

## *Full Length Research*

# **Idowu Akinrolabu: The Making of a Mouth-Painter**

**Folorunso Akinwinsola**

Orere Grammar School, Ile-Oluji, Ondo State, Nigeria.

Phone Number: 08064479433

Email: [winsoladfa@gmail.com](mailto:winsoladfa@gmail.com)

**Accepted 11<sup>th</sup> March, 2020.**

The subject of this research is a Nigerian tetraplegic, Idowu Akinrolabu, who, despite his disabilities, took a career in art and became famous in mouth-painting, (an act of painting done with painting brush held in the mouth as a result of disability that prohibits the use of hand). With his art style, professional contribution, coupled with contemplative depth of his creative vision, one would have thought that the artist would attract a spontaneous and incisive documentation and visibility. Contrary to this expectation, all he got was a casual mention in the print media. For this reason therefore, the study becomes imperative in addressing the imbalance in the documentation. The methodology of data gathering relied solidly on primary and secondary sources of information. These materials will be used to evaluate the textual, contextual, conceptual and stylistic qualities of the artist's works. Idowu Akinrolabu belongs to the younger generation of modern Nigeria artists whose painting technique, not only made a valuable contribution to the visual arts development in Nigeria, but is indeed celebration of the essence of humanity and a demonstration of the enormous capability that lies within man.

**Keywords:** Idowu Akinrolabu, Mouth-Painter

## **INTRODUCTION**

When ability to create art is hampered, it can potentially hurt more than other forms of creativity that are reduced due to a disability. Certainly most of us have experienced a non-permanent disability that has served as an obstacle in regard to creative endeavours – a broken arm, for example. Frankly, it can be a living hell until the injury is healed. That said, for Idowu Akinrolabu with a permanent disability, the obstacle is always present – he learnt to adapt.

Idowu Akinrolabu's story is indeed a testimony of how human-will can triumph over impossible circumstances. During the first 22 years of his life, he walked freely the surface of the earth like any other human being, hoping for a promising future. But in 1982, when he was a final year student of geology at the University of Ife, now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, he suffered a catastrophic change in fortune,

when a wasting disease struck and turned him into a vegetable.<sup>1</sup>

Twelve years of hospitalization at the Lagos University Teaching Hospital, some of which he spent as a client of Occupational Therapy Department, learning how to paint with his mouth.<sup>2</sup> And when he left hospital, his life became a paean to the dignity of labour. His numerous exhibitions and awards, as listed below, are testament to his remarkable ability.

### **Awards<sup>3</sup>**

Idowu Akinrolabu received several awards which include:

- Erich Stegmann Award, Liechtenstein (1990);
- Artist with a Difference from UNESCO, Paris (1995);

and

- Aaragon International Award for Excellence & Creativity (1998).

## BIOGRAPHY

At first, when the entries were recorded, it was a private thoughts and feelings that were put down for posterity. Call it a diary? You may be right. The researcher was told that diary keeping is a habit in Idowu Akinrolabu's family. Idowu Akinrolabu started keeping diaries since he was in primary school. Initially, it was because their father insisted they must, and by 'they' I mean the children. But along the way it became a pleasant and rewarding habit.

The date of Idowu Akinrolabu's birth was recorded by not only his father, but also his mother as 21st of October, 1960. He was the third out of four children, two boys and two girls. His birth coincided with the ravaging famine in Ile-Oluji at that time. No one believed that Idowu Akinrolabu would survive, because several weeks after his birth, when it was time to give him a name, his father did not give him any other name but rather what his elder siblings called him "Idowu": the name that is normally given to a child born after twins in Yoruba land.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 1:** Idowu Akinrolabu at work

© An Inspiring Embodiment of Abilities in Disabilities



**Figure 2:** Idowu Akinrolabu shortly before his death  
© Jibola Akinrolabu

Idowu Akinrolabu's father, Chief Isaiah Olaseinde Akinrolabu was the second out of three children of his father. He had an elder brother born of the same mother before his mother was inherited by his father. It was the custom in Ile-Oluji to give out a widow to the next step brother of her husband. His father was a primary school teacher who read up to Grade II, no wonder he was the General Secretary of Young Men Christian Association (YMCA) of his church St. Peter's (Anglican) Church, Ile-Oluji. He was a teacher and farmer who was able to take care of his family.<sup>5</sup>

