

# **ART AS A CRITIQUE OF BAD GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA: SOME EXAMPLES**

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## **Abstract**

Governance has been seen as the way decisions are arrived at, implemented, and justified and used to manage public resources and affairs at local, state, national, organizational and global levels of human societies. This paper sets out to look at the contributions of art towards criticizing negative aspects of governance in Nigeria. It shows how art, especially painting, was used as a tool for exposing the negative sides of governance in Nigeria. For this, the issue of whether art is tangible enough to play the important role of interrogating bad aspects of governance in Nigeria was looked at. More so, the vision of the artists, themes that deal with and address the negative aspects of governance in Nigeria, and photographs of works were relied on in this study to show how relevant they are in exposing bad governance in Nigeria. Furthermore, this study has revealed that art is a veritable tool for interrogating, and exposing those bad sides of governance in Nigeria, and recommended that every profession in like manner should make their own contributions towards challenging bad governance in Nigeria, as no people can successfully fight bad governance and achieve sustainable progress if they do not first of all rise up to its true situation -calling things their real names.

**Keywords:** Art, Critique and Bad Governance

## **Introduction**

Art is a means of expression and actually a veritable tool for with which the artist interrogates reality, calling a spade a spade on the basis of his/her imagery and symbolic form. These imageries and symbolic forms can be visually perceived as a piece of sculpture executed in fiberglass, a painting on canvas, a ceramic piece, soft textile sculpture or wall hanging (tapestry), a stained glass window and a bronze head.

In Nigeria for instance, many artists have been using art since the early sixties, to interrogate bad governance. Artists like Akinola Lasekan, Chike Aniakor, Obiora Udechukwu, El Anatsui, Gani Odutokun, Jerry Buhari, Chika Okeke, Krydz Ikwuemesi, Ozioma Onuzulike, Olu Oguibe, Chijioke Onuorah, Ndidi Dike, Eva Obodo, S.M. Onyeonu, Tayo Adenaike, and other artists in Nigeria and in the Diaspora, have contributed immensely towards using art to dare, interrogate and criticize bad governance in Nigeria.

What then do we mean by bad governance? The answer to this question requires a prismatic view of what constitutes good governance. Good governance according Ani (2011) is “a situation in which the masses have access to social amenities such as good drinking water, healthcare, good roads, security, and employment opportunities, good and affordable education” (p.61). Taking cognizance of these factors enumerated above, the question becomes, how far have the masses experienced good governance in Nigeria? The history of Nigeria as a sovereign nation has been eventful and equally traumatic. The tragic consequences of the Nigerian civil war of 1967 to 1970 as well as the incursion of the military into the act of governance from 1965 to 1999 were major setbacks to the development of the Nigerian nation state and more so, on the collective psyche of the Nigerian people. Democratically elected governments have also not lived up to expectations as money laundering, corruption, looting, embezzlement, and many other vices still bestride the Nigerian landscape. Ikwuemesi (2012) notes:

It is true that some of the vices ravaging Nigeria are not isolated cases, but most often things take an astronomical turn in the country. This explains why corruption has become so embedded in the system; bad governance is an accepted style in statecraft; materialism has become the dominant life style; architecture has transformed from a social art into the very expression of materialism itself and perhaps the dogged pursuit of ignorance and hedonism (pp. xix-xx)

In response to these existential problems, artists have risen up to the task of addressing these menaces through their art. This is evident in their choice of themes as will be examined later.

### **Interrogating negative aspects of governance in Nigeria through art**

Artists have very important and significant roles to play in nation building. As the vanguard and custodian of civilization, their works become a vehicle for social commentary and a potent tool for the redress of socio-political and economic problems. Aniakor (1989) vividly captures this creative posture when he states that “the artist’s works become the voice of reason charged with the responsibility to name the un-nameable and in the process, prevent the world from going to sleep” (p.6).

Let us take a look at those instances where artists have used works of art to criticize bad governance in Nigeria. For example, when Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe was struggling against imperialism, the artistic contributions of Akinola Lasekan were instructive. According to Ikejiani-Clark (2004) “his paintings were as politically instrumental as his cartoons in the *West African Pilot* were devastating to imperialism”(p.8). Lasekan’s works touched all aspects of colonial rule and experiences, racial injustices, nationalism, corruption, quality education, illiteracy, unity, and discrimination, among other issues. His cartoons were very incisive, uncompromising, emotionally effective and of socio-political relevance.

