

REBUKING THE WRONGDOER AND EXTOLLING THE PRAISE-WORTHY: INTORROGATING PROTEST ART IN AFRICA

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Abstract

African artists, since the pre-colonial era, have used Protest art as a means of propagating political education and appropriate political and socio-economic culture. Unfortunately, this aspect of art engagement has not received the scholarly attention it deserves in the African art-historical discourse. The significance of Protest art can never be over-emphasized in Africa; a continent where there is an apparent lack of patriotism amongst the citizenry because of the disconnect between power and responsibility. Power in African States, rather than being a means of empowerment is being applied as an instrument of domination. This study employs a qualitative and an art – historical research methods. Selected works of some African arts, which portrayed moments of protest from the colonial period to the present day were examined and used as examples. It was observed that thematically, most of the protest art produced during the colonial period are based on nationalism and political emancipation, while themes that boarder on social Justice and good governance dominate the post-colonial protest art in Nigeria. The artists selected for this study have no doubt used their works as creative responses to the various socio-Economic and Political problems that be devil their society.

Introduction

A protest is an action or statement expressing disapproval or objection to something. These objections, disapprovals, oppositions, and challenges could take the form of peaceful protests, sit-ins, marches, boycotts, legal actions, and protest art. Among these types of protest art appears to be least reported and examined in any literary discourse. This is regrettable because there are an abundance of visual art with reference to protest world over especially in Africa where cases of political and social injustice dotted its entire landscape, especially forms the Colonial to era.

Protest art is a broad term that refers to creative works that concern or are produced by activists and social movements. Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), a Spanish painter, sculptor, engraver, ceramist and a dominant figure of the 20th century art, in his monumental painting: Guernica condemns the violence, senselessness and cruelty of war. In this work, Picasso protested against the Bombing of Gurenica city (Spain) by German Air force under Adolphos Hitler during the World War II in 1937 (Burser, 2006). Similarly, the work of Kathe Rollewitz (1867-1945) pursued a resolutely independent course by devoting her art to themes of peace and injustice. To articulate her social and ethical concerns, she adopted an intensely expressive. Yet naturalistic style that is as unrelentingly bleak to her choice of subject. She worked towards peace by attacking the ugliness of war, especially World War II which took the life of her eldest son. Her Lithography Never Again War, for example, is an image of protest against war (Burser, 2006)

During the French revolution (1789-1799) and the execution of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, a group of children of the wealthy elite; the deposed aristocrats swept away with

the revolution started a form of fashion protest. This group was known as the Incroyables. Alexander Fury described them as royalists rather than Republican, using their clothes as an advertisement for political beliefs that ran counter to the status quo (Fury, 2007).. In fact the incroyables were interested in altering perceptions of the body through the clothing's they wore.

The presidential election in the United States of Donald Trump, America, with the Republican Candidate Donald Trump emerging as the winner was trailed by various types of protest art. Artists responded loudly to the election in their towns creating a connection with communities beyond local borders. Claire Voon (2017) reports that over 100 artists and arts organization spread across Philadelphia and Atlanta contributed their colourful creations which ardon art spaces, churches, bars, retail stores and tattoo parlours.

In South Sudan, young artists joined forces in September 2016, to form the Ana Taban collections. The name means 'I am tired in Arabic and their aim is clear; to bring and end to the violence that has been troubling South Sudan, the world newest country, since 2013 (Voon, 2017). Broadly speaking, protest art in Africa could be discerned in their Ancient arts, during the pre-colonial period. The colonial period which marked the beginning of African contemporary art and the art of the post-colonial era, which is still on going.

This paper therefore seeks to interrogate protest art in Africa by examining selected works from the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods. Through qualitative and art-historical analysis, it highlights how artists have used visual expression as a medium of resistance, political education, and social critique. The purpose is to demonstrate that protest art is not merely aesthetic but a vital cultural instrument for rebuking wrongdoing, extolling praiseworthy actions, and fostering democratic consciousness across African societies.

