Godfried Donkor
The First Day of the Yam Custom: 1817
Curated by Koyo Kouoh
20 August — 30 October 2017
Processes of Digestion:  
*The First Day of the Yam Custom*

“The dinosaur can be best understood as the totem animal of modern culture, a creature that unites modern science with mass culture, empirical knowledge with collective fantasy, rational methods with ritual practices.”

William J. T. Mitchell

Visual accounts of 19th century expeditions, as told through illustrations and various drawings, are containers of culture. What do these accounts imply for the interpretations of African realities and how we regard images of Africa more broadly? Such questions become especially pertinent when we consider that these images were circulated widely outside of the continent, but very little within it. For his first solo show in Ghana since 2006, Donkor repatriates one such image — Thomas Edward Bowdich’s *The First Day of the Yam Custom* (1818) — to the land of his origins, in order to explore and expose these contradictions, and finally to redress this balance.

The time between the end of the slave trade and the beginning of the colonial period in 1885 brought about a temporary vacuum in the trade relationships between Europeans and Africans in the Gulf of Guinea. It was a time when all European powers — including those which are not considered colonial powers today, such as Denmark — were aggressively (and often corruptly) competing for the favour of kings and chiefs of the Gulf’s coastal societies. In the processes of drawing up trade treaties — and in establishing diplomatic embassies and commercial missions of various natures — these relationships were articulated, in part, through the presentation of costly gifts during ceremonial events. One such event was the annual yam festival in Kumasi, the capital of Ghana’s Asante territory.

On the 7 September 1817, the first Anglo-trade treaty was formally ratified between the Asantehene (‘ruler of the Kingdom of Asante’) Osei Tutu Asibey Bonsu (reigned from 1800-1824) and Thomas Edward Bowdich, the conductor of the first British mission to Kumasi (b. 1791–1824). According to Bowdich’s account, the Asantehene appeared wrapped in a cloth of European flags. In the essay ‘Sights/Sites of Spectacle: Anglo/Asante Appropriations, Diplomacy and Displays of Power 1816–1820’, curator Fiona Sheales suggests that, in dressing himself this way, Osei Bonsu was not only expressing economic, political and spiritual aspirations, but also concealing and revealing Asante ambitions, hopes and fears for the future.

Drawing on Bowdich’s published account and his seminal illustration, artist Godfried Donkor revives an image of the mission understood to have launched the scramble for Ghana’s gold in the 19th century. The Yam custom, an important event in the Asante calendar, involved various forms of tribute being paid to the king. Seated on a chair of ebony and gold, shaded under his state umbrella (visibly depicted in both works with an elephant on top), Osei Bonsu is portrayed in the midst of a procession. The items he wears have been chosen to symbolise his fearless leadership and to indicate his role as the guardian of his people, whilst the flags carried by those surrounding his throne represent the European countries with which his people traded.

On 22 April 1817, Thomas Edward Bowdich, a young British achiever of modest beginnings, who had worked his way into the favours of John Hope Smith (the British Governor of the Committee of Merchants of the Gold Coast, based at Cape Coast), departed from Cape Coast on a mission lead by Frederick James (the Governor of Fort Accra), and in the company of Henry Tedlie (the Irish assistant surgeon) and Thomas Hutchison (writer and soon to be resident consul in Kumasi). *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee* was an expedition chartered on behalf of the Royal
African Company from Cape Coast Castle into the territory of the Asante; a society known to have legendary resources of gold, who had been attacking European settlements along the coast of Ghana. Accompanying the four British officers were two Royal African Company soldiers, a carpenter, bricklayer, cooper, an Asante guide, three linguists, 48 hammock-men and 80 porters who — as well as transporting the mission’s supplies — also carried the Company gifts intended for the Asantehene. As the scientific officer, Bowdich was charged with collecting information on geography, language, customs, history, music, art and architecture, and therefore carried the burden of reporting in writing to the council and committee on these subjects. The expressed intention of the mission was to make a peace and trade treaty with the Asante, and also to learn more about their culture and customs — as the following instruction by John Hope Smith to Frederick James shows:

“The Gentlemen whom you may select, will of course be well advised by you not to interfere with any customs of the natives, however absurd; or in any way to give them offence. And they cannot too strongly impress upon the minds of the King and people of Ashantee, that the only objects his Britannic Majesty has in view, are, to extend the trade with that country; to prevent all interruption to their free communication with the waterside.”

