

## A Studio Exploration of Wood off-cuts as a Creative Resource for the Production of “The Ruler and the Ruled Sculpture Project”

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### Abstract:

**Background:** “The Ruler and the Ruled” project is a process-oriented studio exploration that attempts to join other African artists such as Sumegne, Dilomprizulike, Hazoume, Titos and Mabunda, who employ recycled materials and joining techniques to address socio-political issues in Africa. The distinctiveness of their creative exploits’ tilts largely on their creativeness in working with their individual processes of joining, tying, welding, and assembling upcycled materials. However, none has consciously utilized the joinery process as a focal of production.

**Objectives:** This study, therefore, focused on joinery and the aesthetic effects joinery brings to form, as it uses these forms to address the plights of the downtrodden.

**Methodology:** the exploration process engages the use of joinery techniques, like dovetail, flatlock, and dado joints as a method in upcycling wood off-cuts and tree-logs to create a body of work, while the exploration results analyses three factors: the materials, process and formal features using formalistic, stylistic, descriptive and iconology approaches.

**Results:** the results metaphorically showed how the ruling elites manipulate the rustics and subject them to both physical and emotional poverty.

**Unique contribution:** An in-depth understanding of the routine craftsmanship the artist put in at different stages of production is highlighted, to give insight on how upcoming artists can maintain the level of creative dexterity required by joinery techniques and processes.

**Definite conclusion:** The conceptual imageries make connections with material and process to provide junctures where meanings are elicited especially as they relate to the downtrodden, to join the ongoing dialog in the African socio-political scene.

**Key recommendation.** further explorations from the present project can still be initiated in different directions to extend what has been done so far.

**Authors Keywords:** Wood off-cuts, Joinery, Creative resource, Upcycled materials, The Ruler and the Ruled

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### Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed great innovation in the field of creative art. Such innovations have often developed in response to grave ecological and environmental crises. The desire to adopt sustainable art-making practices, so as to not worsen environmental degradation has necessitated the use of seemingly waste materials to produce art form which not only adds aesthetic value to the environment but also has the potential to generate a means of livelihood for artists (Nelson et al., 2020). Upcycled materials are affordable and this has led to its use for the production of artworks in the twenty-first century (Livinus Kenechi Ngwu and Akabuike, 2019); (Hemming’s, 2005). The use of wooden off-cuts from timber-processed and unprocessed woods to formulate forms, using fabrication procedure known as the joinery process falls within the category of art forms under discussion. As a process-oriented studio exploration project, *The Ruler and The Ruled* employs both conventional and unconventional joinery techniques, such as dovetail, flatlock, dado, rabbet, cross-lap, mortise and tenon, dowel, dowel in edge, miter, halve, finger, and booth joints among others as a means in interacting with wood and other available materials that helps to strengthen joints.

This ongoing project describes the exploration of materials and joints used and the different stages of production involved in *The Ruler and the Ruled*, a generic name of the body of work produced in the project. Patches and embedded wooden forms are consistently employed as patterns in configuring formal and visual elements in order to create visual imageries that metaphorically reflect the socio-political activities of man on man.

The artistic sensibility of *the Ruler and the Ruled* series is, therefore, derived from wood joinery, the creative process from which the forms take their visual energy. My analysis draws on Sullivan’s concept of transcognition (Barone & Thompson, 2006); (Sullivan, 2005); and Bickel’s (2008), idea, that the content of any sculpture depends largely on three factors: the material(s) used in configuring the work, the process involved in creating the work and the structure, or formal features that gives the work its physical reality.

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Available literature suggests that artists have yet to engage sculpture production using this technique and materials. Hence, the use of the joinery technique as a process for producing sculpture from wood off-cuts becomes the main objective of this studio project. It, therefore, explores wood off-cuts and joinery techniques in different ways to produce sculptures that are geared towards giving a creative insight into the tedious craftsmanship put in by craftsmen and artists alike in the production of objects configured through the employment of joints. It further aimed at creating an in-depth insight and aesthetic awareness in joint making and configuration for the purpose of generating individual appreciation of the joints used in the production of artistic works while showing the aesthetic effects joint brings to forms.

Something that all artists have in common is their ability to produce works from the materials they grew up with, each in their own way. The materials most often are such that they are affordable and always sourced from the artists' immediate environment (Hemming's, 2005); (Ottenberg, 2002). Throughout history, artists have upcycled materials back into aesthetic or utilitarian purposes and sometimes, use it to solve or address problems related to human activities. Works that readily come to mind that falls within this category include: *For Those Left Behind* by Willie Bester (2003), produced from upcycled metal; Sumeagne's, *Body and Soul* (1992-2004), comprised of mixed media metal figurines and recycled materials; Dilomprizulike's *Waiting for Bus* (2003), a mixed media work created from metal, textile, wood, and video ; and Hazoume's (2004) *Bidon Arme*, created from mixed media recyclable empty gallons tower, joined together with the help of ropes.

