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## Perspectives

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### **The Contribution of Cartoonists to Environmental Debates in Nigeria: The Koko Toxic-Waste-Dumping Incident**

In 1988 it came to the attention of some Nigerian students studying in Pisa, Italy that hazardous waste originating from several European countries was being dumped in Koko, a town in mid-western Nigeria. These students promptly wrote letters to all major Nigerian news agencies informing them of this development and supplying copies of the stories on the issue carried by the Italian press, with English translations. The story was confirmed by a correspondent from *The Guardian*,<sup>1</sup> and as of 5 June 1988, articles began to appear in this tabloid backed by pictures of stacks of drums, shipping containers, steel casks, and bags marked “radioactive.” Other media organizations rapidly joined the reportage, and within a couple of days the Koko story had been whipped up into a frenzy, with journalists covering it from different angles. There was also a lot of activity in the editorial cartoon sections and other newspaper cartoon strips, which took up the issue from diverse perspectives.

The media frenzy over the toxic-waste dumping at Koko spurred an investigation by Nigerian government authorities. The resulting reports indicated that over 3,884 tons of hazardous toxic waste had been imported into Nigeria between June 1987 and May 1988 by a company owned and controlled by two Italian nationals and aided by Nigerian associates.<sup>2</sup> The names of the Italians were given as Gianfranco Raffaeli and Desiderio Perazzi, they had used their Nigerian registered company to facilitate the dumping of the toxic waste in Nigeria for the Italian multi-national corporations Ecomar and Jelly Wax. Further investigations by Nigerian authorities revealed that the dumped waste included the following highly hazardous substances, among others: X-ray waste, methyl melamine manufactured by Dyna Cynamid of Norway, polyurethanes from Italian I.V.I., dimethyl and ethyl acetate formaldehyde from several Italian manufacturers, and polychlorobiphenyl—one of the most dangerous substances on earth—from Elma of Turin, Italy.

This incident generated a diplomatic face-off between Nigeria and Italy, which was only resolved by the intervention of the international community. Subsequently, the Nigerian

1 Segun Ogunseitan and Emeka Ogbeide, “Toxic Waste Dump in Koko Town,” *The Sunday Guardian*, 5 June 1988.

2 “Toxic Waste: Italian Ship Detained,” *Saturday Sketch*, 11 June 1988.

government sent the toxic-waste cargo back to Italy, and the Italian government was obliged to help with the cleanup of Koko, with support from other countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States.<sup>3</sup>

### **Eco-Images and Eco-Cartoons**

A picture, it is said, is worth more than a thousand words, and as such, issues of environmental consciousness can be efficiently communicated through the agency of “eco-images.” The coinage “eco-image,” with the prefix “eco” from the word “ecology,” appears to connote any graphic representation that is intended or perceived as informing about, commenting on, critiquing, or raising awareness about the state of or interactions with the environment, including its exploitation, management, conservation, or abuse. This definition of eco-images also encompasses cartoons that depict environmental issues, which in turn can be termed “eco-cartoons.” Caricature graphics have been challenging the status quo since ancient Egypt, providing an alternative recording and representation of events to the official versions.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of cartoons is generally criticism, but they act by coating the bitter pill of criticism with a caramel of humor. They act as barometers for measuring public opinion of social events.

This paper focuses on the 1987 to 1988 dumping of hazardous industrial waste in Koko. The specific focus, however, is the participation by cartoonists in the public debate over the waste-dumping incident as seen in the Nigerian tabloids in the month of June 1988. The paper critically analyzes the number, content, and contexts of cartoons that covered the toxic-waste dumping.

### **Occurrence of Toxic-Waste-Related Cartoons**

Four newspapers were sampled for toxic-waste-related cartoons, the nationally circulated, *The Guardian* and *Nigerian Tribune*, and the regional papers, *The Republic* and

3 For a more in-depth discussion of the Koko issue see Tunde Akingbade, *On the Trail of the Environment* (Lagos: Triple “E” Systems Associates Ltd., 1991); and Greenpeace, *The Database of Known Hazardous Waste Exports from OECD to Non-OECD Countries, 1989–1994* (Washington, DC: Greenpeace, 1994).

4 Roger Pen Cuff, “The American Editorial Cartoon—A Critical Historical Sketch,” *Journal of Educational Sociology* 19, no. 2 (1945): 88.

