

## Killing Fields and a Memorial: Two Installations

Ashiedu Ogboli Ph.D

Department Of Visual and Performing Arts, Faculty of Arts, University of Maiduguri  
Maiduguri Borno State Nigeria

### Abstract

This paper reports two assemblages that were made and displayed by Ashiedu Ogboli. *Killing Fields* and *A Memorial* assemblages were executed over a period of four years and were exhibited as part of a Solo Exhibition entitled *Sambisa Forest* which opened on December 6<sup>th</sup> and closed on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2017 at the Fine Arts Gallery Department of Visual and Performing Arts, University of Maiduguri, Nigeria. The author explores the significance of the assemblages and their intrinsic and extrinsic value.

### Keywords:

**Boko Haram:** A Terrorist organization founded on the premise that Western Education and culture are un-Islamic. The group has waged a war of attrition against the Nigerian state since 2009. The resulting insurgency has led to loss of at least twenty thousand human lives and unmeasurable economic, socio-cultural damage. The insurgency has spilled into the neighbouring states of Chad, Cameroon and Niger, where similar groups have been known to exist in a close or loose association.

**Sambisa Forest:** A nature is reserve where Boko Haram group has made a redoubt and where they have been suspected to keep captives. Folk lore of kanuri people associate Sambisa Forest with natural and mythical hazards: a thicks and complex place. *Zambisande Kantaram* = our zambisa of mosquitoes.

**Assemblage:** A work of art executed by composing related and unrelated materials together.

**Environment:** The material space inhabited by human beings, flora and fauna.

**Installation:** A finished assemblage that is put together to be viewed or kept in a permanent or semi permanent display.

**Zawama:** A sculpted wooden form whose aim is for drying caps. Zawama is usually made with African hardwoods, some of which may be endangered.

### INTRODUCTION

*The artist destroys only to constitute as a voice of his creative freedom away from patronizing institutions. His creative choices are unbounded while his creative directions know no limits. He has replaced institutional patronage with the triumph of a radical creative temperament and innovation. Chike Aniakor. 1*

This paper is the outcome of the experimentation and reinterpretation of artistic symbols and realities of Ashiedu Ogboli, who is also the writer of the paper. This article forms a fragment of a wider body of ongoing ruminations and discourse by the artist in an attempt to find meanings to issues that have direct bearing on life and work in North Eastern Nigeria in particular the whole of Nigeria and even adjoining countries including but not limited to Niger, Chad and Cameroon in general.

This paper deals with two specific assemblages: how they were conceived, the materials gathered, and how they were executed and displayed. However, the presentation is generalized; since this write up is not a strict attempt at a deconstruction. Moreover, it is written by the artist himself and is therefore not “impartial”. We are aware that artists often keep journals of their work and thoughts. Leonardo Da Vinci kept copious notes of his ruminations. In the same manner, Rembrandt kept notes as did Dali, Kandinsky and Picasso. Some artists go as far as to even issue manifestoes.

Turner (1967) discusses how an anthropologist might view a performative phenomenon by examining “the form and objects ...” p 36. This information could then be interpreted subjectively depending on whose hand it has fallen to. Once a manifesto is issued or a performance is made, the event or product falls into the public domain; thereby being beyond the reach of the doer, maker or performer. Such a performance or event might have a specific aim or target. On another hand, a performance or art work could have a multiplicity of aims and objectives. The aim sought by an artist may run contrary to the result eventually achieved. Art often seeks to do several things; some of which may be contradictory at close scrutiny. Some notable aims include validation, commemoration, celebration, expiation, and so on and so forth.

Death rituals exist in all human culture. Scholars of Death Rituals, such as Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington (2010) point to the centrality of these rituals. Their enactments are as varied as culture. Some of such rituals are very direct in the process of mourning, acceptance, rationalization, and catharsis. In some cultures, a person is not considered as no longer alive until all the rituals of death and dying have been concluded. In some cultures the dead are seen as having only changed how they exist, or in what abode they exist. Ohiomokhare

(2015) buttresses this view by asserting that “The philosophy of the life of Africans is cyclical as the future is in our past and our past in our present” p.3.

One can think or cite polytheist religious beliefs and practices which are prevalent among cultures such as Yoruba, Dinka, Dogon, Tibet and the Indus.

On another note, monotheist religions such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism have been exerting their influences on the belief patterns of their adherents, and sometimes by extension, on people that are in proximity with such believers and practitioners. Mass media is a veritable vehicle for proselytization and dissemination of ideas; because it can, and does travel beyond visible borders.

