
Ceramics as a Medium of Social Commentary in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper proposes that a number of Nigerian ceramic artists and sculptors who have experimented with the ceramic medium have considerably engaged with socio-political issues, especially in form of satires and critical commentaries over post-independence politics, politicians and the Nigerian state. It examines the history of critical engagements with the ceramic medium in postcolonial Nigeria and attempts a critical appraisal and analysis of the works of important socially-committed ceramic artists in the country in terms of the themes of conflict and how they intersect with post-independence politics, politicians and the Nigerian state.

Key Words: Ceramics, Social Commentary, Nigerian art, ceramic artists

Introduction

Traditional African societies are known to have had forms of social control, which included the use of satires, songs, folklores, and other creative channels to extol the good and castigate the evil. Their songs, riddles and proverbs were largely didactic and socially-oriented. This creative attitude goes back to primordial times. World art history has often drawn attention to the work of cave artists of the Palaeolithic era when art served as a means of survival and self-preservation. It has been argued that the paintings of the cave artists were not merely decorative; else, they would not have been executed at the uninhabited and hidden parts of the caves (Gardner 1976). This is also true of rock-shelter paintings such as the popular *Marching Warriors*, a picture executed during the Mesolithic period in Spain and which dated about 8000-3000 BC. *Marching Warriors* may be viewed as a record of history and as a social commentary.

In the 19th and 20th centuries when international art movements flourished in Europe and elsewhere, art was more effectively used as a tool for social engineering. Artists portrayed personages and everyday activities either to ennoble the status of what is depicted or to critique it. Their usual subject matter was “the environment, the labours and the struggles of the working class which were often sympathetically described and exalted” (Gardner, 1976:833). The social commitment of the artists also manifested in artistic focus on crime scenes

and court proceedings (Gardner, 1976). The large scale mural painting, *Guernica*, by Pablo Picasso (1881- 1973), for instance, addresses and condemns the brutality of war (Katz et al, 1995:16). Honore Daumier, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Edward Hopper, Jose Clement, Orozco and Ben Shahn, among other artists, used print making, paintings and photographs to express their political views, criticize the government and educate the society. Such works are also historically important because they recorded the events at the period.

In colonial and postcolonial Africa, modernity gave rise to new modes of expressing the socio-political conditions of the people by the emergent modern artists and writers. After the Second World War, most Africans had become highly aware of the political situation of the period (Ijioma, 1979). This was reflected in every genre of the arts such as literature, music, drama and the visual art. During that period, “the educated youths became more vocal in their condemnation of colonial administration” (Ijioma, 1979:49). Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe’s newspaper, the *West African Pilot*, also offered an appreciable platform from which nationalistic struggles of many educated Nigerians were launched. Regarding this, the efforts of Akinola Lasekan, an important Nigerian painter and cartoonist of the colonial and post-colonial periods, who worked with Azikiwe at the *West African Pilot*, cannot be overemphasized. For example, Lasekan had “cartooned the Richard’s constitution of 1946 ... and it caused uproar in official circles (as it) appealed to the intellect of the politically minded Nigerians” (Ijioma, 1979: 49). Such socio-political cartoons, caricatures, incisive articles and sensitization campaigns by the pre-independence nationalists contributed to the struggle for Nigeria’s political independence, which was eventually achieved in 1960. At that time, a group of young visual artists, led by Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko, in their search for a cultural identity for Nigeria, were also involved in fashioning a modern artistic idiom for the country (Okeke-Agulu, 2006). As part of the build-up to the pressures for Nigeria’s independence, also, Chinua Achebe had published a culturally political novel, *Things Fall Apart*, in 1958.

In postcolonial Nigeria, many writers and artists continued with other forms of engagement with the socio-political realities of their time. Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Kenule Saro Wiwa and others became popular social crusaders whose works exposed the ills of the society and the weakness of the government of Nigeria. For instance, Achebe’s novel *A Man of the People*, marked him out as one of many socially committed African writers who exposed the wickedness of post-independence African politicians that manipulated their people and the communal resources for their own selfish interests (Landon 2012). Achebe is known to have held the strong opinion that the trouble with Nigeria lies principally on leadership (Achebe, 1983).

