

Art Forms in Crisis: The Role of Songs and Visual Artworks Created in Response to the #EndSARS Protests in Nigeria

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Abstract: *This article identifies the place, role and relevance of art during the #EndSARS² protests in Nigeria in 2020 and seeks to embark on a critical analysis of selected songs and visual artworks that were created either as a form of solidarity with the movement or as alternative means of expressing the demands of the #EndSARS protesters. The basic assumption here is that conflicts have a broad degree of influence on the overall psyche of a community, leading to significant social changes and global effects. The article looks at the role of art in a variety of crisis situations connected to the #EndSARS protests. Based on several sampling systems, the author selected songs and visual artworks from nationally and internationally notable artists from Nigeria and the diaspora, such as Chike, Dice Ailes, Laolu Senbanjo, and Ayodeji Adegroye to show how these artists and their work have shaped the socio-political climate of Nigeria and to analyze what psychological and creative impact this art has had on individuals during and after the protests.*

Introduction

The rise of the #EndSARS protests in 2020 was abrupt, taking both the government and citizenry of Nigeria by surprise. Even though the events and situations that gave birth to the crisis had long been in existence, they had remained unaddressed in any way deemed satisfactory by the citizenry. As the protest grew in momentum, so did the efforts to end it. While pressures mounted nationally and internationally against the Nigerian government to give in to the demands of the protesters in the hopes of averting further conflict, several celebrities and artists showed their support to the Nigerian youth in diverse ways. Some tweeted; others created and released songs, poems, paintings, videos, short documentaries etc. as their individual forms of protest or demonstrations of support.

As an observer and participant of the protests, the author saw things happen first hand. Following the culmination of events that led to the protests, the time came for a critical examination of these events, at least in part. Thus, the author embarked on research to explore areas that held interest in relation to the arts as a viable tool in crisis situations. This research revealed that a significant number of artists had not only physically participated in the protests but had brought their creative talents to the creation of art forms that bear testament to the events of #EndSARS. It revealed also that a majority of these artistic forays gained momentum after the Lekki Tollgate incident. Using first-hand knowledge in combination with random and purposive sampling techniques, the author identified a selection of artworks and songs that best represented the spirit and ideology of the #EndSARS protests. First, random sampling was applied with a search on internet and music platforms revealing that a significant amount

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2 In this article SARS stands for the Nigerian unit called Special Anti-Robbery Squad, not to be confused with the SARS-CoV-2 (severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus type 2). The # symbol refers to the Twitter activity connected to the protests.

of audio-visual material emerged in solidarity to the #EndSARS movement. In a second step purposive sampling technique allowed the author to narrow down the selection of available material to some examples best illustrating the specific purpose of this discourse. Materials both audio and visual were selected based on a set of preconceived criteria. For example, they had to:

- directly reference the #EndSARS protests
- refer either in part or in total to the long-standing atrocities of the SARS unit of the Nigerian Police force
- refer in part or fully to the Lekki Tollgate shooting
- address the cries of the Nigerian youth
- call out the ongoing corruption and hypocrisy within the Nigerian Government and Police Force

On the basis of these and further criteria this article questions the role of audio-visual materials as instruments in the fight for justice, as well as tools for the propagation of systems of governance suited to the Nigerian situation. The contents of the selected songs and visual art works were analyzed to evaluate patterns in words, phrases, slangs, images, motifs etc. to identify references within the selected pieces to shared ideologies that the protest was built upon. Based on identified patterns within the selected content, the author offers interpretations of underlying meanings that highlight the struggle of the Nigerian youth in relation to police brutality and failed governing systems. With this approach, the author was able to identify a wide variety of elements, phrases, words, motifs, and symbols within the selected works under analysis, that specifically embody the #EndSARS protests.

Using reconstructions of subjective and lived experiences of the #EndSARS protests, the author embarks on a process that analyzes the elements embedded within the selected materials with a view of making meaningful inferences regarding the protests and the political situation in Nigeria. This article also looks at the artistic activities that emerged during and after the protests either in remembrance or in honour of those who participated and lost their lives in the protests. The author considers the selected songs and visual artworks that were created as result of the aforementioned activities with the aim of critically analyzing and establishing the relevance of the works to the overall political situation. Further aspects of this article include information on the background to the #EndSARS protests, a review of protest art forms in Nigeria, and a detailed analysis of selected #EndSARS artworks.

Background to the #EndSARS Protest

The reason for the rise of the #EndSARS protests, which grew to become a movement, is tied to reports of the unsavoury actions and activities of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Nigerian Police Force (NPF). The special squad charged with the responsibility of handling cases involving armed robberies, kidnappings and other crimes considered complex, has over the years been repeatedly accused of acts of unchecked violence. These involve extortion, systematic torture, unlawful detention and imprisonment of civilians especially in the southern and eastern areas of the country. Reports abound on how SARS operatives have over the years participated actively in the ill-treatment, unwarranted punishment, and stereotyping of young Nigerians, as well as the forceful extortion, physical and sexual harassment and concealed killings of apprehended suspects in their custody.

The movement – decentralized in nature – called for the immediate dissolution of SARS and demanded that the members of the squad be subjected to investigations and brought to justice over their long period of recorded abuses. After a two-year hiatus, the movement started to react around October 2020, following increasing witness accounts of violent abuses by victims of the squad's activities. These new and very disturbing revelations together with a video of some SARS officers appearing to

shoot a young man are considered to have been the final push for the movement's awakening.³ This led to a mass demonstration across major cities of the country made more ferocious by unceasing outrage on social media.

Reports indicate that an estimated 28 million tweets bearing the hashtag #EndSARS were accumulated on Twitter alone.⁴ Massive solidarity protests, tweets and demonstrations by Nigerians in diaspora together with efforts by sympathizers also took place in line with the primary protests taking place in Nigeria. The protests, largely patronized by the younger demographic group of Nigeria's population, grew to include demands for accountable governance and an end to corruption and impunity.

