

Remembering and Forgetting: North and South Perspectives on African Aestheticism

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We – as Western rationalists and upholders of the Judaic-Christian heritage – find it difficult to understand that there are people in this world who do not only not choose to share a world view preaching progress through accumulation of facts, fictions, and follies, but virtually disclaim the "a priori" value of such notions as memory and literacy, two of the most prominent properties of Western civilisation. Right in the middle of our own Scandinavian cultures, the Romany people have waged an uphill battle for centuries against assimilation through determined acts of cultural segregation. Ever since the sixteenth century, when they arrived, here they have refused to establish language-contacts with the majority culture; they have opposed being mediated through the institutions of the lexicon and the grammar book. The Indians of North America also opt for non-mediatory contact with the hegemonical culture in order to maintain their cultural integrity.

In these two instances, cultural strategy is defined by opposition to a dominant culture that threatens to subjugate a weaker one. By their non-participatory role the Romany or North American Indian cultural strategists hope to preserve their language and codes of conduct uncontaminated. The heritage they wish to mediate to the next generation is then not represented by information gathered in a text book or an aesthetics projected by an art object, nor even by the song or the tale of the oral tradition, but by, if you like, determined acts of forgetting. Memory in these cases emerges as an active and conservative principle of selecting. Memory and forgetting may be said to constitute a binary pair. *Oblivion*, it turns out then, is positive, *forgetting* rewarding, and *remembering* dangerous.

Perhaps, as an aside, the situation in present-day Yugoslavia would be less volatile and tragic, had the healing process of forgetting had a chance to operate. Or if remembering had had a chance to construct itself as a re-remembering through which the particular events of the past might have been historicised and thus appropriated.

So what has all this got to do with African aesthetics?

First of all, this preamble is meant to demonstrate that it is not only in Africa where one may find an ontology of culture and creativity that denies increment and progression as culture's main instigators. Secondly, it puts another value on the individual than the sole operator of memory, and stresses the function of his/her responsibility across a larger time scale, and thirdly, it highlights some of the features commonly ascribed to African aesthetics and – in way of contrast – helps to define our own understanding of art.

A piece of wood lasts about one hundred years hidden in the African savannah, before the termites have finished with it. Metaphorically speaking, these ants are the guardians of the earth; the earth that in African mythology is often represented as the enemy of the sky. In Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* the anthill with its busy inhabitants may be said to stand for the agency of deformation and change. The weird undigested "cosmic" ideas of the male trio, Sam, Chris and Ikem, that rule the fictive African state Kangan of Achebe's novel are in the end destroyed and their ideas and ideals appropriated.¹ On the anthill a new construction can be raised that will encompass and mingle the experiences of the past and the dreams of the future. In Achebe's idealistic future the earth will be far stronger than the sky, which means that men and women will be governed by the earth's "female" principles. The sky will have to retreat.

The anthill in Achebe's novel thus represents a repository of scattered and selected memories and pieces of wisdom that need to be handled with open-mindedness and discrimination. No tradition, no canon, no prefixed orientation must be allowed to interfere with the work of the ants. Time and memory – as well as its human handlooms, ideologies and religions – are social entities and human constructs, endlessly subjected to change and appropriation. Nothing is holy or sacrosanct. These are some of the lessons one can derive from Achebe.

This discussion leads to an aesthetic principle that is the very recantation of the idea that "a piece of beauty lasts for ever." As "pieces of beauty" cannot last because their employment is bound to shift with every new generation or family of users/viewers, it follows that there can be no autonomous or universal concept of "beauty". There is not even a word for this concept in the African languages, I have

¹ Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* (New York: Anchor Press, 1988).

been told. The closest one may come to it are words denoting "good," "useful," and "auspicious". The formal "beauty" of a piece of art is imbued with significances that relate to complex systems of thought and ritual. In the terms of this creed, to say that a thing is "beautiful" would then be unintelligent, in the same way as aggressive individualism in most non-industrial African societies would be seen as an anomaly and a deviation in need of societal correction.

