

Sokari Douglas Camp (2015) *Europe Supported by Africa and America*

Since discovery of the crude oil in the Niger Delta in 1956, this once flourishing and fertile land has become one of the most polluted and degraded landscape in the world (Sweet Crude, 2007: 00:14:52). 546 million gallons of oil spillage contaminated the river which once used to feed thousands of families with abundance of fish, whilst daily acid rain falls damage whatever property has left (Sweet Crude, 2007: 01:29:25). Wild animals died and the expected human life span has dropped from an average of sixty to forty years (Sweet Crude, 2007: 00:15:23). Local communities suffer extreme poverty whilst multinational oil companies like Shell or Chevron, supported by the Nigerian government are making billions of dollars by selling 42% of the extracted oil for the US market (Sweet Crude, 2007: 01:29:49). Since 1993, inhabitants of the Niger Delta are trying to negotiate an improvement to their situation and taking care of the environment to no avail. Their initially peaceful efforts were met with aggression and severe punishment from their own government what inevitably triggered a violent response (Rotinva, 2018). The world is turning a blind eye to this huge environmental catastrophe and a tragedy of people who have been forced into a daily struggle for existence in these toxic, inhuman conditions. As usual, where politicians fail, artists and activists voice their concerns.

Sokari Douglas Camp CBE, a London based artist born in the Niger Delta in 1958, draws from her Kalabari heritage to cultivate its culture and actively engages in raising awareness of the disastrous situation of her people and land through her creations. This paper will explore inspirations behind one of her sculptures, *Europe Supported by Africa and America* (2015) (Fig.1) and show that it carries a significant message for international audiences

conveying artist's faith in the power of love, collaboration, and re-birth. It will also discuss how it links the past and present exploitation of the Niger Delta – first through enslaving its people, then through extraction of the oil, and will examine how this evocative artwork relates to Camp's own body of work and to those of other artists, who explore similar subjects.



Fig.1 Camp, S. D. (2015) *Europe Supported by Africa and America*.

Europe Supported by Africa and America (2015) is a larger than life-size group sculpture executed in steel, abalone, copper and gold leaf, acrylic paint, and petrol nozzles. It depicts three women dressed in Nigerian style, in colours which dominate flags of the African continent: green, red, and yellow. The two women on the sides are supporting the one in the middle embracing her and holding her arms, allowing her to rest on them whilst she helps them holding a green garland with petrol nozzles on its both ends. They have a chain of the mountains in the backdrop 'and they stand gracefully on a cushion of lush grass and flowers' (sokari.co.uk, 2023).

The sculpture draws a direct inspiration from William Blake's abolitionist engraving of the same title *Europe Supported by Africa and America* (1796) (Fig.3), yet it contains many other references which will be explored further on. The most prominent one is that of the mythological Three Graces, daughters of Zeus: Euphrosyne (mirth), Aglaia (elegance) and Thalia (youth and beauty), described by Hesiod, who together 'constitute an ideal of beauty and grace' what naturally places them as assistants to the Goddess of love, Venus/Aphrodite (Artsper Magazine, 2022 para.2). The Metropolitan Museum of Art argues that '[T]hey bestow what is most pleasurable and beneficent in nature and society: fertility and growth, beauty in the arts, harmonious reciprocity ... In mythology, they play an attendant role, gracing festivals and organizing dances' (2000-2023, line4). Since mythology had been rediscovered during the Renaissance, its protagonists inspired art and literature, and the Three Graces became a popular theme explored by some most acclaimed artists from Lucas Cranach the Elder and Raphael to Picasso (Artsper Magazine, 2022). Their most appraised neoclassical sculptural version is the one from the V&A collections, Antonio Canova's *The Three Graces* (1814 – 17) (Fig.2), which could serve as an inspiration for both artists, William Blake, and Sokari Douglas Camp.



Fig.2 Canova, A. (1814-1817) *The Three Graces*.

Even though Blake was ahead of his time as an artist and a thinker who condemned slavery and supported Libert  ,   galit  , Fraternit   – the ideals of the French Revolution, and he ‘intended the figures as equal,’ still, he represented Europe as sophisticated and modest, dressed in pearls and covered with her long hair (vam.ac.uk, 2023 para.2). On the contrary, as Camp noticed, ‘Africa and America’s armlets, as signifiers of enslavement, emphasise their subjugation’ (vam.ac.uk, 2023 para.2).



Fig.3 Blake, W. (1796) *Europe supported by Africa and America*.