Idowu Akinrolabu's mother, Mrs. Adewetan Clara Akinrolabu was born into an aristocratic and royal family. Her father is from the aristocratic Akingbohungebe family of Odomikan Quarter in Ile-Oluji. On her maternal side, she had the blue blood ran in her veins. The Oijefons' as the indigenes of Ile-Oluji

are called, provided a conducive atmosphere for her educational growth, development and attainment. She had the first feel of formal education at St. Andrews Primary School, Ile-Oluji where she had a profound exposure to Christian values and norms. After her secondary education, Mrs. Adewetan Clara Akinrolabu gained admission to read midwifery which qualified her as a midwife in later years.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Ile-Oluji: Idowu Akinrolabu's Native Land**

Ile-Oluji is an ancient town, Ondo State of Nigeria, where Idowu Akinrolabu was born. The town was formerly known as Ekun Ijamo, with surrounding villages like Ojowo, Upoti, Okua and others. The name Ekun Ijamo was later changed to Ile-Oluji by the people themselves, due to some circumstances.<sup>7</sup> Ile-Oluji,

now in Ile-Oluji/Oke-Igbo Local Government Council of Ondo State of Nigeria, lies between longitude  $04^{\circ} 45' 30''$  and  $05^{\circ} 0' 10''$  and latitude  $07^{\circ} 25' 00''$  and  $07^{\circ} 10' 10''$  and covering an approximate area of 800 (Eight Hundred) square kilometers. Ile-Oluji is bounded on the south by Otasun Hills, Okurughu and Awo rivers, and on the South West by Oke-Igbo (in Ile-Oluji/Oke-Igbo Local Government Council), the North East by Oni River and Ikeji Hills. And on the East, it is bounded by partly by River Owena and partly by Ondo (in Ondo Local Government Council), and on the West by the tributary of the Oni River. Her immediate neighbours are Ondo, Oke-Igbo, Idanre and Ipetu-ljesha.<sup>8</sup>

### Early Education

In line with the desire of Idowu Akinrolabu's father, he was sent to school. His elder siblings had enrolled years earlier. The reason is that his father embraced the Anglican Communion of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) as it was then called. In January 1968 Idowu Akinrolabu was enrolled as pupil No. 9 of primary one at Bishop Philip Memorial Primary School, Ondo. He had been fascinated by the uniform and the habit of taking bath every morning like a teacher. At Bishop Philip, their teachers, (the Headmaster and two other teachers) who all trained at the Teachers College was so dedicated and keenly interested in the boys. One aspect of the school life at Bishop Philip was the difficulty of differentiating the church from the school. The Reverend in charge of Bishop Philip, Late Rev. Obasoro was the choirmaster. A disciplinarian, he was so feared that one would think he was the headmaster. Idowu Akinrolabu later discovered that in a mission school the reverend gentlemen took precedence over the headmaster.<sup>9</sup>

Idowu Akinrolabu's childhood friends were a mixed lot, classmates and neighbours who were his playmates. The classmates came from different background and quarters of Ile-Oluji and Ondo. A good number of them were his sister's age mates. Among them were Yinka Adesunloye, Tolu Adesipe, Ayo Aderanijo. This association was not to continue because at the end of the year, they were promoted to the next class while Idowu Akinrolabu had double promotion. In 1970, he found himself in Primary Three while his classmates were in Primary Two. His class teacher was Mr. Shittu Alao from Ikare-Akoko while Mr. Daodu was his new headmaster. Idowu Akinrolabu's first headmaster had been posted to Isua Akoko. Mr. Daodu the new headmaster, hailed from Egosi now Ilupeju, Ekiti-State. Idowu Akinrolabu was active in academics and he was the smallest boy in his class.

He maintained the lead in all the classes throughout his stay at Bishop Philip.<sup>10</sup>

Most of his classmates in Primary Six in 1973 were adults (a class of twenty seven). When the result of the Primary Six Certificates Examination was released, only twenty of them passed while the other seven failed. The result was usually released after the end of the year. The Headmaster had earlier released the result of primaries One to Five and after which he said "...we regret to say that this year Primary Six result is very poor. Only few pupils passed the examination. Among those that passed very well is Idowu Akinrolabu, (the little rat)." It was the story that went to town and everybody wanted to know this 'little rat' that went to school and stole the show coming out in the Examination with Grade 1.<sup>11</sup>

