

CHAMELEON: A SCULPTURAL DEPICTION OF POOR GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA.

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Abstract

The paper delves into social commentary on poor governance in Nigeria, using sculpture as a focal point to highlight political corruption and the recycling of leaders. The researcher examines the significant governance issue of old, recycled politicians who lack fresh ideas and often use their wealth to become political 'magnates', intermittently using these resources to maintain power at the expense of the nation, with consequences. Sculpture, both as a political tool and a mirror reflecting the excesses and consequences of politicians' hubristic actions, is questioned and depicted. Sculptors have, over time, used their craft to address and mirror issues in their societies, particularly poor governance. Some of these sculptors include Ayo Aina, Myron Liggett, Rene Iche, Willie Bester, Jelili Atiku, among others. These artists use visual forms to highlight the issue of poor governance in a nation facing numerous problems and struggling to accept its political situation. Through practice-based research and deprecatory visual examination, the research presents the Chameleon, created from junk and other found objects, as well as fibre resin, as a sculptural metaphor for poor leadership and its attendant consequences. The investigation suggests that sculpture can serve as a veritable tool for espousal and municipal reawakening of the beautiful art of sculptural research practice, transforming it into a manifesto for political change.

Keywords: Insecurity, Corruption, Sculpture, Chameleon, Metaphor, Social Commentary

Introduction

The art of sculpture has long been a veritable tool for artistic expression as well as a tool for conveying displeasure on the issue of governance in society. This spans back to the era of 'Bubalus Antique' rock (cave) art (12,000 BCE to 8000 BCE), also known as the 'Bubaline' period, which depicts a hunter-gatherer way of life and the later transition to the cattle period. It was followed thereafter, according to Soukopova and Jikta (2017), by the 'Kel Essuf' Period. Symbols (symbolic art forms), properly channelled, have been shown to effectively reflect and convey artistic messages to society. This is partly because, from the beginning, man has relied on symbols to interpret everyday actions. According to Langer (1981), states that "Man is essentially a symbol-using animal". This assertion forms the basis of most of Langer's work throughout her intellectual life and in her seminal works. In this expression, Langer simply means that symbolic thought is deeply rooted in human nature and that artistic symbols can be deployed in artistic expression across various spheres of human endeavour.

The researcher's opinion, in tandem with that expressed by Langer above, is that artistic thought can be conveyed through symbols to communicate cogent messages to the human mind, to foster positive societal change. Consequently, the chameleon was chosen as a metaphor in this paper. In recent times, Nigeria has been characterised by significant leadership challenges. The country faces numerous issues, including corruption, nepotism, political vote rigging, insecurity, including kidnapping, banditry, and the Boko Haram phenomenon. These problems have hindered its progress. The issue of political recycling and the imposition of leaders lacking innovative

solutions to these challenges have been partially responsible for this situation. This paper, 'Chameleon', therefore draws from the proverbial reptile known for its constant skin colour alteration. It metaphorically equates the constant regurgitation and recycling of former leaders and their transmutation from military to military, military to civilian and civilian to civilian.

Military-to-military and military-to-civilian relations often manifest as a cyclical pattern of usurpation and power retention. The occupying force frequently cites poor governance as a justification for its actions, including suspension and violation of the national constitution. Chapter 2, Section 14, Sub-Section 2(a) of the 1999 constitution, which states that "sovereignty belongs to the people". In practice, the military is often the most culpable party. In civilian-to-civilian relations, politicians often perceive themselves as the best solution to solving the country's numerous problems and are reluctant to allow fresh leadership. In all cases, politicians frequently 'strut and pirouette' on self-perceived wisdom despite momentary warning signals that constantly flash them in the face.

Literature Review

Sculpture as a political mirror

Sculpture has long been used as a political conscience. Throughout world history, as well as the pre- and post-colonial history of Nigeria and Africa specifically, sculptors have addressed political stagnation, poor leadership, inequality, wars, and other issues through sculpture. For example, Willie Bester, a South African sculptor, has a work titled "Trojan Horse" (2007) that depicts inequality, repression and apartheid in his country. According to Bester in Godby, M. and Kloper, S. (1996), "I believe that we must protest against that which is wrong. There is no form of escape; remaining apolitical is a luxury that artists simply cannot afford. Similarly, Jelili Atiku, a Nigerian performing artist and sculptor, in his work titled "Free the Press" (2006), seeks to address the issue of arbitrary arrest, detention, torture and occasional murder of journalists, government and political critics in his country.

