



The King that Devours his People: Conceptual Notes on a Sculpture Project

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the implications of personality cult leadership style in the Nigerian context. It sought to situate the work under discussion in a way that it contributes to the ongoing dialogues and debates, within the works of literary and visual artists who have sought to speak against personality cult phenomena. It uses the author's sculptural woodwork titled, *The King that Devours His People*, a process-oriented studio exploration, produced as a visual metaphor using the joinery technique as a method. Thus, the instrumentalist essences of the studio project's formal features are discussed in ways that draw out the implications of personality cult leadership style, especially, in the Nigerian setting. The generated visual imageries articulate the socio-political activities of leaders and its' consequences on the led. It meteorologically addresses the man inhumanity to man perpetrated by the Nigerian leaders on the masses. It particularly focuses on mobilizing against personality cult syndrome. The project significantly rationalizes the history of Nigeria and her people who have been shaped by one form of leadership or another. Thus, the unique joinery method, that gave rise to the formal features shows how artistic media and processes is used as a metaphor to discuss the implications of personality cults as a way of interrogating the strength and limitations of the effect of personality cults within the Nigerian situation.

KEYWORDS

Personality cult; The king that devours his people; Wood joinery; Studio project

INTRODUCTION

The King that Devours His People, is the title of the author's wood sculpture produced using joinery not only as a sculpture process but also as a medium of artistic expression. This paper centers on ideas triggered, but not limited to, the artist's interaction with joined pieces of wood to create a visual image that reflects the socio-political activities of man and the implications of such actions. I will want to use this paper also to examine the works of other artists who have critiqued personality cult in contemporary Africa, especially in Nigeria.

Agenda-setting theorists believe that through propaganda the media has always played a vital role in presenting information in such a way that it reflects people's minds cognitively and influences what they think about. Even in election situations, they can sway voters by endorsing a person as competent and as one who deserves to be admired, loved, and respected (Abbe et al. 2020). This is evident in the Nigerian general election of 2015 and almost every other political transition period in Nigeria (Olukotun, 2000). During the 2015 election, some politicians were gradually but consistently discredited while others were persistently presented as charismatic leaders. Politicians who belonged to the latter group were thereby deified as having all the answers to the country's problems. Through the instrumentality of the media, the masses were convinced that the country's problems would be magically swept away if a particular person was voted in.

The evidence of this kind of propaganda, manifested in the result of the Nigerian 2015 general election as the people swallowed the dyed wood of conviction and voted massively for Alhaji Muhamadu Buhari. However, experience once again has shown that the media had succeeded in installing a cult of personality in the Nigerian political system. This cult of personality is clear in Buhari's' regime, which has used the state-controlled mass media to cultivate a larger-than-life public image of the president in which there is largely unquestioned flattery and praise of him as being a man of extraordinary courage, knowledge, wisdom, or any other superhuman qualities (Nwafor, 2019). Open criticism against the government is often discouraged and there is usually a justification for whatever political twists and turns the regime may decide to take (Iroanusi, 2019). Amidst the usual efforts to muffle the masses by the ruling class, many artists and scholars have used their works as weapons with which they have been part of the struggle for the liberation of the masses from the tyrannical leadership of many rulers in Africa. Indeed, throughout history, artists and writers have used materials and experiences drawn from their immediate environments to produce works that address the prevalent issues in their societies (Binder, 2008).

One of the works that readily comes to mind in the Nigerian context is Onuzulike's (2018, p.8). *Supremacy of Truth*, a poem that was first written in 1994 during the military era in Nigeria when the then General Sani Abacha was in power. It reads:

Onuzulike's poem shows the poet's desire to speak out against the manipulative gag enforced by the military government on people. When the government tramples upon people's freedom of speech, it becomes the duty of the artist through the instrumentality of his works to become the voice of the voiceless. Wole Soyinka is another Nigerian writer who is well known as a social critic and public

*Stuff my mouth with your boots
Glue up my lips with hands
Of Steel
Is the goat lying down
Not lying on his own skin?
And the man pegging another
To the earth
Not himself a captive?
I shall be let alone
When my time is due
Bury me*

*Under the weight of Kilimanjaro
Time shall charge me
In its electrifying belly
And I shall erupt
When my time is due
Heralded by the four winds
Who shall be deafened by my voice
When my time is due.*

intellectual. His writings, which cover all genres, criticize all forms of misuse of power in Africa generally and in Nigeria, specifically. This is apparent in his work entitled *Interventions* after the annulment of the June 12, 1993 elections in Nigeria (Irele, 2015,138).