The underlying themes of most works of art also provide a direct or indirect interrogation of societal ills. The messages they convey to the viewing audience assume visual reality through the creative deployment of compositional elements facilitated by the domestication and mastery of media. Themes accompanying works of art like *And the Beast had the Face of One I know* , a pen and ink drawing by Olu Oguiibe; *The Journey* (mixed media painting) by George Odoh; *Hangman also dies* (wood panel sculpture) by Chijioke Onuorah; *Civil servants crying on pay day* by Ozioma Onuzulike; *Politician addresses a rally* (pen and ink drawing) by Krydz Ikwuemesi; *And they peep to see the ruins: Failure of leadership* (oil on canvas) by Martins Okoro; Chike Aniakor’s, *Allegory of power* (pen, ink, wash and watercolour); *Fallen rider* (Charcoal drawing) by Gani Odutokun; Obiora Udechukwu’s *The Road, the general and the noose* (ink, wash, pencil and watercolor) and *The chameleon* (soft etching) also by Udechukwu, among others, criticize the negative aspects of governance in Nigeria. After all, the formalism of an art work is largely dependent on the mode of presentation of its meaning – its theme.

A well thought out theme is of great relevance in art creation. If it comments on the disruptions in the political, social and economic components of the environment, then, the role of art as a mediator of experiences is ultimately fulfilled. Okeke (1992) stresses:

Art is a weapon for changing and building the society into that which only our subtlest emotion can contrive. It is not mere decoration. It is aesthetic and functional. It should raise questions, address issues, and console the dejected... berate and castigate the bad... (as cited in Oloidi, 2002, p.250).

It has also been pointed out that art is for creating awareness. It also catalyzes discussions on a topic as well as contributing to an already engaged debate. (K. Ene-Orji, Personal communication, June 11, 2013). For the artist, Krydz Ikwuemesi, the interrogatory stance taken by some works of art has to do with ones background and attitude. He believes that art should not be created for its own sake considering the fact that so many unfinished processes and so many conflicts characterize living in Africa. He further asserts that art “has to say something, it has to address something, it has to be hinged on issues and my experiences as a member of society” (K. Ikwuemesi, personal communication, June 11, 2013).

In the light of the relationship between art and society, these questions insist: Should the artist point out societal ills? Is it given to the artist to interrogate the negative aspects of governance? What kind of reality is art constructing? Does art serve as a visual marker in the creative rhythm of time? A good number of Nigerian artists create works of art that assume an interrogative stance. Their works question, lament and make comments about the negative aspects of governance in Nigeria. They have also become increasingly concerned with the social conditions in Nigeria and these are reflected in art works created in diverse media. The domination of the Nigerian peoples by her leaders, as well as the plight of the citizenry, has also received creative attention. Art is used to portray the ills of the society like economic roguery, political banditry, social decapitation and greed, especially that of leaders in different spheres of governance. For example, *And they peep to see the ruins: Failure of leadership*, a painting by Martins Okoro, executed in oil on canvas in 2004, addresses the chaos wrought by incompetent leadership. Kingsley Ene-Orji (2008) is right when he essays:

“Art has always been employed in leadership... the modern and contemporary artists have used it to rein in leaders. Today’s artist employs satire, irony or even frontal critique to tell the truth” (p.6)

Contemporary Nigerian art in its aesthetic and conceptual trappings carries messages that unmask and expose the contradictions of the social order. This is understandable in view of the statement that:

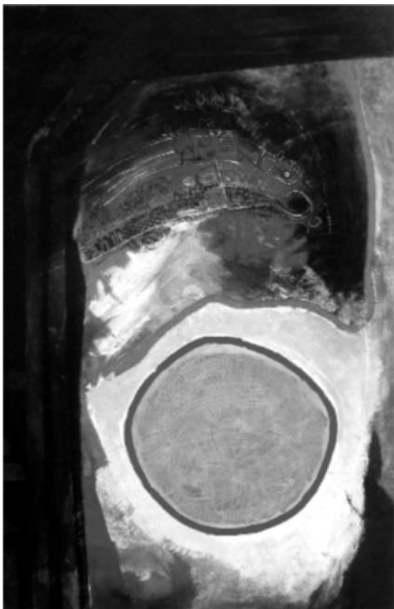
“The artist becomes an integral part of his environment and by the virtue of his creative posture, deconstructs and reconstructs at both personal and collective levels, the internalized experiences that impact on his day to day existence. (Odoh, 2012, p.154)

