



Art Exhibition
interrogating Democracy
and Civil Governance
in Nigeria

from
1960 to 2007

by
Isi-Abaa-Okpu
Creativists

Introduction

Nigeria, like most countries in Africa has a chequered history of democracy. Part of the problem has been the interpretation of democracy and democratic process that borrows heavily from Western canons and epistemic operations. While some are given to critique the democratic experiments as pastiches and transpositions from Other cultures, and suggest the evolvement of democracy that is informed by African communal values and idiosyncrasies. Yet, others have argued the universality of democracy and its abiding principles that are immanent in world cultures. In Nigeria, the process of nationing highlights the fact that Nigeria as an amalgam of "imagined communities" as Benedict Anderson would have us believe, is yet to inculcate the nuances of civil leadership and democratic ideals on the part of both the leaders and the masses.

The above informs the exhibition *Democracy: Proudly Nigerian*. It will interrogate Nigeria's peculiar democracy tradition as a way of deepening further the understanding of democracy in this part. This is crucial towards building a virile and responsive society where every citizen (the leader and the led) is aware of his/her role in the constant remaking of society. The exhibition's interest is also to show the connecting grid between creativity, arts, culture, democracy and society. In pre-contact African society, art was at the centre of society and was the boon that helped reinforce the positivist agencies of communality and collective aspiration. These two germane

items however, have been conspicuously missing in the democratic enterprise since the dawning of self-rule at the end of colonialism in Nigeria.



Aim of the Exhibition

The exhibition is contrived as an agency of conscientisation and, to raise public consciousness. We are yet to understand how we consciously or unconsciously subvert or undermine democracy by our attitude to politics and civil governance.

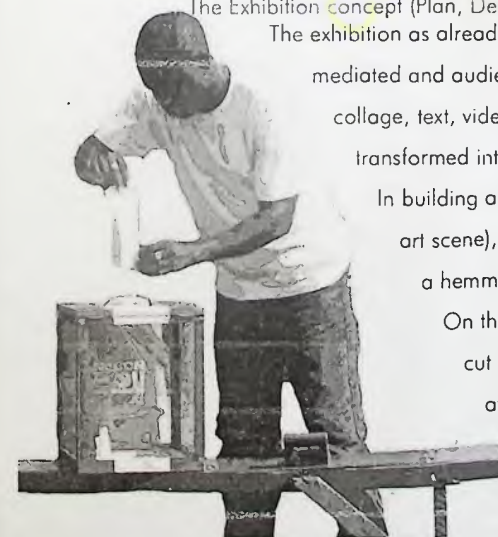
Nature of Exhibition

In its interpretation of *Democracy: Proudly Nigerian*, the exhibition will employ post-modernist ideas in contemporary art whilst attempting to bridge the gulf between conceptualism and perceptualism. The end-product that will be open to the viewing public will be a time-based site-specific multi-mediated 3-D/2-D installation piece that converts an exhibition hall into a work of art (See below for detail of exhibition concept). The exhibition however will avoid the trap of reification that attends most post-modernist ideas by ensuring that the viewing public readily interprets the installation.

The exhibition will be heavily invested in parodies, ironies and satires as the way of interpreting the peculiarity and particularity of Nigeria's brand of democracy. In so many ways, the exhibition will be suggestive of a Nigerian democracy timeline. It is also expected to coincide with the commemoration of June 12, a very important historical milestone in Nigeria's democracy annals.

The Exhibition concept (Plan, Design, Scope and Curatorial Strategy)

The exhibition as already mentioned is time-based, site-specific, multi-mediated and audience participatory. It will explore sculpture processes, collage, text, video, sound and performance. An exhibition hall will be transformed into a piece of art as we create an experiential product. In building a set (currently unheard of in contemporary Nigerian art scene), we will create a tunnel walk-through that empties into a hemmed-in open space in the centre of the exhibition hall. On the walls of the tunnel, there will be uniformly-sized well cut small hard boards with legible texts that present an atmospheric feel of a giant jigsaw puzzle. Some of the



small hard boards will seem to have been wilfully yanked off the wall. It is placed on the ground in a haphazard yet consciously organised manner. Now, the texts that remain on the wall will valorise the contradictions, inversions, subversions noticeable in our democracy. This paradox, the exhibition highlights as proudly vestiges of Nigeria's democracy.

Crudely put, the texts read: absence of rule of law, elevation of mediocrity, manipulation, human right violations, electoral malpractice, prejudice, partiality by electoral commissions, corruption, rigging, bribery, dictatorial tendencies on the part of the ruling class, lack of respect for court rulings and injunctions, politically-motivated killings, avarice, apathy on the part of the electorate, political rascality and irresponsibility, disqualification of credible challengers, among other subversions.

