



***Wákàtí:* Time Shapes African Art**

September 21, 2015 – January 16, 2016



[Fig. 1]

Representing an expansive range of materials, methods, and rituals, this exhibition highlights a selection of exquisite expressions of time, *Wákàtí*, as aesthetic passages and messages in African art. The works illuminate the continuities, transformations, variations, and innovative experiments defining artistic masterpieces of Africa as *Pabambari*. An exclamatory expression, *Pabambari* conveys in one word the sensation of amazement, awe, and speechlessness packed within a profound aesthetic experience. Upon experiencing a vivid moment that is pleasantly overwhelming, one could describe it as *Pabambari*. It is the ultimate taste of a perfect phenomenon in its most enjoyable and astonishing form. As this exhibition shows, time alone tests the veracity and intensity of this aesthetic reality.

sometimes, the unity of time and space disintegrates. Communities displaced by anomie no longer know where or who they are. Ritual artistic intervention may transform the dystopia into healing forms of equilibrium, providing a unified *Pabambari* dimension to their dislocated reality.

Masterpieces of African art evoke the *Pabambari* sensation in multiple senses including the eyes, ears, nose, skin, and all possible avenues of experience. As poetic language, *Pabambari* conveys the rhythm, color, magnificence, and wonder with which critics and admirers have praised the creative productions by artists from ancient to contemporary cultures in Africa. Within the creative resources piloting these remarkable cultures through hundreds of years of originality lies an inventive mystery tied to artistic



Time is the only accurate meter of life, a West African proverb cautions. *Ìgbà kan ò lo bí òréré*: time, unlike the horizon, is not seamlessly infinite. In Yoruba art known as *Onà*, time defines and unifies space. *Ìgbà*, the father of *Wákàtí*, the hour, synchronizes the pacing of time with space as *àsìkò*. But,

rituals of *Pabambari*. In this exhibition, artists from various parts of Africa project the link between time and the concept of *Pabambari*.

To ritually extract fresh life from dead wood was the challenge facing the unknown Dogon sculptor who carved a panel [Fig. 1] in the permanent collection of

the Oklahoma State University Museum of Art (OSUMA). Dogon ethnic ideas of time and space transcend global dimensions. They embrace futuristic, trans-planetary interactions. They also reflect ancient astronautic imaginations. The Dogon door is a vehicle across this imagined space of expressive messaging.

The Dogon door also opens up discussions about the importance of gender in the making and display of indigenous arts of Africa. In the Dogon culture, as well as other indigenous African societies, the wood sculptor is typically male, with masculine animation. Releasing his energy into the center of the cutting adze, the Dogon sculptor neatly sends the blade to the heart of each stroke, smoothly removing precise chunks of hard wood with each strike. He balances sound and time at an emotive symmetry resulting in the desired

Pabambari effect.

For the artist, Dogon sculpting is music: if it sounds good, it looks and feels good. And if it looks good, it sounds good.

The sculpture, an architectural door without its original partner, a building, invokes a loss of family member, as it gains new neighbors in this exhibition

installation. The

sculptor specified it for a building whose time has passed, a building that is no more, just as the name of the sculptor has disappeared into the void of time. In an art gallery, the Dogon panel references the lost architecture, the lost artist, and the lost time through its low relief carving and detailed figurative motifs. It

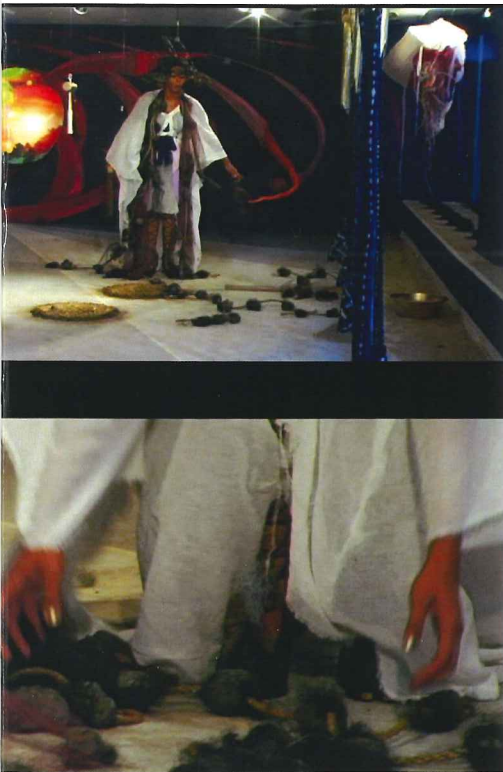
witnesses time by telling a story of ultimate victory amidst inevitable setbacks.