The hidden intention, though, was to assess the gains the Royal African Company could expect from a grand scale intervention into Ghana’s hinterland. This is perceivable from Bowdich’s various accounts. Early on in the trek, the three young officers of the mission expressed distrust of Frederick James’ loyalty towards securing a peace and trade treaty in favour of Cape Coast, knowing that he represented a competing trading post: Fort Accra. The distrust, arguments, animosity and suspicion pervaded the entire operation to the point where Bowdich started a campaign against James, ensuring that frequent inflammatory dispatches on the man’s conduct were reported back to Governor Hope Smith. Finally instigating a coup which overthrew James as the leader of the mission, Bowdich assumed command himself; all this despite his young age and lack of experience in such matters.

Built upon a process of mural painting, and transported by the energy of applied social utopia, the repainting of Bowdich’s original illustration unfolds within the collective subconscious of belonging to the vast and thick layers of blackness. With the revival of this work, Donkor draws parallels between analogies of the past and the present. From this perspective, contexts, events and practices are free for transfer and reinterpretation. Affected, concerned and subjected to the abundant manifestations of white power, the artist’s work challenges the global mainstream’s embrace of the fraught notions of transformation and progress, while humorously poking fun at the status quo — whose only transformative and progressive nature lies in a change of packaging. In repainting Bowdich’s foundational drawing, Donkor combines historical and sociological accounts with a contemporary artistic understanding of a work which triggered British appetite for Ghana, and paved the way for the scramble for gold.

Over the past thirty years, Donkor’s practice, which is embedded in historical and sociological issues, has developed a particular focus on the shared histories of the people of Africa and its wider diaspora, reflecting on the commodification of people and resources in all facets. Borrowing iconography from pop art and mass media, and mixing styles and imagery from conflicting sides of political and cultural divisions, Donkor’s work encompasses painting, collage, print and video, with an emphasis on the powerfully creative aspects of creolisation, emerging from cultural interactions between societies.

In past works, Donkor recontextualises contemporary figures, who he depicts rising from cross-sections of old sailing ships: a recurrent metaphor for the transportation of slaves from West Africa to the New World. Be it the pin-up girl (of his Madonna series), the boxer (a figure that is present throughout his entire
Born in Kumasi in 1964, Donkor moved to England at the tender age of nine, and has spent most of his life in the UK. It is for this reason that political and economic events from British history are a recurring motif in his work. In 2016, responding to an invitation from Milton Cottage to rethink their collection of works by the poet and writer John Milton, Donkor produced an image and text-based collage based on a royal proclamation of King Charles II, from 13 August 1660. The declaration required persons possessing the ‘wicked and traitorous’ books of the 17th century poet, as well as works of the preacher and author John Goodwin, to deliver them to the county sheriffs to be publicly burnt by the hangman at the next assizes. In this work, Donkor brings together modern broadsheet and tabloid newspaper fonts with phrases from Milton’s political texts, including *Eikonoklastes*, the work written for Cromwell’s republican government, and *Eikon Basilike*, the royalist pamphlet the *Eikonoklastes* was written in response to.

In the 1869 essay ‘Culture and Anarchy’, British sage writer Matthew Arnold describes the British societal notion of “self-esteem”. According to Arnold, culture demands the study of perfection, the antithesis of unruly anarchy. Arnold differentiates three groups: the barbarians, the Philisters and the society, and goes on to discuss the whimsical, ludicrous, destructive temper of contrariness at the heart of the British mentality. Arnold’s view, firmly anchored in British national mythology, was first portrayed by William Shakespeare in his play King Henry IV (initially published in 1597–1600). At the beginning of the play, the fat thief and drunkard Sir John Falstaff gives a short speech celebrating madness and law. Falstaff, at this point still friends with the young prince Hal, foresees him becoming king, and thus the ‘laws of England’ falling under Hal’s orders:

“Marry, then, sweet wag, when thou art king, let not us that are squires of the night’s body be called thieves of the day’s beauty; let us be Diana’s foresters, gentlemen of the shade, minions of the moon; and let men say we be men of good government, being governed, as the sea is, by our noble and chaste mistress the moon, under whose countenance we steal.”

