**Anya fulu ugo: The political implications of Africa in the works of Obiora Udechukwu and El Anatsui**

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**Abstract**

Between the 24th of June and 8th July, 2015, the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka organized a homecoming art exhibition and conference for El Anatsui and Obiora Udechukwu, two of the most important artists of the Nsukka School. This article is an attempt to use this exhibition, launched under the rubric of Anya Fulu Ugo (translated literally in Igbo as 'the eyes that see the Eagle'), to examine the diverse, unexpected, and controversial ways in which Udechukwu and Anatsui's thematic and formalistic concerns may have entered into the political debate about African aesthetic and its cogency in the global imaginary.

**Introduction**

In the Igbo traditional society Ugo symbolizes a rare bird. It is seen on rare occasions. That was why the Igbo crafted the saying, ‘Anya Fulu Ugo jaa ya ike na adighi afu Ugo kwadaa’ translating as ‘Anyone who beholds the Eagle must praise it because the Eagle is rarely seen.’ It is important that the Nsukka School has crafted this proverb as the theme of this conference and exhibition heralding the homecoming of Obiora Udechukwu and El Anatsui, two of, among, the most important artists of the Nsukka School. In the words of Chike
Aniakor in his introduction to the inaugural exhibition catalogue of Aka Artists in 1986:

the artistic training of Aka artists has been nurtured within the ambit of artistic experiments geared towards firstly liberating the mind from prevailing orthodoxies in art (or art schools) based purely on western models and secondly, the urgency, if not the immediacy, to reassess the artist’s creative base and reach out for new artistic concerns both in style and content of works (Aniakor, 1986:7).

Aniakor’s words seem to have aptly captured Udechukwu’s and Anastui’s creative trajectories. Both represent a paradigm shift, a radical departure from the western inspired creative economy to a localised aesthetic that influenced and fundamentally altered artistic direction in Nigeria. Ottenberg (1997:165) has once suggested that Anatsui’s “considerable travel in Europe and the New World in recent years has not diminished his African thematic orientations. If anything, his travel experiences have enlarged it,...” Same could also be said of Udechukwu.

The political message of migration
It is significant that both artists emerged at a time of political and economic changes in their different countries. Udechukwu
fled the Nigerian-Biafran civil war in Northern Nigeria in 1967 and returned to war ravaged South-eastern Nigeria where his education was interrupted. He continued his education in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1970 at the end of the civil war. The civil war, therefore, acted as an interlude that was necessary to regain the momentum of an interrupted career. At Nsukka, his ideas would eventually incorporate vestiges of uli motif interposed with occasional imageries of war, struggle and politics. Oloidi (1993) remarks that “the 1970s brought a sudden change in Udechukwu’s creative formalism and that the war had forced him to see, know and understand the world, or humanity, through clearer, realistic foci.” Anatsui himself has observed that Udechukwu’s “works did not merely bemoan a situation or collapse with self-pity, but using the strength of artistic sensibility stood up to the realities of the time” (1993:8), while Odutokun (1993: 9) has also noted that Udechukwu was later “brought headlong into one of the most tragic circumstances of the human condition – a war.” Oloidi, Anatsui and Odutokun’s comments underline thematic concerns and principles central to Udechukwu’s artistic engagements on social justice, violence and politics. In time and space, therefore, Udechukwu would, again and again, expose the moral irresponsibility of an instrumental regime. He lent his voice to the fatalities, the cataclysms and hopelessness of a system set on a faulty path of self-implosion. His contributions to the healthy development of Nigerian art cannot be overemphasized for his was among the first instances that radicalised political consciousness not just in the
Nigerian art scene but also in his immediate constituency, the Nsukka School. Deploying largely aspects of his creative activism, he attempted to prevent the then military regime of Nigeria from consolidating power in the universities through inhuman policies. Draconian military decrees, abuse of extant laws, incessant brutalising of the citizenry and imposition of on-the-spot edicts by the military dictators directly or indirectly influenced Udechukwu’s creative patterns. We will find Udechukwu's political style much more alert to the difficulty of reconciling a modernist artistic culture with an illegitimate political order. For example, themes such as *The General is up 1987*, *The Road*, *The General and The Noose 1993*, and *The Prisoner* capture the draconian military regime characterized by incessant assassinations, killings and imprisonment. The 'General' and 'the Noose' metaphor are employed here to reminisce the historical predominance of murder as the bane of military dictatorship in Nigeria. *The General is up 1987* summarizes the military coup of 1987. General Ibrahim Babangida became head of state after a coup on 27 August 1987, replacing General Muhammadu Buhari. Babangida went ahead to thwart the anticipated democratic transition by amending the Transition to Civil Rule (political programme) decree of 1987, changing the date to January 1992 and then to 1993. Indeed Udechukwu's works from the 1980s to about 1993 would reflect the political ambivalences and tensions raised by the military at the time for the Babangida administration annulled the supposedly freest and fairest election in Nigeria on June 12, 1993. The complex
appropriation and reformulation of forms and contents in the above three works, for which Udechukwu has perfected, speak to these misfortunes and recklessness.

