



Artwork Information Sheet 17

ONUZULIKE'S "NKUKERE AKI" ARMOR FOR THE GIANT OF AFRICA



Nkukere Aki (Palm Kernel shell) Armor for the Giant of Africa, 2018, Clay & Fish line, 339 x 183cm © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University

INTRODUCTION

Clay is one of the most readily available earthy materials found in Nigeria. Creating artworks with clay involves the processes of pinching, throwing and coiling. Some of the oldest art forms discovered by archeologists in Nigeria; Nok terracotta heads, Igbo Ukwu earthen pots and Ife terracotta heads are made from clay. Nevertheless, its relevance in contemporary art forms has been largely overlooked by artists and art scholars alike. This article discusses Onuzulike's quest in this regard, closely looking at his work *Nkukere Aki* (Palm Kernel shell) Armor for the Giant of Africa.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CLAY USE IN NIGERIA

Clay as an art medium has a long history in Nigeria, dating back to the Igbo Ukwu, Nok, and Ife objects which are over 2000 years old. Kenneth Murray taught his students how to build basic kilns, fire, and glaze clay works. His instructions were one of the early pieces of evidence of ceramic teaching in formal training.

Aina Onabolu, regarded as "the father of modern art in Nigeria," advocated for the inclusion of Fine art in the National School curriculum. As a result, the British colonial administration hired Kenneth C. Murray from England "to teach art in some secondary schools in different regions of Nigeria, especially Lagos, Ibadan, and Umuahia" (Onuzulike, 2009). This marked the genesis of ceramic teaching in schools in Nigeria.

The Pottery Training Centre in Abuja where the famous Ladi Kwali was trained was established by the northern Nigerian government in 1951 with the help of British potter Micheal Cardew. At the Centre, local potters were encouraged to infuse local motifs with foreign ones. The artists of the Zaria Art Society, who were students at the National College of Art Science and Technology (NCAST), Zaria, adopted this culture of fusing traditional and foreign motifs.

This concept of fusing traditional forms and motifs with western ones was named "Natural Synthesis." Demas Nwoko, a former student and member of the Art Society, has been described as "the first contemporary Nigerian artist to create very expressive works in baked clay" (Onuzulike, 2009). He draws his inspiration from Nok terracotta heads and Yoruba wood sculptures. Subsequently, El Anatsui also experimented with clay for his broken pot series in which he explored stoneware clay (manganese body). Chris Echeta, Ige Ibigbami, and Abbas Ahuwan are some of the other artists who have experimented with clay. With the emergence of Ozioma Onuzulike on the scene, the use of clay for only pottery and utilitarian purposes was altered (Onwuegbucha, 2016).

THE ARTIST

Ozioma Onuzulike was born in 1972 in Enugu State, Nigeria, and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Fine Arts with First Class Honors from University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1996, a master's degree in Ceramic Art in 2001, and a Ph.D. in Art History in 2007. He is an artist, poet, art historian, and art teacher. He currently teaches at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. His artworks usually confront issues of armed conflicts, corruption, political violence, and human vulnerability. "My artistic goal was to explore the possibilities of combining ceramic elements with other media including wood, paper, and metal to create installations" (Onuzulike, personal communication, 2020). In 2008, his encounter with a man at the airport on his way to the Skowhegan summer art residency in the United States drew his attention to how Africa's natural resources have become the root of our problems as a result of the developed world's interest in these resources. This encounter prompted him to learn more about this issue and watch documentaries like "The Blood Diamond" which fueled his desire to address such issues through his art.

Onwuegbucha acknowledges El Anatsui "as the flagship of the trend of transforming commonplace objects in the Nsukka School through the multiplication of units"(Onwuegbucha, 2016). El

Anatsui is an inspiration to Onuzulike who acknowledges his interest in the history of Africa as he addresses issues of colonialism, migration and other aspects of Africa's history in his works.

THE ARTWORK

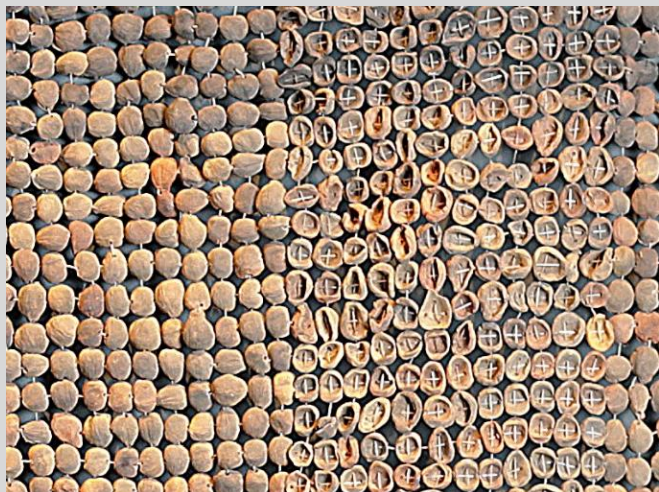


Fig 1. Nkukere Aki (Palm Kernel shell) Armor for the Giant of Africa (Detail), 2018, Clay and Fish line, 339 x 183cm © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art