William Shakespeare, King Henry IV Part 1, (I.II.21 – 28)

Blinded as Falstaff is, he believes he might control the country himself; to his indignation, however, the young prince jails him following his coronation. Ultimately, reason and law triumph over unruly chaos.

Similarly, within his work Donkor is animated by the desire to understand this competing impetus of British psychology that, on the one hand produced refined culture, and on the other anarchy and destruction. The latter is perhaps most clearly demonstrated through Britain’s global assault on the riches of other societies and civilizations, on a scale no other country could ever rival – a process in part initiated through visual accounts such as Bowdich’s seductive illustration.

In his exhibition at Gallery 1957, Donkor has contemporised a work that was for too long situated in the cultural academic study of anthropology, shifting the work’s context to provoke a critical re-evaluation. Performing the role of social critic, Donkor guides the viewers to a new mental space, asking them to reconsider this shared history. The work is part of a global process, galvanised by many Africans, to digest what has influenced who we are now, and how we make sense of who we are becoming. What are the effects on our conscious and unconscious understanding of history, memory, class, race, culture, gender, family and society? What is their psychological resonance and visual impact? The work’s artistic framework is twofold: it firstly offers a new perspective on the piece — which oscillates simultaneously...
between contemporary and historical readings — whilst it secondly exposes similarities between British politics then and now, as witnessed recently through events which similarly exposed frictions of wealth and migration, such as 2016’s ‘Brexit’ referendum, or the horrendous Grenfell Tower tragedy.

Based on a skeleton of greed, guile, disdain and exploitation, the devastation caused by the fire in the Grenfell Tower (a housing block situated in the London neighbourhood of North Kensington, at which — according to police reports — more than eighty people were killed), is emblematic of Matthew Arnold’s vision of the British nation: a place of both culture and anarchy. Some of the poorest citizens of the city were burned to death in one of the country’s richest neighbourhoods, as the local government wished to save money on refurbishment works; to this day, the fate of hundreds of survivors is still unclear. The burned out tower, perceivable from different vantage points across the city, has become a horrible portent of the current situation. In the same way, the ramifications of missions such as Mission from Cape Coast to the Ashantee stand for British pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial actions in the world.

The pain of blackness is indescribable; it is beyond words. The transgeographic and transgenerational transmission and collection of this memory has been passed over from black father to black son. From black mother to black daughter. From Africa to the Americas and Europe over centuries and the transmission continues as we witness contemporary racism and exploitation. Donkor’s work is drenched with the yearning for the digestion of this pain that is now largely silenced despite social movements such as Black Lives Matter. It seeks to visualise the emotional and intellectual damage caused to Africa by contact with Europe, and the ensuing uneven relationships whose effects the world — and particularly the black world — is still subject to today. If we are to understand how patterns of difference and superiority have come into being, and how they continue to structure human interrelations today, we need to decontextualise, deconstruct, unearth, reanalyse and reinterpret imageries that for too long have been presented to us as progressive and transformational for our societies. Donkor does just that — and that is not least.

Koyo Kouoh, Dakar, 2017

2 Fiona Sheales 2011.
3 Thomas E. Bowdich 2014 [1819], p. 7.
4 Matthew Arnold 1869.
5 William Shakespeare 1997 [1597], p. 5.

Bibliography


The First Day of the Yam Custom, 1817, 2017
Oil, acrylic and gold leaf on wood panel
9 panels (121 x 243 cm each)
War Capo II, 2017
Oil, acrylic and gold leaf on wood panel
150 x 230 cm
War Capo I, 2017
Oil, acrylic and gold leaf on wood panel
150 x 230 cm
War Capo III, 2017
Oil, acrylic and gold leaf on wood panel
150 x 230 cm
Anokye’s Dance III, 2017
Ink and colage on paper
150 x 230 cm
War Capo, 2007
Ink and collage on paper
70 x 120 cm
Modern Fante Air
Oil and Ink on paper
92.5 x 135.5 cm
Artist Biography

Godfried Donkor was born in Ghana in 1964 and left at the age of eight. He grew up in Europe, completed his education in Spain and England and after his studies he settled in London to begin his art practice.