Moving the Dogon door from the architecture in Dogonland to a space in Oklahoma separates time from space in a dystopia of lost architecture, evoking both an alienation and an opportunity. The old conversations of the original architecture are muted and can no longer be heard, and the new architecture produces fresh and different experiences in the alternative spaces where the work is now located at this *Wákàtí*.

Wákàtí takes form as a different notion of time in the African women's art of Akire painting [Fig. 2] from Ile Ife: the painting is temporary, cyclic, and a marker of the ritual calendar, because its execution indicates the end of the old year, and the beginning of the new. The painters erase the mural every season, and replace it with a new composition. A time-specific art form, the Akire creative process transcends the product. Unlike the Dogon sculptor, Akire painters Tinuomi Afilaka [Fig. 3], Egbeyemi Akingbade, Sooko Omolajaye, Tinuade Arayemi, Subulade Agbe, Olaomo Alawoekun, Laleye Eruesu, Omilabu Olokose, Loburo Elurele, Adelola Esumonure, Tanimola Omoleye, and Oni Omoleye collaborate on each piece. They sing, dance, and chant poems even as they paint.

In her installation, Denenge Akpem [Fig. 4] improvises around the boundaries of solo and group creativity. Adjacent to the Akire painting, Denenge's ritualistic work explores time as futuristic, at the same time that it feeds from the same placenta as the Akire women in this exhibition. She uses transdisciplinary devices including video, sculpture, painting, photography, installations and performance to mediate separation of her work by time and space from Akire painters.

Akirash Rasheed Olaniyi explores the gendered male factor inherent in indigenous African sculpture, typically produced by men. His installation and performances in the exhibition engage a large number of sculptural pieces by men from more than ten ethnic groups in the



[Fig. 4]



[Fig. 3]

display. These indigenous works connect a different time, a different Africa with the new Africa, the new artists. These fresh voices from Africa include Gbemi Arigbabuwo and prolific painter Tola Wewe [cover].

The works showcased in this exhibition generate a cultural crossroads of reinterpretations within a new context of display and replay. The exhibition narrates the *Wákàtí* of a story with a beginning in Africa, and a second life in the Americas. The rituals of the performances behind the works change with every performance, and are not always the same as the one displayed in the OSUMA gallery. From the context of display the viewer can read the variable *Wákàtí* factor redefining the work.

Each work thus encompasses two bodies of recollections, one African, the other American, that are distinct yet joined as a cultural crossroads. In this exhibition, absence therefore produces a different presence. While the object is now missing its African elements of ritual, of motion and performance in the gallery context, the visitor can still recollect elements of music and dance through empathy and imagination.

Turned into a cultural crossroads, the OSUMA exhibition facilitates a conversation among artists from different times and places in Africa, brought together in the same gallery as iconic rituals and performances of their eras. Display walls, platforms, and floors carrying the works describe new *Wákàtí* of transatlantic experiences remembered and replayed across time and space.

The diversity of paintings, sculptures, photographs, installations, performance, videos, and transdisciplinary explorations enrich the exhibition's offering of creative invocations. Through imagined spaces including Denenge's Afrofuturism and Dogon astronomy, the exhibition generates a ritualistic and performative environment, sending expressive messages to the present audience across unfolding passages of time fragments. *Wákàtí* rhythms measure the patterns and cadences of this *Pabambari* moment.

Moyo Okediji, Ph.D.
Professor of Art and Art History
Director, Center for Art of Africa and Its Diasporas
University of Texas at Austin



[Fig. 2]

[Cover] Tola Wewe, *Waiting*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 53" x 60", private collection

[Fig 1] Bamana (African), Bamana granary door, mid to early 20th century, wood and iron, 48" x 26 ½" x 2", gift of Larry and Mattie Harms, 2011.001.001

[Fig 2] Akire artists painting at their shrine, photo by Moyo Okediji, 2004

[Fig. 3] Tinuomi Aflaka, *Untitled (Olokun)*, 2004, acrylic on canvas, 58" x 93", private collection

[Fig. 4] D. Denenge Akpem, *Alter-Destiny 888*, THE LAB for installation+performance, New York City, photos courtesy Panman Productions

This exhibition is organized by the Oklahoma State University Museum of Art and curated by Moyo Okediji.

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720 S. Husband Street, Stillwater, OK 74074

t. 405-744-2780 | f. 405-744-2800 | museum@okstate.edu | museum.okstate.edu