So the ants, our free-born agents of destruction and change, are invited to dispose of ancestors who had lived too long. It is no wonder then that the hunter in the African masquerade often emerges from the anthill. To eat and be eaten is part of the organism that should be allowed to operate on all levels of human and animal life. That most African art objects are made of wood comes then as no surprise. Wood, in contrast to bronze, rots fast. So to throw away or hide sculptures or masks after they have fulfilled their tasks in this life would, for this same reason, be a compelling demand. In fact any conscious act of preserving art objects or memories for their own sake would be a sacrilege. Invisible art is good art. "L'art pour l'art," says Chinua Achebe, is deodorised shit. The song and proverb would be retained only for their function in the present. The proverb reflects on the story, in the same way as palm-oil completes or diversifies the dish. A skilfully employed proverb in a modern African story complicates the narration, a poor one illustrates it. The oriki or the Yoruba praise poem represents, says Karin Barber, not a way of looking at the past, but a means of re-experiencing it.² The echo of the past is never allowed to dominate; it is tamed to speak in the present voice. Ancestral authority inscribed in the proverb or the tale must be re-created for communication to take place. In other words: if the work of art fails to communicate it is because its symbolic codes are not recognised. Without it a work of art is dead, whatever its artistic attributes.

The Mbari institution among the Igbo of Nigeria consisted of a house that was built outside the the village green at a particular time of the year and filled with objects of all kinds that reflected on events and personalities in the village. The objects were produced by persons, artists, who withdrew for some time to create these things. After the celebration these objects had, as it were, lost their function and were abandoned, to the wonderment of the Westerners who naturally collected them and sold them to the me-

² Karin Barber, "Interpreting Oríkì as History and Literature," in Karin Barber and P. de Moraes Farias (eds.), *Discourse and Its Disguises: The Interpretation of African Oral Texts*, Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham, 1989, pp. 13-23.

tropolitan museums of the West. This is Chinua Achebe's description of the Mbari house:

Now, having made the art object in the Mbari house, they celebrate it. For them the important events are the making, and the celebrating. Not the memory of it, even though the memory is important. Now, the reason for this is that they want the emphasis to be on the process rather than the product. Because if you emphasise the product, it becomes dictatorial, the product begins to take command of the future. So they say, "OK, you have done your bit. Excellent! We have enjoyed it, we have celebrated you, now you can go to rest." The abandonment is deliberate; it is saying "we do not want what our fathers did to obscure what we can do, or to determine what we can do."... We must contain the power of tradition to limit ourselves.³

"We must contain the power of tradition to limit ourselves," says Achebe. This is another statement to the same effect: memory and history have to be used with discrimination, the art object – the mediator between the spiritual and the social forces – must be appreciated for what it is doing rather than for what it is. Art in the African sense always involves participation. If art, literature, or other human products are inscribed with loftier meanings, the risk is self-aggrandisement and self-betrayal. It is the import and the mechanistic emulation of foreign or Western ideas centering on the individual enterprise and the concept of linear time that bewilder and confuse African leaderships, Achebe suggests. African aesthetics, in his understanding, is a radical political belief system.

But Achebe's credo also includes other aspects of art that tentatively could be listed under the rubric of "African aesthetics." One is, as we have already seen, the socio-religious use of art, the presence in the art form of a power that is larger than itself, the art object as a ritual instrument. Most people are familiar with African masks, some might own one, fewer have seen a touristique mask performance, and extremely few in the outside world have participated in a genuine dance ceremony with masks. This listing of different cultural practices is significant. It projects the deterioration of the ritual language, the separation of the body and the spirit, and the commercialisation of art. In the Gelede dance ceremony among the Yoruba that Birgit Åkesson, the Swedish choreographer, has described in her book *Källvattnets mask. Om dans i Afrika*, the women masks

³ In Raoul Granqvist (ed.), "Travelling: Chinua Achebe in Scandinavia, Swedish Writers in Africa," *Umeå Papers in English*, no. 11 (Umeå 1990), pp. 38-39.

dance, chant, sing; they evoke and implore the ancestors to bring them a good harvest; they give the reality of their present situation a physical face through the mediating link provided by tradition. Before the dance the leading woman Iyalase, mother of Ase, feeds the masks with palm-oil and yam, another artist re-paints them, and during the dance the wooden masks, now enlarged with other dress attributes, have emerged from their house and out of their splendid isolation; they are spirits in communion with the people of the market place.⁴ It would be absolutely preposterous to suggest that any one element in the Gelede dance should be separated from the other; the dance, the song, the costumes, the drums, the participation are all dynamically inter-related. All details are important. All "circumstances," lines in the song text, movements in the dance, the shape and the detail of a carving, allude at matters – past and present – that the audience is expected to recognise and react at.

In Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*, the African peasant woman gives voice to her anguish at seeing that her world is being invaded by another culture with another content:

My husband's house
Is a mighty forest of books,
Dark it is and very damp,
The stem rising from the ground
Hot thick and poisonous
Mingles with the corrosive dew
And the rain drops
That have collected in the leaves

If you stay
In my husband's house long,
The ghosts of the dead men
That people this dark forest,
The ghosts of the many white men
And white women
That scream whenever you touch any book,
The deadly vengeance ghosts
Of the writers
Will capture your head
And like my husband
You will become
A walking corpse.

Her husband's living room, with books on the shelves, has become a no-man's-land, a bad and infecteous hinterland inhabited by foul ancestors. On touching the books, the woman believes, you turn into

⁴ Birgit Åkesson, *Källvattnets mask. Om dans i Afrika* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 1983), pp. 71-89.

their counterpart, a "walking corpse". Her response to Western civilisation is based on her own pattern of beliefs. The books become totemic, laden with the "deadly vengeance ghosts" that in any normal situation would have been disposed of, as being detrimental to the well-being of her community.

So according to these aesthetic principles art must never become a *Gestalt*, a frozen symbol, a "thing of beauty". It must never, in the words of Dennis Duerden in *African Art and Literature: The Invisible Past*, "make the structure of the present into a lasting and visible structure which takes too long to destroy. The present must become *invisible*".⁵ An art object thus isolated from its surroundings is a reduced object, as dead and manipulable as is the individual without the safeguards provided by the community.

So African art is anonymous art. As the ego is not found in the separate individual body but in the community, the same view rules the production of art and literature. As art is a medium of communication, the artist is bound to express the union of the spiritual world and the material in which all human beings of his/her community are the shareholders. Obviously the individual carver and painter or sculptor is free to improvise and provide variations and above all infuse it with the energy of his/her vision and skill, but the prototype must remain the same, or – be disbanded altogether. The same is true of the oral performance: the story outline must be kept together: If a deviation takes place, the audience will be bound to correct the story teller. In modern African novels, art's relationship with communality is materialised in many different ways: through the employment of a multiplicity of narrative voices, through proverbs and other oral narrative structures, and through a "depersonalised" style of writing that insists on the performative or dramatic aspect of the presentation. Creativity is a communal enterprise, an engagement with the spirit and the body.

Up till now I have been occupied with an attempt to delineate an African aesthetics that may be called indigenous, an aesthetics that calls for an understanding of a few basic principles related to the multifunctional and communal/ritual aspects of art in Africa. However, it would be falsifying my presentation if I did not also take into the account a number of other perspectives on art and literature in Africa that, although still African in content and formula, also contain integrated or hybridised Western models. I will talk

⁵ Dennis Duerden, *African Art & Literature: The Invisible Present* (London: Heinemann, 1977), p. 24.

about four such perspectives: the primitive, the ritual, the naive, and the Afrocentric. Needless to say, none of them exists in the very bare and raw form in which I choose to talk about it here.

Most art histories dealing with Africa will stop at Picasso's discovery of African art in 1907 in the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris (today's Musée de l'Homme): "The masks," he told André Malraux, "were magical things, mediators... against unknown, threatening spirits... I understood what the Negroes used their sculptures for... All fetishes were weapons, to help people avoid coming under the influence of spirits... to help them become independent. Spirits, the unconscious... they are all the same thing. I understood why I was a painter..."⁶ Picasso and his contemporaries, and a generation of Western artists and writers after him, thought they had discovered in the African art objects a pre-historic link with their own civilisation. It would be more correct to say, however, that what they perceived in the African sculptures and masks and other objects that had been amassed in Western museums through colonial robbery and acquisitiveness was a reflection of their own malaise. It was an ideal construction that aimed at solving some of the existential problems of a culture that at least temporarily was disgusted by its own body. It is questionable whether it had anything to do with African art. The images they were fascinated by were self-reflexive. Primitivism, exoticism, and nativism were some of the hallmarks and labels used when presenting African art in handbooks of art and art gallery manuals.