Godfried uses a range of different techniques. In addition to painting, drawing and photography; the traditional collage is his dominant means of expression in his works on paper. Godfried frequently uses newspaper pages such as the stock market figures from the Financial Times as the background for his collages.

As someone who straddles borders between continents and cultures, the artist is interested in historical, sociological and societal topics; in particular, the shared history of the peoples of Africa and Europe. In view of this, he reflects on the trading of people in all its facets. For Godfried, it is important to illustrate the high value of sport and sexuality and thus the marketing of their protagonists in a global world. Godfried Donkor has become an integral part of the international art world thanks to his unmistakable style. He is not only represented as an artist at many biennials and art fairs around the world, but he is also a popular speaker, lecturer and discussion partner as is demonstrated by his many invitations to lecture tours in Europe, the USA and many African countries.

Awards

1998
‘Prix de la Revelation’, Dakar Biennale

2004
Arts Council of England, research and development

Selected group exhibitions

2017
Afriques Capitales, Parc de la Villiette, Paris, France

2016
Still the barbarians, Eva Ireland Biennale, Limerick, Ireland

2015
Streamlines, Deichtorhallen, Hamburg, Germany

2014
Speaking of people, Ebony, Jet and contemporary Art, Studio Museum in Harlem, NY, USA
How far how near, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Holland

2013
1:54 Art fair, London
Johannesburg artfair, Johannesburg, South Africa
Hollandaise, Raw Material Company, Dakar, Senegal

2012
Cologne Paper Art, Cologne, Germany
Aus Afrika, Galerie Frank Schlag & Cie, Essen, Germany
Hollandaise, Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Holland

Black Germany, Munich museum Haus de kunst, Munich, Germany
Boxe, Fondation Blachere, Apt, France
Moving into space: Football and Art in West Africa, National Museum of Football, Manchester, UK
Gold, Museum Belvedere, Austria

28 days: Reimagining black history month, J M Barnicke gallery/Georgia Scherman projects, Toronto, Canada

2011
Interpretations of Africa, football and design, Design Museum, UK
Johannesburg artfair, Johannesburg, South Africa
Alias, Krakaw Photomonth, Krakaw, Poland
Art on Poetry, Saison Poetry Library, South Bank, London
‘as it is’, Africa Applauded, Mojo Gallery, Dubai

2010
III World festival of Black arts and Cultures, Dakar, Senegal
Space and Currencies, Museum of Africa, Johannesburg, South Africa
Johannesburg artfair, Johannesburg, South Africa

2009
Miami art fair, PULSE, Fred gallery, Miami, USA
Collage, Fred Gallery, London
The wealth of no nation, Resolution gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
ARTCO Gallery, Jo’Burg art fair, Johannesburg, South Africa
Landfall, Docklands Museum, London
2007
ARTCO Gallery, Cologne art fair, Germany

Trade Winds, Docklands Museum, London

AISS, exhibition and launch, Accra, Ghana

Financial Times Mudhut, The Big Chill festival, Heredfordshire, UK

Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery, The Whitworth Art Gallery, UK

AFRICA SELECT, ARTCO Gallery, Herzogenrath, Germany

TransCape, Cape Town, South Africa, 2006

L’Homme est un mystère, Musee d’Art et d’Histoire, ST Brieuc, France

Southern Vogue Series, Project Row Houses, Houston, Texas, USA

A Beautiful Game, Roebling Hall gallery, NY, USA

Around the World in 80 days, ICA, London

Rethinking Nordic Colonialism, NIFCA, Torshavn, Faroe Islands

Look both ways, Stephen Lawrence Gallery, London, 2005

Collection of the Spanish Sports Council, Ses Voltes, Palma de Mallorca, 2004

Pin Up, Tate Modern, London

We Two Together: GHANA.NIGERIA: Oladapo & Godfried Donkor, National Theatre, Accra, Ghana

