

CRISIS IN THE POSTCOLONY

THIS FINAL CHAPTER focuses on the work of Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko, who combined the search for new formal modes to characterize their defining work with reflections on the deteriorating political conditions of the Nigerian nation. In my view, the postindependence political crises, the military intervention in 1966, and the civil war all adversely affected the sense of cultural nationalism that had earlier inspired members of the Art Society and others of that generation in Ibadan and Lagos. In other words, the resurgence of high-stakes regionalism in the postindependence era left its mark on the art and culture sector, the most obvious case being the rise of Mbari Enugu and the unprecedented political art produced by Okeke and Nwoko between 1965 and 1968. By emphasizing the work of these two artists in this chapter, I do not wish merely to highlight their status as leading artists of their generation of postcolonial modernists; rather, I contend that their work during these years marked a critical moment when postcolonial modernism moved beyond the assertion of artistic autonomy or engagement with

formal problems to directly confront the pathologies of newly independent Nigeria. Seen through the prism of the critical poetry of their friends Chris Okigbo and Wole Soyinka and by reconnecting the concerns of this generation of modernists to Nigeria's colonial history and to the early years of its postcolonial experience, this body of work brings the narrative of this book to a fitting conclusion.

End of a Dream

Soon after Nigeria became a parliamentary republic in 1963, it began to experience tremendous stress; its constituent regional polities and ethnic nationalities, riven by inter- and intraparty conflicts, contested for power at the center. Although these tensions were already evident during the late colonial period and had led to the regionalization of the decolonization process, they became more intense after independence with the exit of the common enemy, the British Empire. These political crises brought heightened disillusionment and uncertainty about the national project and created mutual distrust among the major ethnic nationalities and fear of the latter by the minor groups anxious not to be overwhelmed in their own regions. The invariable result was greater assertion of ethnic and religious differences, which in turn catalyzed political contestations that troubled an already weak sense of national unity.

Mutual suspicion over tactics and motives among the major ethnic groups and their allied political parties was manifested, to cite a few important examples, in the rejection of national census numbers in 1962/63, the federal government's declaration of a state of emergency in the western region during the same period, and massive irregularities during the 1964/65 federal and regional elections.¹ These crises provided further justification for military coups and political assassinations in January and July 1966, which in turn led to massacres of Igbo civilians in the northern region that September and the civil war of 1967–70.²

Nigeria's postcolonial predicament had wide-ranging effects on art. For one, the cultural nationalism that had inspired members of the Art Society and their colleagues in Ibadan and Lagos was replaced during the middle and late 1960s by doubt and angst about the role of art and culture in the independent but increasingly distressed nation. Second, anxieties about the fate of project Nigeria led to the failure of the government's dreams for robust and effective national art and cultural institutions (led by the Nigerian Council for the Advancement of Art and Culture, Lagos (NCAAC), and the Lagos

cultural elite (represented by FSAH, the Federal Society of Arts and Humanities). Third, whereas the thrill of political independence did not quite motivate many artists to produce work in praise of the new nation, they were quick to anticipate and confront, as this chapter relates, the sobering realities of the unraveling postcolonial body politic.

Mbari Enugu

In 1963 Uche Okeke moved his cultural center, originally established in 1958 in Kafanchan (a northern Nigerian town where his family lived), to Enugu, the capital of the eastern region. That same year, a group of eastern Nigerian artists, writers, and playwrights, motivated by the desire for an effective platform for advancing a specifically regional cultural agenda, formed the Mbari Enugu. They were led in this venture by the Nigerian dramatist John Ekwere (life dates unknown). Within the next two years, this new alliance made possible unprecedented, dynamic creative interaction between a community of contemporary dramatists, musical performers, visual artists, writers, and critics from eastern Nigeria (figures 7.1–7.3).³ Though conceived as a laboratory for ambitious and experimental art, music, theater, and literature, the government expected Mbari to catalyze a renaissance in the region's contemporary arts and culture.

As it turned out, the expectation that Mbari Enugu would spur the development of the region's culture and arts became urgent when the eastern region, as the Republic of Biafra, seceded from Nigeria in May 1967. Many Mbari artists, writers, and dramatists, together with their counterparts returning from other parts of Nigeria, joined the Arts Section of the Biafran Directorate of Propaganda and took part in cultural workshops directed by the Nigerian poet and novelist Gabriel Okara (b. 1921). The Arts Section was led by Uche Okeke, who was assisted by Ogbonnaya Nwagbara, Okeke's former Art Society colleague. At this point the goals of postcolonial modernism in (eastern) Nigeria changed from inventing an aesthetic ideology informed by the experience of political sovereignty to supporting the young republic. While a full account of art in Biafra, particularly the work of artists and writers in the cultural workshops, must await a systematic study, the remarkable transformation of the work of modernism in eastern Nigeria is strikingly reminiscent of the drastic paradigm change in Euro-American avant-garde art inaugurated—as the art historian Benjamin Buchloh has argued—by the Russian constructivists in the early years of the Russian Revolution.⁴



Figure 7.1 Uche Okeke (seated right) and Lawrence Emeka (center), Mbari Enugu. Photo, courtesy Uche Okeke / Asele Institute, Nimo.



Figure 7.2 Scene from the Eastern Nigeria Theatre Group production of Andre Obe's *Noah*, showing set and costumes designed by Uche Okeke, 1963. Photo, courtesy Uche Okeke / Asele Institute, Nimo.



Figure 7.3 Visitors at the opening of exhibition of work by Oseloka Osadebe (second from right) at Mbari Enugu, ca. 1964. Photo, courtesy Uche Okeke / Asele Institute, Nimo.