Earlier in the year, five of these pupils took entrance examination to Gboluji Anglican Grammar School, Ile-Oluji and eight to Ondo Boys High School, Ondo; they were already seeing themselves as a student of these schools. The Secondary Modern School which was the post primary tier of the Awolowo Educational System was the targets of other classmates. However some of them could not pass the entrance examination to these colleges. For Idowu Akinrolabu, he passed and admitted to Gboluji Grammar School, Ile-Oluji in 1973. He later discovered that his admission was facilitated by his exemplary performance at the entrance examination. While in Gboluji, Idowu Akinrolabu was loved for his diligence and brilliance. He passed out from this college in Grade One in 1978.<sup>12</sup>

### As a Student of Geology

His admission into the University of Ife was a unique and significant turning point in Idowu Akinrolabu's social and intellectual life. It was a fulfilled ambition and golden score in his reckoning. Students came from all parts of Nigeria. There were boys and girls who came straight like Idowu Akinrolabu from the secondary schools. They were in their teens. There were old school masters who were bent on acquiring a degree before departing this earth. Then, boys and girls were usually found in the Faculty of Sciences and the Faculty of Social Sciences while the old men were in the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Education.<sup>13</sup>

It was at the University that Idowu Akinrolabu discovered that the students constituted an elite group. This was demonstrated by the manner students dressed. The mode of dressing attained a state of sophistication and luxury simply because a large number of them were bachelors and therefore seeking suitors. University of Ife, now Obafemi Awolowo

## 044. Int. J. Arts and Humanit.

University, had a very high standard of academic excellence. It was the rule then that the first and the second year students who failed more than two courses at the end of the session would be required to withdraw from Faculty of Sciences or the University entirely. With this rule, Idowu Akinrolabu took up the challenge to work very hard and also to justify his brilliant performances at the Ordinary Level.<sup>14</sup> His course of study, Geology, was never taught in the lower school and he knew nothing about it beyond the pronunciation and recognition as a course of study. He must therefore give it all what it takes to perform creditably.

Later, at his final year of study, Idowu Akinrolabu was attending a departmental project called Geological Independent Mapping at Kuta, a town in Osun State, in 1982, with some of his colleagues when he suddenly had fever. As a typical Nigerian, he regarded it as just an ordinary fever, which he hoped would be taken care of after completion of the project, so he determined to finish the project. The young man never had inkling that something serious might have gone wrong with him. He later took some medications, chloroquine tablets, prescribed by a nurse nearby, and believed that the fever would soon abate. The fever subsided for a day but relapsed again. He woke up one morning and suddenly could not move his hands. Idowu Akinrolabu felt it was a temporary problem, he was not very alarmed. He was however rushed to a nearby clinic for a first aid attention before he was taken to Ondo General Hospital for more intense treatment.<sup>15</sup>

### As a Client of Occupational Therapy

Idowu Akinrolabu had been in LUTH for about 4 months before he was referred for rehabilitation in February, 1983. Following an assessment which revealed that cognitive functions were in good working conditions and that Idowu Akinrolabu had a pain free neck movement, the Occupational Therapists planned and commenced a functional rehabilitation programme aimed at highlighting his abilities in spite of bilateral upper and lower limb flaccid paralysis. Since all he had left were his mental acuity, which remained sharp as if all his talents coalesced in that region, and his mouth, the only tool with which nature spared him from being a complete vegetable.<sup>16</sup>

Initially the plan was to maintain an intellectual interest through reading. His ability to understand the meaning of words and symbols were intact but the will to convert this into the action of reading books and newspapers were hampered because of his inability to walk freely to a library to make a choice of reading

material. When the choice was made for him, he lacked the functional movement required to turn the pages of a book due to the disability involving his hands.<sup>17</sup> The mobility problem was fairly and partly ameliorated when his family purchased a manually operated wheelchair for him. It required an attendant to wheel him around. The situation was better when he got a battery-operated wheelchair which he could, on his own, move at will, using his chin and neck movements.<sup>18</sup> With this, he functioned at his best. As part of tackling the problem of turning pages of books, a sloped wooden frame, on which the book rested, was constructed to fit over the armrest of the wheelchair. A page turner was also made using a long stick of wood with rubber glued to one end. With the stick placed in his mouth, Idowu Akinrolabu mastered turning pages with the rubber end.<sup>19</sup>