Artists most times are compelled to speak up through their works where no one else dares speak to advocate for the masses. Udechukwu's (1991) *What the Serpent Did Not Say*, is another artistic work speaking for the voiceless. This work (executed in pen, brush, and ink on paper) depicts a broad, sweeping line and detailed pen work that contrasts with empty spaces to intensify the focus on the military figure.

The chameleon-like qualities of politicians are suggested in the General's dress, a cross between popular civilian wear and a military uniform (Ottenberg, 2002). The image shows a conflicting character of a figure dressed partly as a civilian and partly as an Army General. To Udechukwu, this is a chameleon-like attribute. The ability to switch characters as it suits them to the detriment of others. This chameleon-like quality of Nigerian politicians reminds one of the Chinese official crackdowns against the *qigong cultivation* revolutionary group known as *Falun Gong*. In July 1999, the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) published a book, titled *Deceiving the Public and Ruining Lives*, in an attempt to cover and justify their suppression of the *Falun Gong*.

Ironically, while the People's Republic of China (PRC) has largely succeeded in crushing the Falun Gong movement within China, the crackdown has, if anything, strengthened *Falun Gong's* position abroad (Greenlee, 2006). This concurs with the reggae artists Bob Marley's 1973 song lyrics, "you can fool some people sometimes but you cannot fool all the people all the time" (Marley, 1973b, track 1. Stanza 4). The same is the case with the Nigerian revolutionary group Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) which the Nigerian government is subduing within Nigeria but is growing strong abroad.

Greenlee, M (2006) wrote a book titled: *The King that Devours His People*, in an attempt to criticize the Chinese government's chameleon-like acts of accusing the *Falun Gong* of insubordination and hate speech, whereas, it is the Chinese government that metaphorically devours her people through the restriction of knowledge, denial of freedom of expression and worship, genocide, torture, and imprisonment. This reminds one of the cases of the Nigerian IPOB that gave rise to the *Hate Speech Bill*. Okonkwo and Akhogba (2013), in discussing Uche Okeke's artistic revolution as a student in Zaria, wrote: "The kind of his revolution was not that kind that devours its children." (Okonkwo and Akhogba, 2013, p,53) If anything, it turned him into a pathfinder, and today he is canonized as one of the heroes of modernism in Nigeria. His revolution brought about the theory of natural synthesis upon which the Nsukka Art School of the University of Nigerian, is known today. This is an indication that when an artist moves for a revolution, it brings about benefits to posterity, unlike the politicians' revolutions which bring about threat of violence and finally the shedding of innocent blood.

How Udechukwu's *What the Serpent Did Not Say* signify Nigerian military and civilian political leaders as chameleons bring us to their other character and theory of *soro mmuo gboo soro mmadu bia unoakwa*, literarily translated as "join the spirits to kill and escort the humans to condolence" (Adage, Unknown). What this means is that the politicians who are supposed to protect the masses are now the ones who are cunningly oppressing them through violence and threat of violence. This is typical of kings who devour their people.

Violence has always been employed by politicians throughout history as a tactic of political action. Even though it is condemnable, some politicians and political theorists have justified it. James Fitzjames Stephen, for instance, as sited in Dudley (1965), thinks that it is good to count heads to avoid breaking them. While V. I. Lenin, on the other hand, found breaking heads a necessary tool in achieving the ends of a socialist society. To Lenin, "one cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs" (Dudley, 1965, p,21). His was the theory of the ends justifies the means, a theory later taken up by Leon Trotsky in literature

and revolution and subsequently prostituted by Stalin and Hitler in ways which have made the twentieth century the 'century of violence' (Dudley, 1965).