Aesthetics of Protest

From the background of Michael Barktins theory of performance and aesthictics.6 protest is performance full of dramatic elements (Bakhtin, 1984). A protest might start spontaneously, but there are always performers that have one collective goal and another side that is against such goal, sometime the authorities. Bendik-Keymer (2016) sees protest as a democratic action that is supposed to move between people and help them collectively consider how to shape life together. Hear him

Aesthetic means attention to how things appear. The aesthetics of protest then should be about how sense becomes sense between people pointing away from how what we currently do toward conversation or as I like to put it consideration of people and of social reality. I wager that until protests take this democratic direction seriously, they will remain aesthetically blocked. Similarly, Onwuakpa (2016) views protest as a democratic and collective action of the affected group. He declares that:

It is obvious that so long as there is an agreement, the civil society and pressure groups are bound to stage protest from time to time to question specific aspects of government policies or express strong disagreement of some decision8.

Pre-colonial Period: Ancient / Traditional Art

Protest art in pre-colonial African art were mainly through the masquerade cult, body painting, such as the Igbo Uli body art, Dance and body gestures. Masquerades were the major medium for expressing disapproval, opposition and challenge in the pre-colonial

African societies. In Igbo land for example, masquerades were in charge of maintaining discipline, enforcing Laws and ensuring social order and solidarity. Nwanna (2005) states that In Igbo land, masquerades speak openly about crimes committed in the society with the hope that the culprits of such offences will turn a new leaf. Often times Night masquerades will burn down houses of defaulters or harm them in order to protest against their wrong doing.

Protest art in pre-colonial Africa could also be seen as a sort of disapproval or opposition to some actions or events. These art forms go a long way in Showcasing the African concept of Justice which entails the principles of fairness, fair share and fair decision.

Early Western Contacts and Colonial Period: The Beginning of Contemporary African Art

Western contacts with Africa resulted in loss of sovereignty in most African societies. Apart from political changes, there were also changes in their art expression, religion, traditional values and their entire culture. Lawal (1977) records these changes thus:

While traditional African art mirrors a society preoccupied with the stabilization and propagation of time-honoured traditions for socio-religious ends, contemporary African Art is the outgrowth the of the breakdown of the society. The trans-Alantic slave trade, European colonization and exploitation, Islam and Christianity, as well as economic and technological forces have disrupted the old order, precipitating socio-cultural transformation of unprecedented portions.¹⁰

During this period Africa went through severe oppression and Exploitation. Many African contemporary artists also produced works whose theme condense these oppression, suffering and exploitation of Africa by western countries. One of such works is *Africa in Tears*, by Cornelius Kpeglo from Togo

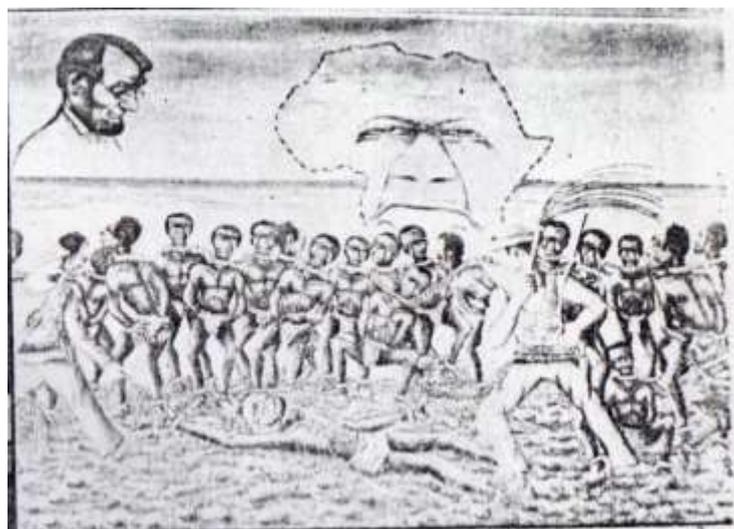


Plate 1: *African Tears* by Cornelius Kpeglo

Kpeglo's painting is a condemnation of the infamous trans-Atlantic slave trade, which started after the discovery of America. During the period of the trans-Atlantic slave trade