Oguibe (1988) also reaffirms this by noting:

The aspiration of all great art is to exhume the essence, to capture and preserve for history the collective schizophrenia of a generation, to touch on the greater truth. And there is no truth in escape. Truth is the taste of bitterleaf. Truth is the chill of the harmattan...My art is fuelled by a seething anger...I yearn for the ultimate eloquence, the living voice of thunder...there must be some hidden essence, the supreme tongue. I yearn for that tongue. Unbind me (as cited in Oloidi, 2002, p.250).

Through the various instruments of artistic languages, Nigerian artists have challenged as well as exposed the socio-economic and political dilemma of underdevelopment, social transformation, and problems of human dignity, misery, poverty and inequality. Since art is a function of the environment, the dominance of works critically engaging socio-political and economic issues of governance in Nigeria is to be expected. In the exhibition titled *Whirlwinds across the Nation* held in 1992, the artist, Chika Okeke, reacted to issues bordering on the socio-economic and political realities in Nigeria. Okeke becomes the eyes and mouthpiece of Nigerian citizens, using brushes and a palette of colours as media of inquiry and commentary.

The works of Nigerian artists are tools for engaging issues of governance. They silently provide a potent communicative propagandist and ideological weapon in governance. For example, Obiora Udechukwu's acrylics painting titled *Basket Mouth* (Plate 1) created in 1993, "depicts the artist as a "madman" whose acerbic criticism is meant to be injurious to none other than the tyrant" (Agbayi, 2002, p.7). *Oppressor* (Plate 2), a mixed media painting by Nsikak Essien, shows a colossal figure sitting atop defenseless masses. In the art exhibition with the theme *Onye Ndidi*, Udechukwu (1985) laments that "we seem to be caught in a new cult of easy money, embezzlement of public funds, exploitation of the weak and extortion. A nation that cannot feed her people is in trouble, and that is putting it mildly" (as cited in Ottenberg, 1997, p.133). Kunle Filani, in his oil painting *The Cake in Niger Delta* (Plate 3), executed in 2003, aptly captures and draws attention to the crisis in the Niger Delta. It also portrays the insatiable urge of political office holders to partake in the sharing of the "national Cake", "a quest that engenders widespread corruption and oppression" (Agbayi, 2003, p.6).



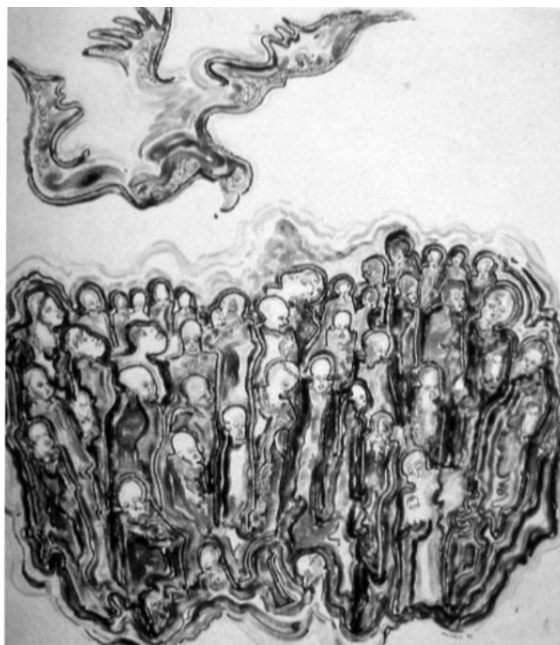
**Plate 1**  
**Obiora Udechukwu**  
*Basket Mouth*, 1993, Acrylics  
**Photo source:** Homage to Asele  
(Exhibition catalogue)