The foregoing observations draw attention to the concern of this paper, which focuses on politics and politicians in terms of their construction of conflicts and problematic human conditions in post-independence Nigerian state. It is evident

that the work of many socially-committed creative writers has been extensively examined in this light by many important scholars (see for example, Ngugi, 1969; Wake, 1969; and Serumaga, 1969). It would also appear that the manner by which Nigerian painters and sculptors have used their art to address issues of politics and the Nigerian state have attracted appreciable critical attention (see for example, Okeke-Agulu, 2006; Onuzulike, 2010; and Odoh, 2012). However, little has been discussed about how works in the ceramic medium have engaged with similar socio-political concerns. This paper attempts an examination of the history and manner by which some Nigerian artists, who have worked in the ceramic medium, addressed post-independence politics, politicians and the Nigerian state.

Ceramics and Political Commentary in Nigeria: A Historical Perspective

Historically, early modern ceramic development in colonial Nigeria grappled essentially with issues of materials and techniques. This is evident in the work of the European potter, D. Roberts, who has been credited with setting up at Ibadan, in 1904, what appears to be the first European-style ceramic workshop in Africa. The focus was on the technical manufacture of table wares using local clays and imported glazes fired in locally constructed kilns. Kenneth Murray, Nigeria's Superintendent of Education from 1927 and later first Director of Antiquities, engaged in similar technical concerns during his inconclusive experiments with local clays and glaze materials from 1929 to 1939 (Onuzulike, 2013). In his teaching stations in Southern Nigeria, especially in Ibadan, Umuahia and Uyo, Murray had tried to work with local potters to improve their production techniques. He particularly trained his students in the construction of kilns for firing their clay models. Murray revived the idea of terracotta sculptures which had been raised to classical heights in the ancient Nok and Ife terracotta traditions of the north-central and south-western regions of Nigeria, respectively. His students focused on the rendition of human heads and relief panels that attempted to recapture local everyday lives. A number of terracotta works by his five special students (Uthman M. Ibrahim, C.C. Ibeto, B.C. Enwonwu, D.L.K. Nnachy and A.P. Umana) were shown in a historic exhibition organized by Murray at the Zwemmer Gallery, London, in 1937, entitled "Nigerian Wood-carvings, Terracottas and Watercolours". With such titles as Nnachy's *An Ohafia Game*; Umana's *Man and Cow*; Enwonwu's *Deadly Combat*; Ibrahim's *Tortoise* and Ibeto's *A Girl, A Hunter, Portrait of a Yoruba Youth, Portrait of a Yoruba Boy, Portrait of an Ibibio Girl and Portrait of an Ibo Hunter*, the works by Murray's students were arguably culturally political but did not engage in explicit critiques of the political power structures of the colonial period.

After the Second World War in 1945 and the greater political and economic awareness it engendered, the Nigerian colonial administration set up pottery training centres as part of the Colonial Development and Welfare scheme. This began with the Okigwe Pottery Training Centre which kicked off

in 1950, the Abuja Pottery Training Center in 1952 and Ado-Ekiti Pottery Training Centre also in 1952. While the Okigwe and Ado-Ekiti centres focused on new ceramic materials and techniques, the Abuja centre (manned by the famous British potter called Michael Cardew) went beyond those to include the search for a Nigerian identity in the new products by drawing on the wealth of indigenous forms and decorations. There was hardly any attempt at the use of the ceramic medium for political critique at the government pottery training centres during the late colonial and post-independence periods that they flourished.

By the early 1950s, higher education had been introduced in Nigeria by the colonial government, especially as part of the build up towards political independence. Historically, it was in one of these schools, The Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology (NCAST), later Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, that a group of culturally and politically conscious young artists began to intellectualize and extend the search for cultural identity which had previously been championed by Murray's art students (Okeke-Agulu, 2006). A similar concern was largely evident in the works of Cardew's pupils, especially in the works of Ladi Kwali, at the Pottery Training Centre in old Abuja (now the Ladi Kwali Pottery Centre, Suleja). The early graduates from Zaria produced revolutionary works that promoted Nigerian cultural identity and socio-political consciousness, especially after Nigeria gained political independence in 1960, and after a number of the Zaria art students graduated in 1961. One of them, Demas Nwoko, began some of the first strongest political critiques with his paintings, and later with his significant body of works in terracotta (fired clay). This marked the beginning of political critiques in the ceramic medium. It was followed in the late 1970s by the ceramic experiments of El Anatsui, and later in the early 1980s and beyond by the works of Chris Echeta, Tony Umunna, Chris Udeh, Shaibu Alasan and others.