Although Mbari Enugu was a logical outcome of the inaugural gesture at Ibadan by a new generation of artists and writers committed to developing artistic and literary modernism within the context of sovereign Nigeria and Africa, I must emphasize that Mbari Enugu is also important to the narrative of this book precisely because its existence was also symptomatic of the end of the euphoria of national independence. Whereas political independence and its implied freedoms inspired the Art Society, Mbari Ibadan, and the consolidating Lagos art world to search for and debate the meaning and relevance of national art and culture, ensuing crises in the body politic by the mid-1960s stifled the nationalist thrust of developments in art, as the result of growing doubts about the viability of a unified Nigeria. Reflecting on the general trend across the West African region, the poet and critic Peter Thomas put it this way:

hard on the heels of the initial euphoria of liberation from the white man's rule has come, first, disillusionment with new black masters acting like white men in disguise (or worse), and then bloody massacres or a series of coups that leave the country more ravaged, weary, and sick at heart than it was before.⁵

Mbari Enugu also casts in higher relief the precariousness of the national imaginary that was only halfheartedly invoked in the struggle for political independence and was then almost immediately pushed to the sidelines of postindependence Nigerian political and cultural practice. As we have seen, political engagement by many Nigerian modernists, from Ben Enwonwu to the Art Society, often involved a critique of colonial ideology's disastrous impact on the subjectivity of the colonized rather than depiction of ostensibly political themes in support of overarching national myths. The events of the mid-1960s drastically changed the subject matter of modern Nigeria art: it became stridently critical of the sociopolitical life of the postcolonial state.

Art Prophesying War: The Work of Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko in the Late 1960s

Fanfare of drums, wooden bells: iron chapter

And our dividing airs are gathered home.

— Christopher Okigbo, from “Thunder Can Break”

I begin this last section of the book with two opening lines of “Thunder Can Break,” the first poem in Christopher Okigbo's collection *Path of Thunder*. I do so not just to acknowledge this poet's remarkable lyric power but

precisely because these lines telegraphically capture, as only poetry can, the fragmentation of the postcolony. Okigbo was a founding member of Mbari Ibadan, and with Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe was an exemplar of the generation of writers who, like their counterparts in the visual arts, engaged in debates about form and content in postcolonial literary modernism. As the literary scholar Obi Nwakanma has noted, the sense of boundless freedom symbolized by political independence inspired the formal experiments and thematic focus of Okigbo's inaugural collection, *Heavensgate*, completed in 1961.⁶ But the political upheavals that began in western Nigeria around 1963 turned Okigbo (who sympathized with the travails of the opposition party leader Obafemi Awolowo) and other Nigerian writers from "mandarins to militants," in the words of the critic Ben Obumsele.⁷ Scholars have quarreled over meaning in Okigbo's famously cryptic poems, with their allusions to dizzyingly diverse European, Asian, and African traditions and their eclectic borrowings from classical and contemporary poets, but there is no denying that his *Path of Thunder* poems, written in 1965 and 1966, are compelling works of prophetic vision. In them we simultaneously encounter the journey of a poet toward resolution of an inner personal journey through the sheer symbolic power of the word and confront a terrifying prophesy of a nation sliding into chaos, horrific ethnic cleansing, and war. Okigbo, as the literary scholar Dubem Okafor rightly noted, "is able to bring together, for compressed poetic treatment, the strands that constitute the messy conjuncture that was postindependence Nigeria and Africa."⁸ Two memorable lines from the poem "Come Thunder" capture this:

The arrows of God tremble at the gates of light
The drums of curfew pander to a dance of death.⁹

If Okigbo's *Path of Thunder* prophesied or at least anticipated the cataleptic trauma suffered by a nation at the brink of civil war, Wole Soyinka dissected and analyzed the political crises as they unfolded in his own poetry and prose. In the suite of poems "October '66," written in the wake of the first military coup (January 1966) and the July counter coup that precipitated the mass killing of eastern Nigerians living in the north, Soyinka chronicled or, rather, reflected upon the violence perpetrated on his fellow citizens in haunting lines. The events of 1966, as his poems seem to affirm, dramatically closed off any residual hope of salvaging the body politic buffeted by the harsh realities of its postcolonial condition. The desolation of the cosmic and natural realms invoked, for instance, by the first stanza of Soyinka's "Harvest of Hate" is total, yet it powerfully conveys a sense of failure and utter disruption of sociopolitical normative order:

So now the sun moves to die at mid-morning
 And laughter wilts on the lips of wine
 The fronds of palm are savaged to a bristle
 And rashes break on kernelled oil.¹⁰

What do these dark poems have to do with the work of Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko? I want to suggest that there is a remarkable correspondence between the prophetic and analytical tenor of Christopher Okigbo's and Wole Soyinka's mid-1960s poetry and Uche Okeke's and Demas Nwoko's work of the same period.¹¹ Not only were they friends and colleagues at Mbari Ibadan, but they all participated in the debate earlier in the decade for an appropriate language of postcolonial literature and art. They also shared the devastating experience of bearing witness to the crumbling of the sovereign, imagined community, the making of which, just a few years earlier, had inspired their formal experiments and conceptual concerns. Like many among their generation in Nigeria and around the continent, they were soon convinced that the task of the postcolonial modernist artist or writer lay not only in developing a new visual or formal language but also, often as a next step, in deploying this new form to the critical examination of the postcolonial condition.

