'Sankofa: Go Back an' Pick'
Three Studio Notes and a Conversation.

El Anatsui

BROKEN POTS: CHAMBERS OF MEMORY

The art object is, as it were, the end of the artist’s experience and the beginning of the audience’s experience. Where the artist bids it goodbye, the audience bids it hello. The object is then the meeting ground between artist and audience. This being so, I wish to depart from the orthodox practice of merely recording the objects on show. I wish rather to take the audience further from this venue briefly, to a background as well as to a foreground, thereby extending the scope of the meeting.

Questions often asked artists by their audiences — especially at exhibitions — boil down to wanting to know what goes on in the artist’s mind. I believe what is demanded is not a cut-and-dried answer — it clearly defies that — but rather an extension of an experience. Widening the scope of the meeting could be one small way of approaching that.

The focus of this exhibition, (Broken Pots: Chambers of Memory), is decay, break up, dilapidation. These phenomena are looked at not from the negative and damnable perspective but rather as pre-requisites for recreation and growth. Works like Imbroglio, Gbeze and Broken Pot celebrate these phenomena in their own way, whereas A Man of the People, based on Chinua Achebe’s book of the same title, Sleeping Man, and Agbada highlight a few of the many visible agents and catalysts of the process. Gbeze in particular encapsulates the entire theme. Meaning herbal pot in my language, Ewe, it is a potent symbol of life’s fortunes, and the breaking of it portends a very grave and inescapable omen, which though not terminal, leaves an indelible lesson and experience in its trail. Goat Skin Bag and Earth Shrine symbolise the repositories of the spiritual heirloom which survive all destruction to provide a foundation and a tenor for rebirth and growth.

All of Africa is undergoing a period of turmoil. There is despondence, 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 and reconstruction, addresses a message. I hasten however to reiterate that regeneration and growth are not automatically consequent upon break-down. Conscious effort, and intact chambers of memory to provide that greg of experience which strengthens the new form, are requisites.

Sculpture, to me, has been a source of unrest, incessant trials, a consuming fire demanding constant stoking. Though away from my own roots, wood to keep
this fire going has not been lacking here. The hyperbolic imagery-laden Nigerian Pidgin, the Nok terracotta I saw first-hand in the Jos Museum and which to me embody some of the finest examples of authentic clay language, the solitary Akwanshi monoliths which make their evocative statements with organic restraint, Uli, that terse economical, space-animating and spontaneous painting tradition of the Igbo among whom I have lived for the past half-decade, the crop of very active contemporary artists and writers, to mention just a few, have continued to provide sources of inspiration, sustenance, influence and encouragement to me throughout these years.
PIECES OF WOOD

Sculpture........................language of media and process............................................

Nature's materials to me have more authenticity and substance than synthetic ones which seek to imitate anything, and have neither a culture of their own nor identity.

Having concentrated on, thought and worked closely in wood as an expressive medium for over six years now, I am beginning to understand why traditional carvers were led to offer prayers and sacrifices to wood spirits before ever delivering the first axe blow in the process of felling trees. An intimate acquaintance with wood as an art medium makes one feel it must have a soul, a resident spirit force. It certainly has a clear identity, a language, a presence which is entirely its own.................................................................

..............................why explore, why new processes, why experiment? Why not just express?

.................In the introduction to an earlier catalogue I opined that newness by itself is not what makes art, but that an artist can explore new techniques if what he has to say cannot be effectively communicated by the old one. This is perhaps underscored not only by the fact that sculpture is a manipulation of physical materials, but also that the subject matter of art itself, life, has rarely changed over the ages, and that the process of renewal, the new ways of presenting the same old materials, is what has kept it going. Exploring techniques and media, apart from acquainting the artist intimately with a slice of the vast land that is art, is, I believe, a potent way of generating new content, a way of learning to speak visually about contemporary circumstances in contemporary idioms. The greatest act of dereliction of duty an artist can commit is to allow life to become cliche-ridden, hackneyed.................................................................