With the renewed protests, which began in earnest on 11 October 2020, the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) once again announced the disbandment of the SARS unit with the promise of subjecting its members to a psychological evaluation as well as setting up a committee to investigate the reported actions of the squad members with immediate effect. Though this move was accepted and deemed a small victory by some of the protesters, the majority noted accurately that similar announcements had been made in the previous years (2017–2019) just to pacify the public without the promises being carried out. Accusations were made by the protesters against the government, stating that it merely planned to reassign the offending squad members to medical centres rather than disband, investigate and evaluate them as the protesters demanded.

In an online article, published 11 October 2020, Niyi Ademoroti⁵ captured the concerns of the protesters succinctly by laying bare the consistent whitewashing of the SARS squad by the NPF with backing from the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN). Ademoroti aligned his thoughts with those of Omonobi and Erunke⁶ and Salaudeen⁷ thus:

The protests of young Nigerians have yielded some results: The NPF has announced that the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) is being dissolved. [...] It is stuff to rejoice to-except, wait, did you read the caveats? The '5 Things to Know about the Dissolution'? states a couple of ways this 'dissolution' will take place. It says these officers will remain with the NPF, redeployed to other Police commands and formations and units. It isn't stated expressly what commands and units and formations these men who kidnap, assault and kill citizens will be assigned to, but it is possible, since they will remain with the Police force, that they will remain on our streets, able to continue to kidnap, assault and kill Nigerians.⁸

Ademoroti's explicit deconstruction of the "caveats" contained in the Inspector General of Police (IGP) statement at the press release served its purpose; which was to enlighten the protesters of the government's plans to bury their "reasonable demands" in political hogwash and indirectly kill the momentum of the demonstrations. This, as expected, was not well received by the protesters and their sympathizers in the diaspora. The protests continued in earnest with the protesters converging and blocking the Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos, Nigeria. This blockage of a major commercial expressway that links the island with the mainland was considered a major economic blow by the protesters on the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN). In order for the FGN to regain control of a fast-escalating situation, a hasty dusk until dawn curfew was imposed in the major cities in which the protests were going on. As expected, the curfew was ignored by the protesters and the Nigerian government resorted to the use of "violent repression including the killing of protesters".⁹

The actions of the FGN against the protesters led to a violent escalation of a previously peaceful and well-coordinated demonstration. Mass destruction of government and private property, killings of more

3 *Impunity and Corruption 2020*.

4 YOMI 2020.

5 Niyi Ademoroti is a reporter and writer for the popular Nigerian blog *BellaNaija*, which is best known for their coverage of society weddings, music performances and trending styles.

6 OMONOBI and ERUNKE 2017.

7 SALAUDEEN 2017.

8 ADEMOROTI 2020.

9 ADEDIRAN 2020.

civilians and several police officers alongside massive arrests and unlawful detention of civilians ensued. Several foreign governments and celebrities worldwide called on the Nigerian government to find a peaceful means of resolving the escalating crisis without the use of force – all of which were ignored.

On the night of 20 October 2020, at about 6:50pm, members of the Nigerian army opened fire on peaceful #EndSARS protesters gathered at the Lekki tollgate Lagos-Nigeria. Reports by Amnesty International (2020) indicate that 12 protesters were killed during the shooting.¹⁰ However, eyewitness accounts insist that the number of those killed were much higher than reported. Claims that some of the bodies were thrown in the water are further given credence by the many reports of missing persons that had been at the protests.

The Rise of Nigerian #EndSARS Protest Art

As the protests grew, so did the spontaneous outbursts and releases of multidimensional talent and energy. The #EndSARS protests not only invaded the social and political consciousness of the country's citizens, especially the young generation, but also illuminated the activist spirit of the majority of its public figures. As the protests continued to gain momentum, it encouraged artists of different genres to identify with the cause and accordingly express themselves through music, performance, photography, drawings, paintings, sculptures and other forms of art. The inflow of creativity helped significantly in increasing, preserving, commemorating and celebrating the spirit of the protest across media platforms both artistic and social. Even as more killings were taking place, the efforts of musical activists such as Fela Anikulapo Kuti (1938–1997) and Majek Fashek (1963–2020) were revived by contemporary afro-pop stars such as Burna Boy, Dice Ailes, Davido, Rudeboy, DJ Switch, 2Baba and many others. Furthermore, visual artists like Victor Odiba, Ayodeji Adegoroye, Laolu Senbanjo, Olu Oguibe, and Victor Ekpuk also rose to the occasion by emulating the fallen activists even as their lives were threatened.

In addition to the national afro-pop music stars and visual artists, the #EndSARS protests, protesters and their demands, also gained immense international coverage from the conventional media and even more so via social media platforms with Twitter being the preferred channel of transmission. The protests started to enjoy heavy patronage from celebrities both on the national and international fronts. International celebrities that identified, sympathized, empathized and supported the movement include Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj, Rihanna, John Boyega, Estelle, Trey Songz, Chance the Rapper, Kanye West and many others. Beyoncé tweeted:

I am heartbroken to see the senseless brutality taking place in Nigeria. There has to be an end to SARS. We have been working on partnerships with youth organizations to support those protesting for change. We are collaborating with coalitions to provide emergency healthcare, food and shelter. To our Nigerian sisters and brothers, we stand with you.¹¹

Nicki Minaj also tweeted her support and stated that, she was praying for the young Nigerians who stood their ground against police brutality and bad governance in the country.¹² Rihanna, an international music star, posted on her official Instagram handle, praising the protesting Nigerians for their courage despite the tough times thus:

I can't bear to see this torture and brutalization that is continuing to affect nations across our planet. It is such a betrayal to the citizens, the very people put in place to protect are the ones we are most afraid of being murdered by. My heart is broken for Nigeria man!! It is unbearable to watch!¹³

While the support of international celebrities was noted to have had a significant impact on the moral of the protesters, it was the actual participation by Nigerian celebrities such as actors, music stars,

10 *Amnesty International* 2020.