The American sculptor Myron Liggett's spinning whirligig sculptures, propelled by kinetic forces, depict a scathing rage and criticism of faulty governance. According to Sandomir (2017), "they carry scabrous messages directed at the State". Eze Ngene's sculptures explore the phenomenon of hunger in the Nigerian context, using the metaphor 'Food for Thought' to create sculptural installations from ready-made vessels and to expose the harsh economic realities of living in his country. The vicissitudes of bad leadership, as manifested in wars, are depicted in the sculpture by René Iché (1937), who was appalled by the bombing of Guernica. He believed that "on the manure of the millennia, after geological cataclysms and warlike disasters, only the statues will remain". The various artists listed above all have one thing in common: they used their sculptures to depict, mirror, highlight, and protest political mishaps amid other happenings in their respective societies. In their conceptual approach to their art of portrayal, the various artists utilised found objects, junk, metal, and other materials to create symbolic, cohesive structures of greater significance. These artists share an ethos of transforming material waste and marginalised narratives into visual critique. This artist/researcher's work falls into this category of transformed messages, like others mentioned above, involving the use of chameleon symbol and found objects, discarded materials, junk and recyclable objects as a metaphorical depiction of poor governance in a nation.

Contextualising the Chameleon and Poor Governance

Chameleonic political figures and the inflexible stance of Nigerian leaders have been a persistent problem, creating stagnation in the nation's polity and development. This collective amnesia appears to prevent leaders from recognising that a policy not adaptable to changing circumstances will ultimately fail. In Nigeria, this has been a persistent issue. Poor governance has also led to irredentist clamour and agitations for a separate post-colonial political identity from some segments of the country due to perceived marginalisation and suppression.

Politicians in this region, particularly in Nigeria, appear to be unaware of modern political governance structures that require the ethos of checks and balances as enshrined in the constitutions of various nations to ensure accountability, equity, justice and progress. Attempts by the country's intellectuals, citizens, and concerned bodies to bring these issues to the fore are often met with resistance and sometimes with punitive measures, including illegal detention, assassination, kidnappings, unexplained disappearance, and other forms of extrajudicial practices. Consequently, there is a need to employ alternative methods, albeit subtly, to expand the scope by utilising other channels to mirror and communicate the issue of poor leadership to magnates in the corridors of power. This particular sculptural medium by this artist/researcher is one such medium.

Methodology: Practice-Based Artistic Research

This paper adopts a practice-based research approach with the artist serving as both creator and researcher, using the creative process as a medium of enquiry. Practice-based research offers insights into knowledge through investigative and experimental methods and involves the practices and skills necessary for visual artists to transform initial plans and ideas into tangible materials when creating sculptural works. Sullivan (2015) argues that art practice is a creative and critical form of human engagement that can be conceptualised as research. This paper critiques conceptions of research and examines the purposes of artistic and educational inquiry as well as institutional and political influences that have shaped them.

This paper compares perceptions of art-based research across policies, practices and methods. It describes various research practices, circumscribed forms, intermediaries, and actions that are part of the theoretical, structural, interpretative, and critical traditions in the visual arts. Documentation through sketches, material experiments and written reflection informs the interpretation of work. Smith and Dean (2009) note that:

Practice-led research arises out of two related ideas. Firstly, that creative work in itself is a form of research and generates detectable research outputs. The product of creative work itself contributes to outcomes of the research process and contributes to answering a research question. Secondly, creative practice, training, and specialised knowledge that creative practitioners have, and the processes they engage in when making art, can lead to specialised research insights that can then be generalised and written up as research.

The research question in this artist's case developed from the question of how sculpture can be utilised to represent political perpetuity, leadership transmutation, corruption, and its consequences, which translate into poor leadership in a nation. Pencil and pen sketches were developed into meaningful visual illustrations. One sketch best representing the topic was chosen for a three-dimensional sculpture of the chameleon.

Fabrication and Creative Process:

The sculpture's creation involved constructing an armature from mild steel, which was securely fastened to a wooden base. The form was modelled using soft, malleable clay. The next step was casting, which was performed using plaster of Paris (POP). Used engine oil was applied sparingly to the modelled clay surface after the clay model was divided into separate parts. This facilitated the clean and easy separation of moulds. POP, a derivative of hydrated calcium sulphate, was used for casting due to its rapid setting and ease of forming a smooth, consistent negative mould. These moulds are referred to as negative moulds because positive moulds are subsequently made from them. Once the moulds have set and hardened, they are separated, the clay scooped out, and the moulds cleaned. They are greased with engine oil, and then positive moulds are taken from the negative moulds using cast phenol resin (a polymer derivative) commonly known as fibre glass. Reinforcement is applied to the fibre glass material using fibre-matt and 5mm mild steel. Casting to obtain negative moulds, charging negative moulds with cast phenol resin (fibre glass), are all part of a complex and elaborate process undertaken to realise the sculpture form.

The next stage is assemblage, which involves coupling various parts and reinforcing the sculpture. This is achieved using 10mm steel, which is cut and shaped to fit the inner form lining of positive moulds. Welding and sealing are carried out using fibre resin mixed with a hardener. Surface grinding is then performed to smooth and refine the sculpture. A curled tail is created using a 10mm rod and welded to the lower end of the sculpture. On the tail is welded a found, discarded dagger knife. A sealed bag (popularly called 'Ghana must go bag'), stashed full with paper to mimic naira money notes, is placed by the chameleon's side to complete the sculpture composition.