The idea of exploring the power-saw as a vehicle for realising work in wood came to me in 1990 when, as an artist-in-residence in the serene and inspiring retreat of the Cummington Community of Arts in the USA, I wanted to log a tree trunk with it for a composite sculpture to be realised with chisels, gouges and mallets. I had used this saw for several years before this, for the mundane purposes of cutting logs, but this time, the first few inches of cut I made struck a chord in me. I stopped immediately in my track. The quiet and ideal privacy of the large studio must have heightened my sensibilities. The cut looked evocative, eloquent of the special potential of this tool, but I also went ahead to try out its other raw speed, and clumsy manoeuvrability. But I felt I had a language which when perfected, can effectively communicate the experience of our age. Since then I've been trying to learn this language which, from experience so far, has no room for flowery expressions or close detail

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Powersaw tearing rough-shod through organic wood at devastating speed, to me, constitutes a metaphor of the hassling, rat-racing hypertensive pace of present day living.................................................................

The same spirit which led the Adinkra symbolists to contrive a visual sign for the abstract concept seriousness, or to capture the visual essence of the talons of Okodie, the spirit which led Uli artists to leave the kolanut and get concerned rather with the spaces in-between them, or to ruminate over the beauty of the trails of eke or the coils of ome ji tendrils, the spirit which led the Nsibidi artists
graphically to encapsulate man in simple curvilinear terms, that kind of spirit, I feel, is opening up my vision, leading me to conceive of things not in their vulgar physique but rather to delve deeper below the surface of events, objects, people and experiences, in an attempt to seek for visual meanings and truths, to distil essences, to decipher symbolic contents.

OLD AND NEW

Iroko — 6
Afara — 11
Oke Ofo — 6 ebony — 7
Oyili oji — 1 ufie — 3
Okpo ocha — 2
Mix the cream of okpo ocha
with the reds of ufie
Perm the yellow ofo opepe
with the browns of oke ofo and
ochres of oyili oji
Mansonía’s indeterminacy and the hesitations of Afara leave Ebony as the prime choice for the monument in reticent black.
Slash rip sear whittle
devastate chip chop
break burn impose juxtapose
control
Express new ideas in old wood. Mix time-furrowed experience with buoyant smoothness; the concavity of old time with the convex posture of new time.
New wood has poetry locked in it.
Old wood is poetry itself, time
Having worn off its prose
what do you do with pant singlet towel buba cloth?
You at least must have heard the background and inside stories narrated by the people in assorted voices.
In a city silhouetted against
an ancient monument
Ikoro addressed a mammoth crowd
He spoke about war after
standing momentarily before History.
Ancient Ikwe Ukpaka and Iroko sources.
The decision is finally taken. Today we took these old mortars up the hill and rolled them down. Old and weak portions retired from the main blocks after this ordeal, which is part of the process of selecting the viable as well as reshaping the original form.
Growth, decay, impermanence? They are all part of the creative process. All are bound by time which is the most powerful and effective shaping force. When sculptors use chisels, gouges, saws, to shape, they are in effect inducing growth, decay, impermanence, imitating time on a very modest, human scale.
CONVERSATION WITH OLU OGUIBE

Olu Oguibe: Let us talk about your work and professional life. We did talk about intuition and the creative process once. Could you tell me what part intuition plays in your work and what position it takes in the formulation of the creative idea? Do you begin by an intuitive impulse and then resolve this by conscious manipulation of form?

El Anatsui: Well, if I should quantify it by way of percentage, I think intuition should be awarded up to 75, 80 per cent, and then the rest goes the other way.

OO: But are there moments when you start out with a consciously thought out idea?

EA: Yes, there are. But I find that most of the work I do without intervention of the conscious, of logic, eventually appears more satisfying to me. That is why I give a large percentage to intuition, but then, intuition itself is informed. I believe it is a product of many deep-seated factors, one of which is the collective unconscious.

