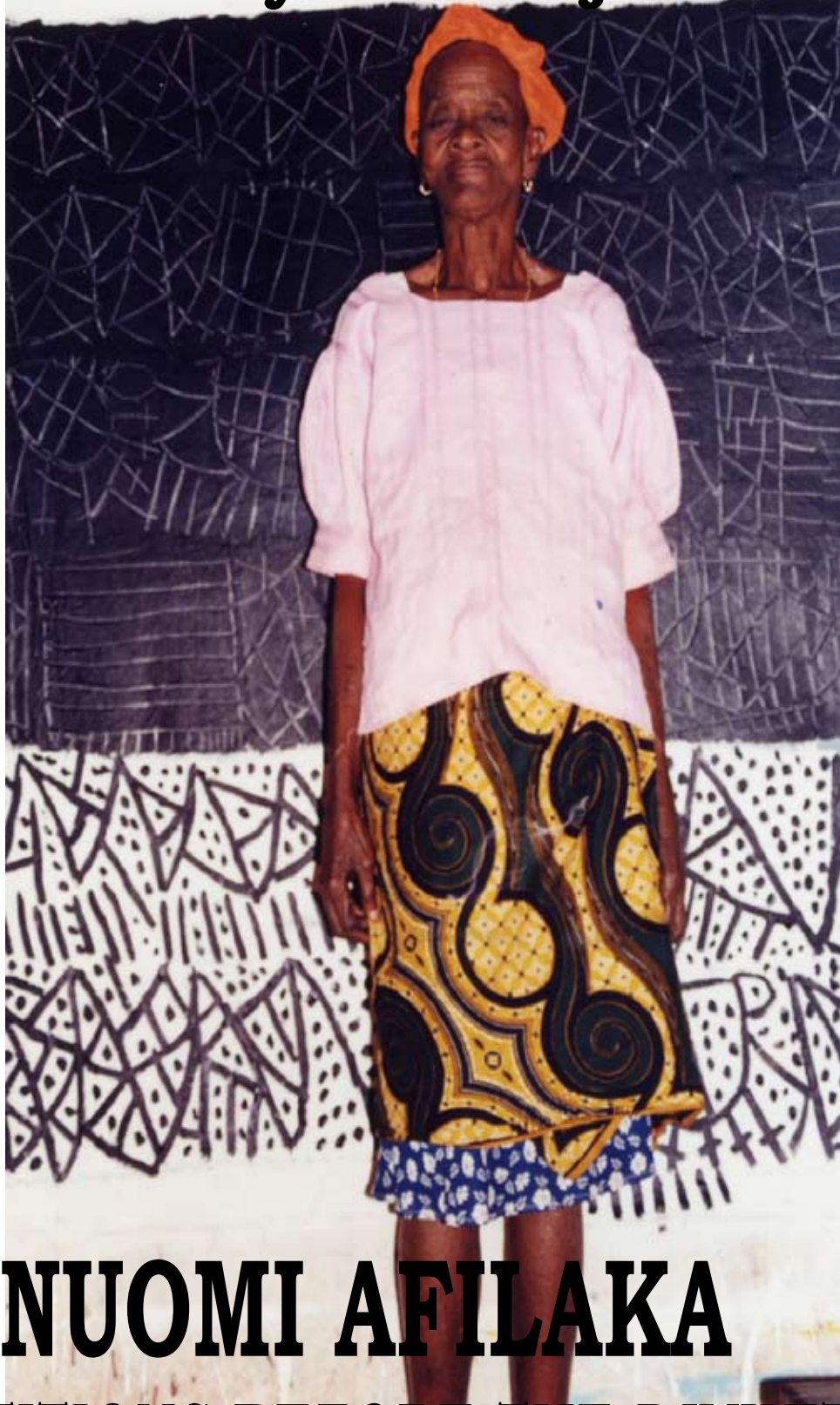


**Moyo Okediji**



**TINUOMI AFILAKA**

PETITIONS BEFORE THE DIVINITIES



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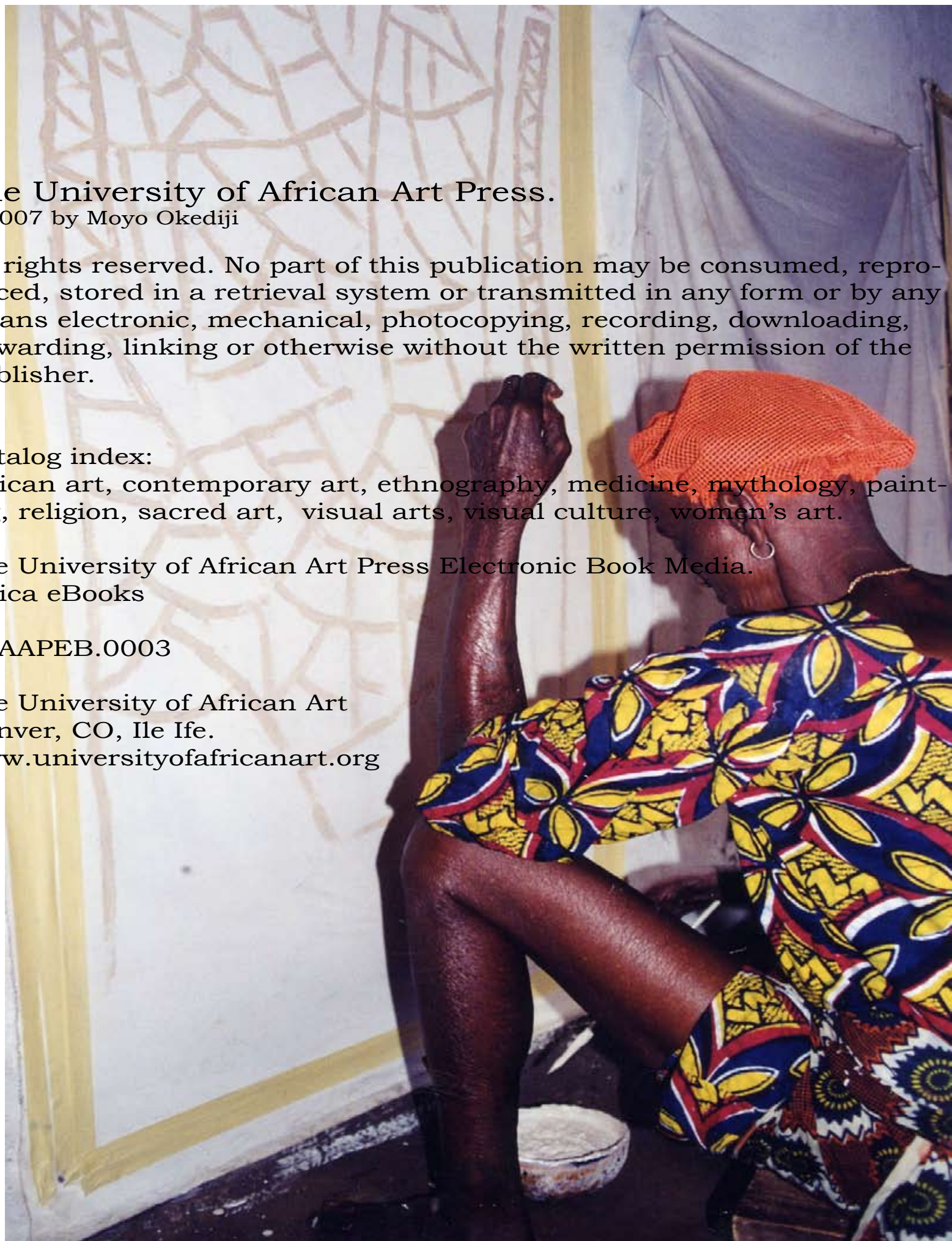
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## **Adalu Elede:**

### Pathology, Theology, and Painting



Painting saved my life. It restored my mind and body. It re-birthed me. I don't know the day I was originally born. It's a long time ago. I didn't ask my parents about my birthday. Nobody asked such questions. I know for sure I was born in this city of Ile Ife. In the Ijesika compound. I painted myself back to life. Hear my story.

Both of my parents were born here in Ile Ife. My father was a peasant farmer. My mother was a housewife. Our family farm was located several miles outside the city. We spent most of our time on the farm. We came to the city for special events, and during festivals.



My father had several wives. It was common in those days for men to have several wives. It is not unusual even now. My mother was one of several wives. My father had several children. I don't know the number. We all lived together. The children lived with their mothers. We had little business with our father, especially the girls. We mostly interacted with our mothers. I almost never dealt directly with father.



