



YEMISI SHYLLON
MUSEUM OF ART
PAN-ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

Artwork Information Sheet **19**

ATO ARINZE'S OKE OSISI



Oke Osisi, 2016, Clay, 116 x 39 x 30cm © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University

INTRODUCTION

The Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University, prides itself in its collection: 'Oke Osis', a pottery piece donated to the museum by the Nigerian artist, Ato Arinze. The piece was created in 2016 and was first shown at the Thought Pyramid Gallery in Lagos, Nigeria, as part of an exhibition commemorating the 60th anniversary of Chinua Achebe's widely read masterpiece 'Things Fall Apart'.

THE ARTIST

Ato Arinze, a native of Onitsha in Anambra state, was born in Lagos in 1966. Before enrolling in visual arts, he participated in a program at the Institute of Design & Textile Technology, Ikeja, Lagos. During this time, he frequently visited artists' studios in Lagos. After studying general arts at the Federal Polytechnic in Oko in 1988 and sculpture at the prestigious Yaba College of Technology in Lagos in 1991, Ato Arinze formally began using ceramics as a medium for self-expression in professional artistic practice. After a tumultuous and epileptic start, fueled in part by indecision and career path experiments, Ato, a lifelong artist, chose to study art, despite his father's wishes and his plans to become a political scientist or physical educationist.

With over twenty years of studio practice as a ceramics artist, and by extension, sculptor, he has been part of numerous exhibitions both home and abroad. In 2012 and 2014, Mr. Arinze served as a visiting ceramics instructor at the Creative Art department, University of Lagos. In the early phase of a process that is described as one of self-definition, clay for Ato wasn't complete to be translated into sculptural form. He began to reach for deep intellectual and conceptual content in his engagement with art. This process, he would refer to as "work" and "art."

Drawing on Olu Oguibe's assertions about Anatsui's pottery, Ato, like Anatsui, engaged in the

transposition of objects to the wall. Ato now sought to use the form as an interpretative medium and a rhetorical vehicle. He does so in line with the specific properties and possibilities, each speaking to significant aspects of nature and existence, and especially to the cyclicity of life (Oguibe, 1998). For over two decades, Ato has been committed to the art of pottery and ceramics, with an underlying passion for its importance and propagation.

OKE OSISI



Fig 1. Oke Osis (close up), 2016, Clay, 116 x 39 x 30cm
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A close look at the work "Oke Osis" in figure 1 shows that the stalk of the tree gradually moves up and at two junctures divide into small branches. These junctures, in turn, have a ball-like form at their tips which represents the leaves. The texture of the sculpture appears smooth and has a lustrous shine. The work looks like a sturdy combination of a stalk and ball-like leaves. In creating 'Oke Osis', the artist employed a technical routine that indexes the stylistic coiling method, preliminarily with earthenware clay;

then fired to an earthenware temperature. His finishing technique entails simulating a bronze patina by using a mixture of kerosene and oil tube colours. Neutral wax polish is then applied in a bid to fix and shine the resulting work.

Ato Arinze's *Oke Osisi* is a medium-sized pottery created as a tribute to Okonkwo, the protagonist in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The piece is an allusion to Okeosisi, a big tree that could make a forest. Such big trees like the Iroko tree among the Yorubas and the Oji tree among the Igbos are found in many localities and are used to build shrines and homes for town or village deities.



Fig 2. *Oke Osisi (close up)*, 2016, Clay, 116 x 39 x 30cm
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Okeosisi is often an appellation and, in some cases, a title given to someone of great importance and typically notable achievements. Praise names such as *Agu* (leopard) or *Okeosisi* (the big tree) are common

in Africa, especially among the Igbos. These praise names usually imply that the individual in question is doing exceptionally well within a group and in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo was such a character (Arinze, 2016).

Ato's pottery colouring is unique and it is rooted in a rudimentary West African pottery artistic tradition. Painted pottery practice in Nigeria can be traced back to the colonial era. In tracing the history of pottery colouring in Nigeria, ceramic artist and art historian, Ozioma Onuzulike states that "as early as the 1940s, several reports in Nigeria captured an important transformation in the decoration and finishing of traditional pottery. This was the colourful enamel painting of baked pots and clay models by potters and local traders.

Ozioma also notes that in recent times, pot painting has also gained a foothold among academically trained potters in Nigeria, who have been forced to look for alternative ways of decorating or finishing their works due to the exorbitant cost of fuel for high-temperature finishing. Danlami Aliyu of the Al Habib Pottery in Minna was a key proponent of this strategy (Onuzulike, 2015).

Pottery is fondly and fundamentally attributed as kitsch- to corroborate art historical canon. As an art genre, it is often viewed as a cliché of functionality and art rooted in primitivism- the African sublimity that Europeans trailed from invading the Benin kingdom to, taking a gradual interest in African carvings that started around 1906 in Paris, when young advanced artists such as Brancusi, Andre Derain, and Pablo Picasso began to copy such.

Pottery is widely regarded as an art devoid of aesthetics and gratification, especially in developing and underdeveloped countries; as a result, it deserves a permanent home and presence within a utilitarian canon and (artistic) accessory. Over the years, and in recent times there has been a widely held unchanging

belief that pottery serves more functional than aesthetic purposes. Hence, pottery is deserving of a detailed artistic investigation and the artist, Ato Arinze, between 2009 and 2010 began to seek more critical engagement with pottery.

The series from which Oke osisi emanates is inspired by nature and events in the artist's environment. It is part of a body of work, "Tree of Life" which the artist began to create between 1995 and 1997 after he had read a book with that title by a South African author, Professor Burne Jones. Ato has created many pieces with different titles before 'Oke Osisi' and is working on a solo exhibition titled Tree of Life. He tells different stories with each piece he creates. The series primarily depicts man's relationship with nature, as well as how nature can be used to better discover true human identity. "Nature, particularly the tree teaches us a lot. If only we can all learn to be as tolerant as the trees in the forest and as humble as the blade of grass, imagine how peaceful our society will be."- Ato Arinze.

Oke Osisi is a piece that equally references nature, and the human life in comparison to trees which, "unlike human beings, with their innate sense of humility, tolerate the forces of nature and selfish attitude of man in their destruction of the ecosystem" (Arinze, 2016). Oke Osisi is a depiction of a close-up intertwining of trees, mutually tolerant and interdependent. Although the trees are arranged in a hierarchical pattern, their interrelatedness speaks of human nature in the world we live in.

CONCLUSION

As a remarkable experimenter, Ato Arinze is one of the few artists challenging the traditional use of clay in ceramics. He has questioned the mere utilitarian value of clay by using it to illustrate "Oke Osisi" an Igbo phrase that is used to address a person of great strength and capacity. His inventive use of clay as a medium of expression reveals itself in the technicality employed in rendering "Oke osisi".

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