millions of black Africans were exported to America to work in the plantations. There African slaves were treated as sub-humans and beasts of burden. The painting depicts the slave trader as a monster. Here, the monster has snatched an African child away from the weeping mother, who looks on helplessly as her child is chained and dragged away into slavery. In the background of the painting is a portrait of Abraham Lincoln over looking the Atlantic Ocean who, together with Martin Luther King, later emerged as champions of the cause of black freedom.

Another work by Cornelius Kpeglo that is centred on protest against trans Atlantic slavery is his *African Revolution*. The painting depicts a revolt by captured Africans in a slave ship. Such occasional revolts by African slaves stand out as the root of the liberation struggle in Africa. In the Republic of Haiti for example, the slaves regained their freedom while others regained their independence through constitutional method.



Plate 2: *African Revolution* by Cornelius Kpeglo

Colonization of African Continent

The period of trans-Atlantic slave trade was marked by exploitation of the continent by Europeans and this continued until quite recently when many African states regained political independence. Colonial administration was formalized in the nineteenth century when the African continent was partitioned among the major European powers. The monumental amount of exploitation and injustice resulted in liberation struggles across Africa and in the same spirit many African artists produced various protest art to challenge such exploitations. A notable artist, from Mozambique, Valente Malantagana captured such opposition to imperialism by African in *Peoples, Creatures and Burning Eyes*



Plate 3, *Peoples, Creatures and Burning Eyes*

Similarly, the exploitation of African mineral resources was captured by Obi Ekwenchi, a Modern Nigerian artist. Here he used his sculpture: *Coal Miners Revolt*, to call our attention to the brutal way in which the colonial authorities killed some of the coal miners who protested their low wages and inhuman treatment by the imperialists. The work captures the boldness and resilience of the coal miners of significance is a figure clothed in Agbada, symbolizing the African elite who always connive with the imperialists to exploit their own people.



Plate 4: *Coal Miners Revolt* by Obi Ekwenchi

Similar case of exploitation of African workers was captured by Uche Okeke, from Nigeria. In his *Delimma of a worker*, Uche Okeke captures a sit in protest, where the worker who has decided to say no to exploitation by refusing to work, was depicted seated on a cement block. The colonial employer tries to force him back to work with no avail. Okeke in this work recognized that fact that the exploited and oppressed class has all it takes to Lberate themselves. It is in this vein that the Okeke also produce. *Aba women Revolt*. During the colonial period some women activities



Plate 4: *Dilemma of a Worker* by Uche Okeke

to protest against

Plate 5: *Aba Women Revolt* by Uche Okeke

... of women that led to the famous Aba women riot which took place in 1929. Agitations for the end to colonial rule had started to gain momentum in Africa, as early as the 1940's, however, it was not until the 1960's that many African countries began to regain their political independence (Odinga 2016). The spirit of independence also caused reawakening of interest in cultural revival.

Independence / Post Colonial Period

Politically speaking, most African countries could not make much progress after attaining independence from their colonial master. In fact, virtually every state in Africa failed after independence. This could be attributed to many factors. The main factor is the nature of transition of power from the colonial government to the African elites/Leaders. The Colonial authorities consciously handed over power to African elites and Institutions that they set up to extract wealth and power for themselves. These so-called African elites in turn employed tribalism/ethnicity as a tool for manipulating their people. When they eat, they eat alone, but when they run into problems, they fan the embers of tribalism and run to their people to defend them. Shortly after gaining independence, several dictators also emerged and dominated the political Landscape. These dictators are charismatic in appearance and they see themselves as messiahs that came to save their people. Odinga (2016) described these African dictators in the following words;

The notorious African dictators include: Mumar Gadaffi, Mobuto se Seiseko, Gysingbe Eyadema, Robert Mugabe and Hussien Habre. Gadaffi for example, regards election as a nuisance and advised revolutionaries not to give up power until the revolution is completed; no one knows when the revolution will be completed. Sometimes it might take the life time of the dictator.

