

Waka-into-Bondage: The Last Mile 3/4 by Ndidi Dike

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Curator Bisi Silva

A DEMOCRACY Project:
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Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos

DEMOCRACY

Normal circumstances dictate that contact between peoples and cultures result in an enriching exchange that leaves each party more knowledgeable. This had been the case to a greater extent with Africa's encounter with other cultures, between the 10th and 14th century, the Trans-Saharan trade in gold and salt between North and West Africa resulted not only in economic prosperity for both regions but in lasting social and cultural exchange. This situation changed over 500 years ago when one of humanity's greatest and longest atrocities began: the transatlantic slave trade which resulted – according to experts' calculations – in the loss of up to 21 million Africans captured, enslaved, killed or died.

Whilst there is no denying that slavery existed long before the arrival of the Europeans, as a result of tribal wars and by Arab traders plugging the Trans-Saharan trade routes these were predominantly for domestic purposes. Whereas, James Valvin observes that West Africa was lured by the Europeans into 'a creeping zone of coastal slave trading to feed the appetite for slave labour in the Atlantic islands and Portugal.'¹ The repercussions of Africa's encounter with Europeans and the impact on the economic, political, and cultural fabric of contemporary African society continue to be felt.

Waka-into-Bondage: The last ¼ mile by Nigerian Artist Ndidi Dike presents the second part of **Democracy**, the inaugural curatorial project of the Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos.

Fela, Gbelerioku Lemi and The Art of the Album Cover, the first exhibition paid tribute to the internationally acclaimed Afro-Beat musician

Fela Anikulapo-Kuti and acknowledges his uncompromising fight for democracy for Nigerians and Africans, the second, **Waka-into-Bondage** takes the history and the legacy of slavery as its point of departure. Dike's recent project takes the form of a sculptural installation signalling a turning point in her artistic practice.

Well known for her wood sculpted totem poles – traditionally the preserve of male sculptors within Nigerian society - and her wall hanging wood reliefs, in 2004 after over a decade of transgressive sculptural practice Dike successfully added painting to her artistic repertoire.

In **Waka-into-Bondage**, the evolution of Dike's work takes on a more conceptual framework liberated from spatial constraints both physical and mental to actualise ideas researched over a considerable period such as the effect of slavery on the local population, in this case the coastal town of Badagry. Using 'loaded' symbols, she presents two large carved wooden boats, one covered and filled with sugar, the other filled with blood red liquid. In coalescing the evocative potential of her materials attention turns to repulsion as Dike attempts to trigger traces and memories of our forebears as they walked the last ¼ mile from Gberetifi Island past the point of no return towards the shores of the Atlantic Ocean.

Fast forward to the present. Slave trading may have been abolished in 1807 but two hundred years later the rise of what is now being called contemporary slavery has become a worrying reality. As slavery, followed by colonisation decimated the natural evolution of our societies, 'human trafficking prevents us from developing a modern democratic society', observes lawyer and activist Bisi Olatun-Olagbegi². In her installation, the use of historic documentary images and images of present day victims of forced migration, Dike collapses temporal space by amalgamating images of Gberetifi Island, the last ¼ mile with that of young women and children taken mainly from the rural areas on the promise of a better future.

The meddling of international foreign financial institutions coupled with the greed, bad governance and the corrupt practices of African political elite since independence has put us into bondage, robbing the people of the fundamental benefits of a democratic society. Dike's work signals a form of introspection which needs to be sustained so as to build a lasting process in Africa in which the equal rights of individuals are respected and the collective freedom of people enhanced. In taking a collective waka-out-of-bondage, a possible trajectory is found in the academic research and documentation of the history of Ghana, in which Professor Albert Adu Boahen sees 'not so much in why the Europeans began to come to West Africa in the 15th Century, as in what they found when they did arrive...but also the effect of this on the social, economic and political institutions of Ghanaians.'³



Ndidi Dike, The Last Mile, 2008, wood, oil, glass, iron, 200 x 400 x 100 cm

Ndidi Dike in conversation with Bisi Silva

> Bisi Silva: I remember briefly discussing a few years ago the issues that you were working on outside of your wall sculpture pieces. You mentioned that for nearly a decade you had been collecting objects associated with slavery. What is the background to this interest?

Ndidi Dike: As an artist I constantly troll different environments for new ideas and media that can be used to develop my work. Sometimes these ideas can percolate in my subconscious for years, until an opportunity arises to actualise them. Around 1999 I started collecting different types of manilla and related objects, then I moved on to making my own version of branded stamps reminiscent of those used to brand slaves as property or chattel. I also noticed there existed little or no discourse or documentation on Nigerian Slave ports despite its centrality to the slave trade.

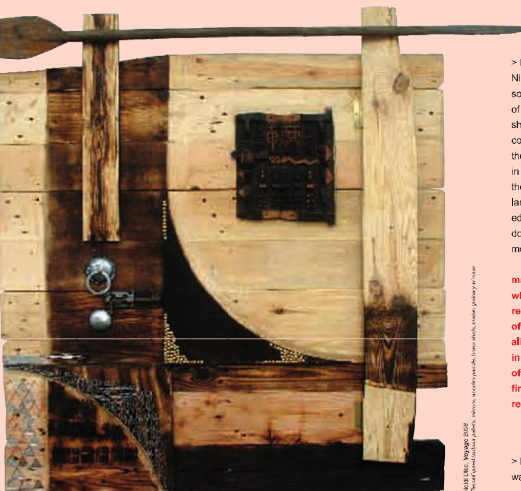
I visited Badagry in 2002 to see the slave route through which large numbers of our people were taken to the Americas to work daily, for long hours on plantations under subhuman conditions. During that visit, I knew I was standing face to face with history. Yet, much as I wanted to go back sooner, it only happened in 2007 at which point I knew I wanted to capture in a dramatic visual form, this cataclysmic episode in human history. No-one can visit Badagry without being moved by this ignoble part of our history or by the consequences of man's inhumanity.