All these African contemporary artists are working with upcycled materials using one form of joints or another. They have explored the process in various ways which have given rise to forms that are highly aesthetic and expressive. This paper, therefore, sets out to explore the joinery process as a technique in sculpture production, using the materiality of wood off-cuts and tree logs as a medium of visual expression.

### Joints in "The Ruler and the Ruled"

The terms join, joints, jointed and joinery are used interchangeably. 'Joinery' represents all the forms of fastening wood, metal, fiber and any other material together; however, the project focused more on wood joinery. Joints sometimes may not require a fastener, however, in most cases, they are always fastened with another substance, which acts as the binder or helps to hold the joint firmly in place. In woodwork, glue, nails and even ropes or wire can serve the same purpose (Joints, 2015). The results of the exploration of wooden off-cuts using joinery techniques gave rise to *The Ruler and the Ruled*, a creative expression from which relief and three-dimensional forms emerged, with a primary focus on the joints from which these forms are created.

This was developed from my *Joinery as a Sculpture Process*, a studio project at Nsukka, Nigeria, which began in the late-1990s. *The Joinery as a Sculpture Process* (Akabuike, 2003) provoked several ideas which, though originating from a common artistic position, moved in diverse directions including installations, wall panels, constructions and the configurations of miscellaneous sculptural works that emerged with diverse techniques derived from both conventional joints and unconventional joints process.



Fig: 1 Flat lock joint or Corner cup joint © author

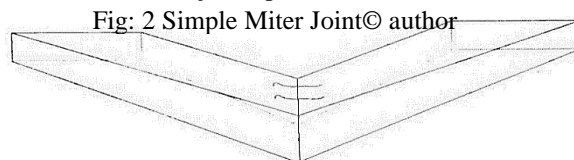


Fig: 2 Simple Miter Joint © author

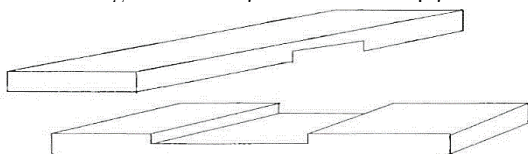


Fig: 3 a & b Cross-Lap joint © author

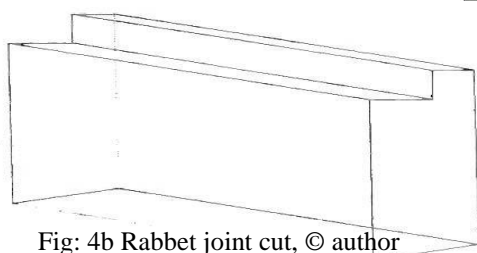
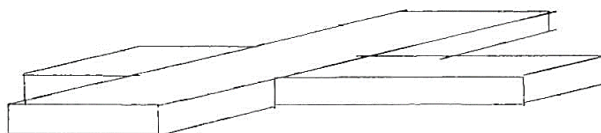


Fig: 4b Rabbet joint cut, © author

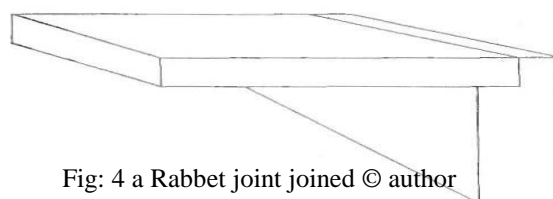


Fig: 4a Rabbet joint joined © author

The local carpenter's artistry in the use of joints to fashion furniture and other

This paper, therefore, focuses on the body of works that I created in wood using joints techniques as a studio process of gluing, fastening and bonding pieces of wood together to create larger forms. It reports on the processes employed in creating the woodworks, how the processes and the materials contribute to the choice of the joint used and how the joint shaped the content of the works. Some of the visual illustrations used in this report are taken from my work processes and from the results of the studio exploration while others are the contemporary carpentry and joinery processes of the woodwork.

### **Sources of Materials**

The wood off-cuts used for this project were collected from the Timber Shed in Nsukka southeast, Nigeria, where they also have Sawmills. The off-cuts are generated from wood produced for export by wood processing factories. The off-cuts were procured from a Trade Union which buys in wholesale from the processing companies in order to retail them to consumers, who in turn use them as firewood and for minor carpentry work.

Because the Union buys in bulk, the off-cuts come in various sizes, which traders' sort according to size in order to maximize profit from the consumers. Depending on the length of each off-cut, some local carpenters also buy for furniture making. But this is rare since the companies usually select the best before discarding the rest for firewood. However, if someone is lucky enough to come on the day the traders buy the wood from the company, and before they have the opportunity to sort them into different sizes, he may be able to buy in bulk from them. This reduces the cost for the buyer, as the trader might sell for a little gain in order to spare himself the problem of sorting and transporting the wood off-cuts to his shop.

Another material used in this project is unprocessed logs brought at the point of deforestation in the bush. These are sold by another trade union from where they are procured instead of solely retailing them for the last-local-consumers who usually use them as firewood. This may be sold in the same Timber-wood market where the off-cuts are bought or at different spots located elsewhere both at the interior-bush-wood-markets or some other locations within the towns where firewood is sold. For the purpose of clarity, I hereafter refer to the unprocessed logs as *tree-logs* and factory-processed woods as *off-cuts*. The tree-logs sometimes serve as a host or are sometimes combined with pieces of off-cuts to create a unit that is interwoven to constitute a single unit, as will be seen in the results of the work.