Sokari Douglas Camp decided to represent all three figures as truly equal. She recreated their poses truthfully to the Blake’s original but in her version, they have Africanised features and wear ‘g  l   head ties, inspired by a family photograph of three women at a wedding in Port Harcourt, Nigeria’ (vam.ac.uk, 2023 para.3). They still hold a wreath made of tobacco leaves, a reference to a tragic past when the Niger Delta was called a ‘Slave Coast’ as between 1500 and 1800 about 3.5 million of its people were enslaved and sent to America (Sweet Crude, 2007: 00:12:05). The petrol nozzles at the ends of the wreath indicate a tragic present situation of the region. The artist carefully chose the types of cloth she dressed her

figures with. As she says they ‘could come from different parts of the world, ... a Mondrian pattern that looks like sleek building blocks to represent Europe and a woven cloth with an Igbo pattern for Africa’ (sokari.co.uk, 2023). The V&A (Victoria & Albert) website argues that ‘the artist adds to the reading of her work by dressing America in Paisley – a textile whose patterns are of Persian and Indian origins, but whose name derives from the Scottish town and centre of production of that fabric. In doing so, she reminds us that cloth carries within itself interwoven narratives of trade, often complicated by geopolitics’ (vam.ac.uk, 2023 para.3). That attention to a cloth and messages it can convey, links the Camp’s sculpture with an artwork of another contemporary Nigerian artist, Yinka Shonibare’s *The Three Graces* (2001) (Fig. 4).



Fig.4 Shonibare, Y. (2001) *The Three Graces*.

Shonibare’s Graces are positioned differently than those of Camp, these headless female corpses do not support each other, the front one turns her back on the other two as if they had a disagreement and she wants to leave. They are also not equal in sizes like the Camp’s Graces, yet they resemble her work through the lavishly patterned African fabrics used for their Victorian style dresses. One of them is an imitation of a Chanel fabric and Nancy Hynes and John Picton argue that ‘[T]he use of this fabric was meant to further explore the themes of post-colonialism, globalism, and cultural interaction’ present throughout

Shonibare's work 'while also commenting on the consumerism and consumer culture of the modern world and how all of these themes intersect' (Hynes and Picton, 2001). That intersection of themes perfectly corresponds with the role of the fabrics chosen by Sokari Douglas Camp for her Graces.

Another contemporary artist who embraced a theme of the Three Graces in her sculptures is Niki de Saint Phalle. In 1999 she created *The Three Graces* (Fig.5) who despite of not supporting each other physically, being in fact placed away from one another, still convey a strong message of togetherness. Engaged in a spontaneous dance, they give a sense of freedom, happiness, and joy. Dressed in tight, colourful swimsuits, covered in various symbols like hearts and stars, they embody a call for love and represent equality of a humankind. Their voluptuous bodies are of different colours; black, yellow, and white what indicates their diversity and links de Saint Phalle's work to those of Blake and Camp who said about her Graces that they 'represent women in the world' and she thinks her 'work is international and conscious of our humanity and the coercion in working with each other' (sokari.co.uk, 2023).



Fig.5 Saint Phalle, de, N. (1999) *The Three Graces*.

Dance is an essential part of African continent's culture and Sokari Douglas Camp often draws themes of her sculptures from her Kalabari culture rich in festivals and masquerades. Her Three Graces are still, however, throughout art history they have been often depicted dancing, like the arguably most famous ones from the monumental Botticelli's Renaissance painting *Primavera* (1477-1482) (Fig.6), the allegory of Spring.



Fig.6 Botticelli, S. (1477-1482) *Primavera* (Spring).

Interestingly, *Primavera* is also the title of Sokari Douglas Camp's exhibition held in May 2016 at October Gallery in London. *Europe Supported by Africa and America* (2015) (Fig.7) was displayed there along with two similar sculptures; *Blind Love and Grace* (2016) (Fig.8) and *Primavera* (2015) (Fig.9). Looking closer at these works reveals that when placed next to each other, they recreate the figures from the central composition of the Botticelli's masterpiece.



Fig.7 Camp, S. D. (2015)

Europe Supported by Africa and America.



Fig.8 Camp, S. D. (2016)

Blind Love and Grace.



Fig.9 Camp, S. D. (2015)

Primavera.