**Plate 2**  
**Nsikak Essien**  
*Oppressor*, 1987, mixed media  
**Photo source:** *Aka '87* (Exhibition catalogue)



**Plate 3**  
**Kunle Filani**  
*The Cake in Niger Delta*,  
 2003, oil on canvas  
**Photo source:** *Homage to Asele* (Exhibition catalogue



**Plate 4**  
**Chike Aniakor**  
*Falcon descent on the people*,  
 2003, pen, ink and watercolour  
**Photo source:** Simon Ottenberg (1997) *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*

THE APPARENT DISCONNECT BETWEEN LEADERS AND THE PEOPLE

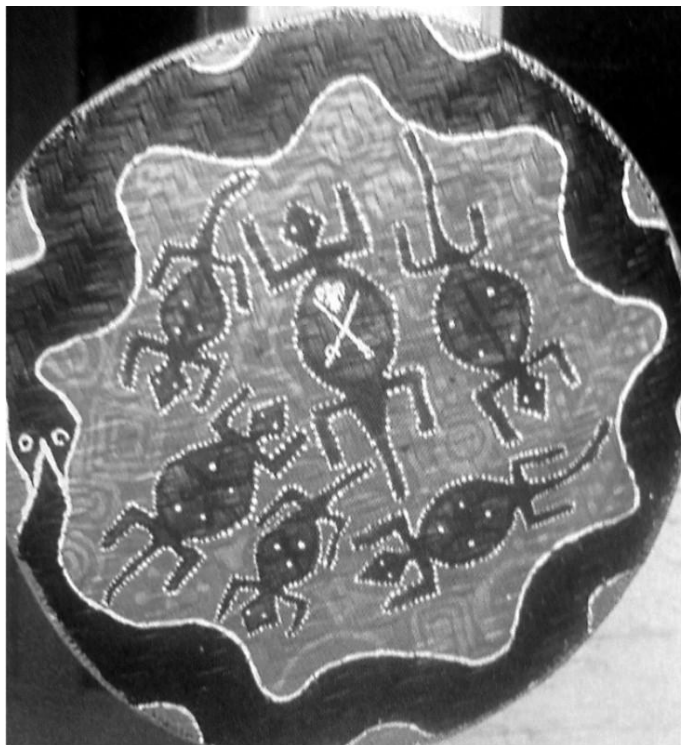
*The People and Destiny* (glazed ceramics). The work captures the lean faces of the people and raises question on the nation's destination and the relationship between the people and politicians. Writing on "Art in the Service of Politics: Politics in the Service of Art" Ikejiani-Clark (2004) notes that "contemporary Nigerian art such as Nsukka prints, harbour messages with tremendous and profound implications" (p.8). An example is *Expectation* by Ndidi Dike which depicts hardship prevalent in today's society. The work also underscores hopelessness occasioned by bad governance. C.C. Okorie's work titled *War* in its mystical and colourful splendor makes philosophical inquiry into the "dog eats dog" poise of Nigeria's political turf. So also is *Bad Belle Ancestors* by Chijioke Onuorah, another artist of the Nsukka Art School. The work addresses the typical scenario in Nigeria politics whereby political actors employ devious strategies in the face of unfavourable political fortunes (Ibid).

The artist and art historian, Chike Aniakor, in recent years has become increasingly concerned with social condition in Nigeria. This is clearly evident in the work titled *Falcon Descent on the people* (Plate 4) which ponders on the domineering stance of Nigerian leaders and the plight of the citizenry. Executed in ink and watercolour, it depicts the bad leader as a predatory

falcon hovering over a group of defenseless people with the intent to devour them. Olu Oguibe, in his ink drawing titled *And the Beast had the Face of One I Know*, skillfully and conspicuously depicts the photograph of a Nigerian Head of State as a beast who, from his seat of power, unleashes terror on defenseless and helpless Nigerians. In the lyrics of one of the songs by the Afro-beat musician, Fela Anikulapo' Kuti, the then Head of State was "*Baba, if you put am ngida, na you sabi*". Another of Oguibe's work, *We are all Lizards Sprawling in the Sun* (Plate 5), produced in 1989, depicts a central image of a lizard inscribed with crossed swords, staff and a general's insignia, and surrounded by five smaller lizards. Here, the artist alludes to the hopelessness of ordinary Nigerians in the face of tyranny. (Ottenberg, 1997, p.230).

