

The Year of Return: Sculptures in Commemoration of the Return of the Ghanaian Diaspora at Anomabo Heroes' Park

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Abstract: According to Tola (2017), statues are three-dimension images that are constructed mainly to commemorate or remember a person or important event, or which has become important to a social group as a part of their remembrance of historic times or cultural heritage, or as an example of historic architecture. Commemorations range from individuals to groups, events, etc. whose contribution and the impact reaches entire society or culture or groups.

The effective use of sculptured artworks for commemoration has been demonstrated in the public space in many cities, towns and even villages around the world. In this respect, the events of the taking away of the natives of the West African Territories across the Atlantic have amply commemorated the erection of the group statues at the foreground of Fort William, another imposing reminder of the legacies the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The objective of this project was to create a collection of sculptures representing the “Year of Return” theme as capture in the terms of reference of the Ghana Tourism Authority. The works were created in Kumasi, in the Ashanti region and moved to the site at Anomabo in the Central region where they were mounted.

Keywords: Commemorative sculptures, diaspora, slave trade, Anomabo, root tourism.

Background of the project

Creation of sculptural monument has often been for the main purpose of the commemoration of an event, institution, groups, individuals etc. when this is done in a durable media, such as bronze, cast iron, concrete, polymers etc., usually the idea is to have the artwork last as long as it is practically possible within the mounted environment.

The commemoration of the trans-Atlantic slave trade has been done on various levels and forms. According to (Franklin, 2008) the year 2008 marks the 200th year of the end of the legal year of involvement of the United States (Commission on the Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade Act, 2008), whereas in 2007 there were commemorations and exhibitions to mark the end of this event in the United Kingdom. On the 26 March 2007, the United Nations General Assembly devoted the 61st session to the commemoration of the 200th Anniversary of the Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. It was held that 25 March 2007 should be designated as the International Day for the Commemoration of the 200th Anniversary (United Nations Digital Library, 2007). In March 2019, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet spoke in commemoration of the transatlantic slave trade (OHCHR, 2019).

There have been equally impactful moves to commemorate the events of the transatlantic slave trade in the West African sub-region. Most of these commemorations are designed to boost roots tourism in the region (Law, 2008). Despite several criticisms of these commemorative events, their organisations have seen the return of many in the diaspora to the sub-region. Some countries in West Africa have taken advantage of the 200th Year of the Abolition of the transatlantic slave trade and the 400th year of its start to initiate events that will improve their tourism. These include Benin (Law, 2008), Sierra Leone (Adia & Shabazz, 2009), Senegal (Åkesson & Baaz, 2015).

In 2007, in the 50th year of Ghana’s independence, the government initiated the Joseph Project to commemorate 200 years since the abolition of slavery and to encourage Africans abroad to return (Tetteh, 2018).

In September 2018, Ghana’s President Nana Addo Danquah Akufo Addo formally launched the “Year of Return, Ghana 2019” in Washington, D.C., for Africans in the Diaspora to reconnect with the continent, and

also to commemorate the 400 years of the transatlantic slave trade (Tetteh, 2018; Yeboah, 2019; Asiedu, 2018).

In the light of the on-going developments in the sub-region, the Ghana Tourism Authority requested the erection of these commemorative monuments to honour the memory of those who were taken from the coastal shores of Ghana.

The creation and mounting of these monuments appear to be in fulfilment of a request made by the Mpontuhen of Anomabo, Nana Egyir Aggrey. On September 27, 2006, he was reported to have requested the Government of Ghana, during the country's preparation towards the 50th Anniversary, to honour the citizen of Anomabo for their role in the country's independence struggle and the memory of those who were taken as slaves to the Americas (Ghana News Agency as cited in Ghanaweb, 2006). Whether the town deserves to receive such honour is a discussion for another day. However, the contributions such individuals as Jacob Wilson-Sey, Kwegyir Aggrey, and Ekem Ferguson are noteworthy.

