

ISSUES OF SECURITY AND INSECURITY IN BOKO HARAM ERA: A CONTEXTUALIZATION OF MOYO OKEDIJI'S EXPLOSIVE IMAGES

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Abstract

The process of “deafrikanizing” the Africans by the West and the Arab and their agents through their missionary activities and the institutionalization of their educational and political systems have caused “things to fall apart.” In other words, the cantankerous and insecure state of the postcolonial African nation-states is traceable to the Westernization and Arabization of Africans. The accounts of how various indigenous cultures resisted the incursion of the Western culture abound and the current resistance to Western education by the Islamic fundamentalist sect, Boko Haram which loosely translates to “Western education is forbidden or evil” is a modern version on a long resistance. Unlike the traditional Africans whose custom it is not to fight for their gods, these proselytizing foreign religions - Christianity and Islam - have a long history of religious wars and intolerance which their adherents have continued in modern times subtly and grossly. These alien faith traditions implanted religious intolerance and violence in Africa and the terrorist activities of Boko Haram like the 1998 bombing of the American Embassy in Kenya by an Islamic terrorist group are all markers of acculturation and bigotry. The “explosive” artworks of Moyo Okediji explore the ambiguity of security and insecurity in Nigeria in an era I term, “The Boko Haram era”: 2009 to date. Unlike Boko Haram that has explored the soda aluminum cans for making explosives and bombs, Okediji has engaged the same aluminum cans in creating “explosive” and interrogative contemporary artworks that celebrate the principle of “trash to treasure” as against Boko Haram’s “trash to terror.” A very brief narrative on recent contemporary art practice in Nigeria shows how artists have been proactive and reactive in material use and thematic interrogation.

“Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world” by religious fundamentalism, bigotry and uncontrolled senses. And the process of “deafrikanizing” the Africans by the West and the Arab and their agents through their missionary activities and the institutionalization of their educational and political systems have caused “things to fall apart.” In other words, the cantankerous and insecure state of the postcolonial African nation-states is traceable to the Westernization and Arabization of Africans. Lamenting the grave consequences of Western imperialism and culture on the Igbo culture Obierika in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) intones, “The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.”

The accounts of how various indigenous cultures resisted the incursion of the Western culture abound and the current resistance to Western education by the Islamic fundamentalist sect, Boko Haram which loosely translates to “Western education is forbidden or evil” is a

modern version on a long resistance. “Since the Sokoto Caliphate, which ruled parts of what is now northern Nigeria, Niger and southern Cameroon, fell under British control in 1903, there has been resistance among the area's Muslims to Western education” (Choita 2012). Their resistance is “due to [the] activities of early Christian missionaries who used Western education as a tool for evangelism” (Wikipedia 2012). According to Peter-Jazzy Ezeh (2012: 89):

Whether in the shape of Christianity or Islam the imported religions in Africa were introduced to serve opportunistic ends of hegemonic foreign interests. It is, therefore, not hard to see why the imposed, and in most cases ill-digested, belief system cannot serve as an effective normative system that strengthens cordial existence in the plural post-colonial society. They were designed to cause divisiveness among indigenous Africans.

Unlike the traditional Africans whose custom it is not to fight for their gods, just rephrasing an elder in Chinua Achebe (1958:113), these proselytizing foreign religions - Christianity and Islam - have a long history of religious wars and intolerance which their adherents have continued in modern times subtly and grossly. One of the many incidents of intolerance by the new converts to the Christian faith was portrayed by Chinua Achebe (1958) thus: “Three converts had gone into the village and boasted openly that all the gods were dead and impotent and that they were prepared to defy them by burning all their shrine. ‘Go and burn your mothers’ genitals, said one of the priests’.” These alien faith traditions implanted religious intolerance and violence in Africa. And just like the saying, “what goes around, comes around” and the universal principle “what a man sows that he must reap,” the Christian and Islamic faiths have continued to reap the bitter fruits of their intolerance and attack against the traditional African religion. Likewise the 9/11 terrorist attack was a karmic reaction and ex-president Bill Clinton stated this in his speech at Georgetown University, Washington DC on Wednesday November 17, 2001 and Matt Kaufman summarizes it thus: “America was paying the price for its history of slavery and genocide of Indians, and Christendom was paying the price for committing massacres during the First Crusade some 900 years ago.” And in the words of Clinton: "In the first Crusade, when the Christian soldiers took Jerusalem, they first burned a synagogue with 300 Jews in it and proceeded to kill every woman and child who was a Muslim on the Temple Mount. I can tell you that story is still being told today in the Middle East and we are still paying for it."

