

IMAGES OF POWER IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN PAINTINGS.

Blaise Gundu Gbaden

Department of Visual and Creative Arts

Federal University Lafia

PMB 146, Lafia

Nasarawa State

Nigeria

mrblaisegbaden@gmail.com

+234(0)8038386407

and

Emmanuel Ikemefula Irokanulo

Department of Fine Arts

School of Art, Design and Printing

Yaba College of Technology

Yaba, Lagos State

Nigeria

emmairoka67@gmail.com

+234(0)8034267433

Abstract

Contemporary Nigerian paintings are replete with images and notions of power and power relations among the ethnically pluralistic peoples of Nigeria. This paper presents a select number of paintings that best manifest the idea of how power is depicted and how power influences human thinking and aspiration from a Nigerian perspective. To best epitomise this concept, the paintings of Kolade Oshinowo, Chike Obeagu, Dhlimi Munza, Blaise Gundu Gbaden and Emmanuel Ikemefula Irokanulo have been scrutinised. It has been discovered that power is illustrated in different forms. The discourse that follows these revelations centres on the manner in which these differing notions influence the social life of the people without distorting the intrinsic aesthetic values inherent in the paintings.

Introduction

The word “image” has been a bit complex and problematic to define over time. It became more difficult even in the twentieth century because of the complexity of imageries flowing into our psychic from the multiple technological sources in the world today. Image, according to Mitchell (1998), is an “idea” of a thing, perhaps the essence of it than its physical propensities. Image and power are two things that continue to pose as a challenge in contemporary art circles. Elias (1978) comments on power thus,

we say that a person possesses great power, as if power were a thing he carried about in his pocket. This use of the word is a relic of magico-mythical ideas. Power is not an amulet possessed by one person and not by another; it is a structural characteristic of human relationships of all human relationships.

Power and image feature greatly in the contemporary painting in Nigeria. For example, Irokanulo (2014) articulated image from the Igbo point of view as “*Onyinyo*” where

he likened an image to the philosophical theory of “earth and world” as imbibing the Heideggerian philosophical concept. For Irokanulo (2014), image is an idea of physical propensities of a thing or a being within a thing or subject of discourse. Image is most times linked to power of psychological construction, of thought using imaginative power to create an idea of a thought with figuring of human or a thing. For example, Achebe’s narrative of Okonkwo in his book “Things Fall Apart”, is the construction of “an image” of the native of Eastern Nigeria in the face of the colonial struggle of power with the natives of the territory. Contemporary painting in Nigeria has continued to dwell on these two elements consciously or unconsciously; may be because of the country’s current struggle to find her path in contemporary political reality, where these elements often manifest in the form of political and economic struggle of the people to forge a nation.

Notions of power and authority have often appeared as subject matter in the paintings of artists of Western, Asian, African or other nationalities in the form of social status symbols and display of wealth, political influence, and economic domination/relevance or as items of commerce, trade or inheritance. On other levels of interaction images of sexual or gender power abound in the paintings of artists concerned about topical issues in society as overt or covert statements of class struggle. “For centuries, court artists used their talents to glorify rulers and potentates. Today’s corporate executives and politicians also recognize the power art has as a status symbol” (www.dw-world.de).

Power in the context of this paper defines the capacity to do something, an ability to exercise strength, and some level of desire to control and influence other people in political and social terms. It has two distinct forms which sociologists recognise as authority and coercion. Authority is a form of power which is accepted as being legitimate and therefore right and just and is obeyed by the citizens of a nation state. Coercion on the other hand is not regarded as legitimate by those subject to its influence. The Weberian view point of power sees it as the ability to get your own way even when others are opposed to your wishes (Haralambos and Holborn, 2004).

Power is a social construct, meaning that the relationships which take place in society among social groups are of paramount significance in this paper. The dynamics that take place between men and women, within households, in tertiary institutions, in governmental work environments, and most essentially the power bargains that take place between the rulers and the ruled are reflected in an ambitious way in this paper. In realistic terms which party or groups get to benefit most from such power struggles becomes a core objective of this paper.

What happens to the loser in the long run? Is the loser really the person at the receiving end or rather the one gaining the upper hand by pretending to be weak? So viewed from these perspectives the concept of power becomes a complicated phenomenon that requires artistic interventions to interpret its validity or repudiate its false claims.

Pertinent questions can arise from this trend of discourse. Can Painting exercise power in the form of social influence through images? Can Painting also examine the exercise and influences of such power on humanity? Artistic expressions are capable of studying and analysing these different expressions of power that can move from serious existential questions at the personal level to complex social and even political problems at a wider level. Artists tend to depict many social phenomena in their paintings. Literature on art studies have not necessarily focused on the portrayal of power in the paintings of contemporary Nigerian painters. This has prompted embarking on this research which uses both primary and secondary sources as data base for postulating the ideas put forth here.