11 BEYONCÉ 2020; see also BAMIDELE 2020.

12 BAMIDELE 2020.

13 BAMIDELE 2020.

social media influencers, entrepreneurs, prominent business people, religious and public figures that maintained the momentum of the protests. Celebrities such as Falz, Wizkid, Tiwa Savage, Davido, Anthony Joshua, Odion Ighalo, Burna Boy, Fireboy DML, Rema, Don Jazzy, Olamide, Chike, Kate Henshaw and many other public figures showed their support and strong desire for the government of Nigeria to agree to their five-point demands on the dissolution of the SARS.¹⁴

The aforementioned personalities physically participated in the daily marches, providing the protesters with the much-needed amenities and extending solidarity for the general efforts and vision of the movement.¹⁵ After the Lekki massacre mentioned above, the actions of several celebrities took a different turn. Alternate avenues began to be explored, such as the massive release of single tracks and visual artworks created in honour of the victims of the shooting or as alternate forms of generally criticizing the Federal Government of Nigeria for their action against the protesters.

Many artworks and songs were released during and after the #EndSARS protest; in this article therefore, the use of purposive sampling¹⁶ was employed to select two songs and two visual artworks to be critically analyzed here. The songs and artworks under review were specifically selected based on relevance to #EndSARS protests, meaning that songs or visual artworks that did not clearly relate to the protest in either their lyrics or their use of elements and symbols were not considered. The intention of the author is to dissect, in a critical manner, the lyrics of the songs and the elements and symbols within the visual artworks with the aim of identifying their relevance to the #EndSARS movement and the overall political landscape of Nigeria.

Analysis of Two Songs Created in Response to the #EndSARS Protests

Example I. "20.10.20 (Wahala Dey)" by Chike

Mr Speaker we need to address certain people
 The Nigerian youth social media
 Yes though good has it's negative impact
 Let me first thank you for condemning the wanton killing and carnage that happened at Lekki
 When I went through the comments I could not believe it the curses the abuses from children

You don win election
 So you don't care anymore
 29 million you be senator
 You don de match us oh
 But you say make we no talk oh
 Say make police no de shoot us
 But you bring soldier

14 The organizers of the #EndSARS protest had submitted a five-point demand or agenda on how they wanted the SARS unit of the Nigerian Police Force to be handled by the Federal Government of Nigeria. See *The Cable* 13.10.2020. The 5-point demands of the protesters were as follows: 1) Immediate release of all arrested protesters; 2) Justice for all deceased victims of police brutality and appropriate compensation for their families; 3) Setting up an independent body to oversee the investigation and prosecution of all reports of police misconduct (within 10 days); 4) In line with the new Police Act, psychological evaluation and retraining (to be confirmed by independent body) of all disbanded SARS officers before they can be redeployed; 5) Increase police salary so that they are adequately compensated for protecting lives and property of citizens.

15 This statement is made based on the author witnessing the said participation by the celebrities during the protests both online through social media feeds and in news reports.

16 As a participant of the protests, I spent a lot of time following the participation of certain artists and their actions during and after the protests. It was during these observations that I discovered that a number of them had released songs or created artworks that honoured those who died, participated in the protest or in commemoration of the Lekki tollgate massacre. I discovered that while certain songs or works claimed to be #EndSARS inspired, the lyrics or the elements bore little or no reference to the movement. Hence the conscious choice to go through as many as possible and settle for the ones that bore more significant elements of the #EndSARS movement in both lyrics and symbols used in expression. This conscious and deliberate process informed the use of the purposive sampling technique.

Wahala dey ah ah eh ah
If you no know
Wahala Dey ah ah eh ah
Them de kill us
Wahala dey ah ah eh ah
If you no know
Wahala dey ah ah eh ah
Them de kill us
Soro soke wahala dey

They said this all started behind reports that the Cctv cameras
And all the lights of the scene where put off
And then the security operatives fired shots
Resulting in people scampering to safety

Oga Fashola with the camcorder
People don die and they wan code am
Na only God know who go settle the matter
Cos I don't know where the country dey waka
Na who die next shey na me or my brother
Na how wey u think sey we no reach to para
Who give the order to shoot us all
Who give the order to kill us all
Wahala dey ah ah eh ah [...]
People having the effrontery to enter an Oba's palace hold his staff of office
Culture is gone
Mr Speaker in the next five years
There will be no Nigeria¹⁷

Chike-ezekpeazu Osebuka popularly known as Chike is an Afro-pop/Soul singer in Nigeria who was an active participant in the #EndSARS protests. Following the Lekki tollgate massacre many contemporary music stars such as Burna boy, Orezi, Dice Ailes, Dwin the Stoic, Efe Orika wrote and released songs in remembrance and honour of the victims, and also as an outcry against the massacre that forcefully shut down the #EndSARS protests.

For the first nineteen seconds of the song “20.10.20 (Wahala Dey)”, one hears an excerpt of the voice of lawmaker Desmond Oluwashola Elliot, a member of the Lagos state House of Assembly, Surulere Constituency (see lyrics above). The recording of the speaker is passionately advocating for the bill to regulate social media in Nigeria as well as disparaging the actions of the young Nigerians during the protests and calling them “children”. This speech, which later found its way to the internet, earned him so much criticism and backlash that he was forced to apologize for his actions after initially denying them.¹⁸

After the recording fades into the background, the song's opening verse follows immediately. This opening verse draws attention to political leaders such as Elliot, who, after having won their elections, tend to immediately forget their electorates. Chike sings: “you don win election/so you don't care anymore”. These two lines are in reference to the frequently echoed complaints of constituents after every election. The next line, which states: “29 million, you be senator”, is a continuation of the ongoing criticism of the leaders of the Nigerian nation. Here, Chike specifically mentions the federal government's allocation of unreasonable sums of money to its legislators – in this case, 29 million naira – as monthly enumeration for senators; an amount, which the lawmaker's electorates neither see nor feel the impact of. The first three lines of verse 1 directly address the growing greed of Nigerian leaders and their lack

¹⁷ CHIKE 2020a; [music video link](#).

¹⁸ *BellaNaija* 2020b.

of empathy towards their country people. Even though this slight is non-specific, one can assume it is an indirect affront to Elliot, his actions and his colleagues, who are criticized for such characteristics. Lines 4–7 of the same verse revert to the focus of the song, which is the Lekki tollgate massacre. Chike sings: “you don de match us oh/but you say make we no talk oh”. The words in these two lines imply that the government has consistently trampled rights of its citizens, especially that of the young Nigerians, all the while expecting silent compliance to the abuse of power and corruption. The use of Nigerian pidgin gives the words more meaning as many of the nuances behind and between such words could easily be lost. The underlying meaning between the words indicates or points towards the government’s prevalent practice of covering up their mishaps. Here Chike implies that this time it just might not work.

