Available online www.unicrossjournals.com

JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH (JOCRES)

RESEARCH ARTICLE VOL. 3 (3) ISSN:2814-2241

Date Published: September 30, 2024

Pages 210- 222

ANALYSING STREET URCHINS THROUGH PAINTINGS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ALMAJIRI AND SKOLOMBO BOYS

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Abstract

This study sought to explore the depictions of street urchins in painting, analysing themes, technique and historical context that shape their portrayal as a way to hint on the condition of two distinct groups: the Almajiri of Northern Nigeria and the Skolombo boys in southern Nigeria. The qualitative research approach was adopted both with the primary and secondary data sources. In addition, theoretical frames such as iconography and iconology of Edwin Panofsky were appropriated for conceptual understanding of visual symbolism as regards to analysis and interpretation. Through morphological analysis of Paintings like Benson Ibebe's "Almajiri", Luis Meques's "Street Kids", Blessy Bassy's "Free Food", Samuel Eteta's "Middle Child" respectively, findings show that, all the works analysed by these artists' aimed at capturing the struggle for survival of the marginalized children through the use of artistic forms, media and technique. Some artists such as Ibebe opted to represent forms in fragments which align with the creative tradition of cubism, while others such as David, Bassy, Eteta and others, preferred the expressionistic and impressionistic approach. However, the study concluded that, works of arts through visual elements, technique and composition of form, have the power in them to critique societal issues, raise awareness and reflect the harsh realities and conditions of the Almajiri/ Skolombo boys as marginalized children. The study recommended that other artists could explore themes related to marginalized group as well as other social issues as a way of experimenting and expanding their creative and innovative potentials.

Key words: Art, Painting, Visual Analysis, Street Urchins, Almajiri / Skolombo Boys.

1.0 Introduction

The word "Urchin" originated from the Latin word 'Ericius' meaning Hedgehog. Initially it was used to describe small children in the 16th century; it later evolved to refer to ragged street children by the 18th century as known today. (Vidur Lal 2006). For centuries street urchins have been a subject of concern for

artists who find inspiration in capturing their daily struggles through their various artistic media, forms and techniques. Who exactly are street urchins? These are children and adolescent who live on the streets often lacking access to basic necessities like, food, water, shelter, education and healthcare. According to United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2017) there are approximately 150 million children globally who live and work on the streets, either because their families are homeless or they ran away from home. (Indian Matters, 2022). On a general note, one would say these are poor homeless children living and sleeping in the street of the City, they are perceived as the most vulnerable children in the world. "Amnesty International: categorizes them as children on the street engaging in some sort of economic activity including scavenging in dust bins, begging, engaging in some slave labour, carrying loads around markets, walking around residential estate to be hired. Some are described as children who depend on the streets for survival and support, this is because not all street urchins are homeless, even though they work, play or spend time on the streets they still go home to their families/guardians. These children find themselves on the street for many reasons such as economic poverty, Parent death, parental neglect, violence, various degrees of abuses of children at home or in their communities or a quest for knowledge, as seen in Northern Nigeria and some parts of Southern Cross River.

These street urchins are called Almajiri in the North and Skolombo Boys in Cross River. The Almajiri system, with shortcomings in Islamic education and parental neglect has contributed to a large population of homeless children in Northern Nigeria. Whilst in Cross River State, the Skolombo boys face parental rejection. These neglected groups are exposed to exploitation, abuses and various social vices. Their portrayal in painting serves not only as a reflection of societal conditions but also as a commentary on issues such as poverty, innocence and resilience. However, this paper seeks to analyse paintings of street urchins, exploring the themes, technique and historical context that shape their representation. The methodology adopted for this research is qualitative backed with review of available literature, gathering of data from primary and secondary sources relevant to the study.