Beyond his interest in military misrule, Udechukwu has transformed Nigerian social and political upheavals into thematic interjections that inevitably recall to mind “pictures of our disillusioned consciousness” (Nwoga 1990:7). For example his work titled No Water, a theme that draws from his 1981 exhibition held at Nsukka and Lagos, addresses the shortage of water in a country where insufficiency in all its ramifications would tragically define the state of the nation. Windmuller-Luna, (nd) remarks that "An informed reading of No Water reveals that the lack of water also functions as a metaphor for poverty, the uneven distribution of wealth, and the suffering of the poor." Another work by Udechukwu titled Road to Abuja (Figure 1) suggests the uncanny juxtaposition of unlikely itinerary of the rich and the poor towards Abuja. As at 1982 when Udechukwu produced this drawing, Abuja was not yet the capital of Nigeria. There was a gradual shift towards the new capital territory of Abuja. This journey, as Udechukwu depicts, involves the rich and the poor. But while the rich carry briefcases, a symbol of affluence, official corruption and widespread bribery, the poor are sketchily pictured in the hawker figures and congregated humanity. Udechukwu’s habit is to speak in gross factual terms, ignoring romantic and prevaricative utterances as well as intriguing if sometimes nonsensical statement, a style that has a highly politicized implication.
He expressed the optimism that the excesses of military dictatorship in Nigeria during the 1990s could be prevented by a rabidly conscious public willing to oppose the chains of oppression and dominant order. It seems, however, that he
found few or no disciples in his campaign and was eventually exiled in the United States later in the mid-1990s. But one thing was obvious, Udechukwu never allowed his sense of struggle to undermine his capacity for creative self-discovery. His exile never diminished his capacity for creative ingenuity. He charted a course that would, ultimately, define his enduring artistic iconography and ideology in the next decades. I will return to the concept of exile to show how both Anatsui and Udechukwu fit into the concept of ‘Ugo’ in Igbo philosophical worldview.

Like Udechukwu, Anatsui emerged under the corrupt leadership of Ghana’s post-independence despair. While Ghana struggled with the task of political modernization following independence in 1957, Anatsui felt that history would be a good premise to engage the unstable political climate that filled Ghanaian space at then. His eventual migration to Nigeria may be linked to a number of factors. For example, in the 1960s, the consequence of Kwame Nkrumah’s totalitarian rule was becoming increasingly unbearable. From the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s, Ghana faced remarkable economic decline with negative growth rates, hyperinflation, food shortages, massive unemployment, deterioration of pre-colonial infrastructure such as transportation and communication networks, weakening health and social welfare systems, and environmental degradation (Dzorgbo, 3). These instabilities made life unbearable for the average Ghanaian citizen. Millions fled the country as economic refugees. It is significant that Anatsui left Ghana at the height of this
After an economic crisis in the mid 1970s and that his migration to Nigeria has not been linked to any of the above economic crisis. Anatsui, himself has also connected his Broken Pots Series to myriad crises bedevilling the African continent. He asserts:

All of Africa is undergoing a period of turmoil. There is despondency, despair, bewilderment and frustration all over. It is to this predicament that my attempt in these works to use decadence and destruction as elements of creation, addresses a message. I hasten however to reiterate that regeneration and growth are not automatically consequent upon breakdown (Anatsui, 1982:5)