However, Georges Sorel's classic case for violence in politics unlike that of Lenin was not the absolute, physical force of brutality. To him, it is subtler than that. The threat of violence is what counted with Sorel. That is the expectation of violence rather than the actual violence. The violence case, in Sorel's logic, is that only through the threat of violence could the working class achieve that degree of class consciousness on which depended socialist reconstruction, thus what he called the political 'myth'. Which lent an aura of possibility to the threat of violence. If for Lenin, violence was a necessary tactic, for Sorel, it was a matter of strategy. However, Franz Fannon as cited in Dudley (1965), the apologist for violence in a colonial situation such as one found in Africa, is thus closer to Lenin than he is to Sorel even though he shared with Sorel the same intellectual tradition (Dudley, 1965). It is upon this Fannon's idea of actually perpetrating the violence than a mere threat of violence that Nigeria has found herself today.

The kings (political leaders/people in authority) for selfish values have frequently used violence as a generalized end. In this case, the use of violence has only served to breed further violence as political leaders have become intolerant. They see the only condition of their survival in the total elimination of political rivals and the suppression of any form of social criticism. At no time was this more clearly demonstrated than at the present regime in the Federal Republic of Nigeria where 'thuggery' has become the accepted general practice. Nigeria's political leadership began breaking heads to count them. This way, they succeeded in establishing themselves as a dominant political class within an almost total monopoly of power and wealth. But the narrow conception of their interests which they hold is such as to suggest that they may have unwittingly created the conditions which make resorting to violence inevitable if only to change the structure of the political power in the country (Dudley, 1965). It is against this background that *The King that Devours His People*, my sculpture project using joined pieces of wood, joins the dialogue. I will proceed to show how my working materials and techniques are implicated in this discourse before discussing the work itself in the context of the focus of this paper.

Joinery as a Sculpture Process

In this paper, the terms joinery, joints, jointed, and join will be used interchangeably. Joints are most often fastened with another substance, which acts as the binder or helps to hold the joint firmly together. In woodwork, glue, nail, and even rope or wire can serve the same purpose. Joinery as a sculpture process could, therefore, be defined as two or three-dimensional forms on which the primary focus is on the joints

which are the primal mode of expression. The term ‘joint’ represents all the forms of fastening wood, metal, fiber, and any other material together, however, wood joinery is the focus of this work and the use of joints as a method is the primary source of interest and inspiration for my present artistic exploration.

The King that Devours His People, derives from the patched, imbedded, and infused wooden figures attached to the body of a form which is configured as formal and visual elements that make up the body of work under discussion. This is in a bid to situate the process of wood joinery into the Nigerian political sphere built upon the fact that the content of any sculpture depends largely on three factors: the material(s) used in configuring the work, the process involved in creating the work and the structure or formal features that give the work its physical reality (Bickel, 2008). Wood is the primary material used in configuring the artwork (titled *The King that Devours His People*) while the joinery technique (used by carpenters to fashion out furniture and other functional objects) was essentially employed in creating it.

The King that Devours his People was developed from my *Joinery as a Sculpture Process*, a project at Nsukka, Nigeria, beginning from the early 2000s. *The Joinery as a Sculpture Process* (Akabuike, 2003) provoked several ideas which, though originating from a common artistic position moved into diverse directions like installations, wall panel, constructions, and the configurations of miscellaneous sculptural works that emerged with diverse techniques derived from both conventional joints and unconventional joints.

Conceptualizing “The King that Devours His People”

Materials, processes, and forms collectively provide some necessary clues to the meaning of a work of art and also furnish the viewer with an enabling vocabulary for the description and analysis of the work (Obodo, 2010); (Rose, 2001). *The King that Devours His People* is fashioned in wood with a focus on joints. The forms, therefore, derive their visual energy from the creative process that essentially took the nature of joints into account. These seek to directly mirror and convey the conceptual sensibility that occurs as a result of humans preying upon humans by consuming their flesh and blood like a vampire who lives by preying on others. However, in this case, the king figure (who is supposedly the custodian of his subjects) has become their devourer.

