

Exploring Painting as a Tool for Social Commentary for Dating Bomb Blast Effects In Nigeria

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Abstract

Apart from aesthetic purposes, painting has remained a tool for social commentary; a platform for making visual statement or expressing a view about social issues. Sometimes it is used to make political, social and economic statement. Bomb blast in Nigeria has assumed avoidable phenomenon going through the memory lane from the Benin expedition that ended sophisticated bureaucracy of Benin Kingdom in 1897 to the first letter bomb blast that killed Dele Giwa, onetime Editor-in-Chief of Newswatch magazine to the bombing explosion at Ikeja cantonment in 2002 to the present Boko Haram insurgency that started in 2009 claimed to have consumed over thousand people and millions rendered homeless. Effect of bomb blast has often left behind scores of awesome relics scenes. The effect of bomb blast is awesome to behold, yet the truth must be told for posterity. The thrust of the paper takes exceptions in making visual statements about bomb blast effect in Nigeria with reference to Boko Haram activities in recent times. This is to subtly stimulate the inactive stands of the country's policy makers and the stake-holders into urgent action of putting in place "action plan" to end the cause of incessant bombings.

Keywords: painting, social commentary, bomb blast, Book Haram, relics

Introduction

Making social statement or commentary is likened to exercising fundamental human rights or franchise of individual or a reaction or criticism which often comes from within. Maugham (2012) describes social commentary or painting expression as a sort of modernistic protest against social ills by individuals. According to Maggie (2009), making political/social statement in painting is an issue driven by innate force, a phenomenon that has been witnessed among many fore-runners of social critics. She observed that, though some socio-political creative works are intended to be obvious; there are numerous works that are deliberate and more subtle. She concludes that, both types are important to the creative principles and to our modern society of today. The spirit behind social commentary in whatever format is prevalent throughout the whole world – from Greece to Libya, from London to Egypt and from Russia to Harare. For instance, Akriti Art Gallery in 2011 hosted a show titled *Social and Political Injustice* – Issues of Contemporary means of Reaction. According to Maugham (ibid) the exhibition of the paintings became an anti-establishment and rebellion force against social injustice which of course cannot be ignored.

Kleiner (2009) avers that, social commentary is often triggered by injustice in a socio-economic and political arena of some sort. He cited instances of the depression era in Americans where painters grapple openly with their paintings such themes as joblessness and poverty, political injustice and corruption, labour-management conflict, and the excesses of American exploitation by their leaders. Ben Shahn's painting; *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* for example was a bitter comment on social injustice of the trial and execution of anarchist Nicola Sacco and Bartolommeo Vanzetti. The outcome of the famous case in which the dual were condemned to death was a politically motivated trial. A painting by Gropper *the Senate* is another powerfully simplified caricature of American public life. Social commentator, Levine in Kleiner (ibid), evolved a more sophisticated expressionist technique of portraying what he viewed as the degradation of certain aspects of the American national issue, as exemplified in *The Feast of Pure Reason* (Social Realism, 2015). Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* of 1937 that condemns the bombing of Basque capital by the Nazi forces visualizes the brutality of events of that period with provoking statement in painting. The use of semi-abstract images painted in flat intense colour was a provoking visual statement of the time. Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* has remained and stands as the greatest anti-war symbol of all times, and it has remained an embodiment of peace process. The artwork was conceived and created by Picasso as a reaction to the bombing of Guernica, Basque Country by German and Italian warplanes at the order of the Spanish National Forces on 26th April 1937 during the Spanish Civil War (Kleiner, op.cit).

Synopsis of Social Commentary

According to Guity, (n. d), painting as a medium of social commentary was first introduced by artists such as Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Theophile Steinlen, and Leonetto Cappiello in the early 19th century when they view their art as a medium for social change at the heels of the prevalence of injustices in the American society. He observed that, these artists were influenced by the value of modernity and enlightenment of which such values were in stark contrast to those of the American society at large. Their subjects range from the daily struggles of working poor, the scene of brothels, the life styles of addicts, outcasts and the hardships of the old and humble. At this period, social commentatorship assumed the role of a reporter and analyst using painting to initiate a subtle process that can change the phenomenon. Art appeared very critical over the socio-economic structures which are seen as harmful, but it also celebrated the simple joys of humility and somehow poeticizes the everyday life style of the populace. Guity reiterates that, painting as an art form has long been a medium of expressing opinion, criticize and even commenting on the state of a government or society. He opines that, through caricature, allegory and satirist symbolism, artists have commented both explicitly and subversively on everything like vanity, corruption and greed. Buttressing the above, Okanlawon and Akanni (2009) posit that, cartoon paintings has for many years been used by artists to criticize policies of government; citing cartoons as a style of provoking emotions on government agenda or programmes that concern the populace or relating to environmental issues. For instance, Dele Gegede, a socio-political analyst of our time whose cartoon commentaries/themes reflect daily socio-political programs of the government, have often been widely conveyed through prints and other periodicals to create images to strike a meaningful chord that leaves lasting impression purposely meant to initiate change in Nigeria. The role of an artist as a social commentator therefore serves as voicing concerns against the rampant social and political injustice in a society.