It is possible that Broken Pots, being Anatsui’s earliest works in Nigeria, suggests immediate memories of his Ghanaian homestead. The work is highly evocative of a renascent Ghana after collapse on several fronts of her developmental life. Micah Bump has argued that “during the early stages of Ghana’s economic and political downturn, several newly independent countries in the region capitalized on the country's woes and hired Ghanaian professionals to assist in their development. Emigration of teachers, doctors, administrators, and lawyers to Uganda, Botswana, Nigeria, and Zambia characterized these initial emigrant flows.” If Bump’s argument is anything to ponder then it is possible to conclude
that coming originally from Ghana, Anatsui may have preferred Nigeria then as an auspicious space to ventilate his creative energies and revisit his ideas about the historical predicaments of the African continent. Oguibe has also noted that Anatsui "also focused on the concepts of death, decay, and renewal, and their place in the beliefs and philosophies of various African cultures. For these concepts, namely fragilis and disintegration, and ultimately reformulation and regeneration, he chose the broken pot as a metaphor in his sculpture." (50)

While Oguibe connects Anatsui's import of broken pots to 'the beliefs and philosophies of various African cultures', however, the concept of 'turmoil,' 'despondency' and 'despair' Anatsui makes reference to, in relation to his motivation for embarking on the broken pots series, strongly infuses the work with an air of the political. Indeed this suggests that the series' ample intellection cannot be diminished by any vernacular imposition. Africa's colonial experience in itself entails the fragmentation and disintegration intended in Broken Pots. This underscores the theoretical exegesis of 'broken' as a metaphor to engage the contemporary political situation in Africa. The amorphous characterization of forms in the Broken Pots marks an invitation to re-evaluate the indeterminateness of everyday life in the African continent. As Oguibe (1998:50) argues that "a broken pot may never regain its wholeness in terms of its original form, but at the point of its fracture appears a new objectivity, a new entity" one is compelled to see this new objectivity in Africa's postcolonial experience that has
engendered a new form of fragmentation and evolvement that defeats the logic of 'finality'.

Political imaginations in Africa
Like Anatsui many African artists adopt discarded materials to pursue certain goals in their works yet the use of such materials to pursue political goals by Anatsui makes his work very significant in the current socio-political dispensation of Africa and the western world. While Anatsui’s early works in Nigeria during the 1970s bordered on aspects of his cultural roots in Ewe, his 1990s works concentrated on the political and economic re-imagination of the African continent through history. His ideas about colonial violence and postcolonial crises powerfully resonate with an air of critical novelty needed to launch his art into the global arena. His bottle cap works and sculptural clothe patterns eventually made spectacular claims to Africa’s relationship with capitalism and late global capitalism. His thematic direction suggests that history is needed to articulate our collective struggle as a people, and that our present is still troubled with ugly vestiges of the colonial past. Anatsui seems to downplay the political and economic state of his home country, especially at the time of his migration to Nigeria in 1975, perhaps because of his inward conviction that history has grave implication for the postcolonial. Convinced that his migration from Ghana to Nigeria has larger implications for the future success of his creativity, Ottenberg (1997:165) argues that Anatsui’s Migration Series makes multiple allusions to days of slavery,
Africans' numerous migrations in and out of Euro/America and within Africa, including, perhaps, “Anatsui’s own migration from Ghana to Nigeria, where he is quite at home, fully integrated into the Nsukka art scene, without rejecting his Ghanaian past and experience.”