The Ceramic Medium, Nigerian Visual Artists and Political Art

As already hinted above, Demas Nwoko appears to come through as the first modern Nigerian artist to have explored the expressive potentials of the ceramic medium for addressing the socio-political concerns of his time. Nwoko is a notable versatile artist associated with the 'Natural Synthesis' ideology of a group of art students at NCAST, more popularly called the Zaria Art Society. Members of the Society (notably, Uche Okeke, Simon Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Bruce Onobrakpeya and Yusuf Grillo) set out to blend the academic art instructions at Zaria with indigenous art forms, ideas and practices. They called the process of blending materials and creative ideas from "outside" with those from "within" *Natural Synthesis*. In doing this, they undertook study tours of museums and other cultural archives around the country for creative inspirations. Demas Nwoko was particularly fascinated by the Nok terracotta figures and they inspired much of his new ideas of image-making, not only in

his paintings (as evident in his landmark piece, *Nigeria in 1959* [Figure 1]) but also in the terracotta experiments of his early post-Zaria years of the 1960s.



Fig. 1: Demas Nwoko, *Nigeria in 1959*

It has been noted that “Demas Nwoko’s *Nigeria in 1959*, *Beggar*, and *A Chief* tend to adequately capture the manner by which contemporary Nigerian artists have used art as a tool for social history and political critique” particularly in their engagement with “the realities of postcolonial Nigeria” (Onuzulike, 2010). While *Nigeria in 1959* and *Beggar* are paintings, *Soja Come*, *Soja Stay*, *Soja Go* and *Dancers* represent the many pieces in Nwoko’s body of work in terracotta produced in the mid-1960s. According to Onuzulike (2010:120-121):

Nwoko’s *Nigeria in 1959* is one of the earliest direct political critiques by a contemporary Nigerian artist. It is a deep reflection on the political tension that pervaded the year before the country’s independence, especially by the way it probes the complex knots that bound the colony with the imperial power. On the mask-like faces of both the imperial lords and the colonized attendants can be read a hidden fear as they wait tiredly, and perhaps anxiously, for what appears to be a formal opening of an independence celebration. *Nigeria in 1959* is obviously a work that conveys scepticism at the utopian expectations of Nigeria’s independence.

The popularity of Nwoko's *Nigeria in 1959* appears to have drawn attention away from his equally weighty political commentaries in the ceramic medium. In a recent article, Egonwa (2012:183) calls remarkable attention to Nwoko's terracotta sculpture entitled *Soja Come, Soja Stay, Soja Go* "as an extrapolation of the earlier creative thought and telling socio-political subject matter of *Nigeria in 1959*". In other words, *Soja Come, Soja Stay, Soja Go*, by its reference to the transience of power, using a popular Nigerian maxim coined in pidgin English, is an important work in the narrative of Nwoko's engagement with Nigeria's political history.

Nwoko's *Soja Come, Soja Stay, Soja Go* (Figure 2) is a terracotta piece which the artist installs in various poses to depict a soldier 'coming', 'staying' and 'departing'. Like in all other terracotta sculptures of his, the form references the traditional Nok style by its emphasis on the head and stunted torso, perforated eyeballs and thick set lips. Nwoko's soldier figure stands erect, as in an 'attention' position. It is heavily decked with strings of ammunition that encircle its shoulders and chest region. The circular helmet on its head emphasises its facial features, prominently defined by large nostrils and open mouth. While the *Soja Come* pose wields an upwardly pointed rifle in its right hand, *Soja Go* positioning appears to tuck the rifle between the right arm and the body. The figure has sturdy feet that are visually heavy, its trousers appearing heavily stuffed. The *Soja* appears much energized by Nwoko's use of actual and simulated rough textures resulting from the patterns created by the strings of bullets, a continuous ring of clay coils that define the barrel of the rifle, and the many horizontal, vertical and circular clay formations the reference belts, buttons and other features of the soldiers' gear.



Fig. 2: Demas Nwoko, *Soja Come, Soja Stay, Soja Go*, 1968, terracotta. Photo: After S. Uchendu, 1979

Nwoko's *Soja* apparently addresses the transience of political power (as encapsulated in the popular aphorism "soldier go; soldier come"). The work is a witty commentary on the military coups of the 1960s in Nigeria. Similarly, Nwoko's *Dancers* (Fig.3) tends to address the frivolous social and economic lifestyles of the first republic politicians which gave rise to the intervention by the military. *Dancers* show a heavily-built male figure in large, flowing *agbada* (a robe emblematic of Nigerian politics and politicians) dancing with both arms outstretched behind an equally heavily built female figure reclining at his feet, also in an outlandish dancing pose. The female figure, sturdy and apparently overfed, rests backwards with outstretched arms across the man's large gown. The man's face is strategic. His nostrils are open and large; his chins fat and his mouth wide open, exposing rows of teeth that resemble those of a beast. *Dancers* can be read as Nwoko's satire on the socio-economic disposition of the typical Nigerian politician.