Semiotic Images of Bomb Blast (BB) Effects

Semiotic theory is based on language. Language is one of many sign systems of varying degrees of unity, applicability, and complexity. Most codes, etiquette, mathematics, symbols, music, painting and even highway signs are examples of semiotic system. Semiotics has to do with symbols and meanings are associated with content analysis applied in a variety of research contexts including paintings.



Plate 1: Painting expression of the effect of Hiroshima bomb blast by Marukilri and Maruki-Toshi in 1950, source: <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2011/06/history-of-bomb-blast>.

Plate 1 exemplifies artistic impression of bomb blast effect by Marukilri and Maruki-Toshi (1950). The painting expression is a semiotic representation of effect of Hiroshima bomb blast which reportedly consumed thousands of people in Hiroshima in 1945.

Bomb blast is an explosion of a rapid increase in volume and release of energy in an extreme manner usually with the generation of high temperature and the release of gasses. According to Kissane (2009) explosions are created by high explosives travel via supersonic shock waves. When explosive is caused by a man-made device, the audible component upon impact is very devastating. The most powerful bombs ever reported historically which was used in combat to cause devastating effect to lives and property were the two atomic bombs dropped by United State to attack Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan during the Second World War in 1945. Twenty years after the bomb blast, it was told that, the effect of the bomb blast manifested in children born in Japan. Children were sometimes born with amputated limbs or deformity beyond recognition. According to Milstein (2008) whether a bomb is civilian or military targeted, the effect is often devastating causing sudden drastic rise in ambient pressure that often create permanent damage or death to human beings and destruction to properties. According to Alison (2009) the truth of bomb blast might be hard to say, painful to bear or even drastic for the truth but still needed to be said for posterity. Plates 2, 3, 4a, b, c and d exemplify painful scenes to behold yet it must be told either visually or textually. Plate 2 is the lifeless body of

Dele Giwa in his own pool of blood caused by the first letter bomb in Nigeria during the era of General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida's administration as the Head of State.



Plate 2: The life-less body of Dele Giwa- Former Editor-in-Chief

(source: <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2011/06/history-of-bomb-blast-in-nigeria>. Retrieved: 5th January, 2015



Figure 3: Nyanya Garage bomb blast in Abuja. - Evacuation

(Source: <http://www.news2.onlinenigeria.com/thumbnail.php?file=image2abuja>. Retrieved: November, 2014



Plate 4a: Nyanya shopping mall bomb blast.

(Source: <http://www.news2.onlinenigeria.com/thumbnail.php?file=image2abuja.shoppingmall>. Retrieved: 29th November, 2014



Plate 4b: Nyanya shopping mall bomb blast in Abuja.

(Source: <http://www.news2.onlinenigeria.com/thumbnail.php?file=image2abuja.shoppingmall>. Retrieved: 29th November, 2014



Plate 4c: Effect of Nyanya shopping mall bomb blast in Abuja. Relics:

Source: <http://www.news2.onlinenigeria.com/thumbnail.php?file=image2abuja.shoppingmall>. Retrieved: 29th November, 2014



Plate 4d: Effect of Nyanya shopping mall bomb blast.- “Agony woman”

Source:[http://www.news2.onlinenigeria.com/thumbnail.php?file=image2abuja Shopping mall.](http://www.news2.onlinenigeria.com/thumbnail.php?file=image2abuja%20Shopping%20mall)

Retrieved: 29th November, 2014

Looking back to those first decades after the Second World War; the bomb that killed Dele Giwa (Plate 2) - former Editor-in-Chief of the popular weekly magazine – Newswatch; the 2014 Nyanya bomb blast at the Motto Park in Abuja and other parts of the country created shock, disillusionment, and anxiety among the world populations and Nigerian populace as a whole.

Bomb blast which is often accompanied by wanton destruction of human lives and properties could not have been limited to injuries – ranging from minor to survivable and wanton killings and destruction of properties but its implication on farming activities, education and socio-economic activities. The photos in Plate 2 and Plates 3, 4a, b, c and d are few effects of bomb blasts ranging from human destruction, destruction of properties, shock and disillusionment and dark atmosphere caused by dark smoke emission from the inferno of bomb blasts.