Let us then look closely at the works of Okeke and Nwoko and specifically consider how each of them constituted a prophetic statement and critical commentary about the crises of the late 1960s in the Nigerian post-colony. In doing this cross-disciplinary comparative analysis, I do not wish to reprise a cultural studies critique of the cult of medium specificity associated with mainstream Western modernism; rather, my point is to acknowledge their shared artistic visions and emphasize the intellectual context—embellized by the Mbari Club—from which their work emerged. The purpose is also to insist on and return to the idea that runs through this book: that the work of Okeke and Nwoko was part of a postcolonial discourse with which the political, intellectual, and cultural elite was engaged during the first decade of Nigeria's independence.

As we saw in chapter 5, Uche Okeke's most important work in the first years after Zaria was his Uli-inspired drawings on paper. In 1965, however, he made a bold move; or rather, he returned with unprecedented vigor and confidence to *painting* after internalizing and going beyond the formal lessons of Uli design and forms. What is different, apart from their distinctive style, is the scale of Okeke's new paintings. Given the furor that Erhabor Emokpae's large-scale works caused in Lagos and Jimo Akolo's equally large paintings caused in London, Okeke's new works might have reflected his ambition for grand pictorial statements that would further secure his posi-



Figure 7.4 Uche Okeke, *Crucifixion*, gouache on paper, 1962. Artist's collection. Photo, Obiora Udechukwu. © Uche Okeke.

tion as a major painter of his generation. Such modestly scaled gouaches as *Crucifixion* and *Primeval Forest* (1962; figures 7.4 and 7.5), and drawings of the previous years, it seems, were no longer stylistically adequate, their format too modest to convey the big ideas underlying the new work. The 1965 paintings are thus remarkable in terms of both their formal ambition and their layered, indirect, yet compellingly strong political content. In several of them, moreover, there is a dissipation of the earlier anxiety about the cultural identity of his painting style; rather than continue to invoke the lyrical poetry of Uli line, the newer canvases reveal short, nervous strokes, heavily worked surfaces, and awkwardly drawn figures. All these elements are manifest in the paintings as signs of the disorder lurking on the sociopolitical horizon.

Although in some of Okeke's 1965 oil paintings, such as *Nativity* and *Adam and Eve* (figures 7.6 and 7.7), he returned to these recurrent Christian themes—the moment of expulsion of the primordial couple from Eden and the beginning of the Christian redemption story—the more compelling works deal ostensibly with Igbo mythology and metaphysics, as well as with real and fictional Igbo sociopolitical history. *Oyoyo*, a major work of the period, is easily the most significant of Okeke's metaphysical paintings (figure 7.8). Already in 1963, while still in Germany, he had been contem-



Figure 7.5 Uche Okeke, *Primeval Forest*, gouache on paper, 1962. Photo, ArtHouse Contemporary Ltd., Lagos.
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Figure 7.6 Uche Okeke, *Nativity*, oil on board, 1965. Artist's collection. Photo, the author.
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plating Igbo metaphysics and the possibility of using it as a source for deep meditative works of art. Writing to Nwoko, he stated that he had “gone a lot more metaphysical. . . . I have worked on the theme of Oyoyo and I think there is rich material for drama of “‘life unborn.’”¹² Oyoyo (also called *ogbanje* in Igbo and *abiku* in Yoruba) refers to certain children who die prematurely only to return to the same mothers several times because their ties to the world of the unborn—bonds normally severed at birth—remain willfully unbroken.¹³ The prevalence of and enduring belief in the *ogbanje* phenomenon, despite the spread of Christianity and Islam, is attested to by its representation in modern literature, theater, and art, the best-known *ogbanje* character being, perhaps, Okonkwo’s daughter Ezinma in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.¹⁴ In turning to such subject matter, therefore, Okeke, like many of his contemporaries, contemplated an aspect of indigenous cultures at odds with the Christian as well as the modern secular worldview. Oyoyo, in a way, marks his return to the persistent question of cultural conflict in societies that, as a result of the colonial encounter, had come under the hegemony of Christian Europe and its cultures.¹⁵

In this painting, several awkwardly drawn and deformed figures cower behind towering, ancient trees in the deep shadows of the forest, their atten-



Figure 7.7 Uche Okeke, *Adam and Eve*, oil on board, 1965. Artist's collection. Photo, the author. © Uche Okeke.



Figure 7.8 Uche Okeke, *Oyoyo*, oil on board, 1965. Artist's collection. Photo, the author. © Uche Okeke.

tion focused on the *ogbanje* figure rendered in brilliant yellow, with her back turned to the viewer as though she stands at the threshold of the worlds of the living and the dead.¹⁶ Except for the figure squatting in the foreground with its hands covering its face, the others gaze with curiosity at the *ogbanje*. The preternatural light of this nocturnal scene, along with the fawning, spectral figures, conveys a feeling of tragic, inexorable metaphysical drama that the viewer—standing in for the distraught and powerless family of the *ogbanje*—is condemned to watch. This onerous burden, it seems to me, is the key to the covert meaning of this work.