So a curious artistic or practical question arises; which is: “How does a thing die?”, or “When is something dead?”, or perhaps, “What is the final condition of a dead thing?”

A being can be “assisted” to continue to live by the means of embalment, mummification, storage in a special reliquary edifice such as a catacomb, a tomb, a vault, an urn, and calabash or in some other state.

These ritual practices were sometimes extended to ritual animals, totemic figures, domestic pets (such as cats in ancient Egypt) and sacred animals, groves, bushes, forests, mountains and rivers. On another hand, tales, folklore, divination chants and elaborate ritual performances were developed by cultures such as Maya and Yoruba in order to propagate human figures, events and mythical symbols. These practices formed the core and substance for sustenance and cohesiveness of these cultures. The question here therefore posed by the *Killing Fields* and *A Memorial* becomes; “What else do these assemblages hereby put together do for the artists and his audience?”

It is not certain that this paper can, or whether it will answer all of these issues. Even at that, in answering some of these issues, only barely perhaps satisfactory responses will be got.

However, Ekpo Eyo (1977) alludes to the point that:

*“For an object to be qualified as a work of art it must have “something” beyond (sic) more utilitarian value. This something can only be sensed. Some people call it “aesthetic value”, some beauty”, but each of these words has different meanings in different societies; and even within the same society, opinions may differ as to which of two things is more beautiful or more aesthetically satisfying” p. 8.*

## **BACKGROUND TO THE DISCOURSE**

Boko Haram insurgency and other fringe Islamic terror organizations in the Sahel region of Africa have emerged as topical issues of concern in the recent past, and right up to the present. These problems have resulted in serious upheavals that still reverberate and affect life and work in various forms. For an artist, the problem of finding a workspace can be a big challenge. Furthermore, working in a distressed environment places the burden of low patronage or even danger to the individual; as may be caused by a conflicting subject matter.

This writer uses art to understand and explore the complexities of humanity in Nigeria and the rest of the world. As an artist and writer, for well over three decades, I have watched confounding and sometimes affirmative of events unfold. Some of the outcomes have led to serious setbacks to society, while others can be described as exhilarating; others are annoying, infuriating or mindboggling, terrible and disturbing. I live and work in Maiduguri, in North Eastern Nigeria. Maiduguri is an important economic and cultural centre, and a seat of a large university and commercial centre in addition to several specialized research institutes. It is also both an exit and entry point in to four or more independent countries- namely Cameroun, Chad, Niger and indirectly, Central African Republic. Insurgents who have terrorized the region are reported to come from even farther away, in addition to homegrown elements that make up the majority. Maiduguri is the largest city in North Eastern Nigeria, and also the capital of Borno state. It is a nexus for progressive aspirations, and at the same time serving as a hammer and an anvil for crushing and pulverizing ideas, people, life styles and ideals. Goods and ideologies seep across the porous borders, unmarked deserts, riverbeds, Lake Chad’s nomadic agricultural communities, or even through regular land crossings and airports. It is a political gateway, a religious entrepot, a market for all kinds of merchandise, a refugee center and a religious hotbed and in the grips of all the hopes and vagaries of Lake Chad. There is well founded evidence the Lake Chad waters is drying up along with relentless desert encroachment. Boko Haram, an Islamic fringe organization, waging an asymmetrical war in the hope of a caliphate, has had a destabilizing effect since 2009, with the concomitant loss of at least 20,000 human lives, and the displacement of well over two million individuals from towns, villages, communities and families. The collateral damage, according to United Nation agencies and Borno State Government reports (2017), is estimated at several billions of dollars. Similarly, Daura (2012) Waziri (2012) report colossal loss and damage to the social fabric. The damage brought on the social fabric has been enormous. For long periods, several communities were cut off as a result of insecurity such that transportation of goods and human beings came to almost complete halt. Farm produce was virtually impossible to harvest. At a point Boko Haram forbade farming in areas where it controlled. This worsened food insecurity. The internally displaced were thereby forced to move to more secure

camps and feeding centres. Against this backdrop, Aid agencies and relief workers stepped in to fill an apparent vacuum, in order to satisfy the needs of several hundred of thousands of individuals spread in virtually all of North East of Nigeria, beyond Nigeria's borders into Chad, Cameroon and Niger Republic. Displaced peoples camps also sprang up in other parts of Nigeria.