Moreover, all three sculptures are made of steel and recycled oil barrels what links them with the Niger Delta exploitation, they also represent proud African women in traditional Nigerian attire, and they all include a depiction of thriving nature in form of lavish greenery of grass, banana leaves, and flowers. Camp uses this imagery of rebirth, imagery which brings hope and indicates that if the Renaissance ideas of humanism ever-present in Botticelli's art were reintroduced in the areas degraded by the post-colonial economy, they would get a chance to recover. If Venus could envelop this troubled land and its people with love and care, the eternal fires, smoke, and pollution would be gone, and Spring would bring abundance of flowers to mark the celebrations of fertility and growth.

Looking at Sokari Douglas Camp's body of work it becomes prominent that she 'references the environmental and human impact of fossil fuel extraction, an economic colonialism perpetuated by multinational oil companies, but also exacerbated by bad governance from the Nigerian government' (vam.ac.uk, 2023 para.4). Cruel and unlawful proceedings of the Nigerian government are behind the inspiration for a vastly different artwork in the artist's portfolio, *The Bus* (2006) (Fig.10).



Fig.10 Camp, S. D. (2006) *The Bus*.

There are similarities to the *Europe Supported by Africa and America* (2015), as *The Bus* (2006) also has been executed in steel and relates to the Niger Delta issues, yet its form and the message it carries differ from it significantly. This life-size, non-motorised yet mobile 'Living Memorial' has been designed as a monument to a Nigerian environmental activist and author, Ken Saro-Wiwa, who got executed alongside his people on November 10, 1995. It features the names of all nine victims of the execution and Saro-Wiwa's words 'I ACCUSE THE OIL COMPANIES OF PRACTISING GENOCIDE AGAINST THE OGONI' (platformlondon.org, 2023 line.8). Saro-Wiwa dared to interrupt Shell's smooth process of oil extraction, devastating to the land of his ancestors, by leading the Ogoni people 'who had decided that armed force was the only way to get the company to take responsibility for its chronic oil spillages and waste dumping' what resulted in a forced suspension of the company's operations (Rotinva, 2018). As the Greenpeace and Amnesty International reports revealed later, Shell was involved in a bribery to introduce false witnesses during the trial of the Ogoni 9 and the sculpture was planned to commemorate them and 'serve as a public memorial in Ogoniland' (Rotinva, 2018). First 'unveiled outside the Guardian's offices in central London' on the eleventh anniversary of the execution, it went on tour around the UK (sokari.co.uk, 2023). The sculpture never reached its planned destination in Ogoniland as the Nigerian federal authorities detained it at the port of Lagos in 2015 and never let the

memorial to leave the port, whilst renewing 'Shell's license to drill' (Rotinva, 2018). With that work, Sokari Douglas Camp does not send a positive message of love, hope, and rebirth but using Saro-Wiwa's own words she directly accuses the oil giants of being responsible for a genocide.

Undisputable climate crisis caused by the exploitation of the Niger Delta inspires other Nigerian artists who choose diverse ways of expression than Camp. Some execute their artworks reaching like her, for the used oil barrels. One of them is Victor Ehikhamenor, who 'had painted stylized abstract forms' with red acrylic paint on 150 oil barrels for his installation *Wealth of Nations* (2015) (Fig.11) displayed 'at the Jogja National Museum in Yogyakarta, Indonesia as part of 13th Biennale Jogja' (Rotinva, 2018). Ayodeji Rotinwa argues that the barrels have the artist's signature mark and with this artwork he commemorated 'the continued struggle for the Delta and a demand for its people to share in its natural resources' (2018). This proves that it carries a similar message and has a similar intention to the Camp's *Europe Supported by Africa and America* (2015).



Fig.11 Ehikhamenor, V. (2015) *Wealth of Nations*.

Multiple artists displayed their works in a contemporary art gallery in Port-Harcourt in South South Nigeria called Boys Quarters, which held few exhibitions addressing degradation of the Niger Delta; the *Oil Man* in 2014 and the *Black Box* in 2018 (Rotinva, 2018). Amongst them were Kader Attia, John Akomfrah and Allora & Calzadilla who work with video and a painter Segun Aiyesan (Rotinva, 2018). Their work is related with that of Sokari Douglas

Camp through the choice of themes and links it to a documentary, *Sweet Crude* (2007) made in the Niger Delta by a director, Sandy Cioffi and a producer, Tammi Sims. This film shows to what extent the landscape of the Delta has been devastated and allows the local communities to share their daily struggle and feelings towards the multinational oil companies and their own government who chooses to not support its people but rather increase the private wealth disregarding the burning climate issue on a global scale. The film carries a message resembling the one which comes from the Camp's *Europe Supported by Africa and America* (2015), that there is still a time to show this land some love, to stop oil extraction and let it rebirth.