In the remaining part of this paper, the materials and joints used and the different stages of production of the work are analyzed with a focus on the formal features of the work that resulted. The discussion is done within conceptual references that relate to the prevailing tyrannical events in Nigeria, Africa, and other

parts of the world. Its metaphorical implications address how the joint contributed to shaping its content as highlighted in the effects of the personality cult.

Forming the king and his people

I have realized a three-dimensional work that consists of two major parts *The King* and *His People* (See Figure 5). *The King* stands and towers over *His people* who prostrate in reverence and are dwarfed by him. *The King* is a stylized human form with a big head and tiny neck hollowed from a semi-circular piece of wood. It stands like a politician in a rally with one hand raised and mouth opened wide as if in the middle of a speech. The tiny neck is made of a wooden dowel pin while the legs, pinned with a metal dowel, are anchored strongly on the flat pieces of jointed woods configured mostly with variations of dovetails used for visual and tactile effects. These flat pieces of jointed woods serve as the second part of the work (*His People*) as well as the base.

The king's head with its wide-open mouth and big eyes also has a horn-like form, which makes the head appear more like a beasts' head than a human head. On the head are patterns of human figures imbedded into it with the use of chisel and router machines. The same symbols of human figures are also buried in the body. From afar, the king's body looks like an *Ankara* cloth patterned with stylized human figures as the central motif of the design, but a closer look reveals the kings' actual state of decay, wear and tear enough to keep it out of active service but seem to have been patched up with the human motifs. One can say that he is dressed in a borrowed cloth of human forms.