OO: The African American artist Betye Saar gives priority of position to the spiritual and mystical.

EA: I think I subscribe to that. If you remember last time, I mentioned that there are times when you meet people and you feel like you have met them before in some other life or another level of existence. So that brings in the collective unconscious which, I believe, is one of the things she is referring to. I think all of us have it. What we do now does not spring purely from our current or immediate experiences, but from consciousness over many generations as well. It is part and parcel of us, I believe, and does play a very large role in what the artist does.

OO: She also makes a lot of reference to spirits — water spirits, air spirits...

EA: Well, working with wood, for instance, you know, you tear through it and there is some sympathetic feeling it brings about. You feel that this material you are devasting does have life. So in a way that forces you to respect it. There are times when I would be tearing and then I'd have to stop and maybe let the work lie at that stage; not a matter just of tearing it through and through. If you watch most African art, there is that feeling that the artists do have a lot of respect for their medium. They do not try to impose something extraneous. Instead, they allow the material to lead them. Such an attitude can only come from the artist who has sympathy for his medium. You do not regard it as something devoid of all life and identity of its own, something you just go ahead to impose anything on. That is why African sculpture often retains the original cylindrical, monoz yo logical form, and may be that is why it exudes that kind of spiritual feeling or quality which is associated with origins.

OO: I remember the Vincent Kofi sculpture at the Presidential Lodge in Ghana which the artist left to rot because he respected the work and regarded it as an entity unto itself, something which must be allowed to live and not be imprisoned.

EA: That is in Aburi. Unlike our counterparts in the West who might try very hard to preserve it, I think the practice of leaving the work to rot or for termites to eat, is a firm belief in rejuvenation; you leave the work to weather and decay so that new generations of artists would have to create their own works. I believe
this arrangement makes for each generation to add something of its own time to the stock of tradition.

OO: Cyclicity too, like the Mbiri among the Igbo which is mandatorily left to the elements so it can return to earth and round off the cycle of being.

EA: Yes. It is not like in the West where they would go to great lengths to preserve a monument. I think in most African sculpture, especially among the forest peoples, there is a belief in cyclicity and rejuvenation. That is why they would not go to any lengths to preserve works. In the Mbiri example it is not as if the builders/artists do not know about preservation or maintenance.

OO: And artists performed rituals before they cut down a tree or commenced work on a log. What is your equivalent to that?

EA: Well, I believe that the people I buy the wood from would already have performed the necessary rites, otherwise they would not allow felling of the trees. My studio, which is where the wood eventually comes, was consecrated with the proper rites. Spiritual and ritual intervention can be at any stage.

OO: Some believe in ‘the essential element of mysticism’ in art.

EA: From my experience so far, everything that has to do with the spiritual, the mystical or metaphysical or whatever, is a very large component of art, in that art is basically a human activity in answer to an essentially non-materialistic satisfaction or fulfilment.

OO: Do you then subscribe to the theory of the artist as medium, for instance?

EA: Well, I believe the theory is a very valid one because the artist, if you look at him closely, is just a field. I regard him as a highly sensitised or charged field through which some vibrations, spiritual or metaphysical, must pass in order to be externalised and transmitted to the ordinary eye. That largely accounts for why, when you ask an artist what a work he’s doing or has done means, often he does not know. He is a medium. A medium transmits, it does not explain.

OO: In that sense there are similarities between the artist and the diviner.

EA: Well, similarities in the sense that both operate at a spiritual level. And the dissimilarity, perhaps, is that while the diviner might try to prescribe, the artist does not. He might highlight or pinpoint certain things and leave them at that. Artists do not prescribe solutions.

OO: That is something I would indeed like us to return to later on. I recall the incident after your weather offering in Germany when, after your invocation, it suddenly began to rain for the first time after a long spell. Would it be entirely wrong to regard that as merely coincidental or do you think it is a manifestation of the spirit element?

