4. SYMBOLS OF TRADITION IN THE AESTHETICS OF DISPLAYING MEAT

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While conversing with Nigerian art historian and scholar Moyo Okediji in May this year, I began to think about the story of African art from the perspective of the other. Ethnographic studies of art in Africa have always been part of an empirical project to classify the African. In recent decades, a discourse of contemporary art in Africa has emerged to combat conclusions, or the limitations of such definitions of art in Africa.

The idea to photograph meat comes from my ongoing interest in metaphors for postcolonial subjectivity. In my *Car Series* I explore issues of class by treating the car as a way of visualizing the inside and outside spaces that separate middle and working classes in Uganda. I treat the car primarily as a local and contemporary metaphor within Kampala itself.

Though aware of its impact in the West, in this photo essay I do not reference the curatorial discourse of curators like Clementine Deliss in the early 90s, and, more recently Simon Njami and Okwui Enwenzor whose exhibitions and catalogue essays argue against colonial representations of Africa in the West. In this series, my interest lies in a locality and site-specificity that engages the story of family and its influence on the selection of, and expression through objects, that lies in a particular place and time.

So when I arrived at Abdel-karim's butcher, the local name for a butchery, he was just about to eat a plate of *kikalaayi*. Or street fried chips and omelette. "Ah. You're just about to eat," I said. He laughed, and invited me to sit down with him. Prior to this meeting, I had taken interest in Abdel-karim's butcher in Kireka market. Having lived in the nearby neighborhood of Bweyogerere for most of my life, I knew about the notoriety of the butchers in Kireka market. That perspective is partly informed by my family's religious beliefs and, similarly, the community that surrounds us.

I had watched the butcher from between the market stalls. I saw its alluring 90 watt bulbs,

white tiles, and intersecting rectangular forms. Now seated inside, and being inside a butcher for the first time, it looked like someone's office. There was a cup of tea on the counter, next to the weighing scale. A portrait of the Kabaka of Buganda, H.H. Ronald Mwenda-Mutebi hung high up on the wall. The wall was part red in the bottom half. The makeshift stool that he sat on was really a chopping block. Abdel-karim was at home here in his butcher.

Even as one who knew about the butchers of Kireka, here, I couldn't deduce from the meat display the symbolic meanings of community, faith, and the intertwined personal histories of family. But certain symbols began to appear in the display when Abdel-karim told me more about his selection, his taste in meat cuts, and how his autobiography continued from that of his grandfather's. In Abdel-karim's butcher, shapes and objects define this intersection of rectangular forms.

The metal doors on the outside give way to the rectangular roof on the inside. The small cabinets beneath the rectangular glass display are dark and empty. The rectangular glass panel next to the service window bears one long strip of cow rib placed on a hook above, its curve glaring and pristine from a distance, like a prized trophy. On a piece of cardboard, Abdel-karim arranges four pieces of meat cuts in the service window. His face peeps out of the service window covered with five long strips of cow rib, among other meat cuts.

In Abdel-karim's butcher there was a whole conversation, nuanced history, taste, and memory on ribs. Here, the meat-cutter described the cow ribs as the quintessential family meal. He spoke about the memory

of the rib among those 'who have eaten meat for a while,' as opposed to those who have 'only started eating meat recently.' He differentiated between those clients who ask for 'meat with bone and fat' and those who ask for 'lean meat with no bone.' Here, Abdel-karim also enlightened me on the aromatic quality of the ribs. But nowhere did this story of taste and selection arrive at a memory of how the 'meat-cutter' remembered working in his grandfather's butcher.

'I swept the floors of my grandfather's butcher after school,' he recalled. Abdel-karim's grandfather was a 'meat-cutter'. His grandfather owned a meat-cutting shop in the same market as he is working in now. I listened to him narrating his joy and the acceptance he felt working in the butcher as a young child. This was where he had learned about the various cuts of meat, and about the qualities of those cuts. This was where he acquired the 'taste' for meat-cutting, and additionally, where he formed the selection he now has in his current display. I learned that Abdel-karim stubbornly refuses to adapt to market trends because of his attachment to the memory of 'those who have eaten meat for a while.' There was this complex reverence of memory that ignored the ongoing market trend of felt steak.

I listened to what may seem like a commonplace story in this case, reflecting on the colonial story of African art. There was something about the story behind the display of ribs or rather the very skill and taste that developed--not only between Abdel-karim and his grandfather, but for those 'meat-cutters' surrounding them. These were not 'African' enough for the African art history of colonial ethnographers. Yet, as a visual practice, they held a rigorous, personal, and communal understanding of meat. My conscious decision to photograph the meat, and the process of interviewing someone who lives in a near neighborhood, was an exercise in redefining the boundaries of expression.

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Photographs by the author

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