Having partially solved the problems of mobility and reading, another nagging problem was that of writing. Initially, a chin band was made with a pencil attached. This, however, was not adequate. Better success was achieved when a 3/4" circumference felt tip pen was inserted in a 4" long rubber based tube. He was able to grip this aid between his teeth to practice writing. His first efforts at writing legibly were the words 'HAPPY EASTER'. Using the felt tip pen gripped between the teeth required large movements. This had the tendency to make letters large. Also a large art paper was needed to make it possible for him to write. Attempt was made to improve the written word by the introduction of typing. Idowu Akinrolabu learned to type with stick gripped between the teeth using the same rubber support. He started with the manual typewriter which required more physical effort to depress the keys. He found it tiring and painful in the neck region. The electric typewriter was more appropriate. This provided much less resistance for operation of the keys.<sup>20</sup> Idowu Akinrolabu as such, could therefore use the electric typewriter as a communicator if he so desired.

### Disability

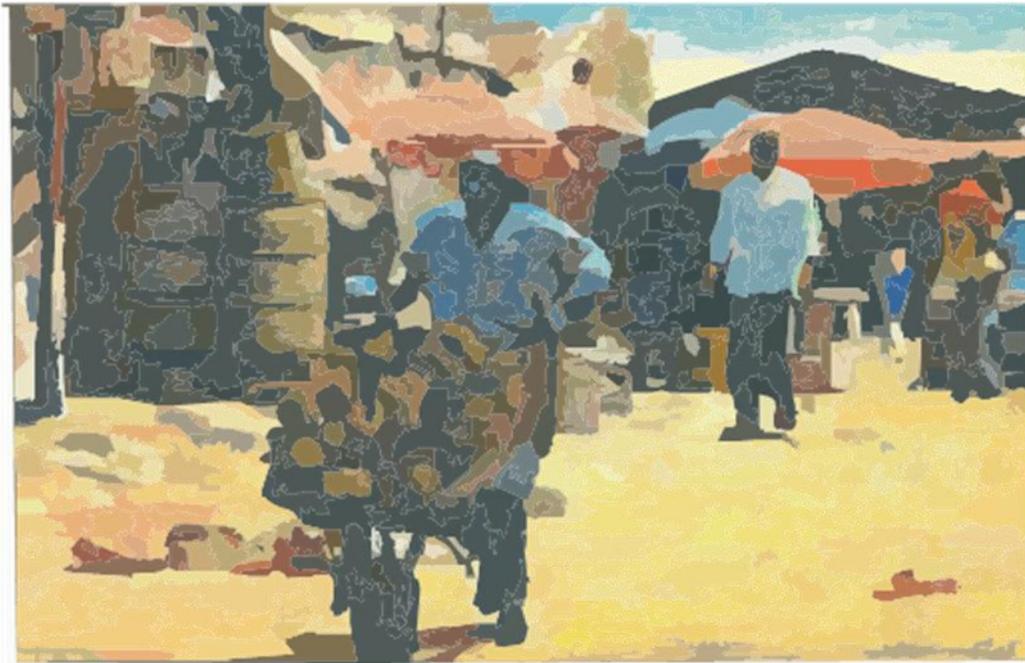
Idowu Akinrolabu would ever be grateful, even in death, to every household of LUTH because they rallied round him to save his life. His doctors, Professor Mustapha Abudu Danesi, Professor Kayode Odusote and Dr. Demola Robert did wonderfully well for him to escape death at that time. They were his extended family. Throughout his travail for twelve years in LUTH, he did not pay a dime as hospital bill, courtesy of Professor Mustapha Abudu Danesi.<sup>21</sup> Professor Mustapha Abudu Danesi is a Professor of Medicine and Consultant Neurology Physician.<sup>22</sup>