While Okeke did not explicitly make this connection, it seems—here I rely on the salience of the theory of intentional fallacy—given the other works he was making at this time, that *Oyoyo* might in fact also be about Nigeria. I am thinking here of the newly born nation that had suddenly developed signs of sickness and, by 1965, could either miraculously turn around toward the living or simply continue on its death-bound journey, lured by bewildering powerful forces, just like the *ogbanje* figure in *Oyoyo*. The yellow figure in the foreground is, to put it differently, poised at the threshold of being, simultaneously pulled by incommensurate opposing forces of coherence and disintegration, of life and death. This idea of (the nation as) the born-to-die figure implicated in multiple cycles of hope and despair resonates with the last sequence of “Elegy for Alto,” Okigbo’s final poem in *Path of Thunder*, written just about the time Okeke painted *Oyoyo*:

An old star departs, leaves us here on the shore
Gazing heavenward for a new star approaching;
The new star appears, foreshadows its going
Before a going and coming that goes on forever. . . .¹⁷

To be sure, the literary scholar Mounira Soliman has argued that the *ogbanje* phenomenon has been deployed by West African writers—who mine its implied concept of reincarnation and its antagonism of existential orders—to “project different socio-political agendas at different times in the history of their countries.”¹⁸ In Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1991), Ade, a friend of Azaro, the *ogbanje* and central character in the novel, likened fictional Nigeria to the *ogbanje/abiku*, which, “Like the spirit child, keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It will become strong.”¹⁹ But where Soliman locates the political ideology of Wole Soyinka’s *abiku* in the tension between collectivity or the tradition of the family (representing the body politic) and individualism or the self-determination of the *abiku*, Okeke’s *ogbanje* is the nation itself that must decide either to return to the sensate world of

familial love or go to the chaotic “death” realm of discarnate, troubled, yet alluring spirits. It is this *abiku*, this nation, that Okri sought to rehabilitate or reimagine in *The Famished Road* as Azaro who, having refused to return to the land of the dead as his friend Ade did, chose life. Okri, so to speak, re-composed the *ogbanje* in Okeke’s *Oyoyo* by turning her back to face her family and the worldly desires, passions, and troubles that come with that decision. Thus, where Okeke’s is a dark vision of Nigeria of the 1960s teetering on the precipice, Okri’s ex-post-facto perspective on that period at least allowed the *ogbanje/abiku*/nation a chance to embark on an arduous journey of self-rehabilitation. Where Okeke projects a coming despair, Okri dreams the possibilities of hope for a nation haunted by its past and present realities. These are alternative visions of 1960s Nigeria.

While *Oyoyo* constitutes a metaphysical statement on the status of the nation in the mid-1960s, Okeke’s paintings *Conflict (After Achebe)* and *Aba Revolt (Women’s War)* engage fictional and documented historical archives as if to suggest that they hold the key to the political destiny of (eastern) Nigeria. Painted with a palette of somber earth colors, *Conflict* depicts the scene in Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) in which powerful Egwugwu masks and their attendants converge on the Umuofia village church, as the mortified Reverend Smith and his interpreter stand between the surging crowd and the soon-to-be-destroyed church (figure 7.9). The confrontation ostensibly began when the Christian zealot, Enoch, unmasked one of the Egwugwu. Enoch’s crime, the symbolic murder of an ancestral spirit, was considered a great abomination among the Igbo. Within the narrative context of the novel, however, it was also a signal act of violence perpetrated by a convert to the new alien religion. Beyond that, it marked for the fictional Igbo community the beginning of an impending cultural and political disaster that was sure to follow the incursion of Christianity and colonial control. In deciding to raze the church moments after the brief confrontation depicted in Okeke’s painting, the gathered Egwugwu and Umuofia elders hoped that this culturally sanctioned act of counterviolence would make whole the desecrated land and restore social order in the town. Still, their hopes came to naught. In response to the act of violence, the British district commissioner, following the familiar text of imperial action, arrested Umuofia’s elders and imposed a heavy fine on the community, thereby forcibly pacifying the town, just as the empire did to other African societies in the early days of colonialism.²⁰

Although *Conflict* is based on a work of fiction, it invokes a moment in imagined history in which heroic action achieved immediate but temporary

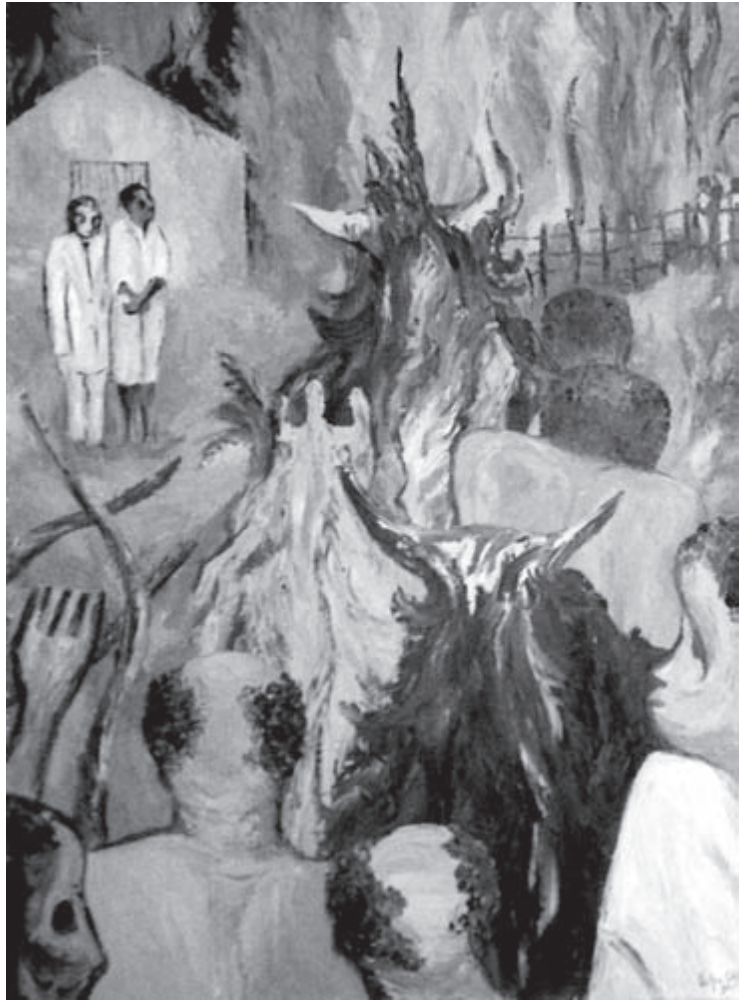


Figure 7.9 Uche Okeke, *Conflict (After Achebe)*, oil on board, 1965. Photo, the author. © Uche Okeke.