The view held by these African dictators is quite misleading. Experience has shown that it is not proper for a leader to overstay his/her legitimate tenure whether the leader is benevolent or not. Writing on this period in Nigerian history which is characterized by military regimes, Onwuakpa (2016) states that "In Nigeria, particularly during the military era, it is usually difficult for artists to make visual presentations or portray any event that is anti-government".

This is bound by the fear of being banished. Despite the fact that the government of that era hardly tolerated protests in any form a lot of protest art was still produced. Uche Okeke reacted to the deception of African post-colonial leaders in his drawing *Demagogue*. The work which he produced in 1966 reveals the recklessness and lack of direction of Nigerian corrupt leaders, who had just received power for their colonial master. The work depicts a politician addressing an apparently dissatisfied audience.



Plate 7: *Demagogue* by Uche Okeke

His outstretched winglike arms and tilted head create an impression of a certain mood around the subject who is obviously looking abandoned and dissatisfied by the situation in which he found himself. Similarly, Nelson Igboamazu, a young Nigeria Sculptor condemns, the corruption, nepotism and exploitation that presently bedevils Nigeria in his *National Cake: survival of the fittest*.



Plate 7: *National Cake:
Survival of the fittest*
By Nelson Igboamazu

Igboamazu, while describing his work, stated:

“The consequences of the wrong foundation set for the nation are manifold. The vision of the nationalists’ struggles to liberate the people from the clutches of colonialism to self-rule was not explicitly met when independence was actualized. The relationship of dependency established during colonialism seemed to continue after official independence because of the crippling influences of colonial rule” (Igboamazu, 2015, p. 14).

Repression and police brutality remain common features of post-colonial Africa. Gani Odutokun’s *Police Brutality* is an apt protest against such government actions, where protesters are usually arrested, injured, or killed (Sani, 2007).



Plate 8: *Police Brutality* by
Gani Odutokun



Plate 9: *African Radio* by
Cliff Nwanna

Another notable art that condemns the leadership style of most African leaders is the *National Radio* by Cliff Nwanna, from Nigeria. Often times, press is emasculated and used solely as a proporganda instrument for the dictator. The work protests the apparent lack of press freedom in most post-colonial African states. The press cannot be held down for too long by any bad administration. Hence such government's attitude, suppressing human rights and gagging the press apparently set the stage for several protests and revolutions such as in Tunisia in 2010. The African artists are also entangled in these revolutions, which they often report visually as witness and participants.

Conclusion

The various protest arts and performances in Africa which spanned from the pre-colonial to the colonial periods seem to have yielded good dividends. One discovers that democratic upsurge has been intensified in since 1990's in many African countries such as Kenya and Cote Drivorie. African people have demonstrated an ability to remove dictators through elections. Indeed, democracy is gaining grounds in some African countries. Formerly, elections were not lost but could be rigged by the ruling party. This is gradually changing, in Nigeria an incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan lost to Mohammadu Buhari, in Burkina Faso, a military coup was rebutted and in 2017, the incumbent president of Gambia Yahya Jammeh lost the presidential election to Adama Barrow and refused to hand over power, however, the timely intervention of the Economic community of west African States (ECOWAS) compelled him to hand over power to the elected president while proceeded on exile to Equatorial Guinea.

Most governments in Africa can now boost of separation of power and an independent and respected Judiciary. However, more inclusive approach to governance

should be encouraged in Africa to reduce conflicts and protests. Education, health care, water and general welfare of the common man must be taken seriously.

As an Afro-optimist who believes in Africa, I look forward for a better society and a democratized Africa and I advocate that people must protest, if need be, not to return to dictatorship.

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