Gani Odutokun's *Fallen Rider* (Plate 6) produced in 1992, depicts a man lying on the ground having been thrown down by his horse. This piece teaches a moral and bitter lesson on the impermanence of circumstances in this case, the rise and fall from power of oppressive leadership. The rider represents the leader while the horse, the masses. The rider (the leader) is looking up to the horse to save him while the horse (the people) forsakes him because of his unscrupulous attitude. This work is the artist's way of criticizing the bad aspect of governance in Nigeria. Through art, Gani Odutokun, now late, having died in a tragic road accident in 1995, fought for the cause of the common man as can be gleaned from the politically charged thematic thrusts of his works such as *Oppressor, For the Oppressed, Dry Earth, and Face of Man*. Gani Odutokun is no doubt an artist whose paintings have directly criticized leadership in a corrupt Nigerian society as his empirical paintings bear testimonies to this submission.





**Plate 5**  
**Olu Oguibe**  
*We are all Lizards Sprawling in the Sun*, 1989,  
 Gouache on basket  
**Photo source:** Simon Ottenberg (1997) *New traditions from Nigeria: seven artists of the Nsukka group*



**Plate 6**  
**Gani Odutokun**  
*Fallen Rider*, 1992, charcoal  
**Photo source:** Gani Odutokun: *A legend of Nigerian art* (exhibition catalogue)

legede, in his paintings, focuses on themes which express the difficulties surrounding day to day existence in Nigeria. His, is the lamentation of a decadent system. In his exhibition titled *EKO RE E*, the artist emphasizes the chaotic nature of the nation as well as exposing the penchant for discriminatory application of principles. The paintings featured in the exhibition, mostly critique the various social and economic implementation programs initiated by the government and its effects on the populace. Indeed, they are visual metaphors that seek to intercede between social extremes while also accentuating the various contradictions and degradation inflicted upon the collective psyche of Nigerians by a few political miscreants (Aguwa, 1999, p.16). This conscious interest in socio-political and economic experiences is in line with the admonition that

Though an artist is creatively and conceptually free to express himself, it is just fair that he should market his art, even if occasionally consoling those who either physically, socially or politically, seem to be permanently trapped in the deep valley of misery (Oloidi, 2002, p.251)

Aligning with this remark, Onuzulike (2013) speaks about the social vision that frames his art practice. He notes:

From my point of view and from my own practice, I have actually tried to speak up for example, against man's inhumanity to man, social conflicts, wars, attendant results of wars as well as the hands that are setting the fires of these wars. (O. Onuzulike, personal communication, June 11, 2013)

From individual and collective artistic standpoints, existential issues will continue to furnish artists with ideas through which experiences can be mediated and represented in order to agitate and rouse the mind from a state of indifference to that of enlightenment and may be, initiate responses to issues raised by these works of art.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, the contributions of art in criticizing bad governance in Nigeria were examined. It also x-rays how themes accompanying works of art convey meanings that question bad governance in Nigeria. The meanings and essence of art as a mirror of society is more than reinforced. As a relevant tool for national development, it enables us to “reflect, rethink, and in the process, repackage experiences through creating channels by which works of art feed the imagination, sensitize our emotions and returns to us, life’s drumbeats we have already begun to take for granted ( Aniakor, 1990, p.3). Art provides a competent voice with which to interrogate the complex situations of the Nigerian condition as caused by bad governance.

All in all, the task of nation building is not the prerogative of artists, but a task that every well meaning Nigerian should embark on, irrespective of professional affiliation. Enebe (2012) also offers admonition:

The present day Nigerian society with its economic and political constraints would be rather better if more hardworking Nigerians can help the nation to increase its productivity. Nigeria has abundant human and natural resources but it needs a crop of hardworking people to set it on the path of progress. Nigerians should all have the innate desire to contribute positively to the development of the nation (p.48).

All aspects of bad governance that retrogress the development of Nigeria, should be critically interrogated and criticized in order for the nation to move forward. Through these criticisms, the good aspects of governance will become enthroned and Nigeria will be a much more comfortable place to live in. The issue of governance in Nigeria has been a tale of dashed hopes and it will be utterly insensitive for Nigerians to pretend that all is well. Speak and be heard!

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