EA: I would not say it was coincidental. The performance took place in Cuxhaven, on the cold and windy North Sea coast of Germany. It was so cold, but I remember, when I got up there — I had to go up the mound to invoke the weather spirit — and when I got up there, something came upon me and I had to remove my tops completely and wrap them round my waist. I suddenly wasn’t aware of the cold and the winds. I think there was something to do with the rain which fell immediately the performance was over. Yes. I felt an intense presence when I went up there. And you know, when gods accept an offering, they send down what is propitious for the occasion or moment.
OO: You have written about the ritual or symbolic significance of particular materials, say, your choice of clay in *Broken Pots* and ebony in *Ritual Statements*.

EA: Well, the urge to manipulate could be regarded as an offshoot of the experience of my people, the Anglo-Ewe in their history of migration to their present abode. They sought protection from a powerful king at Notsie — in present day Togo — who later refused to let them go. Notsie was fortified with strong, extremely thick walls which the Ewe had to break through in order to escape, by devising a plan whereby everybody had to pour all used household water at a designated portion of the wall, over several years, till it weakened. I saw the vestiges of this wall as a schoolboy. You might recall my allusion to the Walls of Notsie in my incantation in the exhibition catalogue, *Walls and Gates*.

Perhaps more pertinent is the well-known story of how, after having observed the adeptness of the Ewe in handling clay, and also to gratify his sadistic and tyrannical excesses, the King asked them to make him a rope out of clay. This matter was put to rest when they diplomatically pleaded for a sample to guide them. In other words, I have a history of clay manipulation. Collective unconscious and conscious forces at work, you might say.

Also, in *Broken Pots*, the clay I used was stoneware, high-firing body as the ceramists call it, and I think it is symbolic in the sense that in firing stoneware, you need to have a body which is well-prepared so it can stand very high temperatures. Earthenware fires at low temperatures so there’s not much problem in handling it by way of firing and its not as strong as stoneware. So, stoneware symbolises strength, and the fact that my pots are made broken is symbolic of life itself which, I do not believe, ends with one coming when death sets in. Because when a pot breaks, it is pulverised and used as grog to make a fresh pot, and when you knead grog into fresh clay it gives extra strength because it has already known high temperatures. So you can keep going, you can go beyond the initial temperature and it will remain intact and strong. The idea that when the old pot is destroyed it comes back to lend life to a newer pot is the symbolism behind *Broken Pots*.

That also explains the choice of clay for it is not something you can illustrate with wood. When you burn wood, it is gone. Ebony for *Ritual Statements*? Well, these statements, aren’t they supposed to be Black statements? Black statements! Statements of Africans! Black people! And I don’t think any colour or any wood symbolises us more than that wood, ebony, which is black. You see, Black has to me this reticent locked-up-power-which-can-erupt-anytime feel. It is in this sense that one must understand the contributions of those specific materials or media to the statements.

OO: I remember you writing in disfavour of synthetic materials and complaining about their lack of soul.

EA: And identity, yes. Synthetic things can only be countenanced when the natural ones they are meant to imitate are not there.

OO: Do you think there is a closer affinity between the creative force and natural materials, then?

EA: I think so. Despite the lure of man-made media artists still return to the natural ones or even stick to them throughout their careers. The earliest attempts in stone, wood and clay, have the deep spiritual, primordial associations which artists strive to achieve.

OO: Your earlier introduction to wood, the early confrontation with wooden
plaques, for instance, the wooden trays which were readily available, produced by others and acquired easily at slight cost, may be responsible for your continued dedication, even fixation, to wood.

EA: I think my affinity for wood is born out of the fact that it is such an inseparable part of our environment. It is all over the place; you cannot leave it out. That explains it more than anything else, as well as the fact that most African sculpture is also in wood. So it is like trying to continue, or going along the same line as the tradition into which I am born.