1.1 Emergence of Street Urchins/Children in Northern Nigeria (Almajiri)

The term "Almajiri is said to emanate from the Arabic word, 'Al-Muhajirin' and was first used by the prophet Muhammad to describe those of his companions (Muhajirun) who migrated with him in his propagation of Islam. However, the name, Muhajirun, later came to refer to the immigrant child in search of Qu'ranic education under the care and supervision of the Islamic teachers (Okonkwo, 2017 and Linus, 2019). In the Kanem Borno Empire, the Emirs supervised and organized the Islamic system of education known as Almajiri School. Initially everything proceeded smoothly with students well cared for with the funds the state treasury and the state Zakka generated before the coming of the British (Hubbard, 1975). With the advents of colonial rule in 1904, the Almajiri School was abolished and the

Western educational system (Boko) began to replace it. The loss of financial support from the state and the Emirs led to the abolishment of state funding for the Almajiri educational system, their responsibility was then taken over by the local scholars who deemed it a moral and religious duty to educate the pupils (Bawa, 2018).

However, the abolishment of the Almajiri School headed the plight of the Almajiri, as the mallams could no longer carter for themselves and their families let alone the children (Almajiri). They were sent out to beg rather than to steal. As seen today, they have become unkempt children with dirty begging bowls, walking bare footed, roaming the streets and motor-parks begging for a living and constituting social nuisance. They look malnourished, dirty, haggard, ragged, destitute, deserted, hungry and sick- looking owing to a long distance of trekking. They are eager to eat anything their hands can find, from left over food to junks and garbage too. As a result, they are vulnerable to sickness, kidnapping, diseases, child abuse and other social vices (Abdulquadir, 2003, Gomment and Esomchi, 2017). They are street urchins and constitute a time bomb ready to explode anytime.

1.2 The Skolombo Boys phenomenon of Cross River State

The Skolombo boys are specific group of street children in Cross River State Nigeria, particularly known for their involvement in petty crime. Their origin is as a result of the following; parental rejection from homes which is often triggered by church messages labelling children witches or wizard, abandonment of infants in trash cans or the financial struggles of single parents inability to care for their children adequately (Alaye2021), (Okam 2019). These children grow up to learn the street life and have become a menace to the society. At first they were innocent harmless children in search of survival but today they have grown to terrorists bearing the name “Isakaba boys” which emerged in 2007 and 2008. Some are prone to child trafficking, teenage pregnancy and others have died as a result of ill health or accident. According to The Guardian Nigeria, the issue of street urchin may not end, because the government has intervened but the help of religious organizations are also needed to curb these menace. Howbeit, it is imperative the artists key into this issues to address visually the plight of the street child, and carefully analyse other artists’ thoughts expressed in their paintings, just like Ballachandra has stated, “the Nigerian artist is no longer penned at the periphery casting wistful glances at the centre. He has moved to the centre from which to address the human society. While Leon Trostsky (2018) has stated “Art is not a mirror to holdup society but a hammer with which to shape it”. Thus, Works of art are a form of visual address the society because a man must know where the rain began to beat him (Aniakor 2014), Robert Rauschenberg on the other hand opines that the artist job is to be a witness to his time in history while Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevera said art can be a weapon of change. In Soyinka’s view, if we do not speak against oppression the man dies in us. With this, contemporary artists will keep on confronting social issues thus; analyses of paintings related to street urchins will give insights into societal attitudes towards poverty, childhood and urban life.

2.0 Research method

A qualitative research approach was employed, backed with a review of available literature. Two theories provided the conceptual framework for the present research which is the theory of interpretation and the iconographic/ iconology theory by Erdwin Panofsky. The sources for data collection include primary and secondary. The primary sources are journals, books in the research area, interviews and photographic documentation. While the Secondary sources are internet, articles, newspapers, and other student projects which are related to the study. References were also made to other artists' paintings.

2.1 A Visual analysis of paintings on Street Urchins

There are two possible ways of reading a work of art as a productive and aesthetic experience. The first is based on analysis of form which is often referred to as formal analysis; this deals with the components used in composing a work of art, especially its structure. The second deals with the various level of meaning which a work of art has. Erwin Panofsky has suggested three steps to be adopted in the interpretation of works of art which are description, iconography / iconology and interpretation. However, two methods will be adopted which is iconography (Surface meaning) and iconology (deeper meaning) in analysing the following works of art in order to move from the literal description of an artwork to its deeper cultural and symbolic meanings. This will offer insights into both the artists' intentions and the broader historical and cultural contexts in which the artwork was created.