Fig.3: Demas Nwoko, *Dancers*, terracotta, 1960s. Photo: After S. Uchendu 1979



Fig.4: El Anatsui, *We De Patch Am*, 1978, stoneware terracotta (manganese body), dia. 40cm

Nwoko's exploration of the Nok terracotta finds extension in the works of El Anatsui at Nsukka in the late 1970s when he created a body of ceramic sculptures entitled *Broken Pots*. While the Nok influence is explicit in Anatsui's *Chambers of Memory*, one finds in *We de Patch Am*, Nwoko's earlier reliance on the Pidgin English to foreground the deep meanings of his work. Anatsui's *We de Patch Am* (Figure 4) recalls the popular everyday conversation "we de patch am, e deh leak" and is a reference to the socio-economic and political turmoil in Nigeria, Ghana and other parts of Africa in those years and beyond.

Like Nwoko and Anatsui, the sculptor Chris Afuba has also drawn from the image-laden Pidgin English to express the conceptual depth of his pieces, especially *I Don Taya*. Afuba's *I Don Taya* (Figure 5) is a terracotta head that evokes the feeling of sympathy for the 'common' Nigerian. The head is rendered in the gesture that captures a feeble man whose yawn, squint eyes and resulting wrinkles may be ascribed to "over-labour". The figure's apparent baldness and wrinkled skin attest to a condition of pain and disillusionment. All these features heighten the man's sickening look. Beyond the pitiable condition of the 'common' man, the artist has also essayed the character of a typical Nigerian political leader in his other piece titled *Politician*.

Afuba's *Politician* (Figure 6) is a terracotta head that shares certain formal features with a typical African mask. The oblong head, left in its natural earthenware colour, is punctuated with distorted, hollow eye sockets, nose and mouth. The linear tactile lines that characterize the head are somewhat reminiscent of *ichi* facial marks popular among titled men in parts of the old Onitsha-Awka Igbo provinces. A grimace of cunning, deceit, and mischievousness is evident in his face. This references the character of the typical Nigerian politician as a greedy, deceitful and noisy person. The notoriety of the personage is portrayed in the manner by which the two sides of the forehead are unevenly depressed, the open mouth twisted alongside the nose. Although the head assumes a standing and motionless position, it never suggests any calm and peaceful disposition. It rather gives the politician a poignant mood as though he is poised to engage in a contest with an opponent in the scramble for his share of the 'national cake'.

Fig.5: Chris Afuba, *I don Taya*,
1978, stained terracotta



Fig.6: Chris Afuba,
Politician, terracotta

Chris Echeta, who trained under Benjo Igwilo and El Anatsui at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, is another artist notable for his consistent political critiques, especially in his series of terracotta sculptures, beginning from his graduation in 1979 up until his active professional career that spanned the 1980s and 1990s. These series of works include *Politician I* (Figure 7), *Evidence of Good Living*, *New Bread Politicians*, *The God Father*, *On Top*, *May 29*, *1999 Handover*, and *We Have Come to Share the Cake*, among a host of others. His clay slab sculpture technique defines his style and has been a dominant feature of his oeuvre. Echeta's humanoid clay forms, which are often bisque fired with little or no colouring, are often set in mass against the usually towering figures of the corrupt 'politician' often depicted as looting the communal treasury (christened

the 'national cake'). Examining Echeta's work "that reflects on Nigeria's socio-political and economic history", Onuzulike (2008) noted that: "Echeta's thematic concerns have strong bearing with his experiences of the brutal Civil War (and which brought his early education to a halt from 1967 to 1970)" and that the artist's "remarkable sensitivity to the human condition explains why he steadfastly continues to satirize poor leadership and its consequences on the led." In an interview with Onuzulike (2008), Echeta is quoted to have said of his *Politician I*, created in 1979 when Nigeria was in another political frenzy, as saying:

If you did not put on the large, flowing gown called "Babariga," "Agbada," "Dansiki" or "One-Thousand-Five-Hundred", as we knew it then, you were not a politician. So, I picked that. It is clear that that is what the main man, the politician, is putting on, encouraging the voters to come after him. He towers above every other person. That is the image of the politician. I am not quite sure whether it was the politician that took that image or the society gave them that image.