The major objectives of the paper are geared towards, i) presenting contemporary Nigerian painters who depict power and power play in their paintings; ii) investigating the

content of power paintings within the context of contemporary Nigerian painting practice; and iii) reviewing and analysing a select number of paintings by Kolade Oshinowo, Chike Obeagu, Dhlimi Munza, Blaise Gundu Gbaden and Emmanuel Ikemefula Irokanulo, to determine the manner of expression of individual artists and how they view societal dynamics. The scope of this paper, therefore, covers contemporary Nigerian painting practice and how the artists have been able to capture in plastic form ideas of power in Nigerian society. The paintings have been executed in oils, acrylics and mixed media as it best enables the production of the artists' prolific oeuvre.

For proper articulation, the choice of a suitable conceptual framework revolves around Max Weber's view of power. In his perception, Weber offers different types of authority which shed light on power in society. Weber defined power as "the chance of a man or a number of men to realize their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action". Weber was interested in presenting three sources of authority, charismatic, traditional and legal, which he claimed were ideals that society could attempt to attain.

This notwithstanding, a *postmodernist* approach permeates the whole paper as it attempts to analyse the impact of power on Painting and its converse depiction of social life in contemporary Nigerian society. The approach here is a *postmodernist* and therefore an interrogative one that imbibes the visual arts practice based research principles as advocated by Sullivan (2005, 2008, and 2010). According to Sullivan (2005) one of the best articulators of the theory of visual arts practice, "the imaginative and intellectual work undertaken by artists is a form of research".

A Chronicle of Power Paintings

Kolade Oshinowo (b.1948)

If one critically examines the paintings of Kolade Oshinowo (b.1946), who classically paints the female form as a central tenet in his art, one gets an amiable perception. The female form in his art is not a victim but usually a proud woman of accomplishment, a mother, a wife, a daughter, a spouse. Even when he depicts her as a housemaid, a trader, a hawker, a school girl, she is elegantly attired and proud of her profession. In the painting, *Matriarch II* (see Fig. 1) she is depicted as a regal matriarch, his most favourite subject matter. A matriarchal figure invokes power and authority. She is in charge of her space, of her home, of her environment, of her neighbourhood. She ensures all goes well and the daily affairs of the household do not fall into financial difficulties and equilibrium is established between work and pleasure.



Fig. 1, Kolade Oshinowo, *Matriarch II*, Mixed Media on Canvas, 122 x 60 cm, 2011, (Source: Oshinowo, 2012)

Oshinowo's painting reveals a truth that is candidly bitter. That the female folk are great power wielders. One would think that in an African setting it is the man that has the final say. But can we be really sure looking at the *Matriarch II* in her assured stance that any king can withstand her gaze of authority, her certainty of purpose, her resolute drive? Do we know for sure the sort of negotiations that go on in the locked up bedrooms of Nigerian homes? Are the women compliant on their home tuff or in control of what takes place behind those closed doors?

Chike Obeagu (b.1975)

When Chike Obeagu depicts what appears as a trade-off of favours between a female and male in his painting titled *Give and Take* (Fig. 2). What one sees can be probably likened to the exchange of sexual favours that sometimes exists between two parties as a form of payment. In Nigeria this activity is called sexual gratification. It could be postulated that this form of exchange may likely take place in higher institutions where a male lecturer may tend to demand for sex in exchange for a good mark from a female student in an examination conducted by a male lecturer or in a government establishment where a female is soliciting for employment and has been given one by the male party in charge of such employment. In such a painting a lot of reading can go into it. But the essential truth is that it mirrors societal expectations whether hurtful or repulsive. The artist has to record these activities to remain faithful to his or her calling as a visual chronicler of human passions, ambitions and foibles.



Fig. 2, Chike Obeagu, *Give and Take*, Mixed Media, 76x79cm, 2013
(Source: www.blackpearlcollections.com)

Obeagu's *Give and Take* means that both parties are exercising their ability to put their power to play for gainful advantage. As the female receives gifts of enticement from the male she gets what she wants and he gets his craving satisfied. It is a selfish act but each party believes that the upper hand is his or hers. The power to bargain is seemingly tied up in a sexual game on the superficial scale but it goes way beyond this level. This ability to conquer the opposite sex is a life and death game that determines who wins the gender domination game. Where one gets there by guile and cunning the other uses seduction and submission. Where one is on top gaining an upper hand by brute force the other reaches the apex of satisfaction riding on his back. The ability to bargain and negotiate the easiest and smoothest of terms without causing much damage the better for the survival of the species.