Line 6 and 7 address the shooting itself: “say make police no shoot us/but you bring soldier”. Chike references the events leading to the shooting where the government had ordered the police to stand down. Such orders served to embolden the protestors who would be shocked by the actions that followed. Line 6 implies in an understated manner that the order for the police to stand down in line 5 was in fact deliberate so as to allow the military (soldiers) unfettered access to the protestors. Chike’s insinuation is that the shooting that took place was in itself a premediated action by the government whose purpose was to quell the uprising and the increasingly bold young protestors.

Wahala is street slang for “trouble”. This trouble could be of many sorts and could come about through dynamic circumstances. Chike’s repetitive use of “Wahala Dey” here means that “there is a lot of trouble”. The chorus (is) in form of a public announcement, a call to renew awareness of the circumstances surrounding the ongoing protest. Chike delivers the lyrics in a tone that suggests he is trying to inform his listeners and those who may be unaware that such things are happening. Lines 1, 3, 5, 7 and 10 of chorus repeat the announcement of “Wahala Dey (ah ah eh ah)”. This is accompanied by the rhythmic delivery of “if you no know” (line 2 and 6 of the chorus) “them they kill us” (lines 4 and 8). The chorus closes with the popularized #EndSARS protest motto “Soro Soke” which is a call to “speak up”. As implied by the phrase “Soro Soke”, the chorus draws the attention of the listener to the fact that young people are being killed for standing up for their rights and the call is for the listener to “Soro Soke” i. e. speak up on their behalf.

A second audio recording is inserted here just before the second verse opens up. The voice of an unidentified reporter or news agent is heard narrating the events leading up to the shooting at the Lekki tollgate. The voice narrates thus: “Before the shootings started, we heard reports that the CCTV cameras and the lights at the scene were put off and the security operatives fired shots resulting in people scampering to safety.” This narration, delivered alongside the rhythmic and soulful beats of the song, add to the sorrowful tone of the event. To enhance the desperate nature of the situation, towards the end of the narration, actual sounds from the shooting are mixed into the opening of verse 2.

Verse 2 is made of 8 lines that narrate the events following the shooting. Whereas Chike is vague in his accusations in verse 1; he becomes specific in line 1 of verse 2 by calling out the dubbed hypocrisy of the Federal Minister of Works and Housing Babatunde Fashola. Fashola, on a security inspection committee of the shooting site, claimed to have sported a carefully placed camcorder that had somehow survived the intense scramble on the night of the shooting.¹⁹

Line 2 of verse 2 indicates the desire and attempt to cover up the killings. It states: “people don die and they wan code am”. Chike returns to his earlier vagueness but perhaps not deliberately this time. The phrase “They wan code am” translates as “They want to cover it up”. The use of “they” suggests the anonymity of those behind the shooting – anonymity that remains even at the time of writing this article.

¹⁹ After the Lekki tollgate shooting the Federal Government of Nigeria constituted a committee charged with inspecting the site of the shooting and reporting back to the president. Fashola was a key member of the committee. It was during the said inspection that Fashola was reported to have found the camcorder containing video evidence of what happened during the shooting. This earned him (Fashola) severe backlash on social media platforms and his “inspecting/detective skills” became memes.

This line is followed by the satirical references to Fashola's acclaimed discovery of the camcorder because it is widely believed that the government of Nigeria filmed the shooting and deliberately left the evidence there to support their premeditated cover-up. This assertion however, remains an assumption and is currently unproven.

A further fact is enshrined by the words in line 3 of verse 2: "na only God know who go settle the matter". The lyrics here imply that, there is no hope of knowing the truth of the situation, nor is there any hope of justice being served concerning the killings of protesters. Hence, Chike's melodic transfer of the "matter" to God who he (Chike) believes is the only one qualified to appoint who will judge and "settle the matter". Chike's reasoning is not baseless as he states in line 4 of verse 2, "cos I don't know where the country waka". This means that he (Chike) "does not know where the country is leading to". This appears to the author a typical response by Nigerians, who are frequently at a loss for how to act or respond to some of the actions and decisions of their leaders. Hence the "over" dependence on God may be understood as a coping mechanism in response to the dire situation or a desperate cry for God to intervene.

This desperation is captured in lines 5–6 of verse 2, "Na who dies next, shey na me or my brother/ Na how wey you think sey we no reach to para". These two lines reflect that no one knows who will die next. It could be a brother or Chike himself. The following line is both a question and a statement of surprise and shock as to how Nigerians have maintained their sanity under these circumstances. "Para" refers to a complete loss of one's self-control; it may be seen as a mental breakdown of some sort. One may view the protesters as group 'para', a generation's loss of control or even a crescendo to a long overdue outburst. The final two lines of the second verse pose the million-dollar question: "Who give the order to shoot us all/ who give the order to kill us all." This is a question that remains unanswered to this day. The song ends with Desmond Elliot's voice predicting that in the "Next Five Years there will be no Nigeria".

The overall theme of the song is centred on the calculated distortion of facts by the political elect with specific regards to the attempted cover up of the #EndSARS shooting. The title of the song is a means of ensuring and enshrining the event. It is a way of making sure that what happened will never be forgotten. The sub-title of "Wahala Dey" is a reminder to the Nigerian youth of the problems that need to be addressed.²⁰

Example II. "No One" by Dice Ailes (Shasha Damilola Aleshinloye)

Eeyyah eh
 O dun mi
 E get as e dey do me
 Let's say hello
 O dun mi yeah yeah

Shey na like this we go dey dey now
 Young man smile police man frown
 Na why SARS shoot a young man down
 Young man down police man smile
 You take my vote and give me hope
 When time come you let man down

Hopes so high
 When I look around I see no one no one oh
 You take my vote and give me hope
 When time come you let man down

²⁰ CHIKE 2020b.

Hopes so high
 When I look around I see no one no one oh
 No one dey my side no one oh
 No one dey my side no one oh [...]