Other resources used in the production process of the works include: Solid objects such as metals (nails, bicycle spokes, binding wire, electrodes); Soft or semi-liquid substances (glues and putty); and finally, fibrous materials (rope and rafters). These materials are very common in local markets.

### **Tools**

Also acquired and used from the local market were the power and manual tools, including a filing machine, jig-saw machine, router machine, cross-section cutting machine, chisels, and a set of locally constructed or English-made Oxy-Acetylene.

### **Work Formations**

This is actually the first stage in retrospect because prior to any cutting, an already existing sketch on paper would be a blueprint from which the physical forms would materialize. So, the process of creating any work in *The Ruler and the Ruled* series involved a lot of sketches on paper prior to the actual creation. This is succeeded with the assemblage of the off-cuts.

All the explorations were embarked upon with a preconceived idea that was put down as a sketch on paper. However, the concepts can also be stored and processed in the artists' mind. This is contrary to Jerry Peart's opinion that "once a piece begins to take on a personality, I know I'm getting somewhere" (Cassidy, 2003, p, 21) and Kasfir's (2000) experience with the Idoma, Ebira (Igbira), Kalabari, and Tiv carving communities in Nigeria. In the case of *The Ruler and the Ruled* series, forms are not achieved by accident or through trials and error; rather every form in the work is a result of a well-calculated intention and effort guided by the theme of the composition.

### **Decision on Techniques and Processes**

The next stage involves deciding on the type of joint to be used. Since the durability and firmness of any joint depends largely on its' level of manipulation, most times, more than one joinery process is employed. In doing this, one or two of the above-mentioned materials are used to strengthen the joints. The form and shape of any sculptural work produced from joints are dependent upon the materials and joints used. These materials also determine the process and the technique with which the joints and the artwork are produced.

### The Two Basic Configurations

Even though the primary materials in this project are the off-cuts and tree-logs, the basic forms are in **Reliefs** and **Three-Dimensions**. From these two basic forms, three categories of works emerged and are classified as follows: -

- (a.) Single Piece Formation: - These constitute the relief works produced solely from the off-cuts and specifically from the vantage of two-dimensional view, like floor fixtures and wall panels.
- (b.) Combined Piece Formation: - These are the three-dimensional works produced from the combination of tree-logs and off-cuts
- (c.) Single Piece 3D formation: - These are three-dimensional works produced exclusively from pieces of off-cuts.

### Stages of Production

#### Processing the off-cuts

The works usually go through several stages of production; starting with more critical processing of the off-cuts, which has been done partially in the factory. Even though they were already sawed, planned and cut into different sizes, forms and given lengths by the processing factory, their edges still need to be planned with either electric or a manual planning machine. If they acquired dirt during transportation, then they need to be washed off so as not to damage the blade of the planning machine.

#### Processing the tree-logs

The tree-logs obtained unprocessed, needs some treatment before they are used for work. They are cleaned by peeling off the bark (sap) and allowed to dry gradually in a controlled environment to reduce cracking. If the wood accumulated mud during transportation, they too must be washed with water and detergent. Sometimes, the logs come from a burnt bush in which case, part of the wood will be charcoal. This requires that the burnt charcoal area be cleaned with iron brush or metal scraper in order to get to the un-burnt wood.

#### Markings and Drawings

This usually commences with a choice of joints and mathematical calculations of a desired strength and effect to be achieved. This is followed by making mental sketches of the joints before putting them down on a sketchbook. Subsequently, the desired joint is transferred by drawing the patterns on the body of the woods, where the pieces of the processed timber will be fused or fitted in; in the case of tree-logs. This is achieved with the help of a pencil, T-Square and other mathematical sets instruments. Two separate markings are usually made, the positive and the negative markings on two different pieces of woods so that each will bear a marking calculated differently from the other; though it is always in form of two sides of the same coin. For instance, in *Dowel Joint*, the male and female part, of the positive and the negative part fuse into each other in such a way that a pin-like protrusion is fused into a hole drilled or perforated with the help of a drilling machine so that the pin-like protrusion could fit in tightly into the drilled openings to fasten both pieces together. In all the works in *The Ruler and the Ruled* series, most of the pieces of wood require multiple joint formations. In this case, each joint is calculated carefully and marked accordingly with signs and symbols to identify where each must fit in perfectly.

The drawing also depends on the type of joint to be used. For instance, in the case of *Through Mortises and Tenon joint*.