On the other hand, the texts placed on the ground read: justice, fairplay, respect for human rights, probity, equity, etc. The parody is that such democratic values are both consciously and unconsciously trampled upon by political leaders as well as the masses. This is highlighted as a performative component of the exhibition. As the audience take a tour of the exhibition, it is very difficult to avoid not trampling on these crucial aspects that make for democracy. This section in the democracy timeline emphasises the present democratic dispensation (1999 – date).

At a section of the walk through, there will be a massive collage made out of archival newspaper and magazine cut-outs that documents the most visible anomalies that marred the different democratic Republics of Nigeria. In the open space where the tunnel empties, there will be a looped video projection that underscores visually the items espoused in the collage. While the collage is text-based, the video makes for extended visual education. On the ground of the open space where the looped video is projected, a text based jigsaw puzzle in the shape of the map of Nigeria is advanced in the same manner like the texts on the ground of the walk-through. The audience will tread



on this map (text-based puzzle) to view the looped video. This unconscious performance by the viewing audience is very central to the exhibition. As the viewing public walk through the exhibition and tread on of the values and ideals of democracy, their legs are filmed in the actual process of trampling. The subtext of this aspect of the exhibition is to showcase our collective involvement and shared guilt in subverting democracy.

What the exhibition will achieve
At the end of the exhibition, it will have drawn the attention of the public to the potency, immediacy of creativity as a mediating agency for social enlightenment and activism. In addition to that, beyond showing the relationship between arts and democracy, it would have also helped to raise public consciousness on the real values of democracy and its importance to development and sustainable society.

The implication of Civil Liberties Organisation's Involvement
The contributions of Civil Liberties Organisation to the socio-political landscape of Nigeria can not be controverted. As the foremost civil and human rights organisation in Nigeria, it has championed the enthronement of democratic values and ideals in Nigeria. *Isi-aba-okpu* Creativists will appreciate and value the partnership with CLO in presenting this historical exhibition to the public. The exhibition will be dedicated to the late Chima Ubani, the former executive director of the Civil Liberties Organisation, and others who (have) fought for the enthronement of good governance and just society in Nigeria.



Sponsor's benefit:

- Logo on all Advertising, Promotional and Media collateral
- Print Exposure
- Branding on building, show entrance, within show venue as per branding plan
- Logo on website with link to sponsors website
- Exhibition will be tagged a CLO project

Requirements:

Publicity and Documentation

- Interactive Website: Online exhibition, with forum, feedbacks, images and streamed videos (www.democracyproudlynigerian.com)
- Press Releases in Print and Electronic Media
- Handbills and flyers

Other Requirements:

- Projector: with slides on democratic events and people.
- newspaper clippings
- exhibition hall
- publications (printed brochures and invitation card)

Time Frame

Date of the exhibition: June 12 – 18, 2007

Possible Venue: Didi Museum, Victoria Island Lagos

Tentative Cost and budget breakdown

- Mobility and Itinerary (April to June towards realising the project): 85,000Naira
- Exhibition logistics (constructing the set, setting up the exhibition, sourcing for materials, texts, video projector, video loop production and dismounting of exhibition – 700,000Naira.
- 25-30page coloured exhibition catalogue with essays and illustrations (500copies): 280,000Naira.
- Invitation cards - 50,000Naira.

- Research logistics – 120,000Naira
- Filming, video editing and interactive CD production – 180,000Naira
- Interactive website - 250,000Naira
- Hiring of Exhibition Hall – 100,000Naira

Grand Total: 1, 765000Naira

Note: The cost of the exhibition is subject to review (downward or upward) in the light of reason and reality so as to realise the project most successfully.

Brief note on Isi-Abaa-Okpu Creativists

Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi and ChukwuEmeka Ogbob

are Nigerian artists whose creative practice explores multiple strands of contemporary art forms and ideas, under the collaborative name of Isi-Abaa-Okpu Creativists. As creativity activists, their practice opens up questions on structures of hegemony, homogeneity, dogma, power and elitism in contemporary creative practices. Their academic interest interrogates uniformity, dominant ideologies, localism, and the architectonics of globalism and globalisation. At the same time, they engage with notions of pedestrianism, banality and ideas of low-culture.

As committed activists (creativity and cultural) who are aware of the intersection between art, politics and social leadership, *Democracy: Proudly Nigerian* is borne out of the need to engage with Nigeria's democratic experience that is both fledging and tottering. In so doing, we would have questioned the parameters and vagaries of Nigeria's peculiar democracy which has remained sufficient food-for-thought for both the citizens and her international friends.