Two concepts are necessary to re-emphasise the grave import of Anya Fulu Ugo at this time of Udechukwu and Anatsui’s career. First is the metaphor of exile and second is the concept of rarity. Reflecting on exile, Edward Said (2002) remarks that “The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever.” But on the contrary the Igbo would say that “Onye njenje ka Onye isi awo ulo ama ihe” translating as “A traveller is wiser than the old person who lives at home”. And to finally concur to this Igbo saying Said (2002) eventually concluded that “Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience”. It is natural to believe that Anatsui and Udechukwu have broken ‘barriers of thought and experience” in their attempt to invent new creative idiom for the art world. Kaplan (1987:76) has strongly suggested that “Isolation, solitude, alienation, and uncertainty are necessary preconditions for ‘great art’ since it is distance and perspective that produce vision”. One cannot dismiss the above postulations and we can conclude that Udechukwu and Anatsui’s alienation has produced a vision of a great art which, unknown to them, permanently transformed the world’s vision of the African continent. This point is strongly highlighted by Okeke-Agulu (2017:12) who argues thus:
Inspired by the pan Africanist visions of men like Nnamdi Azikiwe and Kwame Nkrumah who saw continental Africa as the collective home of all Africans, both Udechukwu and Anatsui - and a generation of their own students - reimagined the notion of artistic and cultural heritage to transcend the confines of the ethnos or nation state. In other words, all African cultures were fair game for reclamation by the continent’s artists faced with the task of inventing new, contemporary forms that satisfied their need to assert their postcolonial subjectivity in an age of intense neo imperial globalisation.

No doubt, Okeke-Agulu captured the wider significance of Anatsui and Udechukwu's works richly encapsulated in their imagination of Africa as a space unbounded by the parochial prescriptions of the state. Both artists' aesthetic doctrines are no more perverse than their ideas about the state of the postcolonial and its crucial place in the global imaginary. This ability to transcend the provincial is illustrated in Anatsui's work titled *The Last Time I wrote to you about Africa*, a highly political work where found wood are assembled to invoke the precarious subalternity imposed on Africa by multiple forces. In the work ten large reddish-brown lumps of wood and twenty
pieces with tree limbs were thrown haphazardly into the boxes. It depicts figures of women and children walking back home with firewood stacked on their heads accompanied by a fallen figure of a woman and a child. This work may embody the historical turmoil Africa experienced at the hands of external forces. The choice of women and children may resonate with the idea of the vulnerable, the immediate victims of crises or the last recipient of economic alms, in the event of disaster in the continent. Anatsui may have employed wood to speak to the destruction of the wild, the wood symbolizing a life giver and at the same time lending a prelude to the process of economic and social devastation. The supposition of wood as a substitute to life, whereby wood is the metonymy for the embattled environment, and its metaphorical symbolism as something that can be cut or destroyed draws attention to that concept of brokenness initially pursued by Anatsui in his broken pots series. The fallen human figures, although seen as ordinary wooden object placed on the floor, reinforces the idea that "when a wood is cut it suggests a broken system that may not be recovered" (Anatsui 1982). At the same time when humans are represented by wood, it suggests that wood, like humans, is vulnerable to death inasmuch as the fallen woman and child invoke the idea of postcolonial ruins that define most African societies which Anatsui himself pursues in his series.

**The political options of stylistics and materiality**

There is a highly political message attached to materiality in the African artistic context. Historical misrepresentations have
attempted to ascribe specific materials to African artists. Wood was mainly believed by early anthropologists to constitute the major sculptural materials of African artists while painting was not considered a vocation indigenous to African artists. The politics of materials and aesthetic vocabularies has featured prominently in international biennales where African artists were selected by Western curators based on an essentialist understanding of 'Africa'. For example such stereotypes had been effectively re-echoed in such previous exhibitions as *Primitive Negro Art: Chiefly from the Belgian Congo* (1923) in the Brooklyn Museum of New York curated by Stewart Culin, *Africa: The Art of a Continent* held at the Solomon R. Guggenheim museum in New York, (1996) and curated by Tom Philips, *Magiciens de la Terre* held at Editions du Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1989 with curator as Jean-Hubert Martin, *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art* held at Center for African Art, New York in 1991 curated by Susan Vogel in collaboration with Ima Ebong among others. Indeed most of these exhibitions revolved around the much contested debate of ‘otherness’ and the West’s efforts at entrenching the ‘other stories’ especially from the standpoint of the outsider (The West). In effect, many curatorial assumptions about a supposed rational character of African artistic productivity were complacent simplifications that could not allow us to see the aesthetic sophistication of artists like Udechukwu and Anatsui.