resolution. That moment would soon be followed by a more devastating display of even greater violence by the invading alien culture and regime. Although Okeke had already represented this subject in an Uli-inspired drawing published in the 1962 African Writers Series edition of *Things Fall Apart*, his ambitious return in 1965 to this particular moment of conflict in the novel, by way of his 1965 painting, is significant.²¹ One way to make sense of this choice is to suppose that although the people of Umuofia lost the war with the colonizers, the one raging instance during which the community demonstrated its refusal to surrender its freedom without a fight presented to Okeke a model of collective action for a society whose survival is threatened by overwhelming outside forces. In that climactic episode, the people of Umuofia courageously provide a firm answer to the haunting question that Okigbo asked in the fifth section of his “Lament of the Silent Sisters”:

“And how does one say no in thunder?”²² In painting this subject, therefore, Okeke memorializes that singular imaginary act of popular resistance and returns it, if only symbolically, to the oral history of the Igbo people, whose complex sociopolitical organization and practices Achebe had reconstructed through the fictive narrative of *Things Fall Apart*.

But if Okeke’s *Conflict* was based on a work of fiction, *Aba Revolt (Women’s War; 1965)* reimagines an actual historical event; namely, the revolutionary action in 1929 by women in eastern Nigeria against the colonial regime (figure 7.10). When Okeke conceived his picture, contemporary political developments had all but eclipsed the momentousness of the Women’s War, yet the event nevertheless had become a popular episode in modern Igbo folklore. Described in colonial literature as the Aba Riots, as if to reinforce the false stereotype of Africans as unruly, the phrase was also likely to elide the fact that the first major organized challenge to the well-established southern Nigerian colonial regime was conceived and promulgated by women. Such a mass revolt nevertheless spoke to the uniqueness of Igbo society, particularly the power wielded by Igbo women, at least until the institution of a modern patriarchal society.²³ Okeke’s pictorial account is in fact an exercise in visual mythopoesis, which is made obvious by the depiction of the leader of the women in the left foreground as Nwanyi Mgbolod’ala, a legendary Igbo Amazon remembered for her powerful, gigantic breasts. This conflation of characters not only connects modern Igbo political history to a deep past, it also amplifies and elevates the action of the leader of the Women’s War to the status of myth.²⁴ That is to say, Okeke extends the significance of that event beyond its temporal specificity and instead proposes it as a model of ethical and radical action for all time. To be sure, the scene depicted in *Conflict* presents the Women’s War of 1929 as a heroic, even if ultimately unsuccessful, last-ditch refusal by Igbo women—recalling the Egwugwu-led confrontation by the Umuofia people—to hand over their destinies to the “invading” Europeans without a fight. In this sense, these pictures, seen against the background of heady regional politics of the 1960s, come across as subtle yet powerful enunciations of Igbo nationalism that, a few years later, would catalyze the Biafran secession from Nigeria.²⁵

Compositionally, the monumental figures of the protesting women occupy a shallow pictorial space, effectively conveying a sense of impending, even if briefly frozen, violent action. Their spiked hair, contorted expressions, and powerfully deformed bodies and the missile-shaped left arm of the women’s leader (to the left), combined with the crude, expressionist brushwork and the accents of flaming red paint all over the picture, coalesce in a disturbing and compelling image. Okeke’s intention, it seems quite obvious,



Figure 7.10 Uche Okeke, *Aba Revolt (Women's War)*, oil on board, 1965. Artist's collection. Photo, the author.
© Uche Okeke.

was not to create a pretty picture; rather, the energy evoked by the facture and style of the painting comes close to articulating the dangerous powers unleashed by the irate women.

The deployment of naked women's bodies in this work complicates, though it does not refute, any claims one might make for it as a history painting. While ethnographically plausible, given that Igbo women routinely wore only waist wrappers in the early twentieth century, Okeke more crucially invoked a powerful imagery that may not have been mobilized in the Women's War of 1929 but which is well known in many African cultures as a sublime biopolitical weapon: the naked woman's body.²⁶ Generally described as the curse of nakedness, the grave flaunting of especially postmenopausal naked bodies is considered by the Igbo the ultimate means of seeking justice, particularly when the community's well-being is threatened by the nefarious action of (usually male) individuals or corporate entities. The logic seems to be that such demonstrations remind everyone of the connection between the procreative power of the woman's body and the survival of human populations; between the autohumiliated, exposed body and the rupturing of cosmic order, which can result in death or madness for the victim of the curse. Clearly then, Okeke's painting links the Women's War, perhaps even argues that its effectiveness must be connected, to the curse of nakedness, which remains today one of the rarest, most dreaded expressions of collective outrage by African women on behalf of their communities.

