

## Re-Inventing African Literature through Visual Arts

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DOI: 10.2478/mjss-2019-0054

### Abstract

Evidence abounds of the synergy that exists between literature and visual arts in Africa. Illustrations are known to have given more meaning to books, while the text plays the role of the storyteller, the illustration acts out the story or scene on the pages of the book. Illustrations also make readership very easy and appealing to children and the uneducated people in our local communities. In recent times however, studies have shown a sharp decline in the inclusion of very good, insightful and inspiring illustrations into African literary text. When included, it is often poor and limited to the cover page of the book. This paper examines the merits derivable from the inclusion of visual arts into African literature as well as the reason for its decline with a view to suggesting how it can be used to reinvent African literature. It is expected that by so doing, publishers and authors will see the need and importance of using more illustrations in their books. This will, in turn, generate more interest in the culture of reading among the youths of the 21st century as well as the development of literature directed towards children and the unread.

**Keywords:** Re-invention; Illustration; Visual Arts; Literature; Publishing

### 1. Introduction

The idea for the paper was birthed as a response to the 50th-anniversary celebration of the classic work *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe (1924-2013), the illustrious Nigerian Africanist and literary icon. Part of the celebration took place at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife in 2008. This came simultaneously with a conference in honour of Achebe, as well as the Ife festival of the Arts. As part of the (2008) celebration, students from selected elementary and junior high schools in the ancient city of Ile-Ife were invited and requested to read *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe 2012) and express it in various forms of artistic rendition. The result was phenomenal; not that illustrations have not been made from this text before, but these children gave their own visual understanding of the novel in a fresh and inspiring way. Using various artistic media such as watercolour, gouache, pencils, pen and ink, they created on paper a wide range of visual perception of the scenes and expressions in *Things Fall Apart*.

2018 marks the 60th year the novel *Things Fall Apart* was published, while the author Chinua Achebe passed in 2013; however, drums are still being rolled out for the celebration of one of the most famous books ever written by an African author (Irele 2001). It became therefore necessary to revisit illustration in literary works on the African continent with particular focus on the works of art created by the school children for the 2008 jubilee celebration of this epic novel. Oral literature was