Brief History of Bomb Blast in Nigeria

Looking back to the Nigerian Civil War which broke out in 1967 and lasted for almost three years, one could easily draw inference that it was caused by security challenges in some sections of the Nigerian population. The first letter bomb was directed to Dele Giwa the founding Editor-in-Chief of Newswatch Magazine in Nigeria was in 1986 in Ikeja-Lagos during the administration of General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida's military regime. The sadistic episode was widely believed to have been state-sponsored (Dapachez, 2011). The bizarre killing of the Editor-in-Chief created awesome and abominable effect that has continued to linger in the minds of Nigerians till date. According to analysts, the death of Dele Giwa takes its roots in a savored fear that he might exposed Mariam Babangida in connection with the case of Gloria Okon a cocaine pusher rumored to have fronted for the then Mariam Babangida the wife of the then head of state of Nigeria. Kolawole (2011) revealed in his memoir that, the issue to prosecute the suspected culprit in the perpetrated letter bomb that killed Dele Giwa brought an end to the great Oputa Panel when the former head of Federal Republic of Nigeria, president Okikiola Olusegun Obasanjo (OBJ) in his characteristic manner questioned Gani Fawehinmi's (SAN) ability of prosecuting the culprit. Obasanjo's suspicion of Gani's ability to prosecute the suspected culprit was further buttressed when the ex-president General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida (IBB) refused to appear before the Oputa panel saddled to investigate the heinous crime was invited. Since then, series of other bombing incidents have been reported in the country, among which include the Boko Haram insurgency and Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and the present ongoing war against Avengers of Niger Delta. According to Kolawole (ibid) and Adeyemi (2011) majority of the heinous crimes happened under the despotic rule of the late General Sani Abacha who was rumored to be behind most of the killings to intimidate his opposition protagonists in his regime.

Some Bomb Explosion incidents in Nigeria

There was however, an isolated case of accidental bombs explosion that took place in Ikeja cantonment in 2002, leading to the death of more than one thousand persons. It was not until March 2010 that Nigeria began to witness bomb blast as an act of terrorism in the civil political dispensation when some bomb blasts went off in Warri during an Amnesty Dialogue organised by Vanguard Newspapers in support of the amnesty program of the then President Umaru Yar'Adua to tackle the cases of militancy in the Niger Delta region (Dapachez, 2011).

The cases of bomb blasts in Nigeria can be chronologically stated as follows:

1. Between 1967 – 1970 – Nigerian Civil War where thousands of people were killed
2. October 19th 1986 – Dele Giwa was murdered in his house in Ikeja, Lagos

3. May 31st 1995 – At Ilorin Stadium, during the launch of Family Support Programme
4. January 18th 1996 – Durbar Hotel, Kaduna. A suspected bomber killed. He was to have brought a copy of Wole Soyinka's book prior to the blast
5. January 20th 1996 – Aminu Kano International Air-port, Kano
6. April 11th 1996 – Ikeja Cantonment, Lagos
7. April 25th – Air Force Base, Ikeja
8. November 14th 1996 – Murtala Muhammed Airport claimed the life of the Chief Security Officer.
9. December 16th 1996 – Bomb blast rocked Colonel Marwa's convoy
10. December 18th 1996 – Bus belonging to Lagos State Task Force on Environmental Sanitation hit
11. January 17th 1997 – Bus belonging to Nigeria Army hit
12. April 22nd 1997 – Blast in Evans Square claims 3 lives
13. December 13th 1997 – Lt. Gen. Oladipo Diya escapes death in Abuja Airport
14. May 12th 1997 – Ibadan gets its first dose of blast at the Federal Ministry of Works and Housing at Eleyele Road, near Jericho Hospital
15. January 27th 2007 – Bombs stored at Ikeja Cantonment exploded leading to the death of over 1000 Lagosians fleeing in fear
16. March 15th 2010 – Warri during Amnesty Dialogue sponsored by Vanguard Media Limited
17. October 1st 2010 – During Nigeria's 50th Independence Anniversary Celebrations in Abuja, suspected to be sponsored by MEND – a group of Niger-Delta militants.
18. April 26th 2011 – At Maiduguri, Bornu State
19. May 29th 2011 – At Army Barracks in Bauchi
20. January 1st 2011- Abuja Army Barracks Mummy Market, and
21. June 16th 2011 – The Nigerian Police Force Headquarters, Abuja with the IG of Police narrowly escaping death.

Countless orchestrated explosions have equally been witnessed in Bauchi, Bornu, Adamawa and Yobe. The Boko Haram deviant behaviour leading to bombings and destruction of properties has been sequentially carried out and has hitherto left behind it scenes of horror - atrocities that are very demeaning and very devastating. The following paintings are the artist's to bombings in Nigeria typical to atrocities of the Boko Haram insurgency. Book Haram have often claimed responsibility.