The work "Nkukere Aki (palm kernel shell) Armor for the Giant of Africa" is part of a series of works that Onuzulike calls "Armor series" in which he uses casted clay, palm kernel shells and terracotta coins. The work which is sized 339 cm by 183 cm, covers almost a full length of the wall and looks like a medieval form of armor used in the West. Casted clay kernel shells have been strung together using a fishing line. When viewed as a whole, the placement of multiple shells strung together gives the impression of a textured surface. Its earthy tones range from brown to reddish-brown to deep gray.

The deep gray tones were achieved by dusting the pre-fired kernel shells with wood dust before re-firing them in the kiln. Before molding, some red earth was added to the clay mixture to achieve the reddish-brown kernel shells. To achieve the form of armor, the kernel shells were strung with strings intersecting each other to join all the pieces together, similar to how warp and weft are used in textiles. Holes were perforated on four opposite sides of the

kernel shells to accomplish this. The shells are strung diversely as some are upturned to reveal the empty shells while others are strung with the protruding shells facing the viewer. The ends of the sleeves are left to droop by stringing in straight lines only.

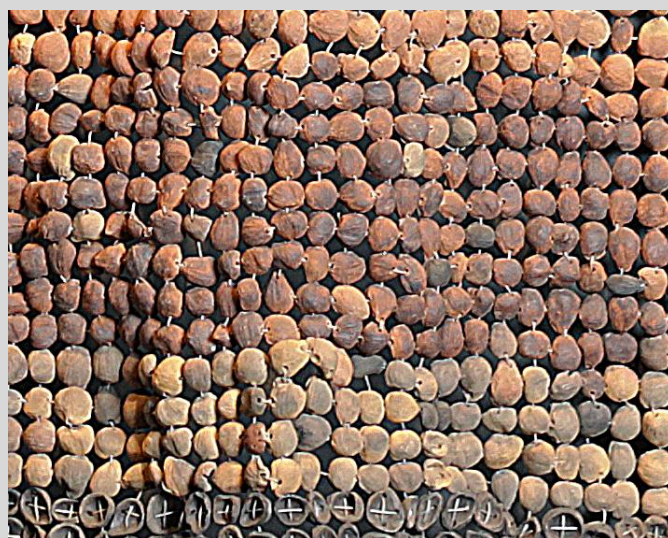


Fig 1. Nkukere Aki (Palm Kernel shell) Armor for the Giant of Africa (Detail), 2018, Clay and Fish line, 339 x 183cm © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art

The artist included "armor" in the title of the work because it reminds him about the issues involving conflict, shield and protection. Onuzulike explained that "the work addresses the unequal power relations between Africa and the imperial world. This unequal power relationship can be seen in all of Africa's interactions with the rest of the world (the first world)." These unequal power relations fueled the practice of slave trade and when slave trade was abolished, the focus shifted to Africa's natural resources especially palm oil, groundnut, and other farm produce. The palm kernel shells reflect these unequal relationships. As a result of these relationships, Africa has been stripped of its natural wealth and left with empty shells. The medieval armor which the shells portray shows that while other nations fight technological wars involving drones and other advanced machinery, Africa still makes medieval armor which shows that it has been left far behind.

The cause of our backwardness is attributed to the hands that have taken the core and left us with nothing. The artwork also draws attention to the fact

that our natural resources have remained at the root of many of the wars and internal conflicts that have occurred in many parts of Africa. This is because the West; Europe and America are interested in these resources and to be in charge of these resources they ferment trouble in those areas. As a result of the competing interests of colonial powers in those areas, many of the places where wars have been fought and are still being fought in Africa are endowed with numerous resources "like the Gr Congo (the Democratic Republic of the Congo) (Onuzulike, personal communication, 2020). The concerns that Onuzulike raise in his work presents the question of how Africans can protect themselves from exploitation.

CONCLUSION

Through the use of clay, Onuzulike has achieved a new level of creative expression, demonstrating the medium's capabilities in the hands of the right mind. Clay can and should be used as a tool for installations because it provides a wide range of possibilities for artists with the desire to experiment. This new dimension in clay exploration championed by Onuzulike has further inspired younger artists like "Ngozi Omeje, Caus Onu and Alozie Onyirioha" (Onwuegbucha, 2016).

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