These realities set the backdrop for the two art assemblages that are being discussed here. The principal motifs that I am using for this art are "found objects", "discards" or "re-discovered materials". Many of them are "already dead" or "expired". Dustbins, gutters and waste dumps provide fertile grounds for my harvests. These materials are retrieved, and cleaned, rearranged, and sometimes painted or embellished.

North Eastern Nigeria has a delicate ecology. This arid region is characterized by sparseness of vegetation and intense and ongoing deforestation, denudation and desertification. Potable water and properly built and well maintained roads tend to be scarce. Access to healthcare delivery is tenuous. Illegal immigration is rampant. Life was already harsh in the best of times. According to Obot (2010) "the national history of Nigeria has been a story of unsustainable exploitation of the renewable natural resources for immediate economic profit". P. 54. The level of damage is stupendous. How this unsustainable model has been serving a catalyst for further conflict is beyond debate. Therefore, these assemblages are a sort of advocacy by this artist-in order to draw attention to damage to the human being and their habitat.

Most of my found objects are wooden boards or carved "Zawama" that are made from acacia tree trunks that have in all likelihood, been harvested in an environmentally unsustainable manner. Therefore, my "harvest" of these discards hopes to call attention to the fragility of the environment, and seeks to give a "second-life" to already expired wood which would most likely be found by "fuel hungry" scavengers for burning in food preparation, or otherwise eaten by termites and the elements. I use the art pieces to call attention to the endangered environment, and possibly stoke a nostalgia; through which society might be brought face-to-face with environmental degradation and loss. It is my hope that the viewer is most likely to ask "What is all this?" and therefore come face to face once more with what is being lost, and perhaps its inestimable value.

This is therefore a sort of advocacy for environmental preservation and sustainable exploitation of nature's endowments, rather than the ongoing pillage which could have fuelled the carnage visited by Boko Haram insurgency-albeit, indirectly. It has been observed that poverty and deprivation can fuel insurgency.

J.F. Ade. Ajayi (2000) in his essay *Mortality and Change*, points out that death and mortality are viewed differently by different cultures. Ajayi for instance, opines that Western society seeks "to master death rather than working with nature" by use of science and technology; a situation that an Indian Prime Minister found to be rather "arrogant" p. 414. Ade Ajayi further stresses an accommodationist position which he believes to be inherent in African mourning rituals. He adds though, that there are varied and conflicting influences that are presently apparently at work on altering African culture and practices and the ease or lack of it, with which the conduct of death rituals are carried out.

What the cultural backdrop could mean for this artist and his reaction to death and loss are encapsulated in these assemblages.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This dualism is in the act of Advocacy and Mourning. The advocacy is aimed at sensitization about the fragility and possible loss of the balance of our ecosystem and livelihood, while the other part is in mourning this loss.

Onazulike (2010) notes that artists the world over, use their work to state positions. Sometime artists go as far as issue manifestoes. Such manifestoes are often written or made as verbal statements. Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and Henri Matisse (1869 – 1954) are known to have issued artistic manifestoes, in addition to carrying out much of their works as assemblages and installations. Similarly, the Zaria Art Society led by Uche Okeke and Bruce Onabrakpeya issued an Art Manifesto that advocated "Natural synthesis" in the late 1950s. Onabrakpeya continues to practice and mentor younger artists to date. P. 119.

Onabrakpeya used the mixed media installation from the joint effort of himself and several artists in the Harmattan Workshop series in Agbaha-otor, Delta State Nigeria for the *Dance of the Golden Jubilee*. The composition made up of plasto cast vignettes and stained glass fibre, also comprises of stone works carried by Godwin Onabrakpeya, Uwa Usen, Ojo Olaniyi and other artists.



Plate 1

**Artist :** Bruce Onobrakpeya in collaboration with other artists.

**Title:** Dance of the Golden Jubilee.

**Year:** 2010.

**Medium:** Mixed media, wood.

**Dimension:** 412 x 240 x 140 cm

Source: Nigeria at 50. The Journey of Our Independence. Federal ministry of Tourism, culture and National Orientation Abuja, Nigeria. 2010.

The advocacy “(The) works are the results of artistic participants from different segments of the society like country folk, urban elites, leaders of thought and thinkers, for the sustained and renewable use of ideas for creativity folk, urban elites, leaders of thought and thinkers, for the sustained and renewable use of ideas for creativity and leadership” p. 324.

*Killing Fields* and *A Memorial* attempt to achieve some or similar lofty goals.