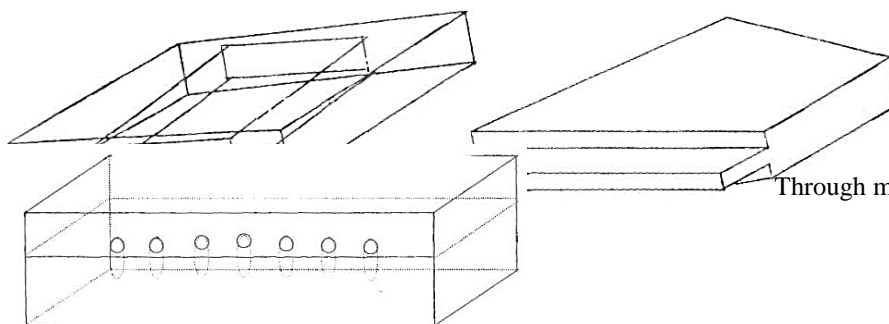


Fig: 5  
Dowel in Edge joint © author

Fig: 6 a & b  
Through mortises and tenon joint © author

The drawing is made in such a way that when the wood is cut, the male part of the joints will protrude while the female part will be grooved in such a way that they will fit perfectly tight when tailored.

### Cutting to Create a Vacuum

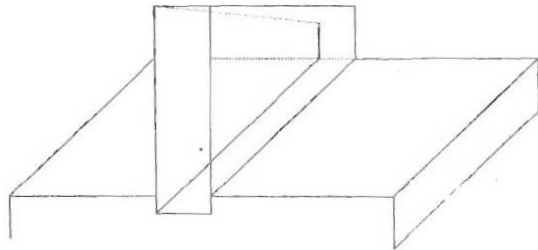


Fig: 7 Dado joint © author

After drawing, cutting into the wood to create a vacuum for the joints will commence. The cutting styles and tools depend on the joints and effects desired. Sometimes, material is removed from only one part of the intercession while the other half is just planned in the case of the *Butt joint*. Other times, the other part may need a little groove or slot, like in the case of *Dado joint*. Power, or manual cutting tools or both could be used simultaneously to achieve the desired form. After the cutting exercise, the male and the female

parts of the joints are fused to form a unit. This is continued until a long jointed wooden relief or three-dimensional sheet is created in case of a wall panel or free-standing form respectively.

### Configuration Process and Reinforcing Joints for Relief Sculpture

This is done by further processing the off-cuts which may range between 10cm to 22cm (width) and 15cm to 34cm (length). Each piece is gently planed along the edge with 'Jack Plane' to harmonize the edge for proper and smooth lapping. The frontal flat surfaces are left for markings and designs while the back is cleaned with water or an iron brush to eliminate dirt.

The production of the relief forms sometimes requires that additional material is employed to enhance strength, malleability, and ductility. This is because some woods break as a result of their nature or because of weakness obtained during the grain formation. Hence, bicycle spokes, stripes of flat metal or plastic sheets and binding wires are provided and drilled into the woods especially against the grains if the piece of wood is such that it can tear or is weak along the grain. On the other hand, flat metal or plastic sheets of about ½ inch thick are fastened along the entire length of the back with ¼ inch screw nails or power stapler for malleability (See plate 9). Pieces of the flat metal bars are also fastened at the back to enhance malleability and strength.

### Creating Joints for Three-Dimensional works and Configuration Processes

Creating joints for three-dimensional form is of two formations:

- (a.) The *Single Piece 3D Formation*
- (b.) The *Combined Piece formations*.

Configuration process of the *three-dimensional* forms usually take the same process of production depending on the category (single or combine piece form). The only difference is that in *single piece 3D formation*; both the edges and the sides of the off-cuts are planed with a *planning machine (Jack Plane)* or smoothed with a *Disc Sandpaper machine* for smooth lapping and a tidy final composition. Also, both sides of the wood are used for markings and designs since both sides are visible when the work is done and exhibited. Since each piece has markings bearing signs, symbols or numbers indicating a corresponding marking on another piece where the joints are meant to fit, it makes it easy to locate the male and the female parts of every corresponding joint. Whenever a selected portion is satisfactorily completed, they are pinned into position and fastened with wood-glue, this will firmly fix and bound them together so that they will not be misplaced again.

### Single Pieces 3D Formation

This is building up a whole three-dimensional form from shear pieces of off-cuts. There is no principle host, every piece is a potential host unlike in the *combined pieces formation* where the tree-log serves as the host. It is more tedious than the *combined piece formation*, because, it requires a more vigorous and creative dexterity. The joints to be used must be critically considered for strength as well as the wood and its grain formation to reduce splitting along the grain when pressure piles up. Cutting contrary to the grain usually results in splitting or breakage when load or pressure is mounted. Multiple halved joints are customarily applied in this build up, which are done in batches of sizeable configurations. Additional material to enhance the strength and malleability are always required (See Assemblage Process).

### Single Pieces 3D Form Assemblage Process

The assemblage of the single off-cuts patterns into a *three-dimensional* form proceeds in batches. Each completed portion is set aside while another set of corresponding pieces are assembled to form a unit. Each unit

forms a batch that is fused with an already completed batch. Every identical corresponding batch are assembled and fit in. This batch by batch build up are firmly fixed together without any fastener but instead with the jointed formation designed for such purpose. Afterward, a critical study is made on the areas with the high possibility of breakage or splitting. These areas are reinforced with other materials such as flat metal sheets and binding wire depending on the degree of weakness to improve resiliency to pressure and force of gravity. However, the individual batches are fastened with wood-glue and bicycle spoke for strength and malleability; not with plastic-bars because the later will visibly distort the finishing. This procedure is continued until all the pieces were assembled as a set of batches before the final build up installations is commenced and concluded. A close observation will show empty spaces intentionally created at intervals within the area of composition. These spaces help the work to have areas of rest since the *anthill-jig-saw puzzle-like* formations already have a simulated atmosphere of unrest.