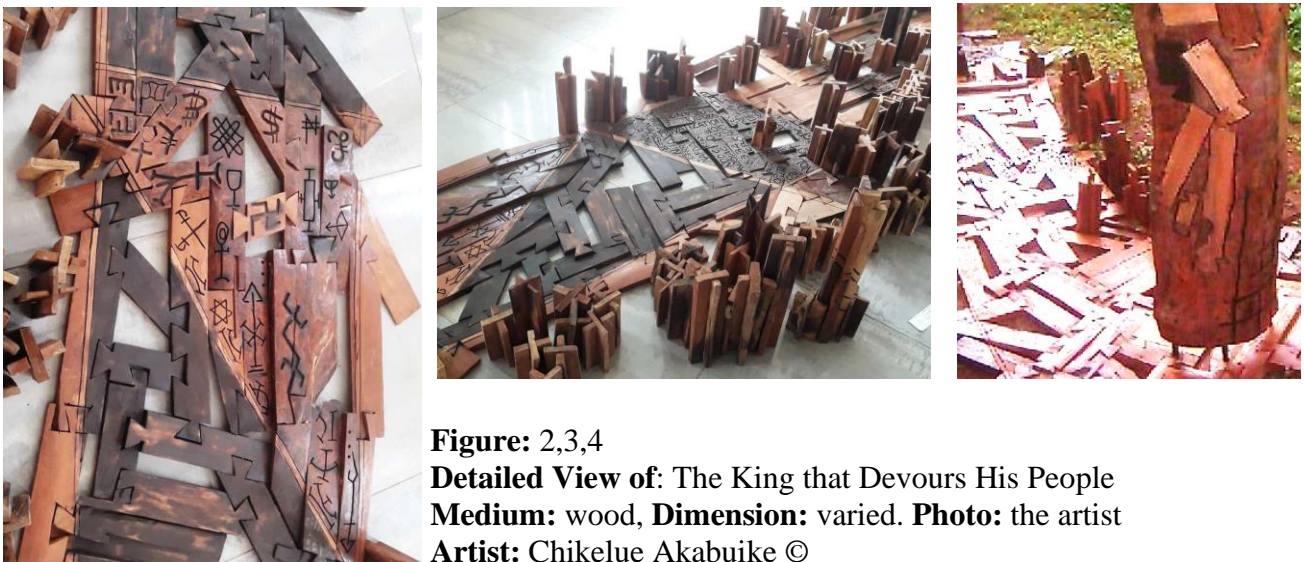


Figure: 2,3,4

Detailed View of: The King that Devours His People

Medium: wood, **Dimension:** varied. **Photo:** the artist

Artist: Chikelue Akabuike ©

The second part and base of the work, which represents the king's people, spread around. They prostrate in worship in a long processional pattern before the king. The assemblage is achieved with the use of a dovetail joint on a ½" (half-inch) thickness of different lengths of 'offcuts'. From afar, the shift of textures and the disturbing restlessness of the contrasting rhythm of the dovetails catch one's attention. A closer observation allows for intimate recognition of separate outlines of units. Relief and intaglio impressions are created by the use of flat woods of different color grains and varieties in thickness which also outlines the diversity in texture



Figure: 5

Title: The King that Devours His People

Medium: wood

Dimension: varied

Photo: Chijioke Onuora

Artist: Chikelue Akabuike ©

The third group of objects in the installation, which also constitutes the king's people is a set of free-standing three-dimensional miniature figures. When compared to the king, they appear diminutive before him even though standing instead of prostrating. Some of the heads are shaped from one half of a dovetail joint while their bodies are configured from halved joints. The halved joints formed a cross-like pattern which enables the figures to stand balanced when installed in an upright position. This contrasts with the jointed cluster formation of the prostrating figures gives the impression that they are throwing themselves randomly on the floor without a definite order because they are scared to behold the king.

CONCEPTUAL DISCUSSION/INTERPRETATION

The title *The King that Devours His People* is derived metaphorically from the Igbo adage *Eze na aghogbu ndi o na achi* literally meaning "the king that deceives his subjects". This is also derived from the concept of *Agwo na enogho ibe ya, adi ebu* meaning "a snake does not grow until it has swallowed another". These

are buttressed by Udechukwu's idea of *soro mmuo gboo soro mmadu bia unoakwa* and the saying that *mmadu ka a na aya*. meaning also that "men are the problems of fellow men" (Adage, Unknown). All these are equated to Nigeria's political arena, where democratically elected leaders turn to magicians. Hence, they practice "the more you look the less you see" (Idom, Unknown), with their subjects and remain benighted of the needs of the people who elected them. They sometimes do not only violently usurp the authority but also use the people as a vampire will use its victims.

From the work, the king is patched up with figures of human forms, reflecting a society in which leaders seat on the welfare and rights of the people while enriching themselves. As literature shows Ellis, (2017), to win elections, some leaders use human parts and sometimes babies for rituals. Those who escape ritual rites are turned into bodyguards and thugs. The leaders equip them with sophisticated weapons to fight and kill each other while protecting their kings' interests (Science, 2020). They do this because of the promise of prominent positions as compensation within the government. However, such promises were never realized since most of them are usually thrown out after the election is won (Christopher J. Kinnan, Daniel B. Gordon, Mark D. DeLong 2011). This trend breeds more violence as the weapons are turned against the masses who eventually become victims of circumstance through armed robbery and other social vices. The cluster of jointed wooden forms on the floor metaphorically represents this category of people. They are the downtrodden just like they lay prostrating at the mercy and manipulations of the king.

It is not gainsaid when one says that some kings are like Dracula. Just like the famous reggae musician Lucky Dube sang, they live on human blood to stay alive. During the day they are your friends but when the night comes, they are no more friends (see, Dracula, YouTube, 2011). A typical example of when the going is good, you have them as a friend but when they do not have any more need for you, they throw you to the dogs. They use people the way artists use their tools but the difference is that the artists take care of their tools knowing that they will need them for the next work. But the politicians "use and throw away." To cap it all, the poor masses never know who their real enemy is because while they fight and kill each other in a bid to protect their so-called king, these so-called (kings) leaders siphon their natural, economic, and social rights from them.