*Daily Sketch*. A dossier of all the cartoons published by the four selected newspapers during the month of June 1988 was collected. These cartoons were sorted into two groups, namely toxic-waste related and non-toxic-waste related. The toxic-waste cartoons were further classified into categories based on their content and statistically analyzed in terms of these categories. The results were presented in a frequency table with percentage analysis. Finally, all the toxic-waste cartoons were analyzed according to their content and context.

In total, 255 cartoons were published during the month of June 1988. Of these, 26 of them related directly or indirectly to the toxic-waste-dumping incident at Koko, representing 10.2 percent. *The Guardian* published the largest number of these toxic-waste cartoons, representing 46.2 percent of the total number of toxic-waste cartoons published during the study period. With only 4 toxic-waste-related cartoons, the *Sketch* published the least of the four newspapers sampled, representing 15.4 percent of the 26 toxic-waste-related cartoons. The results from all the titles surveyed are presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Percentage of Toxic-Waste Cartoons Published in June 1988**

Source	Total No. of Cartoons Published	No. of Toxic-Waste-Related Cartoons Published	Percentage
Guardian	92	12	13
Republic	67	5	7.5
Sketch	34	4	11.8
Tribune	79	5	7.6
Total	255	26	10.2

Though *The Guardian* was the first tabloid to investigate and break the story on the toxic-waste dumping, its first cartoon on the issue was not published until 9 June 1988, a day after *Nigerian Tribune* published its first story and cartoon together.<sup>5</sup> It is also worthy of note that though the *Nigerian Tribune* only published 6 toxic-waste cartoons during the month of June 1988, it published another 12 such cartoons in July 1988, when they were dying out in other tabloids.

5 "Order Removal of Toxic Wastes," *Nigerian Tribune*, 6 June 1988; and Yemi Adaramodu, editorial cartoon, *Nigerian Tribune*, 8 June 1988.

A review of the 26 cartoons identified as commenting on the toxic waste at Koko port reveals six broad categories, namely: 1. Law and Policy; 2. Critical of the Nigerian Government and Its Agencies; 3. Used to Highlight Other Socioeconomic Issues; 4. Humorous; 5. Critical of Foreigners; and 6. Informative. From the tally of cartoons in each one of these six categories, the category with the largest samples is 3, in which the toxic-waste issue was used to highlight unrelated socioeconomic issues (Table 2).

**Table 2: Frequency of Publications by Categories**

SN	Category	Guardian	Republic	Sketch	Tribune	Total
1.	Law and Policy	2	0	1	0	3
2.	Critical of the Government	3	1	0	0	4
3.	Used to Highlight Other Issues	5	0	1	3	9
4.	Humorous	0	2	1	2	5
5.	Critical of Foreigners	2	0	1	1	4
6.	Informative	2	2	0	1	5
7.	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>14*</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>7**</b>	<b>30</b>

\* Two of the cartoon samples published by this title have components that could be classified under more than one category.

\*\* One of the cartoon samples published by this title has components that could be classified under more than one category.

### Content and Context Analysis of Cartoons

In this section, the content and context of some of the 26 toxic-waste-related cartoons, which illustrate the perspectives and diversity of the categories, are analyzed.

#### *Law and Policy*

On Monday, 20 June 1988, the *Daily Sketch* published one of the three cartoons in this category. Though the cartoon was authored by the *Sketch*'s editorial cartoonist, Rinde Oladele, it was not published in the customary spot for editorial cartoons but on the back

page in the human-angle humor strip titled “Paddy.”<sup>6</sup> In this cartoon, the protagonist, Paddy, is shown reading a news item with the message “toxic waste importers to face firing squad,” and in response, he retorts “for intoxicating us with waste.” This cartoon (fig. 1) refers to the policy debate among Nigeria’s military junta in 1988, about whether to punish the dumping of toxic waste with the death penalty, including execution by firing squad—a euphemism for death under a hail of bullets. The punishment of death under a hail of bullets was Nigeria’s military junta’s favored means of punishment, frequently carried out in the full glare of the public. This punishment was therefore the most punitive even among capital punishments, which also included death by hanging. Subsequently, however, on 25 November 1988, after significant local and international pressure, the military junta promulgated the Harmful Waste (Special Criminal Provisions etc.) Decree, which called for life imprisonment for the offence of dumping toxic waste in Nigeria.<sup>7</sup>

*The Guardian* in its editorial cartoon from Sunday, 19 June 1988, authored by staff cartoonist Bisi Ogunbanjo, also made an allusion to the punishment of death by firing squad. One of the characters called out, the “brains behind the toxic waste dumped in Koko should be shot.”<sup>8</sup> It is, however, ironic that in a smaller human-interest cartoon piece on the front page of the same issue the same cartoonist seemed to play devil’s advocate by decrying this maximum punishment for toxic-waste offenders (fig. 2). In this smaller piece titled “Bisi,” the



Figure 1:  
Rinde Oladele,  
“Paddy,” *Daily Sketch* (20 June 1988).