### His Paintings

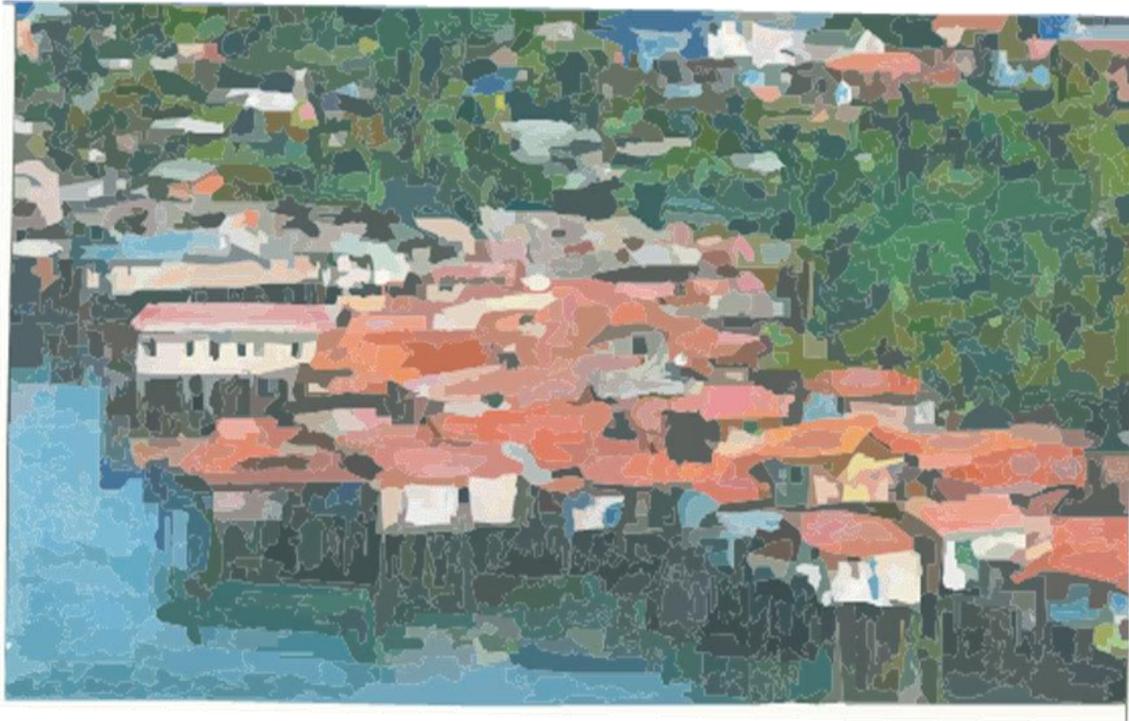
His paintings are show in figures 3-5.



**Figure 3:** *Ija Agba*, Oil on Board, 25 by 30cm 2001. © Jibola Akinrolabu



**Figure 4:** *My Neighbourhood*, Oil on Board, 20 by 30cm, 1993. © Jibola Akinrolabu



**Figure 5:** *Ugbo II*, Oil on Board, 35 by 65cm, 2000. © Jibola Akinrolabu

## Conclusion

This essay provides an historical example of life experience of disability. Structuring this work as thematic, as it connected to current and future learning in a broad range of disciplines, Idowu Akinrolabu had a talent as a painter, but was not given the recognition among contemporary artists. Yet knowledge of how lesser artists managed their professional careers and exhibited their paintings is important in contributing to new documentation about the negotiation of the valid market for art. The development of disability studies and the related discipline of disability history have also provided a receptive environment for artists such as Idowu Akinrolabu to emerge as viable subjects of academic research.

## REFERENCES

1. Jones Akinrolabu, 89years, Idowu Akinrolabu's Uncles, a farmer, interviewed in Ile-Oluji, on March 14, 2016.
2. Ibid.
3. Idowu Akinrolabu, *Hope: An Exhibition of Mouth-Paintings*, Mouth-Painting Catalogue, Ikeja: Treasure House, 1994.
4. Jones Akinrolabu, 89years, Idowu Akinrolabu's Uncles, a farmer, interviewed in Ile-Oluji, on March 14, 2016.
5. Ibid
6. Kehinde Akinrolabu, 64years, Idowu Akinrolabu's elder sister, a retired nurse, interviewed in Ogba, Lagos on November 28, 2015.
7. A. M. Akinfemiwa, *Ile-Oluji: Traditions Growth and Neighbours*, Ibadan: Adeline Ventures, 1994, Pp59-60.
8. Ibid.
9. Jones Akinrolabu, 89years, IdowuAkinrolabu's uncle, a farmer interviewed in Ile-Oluji on March 14, 2016.
10. Ibid.
11. Kehinde Akinrolabu, 64years, IdowuAkinrolabu's elder sister, a retired nurse, interviewed in Ogba, Lagos on November 28, 2015.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Kehinde Akinrolabu, 64years, Idowu Akinrolabu's elder sister, a retired nurse, interviewed in Ogba, Lagos on November 28, 2015.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. O. O. Coker, 72 years Occupation Therapist and former Head of Occupation Therapy Department of

Lagos University Teaching Hospital, interviewed in Ikeja on 16<sup>th</sup> January, 2016.

22. Ibid.