

Onyeka Igwe's Search for Truth

Onyeka Igwe's exhibition "A Repertoire of Protest" at MoMA's PS 1 in Queens.

by Andreas Robertz

In 1929, there were massive protests by market women in what is now Nigeria against new taxes imposed by the British colonial government. It was the first uprising against British rule in the West African country. Their weapon was, above all, a tactic they called "Sitting on a Man." They danced half-naked, sang invective songs, and occupied streets and squares in front of courts and official buildings. The army intervened and shot many of the unarmed women. As a result, the colonial government banned women from gathering in traditional ways and performing their songs and dances. This all became known as the "Aba Women's War" - Aba was the name of the town where the uprisings were put down. British-Nigerian artist and filmmaker Onyeka Igwe used personal and historical documents to trace the real history of these protests. The result can now be seen in her exhibition "A Repertoire of Protest" at MoMA's PS1 in Queens, New York.

Onyeka Igwe's interest in the Aba Women's War began with her great-great-uncle's autobiography, which mentioned the conflict. Neither she nor her parents, who had both grown up in a village near Aba, had known anything about it.

So it seems to me that because of the banning of these kind of women's meetings, this kind of protest, this protest repertoire kind of got lost. Um, this kind of way of embodying a certain grievance or complaint dissipated in some of these communities because of because of the results of British colonialism on a whole, but the specific events of the Aba women's war

The exhibition "A Repertoire of Protest" shows three films made by Onyeka Igwe in 2017 and 18. In one, you see only her mother's hands as she unpacks the nearly 100-year-old original British Colonial Office report on the uprising and turns page after page. Along the way, she talks about her grief over the loss of cultural identity, of forgotten dances, songs and traditions. Her second film shows original films made on behalf of the British government for propaganda purposes around the time in West Africa, and her third film shows improvisations by two dancers who try to reconstruct the repertoire of movements of the dances using the old materials.

Onyeka Igwe has edited questions into the original films that she asked herself while watching them. In this way she wants to draw attention to the hidden intentions with which these films were shot. For example, a young woman can be seen again and again, bare-chested and with lots of chains around her neck, never looking at the camera but always at the floor.

In that film what always strikes me is the woman who's looking down the whole time. Because for me it feels like a slight discomfort with being filmed. That's one way of interpreting it, or it could be, I don't know, like playing a kind of coyness, I'm not really sure. But the kind of choice to focus on her as opposed to other people, who are doing different things, who have different kind of expressions and gazes is one of the first things that I know when I watch that part of the film. So I had a question for her, but also for the person who was making it, like, why did you choose to frame it in this way?

Her questions not only sharpen our view of the colonial filmmakers' intentions, but also of the viewing habits of today's viewers. Most impressive is her third film, in which she has two dancers, whose family history is also connected to Nigeria, improvise on the material, the films from the archive and the diaries. On three screens surrounding the viewers, one can follow their process. They create a repertoire of movement that is captured in stick figure drawings, like the notation of choreography. The result is a powerful rediscovery of movement, which for Onyeka Igwe is a form of ancient knowledge.

I have been interested for a long time in dance or the body as a way of approaching kind of political questions. If we think about these kind of colonial ways of thinking or knowledge systems that are about fact and rationality, what are the other ways that people have come to know things or how different kind of cultures and societies understand knowledge, that is often through the body. So that has kind of been my way in through the archive for a lot of the work that I had been doing around the kind of British colonial archives. Thinking about the body and in this particular kind of group of works, it was all about dance.

"A Repertoire of Protest" is a testimony about women who fought non-violently with only their bodies against foreign domination and oppression. And it reminds us that the term war was deliberately chosen wrongly, because it suggests an armed conflict that was ultimately a bloody massacre.