In Nigeria, most religious conflicts have occurred in the northern region, a predominantly Muslim society peopled by mostly the Hausa-Fulani tribe. These fatal religious attacks with obvious political undertone have been targeted on the Christian minority who are mostly from the southern part of the country. The audacious attacks by the Islamic fundamentalist sect commonly known as Boko Haram is shacking the corporate existence of the nation-state of Nigeria to its foundation. The sect was founded in 2002 in Maiduguri, Borno State by Mohammed Yusuf as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, an Arabic expression which means "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad." This modern day jihadis have attacked many police stations and their headquarters, the United Nation's office, churches, media/newspaper houses with many deaths and properties worth millions of Naira destroyed. In an article titled “The Butchers of Nigeria” Wole Soyinka (2012) states that, “Over the past year, Nigeria’s homegrown terror group Boko Haram has escalated its

deadly attacks against Christian and government targets, with the aim of establishing a Sharia state in the country's north." The terrorist activities of Boko Haram like the 1998 bombing of the American Embassy in Kenya by an Islamic terrorist group "is itself part of a much larger historical narrative about modernity, beginning with late nineteenth century colonialism" (Kasfir 2005). Christian evangelism as a part of the colonial project compounded the friction and fissure created by the Islamic jihadis which have continued to reverberate in a vortex of violence in modern times and in the period that I term the "Boko Haram Era": 2009 to date. Although the group was founded in 2002, its dastardly fatal jihadist activities started in 2009 with the attack of several police stations in Maiduguri that resulted in the death of hundreds of people.

In setting the background to this paper, I have quoted Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" (1958) and William Butler Yeats's *Second Coming* (1919) from which "Things Fall Apart" took its theme and title. Quoting these works is in sync with the conceptual context of Moyo Okediji's aluminum works that derived most of their titles and broader thematic context from Yeats's poem, *Second Coming*:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

New Modernism

Moyo Okediji's new body of works was shown at the Watersworth Gallery, Lagos, July 14 to 30, 2012 under the title "The New Modern: Explosive Images, Incendiary Times." According to the artist:

Since the first suicide bombing, Nigeria has veered outside its conventional cultural horizon to a new political aesthetic era. All the trappings of Nigeria's post-independence culture, and all the artistic expressions with which the old culture was associated, now look irrelevant ... The established meanings now feel jaded ... Within the vortex of this New Modern, nowhere is the era better clearly experienced and expressed than in the visual arts. (Okediji 2012)

Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie (2008) in his article "The Perils of Unilateral Power: Neomodernist Metaphors and The New Global Order" notes that, "The contemporary era after postmodernism has returned to modernist commitments and strategies with a vengeance, a process hereby identified as neomodernism." Hence, "neomodernism" and "new modernism" are neologisms for contemporary art practices that are both global and "glocal".

Moyo Okediji (b. 1959) is currently a professor of Art and Art History at the University of Austin, Texas, USA. He was one of the founding members of the *Ona* group, a collective of five fine art graduates of University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University). The central ideology of the *Ona* group is the exploration of the Yoruba indigenous designs and motifs in modernist expressions. Although Okediji had works with definitive *ona* features in the exhibition, most of the major works were visually and ideological opposed to *Onaism*. In the previous quote, Okediji states that the unimaginable incidences of suicide bombings in Nigeria have revolutionized all things conventional, and as a result, “all the artistic expressions with which the old culture was associated, now look irrelevant [which includes the modernist *ona* style].” Okediji appears to be abandoning the *Ona* ideology and style with his *new modernism* in the same way that Olu Oguibe has abandoned *Ulism* for the postmodernist strategies (see Ottenberg 1998).