Among other requests, Nana Egyir Aggrey is quoted to have said that; "the spirit of these slaves, who were sent to America and elsewhere are still restless waiting for their souls to be buried and their ancestors to rest peacefully (Ghana News Agency as in Ghanaweb, 2006). The mounted sculpture works are, in this regard, a fulfilment of at least part of the wishes of the chiefs and people of Anomabo.

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Introduction

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The effective use of sculptured artworks for commemoration has been demonstrated in the public space in many cities, towns and even villages around the world. In this respect, the events of the taking away of the natives of the West African Territories across the Atlantic are amply commemorated the erection of the group statues at the foreground of Fort William, another imposing reminder of the legacies the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

There is an abundance of publications including the works of Lawrence (1963); Cruickshank (1966); Dantzig (1980); Anquandah (1999); Claridge (1964); Bossman (1967), to the later works of Hansen (2005); Abaka, (2012); and the writing of Hartman (2007), etc. about the physical relocation of a large number of Gold Coast natives to British, French, Spanish and Portuguese colonies, especially in the West Indies. Additionally, physical evidence left behind, indicating that around the fifteenth century, European explorers landed on the shores of the coast of Western Africa (Africans in America, nd), with the initial intention of trading in goods. Alas, much of these "goods" became the body, spirit and soul of the natives (Abbattista, 2011).

Over the course of many centuries, the trade of Africans as slaves to different parts of the world, but more especially the Americas became entrenched. According to Lovejoy (2007), "as a whole, the Transatlantic Slave Trade displaced an estimated 12.5 million people, with about 10,650,000 surviving the Atlantic crossing." This figure is corroborated by (Miller, 2018). This and other systems such as voluntary relocations to seek "greener pasture", asylum-seeking etc. effectively have created the African in the diaspora.

The Return

The need to travel back to their original homes someday is always part of the considerations of immigrants especially with regards to finding information about their heritage (McCain & Ray, 2003, 713). This phenomenon is known as roots tourism" or "diaspora heritage tourism (Alexander, Bryce, & Murdy, 2016). The phenomenon is fast gaining attention as part of the divisions of tourism worldwide (a niche market). Including building a body of knowledge on the issues of diaspora and the desire to return even if it is for a visit.

There can be little doubt that the "homeland-diaspora" paradigm has firmly entered into the contemporary social-science vocabulary (Weingrod & Levi, 2016). According to the paradigm, attention is focused upon groups that migrated or were driven from their native land (the "homeland"), and subsequently found their

way to other places (a "diaspora") where, over long periods, they maintained their distinct communities and dreamed of one day returning to their Ancient Home (Weingrod & Levi, 2016).

These studies have mainly focused upon, to cite few examples, Pakistani immigrants in England, Palestinians in Middle Eastern refugee camps and the Gulf States, Jews and Armenians in their respective diasporas, the "Black Atlantic" diasporas that grew out of the brutal slavery suffered by African populations (Weingrod & Levi, 2016)

The government of Ghana has taken advantage of the desire by the diaspora to return to their original homeland, to declare the year 2019 as the year of return (Tetteh, 2018; Year Of Return, Ghana 2019, 2019). As part of this singular objective, the Ghana Tourism Authority Commissioned the creation of a group of sculptures to be executed and mounted at Anomabo Landing Beach (Heroes' Park). This will be a commemoration of a major landmark spiritual and birth-right journey inviting the Global African family, everywhere, to mark 400 years of the Transatlantic Slave Trade (Green, 2019; Year Of Return, Ghana 2019, 2019).

"The Year of Return, Ghana 2019" celebrates the cumulative resilience of victims of the Trans-Atlantic slave Trade. (Year Of Return, Ghana 2019, 2019). The project is about using the studio practices techniques which resulted into the creation of the sculptures at Anomabo Heroes' Park. "The Homecoming" by sculptor Nathan Scott captures that magical and special moment when a sailor returns home to family (Homecoming, 2020).