A material that is used, has to first of all, be “discovered”. Then, it is thereafter “recognized”, and “imagined”, “assessed”, and “accessed”. These steps are necessary; since not every discarded object is suitable for a particular composition, for the simple reason that it is a discard. To be suitable for use, a material has to have a ‘validity’ that I recognize, and a place or function that I envision or imagine. However, its final usage, or rather, whether or not that particular material will be used or not is not guaranteed or a certainty. In addition, how it will be used, arranged or manipulated depends on several other factors. A found object must be able to “work together” with other parts or materials in the composition. It therefore, becomes an object that is able to stand on its own, while being at the same time, a unit and an independent member of the community. The said object thereby has dual uses or functions: that of an individual, and that of a member of a community. This method is often employed in the creative process of traditional Africa Art and assemblages. It can equally perform the



function of “art-for-arts-sake” and thus become an object that can be imbued with a sacred life and raised to, or consecrated for society’s needs. Such objects could represent reliquary figures, major and minor deities, ancestors, or commemorative constructs, and could equally serve as objects for placation in addition to beautification and decoration or adornment.

Onazulike (2010) quoting Aniakor (1989) asserts that “Artists have always been concerned with their place and their works in the movement of history. After all art... is a historical document which mirrors and reflects the social tendencies of the time of its creation. Being the product of history, it in turn affects, modifies, and acts upon that history making and documentation. P. 118.

In African cosmology, the positions of life and death are fluid. Ancestors live nearby. Death is seldom regarded as a “doomed” process of, or for eternal punishment or banishment. The gods are often liberal and mutable. Errors can be redressed, remedies can be procured, and placation is usually sought for fraught or difficult circumstances. The idea recognizes uncertainties and difficulties as being ever-present. However, difficulties can be approached and adequately addressed and/or such a difficulty remedied through several steps such as propitiation. African Art processes tend to see a universal continuum; and even a loss can become a gain. Willet, (1976) and Eyo. (1977) record several Nigerian artistic cultures that make cultural assemblages. Notable among assemblage makers are the Ijaw; Ivri, the Igbo; for fertility acts such as Fejokwu, Tiv; Dogbera, among other ethnic groups.

The found objects for *Killing Fields and A Memorial* assemblages are originally African hardwoods that have been felled and milled, and shaped into smaller pieces that are nailed or held together with backing battens. For the piece entitled *Killing Fields*, discarded drying boards for moulded cement that were being eaten by termites and other vagaries of weathering and depreciation were retrieved from where they had been dumped. They were cleaned with brush, scraped with knives, and washed with detergent and water, after which they were dried; thus arresting, or at least, significantly slowing down the process of depreciation and decay.



**Plate 2:** Cleaning of retrieved planks for killing fields. The retrieved planks come originally from Nigerian hardwoods. Here, after the initial steps of brushing off surface dust, cleaning and washing with detergent, a layer of gloss paint coating is painted on. This act is random in execution. Thereafter, the planks are dried flat and further coats of paints are put on, using either the brush, the spraying or splashing technique. The planks are allowed to dry and cure and more colours are thereafter added on; usually starting from brighter to darker colours. The red and black signify bloodletting and death, while the subdued white signifies a peaceful period which has been overlaid. The assemblage carries the immediate symbolism of storytelling, in North Eastern Nigeria. In addition, the assemblage is an allegory and attempt to refer to a wider issues that affect the Nigerian environment. A great deal of denudation of the Nigerian environment is currently ongoing. These “deadwoods” are being given a new lease of life in this exercise studio practice by the artist in 2017.

The planks collected were retrieved from dump sites in Maiduguri metropolis. These planks were originally most likely used for placing and drying moulded cement blocks; and were discarded because they had been exhausted. Their use as objects for artistic expression gives them a second chance to live again. They are mostly worn out and shattered- in the same manner that scores of lives of people and their properties, towns, villages,

hamlets, grazing grounds, fishing sites and farmlands have been shattered. The painted pieces are put together in no particular order. They are perforated and random. They lack privacy and stability. They are *Internally Displaced Objects*. They are in limbo.



**Plate 3:** Fragments of Zawama being treated for A Memorial; the assemblage in 2017. These Zawama were originally sculpted out of rare trees such as locust bean, tamarind, mahogany and several endangered species. This wanton harvest on its own is a signaler of death. Note that each “death” or object has its own characteristic and peculiarity. The fragments were collected in Maiduguri metropolis in 2014, where they had been abandoned to the elements; especially the effect of termites and weathering.