For this life we gats harmonize
 Killin' brother man how you dey sleep for night
 Touchin' sisters make tears drop from our eyes
 This kind hate and prejudice we gats minimize
 Oh Lord see the things dem dey normalize
 For the whole wide world we gats humanize
 This our humanity oh we gats something nice
 Love and peace and harmony we gats exercise
 Make mankind fit open eyes
 Black skin black skin
 White skin white skin
 All skin say na human skin
 Black race black race
 White race white race
 All race say na human race
 Black skin black skin
 White skin white skin
 Brown skin say na human skin
 All race all race
 Every race every race
 All race say na human race
 Shey na like this we go dey dey now
 Black man smile white man frown
 So white man shoot a black man down
 Black man down white man smile
 You take my vote and give me hope
 When time come you let man down

Hopes so high
 When I look around I see no one no one oh
 You take my vote and give me hope
 When time come you let man down
 Hopes so high
 When I look around I see no one no one oh

No one dey my side no one oh
 No one dey our side no one oh [...]²¹

Dice Ailes is a singer, songwriter and rapper who was an active participant in the #EndSARS protests. He followed in the footsteps of many fellow music artists by releasing the single track "No One", also in October 2020. The song was dedicated to "the recent events happening in Nigeria and the initiative that has been taken to #EndSARS".²² Dice Ailes is quoted as saying upon the release on the single track "No One":

This stands as a reminder that this movement concerns each and every one of us. As we actively continue to amplify this injustice in our country and other parts of the world, let us remember that no one stands alone. No matter our differences, we are stronger together.²³

²¹ AILES 2020; [audio link](#).

²² *BellaNaija* 2020a.

²³ *BellaNaija* 2020a.

Tomiwa (a columnist with the online music platform *tooxclusive.com*) posits that, “No One” is the singer’s view on “how he sees no one by his side when oppressions and brutality comes”.²⁴ Dice Ailes advocates for the spirit of “unity and harmony; sharing that our skin colours, religions, tribes and cultures shouldn’t continue to factor the human division”.²⁵ The lyrics in lines 6–9 “Shey na like this we go dey dey now [...]” cleverly frame the seeming pleasure that the SARS officials have in seeing their victims suffer. Ailes in his typically understated and gentle vocals illuminates the fact that there is no justification for the shooting and killing of these young men and women by the police officers. Ailes follows Chike’s lyrics in calling out the politicians, though in a less scathing tone. His simple statement in lines 10–13 “You take my vote and give me hope [...]”, directly confronts the leaders for not living up to their promises.

Whereas Chike’s song “20.10.20 (Wahala Dey)” centres on the Nigerian situation, Dice Ailes not only focuses on #EndSARS, but also addresses in lines 23–31: “This kind hate and prejudice we gats minimize [...]”, the worldwide Black Lives Matter movement, which was happening concurrently. The lyrics clearly suggest the need for listeners to strive for one race, look after each other, reduce and eliminate all forms of hate, persecution and prejudice. Dice Ailes “No One” is a call to ‘humanize’ the world. The lyrics relay strongly the artist individual belief and desire for the exhibition of inexhaustible strength, conviction, love, harmony and unity in times of adversity. The vocals attest to the artist’s personal development of his moral nature amidst the #EndSARS tribulations, setting himself and his fellow community on a hopeful path to a better future.

This author contends that the arts, in this case music, possess expansive and immeasurable power of change. Regarding the above postulation, Ikeda channels the “reminiscences” of Vincent Harding on the relation of songs and how they “provided solace and sustenance for those involved in the US civil rights movements”.²⁶ Ikeda quotes Harding thus:

I often think that the power of those songs was in the courage they gave people. Sometimes people would be in dangerous situations and would be singing, ‘We are not afraid. We are not afraid.’ In fact, they were often trembling with fear, but what they were singing about was their determination to not let fear overcome them. They meant, ‘We are not going to let fear conquer us. We are not going to let fear stop us.’²⁷

The exposition provided by Ikeda aligns with the function of songs such as “20.10.20 (Wahala Dey)” and “No One”. These songs served as a source of encouragement, hope and faith that people held on to while going through the horrors of the #EndSARS movement and thereafter.

Analyzing Two Visual Responses to the #EndSARS Protests

Example III. “Lone Flag-bearer”

A writer for the *National News* narrates thus: “On October 1st last year, a young man hoisted a pole bearing the Nigerian flag above his head and set off on a quiet protest.”²⁸ The photograph, a candid shot taken in October 2020 by Ayodeji Adegroye, a photography enthusiast, shows as its main focus a lone male figure dressed in a bumper jacket, dark bucket hat, and black oversized pants. The figure is captured standing tall and defiant on a police traffic stand, hoisting two flags attached to a slender pole. The first flag, which is all white, has been painted with the hashtag #END SARS, with an X on the right-side corner in what appears to be black ink. The second is the Nigerian flag. Both flags are caught

24 TOMIWA 2020.

25 TOMIWA 2020.

26 IKEDA 2015: XVI.

27 IKEDA 2015: XVI.

28 ABASS 2021.

flowing strongly in the wind. Below is a group of protesters all backing the camera but facing the Flag-boy, standing high up on a commandeered police booth.



Fig. 1. "Lone Flag-bearer", 2020, Photograph by Ayodeji Adegrooye.

Flagboy, as the figure in the photo came to be referred to by thousands of people participating physically and online in the #EndSARS protests, had previously been engaged in his own solitary protest; carrying the flag up and down his street in Lagos state, Nigeria. His solitary protest may have been a bid to draw more attention to the #EndSARS movement against the police squad's reign of brutality. Flagboy's continuous parade was in line with the ongoing protests that had recently received renewed vigour in 2020, both online and on several streets in many states across the country.

Flagboy's rigorous participation in the protest elevated him to a symbolic level. For those physically participating in the protest on the streets of Lagos, Flagboy became the directional symbol for the protesters, a source of inspiration and a driving force for the overall tempo of the ongoing protest. While for those participating online, his picture-image as shown in the link above and taken by Adegrooye, served as a mark that indicated a political leaning in terms of the protests.