Figure 2:  
Bisi Ogunbanjo,  
Editorial Cartoon,  
*The Guardian*,  
Nigeria (19 June 1988).

6 Rinde Oladele, “Paddy,” *Daily Sketch*, 20 June 1988.

7 Government of Nigeria, *Harmful Waste (Special Criminal Provisions etc.) Decree*, Decree No. 42, 1988.

8 Bisi Ogunbanjo, editorial cartoon, *The Guardian*, 19 June 1988.

main character is depicted as being engaged in a debate with a man in military uniform, presumably representing the military junta. Bisi tells the soldier that “it is inhuman to kill toxic waste offenders” and the soldier replies sarcastically, “Rubbish! Better that one million Nigerians die from SAP than one guilty importer goes free.”<sup>9</sup> This piece plays on the intense attention paid by the military junta to the toxic-waste issue, attention which the poor economic situation of most Nigerians had not received.<sup>10</sup> According to this reading, Ogunbadejo’s cartoon could also be placed in the category of cartoons that used the toxic-waste issue to address other socioeconomic ills, because of its criticism of the junta over the SAP issue.

### *Cartoons Critical of Nigerian Government and Its Agencies*

Four cartoons were classified under this category, three of which were published by *The Guardian*. The main criticism in these cartoons was aimed at public authorities, specifically for nonchalant conduct and security lapses. They argued that this behavior allowed for the importation of the toxic waste and the attempt to suppress the story in the press.

The second *Guardian* editorial cartoon on toxic waste, authored by Osse Ogwu and published on 10 June 1988, depicted a larger-than-life father figure admonishing a diminutive child.<sup>11</sup> The father figure is most likely a representation of the Nigerian military junta speaking to the Nigerian citizenry with a note of warning to “keep your environment clean, no dumping.” In the background, however, right behind the bent-over father figure, a pipe is depicted discharging what is labeled as “Toxic waste.”<sup>12</sup> The irony of the cartoon is that this same sanitary compeller could not keep its own backyard—Nigeria—free of toxic waste. Another cartoon with a similar message is that of Muiyiwa Collins, published in his regular “Amebo” cartoon strip in *The Republic* on 20 June 1988.<sup>13</sup> The caption on the cartoon indicts the officials of the border control agency, the Nigeria Customs Service, of figuratively sleeping on duty, and thereby leaving the borders porous enough for people to smuggle toxic waste into the country. The aforementioned editorial cartoon from 19 June

9 Bisi Ogunbanjo, “Bisi,” *The Guardian*, 19 June 1988.

10 The junta had imposed a severe austerity policy prescribed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and referred to as the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) in Nigeria in 1985, which had further impoverished Nigerians and cost many lives.

11 Osse Ogwu, editorial cartoon, *The Guardian*, 10 June 1988.

12 This cartoon may be alluding to the mandatory monthly sanitation exercise imposed on Nigerians by the junta since 1984, which took place every last Saturday of the month, under strict supervision by military personnel carrying whips.

13 Muiyiwa Collins, “Amebo,” *The Republic*, 20 June 1988.

1988 in *The Guardian* called for government agencies and officials to be held accountable for their laxities, which allowed for the dumping of the toxic waste in Koko and for mismanagement of the situation thereafter. One of the characters of the strip opined that “heads should roll at customs, external affairs and ministry of health.”<sup>14</sup>

The editorial cartoon from 16 June 1988 in *The Guardian* cryptically criticizes the military governor of Bendel State, where the toxic waste was dumped (fig. 3). Obe Ess (the nom de plume of *The Guardian*'s chief editorial cartoonist) stages a conversation in an editorial room of a newspaper, between the editor and another character, presumably a critic. The critic scolds the editor for not being the first tabloid to publish the news on the toxic-waste dumping, despite the fact that Koko is in the editor's backyard, Bendel State. The editor replies that he could



Figure 3:  
Obe Ess,  
“Caught Out,” *The  
Guardian*, Nigeria  
(16 June 1988).

not publish for fear of the “Major shareholder” and that he has become an “Observer.” The preceding quotes refer first to the rank “Major,” of the then military governor of Bendel State and the fact that the *Observer* newspaper, based in Bendel State, was also owned by the Bendel State government, of which the “Major” John Inienger was chief executive.