Beyond the attempt by certain African artists to corroborate the activities of such stereotypical curators,
Anatsui and Udechukwu seemed to have primarily defined their creative mission as that which must transcend the narrow prescriptions of 'cultural Africa' to embrace a political as well cosmopolitan ethos. Ogbechie (2010) argues that "unlike many contemporary African artists whose styles adopt, adapt, and reflect prevailing preferences of New York contemporary art, Anatsui's art contributes a style to the global context that is resolutely African in its origins and vision of contemporary art." For Udechukwu, formal symbolism has never been consciously pursued to reflect the provincial rather African thematic concerns have always been addressed using an eclectic style that may not allow for any stereotypical connotation. In effect both artists understand the political options of being an artist that defies ethnic classification.

Oguibe (1992: 66) notes that "Anatsui and Udechukwu, among the AKA artists, show an inclination to combine a holistic attitude to traditional design motifs and principles with modernist interpretation which presents very direct links with their aesthetic references". At some point, Udechukwu himself observes that he "deploys the aesthetic strategies of Igbo Uli and the linear symbolism of Nsibidi writing for a largely satirical exposition of the African condition, but with implication that goes beyond Africa to embrace humanity in general" (Oguibe 56). For Udechukwu this is a cosmopolitan vision that transcends Nigeria and even Africa to embrace the entire human race. This eclecticism in essence responds to Udechukwu's disposition to appropriate local artistic resources into modernist ethos. He seems to articulate a pertinently
fashionable self notwithstanding entrenched stereotypical understanding of local artistic repertoire in the global discourse. Indeed as Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu put it "As Nigerian artists travel outside the shore of the country, they negotiate 'multiple cultural systems and temporalities, invent new imaginaries, fashion new ecosystems of production and reception." (23). In line with Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, no doubt, Udechukwu's thematic concerns are strongly infused with a sense of the political in the postcolonial yet his creative style strongly bears the potency of a globalized idiosyncrasy.

Indeed one needs to reflect how Udechukwu and Anatsui imagine Africa as a political space where the mechanism of art could be deployed to resolve the knotty issues surrounding philosophical dialogue and instrumental action. By a combination of politics and aesthetics, both artists attempt to rescue a notion of art practice that was defined by its very attachment to the stereotypical.

Oguibe further observes that "Anatsui and Udechukwu's works provide a conceptual and stylistic framework for younger artists who are today inclined to appreciate these same models through an understanding or misunderstanding of these artists' conceptual parameters." Given Oguibe's observation it is evident that both artists can be theorised in the context of the political and how their lives also influenced that of their best students most of whom are exiled in the West. For example, Olu Oguibe's style was a highly political option that could have been influenced by Udechukwu's. Oguibe's style possibly caused his exile to the UK during the height of military
dictatorship in Nigeria. He was declared wanted by the Ibrahim Babangida Junta because of his singular decision to critique the ills of dictatorship. He was exiled in London where he studied at the School of African and Oriental Studies before migrating to the United States where he lives till date. He recently resigned his position of professorship at the University of Connecticut to engage in full time studio practice. Chika Okeke-Agulu was sacked along with Professor Obiora Udechukwu from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka because of their involvement in the academic Union's struggles against the destabilization caused by the military junta in the universities. He was exiled, along with Obiora Udechukwu, in the 1990s, in the United States where he is currently a professor in Princeton University. Some other artists embarked on self-imposed exile because of either economic reasons or other personal reasons. The significance of Udechukwu and Anatsui in this context is to evaluate their career in relation to a generation of artists that comes after them.

Udechukwu, Anatsui and the lives of their students invoke the political options of style and materiality that would eventually translate to the artists' fraught relationship with the Nigerian state. Both Udechukwu and Anatsui's lives underscore the struggles for the survival of the artist in Nigeria for they were, in varying degrees, at the vanguard of the move to redefine the foundational premise of the visual arts discipline in Nigeria. Again, both artists' lives suggest that exile could be a prerequisite towards great art: Anatsui leaving Ghana in a time of heightened economic crisis and Udechukwu
leaving Nigeria in a time of unbearable political crises emanating from military dictatorships. These experiences have shaped and moulded these artists’ great art towards the political.