However, from the work, one observes a third segment of the society that refuses to prostrate before the king(s). Although they are few or in the minority and are also dominated, punished, violated, debased, crushed, abused, trampled upon, and dwarfed by the influence of the gigantic king, yet they have refused

to give up the struggle. These represent those who have chosen to be the eyes, ears, and voices of the voiceless. Amidst the gagging, blindfolding, and predominantly hopeless society are the artists who through the instrumentality of their works have devoted their lives to enlightening the society and fighting the bad government with the hope that “one-day *e go better*”, meaning that all hope is not lost. This group is depicted by the free-standing figures dwarfed by the king. Metaphorically, this work (*The King that Devours His People*) attempts to join other artists to contribute to the voice of the voiceless and the eyes of the blind.

Primarily, joints serve to bring two weak entities together to strengthen them. A joint as a form of union is always expected to bring about better stability hence the biblical injunction in the book of Ecclesiastes 4:9, KJV “two are better than one for when one falls the other can raise him” (Loftie 1872, p, 414). However, this is not the case in *The King and His People*, for when the people elect *the kings*, they do so with the expectation of having a responsible caretaker, one who will be responsible for their welfare. Be it as it may, the relationship is far from symbiotic. Instead, the king has turned to a vampire, depending on the blood of his subjects for survival.

So far, the primary function of joints as a process of fixing two separate entities together have been appropriated and blended into the conceptual process of *The King and His People*. In other words, the method applied in the materiality of wood as an artistic medium offers a crucial impulse in the exploration as it opens up creative possibilities and channels of discourse within the boundaries of the elected leaders and the electorates. Owing to this, the artwork exudes meanings from different facets of political, social, and religious positions.

While it has political undertones largely driven by the sensitivities of ethnicity and ethnocentrism which manifest in Nigeria in form of the pursuits of ethnic domination and cleansing, agitations and minority issues, resource-control controversies, political exclusion, segregation, ethnic conflicts, terrorism, gender inequality, sit-tight-syndrome, corruption, leadership ineptitude, and marginalization theories, etc. these predicaments are also vividly complemented by the complexities and contradictions harbored in contemporary religions and religious movements.

Apart from the work’s political components, it also explores the area of advocacy for good leadership both in religious and circular movements. It tries to discourage the attempts by the leader to further worsen the situation by intermingling (joining) religion and politics, as the two realms increasingly become

instruments of aggression and impoverishment against the masses. When religion trespasses into other realms such as education and politics to which it does not traditionally belong, the results can be very catastrophic (Ikwuemesi, 2019). So much violence and shedding of innocent blood have emanated as a result of the colonial amalgamation (joining) of the nation of Nigeria. The North has vehemently refused to disengage from this country's amalgamation marriage (joint) since this may deny them direct control of the oil wells. This is because the Northern (Muslims) benefit heavily from the nation's oil products which were mostly deposited in the South East (Christians).

The restless configuration and rough tactile quality of *His People's* segment of the work show how restless some part of the country is. While the smooth relaxed appearance of the king (the central figure) shows how stabilized and relaxed the king is in enjoying the agent of amalgamation (joinery). His relaxed mood shows how he remained stabilized to adequately contain the restlessness of his people (the marginalized, and the downtrodden) as a result of his access to power and wealth. The way human forms were buried in the king also symbolically represents the extent of death and burial which occurs in the country as a result of negligence and marginalization. Symbolically as observed from the work, unlike the rest of the work (representative of his people), which is riddled with roughness to show how tough life is within them, one can see the apparent atmosphere of strength within the king, the texture and finishing being consciously rendered smoothly to show affluence and smoothness of things as a result of his wealth and power.

Worthy of note is the fact that what makes the king smooth and strong are products from *His People*, hence the saying "Monkey dey work Baboon dey chop." Literarily meaning that 'while the Monkey works, the Baboon eats.' This makes the "Nigeria" independence from the Europeans questionable; the independence came only on paper. Africa and Nigeria in particular, are still struggling with the 'contraptions' of the quagmire left behind by the colonial masters. The Europeans' indirect rule is in itself another level of *The King and His People* relationship. Their ability to still hover around like vultures waiting to eat the carcass of the dead over their previous colonies, through the supply of weapons of mass destruction and depopulation agendas is not encouraging.