Methodology

The project used a qualitative approach to design the plan for the work. The specific case of the creation of the Anomabo sculptures is described using a practical studio-based research design format (materials and methods) (Marshall, 2010; Stewart, 2003; Kroes, 2002). The merits and credibility of selecting this research have been provided by Marshall (2010) and Stewart (2003).

The execution of the project led to the production of five-figure sculptures which were cast in fibreglass re-enforced polyester resin (composite) at the location in Kumasi and transported to the site at Anomabo in the Central Region where they were installed. The five figures appear to be in motion (in striding motion), while one of the male figures carrying an infant girl in the chest as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Man with Baby

Nature, chemical and physical characteristics of the fibreglass re-enforced polyester Resin (FRP) are outlined in (Scott Bader, 2002; McVeagh, et al., 2010; Shamsuddin, 2003).

The initial processes of collecting information on the topic of the “Year of Return” required using both primary data as practitioners of the arts and secondary sources on the subjects of “homecoming” (Mason, 2010; Institute For Educational Planning And Administration (Iepa), 2017; Schramm, 2010; Homecoming, 2020), “return” and “commemorations” (Mason, 2010)

The processes leading to the production of the work started with collecting information on the particular incident of the return of some of our brother and sisters in the diaspora; including airport photos, travelling scenes etc. these were recomposed in pencil sketches into forms that will be useful for the work.

This was followed by the creation of the armatures for the individual sculptures. The use of conventional processes of modelling and casting in sculpture were used. See Figure 2.



Figure 2: Clay stage

The difference, however, is the use of the composite material to cast the final statues. Fibreglass re-enforced polyester resin is a relatively new material for casting figures in sculptures. The very process of mixing the resin with its constituents and casting with the re-enforced fibreglass require some knowhow on the practical use of the materials. According to Scott Bader (2002), describes the materials as a "composite" which is light, durable and astonishingly tough. Most manufacturers of these chemicals warn that catalysts and accelerators must never be mixed directly together since they can react with explosive violence (Scott Bader, 2002).

According to Ashby & Johnson (2003), the success of a product is achieved through a combination of sound technical design and imaginative industrial design. This mixture creates product character in the same way that material selection and processes are used to provide functionality, usability, and satisfaction.

Historically, the materials of choice for sculptors were largely bronze, stone and wood. However, in the 20th century, artists started investigating new resources in an attempt to seek what sculpture could be and what it could be made from (Tate Liverpool, n. d). Artists may be influenced by a particular material and its properties in determining the form that sculpture takes. The versatility of polyurethane made it ideal for casting the intricate plumbing of Sarah Lucas's *The Old in Out* 1998, but, according to the artist, the resin also brings specific aesthetic qualities to the work (Tate Liverpool, n. d)

The form and context of the artwork also dictated the material to be used. Sculptures exhibited outdoors need to be sturdy and weather-resistant, for example, and stone, bronze or other durable materials may be preferred for purely practical reasons. In this case, part of the reasons for the choice of the FRP was to endure the effects of the external environment especially at the coast Anomabo where the work will be installed.

Polyester resin, laminated with fibreglass has many advantages such being lighter than reinforced concrete and capable of strong thin forms and details; less expensive than bronze (Goldstein, 1972). LPR is not without disadvantages. It does not have the inherent beauty we find in marble. It smells terrible (Goldstein, 1972). From LPR a wide variety of kinds of sculpture can be made: thin, strong, delicate forms; closed, large, bulbous forms; light or heavy pieces in a wide choice of colours that may be translucent or opaque. Furthermore, it is weather-resistant and very durable and withstands stresses of compression and tension. According to Goldstein (1972), it is always a relief to work on a sculpture twice the life-size knowing that it can easily be moved and placed in any position of choice.