Fig. 3, Chike Obeagu, *National Cake (Divide and Loot)*, Mixed Media Collage, 2009, 62 x 75cm, (Source: the artist)

National Cake (Fig.3) depicts the crux of the matter in Nigeria: Oil/Bad Leadership. Since the discovery of oil, Nigerian leaders have abandoned or failed to explore other lucrative sources of external revenue, like agriculture, which was the country's main source of income. The painting is an illustration of how the country's leaders share the people's commonwealth, each with different tools of greed. The bowl filled with gold bars is a metaphor for black gold (crude oil). Written on the bars of gold are such words as *only gold is divine, only gold is treasured*, which points up the leaders' attitude towards other areas of revenue generation and their greed for the fast wealth which oil readily provides. Meanwhile behind them is a devastated background where the gold is harvested - a picture of what is obtainable in the Niger Delta and the Nigerian society at large.

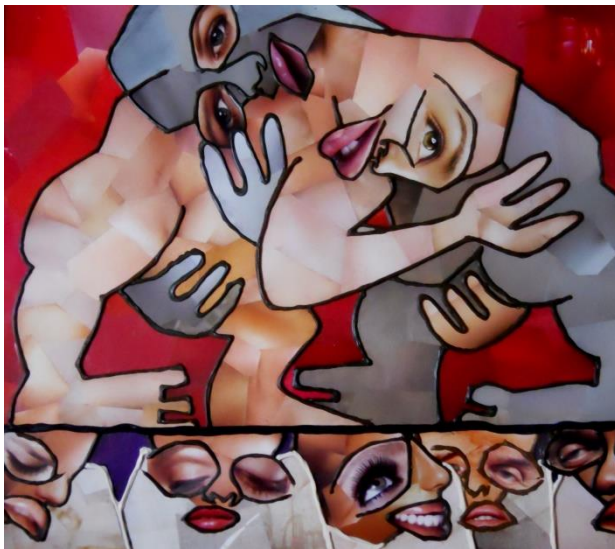


Fig. 4, Chike Obeagu, *When Two Elephants Fight...*, Mixed Media Collage, 2010
62 x 75cm, (Source: the artist)

When Two Elephants Fight... (Fig.4) depicts how selfish and insensitive government leaders in Nigeria can be at times when they engage in unnecessary fight without considering the far reaching effect on the populace. The fight for lump allocation in the budget is a good example. This can drag on for months into a new year, thereby stalling the economy to the detriment of the masses who are usually at the receiving end.

Dhlimi Munza (b.)

Munza paints a glaring picture of power riding on horseback in lucid northern grandeur. Even though *Durbar Equestrians* (Fig.5) captures a specific event, the Zaria Durbar, an annual event held at the behest of the Emir of Zaria to mark the Sallah celebration, it depicts the image of northern Nigerian Muslim aspiration: the conqueror on horseback. Most contemporary Nigerian artists who are not even of northern extraction, would readily paint the horseman on horseback charging from the corners of the orotund earth and/or riding into the fading evening horizon. In-between the coming and going, wars would have been fought, enemies defeated, women raped, and economies toppled. This image has been repeatedly painted by such artists who desire to romanticise the grandeur of the horserace, an event they would have hardly ever experienced first-hand.



Fig. 5, Dhlimi Munza, *Durbar Equestrians*, (detail), Oil on Canvas, 2014
(Source: www.facebook.com)

Abiodun Olaku (b.1958), a Lagos based artist, is one of such painters who often uses idealised equestrian forms as source of inspiration for most of his painting compositions. It is unlikely that Olaku travels to the northern part of Nigeria to study durbar processions and horse races in order to enable him get a proper perspective on the details and nuances of horsemanship and the paraphernalia that accompanies it. Just like his fellow crop of Lagos based artists, such as Edosa Oguigo (b.1961), the horse rider has become his perfect choice for the derivation of power imagery (see Fig. 6 below). Here what the viewer can see are peripheral adornments for the horses, flowing robes of the riders, the brandished spears and an arid landscape, the expected stereotype backdrop.



Fig. 6, Abiodun Olaku, *Untitled*, Oil on Canvas, 2008 (Source: www.abiodunolaku.com)

Blaise Gundu Gbaden (b.1966)

Blaise Gundu Gbaden's depictions of power come in manifold dimensions. Abstracted as they may seem they are commentaries on the state of anarchy the Nigerian nation has fallen into. The rot of governance, the decline of democratic principles which have never been attained and yet already failed the people determine his choice of installations.