Fig. 1 Almajiri (Street Kids), Oil on canvas, Benson Ibebe, facebook.com, 2017.

In 2017, Benson Ibebe executed a painting titled 'Almajiri' (street kids), using the oil medium on canvas. The painting depicts three stylized Almajiri boys rendered in fragments align with the creative tradition of cubism. They are placed in a conical composition holding their hands as they sing in awe to God, two of the boy's heads are placed in frontal view, while the head of little boy on the right, is in profile with an open mouth. Probably he is questioning the creator why they are in such a horrific state. The background accommodating the three figures painted in fragmented cool tones is rendered in tones of reddish orange. The top left of the work shows the image of sun whose rays fall on the faces of the boys standing against the sunlight as they think of a way out of their dilemma. The warm background reveals the intense heat of the scorching sun as the children hustle to survive. The way they hold their bowls in unity suggests a possibly silent conversation about God. The painting is composed of various tones of colour such as blue, yellow, green, orange, purple, black and white. The Jalamia worn by the boys is dominantly painted in blues, with few touches of yellow, green, red and purple. Tones of brown colours are revealed on their dissected head which could suggest their skin tone or dust incurred during the days hustle.

However, some colours are darker than others, while still, others appear lighter than the rest. This is shown on the hand of the middle figure and around their neck. The use of a reddish orange background creates a warm atmosphere. The painting shows off the artist's mastery in his manipulation of multiple colours.

Fig.2 Almajirinarewa, unknown, Oil on Canvas, Gramha.net, 2018.

This painting (Fig.2) portrays a street kid returning from his daily hustle. He holds a red bowl on his left hand which is raised as though his outing was fruitful. He is dressed in a blue shirt; revealing few traces of dirt around the stomach region and around his left hand which highlights the harsh condition he endures. His bleak face and skin are painted

in green tones against the gloomy background rendered with red brush strokes complimenting the skin tone by add depth to the narrative. The use of green can signify growth, hope and renewal, which hints at the boy's resilience and potential for a better future despite his current struggle. However, the artist mastery in his colour usage not only enhances the visual impact but also convey emotional nuance inherent in the Almajiri daily struggle, bringing attention to societal issues such as poverty, child neglect and educational reform. Thus, the painting is a powerful commentary on social inequality and resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity.