OO: I am still curious about the metaphor of pots which are the leitmotif of Venovize, your cycle of ritual receptacles.

EA: As I said earlier, the pot symbolises life. That was the whole idea behind the Broken Pots series. In fact, Venovize is a continuation of Broken Pots which were done in 1978, 79 and 80. The pot is very much a metaphor of life to me because, like life, it is something that has no definite end. Even if it is not ground and recycled as grog, it does not become useless. It is employed in a lot of African sculpture as well as in rituals. That is what they use for offerings to the Gods. Sacrifices are often placed in potsherds, not in whole pots, and each time I work on pots the idea of how pots are used in so many cultures, not only in Africa but all over the world, just comes to the fore, and that inspires me. I remember when I did the weather offering in Germany there was an old woman who used to come for walks on the beach every day. When she saw our performance she broke down in tears and told me that it reminded her of a wooden tray either her great grandfather or her grandfather gave them before World War II, a ritual wooden tray which was used to put out fires. The man told them that if there was a fire and they carried the tray and ran against the wind, the fire would go out. They did use it on a number of occasions and it worked. When she saw this performance she was moved. Superstition or power, whatever you call it, is worldwide. The symbolism of the pot is something you find in all cultures. Venovize, among the Ewe, means ‘twins pots’. If one has twins, certain rituals are performed, and offerings and donations from people are kept in the pots which are so sacred it is believed that, should anyone steal from them, he or she is condemned to be a thief for life. These are my own reactions to these beliefs and practices. What I have done, though, is, rather than create two pots, I have made single pots and divided them in two one way or another, by using brown clay here and red clay there, for instance. I have also sealed them so as physically and symbolically to prevent people who might be tempted to do what they shouldn’t do with them.

OO: Once we talked about the adventurism of much contemporary Western art and you cited the examples of underwater sculpture and the fellow who hauled tons of solar energy equipment to an International Sculpture [ISC] symposium. Don’t you see an element of shallow desperation in that, the kind of frustrated desperation and melodrama one expects of a failing artist whose imaginative options have run out? Or perhaps a certain inability to think an idea through, to exhaust the possibilities of a creative idea by driving it beyond its raw form, the kind of impatience that produces loud and hollow pretensions to art? Sham, more or less?

EA: I think once in a while one gets carried away by the dazzle of certain things which are not really the essence of what one set out to do, like in that very instance. This is not to say there is nothing creative and genuinely imaginative one can do with solar energy. One can certainly do lots of things which might
break the bounds of its conventional functions. The particular chap, however, what he came to do with all that equipment could as well be achieved with ordinary electricity, with some extension cables. I thought he would use solar energy directly to do something you couldn’t do otherwise. He did not. That is why I was not impressed. Nor were all those who saw it. They were all intrigued when the man arrived with these tons of stuff and all he did was ask us to hold fluorescent tubes in a certain formation and that was all. If he had brought extension cables and plugged into a mains supply, we could have held his tubes up for him just as well and he would have achieved the same results: lighting them. There are artists using extreme exploratory processes effectively. But for every process you have a lot of people doing it unimaginatively, and a few who are doing something worth nothing, I have seen the work of some people using computers and other high-tech processes, and they are very exciting. I do not think that process is the beginning and end. It is one of the components and, depending on how one handles it, it could make the difference between a creative mind and a technical hand.

**OO:** Beyond process, what remains?

**EA:** I think imagination is a more crucial aspect of the art-making process. It is not enough to know how to manipulate the computer, you know. What does the imagination do with that? You show you can handle the chain-saw, but what have you configured with the chain-saw? If you are working with water, what form have you configured with water which makes the form peculiar to you and different from anyone else’s work, or extends our experience of water or the chainsaw or computer or whatever else you are working with, beyond the ordinary?

**OO:** Towards the end of her life Louise Nevelson restricted her involvement in the production of her sculptures to the initial design, and many were not quite satisfied with this authorial disjunction between conception and final realisation, like severing the stages and replacing that shadow between with a wall.