The unity (joining) forced on the country Nigeria, comes only in the colors of the skin which is the same color that runs through the wood as the element of the joint. Another metaphorical unity is found in and the occasional intermarriage (joining) of a Muslim northerner (man) and a Christian easterner (woman) and hardly the other way round in marriage exemplified in the joint elements of the different woods achieved by juxtaposing multiple wooden textures. However, the real deep-rooted unity (joint), the ideal

unity, a situation where anybody can comfortably marry and settle in any part of the country and is accepted as one in his own country, is yet not attainable. This is because the colonial masters (the king of kings) made the kings believe that it is their birth-right to be the ruling class (“born to rule” syndrome) while others (his people) were born to follow. This is why riots break out occasionally and claim the lives of many who do not originally belong to the part of the country where they reside. Meanwhile, the king pretends not to take cognizance either because he believes in the agenda of the killers or because he sponsors the killings himself. One way or the other, he pretends not to be responsible for the death of his subjects. Just like in the case of the *Falun Gong* Crackdown in China. However, this ignorance is not always shown when the reverse becomes the case.

A critical look at the work reveals also that *The King that Devours His People* goes further to portray some implications of social and economic betrayal arising from financial misappropriation and stealing of public/private funds. It serves as a visual metaphor of Nigeria as a country in which diverse tribes have been forced into one country with one tribalized king to oversee her affairs. The prostrating, agitating, restless, and subdued mood of his people show tribal sentiments, religious intolerance, and the restless quest for liberation.

The cries of the downtrodden are usually heard by higher powers. In a creative process of joining and fussing, *the king* even though standing with an iron leg has a tiny wooden neck which is an indication that though Nigeria can claim to be strongly amalgamated, clutched, and united (joined), yet she cannot deny a weak political foundation susceptible to breakage. Though the king appears to be in control with his pinned dowel iron leg, with which he manipulates the votes, the thugs, the market women, and the benighted, yet, his wooden dowel-pinned neck is one weakness vulnerable to be counted for breakage.

CONCLUSION

The paper has partly described the processes involved in the production of the work *The King that Devours His People*. It opens up channels of creative possibilities and discussions that can engage an artist in studio explorations as well as enquires into the state of our Nation. The method of rendering the materials has strong functional significance. It manifests metaphorically the influence of colonization (the king of kings) in creating a nation (the king’s people) that seems to have been fused (joined) inordinately with the sole intention to construct avenue of a constant source of income for the colonial masters (the king of kings). The process of the materiality of wood permits an oscillation between fusion and disintegration which is the marriage engagement contracted by the colonial masters in African countries. Such manipulations are

like artistic employment of tools into novel visual imageries, invented through exploration for aesthetics or functionality. Our leadership both colonial (“the king of kings”) and governments (“kings”) has come to the juncture where the meaning of leadership has become a subject of inquiry.

In every work of art, controversies may likely arise. This is usually part of the artist’s intention to create works that pose questions as they mirror life issues. Questions have been raised and answers may not have been given. But one needs to understand the choices that arise from a quest for freedom and the need for social criticism. This will enable one to further ask: where do I stand in this historical process and struggle? Like Bob Marley (1977b, Track 2, stanza 1), aptly said, we have to know “who we are and where we stand in this struggle” Do I have any choice in determining my identity? I may not be aware of the comprehensive nature of these observations on leadership, as well as the fact that this represents a line of inquiry that I am still grappling with. Additionally, I am careful with the temperament of these questions and the need to link my thoughts on the nation’s leadership style to the visual arts. However, a continuous inquiry is pertinent as it relates to the present project as more relevant questions are bound to arise that may initiate a thought in different directions from the present norms to ameliorate the damage done so far in the fabric of the African continent and Nigeria in particular.

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