My mother was my most important influence in life. I lived with her all of my childhood. We were poor, but we had a roof over our heads, and food most of the time. Okay folks.

But my mother was troubled by infertility problems. Before she had me, there were a couple of children who did not live. But after that she was unable to conceive again. She went from one healer to another. Finally, she was told that she had to return to the painting of orisa shrines, according to the tradition of her ancestors. She did, and had me.





She therefore raised me in the tradition of painting orisa shrines. I grew up watching her and her colleagues painting the shrines. She had to dedicate her entire life to shrine painting. It is one thing to pray for a child and to receive the gift from the divinities. It is an entirely different thing to request protection, health and fortune for the child. Your engagement with the divinities is therefore a life-long relationship. My mother therefore was a painter in the shrine until she died at an old age.

I was her only surviving child. After she had me, the divinities granted her wish for more children. But the children were not spared the ravage of infant mortality. There were miscarriages as well. I was the only one spared by death.



I was married young to a man here in Ile Ife. There was no issue between us for many years. He became tired and took another wife. The diviner counseled me to move on, because there was no future with this man. I was also told to leave Ile Ife and travel to Ekiti where I would meet my true husband. It was painfully that I left my first husband, because he was a good man. But I wanted a child of my own.

When I did as the diviner said, I found my own husband. And soon after, I became pregnant and had my children.





All the time I was raising my children, I lived in Ekiti. My husband was a good man. He was a farmer. He had other wives. I was not his first wife. I was a laborer working on his cocoa farm when I became his wife. He was well-to-do, but he had a large family. In that situation, you fended for yourself. I was poor, because all I did to make money was collect and sell leaves.

When my husband was alive, and he supplied us with food, things were fine. But when he died, things were tough, because you didn't make much from selling leaves.





It's so easy to fall into debt, especially when you are buying food on credit. My new husband has not been able to feed the family, so I fend for myself. He is the junior brother of my former husband, and I became his wife by customary laws. I live on my own, and hardly ever see him, which is not uncommon, because he's such a busy man. He has several other wives too, young ones. An ageing farmer, his means are modest, and all his children are grown and gone.

So are mine. I collect wild *eweeran* leaves used for wrapping food, for subsistence. It is a tough manual job that starts at dawn, and continues till late at night. You need to pluck hundreds of leaves daily to meet your basic quota. Hard work in harsh places.



It is not how hard you work that determines how well you are rewarded. Were this true, the camel would be the richest creature on earth. In fact, the harder you work, the less you are rewarded, it sometimes seem. The way of the world is not written in the plain language that we all speak.

I wake up ahead of dawn, and reach the forests as the dew forms. The sun has not risen before me for the last several decades. I gather leaves all day long. It has to be creatively done, to ensure that you have a handsome gathering the year round. You must pluck from certain places at certain times, to keep an even and balanced growth and ensure a steady supply for the entire year, especially when dry.





Whatever I gather throughout the day, I take to the evening market. I have my customers who buy wholesale from me. The price has been pretty steady, but way behind the rate of inflation. Two things are responsible for the steady price in my opinion. One is the fact that leaves themselves are fast falling out of fashion for wrapping food. There are some food, such as eko, that must be wrapped with leaves. Otherwise, people have found plastic substitute for almost everything else. But then, there are hardly anywhere now to find leaves to collect, and the number of professional leave gatherers has dwindled over the years. It takes a lot of endurance to comb the forests looking for leaves.



Those who are rich don't know about those of us who are poor. We live in different worlds. I live in the bushes gathering leaves. They live in their large air-conditioned cars and offices. They attend meetings all days, emerging only to have tea breaks. I never have any break when I'm gathering leaves. There is no time for break. You must gather a large quantity to meet the quota. And you must reach the market at a certain time of the evening to get full fare for your goods.





Time must be carefully managed. If you stayed too long in the bushes to gather more leaves, chances are that you will arrive at the market when the prices have fallen. If you are not careful, you may find it difficult to sell your goods. You don't want to hold them overnight, because they become stale leaves, for a different market, at a lower price. Your best bet is to sell as fresh leaves, straight from the bushes to the market, previously unstored. It takes years of practice to know exactly when to leave the bushes in order to arrive at the right moment at the evening market.