Flagboy's position or symbolic status during the protest was not lost on him as he states in an interview: "The flag was what everybody followed, so my duty was to stir up the flag in the direction we are going. So, if I leave a location and go to another everyone follows."²⁹ It was in his capacity as the protests' compass that he climbed the top of a police security booth to wave his flag with audacity. Flagboy continues his narration thus: "I had to climb that stand so that everybody around the neighbourhood,

²⁹ ABASS 2021.

even those that were not protesting and those that were, could see what we were doing.”³⁰ This became his daily purpose for the period of protests: to be present and to stand at the highest point in the protest location, with the aim of urging people onwards. While his symbolic status was seen as an impetus for those on the streets, his photo exploded on social media platforms after certain celebrities and public figures had reposted it several times. This caused the image to take up a virtual life of its own, and it began to be shared on social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

Flagboy on the other hand, apparently had no idea that his image had gone viral, as he was not an active social media user then. The knowledge that his actions at the protests and his image had become a symbol for amplifying the ideas of the #EndSARS movement was something that clearly came as a surprise to him but also served to encourage more young people in lending their voices to pushing the protest forward. Flagboy as well as his now viral image served to encourage more and more young Nigerians across the country to participate in the ongoing protests or to create their own little pockets that echoed the overall cry for justice nationwide. His relevance in the protest was enhanced by how committed he was to the cause. His passion was evident in his unflinching and prompt daily presence in all protest locations, especially in Lagos state. Flagboy’s commitment continued to be documented on social media, causing a surge in the number of participants at the protests.

Even when the protests moved back online after the Lekki shootings, Flagboy continued in his symbolic role as the compass for the movement. Not only was he still actively advocating for a new direction but also leading a charge and call for the protesters to be resilient and not to give up despite the demoralizing effect of the shootings at the Lekki tollgate. His continued protest on the streets of Lagos every day, despite the risk to his life, was perhaps his way of encouraging the Nigerian youth to continue the fight:

The killing of the protesters was even more serious than what was happening before. We were protesting for them to end SARS and review their budget, and stop corruption and what they did in response to that was kill people. Killing people is a more grievous offence than the other ones. So why are we not protesting this.³¹

The above statement was a personal outcry to both the previous protesters and the government of Nigeria, firstly, against the brutality at the Lekki tollgate that led to the death of several young Nigerians and, secondly, to the seeming silence of the previously protesting masses. Flagboy’s statements capture the anguish at the abrupt end of the protest’s initial vigour and the now impending doom of its cause. Flagboy indicated that he felt personally responsible for ensuring the continuation of the movement. He believed that after his image went viral and in addition to his physical commitment to the cause of the #EndSARS, people were massively encouraged to join the protest. He stated that:

Many people who came out to Lekki, definitely not all of the people who came out, but many, did because they saw my flag. And I am sure that some of those people are gone now. So, if nobody is protesting for their deaths, I should protest for their deaths.³²

The effectiveness of Flagboy himself as well as that of his image during the protests cannot be adequately measured. The above assertion finds credence in several tweets by protest participants. A Twitter user thus stated on his timeline that Flagboy did not know how many people he had given hope to just by waving the flags, how many people felt connected by this act and how much happiness it brought to their souls; another Twitter user wrote that they loved Flagboy and couldn’t wait to see him raise his flag again.³³

30 ABASS 2021.

31 ABASS 2021.

32 ABASS 2021.

33 These statements are paraphrased as recorded from memory since the following Twitter accounts have all been suspended [@Flagboi]; [@LadiAdigun]; [@OguwoKaypable] and the exact quotes can therefore not be referenced.

The presence and image of Flagboy was effective in the #EndSARS protest for carrying forward the movement’s ideas to the public. Flagboy became an artistic symbol that transcended the boundaries of artistic genre as a visual and performative symbol. He, as well as his image, gradually rose to become a monument that could be used in numerous ways to teach future generations the effectiveness of protest as a tool for demanding change within society. Flagboy’s presence and participatory performance during the #EndSARS protests symbolically represented Nigeria’s outcry against injustice, prejudices and all forms of corruption.

Flagboy and the image of the “Lone flag bearer” helped to further humanize the cause of the #EndSARS movement by making it more relatable to the common person. It made it possible for young Nigerians to project and see themselves in place of the countless SARS victims. It served to convey the image of unidentified victims of decade long bad leadership decisions as well as its deep corruptions to a larger audience. The re-education and re-orientation of the young masses through the activities of the protest and its participants such as Flagboy ensured a steady stream of participation as well as a sense of community and common identity.

Example IV. “DEMOCRAZY” by Laolu Senbanjo, Acrylic on Canvas

“Democracy” is an acrylic painting that pays homage to pop art with its vivid colours and intense activity all crammed into the picture space. The work is a satire and a metaphor, full of symbolic representations of aspects of the #EndSARS protests.