**EA:** What did Nevelson say?

**OO:** That the idea is the work.

**EA:** Well, from personal experience, I will not subscribe to that, for no matter how clear-cut the directions, there is always a subjective intervention on the part of the producer. But more importantly, even where the technician sticks strictly to specifications, as in bronze casting, the artist cedes the opportunity to redirect the work or make further discoveries.

**OO:** Stultifies the creative process.

**EA:** Yes. If the artist pursues his work to the end it is more genuine. Otherwise, one creates a factory situation. That is why I think it is important to be involved, as much as possible, at all levels of the work’s evolution.

**OO:** For now, I am interested in what you are doing with history in your work, which is not so much a writing of new history as the recollection of lived experiences.

**EA:** Excerpts. I am taking excerpts from Africa’s history. I don’t think artists have to take as their source only what is happening, the present. There are incidents that one must go into — I think the older one grows the more he tends to have — a retrospective of things. But, if you watch, you see that even most African
writers, Achebe, all of them, are writing beyond fiction, with a strong historical bent. One wants to know where he is coming from to be in a better position to chart where he should go, or even understand where he is going.

**OO:** The closest to what you are doing here would be Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Two Thousand Seasons*, which, like your work, deals with migrations, all the significant migrations that have formed the contours of Africa’s history — from the desert and from the sea. But even more interesting to me is the emphasis on the antiquity of writing in your work. In a world where History has been appropriated by and synonomised with writing, there is a need not only to subvert and invalidate that process but equally to establish an existence where people have always thought there was an absence. *The Face of Africa’s History* does that for me.

**EA:** History — the face of a continent that has been battered but still has its way of remembering or recording the experience not only through oral traditions but also through several surviving writing traditions. So that even if there were no history without writing, the truth remains that we had writing. Whichever way, we have a history. Indeed *The Face of Africa’s History* was directly inspired by my having read a catalogue of an exhibition of African writing traditions. I think the title was ‘Africa and the Written Word’. Before then, I had known of several graphic signs and symbols, mostly from West Africa, but the plethora of writing traditions covered, ranging from the ancient hieroglyphics to recent ones, either of secret or open societies, made an impression that has been created *vis-à-vis* Africa and writing.

Apart from the Adinkra, Nsibidi and Uli, I have been intrigued by Yoruba Aroko symbols, the Bolange scripts of East Africa, the Bamun script from Cameroon, the Mande syllabary, and numerous others. Or to come closer in time and place, Nwugo Aneke, the Igbo visionary who died a few years ago and who, without the benefit of formal education, created a script which after being subjected to thorough study by Professor D. I. Nwogu at the University of Nigeria, was found to conform to, to have the characteristics and answer to the details of, sophisticated writing systems. I understood their book on this revealing project will come out sooner or later. Back to *The Face of Africa’s History*, this was an initial work inspired by this knowledge. Since then, I have done works featuring more of the pictograms, ideograms and alphabets which populate these traditions.

**OO:** The essence, then, is not self-validation as such, but acknowledgement of a part of our history, to reaffirm how reassuring it is to discover that where hitherto we had been made to believe there was absence, there is indeed much presence.

**EA:** Precisely. In fact, my fantasy is that Africa’s problem was not that she did not have writing — rather, that she was choked by too much of it. Is it ‘Tower of Babel’ they call it in the Bible? That kind of situation.

**OO:** Something else I would like us to touch upon: In the West a lot of environment sculpture is going on. Would you go into environment work at some point?