### **Combined Pieces Formation Cutting Patterns**

Cutting patterns on the tree-log could be done manually or with a power tool. But whichever method, the pattern of the form to be cut is always determined by the design on the piece of the off-cuts, the off-cuts are placed on the tree-log for markings and designs before cutting.

### **Piece Formation**

The *combined piece formation* is produced from the configuration of the tree-logs and the off-cuts. In this arrangement, the tree-log serves as the host while the off-cuts are fused, patched and imbedded into it as a buildup. The pieces of the off-cuts are processed as in the *relief pattern* by gently smoothing the edge with a *Jack Plane machine* to ensure proper edge-to-edge lapping. The planning will further ensure a tight fitted line, smooth tidy compositions and to avoid falling off after it has been fused. However, much attention like planning is not given to both sides of the off-cuts since one side will be buried and the other (outer) side may still be burnished (see Forced Unity). Since the tree-log serves as the host, the production of *combined formation* does not require any additional materials for strength and malleability. This is because the tree-log is already packed with strength.

However, occasionally breakage because of weakness in grain formation or excessive pressure as a result of vibration from power tools and manual manipulations may occur. When this happens, bicycle spokes and wood glue are solely used for binding and mending the crack. The spokes are preferable because they are buried into the wood with the help of a *drilling machine* to avoid it being visible afterword unlike the flat-metal-sheet that will stay on the surface considering that the work is in the *round*; it will indicate a weakness in production.

### **Combined Pieces Assemblage Process**

To synergize the off-cuts with the tree-log into a three-dimensional form, after the vacuums for the joints were cut out, the *Principle Forms* (tree-logs or the segment upon which the rest of the buildup will be attached to) are placed on the workbench while the off-cuts are spread on the floor. The vacuums created on the tree-log are spliced with the corresponding pieces of the off-cuts and firmly fixed together with the help of wood-glue if necessary, for strength and to avoid falling off later.

The assemblage takes the form of fixing a jig-saw puzzle to create the whole unit. This process might be very confusing and tasking to an untrained eye, this is because most of the off-cut pieces usually look similar to each other. But each piece has a distinct form and shape which distinguishes it from the others and makes it easier to fit into the vacuum to which it is created. Selections are made easier by sorting the woods' color patination. The selected ones are fixed permanently to the *principle form* and gradually the whole unit is built into an assemblage of visual mirage comprising of relief and intaglio formations on the workbench.

Unlike the process in the single pieces' formation where each completed satisfactory portion was set aside while another set of corresponding pieces were assembled to form a unit, the *combined piece* formation is built up in such a way that the tree-log serves as the host while the off-cuts are buried, fused, spliced, jammed, forced, squeezed and pressed in to close up the vacuumed patterns created for such purpose. In a case where there is more than one tree-log, this procedure is continued until the desired areas are fully fused with the pieces of the off-cuts and the off-cut cutout patterns exhausted and formation concluded. There is scarcely a possibility of breakage so no reinforcement measure is needed unless on rear occasions. In which case, other materials may be used depending on the degree of suspected weakness to improve resiliency to pressure.

### **Finishing/exhibition of Works**

After hanging the reliefs on the wall, balancing the base for the works in the round and coupling every other outstanding form(s) into place, the finishing process starts with treatment against insects like burnishing or administering pyrography where it is desired. Cleaning with an iron brush, sandpapering, and to further create visual effects, synthetic colors are introduced in certain areas to enhance and harmonize with the woods' natural colors before polishing or waxing. Apart from the initial cleaning before the configuration process, the work always requires a more clinical cleaning at the later stage in order to obtain a smooth surface where it is required and a rough surface where it is desired. Smoothing of the work is sometimes done with a powered tool or manually. In whichever method that is being used, the rough sandpaper is used first before the smooth sandpaper this is because the application of the rough sandpaper reduces the hash texture where smoothness is required reasonably before the smooth sandpaper is applied for a finer and smoother finishing.

Burnishing or pyrography is done depending on the desired effect in order to create a strong visual contrast. This is an effect that distinguishes the woods' natural color and patinates it to man-made. Although burnishing also gives the finishing a natural impression, it is consciously applied for aesthetic effect and a more conspicuous introduction of signs and symbols. Finally, the whole work is polished with wax or spread with fine neutral wood vanishes to desired effect.