But the system of transportation has changed. It used to be exclusively done on foot. Later we used lorry transportations for the final parts of the journey. Now we ride motor-cycles all the way home. You just have to make arrangements for them to meet you at particular places, and they will show up. But they are so expensive. They are also rough and dangerous drivers. There have been many motor-cycle accidents, but the divinities protect me.





When you are out there in the bushes, all alone, gathering leaves, a lot thoughts crowd your mind. That is why many leaves-gatherers go crazy. You spend such a lot of time by yourself, as you pluck a leaf after another. You have done it for so many years that you could do it with your eyes closed. But you also know that every moment spells trouble that could be life-treathning. First, the stalks of *eweeran* leaves are as sharp as daggers. Second, you need a really sharp blade to cut this hard stalk. You are constantly at the mercy of Ogun, the god of metals and agriculture, as you navigate your way through the forests, gathering leaves.



Collecting leaves encourages a lot of introspection. You are left to your own thoughts as your only companion. You wonder why the divinities make some people rich, and others poor. Is it just like they make some people tall and others short, and some people thin and others fat? Just like some people are smart and others dull? And not all smart people are rich, just like not all poor people are dull. Strange.





Picking leaves is similar to painting. As you pick leaves, your mind wanders from one thing to another. You sometimes think that you are not thinking, that you are allowing your thoughts to move in any direction that they wanted. But you later realize that you are controlling your thoughts, encouraging certain things and discouraging others. At the same time, there are some things that you really cannot control how you think about them. They stay with you.



What would it feel like to be rich? To sit in one of those fat air-conditioned cars, and drive around town, without one care in the world? At least without having to think about which creditor is coming knocking on your door next. Without having to think about what story to tell the *gari* seller, to make her extend her credit for another month, even though you are not a salaried worker paid on a monthly basis?

To be poor is to be able to tell stories, because your very survival depends on the stories that you can tell when your creditors come for their money, and you don't have it.





Like a poet, you must think faster than your tongue. A painter thinks faster than her hand can move. I have to balance the speed of my hand with the thoughts of my mind. Sometimes my mind is going faster than my hand. And sometimes it is the other way round. I control and balance out the two elements. It is often not possible, and keeping and releasing this tension or ballance is the fun of being an artist, and the surprise that comes from painting.



It had not always been like this. I used to paint the same sort of things as my fellow painters in the Akire group. We painted together the same images as the ones against which I rest my back here. These are the same sort of images that my mother and her colleagues painted when I was young. They have been handed down to us down the ages. When I was having fertility problem and was advised by diviners to join the shrines and participate in shrine activities, these were also the images that we painted. Nobody complained about the images, and I was happy with them, and saw nothing wrong with them or with painting them, just like the other members of the group. That was before my illness.





We all came together as a group and painted these ancient images, sang songs, feasted, drank, prayed, and performed great festivals in the same spirit, the same mood, the same purpose of communal healing. Our style was clear, and we have mastered the forms over the years of practising them during our festivals and ceremonial performances.



But the world was upside-down, and things were going the way they should not be going. They still are. We began to see diseases that never existed before. Ailments were brought for which healers had no prescriptions. Questions for which divivners had no answer. Birds that should fly during the night are flying at noon. Those that should fly during the day are flying at night. And then there came these wars, violence, poverty, and sadness that were never before there.





About twenty five years ago, I became so seriously sick that I thought I was going to die. During the day, I could not lift my arm or leg. Then at night, I had nightmares in my dreams. Strange characters visited me in my dreams. They told me many scary things. But one of the most scary things they told me was that I needed to start writing letters to the divinities. That if I wanted healing in my life, I needed to send petitions before the divinities, asking for change. My ailment of the body was connected with my diseases of poverty. The divinities said that they will be healed together, not separately.



For many years, I ignored these nightmares, but they did not stop. Every night, the same dreams came, with the same characters saying the same thing. Daily, all I could think about were these dreams. The divinities wanted me to stop painting in the style of the group and start writing petitions. First, it was unheard-of for an individual not to paint in the style of the group. Secondly, I did not know how to write.