Fig. 7, Blaise Gundu Gbaden, *Wall of Power*, 2010, hanging, canvas, acrylics and ropes, 386cm x 450cm, (Source: Gbaden 2014)

Wall of Power (Fig. 7) was originally conceived as a forest region where the Lion holds sway as king of the animal kingdom. An important choice for a forest was the inspiration the researcher got from the thousands of falling leaves which litter the painting site on the premises of the Ahmadu Bello University where the painting was initially conceived and installed. Huge mahogany trees, decades old, cover the site with several ancient ideas for art to spring forth. The image of the lion was to be painted striding across the canvasses to show its agility and control of the forest zone. Imagine a lion roaring in the evening after a meal. The metaphor of a terror of the forest seemed to fit the power structure of Nigeria where greedy leaders amass wealth at the expense of the people. They feed on helpless victims, seize their rights, belch and blow the stench in their faces. The absence of the lion was a deliberate manipulation of the pictorial space; would the image not tarnish what was being painted as a curative process; would the aesthetic not be superfluous? Anyway, it was left out for another composition. Left out too are texts; none were found adequate to express power (Gbaden, 2014).

Emmanuel Ikemefula Irokanulo (b.1968)

In Irokanulo's interpretation of image and power (depicted in Fig.8) he decided to draw viewers into the daily light conversations with objects in reality using a natural element like shadow as a tool for interpreting power in contemporary Nigerian society. The image of shadow becomes a vital force in looking at the fluid nature of power and the people that use it. The researcher presents a personal engagement with shadow as a design in painting with data gathered in early stages of development of the painting idea itself. Here, the problem of image and power came to the fore to demonstrate how people who walk the corridors of power use it to abuse and subjugate the less privileged ones.



Fig. 8, Emmanuel Ikemefula Irokanulo, *Corridor of Power*, 2010, Oil on canvas 120x120cm (Source: Irokanulo, 2014)



Fig. 9, Emmanuel Ikemefula Irokanulo, *Exodus*, Oil on canvas, 2010, 120x120cm (Source: Irokanulo, 2014)

The second painting by Irokanulo (Fig. 9) depicts people moving, as if on an exile trail. For some years now, the North eastern part of the country has witnessed upsurges of relentless insurgency. The struggle of the Islamic terrorist sect Boko Haram, has left the people with no choice than to move away from the crisis prone zone. This exile and fleeing from the fighting environment presents the artist with a metaphor of experience; it enables

the reader to understand the structure of shadow changing imagery and acquiring new matrix mirroring the troubled situation that struggles for power have left us with; it is indeed like a journey through life. The journey of life from being a baby to where one is at the present consciousness, represents a total experience that continues to change with time. Only artists can explain this phenomenon in their paintings. Irokanulo's paintings represent these unstable positions of man throughout the stages of life. In this painting, shadow is used as a narrative representative of life situations that portray image and power as a tool for social and political struggle.

Conclusion

The painters whose works have been reviewed have engaged images of power from different perspectives; inclusive of gender, religion, sexuality orientation, leadership strictures, poverty, various socio-economic dimensions, politics, and even aesthetic permutations. The limits of painterly possibilities have been stretched beyond the colour wheel and composition on canvas to embrace new idioms which defy simplistic ideations.

Oshinowo has affirmatively engaged power dynamics from the viewpoint of gender, where the woman, who is supposedly the weaker of the two sexes, wields power enough to rule a whole lineage. This does not mean that the artist does not have other viewpoints from which to engage the power structure of Nigerian society. His whole art practice has been dedicated to painting the life histories of the common human person, housemaids, market women, ordinary street folk, people whom the power play in society directly affects most prominently.

Obeagu has introduced another dimension of gender art, as he confronts head-on sexuality as it operates overtly in tertiary institutions and the public service system in Nigeria. It is quite true that sex is not to be solicited for as graft or bribe or as a coercive factor in such areas of public life but Nigerians do dabble into those murky waters. In some institutions in the USA there are firm laws prohibiting sexual unions between professors and students.

Svrluga (2015) reports about how Harvard University's Faculty of Arts and Sciences formally banned sexual relationships between professors and undergraduate students sometime in early February 2015. Previously there were no laws but because of the fact that recently "sex and gender issues — all the ways that people define themselves, their sexuality, their relationships, and how they interact with one another — are relentlessly discussed on college campuses". Svrluga (2015) further asserts that such a law is courageous as "It sends a message: You don't sleep with other people's children — whether they agree to do it or not — because you're abusing your power".