**EA:** Well, environmental sculpture is not alien to us in Africa either. I don’t think so because most of the things we do are indeed sculpture in the environment. Most African architecture is more sculpture in the environment to me. When you talk about sculpture in the environment you are talking about sculpture which affects the environment totally so that, should you remove it, you feel something great has been taken away, something which engages the open atmosphere or the environment. And that is not new. I certainly have plans. In fact that is the
thrust of most of my dabbling now. I think I am grooming myself for it. An environmental work is not something you impose on an environment, which is what some artists tend to think. I go to villages to sit in the squares, which I consider well-planned environments, and just drink them in. The idea is to be totally at one with these kinds of environment, so they become biological to me, something to draw upon naturally. I have been doing this for over fifteen years. You know, the environment is a larger field with more varied elements in complex relations. That is why a successful environmental work must not be an imposition but a marriage.

OO: Indeed the American critic Eric Gibson makes that point.

EA: Yes, one good example is Demas Nwoko’s house which rather than impose itself on the environment, is part of it, fulfilling in and rising organically from it. That is what I consider environmental work and what I might devote my energies to in the future. The present works might be regarded as sort of little rehearsals towards such since sculpture itself is an environmental phenomenon. It is something in space, and environment is space.

OO: You believe in the eventual evolution of the ultimate work of art, the resolution, or rather, reintegration, of all art forms, as in the masquerade, festivals, or African drama. While one might submit that these examples directly inspire explorations in this direction in much contemporary art, as in installations for example, there seems to me also a possibility that the latter are indications of the irrevocable cyclicity of culture and history in the sense that, after the ultimate disjunction of the consummate work which was achieved in Western Renaissance art, in the easel painting and sculpture in bronze and stone, the media of inertia, art seems to be on a full circle return to what might be called its original, animate form. Equally, there is a tendency towards a seeming universal uniformity in contemporary art, away from culture-specificity and definable cultural identity. Through culture contact and other less innocent machinations, all art seems to be moving towards a certain hybridity.

EA: I think you are referring more to Western art. One can see it has the tendency to choke itself up and then get cleansed, mostly through the intervention of other cultures. What it lacked most was the ability to take a holistic view or approach, tending to focus on single rather than the multi-sided phenomena that come together to give life to art.

As for hybridity, the hybridisation of cultures, as of now, is to me more of a conjecture than reality. I do not buy the idea of a universal culture. Every culture has its essence which, like the soul of man, you cannot change or infect easily. People may talk about a universal culture, a hybrid world culture, because there is greater and faster dissemination of knowledge across boundaries. I read recently about one American scholar talking about a ‘multi-versal’ instead of a ‘uni-versal’ culture. Whatever the case may be, it is from virile stock that a farmer selects to create a hybrid. Unless a culture has strength, it cannot contribute effectively to a universal, or multiversal, dispensation, and that, perhaps, is why it is dangerous for an artist easily to throw away his cultural heirloom and superficially take on an alien one. Any such artist has no confidence in his own and his work is unlikely to be viable or virile, and thus irrelevant. It is only when one proceeds from a position of clear knowledge and definition of oneself that one stands a bright chance of contributing meaningfully to whatever culture formation eventually emerges.

OO: And what, precisely, would this be? Of course Western art has gone through
a progressive process of kenosis in the last two centuries, leaving it with virtually little to seek or find within and causing it to forage elsewhere, first in the Orient and then in Oceania and Africa. You could indeed say that for all Western culture. What is happening presently, I would quite agree with you, postmodernist pluralism or whatever guise it comes under, is of course not exactly the ultimate universalisation of culture which Fanon and Cabral predicted but the return of imperialist appropriation. While Western ethnocentricity might be paradoxical in the sense that its true centre is a hollow absence, many people, especially from other parts of the world, seem to believe that ethnocentricity could indeed be an inhibition rather than a virtue.

EA: Well, personally, I still think it is important to look inside, to go back and pick. A few years ago we had this ‘Go-back-and-pick’ syndrome in Ghana. In Twi we call it ‘Sankofa’: return and retrieve. Sankofa syndrome was a reaction
to a conscious and forcible attempt to denigrate a people’s culture and replace it with an extraneous one. As in all situations of this kind, it recognised also that there are always elements of an invading culture which stay behind; you cannot obliterate it completely because every culture has its positive aspects. Thus the essence was neither a wholesale return to the past nor a total exclusion of external influence. The thrust was inward orientation and selectivity.