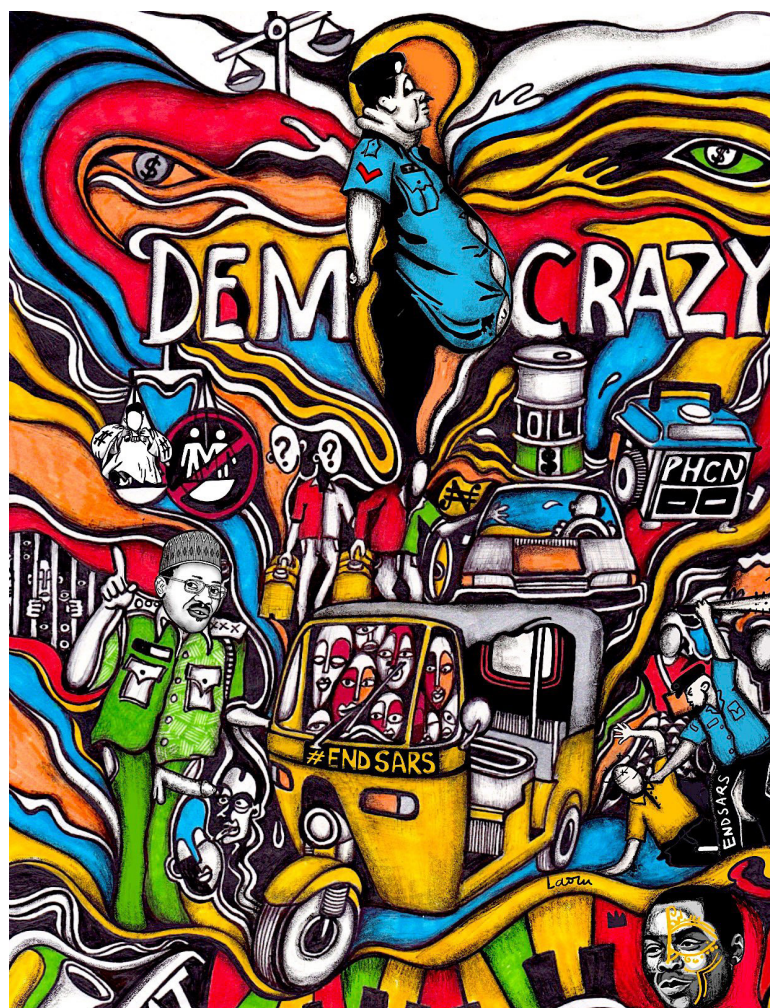


Fig. 2. Detail from DEMOCRAZY – #EndSARS”, 2020, Laolu Senbanjo, Acrylic on Canvas.

The complex and colourful display of this painting illustrates many issues troubling the country. Beginning from the topmost area of the painting, one is able to see a stylized depiction of a pair of eyes with pupils that reflect dollar signs. Each eye is painted in bright shades of green and orange. One can assume that these symbolize foreign or western powers/governments watching the actions and activities happening in the country. The reflection of the dollar signs may also point to the ever-increasing dependency on taking loans from Western governments with nothing to show for it. Closely followed by the “watchful eyes of the west” is the painting’s title in uppercase “DEMOCRAZY”. In the middle of the word is the headless, obese figure of a Nigerian police officer, whose protruding belly (pot belly) is strategically placed to form the letter “O” to complete the painting’s title and the overall label given to Nigeria’s brand of democracy. The officer is portrayed in his blues with the buttons threatening to burst at the seams. This image of the officer portrays a generally unfit physical and mental state as well as a overall lack of knowledge and capacity attributed to many officers when it comes to carrying out their sworn duties of protecting and serving members of the community. The elevated position of the police officer within the painting as well as enlargement, communicate the central theme of the work, which is the demands of the Nigerian youth for the government to end SARS by ordering its disbandment and embarking on a systematic clean-up of the police force.

The middle section of the painting focuses on illustrating the justice system of Nigeria, which is characterized by a blatant abuse of power and a rampart bias favouring the rich against the poor. Captured on the left side of the scales sits a faceless, affluently dressed figure, whose shoulders bear the Naira (₦)³⁴ sign. This faceless individual is a metaphor for both the rich and the members of the justice system, frequently in league with one another in the exchange of favours and money to the detriment of the poor or less privileged. The less privileged occupy the right side of the scales as male and female stick figures, carefully encased in a red STOP sign. The artist pays deliberate attention to portraying both the physical and financial disparity that exists between the rich and the poor and how the line of justice continues to fail in upholding the truth it stands for. The scales allude to the buying of justice that takes place in Nigeria, to which the government turns a blind eye.

Next to the scales, the artist addresses the petroleum and power (electricity) industry of the country. The representation of two male figures engaged in price haggling with a faceless figure in a white and orange saloon car is an ode to the incessant fuel crisis suffered by Nigerians in connection with artificially created fuel scarcities. The two male figures, also faceless, are dressed in white trousers, red and green shirts, holding two yellow cans, commonly used by black market vendors of fuel. Beside the composition of the black marketers at the top right middle corner, is a drum labelled “oil”. This may be an allusion to the position and status of Nigeria as an oil-producing nation and could be a satirical representation of the nation’s inability to meet its petroleum needs.

Next to the drum, labelled “oil” is a small blue and white generator labelled PHCN. This generator commonly known by Nigerians as “I pass my neighbour” is one of the cheapest and most used types of generator within the country. The artist’s action of labelling it PHCN is deliberate as the acronym stands for Power Holding Company of Nigeria. PHCN is the company in charge of providing electricity, a responsibility which it has continuously failed to fulfil. This failure has led to the elevation of the generator named “I pass my neighbour” to the status of PHCN. The over-dependency of Nigerians on generators to generate power for their daily needs is the focus here. The scathing implication is that the nation’s power supply is so bad that its citizens have resorted to alternate means of sourcing power, thus further denting the precarious economy of the nation and increasing the degree of hardships faced by its citizens.

The issue of prison overcrowding and unlawful imprisonment especially of the #EndSARS protesters is depicted by the darkened cell. The cell, overcrowded with faceless eyes, is strategically

³⁴ The Naira sign (₦) is the official insignia/sign for the Nigerian currency.

placed behind the caricature of the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Rtd.) General Muhammadu Buhari. This is a metaphor for how the president has ignored all that the protesters had been asking for, along with the many other issues depicted within the painting. The president, famously known for playing dumb or unaware of what is going on in the country, is shown as raising his left index finger as a sign that attests to his personal belief in his integrity. The use of black and white in representing the prison cell may be a bid to show the stark reality of the prison situation. This was a fact previously alluded to, but with the #EndSARS protests many of the happenings in Nigerian prisons were brought into the limelight.

In the foreground of the painting, closest to the viewer, is a caricature of President Muhammadu Buhari, dressed in his dual capacity of military and civilian head of state. The duality of his dress attests to the citizens' beliefs. The placement of the Hausa cap (a common feature of the president's attire) alludes also to the president's heavily criticized penchant of appointing predominantly northerners into what are termed "key positions". On the opposite of the president, in the lower right corner, is the illustration of an angry looking police officer, caught mid-way in assaulting a faceless victim who is laying on the ground. Surrounding the menacing police officer are several ghost-like and faceless 'onlookers'. These so-called onlookers could also represent the many unidentified victims of the SARS officers.

The yellow tricycle occupies an important position, just like the police officer in the top part of the painting. The yellow tricycle is a fast growing and favoured mode of public transportation by Nigerians to avoid the overcrowding of the yellow buses which are usually used. Commonly called 'keke', the front area of the tricycle is labelled with the hashtag #EndSARS and is crammed full of mask-like faces painted in white, red and orange. These faces shown looking outward may be the artist's tribute to many unidentified persons who led, supported, contributed and pushed the #EndSARS movement forward for many weeks.