### **Results and Conceptual Discussions of Works:**

The studio exploration yielded three categories of works including sculptures in-the-round and relief works. *Unity in Diversity*, *The World is a Maze* and *Forced Unity* has been purposively selected from *The Ruler and The Ruled* series to discuss the result of the studio project. Although some of these works show certain similarities as a result of a common pattern of production, they still vary in representation and configuration. The discussion, however, is focused on description, analysis and interpretation, and conceptual discussion. For orderly presentation, the relief work (wall panel) is discussed first while the sculpture in-the-round follows. It must be noted that the two concepts (relief and in-the-round or the Three-Dimensional) are often complementary in this exploration exercise as the joining technique of one is directly or indirectly applied on the other. Specific joining activities have been identified here.

### **Conceptual discussion**

The primary function of joints as a process of fixing two or more separate entities together has been appropriated and blended into the conceptual process of making the works. In other words, the materiality of off-cuts (semi-processed) and tree-logs (unprocessed) timber offered a crucial impulse towards exploration as it opened up creative possibilities. Owing to this, the works series exude meanings from different works of life. While some of the works like *Unity in Diversity*; *Forced Unity*; *Entanglement*; *The Marriage of East and West*; *The Developed and the Underdeveloped World*, and *The Ruler and the Ruled*; have political undertones, they also explore other aspects of life. The works *Unity in Diversity*, *The World is a Maze*, and *Forced Unity* have been selected for conceptual discussion in this paper.

### **Relief Work:**

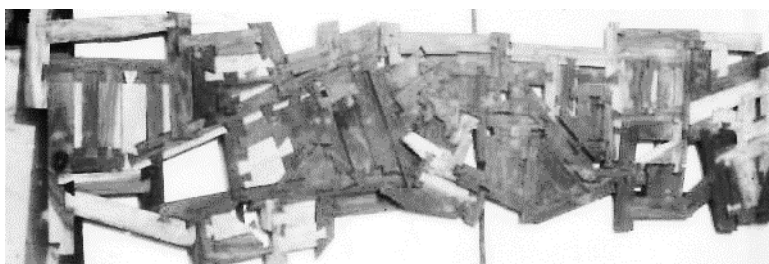


Figure: 8  
Title: *Unity in Diversity*  
Medium: wood  
Dimension: 30 inches' x 101 inches  
Photograph: Chikelue Akabuike  
© Akabuike (2003)

**Unity in Diversity:** (figure: 8) is a landscape assemblage of forms achieved with the use of dovetail joint on a ½" (half an inch) thickness of different lengths of off-cuts. From afar, the shift of textures and the disturbing restlessness of the contrasting dovetail rhythms catch one's attention. From the top left side, one sees a cluster of abstracted human forms in various colors arranged in vertical formation. They seem to be standing on other abstracted figures placed horizontally beneath them. The figures under are in a kind of prostrating formation before the standing figures.

However, a closer view allows intimate recognition of individual clustered figures rendered in spliced off-cut pieces of wood in a relief formation. Above the standing figures, is a parallelogram vacuum which compliments a second wider parallelogram. The second vacuum is just beneath the standing colored figures and situated horizontally in alignment with the prostrating figures. Under these, are cluster of figures spanning to the far-right side of the work in a restless interlocking formation. These are clutching each other with a dovetail-like-jig-saw puzzle joint. However, these clusters are broken at intervals with a stroke of oblique forms bridging the clusters as if forming boundaries and at the same time introducing new clusters

This formation is punctuated by other triangular vacuums. These triangular vacuums, spaced at intervals from the middle of the work in various twists and sizes till they phased out at the far-right end of the work. Although *Unity in Diversity*, was rendered in a landscape formation, a conscious effort was made to asymmetrically balance the edges such that finding a straight line is almost impossible. The artist used flat woods of different colors, grains and the varieties in the thickness of the woods to bring about diversity in the texture of the joint which made some to be depressed (intaglio) and some raised (relief) even in a relatively two dimensional form.

The interplay of geometric open spaces seems to have been consciously created to complement each other as they generated a place of rest for the eye calming the busy atmosphere of unrest created by the dovetails. The open spaces also reconfigured and incorporated the background into the work. The oblique lines which bridged and formed the boundaries in-between the clusters serve also to break the monotony of the sharp contrasting dovetail-jointed clusters. Thereby harmonizing the various clusters as well as distinguishing one cluster from the other. The asymmetrical outline of the landscape formation seems to suggest a map of a country rather than a piece of wall sculpture.

A deeper understanding of the work shows that every individual in each group is, in fact, moving in his or her own direction, even though they seemed to be moving together. These figures are meant to depict fast movements and what may occur in a stamped situation. Having forestalled this outcome, and with the understanding of the nature of dovetail joint which when interlocked with each other, do not disengage or unlock unless deliberately disengaged. Flat metallic and plastic sheets were used at the back to strengthen and add malleability to the joints as well as to ensure that they do not disengage accidentally.

The artist imagines the effect of a gunshot in a market crowd. The work demands the viewer to imagine the action of such crowd from a distance; one will likely see the movement of people in small groups, which seem to be moving in the same direction whereas, they actually are moving in different directions. If there should be a gunshot in their midst, the observer will see how these individuals in each group will scatter to different directions in a spontaneous reaction to the gunshot. Thus, showing how divided they originally were.