Figure 3: The Return

Results

The style of rendition of the work are in-the-round mode and figural representational (Ines Huerta, 2010), but not in the same mode as describing the sculptures as mimetic or design to deceive the eyes. They are representational enough to make a first-timer look again and try to touch. As sculptures occupy similar space as humans. The works could also be described as a true-to-life style which involves the representation or depiction of nature (Naturalism) with the least possible distortion or interpretation (Dodworth, 2019). The installations are mounted on a structure that depicts the Map of Ghana. Showing that, even though the monuments are physically located in the central region, their significance goes beyond one region. Their importance applies to the entire country.

According to (Moore, 1937), the appreciation of sculpture depends on the ability to respond to form in three dimensions. This somehow makes the sculpture difficult to describe. The power of sculpture comes from its ability to transform space through modelling the form (Njoku, 2019; Bailey, 2015). Three-dimensional art forms are difficult completely comprehend without necessarily relating it the corresponding natural form (the human figures) (Moore, 1937). Those who can relate to the form as the artist intends it to be, are advanced in their perception (Moore, 1937), they have been able to make the further intellectual and moral effort essential to recognize form in its entire spatial presence (Moore, On Being a Sculptor, 2013; Ghiselin, 1985; Herbert, 2012).

The Mounted sculptures are there to participate in the space. The Anomabo Space, that memorable Anomabo shore carries a lot of history and memories, against the background of Fort William, which was built between 1753 and 1757. Its Construction was approved and supported by the British parliament (Ghana Museums and Monuments Board, n.d).



Figure 4: Commissioning of the Monument

The Situation of the Sculptures at the precincts of the fort is a grim reminder of the events that took place in the vicinity some centuries ago, and to tell a story of hope with the return of the descendants of these original slaves (Diarra, 2017). All this made possible by the resilience of the human spirit.

The works are designed to convey that simple message of form, not the poetics of it but the single idea of the form as perceived by the senses (Moore, 1937). He mentally sees a complex form from all around himself that he knows while looking at one side what the other side is like; he identifies himself with its centre of gravity, its mass, its weight; he realizes its volume as the space that the shape pushes through the air (Moore, 1937).

Because sculpture frequently occupies space in much the same way as humans occupy space, we can identify with sculpture differently than with painting. Sculpture inhabits the space shared by the viewer. Sculptures are also tactile - one could touch it and feel its various textures and forms. Finally, looking at sculpture is a dynamic activity: the work changes as the viewer moves through space and time (The J. Paul Getty Museum, n. d.)

Many artists are of the view that art should not be explained by the artist, art is to be enjoyed. This is amply supported by (Bernardi, n.d). Art can hardly be adequately explained using a different kind of language. See Figure 5



Figure 5: Audience Interacting with the Monuments

According to (Horvatinčić, 2012), “a monument will continue its life in art history or, in case of some cataclysm, archaeology. If the form will lack that power – the monument will become a part of the history of culture as a document of our time”.

Yet somewhere in faraway future, someone will try to figure out emotional and intellectual frames of our time and space and reconstruct the climate in which we live. However, we should not be mistaken – they will have the insight to all of the comparative factors, and we will not be able to deceive them. They'll judge us by our cemeteries and our monuments as well." (Horvatinčić, 2012).

Conclusions

The objective of this project was to create a collection of sculptures representing the "Year of Return" theme as capture in the terms of reference of the Ghana Tourism Authority. The works were created in Kumasi, in the Ashanti region and moved to the site at Anomabo in the Central region where they were mounted. This objective has been achieved through the construction of the monuments using materials, tools and techniques.

The need for the erect monuments to remember events such as the Transatlantic Slave Trade and Colonial rule in African cannot be overstretched. Commemorations in any form fine, but as artists, we consider that monumental works can outlive this present generation and extend into the distant future.

The commemorative monuments were mounted and officially commissioned by Government officials and the chiefs and people of Anomabo. This was done as a reminder, like in the words of the president, Nana Akufo Addo, “never again, never again!”

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