In Nigeria, the impetus for more critical engagement with materials particularly in the recycling or repurposing mode, has been stimulated by the global success of El Anatsui coupled with the international relevance of some younger artists like Nnenna Okore and Bright Ugochukwu Eke. Both Okore and Eke were former students of Anatsui. Ogbachie (2009) asserts: “It is undeniable that Anatsui’s success as a globally validated installation artist is driving modern Nigerian art in an entirely new direction.” Also the activities of Bisi Silva through her Center for Contemporary Art, CCA, Lagos, have contributed greatly in informing and challenging the contemporary visual art practice in the country.

Okediji’s new works expand the ideology and character of contemporary Nigerian art. And according to the artist:

The mediums of the New Modern are identifiable in terms of the choice of mediums, methods of execution, and meaning of work. The mediums of the New Modern are fragmented into experimentation with trash and trivial to produce treasures and trophies ... The meaning of the work comes from unclear dialect of an abstract visual language. It is a language of incoherence, disruption, disasters, corruption and collapse. (Okediji 2012)

By using strips and pieces of aluminum cans, he repurposes in a purposeful and productive mode a material that has been repurposed in a destructive mode by the members of Boko Haram in manufacturing their explosives and bombs (Fig. 1). In this vein Okediji amplifies the truism in Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. words: “When evil men plot, good men must plan. When evil men burn and bomb, good men must build and bind.”



1. Boko Haram's Homemade Bombs and Explosives.

A precursory effort in the use of burnt, mangled aluminum cans as metaphor for casualties of wars and conflicts is evident in *Casualties*, produced by Kainebe Osahenye in 2008, a year before Boko Haram's first major attacks. Also Raqib Bashorun, an art lecturer and practising artist has explored and integrated hand-woven aluminum pieces in his relief and free standing sculptures. Such integration and synergy could be seen in works like *Heaven Sent*, 2010 and *Scarlet Storm*, 2010. A few other artists have also explored the aluminum cans and printing plates and the weaving techniques in their contemporary artistic expressions. Yet before all of these examples, El Anatsui in 2007 explored the theme of violence in creating an intriguing work out of liquor caps titled *Breeding Takari II*.

New Modernism and Its Interrogative Nuances

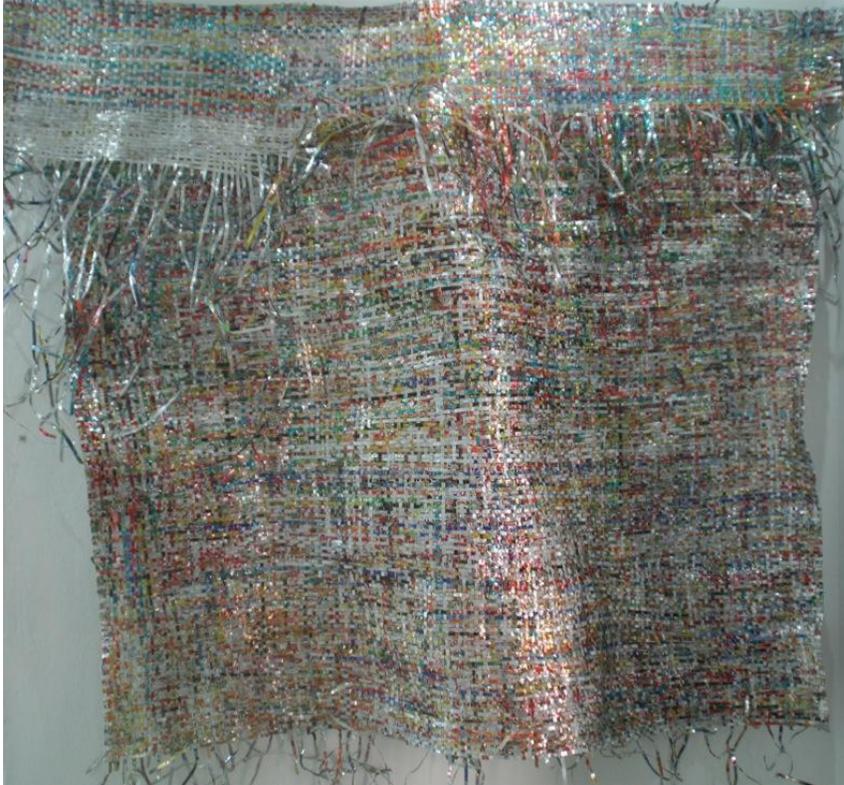
Okediji's "Things Fall Apart" (2012, Fig. 2), is a work with a postmodernist character. It is composed of two hand-woven aluminum works, configured in two layers: an upper band and a supporting layer. The upper band appears to be a fragment of what used to be a much larger form in an unravelling and disintegrating state. This part of the composition is suggestive of the upper part of the country, the North, where Boko Haram holds sway with their series of bombings and killings. With the religious overtone and the political undertone of Boko Haram's activities, the corporate existence of the nation-state of Nigeria is seriously challenged. This is the first time that Nigeria is facing this kind of national security challenges and the future appears ominous. The squarish supporting layer becomes the southern part of the country that is in actuality the major support of the economic base of the country with its abundant crude oil, other mineral resources and highly developed human capital. Although every part of the supporting layer still appears intact, its jagged bottom evokes the vulnerability of the region to Boko Haram's attack. Wole Soyinka (2012) warns that:

[T]he agencies of Boko Haram, its promulgators both in

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evangelical and violent forms, are everywhere. Even here, right here in this throbbing commercial city of Lagos, there are, in all probability, what are known as 'sleepers' waiting for the word to be given. If that word were given this moment, those sleepers would swarm over the walls of this college compound and inundate us.

We have also heard people in the South saying, "Let Boko Haram keep their terror in the North and not bring it to the South for they would not tolerate it if that happens." One cannot image how disastrous a retaliatory attack from the South would be should they be attacked in their region given that some of them have lost their loved ones in the violent attacks in the North.



2. Things Fall Apart, 2012, handwoven aluminum, 60" x 50". Photo: Courtesy of the artist.



3. North and South, 2012, aluminum collage on canvas, 96" x 72". Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

The idea of a highly troubled North and a less troubled South embedded in this piece is reified in “North and South” (2012, aluminum collage on canvas; Fig. 3). In this composition the upper register represents the North; and the exclusive use of red in this section alludes to the numerous deaths in the region resulting from the violent attacks by Boko Haram. Within this section a partly cropped spherical form in the right and a more cropped circle in the top left angle realized predominately in white, signify the limited spaces in the North in which one could have an illusion of security and one of such places could be the Aso Rock presidential villa, the complex which houses the residence and office of the Nigerian President. The dominant use of white in the lower register that represents the South, shows the South as been free from Boko Haram’s attacks at least for now, but the shades of browns and yellows found in it indicate its vulnerability. By the jagged and zigzagged intersecting line in the middle, a spatial tension is evoked and the artist metaphorically interrogates the colonialist's blunder of amalgamating the northern and southern protectorates to create the modern nation-state of Nigeria. This act further implicates the West in creating a vicious circle of insecurity in the modern African States.



4. *The Widening Gyre*, 2012, aluminum collage on canvas, 48'' x 84''. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.



5. *The Eye of the Storm*, 2012, aluminum collage on canvas, 48'' x 84''. Photo: Tobenna Okwuosa.

“*The Widening Gyre*” (2012, Fig. 4) could be read as a close-up rendition of swirling vortex of violence and the atmosphere of insecurity in different shades and nuances; while, the *The Eye of the Storm* (2012, Fig. 5) captures the whirling vortex of violence encircling Nigeria from a wider visual perspective. The cycle of violence induced by religious intolerance is

widening in Nigeria and the country has experienced many fatal religious conflicts since independence and Boko Haram has further widened the gyre with suicide bombing as an attack strategy. Before the Boko Haram era, most Nigerians thought that, “No Nigerian would willfully forfeit his or her life for any position, idea, or belief” (Okediji 2012). The recent outcrop of suicide bombers evidences the dire economic difficulty of most Nigerians. Since independence the leaders of the Nigerian nation have failed to solve the problems of poverty, health, education and others which are the root causes of insecurity in Nigeria. Odomovo Afeno (2012) believes that, “The Boko Haram uprising is primarily the result of the failure of successive governments in Nigeria to fight corruption, provide public services, create economic opportunities and establish accountable and effective security institutions.” And according to the former Secretary General of the United Nations (UN), Kofi Annan as quoted in Odomovo Afeno (2012):

‘[S]ecurity’ ... encompass[es] areas such as education, health, democracy and human rights, protection against environmental degradation, and the proliferation of deadly weapons. We know that we cannot be secure amidst starvation, that we cannot build peace without alleviating poverty, and that we cannot build freedom on the foundation of injustices. These pillars of what we now understand as the people-centred concept of ‘human’ security are inter-related and mutually reinforcing.