These ideas have not lost their appeal in the West. In a collection of photos by Georg Oddner, called *African Art: A Source of Inspiration for Modern Art*, Lars Berglund, in one of the appended essays, makes the following comment:

We feel instinctively whether a mask is effective or not. It is as if the primitive is stored within us as an archetypal legacy from a collective past of mankind.⁷

The Western beholder, one notices, is provided with an evolutionary hindsight. He is able to trace his own roots through the mists of his own civilisation right back to the time when the mask was produced. "Instinctively", because had the same beholder stopped to think for a moment he might have discovered that the mask, far from

6 As quoted in Katia Samaltanos-Stenström, "African Art – Premodern Art", *Before Picasso. African Art in Swedish Collections*. 21.12. 88 - 15.1. 89, Liljevalchs Konsthall, p. 15.

7 Lars Berglund, "Den stora inspirationskällan/The Great Source of Inspiration," in *Afrikanskt. Inspirationskälla för den moderna konsten / African Art: A Source of Inspiration for Modern Art*. Fotograferat / Photographed by Georg Oddner, Malmö Konsthall: 1986, p. 5.

mediating a "primitive" legacy from archetypal times, was in fact a funeral mask made to celebrate a recently deceased Gabon politician.

A second "outside" perspective on African aestheticism is provided by an outlook that has its base in anthropology. It exclusively singles out the ritual significance of the art object and loads it with non-material meanings. The ethnographical museums in the West where the majority of African art objects outside Africa are located (the UCLA hosts 110,000 items, all computerised) tend to favour a presentation of this kind: the material culture of the object, its production history, multi-functionalism, ambiguous usage, is underscored and its metaphorical culture overemphasised. Out of this tradition an aesthetic bias has emerged that tends to regard the object as a refined or heightened form of ritual effervescence of universal aspirations. An African art object, whether an Ashante fertility doll or an Igbo mask, are turned into art prototypes and lose their affinity with a particular region and time. They are made timeless and spaceless (also speechless). The finished or the final product is portrayed and admired, even venerated; the complicated cultural process that has inscribed the art object with layers of complex significances is subordinated or ignored. It is the African art object as cult.

My third category of "African" aesthetics, "the naive," has of course many similarities with the two already discussed. But the concept of "naivety" in African art and literature have come to involve less of the originary and the ritual and more of the social and the contemporary. Ulli Beier, the German art and literary scholar, published already in the mid-1960s articles about Nigerian sign paintings and legends. One of Beier's articles introduces the Onitsha street painter, Middle Art, who drew cartoon histories that were inspired by the Nigerian civil war.⁸ Other street painters used episodes from every-day life, news about political scandals and corruption, sequences from Indian and American films, and anything under the sky that could catch the young hectic and erotic eye. They painted signs, legends, and advertisements, often as comic strip-cartoons with a narration as simple as the very craft that produced it. At the same, this activity at Onitsha, the busy commercial centre of Igboland, had a parallel phenomenon, the Onitsha chapbook with its pathetic romances and moralities about agonised love and bitter-sweet success and clumsy manuals about "how-to-do-it". Like all African cultural productions these operated within each other's dis-

⁸ Ulli Beier, "Middle Art," in *Modern konst i Afrika*, Liljevalchs katalog nr. 348, Liljevalchs konsthall, 1989 (the exhibition had also been shown at Berliner Festspiele in Staatlichen Kunsthalle, Berlin, and in Übersee-Museum, Bremen). pp. 67-68.

course; there was no canon, no prescription, no rule about what it could or should include or involve. It took what it needed and appropriated it. Naive art – a modern variation of the term would be popular art – is transacted or hybridised art.