Bling Bling, London Print Studio, London

Hybrid, ROSL, London

Copy it, steal it, share it, Borusan Art Gallery, Istanbul Biennale, Turkey

BIDA, biennale of sports and art, Salamanca, Spain

A Fiction of Authenticity: Contemporary Africa Abroad, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis

London Print Studio, London

1st Flag, Casino, Luxembourg

Transferts, La Palais Des Beaux Artes, Brussels, Belgium

Camouflage, Brussels, Belgium

2002

Body Power/Power Play, Wurtembergische Kunstverein, Stuttgart, Germany

Origin of End, Leicester City Gallery, Leicester, UK

Visitors, Kunstallan Bohuslans museum, Uddevalia, Sweden

Populated, IASPIS Gallery, Stockholm, Sweden

There is no redemption, Bonnington Gallery, Nottingham, UK

2001

Boxers, Kunstalle Tirol, Austria

Bartimeus Prize exhibition, National Theatre, Ghana

SportsCult, ApexArt, New York, USA

ANSTOSS, Kunst, sport und Politik, Albrecht Durer Kunstverein, Nuremberg

Authentic/Excentric, Venice Biennale, Italy

Africa Today, the Artist and the City, CCCB, Barcelona, Spain

The Figure 8, Pump House Gallery, London

2000

The 7th Havana Biennale, Havana, Cuba

World Trade, Roebling Hall Gallery, NY, USA

The Wiles of the Feminine, Barbara Green Fine Art, NY, USA

Picture This — New Representational Painting, AAA Gallery, NY, USA

1999

Big River — International artist’s exhibition, Trinidad & Tobago

Routes, Five artists, Brunei Gallery, London

1998

Cinco Continentes y uno Ciudad Salon exhibition, Mexico City, Mexico

Dak’Art 98, Dakar Biennale, Dakar, Senegal

Selected solo exhibitions

2011

People of Utopia, Artco gallery, London

2010

The fives court, Fred Gallery, London

Arco art fair, Afnova gallery, Madrid, Spain

2009

The Olympians and Muses, Afnova Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa

Story of a London township, Space, London

2008

State of the Union, Ti + 2 Gallery, London

Once upon a time in the west, there was lace, Wollaton Hall Nottingham, UK

2007

Financial Times, Gorre Festival, Gorre Island, Senegal

Abolition 07, Hackney Museum, London

2006

The Sable Venus and the Black Madonna, Gallerie 23, Amsterdam, Holland

Jamestown Masquerade, Walsh metal works, St Croix, USVI

2005

Concerto in light and Darkness no 2, National Museum, Ghana

Godfried Donkor, Pascal Polar Gallery, Brussels, Belgium

2004

Financial Times, Ecole Regionale des beaux Artes, Nantes, France

2003

The Fancy, Stephen Lawrence Gallery, London

Godfried Donkor, Recent works, The Scene Gallery, NY, USA

2002

Godfried Donkor, Albrecht Durer Kunstverein, Nuremberg, Germany

2001

Handel and Hogarth at Vauxhall pleasure gardens, St Peters Church, London

Artists in Residence exhibition, IASPIS, Stockholm, Sweden

2000

Whose Africa, Horniman Museum, London

Wrestling and Mysticism, Dak’Art 2000, Dakar, Senegal

1999

Slave to Champ, E M A C A, Nottingham, UK

Installations/ Performances

2006

Jamestown Masquerade, St Croix, US Virgin Islands

2005

Jamestown Masquerade, Jamestown, Ghana

1995

Glamour, Harvey Nichols, London

1994

Woodstacks, Harvey Nichols, London

To be the Best, Designed by Rana Salem, Harvey Nichols, London

The Seven Lives of Picasso, Harvey Nichols, London

Perrier sculptures, London Fashion Week Promotion, Harvey Nichols, London
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Founding director Marwan Zakhem
Gallery manager Yesha Puplampu
Gallery assistant Kofi Tsatsu Amable
Exhibition installation Fahd Dtus & the
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