Politician I (Figure 7), created during the electioneering period that ushered in the Second Republic, depicts the politician as towering and imposing in his trademark regalia, the *agbada*. The spectacular coral beads seen against the background of voluminous robe with undulating pleats accentuate the splendour of the Politician. These qualities visibly set him apart from the enraptured masses he seems to be addressing in what appears to be a political rally. Ironically, the towering figure of the politician, which also takes the form of high mountain, appear to temporarily shade the people from the 'sun' and draws attention to the usually deceitful promises of "better life" for the masses by the political class.

Echeta's other work, *Evidence of Good Living*, is a pair of pot-like human figures, probably representing the nation's president and vice-president, depicted as robed in specially designed *Agbada* laundered for an official outing. This work represents Echeta's many pieces in which he satirizes much of Nigerian politicians as overfed, fashionable individuals whose bellies are their gods. Their commitment in gratifying their sensual desires makes them appear as obese. A similar critique can be found in his other work titled *New Breed Politicians* which is composed of four cylindrical human heads. Their distorted and stylized mouths and eyes delineate the nasal part and made them look curious and spectacular. Two of the terracotta heads carry empty shells or bowls and are flanked by another two carrying nothing. The empty shells or bowls may allude to the empty promises usually made by the politicians during electioneering campaigns.

Much of Echeta's political concerns and slab-building techniques are evident in the installation by his pupils Shaibu Alasan and Ozioma Onuzulike, especially in the characterisation of the Nigerian politics and politicians. This is found more prominently exhibited in such works as Alasan's glazed ceramic installation,

Which Way Forward? (Figure 8). Similar concerns are expressed in Onuzulike's series of *agbada*-wearing *Politicians*, which are usually usually depicted as "shamelessly" displaying an array of "costly apparels" signified by intricate embroideries simulated in clay by the artist's innovative use of carved wooden roulettes (Nwigwe, Diogu and Omeje, 2012). Onuzulike's *Politicians* are often depicted as having strangely looking bald heads that tend to characterize the political elites as vultures.



Fig.7: Chris Echeta, *Politician I* 1979, terracotta, ht. 29.5cm.

Fig.8: Saibu Alasan, *Which way Forward?* 1980s, glazed stoneware, variable installation



Like Chris Echeta, another very socially committed Nigerian ceramic artist is Chris Udeh who trained at the Institute of Management and Technology, Enugu. In the series created by Udeh, *King of all Birds*, *Betrayal* and *My Prophecy* are among works that speak eloquently about the warped political culture in Nigeria. *King of all Birds* (Figure 9), and *Betrayal* appear to depict Nigeria's politicians as vultures who see the common treasury as a carcass to be dismembered and shared out. Udeh's *My Prophecy* (Figure 10), is a glazed ceramic form of a chimpanzee, a medium-sized animal known to be clever and selfish. Using dotted incisions, the artist tactically depicted the dark brown hair covering its body except for its naked face and ears. The chimpanzee squats on a green-and-white slab platform shaped after the Nigerian map. On this platform are human bones (skulls) which the 'animal' strives to conceal under its hands and buttocks away from public view. Created in 1994, the artist's references to skulls and bones appear to allude to the politicians' many crimes, usually shielded from the view of the outside world in the name of "democracy".



Fig. 9: Chris Udeh, *King of all Birds* 1985, glazed stoneware



Fig.10: Chris Udeh, *My Prophecy*, 1994, glazed stoneware

Conclusion

From the foregoing, one finds that contemporary Nigerian ceramic artists, along with sculptors who have worked in the clay medium, have not been silent on matters that affect their country, especially its politics and socio-economic conditions. They seem to share similar belief with Achebe that a writer has a responsibility to try and stop the damaging trends of African politicians by exposing and combating the propaganda that they concoct in order to manipulate their own people (Landow, 2012).

Beginning from Demas Nwoko in the 1960s through El Anatsui in the late 1970s to Chris Echeta and many others from the early 1980s to date, a substantial corpus of works in the ceramic medium exist in which the postcolonial political culture in Nigeria has been examined and critiqued. The artists have generally depicted the Nigerian politicians as selfish and corrupt, the masses as impoverished and helpless. Nigerian ceramic artists, a sampling of which has been attempted in this paper, have indeed been socially committed.

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