The prevalent theme of the painting is the rise of the #EndSARS movement and the visualization of many issues that Nigerian leaders have been unable to tackle in recent years. The undulating and amoebic shapes that ensue through fluid lines connecting with each other are filled with bright shades of red, blue and orange pigment. These colours serve to enhance the vivid nature of the painting and project the symbolic elements within the work. Black and white are used as contrasting pigments to outline certain objects or figures within the surface. The use of colour is systematic and very deliberate as it never overshadows or distracts the eye from the elements within the painting. The work serves its purpose of visualizing underlying issues to which the #EndSARS movement demands solutions. Issues such as police brutality, fuel scarcity, irregular or total absence of electricity, corrupt justice systems, leaders' seeming lack of empathy towards their citizens, and many more.

The work, which was posted on the artist's social media page,³⁵ drew over 3,000 comments with many voices amplifying the message embedded in the painting, helping to push the cause of the movement forward along further mediatic avenues. Laolu's visual expression seeks to reveal the underlying truth to the international community: the true nature of Nigeria's leaders; the true nature of the living conditions of the common people in Nigeria. The work clearly exposes the brutality, bloodthirst and unchecked actions of the Nigerian police force. It is an outcry for an end to the unnecessary hardships daily encountered by the citizens of Nigeria and worsened by the stifling and autocratic grip of its leaders.

35 SENBANJO 2020.

Conclusion: The Relevance of Art as an Ode to the #EndSARS Protests

The songs and visual artworks created as an ode to the #EndSARS movement soon grew, as shown in this article, beyond mere rants on social media and groovy tunes to become tools for the propagation and spread of the movement's ideologies. The songs and images created in honour of those who died during the #EndSARS incidents inspired confidence and galvanized the protest spirit. These creative responses to an otherwise unpalatable event show the growing spirit of resistance amidst the common Nigerian people. This resilience is what Enekwachi Agwu refers to as actions capable of "cross cutting sensibilities".³⁶

In furthering his thought process, Agwu implies that the uprisings in and outside Nigeria that amounted to the #EndSARS protests were a demonstration of how the arts as well as social media can have an active role in witnessing and preserving recollections of time and experiences of a people under the same cause. In some ways the works created as part of the images and sounds of the #EndSARS activities served as a demonstration of what social change is all about and its imperativeness to the growth, advancement and development of a people.

The works that comprise the body of this discourse served to exemplify the need for a democratic space for creatives to express themselves free of encumbrances in a way that text or speech may not allow. The works in this article denote the active nature of art as a tool for shaping new realities, new cultures and viral activism as well as a tool that can effectively embody the lived and shared experiences of a people. The works served to widely spread the message and outcries of the Nigerian protesters beyond the streets of Lagos to other cities across the world. They communicated the pain and frustrations of a people long oppressed by the police and the indirect complacency of its government in its inability or refusal to hide the outcries of its citizens. Through the use of symbols, motifs and caricatures Laolu, in his complex visual rendition, captured the crucial social deficiencies of the Nigerian government in a satirical manner. With an expert use of his visual space Laolu spoke to the true conditions of the Nigerian youth and the hurdles they have to contend with on a daily basis.

The songs in turn served to amplify via social media and relevant platforms, the critical voices of many with regard to the treacherous SARS police unit. This set of audio materials woke up a new awareness that embodied the anger and the long-repressed pain of the victims' families and survivors of police brutality. The works drew the attention of world-governments, of well placed individuals, and of human rights organisations to the long and brutal reign, the unattended allegations of assaults, and the horrifying actions of the police force's special unit. This is captured by Chike and Dice Ailes's expert use of street slangs and Nigerian pidgin English to portray the unadulterated circumstances of life in Nigeria as it is experienced daily. The numerous violations captured in the lyrics paint a gruesome picture rendered ever direr by the hypocrisy of the ruling class, embodied in Chike's song by the chilling voice recording of the member of the house of representatives.

This plethora of violations, clearly captured in the audio and visual works in this article, drew the sympathy and outrage of artists across countries who began to express their views and opinions in support of the #EndSARS protest. This outpouring of creative expression, alongside the physical marches across major cities in Nigeria and the world, led to seemingly fervent attempts by the Nigerian government to curb the progress of the protesters. Yet as the authorities desperately tried to quell the uprising, the protest movement began to develop further into an act of memorialization, with many powerful artists lending their voice, resources and physical participation to the cause. This in turn gave rise to images that went beyond the physical posters brandished at the protests sites and began to transcend geographical boundaries by permeating and lingering in newsrooms, and on social media. Images such as those of Flagboy and many others served to put pressure on the government to ad-

³⁶ Agwu 2020.

dress the concerns of the protest. The confidence and fearlessness displayed by Flagboy inspired and communicated confidence to fellow protesters in the overarching goal of the protest. This in combination with the lyrics found in songs such as “20.10.20 (Wahala Dey)” by Chike and many others, which became anthems of the movement, helped in capturing and maintaining the vibrant spirit of the protest and its demands on the Nigerian government.

The work of Laolu Onabanjo further served to push the #EndSARS agenda by portraying and engaging the social conditions of the Nigerian people beyond the issues of police brutality and including in its visual discourse general issues of corruption, the lack of electricity and water, the rising cost of living, and the general absence of social justice in the Nigerian scene. The works and sounds which gained a significant following became a beacon of hope for a nation, which had long remained oppressed and voiceless. The creative expressions of the #EndSARS protests demanded a return to the fundamental values of democracy and a government that seeks the good of its citizenry.

The overall artistic efforts of the creatives in the Nigerian industry helped to address the people’s social conditions with a view to easing them out of a long running corrupt leadership. The participation of celebrated individuals in the protest helped convey to the masses a collective stance in the struggle for a better Nigeria. Meanwhile, the protests have ended; what lives on untainted is the “beauty of creativity behind the protests as well as the promise of change, which remain the subject of deep discussion in Nigerian social, creative, literary and academic circles”.³⁷

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³⁷ Agwu 2020.

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