Dovetail joints, with their ability to hook without disengaging unless a deliberate effort is made to disengage, are a metaphor for the nature of the Nigerian union and amalgamation. The disturbing restlessness of the contrasting dovetail shows how agitated the different ethnic groups are, yet they still remain in "One Nigeria". The vertical figures comprising different colors represents the ruling class (the British and the ethnic group they left in power after independence) who are still de facto rulers. The prostrated ones depict the ruled which constituted the individual clusters representing the other ethnic groups. The way the ruling class is stamping on the ruled shows how the ruling class held onto hegemonic power by intimidation and brutality, supported by their puppeteer whites' counterparts. The spliced off-cuts shows the extent which these other ethnic groups have been subdued, subjugated and stamped to the background without fear or favor. While the smaller parallelogram vacuum represents the nations, mineral deposits located at the top of the standing figures, a wider and richer vacuum is seen in alignment with the downtrodden, representing the nation's oil wells located in the geographical zone of the downtrodden. The oblique forms bridging the clusters represents the individual ethnic ideologies and religious divergences which has also further segregated the country. The rest of the triangular vacuums represents other mineral resources deposited at different geopolitical zones in the nation which are resources that are meant to sustain each zone by default. The asymmetrical balance shows how unsure the boundaries of the nation is. At one time, part of the country was claimed by other neighboring countries, while immigrants from far countries have access to the country through these boundaries unchecked, showing how lax the country's security system is. This also maybe the reason why people from other countries invade the country kill, rape, maim, destroy lives and properties of Nigerians and they will be called bandits from another country without reprimands.

The diversity in the different textures of the joints shows how some ethnic groups struggle from nothing to something irrespective of the difficulties and challenging tasks they are faced with, just like the biblical children of Israel who prospered in Egypt irrespective of their increased labor. The individual groups moving in their own separate directions though united with the dovetail waiting for a stamped brings to mind the Igbo concept of *okwommaazu, ma ukwunaakpumna ala bikokwootuo m* (if your assistance eventually becomes cumbersome for me, then I need no more assistance from you) . This is because though Nigeria may claim to be united as a



nation, but the incidents that took place shortly after independence in 1960 and which plunged the country into a civil war left it further divided. Borrowing from the Southeast Historical Society of Nigeria, fifty years after the Nigeria-Biafra War, it appears that the ruling elite had learnt nothing and forgotten nothing. The tendency to promote the primacy of one ethnic group over the rest is very glaring at the centre and other regional power centres across the country. It shows how Nigeria is a heterogeneous country with its baggage of mutual suspicions, unhealthy rivalries and competition. This state of affairs has been a major clog in Nigerian's march to nationhood. (SOUTHEAST HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF NIGERIA, 2020)

### Three-Dimensional Works:



Figure: 9

Title: Forced Unity

Medium: wood and Metal

Dimension: 2 1/2 x 12 x 25 inch

Chikelue Akabuike ©

**Forced Unity:** (Figure:9) is a vertically placed three-dimensional sculpture that is made up of three main components. The first serving as the base is configured from different pieces of 'dovetail jointed' spliced on a timber processed wood placed horizontally on the floor to house the remaining two components. The second and the third components are mounted vertically on it and arranged so that the outer form serves as the pivot on which the third component revolves. This pivot has no characteristic of joints on it, except where it socks into the base with a tenor and mortise joint; while the third is riddled with multiple dovetailed joints.

The third component is designed to rotate both in a clockwise and anti-clockwise direction when pressure is applied. A quick view of the third component reveals abstracted figures comprising off-cuts wood of different shapes, colors, and texture spliced in a timber processed wood. The off-cuts are arranged in an upward and downward movements that suggests disunity. The restlessness of the figures (jointed off-cuts wood) gives a sharp contrasting appearance when compared to the outer component which appears to be calm and smooth and oblivion of the unrest within it.

**Forced Unity** metaphorically depicted with a vertically placed three-dimensional sculpture made of three main components represented in the way these pieces of woods are forced into one another, serves as a visual metaphor of Nigeria which her multiple tribes are forced into a false unity through the political amalgamation of the Nation Nigeria. In a creative process of joining and fusing, the configuration of the work shows how restless some part of it is, while the host (the outside shield) remained stabilized to adequately contain the restlessness of the inner chamber. The way human forms are buried in the inner chamber symbolically represents the extent of death and burial which occurs in these areas as a result of negligence and marginalization. The seemingly peaceful and smooth atmosphere within the outer shield as emphasized with the texture and finishing were consciously rendered symbolically to show affluence and smoothness of things as a result of wealth spent on it. Unlike the inner chamber which is riddled with roughness showing how tough life is in that area. It is worthy of note to observe that what makes this outer area smooth and wealthy are products derived from the other rough part. Hence the claim of "one Nigeria" becomes questionable.

