the figure are a status symbol which implies that royalty, kingship, power, authority, and enthronement were about to smile at the people that the sculpture represents. The calabash signifies a receptacle for sustenance in time of need. The rough-bodied gourd called *Ukokoghọ nọ fiẹ ‘rọn* in the Edo language is used for powerful defensive and offensive charms intended to intimidate an enemy or opponent. An opponent, seeing the rough-bodied gourd, gets frightened and runs away, for fear of being plagued or infested with boils that are believed to emanate from the gourd. This way, the bearer of the gourd gets protected from whatever harm the opponent or enemy may have planned. Powdery charms preserved in rough-bodied gourd are potent, and also believed to create obstacles or stumbling blocks in an opponent’s or enemy’s way when the charms are blown into the air, especially towards the enemy’s direction, says Madam Oghobaghase (personal communication, 2016). In this Installation, the calabashes, small-fish trap, cowries, and raffia are emblematic of the ritual that may be envisaged in a shrine. Cowries, being previously used traditionally as a medium of exchange, speak of money, and point to wealth. Brass bells refer to announcement, likened to the sound of sirens that precedes a president’s arrival and announces his presence.

A triangle is analogous to the number ‘3’ which is a magic number. And being within the triangle created by the tri-pods of the composition implied some form of protection for the figure (the child) within the tripod. For the child to be king, the mother, father, and the community, here represented by the three stems of the tripod, are standing firmly, and solidly with him. From a Christian perspective, God-the-father, God-the-Son, and God-the-Holy Spirit is believed also to be standing firmly in support. Similarly, the forces underground – represented by the triangle of the tripod’s physical contact with the ground, the forces on land – represented by the lower half of the visual, and the forces of the air above – represented by the upper half of the composition, are implied to be in support. In effect, this child, it would appear, is being *viaticumised* for a great task ahead. A child born of the Niger Delta triangle, in whose veins the ‘triangulated blood’ flows, and whose destiny had been starved away in oil pipelines, ‘must be king’ someday, according to this installation by Nelson Edewor. A child’s voice is a minority among those who claim to be elders. Similarly, UNDP (2006) points out that the Niger Delta peoples are considered a minority in Nigeria. For a child of the minority Niger Delta origin to be ‘king’ of Nigeria, prayers, supplications, and sacrifices have had to be made long before he emerges on the scene. Perhaps mother has had to dip “three fingers of her left hand...” opines Birago Diop in Donatus Ibe Nwoga

(ed.), (1967:107). And when it happens, whether be it a king or president, he/she needs security. This points to the symbolism of **the fish trap** mounted at the top of the bottom section, above the head of the metal sculpture piece, and slightly below the middle section of the composition. In riverine areas of the Niger Delta, fish traps are used to catch fish for subsistence and economic purposes. However, in traditional religion, small fish traps, like the one in this composition, are usually tied at the entrance of houses, or communities for protective ritual purposes, and are believed to trap evil, negative forces, and demonic spirits, and prevent them from gaining entry into the settlements. Okpu (2001, p.17) concurs that

...small products such as traditional mats, trays, and fishing traps are used as protective and defensive mechanisms. Usually, these objects are tied on a piece of wood or stringed across the entrance to a compound; the wood or string is held in position by two posts dug into the ground and standing on opposite sides of the entrance. The accoutrements are believed to have the power to protect believers from witch-hunting and frequent deaths of children in the family or compound.

As a pointer in this installation, it serves as a form of protection for the child who must be king. In this regard, the actions of security agents attached to presidential entourages easily come to mind. One may recall that on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010, about eight months into Dr. Goodluck Jonathan's presidency, two car bombs exploded on Shehu Shagari way, near the new complex of the federal high court in Abuja. Indeed, the title of this three-dimensional installation, "The Child Must be King" expresses a futuristic desire when it was created in 2004, which materialized when Goodluck Jonathan from the Niger Delta became president. It is still a projection, an expectation, anticipation, and a persisting prophecy of more to come. This explains why, Bazunu (2012), in his doctoral thesis titled 'Semiotic Elements in Selected Artworks on the Niger Delta', classified *The Child Must be King* under 'Visuals of Prediction and Hope'.

### ***The Child Must be King and its Relationship of the poem, Viaticum***

Indeed, for a full comprehension of Edewor's *The Child Must be King*, it may also need to be viewed through the prism of Birago Diop's (b. 1906) poem, *Viaticum*:

In one of the three jugs  
 The three jugs where on certain evenings return  
 the tranquil souls, ...  
 Mother has dipped three fingers  
 three fingers of her left hand:  
 thumb, forefinger and middle finger ...  
 With her three fingers red with blood,  
 with dog's blood,  
 with bull's blood,  
 with goat's blood,  
 Mother has touched me three times ...  
 Mother said: 'Go through the world, go  
 in Life. They will follow thy traces.'

Since then I go...

before me advance the breaths of the forefathers. [Birago Diop in Nwoga (ed.) (1967), Pp.107-8].