It is tempting, moreover, to think that Okeke used the performance of the aggressive and violent Mgbedike-type masquerade, traditionally owned by warrior-grade men in the north-central Igbo area (or even the more terrifying and ritually potent Egwugwu), as a visual model for this painting. The large beastly masks, fortified with powerful charms and often wielding weapons that could be used against rivals or irreverent spectators—as memorably presented in Herbert M. Cole's documentary video *Beauty and the Beast*—embody the untamable power of wild spirits and animals.²⁷ In their study of Igbo masks, Herbert Cole and Chike Aniakor have noted that these masks, “as personifications of strength, bravery, and virility, project the ideals of middle-age men in a theatrical context.”²⁸ But let us emphasize that the aggressive power projected by the Mgbedike-type masks in this painting is equally a theatrical surrogate for the crucial work of the age-grade associations that owned such masks in the past, which is primarily to wage war and protect the community. Thus the symbolic, visual, and dramatic gestures associated with the mask are supreme displays, a kind of dramaturgical memorialization of a community's confidence in its warrior grades

long after it has lost its sovereignty to the modern nation-state and well after such indigenous military institutions transformed into social clubs known for their masked displays and community development projects. It is in these masking and similar dance events that we can find the Igbo performative iconography of war, and it is to them, it seems to me, that Okeke sourced the dramatic tenor—achieved through the bulky figuration, the intimidating gesture of raised arms, and the surge of closely packed figures toward the picture plane—of *Aba Revolt* (*Women's War*).

In conflating the curse of nakedness associated with the biopolitics of women's bodies and the aggressive violence of male masks, therefore, Okeke invokes two powerful resources available in the Igbo world for administration of justice and defense of the community against oppressive alien forces. Seen in this light, the figures of Egwugwu in *Conflict* and half-naked women in *Aba Revolt* are one and the same: embodied terrifying power deployed for the defense of a community whose very sovereignty is under attack. Combined with the anxiety signified by the artist's expressive figural mode and painting style, the subject matter of *Aba Revolt* and *Conflict* testify to a troubled colonial past and insinuate the gathering crisis in the postcolony.

A similar stylistic transformation such as the one that occurred in Okeke's paintings in 1965 played out in Nwoko's work in 1967 and 1968, at the onset of the civil war. Unlike most Igbo who fled the western and northern regions to go back to their homelands in the east, Nwoko, a staunch believer in the Nigerian national imaginary, remained in Ibadan, the central city of the western region, throughout the war.²⁹ Remarkably, he produced several key works during this period, in addition to commencing work on his first and best-known architectural projects: the design and construction of the New Culture Studios and the Benedictine monastery in Ibadan.³⁰ For instance, in the wake of the coups and pogroms of 1966 and the initial hostilities of the civil war, Nwoko in his painting and sculpture pushed even further his penchant for figural caricature, which in fact revealed an attitude that, on closer reading, constituted a form of critical commentary on contemporary politics. On Nwoko's use of the disfigured or caricatured form as a formal device, note that whereas his late Zaria work suggests a dark comedic view of political (*Nigeria in 1959*) or genre/personal subject matter (*Bathing Women*; see ch. 3, figures 3.15 and 3.17), the Paris paintings project a parodic vision of the city's residents and the biblical primordial couple (illustrated in ch. 5), and in the late 1960s work, his figuration, characterized by greater deformation, implies an indictment of humanity's tragic imperfections, which had brought on the catastrophic crisis into which the Nigerian nation was plunged.

Although Nwoko's work covered a wide range of subjects, his crisis paintings of 1967—his last significant pictures before he turned his full attention to architecture and furniture design—are remarkably unified by an unprecedented preponderance of red and yellow cadmiums in his palette. It is as if he wished to emphatically assert the relationship between his palette, the subject matter of his painting, and the bloodletting of the pogroms and conflagrations of civil war. This is most evident in two paintings from 1967, *Crisis* and *Hunter in a War Scene*. It is not important, it seems to me, whether or not these pictures were painted after the first shots of the war were fired in May of that year, for there is no significant difference, in terms of the traumatic effect on noncombatants—women and children—between the spectacular violence of the civilian massacres of 1966 and the equally vicious tactics employed by soldiers on both sides of the hostilities. What is crucial to understanding Nwoko's critical enterprise, as these works attest, is that he also makes the connection between the intervention of the military in Nigerian politics, the devastation of the population, and the fraying of the fragile bonds of nationhood.

Crisis shows several terror-stricken, half-naked, wide-eyed women and children fleeing a scene of horror, the sources of their panic somewhere beyond the picture plane (figure 7.11). A few of the women support their drooping breasts—reminiscent of Okeke's warring women—with their hands, in an enigmatic gesture that must symbolize their state of frightening emergency. Nevertheless, Nwoko seems concerned with the human condition in a general sense rather than committed to depicting particular histories or accounts of the Nigerian crisis. He achieves this by presenting a *mise-en-scène* of stereotypical victimhood—frightened, non-ethnically located women and children in an unidentifiable non-place, like actors on a bare stage. It is not so much that he is unwilling to identify the scene of the crisis, which would help identify the victim and the villain, the aggressor and the aggrieved; rather, he seems concerned less with taking sides in the unfolding Nigerian crisis than with identifying with the helpless recipients of violence wherever the crisis plays out across the regional borders.