The Zawama is a marquee for placing a washed felt or cotton, or any other type of cap to dry and retain its roundness and shape. This marquee is made by shaping or carving the acacia wood with an adze into the desired (usually cylindrical) shape and size. The varying weight of the wooden pieces and their condition of decay suggest that various hardwoods that are available in the Savannah and Sahel belts of the north east sub-region have been harvested and used in their manufacture. I am not aware of any concerted effort to grow sustainable forests from which the raw material for these objects could have been sourced. Therefore, these Zawama have most likely been harvested from endangered species and forests, which have exacerbated the denudation of North Eastern Nigeria. Denudation of the environment and the concomitant desertification are some of the catalysts that have been fuelling insurgency in North Eastern Nigeria, where over 50% of all households solely or partially rely on fuel wood and charcoal for most or all of their cooking. This would be perhaps five million or more households as a conservative estimate. My retrieval of these “damaged” and “exhausted” materials is intended to directly call attention to the tenuous plight of the people and the environment: therefore *A Memorial*. The Zawama is an object with a specific place in the social setting of the ethnic groups in the area (such as Kanuri, Bura, Marghi, Gwoza, Chibok and Shuwa, etc.) who value caps highly and are inadvertently “kitted” and “appropriately dressed” through a means that depletes and endangers the environment.

Therefore, the said assemblage in addition to seeking to record the profound losses, (by piling and arranging objects that look like spent and finished skulls) and other body parts, tied with pieces of fabric, asks also directly, whether alternative and environmentally friendly and sustainable materials cannot be used to replace the wooden Zawama and thereby safeguard the fragile eco-system? The tying also reechoes hostage taking, bondage and enslavement.

These open questions about environmental and cultural sustainability are directed to the immediate audience, policy makers, engineers, thinkers and entrepreneurs, and indeed everyone else.

### SUBJECTIVE VIEW POINTS

The assemblages will continue to disintegrate irreversibly as time passes. The speed or rapidity of disintegration will vary from environment to environment, and from season to season. It will also matter whether the constructs are deemed relevant enough to be protected, or whether they should be dismantled and thrown away, or simply



fired up in order to provide cooking or lighting fuel.

How they are displayed is subjective; just like what they will mean is equally relative to an individual's perception and sensibilities. There can be no absolutes-and everything is speculative and tenuous. That is the over arching message being put across.

They can be viewed from any point: side-ways, above and from all sides. There will be no permanent truth or view-point. Therefore, the revelation will continue to evolve new meanings and values.



Plate 4: Zawama has a “personality”. The characteristics of its deterioration is unique to each piece. The loss of lives and property have taken many forms. Each loss is unique and particular.



**Plate 5:** Another view of deterioration of Zawama pieces. It was not uncommon sometime in the past to see a truck load of dead bodies as a result of the insurgency in north east Nigeria. The vehicles were stacked in grotesque manner. Sometimes, one viewed uploads on the internet of suicide bombers, civilians Boko Haram fighters or soldiers, that had been blown apart. The hollowness here signify punctures by shaped eviscerations and discharge of soft tissue.



Plate 6: Zawama: The pile. An allegory for dejection, deterioration, kidnap, death and loss. Installation displayed in department of Visual and Performing Arts, University of Maiduguri, Borno State Nigeria. December 2017. Approximately 1m/1m across.

#### STAGES OF EXECUTION

- i. Acquisition of the materials for the assemblages
- ii. Cleaning with brush, water and detergent
- iii. Drying in open air and within the room
- iv. Brushing on of gloss paint in form of decoration and as a primer
- v. Decoration with chosen colours
- vi. Treatment with shellack
- vii. Reassembling of installation with nails, copper wire and screws, etc
- viii. Final inspection
- ix. Display or exhibition of finished assemblages

#### **The Installation as a Performance.**

When the panel entitled *Killing Fields* (Plate 6 and 7) was fully tied and put together, it was carefully carried by about eight persons and suspended with two steel chains from a first floor balcony of the gallery front. The chain immediately gave way due to the weight of the installation. It crashed into the courtyard below, where it stayed as it had fallen for the duration of the exhibition just like the dead from the insurgency that had been killed in mid-stride.





**Plate 7:** *Killing Fields*. The assemblage by Dr. Ashiedu Ogboli. One-sided view. 1m/1.2m displayed in December 2017 at the Department of Visual and Performing Arts, University of Maiduguri Nigeria.



**Plate 8:** *Killing Fields*. The wreckage at Sambisa Forest Solo Exhibition, by Dr. Ashiedu Ogboli Fine Arts Gallery University of Maiduguri Borno State Nigeria 6<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> December, 2017.

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