What would I tell my colleagues? Already, many said I was mad. They would laugh at me, and expel me from the group. So I told no one of my dreams. But soon the sickness affected my mind. I went to a diviner and confessed everything. The diviner told me that unless I did as the divinities asked in my dreams, I was not going to get any better.

I told the group my tale. I was surprised that no one laughed at me. They all listened, and wanted to know about my dreams in details. They were as curious as I was about the petitions that the divinities wanted from me. Strange.



The divine beings who visited my dream told me that they would show me exactly how to write, the moment I began the petition. It was exactly as they said. During our annual painting festival, my group gave me a separate part of the wall for my petitions. I was scared, not knowing what to do or expect. As I stood alone there facing the portion of the wall given to me, the rest of the group painted together, and ignored me. But I knew they were not ignoring me. that everybody was really trying to see what I was going to do.

The moment I placed my hand on the wall, the petitions flowed from my fingers, almost without any effort. I began to write like a professor. And instantly the lock opened, and I was healed. Strange.





All I am doing in my petitions is pleading with the divinities to be merciful toward the poor. Just for some kindness toward those of us who are poor. It is true that there must be poor people, to complement the rich, just as the tall complement the short. But just some mercy, because it is so hard to be low and poor. The petitions are prayers. All I am doing is praying, and begging, and pleading before the divinities, because the troubles of the poor are too large to see.

As the poor person solves one problem, it only leads to another complication. There is no good solution. It is always a matter of compromise and concessions when you're poor.





When everybody is moving forward, you have a feeling that you are walking backward, blind-folded, and shackled, when you're poor. Because poverty exists in layers of debts and indebtednesses under which poor people are buried and bound. The poor person has no sense of security, because nothing brings fear like poverty and penilessness.

The more I write my petitions, the better I feel. I know the orisa are reading my petitions. They have healed me. I no longer have nightmares. My debts are paid from sales of my paintings. My body is as strong as a maiden's. Since the padlock opened with a click, my mind has been as vigorous as a baby's. My petitions are heard.





Some of the petitions are large. I say many things in them, particularly beseeching the divinities to grant the poor some reprieve. I am not asking for a reversal of fortune for rich folks. May they continue to be rich. All I am asking for is some flank cut for us poor folks too. In the large petitions, my calligraphy is often introspective and difficult to follow or read. Sometimes some symbols are so pregnant that they have multiple meanings. Others defy meaning and interpretation because they are hunchbacks, therefore so emotionally charged that any direct intellectual interpretation will fail.



And there are short petitions, often with clearer symbols and more direct narratives, as in the work here. The rich folk, depicted high above the panel, hides himself among his property, which gives him protection and security. But it also brings isolation and loneliness. Beyond and below the property of the rich folk is the gheto of the poor. They huddle together in their deprivation, frustration, and poverty. Their lives are hard, as we see Ogun's sharp points digging into them, as Yemoja's round and soft side of life turns away from them. The rich folk above, on the other hand, enjoys her soft cushions of life, and Ogun's sharp points turned protectively away from his direction. This is a narrative petition, a simple statement about global inequality, like a verse of poetry.

Other pieces get more or less complex. The larger the piece, the bigger the petition, the grander the request, the fuller the healing. You look like a divinity in my old, old, dreams. Thanks for listening.



# Catalogue:

## Minuscules and Majuscles



1.2003.0001

Tinuomi Afilaka

Untitled

Acrylic on canvas

93 x 57"

Symbols of hills (problems), fortune, and health abound here. This is a long petition, in five parallel lines that flow like a journey, or a river. The colors represent the mood of the petition, ranging from cool and calm, to hot and passionate. The movement of etched white lines form the letters, words, and vocabulary of the petition. The calligraphy, with its energetic dynamism, suggests eloquence, rhetorics, and dialectic approach, presented with emphasis and conviction.



2.2003.0004

Tinuomi Afilaka

2. Leaves of Goodness

Acrylic on Canvas

88x57

Long petition, in six horizontal lines, scripted with emotional symbols of reds, associated with the sanguinous Ogun divinity, in shades of brown, red and orange. The daggers and warheads of the divinity also double into hills, and further regroup into networks, organizations, movements and rhythms that are poetic, musical and calligraphic





3. 2003.0033

Tinuomi Afilaka

Untitled

Acrylic on canvas

Symbols include comb, properties, hills, money, building, combs, and people. The cool color is inviting and reflective.