The way in which this functions cannot be better illustrated than by the following quote from Achebe's *Anthills*. It is Chris's final journey to the North, towards his own execution and the downfall of Kangan. The sign-writers of the bus (which is ironically named *Luxurious*), Chris meditates, are like medieval monks who took a pride not only in copying the scriptural text but also by editing it and adding flourishes to the signs.

The sign-writers of Kangan did not work in dark and holy seclusion of monasteries but in free-for-all market-places under the fiery eye of the sun. And yet in ways not unlike the monk's they sought in their work to capture the past as well invent a future. *Luxurious* had inscribed on its blue body in reds, yellows and whites three different legends... The one at the back of the bus, written in the indigenous language of Bassa ... said simply: *Ife onye metalu* – What a man commits. At the side the inscriptions switched to words of English: *All Saints Bus*; and in front, also in English, they announced finally (or perhaps initially!) *Angel of Mercy* (186).

Let me only as a brief commentary on this passage from an African novel point out a few interesting aspects that in fact underline most of my initial remarks about African aesthetics. In the passage above several discourses transcend and intercept. First of all, the script of the novel appropriates the script of painting, two semiotic systems balance each other, commune with each other, but do not integrate. Secondly, the inscriptions on the bus, each containing different cultural messages, function, diachronically, as the totems or dancing masks we have talked about; they are crafted to "capture the past as well as invent a future." And, thirdly, they also perform this act synchronically and metonymically, because the inscriptions are bound to be "read" differently, in a processual way, as the bus shifts locales (cultures, languages, religions). What in the West is called naive African art or popular art, often with pejorative connotations, proves to be highly sophisticated and complex indeed.

Understandable enthusiasm, but also much adverse criticism, has spun around my fourth and final aesthetic perspective, the Afrocentric approach. Its ideological base is in the USA where it is often associated with scholars at various centres of Afro-American

or Black studies in literature or anthropology. It propagates the emergence and the necessity of an exclusive Afro-American or Afrocentric aesthetics to combat prejudices and ignorance about what is defined as a holistic pan-African culture, "determined by a unity of origin as well as a commons struggle".⁹ It views the African art object or any African cultural expression in more or less the same way as polycentric, holistic, and repetitive. This nativism has met with much heated opposition from intellectuals both in Africa and in the USA. "We run the risk of an ersatz exoticism, like the tourist trinkets in the Gift Shoppes of Lagos and Nairobi," says Anthony A. Appiah.¹⁰ Cultural nationalism is limiting whatever its origin. Traditional Africa and traditional African art, then, whether viewed Eurocentrically or Afrocentrically, will basically generate the same problematic: self-reflexivity that obscures and puzzles. What you will face in the end is not the multi-faceted African mask that moves around you, at each turn offering you a new perspective, a new challenge, but the closed-in and the far too visible object that speaks no language.

So what does my exposition lead to: nihilism or relativism? I hope none of these. I accept pluralism of critical perspectives as my main critical standpoint. This means that the cultural presuppositions of a work of art must be understood and employed to the full as the main avenue towards an understanding of it. This is no easy way, because any work of art, and perhaps African or post-colonial art objects and texts in particular, is inscribed by a multiplicity of traditions and discourses that cut right across broad scales of cultural endeavours. But this is the only way. The syncretism of religion, language and cultural norms that fills in, for instance, the passage describing Chris's bus trip calls for an approach that must be just as liberal and expansive. It cannot be grounded in any predetermined schema. However, in order to deconstruct it one has to pass over a minefield of Western epistemological typologies that threaten to blow up the discourse at every new turn of the road. Thus the critical act itself must be subjected to the same challenges and counter-discourses, since a work of art, like the fantastic house in the African proverb, contains two hundred entrances.

9 Molefi Kete Asante, "Afrocentricity and Culture", in *African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity*, ed. by Molefi Kete Asante and Kariamu Welsh Asante (Türenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc., 1990), p. 6.

10 "New Literatures, New Theories?," in *Canonization and Teaching of African Literatures*, ed. Raoul Granqvist, *Matatu* 7 [1990], 89.