It is doubtful if such laws are in place in Nigeria, well at least not until glaring contraventions occur which require drastic reprisals, are suitable punishments probably allotted in accordance with recommendations of disciplinary committees. Ibekwe (2015) narrates the unpalatable sexual harassment female undergraduate students go through in Nigerian universities due to the absence of clear laws guarding against sexual exploitation of female students.

Obeagu has done other paintings which bother with leadership structures and how the oil wealth of the country is looted at the expense of the common people who should ordinarily benefit from the revenue of such resources. In whatever form of social commentary he engages his collage technique in, Obeagu does have a way of ensuring that power is confronted in a manner that places the masses as he calls Nigerians at an advantage.

Dhlimi blatantly romanticises images of power and all the accoutrements that power hinges on to survive and impact on society. His oeuvre is largely dominated by paintings of the horseman on horseback, images that depict the very centrality of the power base of

northern Nigerian hegemony. Dhlimi is only interested in the aesthetic effects of images and colour permutations on canvas, or at least so it seems. On a superficial level no flaws can be seen in his paintings but philosophical depth is lacking, as one can hardly go beyond the appreciation of beauty and grandeur.

Irokanulo does not lack philosophical magnitude with which to encapsulate his conceptual paintings in. Following in the footsteps of Gauguin and Gani Odutokun, Irokanulo has been exploring shadow as a means of creating paintings for consumption by effervescent minds. Unlike his contemporaries, who are prone to use the concrete human figure he adapts the shadow cast by human figure to parody society and its foibles. The power play he manifests in his paintings are therefore seen to be as fluid as the essences they portray: ideals that cannot be grasped and yet have been breached by Nigerian leadership structure.

Gbaden presents a *postmodernist* insight into the imaging of power in Nigerian society. His perspectives denies the viewer the opportunity to access the concrete visualisation of power in terms of the presence of the lion prowling as king of the jungle in the wall hanging he has created. This seeming absence falls in line with postmodernist art presentation schemes which attempt to negate modernist design principles where idealistic figuration and preciseness of presentation are upheld.

Fundamentally, we have seen that these paintings coming from the studios of some contemporary painters in Nigeria, have a vital point of inclusion in the current social and political discourses that abound in the country. And it is pertinent to note that in the prevailing modern critique of social aesthetics in contemporary Nigerian society, the contributions of these painters and other visual artists in the construction of nationhood in Nigeria are worthy and positive.

References

- Art as a Status Symbol – The Exhibition 'Displaying Power' in Berlin.* (2012). Online available:<http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,5272854,00.html>/retrieved: 01.01.2012
- Elias, N, (1978). *What is Sociology.* London: Hutchinson and Co (Publishers)Ltd 3 Fitzroy Square, London w1p 6JD p74.
- Gbaden, B.G. (2014) *A Postmodernist Interrogation of Walls of Partition.* Ph.D Dissertation. Department of Fine Arts. Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Pp. 221,
- Haralambos, M. and Holborn, M. (2004). *Sociology Themes and Perspectives Sixth Edition.* London: Collins. Pp. 538-543.
- Ibekwe, N. (2015). *How Nigerian Universities Encourage Sexual Harassment of Female Students.* Online available @: <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/178879-how-nigerian-universities-encourage-sexual-harassment-of-female-students.html>/retrieved:12.04.2015
- Irokanulo, E, (2014). *Transforming the Aesthetics of Shadow as an Essence in Painting.* PhD Dissertation. Department of Fine Arts. Ahmadu Bello University Zaria. P.1-2.
- Munza, D. (2014). *Durbar Equestrians.* Image. Online available: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=810011972401777&set=pb.100001789456135.-2207520000.1428702156.&type=3&theatre>
- Mitchell, W.J.T. (1998). *Iconology, Image, Text, Ideology.* The University of Chicago Press. P.151.

IMAGES OF POWER IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN PAINTINGS----- Blaise Gundu Gbaden and Emmanuel Ikemefula Irokanulo

Obeagu, C. (2013). *Give and Take*. Image. Online available:

<http://www.blackpearlcollections.com/home/chike-obeagu/retrieved:09.04.2015>

Oshinowo, K. (2012). *Silhouettes, An Exhibition of Mixed Media Paintings*. Lagos: Nike art Gallery, Lekki. 12-18 May, 2012. Pp. 53,

Svrluga, S. (2015). *Harvard Formally Bans Sexual Relationships Between Professors and Undergrads*. Online available: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2015/02/05/harvard-formally-bans-sexual-relationships-between-professors-and-undergrads/retrieved:12.04.2015>