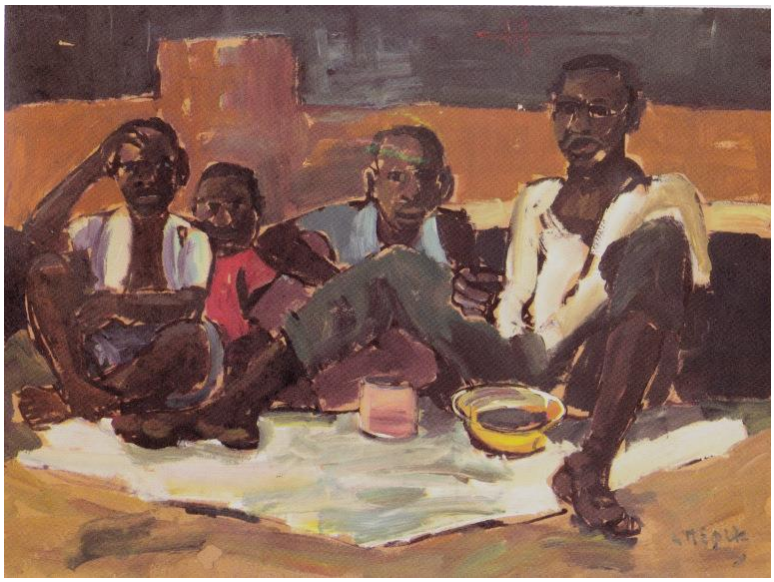

Fig.3 Street kids, Luis Meque, oil on canvas, nationalgallery.org, 1997

In 1997 Luis Meque executed a painting with the title "Street kids" (fig.3). This is a depiction of the plight of marginalized children. It is composed of four seated boys on a white mat revealing the stark contrast between their vulnerable position and the harsh environment they inhabit. The figure seated on the right side of the picture plane wears a white shirt and a grey pant, a yellowish bowl and a pink-like container is placed in-between his raised legs which suggests expectation and optimism amid hardship. Beside him is a young boy whose legs are folded trying to cover his face with his left hand from the sun rays. Behind him is a child in a red shirt that rests his back on an orange- painted wall adding to the narrative of destitution and hopelessness. The expression on their faces shows expectation, while dark colours on the background depict gloom, and oppressive atmosphere which marginalize their existence and daily challenges. However, the artist deliberate choice to pay less attention to details in the execution of the painting could be interpreted as a stylistic device to emphasize the neglect and lack of concern society shows towards streets urchins.

Fig.4 Blessy Bassy, E-Red, Mixed Media, VAT Studio, 2021.

The mixed media painting executed by Blessy Bassy clearly portrays the stark realities faced by the impoverished children juxtaposed in two scenarios, at the forefront is a boy depicted in a state of despair and helplessness. His posture, with his right hand on his head and his eating bowl stuck under his armpit, conveys a sense of exhaustion and resignation. His tired looking appearance suggests weariness and perhaps a sense of being rejected by society. At the background is a food vendor sheltered under a tree surrounded by children stretching out their bowls to beg for morsel of food. This illustrates the difference between those who have access to resources and those who do not, revealing an unequal distribution of wealth.

The active foreground rendered in tones of brown, red, orange and few traces of blue and green reveals the devastating condition of the poor in an environment of social denial. The appearance of the child placed on the foreground connotes hunger as if to spell out "E-Red" that is; there is no food for us today which underlines the message of deprivation and the daily struggle for survival faced by the depicted children. Perhaps they have nothing to offer to them. Still, some of the boys are trying to see what they can get from the vendor. Thus, the overall painting serves as a commentary on social injustice and economic disparity. By capturing this scene with vivid colours and expressive brushstrokes, the artist not only documents but also amplifies the voice of the marginalized.

Fig.5 ***Samuel Eteta, Middle Child,(skolombo), Poster on paper, Vat Studio, 2019***

"The Middle Child" (2019), is a painting by Samuel Eteta (fig.5), executed on cardboard with the poster colour medium. The painting reveals a hungry child gripping and devouring watermelon with much enthusiasm. He ravages it and pays no attention to his unclean hands or his environment. His pale yellowish eyes suggest malnourishment resulting from poor feeding, maltreatment, or ill-health. The artist used different shades of grays, blues, yellow, red, and browns, black and white as neutral tones to evoke the mood of the painting. The use of gray suggests sadness which best represents the state of the child. Suddenly heavens smiled on him as he encounters what to eat, perhaps from a food vendor. As he eats, his irises are raised, as a sign of gratitude to God for providing for the day since hunger has become his companion. This act hints a fleeting relief from hunger, juxtapose against on-going deprivation. However, the artist best captures the mood of the hungry child as a metaphor of the Almajiri/ Skolombo social condition.

Fig.6, David Vilavera, the Pins, Oil on Canvas, Satchiart.com, 2017.