> B.S: There are few artists in Nigeria I know of who have taken slavery as a subject matter so directly in their work as you have done in *Waka-into-Bondage*. Can you talk about the genesis of this project.

N.D: The project comes out of my life's experiences of which 3 are the most relevant. The visits to Badagry in 2002 and 2007 were the catalyst for *Waka-into-Bondage*. Secondly, tertiary education at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka was important in developing my African consciousness. Founded at the twilight of colonial rule by Nigeria's first president, Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe in 1960, he was resolute in his quest for the Black person to occupy a pride of place in the global community after a long history of oppression. As a student at Nsukka I was introduced to the works of great writers such Prof Chinua Achebe and art historians such as Professors Uche Okeke, Chike Aniakor and Obiora Udechukwu.

taught by influential artists and art historians such as Professors Uche Okeke, Chike Aniakor and Obiora Udechukwu.

Lastly my formative years were spent in the United Kingdom. This inevitably made me more conscious, more aware of my African heritage at an earlier age. I became interested in African history and culture and there were many things my contemporaries who grew up in Nigeria took for granted which I could not.



> B.S: The *Waka-into-Bondage* project is a move from the traditional sculpture and paintings for which you are well known. This sculptural installation is one of your first forays into a more conceptual way of working. How does this new direction expand on your work?

N.D: I have been working for a while in relief and two-dimensional format. As one constantly explores new ideas, different aesthetic representations are formed. I felt this project would be better articulated in a different format than I normally used and a more conceptual format was the most appropriate. It allows for experimentation in a way that the 2 dimension could not. For example in my recent sculptures such as *Dwellings*, *Doors and Windows* (2008) I appropriate harbour pallets, break them down and reconfigure them in a way that evokes traces of the voyage. The blood represents what was shed before, during and after the Transatlantic trade, but also what continues to be shed today. The photographic montage include images I took at Badagry, documentary images and other found images symbolising a continuum of slavery past and the rise in contemporary forms of bondage and exploitation.

> B.S: I remain shocked that Nigeria and Lagos where some of the largest numbers of slaves were taken from its shores neglected to commemorate 200 years of the abolition of slave trading in 2007. It neither featured in the State or the country at large's cultural, historical or educational calendar. Why do you think there was this monumental omission?

N.D: You are right to observe that the anniversary did not feature in any cultural or educational calendar. I guess it comes down to our notorious collective amnesia. But one thing is certain: if Chief Musthood Abiola, the famous Nigerian businessman, philanthropist, pan Africanist and politician who began the campaign for the payment of reparations to African nations for three centuries of slavery, colonialism and imperialism had been alive, I am certain that it would have been marked in a noticeably manner in Nigeria and other parts of Africa. Chief Abiola deployed stupendous financial, media, literary and intellectual resources towards this campaign.

> B.S: Whilst the slave trade was legally abolished 200 yrs – slavery in its contemporary form seems to be on the rise. We see in the media everyday stories about human trafficking of women and children, forced child labour, sex slavery among others. Is this an aspect reflected in your research and your work?

N.D: As I stated earlier, slave trading may have been abolished by the British parliament 200 years ago, but it is still in practice in certain countries. There are so many countries where the condition of the Black people leaves much to be desired.

These new forms of slavery are not yet captured in the current works. I hope to reflect on them soon in another set of works.

Needless to say, we need to revisit our knowledge about our history and our culture. It is important that artists such as Ndidi Dike are taking critical possession of this history and the memories associated with it.

¹ James Valvin, In The Origins of Atlantic Slavery, A Short History of Slavery Penguin, London 2007, p38.
² Bisi Olatun-Olagbegi In Trafficking www.africanart.com
³ Professor Albert Adu Boahen untold Ghana's history. New African, Oct 2006, p87.

The Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos (CCA, Lagos) is a independent, non profit making visual arts organisation. It aims to provide a platform for the development, presentation, and discussion of contemporary visual art and culture through a diverse programme of exhibitions, workshops, talks, seminars, performances and film screenings.

CCA, Lagos focuses on new media and experimental visual art practice such as photography, animation, film and video, performance art and new forms of sculpture which have been under-presented in contemporary Nigerian artistic practice. CCA, Lagos works primarily from Nigeria and the West African Region in addition to collaborating with other African and international organisations, artists and curators.

Acknowledgment

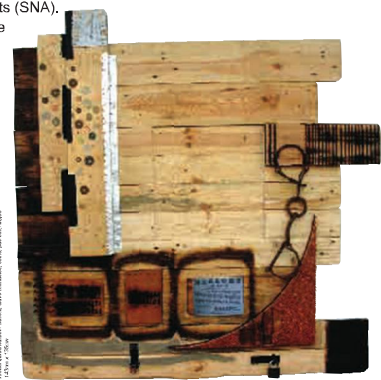
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Ndidi Dike

Ndidi Dike is a visual artist working in sculpture and mixed media painting. She graduated from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka with a Diploma in Music Education (Voice) followed by a B.A Fine and Applied Arts in 1984 (major Mixed Media Painting).

Dike has participated in several solo and group exhibitions in Nigeria, Africa and internationally, including Women to Women, Weaving Cultures, Shaping History (2000) University Art Gallery, Indiana State University, Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa (1995) Whitechapel Gallery, London.

She is a member of the Guild of Fine Arts, Nigeria (GFAN) and Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA). Her work is to be found in public and private collections in Nigeria and abroad.



Ndidi Dike, *Overlooking Badagry and Hometown*, 2008, wood, oil, glass, iron, 200 x 400 x 100 cm