In terms of rarity, both Udechukwu and Anatsui fit into the concept of ‘Ugo’ musing encapsulated in Igbo philosophical maxim. Ugo symbolizes, in this context, a noble one who is rarely seen. Both of them have long left their different countries: Anatsui left Ghana in 1975, Udechukwu left Nigeria in 1997. Both have achieved international acclaim, not by slavish emulation of western artistic paradigm but by maintaining a consistent and focused creative idiosyncrasy; both have pursued similar humanistic pre-occupation in their creative oeuvres: their works, at one time or the other, bore terrible burden of trauma, and loss, arguably a premise they wished to question what Hudita Mustafa describes as “postcolonial ruins”. For example, while Anatsui has employed materials sourced from his local environment to comment on the complexities of Africa’s relentless struggle with western capitalist systems, Odutokun notes that:

Through his works, Udechukwu symbolizes the struggle of the quintessential African avant-garde artist; the struggle to realise in visual metaphor the pains, the joys and the dreams of an emergent continent ravaged by want and threatened by domineering cultural and
economic forces and hoping, perhaps, that through such realization he might sensitise the citizenry to the grimness of their reality (1993:10).

The question is whether Udechukwu succeeded, as Odutokun implies, in sensitizing the morbid citizenry to the grimness of their reality. This is still debatable. It is possible to argue that most art historians have not sufficiently theorized the significance of Udechukwu’s tutelage in, and Anatsui’s migration to Nsukka especially with regard to the new methodological direction in the artistic tradition of the Nsukka School. But a number of successful artists have pointed to Udechukwu and Anatsui as their immediate influence. For example Bright Eke, Uche Onyishi, Nnenna Okore, among others have given credit to Anatsui for their radical breakthrough in the mastery of their medium. Tayo Adenaike, Olu Oguibe, Chika Okeke, Krydz Ikwuemesi, Sylvester Ogbechie, George Odoh, among others, have been influenced by Udechukwu’s stylistic brevity. Perhaps war memories informed Udechukwu’s ideas about dark, sombre colours and his lines that are characterised by anguish, impoverishment, devastation, emptiness, depletion and suffering, some of the misfortunes that would still persist in contemporary Nigerian psycho-social landscape. Udechukwu’s influence on the later generation of Nsukka artists can never be adequately quantified.
This is a better time to apparently discuss Anatsui and Udechukwu’s stylistic development especially as their influences on the artistic trajectory of the Nsukka School is somewhat indecisive. Both artists have overstretched the potency of their creative techniques and medium: For Udechukwu lines later became attenuated and assumed a resilient force needed to disaggregate the powerful yoke of a painterly intuition. For Anatsui wood would eventually revisit the teleological narration of Africa’s underdevelopment while giving way to waste materials that would synthesize Africa’s collective struggle for political and economic emancipation. Anatsui achieves an expressive extravagance that calls to mind the hard fact that clothes washed and spread to dry under the African sun would eventually find repose in the gallery spaces of the west. Anatsui reminds the West that African clothes hung on their Galleries are highly political and symbolic of the multiple narratives clothes can assume in the discourse of socio-economic and cultural interdependence. Perhaps, these African wrappers are a retort to the mercantile importation of textile fabrics into West Africa from Manchester. However while the textiles are imported from Manchester into west Africa to dominate Africa’s textile economy, the same textiles have been symbolically reconstructed into wrapper and taken to the West where they can now answer to the tensions and contradictions of cultural re-production and regeneration. This suggests that radical creative ideas defy monopoly (this time western monopoly). The inherent rhetorics and postulations to
Anatsui’s clothe metaphor are endless and space may threaten further extrapolations.

**Conclusion**

In this essay Anya Fulu Ugo exhibition serves as a vehicle to revisit the historic impact of Udechukwu and Anatsui in the art Department of the University of Nigeria Nsukka. The essay has shown how Udechukwu and Anatsui's art were shaped by the political and economic circumstances of their different countries. Udechukwu and Anatsui would eventually embrace a more political and cosmopolitan vision in their style. For Udechukwu that reflected in the formal analysis of lines reminiscent of 20th century Euro-American modernists. In effect, this style defeats the teleological narration of Africa's artistic productivity as mere craft, by 20th century Euro-American curators. For Anatsui his ideas would become more eclectic in critiquing the ills of global capital through the transformation of everyday objects into yet other objects that bear critical resonances of Africa's cultural, economic and political encounter with the the global south.

**References**


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