David Villavera in 2017 produce a painting with the title ‘’The ‘Pins’’ (fig.6), which he executed using the oil medium on canvas. The painting shows a seated malnourished child, enveloped in an environment of despair and neglect. The image covers one-third of the picture plane. The child gruesome face is raised as he stares anxiously at the viewer with disdain in his eyes. His left-hand rests on a raised knee while the other rest on his right leg lying slightly helplessly on the ground revealing his bruised feet. The ground on which he seats is painted in various tones of saturated hues, portraying a dirty environment. The upper part of the work is painted in dark tones of blues, creating stark contrasts between the child and the bleak surroundings, thereby creating a morbid feeling to the pictorial environment. The artist opted to use a larger safety pin as a device in connecting visually the background and the child’s figure, enhancing the portrayal of his pain and sorrow. The use of lines, colours, shapes, forms, safety pins and high contrasts effectively suggest the harsh conditions experience by some children in the society, depicting themes of suffering, pain, poverty, destitution, abandonment, misery and neglect. The larger pin is prominently displayed, starting from the left side of the child’s head covering down to his left foot, which emphasizes a movement that underscore the child’s sorrowful state. On the other hand, the smaller pin connects the child’s forehead to the shoulder. The artist demonstrates meticulous rendering to visual details revealing good command of colours and technique to evoke deep empathy and reflection on the hardship faced by vulnerable children.

Fig.7 Blessy Bassy, the Al. conference, oil on canvas, 90x 90inch 2021.

The "Al-conference" is a mixed media painting on a 3x3 feet canvas, created by Blessy Bassy in 2021. It depicts another sight of street boys. This scene captures them as they stand in what looks like a cyclic composition probably conversing and sharing the day's outcome. However, they are placed at the centre of the picture plane and rendered in tones of blue, orange, green, yellow, purple and white in order to reveal some of their sorrowful condition. Their placement serves as an encounter between them and the observer. Looking further at the painting are distant figures and moving vehicles rendered in subtle tones of red, blue and yellow. The road is covered with dirt which is part of their identity. Although they can be seen begging on the streets, yet they occasionally create some room for private reflections on their condition. The artist used sweeping strokes to depict a dirty surrounding as a way to capture their sorrowful state.

Fig.8 Blessy Bassy, Free Food, Mixed Media, 90x120inc, 2020.

Blessy created a work with the title 'Free Food' (Fig.8), which draws our attention to the nature of the famished life of the Almajiri / skolombo boys in a society that is politically structured to render him/her a destitute who must scavenge for food as a permanent source of livelihood. In the painting, four boys are seen on the background, while one of them strategically placed to the extreme left of the picture baseline, in short, at the foreground. What strikes an onlooker is the chromatic evocation of the helpless condition of the street boy as he picks possibly food fragments from an environment already devastated by layers upon layers of dirt.

The nature of environment here can be seen in the painter's use of strong highlights, sharp contrasts to underscore the nature of this famished environment. The Almajiri boy here serves as a visual metaphor of the social condition in the north. In this sense, the figure is a metaphor for all Almajiri as a discarded, neglected and an abandon collectively.

3.0 Conclusion

Conclusively, the above analysis of paintings by different artists' offers a glimpse into the lives of marginalized children within and in diaspora, thereby reflecting the social, economic, and political context of their time. From the works of Luis Meque executed in the 90s down to the paintings of David Vilaver, Benson Ibebe, and others executed in the 2000s, one noticeable fact is that each piece captures the uncomfortable scenarios of these marginalized children in different settings and condition. However, the use of oil medium which is considered a slow drying pigment by some of the artists', has become a symbol of the sluggish /slow responses or approach employed by concerned individual in the society in proffering lasting solution on the plight of the marginalized children. Thus, Street urchins abound in many cities and town; which is why the selected paintings makes it glaring that they suffer same fate which is that of neglect, rejection and abandonment.

According to Ernesto 'Che' Guevera "Art can be a weapon of change'', while Soyinka viewed that if we do not speak against oppression the man dies in us. However, finding shows that works of art have in them the power to advocate critique and create awareness regarding the plight of street urchins as well as other societal ills.

The study recommends that artists should focus on social issues in Nigeria as a means of conceptualizing pictorial compositions that create awareness on the plight of Almajiri and skolombo boys in Nigeria. The study thus poses a challenge to other artists to explore themes related to marginalized group as well as other social issues as a way of experimenting and expanding their creative and innovative potentials, thereby contributing and add to existing literature.

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