This same tendency to draw on the experience of the civil war to make a universal comment on the horrors of armed conflict is evident in *Hunter in a War Scene*, in which a thin, naked man sits in an arid red field, his hunting gun by his side, as he contemplates the horror all around him (figure 7.12). Scattered within the picture plane are flat, floating anthropomorphic shapes representing dead people and iconic notations of desiccated vegetation and a network of thorns. But what is the painting about? What does a hunter have



Figure 7.11 Demas Nwoko, *Crisis*, oil on board, 1967. Artist's collection. Photo, the author.
© Demas Nwoko.

to do with war and the killing of men rather than wild animals? According to Nwoko, the painting was inspired by a scene he observed at Nsukka, the first major theater of the Biafran War. Against the better-equipped national army, the ragtag Biafran troops, armed with Dane guns and machetes, were decimated; a lone surviving fighter was found among the dead, dazed by the imponderable carnage he had just witnessed. But while the painting may be a putative record of an observed postbattle scene, it reveals something of Nwoko's estimation of Biafra, faced as it was by a superior national army backed by global powers, as an impossible idea that could only invite the desolation of the breakaway republic. Moreover, the futility of a war of independence executed by civilian conscripts against a more powerful professional army, along with the national army's savage tactics, made the senselessness of war itself all the more apparent, as this work suggests. Here we are reminded of the surreal encounter, suffused with potential violence, in the last stanza of Wole Soyinka's poem "Civilian and Soldier":

I hope some day
Intent upon my trade of living, to be checked
In stride by your apparition in a trench,
Signalling, I am a soldier. No hesitation then
But I will shoot you clean and fair
With meat and bread, a gourd of wine
A bunch of breasts from either arm, and that



Figure 7.12 Demas Nwoko, *Hunter in a War Scene*, oil on board, 1967. Artist's collection. Photo, the author. © Demas Nwoko.

Lone question—do you friend, even now, know
What it is all about?³¹

Nwoko bears witness to deadly confrontation, both real and imaginary, of civilians and soldiers in a senseless war, yet despite (or perhaps given) his unwavering commitment to the dream of an undivided nation, the figure of the soldier simultaneously fascinated and repulsed him. It is fascinating because the nation's unity depended on the federal army's military campaign and repulsive because the political imperative of unifying the disintegrating nation could not justify the heavy civilian casualties suffered by the break-away region(s). This view of the soldier and the Nigerian civil war as both necessary and abhorrent can be deduced from his sense of nationalism and his depiction of the soldier as a dark figure, a character who irrevocably changed the course of history in postcolonial Nigeria.

At the beginning of the war, Nwoko made the acquaintance of what he would later describe as a friendly Biafran soldier in the vicinity of the Enugu front. From the sketches he made of this soldier Nwoko developed the two paintings *Combatant I* and *Combatant II* (1967), as well as the 1968 terracotta figure *Soldier (Soja)*.³² While these works may have been a response to an encounter with the particular soldier in Nwoko's anecdotal account, the



Figure 7.13
 Demas Nwoko,
Combatant I, oil on
 board, 1967. Artist's
 collection. Photo, the
 author. © Demas Nwoko.

images more crucially are not so much individual portraits as commentaries on the soldier as a monstrous figure whose forced intervention in the body politic has spelled disaster for independent Nigeria. Rather than humanize the benevolent Enugu soldier, as we might expect, Nwoko's images come across as portraits of primal power indexed by the combatant's tools of war. In both paintings the soldier is in full combat gear—helmet, automatic rifle, shoulder-strapped bullet belt, and forest-green uniform—but whereas the head of the figure in *Combatant II* is shown as inside the helmet, as one should expect, in *Combatant I* both are completely and structurally fused, resulting in a much more terrifying, sinister head (figures 7.13 and 7.14). We are thus compelled to view these two paintings as testifying to Nwoko's conviction that the military campaigns effectively transformed the martial class from human beings who could have used controlled coercive violence to set



aright the fragmenting body politic to irredeemable death merchants whose presence in the political sphere was antithetical to any hope for progress in the postcolony. This is precisely how I read the terra-cotta *Soldier (Soja)* (figures 7.15 and 7.16).

With its hydrocephalic head, its brutally disarticulated, almost withering body, and its rough surface texture, *Soldier* has a much more disconcerting aura than any other of Nwoko's works. Moreover, by archaizing the soldier's military paraphernalia—the sophisticated modern firearm suggested in the *Combatant* paintings is reduced to a crude, clublike weapon, and the bullet belt is transformed into an elaborate necklace—Nwoko returns us, if tenuously, to his Nok-inspired formal style. *Soldier* and the other 1968 terra-cotta sculptures reveal the extent to which Nwoko had moved from what now seems like classically restrained formalism in the 1965 terra-cotta series to a more baroque figuration. In the structurally complex *Enuani Dancers* (figure 7.17), in which a male and female pair engages in an erotic dance reminiscent of the energetic and acrobatic movements of traditional western Igbo dancers, the male dancer's serpentine pose reveals a new confidence in Nwoko's ability to work clay into technically challenging, dynamic forms. This dramatic formalism, absent in the earlier terra-cotta, is equally present in the *Dancing Couple (Owambe)*, which shows two figures with neckless heads, ornate nostrils, and huge grill-like teeth locked in a sensuous, crushing embrace (figure 7.18). The wide, rectangular body of the male and the contrasting reduction of the female's body to two massive bulbous forms that could be either buttocks or breasts, along with the three awkwardly displaced hands, heighten the surrealistic quality of the work. These two pairs of sculptures emphatically assert the emergence of a formal style that dramatically combines the expressive and surrealistic traits in Nwoko's work since the late 1950s with his now sublimated Nok sculptural style. And this—in addition to its particular connection to the transformative political crises of the late 1960s—is precisely what makes *Soldier* a watershed piece of comparable significance to Nwoko's earlier painting, *Nigeria in 1959*.

There are in fact two important points to be made, on the one hand, about the relationship between *Soldier* and *Nigeria in 1959* and, on the other, about the transformations in Nigerian politics during the independence decade in relation to the postcolonial modernism detailed in this book. First, in presenting the soldier as a symbol of the emergence of the military as key players in post-coup d'état Nigerian politics, *Soldier* memorialized (perhaps even *figured*) Nwoko's mourning of the crushing end of the years of independence. If *Nigeria in 1959* is about the dawn of independence and concomitant anx-

Figure 7.14 Demas Nwoko, *Combatant II*, oil on board, 1967. Artist's collection. Photo, the author.
© Demas Nwoko.