4. 2003.0005

Tinuomi Afilaka, assisted by Oni Omoleye and Iyawo

Untitled

Acrylic on canvas

94x59

Inventive symbols of people, properties, hills, roads, combs and other characters are placed in a landscape of changing colors and moods.





5. 2003.0006

Tinuomi Afilaka, assisted by Oni Omoleye and Iyawo

Protective Fences

Acrylic on Canvas

70x58

Interaction of various characters, in colors of red and light blue on green and yellow circles, suggesting markets, festivals and congregations, on a deep background of dark blue and green field, suggesting the night.



6. 2003.0010

Tinuomi Afilaka

Untitled

Acrylic on Canvas

52x57

A large petition with restless images of diverse people, shown in red and black colors on a luminous turquoise blue background.





7. 2003.0012

Tinuomi Afilaka, assisted by Oni Omoleye and Iyawo

Untitled

Acrylic on Canvas

58x55

A large petition with bold characters and paraphernalia, rendered in bright blue and green rendered on a dark red background with lighter orange and organic shapes and circles, suggestive of celestial and terrestrial forces..



8. 2003.0016

Untitled

Acrylic on Canvas

42x30

Colors indicate clash of unequal proportions and different spiritual and physical forces, petitioned in light blue on a background of light and dark red.





9. Tinuade Afilaka, assisted by Oni Omoleye and Iyawo

Rosetta Stone II

Acrylic on canvas

24x31

Another version of the rich man secure behind his wealth, enjoying the best of time. The lower section shows the ghetto, with various poor people, integrated by their poverty, petitioned on a yellow green background with lyrical red and black calligraphy.



10. Tinuade Afilaka, assisted by Omilabu, Omoleye and Iyawo  
Untitled

Acrylic on Canvas

31x22

Short petition, probably a portrait of a rich folk, resplendent in his court, executed in dark browns on an orange background with bright pink and yellow circles





11. 2003.0093

Tinuomi Afilaka

Untitled

Terrachroma on canvas, 2002

A march, demonstration or protest, done in half circles with lines in a downward vertical orientation in off-white and black, rendered on a blended background of oranges, yellows and browns, divided by borders with thick lines and geometric shapes at top and bottom.



12, Tinuomi Afilaka

Untitled

Terrachroma on canvas, 2002

Radiations and interaction of similar and different spirits, petitioned in circles with lines extending in a vertical orientations, outlined with bold red marks on a black and white background





13. 2003.009

Tinuomi Afilaka

Untitled

Terrachroma on canvas, 2002

Crossroads, possibilities and confoundment, scripted on an abstracted background in tones of brown, yellow, red and green, with white and black calligraphies.



14. 2003.0098

Tinuomi Afilaka

Untitled

Terrachroma on canvas, 2002

Crowns and peasants, workers and masters, kings and prisoners, linked in white and black letters executed on a background of shades of red.





15. 2003.0100

Tinuomi Afilaka

Untitled

Terrachroma on canvas, 2002

A petition showing the extensive property of a rich folk, with white and black calligraphy executed on an abstracted tonal background of reds, greens, browns and yellows.



16. Tinuomi Afilaka

Untitled

Terrachroma on canvas, 2002

The night market brings all various spirits together, irrespective of status, wealth, or other attributes. It is symbol of the leveler of class and power, showing organic circular shapes and symbols with upward extending vertical lines, all in black, brown and white.





17. 2003.0102

Tinuomi Afilaka

Untitled

Terrachroma on canvas, 2002

Ladders, network, and connections from the ground to the top. Not all roads lead to the summit, as shown in this short petition, done in brown, white and black.



18. 2003.0099

Tinuomi Afilaka

Untitled

Terrachroma on canvas, 2002

Separations and fragmentations that turn into ladders, walls, roads and cities, executed in shades of brown, black and white.





19. Tinuomi Afilaka

Untitled

Terrachroma on canvas, 2002

Cityscape, showing class segregation and discrimination in black, red and white.



20. 2003.0071

Tinuomi Afilaka

Untitled

Terrachroma on canvas

Calligraphies of unity, solidarity and collaboration, petitioned in thick white lines at top and bottom section of canvas, leaving edges of vertical stripes with a background of figurative half circles and lines ascending in a vertical orientation, all in black, brown and white.