Analysis of Sculpture:

The sculpture is inspired by political leadership recycling in Nigeria, political deception, corruption and the attendant, sometimes devastating, consequences of poor leadership. The conceptual sculpture, bearing a metaphorical theme, seeks to traverse and foreclose political leadership and aesthetics from a sarcastic yet bitter wounding perspective. Appurtenances and elements of aesthetic composition are employed (Plates I, II & III). Symbols deployed by the artist highlight political messages, with occasional exaggerations to convey them to the viewer. The work metaphorically provides an insight into the life of an average African politician (with particular focus on Nigeria) and the 'stay-put' mentality, even in adverse situations. The voluptuous chameleon form cast depicts affluence and a conspicuous display of wealth often associated with easy money and the get-rich-quick syndrome, most frequently stemming from corrupt avenues and shady deals. This links sculptural forms, symbols, and aesthetics to political corruption, greed and avarice. The chameleon metaphorically symbolises political transmutations and the constant failure of promises, with leaders deceiving themselves and the public into believing they will honestly and peacefully hold clean, credible elections and hand over power to the true winners, given that most election processes never hold water.

The chameleon's transformation from military ruler to civilian leader, against all odds, is symbolised by the military beret held in its left hand while it wears a civilian hat. This syndrome has been observed in Nigeria both historically and recently. The issue of political leaders' reluctance to relinquish power or leave office, even when incapacitated by illness or

infirmity, is represented by the severed right limb of the chameleon. The walking stick held in its right hand symbolises old age and the opportunistic nature of many Nigerian politicians who lack a political ideology and frequently switch parties for personal gain. The chameleon's limp left leg depicts a desire for what is not rightfully its own, even in its adverse physical condition and recognising its wrongness, as well as a negative impact on the general public.



Plate I, 'Chameleon', Polyvinyl Chloride, Mixed-Media, 69cm x 54cm x 82cm, Photography: Paul Aziza Imieh, 2023.

The chameleon is depicted wearing a civilian '*agbada*' and hat, representing typical Nigerian politician attire worn at political rallies. These events often feature false promises that are rarely fulfilled and financial handouts to the poor, who are frequently drawn to rally grounds by poverty and hunger. The Ghana Must Go bag typically symbolises the weaponisation of poverty by distributing pittance from funds often carried to the rally grounds. These funds may originate from questionable sources, sometimes from a corrupt, ill-gotten wealth culture prevalent within the political elite. They are distributed to the poor in exchange for their votes.



Plate III, 'Chameleon' (Detail), Polyvinyl Chloride, 69cm x 54cm x 82cm, Photography: Paul Aziza Imieh, 2023.



Plate II, 'Chameleon' (Detail), Polyvinyl Chloride; 69cm x 54cm x 82cm, Photography: Paul Aziza Imieh, 2023.

Alphabetic inscriptions on the *agbada* attire of various political parties' names also symbolise chameleon-like conjecture and shifts in allegiance. This is often observed as politicians switch between favourable parties at convenient times, possibly due to a lack of ideological consistency and a pursuit of personal gain and materialism.

The discarded dagger at the tail of the chameleon symbolises the political betrayal of the masses; it seeks to govern at all costs. The dagger is a 'symbolic poetic imagery' in the composition, metaphorically representing the continued hardship to be visited upon the masses after the election. The emerald-green, multi-coloured verdigris finish and patina metaphorically represent the ever-changing nature of colours, a characteristic of the chameleon, even in its natural habitat of green grass or bushes.

The work depicts Nigerian political leaders' attitudes towards power, materialism and self-aggrandisement at the expense of the nation and ordinary citizens. Consequently, an average Nigerian politician in vanity fails to realise that, according to Heinlein (1984), "the supreme irony of life itself is that hardly does anyone get to leave this life, alive".

Conclusion

The symbolic chameleon sculpture exemplifies artistic practice by questioning political governance and the attributes of good governance. Employing material, allegory and metaphor, it highlights poor political leadership. From a historical perspective, it situates sculpture as an observer of the past.

The chameleon sculpture also transforms metaphorical themes and discarded materials into a cautionary statement, asserting sculpture as an art form. It demonstrates that creative art practice can be used to reflect and highlight societal ills, even in a nation facing political uncertainty and challenges such as instability, election rigging, corruption, banditry and kidnapping.

Recommendations

Scholarly Continuity: Further research should be encouraged on how Nigerian sculptors can utilise mixed-media materials to address the issue of poor political leadership in society.

Public Engagement: It would be a welcome development if more politically inclined exhibitions were sponsored or co-sponsored by public-spirited bodies, corporate organisations, and NGOs to expose issues of poor governance.

Art Education: The curriculum in both secondary and tertiary institutions should be improved, well-developed, and integrated into the school curriculum to encourage art students to focus part of their creative research on political sculpture as a medium to highlight and reflect issues of poor governance in society.

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