Figure 7.16 Demas Nwoko, *Soldier (Soja)*, side view, terra-cotta, 1968. Artist's collection. Photo, Demas Nwoko. © Demas Nwoko.

ious optimism about the dividends of sovereignty, *Soldier* marks the crumbling of the progressive, if already fragile, national imaginaries that funded cultural and political work of the early 1960s and the inaugural terrors of the postcolony presided over by the military. Second, these two works are important signposts in Nwoko's and Nigeria's postcolonial modernism. If, as chapter 3 contended, the visual rhetoric of *Nigeria in 1959* is deeply inflected by the young artist's encounter with the work of the early twentieth-century European avant-garde, *Soldier* emerges from a stylistic detour—catalyzed by the theory of natural synthesis—that is characterized by appropriation and sublimation of the formal protocols of ancient Nok sculpture, a critical process at the core of what Nwoko and his colleagues anticipated from successful cultural decolonization.

Figure 7.15 Demas Nwoko, *Soldier (Soja)*, front view, terra-cotta, 1968. Artist's collection. Photo, Demas Nwoko. © Demas Nwoko.



Figure 7.17 Demas Nwoko, *Enuani Dancers*, terra-cotta, 1968. Artist's collection. Photo, the author.
© Demas Nwoko.

Conclusion

As this, the final chapter makes plain, Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko's work in the late 1960s raised the stakes and expanded the meaning of the political in postcolonial modernism. In other words, whereas political engagement by their generation of artists had previously revolved around claiming freedom for self-narration and developing a postcolonial artistic language, it now included prognostications on and critical analyses of the distressed body politic. While this latter task had been taken up earlier by a few contemporary dramatists and writers—here Hubert Ogunde's *Bread and Bullet* (1949) and *Yoruba Ronu* (1964)³³ and Wole Soyinka's *Dance of the Forests* come to mind—



Figure 7.18 Demas Nwoko, *Dancing Couple (Owambe)*, terra-cotta, 1968. Artist's collection. Photo, the author.
© Demas Nwoko.

Nwoko and Okeke heralded a new visual politics that simultaneously marked the full immersion of modern Nigerian art in the unruly politics of the postcolony. This body of work, to be sure, emphatically fulfills the objective of the Art Society a decade before, which is the participation of the Nigerian artist in articulating the symbolic production of the postcolonial self in all its complexities and contradictions; and, as Aina Onabolu did decades before, Nwoko and Okeke boldly asserted in these late-1960s paintings and sculptures, with greater vigor, the right to decide the language and tone of their own critical self-assertion.

There is no doubt, though, that the apparent reformulation by Okeke and Nwoko of the role of art in the postcolonial state raises a fundamental question about the very nature and meaning of postcolonial modernism. Here is the problem; if, as I argue throughout this book, postcolonial modernism was an argument for self-making in the context of the decolonizing nation, might we say that once the relationship between the artist and the postcolonial state changes, as indexed in Okeke's and Nwoko's work described in this chapter, does it still make sense to lump this new work with the work preceding it? I propose that by becoming critical of the affairs of the postcolony soon after willing it into existence, Okeke and Nwoko expanded the work of postcolonial modernism and thus realized the full implication of *mbari*, the name (cf. chapter 4) Achebe gave the collective of writers, artists, dramatists, and critics established in Ibadan in 1961. The Igbo *mbari* thus provides a fitting conceptual model for postcolonial modernism in all its varied stylistic and thematic manifestations. But how can this be?

Let us note that although the Igbo *mbari* was a monument to *Ala* and other deities and a celebration of a community's achievements, it included, as Chinua Achebe has noted, "all significant encounters which man has in his journey through life, especially new, unaccustomed, and thus potentially threatening encounters."³⁴ In other words, in celebrating the gods and the human society, the *mbari* artists featured magnificent portraits of the gods and heroes and symbols of progress but also figures of disruptive forces—terrifying diseases, colonial forces, abominable characters—that must be confronted, neutralized, or appeased as part of the ritual of social renewal. The artists engaged in sheer display of artistic skill and vision, visualized the aspirations of the imagined community, and flagged moments, sites, and agents of social disorder. This sense that *mbari* artists conceived of their work as celebration *and* critique but also as a platform for expression of individual desires and collective imaginaries suggests a productive way of thinking of the relationship between the postcolonial modernist and the nation.

Whether it is the exploration of new and exciting visual language or the depiction of folklore and mythological subjects, genre themes and allegories of sociopolitical fragmentation, or commentary on colonial power relations and critique of postcolonial violence and dysfunction, the work of the artists discussed in this book—from Bruce Onobrakpeya to Erhabor Emokpae, from Colette Omogbai to Ibrahim El Salahi, from Demas Nwoko to Jimo Akolo, from Simon Okeke to Uche Okeke, among others—could have easily found a place in the Igbo *mbari* complex. And just as, according to Achebe, “the celebration of *mbari* was no blind adoration of a perfect world or even a good world . . . an acknowledgment of the world as these particular inhabitants perceived it in reality, in their dreams and their imagination,”³⁵ postcolonial modernism’s relationship with the nation was one of critical examination of and commentary on the cultural and political dynamics of late colonialism and the postindependence period.

In the end, what the work detailed in this book tells us is that during the mid-twentieth century, nationalism and decolonization as ideas and practices in Nigeria and—as we now know—other parts of Africa and beyond, were primal catalysts of a short-lived yet historically significant, complex, tangled, multilayered, and fraught artistic modernism.