### *Cartoons Associated with Other Unrelated Socioeconomic Issues*

The toxic-waste-dumping issue served as a good springboard for cartoonists to launch criticism of other issues; it was frequently used to highlight other equally important though unrelated socioeconomic issues. The cartoonists used the toxic-waste issue in multiple ways: as a background, a mirror of contrast, and a mood lightener for poking fun at other serious issues. Of the six categories, this category is the largest, with nine

<sup>14</sup> Bisi Ogunbadejo, editorial cartoon, *The Guardian*, 19 June 1988.



such cartoons published in the period under review. Five of these nine cartoons were published in *The Guardian*, though two of these have strips that can also be classified under other categories.

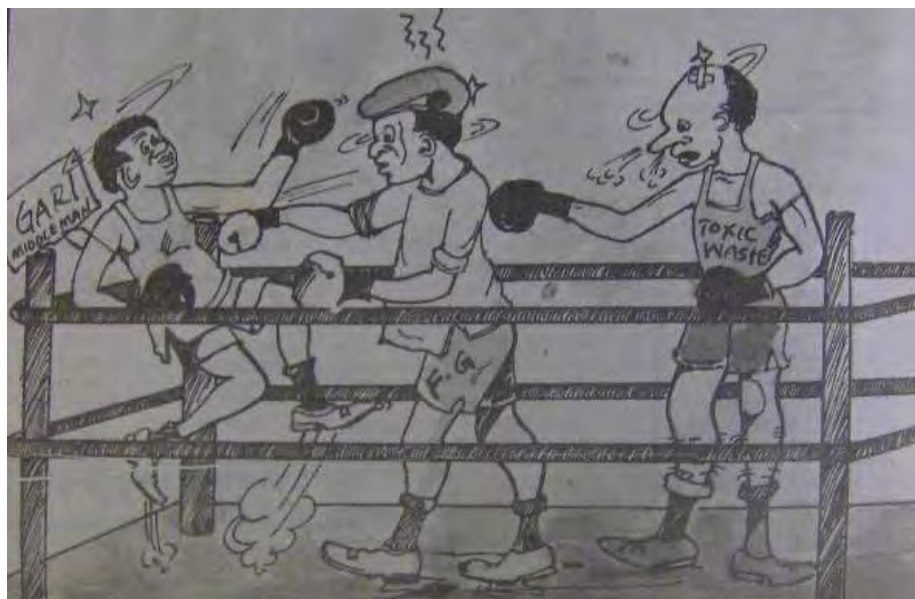


Figure 4:  
Rinde Oladele,  
Sketch Cartoon,  
*Daily Sketch* (21  
June 1988).

Three of the cartoons in this category highlight the challenges of locally generated waste, both domestic and industrial, in contrast to the dumped toxic waste of foreign origin. *Nigerian Tribune*, in its editorial cartoon from 27 June 1988 by Ronke Adesanya, uses the toxic-waste issue to draw attention to the pervasive corruption in the Nigeria Police Force.<sup>15</sup> The artist first depicts a news item in the background of the cartoon, stating that police officers serving in the Koko port area are to be screened for radioactive effects, and then she has her main character retort, “Only?” A contextual appreciation of this cartoon may lead one to infer that Adesanya was implying that the police should be screened for more than radioactivity, particularly for corruption, in view of their infamy for literally extorting and pocketing bribes at checkpoints on highways.

In an editorial cartoon from 21 June 1988, Rinde Oladele of the *Sketch* portrays a dramatic scene in a boxing ring with three characters, two are of large build while the third

<sup>15</sup> Ronke Adesanya, editorial cartoon, *Nigerian Tribune*, 27 June 1988.

is a scrawny-looking fellow (fig. 4). One of the large-built pugilists is labeled “F.G.” (for Federal Government); he is depicted pummeling the scrawny-looking fellow who is labeled “Gari Middle Man.” Gari is the inexpensive staple food for the poor in Nigeria, and is made from grated cassava stems. The second large pugilist is labeled “Toxic Waste” and he stands behind the F.G. character, urging F.G. to “Leave him alone! Try me for size.” With this cartoon, Oladele was both emphasizing the economic hardship foisted upon the Nigerian citizenry by the Nigerian military junta’s economic policies, and poking fun at the junta, which it has met its match in the toxic waste. It is also worthy of note that the character tagged “Toxic Waste” is depicted with a pointed nose, which is used to characterize persons with European ancestry; most likely a racial profiling of the origin of the toxic waste.