A second look at the work perhaps will reveal to the viewer also that *The Forced Unity* as visual imagery, goes further to portray some implications of social and economic betrayal arising from financial misappropriation and stealing of public/private funds. The multiple directional movements of these pieces of wood show the restless quest for liberation, tribal sentiments, and religious intolerance among the Nigerian people. The appearance of joints at the base is also an indication of the Nigerian weak political foundation created during the 1914 amalgamation. This work shows that while Nigeria can claim to be united, she cannot claim to be indivisible.

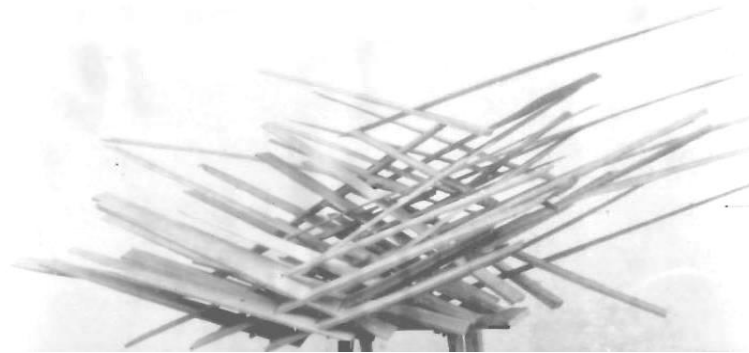


Figure: 10  
Title: The World is a Maze  
Medium: wood, wire and nail  
Dimension: 33 inches' x 95 inches  
Photograph: Chikelue Akabuike  
© Akabuike (2003)

*The World is a Maze*: (Figure 10.) is rendered with halve and cross lap joints. From a distance, one sees a crisscross of woods of different lengths that seem to be moving and stopping at various points linking up with each other again. Closer observation shows different layers in a maze-like pattern. Each layer is linked in a similar way to another in an upward or downward movement. They are also linked similarly by other layers at both sides creating a myriad of similar patterns that crisscrosses in a wild confused manner giving one an impression of paths linked to each other in a confusing network.

The emphases is laid on the formation of the line work rather on texture and colors. Hence, there is no visible applied texture or color apart from that of the natural wood. The line movements are also devoid of direction instead they appear to be scattered in every direction. The outer boundaries, however, show no specific or controlled boundaries instead the edges are asymmetrically left to diversify at different points and directions sometimes, linking up with each other and sometimes vying, and other times moving away from each other as they phase out to the atmosphere.

Metaphorically, the work represents a network of paths projecting the artist's idea of the Igbo people wondering in a maze-like world. It goes to idealize the group's inability to completely understand their world and the universe in general hence always applying their concept of *Ala wuutuand O jeembaenweilomeaning* that everywhere is home and a diaspora or he who goes abroad incurs no enemies respectively. These concepts are glaring in their refusal to consider returning home irrespective of any ill treatment meted to them in foreign countries. The Igbo people, are always seen in a situation where they are constantly in a move, in search of something which they believe is in a particular place quite remote from where they are. They are oftentimes unable to imagine or know exactly what could happen to them or around them in the near future. This tends to make them take certain decisions that most often are detrimental to their wellbeing. It is, therefore, a known fact that Igbos, at even on an odd situation, can move very far in search of greener pasture, irrespective of the distance, race, religion or social grouping situations. At times, they miss the pasture by taking the wrong turn, which may eventually lead them; back to be where they started or take them further away from their goal. This is evident in the amount of investments they make outside their homelands which most times are burnt down and destroyed by the host communities each time there is a civil unrest. Fifty years after the Nigeria-Biafra War, it appears that the Igbo people had forgotten nothing, remembered nothing and probably learnt nothing. *The World is a Maze* interrogates the state of the Igbo nation 50 years after Biafra. In the light of the killing of Igbos in China, South Africa, and resurgence of Biafra in Nigeria as a result of further killings in their homeland and the various demands by Igbo groups for secession, it appears that the time for Igbos to come home and build their land is here. But why the Igbos have refused to come home to build their home instead of wallowing in foreign countries where they are not wanted still remains unanswered. They need to strengthen their political and economy institutions so as not to be manipulated by other ethnic groups in power. If restructuring Nigeria through greater autonomy to ethnic groups will defuse the incessant agitation for secession and the constant quest to leave home, then let them work toward it than running away from home (Southeast Historical Society of Nigeria, 2020).

### Conclusion

This paper has described the processes involved in the production of some of the works done in *The Ruler and the Ruled* series. The exploration carried out in this direction depended on the use of off-cuts and tree-logs timber as the basic materials. It opened up channels of creative possibilities that could engage an artist in studio enquires over time. Off-cuts timber as upcycling material for art have a strong functional significance

which is supported by its yielding physical quality with tree-logs. Having exploited these potentials in creating works that seem to have fused experience to objects of forms, the materiality of off-cuts permits an oscillation between process and material whereby manipulating artistic tools; novel visual imageries were invented. These imageries are forms that go to make connections with material and process to provide junctures where meanings could be elicited from the works. In doing this, it is likely that controversies may arise; but this is usually part of every other artist's intention. To create works that pose questions as they mirror life issues. However, further explorations from the present project can still be initiated in different directions to extend what has been done so far.

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