A Nigerian, Lagos based photographer, George Osodi also focuses on the degraded Niger Delta's landscape and the enormous effort of its inhabitants to exist in its toxic environment. He spent over six years documenting the injustices happening in the region and created images like *Oil Slick* (2013) (Fig.12) similarly to Cioffi's *Sweet Crude* (2007) depicting the place stripped of its natural wealth yet still beloved by its people (Liverpoolmuseums.org.uk, 2023). Osodi explains that what he wishes to achieve with his pictures is 'to draw the viewer near (his) images in order to provoke a feeling and be inspired or trigger a deep sense of change within the observer' (Liverpoolmuseums.org.uk, 2023). This statement reveals a similar intention to that of Sokari Douglas Camp, who through her sculpture *Europe Supported by Africa and America* (2015) hopes to awaken the consciousness of the viewer and inspire a change. Both artists show a perseverance of the Niger Delta people; Osodi through showing them carrying on their daily routines and Camp by creating her Graces as Nigerian women, proud of their heritage and supportive to each other. Significantly, as previously mentioned, the Camp's Graces' attire was inspired by a family picture taken at a wedding, a ceremony which proves that even in this poisonous environment people do not give up and carry on with their lives and their work.



Fig.12 Osodi, G. (2013) *Oil Slick*.

The final artist this paper will discuss, whose work can be linked through its themes to that of Sokari Douglas Camp is another photographer, Fabrice Monteiro. Currently based in Dakar, Senegal, he used to live also in Benin and his works express his concern with the level of pollution overtaking the African continent. In 2013-16 Monteiro created *The Prophecy* series 'based on nine different environmental problems in Senegal, including forest fires, plastic waste and oil spills, and was gradually expanded to address worldwide pollution' (magnin-a.com, 2023 para.1). A part of this series is currently displayed in Tate Modern at the first exhibition of contemporary African photography, *A World in Common*. As Eddy Frankel points out '[L]andfills, pollution and water scarcity fill the works of ... Fabrice Monteiro' what directly connects them with those created by the artists inspired by the environmental degradation of the Niger Delta (2023). They also prove that it is not only a local issue, that the problem occurs globally, and it is in the best interest of all people to try to stop the exploitation of natural resources that devastates the landscapes of many countries. What further links *The Prophecy* (2013-16) series (Fig.13, 14) with the Camp's *Europe Supported by Africa and America* (2015) are the carefully created outfits drawing in both cases from the rich heritage of artists' cultures.



Fig.13 Monteiro, F. (2015) *Untitled #8*.



Fig.14 Monteiro, F. (2014) *Untitled #6*.

This paper examined what inspired Sokari Douglas Camp's sculpture, *Europe Supported by Africa and America* (2015) (Fig.1) compared it with other examples of her work, and with works of other artists pursuing the same themes. The critical analysis of the Camp's sculpture revealed its direct links with the William Blake's abolitionist engraving of the same title *Europe Supported by Africa and America* (1796) (Fig.2). It also linked it through a classical theme of the Three Graces with Antonio Canova's and Sandro Botticelli's masterpieces *The Three Graces* (1814 – 17) (Fig.3) and *Primavera* (1477-1482) (Fig.6). This paper explored who else amongst contemporary artists reached for that theme and how their artworks relate to the Camp's sculpture. It explained how the past and present exploitation of the Niger Delta and the disastrous situation of the region inspired the examined artwork and other examples from the Camp's portfolio. It also compared her *Europe Supported by Africa and America* (2015) (Fig.1) with creations of other artists who address environmental crisis of the African continent using either similar or different techniques and mediums than Camp. Moreover, this essay showed how the examined artwork conveys the artist's faith in the power of love, collaboration, and rebirth and how this significant message is deeply rooted in the Renaissance idea of humanism. This artist's outcry, a call for action, an attempt to awaken the audience corresponds with the question asked in the *Sweet Crude* (2007) '[W]hat if the world paid attention before it was too late?' (2007: 01.31.19). If it did, the Niger Delta and other devastated landscapes would get a chance for a Renaissance – rebirth and the Spring – Primavera would turn the poisoned land

into a lavish, fertile greenery like the one shown in Sokari Douglas Camp's *Europe Supported by Africa and America* (2015) (Fig.1).

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