OO: Which is what Chinweizu means when he insists that Afrocentrism is not about shutting out others but about sitting square on your own tree while picking whatever is good from others.

EA: Yes. I think ethnocentrism can only inhibit where it is absolute, when it is exclusivist. But when you are concerned with combining the best part of the past and the present, the largely indigenous with the relevant foreign, there is no danger at all. I cannot remember who asked this very pertinent, rhetorical question: “Show me the nation which in order to progress surrendered its past.” It was this consciousness of the need to effect some continuity, to have a sense of history, which helped the Ewe resolve the clay rope problem at Notsie and gave rise to the dictum: ka xoxo na wogbea yeye do — it is on the sample of the old rope that one weaves a new one. I knew this saying as a little kid. I am now getting to understand its import.

OO: Let us return once more to your work. When do you move away from a phase in your work, move on; when you get bored with a particular manner or
phase, or when you feel it is no longer adequate to express your passions or you have mastered it?

**EA:** I talked about material and media, like clay and wood. I would say I moved away from clay because of technical hitches, the very hitches that drove me to Britain where these works were done. If I could overcome those hitches, I would return to clay. As for wood, I do not think I ever want to stop. It is not easy to stop like that. It is possible to keep the two going, but you find that one inevitably dominates. Right now it is wood most of the way.

**OO:** Let me take up your comment on artists and prescriptions where you maintain that it is not the artist’s duty to provide solutions. Achebe, who is known for his unapologetic position on the necessity of commitment to community, has equally repudiated the idea of the artist as Messiah. What precisely, then, could be legitimately expected of the artist? Or indeed, should anything be expected of the artist in the first place?

**EA:** The mention of a messiah conjures the picture of, on the one hand, a people who are in need of redemption from a terrible affliction, and, on the other, a saviour who comes and by a single act redeems them, and leaves with a promise to return. I suppose that it is the Christian example of messianism — I am not quite sure — you know, I stopped having anything to do with the church three decades ago — not that I initially had any deep involvement with it even.

Now, back to the comparison. There is a peculiarity about the artist. He could be more sensitive, could be a visionary, could have higher imaginative powers, but he is, unlike a messiah, essentially a member of his community who suffers the same fate as any other. I do not think anything is expected of him at all costs — his peculiar endowments make him do what he does: to sensitise society might stabilise itself or, if you like, save itself, including the artist. He does not try to win them over as followers or worshippers, only vaguely hopes to provoke their active participation in a self-redeeming process. Because he is a member of society, we tend to talk about and assess his relevance to that society and that generation — every generation has its own artists. I believe this explains why times of suffering, crisis, and grave conditions beget art of equally great intensity. There is this reciprocal healing relationship between art and its milieu, and if one is to look for an example, we would not have to look far in time and place. You and I are conversant with the poetry, fiction, drama and works of visual artists — painters, sculptors, most of them now on the faculty of the university here — produced during and immediately after the Nigeria-Biafra war. You cannot miss the intensity of their vision, their relevance and above all, their soul-lifting quality. They did not simply set out to bemoan or decay a grave situation. Perhaps they played their legitimate role by their reactions to the challenges of the period as sensitive members of their society, and artists, and I believe their efforts would have given strength to the soul of the society.

We tend to doubt, even artists, whether we make a contribution to society mainly because, whatever effect we achieve is imperceptible and extraordinarily slow in coming, being an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary one. When, for instance, an army with definite assignment, overrun a territory, everybody sees it immediately and experiences it physically. That is why nobody doubts the role of a soldier in society, especially one in which disruptive forces have focused the orientation of people on material and physical manifestations of things. Well, the artist is not a soldier, and his place cannot be so concretely discerned.