The resonance of 'three' in both Diop's *Viaticum* and Edewor's *The Child Must be King* is at a high pitch. In *Viaticum*, we read of: 'three jugs'; 'three fingers' – thumb, forefinger, and middle finger; 'three animals' blood – 'dog's blood', 'bull's blood' and 'goat's blood'; 'touched me three times; (touched three parts of the body – 'forehead', 'left breast' and 'navel'); and other references to 'three' which pervade the poem. In *the Child must be King*, we see three sticks forming a tripod; three triangles; three calabashes; three basket trays; three sides; three planes of reference; three points of contact; three sections/layers – bottom, middle and top. The poem *Viaticum* is child-centered: the sacrifices/rituals are for the protection and advancement of the child who is about to embark on a mission. He also narrates the ritual experiences. In Edewor's visual, we see the entire tripod installation erected for a covering over and around, the metal sculpture, which the artist calls 'The Child'. The visual is appropriately titled to reflect child-centeredness.

It will seem, therefore, that Edewor studied Birago Diop's poem, *Viaticum* before producing the metal sculpture representing the child and the entire installation because it seems a visual treatise of the poem. Edewor was asked about the relationship between his 2004 installation *The Child Must be King* and Birago Diop's poem, *Viaticum*. His response was 'Yes! I studied the poem as a college boy to pass my exams, but it was not directly in my consciousness while producing the sculpture ...it is possible that the poem was in my subconscious' he said in my interview with him at his New Dawn Studios, Abraka in September 16th, 2011.

## Conclusion

From the foregoing analysis, one can conclude that Nelson Edewor's Installation, *The Child Must be King*, is aesthetic as much as a prophetic work of art, strongly influenced by the artist's cultural and environmental background. One can also see from this paper that, the signs and symbols perceived in the installation are probable visual illustration of Birago Diop's poem *Viaticum*, and an expression of his ambition.

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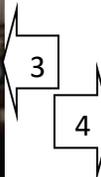
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## Figures



**Figure 1:** Madam Iyayi Oghobaghase's Songo shrine, veiled with palm fronds. The veiling she says prevents un-invited entrants and creates an air of seclusion, being set apart and screened, or holiness for the deity. **Photo credit:** the author.

**Figure 2:** Madam Iyayi Oghobaghase's Songo shrine unveiled. Note the wall adornment of dots, and vertical and diagonal lines in red, white, and black. Even the accoutrements like calabashes, stones, and a stool are also painted to make the installation uniform. **Photo credit:** the author.



**Figure 3:** Sanctuary at Saint Paul's Catholic Church, Abraka. Of interest are the metal railings, draped inner altar, stained glass window, and crucifix at the top background. **Photo credit:** the author. **Figure 4:** Detail of Stained Glass background window.



**Figure 5:** Detail of a painting of Christian religious subject 'The Last Supper' in Figures 3 and 4.



**Figure 6:** Sanctuary at Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Abraka; Note the metal railings; an inner altar aesthetically modeled with draped fabric, flanked by two potted plants; and a Crucifix in the background. **Photo credit:** the author.



**Figure 7:** An Altar raised in honor of the Virgin Mary behind metal railings, topped with wooden hand-rest. Location: Sacred Heart Catholic Church Abraka, Delta State Nigeria. Of note in this visual is the aesthetic configuration of drapes and arrangement of flowers by an artist (in the background, putting finishing touches to the composition); and a devotee making supplication in the foreground. Like in traditional shrines, there is an extent to which supplicants may advance. In the shrine above, the metal railings seem to express that limit. In this illustration, all the elements that make up the composition (the sculpture, raised platform, assorted flowers, and configuration of draped fabrics) have somewhat transformed the arrangement into an installation of a sort. **Photo credit:** the author.

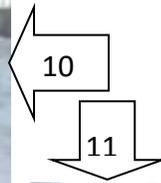


**Figure 8:** The Sanctuary of Draped-Fabric background Altar of a Pentecostal Church in Abraka. Note the elevated pavement, a glass pulpit in the middle distance, a potted plant on the left of the picture, and the background-central pattern's allusion to the cross. Location: Living Faith Church Abraka, Delta State Nigeria. **Photo credit:** the author.



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**Figure 9:** An Altar with Draped-Fabric background at an Inter-Denominational Pentecostal Church in Abraka. Note the semi-circular, elevated four-step pavement, and potted plants on the flanks and centre of the altar, where the marble pulpit is located. Of note also are five leather-cased cushions on which worshippers may kneel and usually do not go beyond while being prayed for by the priests. Location: Our Saviour's Chapel, Abraka. **Photo credit:** the author.



**Figure 10:** Nelson Edewor *The Child Must Be King* (2004). Sculpture, Installation/mixed media. Location: Niger Delta Cultural Centre, Agbarha-Otor. **Photo credit:** the author. **Figure 11:** Detail of *The Child Must be King*. **Photo credit:** the author.