The conundrum and paradox of security and insecurity are causing more and more people particularly those who have failed to make it materially to look toward the heaven for what it can offer. “The Lady with Crossed Legs” (Fig. 6) appears to be one of the several heavenly virgins said to be the reward of the jihadist suicide bombers. A white egg in her right arm becomes a symbolic icon for purity/virginity and with crossed legs, she flaunts her chastity. By rendering the figure in blues and reds that mix optically to various shades of black and brown, the artist re-contextualizes the blacks self-affirmative slogan, “black is beautiful” in the celestial realm. The figure appears to be floating in an ethereal space with what appears to be her wings schematically represented in white. This is an example of the extraterrestrial beauties that are pushing some frustrated wretches to “religious” suicide missions. Consequently, their amorous and voyeuristic desires implicate them in a network of illusion.



6. Lady with Crossed Legs, 2012, aluminum collage on canvas, 50" x 84".
Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

“Falcon and Falconer” (2012, Fig. 7) is an intricately and compactly hand-woven piece with immense size. A vertically aligned work realized from two parts conjoined in an overlapping manner in the middle. By one part of the work overlapping the other, the feeling of concealment which the artist said is a central idea in its conceptualization is dramatized poetically. The artist informs:

As a characteristic of the New Modern, a central piece titled Falcon and Falconer in this exhibition uses the strategy of concealment. Terrorists often deploy the same strategy of concealment, as they mask and hide their weapons of destruction, while targeting their victims ... To demonstrate the global scale, and timeless textures of this New Modern, the title of the work borrows from the 1919 poem, “The Second Coming,” by W.B. Yeats.



7. Falcon and Falconer, 2012, hand-woven aluminum, 116" x 60" non-regular.
Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Furthermore, the shimmering silver of the aluminum strips evokes the tropical sun of Sub-Saharan Africa, the geographical stage on which all of these constellations of violence and intolerance are being played out. The ambiguity of insecurity and security in the modern state of Nigeria is generated by the multiple specks of red and blue that suggest violence and peace in a common field space. The jagged edges of the work become the visual equivalent of Eedris Abdulkareem's 2004 hit track "Jaga Jaga," the chorus goes:

Nigeria jagajaga
Everything scatter scatter
Poor man dey suffer suffer

Gbosa, gbosa, gun shot inna de air

Jagajaga is a Nigerian pidgin for something that is awkwardly distorted. The artiste radically interrogates the precarious and insecure state of Nigeria by engaging contemporary existential challenges of the inhabitants of the most populous nation of Africa. About 10 years after Eedris Abdulkareem's "Jaga Jaga," things have deteriorated and the national security issue in the Boko Haram era has become very problematic.

Unlike the members of the fundamentalist Islamic sect, Boko Haram, who have explored the soda aluminum cans for making explosives and bombs, Okediji has engaged the same aluminum cans in creating "explosive," interrogative contemporary artworks. Simply put, Okediji has explored the principle of "trash to treasure" as against Boko Haram's "trash to terror." Embedded within the principle of "trash to treasure" is the principle of non violent, ahimsa. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. used this principle, ahimsa, in his fight for the civil rights of the blacks in America and was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi who used it in his opposition to racism in South Africa and Western colonialism in India; and ahimsa is a fundamental teaching in the ancient Vedic philosophy of India. With other "explosive" aluminum artworks such as "Point of No Return," "Terra Nullius" (No Man's Land), "Ceremony of the Innocent," and "End of Meaning 1-6," all produced in 2012, Prof. Moyo Okediji, a United States based Nigerian professor of Art History and a practising artist, engages the issues of security and insecurity in the present Boko Haram era, a time frame in which Nigeria tilts precariously.

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