### *Humorous*

A significant number of the 26 collected toxic-waste cartoons appeared to be simply meant for humor, without any discernible secondary meaning. However, their authors used the seemingly innocuous humor to mask their own interpretations of and opinions on about several issues that emanated from the toxic-waste-dumping incident. It is worth noting that *The Guardian*, which published the largest number of toxic-waste-related cartoons from the tabloids sampled, did not publish a single cartoon that can be classified under this category. This may be due to the strictly formal editorial policy of *The Guardian*, relative to other Nigerian titles.

Yemi Adaramodu of the *Nigerian Tribune* in his regular “Kongi” cartoon strip, published 19 June 1988, had his protagonist Kongi professing affection to a lady and promising that he would die for her, until he finds out she resides in Koko, whereupon the reader is left with the impression that he recants.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in the “Paddy” cartoon strip on the back page of the *Daily Sketch* published 27 June 1988, Paddy pokes fun at his companion by threatening to test the other character’s beer for toxicity (fig. 5).



Figure 5:  
Rinde Oladele,  
“Paddy,” *Daily Sketch* (27 June 1988).

<sup>16</sup> Yemi Adaramodu, “Kongi,” *Nigerian Tribune*, 19 June 1988.

*Cartoons Critical of Foreigners and Informative Cartoons*

In the editorial cartoon of *The Guardian* published on 18 June 1988, aptly titled “The Italian Mess,” one of the characters lashes out in patriotic fervor, “Those blighters! What do they take us for? Coming from Italy to dump industrial wastes here.”<sup>17</sup> This piece attempts to rouse nationalistic sentiments of *them* versus *us* to criticize the Italians who were responsible for importing the toxic waste. And as if to drive home this point even more, the same cartoon was reprinted two days later in *The Guardian* on 20 June 1988. Even without encouragement from the media, the toxic-waste debacle further exacerbated mistrust of foreigners in Nigeria during this period, and all suspicious acts by foreigners received the label of “toxic.”



Figure 6:  
Tunde Ayinde,  
“Big Bros,”  
*Tribune*  
(15 June 1988).

Some of the toxic-waste-related cartoons merely relayed news items that had been published in the mainstream print media in a brief and concise manner, often with humor and little or no expression of the cartoonists’ opinions. An example of a cartoon falling within this category is the editorial cartoon of *The Republic* published 30 June 1988, where a wall was depicted with seven posters on it, all bearing several actual news headlines on toxic waste reported in the print media throughout the month of June 1988.<sup>18</sup> However, when the Norwegian government agreed to commence the cleanup of a toxic waste dump in Guinea Bissau, *Nigerian Tribune*’s editorial cartoonist Tunde Ayinde made one of his characters retort minimally, “what of the one in our backyard?” (fig. 6). This response raised the implicit question of whether the Italian government would help in its turn with the cleanup of the contaminated areas in Nigeria.<sup>19</sup>

17 Bisi Ogunbadejo, “The Italian Mess,” *The Guardian*, 18 June 1988.

18 Emcee, editorial cartoon, *The Republic*, 30 June 1988.

19 Eventually, the Italian government, along with other Western governments, would assist with the cleanup of toxic waste in Koko.

## Conclusion

The media was critical in stimulating the response of the public to the Koko waste-dumping incident, and cartooning was a potent component of this media sensitization. This was especially due to the high level of illiteracy in Nigeria, hence it was easier to communicate information about the waste dumping incident through pictorial representations. The public reaction elicited by the media sensitization spurred public outcry and protests that forced the Nigerian authorities to react by repatriating the waste and to provide radioactive screening and treatment for victims. The environmental consciousness generated spurred the establishment of local environmental non-governmental organizations, such as the Koko Defense Group and People United to Save Koko. The Nigerian people and the organizations established as a result of the media sensitization spurred the government into promulgating the Harmful Waste (Special Criminal Provisions etc.) Decree and establishing the Federal Environmental Protection Agency with the Federal Environmental Protection Agency Decree. This agency now acts as Nigeria's statutory environmental watchdog. The effect of these images on public opinion and policy illustrates the numerous possibilities of employing cartoons as eco-images.