Artistic expression of effects of Bomb Blasts in Nigeria



Figure 1a: "Devastating": Okanlawon A.K. (2015), Mixed Media, 100 x 120cm

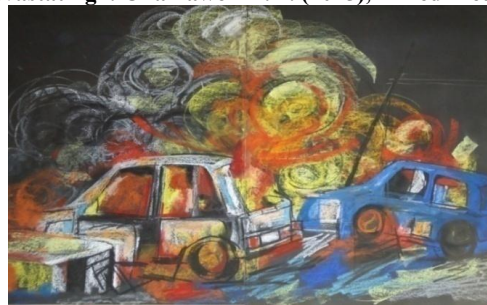


Figure 1b: "Devastating II": Okanlawon A.K. (2015), Pastel on Paper 45 x 60cm



Figure 1c: Devastating III: Okanlawon A.K. (2015), Pastel on Paper 45 x 60cm

Figures 1a, b and c are the artist's commentary on effects of bomb blast on properties. The artistic statement from the bomb explosion depicts emission of smoke of black flames (figure 1a) spread over the sky in a reddish-yellow colour (figure 1b and 1c) to depict effects of the phenomenon. The effect gives the illustration of devastation associated/inflicted on human properties. The fuming flames were rendered in dominant mixtures of primary and neutral colours to translate the intensity of destruction.



Figure 2: Devastating IV: Okanlawon A.K. (2015), Mixed Media, 45 x 60cm

Figure 2 titled *Devastation IV* is an artistic statement of bomb blast in Kano where properties in buildings and cars were destroyed in the inferno of the blast. Like the paintings in 1a, b, c, and d, the painting is dominated by mixtures of primary and neutral colours to translate the destruction. The destructive background is dominated by white colour and tint of blue. The red colour in the flames translates the disturbing scene which the Emir of Kano was said to have asked whether the country is fighting a Civil war when the explosion took place in Nyanya.



Figure 3a: Devastating V: Okanlawon A.K. (2015), Acrylic, 80 x 100cm

Figure 3a titled *Devastation V* is an artistic statement of disillusioned eye witnesses gathered at the horrific scene of the blast to express their shock of the incident. Properties worth millions of Naira, according to an eye witness, were destroyed in the explosion. The impact of the explosion resulted into destruction of properties and human death littered the ground of the bombed scene. The painting is a statement about the effect of bomb blasts include human destruction, destruction of properties, shock and disillusionment. The colours were used interchangeably and dominated by red, white and black colours to create effective contrast of aesthetics, however with patches of tone of blue colour to strengthen the painting.



Figure 3b: Devastating VI: Okanlawon A.K. (2015), Acrylic, 80 x 100cm

Figure 3b called *Devastation* is artistic statement of the physical effect of bomb blasts which shows human destruction and destruction of properties with corpses littered on the ground. The painting is dominated by secondary colours with black and colour used to create contrast. The white colour at the centre of the painting is deliberately applied to translate possibility of hope of eventual peace.



Figure 3c: Relics: Okanlawon A.K. (2015), Mixed Media, 80 x 100cm

Figure 3 titled *Relics* is artistic statement of aftermath effect of bomb blast. Whether a bomb is military or civilian targeted, the aftermath effect is always sadistically devastating. Disillusioned eye witnesses gather at the horrific scene of the blast to express their shock and dismay over the effects. The dark background is artistic expression of the effect of the dark smoke emitted by the inferno. The explosion in a Nigerian shopping mall killed at least 21 people according to eye witness, just an hour before the national football team played Argentina in the World Cup. It was a sad day in the history of Nigeria. Witnesses said the blast left body parts scattered around the Emab Plaza in an upmarket district of Abuja and billows of black smoke could be seen from a mile away. The painting is dominated by neutral colours of white, black and a secondary colour blue and tints of red. The effect is quite aesthetically inclined.

Conclusion

The paintings have successfully documented the effects of bomb blasts in Nigeria vi-s-avis the Boko Haram atrocities against humanity in Nyanya in Abuja and Kano from the painter's point of view or perception. This will not only serve as a commentary, but a documentation of the country's sadistic historic events that may open a new vista of artistic expression for budding artists. It will encourage artists both at home and in Diaspora to appreciate the significant position of Nigeria's experience of insurgency. It would also serve as epitaph to subtly stimulate the inactive stands of the country's decisions makers and the stake-holders into urgent action of putting in place an action plan to end the cause/causes of bombings that are gradually institutionalising into becoming means of settling scores in Nigeria.

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